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ST NICHOLAS AND THE STORY OF THE THREE SCHOOLBOYS MURDERED BY AN INN-KEEPER AND STASHED IN A PICKLING CASK

Saints' Lives are a form of folk story. These circulated widely in the middle ages, sometimes as ballads or plays, and they gained additional material from the need to tell a good story. Tracing these stories back to a literary source can be time-consuming.

Today is St Nicholas' Day, so an investigation of this sort seems appropriate. A correspondent wrote to me a couple of days ago as follows:

One legend that is popular in the [medieval stained-glass] windows and also illuminated manuscripts of the same period is the legend of the three children resurrected from the pickling vat. I gather that this is a much later version of a legend of three scholars drugged and murdered. I cannot find any real source or text for this legend in Latin or a European language...

This legend is in fact known as the "Miracle of the Three Clerics", in the short titles given by Charles W. Jones to the legends in his *Saint Nicholas of Myra, Bari and Manhattan*, p.497-8. But they are clearly youths, who have just received the tonsure, so we also have The Three Clerks, The Three Boys/Schoolboys, and so on.

Here is a 1390 illustration:



St Nicholas and the resurrection of the three murdered students. From the De Grey hours, via [Wikipedia](#).

None of the early Greek legends contain this story, nor is it found in the *Golden Legend*, nor in the Roman breviary. But it does appear in early French verse, and it is very popular indeed in artistic depictions, where it is the most popular of the miracles of St Nicholas. By the 14th century in English wall paintings, St Nicholas almost always appears in the “Raising to Life of the Three Boys”.^[1]

McKnight in his useful 1919 book on St Nicholas^[2] gives this summary of the story:

Still another story in which St. Nicholas appears as the guardian angel of schoolboys, is the one dealing with the resuscitation of the three schoolboys murdered on their journey home. The story, which appears in a number of variant forms, relates how three boys, on their journey home from school, take lodging at an inn, or as some versions have it, farmhouse. In the night the treacherous host and hostess murder the boys, cut up their three bodies, and throw the pieces into casks used for salting meat. In the morning St. Nicholas appears and calls the guilty ones to task. They deny guilt, but are convicted when the saint causes the boys, sound of body and limb, to arise from the casks.

McKnight states in quotes that the story is “not known among the Greeks, who are so

devoted to St. Nicholas”, and gives a reference for that quote to C. Cahier, *Caractéristiques des saints dans l’art populaire*, Paris, 1867, vol. i. He adds that:

Its earliest record is said to be that in the French life of St. Nicholas by Wace. With the incident in the story, Wace connects the great honor paid to St. Nicholas by schoolboys. “Because,” says Wace, “he did such honor to schoolboys, they celebrate this day [Dec. 6] by reading and singing and reciting the miracles of St. Nicholas.”

Wace was a Norman poet, who wrote a Life of St Nicholas in French verse, drawing upon two versions of the Life by John the Deacon, and adding seven episodes which seem to come from popular legends of the time. The story of the Three Boys appears as verses 213-226. There is in fact an edition, study and translation of this text in English by Jean Blacker and friends, with a Google Books preview.^[3] I was only able to see the French text, which begins “Tres clerks alouent a escole.” (p.284) Fredell (below) gives the text as follows:

Treis clerks alouent a escole.
- N'en ferai mie grant parole. -
Li ostes par nuit les occist,
Les cors mussat, l'aver en prist. (216)
Saint Nicholas par Deu le sout,
Sempres fu la si cum Deu plout.
Les clerks a l'oste demandat,
Nes pout celer si les mustrat. (220)
Saint Nicholas par sa preere
Mist les almes le cors arere.
Pur ceo qu'as clerks fit cel honur
Funt li clers la fest a son jur (224)
De ben lire et ben chanter
Et des miracles reciter.

Unfortunately the preview breaks off, and does not give the English on p.285.

From the prefatory material I learn that the miracle is not found in any of the early Latin prose texts either. It does appear in Latin hymns dating from the eleventh century and from three extant rhymed versions of the legend that predate Wace. It also appears in a Latin play preserved in the Fleury playbook. These details the editors obtained from the most recent edition, that of Einar Ronsjö, pp.42-45, although this is inaccessible to me.^[4] There are 5 manuscripts, the earliest, A (Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal 3516, f. 69v-73v), dating to 1267 or 1268.

Wace states that his poem is an adaptation of one or more Latin texts. The main source was the *Life* written by John the Deacon in Naples ca. 880, which exists in two different versions, the original and an interpolated version. The first of these was that printed in 1479 by Boninus Mombritius in his *Vitae sanctorum*. This was Wace's main source. But he seems also to have known another version, interpolated with extra episodes, which was printed by Falconius in the *S. Nicolai acta primigenia* in 1751. There is also a Latin version that fuses

both, which appears in 11th century manuscript Paris, BNF, lat. 5607.

The most useful article that can be readily accessed is Joel Fredell's account, "The Three Clerks and St. Nicholas in Medieval England".^[5] Fredell tells us that "The Three Clerks", a Latin drama from ca. 1100 found in British Library Additional 2241, apparently from Hildesheim in Germany. He also summarises the various versions of the story:

In its simplest form, in Wace's c. 1150 *Life*, three clerks on their way to school stop at an inn; they are murdered by the innkeeper for their traveling money. St. Nicholas then appears and resurrects the students. Wace's version of the tale only briefly covers the murder, concentrating on the resurrection for much of its fourteen lines.

The roughly contemporary Fleury version adds a number of details not seen in Wace or any earlier extant sources. Here a scheming wife urges her husband to murder the clerks, and Nicholas pretends to be a customer demanding "fresh meat" - a strategy which leads to the discovery of the murder and the couple crying miserere to Nicholas. The revived clerks pray to St. Nicholas before singing a *Te Deum* to close.

This play in fact seems to conflate the Three Clerks murder/resurrection with another "apocryphal" episode in the life of Nicholas also known primarily from Wace: the Murdered Merchant. A merchant goes on pilgrimage, loaded with offerings, to a shrine to St. Nicholas. A wicked innkeeper murders the merchant for his wealth, cuts up the body, and salts it down in a pickling vat. St. Nicholas resurrects the merchant in the night, who greets the astonished innkeeper in the morning and convinces the latter to atone for his crime by coming along to the shrine of St. Nicholas and asking for mercy.

The Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodley 779 MS of the *SEL* [=Southern English Legendary] (before 1450) seems to contain the crowning development of the Clerk/Merchant fusion of meat, mercy, and meretricious wife found in the Fleury play-book. The Three Clerks here is a 99-line episode at the end of the life of Nicholas. The innkeeper has become a butcher who, in response to his wife's suggestion that they can profit from the clerks as guests, offers lodging and then murders them. When the butcher discovers that the clerks are penniless, the wife suggests grinding and salting the bodies, using the meat for pies and pasties to sell in order to make something out of the murder. The butcher obligingly grinds up the students and salts them down in a pickling tub. Nicholas appears as the couple are hawking the pies and pasties, asks for "clean meat," forces the couple to take him to the salting tub where they kneel and beg forgiveness, and raises up the reconstituted students from their pickle. The clerks close the episode with a prayer to St. Nicholas and a shortened vernacular *Te Deum*.

The slightly earlier version in Cambridge, Cambridge University Library, Trinity College MS 605 (c. 1400) disposes of the episode in six lines, placing the students in a vat simmering under a brown sauce, from which St. Nicholas saves them with no dialogue, pleas, or prayers.⁹

This latter version is preceded by a longer episode also found in Wace and subsequently rare in the written canon of Nicholas's life, but documented in

stained glass and painting. When the boy Nicholas is to be ordained bishop of Myra, his landlady is so excited to view the ordination that she leaves her baby in bathwater over a fire. When she returns the baby is playing with the simmering bubbles, his “cors tendre et nu” miraculously unharmed; the grateful mother gives full credit to the saintly intervention of Nicholas

Fredell states that the miracle may have been “official” in France, but apocryphal in England!

From all this I think we may infer that the story arose in Normandy in the early 11th century, as a folk-story, and went on to massive artistic success. Curiously there is even a retelling by Balzac, *Les trois clercs de saint Nicholas*.

1. ^[1]Fredell, p.181.↩

2. ^[2]George H. McKnight, *St. Nicholas: His Legend and His Role in the Christmas Celebration and Other Popular Customs*, Putnam (1919). Online at [Archive.org](#), and also at [Project Gutenberg](#).↩

3. ^[3]Wace, *The Hagiographical Works: The <i>Conception Nostre Dame</i> and the Lives of St Margaret and St Nicholas*. Translated with introduction and notes by Jean Blacker, Glyn S. Burgess, Amy V. Ogden with the original texts included, Brill (2013). Preview [here](#). Manuscripts [p.237](#). Outline of the story episodes [p.241](#). Notes on [p.347](#).↩

4. ^[4]Einar Ronsjö, *La Vie de saint Nicolas, par Wace, poème religieux du XIIe siècle, publié d'après tous les manuscrits*, Études Romanes de Lund, 5 (Lund: Gleerup; Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1942).↩

5. ^[5]J. Fredell, “The Three Clerks and St. Nicholas in Medieval England”, *Studies in Philology* 92, 181-202. [JSTOR](#).↩
