

'England, hope for light after the confusion of darkness': English political identity in the late medieval carol

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Abstract

The late medieval carol is an important indigenous musical form that is abundant in a number of sources from the late fourteenth to the early sixteenth century both with and without extant musical notation. Often thought of as a song that only addresses Christmas themes, medieval carols, in fact, cover a variety of subject matter: love, humour, moralistic tales, the veneration of saints, and politics, to name but a few. This short study seeks to discuss the political carols; addressing their position in manuscripts of the time, examining the clues they might give to the establishments they were performed in, and exploring their representation of English political identity during this turbulent period of history.

Keywords: England; Middle Ages; Music; Carols; Politics; Identity; Manuscripts

The late medieval carol is an important musical form, easily identified by its repetitive verse/burden structure, which is unique to England in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Found with and without musical notation ranging from small pocket notebooks to large illuminated manuscripts, the carol was a popular musical form in the late Middle Ages. Over 500 carol lyrics survive; approximately 33 with musical notation. Often thought of as a Christmas song (many survive on this theme) carols actually address numerous subjects: love, nativity, women, saints, humour, moralistic tales, and politics, to name but a few. This diverse subject matter provides us with a unique window into various aspects of late medieval life. This study will look specifically at the political carols; the subject matter of which ranges from the celebration of battles and kings to the veneration of political saints. It will draw attention to the importance of such politically charged carols; exploring their representation of English political identity during this turbulent period of history, discussing their placement within significant manuscripts such as GB-Lbl Egerton 3307, and questioning the use of secular political themes during Christmas celebrations. The manuscript GB-Lbl Egerton, which has no proven provenance, contains a substantial number of political carols. This study will examine how the political carols may contribute to our understanding of its origins, in turn contributing to wider knowledge of the contexts in which such carols were used.

England in the fifteenth century was a land of wars and political chaos; war with France in the early part of the century quickly turned into a bloody civil war

between the house of Lancaster and the house of York for control of the English crown. As Alessandra Petrina (2004: 1) notes, this turbulent century is when

the English nation finds its modern identity and is ultimately released, even through the endless vicissitudes of the Hundred Years' War, from its connection with France and the French crown [...] the deposition of an anointed King, Richard II, introduces a time of almost frenetic changes, concluding with the ascent to the throne of the first Tudor King.

Carols from this period reflect this political turmoil and growing sense of identity: conveying a pride in England and its achievements on the world stage; keeping tales of significant English saints alive; and pleading for the deliverance of England from her enemies. Their texts can be vibrant and rousing; often projecting a sense of English pride, identity, and unity. In total, there are twenty-five carols extant with and without musical notation that are political in nature (carols that recount political events, carols associated with royalty, and carols associated with the politically significant saints St George and St Thomas of Canterbury).

Table 1

Extant notated carols with political lyrics, or lyrics associated with St Thomas or St George, in notated carol manuscripts.

Carol	Manuscript	Folio Number	Subject, dedication and attribution
Deo Gracias Anglia	GB-Ctc 0.3.58 GB-Obl Selden b.26	No. 7 17v	Henry V and victory at Agincourt in 1415
I pra you, sers, al in fere	GB-Ob Douce 302	29r	St Thomas of Canterbury
A, a, a, a,	GB-Lbl Sloane 2593	23v	St Thomas of Canterbury
Princeps pacis	GB-Lbl Egerton 3307	49v-50	Peace and victory
Anglia, tibi turbidas	GB-Lbl Egerton 3307	60v-61	Plea for England and friendship with others
Benedicte Deo	GB-Lbl Egerton 3307	61v	England and France bless the Lord
Saint Thomas honour we	GB-Lbl Egerton 3307	62v-63	St Thomas of Canterbury
Enforce we us	GB-Lbl Egerton 3307	63v	St George and the battle of Agincourt
Exultavit cor	GB-Lbl Egerton 3307	64v	Henry V
Princeps Serenissime	GB-Lbl Egerton 3307	64v	Henry VI

Pastor cecus in gregys medio	GB-Ob Eng.poet.e.1	35r	St Thomas of Canterbury
Jesu, for they mercy	GB-Lbl Additional 5665	44v-45	Scottish truce or perhaps the Wars of the Roses
Letare Cantuaria	GB-Lbl Additional 5665	27v-28	St Thomas of Canterbury
Clangat Tuba	GB-Lbl Additional 5665	41v-42	St Thomas of Canterbury
For I love, I love and whom love thee	GB-Lbl Additional 5465	40v-46	Celebration of the birth of Henry VII's child and the end of the Wars of the Roses
From stormy windes	GB-Lbl Additional 5465	104v-108	Prince Arthur (son of Henry VII)
This day dawes	GB-Lbl Additional 5465		Queen Elizabeth (wife of Henry VII)
Enforce yourself as Goddess knight	GB-Lbl Additional 5465	115v-118	Henry VII or VIII
Though sum sayeth	Gb-Lbl Additional 31922	71v-72r	By Henry VIII
Whiles life or breath	Gb-Lbl Additional 31922	54v-55	Henry VIII through the eyes of Catherine

England, be glad	Gb-Lbl Additional 31922	100v-102	1513 French invasion
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The largest extant gathering of political carols in any one manuscript of the fifteenth century is found within the substantial and impressive GB-Lbl Egerton 3307 (Egerton).¹ Dating from c.1450, this manuscript contains two very distinct sections; the first comprising processional music for use in Holy Week, and the second containing thirty-one carols plus three other songs with secular texts. The carols within this manuscript are all extant with musical notation, and are notated for two or three voices with either a single or double burden; typical of carol style at this time. The political carols of Egerton, and of other musically notated manuscripts of this period, follow this same formula. It is only their texts, rather than the employment of any particular structural or musical content, that sets them apart from the non-political carols.

Although the majority of the carols found in Egerton are for the Feast of the Nativity, seven carols provide a commentary on English politics; six of these are grouped closely together from folios 60v to 64v and range from pleas for peace, the praise of political saints, to celebrating King Henry V and VI. In a manuscript as well executed and organised as Egerton it is easy to argue that this distinctive grouping was no accident; particularly as carols are often found scattered in seemingly random positions in other manuscripts.

Table 2

The order of carols in GB-Lbl Egerton 3307

Topos	Folio Number	Title
Nativity	49	Tibi laus tibi gloria
Nativity/political	49v-50	Princeps pacis
Topos	Folio Number	Title
Nativity	50v-51	David ex progenie
Nativity	51v	Novo profusi gaudio
Nativity	53	Novus sol de virgine
Nativity	53v-54	Sol occasum nesciens
Saint Stephen	54v	The holy martyr Stephen
Nativity	55	Qui natus est de virgine
Nativity	55v-57	Ave rex angelorum
Nativity	57v-58	Cum virtus magnifica
Nativity	58v-59	Illuminare Jerusalem
Ivy	59v-60	Ivy is good
Political	60v-61	Anglia, tibi turbidas
Political	61v	Benedicte Deo
Saint John	62	Johannes, Jesu care
Saint Thomas (political)	62v-63	Saint Thomas honour we

Political	63v	Enforce we us
Political	64	Exultavit cor
Political	64v	Princeps serenissime
Nativity	65	Ecce, quod natura
Nativity	65v-66	Almighty Jesu
Moral Counsel	66v	I pray you all
Nativity	67	Ave, plena gracia
Nativity	67v	Verbum patris
Nativity	68	Illuxit leticia
Refrain Song	68v	Omnes una gaudemus
Nativity	69	Alleluia: Diva natalicia
Nativity	69v-70	Omnis caterva fidelium
Women's address	70v-71	Comedentes convenite
Nativity	71v	Gaudeamus pariter
Topos	Folio Number	Title
Nativity	72	Parit virgo filium
Drinking Song – not a carol	72v-75	O potores exquisite
Motet	75v-77	Cantemus Domino
Carol – no text	77v-78	
Nativity	79	Lauda salvatorem

Why are so many political carols found grouped together in this manuscript, and in what type of establishment would they have been appropriate? In addressing these questions the carol *St Thomas honour we* may be a good place to start.

Saint Thomas honour we,
thro whose blood Holy Church is made free.

All Holy Church was but a thrall, thro King and temporal
lordes all, he was slain in Christes hall
and set all thing in unity, and set all thing in unity;
his death hath such aucturity.

The King exiled him out of land, the King exiled
him out of land, and took his good in his hand,
for bidding both free and bond that no prayer for
him should be, that no prayer for him should be;
so fierce he shewed his cruelty.

All ben exiled that to him lang, all ben exiled
that to him lang,
women, children, old men among,
young babes that weeped instead of song; Saint Thomas said;
welcome ye be;
ilk land is now your own country.²

This seven-stanza carol, notated for three voices, with repeated burden, sits in the middle of the political carols of Egerton. Finding a carol to this saint placed in such a way is certainly not surprising considering the political associations that come with his legacy. Thomas Becket, former archbishop of Canterbury, was a saint with a distinctly English political identity as a result of his assassination at the hands of King Henry II's knights in December 1170. The cult of St Thomas quickly established after his death in the twelfth century, and was still strong in the fifteenth. Evidence of his continuing popularity can be seen in extant imagery from the fifteenth century; the fifteenth-century stained-glass window from within York Minster depicting St Thomas (see image 2 on page 21) being an excellent example of his enduring status.

Figure 1

Original manuscript image of the carol 'St Thomas honour we'; GB-Lbl Egerton

3307 f. 62v. © British Library Board



St. Thomas was a saint of the people rather than the crown, and it has been suggested that Becket

heralded a tradition of saintly opposition to the crown, in which baronial leaders [...] who had been executed by unpopular regimes, were widely recognized as saints [...] venerating these saints became at least partially a way of critiquing the regimes that had executed them.

(Good, 2009: 19).

There is no denying the political undertones that the cult of St. Thomas represented; the eventual attempt by Henry VIII to erase his cult entirely due to his status as a traitor to the crown attests to this; Henry destroyed his shrine within Canterbury Cathedral in 1540. The carols of St Thomas (of which five are extant) must therefore be treated as politically charged and representing a particularly English identity at this time. Despite the feast day of St Thomas falling on the 29 December, during the Christmas period, this carol's position at the heart of this group seems to emphasize its political identity.

Debates over the provenance of Egerton have not yet come to any definitive conclusions; the two main candidates remain Meaux Abbey in Yorkshire, or the more southerly St George's Chapel in Windsor.³ It has been suggested, however, that there may be a connection with the area of Hythe on the south east coast due to the inclusion of the (non-political) carol *Ivy is Good*, which sits immediately before the

group of political carols in the middle of the carol section, and includes in its final verse the name of 'hye' which could allude to this town (McPeck, 1963: 12). The final verse reads:

Where it taketh hold it keepeth fast
And strenketh it that is him by;
It keepeth wall from cost and waste,
As men may see all day at hye:
Ivy: I can tell no cause why
But we must love that gentle tree.

(Stevens, 1970: 44)

Hythe was well known for its ivy in the Middle Ages, and was

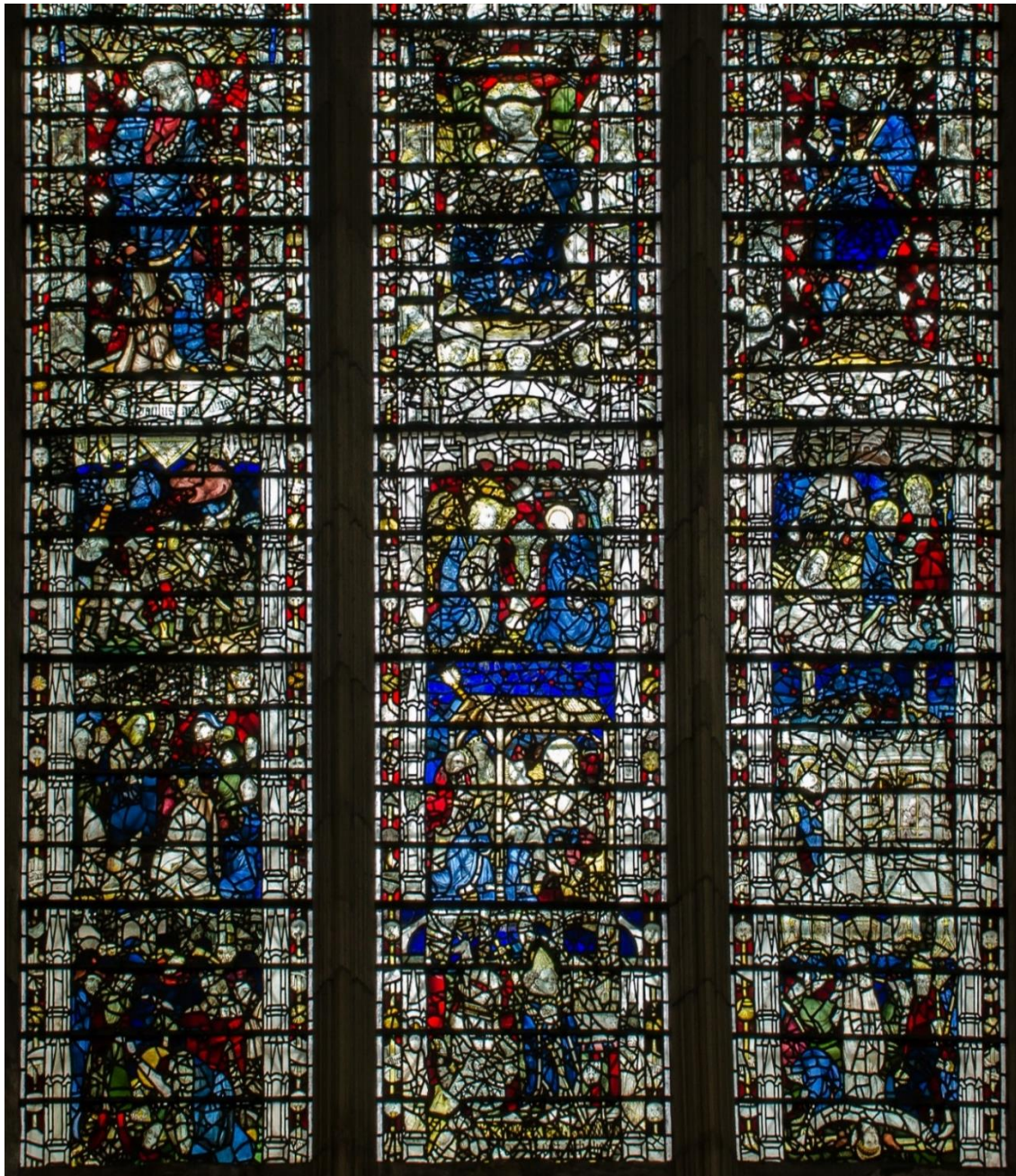
something of a pleasure resort [that was] visited frequently by the English royal court. In view of the known connection between Hythe and Henry V and VI in affairs of state [...]; business as well as pleasure could have made the area well known to the Royal court and all those in any way closely connected with it.

(McPeck, 1963: 12)

Image 2

Fifteenth-Century depiction of St Thomas of Canterbury. Copyright Julian P

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The connection between this manuscript and the area of Hythe has previously been dismissed as having relevance only in that those attending St George's Chapel in

Windsor would have known the location and understood its inclusion within the manuscript. However, could there be a more local connection to the manuscript? Hythe was certainly a town of importance in the Middle Ages, providing a port and no fewer than two castles, one of which, if a more local connection was established, may prove to be of interest; the castle of Saltwood. The Archbishop of Canterbury's palace for a great majority of its life until the reign of Henry VII, Saltwood was a Bishop's palace of some prominence. It had strong political connections, contained within its walls its own chapel dedicated to the Saints Mary and Thomas of Canterbury, and housed its own resident priests. Is it therefore possible that this type of establishment could have been connected with a manuscript such as Egerton? It is certainly not impossible. The inclusion of the carol for St Thomas is an unusual choice for St George's Chapel in Windsor. This carol would, however, be entirely appropriate in a chapel dedicated to him, and certainly would not be unexpected in the palace of the Archbishop of Canterbury; particularly one closely connected with his assassination (Saltwood Castle was the meeting place of Henry's knights before they rode to Canterbury to murder Thomas Becket).

The overtly political nature of the carols within Egerton, including this carol to St Thomas, would seem appropriate in a setting such as Saltwood, a castle with a strong English political identity, one that, as Alan Clark suggests, for much of its life 'seems to have enjoyed an uneasy dual occupation between priests and prelates on the one side, and the noblemen or garrison commanders on the other' (Clark, 1975:

9). The celebration of Henry V and VI within the carols may also seem appropriate within this setting, not only due to its dual occupation, but also considering the Archbishop of Canterbury's close connection with Henry V and the battle of Agincourt, where he was present at the King's side. Archbishop Chichele, who was Archbishop until 1443, was also present at the siege of Rouen, negotiating the surrender of the city in 1419 on behalf of Henry V. The carol to Henry VI, 'Princeps serenissime', also appears to be a direct address to the King, suggesting his presence while it is sung, which could have been possible at Saltwood. The inclusion of secular pieces such as the drinking song *O Potores* (not a carol but placed within the carol section of the manuscript), would have also been appropriate in such a setting; Christmas celebrations would have taken place with members of the clergy, military figures and members of the castle household. These festivities would most likely have included women; the inclusion of the carol *Comidentes convenite*, which specifically addresses female company, would therefore suggest their presence.

Much of the argument for St George's Chapel as the place of origin for this manuscript is based around the inclusion of the processional hymn dedicated to St George, *Salve festa dies*. It has been argued that its inclusion in the liturgy and its placement with the other liturgical hymns 'indicates the probability either of an establishment dedicated to St George or a chapel in his honour within a large establishment' (McPeck, 1963: 11). St George, however, is also a saint with strong political associations, therefore a hymn dedicated to him within this manuscript

would not seem out of place, particularly alongside a carol celebrating him in the same manuscript. He came to particular prominence in the early part of the fifteenth century when Henry V invoked him as the patron Saint of England at the battle of Agincourt in 1415. Many soldiers believed they had seen St George fighting in the battle for the English side, and as a result of English success the feast of St George was given principal status by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Archbishop Chichele, in the same year. Carols and hymns dedicated to St George would seem appropriate in the archbishop's palace. The carol reads:

Enforce we us with all our might

To love Saint George our Lady knight.

Worship of virtue is the meed, And sueth him ay of
right;

To worship George then have we need, Which is
our sov'reign lady's knight.

He kept the maid from dragon's dread,

And fraid all France and put to flight at

Agincourt, the chronicle ye read; The French

him see formost in fight.

In his virtue he will us lead Againes the

fiend, the foul wight, And with his banner
overspread,
If we him love with all our might.

(Stevens, 1970: 49)

Saltwood Castle has a strong English political identity, and would therefore seem an appropriate consideration as the location for a manuscript containing so many political carols. However, even if Saltwood proves not to be the location for this manuscript, it would certainly seem possible that it could have come from an episcopal house of this kind, the political carols perhaps offering some clues. It is imperative that scholars look to more provincial locations for extant manuscripts as well as royal courts, abbeys and cathedrals; less obvious locations might be less glamorous, but may be just as valid.

The inclusion of such a large group in the heart of the carol section in Egerton suggests a strong political slant to any Christmas festivities within the establishment the manuscript was designed for; an establishment where the celebration of English political themes in conjunction with carols of the Nativity and the New Year was appropriate. Although this might be the case for the carols of Egerton, we must consider whether the inclusion of such political carols would always be appropriate during festivities at this time of year. GB-Lbl Additional MS 5665 (Ritson), 'the most important indigenous musical source between the Old Hall manuscript and the Eton Choirbook', is one manuscript that goes a little way to helping us understand the

possible inclusion of this genre of carol in Christmas celebrations (Lane and Sandon, 2001: i). It dates from between 1460 and 1510, and contains a total of 44 musically notated, polyphonic carols in the earliest layer of the manuscript, as well as 43 other polyphonic compositions from a later period.⁴ Only three of these 44 carols are political in nature: *Jesu for thy mercy*, *Letare Cantuaria* and *Clangat Tuba*.

Of particular interest in this manuscript is the labelling, contemporary to the musical notation, of each carol. Each one is labelled either, 'in die nativitatis', 'de sancto Maria', 'de sancto Johanne', 'de innocentibus', 'in die circumcissionis', 'Sancta Stephani', 'de nativitate Domini', 'de sancto Thoma', 'Epiphanie', 'ad placitum' and 'in fine nativitatis'. Only one carol is given no label at all, *Salve, sancta parens*, a carol for the Virgin. *Jesu for thy mercy*, a political carol, which 'may refer to the danger to the English truce with Scotland in 1499 [or possibly] the strife of Lancaster and York', is given the same instructions as those carols of moral counsel, and is clearly labelled 'ad placitum' translating as 'at pleasure' (Greene, 1977: 481). This labelling of the political carol within Ritson as 'ad placitum' may suggest that there were no hard and fast rules for the inclusion of secular, and indeed political, carols; they were performed within the Christmas celebrations, as the instruction reads, 'at pleasure'.

The two carols for the veneration of St Thomas are labelled as 'de sancto Thoma'. *Letare, Cantuaria*, a Latin carol which talks of an English nation, with verse one reading 'Gens Anglorum gaudeat in laudem pii martiris' ['Let the English nation rejoice in praising the holy martyr'], is situated between two carols for the Nativity,

again suggesting the compiler of the manuscript thought a carol such as this was appropriate within the celebration of the Nativity.⁵

The non-musically notated manuscript GB-Lbl Additional 31042 (known as the London Thornton Manuscript), also offers a substantial, and important clue to the inclusion and performance of the political carol within Christmas celebrations.⁶ The carol from this manuscript, *The Rose es the fairest flour of alle*, addresses the battle of Agincourt and King Henry V through allegorical text. As R. L. Greene notes, 'not until the third stanza does it become clear that an English king is meant [...] The fleur-de-lis, of course, is France' (Greene, 1977: 475). In verse two then, it would seem the author is suggesting that the fleur-de-lis (France) and other flowers (other nations) should worship the rose (England/Henry V):

Witnesse thies clerkes that bene wysse;

The Rose es the flour moste holdyn in prysse;

Therefore me thynke the Flour-de Lyse

Scholde wirchipe the Rosy of Ryse

A bene his thralle,

And so scholde other floures alle.

This carol is found with a heading that reads 'A Carolle for Crystynmesse', thus indicating very clearly that a political carol such as this was perfectly acceptable within Christmas celebrations, and that it was perhaps the form, one that most

probably encouraged group singing with the continual re-enforcement of their message both textually and musically in a repeated burden, that was important for performance in these celebrations and not necessarily the textual content.

Collective singing is often encouraged within the burdens of the carols. An example of this is seen in *Exultavit Cor* from Egerton. This carol gives thanks to God for helping Henry V in battle, with the burden exclaiming, 'My heart has rejoiced in the Lord; now let this assembly sing together' (Stevens, 1970: 144). A call to sing is also evident in the burden of the fifteen-stanza carol found in IR-Dtc D.4.18, which gives a full account of the battle of Towton in 1461 from the point of view of a Yorkist supporter (see Greene, 1977: 477–8). The burden reads:

Now is the Rose of Rone growen to a gret honoure;

Therefor sing we eurerychone, 'I blessed be that floure.'

(Greene, 1977: 260)

This call to sing may give us reason to believe that the ceremonies or festivities these carols were being used in were inclusive of both performer and audience/participants. This could, of course, refer only to members of the choir, but the possibility that it is a wider call to those present remains. Indeed, it is not only within the political carol genre that the call to sing together is evident, but across many others. What better way to nurture a sense of a unified culture and nation than to sing of such political events together?

Some scholars have dismissed the idea of there being a sense of nation at this time, arguing that England had developed no real sense of nation or nationalism until the late sixteenth century, but it would seem the carols are pointing, at least, towards a sense of unity and nationhood here in spite of, or perhaps because of, the political turmoil of the time (Kumar, 2003: 90). The reference to an 'English nation' in the carol *Letare, Cantuaria*, may echo some sentiment of this.

Rejoice, O Canterbury, in the victory of St Thomas

Let the English nation rejoice in praising the holy martyr,

For the feast-day of the blessed Archbishop Thomas now shines out upon us.

(Stevens, 1970: 145)

As L. O. Fradenburg notes, the word

'Nation' is recorded as appearing in English around the same time as 'country' (c.a. 1300), with the following meanings: [...] 'an extensive aggregate of persons so closely associated with each other by common descent, language, or history, as to form a distinct race of people, usually organized by a separate political state and occupying a definite territory'; [...] 'a family, kindred'; also, later in the fourteenth century [...] 'a particular class, kind, or race of persons'.

(Fradenburg, 2003: 31–2)

The word 'nation', it seems, had particular connotations during this period, informing the way in which we read the politics of these English carols.

In the carol *Benedicte Deo*, we also get a sense of England as a collective body in comparison to other nations, and perhaps even a sense of England as an 'empire' if one examines the text of the final stanza. The carol translates from Latin as:

Bless the Lord God;

Praise him in all generations.

Angels and heavens, powers and seas and all works, bless the Lord

Sun, moon and stars, dew, fire and cold, darkness and lightening, bless the

Lord

All moving things that live in the world in your appointed stations, bless the

Lord

England and France, and all empires, throughout all climes, bless the

Lord.

(Stevens, 1970: 143)

This sense of a collective body of people is also reflected in the Latin carol *Anglia, tibi turbidas*, found within the Egerton manuscript.

England, hope for light after the confusion of darkness

The wickedness of conspirators and the armed
might of tyrants are making a confused retreat;
with sure confidence, hope for light after darkness.

Let friendship increase and justice take root;
Let false-dealing flee into exile; With no sadness
of mind, hope, hope for light after darkness

Let the glowing torch of greed
and the stinking dregs of lust be purged;
And, sweeping away enticements with the briar
of fear, hope, hope for light after darkness

Let the despoiling of poor persons and crimes of
robbery
seek eternal hiding-places;
And, solaced by the (good) things of old, hope for light after darkness.

(Stevens, 1970: 143)

This carol, although not using the word nation, is still referring to England in some sense of unity, as something recognisable, as well as a unified force against tyranny and conspirators. It is unclear whether this text may refer to the aftermath of the

continental war or the Wars of the Roses. Either way, its text is powerful and persuasive; making a passionate plea for turbulent times to pass, and friendship to be established.

Through just these few carols, we can see a collective idea of nationality starting to emerge in the use of phrases such as 'English nation', or the perhaps subtle reference to England as an 'empire', or even just in the addressing of England as though it is a definitive, collective body of people, as in *Anglia tibi turbidas* with its call for peace and unification after civil war. These sentiments were clearly being shared through the music of the time, and during Christmas festivities and celebrations.

This brief exploration of the political carols has revealed a number of interesting points for further discussion and research. It has gone some way to demonstrating that Nativity and sacred texts were not the exclusive repertoire of this season; political carols were welcome inclusions. Evidence suggests that a growing sense of English identity and national pride is evident within the carol texts and would have been shared, and sung about collectively within Christmas celebrations. The simple, yet highly effective, repetitive form of the carols, made it an ideal choice for the celebration, transmission and preservation of important political events. What better way to celebrate and commit to memory emotive events in English history than through such an effective, exclusively English, musical form with its repeating burden and opportunity for communal singing

within ceremonies and celebrations?

Notes

1. Information collated from the Digital Imaging Archive of Medieval Music
<http://www.diamm.ac.uk/jsp/Descriptions?op=SOURCE&sourceKey=207>
2. For a full transcription, including a musical setting, see Stevens (1970: 48).
3. There are interesting and convincing arguments both for and against both possible locations. For more detail on the debate over the provenance of this manuscript, see: Schofield (1946); Greene (1954); and McPeck (1963). Although these publications are from several decades ago, the debate has not moved on from these initial thoughts.
4. See
<http://www.diamm.ac.uk/jsp/Descriptions%3Fop%3DSOURCE%26sourceKey%3D796>. For more discussion of provenance and dating, see also Lane and Sandon (2001), Stevens (1970: xxii and 125) and Stevens (1975: xvii–xix).
5. For a full transcription of this carol see Stevens (1970: 84), and for a full translation from Latin to English see 145.
6. For more detailed information on this manuscript see Thompson (1987).

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