‘Verray goddes apes’: Troilus, Seynt Idiot and Festive Culture

Abstract
This paper examines the reference to ‘Seynt Idiot’ in Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*, a blasphemous caricature of the God of Love which occurs in the first book. It identifies parallels between this epithet and the mock saints found in medieval inversion rituals, especially the continental *sermons joyeux* and other liturgical parodies. On the basis of these echoes, the paper argues that Seynt Idiot is being used to draw sarcastic parallels between love and the practices of medieval festive culture. The implications of this are discussed in detail, paying particular attention to the attitudes it implies towards the discourse of revelry.

Chaucer’s debt to festive culture is by now well documented. The efforts of a number of critics, including Alfred David, Carl Lindahl, John Ganim and Jon Cook, have done much to reveal the echoes of festive practice and modes of thought found in his work. Most of this scholarship is of course directed at the *Canterbury Tales*. For example, Laura Kendrick has connected the *Tales* to ‘occasions associated with seasonal change’, and Arthur Lindley has described the frame narrative itself as a ‘holiday tale-telling game, a festive activity presided over by a mock-king and leading to a promised feast’. However, an interesting and unrecognised allusion to inversion ritual also occurs in one of Chaucer’s earlier and ostensibly more formal works, *Troilus and Criseyde*. Although this reference may seem slight, it carries important repercussions. Not only does it colour the conception of love offered by the romance, it also gives an insight into Chaucer’s general view of popular culture at this stage in his career. This paper will address these issues in turn. It will first seek to unravel Chaucer’s allusion to festivity, pinning down the rituals he evokes, before gauging how such material contributes towards wider patterns of meaning in the poem.

The reference in question occurs in the first book of *Troilus*, shortly after the protagonist first confesses his attraction to the ‘swete fo called Criseyde’ (I, 874). His confidant Pandarus expresses surprise at this admission, since his friend has always shown utter contempt for love. Pandarus reminds Troilus at length of his former mockery and ‘scorn’ of romantic attachment:

  But wel is me that ever that I was born,
That thou biset art in so good a place;
For by my trouthe, in love I dorste have sworn,
Thee sholde never han tid thus fayr a grace;
And wostow why? For thou were wont to chace
At Love in scorn, and for despyt him calle
‘Seynt Idiot, lord of thise foles alle’. (I, 904-10)

The reference to ‘Seynt Idiot’ in this passage is curious. Like much else in this exchange, it has no parallel in Chaucer’s immediate sources, as it does not occur in either Boccaccio’s Il Filostrato or Beauvau’s French redaction Le Roman de Troye. The promotion of love to an ironic sainthood has in fact proven sufficiently remarkable to attract a small amount of critical commentary. Much of this concerns its anachronistic reference to saint-worship, its opposition to the cult of fin ‘amor, or its presentation of love as a religion with its own set of martyrs, a commonplace also found in the Legend of Good Women (F 338) and in the Introduction to the Man of Law’s Tale (II 61). While these are certainly important concerns, this focus does tend to obscure the probable roots of Seynt Idiot. In particular, it overlooks the important allusion to revelry that occurs in this phrase.

What connects Pandarus’ statement to festive culture is the fact that he uses the title of a burlesque saint, an anointed ‘idiot’, to disparage love. The name Seynt Idiot recalls the various parodies of the vitae, miracles and cults of saints which were generated during the Middle Ages. In particular, it is reminiscent of the figures at the centre of these travesties. Continental literature contains an entire pantheon of such burlesque holymen or saints facétieux: for instance, medieval French refers to Saint Fausset (Saint Falsehood), Sainte Oignon (Saint Onion), Sainte Raisin (Saint Grapes), Saint Velu (Saint Hairy), and Sainete Caquette (Saint Chatterer), while Middle Dutch pays tribute to Sinte Haryngus (Saint Herring), Sint Snottolf (Saint Snot-Nose), Sint Aelwaere (Saint Punch-Up), and Sint Raspinus (Saint Prison). The styling ‘Seynt Idiot’ follows the form of these figures, marking the canonization of a humdrum, profane or otherwise inappropriate object or being. Some are in fact very close in form to Chaucer’s parody, as the names ‘Sainte Follie’ and ‘Saint Sot’ occur in French texts. Troilus’ pejorative description of love, in other words, seems to hint at an expansive tradition of grotesque holymen.
This in turn provides an important connection between *Troilus and Criseyde* and medieval festive culture. Despite their apparent provenance in Latin texts such as the *Historia de Nemine* (c.1250) and the *Tractatus Garsiae* (c.1100), which feature Saint Nobody, Saint Cupidity and ‘the blessed martyrs Silver and Gold’, by the late Middle Ages parodic saints had been firmly absorbed into popular culture. They had a particularly strong foothold in festive practice. The presence of mock saints in revelry is clear from a range of continental sources, which provide extensive documentation of the role they played in games and rituals. One form which highlights their prominence with particular clarity is the *sermon joyeux*. Broadly defined, this was a form of liturgical parody in which a speaker recited a bawdy, scatological or merely nonsensical text, closely following conventional *ars praedecandi*. It was often performed on festival occasions, since its point was to verbalise the relaxation of usual standards and restraints: as Jean-Claude Aubailly states, the sermon generally presents ‘an apology for good cheer, for wine and for sex, celebrating in dramatic form the lifting of the forbidden and the taboo, and illustrating the outburst of joy which results’.

The mock sermon drew mock saints firmly into its framework from an early point, to the extent that the two became virtually inseparable. According to Jacques Merceron, around a third of the surviving French *sermons joyeux* incorporate some form of parodic hagiography. The titles of the surviving texts make this link clear: many boast such headings as *Sermon joyeux de Saint Jambon et Sainte Andouille* (Saint Ham and Saint Sausage), *Sermon de Saint Belin* (Saint Ram), *Sermoen van Sencte Reinhuut* (Saint Empty), or *Sermo pauperis Henrici de Sancto Nemine* (‘Sermon of Poor Henry on Saint Nobody’). As Jelle Koopmans and Paul Verhuyck observe, the burlesque saint is a ‘principal theme’ of the mock sermon, ‘without doubt most important since it is most typical’. The strong presence of mock saints in such customs demonstrates their affinity with the practices of misrule.

The important position allocated to mock saints is further illustrated by the function they perform in many games and rituals. The saints do not play merely a marginal or cosmetic role in medieval festivity, but are often evoked as patrons or mascots of celebration itself. They are either treated as exemplars for revellers to follow, or else as protectors of the celebrants. One Middle Dutch lyric of the late fifteenth century, for instance, specifically names ‘Sinte Reynuut’ as ‘patroon van drinkebroers’, or...
patron of drinkers. Elsewhere there are proverbial references to ‘la confrérie saint Fausset’ or ‘the brotherhood of Saint Falsehood’, while Shrovetide is described as the Feast of Saint Crevard (Saint Famished). Mock saints therefore seem to have played a quasi-protective role on feast occasions, acting as figureheads for the revels. In line with this, the saints also seem to have been treated as objects of ironic reverence, subject to prayers and oaths during festivals. This is evident from the ceremony used to swear in a new king of fools at Brussels, which contains a pledge to Sinte Reynuut and ends with the direction ‘now shove all your fingers into your hole and kiss them’. The *Sermon tresjoyeulx de monseigneur Sainct Frappecul* contains much the same idea, ending with the directive ‘make your supplication to Saint Smack-arse our lord, who enables us always to spank, and to slap arses without respite’. Other texts even claim the saints as emblems of inversion itself. A French mock sermon on Saint Pou (Saint Louse), for example, turns Pou into a fully fledged embodiment of carnival, emphasising how he bites all equally, with no regard for rank: as Koopmans and Verhuyck write, the saint is ‘almost invisible and completely anarchistic…the Louse represents chaos in the order, the grain of sand in the cog-wheels: a possible idol for all those who do not profit from the established order, for the marginalised’. In other sources this identification is developed even further. In a fifteenth-century *mardi gras* play from northern France, Saint Pensard (Saint Potbelly) is used as an alternative name for the figure of Carnival. Similarly, in one of the eclogues of the Castilian poet Juan del Encina, carnival is revered under the name of San Antruejo (Saint Carnival): according to Françoise Maurizi, this idea was widespread in medieval Spain. The mock saint, in other words, not only functions as the symbolic protector of revellers, but may also be the essence of revelry incarnate. Accordingly, feasting and drinking become acts of veneration to him or her.

In fact, some saints played a role in festivity that was more than purely symbolic. In a performance staged in Saxony in 1524, a saint appeared in material form to act as a centrepiece for the festivities. On this occasion, ‘a mock bishop dressed in a straw cloak, with a fish basket for a mitre’ led the town of Buchholz in a series of games and parodies, most of which revolved around the ‘sanctification’ of a collection of ‘relics’: these consisted of ‘a horse’s head, the jawbone of a cow and two horselegs’. A less elaborate but comparable practice is evident in Spain. Charlotte Stern notes that ‘a straw man representing San Gorgomellaz (Saint Bigthroat) or San Antruejo’ could
serve as ‘an actual stage prop’ during the ‘games associated with folk Carnival celebrations...just as the English puppet Jack-of-Lent personified the Lenten season’. In these instances, therefore, the parodic saint was made physically manifest, and used as the direct focus of play. As a variation of this practice, other sources suggest that the saint could function as a persona to be adopted, perhaps by the leader of the celebrants. This possibility is hinted at in the sixteenth-century German text ‘Gedidhte vom Niemand’, a dramatic monologue narrated by Saint Nobody himself. A similar case is a Dutch spotsermoen in which the narrator speaks intermittently as ‘Sanctus Drincatibus’ and ‘St Bacchus’, and attributes texts to each. This performative possibility could well underpin such figures as Sainte Follie and other canonised entertainers, especially since Follie is described as the ‘père’ of numerous other saints, effectively their author and controller. It appears as though mock saints were a role to be played in celebration as well as a symbol to be evoked.

In sum, continental sources reveal that the mock saint had a vital function to perform in medieval festive culture. They could on various occasions serve as the figurehead, the director, or even the centre of celebratory activity. Revellers often seem to conceive their gatherings as cults dedicated to these profane figures, and at times make them appear in material form, either as actors or objects to be ironically venerated. In other words, much like Chaucer’s Seynt Idiot, the mock saint was ‘lorde of these fooles alle’, leading others into foolery by overseeing misrule, as its symbolic patron or its actual conductor.

Before considering why Chaucer might include a mock saint in Troilus, and what are the effects and ramifications of this, it is necessary to examine the roles played by mock saints in English festivity. After all, while European accounts of the saintes facétieux are illuminating, there is no automatic reason to suppose that they reflect practices on the other side of the North Sea, especially given the absence of Carnival in the British ritual year. At first glance, the evidence of similar customs in medieval England does seem disappointingly patchy. The references themselves are more disparate than the Dutch, French, and German sources, and do not award saints as consistent and formalised a place in festivity. Moreover, some allusions clearly belong more to religious polemic than traditional play, such as Lollard derision of ‘Mariam de Falsyngham’ and ‘the Lefdy of Foulpette’, or John Bale’s jeering at ‘imagys’ of
'seynt Spryte', ‘saynt Cutlake’ (Saint Cutlass), and ‘saynt Legearde’ (Saint Carthorse). Other records are frustratingly vague, such as the complaints by various bishops, including Walter Cantilupe in 1240 and John Grandisson in 1360, that some ‘unsuitable pastimes’ aim to show ‘irreverence and contempt for the saints’, or ‘bring shame to the saints’. Nevertheless, there are several pieces of evidence that do suggest that mock saints had a key presence in English revelry. Throughout the English references to these figures, even though most are post-medieval, insistent connections arise between mock saints and folk customs, locating mock saints firmly within traditional festive culture.

The firmest connection between these names and the English ritual year is provided by the figure of St Distaff. Distaff is the only English saint to have an appointed ‘feast day’, as sources occasionally describe 7 January, or the morning following Twelfth Night, as St Distaff’s Day. The connection between this date and the figure seems to be based on the traditional duties carried out on the day. As the first day of Yuletide not consecrated by an official feast, 7 January was a time in which domestic work could supposedly be resumed, such as the weaving which Distaff personifies. Nonetheless, despite its theoretical position at the end of Yuletide, the day did not represent the cessation of celebration. It gave rise to a number of peculiar customs, many of which dramatised its vexed position between labour and leisure. As Chambers summarises in his *Book of Days*, mock battles were often staged between men and women over the materials used in weaving: to mark Distaff’s Day, men would ritually gather up ‘flax and tow’ to make bonfires, while women would retaliate by ‘sousing’ their attackers ‘from the water-pails’. What makes this all the more interesting is that there is some suggestion that either the rituals or the figure are medieval in origin. Although the earliest full account of the revels of ‘S. Distaffs day’ is Robert Herrick’s *Hesperides* (1648), which describes this occasion as one of ‘partly worke and partly play’, earlier allusions imply that it may have existed in the Middle Ages. According Derek Forbes, Lydgate’s *Disguising at Hertford* (c.1430) contains a number of oblique references to the occasion, developing it into an allegory for Henry VI’s passage out of ‘nursing care’ into ‘impending male training for the realities of life’. Gail McMurray Gibson makes similar claims of the Digby plays (fifteenth century), noting that ‘the St. Distaff play and game must have performed an especially significant kind of ritual definition, as society turned from Christmas sport
and Christmas worship to its “ownt vocation”\textsuperscript{32}. Saint Distaff might therefore provide some evidence that burlesque saints were part of medieval English popular culture: here a particular point in the ritual calendar, around which an informal set of practices has gathered, is conceived as a festival in honour of a parodic martyr.

Although Saint Distaff is the only example of a festive occasion taking the name of a mock saint, a number of texts refer to specific customs and games in which mock saints were apparently involved. One example is the group of rituals associated with Saint Agnes’ Eve. This occasion gave rise to various rites which supposedly allowed an unmarried girl to ‘see her future partner in her dreams’, such as the preparation of ‘dumb cake’, or standing ‘over the spars of a gate or stile, looking on the moon’.\textsuperscript{33} In his \textit{Fruitful Treatise of Fasting} (1552), the Protestant theologian Thomas Becon suggests that an imaginary saint was associated with these traditions. During his attack on the ‘fond foolishness’ of folk observance, Becon derides ceremonies performed on this ‘blessed saints even’, describing how ‘maids’ will habitually beseech ‘St Sweetlad’ to ‘send us...good husbands’\textsuperscript{34}. Since the term ‘sweet lad’ is a common endearment for a male lover, this appears to be a saint created for the customs, somewhat like the ‘phallic’ saints that were worshipped for similar ends in France and the Netherlands.\textsuperscript{35} A second saint with clear festive roots is ‘Saint Fool’, who is preserved in the sayings ‘the vicar of saint foole’ and ‘the Vicarege of S. Foole’.\textsuperscript{36} These phrases were proverbial by the sixteenth century, as they occur in a large number of early modern texts, ranging from the satires of Thomas Nashe, Joseph Hall and John Weever, to devotional treatises by Richard Montagu, Arthur Dent and Richard Charnock.\textsuperscript{37} Although the earliest known reference to ‘Saint Fools’ is Heywood’s \textit{Epigrams} (c.1520), the name evidently stems from earlier festive pastimes.\textsuperscript{38} The interlude \textit{Misogonus} (c.1564-77) makes this clear: in the play, the ‘morio’ or ‘fool’ Cacurgus states that another character ‘would crave...the vicar of Saint Fools’, only to be told he would ‘rather have shaking o’th’ sheets’.\textsuperscript{39} As Sally Harper points out, it is apparent that ‘the Vicar of Saint Fools’ refers here to a form of ‘country dance’.\textsuperscript{40} The fact that Cacurgus is affecting a deliberately ‘rustic’ timbre attests to this, as does the pairing of ‘the Vicar’ with a well-known reel ‘the Shaking of the Sheets’, which is used as a setting for several later ballads.\textsuperscript{41} Other texts also signal the same origin for Saint Fool: James Calfhill, in his \textit{Answer to Martiiall} (1566), refers to his Vicar as ‘both minstrel and minister’, while Robert Greene links him with
a type of costume, comparing a man’s ‘fine cloathes’ to a ‘footcloth for the vickar of Saint Foole’s’. It seems that Saint Fool belongs to the world of popular performance, and celebratory music and dance in particular. Like Becon’s St Sweetlad, these references indicate that mock saints had some currency in English festive culture at the end of the Middle Ages.

Beyond these literary sources, there are also a handful of interesting citations in parish records and account books. Three of these are worth noting in particular: the borough court books of Grimsby, which refer to ‘the play of holy John of bowre’ in 1527; local records at Shrewsbury, which mention a ‘playe of St Iulian the Apostate’ in 1556; and the churchwarden’s accounts of Ashburton, Devon, which record a payment of ‘wyne’ for ‘hym that played Saynt Rosmont’, also in 1556. Lawrence Clopper has analysed these records closely, and suggests that they describe Midsummer or May games presided over by fictitious saints. He connects ‘Rosemont’ and ‘holy John’ with the election of ‘Somer lords’, who would customarily ‘govern’ from decorated arbours: the first is possibly ‘king of a bower known as “Rose Mont”’, the second ‘a local “saint”, a May king who is enthroned in a bower’. In other words, these ‘saints’ may be titles adopted by the traditional leaders of parish revels. In like manner, St Julian might have some link to the practice of setting bonfires on Midsummer Eve, a custom recorded from the thirteenth century onward: as Clopper stresses, this custom was popularly thought to stem from ‘Iulianus apostata, whych tyrannously brent the bones of Saint Iohan Baptyst’. Again, the mock saint appears in the context of seasonal play, as a festival is apparently envisioned as a feast in his honour. Clopper’s remarks therefore imply that mock saints had a function in these games, acting as personae for revellers or patrons of celebration. It seems that English mock saints could on occasion possess a function equivalent to their continental counterparts.

Alongside these more or less specific references, many texts also reveal a generalised association between the saints and seasonal release. For instance, in numerous sources there are clear connections between the saints and food, especially the overeating of festival occasions. Such a link is apparent in Sir David Lindsay’s *Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis* (1552), which twice evokes ‘Sanct Clone’ in the context of celebratory feasting, once by a character demanding ‘gude wine’, and once by Foly, a fool figure who distributes food or ‘disjune’. A similar connection occurs in John Palsgrave’s
translation of Willem de Volder’s *Acolastus* (1540), which extends a passing reference to ‘sancta saturitas’ in the original text into a discussion of ‘holy belyfulnesse’, ‘saynte fylgutte’, and ‘saynte panchart’. Each of these figures is also linked with feasting, having the stated power to ‘make thee happy with sendyng thee good meate and drynke’. 48 Alongside these alimentary connotations, there are also a number of texts which grant mock saints an ironic authority over practices associated with misrule. At the end of the fifteenth century, William Dunbar awards two mock saints precisely this status: in ‘To the Merchants of Edinburgh’ he derides ‘commone menstrallis’ as men who ‘serve Sanct Cloun’, while ‘The Dance of the Seven Deadly Sins’ describes a burlesque tournament in which one competitor carries a ‘baner’ that depicts ‘Sanct Girnega’, apparently a folkloric devil.49 In either case, the mock saint comes to preside over celebration, as popular music becomes a devotion to clownishness, and a canonised demon becomes an emblem of inversion. Much the same logic appears in the morality play *Hick Scorner* (c.1513). Here mock saints also represent an inverted morality, as the Vices name ‘Saint Pintle’ (Saint Penis) and ‘Saint Tyburn of Kent’ as the ruling influences of their riotous ‘folly’: at one stage they even define their ‘lechery and misusing’ as a ‘pilgrimage...to Tyburn’. 50 A similar idea might underlie Middle English romances such as *Sir Ferumbras* (c.1380) and *Beves of Hamptoun* (c.1324), in which swearing by ‘seynt Mahoun’ also signifies wilful sacrilege.51 At any rate, in these late-medieval texts, there seems to be a powerful link between mock saints and the moral inversion associated with revelry, as well as with feasting on ‘good meate and drynke’.

But perhaps the area of English revelry most strongly tied to mock saints is the parodic sermon. The performance of *sermons joyeux* in medieval and early modern England is reasonably well documented. The earliest surviving example dates from the first quarter of the fourteenth century, in the form of an Anglo-Norman text beginning ‘Seignours e dames, ore escotez’ which specifically identifies itself as a ‘sermoun’. 52 From this point onwards, there are intermittent accounts of sermon performance well into the modern period. Mock sermons are known to have been staged in the 1380s, when the friar Peter Pateshull delivered a ‘sermonem lusorium’ on the text ‘De nihilo nihil est, et nihil semper erit’ (‘Of nothing nothing is, and nothing will always be’); in 1520 at Oxford, when the ledger of the bookseller John Dorne records the sale of a ‘sermon of messrulle’; in 1600 at Cambridge, when a
group of students were accused of making ‘publique sermons...in Tavernes’ which did ‘verye disorderlye misvse in generall all free burgesses’; and in 1626 at Chester, when ‘a ballett munger’ was tried for entering a church pulpit and making a ‘ridiculous or prophaned sermon therein to the greate Dishonor of Almightye god’. The sermon was also enacted on several occasions throughout the calendar. While Thomas More links it with Yuletide, describing ‘a mowynge sermon’ delivered by a figure ‘prykked in blankettes...in a christemas game’, Bale complains that May games often included mimicry and ridicule of preachers. There are also records of sermon performances on Plough Monday and at Shrovetide.

Much like the European *sermons joyeux* and *spotsermoens*, English mock sermons apparently made extensive use of burlesque saints. Mock holymen appear in the two earliest English sermons to survive, a piece of c.1478 on the text ‘Mollificant olera durissima crusta’ (‘hoote wortes makeyn sofft hard crusstes’), and the *Gospels of the Distaffs* (c.1510). The former gives a list of the holy ‘doctors’ ‘Vertas (Fart-arse), Gadatryme, Trumpas (Trump-arse), and Dadyltrymsert’, while the latter incorporates a series of ‘gloses’ by housewives with such quasi-hagiographic names as ‘Abunde of the Ouen’ and ‘Margaret of the Whete’. In fact, the connection between English sermons and travestic saints proves sufficiently robust to survive the Reformation. A burlesque sermon dating from c.1600 takes the name ‘Malt’ as its central authority, obviously parodying ‘Matt.’ or St Matthew. A contemporary piece from Lincolnshire outlined in a bill of complaint also makes use of the convention, citing ‘the booke of Mabb’ and ‘the blessing of Bullbeefe’. A further suggestive case is Langland’s depiction of the gluttonous Doctour of Divinity in the B- and C-texts of *Piers Plowman*. The name ‘Seint Avereys’ (Saint Avarice, or Saint Averroes) appears here as one of the authorities the Doctour uses to corroborate his arguments: ‘he hath dronken so depe he wole devyne soone/ and preven it by hir Pocalips and passion of Seint Avereys’. The context in which this name appears has clear overtones of mock preaching: like a burlesque preacher, the Doctour is voicing hollow arguments which the hearer is meant to reject, is conspicuously drunk, and is attempting to turn gluttony into a form of devotion, asserting that ‘bacoun’ and ‘blancmanger’ might be ‘fode for a penaunt’. Langland seems to be undermining the Doctour’s rhetoric by tacitly comparing him to a mock preacher, and includes a burlesque saint as a necessary part of this analogy. Overall, the widespread
performance of parodic sermons in England, and the occurrence of mock saints in many of those that do survive, once again locates the mock saint among the patterns of English revelry.

The mock sermon is in fact doubly important when referring to Chaucer specifically, since it allows a reasonably firm connection to be drawn between his work and parodic saints. A number of critics have seen distinct echoes of parodic sermons throughout Chaucer’s output. Lee Patterson, for instance, has argued that the Prologue of the Wife of Bath derives many of its signature strategies from the genre. Comparing the Prologue to such examples as Roger de Collerye’s *Sermon pour une nopce*, Patterson finds that its first 160 lines can be categorised as ‘a brief version of sermon joyeux’, since ‘the Wife twists a biblical thema’ to ‘discover an irreducible carnality’.62 This idea has been revisited by Lisa Perfetti, who agrees that the Wife’s discourse is ‘framed’ as a ‘mock sermon in which she uses her life as a kind of exemplum...appropriating and implicitly deflating the authority of preachers’.63 Other pieces by Chaucer have attracted similar remarks. Several decades ago G.H. Gerould held that the Pardoner’s Prologue could also be approached as a mock sermon, a conclusion recently echoed by Roberta Mullini.64 The Pardoner’s discourse certainly resembles at least one surviving example of the form, the *Sermon joyeux d’un dépucelleur de nourrices*: here a self-confessed ‘deflowerer or nursemaids’ also ‘preaches’ of own lecherous pursuits, recalling the Pardoner’s vow to ‘have a joly wenche in every toun’ (VI 452-53).65

If these texts are accepted as parodic sermons, then it allows some elements within them to be linked with the mock saint tradition. Two points of particular interest are Alisoun’s claim that she bears ‘seint Venus seel’ (III 604) and the Pardoner’s oath ‘by Seint Ronyon’ (VI 309-10). Even if Venus and Ronyon are not fully-fledged parodic saints, both are at least reminiscent of the other burlesques. As Arthur Hoffman has suggested, Saint Venus provides a carnivalesque counterpoint to the saint who should be revered on the pilgrimage, embodying a debased morality much like Saint Tyburn or the ‘patroon van drinkebroers’.66 Along the same lines, Ronyon seems to have overtones of obscenity. Although Walter Skeat and James Sledd have argued that a genuine saint is intended here, respectively reading ‘Ronyon’ as Ronan or Ninnian, other possibilities have been advanced: these include ‘Rognan’ (Kidney), ‘Runnion’
(Penis), ‘Rogne’ (Scab), and ‘Rogueux’ (‘a scurvy fellow’). The editors of Nashe’s ‘wanton Elegie’ _The choise of valentines_ (c.1593), in which ‘Saint Runnion’ also features, add a further possibility: ‘a mangy or fat woman’. Ann Haskell concludes that all these elements are probably implied at once, as ‘the possibility of punning...must not be ruled out’. It would appear that for Chaucer deploying this type of festive parody necessarily leads to the production of caricatured or distorted saint-names. Chaucer himself, in other words, might spell out some link between English festivity and the mock saint.

To summarise all that has been said so far, it seems clear that mock saints were a firm part of various customs and rituals, from the games of ‘S. Distaffs day’ to traditional music and dance. The literary register signals a strong association between parodic holymen, feasting and seasonal disorder, and often appoints them as symbols of the inverted morality of misrule. Nevertheless, the evidence gathered here is not without its problems. When it is considered in relation to Chaucer specifically, it gains particular complexities. The fact that most records of mock saints are either from mainland Europe or from the centuries following Chaucer’s death should caution against drawing straightforward links between _Troilus_ and the tradition. Such factors necessitate some consideration of how the gap might be bridged, or how Seynt Idiot can be linked to the other sources cited here.

To resolve this question, four possible explanations present themselves. The first of these is simply to view Idiot as an isolated case, a self-contained innovation on the part of Chaucer, which has no relationship to any later texts or customs. The figure might instead be linked to the commonplace idea of love as a religion, following William Dodd’s reading. This theory can be quickly discounted, however, given the use that Chaucer makes of the figure. The emphatically festive connotations that surround Seynt Idiot, and especially his direct relationship with foolery, seem too close to the other usages to be purely coincidental; likewise, his name clearly overlaps with the other examples, being almost identical in meaning to the French Saint Sot, the English Saint Fool, and the Scottish Saint Cloun. Consequently, Chaucer’s deployment of Idiot makes it difficult to assume that he has no connection with the other burlesques. A second position might be to regard Chaucer as the inventor of the conceit, which was in turn taken up by readers of his work – in other words, he is not
responding to a prior tradition in which later writers are also situated, but managed to
initiate the convention himself. This has more merit than the previous possibility, at
least at first glance, since there are some grounds for regarding Chaucer as the
originator of the tradition. A number of later sources do appear to be echoing Chaucer
directly in their deployment of parodic saint-names. For instance, the mention of
‘Saint Runnion’ in Nashe’s *Choise of valentines* is one of a number of allusions to
Chaucer in the text: Nashe mentions ‘poor patient Grisel’, echoes the Wife of Bath in
the line ‘alass, alass, that love should be a sinne’, and even opens the piece with a
Chaucerian caveat, urging his reader to turn to ‘better lynes’ should they ‘blame my
verse of loose unchastitie’.71 In fact, Seynt Idiot himself makes a later appearance in a
similar context: the phrase ‘Saint Idiot is his lord, iwis’ is among the self-conscious
archaisms spoken by the pedantic scholar Moth in William Cartwright’s play *The
Ordinary* (c.1635).72 Nevertheless, when considered closely, this explanation is no
more satisfactory than the previous one. It cannot account for the sheer volume of
later burlesque saints, or the fact that many occur in emphatically non-literary sources,
such as the rites of Saint Sweetlad and Saint Distaff, or the names of the ‘playes’ at
Shrewsbury, Ashburton and Grimsby. It is difficult to see why these demotic usages
would incorporate learned allusions to medieval poetry, given their basis in popular
and communal culture. Therefore not every instance of a mock saint can be
comfortably traced back to Chaucer: his work cannot justifiably be seen as the source
of all later references.

A third possible explanation is that Chaucer is simply alluding to continental
practices, and that his reference here is to the traditions of revelry native to France and
other countries in mainland Europe. Again, the evidence does support this idea at least
to a degree. One of the other mock saints named in Chaucer’s canon does seem to
stem directly from French culture: the Wife of Bath’s ‘Seint Venus’ is probably drawn
from the *Roman de la Rose*, in which Cupid swears ‘par sainte Venus, ma mere’, or
‘by my modir seint Venus’ as it is rendered in the Middle English translation (C
5953).73 There are also suggestions that Chaucer had more general contact with
French festivity, such as the similarities between the frame narrative of the
*Canterbury Tales* and the poetry competitions of the *puys*: these fraternities were in
turn probably responsible for many of the *esbattements* and *sermons joyeux* in which
*saïnts facétieux* appear.74 Furthermore, given the etymology of the word ‘idiot’ it is
not too difficult to imagine that Chaucer might have the French tradition in mind in Troilus’ speech, or even a particular French precedent. In other words, he may be referring strictly and specifically to continental traditions. This in turn would make Seynt Idiot a rather esoteric reference, which indicates parodies carried out abroad and in other languages, instead of evoking the immediate festive culture in England itself. But this still does not explain why Chaucer would include such a reference in an English text, and without expanding on it further. The oblique nature of the reference, as Chaucer does not feel it necessary to spell out precisely why Idiot acts as a ‘lord of…fooles’, suggests that his audience will have some pre-existing familiarity with these traditions or the ideas which underpin them. While this solution cannot be ruled out altogether, it is therefore at least slightly problematic.

The fourth possibility, then, is that Chaucer has some tacit awareness of oral tradition of mock saints in England, one which is not widely represented in written form until the sixteenth century. While this is of course difficult to prove beyond all doubt, it remains the best hypothesis. Many of the English sources which name mock saints do gesture back to customs and rituals that are demonstrably medieval in character, such as May games, mock preaching, and the revels of Midsummer’s Eve. Likewise, the fact that the saints are most amply documented in the post-medieval period can be attributed to the new scrutiny popular culture received following the Reformation, which Peter Burke has analysed at length. Many of the texts which preserve the names of parodic saints are written in this vein, as their authors interrogate popular observance for signs of ‘superstition and idolatry’: thus Becon alludes to Sweetlad in a disquisition on fasting and feast-days, Dent refers to St Fool while attacking ballads and songs, and Bale’s ‘Cutlake’ and ‘Legearde’ are linked with suspicious folk customs, being figures venerated by the ‘old…witche’ Idololatria. In sum, although the majority of sources are modern, they do seem to regard mock saints as part of an older culture, pushing them back to Chaucer’s own period. Despite the difficulty of asserting this point with total confidence, it seems likely that Seynt Idiot is a conscious allusion to the celebratory practices of Chaucer’s own culture, and that the same traditions of merrymaking underlie the modern references and Troilus alike. It therefore seems most probable that Idiot is a means by which Chaucer seeks to evoke the wider culture of popular revelry.
The question remains, however, exactly why Chaucer should choose to introduce a reference to festive discourse into this particular poem. After all, such a move is at odds with the apparent formality of the text, which since C.S. Lewis has been regarded as Chaucer’s most forceful vindication of elite ‘courtly tradition’. One explanation is provided by the immediate context in which the citation appears. The label Seynt Idiot neatly reinforces many of Troilus’ charges against love. In fact, once the festive status of Seynt Idiot is acknowledged, other elements in Troilus’ caricature begin to make more sense, as revelry gives them a common thematic core. In the first place, if Seynt Idiot is regarded as a festival saint, it explains why Chaucer appoints Love ‘lord of thise foles alle’ when he gives him this name. The notion of an ‘idiot’ being ‘lord’ of fools echoes the patronage mock saints conventionally held over feast occasions. In their role as the directors or protectors of revelry, they were also foolish beings who licensed others to immerse themselves in folly. These implications are further extended in Troilus’ claim that ‘loves servauntz’ are ‘verray goddes apes’ (I, 912-13). According to the MED, notions of performance and profanation are embedded in the word ‘ape’: amongst its possible range of meanings is ‘a fool’, in the sense of a professional entertainer, and ‘one who does tricks, a trickster’. The fact that these ‘tricks’ are apparently directed at ‘god’ might even suggest the blasphemies of liturgical parody, of which mock saints are a key example.

Alongside these echoes, the name Seynt Idiot also draws out further festive resonances in Troilus’ mockery. Another point of connection is Troilus’ insistence that Seynt Idiot promotes sickness, the ‘blaunche fevere’ of amor hereos. Troilus ridicules the various symptoms of melancholy displayed by lovers, as they ‘make hem for to grone’, wear ‘more than ynough ...for the cold’ and ‘monche hir mete alone’ (I, 914-15, 918-19). The point here seems to be that Seynt Idiot, far from having the curative powers of a real martyr, actively propagates disease: those who fall under his influence are made ill, rather than receiving relief from illness. This is further implied by the fact that ‘idiot’ could also describe a quack-doctor in Middle English, another charlatan whose patients ‘sholde never kevere’ (I, 917). What makes all this particularly interesting is that it resembles a common joke in the sermons joyeux. Several of the sermons claim that mock saints spread sickness among their devotees, assuming that these inverted holymen must have the opposite powers of true saints. For instance, the bawdy Sermon joyeux de Saint Velu names ‘Sainct Trottet’ as...
‘patron des prostituées’, and claims that each of his followers ‘carries his medicine with him, you can be sure’. The same idea reaches grotesque proportions in a Dutch text, which promises that ‘whoever drinks so much that he dishonours his trousers’ will be absolved by Saint Drincatibus, and vividly details the effects of such devotion: ‘a certain water you must drink...even if it starts to run out through your arsehole...even if in the morning you have cellar fever’. Seynt Idiot allows Chaucer to make much the same joke in English, drawing parallels between lovesickness and the maladies mock saints traditionally cause.

A further link is provided by the discourse that Troilus attributes to lovers. According to Pandarus, Troilus claims that ‘thise lovers wolden speke in general’, believing ‘it was a siker art...to assayen over-al’ (I, 926-28). Again, this is reminiscent of festive conduct, and the types of language in which it is phrased. Troilus’ basic accusation is that the followers of Love refuse to speak in specific terms. Rather than producing meaning that identifies a clear object, their speech is broad and ambiguous, as it attempts to ‘assayen over-al’. As Anthony Gash in particular has noted, the peculiar idiom of medieval celebration was also characterised by breadth and ambiguity: it used ‘reversal and parody’ to ‘open up every form of equivocation which closed formal discourse...seeks to seal off’. The language of festivity, in other words, has an analogous scope in its meaning. It also refuses to be pinned down to one sense or object alone, as its parodies, puns and ironies play with multiple implications. Chaucer’s depiction of a language that tends to range ‘over-al’ provides another overlap between the speech of lovers and celebrants, and another level to Troilus’ attack.

In the same vein, Seynt Idiot also debases romantic love by tacitly sexualising it. Throughout popular ritual, many of the mock saints possess strong sexual connotations. In French this link is often explicit: the French saints not only include openly ‘phallic’ figures such as Saint Foutin (Saint Screw) and Saint Guerluchon (Saint Lover), but also more suggestively named characters, such as Sainct Billouart (Saint Rod) and Saint Frappart (Saint Spanker). Much the same association is evident in England. The customs attached to Saint Sweetlad and Saint Julian Apostate, for instance, have a clear sexual element: according to John Aubrey the ‘magic secrets’ of ‘St Agnes’ night’ include such blatantly phallic rituals as ‘sticking a
pin in your sleeve’ and straddling ‘the spars of a gate’, while the Midsummer bonfires were notorious for the ‘lustful acts’ and ‘sexual debauchery’ that accompanied them. In literature as well the English saints are frequently sexualised. The most obvious example is Saint Pintle of Hicks Corner, but there are a number of others: Nicholas Breton’s Strange Newes (1620) mentions one Saint Grincums (Saint Pox), while Gabriel Harvey’s burlesque love-letter ‘To my good Mistresse Anne’ (1580) assures its addressee that ‘my S. Penny may performe thy wishe’. This sexual dimension adds a further charge, as Seynt Idiot becomes a scornful allusion to the real motivations underlying the ‘siker art’ of lovers.

Seynt Idiot is therefore more than a casual or incidental remark. Regarding Love in such terms triggers an extended joke in the text, as the cult of Love is derisively likened to several aspects of festive behaviour. The reverence of ‘thise loveres’ merges with the foolishness of carnival, as both share the same underlying sexuality, imprecision of language, and association with illness. It raises much the same point as the later Lover’s Mass (c.1450), which similarly identifies the ‘word…of lovers old and newe’ with profane parody. The figure of Seynt Idiot thus becomes a way of ridiculing the pretensions of fin’amour, as he provides a core around which other disparaging allusions to festivity are gathered.

However, this is by no means the only significance the figure carries. When the styling Seynt Idiot is explored more fully, further levels of complexity emerge. It is particularly worth noting that the meaning of festivity in Troilus is unstable. When merrymaking is first evoked through Seynt Idiot, it has an obviously negative value. Troilus connects love with festivity in order to discredit or ‘despit’ it: it is part of his ‘relentless scoffing at love and all love’s servants’, a way of dismissing the ‘feyning’ and ‘faylyng’ of lovers. Festivity is therefore aligned with deception, frivolity and lechery, much as it is in the work of medieval moralists, who routinely classify celebration as ‘lesyngis’, ‘vnresonable speche’, and ‘alle manere harlotrie’. However, Chaucer’s narrative permits festivity to transcend this valuation. During the following stanzas, Troilus’ jest at the expense of Love is played out in earnest. Immediately after Pandarus has described Troilus’ ‘japes’, he leads his friend through a ritual designed to ‘apese’ the ‘wrathe’ of Love: ‘Now bete thi brest, and sey to God of Love,/ Thy grace, lord, for now I me repente,/ If I mysspake’ (I, 932-34). As
Chauncey Wood notes, this section of the poem maintains the notion that love is a ‘parodic religion’ akin to inversion ritual. Troilus and Pandarus are effectively performing a parodic ‘confessional scene’ in these lines, ‘complete with breast-beating, prayers for the forgiveness of “japes”, and advice’. Chaucer even imitates the formulae of confessors in this section, as Pandarus encourages Troilus to ‘sey with al thyn herte in god entente’ (I, 935). The idea that love is a festive travesty of worship is therefore retained, even as Troilus repents his attack. Troilus now secures Love’s favour by performing the very rituals he has used to condemn it.

The meaning of festivity has therefore altered. Love’s semblance to festivity is no longer something that disgraces it, but merely part of its overall nature. Troilus now participates in love’s carnivalesque parodies simply as a necessary part of being a lover. Chaucer reclaims festivity, in other words, allowing it to gain a more positive value and transcend Troilus’ disparagement. In fact, this revaluation goes even further. The reference to Seynt Idiot gains greater significance when it is compared to the final stanzas of the text. The implication of festivity that Idiot brings into Troilus serves to foreshadow the closing scenes of the romance. In particular, it anticipates the final truth that Troilus obtains on death, when ‘with ful avysement’ he looks down upon ‘this wrecched world’ and ‘lough right at the wo/ Of hem that wepten’ (V, 1811-16, 1821-22). Yasunari Takada has spelled out the festive content of these lines. Takada argues that the final stanzas of Troilus echo the Dantean ‘festa di Paradiso’, although notes a crucial difference between the ways in which the Italian and English poets approach this concept. According to Takada, Chaucer permits his ‘feast’ to retain its carnivalesque implications, allowing it to mean both ‘earthly joy and heavenly felicity’: ‘the “feste” in the Troilus...is characteristically dual in its semantic figuration...from festivity to convivium, from carnal pleasure to spiritual bliss, the word “feste” is used, importantly, in its full duality’. In effect, Troilus’ final burst of laughter, as he sees every worldly thing dissolve into a ‘litel spot of erthe’, manages to preserve a clear festive inflection (V, 1815). It becomes carnivalesque laughter, ‘directed not at one part only, but at the whole’, collapsing all distinctions.

If Takada is correct here, then Seynt Idiot can be regarded as a prefiguration of this final transcendence. There is after all a direct line of continuation between Troilus’ confession of love in the first book and his transportation ‘to the holughnesse of the
eighthe spere’ in the fifth: both in terms of his own actions and in terms of the narrative as a whole, Troilus’ love for Criseyde brings him to this point (V, 1809). Likewise, Troilus’ behaviour after death recalls the liturgical parodies Seynt Love evokes. He is apparently laughing at the rituals of mourning, ‘the wo/ Of hem that wepten for his deth’: from his new vantage point these obsequies in effect become festive parodies, generating amusement rather than solemnity. Love’s identification with a mock saint at the start of this process therefore looks forward to the ‘pleyn felicite’ Troilus goes on to experience. What is most striking here, however, is the implicit meaning that this imposes on festivity. Merrymaking now gains a philosophical value, as it is implicated in the triumphant vision Troilus attains after ‘his lighte goost ful blisfully is went’ (V, 1808). The ‘bliss’ he feels is made to resemble a ‘feste’, not only in terms of the pleasure it brings, but also in the new perspective that it fosters. This completes the process of redefining revelry that begins earlier in the text. Festivity now gains an even more positive value, being linked with the wisdom Troilus obtains as he enters Heaven. The pejorative meaning misrule initially holds in the poem is decisively overturned.

In conclusion, the appearance of a mock saint in *Troilus and Criseyde* carries some important implications. At the very least, it reconfirms the presence of popular and comic forms in *Troilus*, noted elsewhere by Karla Taylor in her work on proverbs in the poem, and by Richard Firth Green in his remarks on its use of fabliau. This in turn works against the mode of reading which defines the piece as little more than a defence of ‘courtly tradition’. But more than this, Seynt Idiot helps to pin down Chaucer’s attitude towards revelry at this point in his development as a poet. His first disdainful reference to festive inversion seems to be a sort of joke, since these ideas are swiftly discarded. Seynt Idiot may begin as an elaborate satire on the pretensions of lovers, but he is rapidly turned into a fitting embodiment of love, before merging with Troilus’ transcendent insights at the close of the poem. This gradual reappraisal of festivity suggests that, even at this stage, Chaucer is prepared to see the forms of popular culture as more than simply corruptive or gratuitous exercises. Although his use of festive culture here is certainly more tentative than the games and inversions of the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer already seems to see misrule as something of interest, with a valuable philosophical dimension.


9 The authoritative work on the sermon remains Sander Gilman, *Parodic Sermon in European Perspective: Aspects of Liturgical Parody from the Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia, 1974). Gilman’s survey makes no mention of the line from *Troilus* which concerns the present essay. In fact, he states that such forms are ‘purposefully excluded’ from Chaucer’s compositions: ‘while Chaucer offers the reader literary parodies…there are no liturgical parodies in his work’ (149-50).


Koopmans, *Quatre Sermons Joyeux*, 66 (my translation). In the original French, ‘En faisant supplication/ A Sainct Frappecul le baron:/ Que puissons toujours baculer/ Et frapper culs sans reculer’.


23


35 Compare Coissac’s account of the rituals associated with Saint Guénolé (Saint Give-Birth) in Brittany, which involves ‘jeunes filles qui désirent se marier vont piquer des épingles dans les pieds de certains saints’, or ‘young girls who wish to marry pricking with needles the feet of certain saints’ (Guillaume-Michel Coissac, *Mon Limousin, Moeurs, Coutumes, Legendes* [Paris, 1913], 331). On phallic saints generally, see Jane Tibbetts Schulaenbourg, *Forgetful of their sex: female sanctity and society, ca. 500-1100* (Chicago, 1998), 224-26; Richard Payne Knight and Thomas
Wright, *Discourse on Priapus and Worship of the Generative Powers During the Middle Ages of Western Europe* (London, 1866), 139-41.


46 Clopper, *Drama, Play and Game*, 304. Clopper is quoting an anonymous ‘attack on superstition’ originating from Canterbury, 1561.


64 G.H. Gerould, *Old English and Medieval Literature* (New York, 1929), 154; Roberta Mullini, “‘Better be sott Somer than Sage Salamon’: carnivalesque features in John Heywood’s plays’, in Konrad Eisenbichler and Wim Husken, eds., *Carnival and Carnivalesque: the fool, the reformer, the wildman, and others in Early Modern Theatre*, Ludus 4 (Amsterdam, 1999), 29-42.


76 Becon, A Fruitful Treatise, 536; Bale, Comedy concernynge thre laws, 176.


78 See MED entry for ‘idiote’, sense (c), where the earliest instance is c.1400.

79 Koopmans, Quatre Sermons Joyeux, 81 (my translation). The French reads: ‘C’est chose certaine/ Qu’il porte sur luy medecine’.

80 Pleij, Het gilde, 257 (my translation). In the Middle Dutch, ‘Zo wie drijnct, dat hij zijn brouc onnheert,/ Die zoude hebben voor zijn beghin’; ‘Van dien waterken te drijnckene...Al sauden zij ulieden under ten eersgate uutloopen...Al saudi er ’s morghen den keldercurts of alle hebben’.


82 Merceron, Dictionnaire thématique et géographique des saints imaginaires, 190, 226.


