

'In Which Land Were You Born?': Cultural Transmission in the Historie van Jan van Beverley

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By any measure, St John of Beverley is not an obvious choice of subject for a medieval miracle play. Although he was undoubtedly a crucial figure in the northern English church at the beginning of the eighth century, rising to become bishop of Hexham and York, ordaining Bede as priest and deacon, and founding the community of 'Inderauuda', later Beverley, his life lacks any of the 'sensational...supernatural events' which are common staples of the genre.¹ Even the handful of miracles attributed to him are relatively low-key affairs: Bede stresses his importance as an educator and healer above all, recording how he took in a dumb man and painstakingly taught him to speak, and healed a monk, a local thane, and the daughter of an abbess by prayer and holy water.² It is true that further miracles were added by Folcard, William Ketell and others after John's canonisation in 1037, such as providing king Osred of Northumbria with bottomless jars of wine and beer, or restoring a boy to life after a fall from the roof of his minster, but even in this expanded form John's biography offers only slight potential for dramatic spectacle.³

However, by the last centuries of the Middle Ages John's story had gained several arresting elements. A number of curious legends were posthumously attached to him, as Susan Wilson in particular has documented.⁴ By the twelfth century he had an odd reputation as an intercessor during military campaigns. His banner was carried into battle against the Scots by Archbishop Thurstan of York in 1138, and by all three Edwards in the fourteenth century, while in 1415 Henry V and Archbishop Henry Chichele credited him with the English victory at Agincourt.⁵ Even stranger still is a peculiar narrative that concerns the current article, a story which first surfaces at the turn of the sixteenth century. This involves John in a

¹ William Tydeman, *English Medieval Theatre 1400-1500* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986), p.53.

² Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, trans. Leo Shirley-Price and R.E. Latham (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), p.329. Bede's outlines John's life and miracles in Book V.2-6 of the *History*.

³ See Folcard, 'Vita Sancti Johannis episcopi Eboracensis' and William Ketell 'Miracula Sancti Johannis Eboracensis episcopi', *The Historians of the Church of York and its Archbishops*, ed. James Raine, Rolls Series 71, 2 vols (London: Longmans and Green, 1879-86), I.239-347; Ian Lancashire, *Dramatic Texts and Records of Britain* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), p.82.

⁴ Susan E. Wilson, *The Life and After-Life of St John of Beverley: the Evolution of the Cult of an Anglo-Saxon Saint* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).

⁵ Donald Nicholl, *Thurstan: Archbishop of York, 1114-1140* (York: Stonegate, 1964), p.224; D. M. Palliser, 'John of Beverley [St John of Beverley] (d. 721)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/14845>, accessed 10 Sept 2011]; Anne Curry, *The Battle of Agincourt: Sources and Interpretations* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2000), p.275.

thoroughly ahistoric story of incest, murder and bodily transformation. In this account, John is a hermit who is visited by the devil in the guise of an angel, and persuaded to rape and murder his own sister. As not even the pope can find a fitting penalty for such sins, John is then forced to redeem himself by living as a wild beast for seven years, eating grass and walking on all fours. He is only freed from this state when his absolution is announced by a newborn child, and his sister is restored to life. As Van Eck comments, even by the standards of popular hagiography, this tale is ‘iets vreemds, iets ongewoons’ (‘something bizarre, something extraordinary’).⁶

This story is not only remarkable in terms of its lurid content, but also for the form in which it has been preserved. The only text recounting this strange sequence of events is the *Historie van Jan van Beverley*, a chapbook written in Middle Dutch around the turn of the sixteenth century. A full translation of the text is appended to the present article. The earliest known edition of the *Historie* was produced in Brussels by Thomas van der Noot: although this does not give a year of publication, it has been dated to c.1512 by its modern editor G.J. Boekenoogen, owing to the level of deterioration shown in its *drukkersmerk* (‘printer’s mark’).⁷ Although Van der Noot’s reasons for publishing the *Historie* can only be guessed at, the book is consistent with wider trends in his output. As Herman Pleij has observed, the story’s emphasis on direct intervention by God in human affairs shows a concern with ‘de individuele beleving van het Godsmysterie’ (‘the individual experience of the Divine Mystery’), and is something that can be seen throughout his work. This in turn probably stems from the mercantile culture of the Low Countries, with its championing of ‘individuele ondernemerschap’ (‘individual enterprise’) and ‘streven naar onafhankelijkheid’ (‘pursuit of independence’) above all else.⁸ At any rate, the tale evidently found an enthusiastic readership, as it achieved an enduring popularity in the Netherlands. Although Van der Noot does not seem to have issued a further edition, despite remaining active as a printer until 1523, a number of later copies are known. In 1543 it was printed at Antwerp by Jacob van Liesveldt, whose motives for printing the text seem to have differed from those of Van der Noot. Since Van Liesveldt had firm Protestant sympathies, and would be executed in 1545 for publishing a Dutch-language bible, he may have selected the text for its tacit anti-papalism: its depiction of ‘Die Paues’ (‘The Pope’) is not at all positive, as the pontiff is

⁶ P.L. van Eck, ‘Nederlandse volksboeken’, *Taal en Letteren* 15 (1905): 340-52 (p.346).

⁷ G.J. Boekenoogen, *Historie van Jan van Beverley* (Leiden: Brill, 1903), p.40.

⁸ Herman Pleij, *De wereld volgens Thomas van der Noot, boekdrukker en uitgever te Brussel in het eerste kwart van de zestiende eeuw* (Muiderberg: Dick Coutinho, 1982), pp.40-41.

unable to instruct John during his pilgrimage to Rome, leaving him to arrange his own penance; worse still, he seems more concerned with personal reputation than fulfilling his duties, even greeting John with the words ‘Pelgrim mi dunct dat ghi mi mint’ (‘Pilgrim, I think that you love me’).⁹ Whatever his reasons, Van Liesveldt’s edition proved popular in its own right, as it was reprinted in 1574 by Jan van Ghelen.¹⁰ Further editions of the text appeared at Antwerp in 1689 and 1698, and at Ghent in c.1767.¹¹ There is also evidence of a second Ghent edition from as late as 1789, although this is only known from a reference in a printer’s account-book.¹² The piece also seems to have attained a wide audience, as it apparently circulated outside its immediate urban environment. In 1608 a text entitled ‘jan van bewerleij in enghellandt’ is listed among the possessions of the Frisian farmer Dirck Jansz.¹³ Even these records do not represent the full extent of the text’s popularity. In addition to the surviving copies, there is at least one further lost edition of the piece, which may even predate that of Van der Noot. This is clear from the differences between the Van Liesveldt and Van der Noot texts: while both contain several unfinished couplets, some of the lines omitted by Van Liesveldt are preserved by Van der Noot, and vice versa. This either suggests that both printers were working from a common exemplar, or that a revised edition was produced at some point between 1512 and 1543.

Even with this question aside, the *Historie* remains one of the most puzzling entries in the literature of the Low Countries. From the early twentieth century onwards, the critical reception of the piece has been marked by an extreme multiplicity of interpretation, as it has given rise to a variety of different, often conflicting viewpoints and theories. The principal reason for this debate is the condition of the text, as it is fairly clear that the printed editions do not preserve the piece in its original form. All of the surviving copies of the text recount its narrative using a mixture of prose and verse, also including elaborate woodcuts to supply further visual cues: such key moments as John’s rape, murder and burial of his sister, his visitation by the bogus angel, and his capture in the forest, are supplemented by rich illustrations. The movement between these forms is often jarring, and it strongly suggests that

⁹ See Herman Pleij, ‘Literatuur en Censuur in de Zestiende Eeuw’, *Boeken onder Druk: Censuur en pers-onvrijheid in Nederland sinds de boekdrukkunst*, ed. Marita Mathijssen (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011), pp.17-30.

¹⁰ R.J. Resoort, ‘Het raadsel van de rijmdrukken’, *Nederlandse Letterkunde* 3 (1998): 327-344 (335-36).

¹¹ Maurits Sabbe, *Het leven ende den cours der studenten* (Antwerp: Buschmann, 1908), p.273.

¹² Emile Henri van Heurck, *De Vlaamsche Volksboeken* (Antwerp: Buschmann, 1943), p.116.

¹³ Dirck Jansz, *Het aantekeningenboek van Dirck Jansz (1604-1660)*, ed. Pieter Gerbenzon (Hilversum: Uitgeverij Verloren, 1993), p.128.

the printed versions have been adapted from an earlier text. As Boekenooogen first pointed out, it is probable that the prose sections are later additions, serving to condense passages initially written in verse: ‘originally, the story must have been written entirely in verse.... The prose for the most part replaces segments of the original poem, revealed by the fact that there are gaps if only the verse is read; and this is further confirmed, because in several places lines appear to be missing at the beginning or end of the rhyming sections’.¹⁴ There are a few dissenters from this view: the most prominent are J. van Mierlo, who attributes the discrepancies to printing errors, and W.M.H. Hummelen, who implies that the prose sections may predate the verse, describing the piece as ‘oorspronkelijk een verhalende tekst in proza’ (‘originally a narrative text in prose’).¹⁵ Along the same lines, Dirk Coigneau has raised the intriguing possibility that the verse sections may merely serve to embellish the prose, rather than being the entire basis of the text, pointing out the interplay between the two modes: ‘the rhyming scenes are often the (emotionally intensified) reiteration of earlier words spoken by the same characters in prose, words that often cannot be overlooked for a proper understanding of the verse “response”’.¹⁶ Nevertheless the majority of commentators have supported Boekenooogen’s theories. In fact a number of other critics, such as Barnouw, have identified occasional ‘sporen van rijmen’ (‘traces of rhyme’) within the prose sections, which further suggests that they are redactions of verse.¹⁷ Beuken has even gone so far as to claim that the prose sections contain enough ‘sporen’ for the conjectured verse text to be reconstructed in its entirety.¹⁸ It is also true that this form of adaptation was common among the Dutch and Flemish printers, especially when trying to print long works inexpensively. Other early books using this mixed form were demonstrably based on earlier poetic works,

¹⁴ ‘Oorspronkelijk moet het verhaal geheel in verzen zijn geschreven...Dat dit proza op de meeste plaatsen gedeelten van het oorspronkelijke gedicht vervangt, blijkt uit het feit dat er lacunes ontstaan als men alleen de verzen leest, en het wordt bevestigd, doordat op die plaatsen vaak een rijmregel blijkt te ontbreken aan het begin of het slot van het berijmde gedeelte’: G.J. Boekenooogen, ‘De Nederlandsche volksboeken’, *Verspreide geschriften van Dr G.J. Boekenooogen*, ed. A.A. van Rijnbach (Leiden: Brill, 1949), pp.207-251 (p.248).

¹⁵ J. van Mierlo, ‘Over vorm en dichter van Mariken van Nieumeghen’, *Verslagen en Mededel. Kon. VI. Acad. Taal en Letterkunde* (1949): 1-29; W.M.H. Hummelen, *Repertorium van het rederijkersdrama 1500 - ca. 1620* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1968), p.279.

¹⁶ ‘Zijn de berijmde scènes er dikwijls het (emotioneel verhevigde) vervolg op eerder door dezelfde personages in proza gesproken woorden, woorden die voor het goede begrip van de berijmde ‘reactie’ vaak niet kunnen worden gemist’: Dirk Coigneau, ‘Drama in druk, tot circa 1540’, *Spel en spektakel - Middeleeuws toneel in de Lage Landen*, ed. Hans van Dijk, Bart Ramakers (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Prometheus, 2001), pp.201-214 (p.213).

¹⁷ A.J. Barnouw, ‘Mary of Nimmegen’, *The Germanic Review* 6 (1931): 78-81.

¹⁸ W.H. Beuken, ‘Mariken’s eerherstel’, *Tijdschrift voor taal en letteren* 19 (1931): 111-122.

such as *Floris ende Blancefleur* and *De strijt van Roncevale*, which have their roots in two thirteenth-century Middle Dutch romances.¹⁹

Even accepting Boekenooogen's thesis, other questions about the original form of the text remain. Boekenooogen assumed that the base-text for the *Historie* was a straightforward narrative poem, only modifying this later to 'een dramatisch gedicht' ('a dramatic poem').²⁰ However, it seems most likely that the true origins of the piece lie in drama. Gerrit Kalff, writing shortly after the publication of Boekenooogen's edition, was the first to identify the piece as a *mirakelspel* or miracle play, a position he restated with increasing confidence throughout his career. The main reason for this assessment was the role of dialogue in the narrative: Kalff pointed out that the text showed a clear dependence on the verse exchanges to drive its action forward, in sharp contrast to other similar works, where the verse fragments were more scattered and haphazard, serving merely 'te sieren' ('to decorate') the prose. He writes: 'this chapbook may have been a work in verse originally, but of what nature? If we bear in mind that in this work there occurs a fairly large number of characters, that the dialogue brings about a certain development of the action, then we have to suppose that we are dealing with a play...the dialogues and the corresponding development of action belong to the essence of the work, the prose being merely an occasional part, presenting a summary or making the course of events clearer'.²¹ Later he came to regard the *Historie* as something of an archetypal *mirakelspel* (miracle play), owing to its heavy emphasis on supernatural intervention and refusal to rationalise its events.²²

There are firm grounds for accepting this view. Alongside the reasons that Kalff gives, it is also worth noting that there are dramatisations of similar 'hairy hermit' stories in other languages and cultures, such as *Onofrio* in Italian and the *Vie de Saint Jehan le Paulu* in

¹⁹ See Luc Debaene, *De Nederlandse volksboeken: ontstaan en geschiedenis van de Nederlandse prozaromans, gedrukt tussen 1475 en 1540* (Middelburg: Antiquariaat Merlijn, 1977), pp.48-53, 165-72.

²⁰ G.J. Boekenooogen, *De historie van den verloren sone* (Leiden: Brill, 1908), p.59.

²¹ 'Een rijmwerk zal dit volksboek dus oorspronkelijk zijn geweest; doch van welken aard? Wanneer wij in het oog houden, dat er in dit werk een vrij groot aantal personen voorkomt, die eene bepaalde handeling in dialogen tot ontwikkeling brengen, dan moeten wij wel gaan vermoeden, dat wij hier te doen hebben met een drama...de dialogen en de daarbij behorende ontwikkeling der handeling het wezenlijke van het werk; het proza dient slechts om hier en daar een deel van het oorspronkelijke beknopt weer te geven of het verloop van de handeling te verduidelijken': G. Kalff, 'Bijdragen tot de geschiedenis van ons Middeleeuwsch drama', *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandse Taal- en Letterkunde* 22 (1903): 304-20 (p.305).

²² See G. Kalff, *Geschiedenis der Nederlandsche letterkunde* (Groningen: J.B. Wolters, 1907), II, pp.325-26.

French, showing that these stories did lend themselves readily to theatrical performance.²³ The presence of the woodcuts might also signal such an origin, as they are probably intended to help the reader visualise the on-stage action, restoring a spectacular dimension to the narrative. But Kalff's position also has further important implications for understanding the origins of the *Historie*. If the text was indeed originally a play, this would allow its printed edition to be placed in the genre of *leesdrama's* ('reading plays'), a form not uncommon among early printed books in the Netherlands. This identification allows further conclusions to be drawn, albeit tentatively. Alongside *Jan van Beverley*, there are two further examples of *leesdrama* texts, *Mariken van Nieumeghen* (c.1515) and *Verloren Sone* (1540). Of these, the *Mariken* has the best documented history, as its original play-text has survived, albeit in a partial, corrupt and unofficial *piraat-editie* ('pirate-version') issued by Willem Vorstermann. What is crucial here is that the *Mariken* shows many of the hallmarks of the *rederijderskamers* ('chambers of rhetoric'), lay fraternities comprised of craftsmen and merchants which came to dominate the urban culture of the Low Countries at the close of the Middle Ages. The play is itself a colourful account of the life of the legendary figure Mary of Nijmegen, who allegedly lived as the consort of the demon Moenen for seven years, until her inevitable return to the church. The piece is clearly recognisable as a *rederijker* play, as its plot awards a central place to two of the key concerns of the chambers, rhetoric and instructive theatre.²⁴ Among the powers Moenen gives Mary is the ability to compose complex speeches, which she exercises in praise of 'Rethorijcke, auctentijcke, conste lieflijcke' ('rhetoric, the truest, loveliest art'); likewise, it treats *mirakelspelen* themselves as potential vehicles for divine revelation, as Mary's presence at a play of the Virgin triggers her repentance. It also incorporates many of the elaborate verse-forms favoured by the chambers, such as the *refrain* and *rondeel*.²⁵ The *Mariken* thus allows a direct line to be drawn from the chambers to the printing press. Its own transformation into prose shows how plays were adapted by printers in order to become marketable, or in order to be made suitable for private reading. Many of these adaptations are no less present in the *Historie van Jan van Beverley*: the reliance on extensive woodcuts is common to both texts, for instance. In fact, Barnouw's

²³ See Charles Alleyn Williams and Louis Allen, *The German Legends of the Hairy Anchorite with Two Old French Texts of La Vie de Saint Jehan Paulus* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1935).

²⁴ See Nelleke Moser, *De strijd voor rhetorica* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2001), pp.78-85, Anne-Laure van Bruaene, "'In principio erat verbum': Drama, devotion, reformation and urban association in Low Countries", in *Early modern confraternities in Europe and the Americas*, ed. Christopher F. Black and Pamela Gravestock (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 64-80.

²⁵ See Bas Jongenelen and Ben Parsons, 'The Verses of *Mariken van Nieumeghen*', *Dutch Crossing* 32 (2008): 116-22.

‘sporen van rijmen’ occasionally betray signs of the intricate, repetitive verse forms favoured by the *rederijkers*: for instance, the section in which John’s father laments his son’s desire to become a hermit twice contains the line ‘daerom so biddic u’ (‘therefore I beg of you’), which recalls the *stockregel* (‘refrain’) of such formal pieces as the *refrein* or *rondeel*. It therefore seems probable that the *Historie* took the same route to the press, and is also a product of the *rederijkers*. Indeed, a number of analysts have voiced precisely this conclusion, and assumed that the play is the work of an unknown member of the *kamers*.²⁶

Although the dramatic origins of the play are fairly widely agreed on, this consensus has still not silenced critical debate. In fact, Kalff’s position has if anything opened up a greater range of interpretations, inviting further speculation about the nature of the play itself and its manner of its performance. Kalff, along with Debaene and Ter Laan after him, assumed that the piece was a more or less conventional stage-drama, in which a company of actors would perform as a range of different characters: hence he refers to ‘een vrij groot aantal personen’ (‘a fairly extensive cast of characters’) as evidence of the text’s theatrical roots.²⁷ On the other hand, Worp conceived the piece along alternative lines, describing it as an *elegie-comedie*: a dramatic monologue somewhere between a play and a declamation, rather like the numerous comic monologues that have survived from the period. According to Worp, the play would originally call for a single actor to perform a variety of different parts, altering his voice accordingly: ‘it was probably acted out by a single person, who changed his voice for every role he played, and explained the words with gestures’.²⁸ Most recently Herman Pleij has argued that the piece could well be a *poppenspel* (puppet-play), as its structure preserves the characteristic forms of this once-popular type of entertainment. This implies that the prose sections were not later interpolations, but played a direct function in performance, as they would be recited by the puppeteer himself to set the scenes for the verse dialogue taking place between his marionettes.²⁹ Of course, any of these possibilities is equally likely, as all have at least a degree of precedence in the dramatic culture of the Low Countries. Owing to the absence of an actual text of the play, or any records relating to its performance, none can be deemed more probable than the others. All that can be said for certain is that, as a *leesdrama*,

²⁶ Boekennoogen, ‘De Nederlandsche volksboeken’, p.251; Hummelen, *Repertorium*, p.279.

²⁷ Kalff, ‘Bijdragen tot de geschiedenis’, p.305.

²⁸ ‘Zij werd waarschijnlijk door één persoon voorgedragen, die zijne stem veranderde bij elke rol, die hij weergaf, en de woorden door gebaren verduidelijkte’: J.A. Worp, ‘Is de *Mariken van Nieuwmeegen* geschreven om vertoond te worden?’, *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandse Taal- en Letterkunde* 36 (1917): 152-57 (p.157).

²⁹ Herman Pleij, *Het gevleugelde woord – Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur 1400-1560* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Bert Bakker, 2007), pp.173, 531.

the text as we now have it was intended for a different sort of performance altogether: one that might recall the inherently dramatic nature of medieval reading, along the lines that Clark and Sheingorn have stressed, but one that demanded private and imaginative enactment, rather than more public staging.³⁰ As Coigneau justly states, whatever its origins, the work in its extant form is more of a *historie* than a drama, thoroughly and methodically reworked for readers rather than actors.³¹

As if all this were not complicated enough, the case grows still more difficult when trying to disentangle the sources of this conjectured play. In terms of its narrative structure, the text draws on two folkloric topoi, listed in the Aarne-Thompson-Uther index as 839 ‘One Vice Carries Another With It (The Three Sins of the Hermit)’, and 756a ‘The Self-Righteous Hermit’.³² The first of these dominates the earliest section of the piece, as John is offered a choice of sins by the devil, and chooses drunkenness as the least of these, only to find himself overcome by lust and fear as a result of his intoxication. The second theme comes into play after the abortive pilgrimage to Rome, during John’s time as a wild beast, and culminates with the miracle that liberates him from his guilt. Owing to the traditional nature of these motifs, it is almost impossible to identify a source for the story with any certainty. Although the play’s conflation of them is relatively unusual, the motifs themselves occur in several literatures and cultures. There are documented examples of the ‘Three Sins’ in French, English, German, Irish, Russian, Polish, and Estonian, and even occurrences as far afield as Hebrew, Turkish, Arabic, and Swahili.³³ Likewise, the story of the hermit living as a beast was attached to numerous different saints throughout the Middle Ages, including John Chrysostom, Emilianus, Albanus, and Paul of Thebes; taking a wider view, it also is hinted at in the Persian and Coptic legends surrounding the heresiarch Mani, in the Old Testament account of Nebuchadnezzar’s madness, and even in the Babylonian epic *Gilgamesh*.³⁴ This

³⁰ Robert L.A. Clark and Pamela Sheingorn, ‘Performative Reading: The Illustrated Manuscripts of Arnoul Gréban’s *Mystère de la Passion*’, *European Medieval Drama* 6 (2002): 129–72.

³¹ Dirk Coigneau, ‘Van de *Bliscappen* tot Cammaert, vier eeuwen toneelliteratuur in Brussel’, *De macht van het schone woord - Literatuur in Brussel van de 14de tot de 18de eeuw*, ed. Jozef Janssens and Remco Sleiderink (Leuven: Davidsfonds, 2003), pp. 213–233 (pp.226–27).

³² Hans-Jörg Uther, *The Types of International Folktales: a Classification and Bibliography*, 3 vols. (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedekatemia, 2004), I, pp.410, 471.

³³ Archer Taylor, ‘The Three Sins of the Hermit’, *Modern Philology* 20 (1922): 61–94.

³⁴ Williams and Allen, *German Legends of the Hairy Anchorite*, pp.14–15; Werner Sundermann, ‘On Human Races, Semi-Human Beings and Monsters’, *The light and the darkness: studies in Manichaeism and its world*, ed. Paul Allan Mirecki and Jason BeDuhn (Leiden: Brill, 2001), pp.181–99; Charles Allyn Williams, *Oriental Affinities of the Legend of the Hairy Anchorite*, 2 vols. (Urbana: The University of Illinois, 1925), I, 52–55; Patrick Malrieu, *Qui veut faire l’ange fait la bête! De la gwerz bretonne de Yann Girin à la légende hagiographique et au mythe*, Centre de recherche bretonne et celtique (Rennes: Tir, 2010).

form of penance is also a staple element in medieval secular literature, appearing in such romances as *Sir Orfeo*, the Tristram and Lancelot cycles, the *lais* of Marie de France, and the story of Robert the Devil, which appeared in Dutch as *Robrecht die Duyvel* around the same time as the *Historie*.³⁵ The wide distribution of parallels has in fact allowed scholars to link the *Historie* to some fairly remote texts: Maximilianus, for instance, claims a connection to the thirteenth-century Persian writer Saadi, while Te Winkel relates it to legends surrounding the early desert fathers.³⁶ Given this wealth of analogues it is difficult to pin down a single source with any confidence. All that can be said is that the story weaves together two traditions that were well-known and widely disseminated during the Middle Ages.

A more intriguing question, however, is whether the text has a lost Middle English precursor, which the Dutch play might be adapting or even directly translating. The basic fact that the central character is English, with a cult based in England, obviously signals this possibility, as does the northern English setting of much of the action. Although this idea has been raised intermittently by Dutch commentators, such as Hummelen and Boekenooogen, the pervading assumption of most Dutch criticism is that the piece was cobbled together by a Dutch or Flemish *rederijker*. The first critic to investigate the English roots of the piece with any seriousness was Alan Deighton, in a group of three interrelated essays published in the early 1990s. Deighton assembled a small but suggestive group of sources that imply an English tradition of John as a hairy hermit: an otherwise inexplicable reference by Julian of Norwich to ‘seynt Johnn of Beverley’ being ‘sufferyd...to falle’ before gaining ‘manyfolde more grace...by the contricyon and the mekenesse that he had in hys lyuyng’; a sequence of illuminations in a fourteenth-century English manuscript of Gregory’s *Decretals*, which also bring the same two narrative motifs together; and a frieze at the church of St Hubert, Idwsorth, which places a hairy hermit among a range of saints also named John.³⁷ This led Deighton to conclude that a lost Middle English text may be the ultimate source of the *Historie*: as he writes, ‘the immediate antecedents of *Jan van Beverley* are in general clear: a

³⁵ See P. Doob, *Nebuchadnezzar's Children: Conventions of Madness in Middle English Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), pp.158–207; Rob Resoort, *Robrecht de Duyvel* (Muiderberg: Dick Coutinho, 1980).

³⁶ P. Maximilianus, ‘De bekoring van Jan van Beverley’, *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandse Taal- en Letterkunde* 72 (1954): 35–37; Jan te Winkel, *De ontwikkelingsgang der Nederlandsche letterkunde* (Utrecht: HES Publishers, 1973), II, p.399.

³⁷ Alan Deighton, ‘Julian of Norwich’s Knowledge of the Life of St John of Beverley’, *Notes and Queries* 40 (1993): 440–43; Alan R. Deighton, ‘The Literary Context of the Wall-Painting at Idwsorth, Hampshire’, *Antiquities Journal* 73 (1994): 6975. A further piece of possible evidence is discussed in Ben Parsons, ‘Saint John of Beverley’, *Folklore Society News* 67 (2012): 4–5.

fifteenth-century Dutch version, possibly a play, in verse, based on an English version linking the story to St John of Beverley. This must have existed by the last quarter of the fourteenth century'.³⁸ However, in spite of this confident conclusion, Deighton's views do not seem to have found wide acceptance. In her recent survey of medieval drama, for instance, Lynette Muir emphatically dismisses this possibility, concluding that 'the legend is quite unknown in England'.³⁹

It is of course difficult to prove this case one way or another, just as it is to reconstruct the form of the original play. On balance, however, it seems probable that the narrative is derived from an English story, if not necessarily a fully-developed English text. Some proof of the origin of the story can be drawn from the *Historie* itself. Although the main components of the narrative stem from a widespread stock of topoi and myths, which cannot be tied to any specific provenance, there are important links between the *Historie* and the life of John, at least as it was understood by the later Middle Ages. This suggests that he was not arbitrarily inserted into the narrative, but that his biography might have given rise to the legend, or at least have invited the addition of other motifs. Two elements in particular are consistent with the later accounts of his life. The first of these is the noble birth of John. John's high social status is reiterated throughout the *Historie*, as he is from the first identified as son and heir of 'die grave van Beverley' ('the count of Beverley'). As well as making his fall into depravity all the more poignant, this feature also plays a direct role in John's seclusion and in the commission of his sins: John's rejection of the world is also a rejection of his father's wealth and power, and the comparative luxury of his father's 'hof' ('court') supplies the wine on which he gets drunk. Although Bede mentions nothing about John's descent, his high birth had become an established fact by the end of the Middle Ages. It is first explicitly mentioned in the eleventh-century *Chronica Pontificum Ecclesiae Eboracensis*, which gives the following potted biography for him: 'The fifth to govern the church of York was the sainted and praiseworthy Archbishop John, who was of the English nation, of noble birth, and as a child was delivered over to Archbishop Thedoro of Canterbury to be trained with letters, on account of his excelling in the Scriptures by quickness of wit'.⁴⁰ Folcard may also allude to

³⁸ Alan R. Deighton, 'The Sins of John of Saint John of Beverley: The Case of the Dutch "volksboek" *Jan van Beverley*', *Leuvense Bijdragen* 82 (1993): 227-46 (p.243).

³⁹ Lynette Muir, *Love and Conflict in Medieval Drama: the Plays and their Legacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2010), p.25.

⁴⁰ 'Quintus Eboracensem rexit ecclesiam sanctus et digne laudabilis archiepiscopus Johannes, hic de gente anglorum, natalibus nobilis, puer Thedoro Cantuariensi archiepiscopo ad imbuendum literis traditus, propter ejus excellentem in Scripturis ingenii vivacitatem': *Chronica Pontificum Ecclesiae Eboracensis*, in *The*

this notion when he calls the young John ‘gloriosus Dei miles finetenus in Christi perseveravit militia’ (‘a knight for the glory of God serving in the army of Christ’).⁴¹ The *Historie*’s characterisation of John as a young nobleman is therefore consistent with his later legend.

A second point of overlap is the tradition of John living for a period as a hermit. This is also not mentioned in Bede, but by the time that Folcard wrote his life of John it had obviously been accepted as a major part of John’s ministry. According to Folcard, ‘this same prelate beloved by God dedicated a church to the honour of Blessed Michael the Archangel in a village called Erneshowe, not far from where the river Tyne flows. St John would remain there frequently, in fasting, and prayer, and the distribution of alms, and especially at the time of Lent, because that place was remote from the greater number of people’.⁴² The *Chronica* echoes this point, also noting similar activity: ‘he preached the word of God in nearby regions to those of the English people who were still ignorant, to draw them from heretical living, on the bank of the river Tyne in the place which is called Erneshowe, which means “the mountain of eagles”; for a long time he gave himself up to God, in the great purity of contemplation’.⁴³ This tradition of withdrawal and contemplation perhaps also underlies an epithet that is occasionally assigned to him, that of ‘alterum Eliam’ (‘second Elijah’).⁴⁴ Again the *Historie* takes up this feature, referring to him as ‘die heremijt’ throughout, and even allowing his withdrawal to eclipse his activity as bishop, healer and monastic founder. All of this suggests that John has not been dropped into the story merely as an afterthought, but that the story might have been extrapolated from the accepted facts of his life. At least, elements within his later *vitae*, if not his actual history, might have allowed the two story motifs to become attached to him, providing the stem on to which the later legend could be grafted. It is in fact possible to develop these links even further. Folcard’s claim that John dedicated a church to St Michael might account for the diabolical visitor of the *Historie*. If John was believed to have founded a church on the site of his hermitage, then it is not unreasonable to

Historians of the Church of York and its Archbishops, ed. Raine, II.326. See Wilson, *Life and After-Life of John of Beverley*, pp.21-22.

⁴¹Folcard, ‘Vita Sancti Johannis’, I.243-44.

⁴² ‘Dedicaverat idem dilectus Deo praesul ecclesiam in honorem Beati Michaelis Archangeli in villula dicta Herneshou, non longe a defluente ane Tyne fluvii. Hic frequenter, et maxime Quadragesimali tempore, quod a populari frequentia locus remotior erat, in jejuniis, et orationibus, et eleemosynarum largitionibus intentus Sanctus Johannes manebat’: *ibid.*, I.246-47.

⁴³ ‘In regionibus circumstantibus, verbum Dei rudibus adhuc Anglorum populis evangelizavit, ad hereticam se conferens vitam, super ripam Tyne fluvii in loco qui Arneshaug dicitur, quod interpretatur Mons Aquiliae, diu seipsum Deo in magna contemplationis puritate immolavit’: *Chronica*, II.327.

⁴⁴ Ketell, ‘Miracula’, I.271.

assume that a myth arose to explain this circumstance, claiming that an angel came to him during his seclusion; this in turn may have been distorted into the demonic tempter recorded by the Dutch text. Either way, the story of John as a hairy hermit suggests some basic familiarity with the substance of his official life, developing hints that are already there. This in turn suggests that the story does indeed have an English origin, on the basis that detailed knowledge of John is unlikely to have been widespread outside England.

However, accepting that the story is English in origin does not fully resolve matters. If anything it raises further questions, deepening the mystery of how and why it entered the culture of the Low Countries. As Malcolm Jones writes, it becomes all the more difficult to establish why a Dutch-speaking playwright and a succession of printers should think ‘a Flemish readership...at all interested in the life of an English saint of only local interest even in England’.⁴⁵ While this perhaps overstates John’s obscurity, as the use of his banner by a run of English kings shows that his cult was more national than regional in extent, the basic point remains: on the face of it there is little obvious reason why he should have been known in the Low Countries, let alone thought an apt subject for a play and chapbook. However, it is worth noting that the story of John is not a lone instance of *rederijkers* drawing on English material for their *spelen*. A little later than the *Historie* is the farce *Den jongen geheeten Jacke* (‘The Boy Named Jack’). This also survives in a chapbook edition, printed by Michiel Hillen in 1528, and derives its plot from a popular fifteenth-century English poem known variously as *Jacke and his Stepdame* and *The Frere and the Boye*.⁴⁶ A further possible case is *Die Eerste Bliscap van Maria* (‘The First Joy of Mary’), composed at Brussels in c.1444, which is close in form to the Mary play in the N-Town collection: however, uncertainties of dating make it difficult to establish the line of influence here.⁴⁷ The traffic could also move in the opposite direction, with *Elckerlijc/Everyman* being the best-known example.⁴⁸ In fact, this exchange of narratives and themes has driven some commentators to see English and Dutch urban drama as ‘part of a shared culture’ spanning the North Sea.⁴⁹ However, John is

⁴⁵ Malcolm Jones, *The Secret Middle Ages* (Stroud: Sutton, 2002), p.24.

⁴⁶ See G.J. Boekennoogen, *Historie van den jongen geheeten Jacke* (Leiden: Brill, 1905); Melissa Furrow, *Ten Fifteenth-Century Comic Poems* (New York: Garland, 1985), pp.67-156.

⁴⁷ Bart Ramakers, *Spelen en figuren: toneelkunst en processiecultuur in Oudenaarde tussen Middeleeuwen en Moderne Tijd* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1996), p.379.

⁴⁸ A point reinforced by the recent dual language edition, *Everyman and Its Dutch Original, Elckerlijc*, ed. Clifford Davidson, Martin W. Walsh and Ton J. Broos, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007).

⁴⁹ Claire Sponsler, *Drama and Resistance: Bodies, Goods and Theatricality in Late Medieval England* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1997), p.96. See also Leonard Forster, ‘Literary relations between the

different from these other cases, as it is much less obvious why he should have significance outside Yorkshire, let alone England. Unlike this comedic and pious material, which would prove equally funny or instructive to English and Flemish audiences, John is much more rooted to a specific place; as a consequence, his appearance in the Low Countries is much harder to explain.

Nonetheless, John's close connection to a particular place may also account for the transmission of his story. The fact is that John was perhaps not quite as remote from the fifteenth-century Low Countries as might be assumed. If we consider the part played by Beverley as a centre of trade, and the significance of John's cult to the town itself, then links can be traced between the saint and the Netherlands. Although modern-day Beverley is a fairly minor market-town, recording a population of 17,549 in the 2001 census, in the medieval and early modern period it was one of the most important settlements in England.⁵⁰ According to the poll tax returns for 1377, Beverley had 2,663 taxpayers at the end of the fourteenth century, meaning that its total population can be placed around the 4,400 mark.⁵¹ This would make Beverley not only the second largest town in Yorkshire after York itself, but the second largest in the north of England, ahead of Newcastle, Hull, Durham and Carlisle. The principal reason for this pre-eminence was commerce. There was a market at the town from an early date, and trading activity was apparently encouraged by successive archbishops of York, who had possession of the town from the reign of Edward the Confessor onwards.⁵² In particular Beverley attained significance as a major hub in the wool trade. A merchant guild was established as early as the first decades of the twelfth century, and the town benefited from its proximity to Coverham Abbey and Bridlington Priory, whose produce passed through its market.⁵³ By the turn of the fourteenth century, Beverley had even overtaken York in exports of wool: as T.H. Lloyd writes, between 1298 and 1305 'about 70 Beverley men and women can be identified' in customs accounts, in comparison to York's

Low Countries, England and Germany', *Dutch Crossing* 24 (1984), pp.16-31; Alexandra F. Johnston, 'Traders and Playmakers: English Guildsmen and the Low Countries', *England and the Low Countries in the Late Middle Ages*, ed. Caroline M. Barron and Nigel Saul (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), pp.99-114; Alexandra F. Johnston, 'The Continental Connection: A Reconsideration', *The Stage as a Mirror: Civic Theatre in Late Medieval Europe*, ed. A.E. Knight (London: Brewer, 1997), pp.7-24.

⁵⁰ 'Area: Beverley CP', Office for National Statistics, 28 April 2004 <<http://neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/>>, [Accessed 28 September 2011].

⁵¹ W.G. Hoskins, *Local History in England*, 3rd ed. (Harlow: Longman, 1984), pp.277-78.

⁵² Rosemary E. Horrox, 'Medieval Beverley', *A History of the County of York, East Riding*, ed. KJ Allison, The Victoria History of the Counties of England, 6 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969-89), VI.2-62 (p.34).

⁵³ Adrian Robert Bell, Chris Brooks, and Paul Dryburgh, *The English Wool Market, c. 1230-1327* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2007), p.55.

56, and ‘three of the four merchants who exported more than 1000 sacks’ came from the town.⁵⁴

Such a degree of involvement in the wool-trade obviously brought Beverley and its citizens into sustained contact with the Flemings. The earliest links between Flanders and the town were created soon after the Norman conquest, as the Fleming Drogo de Bevrere was apparently awarded extensive territories in East Riding: the Domesday Book shows that the ‘terra Drogonis de Bevere’ comprised most of Holderness.⁵⁵ Although Drogo had apparently returned to the continent by 1087, when his estates were transferred to Odo of Champagne, the connections between Beverley and Flanders remained.⁵⁶ The presence of a more or less permanent community of Flemings is attested in the street-name Flammengaria or Flemingate, which is first recorded in the twelfth century, and is still part of the town centre of modern-day Beverley.⁵⁷ Occasionally documents allow specific individuals to come into view: a twelfth-century property charter in the cartulary of Rievaulx Abbey, for instance, places one Boidin of Flanders in the town.⁵⁸ Such traces continue even after Beverley was eclipsed by Hull as a commercial centre, as sixteenth-century parish registers and other records contain a number of Dutch and Flemish names. In 1565 ‘M. Jaine’ is listed as a ‘suscepatrix’ or godmother, and in 1576 John Haunce is recorded paying eight pence ‘for a concord’ with another tradesman: since these names are probably derived from the Dutch patronymic ‘Hans’ or ‘Jan’, they suggest some connection with the Low Countries.⁵⁹ Less ambiguous are a clutch of clearly toponymic surnames: Christopher Fleemyng in 1571, Leonard Burgaine in 1575, John Flunders in 1618, and Francis Holland in 1562.⁶⁰ Flemings also leave traces of activity in the religious life of the town, as some sources name Robert of

⁵⁴ T.H. Lloyd, *The English Wool Trade in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p.129.

⁵⁵ Margaret L. Faull and Marie Stinson, *Domesday Book: Yorkshire*, 2 vols. (Chichester: Phillimore, 1986), II.323-25.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, I, p.lxxxv.

⁵⁷ A.H. Smith, *The Place-Names of the East-Riding of Yorkshire and York* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1937), p.195.

⁵⁸ J.C. Atkinson, *Cartularium Abbathiae de Rievallae*, Surtees Society 83 (Durham: Andrews and Co, 1889), p.84.

⁵⁹ J. Dennett, *Beverley Borough Records, 1575-1821* (Leeds: Yorkshire Archaeological Society, 1933), p.3; Keith Holt, *The Parish Register of Beverley St Mary 1561-1638*, Parish Registers Series CLXV (Leeds: Yorkshire Archaeological Society, 2002), p.5; Charles Wareing Bardsley, *A Dictionary of English and Welsh Surnames* (London: Frowde, 1901), pp.354-55; Henry Harrison, *Surnames of the United Kingdom: A Concise Etymological Dictionary* (London: Eaton, 1912), pp.186-87, 233.

⁶⁰ Holt, *Parish Register of Beverley St Mary*, pp.97, 11, 159, 2.

Ghent as provost of Beverley Minster between 1132 and 1142.⁶¹ Nor did this movement flow in one direction alone, as Beverley tradesmen can also be located in the Low Countries. In 1314 Walter de Burton and John Hacoun, ‘merchants and burgesses of Beverley’, were seized at Flanders by the commander of the French army, and deprived of money to the value of £225.⁶² The wills of Beverley merchants also periodically mention properties in northern France and the Netherlands, with two such examples dating from 1407 and 1436.⁶³ The familiarity of Beverley merchants with the Low Countries was in fact sufficiently strong to be exploited by the crown on occasion: in 1336 Edward II enlisted Stephen la Gard of Beverley for a diplomatic mission to Flanders.⁶⁴

The links between medieval Beverley and Flanders, and the fact that their common participation in the wool-trade knitted them together, begins to explain how the story of John travelled to the Low Countries. In fact, it seems more than likely that this commercial activity would have brought knowledge of the saint to the Netherlands, given the important symbolic function that the cult of John played for the town. As Keith Stringer summarises, John provided a clear anchorage point for Beverley’s sense of identity, ‘as communal cohesion was reinforced by the focal role St John of Beverley played in local religious life and social regulation...above all, it was the magnetic power of St John’s cult that set Beverley firmly within a network of larger interactions’.⁶⁵ This role is nowhere more visible than in the pageantry of the town, which often treated John as a foundation for its social hierarchies. Every Rogation Monday, for instance, the relics of John were carried through the town in a formal procession from the minster to the chapel of St Mary. As well as showing collective devotion to John, the event became an opportunity to exhibit the most powerful groups within Beverley: each guild was obliged to build a decorated ‘wooden castle’ (*castellum ligneum*) along the route, housing its members, and stiff fines were incurred for any absences.⁶⁶ Given the central role that John’s cult played in Beverley’s civic life, and that the *Historie* probably originates from the mercantile culture of the *rederijkers*, it seems that Dutch-speaking

⁶¹ Archibald Leach, *Memorials of Beverley Minster: The Chapter Act Book of the Collegiate Church of St John of Beverley*, 2 vols. (Durham: Andrews and Co., 1903), II, pp.xi-xii.

⁶² George Poulson, *Beverlac; or the Antiquities and History of the Town of Beverley*, 2 vols. (London: George Scaum, 1829), I, p.88.

⁶³ Jenny Kermode, *Medieval Merchants: York, Beverley and Hull in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p.169.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p.49.

⁶⁵ Keith Stringer, ‘States, liberties and communities in medieval Britain and Ireland’, *Liberties and Identities in the Medieval British Isles*, ed. Michael Prestwich (Cambridge: Brewer, 2008), p.25.

⁶⁶ Arthur F. Leach, *Beverley Town Documents* (London: Benard Quaritch, 1900), p.99.

merchants must have encountered John through the channel of trade. This may have piqued their curiosity about him, leading to the dramatisation of his story by one or other of the *kamers*.

But perhaps more importantly, these trade-links also suggest why Thomas van der Noot thought the book marketable to the burghers of Brussels. Some sense of his thoughts towards it can be gauged from the other saint's lives he printed as chapbooks: there are two further examples, the *Legende van S. Rombout* (c.1505), and the *Legende van Sinte Alena* (c.1518). What is notable about these texts is that they have clearly been selected for their direct significance to the religious life of Brussels. As Pleij puts it, both are 'locale heiligen uit de buurt' ('local saints of the surrounding region'): Rumbold was a British missionary martyred at Mechelen, and Alena was an early convert to Christianity born at Dilbeek, who was dismembered on the orders of her parents.⁶⁷ Since both Mechelen and Dilbeek are close to Brussels, Van der Noot obviously limited his choice of hagiography to those saints with closest proximity to his readership. This policy has clear implication for the *Historie*, as it suggests that John was held to be a saint with close relevance to Brussels. Van der Noot's readership perhaps also considered him a local saint, in a manner of speaking, as his cult was firmly in their orbit, impinging on their world via the wool-trade. What the story of John perhaps highlights, then, is a close convergence between the vernacular cultures of Flanders and northern England at the close of the Middle Ages. The level of trade between the two areas fostered strong ties between them, to the extent that elements from one culture could be seen as an automatic part of the other. The case of John, like *Den jongen geheeten Jacke* after it, shows Flanders and Yorkshire growing sufficiently close that material originating from one could be treated as directly pertinent to the other.

By way of a conclusion, one final point worth addressing is whether the Dutch text might preserve one of the most elusive forms in medieval drama, an English miracle play. Deighton seems to have thought this at least a possibility: he implies that the *Historie*'s source-text may have been dramatic in character, 'although...no longer stageable', but ultimately concedes that 'we can only guess...at the form of the English original'.⁶⁸ Unfortunately, in considering this issue, we arrive at the outer limits of what even informed conjecture can deliver. There is little in the Dutch text that suggests it is a direct translation: its verse portions contain few of

⁶⁷ Pleij, *De wereld volgens Thomas van der Noot*, p.39.

⁶⁸ Deighton, 'Julian of Norwich's Knowledge', p.443.

the formulaic tags that pad out the lines of *Everyman*, for instance, which might suggest adaptation from another language.⁶⁹ Moreover, in several respects the play neatly fits the wider context of *rederijker* drama. This can be seen clearly in its emphasis on the youth of John, who is identified as a ‘ionghelinck’ (‘youth’) from the first: since he has apparently just ceased to be a child and gained knowledge of ‘goet ende quaet’ (‘good and evil’), this would place him around the age of fourteen, according to the traditional series of life-stages developed by Isidore of Seville and Bartholomew of England.⁷⁰ The fact that the sinful protagonist is characterised as a young man reflects one of the key concerns of the *kamers*, which did often function as schools, training their younger members in literacy, deportment and citizenship.⁷¹ In fact, for this reason several groups, such as Pax Vobis (Peace to You) at Oudenaarde, are called ‘scolen van der retorijken’ (‘schools of rhetoric’) in the earliest records.⁷² Their plays also show particular concern for the spiritual development of adolescents: in the 1539 a festival was held at Ghent, in which several of the plays performed were *Everyman*-style moralities, focusing specifically on characters identified as ‘een jongeman’ (‘a young man’).⁷³ Given its similar focus on the conduct of the young, and what might go wrong when they are left without the control of a parent or community, the *Historie* is largely consonant with the culture of the *rederijkers*.

Nevertheless, the idea that the text preserves an otherwise unknown English play remains a tempting prospect, and does have a couple of circumstantial details in its favour. In the first place, its connection to Beverley is suggestive, since this town has long been recognised as an important centre for medieval drama, as work by Arthur Leach, Diana Wyatt and Alan Nelson has shown.⁷⁴ A lost Corpus Christi cycle, possibly comprising as many as thirty-eight plays, was performed there from 1377, and was established as an annual custom in 1390 and 1411; alongside this there were other occasions for performance, such as an isolated reference

⁶⁹ See E.R. Tigg, ‘Is Elckerlijc Prior to Everyman?’, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 38 (1939): 568-96.

⁷⁰ See Michael E. Goodich, *From Birth to Old Age: The Human Life Cycle in Medieval Thought, 1250-1350* (New York: University Press of America, 1989); Shulamith Shahar, *Childhood in the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 1990), p.202.

⁷¹ See Herman Pleij, *Nederlandse literatuur in de late Middeleeuwen* (Utrecht: H. en S. Uitgevers, 1990), pp.158-191.

⁷² D.J. van der Meersch, *Kronyk der Rederykkamers van Andenaerde, van de vroegste tyder af tot omtrent den Jare 1830* (Ghent: F. en E. Gyselynck, 1844), p.69.

⁷³ B.H. Ern  and L.M. van Dis, *De Gentse Spelen van 1539*, 2 vols. (’s-Gravenhage: M. Nijhoff, 1982), I.340-68, 434-68.

⁷⁴ Leach, *Beverley Town Documents*; Arthur Leach, ‘Some English Plays and Players’; Diana Wyatt, ‘Performance and Ceremonial in Beverley Before 1642’, (unpublished doctoral thesis, York University, 1983); Alan H. Nelson, *Medieval English Stage: Corpus Christi Pageants and Plays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), pp.88-99.

to a play of the Resurrection in c.1220, and a summer Pater Noster play first recorded in 1441.⁷⁵ Even if, as Lawrence Clopper has recently suggested, these plays were more likely to be ‘tableaux vivantes with speeches...spectacles rather than dramas’, it is clear that Beverley fostered a large number and range of performances: in fact, records throughout the fifteenth century refer to guilds being fined for negligence in performing the Corpus Christi plays, underscoring the importance of such events to the borough authorities.⁷⁶ While the records do not refer to anything that even roughly corresponds to the events of the *Historie*, it is entirely possible that a play at Beverley recounting the sensational, apocryphal life of the town’s founder may be an ancestor of the Dutch text. The Pater Noster plays certainly seem to have had a comparable emphasis on sin, as each ‘ludus’ was apparently dedicated to one of the seven deadly sins: John’s *vita* might well have provided a pointed example of pride or lechery for the edification of Beverley’s townspeople.⁷⁷

Along the same lines, it is also worth observing that John is in fact given a peripheral connection to drama in one of his later miracles. A thirteenth-century collection of John’s *miracula* tells the story of a boy climbing on to the roof of Beverley minster to witness a ‘play of the passion of the Lord’ (‘repraesentatio Dominicae resurrectionis’) at Easter, and falling after being pursued by the town watch. Although killed by the fall, once the boy was taken into the minster he was restored to life, apparently owing to John’s intercession. Interestingly enough, the author of this account emphasises the semblance between this miracle and theatre, making John into the producer of a new, more divine spectacle which both supplants and complements the aborted play: ‘so it came to pass, that the multitude of the people outside the church, who were not able to participate in the performance, saw more marvellous proof of the resurrection of the body inside the church; and not only of the resurrection, but of the passion of the Lord’.⁷⁸ This episode therefore suggests a certain link between John and dramatic performance. John not only lends his approval to drama through this miracle, saving the life of a boy who sought to watch the *repraesentatio*, but effectively participates in it, staging his own educative spectacle within his minster; what he performs

⁷⁵ Leach, *Beverley Town Documents*, pp.33-34; Nelson, *Medieval English Stage*, pp.97-98; Lancashire, *Dramatic Texts and Records*, pp.82-84.

⁷⁶ Lawrence M. Clopper, *Drama, Play and Game: English Festive Culture in the Medieval and Early Modern Period* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p.153.

⁷⁷ Lancashire, *Dramatic Texts*, p.84.

⁷⁸ ‘Factum est ergo, ut qui prae populi multitudine extra ecclesiam repraesentationi non poterant interesse, mirabilius viderent resurrectionis indicium intra corpus ecclesiae; et non tantum resurrectionis, sed passionis Dominicae’: ‘Miracula Alia Sancti Johannes Episcopi’, *Historians of the Church of York*, I.329-30.

inside the church is simply a mirror of what was due to be staged outside it. While this again does not prove that the roots of the *Historie* definitely lie in Beverley, it might hint at an association between John and drama during the Middle Ages, which in turn might imply that his legend did lend itself at some point to performance.

Taking a longer view, the wider culture of performance in medieval England also makes it possible that the text could have emerged from such roots. Other surviving English miracle plays do show that this form of narrative, with an intensely sinful man becoming reconciled with God, did have a presence in medieval English drama. An interesting point of comparison is the early fifteenth-century fragment *Dux Moraud*, which resembles the *Historie* in the overall trajectory of its narrative.⁷⁹ Both plays focus on a nobleman, revolve around incest, murder, and repentance, and feature a sequence of gradually snowballing sins. The title-character of *Dux Moraud*, whose speaking role is the only segment of the play to have survived, ravishes and impregnates his own daughter, in much the same manner that John treats his sister, before driving her to kill her mother and the resulting child; the climax of both plays is the penance performed by the main character, and his ultimate restoration to grace, even though Moraud is fatally ‘smetyn in þe fas/ With carful strokys’ before he can carry out his restitution. While it is difficult to claim that this sort of story is typical of the English miracle plays, owing to the paucity of surviving texts, it does show that this material was being performed in England at the close of the Middle Ages. The excesses of the *Historie*, in other words, might not be wholly aberrant, as similar patterns are documented elsewhere in medieval English drama. Although we might believe that such ‘lurid subject matter’ is ‘Jacobean in sensibility’ rather than medieval, as John Coldewey has written in relation to *Dux Moraud*, these themes may fit better into English dramatic culture than such judgements allow.⁸⁰ All in all, it remains impossible to determine whether or not the *Historie* preserves a lost English play. Nevertheless, there is no reason to discount the idea out of hand, as the parallels in English drama and the connection to Beverley make it at least a possibility.

⁷⁹ Norman Davis, *Non-Cycle Plays and Fragments*, EETS s.s. 1 (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp.106-13.

⁸⁰ John C. Coldewey, *Early English Drama* (London: Routledge 1993), p.17.

The History of John of Beverley⁸¹

Here begins the very wonderful history of the good hermit John, son of the count of Beverley, who was born in England.

In former days there lived a rich and powerful man in England, and he was count of Beverley. This count was a widower, as his lady had passed away. But he had from her body two beautiful children, who were a son called John and a daughter named Collette. These two children he very lovingly and amiably raised, as a good father is obliged to do.

How John of Beverley scorned the world and said farewell to his father the count and became a hermit.

And when this youth John of Beverley grew older, coming to manhood, and had understanding of good and evil, he came to think to himself that the world was full of deceit, and that one had but a brief time to live on this wretched world. Therefore he made a plan for himself, that he would abandon the world and all of its false works, inspired by the love of our sweet Lord, and he spoke to himself thusly:

Deceit of the world, false and empty,
 [I shall forsake you now and forever.]
 You are nothing but a vale of tears,
 For this living is all a decline,
 Here there is no eternal city.
 I wish to seek out a path
 Other than that the world has taught me,
 As he that turns himself to the world,
 He will certainly be abused:
 For he that serves the world, the world rewards.
 Therefore I wish to forsake this world
 And go and lead a holy life,
 Serving God through every hour,
 And lay down in devotion,
 And beseech God in my prayers,

⁸¹ Our translation is based on the edition of Boekennoogen: G.J. Boekennoogen, *Historie van Jan van Beverley* (Leiden: Brill, 1903), pp.1-35. Boekennoogen in turn based his text on Van der Noot's 1512 edition, supplemented by lines from the Van Liesveldt imprint of 1543. We use square brackets to indicate lines taken from Van Liesveldt. The woodcuts are also derived from Van der Noot's edition, and are reproduced with kind permission by Cees Klapwijk at Digitale Bibliotheek voor de Nederlandse Letteren (dbnl.org).

Night and day, early and late,
 That he might forgive my misdeeds,
 And protect me from all sins;
 Since I notice in these hours
 He who pledges his heart to God,
 And holds himself to the holy Ten Commandments,
 Will receive by this a greater reward
 Than he that stays in service to the world.
 Therefore I wish my immature youth
 To be given over early to the virtues,
 For I observe in my heart,
 That virtue is the greatest good of all
 By which one may win the kingdom of heaven.

And as this good and holy youth John thus stood against the world and despised it so bitterly, his father the count of Beverley came up to him and was very surprised by the words that his son said, that he would forsake him and all the world. And he spoke to him in this way: 'My beloved and favoured son John, what grieves you that you wish to leave me, my court and my land, where you have and will have everything you want? Therefore it surprises me greatly that you wish to leave me; this shall, I think, cost me my life, since I have no other security than you. That is why I plead with you, my dear son, that you will change your intentions and stay with me. I will pay you gold, silver and possessions aplenty, and I will acquire a rich wife for you so that you will be honoured forever, and I will make you lord of the land and countship of Beverley. That is why I plead that you will stay with me'.

IMAGE 1

When the youth heard the count his father say this, he spoke to him with sweet words as follows: 'My very redoubtable father, my lord, you plead with me that I would stay with you. This I yearn to do, and if you can make me a promise I will do as you bid. But if you cannot do this then I will no longer remain in your court, even though you may kill me for it'. And the count, understanding his son's words, answered him thusly and said: 'My dear son, ask of me whatever you wish and it shall be done by me for you'. 'Lord father', the young man said, 'I therefore plead with you to banish death out of your land, so that he will never again come here, nor kill any man in this land; otherwise I will immediately part from you

and become a hermit my whole life long in a wasteland, without coming to your court again, for riches and pleasures are all fleeting and against the soul. This is why, dear father, I will go to search for unchanging things and my soul's salvation'.

When the count heard these words he began to cry heavily and spoke to him with these sad words:

O son, sadly I do not have this power,
So I cannot claim I can do this.
No one can escape the death
That God wishes to allocate him.
I wish I knew who has advised you
And who brought you to choose this life.

THE COUNT'S SON:⁸² Father, all my soul's strength
Has been touched within by God,
So that above all I would love him,
For he is my Lord, my God.
Also it is given in the first commandment
That men should love him above all,
It is utterly right that we should love him,
Since he is father of us all, I let you know,
Who is enthroned in heaven,
And who came down here for us
And who has assumed humanity,
Born from a pure virgin.

THE COUNT: John, son, you have chosen what is best.
May God always inspire you to goodness.
I will henceforth keep silent for you
And I will never again impede you.
Pray for me to our Lord,
That God might also send his grace to me
And be gracious to me, a sinner.
This I plead to you at this time.

JOHN, THE COUNT'S SON: Father, may God forgive you all sins,

⁸² John's character passes through several designations in the text, apparently to reflect his development. He is called at various points 'Des graven sone', 'Die heremijt', 'Sint Ian', and finally 'Sint Ian die heremijt'.

And after this life give you his heaven,
 And also to us all do likewise
 When we depart from this life.
 Now I will go to become a hermit
 And keep myself from all worldly things.
 Friends and family I will leave
 And I will go to lodge in a wood.

And after these words the son kissed the father very many times with crying eyes and with sighing heart, and after many cries and sighs they parted from each other, and the son John immediately went with great devotion to a large forest, and made there a hut to praise our sweet Lord day and night with faithfulness.

IMAGE 2

How the count's daughter sought out her brother who lived in the forest.

And when the good John had lived a while in the forest his sister thought that she would seek out her brother and see if he wanted to continue his austere life and was still living in the forest. She did as she had thought and travelled until as she came to the place where she found her brother and said to him as follows:

It confuses me, brother, in many ways,
 That you have come to this point,
 You might just as well lead a holy life
 Without separating yourself from all company:
 If only one could forbid you
 This life that you have chosen.
 Of a high status we are born,
 And also of a noble lineage.

THE HERMIT: Sister, know that I care little for that,
 For this is nothing more than vanity.
 What does it help if we argue a lot?
 I have no friend nor kinsman so great
 That he should wish to die the death for me,
 Which I must die at any rate.
 But God, who is the eternal good,

Has suffered death for me.
 Here in this vale of tears
 He died out of true love.
 Sister if you would think on this,
 You should turn yourself from all creatures
 And serve God at all times
 For his clear, eternal bliss.

COLLETTE: Certainly John, brother, you speak the truth
 You have taught me very well
 And you tell me the plain truth.
 But there is no man, however bold,
 Who would oppose you here in the land,
 Or also among all of the people
 That should dare to mistreat you:
 They must tolerate you,
 For you are rich and powerful by birth,
 One shall have to honour you here.

THE HERMIT: Sister, I see from you in truth
 That you wish to follow the flesh.
 Had you tasted the soul's desire,
 And understood the nature of your soul,
 You should not speak those things.
 Or if you could taste heavenly things,
 You should not say those things.
 Certainly you have been misguided,
 For I shall tell you how
 The world, the devil and the flesh,
 When all these three have their desires,
 Then the noble soul is lost,
 Which God so amicably has chosen.
 Sister, you should think on this,
 And carry a pure heart within,
 Precious with clarity down to the base,
 In virtue without sin,

And you should give yourself to this
 So that you will hold on to your virginal life
 And an unmarried state.
 That is better counsel for your soul
 Than that you wish me to consider.

COLLETTE: Brother, in all good things
 May God always strengthen you,
 And also in all good works,
 And may God give me his grace.
 I shall live the better all my life by
 That you have made me comprehend here.
 Farewell brother, I will go
 Back again to our father's court.
 But you must know, brother, that I swear to you
 I shall come here often to speak with you,
 And provide everything you lack,
 And I shall do all that you ask.

THE HERMIT: In God's name, sister, that pleases me,
 Come in the name of our Lord.
 But, sister, greet our father for me profusely
 And go: may God lead you.

And after these words the girl parted from her brother and she went into the town to the count, her father, where she thought very often of her brother. The good hermit John stayed alone in his hut, where he served our Lord greatly, inwardly and devoutly.

IMAGE 3

How the devil came to the holy hermit John in the form of an angel.

The devil, noticing that this holy man thus remained steadfast and ardent in the love of our dear Lord, which he greatly hated, thought to himself how he might draw away and deprive the foresaid hermit of the grace and salvation of our dear Lord. This he was very determined to do, and he went for that reason in the form of an angel to the place where he found this holy hermit, and spoke with a feigned sweet voice to him as follows: 'John, I am sent here by my supreme Lord who commands and orders you to perform one of these three sins: drinking

until drunk, rape, or murder. You must do one, or otherwise you shall be damned eternally, since you have angered him by elevating yourself in your holiness; therefore I say to you again that if you do not commit one of these three sins, you shall be damned eternally; so think well what you will do'. And with these words the devil departed from there, and the holy man remained there alone, very sick of heart and of soul from the tidings that he had received from that angel; and he was in great confusion which sin was the least he might perform, as all three were very great and wicked. And after he had been torn by doubt in this way for a long time, he chose drinking until drunk, thinking that this was the smallest sin of the three. Nonetheless he worried that great evil might come from it, and he spoke to himself with weeping eyes as follows:

Oh God now give me this blessing,
 For my heart is sorely tried,
 I have within so great a fear,
 When I think in my senses
 That good will never come to me from this,
 For I cannot think of a thing so difficult.
 I would prefer to die two deaths
 If God would release me from this.

While he stood in such a way and complained his sister came to him. She was very surprised by the cries of her brother and said to him:

John, brother, I think I hear you complain,
 I fear you must lack something,
 This I can I hear well from your speech,
 Or you have something in your heart that pains you:
 Do you know of something you might desire,
 That you wish to drink or to eat?

THE HERMIT:

Yes I do, sister, I tell you,
 I should like to drink some wine,
 And for you to be here by me,
 Until the day becomes evening,
 For if I take too much wine,
 You should then warn me,
 I have within so great a fear
 That something bad might befall me.

COLLETTE:
John, brother, you should not worry,
I shall do for you as you ask,
Drink until you have enough,
And satisfy your appetite,
And do not spare the cost,
There is wine enough in our father's court,
For this God must have thanks and praise,
He is the only one that can grant such goods.

IMAGE 4

How saint John the hermit drank until drunk and how he raped and murdered his sister, which brought him great sorrow afterwards, as you will hear subsequently.

And after these words saint John's sister went to her father's court and took from there the best wine and the best food she could obtain and brought it to her brother. He drank from that wine so abundantly, becoming so drunk that he did not know what he said or did. And the devil, noticing that he had fooled the good man in this way and brought him to drunkenness, thought to himself that he would now tempt him with uncleanness, which he did, and he tempted him to such an extraordinary degree that the good man became greatly infected with uncleanness and burned within with desire, so that he caught a yearning for his sister, to impose his will on to her, and he said to her this:

This wine fills life with joy,
Sister, this is a noble liquid,
I am becoming delighted by it,
As I feel throughout my body:
Sister you are a beautiful woman,
You should soon please me well.

COLLETTE: Oh brother, how dare you say this to me?
It astounds me very greatly,
You should feel ashamed of yourself before our Lord,
I think you are out of your senses,
Or this impulse is given you by the devil,
Who should like to corrupt us.
I would prefer to die the death

Before I did this sin with you.
 You taught me, you did, in your counsel,
 That all sin I should abandon
 And lead a pure virginal life,
 This you have taught me yourself.
 Also we should be dishonoured by this,
 As you are called a holy man.

THE HERMIT: Sister, know that I cannot resist,
 This I say to you with brief words,
 I shall play with you the game of love,
 Whether you like it or not,
 I shall do all my wishes with you,
 And impose my will on you.

And after this he took his sister in both his arms and threw her forcefully on to the grass, and he did his will with her, and after he fulfilled his will, he started fearing that she would complain to her father, and he said to himself thusly:

Now I worry above all things,
 That she will bring me into scandal
 Once she tells of these things
 And damages me with her words.
 It is better that I murder her
 (This I think now in my reasoning)
 Than she bring me into scandal,
 And stow her in a ditch,
 So that no man will never know
 Where she has gone.
 I shall spare her no longer,
 I shall take her life right away.

And when he had murdered her, he dug a ditch for her so that no man should know, and when he had buried her he was seized with such a great fatigue that he had to sleep, and when he sat and slept, a voice cried out from heaven and spoke to him in this manner:

Oh John, what sin you have wrought,
 You were once a holy hermit,
 Now you have lost all your sanctity,

And are bereft of all your virtue,
Because you have believed the devil,
Who falsely has deceived you.
Since he has misled you
He is now having a great feast.

And when the hermit awoke from his sleep he was extremely scared and afraid within himself, so that from great terror he could barely stir or stand, and he said this, all weeping:

I grow fearful in my soul,
Here where I sat and slept
I heard a voice call to me,
So that from within I am afraid.
I have done a thing that sorely afflicts me
Because my conscience was totally overwhelmed.
Oh where are you, beautiful maid,
The sweetest of all, sister of mine?
Oh Lord God, where might she be?
I think things are not well with her,
As I find here my knife all bloodied,
I think I have done ill to her:
It comes to me now very clearly,
I know full well that I raped her
And with force brought her to it,
And that I also have murdered her.
This I know now very accurately,
That drunkenness, for certain,
Is the root of all wickedness,
Although I chose it as the smallest sin,
It is the greatest ground for evil.
Now I see it well with my eyes
That the devil has fooled me falsely,
Which I shall rue eternally.
Nevertheless I must not despair
In the way that Judas did,
I will go to seek out the city of Rome

And confess there my sins entirely
 Before the pope, our earthly father.
 I do not know of any other counsel for me on earth
 Than the priestly estate.

And after these words the good hermit with crying eyes, with heavy heart and with great regret for his sins began on his way to Rome to confess to the pope, hoping to receive penance for his sins and there become absolved by the pope.

IMAGE 5

How the holy hermit saint John came to Rome and confessed himself to the pope.

Now saint John the good hermit travelled long with great effort and sorrow for his sins, and he came to the city of Rome, and he went directly to the pope, before whom he fell very humbly to both his knees, and started weeping so very extraordinarily that he could not speak a word for his great sadness. The pope, seeing this, wondered to himself deeply and spoke to him with these sweet words:

Pilgrim, I think you love me,
 I see this well from your bearing.
 God, who died on the wooden cross
 Wants to have you in his protection.
 I think, seeing you, that you are tired,
 I think I see it well in your manner,
 Pilgrim, will you tell me quickly
 In which land were you born?

SAINT JOHN: Oh favoured earthly father,
 This I shall let you know,
 I was born in England,
 And I have come here from there,
 And I have undertaken this pilgrimage
 So that I might have God's grace,
 I am laden with such great sins.
 O earthly father, I wish you to know that
 I am soiled with such great sins,
 I am one of the greatest sinners that

Appears now under the sun.

Will you hear me, pope, earthly father?

I shall tell you all of them

And lay bare all my sins to you.

THE POPE:

Yes, pilgrim, I wish you to reveal to me

All of your sins, great and small,

I hope that God will forgive you

And you should find reconciliation with God

When you never again commit them,

And you regret and repent them

And you are prepared to make amends

With the penance one should set you.

SAINT JOHN:

Yes I am, earthly father, you must know

That if I might receive God's mercy,

I shall do all you advise me.

Earthly father, now hear me and understand,

I have done the wickedest deed

That ever a sinner has wrought,

Which is drunkenness, murder and rape.

Listen, earthly father, I will make you see:

I had a sister, fair and good,

One time it befell me

That I was extremely drunk,

So that I on that selfsame day

Did a thing I may rue a long time,

To my sister, I tell you this:

With me she drank and ate

Until I threw her down there

And with force compelled her

So that I raped her, that beautiful woman,

And then murdered her and took her life

And buried her then beneath the soil;

For this my heart suffered great regret

As I came back to myself.

THE POPE: The like of these sins I never knew,
 Nor has such a thing come to me before.
 Your heart may tear from regret
 When you come to think of it,
 The air might stink from your sins.
 It is a wonder that you do not sink
 Into the earth and drown,
 So God must know a remedy for this.

SAINT JOHN: Earthly father, I know and understand well
 That I have greatly misbehaved,
 Therefore I wish and yearn for
 Penance, and submit to your ruling,
 Even though it should kill me,
 And also pull me limb from limb.
 May God's mercy befall me
 And if I may be saved,
 I would long to be killed
 And yearn to die a bitter death.

THE POPE: Pilgrim, your remorse is very great,
 I see that well from your expression,
 But I am not able to find advice,
 Nor can I give it at this time,
 Or know the penalty for such sins.
 But this should not dissuade you,
 I shall console you nevertheless.
 This occurred to me in my mind:
 In England stands a forest
 [In there a hermit dwells,]
 And his name, this is certain,
 Is John of Beverley.
 In all virtues he is perfected,
 He stands before God in high regard:
 It is shown to me here on earth
 That God has chosen him.

You were born in England,
It is strange you do not know about it.

THE HERMIT: Yes, I know, earthly father, be sure of that,
Much better than any man living.
God send grace to him,
That he may receive God's mercy,
And be protected from all further evil,
This I pray to God in his compassion.
John knows all my private business,
And all my sins large and small,
And my errors: he knows them all.
From him I have taken counsel
That I should come to your grace.
Owing to this, earthly father, I pray that you
Have mercy on me,
I wish to amend my misdeed.

THE POPE: Pilgrim, I cannot find any guidance
As to what penance I might set.
Therefore go, without waiting any longer,
Now head back again
To where you live in England.
And speak with John of Beverley
And live by his advice,
This I command you by obedience,
He is so wise and so judicious
And so beloved by God,
I hope he will tell you clearly
What God will have you do,
And furthermore I do tell you
When he has fixed the penance for you,
Then shall he absolve you fully.
And as he does this, that holy hermit,
In that time,
I give him all my authority

Which I have received from God
 And by the discretion of our Lord.
 Now get going with fast pace
 Back to the road from which you have come.

After these words ended, the holy hermit saint John parted from the pope, and he went out of the city of Rome with great sorrow, for he did not know any other advice for him, speaking thus:

Oh blessed earthly father,
 Did you know no other advice for me?
 This is a poor consolation for me,
 That I am dispatched to myself.
 Oh fountain, that all the world praises,
 Mary, solace of all sinning creatures,
 Remember me at this hour,
 All the world's hope, comfort and faith,
 Pray for my sinful misdeed
 To Christ, your well-loved child,
 That he may send me his mercy,
 And his compassion as well.
 Fountain of all devotion,
 God's blessed mother,
 Help me now where you are:
 I pray to you, queen and fair maiden,
 Empress of heaven's throne,
 Let me feature in your prayers.
 My heart cries to you at this time,
 Do not let me be forsaken.
 Oh, mother of all charity,
 Stir yourself quickly to pray for me,
 Free me from the hellish fire,
 Oh, of all creatures the meekest,
 Unsullied virgin, unblemished and pure,
 Beautiful virgin, hear my cries,
 Unblemished virgin, have mercy on me,

Show me in the hour of my death
 Your face, for that is a great bliss.
 Your holy life is an image
 And an example for all good women.
 Here in this world and beyond,
 Pure virgin, they shall honour you,
 As I know no man in earth's kingdom
 Can counterfeit your likeness,
 Root of women you must remain,
 In east or west, I dare well attest.

About the penance that the holy hermit John did, when he had come back to England.

When the hermit Saint John had journeyed far, with great effort and great remorse for his sins, after travelling hard he came back to the same place where he murdered his sister. And when he saw this place he said this:

Now I am here at the place
 Where I did the great sins,
 Now I will without any delay
 Fix the penalty for myself,
 And arrange myself here
 So that I shall creep like an animal
 On hands and on feet like a beast
 My whole life long in this forest,
 And drink water and eat roots:
 This I shall not neglect.
 Likewise my mouth will never more speak
 Until the time and the hour
 That a mother brings forth and raises
 A boy-child one night in age
 Who will speak to me and tell me
 That God has forgiven my sins:
 And never more will I speak before this.

After these words he knelt down upon both his knees, setting both of his hands on the earth, and began to go on hands and feet like a beast, which he did for seven years or thereabouts,

without eating anything other than roots, and not speaking, but mute like a beast. Now I shall be silent about the holy hermit Saint John of Beverley and write about the count who reigned in that land.

How the count of Beverley went out hunting, and how the holy hermit saint John was captured by the count's huntsman.

And when the holy hermit saint John was in Rome, his father, the count of Beverley, died. And after his death those of the land elected another count, who was the nearest relation to the deceased count. And when that count had reigned for some years, it so happened that his wife fell pregnant, and was heavy with child. And when the time was fulfilled she bore a beautiful son from the grace and the will of God. From this the count was very happy, and early in the morning he ventured out to hunt, on the same day that they would baptise the child. And as the count and his huntsman had been hunting for a long time in the wood, the huntsman saw the holy hermit going on his hands and feet, and he thought that this was a strange animal, because he was all rough and hairy. The huntsman, not knowing what kind of animal this was, said this to the count:

Now I see the greatest wonder
That I ever saw in this forest,
For, my lord, I see a marvellous beast,
I should almost be afraid of it,
It is the most wondrous animal
That my eyes ever saw.

THE COUNT: Quickly, blow the horn, let us hunt it,
And let the dogs chase after it
Rapidly, so that it does not elude us.
But once it is captured,
We will not beat it, kill it or slay it,
But we shall bind it fast
And to the court send it
And take it there into the hall.
There the women shall see it all together
And behold this wonder and mark it
As to church they bring my son
Who was born in our house last night

From my favoured wife
Who this night was belaboured.

IMAGE 6

THE HUNTSMAN: By God, my lord, I have captured that animal for us
Without striking or slaughtering it,
It let me seize him like a little lamb,
It did not resist one bit.

THE COUNT: It is good for you to bind it fast,
So that it might not escape.

THE HUNTSMAN: No indeed, I shall tie it fast
Without any further delay,
Then I shall lead it beside me.
See how quietly it goes,
It is not brutal in the least,
It will let itself be led like a lamb.
I never saw a beast so tame
It goes along wherever we wish.

THE COUNT: Lead it to the court and be quiet, all silent,
There inside, in the throne-room
And let it go serenely
Without beating and without jostling.

How the count's child announced to John that his sins were forgiven.

With these words the count and the hunter came with saint John into the town, with no other thought than he was a strange animal, and there came unto them many women, taking the count's son to church to receive his holy baptism. And when they came there with the child, the count and the hunter were standing with the holy hermit saint John, whom they had bound very fast, having thought nothing other than he was a strange wild animal; then the child called out with a loud voice, saying this to saint John the hermit:

Stand up, John of Beverley
This I command you at this time,
God has forgiven all your sins.

For the penance that you have done,
 You shall obtain the eternal reward
 Once you are here no longer.

SAINT JOHN THE HERMIT: God must be blessed for this

And this child must be blessed
 For God has sent his voice through him,
 And blessed must be the mother who carried
 Him and brought him into this world.
 That I have lived until the day
 That God has forgiven my sins,
 This is very gratifying to my heart.

THE COUNT: Now, I have never heard until this present day
 More wonder upon an hour.
 Are you human, a creature,
 From God's fashioning, in this time?

JOHN THE HERMIT: Yes I am. I am John of Beverley, a hermit
 Who has lived here in this forest,
 I have gone like a beast
 On hands and on feet for seven years,
 Never in that time have I spoken, I swear,
 [A word from any language.
 Someone should summon a priest for me,]
 Then to him I shall lay all bare,
 And declare my whole life
 As honestly as I can.

THE COUNT: So shall it be done, holy blessed man
 Of Beverley, well beloved nephew,
 Your father was indeed a noble count,
 And we are both of one blood,
 Therefore accept it as a tribute that
 I myself shall summon a bishop for you,
 Without any longer delay,
 The worthiest of all known
 That I can find in England.

And after these words the count himself went to the bishop of Canterbury, whom he told all this history, praying him that he would go with him into his court, for there was a holy man who wished to confess. The bishop understood the words of the count and went immediately with him to his palace, where he found the holy hermit saint John, who confessed to the bishop. And when the bishop heard the confession, he was greatly astonished and said this:

I have never heard such deeds
 As I have now heard in this confession.
 [I pray you, John, now say to me,]
 When you took your sister's life,
 Where did you bury that very beautiful woman?
 Show me the place this day.
 God is he that can do all things,
 With his divine power,
 So he has all things under control,
 This almighty God of heaven's kingdom:
 His works are miraculous.
 This mercy you have received
 Freely cannot have happened
 Without your sister also having obtained mercy,
 As you may mark and understand.
 You were the instigator of that thing,
 She was the innocent one who underwent death,
 And truly died in the manner of a martyr.
 I hope that God persevered for her,
 Also granting her mercy.

SAINT JOHN:

Now will I go to that place
 Where I buried her, that is certain,
 Decked with leaves under the grass,
 This I shall rue forever.
 Oh God, may I behold her again
 And also speak to her in greeting,
 Then the delight would be boundless,
 That I should have within my heart.
 Now I will set off to go there.

IMAGE 7

How saint John's sister, whom he had raped and murdered, rose from death.

The holy hermit saint John went immediately where he had buried his sister and he broke open that grave with weeping eyes, and as soon that grave was opened, she stood up out of the grave and said this with a loud clear voice:

Oh, who is this creature
That woke me out of my rest?
It seems to me it is my brother who speaks there,
I hear it well from his speech.

SAINT JOHN: What, you live again, pure virgin,
That altogether beloved sister of mine.
Oh lord, how may this be?
And I did to you such evil death.

COLLETTE: Oh dear brother, I have no need,
I live with joy in my spirit,
I have seen many high feasts,
Many angels of great worth
Have come to me here on earth
With great heavenly melodies
So I might delight myself with them.
I have seen them here with me often,
And your guardian angel I have seen
With great joy coming to me,
And he told me about your holy, austere life
Which you have given to yourself
And my guardian angel has made me understand
That I shall be rewarded with maidenhood
Even after you have taken my purity
Since I did not give my will to that,
And it was against my wishes,
Drunkenness drove you to it,
And because an evil angel drove you

To murder and rape me.
 Therefore the angels and archangels came
 To comfort me all days.
 They told me also at the same time
 That God forgave your sins,
 Then God, who works all things for good, sent
 My soul again into my body,
 So that I should inform you,
 Speaking a reliable confession,
 And receive that holy sacrament
 Before my life here would end.
 So I will now prepare myself for that.

SAINT JOHN: God must be praised for the events
 That he did to us both.
 Now come sister, and let us go,
 Where we may find the bishop
 So that he may know and understand this,
 And tell him of both our lives,
 Praying to him that he will give us
 That worthy, holy, lofty sacrament,
 So that we, after this life full of suffering,
 Might come to Jesus the adored,
 Where God the father we will bring us.
 Now say 'Amen' all together.

Amen.

Here ends that life of the holy hermit saint John of Beverley. And it was printed for the comfort of all sinners. In the princely city of Brussels by me, Thomas vander Noot, living in the Steenstraat in the Knight of the Sea.