Abstract

Humour is generally regarded as a means to entertain, but it should not always be considered superficial. This thesis explores the use of humour in the 'mystery plays' of the York Corpus Christi Cycle and the Towneley MS, moving away from a consideration of the use of humor as little more than an aesthetic embellishment on otherwise serious biblical dramas, towards an appreciation of the range of meanings located in comic forms. Rather than merely functioning as a pleasing distraction, the humour of these plays was rooted in devotional trends and broader lay concerns of Yorkshire and north-east England in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Its analysis offers fruitful insights into the complex and competing discourses of contemporary lay society, and how a varied demographic of spectators considered their relationship with God.

Drawing on established critical approaches and utilising theories from the field of Humour Studies, the following work argues that comic forms were utilised as a way to prompt a cognitive process in spectators, playing on incongruities between the biblical narrative and elements of contemporary life brought into performances. Rather than timeless evocations of biblical history, these plays were defined by their contemporaneity. The surviving play-texts encode tensions through their use of humour, drawing attention to apparent inconsistencies between the biblical and the contemporary, rather than masking them. By this means, those experiencing the dramas were motivated to consider the relationship between their own lives and the arc – or cycle – of biblical history.

The first chapter considers the 'lost' York *Funeral of the Virgin* pageant, which prompted the only record of laughter as a response to the cycle: though not for the reasons producers might have hoped. A new speculative context is offered for the play, reflecting the sense in which narratives beyond performances could inform audience response. A similar approach is presented in the second chapter on the Noah plays of York and Towneley; it reassesses the much-discussed comic relationship of the patriarch and his wife. Chapter three looks to plays associated with the 'shepherds', considering the humour of the plays as a reflection of specific devotional and commercial interests vested in the region where they were produced. In chapter five the comically-inflected performances of Herod and the tyrants are reconsidered, within a discursive context of temptation and superficiality. Finally, chapters six and seven look to the use of humour in plays involving Joseph, Mary and Christ, where comic elements mediate between the 'earthly' and the divine.

‘Lo, he merys. Lo, he laghys’

Humour, Laughter, and Audience Response in the York and Towneley Plays

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Table of Contents

List of Illustrations

List of Abbreviations

EEBO	*Early English Books Online* (online at eebo.chedwyck.com)
EETS	Early English Text Society
MED	*Middle English Dictionary* (online at <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary>.)
METh	*Middle English Theatre*
REED	*Records of Early English Drama*
Towneley	Epp, Garrett ed., *The Towneley Plays* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2018).
VCH	*The History of the Counties of England (Victoria County Histories).*
York	Davidson, Clifford ed., *The York Corpus Christi Plays* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2011).

Although I have made reference to Garett Epp's edition of the Towneley Plays throughout, I have used certain alternate titles to those provided in his work for the sake of clarity. Given the similarity of the titles of individual plays from York and Towneley, those used in this thesis correspond to those in Epp's edition (marked in brackets) in the following way:

Prima Pastorum	('The Shepherds 1')
Secunda Pastorum	('The Shepherds 2')
Magnus Herodes	('Herod the Great')

These alternate titles are taken from A.C. Cawley ed., *The Wakefield Pageants in the Towneley Cycle* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1958).

Declaration

This work has been submitted to Durham University in accordance with the regulations for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. It is entirely my own work, and no part of it has been previously submitted to Durham University or any other university for a degree.

Excerpts from chapters two and three, in earlier forms, have been published as ' "Pedens Super Feretrum": Fergus, Aelred, and the York 'Funeral of the Virgin', *Medieval English Theatre,* 39 (2017), 103–25 and ' "With myrth and gam, / To the lawde of this lam": Shepherds and the *Agnus Dei* in the York and Towneley Plays', *European Medieval Drama,* 21 (2017), 141–59.

Statement of Copyright

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Finally thanks must go to my family for making me see the joy and importance of humour from a very early age, especially my parents Pam and Andy, and my sister Kirsty. To Laura, for her love and support, and for always reminding me that laughter isn't only an object for academic discussion.

Introduction

'Just a made-up play, I suppose?' said Colin.
'That's it. Just a funny story to make people laugh'.[1]

In 1911 a children's book named *The Old Miracle Plays of England* was published. Written by Netta Syrett, it tells the story of two children living in the early fifteenth century – Colin and Margery – who journey to York and watch the city's famous plays. Syrett relied on contemporary scholarship when writing, explaining and expanding on what was known of the plays to her readers; in the quotation above, Colin is speaking to 'Master Gyseburn', a fictionalised relation of John Gyseburn, once mayor of the city.[2] Although the characters tend to use language more suited to an Edwardian nursery than the streets of late medieval York, Syrett's book is especially interesting because it tries to imagine how contemporary spectators responded to, or experienced the plays. Her characters are not merely passive recipients of a performed biblical narrative, sitting down piously to be educated in the stories of Christian devotion. They are active respondents, questioning, arguing, and – perhaps most importantly – laughing, at the content of the plays.

This thesis is inspired by the biblical dramatic works which have often been referred to as 'mystery plays', staged at sites across England during at least the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Like Syrett before me, I look to the city of York's late medieval Corpus Christi Play (or 'Plays') as a point of departure: an urban location where we can hope to imagine these performance traditions, their places and their people. Adopting a regional focus, I consider the plays of York alongside those of the Towneley MS, ruminating on those performances which Syrett would categorize as staged 'just…to make people laugh'. Contemporary scholarship on the plays, and more broadly on the culture of north-east England in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, allows us a means to gain a closer understanding of these performances, and the way spectators responded to them. I aim to explore the relevance of humour and laughter in these

[1] Netta Syrett, *The Old Miracle Plays of England* (London: Mowbray, 1911), 70.

[2] See David Mills, 'Netta Syrett and *The Old Miracle Plays of England*', *METh*, 10:2 (1988), 117–28. John Gysburn was a controversial figure, and his house was associated with the third station of the Corpus Christi Play: see Meg Twycross, '"Places to Hear the Play": Pageant Stations at York, 1398-1572', *REED Newsletter*, 3:2 (1978), 11, 19; Christian Liddy, *War, Politics and Finance in Late Medieval English Towns: Bristol, York and the Crown, 1350–1400* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2005), 87.

biblical plays, considering how their comic elements relate to devotional content as a way to define – not distract from – meaning.

The Plays

The York Corpus Christi Play, a cycle of pageants portraying the biblical history of the world from Creation to Doomsday, has been described as 'the most lavish, long-lasting, and complex form of theatrical enterprise in English theatre history'.[3] The performance tradition was first recorded in the latter half of the fourteenth century, and played a part in York's dramatic culture until at least 1569, when the plays appear to have been considered outmoded in the context of the Elizabethan Reformation.[4] Individual pageants were performed by craft guilds or other groups, using wagons which were pulled around the streets of York, stopping at a variety of stations around the city. The pageants, also known collectively as the York Plays, survive in a single manuscript known as British Library MS Additional 35390, which will henceforth be referred to as the 'York Register': an official civic document made somewhere between 1463–77 by the Common Clerk of the city.[5]

Part of the reason why so much attention has been lavished on the York Plays by scholars of early drama is due to the survival of both play-texts and extensive records of related performance activity in the city, including payments to actors, civic documentation referring to the staging of the Cycle, or other related details.[6] Due to this, they have been considered widely in a range of new historicist works, mostly focused on the devotional, civic, and socio-economic contexts of the performances, and the way this shaped meaning within the cycle. Seeta Chaganti has remarked that this kind of interdisciplinarity, drawing on records and analyses beyond the literary text of the play script, is so useful in the study of medieval drama because it 'integrates performance with culture and culture with performance'.[7] Certainly, an interdisciplinary approach lies at the heart of the following work.

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[3] Sarah Beckwith, *Signifying God: Social Relation and Symbolic Act in the York Corpus Christi Plays* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2001), xv.

[4] For an overview of the origins and demise of the York Plays see Richard Beadle ed., *The York Plays: A Critical Edition of the York Corpus Christi Play as Recorded in British Library Additional MS 35290*, 2 Vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), II, xvii–xxxiii.

[5] Alexandra F. Johnston, 'English Biblical Drama', in *The Routledge Research Companion to Early Drama and Performance*, ed. Pamela M. King (London: Routledge, 2017), 188–89; Beadle has recently suggested that the plays were recorded c.1476–77, though I retain the more conservative range throughout this thesis: see Richard Beadle, 'Nicholas Lancaster, Richard of Gloucester and the York Corpus Christi Play', in *The York Mystery Plays: Performance in the City*, ed. Margaret Rogerson (Woodbridge: York Medieval Press, 2011), 31–52.

[6] See Alexandra F. Johnston and Margaret Rogerson, eds and trans., *REED: York,* 2 Vols. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1979).

[7] Seeta Chaganti, 'The Platea Pre- and Postmodern: A Landscape of Medieval Performance Studies', *Exemplaria*, 25:3 (2013), 255. See, for example, Pamela M. King, *The York Mystery Cycle and the Worship of the City* (Cambridge: Brewer,

The survival of both scripts and records associated with the York plays is an asset, but so too is the nature of the late medieval city, critical to our understanding. York was no provincial backwater in the fifteenth century, when the Register was compiled. A well-connected and wealthy centre of both mercantile and religious culture, renowned both nationally and internationally as a site of commerce, trade, and devotional piety. It was undoubtedly the 'capital' of northern England, with a population second only to London in the early fifteenth century.[8] The endemic economic decline of York, felt soon after, only adds to the complex tapestry of the broader performance culture of which the surviving plays-texts are a product.[9] York was large and cosmopolitan, relative to the rest of late medieval England: ideas at the cutting edge of contemporary culture circulated in the space, which should inform our understanding of the plays, and their spectators.

The same cannot necessarily be said of the other set of plays under consideration in this thesis, those collected in Huntington MS 1, widely known as the Towneley MS, whose origins remain somewhat obscure. Whereas this manuscript had been for many years identified as a late fifteenth-century record of a performance cycle belonging to the town of Wakefield, recent critical consensus views the document as a miscellaneous collection of biblical plays drawn from different locations, compiled c.1552–58.[10] For so long held up as a cycle comparable to York, it is now generally accepted that the 'Towneley Plays' which survive are not parts of a dramatically unified whole, and scholars continue to debate their 'medieval' nature. Johnston has suggested that the Towneley MS may be a legal document, a set of plays collected to be scrutinized for their particular doctrinal leanings by authorities in the tumultuous era of the English Reformation.[11] Gibson and Coletti, on the other hand, have recently proposed that the work was compiled for a Catholic gentry household, for private use.[12] Although both place the compilation of play-texts in the West Riding of the mid-sixteenth century, it remains unclear how these scripts were collected, and from which contexts they derive. It has even been suggested that the

2006); Christina M. Fitzgerald, *The Drama of Masculinity and Medieval English Guild Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Nicole R. Rice and Margaret Aziza Pappano, *The Civic Cycles: Artisan Drama and Identity in Premodern England* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015).

[8] Liddy, *War, Politics and Finance,* 207–13.

[9] D.M. Palliser, *Medieval York: 600–1540* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 238–93.

[10] Johnston, 'English Biblical Drama', 193–94; see Barbara Palmer, 'Recycling "the Wakefield Cycle": The Records', *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama*, 41 (2002), 88–130.

[11] Johnston, 'English Biblical Drama', 94. She cites a forthcoming article, 'The Towneley Manuscript: Huntingdon Library MS HM 1', not available at the time of writing.

[12] Theresa Coletti and Gail McMurray Gibson, 'The Tudor Origins of Medieval Drama', *A Companion to Tudor Literature*, ed. Kent Cartwright (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 228–45, esp. 236–41; also Murray McGillivray, 'The Towneley Manuscript and Performance: Tudor Recycling?', in *Editing, Performance, Texts: New Practices in Medieval and Early Modern English Drama*, ed. Jacqueline Jenkins and Julie Sanders (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 49–69.

manuscript was compiled for private devotional use, for reading rather than performing.[13] In Pamela King's words, the York Register was a 'document of civic control', where city authorities formally recorded plays performed by urban groups; the Towneley MS, by contrast, might be essentially 'antiquarian' in nature, distanced from any discrete performance tradition.[14]

These new readings of the Towneley MS must influence how the surviving play-texts are approached, especially when considering how spectators (or readers) likely responded to them at the time they were conceived of in their surviving forms. The York Register is a somewhat stable entity, and from it – and using other records associated with the city's Corpus Christi Play – the various contexts of the constituent play-texts can be located with a certain level of precision: we broadly know where and when performances occurred, what kinds of people were present at them, and what range of meanings they might have drawn on as spectators. This level of information allows us to approach the temporal dimension of humour in the plays, following the asssumption that comic elements are rooted in time and space as much as text – something which will be returned to later.

Affirming the various contexts from which the Towneley MS emerged – an issue at the heart of the working of this thesis – is difficult, if not impossible. If the plays in this manuscript, unlike those of the York Register, are untethered from their 'original' specific performance sites, dates, or persons, how can we hope to understand their use of humour as a product of the context they derive from? Admittedly we do not know how the plays were collected, or even whether they represented a contemporary 'living' tradition: indeed, they may have been brought together as antiquarian pieces, to be read but perhaps never staged in the dramatic sense. Yet given the format of the surviving Towneley MS, presented as a collection of labelled scripts where lines are attributed to characters and stage directions (however limited) are offered, I contend that the contents were indeed conceived as play-scripts. Even if they were not recorded to be staged in the same sense as the York Plays, and 'read' rather than 'produced', this format suggests that the texts were performed at least imaginatively, if not physically.

The recent critical consensus that the Towneley MS was written in the mid-sixteenth century, at a location proximate to York, allows us to broadly contextualise the manuscript as it survives. At least some of the play-texts within the Towneley MS, wherever they originated individually, were clearly influenced by those of York: something which is unsurprising, given the

[13] David Klausner, 'Living Pictures: Drama without Text, Drama without Action', in *Medieval Theatre Performance: Actors, Dancers, Automata and their Audiences*, ed. Philip Butterworth and Katie Normington (Cambridge: Brewer, 2017), 108; Palmer, 'Recycling', 88–130.
[14] Pamela M. King, 'Manuscripts, Antiquarians, Editors and Critics: The Historiography of Reception', in *The Routledge Research Companion to Early Drama and Performance*, ed. Pamela M. King (London: Routledge, 2017), 280.

latter city's pre-eminent status throughout this period, and the fame of its Corpus Christi Play.[15] We know that the York Register and the Towneley MS were compiled c.1463–77 and c.1552-58 respectively, and – importantly – that similar biblical drama was being performed throughout and beyond this period in northern England.[16] For this reason, despite the ambiguity surrounding the Towneley MS it is entirely possible that the play-texts within it were performed around the mid-sixteenth century, and compiled as part of a 'living tradition'. Although both manuscripts were likely produced for different reasons, differences in style and substance between the plays may owe less to this factor, and more to different times at which they were written.

As the Towneley MS was produced in the 1550s, we can only safely assume that the play-texts within it are contextually rooted in this period: to attribute them to an earlier date is highly speculative. As I will expand on shortly, if we acknowledge that both producers and audiences of the plays shaped the surviving texts – even if those producers were writers rather than performers, moulding their work to fit an intended reader, rather than a spectator – the play-scripts of the Towneley MS can be contexualised, however tentatively, just as those of York have been. As this thesis will reveal, considering the differences in the use of humour between the two manuscipts – especially if we understand the plays to have derived from different periods – can offer surprising insights into the flexibility of comic forms, and the ways they were used to respond to contemporary affairs within these biblical performances.

Methodology

Since this thesis focuses on humour and laughter, attention will be given particularly to the nature of audience response in the period when the respective plays were being performed. Scholars have increasingly come to understand performance as experience, rather than literary work expressed in a play-script. The nature of spectatorship has been considered in various works on early drama in the last decades, and with it the sense that in these plays both spectators and producers (whether actors, stagehands, supporters, patrons) played a part in the construction of performances.[17] Staged plays became collaborative activities, where meaning was negotiated

[15] See Peter Meredith, 'The Towneley Cycle', *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. Richard Beadle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 146–47.
[16] The York Cycle was performed, in altered form, until 1569, whilst similar performance traditions persisted elsewhere into the late sixteenth and early sixteenth-centuries in Preston, Lancaster and Kendal: see Beckwith, *Signifying God,* 124-30; Clifford Davidson, *Festivals and Plays in Late Medieval Britain* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 69-70.
[17] Peter Ramey, 'The Audience-Interactive Games of Middle English Religious Drama', *Comparative Drama,* 47:1 (2013), 55–83; Heather Hill-Vasquez, *Sacred Players: The Politics of Response in Middle English Religious Drama*

rather than assumed. This could enable an idea of collective unity, but also fragmentation, in part because responses were potentially so differentiated, raising the distinction between individual spectators and the broader audience group.[18]

Scholars have relied on a variety of means to hypothesize audience response in these plays, especially in the consideration of contemporary cultures of performance. The analyses I present are predicated in large part upon the idea that engagement with the spaces (or hypothetical locations) of performances allows scholars speculative access to the meaning (or range of interpretations) taken by spectators of a play. Clare Wright has noted that early drama scholars have for a long time been 'acutely aware of how medieval plays fit with and respond to their various performance environments', acknowledging that 'the social, political and cultural aspects of space and place are now central to the study of pre-playhouse drama'.[19] To understand how contemporary spectators might have responded to performed play-scripts, we must acknowledge that meaning was produced beyond the embodied text, and look to both the spaces of performances and the multiform ideas which circulated within them. Where possible this study will look to specific sites of performance, but also to the broader locations or location-based knowledge which producers and audiences brought to the plays.

This thesis draws on what Katie Normington identifies as the 'material remains' of the late medieval period as a means to better understand the potential range of audience reactions to the York and Towneley plays, analysing various pictorial, textual, literary and historical sources to facilitate this.[20] Analysis of these surviving artefacts can only ever allow us to gain a partial and fragmentary prism into the lives of contemporary performers or audiences, yet when placed in conversation with each other, these 'remains' can offer insights into a diverse and varied culture, sometimes confounding scholarly assumptions. Given the providence of the play-scripts under consideration, this thesis will in the main part limit analysis of material remains to those deriving from fifteenth and sixteenth-century Yorkshire, Whilst it is near impossible to regain an

(Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2007); John J. McGavin, 'Medieval Theatricality and Spectatorship', *Theta: Theâtre Tudor*, 8 (2009), 194–95.

[18] Sarah Carpenter, 'New Evidence: Vives and Audience-Response to Biblical Drama', *METh*, 31 (2009), 3–12; Claire Sponsler, 'The Culture of the Spectator: Conformity and Resistance to Medieval Performances', *Theatre Journal*, 44:1 (1992), 15–29, esp. 27; Sheila Lindenbaum, 'Rituals of Exclusion: Feasts and Plays of the English Religious Fraternities', in *Festive Drama: Papers from the Sixth Triennial Colloquium of the International Society for the Study of Medieval Theatre,* ed. Meg Twycross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 54–65; McGavin and Walker, *Imagining Spectatorship*, 8–16.

[19] Clare Wright, 'Body, Site and Memory in the Croxton Play of the Sacrament', in *Performing Environments: Site Specificity in Medieval and Early Modern English Drama,* ed. Susan Bennett and Mary Polito (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 159; see also Joanne Tompkins, "The 'Place' and Practice of Site-Specific Theatre and Performance', in *Performing Site-Specific Theatre: Politics, Place and Practice,* ed. Anna Birch and Joanne Tompkins (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 1-17.

[20] Katie Normington, *Medieval English Drama: Performance and Spectatorship* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 3–5.

exhaustive or wholly accurate sense of late medieval or early modern spectatorship, this thesis presents an attempt to imagine how certain dynamics of audience response functioned.

As a development of reader response theory, approaches to 'audience response' have been contested. As Brian Richardson has argued, such criticism falls into two camps, where one group interprets a text in the way it would be read by an idealised 'Informed Reader', and the other suggests that no such paradigm of ideal response can exist, given its contested and varied nature, and the absence of an authority to judge one interpretation over another.[21] Throughout the thesis it is not ever assumed that audiences always responded in the same way, or that the plays were produced only for the kind of perfect spectator who understood all comic allusions within them. Instead the following study attempts to demonstrate the potential layers of meaning which could be found by spectators in the humour of these play-texts, and the different ways this could be interpreted by the diverse range of people present at contemporary performances – including men, women and children of a broad range of social strata and occupation.

The surviving play-texts of York and Towneley offer us no formal insights into how audiences responded to the staged performances which the scripts infer, and few accounts of reactions to individual performances survive. Yet from the scripts we can read comic elements in the works, and the potential for humour, as conscious attempts on the part of playmakers to rouse laughter or similar from their audiences. This study considers the broad groups which constituted audiences to these largely-public or semi-public plays, and the influences – social, devotional, economic or otherwise – which would have influenced perception. Whilst a monistic notion audience response remains unfeasible, the intention to prompt laughter, by whatever means, remains open for analysis.

I will chiefly consider how the use of humour might interact with desired audience responses, focusing on the way elements of these play-scripts appear designed to raise laughter, mirth, or enjoyment among spectators. These comic elements have been regularly acknowledged by drama scholars, yet no study has so far offered a sustained attempt to engage with the use of humour as a performative device in these plays specifically. Whilst a number of short scholarly works have considered comic aspects of the dramas, they have generally looked to them as aesthetic embellishments, or within the context of Bakhtinian notions of comic forms, which I will return to shortly.[22] I hope to offer a general approach to understanding the relevance of

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[21] Brian Richardson, 'The Other Readers' Response: On Multiple, Divided and Oppositional Audiences', *Criticism,* 39:1 (1997), 31-33, 44-46; see also Jeremy Lopez, *Theatrical Convention and Audience Response in Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 13-34.

[22] See for example Arnold Williams, 'The Comic in the Cycles', *Medieval Drama,* ed. Neville Denny, Stratford-upon-Avon Studies 16 (London: Arnold, 1973), 109–23; Glynne Wickham, 'Medieval Comic Traditions and the Beginnings of English Comedy', in *Comic Drama: The European Heritage*, ed. W.D. Howarth (London: Methuen,

humour within these biblical plays. My study relies on the consideration of humour as a context-driven force, reliant on a very specific reading of the location of productions, the nature of the actors or spectators experiencing it, and any other potential stimuli that might rouse laughter as a response.

Whilst the surviving plays of the York Register and the Towneley MS may have similar origins, I read the manuscripts as 'snapshots' of the drama as it was performed.[23] This clearly places the pageants of York in the late fifteenth century, yet move the plays-texts of the Towneley MS as later witnesses to the era the Henrician Reformation, and the resurgent Marian Catholicism of the 1550s. The difference in chronology between York and Towneley, alongside the geographical proximity of the performance traditions which they represent, allows for a creative consideration of changes in the use of humour between the dates of the manuscripts. The respective comic elements of York and Towneley may be attributed in part to the creative differences of their producers; but they also reflect a shift in expression, where late medieval modes of performative representation met with the complex religious tumult of mid-sixteenth-century England.

Although I argue that Towneley represents a later development of a tradition represented earliest in York, I still work on the assumption that both grew out of a similar source. As Lawrence Clopper has noted, these 'vernacular works were part of the phenomenon of northern and late medieval lay spirituality', rooted particularly in fourteenth-century Yorkshire. This movement saw the circulation of various other religious works written in the vernacular, including the *Northern Passion*, the *Cursor Mundi*, and the *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ.*[24] Given their regional provenance, we can understand both the York and Towneley plays as products of – and participants within – an enthusiastic new form of lay devotion, associated specifically with the towns and cities of north-east England. This appears to have been at least associated with attempts by the Archbishop of York, John Thoresby, in his *Lay Folks' Catechism*, to promote further understanding of Christian doctrine within the region's lay community.[25]

The performances were accessible and represented a devotional didacticism performed by and for the laity, rather than the Church; these biblical plays were a distinctively lay endeavour,

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1978), 40–62; Albert H. Tricomi, 'Re-Envisioning England's Medieval Cycle Comedy', in *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England,* 5 (1991), 11–26; Hans-Jürgen Diller, 'Laughter in Medieval English Drama: A Critique of Modernizing and Historical Analyses', *Comparative Drama,* 36:1 (2002), 1–19.

[23] Christina Fitzgerald and John T. Sebastian, eds, *The Broadview Anthology of Medieval Drama* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2013), 77.

[24] Lawrence Clopper, *Drama, Play and Game: English Festive Culture in the Medieval and Early Modern Period* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 208.

[25] Jonathan Hughes, *Pastors and Visionaries: Religion and Secular Life in Late Medieval Yorkshire* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1988), esp. 56, 251–97; Jeremy Goldberg, 'From Tableaux to Text: The York Corpus Christi Play ca. 1378–1428', *Viator*, 43:2 (2012), 263–65.

emerging out of an innovative culture of vernacular devotion. The persons who organised, funded, performed or otherwise most influenced these performances were of the 'middling sort', figures or institutions whose wealth was firmly associated with the urban sites which facilitated their economic prosperity. These wealthy laypeople were members of a distinctive and emergent 'bourgeois' stratum, and the performances associated with them told biblical or religious stories which were necessarily vested in this distinct devotional ethos, reflecting their position in society.[26] As Clopper notes, 'what they brought into the plays and what they left out defines for us the lay religious life'.[27]

The performance of devotional plays by members of this emergent culture raises a number of questions. Should we understand late medieval biblical drama as merely a lay expression of narratives controlled by the Church, or an appropriation of these narratives? Were biblical (or pseudo-biblical) stories regarded as possessions of religious authorities, or as part of a devotional culture more broadly accessible to laypeople? And how far did producers or spectators of these dramas observe a distinction between 'religious' and 'lay' versions of these important works? For Clopper, a distinction between lay and religious approaches to devotional practice is clear within the plays; he finds an 'unease and anxiety along the line of separation' between clerically controlled doctrine on the one hand, and the 'lay exercise of neighbourly exhortation' on the other.[28]

It is difficult to understand what a highly diverse late medieval audience of these plays would have regarded as the 'authoritative version'. Scripture was available only through the Latin Vulgate at this time, and it is unclear how laypeople distinguished between this 'official' text and devotional or apocryphal works accessible in the vernacular, or to what extent they understood the concept of 'adaptation' with regards to biblical narratives. Yet Clopper's idea that play-texts could be read as 'illustrations of the anxiety of belief' can be fully observed through an exploration of humour in the plays. Here lay – and distinctly bourgeois – values are staged alongside a biblical narrative most firmly associated with the formal Church. Comic elements of the plays denote the intrusion of contemporary concerns, expressions and anxieties into biblical scenes.

Unlike a printed sermon or a written commentary, where such concerns might be envisaged as a gloss on a text, in these plays late medieval producers and spectators shaped and

[26] See, for example, Kathleen Ashley, 'Medieval Courtesy Literature and Dramatic Mirrors of Female Conduct', in *The Ideology of Conduct: Essays in Literature and the History of Sexuality*, ed. Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse (London: Routledge, 1987), 25–38.
[27] Clopper, *Drama, Play and Game*, 208.
[28] Ibid., 205–6.

adapted the biblical narrative itself, to suit their own interests.[29] As Symes had stated, 'medieval drama enacts what a community needs to enact, in whatever venue is available or appropriate'.[30] I argue that these plays deploy comic elements to draw attention to, and perhaps negotiate between, apparent overlaps between narratives of biblical history and the contemporary, localised, culture of their spectators.

Humour and Humour Theory

In her book, Netta Syrett claims that it would not 'seem strange' to any contemporary spectators 'that a few of the plays should be written on purpose to make the audience laugh', so that 'their attention would be kept fresh for the more serious part of the Bible teaching'.[31] Of course, Syrett's work was not designed to be a scholarly text, and reflects a critical understanding of the York plays which is in parts outdated. Yet the attitude expressed towards humorous aspects of the performances still lingers in perceptions of early biblical drama: that comic elements of these plays are aesthetic fancies, funny stories 'to make the audience laugh' whilst the 'more serious part' of the performance is accomplished.

Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* is perhaps the most influential scholarly evocation of this separation between humour and biblical meaning. His discussions of the 'carnival festivities and […] comic spectacles' which 'had an important place in the life of medieval man' – mock rituals such as the *festa stultorum*, the 'feast of the ass' and the *risus paschalis* of Easter, as well as the parish feasts, fairs, and open-air festivities which somehow all fit within the same 'comic folk aspect' – remain provocative. For Bakhtin laughter was a wild and unregulated force, interacting with religious matter only to defy it and thus temporarily liberating the Christian populace of the Middle Ages from the shackles of spiritual oppression. He speaks of a dichotomy between the 'official sphere of high ideology and literature' and a 'folk humour […] marked by exceptional radicalism, freedom and ruthlessness', which may seem pertinent here.[32]

Bakhtin's work has been widely criticised, but it does touch on the study of humour in biblical drama which is at the heart of this thesis, and offers a solid theoretical paradigm which underpins the haze of perceptions still surrounding the topic. His critical offering of the 'carnivalesque', a term denoting the idea that festive occasions in the Middle Ages inevitably

[29] See for example Ashley, 'Medieval Courtesy Literature and Dramatic Mirrors of Female Conduct', 33–34.
[30] Carol Symes, 'The History of Medieval Theatre / Theatre of Medieval History: Dramatic Documents and the Performance of the Past', *History Compass* 7:3 (2009), 1034–35.
[31] Syrett, *Old Miracle Plays of England*, 42–43.
[32] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984), 6, 72, 82.

brought with them a parodic subversion of the holy, built in alongside the strictures of medieval religion, has been used in the context of comic aspects of biblical drama.[33] This thesis is concerned with the comic reuse of the material of religious devotion, categorised by Bakhtin as the *Parodia Sacra.* Yet even to raise the comic and the sacred as oppositional forces in the Middle Ages has been deemed problematic by scholars of medieval humour.[34]

According to Ryan Giles, 'Bakthin was right to characterise medieval holidays as dual expressions of solemnity and laugher, but his tendency to interpret the 'official' and the 'popular' side of feasts as conflictive and contradictory cannot be sustained by the evidence'.[35] Burde supports this statement, noting that 'nuance is glossed over in Bakhtin's model and its dichotomies of gloomy versus insouciant, intolerant versus liberated': he stresses that it is 'ill-advised to think of 'the sacred' and 'the comic' as homogenous and oppositional entities'.[36] Indeed, the idea that humour signifies an indefinable 'folk' element, and always functions as secular or secularising force, is strongly questioned in this thesis. In the plays I consider, humour and laughter operate alongside religious themes, in ways that enable rather than reject devotional practices. Over the course of this thesis I will demonstrate that humour may draw from 'popular' sources in the plays – namely their lay context – yet it does so in order to prompt engagement with the religious content of the drama.

Examining medievalism in comic performances, Louise D'Arcens writes that 'the temporal dimension of humor [sic] makes it an especially compelling vehicle for engaging with the past'.[37] Her study relies upon the importance of anachronism in comic perceptions of the Middle Ages, prompting the observation of pleasurable incongruity, which theorists have identified as one of the key mechanisms of humour processing.[38] Relying on Mark C. Weeks and Arthur Schopenhauer, D'Arcens notes that 'at its very heart laughter is an anachronistic phenomenon, in which the pleasurable 'now' intrudes into the serious engagement with chronology'.[39] Although

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[33] For example, Kristina Simeonova, 'The Aesthetic Function of the Carnivalesque in Medieval Drama', in *Bakhtin: Carnival and Other Subjects*, ed. David Shepherd (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993), 70–80.
[34] For example, Martha Bayless, *Parody in the Middle Ages: The Latin Tradition* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 177–212; Mark Burde, 'The *Parodia sacra* Problem and Medieval Comic Studies', in *Laughter in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times: Epistemology of a Fundamental Human Behaviour, Its Meaning, and Consequences*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 215–42; Ryan D. Giles, *The Laughter of the Saints: Parodies of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Spain (*Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 5–12.
[35] Giles, *The Laughter of the Saints*, 5.
[36] Burde, 'The *Parodia Sacra* Problem', 240–42.
[37] Louise D'Arcens, 'You Had to Be There: Anachronism and the Limits of Laughing at the Middle Ages', *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies*, 5:2 (2014), 140–53, 141.
[38] Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002), 2–3.
[39] Mark C. Weeks, 'Laughter, Desire, and Time', *Humor*, 15:4 (2002), 383–400, esp. 391–92; Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E.F.J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1989), 280. D'Arcens, 'You Had to Be There', 143.

D'Arcens comments on comic framing in modern portrayals of the medieval past, her work provides a satisfying model for considering the functioning of humour in York and Towneley.

Although we now generally consider the biblical drama of the plays to represent contemporary interaction with devotional material, it is important to note that the performance of these narratives was also an attempt to re-stage characters and sites which bore historical importance. Recently Margaret Rogerson has suggested we might interpret biblical drama in just this way, as a 'historical re-enactment' undertaken by late medieval producers and spectators, 're-presenting the past as if it were happening now', and rooting scriptural narratives 'in the contemporaneity of their communities'.[40] Sarah Elliott Novacich too has stressed the significance of the plays as a form of archive, expressing a specifically engineered remembrance of the past, and an particular evocation of biblical history.[41] Following D'Arcens, just as modern spectators might now find humour in the portrayal of characters of the medieval past holding consciously modern concerns, so too might spectators of the fifteenth century have been prompted to laugh at characters in scenes from biblical history who seemed to express themselves in anachronistically contemporary terms.

It has been argued that the plays of both York and Towneley work towards a sense of 'conceptual blending', where the performance space becomes the biblical site.[42] Spectators and producers alike are brought into a Holy Land where the events of the biblical narrative are restaged, drawing these contemporary figures to participate within it; they are overwhelmed and incorporated into this performative location, but the contemporary continues to exist within it and alongside it.[43] This 'blending' has been accepted as a feature of early biblical drama, where producers and spectators re-imagined familiar spaces or faces to furnish and embody their conception of the biblical narrative.

We must assume, however, that such a broad conceptual scheme was not understood in the same way by each spectator of these plays, who brought heterogenous meaning to these spaces. As Joanne Tompkins has noted, when considering the relationship of site and performance spatial theorists have insisted 'on multifaceted, mutable interpretations of space and place which are predicated on – and contribute to – an understanding of social, political, gender,

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[40] Margaret Rogerson, 'Re-Enacting the Past: Medieval English Biblical Plays and Some Modern Analogues', in *The Routledge Companion to Early Drama and Performance*, ed. Pamela M. King (London: Routledge, 2017), 300–302.
[41] Sarah Elliott Novacich, *Shaping the Archive in Late Medieval England: History, Poetry and Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 1–24.
[42] Jill Stevenson, 'Embodied Enchantments: Cognitive Theory and the York Mystery Plays', in *The York Mystery Plays: Performance in the City*, ed. Margaret Rogerson (Woodbridge: York Medieval Press, 2011), 91–112; Stevenson cites G. Fauconnier and M. Turner, *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 266–67.
[43] McGavin and Walker, *Imagining Spectatorship*, 5–8; also Anne Higgins, 'Work and Plays: Guild Casting in the Corpus Christi Drama', *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England*, 7 (1995), 76–97.

and economic factors that in turn determine form and function'.[44] In attempting to address potential audience responses to these plays, the following thesis will explore the limits of such 'blending', and the contested range of meanings which could arise from it.

The absorption of performance spaces into biblical history has usually been considered as a means for spectators to gain closer devotional understanding. D'Arcens argues, however, that in the use of humour in the performance of historical narratives we find the acknowledgement (or comic evocation) of a 'paradoxical temporality', where the incongruent nature of mixing the past and the present is noted as an 'error'.[45] Critics of the plays have to a certain extent also noted the potential for comic incongruity in this 'paradoxical temporality', where a local figure would be recognised simultaneously by spectators for who he was and the biblical figure whom he portrayed.[46] But I argue further that many comic aspects of the plays are designed to highlight specific tensions resulting from this blending of the contemporary with the past. Within the model D'Arcens proposes, the effect of this is to draw the past into the present and vice versa, calling attention to 'the many unexamined contradictions underpinning the values of modernity'.[47] I argue that in many comic elements of these plays, we find that tensions between the past (biblical narrative) and the contemporary (the world of the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries) are consciously being played with.

Humour is prompted when the everyday experiences of spectators (and producers) of the plays are seen to encroach on prominent events in biblical history. This dynamic can be interpreted from the angle of comic 'Incongruity', where two 'frames' or 'scripts' (discreet bodies of encoded information and experience) come together to create comic tension.[48] This process is relatively simple to understand in terms of a short joke or witticism. Here, a joker begins to speak on a subject following the direction of an established 'frame', prompting the listener to hold certain expectations of how the speech will end. ('Waiter, Waiter, there's a fly in my soup!') These expectations are thwarted, and the listener realizes that the joker's subject was something else all along. ('Don't shout too loud sir, or everybody will want one.') To work effectively, both

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[44] Tompkins, "The 'Place' and Practice of Site-Specific Theatre and Performance', 4-5. Tompkins cites Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space,* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 88, and Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 96.
[45] D'Arcens, 'You Had to Be There', 145–47.
[46] Higgens, 'Work and Plays', 96–7; Jeremy Goldberg, 'Craft Guilds, The Corpus Christi Play and Civic Government', *The Government of Medieval York: Essays in Commemoration of the 1396 Royal Charter*, ed. Sarah Rees Jones (York: University of York/The Borthwick Institute for Historical Research, 1997), 141.
[47] D'Arcens, 'You Had to Be There', 146.
[48] For example, Victor Raskin, *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1985); Salvatore Attardo and Victor Raskin, 'Script Theory Revis(it)ed: Joke Similarity and Joke Representation Model', *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 4 (1991), 293–347.

'frames' must make sense independently of each other in the context of the joke, with discord (or humour) only arising from their being forced together.

In a recent study Theresa Hamilton has attempted to adapt these theories to understand the function of humour in longer narratives, in her case, works of medieval parodic literature, and the fabliaux tradition. She argues persuasively that such an interpretive strategy can be used beyond the 'short joke' context. Raskin and Attardo refer to the understanding of comic incongruity as an intuitive process; Hamilton, however, insists specifically that the analysis of medieval humour requires a 'recognition of Script Oppositions' which were 'highly dependent on the analyzer's own cultural background and knowledge'. We can hope to understand these 'by relying on historical knowledge of the former time and trusting the structures that the text itself suggests'.[49] Although my approach will be far less socio-linguistic than those outlined above, this thesis will use such 'historical knowledge' as an approach to the humour of these plays.

John Morreall has recognized that the process of humorous amusement, whereby action within one of these 'frames' is contrasted with another opposing 'frame', is actually a process of 'cognitive play'. In this process listeners or audiences are prompted (or primed) to become to a certain extent 'emotionally disengaged' from potentially controversial subjects or conflicts, and can also gain a closer understanding of their relationship to both incongruous 'frames'.[50] The process of prompting humour in these plays is not a shallow activity, where laughter is simply roused at the incongruity of two frames of reference. I will consider humorous aspects of biblical plays using this hermeneutic, suggesting that 'cognitive play' is achieved through the bringing together of 'contemporary' and 'biblical-historical' frames. Whilst these are flexible categories, they allow a useful means to approach the diverse range of humour under consideration in this work.

In part, this is echoed in Peter Ramey's suggestion that medieval biblical drama might be read as an 'audience-interactive' process, where spectators could 'explore questions of social and spiritual identification' through performance.[51] But in the plays, humour specifically was used as a means to lead spectators to consider their own values, and those associated with their contemporary environment, against the formal meaning of the biblical narratives which the performances were based on. It has been noted that humour holds a particular utility in a didactic context; as well as 'recognizing and reversing power structures', 'challenging social order'

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[49] Theresa Hamilton, *Humorous Structures of English Narratives: 1200–1600* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2013), 72, 73. For an overview of Attardo and Raskin's *General Theory of Verbal Humor* see esp. 60–74.
[50] John Morreall, 'Humor as Cognitive Play', *Journal of Literary Theory*, 3:2 (2009), 254–58; also Willibald Ruch, 'The Psychology of Humour', in *The Primer of Humor Research*, ed. Victor Raskin (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2008), 25–27.
[51] Peter Ramey, 'The Audience-Interactive Games of Middle English Religious Drama', *Comparative Drama,* 47:1 (2013), 55–83.

and 'building community', laughter offers the potential to enable 'dialogic resistance, for the promotion of critical thinking…' and encourage 'intellectual play or intervention'.[52] In this thesis I want to focus on humour as a means to enable a dialogic space in which contemporary action and motivation could be brought into question; in these plays comic forms prompted producers and spectators alike to reassess the nature of their own lives, considering their existence against a renewed devotional understanding.

Outline of Chapters

The exploration of humour as a dramatic function – rather than merely an aesthetic device – allows us to conceive of the huge variety of elements being drawn on in performances of early drama. In the first chapter I will consider the *Funeral of the Virgin*, a pageant 'missing' from the York Cycle which contains the only record of laughter as an audience response to the plays. The *Funeral* lacks the evidence of a play-script, yet other supporting textual evidence survives which offers a particularly good introduction to understanding the function (and functioning) of humour in these biblical dramas. I propose a new reading based on extended analysis of the curious name given to the antagonist of the piece, 'Fergus'. The name conjured up specific popular associations, and this chapter considers how narratives of local significance, beyond conceptions of biblical history, could play a part in the construction of meaning within performances.

Yet such a 'layering' of biblical and local narratives – akin to the 'conceptual blending' which many scholars have seen as intrinsic to the functioning of the plays – was not without its problems in these performances. It could be considered an unwelcome intrusion by spectators, provoke laughter, dissent, or contention over interpretive meaning. Consideration of the York *Funeral* allows us a way to think about the importance of audience response: the spectator chooses what to laugh *with* and what to laugh *at.* As an entry point to the discussion of the potential roles of humour in these plays, this chapter will suggest that narratives from outside the biblical 'script' readily informed and sometimes threatened to encroach on performances. Yet whilst the producers of the *Funeral* could not control the tensions raised by this meeting of 'local' and 'biblical' frames in their pageant, other such plays readily harnessed it, as a means to provoke spectators to think on the potential disjunction between the two.

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[52] See Tarez Samra Graban, 'Beyond "Wit and Persuasion": Rhetoric, Composition, and Humor', in *Primer of Humor Research*, ed. Victor Raskin (New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2008), 415; cited in Jean N. Goodrich, '"So I Thought as I Stood, To Mirth Us Among": The Function of Laughter in *The Second Shepherds' Play*', in *Laughter in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times: Epistemology of a Fundamental Human Behaviour, Its Meaning, and Consequences,* ed. Albrecht Classen (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 536.

In the second chapter I approach the well-trodden ground of humour in the York *Building of the Ark* and *The Flood*, and the Towneley *Noah and the Ark*. Yet where scholars have previously focused on the role of Noah's Uxor as a comic character, I argue that both biblical partners participate in, and are integral to, the humour of the piece. Noah and Uxor are presented as a subversion of the paradigmatic married couple, in a relationship at the heart of contemporary conceptions of social regulation, urban commerce, and lay devotion. Rather than rehearsing a topsy-turvy marriage between the intransigent Uxor and her righteous husband, I reconsider this humorous couple in terms of their relative (im)moral parity.

The humorous relations of Noah and Uxor highlight the discord between contemporary ideas of marriage as a civic and commercial institution, and the isolating inevitability of the Great Flood, reflecting concerns over 'those left behind'. I consider the comic presentation of this marital relationship as a tool to enable those experiencing performances to think about the problematic meeting of contemporary expectations and the religious narrative. Still, the importance of both characters in this union – as mother and father of a reborn world – is reflected in the nature of humour in these plays: comic elements bring germane yet discordant ideas to the fore, but do not necessarily resolve them.

Shepherds are the focus of the third chapter: characters who are well-known comic figures in the Towneley *Prima* and *Secunda Pastorum*, but perhaps less so in the York *Offering of the Shepherds*. Again, a great deal of the humour within these plays is vested in the meeting point of the contemporary and the biblical, the drama used as a means to express socio-economic narratives beyond the play-texts. I will first consider the comic shepherds in the light of changing economic trends over the region, thinking about the potential for the plays to function simultaneously as nostalgic pieces, and invocations to Christ. The large amount of material dedicated to comic play and performance in the Towneley *Prima* and *Secunda*, as well as the implications of this in contrast to the York *Offering*, is re-interpreted.

Following this, my consideration of the shepherds turns to the relevance of humour in portraying an object associated with their pastoral status as carers – and figures waiting in anticipation – of the Lamb of God. In this chapter I read the plays in terms of a once-ubiquitous devotional item which is now mostly forgotten: the *Agnus Dei* (a small object made of wax, and depicting the Lamb) was likely produced by the craft responsible for the York *Offering* pageant. The humour in the Towneley 'shepherds' plays is read as a response to these objects, which by the mid-sixteenth century held a significance that placed them at the heart of fierce religious dispute. Perhaps uniquely, humorous forms could both allay the tensions roused by these

objects, or express criticism of them, offering a certain 'slipperiness' which must be thought of as an asset of comic presentation.

Chapter four looks to the popularity of the infamously comic Herod, alongside similar bombastic tyrants in York and Towneley. The discussion begins with a consideration of comic characterisation in the York *Christ Before Herod,* where Herod's exotic exuberance and comic presentation of authority is shown to have a potentially destabilising effect, which only the silence of Christ can resist. Antagonist and protagonist are carefully defined against each other, expressed through Christ's unwillingness to participate in the 'games' of the tyrant; yet anxieties over potential similarities between the two figures remain, as I will show.

I go on to suggest that the portrayal of Herod and other tyrants in these plays goes beyond their identification as comic Eastern despots, with little real authority in the context of the performances. In this period Herod was also associated with other threatening figures, both distant and closer to home: the laughter which he and the tyrants raise is considered as a recourse to gaining authority rather than undermining it, as other scholars have argued. I explore the way Herod's comic nature makes him an attractive and entertaining figure, something at odds with his malignant biblical status.

In chapters five and six I attempt to tackle the use of humour in pageants associated with the holiest of worldly figures, the Virgin Mary and Christ. My argument challenges ideas which insist on the separation between the comic and the divine in the late medieval period. I first look to the staging of the marital relationship in the *Joseph's Troubles* plays of York and Towneley. Featuring a character who threatens to undermine the idea of Mary's virginity, the comic presentation of the couple's relationship is complicated. Yet, as in the Noah-Uxor relationship, the characters of both Joseph and Mary are involved in the humour of these plays. Their comic interplay provided a performative means by which laypeople could approach the Divine.

Finally I will consider the problematic humour of the soldiers in the York *Crucifixio Christi*. My approach sets cruel laughter against the intense joy which the culmination of the Passion could represent for late medieval spectators. I reinterpret the 'dark humour' of the Soldiers as a way to raise laughter in the face of the performance of torture; whilst those damaging Christ's body are laughed at, their comic actions enabled spectators to participate in a very specific kind of late medieval devotion, where Christ's wounds allowed access to the joy and pleasure of his sacrifice. This is drawn in sharp contrast to the Towneley *Crucifixion*, where humour – as abuse, rather than joy – reflects broader trends in contemporary devotion.

I set out the argument that laughter could represent mockery but also held the potential to aid devotion: a central purpose of these performances. In these plays, humour both derives

from, and negotiates, overlapping or ostensibly contradictory 'frames'. Comic elements raise attention to the possible disjunct between the contemporary and the spiritual, vested in biblical history. Laughter was thus proffered as a way for audiences to think about the nature of this incongruity, and to bring themselves closer to Christ.

Chapter 1

The York Funeral of the Virgin:

Laughter, Response, and Discord

The York pageant of the *Funeral of the Virgin* may be considered an odd starting point for a thesis on medieval drama, largely because its script does not survive. The pageant was certainly performed as part of the city's Corpus Christi Play, but no record of it was left in the York Register, and nothing indicates that any attempt was ever made to include it alongside the other texts of the Cycle. Our knowledge of the pageant is derived only from various civic records which comment on practical issues surrounding its staging, especially the difficulties of the performance.

A passage from the city's Ordo Paginarum, a list of pageants from the Corpus Christi Play composed in 1415, gives us the characters and sparse rudiments of the narrative: 'four apostles [carrying the funeral bier] of Mary and Fergus hanging over the bier [with two other Jews and one angel'.[1] This brief record broadly aligns with what we know of the narrative of the Burial of the Virgin: the story revolves around an antagonistic Jewish figure (sometimes a prince, or a priest) and his two associates, who attempt to knock over the Virgin Mary's funeral bier as it is carried by a group of apostles. On touching the coffin, the malefactors suffer divine punishment for their actions: the hands of the leader hands stick to the bier, whilst his associates are blinded. These Jewish figures are miraculously healed – through the intercession of the Virgin – when they convert to the Christian faith.

The production of the performance has attracted critical attention for the violent controversy it supposedly aroused when it was being staged by the Masons, set down in a complaint from 1432:

> …the Masons of this city have been accustomed to murmur amongst themselves about their pageant in the Corpus Christi Play in which Fergus was beaten because the subject of the pageant is not contained in the sacred scripture and used to produce more noise and laughter than devotion. And whenever quarrels, disagreements and fights used to

[1] Alexandra F. Johnston and Margaret Rogerson, eds and trans., *REED: York*, 2 Vols. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, (1979), I, 23; II, 709. This translation, given in *REED: York*, II, is based on a late nineteenth-century transcription by Lucy Toulmin Smith, as the text is now damaged: 'Quatuor Apostoli [portantes feretrum] Marie & fergus pedens super feretrum [suum ij aliis Iudeis cum vno Angelo'.

> arise among the people from this they have rarely or never been able to produce their pageant in daylight as the preceding pageants do.[2]

This much-quoted source tells us little about the performed narrative of the pageant, but it does offer a considerable insight into the staging conditions of the York Cycle, and the potential for spectators to become especially animated in response to an ostensibly biblical play.[3] As a performance without a text, the *Funeral* reflects Claire Sponsler's idea that early drama has the potential to act as a 'provocation' to literary history, urging us to look beyond the written page.[4] This pageant offers a rare means by which to approach a work of the York Cycle specifically as a living performance, not bounded by a surviving play text. The work of producers and spectators, and the staging of the pageant, is prioritized over a written rendition of it, forcing us to think in a different way about the construction of meaning in these performances.

The *Funeral* pageant is so relevant to this particular study because its analysis raises a number of issues which will be considered throughout this thesis. Foremost is the question over the role of audience response in these plays. The *Funeral* is likely to have contained comic elements, probably drawn from moments of slapstick and physical comedy within the piece, involving a malicious Jewish prince and his attack on body of the Virgin Mary.[5] But perhaps more importantly, the *Funeral* is the only pageant within the York Cycle at which audiences are *recorded* as having laughed. This enviable accolade should not mislead readers, however: this laughter is presented as a negative aspect of the audience's response to the plays, as it actually appears to be a rare account of a performance going wrong.

The tension between the intended comic aspects of the pageant, and the apparently unruly, unwarranted laughter which producers of the *Funeral* claim it raised, is an interesting starting point for the consideration of how humour functioned in these plays. Laughter was clearly neither exclusively desirable or undesirable: it held the potential to destabilize and problematize performances if it was improperly controlled. This loss of control attests to the power of spectators, and frames their participation – alongside producers – in the construction of meaning within these performances.[6] It also draws us to consider more broadly how 'biblical' narratives were used in these dramatic productions: how should we imagine that these stories

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[2] *REED: York*, II, 732.
[3] For example, Carpenter, 'New Evidence: Vives and Audience-Response', 3–12; for slapstick, see Philip Butterworth, 'Substitution: Theatrical Sleight of Hand in Medieval Plays', *European Medieval Drama,* 9 (2005), 209–29.
[4] Claire Sponsler, *The Queen's Dumbshows: John Lydgate and the Making of Early Theater* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 1–16, esp. 6.
[5] Butterworth, 'Substitution: Theatrical Sleight of Hand', 209–29.
[6] Carpenter, 'New Evidence: Vives and Audience Response', 8–10.

(necessarily drawn from contemporary sources beyond the Latin Vulgate) were adapted into the so-called 'mystery plays'?

In this section, I will focus on the *Funeral* pageant as a means to consider how we can approach surviving records of early drama from the perspective of audiences and producers, rather than play-scripts. First I will look to evidence from the 1432 complaint to provide a speculative context for the play which has so far gone unnoted. Looking to the specific use of the name 'Fergus' in the play, I will consider how this distinct appellation constructed a meaning in performances, related to the narratives of both the Virgin's funeral, and localized regional history. I will then enquire why the *Funeral* purportedly became the controversial piece which the Mason's complaint suggests it was. As Sponsler suggests, 'theatre histories are inevitably concerned with the problem of absence…and with events that were transient and evanescent'.[7] A variety of contextual approaches surround the *Funeral,* making its interpretation difficult for modern scholars, but perhaps also for contemporaries. Thinking especially about audience response, I will consider not only how spectators participated in the construction of meaning in these performances, but also how this interpretive stance could – and did – become contested.

The record of the audience's heated response to the performance of the *Funeral* is interesting, but so too is the particular way in which the pageant itself is described. Hitherto, scholars have tended to focus on part of the Mason's complaint which suggests that the play was so controversial because its subject was not contained in sacred scripture ('mat*er*ia pagine illius in sacra non continet*ur* scriptura'), and for this reason was somehow more prone to rousing dissent or disapproval from spectators.[8] The Burial of the Virgin is an apocryphal narrative, certainly not included in the Latin *Vulgate.* Yet the extent to which this would be a concern to producers or spectators of the pageant in 1432 is questionable, as modern conceptions of 'Scripture' are necessarily distinct from late medieval antecedents; it was likely not a single Bible, but rather a pool of texts and narratives, in Latin and the vernacular, which represented 'sacred scripture' in this period.

Numerous contemporary sources attest that the narrative of the 'Burial' was considered a significant part of biblical history, including Jacobus de Voragine's popular *Legenda Aurea*, and the northern English *Cursor Mundi.*[9] Geographically, the closest analogous performance of the

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[7] Claire Sponsler, 'From Archive to Repertoire: The *Disguising at Hertford* and Performance Practices', in *Medieval Theatre Performance: Actors, Dancers, Automata and their Audiences*, ed. Philip Butterworth and Katie Normington (Cambridge: Brewer, 2017), 17–19, (17).

[8] See Beadle, *The York Plays*, II, 424–25; Mark R. Sullivan, 'The Missing York *Funeral of the Virgin*', in *The Dramatic Tradition of the Middle Ages*, ed. Clifford Davidson (New York: AMS Press, 2005), 150–54.

[9] Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, vol. II, trans. William Granger Ryan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 81, 91–92; Anon., *Cursor Mundi,* Vol. IV, ed. Richard Morris, EETS 66 (London: Kegan Paul, 1878), 1182–88.

scene, likely staged in East Anglia, was included in the N-Town *Assumption of Mary*.[10] In the parish church of Pickering only thirty miles from York, a large-scale wall painting depicts the narrative in some detail, and representations of the same scene survive in at least two windows in York Minster from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, similarly showing the Jewish prince dangling the Virgin's bier.[11] In all of these works, the 'apocryphal' nature of the story is of little concern. Added to this, it is difficult to overstate the importance of the Virgin Mary to popular devotion in this period, making the idea that the Masons complained that the funerary narrative was itself in some way problematic difficult to credit. What it was exactly that caused anxiety over the performance here, then, remains ambiguous.

The account is of course highly subjective: it is framed within a complaint made by the Goldsmiths, who wish the Masons to be given responsibility for a part of the performance of *Herod and the Magi*. The Masons' grumbling might be read as a convenient motivation for change, possibly to a pageant which allowed them greater scope to depict the wealth or prestige of their craft, or for other practical reasons.[12] Yet it does refer to a surprising tension which apparently surrounded the performance: the pageant stirred not only 'more noise and laughter than devotion', but also 'quarrels, disagreements and fights' in the city – violent activity roused as the result of a play. Whilst the complaint does talk of the *Funeral* often missing performance in the daylight, and being obscured by staging in the dark, this risk appears to have been contingent on the violent response the pageant had on spectators, rather than the cause of it.

So what was it about the performance, we may ask, that caused such paroxysms of urban strife? As a starting point, we may look to the initial description given of the *Funeral* in the 1432 account, where it is referred to not as the 'Burial of the Virgin', but rather as 'the play in which Fergus was beaten'. This use of the name 'Fergus' has been marked as an oddity, yet little prolonged consideration has been given to its specific use in the pageant.[13] Today the name carries certain Caledonian associations, and we may interpret its use in the context of the play as a comic means to associate the Jewish antagonist of the narrative with a generalised Scottish

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[10] *Assumption of Mary*, in *The N-Town Plays*, ed. Douglas Sugano (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007).

[11] G.H. Lightfoot, 'Mural Paintings in Saint Peter's church, Pickering', *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal*, 13 (1895), 353–70; also Kate Giles, 'Seeing and Believing: Visuality and Space in Pre-Modern England', *World Archaeology*, 39:1 (2007), 105–21; for York Minster see Clifford Davidson and David E. O'Connor, 'York Art: A Subject List of Extant and Lost Art', *Early Drama, Art and Music*, 4 (2003), 68; Ruth Evans, 'When a Body Meets a Body: Fergus and Mary in the York Cycle', in *New Medieval Literatures I*, ed. Wendy Scase, Rita Copeland and David Lawton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 200–202; Paul Hardwick, 'Making Light of Devotion: The Pilgrimage Window in York Minster', *Medieval English Comedy*, ed. Paul Hardwick and Sandra Hordis (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 65.

[12] For example, Sheila Christie, 'Bridging the Jurisdictional Divide: The Masons and the York Corpus Christi Play', in *The York Plays: Performance in the City*, ed. Margaret Rogerson (Woodbridge: York Medieval Press, 2011), 53–66.

[13] Beadle, *The York Plays*, II, 424–425; Christie, 'Bridging the Jurisdictional Divide', 62 n.36.; Sullivan, 'The Missing York *Funeral of the Virgin*', 150–54.

enemy. As Mark Sullivan comments, the people of York likely bore antipathy to the Scots, who led military excursions into Yorkshire sporadically throughout the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries.[14] The name 'Fergus' may have been given to the ungodly prince as a way to create a hate figure of amalgamated identities: Jewish communities had been formally expelled from England in 1290, and a Scottish figure could be utilised as an approximate reference to the malevolent foreign 'Other', standing in for an otherwise absent foe.

If we look to other versions of the 'Burial' narrative, the leading Jewish antagonist is given various names which circulated in this period. Yet unlike 'Fergus' in York, these usually stressed the specifically Jewish identity of the antagonist: as Mill notes, in other versions from England as well as the Continent, he is variously referred to as Isachar, Reuben, or even just 'Judea aldorman'.[15] The only other surviving version of the 'Burial' narrative where the name 'Fergus' is used comes from the *Northern Homily Cycle*, a biblical (or pseudo-biblical) literary work written in the vernacular. Not designating the character within the story itself, the phrase 'Fergus conuersus & baptizatus' appears as a subheading for the 'Burial' passage, specifically in the two surviving manuscript versions written in a northern English dialect, BL Harley 4196 and BL Cotton Tiberius E. VII.[16] Both of these manuscripts were composed in the early fifteenth century, and their production is associated with Augustinian Canons in York, or the broader region of North Yorkshire.[17]

The occurrence of 'Fergus' in the *NHC* manuscripts and the *Funeral* pageant, works deriving from a similar location and period, suggests that the appellation was in some way significant to York in its historic fabric and religious identity. Drawn from a period of considerable warfare over the borders of Scotland and England, and well-remembered into the fifteenth century, the leading Jewish antagonist of the York *Funeral* was characterised at least in part as a fearsome twelfth-century leader, Fergus of Galloway. This figure came to represent the so-called Galwegians for centuries, and provides us with a new means to understand the *Funeral of the Virgin* pageant.

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[14] Sullivan, 'The Missing York *Funeral of the Virgin*', 152–53.
[15] Anna J. Mill, 'The York Plays of the Dying, Assumption and Coronation of Our Lady', *PMLA*, 65:5 (1950), 868.
[16] *Altenglische Legenden: Neue Folge. Mit Einleitung und Anmerkungen*, ed. Carl Horstmann (Heilbronn: Henniger, 1881), 117, l.418.
[17] See James H. Morey, *Book and Verse: A Guide to Middle English Biblical Literature* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 323–30; John Block Friedman, *Northern English Books, Owners and Makers in the Late Middle Ages* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 91–92.

Section 2.1
Fergus on the Streets

Fergus is undoubtedly the most famed ruler of the medieval region of Galloway. His reputation figured prominently in both Scottish and English chronicles during his lifetime and for generations beyond.[18] Although the records are unclear, his reign likely began in the late 1120s or early 1130s and ended in 1160 when he was forced to cede power to his two sons. He was a renowned leader, lord and self-styled 'king' of Galloway at a time when the region was entirely autonomous of Scottish rule, reaching from the west coast on the Irish sea to as far as Annandale in the east, and the river Doon in the north.[19] Fergus was a major player in Anglo-Scottish politics of the twelfth century, a politician who shrewdly changed allegiances between Scottish and English rulers to maintain political freedom.[20] Galloway was a bastion of Gaelic culture in this period, associated with Ireland and the Isle of Man against the Anglo/Scoto-Norman powers to the east and the south.[21]

Yet it is not so much who Fergus was, but what his name – and the inhabitants of the region he ruled – came to represent, which should inform our understanding of the *Funeral* pageant. In England the Galwegians begin to play a prominent role in contemporary history writing after the late 1130s. Under the tumultuous reign of King Stephen, various Scottish incursions affected much of Northumberland, County Durham and Yorkshire. The Scottish forces at this time were led by David I, whose allegiance to Empress Matilda – Stephen's enemy – was shared by the people of Galloway. In various accounts the Galwegian troops are painted as major participants in the action; they apparently caused much trouble, threatening the martial endeavour of their fair-weather allies.[22] From 1137 David's forces ravaged north-east England, slaughtering thousands and wreaking general destruction, before the famed English victory at the Battle of the Standard in 1138.

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[18] Emilia Jamroziak, 'Cistercian Border Conflicts: Some Comparisons between the Experience of Scotland and Pomerania', in *Monasteries and Societies in the British Isles in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. Janet Burton and Karen Stöber (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2008), 41–42.
[19] Daphne Brooke, *Wild Men and Holy Places: St Ninian, Whithorn and the Medieval Realm of Galloway* (Edinburgh: Canongate Press, 1994), 79.
[20] Richard D. Oram, 'Fergus, Galloway and the Scots', in *Galloway: Land and Lordship,* ed. Richard D. Oram and Geoffrey Stell (Edinburgh: Scottish Society for Northern Studies, 1991), 121.
[21] Hector L. MacQueen, 'The Laws of Galloway: A Preliminary Survey', in *Galloway: Land and Lordship*, ed. Richard D. Oram and Geoffrey Stell (Edinburgh: Scottish Society for Northern Studies, 1991), 131–43.
[22] The Galwegians were blamed for almost derailing the Scottish army because of an argument over a woman in Durham. See 'The Chronicles of John and Richard of Hexham', in *Church Historians of England,* Vol. IV, Part I, trans. and ed. Joseph Stevenson (London: PBER, 1856), 8, 45.

Fought near Northallerton, at a point between the cities of York and Durham, the Battle of the Standard had a profound impact on the history-writing of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in northern England. The contemporary chroniclers mostly came from Cistercian or Augustinian institutions, based around these two urban centres important for their religious authority, and their records of the battle mutually influenced and informed each other.[23] Richard of Hexham's *Historia de gestis regis Stephani et de bello Standardii* appears to have been the earliest and most influential of these, alongside *De bello standardi* by Aelred of Rievaulx.[24] Links between the Augustinians and the Cistercians were well-established by the middle of the twelfth century, and continued into the succeeding centuries.[25]

The accounts of Aelred and Richard characterised the Galwegians as unchristian enemies of the region. [26] Both writers were allies of the Scottish king, and their writings are heavily partisan: they used the men of Galloway to deflect from the atrocities committed by David's Scots-led army.[27] Richard speaks of the 'Picts, commonly known as Galwegians' tearing through Northumberland and County Durham on a bloody rampage, 'sparing no rank, no age, no sex, no condition' from their massacre, and taking matrons and virgins into slavery.[28] Both men refer to these soldiers as 'Picts', drawing on Bede's description of an ungodly (and unruly) race who inhabited western Scotland in the fifth century. In doing so, they stress the ancient estrangement of Galloway from the rest of Christian civilisation, and the savage nature of its inhabitants.[29]

Overall, both accounts of the battle emphasise Galwegian barbarity and apparent godlessness. Richard speaks of attack on the altar of St. Michael near Hexham, where two feckless Galwegians – going against the orders of King David – pillaged the religious building. His account outlines their destruction of precious objects and slaughter of clergy, women and children, before they are finally stopped and meet divine retribution.[30] This characterisation of the soldiers of Galloway is informed by the chronicles' framing of the battle as a holy war.[31]

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[23] Matthew Strickland, *War and Chivalry: The Conduct and Perception of War in England and Normandy, 1066–1217* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 295.
[24] See Antonia Gransden, *Historical Writing in England c.500 to c.1307* (London: Routledge, 1996), 181–85; Truax, *Aelred the Peacemak*er, 142–43, and Elizabeth Freeman, 'Aelred as a Historian among Historians', in *A Companion to Aelred of Rievaulx (1110–1167)*, ed. Marsha L. Dutton (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 114.
[25] Richard Oram also includes Roger de Howden as an influential, if slightly later, source on the Battle of the Standard: see 'The Mythical Pict and the Monastic Pedant: The Origin of the Legend of the Galloway Picts', *Pictish Arts Society Journal*, 4 (1993), 14–27; Emilia Jamroziak, *The Cistercian Order in Medieval Europe, 1090–1500* (London: Routledge, 2013), 223–24.
[26] Strickland, *War and Chivalry,* 293–96.
[27] Oram, 'The Mythical Pict and the Monastic Pedant', 22–24. Also Brooke, *Wild Men and Holy Places*, 99.
[28] Richard of Hexham, 'De Gestis Regis Stephani'*,* in *Chronicles of the Reigns of Stephen, Henry II and Richard I*, 4 Vols., ed. Richard Howlett (London: Longman, 1884–89, 96), III, 152–53.
[29] See Gransden, *Historical Writing in England,* 175; Oram, 'The Mythical Pict', 14–20.
[30] Richard of Hexham, in *Chronicles*, III, 154.
[31] Richard Oram, *Domination and Lordship: Scotland, 1070–1230* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 94.

Aelred repeatedly claims that the English acted 'in the defence of the Church of Christ against the barbarians', and he makes clear that it was the men of Galloway who prompted this assertion, not the Scottish troops.[32] The Battle of the Standard was led by Archbishop Thurstan of York, who alongside other clergy carried a Holy Pyx onto the battlefield, alongside the banners of the patron saints of York, Beverley, and Ripon.[33] Certainly in subsequent chronicles parallels are drawn between this battle and the contemporary launch of the Second Crusade.[34]

The language used to describe the men of Galloway and their actions is especially akin to descriptions in contemporary anti-Semitic 'blood libels', such as those surrounding William of Norwich, or Little Hugh of Lincoln.[35] Like the imaginary Jewish antagonists of these narratives, the troops are portrayed killing children and drinking their blood in a ritualistic manner, as well as perpetrating other ungodly desecrations.[36] Although not 'pagan', the Galwegians followed their own laws and customs which often seemed alien to outsiders.[37] The association of Galwegians with Blood Libel is of importance when we consider possible connections to the *Funeral* pageant. It becomes clear why the name of a leader of Galloway might stand in for an antagonistic Jewish figure.

Richard Oram has argued that the particular characterisation of the people of Galloway disseminated by these chronicles defined perceptions of Galwegian racial identity across northern Europe.[38] As troops from Galloway regularly acted as mercenaries in Britain and on the Continent throughout the medieval period, their bloodthirsty reputation continued to be propagated.[39] Alongside this, Galwegians were, like the Jews, dually reviled as barbarous figures,

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[32] Aird, 'Sweet Civility', in *Imagining Frontiers* 63–66; quotation taken from *Aelred of Rievaulx: The Historical Works*, translated Jane Patricia Freeland, edited Marsha L. Dutton (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2005), 248;
[33] See Marianne Garrity '"Hidden Honey": The Many Meanings of Aelred of Rievaulx's *De bello standardi*', *Cistercian Studies Quarterly*, *44:1* (2009), 57–64.
[34] In his account of a speech given by the Bishop of Orkney before the battle, Henry of Huntingdon talks of the way the 'Holy Land' sites of Jerusalem and Antioch had been taken by Norman Christian authority, and that the Scots-led army would similarly succumb. 'Audax Francia vos experta delituit: ferox Anglia vobis capta succubuit, dives Apulia vos sortita refloruit, Jerusalem famosa, et insignis Antiochia, se vobis utraque supposuit. Nunc autem Scotia vobis rite subjecta repellere conatur; inermem praeferens temeritem, rixae quam pugnae aptior': see *Henrici Archidiaconi Huntendunensis Historia Anglorum*, ed. Thomas Arnold (London: Longman, 1879), 262. Greenaway translates this as 'Bold France, when she had put you to the test, melted away. Fruitful England fell to your conquest. Wealthy Apulia, gaining you, renewed herself. Jerusalem, the celebrated, and famous Antioch both submitted to you. Now, however, Scotland, rightly subjected to you, attempts to thrust you back, preferring unarmed rashness, more fitting for brawl than battle.' See Henry, Archdeacon of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum (History of the English People)* ed. and trans Diana Greenaway (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 715.
[35] Anthony Bale, 'Fictions of Judaism in England before 1290', in *The Jews in Medieval England: Historical, Literary and Archeological* Sources, ed. Patricia Skinner (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2003), 130–31; also Alan Dundes, 'The Ritual Murder or Blood Libel Legend: A Study of Anti-Semitic Victimization through Projective Inversion', in *The Blood Libel Legend: A Casebook in Anti-Semitic Folklore* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 336–78.
[36] Richard of Hexham, 'The Chronicles', *Church Historians of England*, 4:1 (1856), 43; Speech of Walter Espec, 'De Bello Standardii', *Ailred of Rievaulx: The Historical Works*, 255.
[37]MacQueen, 'The Laws of Galloway', 131–43.
[38] Oram, 'The Mythical Pict', 24.
[39] Richard D. Oram, 'Fergus, Galloway and the Scots', 124.

and widely mocked as subhuman entities. In the *Bello Standardi* Aelred refers to Galwegian soldiers when he asks, 'who could not laugh rather than fear' when the 'worthless Scot with his nearly bare buttocks' runs into battle. Richard of Hexham clearly relishes that, on entering the fray some Galwegians were 'slain immediately' while the rest 'disgracefully fled'.[40] They are regularly presented as stupid, or as figures primed for mockery. If we imagine that York's *Fergus* involved slapstick comic action, it is easy to consider these men of Galloway – characterized by both barbarity and their ridiculousness – as analogous figures to villains of the play.[41]

Battle Narratives and Northern History

The historical writing of Aelred and Richard, and their particular characterisation of the Galwegians, continued to be widely influential in the region as the number of Cistercian and Augustinian houses grew.[42] Copies of Aelred's *Bello Standardii* circulated extensively in the local area, recorded at Rievaulx, Sawley, Meaux and Kirkham, as well as Durham Cathedral.[43] The works were not only collected, but read and actively used by members of these institutions. Peter Langtoft of Bridlington, an Augustinian canon writing between 1297 and 1307, relies heavily on Aelred's account of the battle.[44] Abbot Thomas Burton of Meaux, near Beverley, used Aelred's text when he wrote the institution's chronicle in the early fifteenth century, and refers to the Galwegians' disreputable role in the Battle of the Standard specifically.[45]

Due to the persistent circulation of narratives on the battle in and around Yorkshire, the Galwegians continued to be cited as special enemies of the region into the period when the York *Funeral* pageant was being produced. Importantly, it was Fergus particularly who continued to be referred to as the dynastic progenitor of this barbarous enemy. Long after the Battle of the Standard a bloody dispute between Fergus' sons (and grandson) occurred, causing a widely reported scandal: writing in the late twelfth century, Roger of Howden records the parties of the

[40] *Ailred of Rievaulx: The Historical Works,* 253. Also Ronan Toolis, "'Naked and Unarmored": A Reassessment of the Role of the Glaswegians at the Battle of the Standard', *Transactions of the Dumfriesshire and Galloway Natural History and Antiquarian Society*, 78 (2004), 79–92; Richard of Hexham, *Church Historians of England*, 4:1, 50.
[41] Oram, 'The Mythical Pict', 24.
[42] See Michael Carter "'It would have pitied any heart to see": Destruction and Survival at Cistercian Monasteries in Northern England at the Dissolution', *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, 168: 1 (2015), 79.
[43] Elizabeth Freeman, 'Aelred of Rievaulx's *De Bello Standardii*: Cistercian Historiography and the Creation of Community Memories', *Cîteaux*, 49:1–2 (1998), 22–27.
[44] *The Chronicle of Pierre de Langtoft, in French verse, from the earliest period to the death of King Edward I*, ed. Thomas Wright, 2 vols. (Rolls Series 47; London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1866 and 1868), 1, 479. Langtoft's reference to the Galwegians is ambiguous as the published transcription refers to 'Walays' rather than 'Gawalays', yet as the Welsh played no part in the battle, it is likely that the men of Galloway are the enemies mentioned.
[45] Freeman, 'Aelred as a Historian', 142; see Thomas Burton, *Chronica Monasterii de Melsa*, ed. Edward A. Bond, 3 vols, Rolls Series 43 (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1866–68), I, 122. Burton refers to the Galwegians fleeing from the enemy and abandoning King David of Scotland on the front line.

dispute as '*Hutredus et Gilbertus filii Ferregus',* the joint rulers of '*Galwalenses'*, as well as '*Malculumb, filius Gilleberti filii Fergus'*. A generation later, the same writer discusses the renewal of peace between Galloway and Scotland following a different conflict, a dispute between '*Rollandum, filium Uchtredi filii Fergus'* and '*Dunecano filio Gilberti filii Fergus'*.[46] Ever-present in these increasingly complex accounts of inter-familial warfare, 'Fergus' is clearly marked as the patriarch of the savage land.

A contemporary Augustinian canon, William of Newburgh, similarly refers to Uchtred and Gilbert as '*Hi nimirum Fergusi'*: those [people], without doubt, of Fergus.[47] Evidently such an identification of 'Fergus' with the bloody land of Galloway still occurred in Yorkshire into the fifteenth century, as the leader is repeatedly referred to in the contemporary *Chronicle of Jervaulx*, later published in an antiquarian text by Roger Twysden in 1652.[48] Fergus was also well-remembered as a dynastic progenitor: of Alan of Galloway, and ultimately John Balliol, John II of Scotland.[49] Beyond these religious works, he was even fictionalised as a courtly knight in the Old French *Roman de Fergus*, as well as the Middle Dutch *Ferguut,* produced in the late thirteenth century.[50] Clearly the name 'Fergus' occupied the popular imagination beyond Scotland, and held specific associations with Galloway for a lengthy period. We might, then, consider that its use in the York *Funeral* also held this particular significance.

Fergus and the Virgin

Historical accounts of 'Fergus', progenitor of the barbarous Galwegians roundly condemned in accounts of the Battle of the Standard, circulated widely in north-east England into the late medieval period, especially in Cistercian or Augustinian institutions. Alexandra Johnston has argued persuasively that the contents of York's own Augustinian Friary were influential sources for the city's play cycle, reinforcing a speculative link between these accounts of Galwegian barbarity and the use of the name 'Fergus' in the *Funeral* pageant.[51] Yet another related narrative

[46] *Chronica Magistri Rogeri de Houedene*, ed. William Stubbs, 4 Vols., Rolls Series 51 (London: Longmans, Green, 1868–71), 2 (1869), 79–80, 309.
[47] See William of Newburgh, *Chronicles,* I, 186–87.
[48] 'Chronicon of John of Brompton', *Historiae Anglicanae Scriptores X,* ed. Roger Twysden (London: Cornelius Bee, 1652), cols 720–1284, at cols 1105, 1116, and especially 1092–93.
[49] See Richard Oram, 'A Family Business? Colonisation and Settlement in Twelfth and Thirteenth Century Galloway', *The Scottish Historical Review*, 72:194, II (1993), 111–45, esp. 139–45.
[50] See Thomas Clancy, 'Scottish Literatures Before Scottish Literature', in *The Cambridge Companion to Scottish Literature*, ed. Gerald Carruthers and Liam McIlvanney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 13–26; see Guillaume le Clerc, *Fergus of Galloway*, trans. D.D.R. Owen (London: Dent, 1991), and *Dutch Romances: 2: Ferguut,* ed. and trans. David F. Johnson and Geert H.M. Claassens (Cambridge: Brewer, 2000).
[51] Alexandra Johnston, 'The World Made Flesh: Augustinian Elements in the York Cycle', in *The Centre and Its Compass: Studies in Medieval Literature in Honour of Professor John Layerle,* ed. Robert A. Taylor (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1993), 225–46; also Johnston, 'The York Cycle and the Libraries of York', in *The Church and*

makes the association between Fergus of Galloway and the Jewish prince of the *Funeral* all the more compelling. To find this, we must look again to Aelred of Rievaulx: not a work composed by the Cistercian luminary, but about him, in the hagiographical form of the *Vita Aelredi.*

Written by fellow Cistercian Walter Daniel, this text describes Aelred's visit to Dundrennan in Galloway, a daughter-house of Rievaulx. After whipping the institution into shape, the abbot encounters the warring rulers of the bestial and uncivilized land.

> …the father went down to Galloway to visit and comfort a daughter-house of Rievaulx. There he found the petty king of that land incensed against his sons, and the sons raging against their father and each other. It is a wild country where the inhabitants are like beasts, and is altogether barbarous [...] There chastity founders as often as lust wills, and the pure is only so far removed from the harlot that the more chaste will change their husbands every month, and a man will sell his wife for a heifer […]
>
> As I have said, our father on a visit to the place found the princes of the province quarrelling amongst themselves. The King of Scotland could not subdue, nor the bishop pacify, their mutual hatreds, rancour and tyranny. Sons were against father, father against sons, brother against brother, daily polluting the unhappy little land with bloodshed. Aelred the peacemaker met with them all…He eagerly urged their veteran sire to put on a monastic habit and by his marvellous admonishment bent him to that course, and taught him – who had taken the lives of thousands – to become a partaker of the life eternal, to such effect that he ended his days in a monastery of religious brethren… His sons, holding their father in great veneration, live together to this day in peace and tranquillity […][52]

The account may not mention Fergus of Galloway by name, but certainly he is the 'petty king': readers were likely to have picked up the allusion due to the man's fame.[53] Indeed, Daniel's claim that the warring ruler became resident of a monastic house following this dispute is attested in the *Chronicle of Holyrood*, where in 1160 'Fergus, Prince of Galloway…assumed the dress of a canon'.[54] Daniel's narrative is a hagiographical bending of the truth: the strife of the 'unhappy little land' of Galloway was not just caused by civil war between family members, but also due to

Learning in Later Medieval Society: Essays in Honour of R.B. Dobson, ed. Caroline Barron and Jenny Stratford (Donington: Shaun Tyas, 2002), 355–70.

[52] Walter Daniel, *The Life of Ailred of Rievaulx*, trans. F.M. Powicke (London: Nelson & Sons, 1950), 45–46.

[53] See Oram, 'A Family Business?', 139–45.

[54] 'The Chronicle of Holyrood', in *Church Historians of England*, 4:1, 747.

repeated military incursions by King Malcolm of Scotland, who subdued the people and forced Fergus to give over control of the land to his sons.[55]

Aelred may well have been part of these negotiations, but it is fairly clear why Walter Daniel portrays him as the prime mover for peace in the affair. The abbot held a particular interest in Galloway: he is thought to have written the *Vita Niniani*, a hagiographical account of the fifth-century saint Ninian and his conversion of the land of the Picts, associated with the Galwegian see of Whithorn.[56] Daniel's account in the *Vita Aelredi*, therefore, both aligns his former abbot with St. Ninian, and emphasises the role played by Aelred in Galloway's spiritual reform. In the *Vita* Galloway is presented as a land suffering religious and political malaise. In this 'wild country where the inhabitants are like beasts' barbarity reigned in a landscape polluted with blood, bereft of civilisation and godliness. The people of the region are further defined by their sexual immorality. Aelred restores the land to God, with both the 'petty king' and his warring sons converted by the abbot's 'marvellous admonishment', turning the barbarous Fergus into a pious monk seeking Christ's redemption.[57]

It is noticeable that this account of Aelred's activities is analogous to the 'Burial of the Virgin' narrative. Fergus, a barbarous king matched by two barbarous princes, raises discord typified by ungodly savagery in a once-sacred country, just as the antagonistic Jews rail against the scene of the Virgin's burial. The 'petty king' Fergus, and Galloway itself, suffer from the familial rift raised by civil war: the body politic is dismembered, just as the Jewish prince is thought to have been pulled apart or disjointed in the staging of the play, his hand adhering to the funeral bier.[58] Beadle notes that both the name of the Jewish prince and the suggestion that he is beaten whilst dangling from the funeral bier are only included in a performed narrative in York.[59] Following Daniel's account, might we speculate that the 'beating' of Fergus was carried out by blinded princes unable to see their true enemies, rather than the solemn apostles? The *Funeral*, rather than exclusively performing a biblical history, could have also reflected the strife of the Galwegian civil war, where 'Sons were against father, father against sons'.

Only when the 'petty king' turns to Christ – whether through Aelred, or through the Virgin Mary – is proper order restored in the country of Galloway. We have established that the

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[55] See Keith Stringer, 'Galloway and the Abbeys of Rievaulx and Dundrennan', in *Transactions of the Dumfriesshire and Galloway Natural History and Antiquarian Society*, Third Series, 55 (1980), 175–76.
[56] Jean Truax, *Aelred the Peacemaker: The Public Life of a Cistercian Abbot* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2017), 159–60.
[57] For comments on the Cistercian and Augustinian forays into Galloway, see William Aird, '"Sweet Civility and Barbarous Rudeness": A View from the Frontier. Abbot Ailred of Rievaulx and the Scots', in *Imagining Frontiers, Contesting Identities*, ed. Steven G. Ellis and Lud'a Klusáková (Pisa: Pisa University Press, 2007), 59–75.
[58] Butterworth, 'Substitution: Theatrical Sleight of Hand', 214–15.
[59]Beadle, *York Plays, I,* 424–25.

Galwegians were regarded as heathens, a race who from at least the twelfth century were presented as starkly inferior to the English, and even to the Scots. But it should also be remembered that Aelred was an early northern Cistercian luminary, and it is his reputation as a stalwart of this order that defined him in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The Cistercians were particularly associated with the Virgin Mary in the late medieval period, whom they prayed to as divine intercessor.[60] If the historical Fergus was aligned with a Jewish prince, Aelred could certainly stand in for the apostolic figures of the *Burial* narrative, concerned with the sanctity and incorruptibility of the Virgin's body.

The story of Aelred's trip to Galloway, and his reform both of the country and its fearsome leader Fergus, was told well beyond the twelfth century within Cistercian houses, which are known to have maintained close communications between themselves, as well as extensive historical records – especially concerning their saintly abbots.[61] The order continued to be prolific in Yorkshire after its foundation, gradually consolidating its prominent status in the region through a numerous range of religious houses – including the impressively large abbeys of Fountains, Rievaulx, and Byland – as well as a considerable stake in the trade of wool well into the fifteenth century.[62] Due to the dominant presence of the order in the region, it is highly likely that the story of Aelred's trip to Galloway, and his 'taming' of Fergus, was known widely until at least the early sixteenth century, when the houses were dissolved.

Added to this, Aelred was as a popular northern saint in the later medieval period, and writings about him continued to be produced in Yorkshire beyond a purely Cistercian sphere. Although few records of manuscripts of the *Vita Aelredi* survive, relevant portions of the hagiography still passed between religious institutions, including the story of the abbot's work in Galloway. In the mid-fourteenth century, John of Tynemouth – associated with north-east England, and sometimes even York itself – included an abridged version of Daniel's work in his *Sanctilogium Angliae Walliae Scotiae et Hiberniae.* This work details the lives of one hundred and fifty-six saints from England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland, and survives in various forms from the north of England, with known copies deriving from York Minster and Durham Cathedral.[63]

The *Sanctilogium*, for a long time erroneously associated with the writer John Capgrave, went on to be printed by Wynkyn de Worde in 1515 and achieved wide circulation under the title

[60] Jamroziak, *The Cistercian Order*, 174–75.
[61] Ibid., 223–24.
[62] The Cistercians owned a property in York from which their wool was traded. See Carter, "Destruction and Survival at Cistercian Monasteries in Northern England at the Dissolution', *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, 168:1 (2015), 79.
[63] Friedman, *Northern English Books*, 91–92.

De Nova Legenda Anglie.[64] The printed version retained the story of Aelred's trip, denoting its importance within the saint's broader hagiography: given the comprehensive nature of the whole work, many other elements of Daniel's *Vita* were stripped out. Aelred appears to have been particularly known by late medieval audiences for his handling of Fergus, and for the reform of Galloway.

The *Kalendre of the New Legende of Englande.*, published by Robert Pynson in London, 1516, is a translation and abridgement of *De Nova Legenda,* and the last collection of saints' lives to be printed in the vernacular before the Reformation.[65] Given the brevity of the account of Aelred in the *Kalendre,* it is notable that the text still refers to this episode, noting that 'he refourmyd the hole cou[n]trey of gallway / and wrote the lyfe of Seynt Edwarde kynge and consellore and dyd many other thynges'.[66] Although it runs to only half a line of text, the inclusion of the episode evokes the importance of the narrative to readers – especially as it is mentioned alongside a reference to the abbot's popular work on the life of Edward the Confessor.

Both de Worde and Pynson printed in London, yet we might assume that the story of the Cistercian abbot and the Galwegians was still widely remembered in the North, where texts associated with Aelred remained popular.[67] Aelred's intervention in Galloway was well-known and became a key feature of the saint's life: the popularity of this narrative into the early sixteenth century. Aelred was a well-loved saint associated with Yorkshire and the Virgin Mary. His defeat of a historic enemy of the region, Fergus of Galloway – a character more broadly representative of the Galwegian people in the popular imagination – may have become a local analogue for the narrative of the Virgin's burial, explaining why such a curious appellation should be used to name the Jewish antagonist in the York *Funeral.*

Marian Miracles and Local Adaptation

Beyond other dramatic renderings of the same story, notably in the N-Town plays, Marian miracles connected with Jewish antagonists were popular throughout the later Middle Ages.[68] Philip Butterworth has demonstrated the closeness of these stories to different renderings of the Burial of the Virgin narrative – both textual, and performative – as well as to other works,

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[64] Mary Beth Long, 'Corpora and Manuscripts, Authors and Audiences', in *A Companion to Middle English Hagiography,* ed. Sarah Salih (Cambridge: Brewer, 2006), 62.
[65] Ibid.
[66] *Kalendre of the newe legende of Englande* (London: Richard Pynson, 1516), *EEBO* [Accessed 20.02.16].
[67] See Friedman, *Northern English Books*, 91–92.
[68] See Sylvia Tomasch, 'Postcolonial Chaucer and the Virtual Jew', *The Postcolonial Middle Ages*, ed. J.J. Cohen (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 243–60; Ruth Evans, 'The Jew, the Host, and the Virgin Martyr', *Medieval Virginities*, ed. Ruth Evans, Anke Bernau, Sarah Salih (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 167–86.

including *The Croxton Play of the Sacrament*. In all of these, Jewish characters are portrayed as figures of malignant carnality, suffering mutilation, disembodiment, or blindness as a result of their spiritual impurity, and attacks on physical representations of the Divine in particular.[69]

It has been suggested that some of the popularity of these stories – where the purity of the Divine is threatened by bodily transgression – is actually vested in the specific historicity of the narrative.[70] Late medieval Marian miracle stories were often associated with local sites or figures, allowing their audiences to recall specific historical moments of threat, and divinely-inspired activities which restored spiritual wellbeing to the community. In these stories Jewish figures are often represented as forces of alterity, whose presence – and defeat – aided in the construction of late medieval devotional identity.[71] Jewish characters like Fergus in the York *Funeral* were presented as alien figures: threatening strangers to Christian devotion. Yet through their ultimate defeat and conversion, these characters also represent the reformative powers of faith, both healing and further expanding the community of worshippers.

In York, the desire for urban streets to be recast, through biblical drama, as sites of the Holy Land has been well-discussed: a process of 'conceptual blending' merged aspects of contemporary life with the narrative of devotional history, in an attempt to bring producers and spectators closer to the Divine.[72] But in the *Fergus* pageant we see a further layer: a character from a historical narrative analogous to the story of the Virgin's burial, and of some importance to the region's past, is brought into the biblical story. Whether this 'layering' of narratives could be attributed to the producers of the pageant or to popular associations formed by spectators is unclear, given the absence of any play-script. Yet it seems likely that performances of the *Funeral* transposed a story of local antagonism and reform onto the cycle of biblical history, creating a Marian miracle story which the people of York could claim for their own.

We can find a contemporary precedent for this transposition in a stained-glass panel from the church of St. Peter Mancroft in Norwich, created in the mid-fifteenth century. Donated by a wealthy local mercer named Robert Toppes, the window depicts the moment in the Burial of the Virgin narrative when the Jewish prince dangles from the Virgin's funeral bier; as in the *Ordo*, the moment of punishment at the hands of the Divine is taken as the highlight of the narrative.[73] In the window the Jewish antagonist is presented as a knightly figure, but not merely a generalised martial enemy: the heraldry displayed on the man's armour identifies him with a former local

[69] Butterworth, 'Substitution: Theatrical Sleight of Hand', 209–30.
[70] Denise L. Despres, 'The Immaculate Flesh and the Social Body: Mary and the Jews', *Jewish History,* 12:1 (1998), 47–69; Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 'The Flow of Blood in Medieval Norwich', *Speculum*, 79: 1 (2004), 26–65.
[71] See also Tomasch, 'Postcolonial Chaucer and the Virtual Jew', 243–60.
[72] Stevenson, 'Embodied Enchantments', 91–112.
[73] See figure 1.

Figure 1: Funeral of the Virgin, panel s.I. 3g,
St. Peter Mancroft Church, Norwich, (c.1450).

Figure 2: Funeral of the Virgin, Nave, South Wall,
Church of Ss. Peter and Paul, Pickering, (c.1450).

magnate, William de la Pole, Duke of Suffolk.[74] Suffolk was considered as a malignant force to many residents of Norwich for a variety of reasons, including his interference in civic affairs and the reputed lawlessness of his retainers across East Anglia.[75] He had fallen from grace by the time of the window's creation, was imprisoned as a traitor in 1450, and later executed by enemies on his release, as he tried to flee to France.

The window's patron, Toppes, had himself fallen foul of Suffolk's arbitrations, and the surviving panel demonstrates that the villain of the Marian 'Burial' narrative was used outside of York to frame a localized, secular enemy. Surprising parallels can be drawn between the attributes afforded to Fergus of Galloway and Suffolk in these accounts: both men had been powerful and feared rulers; they were known for the savagery of their associates, and for the lawlessness which they spread. Both were also vanquished and 'reformed', only to die soon after their fall from power, to be reconciled with God. Toppes' window was a means to inscribe the story of Suffolk's local wrongdoing and defeat into the space of his parish church, operating as a site for common memorialization. Clare Wright has compared the way wealthy donors paid for themselves to be inserted into devotional art to contemporary performances, which were able to 'collapse time and space, bringing historical past and contemporary present together,thereby reinforcing the immediacy, relevance and significance of biblical events for the individual'.[76]

But whereas donors generally chose to have themselves depicted in the presence of divinity, here the opposite occurred. Using the 'Burial' narrative, both Toppes' window and the York *Funeral* pageant enacted – or at the very least reiterated – an association between a contemporary (or historical) individual and the antagonist of the story. An attempt was clearly made to tie a figure of the local past to the Jewish aggressor of the 'Burial': a character associated with misrule and barbarity, whose ultimate redemption perhaps made him a useful figure for popular moralizing. Some twenty-five miles from York in the town of Pickering, a cycle of mid-fifteenth-century wall paintings survive which also depict the Burial of the Virgin, and again the Jewish antagonist is portrayed as an armoured knight.[77] Although here the figure has no obvious identifying features, it remains tempting to speculate that he may have represented a more particular enemy – whether Fergus of Galloway, or another local antagonist.

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[74] See David King, *The Medieval Stained Glass of St Peter Mancroft, Norwich*, Corpus Vitrearum Medii Ævi 5 (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 2006), clxxxvi–clxxxvii, 74.
[75] Lorraine Attreed, 'The Politics of Welcome: Ceremonies and Constitutional Development in Later Medieval English Towns', in *City and Spectacle in Medieval Europe*, ed. Barbara Hanawalt and Kathryn Reyerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 215; John Marshall, '"Fortune in Worldys Worschyppe": The Satirizing of the Suffolks in *Wisdom*', *METh,* 14 (1992), 37–66; King, *The Medieval Stained Glass of St Peter Mancroft*, liii–liv.
[76] Clare Wright, 'Ontologies of Play: Reconstructing the Relationship between Audience and Act in Early English Drama', *Shakespeare Bulletin* 35:2 (2017),
[77] See figure 2.

Section 2.2:
'Disagreements, Quarrels and Fights'
as Audience Response

If the antagonist of the *Funeral* pageant was known as 'Fergus' due to an association drawn by producers and audiences between the contents of the play and the stories of local saint Aelred of Rievaulx about reformed Galwegians, the complaint that 'the subject of the pageant is not contained in Holy Scripture' might be reinterpreted.[78] As I have argued, in the case of the *Funeral* – as in the windows of St. Peter Mancroft – we may regard the name 'Fergus' as an attempt to layer the pseudo-biblical Marian miracle story onto a narrative of York's past, entirely distinct from the contents of the rest of the biblical cycle. Rather than a 'conceptual blending' of the contemporary world with the biblical narrative, an attempt was made to frame the performance of the *Funeral* with a narrative relevant to the history of York, and the surrounding region.

It is possible that the 'blending' of two distinct narratives failed here because the performance of the *Funeral* – or more specifically the 'play in which Fergus is beaten' – went too far, subsuming the Marian story which was ostensibly being performed. Rather than expressing a concern for the inclusion of an apocryphal narrative in the York Cycle, the problems caused by the subject of the pageant are more likely to have derived from the failure of this 'blending'; the performance did not properly fit in its place within the arc of biblical history being presented, as it told a completely different story. The deviation from 'sacred scripture', then, represents a criticism of the performance as a pseudo-hagiographical narrative, rather than a biblical one. Such a problem is particular to the dramatic medium, where narratives become embodied performances which, in order to function, need to be accepted by an audience. Distinct from literary or pictorial repretantations, the embodied nature of drama allows meaning to become contested even as it is performed.

This new interpretation of the York *Funeral* offers us an insight into how performances of biblical pageants engaged with narratives beyond those ostensibly being staged. As we see in other pageants under discussion in this thesis, these performances held the potential to represent forms or signify ideas beyond the biblical (or even pseudo-biblical) framework which the cycle formally encompasses. Reading this pageant's villain as a representation of Fergus of Galloway provides us with a possible explanation for the nature of the Mason's complaint, yet the question of how or why such a play became controversial on the streets of York remains unanswered. If the 'Burial' narrative was blended with a story of local significance through the performance of

[78] *REED: York*, 732.

the *Funeral*, why was it so problematic for the craft group producing it? And why, rather than simply changing and redefining the action of the performance, did they want to be rid of the pageant completely?

In seeking a potential cause for such a violent and oppositional reaction, we must acknowledge the importance of audience response. Early performance should be conceived of as a collective exercise, where producers and spectators alike interact to negotiate interpretative meaning. As Carpenter notes, 'late medieval audiences seem to have a participatory role…those who watch and those who act are colleagues and collaborators in the creation of the performance'.[79] Still, the sense in which the Masons complain that the *Funeral* stirred 'more noise and laughter than devotion', and caused 'quarrels, disagreements and fights' prompts us to go further in this consideration of the audience as an entity. Given the contentious nature of the responses which the *Funeral* drew, the 'collaboration' between audiences and producers seems to have failed.

The *Funeral* seems to provide an example of individual (or groups) of spectators disagreeing amongst themselves about just how to respond to the performed action. As McGavin and Walker note, scholars have too 'often tended…to accept that spectators were effectively homogenized into a single community' by the dynamics of a production.[80] In the Mason's complaint about the staging of the *Funeral*, we find the suggestion that spectators were in conflict when they responded to this pageant, threatening to undermine its meaning altogether. Their responses were driven by different interpretations of the pageant, owing to a broader contextual frame of the York Cycle. Tom Pettitt describes a similar process to the 'layering' of narratives – in our case of Fergus, and the Burial of the Virgin – in an attempt to adapt the concept of 'intertextuality' to early drama. He refers to the 'intrusion' of related – yet not consciously cited – material into a performance, and the way this intrusion could influence 'the reception of the works concerned when noticed by original readers and audiences'.[81]

Sarah Beckwith imagines the Corpus Christi – both literally, the Body of Christ, and figuratively, the civic festival - as a means to bring individuals together, offering the loose cohesion of people with diverse and opposing ideas, contentious positions which are inherent within urban life.[82] Similarly Ruth Evans has noted that these biblical plays should be viewed 'as

[79] Carpenter, 'New Evidence: Vives and Audience-Response', 9–10; Ramey, 'Audience-Interactive Games', 55–83.
[80] McGavin and Walker, *Imagining Spectatorship*, 19.
[81] Tom Pettitt, 'Performing Intrusions: Interaction and Interaxionality in Medieval English Theatre', in *Medieval Theatre Performance: Actors, Dancers, Automata and their Audiences*, ed. Philip Butterworth and Katie Normington (Cambridge: Brewer, 2017), 53–54.
[82] Beckwith, *Signifying God*, 27–30.

sights where meanings can be contested, perhaps with ambiguous results'.[83] With the pageant of the *Funeral* in mind, we may understand the 'quarrels, fights, and disagreements' as indicative of a problem in the production, where a diversity of responses – rather than a single consensus – were raised by the 'intrusion' of the character 'Fergus' in the Burial of the Virgin narrative. Here a 'loose cohesion' was not gained, and contested meanings appear to have roused disputes.

Counter-Narratives and Approaching Fergus

Spectators could have identified a Jewish-Galwegian antagonist in the *Funeral* as 'Fergus', yet a counter-narrative would also have been available. Against the barbarous and hated figure of Walter Daniel's narrative, a more benign image of the twelfth-century Galwegian ruler was also in play in the city. In the mid-twelfth century, it was Fergus who oversaw the renewal of spiritual and temporal connections between York and the see of Whithorn in Galloway, formalising an arrangement by which the Galwegian bishop owed subordination to the Archbishop of York.[84] Essentially, any new bishop of Galloway had to be approved and invested by the Archbishop of York, and act as his suffragen: in practice, this meant that the Galwegian prelate was obliged to carry out duties in the York diocese. The pledge of spiritual submission made by Galloway to York held a level of importance, and the relationship remained a prominent and active one until at least the late fourteenth century, not least because it allowed the Galwegian prelate to make more money than in his own substantially poorer diocese.[85] Bishops of Whithorn carried out duties in York, and were likely visible and well-known as Galwegians on the streets throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.[86]

The relationship between Whithorn, also known as Candida Casa, and York was thought to have been established in the fifth century under St. Ninian, but it had become moribund before its renewal under Fergus.[87] We can assume that the archbishops of York and those associated with the diocese appreciated the renewed connection, as it supported the historic claim of dominance made by the northern English archdiocese over the Scottish Church. A

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[83] Ruth Evans, 'Body Politics: Engendering Medieval Cycle Drama', in *Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature: The Wife of Bath and All her Sect*, ed. Ruth Evans and Leslie Johnson (Abingdon: Routledge, 1994), 113–14.
[84] Alan MacQuarrie, *Medieval Scotland: Kingship and Nation* (Stroud: Sutton, 2004), 110.
[85] See A. D. M. Barrell, *The Papacy, Scotland and Northern England, 1342–1378* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 184–186; Gordon Donaldson, 'The Bishops and Priors of Whithorn', *Transactions of the Dumfriesshire and Galloway Natural History and Antiquarian Society*, 3rd Series, 27 (1950), 127–54.
[85] Alan MacQuarrie, *Medieval Scotland: Kingship and Nation* (Stroud: Sutton, 2004), 110.
[86] See Oram, 'The Medieval Bishops of Whithorn', 141–42;
[87] Richard Oram, 'The Medieval Bishops of Whithorn, their Cathedral and their Tombs', in *'Clothing for the Soul Divine': Burials at the Tomb of S. Ninian: Excavations at Whithorn Priory, 1957–67*, ed. Christopher Lowe (Edinburgh: Historic Scotland, 2009), 131–44.

thirteenth-century document from York Minster contains a list of the earliest bishops of Whithorn and their submission to the English archbishop, likely drawn up to defend and demonstrate the precedent for the relationship.[88] In the second half of the fourteenth century we also find references to the seat of Candida Casa, St. Ninian, and the historical relationship between Galloway and the Church of York in the *Chronica Metricum Ecclesiae Eboracensis*, written by Johannes de Allhallowgate of Ripon.[89]

Within this context we can discern two divergent narratives of Fergus and the Galwegians which may have affected their reputation in and around the city of York. Following a Cistercian or Augustinian narrative, people may have viewed Fergus and the Galwegians as barbarous and ungodly people, only reformed and turned to God through the admonishment of the Abbot of Rievaulx. This in part reflects the personal and political antipathy which Aelred appears to have borne towards Fergus and the Galwegians in particular, a position which persisted through the influence of Cistercian and Augustinian writing into the sixteenth century.[90] Yet following an understanding of the historical link between the diocese of Whithorn, or Galloway, and York, others may have regarded Fergus and the Galwegians as supportive allies against the threat of the Scots, their bishops well-known in the York diocese.

By the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century it is likely that both of these narratives had converged through the story associated with the *Funeral* pageant: through spiritual reform Fergus and Galloway were brought back to the Christian community, and the community of York more specifically. As memorialised through the performance of the *Funeral*, once-barbarous characters such as Fergus could be reformed through the power of the Virgin Mary to find a place in the godly community evoked by the Corpus Christi Play. Still, this does not allow us to pin down any obvious cause for the violent outbursts which the pageant began to stir up on the streets of York in the years before 1432. If we assume that the *Funeral* was successfully performed before this date, and that it had become controversial only over the course of the last few years of its performance, we may get a clearer picture of why responses to the play were so mixed.

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[88] '*Deo quod episcopi candide case esse debeunt subiecti archiepiscopo eboracensi*': see Joanna Story, 'Concerning the Bishops of Whithorn and Their Subjugation to the Archbishops of York: Some Observations on the Manuscript Evidence and Its Links with Durham', in *Durham Archaeological Journal: Transactions of the Architectural and Archaeological Society of Durham and Northumberland*, 14–15 (1999), 81; R. J. Brentano, 'Whithorn and York', *Scottish Historical Review*, 32 (1953), 144–46.

[89] Johanne de Allhallowgate, 'Chronicon Metricum Ecclesiae Eboracensis', in James Raine, ed., *The Historians of the Church of York and its Archbishops*, Vol. II (London: Longman, 1886), 460–62.

[90] See Richard Oram, *The Lordship of Galloway* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2000), 67; also Oram, *Domination and Lordship*, 102–6.

In his notes on the *Funeral* pageant Beadle suggests that the Scottish name 'Fergus' for the Jewish antagonist might have been intended as an 'ironic or grimly humorous' elision of two enemies, one contemporary and the other universalised. York was often involved in military campaigns against Scottish forces from the early fourteenth century onwards, and from 1419 hostilities became more marked, reflected in the enactment of harsh laws against Scots residents in the city which attempted to limit their access to positions of authority or influence.[91] It has been suggested that wealthier Scots were deterred from settling in northern England during this period due to nationalistic animosity.[92]

Yet in recent work on late medieval immigrants in England, Sarah Rees Jones has pointed out that Scots continued to live and work in the city throughout this period, likely making up c.60–70% of the first-generation immigrant population in 1440 – only eight years after the Mason's complaint.[93] Added to this, people of Scots heritage appear to have prospered in the city across the period, evinced by their becoming freemen – a privilege possibly afforded to only a quarter of householders, a small proportion of the York's total inhabitants.[94] After the 1419 legislature, a response to the Scottish Crown formally allying itself with France, around thirty Scottish residents of the city swore oaths of allegiance before the council, formally supported by fellow English-born craftsmen.

Craft guilds also began to register ordinances outlining their acceptance of Scots workers, and the city in no way excluded working migrants from north of the border.[95] Nationalist hostilities were undoubtedly present, but should not wholly define our understanding of relations in the city.[96] The position of Scots in fifteenth-century York and the surrounding region was complicated, but there is no decisive factor to explain why 'Fergus' might have been less acceptable to audiences from the 1430s.

Yet such a shift in perceptions may have been present in changing attitudes by inhabitants of York to Galloway and the Galwegians. Although the hagiographical narrative of Aelred's trip to Galloway and reform of the region and its ruler was still widely disseminated until the English Reformation, by the second quarter of the fifteenth century the results of this

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[91] Beadle, *York Plays* II, 425; *York Memorandum Book Part II (1388–1493: Lettered A/Y in the Guildhall Muniment Room*, Surtees Society CXXV (Durham: Andrews, 1915), 86.
[92] J.A.F. Thomson, 'Scots in England in the Fifteenth Century', *Scottish Historical Review,* 79, (2000), 1–16, esp. 4–6.
[93] Sarah Rees Jones, 'Scots in the North of England: The First Alien Subsidy, 1440–43', in *Resident Aliens in Later Medieval England* ed. W. Mark Ormrod, Nicola McDonald and Craig Taylor (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017), 56–57.
[94] Ibid., 62; the surnames of at least 14 freemen recorded are associated with Scotland: *Register of the Freemen of the City of York: Vol. 1, 1272–1558,* ed. Francis Collins (Durham: Surtees Society, 1897), 927.
[95] Rees Jones, 'Scots in the North', 51–52.
[96] Ibid., 61–70; resident Scots were assessed for Alien Subsidies in York and the three Ridings 1440–89, and of these 288 were householders; 55 were assessed in York alone: see data visualizations from 'England's Medieval Immigrants Project', managed by the University of York, <www.englandsimmigrants.com> (accessed 10.03.16).

reform were less tangible in York. The last of the bishops of Whithorn to serve in the York archdiocese was Oswald, an unfortunate figure who was elected to his position just before the papal schism of 1378, when a rival pope supported by the Scottish Crown appointed another in his place. Caught on the wrong side of the dispute, Oswald – who had been given his place by the Pope supported by the English monarch – administered entirely within the diocese of York rather than Whithorn itself.

Given the records of his carrying out duties in various parish churches in the city, it is likely that Oswald was known to the local inhabitants at this time.[97] Certainly though, not all spectators of the *Funeral* before the 1432 complaint would have remembered this Galwegian bishop. Records suggest that he was not active in York much after the end of the fourteenth century, and he is last mentioned as the master of a hospital in County Durham in 1418, where he likely died.[98] Following this, the bishops of Whithorn no longer pledged obedience to or acted as suffragens of the Archbishop of York, as by this time Galloway had in the most part been fully absorbed into the rest of Scotland, containing only a few of the vestiges of its notional past as an independent state.[99] By this period the distinction between Galwegians and Scots had largely been lost. A 1430 ordinance by Charles I of Scotland established that Whithorn and its clerics should henceforth be treated like the other Scottish bishoprics, no longer beholden to York. It is perhaps this final separation, or the waning memory of any link between York and Galloway by certain spectators, which had an impact on interpretations of 'Fergus' in the *Funeral.*[100]

The York *Funeral* and Conflicts of Response

As a cause for the controversy reported in the Mason's complaint, we might consider a clash of perceptions between the members of the pageant's audiences who remembered that the story of the performance told of York's ancient association with the reform of Galloway, and others who saw 'Fergus' only as a representative of the antagonistic Scottish enemy. It is the conflict of these responses which we can read as the 'quarrels, disagreements, and fights' of the 1432 complaint. For those who understood Fergus as a Jewish enemy aligned with a formerly wild Galwegian

[97] For evidence of his duties in York see David Michael Smith, *A Catalogue of the Register of Richard Waldby, Archbishop of York 1397* (York: Borthwick Institute of Historical Research, 1974), ii, 10–12 and 37–43; R. N. Swanson, *A Calendar of the Register of Richard Scrope, Archbishop of York, 1398–1405* (York: Borthwick Institute of Historical Research, 1981), v–vi.
[98] *VCH: Durham*, II, ed. William Page (London: Constable, 1907), 123.
[99] See MacQueen, 'The Laws of Galloway', 131–43. Oram, 'The Medieval Bishops of Whithorn, Their Cathedral and Their Tombs', 131–44.
[100] See Donaldson, 'The Bishops and Priors of Whithorn', 134.

figure, his conversion to Christianity might easily be celebrated in the city: especially those who remembered the story of Aelred's conversion of the people of Galloway. This had led to centuries of a close-formed relationship between the Diocese of Galloway and the Archdiocese of York, only to end in real terms in the early fifteenth century. Yet if certain members of the audience no longer appreciated the ancient distinction between Galloway and Scotland, and considered 'Fergus' to be a Scot, the acceptance and embrace of such an initially antagonistic contemporary military enemy into the York community provides us with an ample cause for the controversies which the performance began to raise.

The disorder roused by the *Funeral*, noted in the Mason's complaint, probably represents a shift in audience perception where a single interpretation of the performance began to be challenged by spectators with new ways of understanding. Thus, the conflict can be read as a form of intertextual 'intrusion', reflecting contemporary developments beyond the dramatic work itself.[101] The conversion and acceptance of the barbarous Fergus into York's community was no longer firmly tied to the formerly-held association between Galloway and the city. The antagonist central to the pageant was no longer interpreted solely as a representation of a barbarous historic foe, turned into a valuable ally of York through the power of Christian devotion, mediated through Aelred and the Virgin Mary. By the 1430s the meaning embodied in the character had become contested.

Individual spectators brought with them their own experiences, perceptions, interests and values to performances, and it is the meeting of these individualized spectators which the Masons' complaint signifies. It is notable that these differences appear not to be defined alongside clearly delineated demographic lines: the violent and contesting responses 'used to arise amongst the people', referring to a general group of spectators, rather than one defined by nationality, association, or age. Here an audience has been transformed into a mass of individuals, refusing to co-operate or become absorbed into the world of the play. Accounts of the *Funeral* demonstrate the importance of consensus in interpretation amongst spectators, and the potential for disagreement to result in a situation where the meaning of the performance as a communal act is wholly undermined.

Although it provides the only record of laughter in response to a play of the York Cycle, the *Funeral* emphasizes the sense in which this was not always desirable. Elements of the pageants were likely intended to rouse laughter, given the slapstick potential of the performance, and the comic nature of the antagonistic 'Fergus' and his companions, but here it is

[101] See Pettitt, 'Performing Intrusions', 53.

uncontrolled; the dialogic response driven by the incongruity of the Burial narrative and the local story history became less distinct or sharply delineated, resulting in a contestation of meaning. Laughter held the power to undermine performances, as much as to reinforce consensus within them, or even achieve something in-between. Humour could be wielded to negotiate audience response, and drive it in thoughtful directions. But when pageants failed in this, performances could lead to 'more noise and laughter than devotion'.

Chapter 2

'Overeflowen with floode':

Marital Practice and the Noah Plays

The biblical narrative of Noah and the Great Flood was widely performed in the late medieval period across north-east England: York had a Noah play, as did Hull, Newcastle, Pontefract, and other towns in the region.[1] Although scripts do not survive for most of these performances, those that do are ripe with humour, characterised by both verbal wit and physical comedy. It's likely that these plays were popular not only because they recount an imaginatively exciting story of mass death and rebirth, but because they do so through the prism of marriage. The relationship of Noah and his wife, 'Uxor' in the plays, is only briefly mentioned in Genesis, but consistently outlined in medieval Gnostic, Qur'anic, and apocryphal Christian sources.[2] In a story familiar to modern readers Noah is called on by God, as the last righteous man on Earth, to build the Ark, preserving his family and a number of each of the earth's animals within it whilst the world floods. Yet in various medieval traditions, for a variety of given reasons, Uxor, Noah's otherwise unnamed wife (in English drama, at least) resists her husband's orders, and God's will.[3] She refuses to board the Ark, and in the plays of York, Towneley, Chester, and elsewhere, this intransigence becomes a battle of wills between husband and wife.

This section will focus largely on the York *Building of Noah's Ark* and *The Flood,* and the Towneley *Noah*: play-texts recorded within a close regional proximity of each other, yet significantly divergent in their portrayal of Noah and Uxor's relationship.[4] In comments on the humorous nature of the plays, scholars have generally focused on the portrayal of Uxor in the marital disputes at the heart of these performances. Kolve famously characterised her as the 'root-form of the shrewish wife' and called the couple 'the archetype of everyday marital

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[1] Diana Wyatt, 'Arks, Crafts and Authorities: Textual and Contextual Evidence for North-Eastern English Noah Plays', in *The Yearbook of English Studies,* 43 (2013), 48–68.

[2] See Alfred David, 'Noah's Wife's Flood', *The Performance of Middle English Culture: Essays on Chaucer and the Drama in Honor of Martin Stevens* ed. James J. Paxton, Laurence M. Clopper and Sylvia Tomasch (Cambridge: Brewer, 1998), 99–101; also V.A. Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative*: *The First Five Canterbury Tales* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984), 198–211.

[3] Noah's wife is named in other works: see Francis Lee Utley, 'One Hundred and Three Names of Noah's Wife', *Speculum* 16:4 (1941), 426–52.

[4] Whilst the Newcastle 'Shipwrights Dirge' does provide a scripted Noah play of supposedly medieval origins, due to the ambiguous nature of the text – stylistically a product of late alterations, and surviving only in a late eighteenth-century antiquarian copy – this study will consider it only briefly. See John Anderson, and A.C. Cawley, 'The Newcastle play of Noah's Ark', REED Newsletter 2:1 (1977): 11–17; also Norman Davis, ed., *Non-Cycle Plays and Fragments*, EETS Supplementary Text 1 (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), xl–xliii, 19–31.

infelicity'.[5] Although written over five decades ago, this assessment of Uxor as the stereotypical unruly woman, rooted in fabliaux tradition and defined against Noah as the idealised patriarch, still defines any approach to the diluvian relationship. Furthermore, the disputes of Noah and Uxor have been read typologically, with Noah as Christ, the Ark as the Church, and Uxor as a hardened sinner, reluctant to repent.[6] In a recent overview of the York *Flood*, Richard Beadle echoes this persistent treatment, stating that Uxor represents the 'hardened sinner' initially refusing to repent, set in stark contrast against 'the patience and meekness of Noah'.[7]

Attempts have been made to re-calibrate interpretations of Uxor, and to argue that she could have represented more than a caricatured virago: she expresses concerns which would have been considered pertinent to contemporary audiences.[8] Sympathetic to this approach, my study of humour in the plays proposes that comic aspects of the piece are drawn from the comic characterisation of both Noah and Uxor, rather than from a grotesque portrayal of Uxor alone. As Alfred David queried over two decades ago: 'When they laughed at these scenes, did medieval audiences truly sympathize *only* with sely Noah, and regard his wife's behaviour as a reprehensible subversion of the divinely ordained hierarchy in this best of all possible created worlds?'.[9] As her dependent appellation already suggests, Uxor's characterisation is bound to that of her husband. It is the discursive nature of their relationship, expressed in comic terms, which allows us to gain meaning from the play-texts.

First I consider how the humorous relationship between Uxor and Noah is portrayed as a means to explore the ideas of correct marital practice. Uxor's intransigence may have been more sympathetic to audiences than has previously been assumed, as others have suggested. Here the comic sparring of Noah and his wife is considered as a response to or reworking of certain discourses expressed in contemporary conduct literature. Then, turning my attention to Noah, I problematise the scholarly convention that the character represented a staunchly moral and righteous man, against whom many modern critics continue to define his wife. Using a range of contemporary literary and visual sources, I argue that the humour of the performances plays on less savoury aspects of Noah's character. Finally I explore the plays' comic treatment of marriage within a broader social and devotional context. The Noah plays brought to life a cataclysmic

[5] Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi*, 146.
[6] Kusue Kurakawa, 'Noah's Wife as a Virago: A Folkloric Figure in English Mystery Plays', *The Profane Arts of the Middle Ages,* 5 (1996), 221; see J.P. Lewis, *A Study of the Interpretation of Noah and the Flood in Jewish and Christian Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1968).
[7] Beadle, *York Plays,* vol. II, 52.
[8] See for example Ruth Evans, 'Feminist Re-Enactments: Gender and the Towneley Uxor Noe', in *A Wyf Ther Was: Essays in Honour of Paule Mertens*-Fonck, ed. Juliete Dor (*Liège*: *Liège* Language and Literature, 1992), 141–54; Jane Tolmie, 'Mrs Noah and Didactic Abuses', *Early Theatre,* 5:1 (2002), 11–35.
[9] David, 'Noah's Wife's Flood', 99.

event, the devastation of human civilisation as well as its rebirth. Uxor and Noah's relationship was central to performances, and through humour, expressed certain anxieties over the Great Flood.

Section 2.1
Noah, Uxor, and Marital Paradigms

Marriage is unequivocally a central concern in both the York and Towneley Noah plays, and it is presented comically. More than an aesthetic choice, this use of humour in many ways defined the plays. The humour in these plays has been largely taken for granted. Yet in light of the biblical narrative – or even the apocryphal one, where Uxor is indeed sometimes a recalcitrant wife – we must confront the fact that comic aspects of the performances were a dramatic choice, not an inevitability. There is nothing inherently humorous about the story of Noah and the Ark, or even of the narrative of his wife's initial refusal to board it. Given that the episode brings together the heady themes of near-universal sin, environmental tragedy and the righteous renewal and redemption of the Earth, we must ask why so many performances of the narrative were comic, and why exactly the marriage of Noah and Uxor is so often at their forefront.

The comic aspects of Noah and Uxor's relationship were a means to talk about marital conduct in the plays. Through their humour, the play-texts pose a number of questions to audiences. How should a good wife, or a good husband, act? How do the values of the characters contrast or assimilate to our own? How might we react in a similar situation to news of the Flood? York and Towneley – surviving from alternate periods of time and locations, and thus reflecting different social contexts – deal with these questions in their own way. Marriage – and particularly the humour of discord within marital relationships – is used as a way to think about a biblical story marking new beginnings; the underlying, fundamental question is how a married couple (following Adam and Eve) should act as the productive unit who will form a new – and less sinful – society.

In this period the idealised urban man was a husband, and the woman was a wife, and this marital relationship was also celebrated in devotional terms: marriage was the cornerstone of urban life. Where once religious ideals of personal sanctity had been rooted in celibacy and dedication to God through exclusive religious vows, by the late medieval period – influenced by the explosive growth of an increasingly wealthy 'middling sort', in towns and cities especially – marriage had become a virtuous institution of the laity, rather than one which was merely

tolerated.[10] Despite this (or perhaps because of it) worries over the power relationship within marital couples were also frequently apparent. Fabliaux literature regularly expressed anxieties to this end, regularly pitching the authority of husbands against the agency of wives – a tradition many critics have identified as being reflected (or refracted) in the Noah plays.[11] Attempts to regulate marital relations are prominent features of other texts of the period, and we see elements of this discourse in the plays. Considering the performed relationship of Noah and Uxor, a dynamic emerges which reflects the complex dynamic of autonomy and authority rooted in the realities of economic roles borne by husbands and wives. A strictly patriarchal model of relations, which we might otherwise assume was paradigmatic, is challenged in the plays.

Models of Marriage

After some initial words by Noah, the Towneley *Noah* leads into a speech by God, where the deity informs the audience of the parameters of his proposed ark-building project. Importantly, God's speech makes it clear that he regards both husband and wife as righteous figures, worthy of survival:

> God: Therefore shall I fordo / All this medillerd
> With floodis that shall flo / & ryn with hidous rerd
> Sayf noe and his wife…
> Ffor that wold neuer stryfe
> With me [ne] me offend.
> (Towneley *Noah,* ll. 144–46, 154–55)

The pairing of 'noe and his wife' may seem perfectly conventional in this speech, yet a brief comparison to the York *Building of the Noah's Ark* suggests otherwise. Here God fails to mention Uxor in his opening monologue, referring to the salvation of 'Noe alon', followed by 'his sones' and 'there wyffes' as an afterthought (York *Building,* ll. 29–32). The implicit hierarchy here is consciously patriarchal: Noah is defined as God's servant, the master of sons who will beget

[10] See for example Glenn Burger, *Chaucer's Queer Nation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 44; P.H. Cullum and Jeremy Goldberg, 'How Margaret Blackburn Taught Her Daughters: Reading Devotional Instruction in a Book of Hours', in *Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts in Late Medieval Britain: Essays for Felicity Riddy,* ed. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000), 230–36; Kathleen Ashley and Pamela Sheingorn, 'Introduction', in *Interpreting Cultural Symbols: Saint Anne in Late Medieval* Society, ed. Kathleen Ashley and Pamela Sheingorn (London: University of Georgia Press, 1990). 50–51.
[11] See Rosemary Woolf, *The English Mystery* Plays (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 136–45; Katie Normington, *Gender and Medieval Drama* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2004), 121–22.

more male offspring through their young wives. Uxor is mentioned only in a later passage, where God first tells Noah that 'diverse beestis' and 'fewles' must share the ark with him (York *Building* ll. 124, 125), before his 'wyffe' is mentioned, at line 132; in York, Uxor appears to be an afterthought.

The play-script of the Towneley *Noah* is the only one to present the marital relationship as ordained by God. In this play, the deity's assertion that Noah and his wife 'wold neuer stryfe / With me [ne] me offend' has clear comic potential: an audience who had seen or heard of the play before would know of the marital 'stryfe' to come. Yet their relationship is still legitimised by God's words, which ultimately foreshadow the harmony husband and wife reach at the play's end. Within the Towneley *Noah* the marriage of Noah and Uxor, and their integral position within the biblical history of humanity, clearly evokes this lay ideology of marital devotion. The play is usually identified as a showcase of the archetypal 'infelicitous' marriage, rousing laughter, rather than earnest attentions. Yet it does, I argue, still endeavour to validate and promote the importance of this marital structure.

Kathleen Ashley has argued that early drama could offer behavioural education to its audiences, as part of the pedagogical nature of the plays. She argues that the characteristic behaviour of female protagonists in similar biblical plays is informed directly by contemporary didactic works such as the popular *Book of the Knight of the Tower,* educating audience members to the 'most proper social behaviours'. Biblical drama distorted exegetical traditions beyond recognition in order to achieve this, and fulfil dramatizations sympathetic to specifically lay, 'bourgeois values'.[12] Although portraying a quarrelsome couple, we may regard the Noah plays too as functioning in a way similar to contemporary conduct literature, made up of courtesy texts which increasingly featured what Felicity Riddy has referred to as an 'idealised bourgeois ethos'.[13]

The characteristics of contemporary conduct literature – usually featuring exemplary figures valued for their virtue – first seem to be at odds with the portrayals of the warring Uxor and Noah; yet the plays still functioned as means to educate audiences in proper social behaviour, through the comic presentation of how *not* to act. In in raising laughter at their misdoings, the characters work with their spectators to mould clear ideas of normative and socially proper marriage relations. And through the laughter raised at the couple's fights, both verbal and physical, spectators could define their own ideas of good marital practice, within the shared social space of performance.

[12] Ashley, 'Medieval Courtesy Literature and Dramatic Mirrors of Female Conduct', 25–28, 32.
[13] Felicity Riddy, 'Mother Knows Best: Reading Social Change in a Courtesy Text', *Speculum* 7:1 (1996), 66–86.

The Shrewish Wife and the Righteous Patriarch?

God's initial comment in the Towneley *Noah* (pregnant with dramatic irony) that 'noe and his wife…wold neuer stryfe' sets up an ideal of marriage, which Noah immediately questions through his response to the deity:

> Noah: Lord, homeward will I hast
> As fast as that I may.
> My [wife] will I frast
> What she will say,
> And I am agast
> That we get some fray
> Betwixt us both.
> (ll. 263–69)

Breaking away from God's company, Noah speeds home 'agast' at the thought of telling his wife the news – he cannot comprehend her response and fears the 'fray' that might result. It is unclear in the latter end of this dialogue whether Noah shares these anxieties with God or just in the form of an aside to the audience; either way, it is comic that his fear of God is at least matched by the fear of his wife's opinion of the matter.

Noah's listing of his wife's fearsome characteristics – 'full tethee', 'oft angre' and 'wroth' (ll. 270–74) – is presented as an aside to the audience which is comically juxtaposed with his sweetly call to Uxor in the following line, 'God spede, dere wife / how fayre ye?' (l. 275). Uxor's response is equally comic as Noah's anxieties are realised, and any pretence of civility is swept aside. She resumes what is clearly an ongoing list of complaints, criticising Noah for his long absence, his family's hunger, and his lugubrious character, 'alway adred' and 'euer of sorow' (ll. 291, 298). This initial portrayal of Noah and Uxor's relationship seems to support a two-dimensional reading of both characters, the former a hen-pecked husband and the latter a shrewish wife. Yet the ensuing discourse between the characters can inform a different and more nuanced reading.

Uxor's complaints move from the bemoaning of all husbands and their treatment of their wives – a direct address to the women in the audience – to a complaint over her everyday worries in Noah's household. She bewails her position as one of anxiety and grief, having to follow her husband's commands and way of life, often at her own expense.

Uxor: If he teyn I must tary
How so euer it standis,
With seymland full sory,
Wryngand both my handis
Ffor drede.
(ll. 304–308.)

Noah's initial fear is over a 'fray' between him and his wife, his words characteristic of the inverted patriarchy which we might expect of the fabliaux tradition. Yet Uxor does not just scream and shout in response: her words voice reciprocal anxieties to his, which are fleshed out in the performance. Although it has no obvious root in scripture, the couple both attest to their own poverty, Uxor complaining of their 'veray skant' existence, and Noah agreeing that they are 'hard sted' (ll. 1286–87). This powerlessness justifies, to some extent, Uxor's complaining. As McSheffrey notes, within an ideal urban marriage in this period, the husband held authority over his wife, but was also responsible for the prosperity of the household.[14] Uxor's complaints – over their poverty, and Noah's absence – resonate with anxieties over a husband's mismanagement of the household, just as his words speak of a man harassed and harried by an unruly wife.

The solution which Uxor poses to her problems is to charm her husband: with 'gam & with gyle' and her 'smyte and smyle' she can work to get what she wants (ll. 310–11). This triggers a violent response from her husband, who bellows: 'We! Hold thi tong ram-skyt / or I shall the still' (ll. 313–14). Noah's explosively angry response to Uxor's words, and the ensuing sharp-tongued argument between them, suggests that the patriarch fears losing control. Uxor's recourse to 'gam and gyle' in fact reflects the contemporary advice of some churchmen on a woman's role in marriage, who suggested that a wifely influence on her husband's affairs was necessary to regulate his good social conduct.[15] Although women were expected to respect the authority of their husbands, they were also deemed to be a benevolent influence on the potential pitfalls of masculine sensibilities.

To refer to her 'gam and gyle' may in some ways suggest the deviousness and illicit power Uxor claims in her marriage, but also references the idea of female cunning – working within the parameters of formal patriarchal authority to gain wifely power. Uxor's use of these methods may not have aroused surprise in the audiences as much as they did in Noah – especially as in his

[14] Shannon McSheffrey, *Marriage, Sex and Civic Culture in Late Medieval London* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 138–40.
[15] Sara M. Butler, *The Language of Abuse: Marital Violence in Late Medieval England* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 34–6.

opening speech the patriarch described himself as '[…] old, / Seke, sory and cold, / As muk apon mold' (ll. 88–90): hardly features characteristic of an ideal urban husband. Although Uxor is presumptuous, Noah is also far from the epitome of the ideal patriarch: both characters learn about marriage within the play. Calling her 'ram-skyt' ('ram shit'), and threatening to 'still' her, appears to be an excessively violent and offensive gesture, and within the performance this explosion was probably played for comic effect, founded on Noah's mood-swings from fearful to raging husband. The overall effect of this passage is to suggest that neither figure here holds control over themselves or the other, as the ensuing disputes demonstrate.

The Towneley *Noah* contains two scenes of major conflict between Uxor and her husband, the first beginning around line 313 with Noah's shout 'Hold thi tong', and fizzling out around line 339 as he decides to 'kepe charyte' in order to get on with building the ark. The second begins around line 353 when Uxor criticises and refuses to board the ark, and ends only when both are exhausted and face the remonstration of their sons – a filial intervention unique to this play (l. 416). Thus almost a fifth of the play's dialogue – roughly 110 out of 558 lines – is taken up purely with marital conflict.

Within this conflict it is interesting dramatically that such a domestic argument, supposedly occurring within a private kin-based environment, is acted out with both figures actively calling for the support of members of the audience. The first example of this occurs early in Uxor's initial complaints against Noah, just before the first conflict scene, when she speaks of her marital regret:

> Uxor: We women may wary / all ill husbandis;
> I haue oone, bi Mary! / that lowsyd me of my bandis
> (ll. 300–303)

It is unclear whether Uxor's lament is posed to the whole of the audience or just its women – though she certainly establishes that her suffering is caused by her gendered position in society. (This also has great potential for comic effect if we consider that Uxor was probably played by a man in female costume, drawing attention to the transgression of gender already.) The use of 'We' here establishes the female spectators of the performance as a distinct group, regardless of their class or vocational differences, whilst her decrying of 'all ill husbandis' similarly reflects an attempt to polarise the audience into male and female groups.

In her speech to the audience, Uxor pulls audience members into the domestic argument being performed. Expressing themselves as players in a performative conduct text, both the

patriarch and his wife interact with members of the audience, asking them to consider or reconsider their views on proper behaviour. If Noah is failing to fulfil his duties as a husband, as their poverty and his long absence suggests, Uxor's arguments would be justified, and potentially familiar, to at least some spectators. We see this again in the second section of argumentative dialogue in the play, when after expressing her desire for a 'wedows coyll', Uxor launches a direct call to wives present in the audience:

Uxor: […] I se on this sole
Of wifis that ar here,
Ffor the life that thay leyd,
Wold thare husbandis were dede,
Ffor, as euer ete I brede,
So wold I oure syre were.
(ll. 567–72)

Uxor's declarations to the 'wifis' of the audience are bold, concerning the death of her own husband and the suggestion that all wives desire the same, to improve 'the life that thay leyd'. This ranting speech was clearly played as comically desperate hyperbole, only emphasised by the odd rhyme of 'dede' with the mock oath 'Ffor as euer ete I brede'. Yet again here the humour of this marital misconduct reflects the concerns of at least some spectators; if Noah cannot govern the household, Uxor's attitude may be understandable, and the idea of the wealthy widow, emancipated from husbandly control, certainly had a relevance contemporary in urban society.[16]

In this speech Uxor clearly offers a negative image of marital relations, as does Noah in his address to the audience that directly follows his wife's. Equally as riled, Noah offers a reciprocal warning to all husbands:

Noah: Yee men that has wifis / whyls they ar yong,
If ye luf youre lifis / chastice thare tonge:
Me thynk me hert ryfis / both levyr and long,
To se sich stryfis / wedmen among;
(ll. 573–80).

[16] Barbara A. Hanawalt, *The Wealth of Wives: Women, Law and Economy in Late Medieval London* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 104–106; of course, the 'liberating' nature of widowhood was not a widespread reality: see P. J. P. Goldberg trans. and ed., *Women in England c.1275–1525: Documentary Sources* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 19–20.

Although Noah's words seem more reasonable here, avoiding the suggestion that he wishes his wife dead, his speech is a mirror to Uxor's.

In calling for husbands to chastise their wives 'whyls they ar yong', Noah still avoids addressing his complicity in the marital disharmony which the audience is experiencing. The prefatory warning 'if ye luf youre lifis' directly addresses Uxor's wish to see him dead, making his suggestions all the more comic. Calling on husbands or 'wedmen' within the audience, his words at first appear to validate dominant perceptions of how husbands treated wives in the late medieval period. Yet the ironic sense in which these complaints mirror those expressed by his wife undermines this idea. Both Noah and Uxor appeal to the audience: their expressions and exhortations are equally comic, neither holding an objective position of moral superiority in contemporary marital terms.

If we consider Noah's actions and words as we do Uxor's – as exemplary behaviour in reverse – we may understand the play as a more nuanced depiction of marital disharmony. This is supported by two contemporary examples of conduct literature, *How the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter* and *How the Wise Man Taught His Son,* works with a widespread circulation in this period.[17] Riddy and Dronzek suggest that both works were designed to appeal to an urban, secular and 'middle-class' audience: almost exactly the demographic who were producing Noah plays.[18]

Usually considered as poems for the education of children or adolescents, it is useful to note the form of the idealised 'husband' or 'wife' in either text, as these may be read as bourgeois marital exemplars against the presentation of Noah and Uxor. Predictably, *How the Good Wife* focusses on the virtues of mildness, domesticity and the sexual honour, and *How the Wise Man* looks to business, money and social reputation, yet both share a concern with proper devotion and – importantly – how to treat a spouse and achieve marital harmony.[19]

The poem *How the Good Wife* tells women to love their husbands 'aboven all thinge' and answer his anger and wroth only with meekness. Uxor in the Towneley *Noah* seems to

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[17] See Tauno F. Mustanoja, ed. *How the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter; The Good Wyfe Wold a Pylgrimage; The Thewis of Good Women* (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1948). Although the writers of both texts have been given a tentative Midlands provenance, Mustanoja notes the existence of a very similar text written in Lowland Scots dialect, and even the possibility that *How the Goodwife* was written as far North as Lincoln or Huddersfield.

[18] Anna Dronzek, 'Gendered Theories of Education in Fifteenth Century Conduct Books', in *Medieval Conduct*, ed. Kathleen M. Ashley and Robert C. Clarke (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Minnesota Press, 2001), 137; Riddy, 'Mother Knows Best', 67.

[19] 'How the Wise Man Taught His Son' and 'How the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter', in *Codex Ashmole 61: A Compilation of Popular Middle English Verse,* ed. George Shuffleton (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2008), accessed 01.02.15, <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/shuffelton-codex-ashmole-61.>. Henceforth the texts will be abbreviated as *How the Wise Man* and *How the Good Wife*.

consciously enrage her husband, making him turn from fearful passivity to 'ram-skyt' wrathfulness. Her actions seem to directly conflict the Good Wife's admonishment:

> Fayre wordys wreth do slake;
> Fayre wordys wreth schall never make;
> Ne fayre wordys brake never bone,
> Ne never schall in no wone.
> (*How the Good Wife Taught her Daughter*, ll. 41–44)

If we look only to this source, it would seem likely that Uxor's foul tongue was regarded as a primary reason for marital discord in the Noah household, the line 'brake never a bone' working nicely alongside her own threat to 'breke' her husband's head (l. 559). Uxor's comic threats eschew specific warnings made in *How the Good Wife*, yet if we understand her as an example of how not to act, the performance actually works to reinforce the same message, valuing 'fayre wordys' in marriage over such sharp criticisms.

Ruth Evans has argued that Uxor is portrayed as a comic figure whose 'disobedience and garrulity affirmed the need for men to control rebellious women, and for women to control themselves'.[20] Yet in the Towneley *Noah* we can also understand a similar message being posed to husbands, about the need to express authority over their wives, but also self-regulation. Riddy has argued that texts such as *Good Wife* were written by male clerics to promulgate social norms of female passivity and male control, yet similar texts concerning the characteristics of good men often appear anthologised in the same manuscripts.[21] When considering the comic arguments within the play, and their association with social practice, scholars of the diluvian marriage seem to ignore the idea that Noah may be equally complicit in this marital disharmony.[22]

How the Wise Man Taught His Son offers a fruitful range of similarities to the *How the Good Wife*. In both conduct texts it is assumed the bad husband (rather than the wife) was more likely to be a physical aggressor, both offer broadly similar advice in treating a spouse. The Wise Man teaches that a husband should chastise his wife only with 'love and awe', and use 'feyre wordys' (ll. 41–2) rather than violence to handle her wrongs, just as in *How the Good Wife*, promoting the idea of passive authority. Especially pertinent to the Towneley *Noah*, *How the Wise Man* also gives advice on the treatment of wives in the context of a broader community, and their judgement of the marriage beyond the domestic setting:

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[20] Ruth Evans, 'Feminist Re-Enactments: Gender and the Towneley *Uxor Noe*', 147.
[21] Riddy, 'Mother Knows Best', 71; See Dronzek, 'Gendered Theories', 139.
[22] See for example Butler, *The Language of Abuse,* 50–65.

Sone, thi wife though schall not chide,
Ne caule her by no vylons name;
For sche that schall ly by thy syde,
To calle hyr wykyd, it is thy schame.
When thou schall thy wife defame,
Welle may another man do so;
(*How the Wise Man Taught His Son*, ll. 41–500.)

Noah's words, like those of his wife, are directly at odds with the conduct text – he shouts and threatens just as Uxor does, 'ram-skyt' certainly fulfilling the criteria for a 'vylons name'. The suggestion that defaming a wife exposes her to public censure is brought to the fore in this context; their marital dispute is literally performed before an audience of their social peers, the domestic squabble transformed into a spectator sport. Noah fails to control his wife by peaceful means; moreover, he also shows that he cannot control himself. In this sense the patriarchal character shows exactly what a wise husband is not to do, putting him on par with his Uxor in terms of bad conduct.

It is clear that both marital players act in a way which was considered socially improper, their bad behaviour exaggerated and made farcical through performance. As Josie Campbell has pointed out, the ultimate outcome of the Towneley *Noah* is not that one character gains mastery over the other, but rather that they both reach an acceptable level of parity. After all of their comic fighting, resolution arrives when the couple begin to work together in companionate reciprocity.[23] The Towneley *Noah* is akin to a conduct text, allowing spectators to engage – through humour – with the tensions and conflicts of marital relationships. Whilst these arguments are comic, the couple's reconciliation foreshadows the Flood: the play both prompted audiences to consider what defined acceptable social behaviour within marriage, and reasserted the devotional harmony of the marital relationship.

The boundaries of socially-acceptable marital practice evinced through this dramatic work are inherently more flexible than those provided in the courtesy texts or exemplary dramatic models which Ashley considers in her study. Unlike *How the Good Wife* or *How the Wise Man*, the Towneley play of *Noah* offers a medium though which advice on good conduct could be offered through humour rather than straightforward didacticism. Furthermore, contemporary standards of good marital conduct – constructed to project and serve specifically urban, bourgeois values –

[23] Josie P. Campbell, 'The Idea of Order in the Wakefield Noah', *The Chaucer Review,* 10:1 (1975), 76–86.

could thus be defined through devotional means. Rather than an idealised marriage, the Towneley *Noah* defines good conjugal practice against the performance of models of bad behaviour. Spectators laughing together at the relationship of Noah and Uxor both actively shaped, and collectively informed, a conception of the practice of good marital relations.

Marital Strife and Contextual Difference

Although usually regarded as highly similar dramatic narratives, the treatment of the marital relationship in the York Noah plays differs substantially from that portrayed in Towneley. In the first of the York performances, the Shipwrights' *Building of Noah's Ark*, Uxor is not represented in character at all – this pageant is instead played as a two-hander between the patriarch and God Himself, instructing 'Noe alon' in the shipbuilding craft (l. 29). This identification of Noah as an individual, chosen by God, is stressed throughout the play and drives the narrative. As has been noted, God does not include Uxor in the opening speech which sets out a divine plan for the humanity's salvation, despite his early mention of Noah's sons and daughters-in-law. The deity only informs Noah of the inclusion of 'Thy wyffe' at line 132, to be brought on to the ark after the 'dyverse beestis' have boarded (l. 124).

In neither the York *Building* nor *The Flood* does the biblical patriarch show any anxiety or concern over his wife's possible response to the divine scheme. Indeed, the York patriarch hardly seems concerned with his wife at all. In both sets of play-scripts, the opening lines set the scene of Genesis so far, yet their language is interestingly divergent. Whilst Towneley's Noah informs the audience simply that the 'gracyous lord / to his liknes maide man' and 'eue that woman' (ll. 40, 45), in the York *Building* God gives the initial speech, and stresses the godly importance of husband and wife:

God: And to my liknes made I man,
Lord and syre on ilke a side
Of all medillerthe I made hym than.
A woman also with hym wroght I,
All in lawe to lede ther lyffe
(ll. 6–10).

This passage reinforces the devotional legitimacy of marriage as a godly institution, as in Towneley, but here the line 'in lawe to lede ther lyffe' evokes the idea of the marital relationship as a legal contract as much as a personal bond, designed by God with a perfect world in mind.

Here, whilst 'man' is given the rank of 'Lord and syre', 'woman' appears almost as an afterthought, 'also with hym wroght', suggesting a clearly demarcated hierarchy of male pre-eminence. Confusingly however, only a few lines later God semantically aligns the crimes of mankind with marital failure:

> God: …synne is now reynand so ryffe,
> That me repentys and rewys forthi
> That ever I made outhir man or wiffe
> (ll. 14–16).

Although it may be argued that the words 'wiffe' and 'woman' were interchangeable in this period, the word choice – and the stress of 'wiffe' as the last rhymed word of the stanza – is a conscious reference to the marital relationship. Yet if marriage holds such a prominent position at the centre of this opening speech, the absence of Uxor in this pageant seems odd, especially when Noah's sons 'with there wyffes' are prominently placed (ll. 31–2).

No speaking parts are afforded to Noah's children within the *Building*, yet their inclusion is implicit from the start of *The Flood*. After a lengthy preamble on his domestic authority, as well as his lineage and Godly legitimacy, Noah finally gives way to his son:

> Noe: My seemly sonnes and doughteres dere,
> Takis ye entent unto my skylle.
> I Filius: Fader, we are all redy here
> Youre biddyng baynly to fulfille
> (ll. 45–8.)

Demonstrating obedience and due deference, the first son's statement 'we are all redy' implies that he and his siblings are fully prepared for the oncoming deluge. We may infer that Noah's family have already played a role in helping build the vessel under his direction, possibly

constructing the physical form of the ark in the former pageant. If this is the case, of the 'eight bodies' to be saved, as mentioned in the *Building*, only Uxor is missing from the picture (l. 134).[24]

The physical absence of Uxor builds dramatic tension in the York narrative, making her first exclamation in line fifty-seven of the second pageant *The Flood*, 'What sais though, sone?' all the more expressive. If we are to imagine that Uxor was hidden from the stage until this point, or even milling amongst the audience on the street, the impact of her entrance would have been considerable – especially if spectators were eagerly awaiting her presence in anticipation of the comic arguments to follow: her initial absence may thus have paradoxically worked to draw the audience's attention.

When she does assume her position before the audience, the York Uxor does portray some of the same characteristics as her Towneley counter-part, angrily questioning Noah's professed authority. At the beginning of *The Flood* Noah reminds the audience of his mission from God, as well as his command over 'thre seemly sonnes' and 'worthy wife', ever at his 'steven to stande' (ll. 5–6). Uxor's subsequent line, 'What sais thou, sone?', provides the first moment of discord in the play, foreshadowing her opposition to entering the ark (l. 56). In this pageant, the primary reason for Uxor's refusal to enter the ark is her lack of understanding. Unaware of the impending flood, Uxor repeatedly refers to her husband as mentally unstable, referring to his 'toure deraye' (deranged plan), then claiming that he 'fonnes full faste' and is 'nere woode' (ll. 78, 89, 91). Only at line 118 does Noah explain that his actions are motivated by 'Goddis wille', and not just his own fear of the rain.

After a flurry of reproof, Uxor's moment of resignation in *The Flood* comes around lines 141–44 as she realises the consequences of the oncoming deluge, mourning her 'commodrys' and 'cosynes' who will be lost to the waters. Rather than the continued spirited resistance which Uxor performs in the Towneley *Noah*, in York the character expresses sorrow in sharp contrast to her previous high temper.

Uxor: Allas, my lyff me is full lath
I lyffe overlange this lare to lere
[…] My frendis that I fra yoode
Are overeflowen with floode.
(ll. 147–48, 151–52)

[24] See Mike Tyler, 'Group Dynamics: The Noah Family in the York Pageant of The Flood', in *The York Mystery Plays: Performance in the City* (Woodbridge: York Medieval Press, 2011), 85–6.

Her spirit appears broken, with claims that she has lived too long to hear this news: the word 'lyff' is repeated to stress the loss surrounding her. Her alliterative outpouring in 'frendis', 'overflowen' and 'floode' carries a simple yearning for those now lost, evoking the flowing of the waters. As in earlier lines of the play, here Uxor's words work in opposition to the rest of the characters in the ark, yet not merely from a general expression of intransigence. Whilst everyone else strives forward in productivity, she can only think of those they are leaving behind. From this point in the pageant Uxor all but disappears from the narrative, seemingly silenced.

Unlike in Towneley, where Noah's wife appears to adapt to life on the ark and actively aids her husband, in *The Flood* Uxor's voice remains dissonant, becoming detached and almost obsolete. The audience waits around fifty lines before her voice is heard again, sandwiched between Noah's words:

Noe:	I sall assaye the see
	How depe that it is here.
Uxor:	Loved be that Lord that giffes all grace
	Tha kyndly thus oure care wolde kele
Noe:	I sall caste leede and loke the space
	How depe the water is ilke a dele.
	(ll.195–200)

In this fragment Noah's words, focused on the practicalities of the flood and measuring the depth of the water, contrast starkly with Uxor's prayer; the orthodoxy and devotion of her speech appear to demonstrate a reformed woman, who has gained knowledge of God's will. Mike Tyler argues that Uxor has, by this point, reached harmony with the rest of her family, and acceptance of God's plans.[25] Yet in this part of the narrative, and with view to her former position as a lively antagonist, her diminished speech has become muted and incongruous: it is weakened, and far removed from the physicality of Noah's seafaring.

In spite of this new understanding of God, the next question Uxor poses to Noah – following a long silence – reiterates her melancholy. As they return to solid land, she asks: 'wher are nowe all oure kynne / And companye we knew before?' (ll. 269–70). Fixated on what she has lost, the York Uxor is ultimately silenced by the deluge, losing the passion with which she previously fought. Whilst the Towneley Uxor happily discusses the post-diluvian landscape with her husband on the deck of the Ark – which has here become a shared domestic space – the

[25] Tyler, 'Group Dynamics', 87–88.

York Noah looks to the future without his wife, who is unable to engage with this brave new world.

An Imperfect Couple

Although undoubtedly offering much in terms of comic performance, the arguments of Uxor and Noah in the York *Flood* are never presented as balanced, as they are in Towneley. From their first conflict we see less direct communication between the York couple, Noah using his son as an intermediary to fetch Uxor to the ark, instead of calling on her himself. Rather than relying on gendered appeals to audience members, or farcical physical threats, the York Uxor simply suffers for her unfamiliarity with the flood; her lack of knowledge is humorous when placed in opposition with Noah's position of divine authority, as well as the biblical foreknowledge of the audience members.

Uxor's relation to Noah may signify the overcoming of ignorance in the face of divine knowledge, as others have suggested.[26] Yet this reading ignores Noah's role in her ignorance, which appears far from exemplary. Read as a conduct text, in York it may first appear that the plays advised that women should submit to their husbands unconditionally, in order to achieve salvation. But perhaps this might have been read differently in light of Noah's unwillingness to share information of the deluge: Uxor's main grievance in *The Flood* seems to be that Noah has not told her of the ark earlier, exclaiming to Noah 'thou myght have leteyn me wete' and 'thow shulde have wite my wille' (ll. 113, 123). As Tolmie notes, Uxor's understandable anger is due to her 'late and mediated exposure' to the realities of the situation.[27] Her exclusion from Noah's godly work in the plays may indeed have been questioned by contemporaries, not merely accepted as some kind of patriarchal norm.

It is clear from various contemporary urban records that wives played a large part in civic society, often running individual businesses, holding membership of prominent guilds, and fulfilling various economical roles.[28] Wives were economic players within a 'companionate marriage', emerging in the later medieval period especially amongst urban, commercial communities of artisans and merchants.[29] It is telling that the Fishers' guild, who took the lead in

[26] See R.J. Daniels, 'Uxor Noah: A Raven or a Dove?', *Chaucer Review* 14:1 (1979), 23–32.
[27] Tolmie, 'Mrs Noah and Didactic Abuses', 11.
[28] Mavis E. Mate, *Women in Medieval English Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 51; Philippa Hoskin, 'The Accounts of the Medieval Paternoster Gild of York', *Northern History* 44:1 (2007), 9–10.
[29] Martha Howell, 'The Properties of Marriage in Late Medieval Europe: Commercial Wealth and the Creation of Modern Marriage', in *Love, Marriage, and Family Ties in the Later Middle Ages,* ed. Isabel Davis, Miriam Müller and Sarah Rees Jones (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003), 17–61.

producing the York *Flood,* recognised the role of a female workforce in their industry. The 1418 York Fishers' ordinance rules that: 'na man na woman occupie or dele wyth the Crafte of ffyshmangers bot that alleanly (th)at deles wyth na nother craftes' suggesting that in women did play some form of officially-recognised role in the city.[30]

Certainly, late medieval English communities associated with Fishers, Mariners or Shipwrights felt the regular absence of men, and possibly as a result offered a heightened role for wives – though this picture is complicated.[31] With this in mind it seems odd to consider that the role of Uxor could be so detached from that of Noah. Noah's daughters-in-law appear as aware of the oncoming flood as their husbands and take a similar role in persuading Uxor to board the ark. These women are not excluded from the divinely-voiced knowledge of the deluge, making Uxor's marginalisation all the more surprising.

Uxor is given far less of a voice in York than in Towneley, this perhaps functions as a way to underline Noah's unfairness. His reticence is motivated by his perception of Uxor's disinterest in the scheme: odd in the light of contemporary expectations of a wife's economic role.

> Noah: Now, dame, thee thar noght drede a dele,
> For till accounte it cost thee noght;
> (York, *Flood,* ll. 131–32).

With his commercially resonant vocabulary ('dele', and 'accounte') York's Noah stresses his own economic authority; the building of the ark is literally none of his wife's business: it will cost her 'nought'. Noah refuses to acknowledge that his wife has any stake in the upcoming change in their circumstances. This failure to engage his wife in God's plan may have jarred with spectators more used to the 'companionate' system: Uxor's anger is comic, but so too is Noah's failure to respect her position in the commercial household.

Katie Normington makes a similarly point when she reads the Towneley Uxor as an economic player who loses out when her husband forces her to board the ark. Normington links the performance to increasing restrictions imposed on women in urban communities during the fifteenth century, arguing that Uxor's resistance to embarkation reflects the contemporary reluctance of women to down tools.[32] I suggest that although this may be true of the York plays,

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[30] *REED: York*, II, 626, also cited in Tyler, 'Group Dynamics', 80.
[31] See Maryanne Kowaleski, 'The Demography of Maritime Communities in Late Medieval England', in *Town and Countryside in the Age of the Black Death: Essays in Honour of John Hatcher,* ed. Mark Bailey and Stephen Rigby (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), 87–118.
[32] Normington, *Gender and Medieval Drama*, 130–31.

produced in an urban environment where during the fifteenth century women were increasingly afforded less access to positions of economic power and autonomy, the Towneley *Noah* pertains less to this socio-economic context. In Towneley, Uxor does assert her position as a working woman when she spins on a hill near the ark rather than boarding it. She says: 'Sir, for Jak nor for Gill, / Will I turne my face / Till I have on this hill / Spon a space / On my rok (ll. 486–490). But we need not read Uxor's dissent as representing her wish to be economically independent from Noah, or even her prioritisation of her work over his, as Tolmie has suggested.[33] Spinning does not necessarily denote Uxor's independent industry: weaving was undertaken for commercial purposes, but it was also carried out in the home. As one of her daughters-in-law comments, 'If ye like ye may spyn, / Moder, in the ship' (ll. 521–22).

Despite the recurrence of violence between Noah and Uxor, her concern is for her family and the domestic space, rather than any business connections in 'towne' as is mentioned in York. Whilst Normington talks of the Towneley Uxor representing the 'independence of woman tied to cottage industries' against the 'limiting' role of the urban economy, outside of towns and cities female work was often less valued, and offered less actual autonomy.[34] This was especially true after the end of the fifteenth century, when the script of the Towneley *Noah* was actually recorded.

Instead, in this play it is the discord between man and wife within the household which is brought to the fore, and again neither character acts unproblematically. Uxor's insistence on spinning appears resistant and economically-minded, but is still part of a broader comic quarrel with Noah. She had earlier told him to 'cloute thi shone' (l. 510) or mind his own business, and cares nothing for his 'felowship' (l. 526), only entering the ark when the 'water nyghys so nere' that she 'sit not dry' (ll. 534–35).

Even after she agrees to board the ship and abandon her spinning, Uxor remains unwilling to do Noah's 'bydyng', insultingly inciting him to 'Go from doore to mydyng' (ll. 543–4) or dung heap. Noah fully participates in this quarrel, threatening to give her a 'lik' of the 'whyp' (l. 546), or beat her with his staff (ll. 551–52), this language of abuse bears comically sexual overtones: he goes on to asks if the 'strokys' are good (ll .553). This is a domestic dispute concerned with sexual politics, rather than broader economic woes. Uxor's opposition is expressed through her weaving, but this is a symbol of their domestic discord – unlike in York, where the equivalent

[33] Jane Tolmie, 'Mrs Noah and Didactic Abuses', 15.
[34] Normington, *Gender and Medieval Drama*, 129. See Marjorie McIntosh, *Working Women in English Society, 1300–1620* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), esp. 251–53; P.J.P. Goldberg, 'Female labour, service and marriage in the late medieval urban north', *Northern History*, 22 (1986), 18–38.

character repeatedly refers to packing her 'tolis' for 'towne' (ll. 110, 81), and of her 'commodrys' and 'cosyns' there (l. 143).

It is only when their three sons question why Uxor and Noah act in such a way that the couple put an end to their argument: the peace is not a result of female acquiescence, but an acknowledgement of their mutual bad conduct. The question posed by the First Son, 'A, why fare ye thus, / Fader and moder both?' (ll. 599–600), emphasises this mutuality, the Second Son making clear that both are ill-mannered: 'Ye shuld not be so spitus, / Standyng in sich a woth (ll. 601–602). Whilst it is Noah who responds to this criticism, he defers to the judgement of his children and acknowledges marital misconduct, saying 'We will do as ye bid us, / We will no more be wroth' (ll. 605–606). The Towneley *Noah* focuses on the marital strife of Noah and Uxor, but concludes it with the assessment that both figures have acted in the wrong.

Whilst they are so often analysed collectively, the York and Towneley Noah plays are very different, not only for the way they handle the scene, but also for the distinct contexts which their characters reflect. It has generally been assumed that as Noah is the last righteous man, in these plays humorous discord arises through the character of the shrewish Uxor, whose refusal to enter the ark is sinful and malign.

But Uxor's resistance should be framed in the context of the broader marital argument presented, where neither husband nor wife conducts themselves well. It is useful to move away from assuming a strict dichotomy between the goodly Noah and his unruly wife when considering how spectators might have responded to the performers. In the following sections I will focus on contemporary representations of the patriarch, traversing beyond the prevailing conception of Noah as a purely righteous man to consider the broader implications of his marital disputes. The Noah plays in both York and Towneley present married couples behaving badly, not merely upright husbands measured against their unruly wives.

Section 2.2
Sour Grapes and Troubled Waters:
a New Perspective on Noah

In the York and Towneley Noah plays, pre-existing biblical and apocryphal narratives were adapted to fit the interests of their producers and audiences, and in this way fulfil contemporary devotional needs. Ashley has noted that biblical drama of this period reinforced new sensibilities associated with the city, 'modelling and mirroring civic and social identities appropriate to…

urban and largely bourgeois patrons'.[35] Yet alongside these new adaptations of biblical narratives, the influence of established interpretive traditions – amongst the clergy and the broader lay population – must have persisted, perhaps even as the drama was being performed. Plays like the Corpus Christi pageants in York could not hope to replace existing narratives: they held the ability to re-shape and repackage biblical stories, but they could never fully replace pre-existing versions of the tales, which were often entrenched in other forms of contemporary representation.

In order to elucidate this, it may be useful to consider the Noah plays as theatrical 'hypertexts'. According to Gérard Genette, a hypertext 'transforms, modifies, elaborates or extends' the 'hypotext' on which it is broadly based.[36] More than a commentary, the newer text relies on, yet never fully supersedes, the work on which it is broadly based, consciously depending on it in order to operate. The Noah plays – our hypertexts – are works which adapt, elaborate, but ultimate rely on a biblical 'hypotext'. But in the context of late medieval England, these narratives are more difficult to classify as a single unified text. The audiences of these plays comprised religious and lay spectators, literate and illiterate, occupying various social positions and holding different conceptions of biblical stories.[37]

As the Latin Vulgate was the primary biblical source of this period, and available to very few of the people who watched the plays, the 'hypotext' of the Noah plays must be conceptualised as a broader entity, comprising the multiform representations, texts, and teachings which informed an understanding of scriptural history to the broad demographic of late medieval spectators. Considering the influence of this broader 'hypotext' on the surviving Noah play-scripts is of value: it allows us to problematise the critical binary between the 'righteous' patriarch and his 'shrewish' wife in the specific context of the period when these dramas were recorded and performed. At this time, Noah was in fact viewed in a far more complicated way. He was a righteous saviour, who re-established humanity after the Great Flood. Yet he was also a drunkard, whose excessing drinking was associated with gluttony and vice.

An account of Noah's drunkenness is given in Genesis 9:20–28, shortly after the flood waters recede. First offering a sacrifice to thank God for his protection, Noah proceeds to become a husbandman, tilling the earth and planting a vineyard. With the fruits of his labour he

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[35] Ashley, 'Medieval Courtesy Literature', 33–4. Even if the Towneley MS did not originate within a civic context, the plays were certainly influenced by more clearly urban drama as in York, and still appear to adhere to similar values.

[36] See Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (London: Routledge, 1992), 5; quotation taken from Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics,* 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2007), 106.

[37] McGavin and Walker, *Imagining Spectatorship,* 8–19, 39.

creates wine, drinks to excess, and reclines naked in his tent in a drunken stupor. Ham sees Noah's nakedness and laughs, mocking the foolish old man; yet when he alerts his brothers to their father's condition, they respectfully shield their gazes and re-cover the patriarch. On waking Noah learns of his shame and Ham's laughter, and as a result curses his offspring, the sons of Canaan. The laughter which Noah brings upon himself is key to this study, raising the question of whether the patriarch was viewed more broadly as a comically sinful figure.

Modern exegetes believe the Noah narrative was derived from two distinct traditions, resulting in an inconsistent characterisation of the patriarch.[38] Noah is reduced from saviour of humanity to a drunkard who both exposes himself, and curses his own son – far fallen from the righteous man of ark-building fame. Although not a popular biblical passage today, evidence survives to suggest that Noah's drunkenness was widely known within the later medieval period, by clerical and lay groups. It is my contention that this reading of Noah – as both righteous man and sinful drunkard – influenced contemporary interpretation of the performances under discussion.[39] A better understanding of Noah's dualistic characterisation should, in turn, influence the way scholars consider both the patriarch and his wife in these play-texts.

Imagining Noah's Drunkenness

In a work on the medieval wine trade, Susan Rose notes that artists of the late medieval period 'painted the drunkenness of Noah and his shame far more often than they painted animals entering the ark'.[40] The episode was broadly known to audiences of the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, and a number of English manuscripts from this period show that the narrative permeated through contemporary expressions of lay devotional culture: a category which the York and Towneley plays both belong to.

The 'Holkham Bible', British Library Add. MS 47682, is thought to have been produced in fourteenth-century London as a teaching aid for a Dominican friar, using sophisticated and elaborate illustrations alongside textual excerpts to educate wealthy patrons.[41] This manuscript depicts the Noah narrative over several pages, beginning with the building of the Ark and the

[38] See for example J. David Pleins, 'When Myths go Wrong: Deconstructing the Drunkenness of Noah', *Culture and Religion: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 5:2 (2004), 219; Lindsay Marie Ross, 'Genesis 9:20–21: Noah's Legacy of the Vine', *The Journal of Religion* 3:1 (2003), 55; Devora Steinmetz, 'Vineyard, Farm and Garden: The Drunkenness of Noah in the Context of Primeval History', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 113:2 (1994), 193–207.
[39] Only two known examples of Noah's drunkenness in performance exist, the *Passion de Semur* and the *Mystere du Viel Testament*. Both originate in France, in regions associated with wine production: perhaps the reason for their inclusion. See Lynette Muir, *The Biblical Drama of Medieval Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 74.
[40] Susan Rose, *The Wine Trade in Medieval Europe 1000–1500* (London: Continuum, 2011), 157.
[41] See Michelle Brown, *The Holkham Bible Picture Book: A Facsimile* (London: British Library, 2007), 1–17; also Claus Michael Kauffmann, *Biblical Imagery in Medieval England 700–1500* (London: Harvey Miller, 2003), 231–37.

Great Flood (ff.7r–8r), before moving on to the narrative of disembarkation, firstly depicting Noah's sacrifice of thanks to God and his cultivation of the vineyard, and then the harvesting of the vines and Noah's subsequent drunken stupor (ff.8v–9r).[42] The bottom half of f.9r portrays the drunkenness scene in some detail: Noah is slumped against several large wine barrels, his head down 'dozing' and his tunic asunder. His right hand clings to a drinking vessel, and his characterisation as a drunken old man is reinforced by a wispy grey beard and the feeble bareness of his pale legs. Ham stoops to point to his father's genitals, smirking with eyebrows raised, as his brothers avert their eyes, one covering Noah and the other pushing the laughing figure aside. As if occurring simultaneously, within the same image Noah is shown again upright, chastising his son Ham for his mockery

Figure 3: Noah Building the Ark, in the 'Holkham Bible',
British Library Additional MS 47682, f.7r.

[42] See figures 3–6.

Figure 4: Noah and the Flood, in the 'Holkham Bible',
British Library Additional MS 47682, f.8v.

Figure 5: Noah Tending his Vineyard, in the 'Holkham Bible',
British Library Additional MS 47682, f.8r.

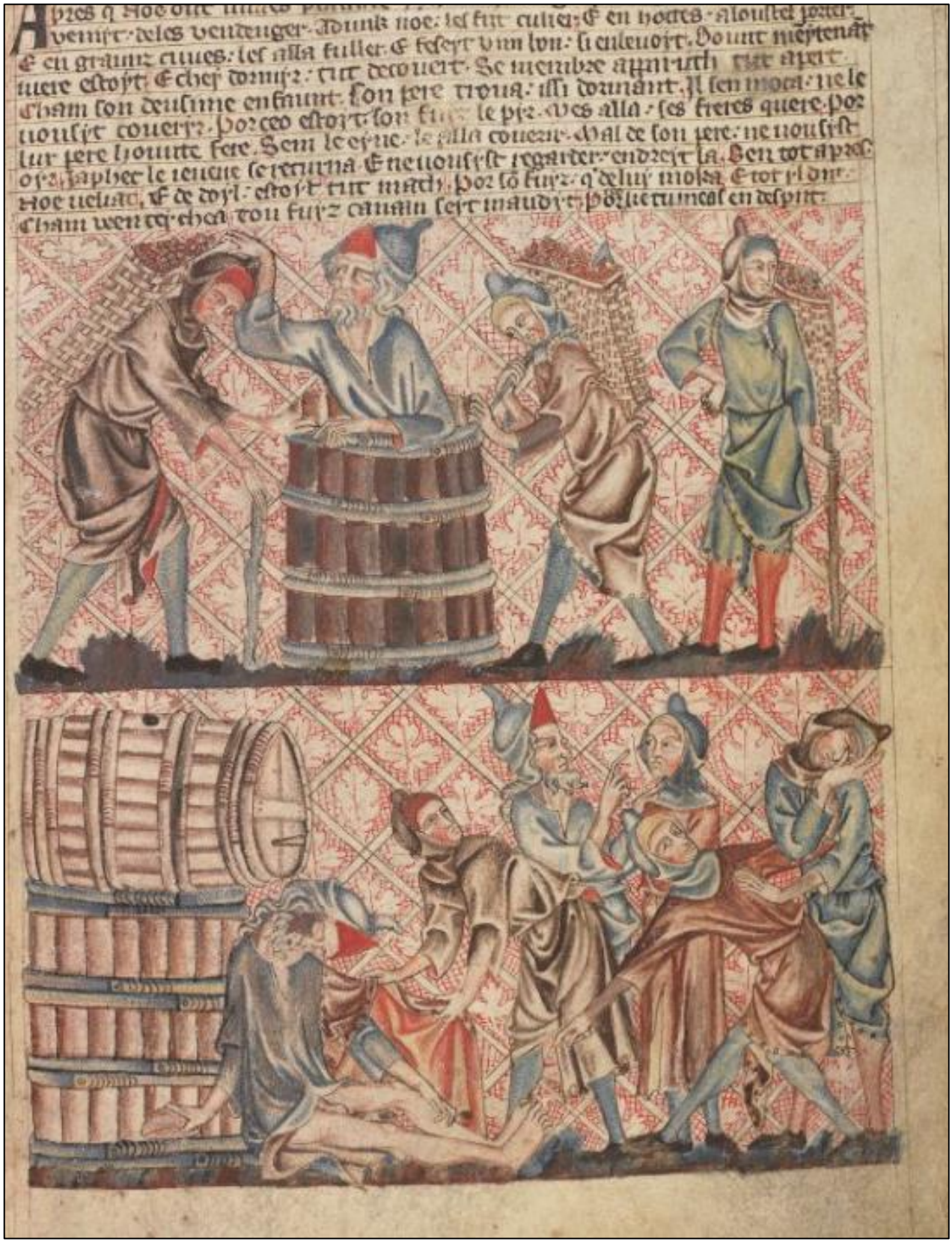

Figure 6: Noah Making Wine, and Drunk, in the 'Holkham Bible',
British Library Additional MS 47682, f.9v.

The episode of Noah's drunkenness is an integrated part of the narrative associated with the patriarch, something especially significant if we are to consider this manuscript as a finely-crafted pedagogical tool: the story was clearly considered by the writer to hold an important meaning. Less clear though is what this meaning is. Whereas the image appears to ridicule Noah for his inebriation, the interpretation of the episode is ambiguous: Noah is also a victim of his son's disrespect, with the patriarch's drunkenness and the punishment of Ham indelibly linked. Given the subjective nature of reading such images, it is difficult to know how to interpret this depiction: is Noah unjustly mocked here, or is the viewer being encouraged to laugh at him? Other illustrations from a similar period allow us a wider range of examples to consider this question.

Produced in the late fourteenth century, Egerton MS 1894 ('The Egerton Genesis') follows a similar format to the Holkham Bible, containing large illustrations and small explanatory textual commentaries. In this manuscript the story of Noah's life is spread over seven leaves, and also briefly covers the patriarch's father Lamech, referred to in the York *Flood* – alongside his other children. Illustrations from the Egerton Genesis have been noted for their sometimes lurid and grotesque quality, making for an 'exaggerated burlesque' style which is clearly apparent in the depiction of Noah's drunkenness.[43] Split into four panels, the upper two scenes of f.4v depict a bushy-haired Ham smiling to the point of grimace, pointing a slender finger towards his father's exposed genitals. His brother Shem firstly shields his own eyes, before moving circumspectly to cover Noah up.[44]

Although the image does emphasise Ham's base and corporeal nature, denoted by his grimace-like smile and strangely squat figure, it clearly prompts viewers to laugh at Noah's prone form. Obviously drunk, the patriarch covers his face limply with flailing arms, which in turn causes his cloak to rise and twist around his sprawled form, exposing his large genitals. The comic nature of this scene is accentuated by the strangely phallic wine jug and drinking-bowl which stand next to him, and also the vineyard behind: gnarled and withering vines are tied to stiff upright poles, from which sprout curiously pendulous clusters of grapes. The depiction participates in Ham's mockery and draws attention to Noah's curiously sexualised disgrace, the righteous patriarch turned into a humorous figure: the phallic symbolism is ironic, stressing the impotency of a drunk old man. Throughout the Egerton Genesis manuscript powerful and privileged figures are portrayed disrespectfully, in bawdy or scatological illustration. This has led to some speculation that the work's patron was of the urban 'upper middle class', and possibly

[43] Mary Coker Joslin and Carolyn Coker Joslin Watson, *The Egerton Genesis* (London: British Library, 2001), 48–49.
[44] See figure 7.

Figure 7: Noah's Drunkenness, detail, 'Egerton Genesis', Egerton MS 1894, f.4v.

even a sponsor of contemporary biblical drama; others, though, have noted that the 'buffoonery of expression' on display was not exclusively the preserve of a lay bourgeois audience.[45] Still, here privileged figures are portrayed disrespectfully, in bawdy or scatological illustration. This has led to some speculation that the work's patron was of the urban 'upper middle class', and possibly even a sponsor of contemporary biblical drama; others, though, have noted that the 'buffoonery of expression' on display was not exclusively the preserve of a lay bourgeois audience.[46] Still, here Noah's drunkenness is clearly depicted at least in part as a comic episode, the patriarch a subject for mockery.

Comic treatment of the scene is even more apparent in the Yates Thompson MS 14, a psalter known to have belonged to a knightly family in Norfolk.[47] A series of illustrations, framed in medallions trail across the borders of a page in the manuscript, depict scenes from Genesis: three are dedicated to Noah's story, with one of these displaying his drunkenness. Here the

[45] Joslin and Watson, *The Egerton Genesis,* 128; Lucy Freeman Sandler, 'Review: The Egerton Genesis by Mary Coker Joslin; Carolyn Coker Joslin Watson', *Speculum*, 78 (2003), 916. It has also been suggested that the manuscript was produced in north-east England, though the evidence for this is largely speculative: see Eric G. Millar, 'The Egerton Genesis and the M.R. James Memorial Manuscript', *Archaeologia*, 87 (1938), 1–5.
[46] Joslin and Watson, *The Egerton Genesis,* 128; Lucy Freeman Sandler, 'Review: The Egerton Genesis by Mary Coker Joslin; Carolyn Coker Joslin Watson', *Speculum*, 78 (2003), 916. It has also been suggested that the manuscript was produced in north-east England, though the evidence for this is largely speculative: see Eric G. Millar, 'The Egerton Genesis and the M.R. James Memorial Manuscript', *Archaeologia*, 87 (1938), 1–5.
[47] 'Yates Thompson MS 14', Digitised Manuscripts, British Library Website [Accessed 02.02.15].

episode is clearly an object for derision, or criticism of the patriarch. Whilst the first two medallions show Noah as an upright and respectable figure, building and boarding the ark with his family, the story of his drunkenness is placed in a position of prominence at the top right-hand side of the page. Noah is sprawled on the ground, wine goblet just fallen from his hand, with his genitals fully exposed and carefully delineated. Ham points and laughs, surrounded by not only his two brothers, but almost the whole family; two figures shield their eyes, visibly disappointed, and the others look away in shame.[48]

To the right of this medallion, at the border of the page, Noah sits with his legs jauntily dangling from a grape-vine on which he is resting. Ruddy-faced, he sips from the same large goblet which appears on the ground in the medallion, a proud peacock over his head representing gluttony. The text which these illuminations border is a popular verse taken from Psalm 1, warning the reader against sinning or turning to the path of sin. The implication of the manuscript illustrations is here made starkly clear. Within the life of Noah, the patriarch rises as a righteous man, leading a united family through the Great Flood, but goes on to fall from grace through his drunkenness, spreading discord and shame on his family as a result.

As these manuscript images show, rather than an inconsequential narrative, Noah's drunkenness was regarded by many in the late medieval period as an intrinsic element of the patriarch's story, and of the biblical narrative. This can be similarly evinced in York specifically, where we find at least three surviving examples of stained glass which illustrate that the episode was known in the space where the plays were being performed. The earliest depiction of Noah's drunkenness in York glass survives in the Minster's Chapterhouse, originally created during the twelfth century.[49] The figural details of the glass are obscured by age, and the original position of the window remains unclear, yet it does demonstrate a longstanding awareness of this drunkenness narrative in the city. The most prominent portrayal of the scene comes from the building's Great East window, a monumental expanse of glass which essentially depicts the biblical history of the world: it is a 'Doom Cycle', covering stories from Genesis and the life of Christ, before focusing particularly on the Book of Revelation towards the bottom of the window.[50] Given the limited area given over to the Genesis narrative, it is telling that Noah's life is depicted in two panels, one showing Noah' family aboard the ark, and the other displaying the patriarch's drunken nakedness.

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[48] See figures 8–11.
[49] Clifford Davidson 'York Art: A Subject List of Extant and Lost Art', *Early Drama, Art and Music* (2003), 16.
[50] See Sarah Brown, *'Our Magnificent Fabryk': York Minster, An Architectural History c.1220–1500* (Swindon: English Heritage, 2003), 218–20; also Thomas French and David O'Connor, *York Minster, The Great East Window* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

Figure 8: 'St Omer Psalter', Yates Thompson MS 14, f.7r.

Figure 9: The Building of the Ark, detail, 'St Omer Psalter', Yates Thompson MS 14, f.7r.

Figure 10: The Boarding of the Ark, detail, 'St Omer Psalter', Yates Thompson MS 14, f.7r.

Figure 11: Noah's Drunkenness, detail, 'St Omer Psalter', Yates Thompson MS 14, f.7r.

As in the manuscript images, these two scenes are used to summarize Noah's life, succinctly establishing what were likely the most popular stories associated with the patriarch. One panel shows a bearded Noah standing in prayer at the prow of a ship, the sail taut against a mighty wind. Two richly dressed women huddle against a younger man in the centre of the deck, whilst a dog stands hesitant at the stern; the dynamism of the scene is attained through the varying blues of the waters, and the detailed facial expressiveness. Clifford Davidson has asserted that these figures correspond to the characters in *The Flood*, though his claims that the glass depicts a recalcitrant Uxor are questionable.[51] Two of Noah's sons are also absent, despite their prominent position it the pageant, as well as the remaining female characters, whether wives or daughters-in-law. More than an accurate portrayal of a dramatic scene, this window should be read as a broader representation of the flood narrative as understood by the inhabitants of York, with characters dressed in their urban finery just as wealthy inhabitants of the city, and the actors performing in the pageant, would have been.

Rather than portraying the building of the ark and then the flood, as in the surviving York Cycle, the adjacent panel undeniably portrays Noah's drunkenness.[52] As Shem and Japheth look away and shield their eyes, Ham looks down on Noah from some distance, lip curled in haughty disdain. A large wine jug appears to the left of the image, topped with a large drinking bowl which Noah has clearly made recent use of. Although the tell-tale iconographic features of the vines and grapes are missing, the arrangement of the figures clearly evokes the manuscript allusions mentioned earlier. As in these manuscripts, the scene of the flood is again apparently mirrored by Noah's drunkenness – seemingly more significant than Noah's covenant with God. Clearly the narrative was regarded as worthy of representation in this prestigious glass scheme, suggesting that it was a well-known and significant part of the Old Testament.

This window was created under the patronage of Bishop Skirlaw of Durham and produced by the glazier John Thornton of Coventry from 1405–1408.[53] Although large and prominent, it is difficult to consider this panel as a 'popular' or accessible depiction of Noah's drunkenness due to its position, and the clerical nature of its patron. Like the Chapterhouse, the chancel was generally accessible only to the religious elite of the cathedral, and the Noah windows in turn would have been very difficult to discern from ground level, as they are now. Located in a building often teeming with various kinds of people, the East Window only goes as far as

[51] Davidson, 'York Art', 16. Neither the facial expressions nor the gestures of either female figure seem to suggest resistance, and, considering the relative ages of the women in the glass, it is unclear whether Uxor is even being represented: see figure 12.
[52] See figures 12 and 13.
[53] Sarah Brown, *Apocalypse: The Great East Window of York Minster* (London: Third Millennium Publishing, 2014), 23–33.

Figure 12: Noah's Ark, panel 14b., East Window I, York Minster (York, c.1405–1408).

Figure 13: Noah's Drunkenness, panel 14c., East Window I, York Minster (York, c.1405–1408).

demonstrating the popularity of this narrative amongst the wealthier clerical and lay patrons of visual art in the city.

Fortunately, a very similar set of glass panels depicting Noah survives in the church of St. Michael's Spurriergate, in the centre of York. Within the church a wealth of stained glass still survives from the fifteenth century, which would have been funded at least in part by the various parishioners and lay patrons who regularly used the building: we know that although it was a relatively wealthy institution in this period, St. Michael's held parishioners of varying social positions.[54] The glass of St. Michael's is especially relevant because it includes depictions of the Noah narrative at a widely accessible level, demonstrating that the story was an object of interest within lay communities as well as clerical ones. In the church, one panel clearly depicts the Noah family standing before a large boat, and the next is thought to depict the patriarch's drunkenness.[55] As in the East Window, three figures cluster around Noah, though here he is positioned almost diagonally across the scene. One of the figures gestures towards the recumbent man's groin, though here the corresponding glass is heavily leaded and wholly obscured, making it difficult to tell whether this is indecent exposure or merely a furled robe.

Although the absence of Noah's genitals in this window would seem to suggest that the panel has been misattributed, the glass of St. Michael's has suffered a chequered history: it suffered through modifications by the so-called 'plumber-glaziers' of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, during which time other natural damage also occurred. After it was put into protective storage during the Second World War, the pieces were considered to have been in too much disarray to be put back in their original positions, and as a result were extensively rearranged. [56] Although the gestures and general shape of the scene suggests that it did indeed originally depict Noah's drunkenness, fragments have clearly been mixed up to some degree; this is possibly the reason why Noah's eyes are not closed (sleeping), and why no grapes or drinking vessels remain.

It has been suggested that the glass of St. Michael's was created within the same workshop as the Minster's East Window, by John Thornton or his followers. [57] The same glazier was also responsible for the glass of Great Malvern Priory, which still contains a great number of panels

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[54] Christopher Webb, ed. *Churchwardens Accounts of St. Michael, Spurriergate, York, 1518–48,* 2 Vols. Borthwick Texts and Calendars Series 20 (York: University of York/Borthwick Institute for Historical Research, 1997), I, 11.
[55] See figures 14 and 15; Davidson 'York Art', 16.
[56] Dean of York Minster Eric Milner-White carried out this work: see Eric Milner-White, *The Ancient Glass of St Michael's, Spurriergate* (York: H. Morley and Sons, 1948); also Barbara Wilson and Frances Mee, *The Medieval Parish Churches of York: The Pictorial Evidence* (York: York Archaeological Trust, 1998), 135.
[57] See John A. Knowles, 'John Thornton of Coventry and the East Window of Great Malvern Priory', *The Antiquaries Journal,* 39:3 (1959), 274–282; Gilderdale-Scott argues that Thornton was likely to have maintained workshops in York and the Midlands during this period. See Heather Gilderdale-Scott and George Demidowicz, *St. Michael's Coventry: The Rise and Fall of the Old* Cathedral (London: Scala Arts and Heritage Publishers, 2015), 119–125.

produced at a time contemporary with that of St. Michael's, sometime in the mid-fifteenth century.[58] A twelve-scene Genesis cycle survives, with the narrative of Noah's life spread over seven panels, again attesting to his iconographic popularity. Several panels depict his drunkenness, showing first Noah tending his vineyard and then laying drunken before his sons.[59] Here we not only see drinking paraphernalia, but also a profusion of vines bearing bunches of grapes that are missing from both the Minster's East Window and St. Michael's.

It is unclear whether the Minster's window originally also contained vines and grapes, yet it is easy to discover where fragments depicting these have ended up in the glass-diaspora of the latter church. Early records of St. Michael's note the existence of an impressive Jesse Tree window, donated by a wealthy late medieval parishioner, which likely influenced the attribution of glass depicting vines to this particular design.[60] In the re-ordered Jesse we see a vast profusion of not only vines, but also many bunches of grapes.[61] Although the Jesse iconography often contained fruit hanging from long sinuous tendrils, the massed nature of the vines and the sheer number of grapes suggest that they may have originated elsewhere: possibly from a vineyard or drunkenness scene like that at Great Malvern

If the drunkenness scene at St. Michael's is accurately identified and was once far clearer, it is possible to speculate that a larger number of panels depicting the Noah narrative may also have once existed in the church, as in Great Malvern. The later fifteenth-century glazing scheme at St. Neots', Cornwall, for example, included a window made up of various panels dedicated completely to the life of Noah, reinforcing the idea that he was a popular devotional figure known for both the Great Flood and his later drunkenness.[62]Although due to the nature of the surviving glass it must remain conjectural, it is likely that the parishioners of St. Michael's at least had an awareness of Noah both as the builder of the ark, and as a drunken sinner.

The guilds of Fishers and Mariners – those who produced *The Flood* pageant – were particularly associated with the parish of St. Michael's, situated parallel to York's great tidal river and the Ouse Bridge, the site of a regular fish market.[63] The church itself was also on the pageant route of the Corpus Christi Play, and parish-owned property was regularly rented out for viewing performances.[64] Thus we might expect audiences and craft producers of the Noah plays to have

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[58] For an extensive study of this see Heather Gilderdale-Scott, *The Painted Glass of Great Malvern Priory, Worcestershire, c.1430–1500,* Ph.D Thesis (London, 2008).
[59] See figures 16 and 17.
[60] Webb, *Churchwardens Accounts of St. Michael*, I, 7, 154–55.
[61] See figures 18–20.
[62] See Gilbert Davies, *A description, accompanied by sixteen coloured plates, of the splendid decorations recently made to the Church of St. Neot, in Cornwall, at the sole expense of the Reverend Richard Gerveys Grylls* (London: Hedgeland, 1830).
[63] Webb, *Churchwardens' Accounts of St. Michael,* I, 4.
[64] Twycross, 'Pageant stations at York, 1398–1572', 21; Webb, *Churchwardens' Accounts of St. Michael,* I, 134, 140, 147.

Figure 14: The Building of the Ark, panel s.V. 3b.,
St. Michael's Spurriergate, York (York, c. 1420).

Figure 15: Noah's Drunkenness, panel s.V. 3c.,
St. Michael's Spurriergate, York (York, c. 1420).

Figure 16: Noah's Vineyard, panel s.IV. 2b, South Aisle Choir, St. Anne's Chapel, Great Malvern Priory (Great Malvern, c.1450).

Figure 17: Noah's Drunkenness, panel s.IV. 2c., South Aisle Choir, St. Anne's Chapel, Great Malvern Priory (Great Malvern, c.1450).

Figure 18: Tree of Jesse, detail, panel s.IV. 1b.,
St. Michael's Spurriergate, York (c.1420).

Figure 19: Tree of Jesse, detail, panel s.IV. 1c.,
St. Michael's Spurriergate, York, (c. 1420).

Figure 20: Tree of Jesse, detail, panel s.IV. 2d.,
St. Michael's Spurriergate, York, (c. 1420).

known of this controversial aspect of the patriarch's life, something which must inevitably have influenced or shaped their treatment of the character.

A Sinful Patriarch? Contemporary Interpretation

Noah's drunkenness was regularly depicted, and appears to have been relatively popular amongst various audiences across the period: his characterisation as a figure of sin, to be mocked for debauchery, must surely have influenced the way he was regarded in performances. In works such as Yates Thomson MS 14 the actions of the patriarch are clearly being criticised, but scholars of the iconography have generally maintained that portrayals of the scene were supposed to express the injustice of Noah's mockery at the hands of his son Ham. This interpretation of the scene is largely based on readings of the works of Italian Renaissance artists, who tended to shroud or obscure the patriarch's genitalia, and stressed his vulnerability in the face of his sons.[65] But it is also evident in others fifteenth and sixteenth century works such as the *Biblia Pauperum*, a finely illustrated and oft-printed text originating in western Europe around the mid-fifteenth century.[66]

The purpose of this work was to offer clear, 'readable' devotional images which aligned Old Testament scenes with those from the life of Christ, stressing the typological unity of their messages, as well as aiding remembrance of the scenes. As we see in the particularly lavish British Library Royal MS 5, the scene of Noah's drunkenness and nakedness is set directly alongside a central panel depicting the mockery of Christ at the hands of his torturers, and another showing the mockery of Elisha.[67] Here the post-flood scene is purposefully defined as a story of Noah's vulnerability and unjust mockery, rather than as a narrative of personal failure and shame. Although in the scene the patriarch's exposed genitals and the overarching pendulous vine remind us of Noah's sinful error, the typological parallels drawn force us to question how viewers were being encouraged to interpret the scene.

The *Biblia Pauperum* was often produced in cheap 'block-books', with surviving examples spread across Europe, attesting to their popularity. Yet these texts were not truly 'Bibles of the Poor', with all of the universal reach which this term suggests: copies are thought to have been used mostly by wealthy laypersons, who were 'accustomed to books, but not professional users

[65] For an overview of this argument see Helene E. Roberts, *Encyclopedia of Comparative Iconography: Themes Depicted in Works of Art* (London: Routledge, 1998), 266.
[66] See Avril Henry, ed., *Biblia Pauperum: A Facsimile Edition* (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1987).
[67] See figures 21–22.

Figure 21: Noah's Drunkenness, Christ's Scourging, St. Elisha and the Bears,
'Biblia Pauperum', Kings MS 5, f.15r.

Figure 22: Noah's Drunkenness, detail,
'Biblia Pauperum', Kings MS 5, f.15r.

of them'.[68] The *Biblia* was influenced by contemporary theologians who championed Noah, and we must not assume it provides the definitive interpretive model of the narrative in this period.

[68] Tobin Nellhaus, 'Mementos of things to come: Orality, Literacy, and Typology in the Biblia Pauperum', in *Printing the written word: the social history of books, circa 1450–1520,* ed. Sandra Hindman (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1991), 292–321, esp. 312.

Certain clerical figures attempted to justify the patriarch's drunkenness through a variety of somewhat doubtful claims: some stated that Noah's intoxication was borne of naivety, as no grapes existed before the Flood; others, including Peter Comestor and Peter the Chanter, suggested that the patriarch lived at a time before underwear was invented.[69] Brian Murdoch notes that attempts to absolve Noah, and assimilate the episode of his drunkenness with the mockery of Christ, were far more common in inter-clerical discourse than in portrayals for laypeople, where Noah made 'regular appearances as an illustration of reprehensible and or obscene drunkenness'.[70] This duality of Noah's character – presented as both a Christ-like saviour and a ridiculous drunkard – was widely acknowledged.

Several sermon sources can also help us to establish exactly how the episode was treated in preaching and didactic works. Although composed and printed as late as 1591, Henry Smith's sermon, entitled *The First Sermon of Noahs drunkenness, A Glasse Wherein all drunkards may behold their beastlinesse*, gives us an incredibly discursive exegesis on the post-flood narrative.[71] In Smith's sermon, Noah is consciously used as a 'bad example' of drunkenness: he is directly aligned with 'all drunkards', and his story acts as a mirror to their 'beastlinesse'. Smith praises Noah's initial labours in husbandry, before describing the patriarch's downfall and isolation from God: his trajectory from righteousness to sin is noted in the connection of the two scenes most associated with his life: 'hee which was not drowned with water, was drowned after with wine'. [72] Noah loses his righteousness through his drunken stupor; he is praised in one verse and dispraised in another: 'even now God commends him for his lowliness, and now discommends him for his drunkennes'.[73] The sermon barely refers to Ham, but when Smith does talk of irreverent laughter directed at Noah, it is as an example of how the common drunkard is treated: 'all that see him do mock him'. Those theologians who might 'excuse Noah and mittigate his faults', are also criticised, confronting the dualism inherent in contemporary characterisations.

It has been suggested that a shift occurred between fifteenth-and sixteenth-century exegetical readings of the post-flood episode, with Protestant thinkers (like Smith) favouring literal readings over allegorical ones, keen to express the idea that even the greatest of saints

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[69] See Philip M. Soergal, *Miracles and the Protestant Imagination: The Evangelical Wonder Book in Reformation Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 134–36; also David M. Whitford, ' "Forgetting him selfe after a most filthie and shamefull sorte": Martin Luther and John Calvin on Genesis 9' in *Calvin and Luther: The Continuing Relationship*, ed. R. Ward Holder (Göttingen: Vandenoeck and Ruprecht, 2013), 40.

[70] See Brian Murdoch, *The Medieval Popular Bible: Expansions of Genesis in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2003), esp. 96–100, 122–26.

[71] Henry Smith, *The First Sermon of Noahs drunkenness, A Glasse Wherein all drunkards may behold their beastlinesse* (London: William Kearney, 1591), *EEBO*. [Accessed 01.04.16].

[72] Ibid., 13, 15.

[73] Smith, *The First Sermon of Noahs drunkenness,* 15.

could fall to sin.[74] Notably, John Calvin labelled Noah's drunkenness a 'filthy and detestable crime' which made him into a 'laughing stock to all'.[75] Yet Smith's sermon does follow in a medieval tradition of English proselytising against Noah's drunkenness, where the episode was used in a similar way in earlier sermons and other popular works. Hereford Cathedral Library MS O.iii.5 is a collection of forty-one sermons, written in the late fifteenth century by different hands and for preaching in parishes and in religious institutions.[76] The thirtieth sermon of this collection – beginning 'Venite ascendamus ad montem Domini' – features a portrayal of Noah strikingly similar to Smith's, expressing the importance of moderation. The patriarch's story was a useful example of immoral practices, and the ill consequences of intoxication.[77]

In turn, this work makes repeated references to exegetical writing on Noah's drunkenness composed by Robert Holcot, an influential Dominican friar of early fourteenth century, once assistant to the bibliophile bishop of Durham Richard Bury.[78] Many of Holcot's works were widely disseminated throughout England and continental Europe well into the sixteenth century; lectio 21 of Holcot's *Super Sapientam Salomonis*, an extremely popular book of sermons, uses Noah's drunkenness as a way to discuss the malevolent effects of intoxication.[79] Moralizing discourses on Noah as a drunkard were clearly present in England from at least the fourteenth century, and possibly earlier: his portrayal as an exemplar of bad behaviour seems to have been harnessed in such works both before and after the Reformation. These proselytizing works make it clear that in the period when the York and Towneley Noah plays were being recorded, the patriarch was not just considered a 'righteous man': his character held far more sinful baggage than scholars of the plays have assumed.

What to do with the Drunken Noah?

There is no surviving record of the staging of Noah's drunkenness in England – perhaps odd, as the scene was so regularly invoked in contemporary visual portrayals of both the patriarch's life,

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[74] See John L. Thompson ed. *Reformation Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament, Genesis 1–11* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2012), lxii–lxiii; Whitford, 'Martin Luther and John Calvin on Genesis 9', 42.
[75] John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, Volume I, trans. John King (Michigan: Erdmans, 1948), 300–301; also cited in Soergal, *Miracles and the Protestant Imagination*, 136.
[76] Siegfried Wenzel, *Latin Sermon Collections from Later Medieval England: Orthodox Preaching in the Age of Wyclif* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 159–161.
[77] Wenzel, *Latin Sermon Collections,* 324–26; Soergal, *Miracles and the Protestant Imagination*, 136.
[78] Jenny Swanson, 'Holcot, Robert (*c.*1290–1349).' *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography Online* (accessed 13.04.15) <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/13485>.
[79] Robert Holkot [sic], *Super Sapientam Salomonis* (Paris: Georg Wolf, 1489), lectio XXI (unpaginated).

and of Genesis more broadly.[80] Performances of Noah's drunkenness may not have suited the specific urban context out of which many of the more prominent surviving play-texts – including York, Chester, and even Newcastle – arose. As Ashley has noted, these plays were adapted to suit 'civic and social identities appropriate to…urban and largely bourgeois patrons'.[81] Related to this, the absence of the drunkenness episode may be read as conscious erasure.

If we look to the York Cycle, whilst the character of Noah is initially mocked in the *Building* for his advanced age, as he learns the craft of shipbuilding he becomes the idealised householder, a patriarchal figure rallying his family into an ordered unit. As Christina Fitzgerald has argued, Noah represented a paragon of civic patriarchal authority, in holding control over his dependents in a way which real craft masters within the guild – and more generally the freemen of the city – were supposed to emulate.[82] As Noah was clearly appropriated in the civic context of the plays as a righteous householder, the non-portrayal of the later narrative of drunkenness associated with him may have been a conscious choice. When such a patriarchal figure was a drunkard he failed to meet his civic responsibilities, not only to the detriment of his own family, but the broader community.[83]

In not staging Noah's drunkenness, the pageants associated with the figure in York to some extent avoid engaging with the ultimately dualistic character presented elsewhere. Here Noah's righteousness is portrayed, but not his fall from God's graces. Yet these performances did not function as simply linear narratives: producers and spectators both would have known of Noah's future downfall and degradation, throughout staging or watching his construction of the Ark. Norman Simms has suggested that in Chester, the band of disreputable friends or 'gossipes' associated with Noah's wife, who sing while overflowing with Malmsey wine and flood water, may have originated as a means to deflect attention from Noah's ultimate alcohol-based downfall.[84] In this sense, Uxor's supposedly termagant status may be itself read as a response to anxieties over Noah's positioning as an exemplary figure of urban life.

No similar reference to Uxor's drinking appears in the York pageants or the Towneley MS, though in Newcastle Noah's wife tricks him into drinking a truth serum - something which may

[80] Only two performance traditions are known to have included the staging of Noah's drunkenness: the *Passion de Semur* and the *Mystere du Viel Testament.* Muir suggests that this may be due to the association of both performances with regions of wine production. See Muir, *Biblical Drama of Medieval Europe*, 74.
[81] Ashley, 'Medieval Courtesy Literature and Dramatic Mirrors of Female Conduct', 33–4.
[82] Christina M. Fitzgerald, 'Manning the Ark in York and Chester', *Exemplaria,* 15:2 (2005), 351–84.
[83] See Jessica Warner, 'Shifting Categories of the Social Harms Associated with Alcohol: Examples from Late Medieval and Early Modern England', *American Journal of Public Health,* 87:11 (1997), 1790; also Hughes, *Pastors and Visionaries*, 151–52.
[84] Norman Simms, 'Mrs Noah's Secret: A Psychohistorical Reading of the Chester Cycle Third Pageant', *Parergon,* 14:2 (1997), 18–20.

offer an analogue to the drunkenness narrative.[85] Rather than focusing on Uxor's alcoholism, in York it was perhaps the case that the comic relationship of Noah and his wife was introduced to distract spectators from the patriarch's problematic association with drunkenness. Although not denying this inevitable feature of Noah's later life, the presentation of his marital strife – and characterisation of his tempestuous and dramatically powerful (yet scripturally negligible) wife – creates a different means by which spectators could laugh at the patriarch, yet still see him overcome household troubles to become the saviour of mankind.

Whilst the audience may have been prepared to laugh directly at Noah for his intoxication after the flood, instead they were prompted to laugh at his relationship with his wife, side-stepping the civically problematic notion of his alcoholism, and replacing it with the far more acceptable comic form of marital strife. In the light of Genette's hypotext, however, we might also question how far audience members would be able to forget or ignore the narrative of Noah's intoxication in favour of the civically favourable image of the patriarch projected through the dramas. The patriarch's passing reference to 'brede and wyne' at the end of the York pageant (York *Flood,* l.318), although Eucharistic in theme, may have offered a humorous double-meaning, playing on the drunkenness and gluttony with which he was also associated.

Noah's drunkenness, and the character's moral trajectory from righteous man to sinful inebriate, was well known in England when plays involving the patriarch were being produced, performed and recorded. The episode was interpreted in a variety of ways, although the condemnation of Noah as a figure of reprehensible drunkenness appears to have been widespread. A comic performance of marriage dominates these plays, and this new understanding of Noah allows us to reconsider the idea that the fractious relationship he has with his wife presupposes a binary of good and evil, righteous and sinner. Portrayed within the civic paradigm of marriage, both Noah and Uxor are problematic characters, despite the fact that they have been chosen to usher in the new age of humanity after the Great Flood. It is this relationship between two opposing figures, neither of whom is to be wholly condemned, nor wholly praised, which is used in the plays as a framework for the tensions inherent in the diluvian narrative.

[85] See John Anderson, and A.C. Cawley, 'The Newcastle play of Noah's Ark', REED Newsletter 2:1 (1977), 15-17.

Section 2.3

Flooding the Marketplace:
Isolationist Dream or Civic Fantasy?

Jane Tolmie has argued that Uxor's 'resisting voice' represents the cruelties of the Great Flood to an audience which was likely at least partly empathetic: her questioning of the biblical event is 'present and persistent even when it is disapproved and defeated'.[86] Certainly the tension which rises from Uxor's dissent – questioning both her husband's entreaties, and the Great Flood itself – profoundly shapes the plays. Importantly though, Uxor's dissent is not played against Noah's steadfast righteousness, as has been mostly assumed. Normington suggests that Noah's treatment of his wife undermines the righteousness God has labelled him with.[87] But in the minds of spectators too, knowledge of the patriarch's future fall from grace – through the widely known story of his drunkenness – may have mirrored the anxieties which Uxor so keenly expresses. Whilst for some audience members Uxor may have represented merely a shrewish wife, cast against a righteous husband, to others this relationship would have been far further nuanced. If we assume that both husband and wife were considered problematic figures, we can radically reinterpret the use of humour in the plays, and the interpretive meaning spectators could draw from performances.

The relationship between the marital couple is positioned as a central aspect of the York and Towneley Noah plays. Beyond York, performances involving Noah and his family appear to have been used in the late medieval period across various towns and cities in the north-east of England and beyond: records of Noah plays survive from Hull, Beverley, Pontefract, Wakefield York and Newcastle.[88] Christina Fitzgerald argues that the urban paradigm which Noah represents in the plays was consciously portrayed as a fantasy; the idea of the isolated and self-sustaining craft workshop was undermined by and at odds with the experience of the guild members producing the plays, who saw the implicit hierarchies of this performed space as unrepresentative and misleading.[89]

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[86] Jane Tolmie, 'Mrs Noah and Didactic Abuses', 11.
[87] Katie Normington, *Gender and Medieval Drama* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2004), 129–30.
[88] Wyatt, 'Arks, Crafts and Authorities, 48–68.
[89] Fitzgerald 'Manning the Ark in York and Chester', 351–84; Fitzgerald, *Drama of Masculinity*, 64–71; see also Heather Swanson, 'The Illusion of Economic Structure: Craft Guilds in Late Medieval English Towns', *Past and Present*, 121 (1988), 29–48.

Yet Noah's significance in this period went beyond the figure's association with these crafts, and our interpretation of the plays should consider why the patriarch and his family were more broadly utilised in specifically urban environments. Whereas the *Building* and the *Flood* in York were part of a broader cycle, in Hull – and potentially elsewhere – the 'Noah Play' was the only such biblical drama staged.[90] Noah's sea-faring most obviously connects him to groups such as fishermen, mariners and shipbuilders – as in York. In a region such as Yorkshire however, where much wealth was based on production, shipping and trade in the late medieval period, Noah could more broadly represent both the first artisan and the first merchant, building his Ark before transporting his family and goods to salvation.[91]

The performance of the story of Noah appears to have held a wide-ranging significance, and it is tempting to consider that this was due to the patriarch's appropriation as a model for urban life, and bourgeois devotion. Yet this idea becomes problematic when we consider that the crux of the play concerns the destruction of community beyond the immediate familial household. Scholars have long discussed the blurring of boundaries in the city facilitated in York by the Corpus Christi Cycle, where urban streets and inhabitants become aligned with those of biblical history. If we assume that performance on the streets, or in 'common' areas such as market squares or churchyards, was the norm for the Noah plays, the vice of Noah's world becomes the sin of the contemporary city, and audiences are implicitly 'drowned' through their exclusion from the Ark.[92]

The notion of Noah's Ark as an isolated and self-sufficient entity at first appears to fit with the idea that the patriarch's vessel worked as a representation of the urban paradigm of the craft household, the most basic structure of regulation in towns and cities. In the fifteenth century just as mayors ruled over cities, and aldermen ruled over their wards, husbands were expected to ensure the virtue and good running of their households, exerting authority over their dependents; at the centre of this contemporary civic paradigm lay the 'conjugal relationship between the master and his wife'.[93]

As a unit which isolates itself, though, ultimately in these plays it is made clear that the patriarch and his family must escape the city; they must run not just from the waters which

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[90] See Anna J. Mill, 'The Hull Noah Play', *The Modern Language Review,* 33:4 (1938), 489–505; Patricia Badir, 'The Garrison of the Godly: Anticlericalism and the Performance of Distinction in Early Modern Hull', *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies,* 27:2 (1997), 287–95.
[91] For notes on the region's economy see Sarah Rees Jones, *York, The Making of a City 1068–1350* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 253.
[92] This is noted with regards to York in Richard Beadle and Pamela King ed. *The York Mystery Plays: A Selection in Modern Spelling* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 21; Cami D. Agan, 'The Plateau in the York and Wakefield Cycles: venues for Liminality and Salvation', *Studies in* Philology, 94:3 (1997), 361.
[93] McSheffrey, *Marriage, Sex and Civic*, 138–39.

threaten to overcome them, but also from the urban society which has become infected with sin and vice. Whereas Noah and Uxor's household might represent a civic paradigm, it also ultimately rejects the idea of the city as a collective space, drawing on this shared habitation in order to function. As Gervase Rosser has determined, in this period urban life was based around an interrelated conglomeration of people working alongside each other, and more acutely, involved various overlapping networks of people involved in trade and commerce beyond and including guild and civic structures.[94] In this way, in the Noah plays there is a disjunct between this idea of the isolated Ark – an essential part of the biblical narrative – and the urban experience of communality.

Those Left Behind

In the York *Flood,* Uxor is early to raise her sadness that all her friends are doomed to 'overeflowen with floode' (l. 152), and after the waters have devastated the world with 'wrekis' and woo' (ll. 167–68) Noah comments on this sorrow: 'Dame, all ar drowned, late be thy dyne' (l. 271). Although Noah's attitude is dismissive, there was a certain contemporary interest with the theme of those excluded from the Ark. Whilst the Great Flood was considered inevitable, the conflict staged between Noah and Uxor in these plays in part represents a contemporary tension, between the expectations of urban life – as a communal, inter-personal way of living – and the strictures of the religious narrative. As established, performances such as the Noah plays brought together bourgeois values and religious subjects, but also demonstrate the conflicts inherent in such adaptations – one of which was clearly a concern for those left behind.

In the previous chapter we considered the prominence of the 'drunkenness' scene in various manuscripts depicting the Noah narrative, and in the same texts we can see also this focus on the human remnants of the world before the Great Flood. Looking again to the Holkham Bible, we can observe various depictions of those drowned by the purifying waters: two finely-drawn naked figures, visibly male and limply intertwined, float in the water as the Ark crests the waves above them.[95] The presence of these figures is particularly interesting because it suggests that they held a pedagogical significance: as this manuscript likely acted as a friar's teaching aid, we must wonder what meaning this portrayal held.

Similarly, the Yates Thompson MS clearly shows the dead below Noah on the Ark, having already established their sinful nature in the previous medallion and attached decorative

[94] Gervase Rosser, 'Going to the Fraternity Feast: Commensality and Social Relations in Late Medieval England', *Journal of British Studies*, 33 (1994): 430–446.
[95] See figure 4.

tendrils.[96] In this work the figures of the dead are massed into a grotesque clump of corpses, bodies merging together – in part due to the miniature scale on which the figures are drawn in a small medallion on the page's border. Both manuscript depictions share the familiar figure of the raven, sent out by Noah before the dove and now picking at a dead horse's eye. The fact that they treat the Great Flood not only as a stream of cleansing and purification, but also as a narrative of death and destruction for those who had sinned, suggests that this aspect of the narrative was also of some importance at the time the plays were being staged, and should influence our interpretation of the performances.

In the late medieval period the narrative of the Great Flood, the story of Noah's family escape, is repeatedly told as an abandonment of the city and associated urban spaces. The Noah story seems to have been specifically associated with the idea of civic abandonment, in which the city is presented as an entity ruined by sin. In the Bedford Book of Hours, a manuscript produced in 1423 in France for John Duke of Bedford, we clearly see such grand stone edifices overwhelmed by the flood waters, their numerous inhabitants floating dead in the deluge.[97] A contemporary sermon taken from a popular composite Dominican cycle denotes that the sins which led to the Great Flood were specifically associated with the city – here taken to be lechery:

> For that syn, as we rede in *Genesis capitulo non*o, all the worlde was distroyed withe Noye flode, except Viij personys. This synne was also the cawse of [th]e distruccion of v cyteis that sanke downe into hell, v*t patet Genesis xix*. Also it was the cawse of [th]e distruccion of the citie of Troye and of [th]e cite of Babilon.[98]

In this account, the sins which Noah and his family escape from are the same as those of Troy and Babylon, as well as the other biblical cities fated for destruction. The grouping of these urban spaces here reinforces the idea that in the late medieval period, the sinful world of Noah's contemporaries was understood specifically as a problematic city, primed for destruction. The Noah narrative seems to have been popular due to its call for the rebirth and re-founding of a city, to replace the sinful decay, evoking the kind of rebirth associated with ideas of the 'New

[96] See figure 10.
[97] See figure 23.
[98] 'Sermon 12: Epiphany Octave', *A Late Fifteenth-Century Dominical Sermon Cycle*: *Edited from Bodleian Library MS E. Musaeo 180 and Other Manuscripts*, 2 Vols., ed. Stephen Morrison, EETS 337–38 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), I, 69–70.

Figure 23: The Great Flood, 'The Bedford Book of Hours',
British Library Additional MS 18850, f. 16v. (c.1423).

Troy' so popular in late medieval civic culture.[99] Yet this idea of urban desolation still makes the Noah plays seem an uncomfortable choice for civic drama.

The problem is further played out in the Towneley pageant, as we glimpse the physical destruction caused by the flood waters. Here Noah lists the things now absent from the new world, all destroyed with flood:

> Noah: […] nowder cart ne plogh
> Is left, as I weyn / nowder tre then bogh
> Ne other thing
> Bot all is away;
> Many castels I say,
> Grete townes of aray,
> flit has this flowing.
> (ll. 773–80)

In this passage Noah establishes a hierarchy of sorts, prioritising specifically urban spaces – over rural ones.[100] Beginning with the rural hinterland, Noah describes the missing cart and the plough, tree and bough – evoking images of the countryside as a space of provision for food and timber. The 'castel' he refers to next reflects the various centres of royal administration, placed just behind the centrally important metropolis. To end on the missing 'Grete townes' marks the importance and relevance of these settlements to the producers and the spectators – that they are of 'aray', and not the castles, highlights predominance of civic wealth over other more traditional markers of authority. Yet although Noah appears to privilege the town in this dialogue, he speaks of glorious places which no longer exist – just as the York Uxor mourns for her lost communities, the Towneley Noah reflects on these unfortunate urban spaces.

Jane Tolmie has argued that in these Noah plays Uxor's voice is specifically associated with 'those left behind': the dead, and specifically 'women at the bottom of the hierarchy of discourse'.[101] Tolmie categorises Uxor as a voice of dissent, whose character highlights the potential cruelties of the Great Flood and thus the hidden voices of especially female spectators, subjugated to patriarchal authority but 'raising troubling questions about the exclusionary

[99] See Sylvia Federico, *New Troy: Fantasies of Empire in the Late Middle* Ages (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 1–29.
[100] Scoville has noted that the urban space is recurrently prioritised over the rural in the York Cycle: see Chester Scoville, ' "But owthr in frith or felde": The Rural in the York Cycle', *Comparative Drama*, 37:2 (2003), 175–87.
[101] Tolmie, 'Mrs Noah and Didactic Abuses', 11–12.

premises of everyday life'.[102] Alfred David and Joseph Ricke both argue that Uxor is characterised by dissent, questioning the need for the widespread death that the Great Flood caused.[103] More broadly though, we can read Uxor's sympathy for the dead as sorrow for the death of the urban community, for all those spectators of the play who are left behind in the waters. Moreover, I argue that while Uxor's dissent might represent a concern for those left behind, her fractious discourse with Noah should be read as a means to express and attempt to negotiate tensions between the biblical story of the Great Flood and the specific needs of urban life in the performances.

The Bible and the Town: Negotiating Dissent

In the York pageant of *The Flood*, Uxor voices concern for those who will be left behind, 'commodrys' and 'cosynes' forced to 'bathe' (l. 143). Uxor's speech should not be regarded as simple recalcitrance, as her concerns reflect the wider concerns, or unease, of the majority – whether in the dramatic world of the play itself, or the temporal world of the spectators. Although spectators undoubtedly understood the function of the Great Flood, and its doctrinal significance, Uxor places the scene firmly in a familiar urban context, placing audience members into the world of the performance and questioning why such cosmic events must occur. She rails against Noah in defence of her urban associates, who are now to be drowned.

> Uxor: My frendis that I fra yoode
> Are overeflowen with floode.
> (ll. 151–52)

The linguistic playfulness of the rhyme in this couplet, and the repetition of the long 'o' sound in 'yoode' and 'floode', serves only to briefly mask the reality of the situation – her speech is characterised here by balefulness, set in stark contrast to her previous passion. All of Uxor's acquaintances are fated to be killed, bearing not only social consequences but also economic ones.

It is very clear in the mind of the York Uxor that the town is a beneficial geographical and social site, sheltering and propagating the family household, whilst also fulfilling its needs. In an early response to Noah's command to board the Ark, she calls to her children to leave the vessel

[102] Ibid., 22.
[103] David, 'Noah's Wife's Flood', 105–6; Joseph Ricke, 'Parody, Performance, and the 'Ultimate' Meaning of Noah's Shrew', *Mediaevalia,* 8 (1995), 263–81.

and re-join this civilised world, calling out 'Doo barnes, goo we and trusse to towne' (l. 81). The use of the word 'towne' is very important here, not only as she beseeches her family to re-join the audience at street level, but also as she clearly delineates Noah's newly-built Ark from the urban space. This urban space is safe and also well-ordered, defined against the 'toure deraye' (l. 78) of the Ark: a chaotic space her husband offers as its replacement. Uxor's concerns are of a dislocation from friends and relatives, but also those associations which drove their urban prosperity.

The argument between Noah and Uxor is full of comic bombast and hyperbole, but the reason this section is so ripe with humour is due to the anxiety provoked by the audience's conflicting ideas of the urban space inhabited by the performances. The spectators all come to the pageant with the knowledge that Noah and his family must board the Ark in order to save humanity and flee, but the audience are in effect watching a dramatised history of their own progenitors, and must have acknowledged the inevitability of the dramatised events. Yet this must have conflicted with the more closely civic idea that the urban space should be maintained, not abandoned. Contemporary accounts attest to a drive in the late medieval period for civic governments to cleanse their streets and common land; there was a growing concern for the physical and moral cleanliness in the city, driven in part by the desire of these institutions to consolidate and even broaden their own authority under the designation of civic sanctity.[104]

Although this drive for cleansing and purification seems to share the aims of the Noah performances, importantly the streets of York (of Hull, or Newcastle) were undergoing a drive for reform, not destruction. Late medieval spectators would have considered those left behind, but also the realities of the post-diluvian world: purified, but full of bodies and remnants of the past. If played in an urban environment, the city or town of performance is elided with the sinful world Noah is attempting to flee. The implications of this are masked by the humour of marital arguments, but after they have embarked Uxor's assertions of loss become increasingly poignant.

Uxor: But Noye, wher are nowe all oure kynne
And companye we knewe before?
Noah: Dame, all ar drowned, late be thy dyne,
And sone thei boughte ther synnes sore.
(ll. 269–70)

[104] See Carole Rawcliffe, 'Health and Safety at Work', in *Medieval East Anglia,* ed. Christopher Harper-Bill (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2003), 130–152; also Jeremy Goldberg, 'Pigs and Prostitutes: Streetwalking in Comparative Perspective', in *Young Medieval Women* ed. Katherine J. Lewis (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1999), 172–93.

Now Uxor's fears are fulfilled, and she mournfully questions the location of her 'kynne' and 'companye'. She grieves not only for her family but also for the loss of the urban network in which she had so much vested, breaking civic ties which appear to have been of some importance to her character.

Noah's answer is playfully couched in the language of the marketplace, attempting to distance himself from the town or the city, and express the ultimate authority of religious devotion. That the drowned 'boughte ther synnes sore' reflects the economic ties which Noah is apparently happy to escape. Sin here is expressed as a commercial transaction, in which the inhabitants of the urban space have been overwhelmed by their own immorality, just as they have been overcome by the waters. Yet in this commercial-cum-devotional language, the Noah household has lost out just as much as those who have drowned. Although the small organisational unit of the household played a central role in the civic ideology of order and the bourgeois economy during this period, Uxor's dissenting voice reminds us that these units were in no way supposed to be self-sufficient.

Fitzgerald comments that York Noah's wife clings to the city, and its 'interdependent community of both kin and cohort', in contrast to her husband, who clearly feels little remorse in abandoning it. She suggests that within the plays Noah (like Christ) is 'valorised for his independent masculine work ethic over a communal one…reflecting the ambivalence of guilds to the civic structures imposed upon them'.[105] The extent to which Noah is actually 'valorised' in these pageants, however, is questionable. As we have already established, Noah was a nuanced – and in some ways problematic – figure. If we do not assume that the actions of the patriarch are designed to be unhesitatingly supported by spectators, his isolationist attitude might at least have been opposed, or a least questioned, by some of them.

The 'ambivalence' which the guilds producing the Noah pageants in York had to 'civic structures imposed upon them', which Fitzgerald provides as a justification for the isolated nature of Noah's household, is also less than clear if we consider the wider utility of the plays.[106] Performances were intended to reflect the concerns of the broader urban community of spectators who watched them, as much as the guilds who staged them: we must question the idea that Noah's isolationist attitude was 'valorised', even if it was an inevitable aspect of the biblical narrative. In the pageant, all die except for those on the Ark: importantly it is only Uxor who is not reconciled to this fate, and who attempts to justify and defend the urban space.

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[105] Fitzgerald, *Drama of Masculinity*, 71, 163.

[106] Clifford Davidson offers something of a rebuttal to the idea of guild ambivalence to civic endeavours: see Clifford Davidson, 'York Guilds and the Corpus Christi Plays: Unwilling Participants?', *Early Theatre: A Journal Associated with the Records of Early English Drama,* 9:2 (2006), 11–33.

In Towneley, Uxor shows less concern for her previous acquaintances than her York counterpart does, playing into the sense in which *Noah* focusses more on the marital relationship as domestic entity, rather than a part of a broader community. Yet Noah still mentions those people abandoned to the waters after their dispute, and as in the York play they are painted by his character in a wholly negative light: the 'prowdist of pryde /… that euer was spyde, /With syn' (ll786–89). The alliterative effect of 'prowdist' and 'pryde' here emphasises the moralistic nature of Noah's condemnations, perhaps less easy to accept for spectators who understood that the future would bring the patriarch's own sinful decline. The rhyme of 'pryde' and 'spyde' is partly comic, but reinforces the inevitability of the flood waters, an unstoppable force against urban society.

Noah makes clear than these sinners are all 'slayn' and that they will be judged by God, not returned to life on earth (ll. 790–91, 794–98). Yet still, the dissenting voice of Uxor remains prominent, driving questions over the purpose of such a catastrophe. In both York and Towneley the disputes between Uxor and Noah expose the tensions inherent within mutual investment in both the urban site and in the religious narrative.

The Sobering New Start?

If a tension is played out in these plays between the celebration of civic households and the destruction of the urban sites on which they relied to function, we may ask why the narrative of Noah's Ark was so regularly used in towns and cities. Patricia Badir has suggested that the narrative of the Great Flood was favoured specifically by Hull because it committed to memory an 'insulated, self-contained and close community protected from adversity by virtue of its defences and its godliness'; she considers the city fashioning itself as a garrison where urban inhabitants treated their ark-like city walls as a 'stronghold of the select and godly few'.[107] Although the language of a godly garrison is in some ways specific to Hull, other urban settlements in the North East might easily view themselves in similar terms – the ridings of Yorkshire, as well as the regions of Northumberland and Country Durham had historically been threatened by attacks from the Scots, and had been drawn upon consistently for various militaristic ends.[108]

This reading challenges the ideas of mimetic performance which Beadle and King propose in York, where the audience beyond the staged Ark became those drowned as sinners. Rather

[107] Badir, 'The Garrison of the Godly', 292.
[108] See for example Alastair J. Macdonald, 'John Hardyng, Northumbrian Identity and the Scots', in *North-East England in the Late Middle Ages,* ed. C.D. Liddy and R.H. Britnell (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2005), 29–42.

than promoting an isolationist fantasy of the strength of the individual household, the plays emphasise the importance of urban communities as prosperous and fruitful bulwarks against the outside world. Working against contemporary narratives which marked the sins of the world as particularly rooted in urban sites, these late medieval performances may have provided a means to frame towns and cities as godly spaces. Yet this ignores, to some extent, the discord within Noah's marital relationship which is at the heart of the surviving play-scripts. and the evidence which suggests that the dissenting voice of Uxor played an established role beyond York and Towneley.[109] The brave new start offered by the Great Flood does bear typological associations with baptism: following the deluge the Earth may be read as purified, cleansed and redeemed of its previous sinfulness. Yet the arguments of Noah and Uxor provide a way to dissent from this notion, and to express the tensions within this dream of redemption.

Tolmie talks about the way humour is utilised in the Noah plays as a 'masking element, whereby the implications of the marital dispute – violence and physical abuse – can be obscured and made safe to spectators'.[110] Yet in other ways the humour of these performances exposes tensions within the Great Flood narrative. Noah and Uxor's arguments are only resolved by the unstoppable force of the flood, which – as a catastrophic natural event – is little affected by their quarrelling. Still, this conjugal discord has a probing effect, questioning the implications of the event in distinctly bourgeois terms. The marriage of Uxor and Noah represents an imperfect meeting of the religious narrative of the great Flood - where the patriarch builds an Ark on the instructions of God, and saves his family to form a new civilisation – with late medieval expectations of marital conduct, community, and respect for the prosperity of the urban site.

Neither Noah nor Uxor are presented as purely righteous entities, yet together their explosive relationship offers a discursive means for spectators to consider the Great Flood, and confront the implications it raised. Uxor's voice is in part sympathetic, and Noah's poor conduct as a husband foreshadows what spectators would have known was his inevitable fall, to drunkenness and immorality after the flood. As the play ends, the misgivings raised by these problematic characters are not resolved: instead, audience members are driven to reconsider the narrative in a pragmatic way, and seek out their own model of piety and devotion from this imperfect and shaky ground. Tensions within the Ark are emblematic of tensions in the city; they emerge at the meeting point of these religious narratives and the lived experience of spectators. Perhaps earthly purification is impossible, before the ultimate salvation of Heaven.

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[109] Anna Mill suggests that Noah's wife was probably a popular character in Hull because the actor performing as Uxor was paid a great deal more than the one playing her husband. See Anna J. Mill, 'Noah's Wife Again', *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America,* 56:3 (1941), 624.
[110] Tolmie, 'Mrs Noah and Didactic Abuses', 19.

Chapter 3

'With myrth and gam':

Commerce, Devotion, and the Shepherds Plays

The York *Offering of the Shepherds* and the Towneley *Prima* and *Secunda Pastorum* all narrate the story of the shepherds at the nativity in different ways, based on Luke 2:8–20. Whilst the survival of play-scripts with such a proximate geographical provenance as York and Towneley may be incidental, it is of interest that these specific performance narratives all derive from Yorkshire, a region which played a prominent role in the national wool and cloth trades. The relationship between the areas with which the surviving texts are associated – the city of York, and the West Riding of Yorkshire – is particularly pertinent, as both sites play firmly established roles in the discourse of medieval and early modern economic history in England.

The York *Offering* is undoubtedly the earliest example of these plays, surviving from the period attributed to the composition of the city's Register, 1463–77. From at least the time the Ordo Paginarum had been written (1415) the *Offering* was being staged by the Chandlers, workers of wax in the city – though the form of the play at this stage remains obscure. The Chandlers continued to be responsible for the *Offering* until the formal close of the Cycle in 1569, a production which they shouldered with little cause for remark until 1552 when they required a civic subsidy for the staging, and further financial support in 1563 and again in 1569.[1] In York the *Offering* has been regarded as 'relatively underdeveloped' by Richardson and 'brief and comparatively formal' by Woolf; as Beadle notes, it has generally been considered as a poor relation to the Shepherds plays of Chester and Towneley.[2] It is certainly a far shorter piece, and less studied – though the themes it carries, as well as its well-documented performance history, make it worthy of further investigation.

The Towneley *Prima* and *Secunda Pastorum* on the other hand survive as play scripts of some length. They are often described as being amongst the finest surviving examples of early English drama – especially the latter play, which has traditionally received popular and scholarly acclaim for its use of humour.[3] As the Towneley MS is no longer considered as a record of the

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[1] Richard Beadle, ed. *The York Plays: A Critical Edition of the York Corpus Christi Play as recorded in British Library Additional MS 35290,* 2 Vols., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), II, 108–109.
[2] Christine Richardson, 'The Medieval English and French Shepherds Plays: A Comparative Study of the Dramatic Tradition', Ph.D Thesis (York, 1988), 113; Woolf, *English Mystery Plays,* 183; Beadle, *York Plays* II, 113.
[3] On the popularity of the *Secunda* see Peter Meredith, 'The Towneley Cycle', in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. Richard Beadle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 134-35.

Corpus Christi Cycle of Wakefield, context-specific consideration of both texts has become somewhat difficult.[4] Like the rest of the Towneley plays, the performance history of the *Prima* and *Secunda* is obscure.

In the Bible, or more specifically the Gospel of Luke, whilst watching their flocks the Shepherds are told of Christ's birth and become the first to visit the infant and witness the Son of God's coming. The episode receives brisk treatment in Holy Scripture; the visitation of the angel of the Lord, his speech, the shepherds' decision to visit Christ, and their spreading of the good news are outlined across only thirteen verses. Little characterises the Shepherds before their visitation by the angel, except for their vocation and their movements: not denying the typological importance of pastors, they essentially rear livestock and act as evangelical conduits. The brevity of this account appears to have driven various medieval playwrights to elaborate the narrative for performances, often characterising the shepherds as particularly comic figures.[5]

There is certainly no precedent for this in the Bible, and there is nothing intrinsically humorous about the profession which defines these figures. In the Old and New Testaments, the shepherd often represents a leader of peoples, a director of both temporal and spiritual matters who guides his flock in the ways to God. Christ himself acts as both 'Good Shepherd' (John 10:11), and sacrificial Lamb of God (John 1:29). In the York *Offering of the Shepherds*, and the Towneley *Prima* and *Secunda Pastorum* the protagonists play this serious role, repeating the prophecies of the Old Laws about His coming, and foreshadowing His birth. Yet in each of the plays this image of the shepherds – as patriarchs, prophets, or clerics – is juxtaposed comically with the rustic nature of the figures: people of the countryside, of little learning or manners.

In these three performance texts though, humour plays a substantial role beyond this basic juxtaposition. Again, much is vested in the meeting of the contemporary and biblical, and in this light other popular associations held with shepherds in this period become important. In the first section of this chapter I will consider these plays in the light of the economic realities which such figures represented, both on the streets of York, and in the broader region of the West Riding. Whilst the play-texts have been noted for their comic aspects and literary sophistication, little scrutiny has been given to the wider context of these performance pieces, as evocations of both religious narratives, and lay and bourgeois concerns. My analysis will look to the specific commercial trends in wool and textiles which largely shaped Yorkshire – and the

[4] Barbara D. Palmer, ' "Towneley Plays" or "Wakefield Cycle" Revisited', *Comparative Drama,* 21:4 (1987), 318–48; for a summary of controversy surrounding the manuscript see Peter Happé , *The Towneley Cycle: Unity and Diversity* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007), 1–14.
[5] Muir, *Biblical Drama of Medieval Europe,* 102–104.

lives of those writing, producing, and watching the plays – throughout the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries.

Following this I will consider the plays in relation to another commercial product also associated with the Shepherds at this time, manufactured as part of what might be referred to as the 'craft of devotion'. Certain aspects of all of the plays can be understood as references to objects of considerable thaumaturgical significance known as Agnus Dei amulets: artefacts of popular religiosity which were once ubiquitous, but are now little-known. These items allow us a new way to read both the plays, and the humour within them. They reiterate the importance of York as a major supplier of ecclesiastical and devotional items in the late fifteenth century, and offer an insight into the specific devotional context of Towneley, as a text produced at the heart of the religious controversies of the long Reformation period in England. More than an aesthetic device, in these plays humour was a powerful tool in negotiating the complexities of contemporary devotional cultures.

Section 3.1

Wool, Cloth, and the Shepherds

Far shorter than its Towneley counterparts, the York *Offering of the Shepherds* is a pageant of some 131 lines. Richard Beadle notes that the text, as it survives, is somewhat fragmentary: there is a lacuna around the point where the angel appears to the shepherds, shortening what must already have been a fairly short script.[6] It's possible that the surviving script lacks a great deal more of what would have been present in performances: lines are missing from the Virgin Mary's response to the shepherds, and as it stands the piece does not fully reveal the relationship between the *Offering* and the previous pageant, the *Nativity*, which other records describe.[7] The pageant as we know it is made up of three sections: the first a set of speeches between the three shepherds, prophesying the birth of Christ; the second (from what is currently l.56) consisting of their various responses to the angel, and their journey to Bethlehem; the third presenting their speeches made to the Christ-child.

[6] Richard Beadle, 'An Unnoticed Lacuna in the York Chandlers' Pageant', in *So Meny People, Longages and Tonges: Philological Essays in Scots and Mediaeval English Presented to Angus McIntosh*, ed. Michael Benskin and M. L. Samuels (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981), 229–35.
[7] For speculation on Mary's response and other absences see Beadle, *York Plays,* II, 110–11, 113.

Scholars have tended to focus on the prophesying of the shepherds in the *Offering*, their rustic simplicity, or the typological overtones which they convey.[8] Whilst these are relevant interpretive approaches, a sustained consideration of the *Offering* against the contexts of urban life, civic society and commercial trade has been lacking, despite similar discussion of other York pageants elsewhere.[9] The reasons for this are plain: the *Offering* was produced by the Chandlers, a craft group about which remarkably little is known or recorded. Yet we should not ignore the popular associations likely held by the *Offering* and its eponymous characters.

To contemporary spectators, shepherds would not only have been abstract figures notionally associated with priests or prophets; they were also linked to the real-life workers who farmed a vast hinterland surrounding York at this time. The creatures which they protected – and with which they were associated – fed the roaring trade in wool, and later textiles, which offered perhaps the greatest source of wealth and prosperity in the high to late medieval period.[10] Discussions of the *Offering,* as well as the Towneley *Prima* and *Secunda,* have previously alluded to the context of the wool trade, as well as to the cloth trade which followed it. Yet they have never proceeded to consider the plays' significance within the wider economic framework of late medieval Yorkshire.[11]

Wealth provided by the lucrative wool trade lay at the centre of York's economic flourishing in the later Middle Ages.[12] It resulted in a surge of investment in the region, which notably enriched and further enabled bourgeois devotion during this period. This is perhaps most materially evident in the alterations made to the fabric of parish churches or civic buildings at the time, but it also supported the burgeoning literary production of local devotional works, including the influential writings of Richard Rolle and Nicholas Love, and likely the performance traditions of the area.[13] Considering the importance of wool to York specifically, the *Offering* was necessarily influenced by this broader economic context, as the only pageant of the cycle to feature lengthy allusions to shepherding and sheep.

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[8] Vincente Chacon Carmona, 'Shepherds' and Advent Fast: Liturgical Renewal in English and Castilian Pastoral Drama of the Late Middle Ages', *European Medieval Drama,* 17 (2013), 1–42; Woolf, *English Mystery Plays,* 183; Thomas P. Campbell, 'Why do the Shepherds Prophesy?', *Comparative Drama*, 12:2 (1978), 137–150.

[9] For a recent example see Rice and Pappano, *The Civic Cycles*.

[10] See Adrian R. Bell, Chris Brooks, Paul R. Dryburgh, *The English Wool Market, c.1230–1327* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), esp. 8–9.

[11] See for example Christine Richardson's comparative study of the shepherds plays, 'The Medieval English and French Shepherds Plays', in *Festive Drama: Papers from the Sixth Triennial Colloquium of the International Society for the Study of Medieval Theatre, Lancaster, 13–19 July, 1989,* ed. Meg Twycross (Cambridge: Brewer, 1996), 259–69.

[12] 'The development of the English wool trade and the woolen cloth industry were both fundamental to the growth and prosperity of York.': Sarah Rees Jones, *York: The Making of a City*, 255; Pamela Nightingale, 'The Rise and Decline of medieval York: A Reassessment', *Past and Present* 206 (2010), 8–9.

[13] For a discussion of the breadth and nature of this vibrancy of devotional culture in Yorkshire, see Hughes, *Pastors and Visionaries*, esp. 251–97.

Pastoral Economics

From at least the early thirteenth century York held regional and national eminence as a 'collecting centre' for wool in England: it was at the heart of a large network of producers which stretched over much of northern England, including Yorkshire and much of the North-West. Pamela Nightingale explains that York's prosperity was firmly rooted in this status as a wool hub, with the city's merchants acting as middlemen between producers and alien exporters, trading through Hull and London. This arrangement brought a great influx of coin into the region, which in turn facilitated more local credit and offered the potential for investment in commerce and other projects in the city; it also brought a huge number of potential commercial consumers to the city, as those who came to sell their wool stocks also bought or traded with merchants and artisans in York.[14] Thus through the wool trade merchants and artisans were given access to an extensive market for the distribution of the city's manufactures and imports, such as cloth, leather, metal, glass, and wine, leading crafts to increasingly specialise. This wool network helped to establish York as the premier city of the north of England, adding substantially to its status as the second or third wealthiest urban site in the country.[15]

We should not imagine that this new wealth was entirely vested in the bourgeois, urban laity: it was also felt by local gentry, and the Church. Besides the investment being ploughed into parish churches, hospitals, and monastic institutions by townspeople and local seigniorial figures, Nightingale points out that 'the pattern of clerical investment followed that of mercantile investment', both reflecting the movements of the wool trade.[16] It brought coin into York, and was broadly responsible for the considerable wealth and authority, both religious and secular, vested in the city.

If we look to the rise of York's Corpus Christi celebrations, it is not difficult to conclude that the development of these performative traditions was associated with the pre-eminent position York claimed for itself in the latter half of the fourteenth century. An oft-cited account from the A/Y Memorandum book declares that the Cycle was 'en honour & reuerence nostre-seignour Iesu Crist & honour & profit de [..] la Citee…'.[17] A similar passage appears in the first

[14] Nightingale, 'The Rise and Decline', 8.
[15] Palliser, *Medieval York*, 182–4; for comparative data see Alan Dyer, 'Appendix: ranking lists of English medieval towns', in *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain: Volume I, 600–1540,* ed. D.M. Palliser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 735, 758: York's assessment for taxable wealth by lay subsidy ranked it as the third wealthiest after Bristol in 1334, and second only to London in the Poll Tax 1377, though both figures are somewhat unreliable; for further discussion see Liddy, *War, Politics and Finance,* 11, 207–13.
[16] Nightingale, 'The Rise and Decline', 9.
[17] *REED: York* I, 11; for translation 'in honour and reverence of our lord Jesus Christ and honour and profit of the […] city', see *REED: York* II, 697.

constitution of the city's Corpus Christi Guild, founded around 1408, associated not with the plays but the procession which formed part of the annual festival, defining its public activities as 'ad honorem Dei et civitatis Ebor' (to the honour of God and the city of York).[18] The northern capital was conscious of its position of wealth and authority, and performance traditions were a means of self-identification, reiterating its status both to inhabitants of York, and to those outside of it.

Mervyn James notes that the image of the city promoted through these performances 'helped to extend and confirm the network of contacts with those whose wealth and power made them significant in the external relationships of the community'.[19] The honour of the city was a product of these networks and the prosperity which they offered, but also provided a way to consolidate and assure prosperity. In this sense the performances glorified York as a centre of devotion, and celebrated (and asserted) the city as a tangible nexus of trade. Although not formally associated with the cycle, the Corpus Christi guild contained most of the wealthy wool merchants of York by the early decades of the fifteenth century, making the link between this network and the celebration of Corpus Christi ever more apparent.[20] Through endeavours such as the Corpus Christi Play, York's civic leaders wished to promote the idea that their urban space was a hub of authority, commerce and devotion.

In his work on the treatment of 'the rural' in the cycle, Chester Scoville implicitly draws on the idea of York as an important urban centre, whose leaders and inhabitants utilised the surrounding countryside as a means of self-fashioning. Scoville argues that the York Cycle in general, and the *Offering* in particular, presents the countryside as an uncivilised and wild space, to be tamed by urban order. York is portrayed as the civic ideal of the 'New Jerusalem', or in the case of the *Offering*, Bethlehem.[21] The idea that the cycle was used to fuse the city of York with the lands of the Bible, sanctifying and redefining the spaces within it, has been well established.[22] But focusing on the role of the hinterland in this re-shaping of the city as a site of the Holy Land offers something different. It allows us to reflect on how the pageants of the cycle reflected

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[18] *The Register of the Guild of Corpus Christi in the City of York,* ed. Robert H. Skaife, Surtees Society 57 (Durham: Andrews and Co., 1872), 6, 10.
[19] M.R. James, 'Ritual, Drama, and Social Body in the Late Medieval English Town', *Past and Present*, 98:1 (1983), 12–13.
[20] See Anne F. Sutton, 'The Merchant Adventurers of England: The Place of the Adventurers of York and the North in the Late Middle Ages', *Northern History,* 46:2 (2009), 226–27.
[21] See Scoville, "But owthir in frith or felde": The Rural in the York Cycle', 175–87.
[22] See King, *The York Mystery Cycle*, 141; Stevenson, 'Embodied Enchantments', 91–112; contemporary civic performances carried out this blending more broadly: see Gervase Rosser, 'Urban Culture and the Church 1300–1540', in *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain: Volume I, 600–1540,* ed. D. M. Palliser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 356.

particular civic or craft interests within the city, and also how these performances dealt with the important networks which surrounded and essentially fed the prosperity of this urban space.

The presentation of York as the 'New Jerusalem', and the biblical nature of the pageants more generally, does not preclude the dramatic portrayal of the city as a centre of trade. The craft-based structure of the cycle as a whole gives this comprehensive reading further credence, and the idea that pageants blended the values of devotion with those of trade interests has been well-argued elsewhere. The producers of the cycle sought to project a glorious image of the city, and to define its relationship with those who relied upon it (and who it, in turn, relied upon). We know that York was an important urban centre, whose relationship with a vast hinterland was complex: rural and semi-rural producers both supplied York and were in turn supplied by the city.[23] With this in mind, we can reconsider the York *Offering* to represent both devotional and economic movement. The pageant portrays the journey of three shepherds in pilgrimage to the place of Christ's birth, the Holy City: but it also evokes a movement from 'felles' (l. 34) and fields – sites of wool production – to the central trading hub.

Urban Movements

Movement to the city is a central theme of the *Offering*, following on from Joseph's initial description of Bethlehem in the previous pageant of *The Nativity*, and contrasting against the relatively static action settled by the Holy Family by the end of that production. In *The Nativity* Joseph's words outline the hubbub within the city, but also influx of people into it:

> Joseph: For we haye sought bothe vppe and doune
> Thurgh diuerse stretis in [th]is cite.
> So mekill pepull is comen to towne
> [Th]at we can no nowhare herbered be…
> (York, *Nativity*, ll. 8–11)

Description of the 'diuerse stretis' alludes to a network of travel, through which 'mekill pepull' are coming to the city. In the *Offering* this idea of movement is almost instantly seized upon by the first shepherd, who after calling his brothers to attention begins with the line 'Sen we walke thus, withouten were' (l. 3), both describing their imminent travel, and humble faith in it. Their walking 'withouten were' marks a shift from Joseph's frantic route 'vppe and doune', suggesting

[23] See Rees Jones, *York: The Making of A City,* 235–9.

a change in both purpose and possibility after the birth of the Christ-child – though the shepherds talk from a performance space temporarily estranged from the urban world.

By beginning with the shepherds' prophesies, the York *Offering* differs from the action of the better-known Towneley and Chester 'shepherds' plays, which make much of the comic activity of the eponymous protagonists before the arrival of the Angel of the Lord. The N-Town version of the narrative, by contrast, begins directly with the arrival of the angel. The shepherds of the *Offering* speak of Christ even before the Visitation and have knowledge of both the holy birth and the best route to it: that they must journey to a 'burgh hereby' (l. 13) makes the guiding 'sterne' (ll. 15) somewhat superfluous. The York shepherds anticipate not only the coming of Christ, but also their imminent return to the city:

1 Pastor: And in Bedlem hereby
Sall that same barne by borne.
2 Pastor: Or he be borne in burgh hereby, [...]
(ll. 11–13)

In the interest of rhythm, here the site of the birth – Bethlehem, or York – is mentioned before the coming of the 'barne' himself, and the mention of the more generalised 'burgh' further blurs the boundaries between York and the Holy Land. The effect of this is to site the city as a distant yet dramatically imminent entity, which will be the focus of the shepherds' travels. Whether the path of this journey is to be recognised as a pilgrimage or a trade route – perhaps even both – is unclear.

Where the First and Second Shepherd know of Christ's impending arrival, the Third Shepherd still sees it as a distant prospect. Reflecting the most pervasively comic attitude present throughout the York Cycle, the Third Shepherd sharply shifts the focus of the audience from the divine to the mundane or every-day, through his own anticlimactic speech:

3 Pastor: I have herde say, by that same light,
The children of Israell shulde be made free,
The fore of the feedne to felle in fighte,
And all his pouer excluded shulde be
Wherefore, brether, I rede that wee
Flitte faste overe thees felles
To frayste to fynde oure fee

And talke of sumwhat ellis.
(ll. 29–36.) [24]

The Third Shepherd's words move swiftly from prophesy to harsh practicality, the concern for his sheep or 'fee' (l. 35) overcoming his anticipation of Christ. The incongruity expressed here is clearly comic, the half-rhyme of 'rede' and 'fee' highlighting the contrast of his role as prophet and as sheep herdsman. This is perhaps the only moment in the *Offering* when the practicalities of shepherding – the care of livestock – are actually mentioned, and it is important that the reference is placed in comic contrast with the other shepherds' speeches. His assertion that they should find their sheep and 'talke of sumwhat ellis' is dissonant with the way they have been previously characterised.

Again the humour of these lines relies on the value of conscious anachronism, appreciated by spectators. Whereas the presence of shepherds as patriarchs – from Abel to Joseph, Moses and Isaac – was well established in Scripture, the bleeding of contemporary characterisation into the performance highlights a certain incongruity between the biblical narrative and present time. The portrayal of the Third Shepherd as a modern-day rustic, apparently contrasted with his prophetic partners, encourages audience members to re-evaluate their own idea of the narrative.

The comic turn of the Third Shepherd's speech also represents a possible deviation from the route which he and his companions will ultimately follow to the Christ-child. His words invoke movement, but rather than to 'burgh' or 'Bedlem', his call to 'flitte fast overe these felles' is disruptive. The alliterative quality of this line highlights the speed of travel, but also the potential farcicality of the Third Shepherd's plans: his intention for them to 'flitte' is juxtaposed with the steady 'walke' which his companion proposes. An intention to avoid the centre and move further into the 'felles' not only poses the problem of his failure to reach Christ, but also his failure to acknowledge the importance of the city.

Scoville has noted that in the York *Offering*, and in the cycle more generally, there is an attitude towards the rural which is 'both suspicious and colonizing', the pageants clearly distinguishing the city from the uncivilised wasteland that lies beyond its bounds. The fields of the shepherds are distinctly non-urban, justified and ordered only by their association with the city.[25] But further than this, the location which the shepherds inhabit is presented in the pageant only as a transient space, 'flitte' as the third shepherd suggests, whose existence is defined only by its position on the route to the city. The unwillingness to establish a network to the urban

[24] My emphasis.
[25] Scoville, 'The Rural in the York Cycle', 175–77.

centre, which it must properly look to as central and superior, is a commercial issue as much as a devotional one.

The characterisation of York as an urban centre, defined against a rural hinterland, is clearly a feature of the plays. But it also reflects the experience of York's inhabitants, living in a site which had undergone intense urban development by the time the pageants were performed. Sarah Rees Jones argues that the various civic building projects and the increasing density of living and commercial spaces between 1100 and 1330, especially the extensive rebuilding of public buildings and fortifications in stone, 'conformed to contemporary ideals of what it meant to be a city', and 'provided a powerful new urban landscape, defined visually, administratively, and culturally as urban in relation to the surrounding countryside'.[26] Both Scoville and Rees Jones agree with D.M. Palliser that 'town and hinterland were linked and complementary rather than opposed' in this period.[27] But in terms of the city's identity, York defined itself against the rural or semi-rural spaces which surrounded it, evoking contemporary ideas of 'romanitas' and the New Jerusalem, and using both classical and biblical ideals to project a model of urban civilisation.[28]

After the Visitation, the First and Second Shepherd again repeat that they will journey to 'Bedlam'(l. 73) or 'the burgh' (l. 87) to visit the babe. The Third Shepherd's reluctance is now clearly placated, as his faith in their journey is restored: 'Hym for to fine has we no drede' (l. 79). In establishing this link between their pastoral land and the city, the shepherds make a return to the urban streets which spectators would have anticipated since the last pageant: movement to and from the site of Christ's birth consciously sets the route of travel at the forefront of the performance.

Beadle has suggested that the *Offering* was staged on a wagon representing the countryside, the journey to Bethlehem indicated by the actors walking to the wagon previously used by the Tilethatchers' *Nativity*, presumably settled nearby.[29] Stepping down from their own wagon to join the Nativity scene, the shepherds make the journey from country to city, the byways of York becoming the streets of Bethlehem. In this transition the urban space is clearly prioritised, but it is placed at the centre of the shepherds' journey, not the end of it. Once they have visited the Christ-child's bedside the shepherds go 'hame agayne' (l. 130) spreading the word of his birth far and wide, a journey mirroring the commercial movements into and out of the city.

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[26] Rees Jones, *York: The Making of A City,* 238.
[27] Scoville, ' The Rural in the York Cycle', 175; Rees-Jones, 235–6; see David Palliser, *Tudor York* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 1–2.
[28] For the idea of 'romanitas' as a contemporary civic model, see Rees Jones, *York: The Making of A City,* 238; for York as Jerusalem in the Corpus Christi Cycle see Scoville, 'The Rural in the York Cycle', 184–5.
[29] Beadle, *York Plays*, II, 114.

Wool, Shepherds and Decline

York's position as a central hub of the wool trade, and the economic investment which this brought to this city had a profound effect on the Corpus Christi Cycle. But it may be that the fall of this system also had an important impact on the plays. Precisely when York's late medieval economy began to go into decline is a matter of considerable debate, closely intertwined with conflicting accounts of the city's wealth over the fifteenth century, as well as the widescale commercial shift from woollen to cloth export in England during this period. Historians have broadly established that during the early fourteenth century the wool trade in York suffered for a variety of reasons: a large scale famine hit across England around 1315–22, leading to a much reduced countryside population; wars between France and Flanders, as well as the Flemish civil war, made exports more difficult to manage; the repeated military incursions of the Scots into Yorkshire put a strain on wool production.[30] As a result, many merchants in York appear to have lost their wealth: from 1322–63 the mayoralty was dominated instead by those with landed wealth. In the lay subsidy of 1334, few of York's taxpayers appear to be merchants, and only two were wool exporters, compared to fifty-six in 1298–1305.[31]

From the mid-fourteenth century the economic nature of York shifted again, not least due to the major social upheaval caused by the Black Death. Whilst York continued to act as a kind of hub for the export of wool, the Crown's ban on this trade from 1352–57, and the rise in competition from merchants from ports such as Hull, led to a diversification into the cloth trade.[32] For a number of years the historical consensus, led by Bartlett and Miller, was that the emergence of the cloth trade in the late fourteenth century bought a new economic flourishing to York which lasted until the beginning of the sixteenth century.[33] The idea that cloth brought a new wealth and renewed civic prestige to the city has influenced the study of the York Cycle, as it is assumed that the performances arose from a period of renewed confidence in the urban

[30] See Nightingale, 'The Rise and Decline', 12–13; Mark Ormrod, 'York and the Crown under the First Three Edwards', *The Government of Medieval York: Essays in Commemoration of the1396 Royal Charter,* ed. Sarah Rees Jones, Borthwick Studies in History Series, 3 (York: University of York / Borthwick Institute of Historical Research, 1997), 14–33.
[31] Nightingale, 'The Rise and Decline', 13.
[32] See Jenny Kermode, 'Northern Towns', *Cambridge Urban History: Volume I, 600–1540*, ed. D. M. Palliser, 678–79; Nightingale, 'The Rise and Decline', 19–20.
[33] J. N. Bartlett, 'The Expansion and Decline of York in the Later Middle Ages', *The Economic History Review*, Second Series, 12:1 (1959), 17–33; E. Miller, 'Medieval York: The Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries', in *VCH: The City of York*, ed. P.M. Tillot (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 34–37.

economy: although there was an economic slump, the so-called 'Northern Capital' weathered it well.[34]

In recent years certain scholars have reassessed how detrimental the loss of the wool trade was to the city's economic fortunes. In an extensive study of debt certificates over the late thirteenth to sixteenth centuries, Nightingale has convincingly argued that the rise in the cloth trade did little to mitigate York's economic decline. Whereas once York merchants had acted as middlemen between the wool taken from wealthy rural landowners, and buyers from overseas, the upheaval of the mid-fourteenth century caused a shift from dealings with large-scale demesne wool farmers to small-scale flocks managed by peasants, who worked their land as tenants. This meant that not only did the wool quality generally go down (due to a loss of trade expertise), but also credit. Large landowners could afford to trade their wool for credit to wool merchants, who in turn brought back profits after trade overseas; but peasants sold to local woolmen or 'broggers', who collected and brought the product into towns, and expected instant payment for it.[35]

By 1377 York had a huge population dedicated to the cloth trade, and the rise in numbers of freemen, as well as a surge in city's populace, have in many cases been taken as signs of heightened prosperity. But although this change in the direction of commercial interests did bring wealth to York, it was spread across a larger range of people, rather than vested in a smaller mercantile elite – incomes on average remained smaller. The cloth trade involved more traders and artisans in the production chain than the trade in wool: money passed from wool producers to the broggers who sold their wares, and then to anyone from carders and spinners to tailors who worked the wool into cloth for sale. Although wealth was spread wider, fewer people commanded the kind of profits which allowed for large-scale investment in the city, which, taken alongside reduced access to credit, and increased competition from elsewhere in the region, led to a general decline.

Even at their highest, the value of cloth exports were worth less than a quarter than wool had been.[36] York, and other long-established urban centres in Yorkshire such as Beverley, Hull, and Scarborough, were losing out to competition from towns in the West Riding, which were beginning to trade directly with London as an exporter, bypassing the network at which York

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[34] For an outline of this see Pamela M. King, 'The York and Coventry Mystery Cycles: A Comparative Model of Civic Response to Growth and Recession', *Early Theatre: A Journal Associated with the Records of Early English Drama,* 22:1 (1997), 21–22.

[35] Nightingale, 'The Rise and Decline', 3–42, esp. 4, 32–33. It is interesting to note that the Woolmen are attributed to producing a play of the York Cycle with a similar focus on travel networks and movement, *The Travelers to Emmaus*, though the production history of the pageant is unclear, and the Woolmen are unlikely to have produced it from the beginning of the fifteenth century.

[36] Nightingale, 'The Rise and Decline', 39.

had previously been the heart.[37] Although it is unclear how much of this would have been felt by the inhabitants of York, it is likely that a reduction in civic investments, coupled with an expanded population, was noticed. Indeed, Nightingale links the rise in general dissatisfaction with the city's economic position to the uprisings of the 1380s, and discontent with the wealthy merchants who were no longer in the ascendancy.[38] Economic activity continued in York, but the wealthy trade at the heart of its prosperity was gone, and smaller rivals nearby competed as centres of manufacturing and trade. The city remained in steady decline and it was increasingly side-lined over the course of the fifteenth century.[39]

Rather than being rooted in a time of renewed prosperity, I argue that the growth of the York Cycle was at least in part a response to this period of economic decline for the city. As an expression of York as an idealised city, the plays served to shore up civic pride in the face of failing economic importance. The role which the cycle held in honouring the city, as mentioned above, was visible in both the form of the plays (staged by and therefore showcasing a large number of the city's crafts) and their content. Although York had lost its central source of wealth through the decline of the wool trade, it was still the devotional centre of the region, and used this identity as a means to reassert the prestige and authority of the city.

We know that the performances of the Corpus Christi Play drew in large numbers of spectators, the festival acting as a major event of devotion and entertainment. That the number of people making this journey to York to some extent consolidated or re-traced the old trade networks, and re-established the city as some kind of nexus, is worth consideration throughout the plays. As we know the script was written down in the 1460s or 1470s, we may rest assured that the text which survives arises from a context of urban commercial decline, surely keenly felt by producers and spectators of the pageants alike. The York *Offering*, the pageant of the cycle most associated to the wool trade through the shepherds within it, imaginatively positions the city yet again as a central entity. Their movements elide former commercial trade routes with new routes to devotion, and to Christ.

In her brief analysis of the York *Offering*, Woolf considers the major themes of the shepherds' speeches of adoration to be: 'regret for their poverty and simplicity, an affectionate delight in the Christ-Child as a baby, and a faith in His power'.[40] This first note, on the humbleness and simplicity of the shepherds, is largely unavoidable in any consideration of the

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[37] Palliser, *Medieval York,* 234–5; Kermode, 'Northern Towns', 676–7.
[38] Nightingale, 'The Rise and Decline', 24.
[39] Jennifer Kermode, 'The greater towns 1300–1540', in *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain: Volume I, 600–1540,* ed. D.M. Palliser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 454; Palliser, *Medieval York*, 235–6; Rees Jones, *York: The Making of A City,* 257.
[40] Woolf, *English Mystery Plays,* 184.

play, especially when compared with the wealth of the Magi and Herod's court, which were staged in the next pageant of the cycle. Yet these professions of poverty and simplicity – traditional models of Christian humbleness and faith – are matched by a keen interest in money and commerce in the play script. This begins when the Second Shepherd declares that at his birth, Christ 'with his blissid bloode he shulde us by' (l. 19), redeeming that which has been lost. The use of 'b[u]y' here is interesting for the way it turns the holy blood into an item to be traded for renewed prosperity. Although the blurring of commercial and sacrificial language is not uncommon in this context, against the backdrop of the economic decline of York the works take on a new meaning. Christ with his Crucifixion will pay for the sins of the world, but here he is playfully turned into an active trader, rather than a product to be sacrificed for sale.

The idea that Christ will 'by' back the sins of humankind in a grand act of redemption is reinforced later in the text when the shepherds gather around the newborn babe. Aside from the acts of gift giving, which may be interpreted as trade activities, the language used by the shepherds implores Christ to offer them favour and facilitate change.

1 Pastor: And whenne ye shall welde all,
Gud Sonne, forget noght me
Yf any fordele falle.
(ll. 105–7)

2 Pastor: And whan ye shall be Lorde in land,
Dose good agayne, and forget me noght,
For I have herde declared
Of connyng clerkis and clene
That bountith askis rewarde,
Now watte ye what I mene.
(ll. 114–19)

These requests to Christ may be considered in purely spiritual or pastoral terms – the characters are shepherds after all, wishing the infant Christ to care for them as they care for their sheep. The suggestion that Christ will 'welde all' and 'be Lorde in land' demonstrates the authority which the shepherds vest in him as a figure of the centre, not the periphery. But rather than praising who he is and what he will do for the world more generally, the shepherds, perhaps strangely in a pageant with such universal meaning, focus keenly on their own interests. The

request repeated by both shepherds that Christ should 'forget noght me' and 'forget me noght' stresses their individual identity, perhaps pointing to the role of the Christ-child as a key intercessor, by whom to access God in intimate terms. Yet they seem to also call for a boost in trade. The First Shepherd's request 'forget noght me / Yf any fordele falle' sounds as much like a business proposition as a call for salvation, with 'fordele' denoting benefit or profit, resonant of worldly rather than spiritual aid. It paints the messiah as a figure who will bring new wealth or trade to those who support him. Mixing ideas of economic prosperity with devotion, this is certainly reinforces the argument that the York Cycle was a dramatic means to bolster and further the city's reputation, as a centre for both religion *and* trade.

The final two lines of the Second Shepherd's speech are equally suggestive of an economic agenda. In spelling out that 'bountith askis rewarde', it is unclear whether the shepherd is actually propositioning the newborn Christ to offer him something in exchange for the 'two cobill notis uppon a bande' (l. 112) he has given as a gift, or if he sees Christ as a bounty which asks compensation from the world. The addition of the final line 'Nowe watte ye what I mene' in this context appears abrupt, and even vulgarly comic – the language of trade and barter appears before the Christ child, whose new existence becomes a promise for new prosperity and wealth.

Amongst this anticipation of new redemption and prosperity, the tone of the pageant, although looking forward to the coming of Christ, is nevertheless nostalgic. As the pageant opens with prophesies of the Old Testament, the shepherds begin by looking backwards. This typological mood is made less abstract by their designation of the patriarchs as 'formefadres' or forefathers (l. 5), their own ancestors: rather than just rustics on a hillside, the shepherds are ennobled and redefined by the past. The shepherds are of prosperous and venerable stock, fallen on hard times: the First Shepherd's claim that though he be 'but a simple knave', he comes from a 'curtayse kynne', and the Second Shepherd readily asserts that he is 'ovir poure to make presande' (l. 110). These comments are resonant of York's repeated pleas of poverty to the Crown from 1442, and the fall of the wool merchants, cut from their former prosperity.[41]

The poverty of the shepherds is also represented comically through their gifts – a 'barren' brooch (l. 103), two hazelnuts on a band (l. 112), and a horn spoon big enough for 'fourty pese' (ll. 124–25). But they are nevertheless great men fallen on hard times, looking forward to the future which Christ will bring. In the *Offering* York is re-established as a central hub, an urban space which draws in the outside world, to be enriched and sanctified. The shepherds of York have visited the city, and gained their promise of credit for new prosperity in the birth of Christ.

[41] See Kermode, *Medieval Merchants: York, Beverley and Hull in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, 61–62; Palliser, *Medieval York,* 238.

Fulfilling their route from urban space, they go 'hame agayne / and make mirthe' (ll. 130–31), re-walking the route of trade now imbued with this new devotional impetus.

By the time the *Offering* was recorded in the Register York had reached a point of decline which was likely clear to audiences of the plays. Even if the cloth trade gave the image of prosperity in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, by at least the 1450s the economy bore clear signs of stagnation. Yet the *Offering* leaves us with an optimistic anticipation of change, not dejection at the loss of commerce. Up until the mid-fifteenth century a small number of York wool merchants continued to trade, gleaning considerable wealth from this traditional form of commerce.[42] Several mayors of York were wool traders, and a number of York merchants became mayor of the Wool Staple in Calais. This may have led to a hope that the former hub of the wool trade would regain its position, on which the city's prosperity had largely relied. Yet where wealth was still being drawn from wool it was far more limited and vested in fewer people, who diversified into the export of leather, wine, and other items to continue to prosper.[43]

Inhabitants of York would no doubt have been aware of this decline, even those not directly involved in civic governance or mercantile trade. After various attempts to re-invigorate the trade in wool for York throughout the early fifteenth century, Nightingale points to an event of 1454 as a 'mortal blow' to the trade: in May of that year the garrison at Calais seized all of the wool stocks in the port after a dispute over unpaid wages. It appears that whereas the London merchants had been warned of this impending seizure, those of York had invested heavily in exports to the town, and suffered the worst hit. Due to the precarious balance of credit necessary to the trade, after 1455 wool exports through Hull from York merchants floundered, and never recovered.[44] Recorded only one or two decades after this disaster, the York *Offering* speaks of what the wool trade had once offered to the city, and how the urban space had suffered at its loss. Ultimately though the pageant asserts that through devotional practice and the re-establishment of York as Bethlehem or the New Jerusalem the city's fortunes could be lifted and renewed, just as all humankind was renewed through the coming of Christ.

Shifting Prosperity

Following Nightingale, we can link the Corpus Christi Cycle in York – or at least the late-fifteenth century play-scripts – to the city's decline, rather than its economic flourishing. The *Offering* can be read as a reflection of this: it is a pageant of suffering and loss in terms of wealth

[42] Nightingale, 'The Rise and Decline', 39.
[43] Kermode, *Medieval Merchants*, 169.
[44] Nightingale, 'The Rise and Decline', 34.

and topography, both spiritual and earthly. But it anticipates the return to the city, through Christ. York's fall is rarely mentioned without reference to the almost simultaneous rise of towns in the West Riding of Yorkshire, due to their new participation in the cloth trade. Again, the formerly-accepted narrative that the 'villages' of this region sapped away York's wealth has been questioned: Palliser makes clear that the shift to cloth-making in the West Riding must be set alongside a plethora of other detrimental circumstances, including national recession beginning at the start of the fifteenth century, and increasing exclusion of English merchants in the Baltic by the Hanse after 1402. Coin was in short supply after the closure of the Calais mint in 1404, reducing its value to around one fifth of what it had been in 1350, and severely limiting credit.[45] In Yorkshire specifically, an agrarian crisis hit from 1438–40, with harvest failures and resultant epidemics and famine.[46] This was only made worse again by a mid-fifteenth century economic slump, hitting London in the 1440s and spreading beyond, reducing trade, employment, and mercantile credit in York and elsewhere.[47]

Although the country and the region were all suffering, in relative terms York was in decline, alongside the once-dominant towns of the East (including Hull and Beverley), to the benefit of the West Riding.[48] As Kermode states, older urban centres were being outpaced by smaller towns including Wakefield, Barnsley, Bradford, and Leeds, and by 1478 West Riding mills outstripped all other northern producers. In a major shift, the fifteenth century saw cloth production become as important to urban success and prosperity as trade.[49] The new prosperity of the West Riding fits well with specific associations of the region with the plays of the Towneley MS. Previously the surviving scripts of this manuscript were linked to Wakefield for a variety of reasons, though recent studies have suggested that there is no real evidence that the plays represent a coherent lost 'mystery cycle' for the town.[50] With this shift in scholarly opinion, the conclusions of scholarship on the 'Wakefield Cycle' should not be rejected outright.

Christine Richardson's comparative work on the shepherds in performances in England and France is a far-reaching and useful study which creates a picture of the late medieval shepherd in terms of contemporary recognition, which draws on the relevance of commerce and the cloth trade. Richardson's idea that the York *Offering* is a 'relatively underdeveloped' and 'un-

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[45] Palliser, *Medieval York,* 236–7; Nightingale, 'The Rise and Decline', 35.
[46] A.J. Pollard, 'The North-Eastern Economy and the Agrarian Crisis of 1438–40', *Northern History*, 25 (1989), 88–105.
[47] Palliser, *Medieval York,* 237.
[48] See Bruce M.S. Campbell, 'Benchmarking Medieval Economic Development: England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, c.1290', *The Economic History Review*, 61:4 (2008), 938, cited in Rees Jones, *York: The Making of A City,* 254.
[49] Kermode, 'Northern Towns', 675–77.
[50] See Palmer, '"Towneley Plays" or "Wakefield Cycle"', 335. For a brief discussion see Philip Butterworth, 'The Bible and the Towneley Plays of Isaac and Iacob', in *Staging Scripture: Biblical Drama, 1350–1600*, ed. Peter Happé and Wim Hüsken (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 106–108.

individualised' play, due to the fact that by the early fifteenth century 'the shepherd was no longer a figure that excited local interest or reflected local activity and pride' in the region, requires further scrutiny.[51] Indeed, I suggest that in late fifteenth-century York shepherds still bore an important value to producers and spectators of the city's Cycle; the difference between this pageant and the more lengthy *Prima* and *Secunda Pastorum* has far more to do with the later recording of the Towneley plays.

York remained an important economic power in Yorkshire after 1450, and even produced nearly twice as much cloth as any other town in the region until the end of the fifteenth century.[52] But still, where York's economy was falling, prosperity was felt in the region elsewhere.[53] Although Wakefield is no longer considered to be the definitive origin for the plays of the Towneley MS, scholars have generally agreed that the surviving works did likely originate in the West Riding of Yorkshire. This means that, as in Richardson's work, we can still draw associations between the shepherds in these plays, and the real-life figures directly involved in providing for the cloth economy of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The Towneley shepherds differ wildly from those in the York *Offering*, but to find a plausible reason for this we may look again to the significance of the hinterland which the figures inhabit, and their relationship to the holy city of Bethlehem, read as an idealised urban centre.

It is important to note that in both the Towneley *Prima* and *Secunda Pastorum*, the most marked contrast to the York *Offering* is the position of the shepherds as figures who really inhabit the non-urban space, and do not look immediately to Christ. Rather than beginning with the prophesies of Jesus' coming, as in the *Offering,* individual characterisations of the Towneley shepherds are developed further: their lives, mores, and working conditions are brought into focus. The *Prima* begins with a long speech from the First Shepherd concerning the changeable weather – 'Now in hart, now in heyll, / now in weytt, now in blast" (ll. 7–8) – social injustice and poverty, and pestilence suffered by his sheep ('The rott has theym slone': l.38). This is directly followed by a speech from the Second Shepherd similarly complaining of the ills which beset him, and the entrance of the Third Shepherd in conversation with the first two. The character of Jak Garcio, the boy, brings a festive element to the production, before the shepherds sit down to their much-discussed feast.[54] It is not until line 296 that the angel appears, and the shepherds begin to talk of Jesus and his birth.

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[51] Richardson, 'The Medieval English and French Shepherds Plays'*,* 114.
[52] Palliser, *Medieval York,* 238.
[53] Kermode, 'Northern Towns', 675–77.
[54] See for example Suzanne Speyser, 'Dramatic Illusion and Sacred Reality in the Towneley *Prima Pastorum'*, *Studies in Philology,* 78:1 (1981), 1–19.

A very similar model is followed in the *Secunda*, beginning with long speeches in which the First, Second and Third Shepherds consecutively complain of their lives and conditions, before arguing together: 'Peasse, boy, I bad. No more ianglyng, / Or I shall make the full rad' (ll. 252–53). Here the shepherds are clearly portrayed as comic characters, their complaints semi-serious, but their dialogue projected towards the audience. Much has been written on the possible devotional meaning of the shepherds' speeches and arguments, though at some level, this dialogue should be read as means to engage and entertain spectators.[55] Instead of Jak Garcio, following the speeches of the shepherds and their arguments comes Mak, an untrustworthy figure whose profession is undefined. After casting some kind of spell over the shepherds, Mak steals a sheep, and what follows is a parody of the Adoration, where his wife Gyll swaddles the beast and claims it as her own child.[56]

The couple's ruse is rumbled by the shepherds amongst considerable comic activity, and only after this extensive comic episode does the angel appear (l. 920). Many view the Towneley 'shepherds' plays, especially the *Secunda*, as masterpieces of early theatre, mostly for their intelligent pacing, and the blend of low humour with high drama.[57] Much of this is achieved through the space afforded to the shepherds at the beginning of both plays, where each is distinctly characterised. In the York *Offering* the First and Second Shepherds are generally indistinguishable, with some comic dissent from the Third Shepherd. The narrative is driven swiftly away from the countryside and towards the city, and Christ. The Towneley shepherds, on the other hand, are more fully realised as individuals with their own distinct concerns and identities: their lives in the countryside resonate within the central biblical narrative, though they are estranged from it. Here the lives of the shepherds, and the hinterland they inhabit, are worthy of consideration, even celebration.

The *Prima* and the *Secunda* focus on the environment in which the shepherds live, rather than drawing our attention directly to the urban space, as in York.[58] Complaints about the weather and of the harshness of the fields which the shepherds inhabit are prominent elements at the beginning of both plays, likely delivered to comic effect.[59] In the *Prima* the First Shepherd

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[55] See for example Campbell, 'Why Do the Shepherds Prophecy?', 137–50; or William M. Manly, 'Shepherds and Prophets: Religious Unity in the Towneley *Secunda Pastorum'*, *Publications of the Modern Language Association,* 78:3 (1963), 151–55.

[56] For an overview of scholarly interpretation see Lois Roney, 'The Wakefield *First* and *Second Shepherds* Play*s* as Complements in Psychology and Parody', *Speculum*, 58:3 (1983), 696–723, esp. 714–17.

[57] For an overview see or Lawrence J. Ross, 'Symbol and Structure in the *Secunda Pastorum*,' *Comparative Drama,* 1 (1967), 122–43.

[58] For discussion of the environment in an ecological sense, and of enclosure in the Towneley plays, see Lisa J. Kiser, "Mak's Heirs: Sheep and Humans in the Pastoral Ecology of the Towneley *First* and *Second Shepherds' Plays*', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology,* 108:3 (2009), 336–59.

[59] For a discussion of this in a broader European context, see Vincente Chacon Carmona, 'Landscape and Environment in Medieval Shepherds' Plays', *European Medieval Drama*, 14 (2010), 137–46, esp. 139–40.

talks of 'heyll [...] weytt [...] blast' and 'rane'(ll. 7–8), as well as the difficulty of his life. Similarly the First Shepherd of the *Secunda* talks of 'cold'(l. 1), 'stormes and tempest'(l. 10), before describing his own personal troubles. Importantly this difficult environment is described more fully than the single reference to 'felles' in the *Offering*; the shepherds 'walkys on the moore'(l. 15), their 'landys lyys falow' (ll. 20–21), and they 'sytt in a stone' (l. 74). Continuing into the play, the Third Shepherd makes reference to 'feyldys'(ll. 193, 243), 'corne' (l. 259) and 'the moore' (ll. 15, 295), again evoking the physical presence of the countryside.

Although the descriptions of the pastoral environment arise only vaguely, they have a clear position in the dialogue, and place the shepherds in a firm geographical space. After the First Shepherds' description of the weather in the *Prima*, the Second Shepherd makes a passing reference to 'plogh and wane'(l. 90) before asking if his companion is 'in this towne' (l. 127). His comment recalls the urban space, but only as a geographical marker: he is a figure passing by, moving through the region. His claim that 'Poore men ar in the dyke' (l. 135) again roots the characters in the countryside, as the First Shepherd goes on to talk about 'pasture' (l. 153), 'plane' (l. 167) and 'myln whele' (l. 182). The men clearly inhabit a non-urban space: just as in the *Secunda* they only begin to walk to Bethlehem after their position in the countryside is firmly – and comically – established.

Although the shepherds in both plays complain, their complaints are comic. The nature of the feast in the *Prima*, and the episode of Mak and Gyl in the *Secunda*, are clearly designed to rouse laughter. The space they inhabit is elevated through the humour of the plays: it becomes less miserable, dreary and windswept, and more a place of comic elaboration, distinct from the urban centre. This celebration of the hinterland draws an interesting contrast to the York *Offering*, where all focus is given to the city. In both of the Towneley plays the action lingers in this rural space, making none of the same references to the Bethlehem as a 'burgh' nearby, or any other imminent city site. In proportion to York, the Towneley plays both give very little space to the adoration of Christ, and far more to the so-called 'secular' antics of the shepherds themselves. This development of the shepherds demonstrates a willingness to celebrate these workers, whose toils and escapades are somehow vindicated and sacralised by the Christ-child.

Celebrating the Hinterland

This focus on the space which the shepherds inhabit in the countryside has important implications for our interpretation of the plays. Whereas in the *Offering* York is positioned as both Bethlehem and an important trade nexus, blending spiritual and commercial identities, in

both Towneley plays the local importance and prestige of the city is less keenly stressed. This perhaps reflects a crucial difference in the success of York, through the wool trade, and the towns of the West Riding, in the cloth trade: where the former had held (and attempted to retain) a position as a commercial hub in the lucrative industry, the latter were not centres of mercantile activity, but of production. As producers, not merchants, their goods were sent directly to London for trade further afield.

Where once wool had been transported to the city of York from as far as Westmorland, from as early as the 1360s West Riding merchants were trading cloth directly with Londoners, acquiring the 'credit, coin and raw materials' which allowed them to 'bypass' York.[60] York may have lost its position as a hub, but the towns of the West Riding did not take it over. By the late 1470s these cloth manufacturing boroughs had 'assumed from York's exporters the chief responsibility for bringing coin into the region, but only through transportation of their goods for sale in the capital'.[61] At this point in the fifteenth century London, with more access to bullion and credit, became the unrivalled hub of trade in England. We may locate the important shift of these commercial systems in the plays. In the Towneley *Prima* and *Secunda*, representing the West Riding towns, the image of the idealised city or Bethlehem is figured as a distant urban centre, removed from the shepherds' own home, much like London. In the *Offering* a hierarchy is established whereby the city is marked as superior, the heart of the network of trade being travelled by the shepherds. But in Towneley it is the hinterland which is celebrated.

In York the coming of the Christ-child offers both salvation and a solution to the city's problems, imagined as the re-emergence of the urban site as a centre of trade. In Towneley, this city which the shepherds must travel to is London – and the portrayal of their relationship with the urban centre is entirely different. This is perhaps alluded to early in the *Secunda* at the arrival of Mak, where the character adopts the voice of 'a yoman //…of the kyng' (ll.291-92) who threatens to have the shepherds 'thwang' (l.307) or flogged if they do not follow his bidding. Although none of those gathered are fooled by the pretense, calls for Mark to 'take outt that sothren tothe' (l.311) suggest that he was using a false southern English accent to evoke ideas of mastery. This is a comic moment, but it clearly establishes that for the shepherds such authority remains vested entirely outside of the local region, somewhere beyond their reach.

At the close of the *Offering* pageant in York, the shepherds offer gifts to Christ while exhorting him to remember them, allowing them to act like free traders negotiating with the babe for spiritual and commercial aid, and calling for a restoration of that which has been lost. In

[60] Palliser, *Medieval York,* 234–5; Nightingale, 'The Rise and Decline', 40.
[61] Nightingale, 'The Rise and Decline', 36.

the *Prima*, the shepherds talk only of being granted the grace to see God; they praise him, but are in no position to negotiate. After all of their complaints at the beginning of the play, the Virgin offers only vague assurances that Christ will 'rewarde' them with 'good grace', a speedy return, and 'good endyng' (ll. 703, 708, 710–711). These references to 'spede' and 'endyng' mark the urban site as the definite end of their route. In the *Secunda* the shepherds only celebrate the child, and it is the Virgin who promises them 'He [will] kepe you fro wo […]' (l. 1072), apparently on her own initiative. They are passive figures rather than active traders, with their gifts all items to be consumed or played with – a 'bob of cherys', a 'byrd', and a 'ball' (ll. 1036, 1044, 1060) matched by the 'lytyll spruse cofer', 'ball', and a 'botell' of the *Prima* (ll. 672, 681, 694).

Whereas the York *Offering* ends with the shepherds being given a voice, used to call for aid and protection from Christ to bring new prosperity to them, both of the Towneley plays seem to mute the shepherds' claims, despite their celebratory singing at the end of each play. In York the urban space, and regeneration of it, is central to the performance; in the *Prima* and *Secunda* the shepherds are far happier to inhabit the countryside, despite the problems which they suffer there. In all of the plays the visit to the Christ-child offers a promise of salvation and protection, an important beginning for the relationship of God and the layperson.

But only in York do economic interests, and the interests of the city, come to the fore. The pageant is nostalgic, looking back to a position lost, yet anticipating or pleading for a prosperous future. In Towneley the shepherds celebrate their hinterland, but it is clearly one far removed from the centre where Christ resides – if not in topographical terms, at least in imaginative ones. Deriving from a region of supply, here the shepherds are unashamedly rural, revelling at the periphery where wealth is made. Where in the *Offering* the nexus of prosperity is local, in Towneley it is some way away.

Section 3.2
Devotion, Magic, and the Agnus Dei

The shepherds are important devotional figures: for their dissemination of the news of Christ's coming they have often been marked as proto-clergy. In York and Towneley they also play a role as everyman figures, comic characters whose mundane existence is elevated by their act of witness: though not so far as in Chester, where by the end of the play they 'adopt new roles with

religious purposes'.[62] In York and Towneley they remain non-clerical figures, forming an important connection between humanity and God: the presence of these characterful shepherds resonates with the contemporary importance of lay devotion, a culture of religious understanding from which both sets of plays ultimately arose.[63]

In the *Offering*, after meeting the Christ-child the shepherds will go 'hame agayne / And make mirth as we gange' (ll. 130–31): reflecting the festive processionary celebrations of Corpus Christi day, they will 'make mirth' as they journey back home. Similarly, in the *Prima* the shepherds declare their intention to perform on their return homeward, spreading the word of Christ's coming: 'With myrth and gam, / To the lawde of this lam, / Syng we in sight' (ll. 722–24). The 'myrth and gam' of the shepherds references ideas of play, also present in the *Secunda*: 'What grace we haue fun!'. To syng are we bun' (ll. 1085, 1087). Here the shepherds are 'bun' or compelled to sing, but through a spirit of festivity, this becomes a devotional practice distinct from clerical ritual. But importantly, this playful singing demonstrates a willingness to perform in God's service through festive action, or devotional performativity.

Travelling away from Bethlehem, each shepherd returns home supplied with a new devotional energy. The Corpus Christi Cycle itself was a means to project this image of York as a devotional centre, helping to bolster the 'glory' or prestige it claimed. By the second half of the fifteenth century, when the pageant scripts were first recorded, York clearly no longer held its position as the hub of a profitable wool network, or even as the dominant centre of the less-profitable trade in cloth. Neverthelless the city still played a role as the most important religious centre of the north of England, and through this, a major commercial hub in the business of devotion.

A vast number of York's inhabitants worked to meet the appetites of lay and religious visitors to the city, whether they offered nourishment, accommodation, luxury, or devotional merchandise.[64] Artisans, traders, and merchants relied on the business of supplying the Minster, as well as the large number of monasteries, devotional institutions, hospitals, and parish churches, in York and beyond.[65] Looking to the Chandlers, the group responsible for the production of the *Offering of the Shepherds* in York, this section will consider the role played by the city as a key 'devotional supplier' in this period, and how specific items associated with this status might influence our reading of the plays.

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[62] Happé , *The Towneley Cycle,* 159.
[63] For one interpretation of this see King, *The York Mystery Cycle*, esp. 15–18.
[64] Palliser, *Medieval York*, 238 ; Kermode,'Northern Towns', 679.
[65] Heather Swanson, *Medieval Artisans: An Urban Class in Late Medieval England* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 98–99.

Chandlers and Shepherds

The Chandlers were a craft group of some standing in York, with members appearing regularly in the freemen's registers.[66] They were responsible for the performance of the York *Offering* from at least the earliest record we have of it, and continued to stage the pageant right until the last of the performances in the 1560s.[67] The Chandlers were responsible for the production of high-quality candles in the city, working with beeswax rather than the lower quality tallow fat of other lesser producers. Although this industry sounds fairly low key, the group profited from the presence of huge demand in the city, not only from domestic users, but from the vast number of churches, religious houses, and devotional sites of York, including hundreds of chantries before which candles were burned.[68]

We may question why the *Offering* was not produced by a craft group associated with wool, or cloth. In England and on the Continent, candles were often used in performances to represent the star over Bethlehem, a key iconographical device in these plays.[69] The York *Offering* appears to have been no exception, with the Ordo Paginarum outlining that the pageant involved a 'stella in oriente', alongside the angels, the shepherds, and their singing.[70] In the text of the pageant itself, the Third Shepherd talks of Christ as a 'light', a word often used interchangeably with candle in this period, that he hopes to 'loke uppon' (l. 27) and that will precede the coming of the Messiah. Importantly the Chandlers' products were explicitly associated with devotional or high-status use.

The proliferation and importance of candles to the *Offering* and the other plays cannot be brought into doubt. But we may also speculate on another wax item possibly manufactured or at least associated with the chandler's craft, which is closely tied to the essential iconography of the plays: a small object which has been little studied, but which was ubiquitous throughout Christendom in the later medieval period, called an 'Agnus Dei'. The 'Agnus Dei', or Lamb of God, was a popular iconographical image in the late medieval and early modern periods in England. Usually depicted as a Lamb carrying the triumphal flag of Christ's resurrection, representations survive in various popular media, both on an intimate and monumental scale. Intriguingly the image appears to have been especially popular in Yorkshire, Durham and

[66] Over seventy Chandlers are enrolled as Freemen, with at least ten named as chamberlains: see *Register of the Freemen of the City of* York, I, 11–279.
[67] Beadle, *York Plays*, II, 108–9.
[68] Swanson, *Medieval Artisans,* 98–100.
[69] Lynette Muir points out that in the version of the shepherds play from the town of Arras, the dazzled protagonists even ask 'Where did you get all those candles?': see Muir, *Biblical Drama of Medieval Europe,* 102–3.
[70] See Beadle, *York Plays*, II, 108, 110, 114–15.

Northumberland from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries, where Elizabeth A. New suggests a new 'Christocentric trend' in devotion, embodied by the widespread use of the design on personal seals.[71] Whilst visually represented as a lamb, the words 'Agnus Dei' were familiar to those who attended Mass, where they appear at both the raising of the Host and the division of the holy sacrament. This idea of Christ as the sacrificial 'Lamb of God' is clearly developed in the 'shepherds' plays, not least through the vocation of the protagonists themselves.

But distinct from this, across the medieval period an Agnus Dei was also something quite different: a devotional object made from consecrated wax and bearing properties of divine protection. The history of these items is obscure, though records survive suggesting that the wax discs – imprinted with an image of the Lamb – were manufactured as early as AD 417, under Pope Zosimus. The objects were created under papal authority from the remains of the paschal candles used in Easter celebrations, which were melted down, mixed with the Holy Chrism, and made into wax discs stamped with the image of the Lamb.[72] The paschal candle represented Christ, and carried baptismal as well as Eucharistic associations – though importantly, unlike the Host the wax Agnus Dei could be kept and cherished, worn and handed down from generation to generation.[73]

Figure 24: Agnus Dei (lead casing over wax disc),
discovered beneath the Globe Theatre, London (c.15th Century).

[71] Elizabeth A. New, 'Christological Personal Seals and Christocentric Devotion in Later Medieval England and Wales', *Antiquaries Journal*, 82 (2002): 47–68.
[72] Sergio Bertelli, *The King's Body: Sacred Rituals of Power in Medieval and Early Modern Europe,* trans. R. Burr Litchfield (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 132–35.
[73] Ronald W. Lightbown, *Mediaeval European Jewellery: With a Catalogue of the Collection in the Victoria and Albert Museum* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1992), 99; for an example dating from fifteenth century England, found in excavations of the Globe Theatre in London, see figure 24.

As a sacramental object, an Agnus Dei had a clear devotional value, but also a talismanic one. From at least the twelfth and thirteenth centuries it was regarded as an important protection against storms and bad weather: writing in the early thirteenth century Matthew Paris reports that his abbot John of Hertford placed one at the highest pinnacle of the abbey, to protect it from the threat of lightening. By the fifteenth century they were sometimes particularly associated with the protection of infants, or of women in childbirth, though they also continued to protect their wearers from a wide range of other maladies.[74] Agnus Dei were recommended for personal use in the *Salernitan Regimen*, a particularly popular medieval compilation of the period, and are recommended alongside other such amulets in recipe books, surgeries, and practical medical treatises on the one hand, and saints' lives, exempla, and manuals of pastoral care on the other.[75]

To determine the relevance of these items to the region where the plays were produced, we can look to various records of Agnus Dei amulets left in testamentary bequests associated with York and Yorkshire. At least sixteen references to the bequest of an Agnus Dei are made in the wills included in the *Testamenta Eboracensia* series, from people of varying social status.[76] Nine are recorded as being left 'circa caput Sancti Willelmi' in an inventory of York Minster dated 1500–1510, whilst an inventory of the city's Corpus Christi guild lists the donation of three of the same objects to the association in 1465, and a further two in the latter part of the century.[77] These items are often mentioned alongside jewels, and sometimes with objects which have similar apotropaic properties, including rings and objects made of coral.[78] Clearly they were highly valued, both in terms of protection and personal devotion.

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[74] John Cherry, 'Containers for Agnus Deis', in *Through a Glass Brightly: Studies in Byzantine and Medieval Art and Archaeology,* ed. Chris Entwistle (Oxford: Oxbow, 2003), 171, 177.

[75] Bühler notes that the poem above was included in a variety of medical manuscripts, and it was often a component of the *Regimen sanitatis Salernitanum*: see Curt F. Bühler, 'Notes on a Manuscript of the "Virtutes Agnus Dei"', *The Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 15 (1944), 221; see *Collectio Salernitana. Documenti Inediti e Trattati di Medicina Appartenenti alla Scuola Medica Salernitana*, ed. Salvatore De Renzi, 5 vols. (Naples: Filiatre-Sebezio, 1852–59), I, 505; Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 78; Peter Murray Jones, 'Image, Word, and Medicine in the Middle Ages', in *Visualizing Medieval Medicine and Natural History, 1200–1500,* ed. Jean A. Givens, Karen M Reeds, Alain Touwaide (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 19.

[76] *Testamenta Eboracensia, Wills registered at York*, 4 Vols., ed. James Raine [from vol. II: J.R. the younger], Surtees Society, 4, 30, 45, 53 (Newcastle: Blackwell and Durham: Andrews, 1834–69), I, 161, 381; II, 9, 23, 48, 122, 136; III, 104, 119, 164, 194, 237, 275; IV, 60, 111, 234, 258; John Frankis, a resident of the West Riding village of Hedon, left 'unum agnus Dei ornatum et inclusum cum argento' to the Abbot of Thornton in Lincolnshire; Alicia Upstall of Coney Street, York, left 'j Agnus Dei aureo' to her brother John; Matilda, Countess of Cambridge, left the grandest version, 'unum jocale vocatum Agnus Dei coopertum cum argento circumtextum cum lapidibus de perylls': see Vols. I: 161; II: 9;122.

[77] *The Fabric Rolls of York Minster: With and Appendix of Illustrative Documents*, ed. James Raine, Surtees Society 35 (Durham: George Andrews, 1859), 224–25; *REED: York,* II, 634–36, 640–41.

[78] *Testamenta Eboracensia,* III, 119, 164.

In a recent study of domestic objects in York during this period, Lisa Liddy has confirmed that Agnus Dei amulets were fairly commonly included in testamentary bequests where they were passed on to family or household members, as well as religious institutions in the region.[79] Although most textual records suggest that they were objects for the relatively wealthy, surviving examples made of tin or horn, rather than gold or silver, suggest that their use was widespread – indeed, Ronald Lightbown suggests that excluding rings, Agnus Dei were perhaps the one prophylactic charm worn by all classes'.[80] The widespread presence of these jewellery items makes them a relevant and hitherto unexplored object of study in relation to the York and Towneley 'shepherds' plays. [81]

Whilst it is unclear whether the York Chandlers manufactured these wax objects, they were known to produce items which held similar values. Little has been written on the work of Chandlers in late medieval society, but certainly they may have been associated with magic or miracle working, due to the nature of the goods they produced.[82] The craft's ordinances of c.1420 make clear that guild members also created images or other shapes in wax, referred to as 'castynwork' and 'holghwork'.[83] Clearly describing objects which have been 'cast' or moulded into a certain shape, these words have been taken to denote votive objects left at shrines such as body parts, or ships made of wax, commissioned and left at these holy sites to invoke protection or healing, physically or spiritually.[84]

The Chandlers held connections to the Barbers, Spicers, and Apothecaries, all involved in medical practices, at this time also expressly linked to spiritual healing.[85] Further, the Chandlers would have been explicitly associated with supplies for the festival of Candlemass where laypeople brought candles to church to be blessed, and imbued with apotropaic powers.[86] Strikingly similar to the Agnus Dei discs, after the ceremony these candles were thought to hold the power to protect from thunderstorms, sickness, the devil, or even the pains of childbirth.[87]

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[79] Lisa Jane Howarth Liddy, 'Domestic Objects in York c.1400–1600: Consumption, Neighborhood, and Choice', Ph.D Thesis (York, 2015), 142.
[80] Lightbown, *Mediaeval European Jewellery*, 99.
[81] So-called Agnus Dei amulets or rings survive which clearly never held the integral sanctified wax disc, though the image of the Lamb printed upon them, and the powers attributed to the object, clearly reference the sacramental object. See Peter Murray Jones and Lea T. Olsan, 'Middleham Jewel: Ritual, Power, and Devotion', *Viator,* 31 (2000), 279.
[82] Eamonn Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c.1400–1580* (London: Yale University Press, 1992), 281–2.
[83] Swanson, *Medieval Artisans*, 99.
[84] Wax votives are depicted in stained glass at St. William's shrine in York Minster: see Christopher Daniell, *Death and Burial in Medieval England: 1066–1550* (London: Routledge, 1997), 21–22.
[85] Philip Michael Stell, 'Medical Practice in Medieval York', *Borthwick Papers* 90 (1996), 13–14.
[86] Roberta Gilchrist, *Medieval Life: Archaeology and the Life Course* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2012), 171; King, *The York Mystery Cycle*, 121.
[87] Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, 16–17.

Although ostensibly all Agnus Dei amulets were made by the Pope, the survival of numerous examples, and evidence of widespread ownership amongst both higher and lower strata of society, suggests that production beyond Rome was prevalent. Both Pope Paul II and Sixtus IV sent out bulls reserving the right to produce and trade in Agnus Dei tablets themselves, in 1470 and 1471 respectively, making localised manufacturing before and after this date extremely likely; indeed, in 1452 Nicholas V had gone as far as to impose heavy fines on two laymen who had been producing them on a large scale.[88] The inventory of a Netherlandish jeweller named Haquinet Hierche, made in 1485, records a stock of around two hundred and sixty Agnus Dei amulets, and they were likely manufactured and sold in England too. An inventory of York goldsmith John Colan, made in the late fifteenth century, records the debt of 2s. 6d. to one 'domina Worsley' for setting an Agnus Dei in gold.[89]

As manufacturers of high-quality wax products, who supplied the many ecclesiastical and devotional institutions of York with candles, the Chandlers were likely associated with the production or trade of these amuletic objects in the city. In 1475 a Barber-Chandler named Thomas Barber was fined 4d. in the Mayor's Court for 'selling wax images in the street', and various wills of York Chandlers mention the passing down of wax moulds – though whether any of these carried the imprint of the Agnus Dei is a matter of uncertainty.[90] Even if the Chandlers in York did not produce these Agnus Dei, an association between the craft group and these objects, or the properties which they held, may have been a factor in their presentation of the *Offering*, with its central focus on the Lamb of God.

The Agnus Dei in York and Towneley

The properties of an Agnus Dei are perhaps most simply outlined in a letter sent from Pope Urban VI to Byzantine emperor John Paleologos V in 1362:

> Balm and pure as wax with the water of chrism
> Made the Agnus, that I give you as a great gift.
> Born from a spring, mystically sanctified,
> It destroys ghosts and any malice.

[88] Lightbown, *Mediaeval European Jewellery*, 229.
[89] 'De domina Worsley de Ebor., pro faction j lez Agnus Dei, ij s. vjd / Pro auriatione ponderis ejusdem lez Agnus iijd.' (To Mistress Worsley of York, for the setting of one of the Agnus Dei 2s. 6d., for the weight of gold of the Agnus 3d.) *Testamenta Eboracensia*, IV, 60.
[90] See R.B. Dobson ed. *York City Chamberlains' Account Rolls 1396*–1500 (Gateshead: Northumberland Press, 1980), 145; Stell, 'Medical Practice in Medieval York', 13

Helps pregnant women in childbirth,
If carried with purity, it protects from the waves,
Shatters sin and suffering with Christ's blood.
It brings precious gifts, puts out fires.
Protects against sudden death, and from Satan's ruin.
If honoured, it wins trophies from enemies.
The smallest part alone is worth the whole.
Lamb of God, who takes away sins, have mercy on me.[91]

Entitled 'Virtues of the Agnus Dei', this poem survives in numerous manuscripts: it is unclear where it originated, or at precisely what period.[92] But it clearly marks out properties attributed to the Agnus Dei as following certain themes: protection from evil spirits, malice, sin, or diabolical interference (essentially spiritual concerns); protection from shipwreck, bad weather, fire (atmospheric or environmental dangers); and protection from sudden death, the pains of childbirth, and earthly enemies (medical, physical, and psychological concerns). These particular properties of the Agnus Dei, I argue, are outlined in the *Offering,* as well as the *Prima* and *Secunda* of Towneley. The plays portray suffering undergone by the shepherds before the coming of Christ, and privation of the Lamb of God, but simultaneously anticipate the protective powers of the Agnus Dei.

Although the association between the Agnus Dei and the craft of Chandlers can only be made securely for the *Offering*, we know that large parts of the Towneley MS were influenced by the York Cycle.[93] Further, if this popular association between the Chandlers and the 'shepherds' narrative existed, it is likely to have had a broader reach than York alone. The image of the Lamb, and likely the Agnus Dei amulet, was also associated with John the Baptist, whose relation to the cloth trade in the fifteenth end sixteenth centuries would have been particularly relevant to the towns of the West Riding associated with the Towneley MS.[94] Just as the shepherds in these plays anticipate the coming of Christ, the Lamb of God, they also look forward to the protection of the Agnus Dei.

[91] Translation by R. Burr Litchfield, taken from Bertelli, *The King's Body*, 136. The final line derives from John 1:29 'Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world'; the phrase 'Agnus dei qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis' was repeated at the fraction of the Host, following the Use of York: see *The Lay Folks Mass Book,* ed. and trans Thomas Frederick Simmons, EETS 71 (London: Trübner and Co., 1879), 112-13.
[92] See Bühler, 'Notes on a Manuscript of the "Virtutes Agnus Dei" ', 220–224.
[93] See Meredith, 'The Towneley cycle', 146–7.
[94] Muir, *Biblical Drama*, 37.

A comic aspect generally picked out of the 'shepherds' plays is the general concern exhibited for the weather. The potential for humour in these figures of Yorkshire complaining incessantly about the cold and wet has been much rehearsed, especially when balanced against the incongruity of this setting, where the saturated hills of northern England stand in for the arid plains of the Holy Land. Importantly though, we must remember that the Agnus Dei were well known to protect against inclement weather, and the ill effects which this could have on labour, travel and trade in particular.

Both of the Towneley plays begin with loud complaints about the poor climate and generally bad weather. In the *Prima* the First Shepherd talks of 'downe cast' (l. 4) skies to match his bad mood, whilst the changeable nature of 'now in heyll, now in weytt, now in blast' (l. 8) 'Now in fayre, now in rane' (l. 11) is matched in the *Secunda*: 'In stormes and tempest, / Now in the eest, now in the west, / Wo is hym has never rest / Mydday or morow!' (ll. 10–13). The similarity of these opening lines is striking, and – it should be acknowledged – allows for much comic business. The shivering rustics on the hillside are brought into the site of performance, likely urban, or at least a warm hall or sheltered settlement, and the suffering which they loudly report could be easily exaggerated for comic effect.

Whereas in the *Prima* only the First Shepherd audibly complains about the weather, in the *Secunda* Coll, Gyb, and Daw all offer such comments. The Second Shepherd talks of 'wyndys ful kene, / And the frostys so hydus thay water myn eeyne…Now in dry, now in wete, / Now in snaw, now in slete' (ll. 84–85, 88–89), while the Third offers similar hyperbolic complaints:

> 3 Pastor: Was never syn Noe floode sich floodys seyn,
> Wyndys and ranys so rude, and stormes so keyn
> […] These flodys so thay drowne,
> Both in feldys and in towne,
> And berys all downe;
> (ll. 183–86, 192–94.)

This onslaught of references to inclement weather – 'wyndys', 'ranys', 'stormys', 'floodys', 'frostys' – allows the shepherds in performance to rant and rave, comically iterating their position in the storm-tossed wilderness, which the audience can see simultaneously as a simple performance space.

The connection of these complaints to the properties of the Agnus Dei is especially convincing if we consider the specific references to shipwreck in the play. Whilst these sea-

bound catastrophes may be associated with storms more broadly, the references are perhaps odd if we acknowledge that the shepherds are pastoral figures, concerned with the grazing of sheep inland. The shepherd Daw's reference to 'Noe floode' and the drowning of both 'feldys and towne' is matched by Coll's 'stormes and tempests…' in the East and West, all concerns more linked to travel in vessels on open water than to life in the countryside. Looking back to the *Prima* the Third Shepherd, Slawpase, speaks of the slowness and senility of his fellows using similar imagery, saying that they 'wold by thare wytt / make a shyp be drownde' (ll. 209–10).

All of these quotations speak of ill fortune in weather, and the references to tempests and shipwrecks make an association with the Agnus Dei particularly likely. Indeed, it is the coming of the Christ child, which the plays of course pre-empt, which will rectify these issues. In York the Second Shepherd speaks of Christ as a figure who shall save 'bothe see and sande' (l. 108), and the Third Shepherd of the *Prima* similarly anticipates the arrival of Christ: '…ther shuld be, / When that kyng commys new, peasse by land and se' (ll. 583–84). The shepherds all look to Christ to save them from bad weather, but it is also the devotional object of the Agnus Dei which they hope for, the amulet known for its powers to protect against these environmental concerns specifically. The Agnus Dei was said to 'protect […] from the waves', and sailors or travellers would throw pieces of the wax disc into the sea in an effort to calm rough waters.[95]

The anticipation of the Agnus Dei can also be inferred through the several – seemingly unexplained – acts of magic in the texts. The amuletic object was supposed to protect its wearer from the ill effects of magic, whilst acting as a thaumaturgical device itself, wielding like powers of its own. In the *Prima* the Third Shepherd Slawpase offers a stream of dialogue which, at first appearing to be a mixture of nonsense actions and devotional words, actually represents a form of magical charm or incantation, cast against fears of the night.

3 Pastor: A crosse let vs kest –
Cryst-crosse,
Benedyght eest and west –
For drede.
Iesus onazorus
Crucyefixus,
Morcus, Andreus,
God be oure spede!
(ll. 418–25)

[95] See Bertelli, *The King's Body*, 136.

Duffy has convincingly determined that these forms of charm were commonplace in late medieval culture, with crosses and holy names perceived to offer particularly effective magical protections, whether spoken, written, or inscribed.[96] Many of the Agnus Dei which survive from this period do carry these supposedly 'magic' words and symbols, including crosses, the monogram of Christ, and the names of the Three Kings (Melchior, Caspar and Balthasar), which were supposed to have particular power over sickness.[97] In calling on Mark, Andrew, and Jesus of Nazareth, the third shepherd both earnestly anticipates and looks to the protections of these holy figures. He also demonstrates a form of comic anachronism – the 'crucyefixus' marks the end, rather than the beginning of Christ's life.

Slawpase carries out his incantation – a form of prayer – just as the shepherds fall asleep after their magnificent feast: protection from the night. That these words are followed directly by the speech of the Angel of the Lord essentially vindicates them, marking his words as an example of the benevolent use of magic – like the charms mentioned by Duffy - rather than anything malevolent. No distinction between magic and devotion is made here: Slawpase's chant is a prayer as much as a magical protection. This contrasts firmly with the directly comparable incantation made in the *Secunda*, where it is the troublesome Mak casting the spells. Using vocabulary very similar to Slawpase, just as all of the shepherds are about to sleep, he recites the words:

> Mak: Fro my top to my too,
> *Manus tuas commendo,*
> *Poncio Pilato*;
> Cryste-crosse me spede!
> (ll. 483–86).

Just as Slawpase does, Mak chants 'Cryst-crosse', the charm invoking Christian protection. But alongside this he also calls on Pontius Pilate, the leader who condemned Christ, something which suggests his intentions may be nefarious: the whole phrase he invokes is actually a subversion of Luke 23:46, Jesus' last words on the cross: 'Pater in manus tuas domine commendo spiritum meum'.

[96] Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, 276–77.
[97] Lightbown, *Mediaeval European Jewellery, 99*.

Unlike Slawpase's benevolent charm of protection, here Mak uses bad magic – something further established as Mak continues in his role as some kind of evil necromancer.[98]

Mak: Bot abowte you a serkyll,
As rownde as a moyn,
To have done that I wyll,
Tyll that it be noyn,
That ye lyg stone-styll
To that I have doyne;
And I shall say thertyll
Of good wordys a foyne:
On hight,
Over youre heydys, my hand I lyft.
Outt go youre eeen! Fordo youre sight!
Both yit I must make better shyft
And it be right.
(ll. 400–412)

The Agnus Dei amulets were renowned to protect against such malicious magical acts, and the presence of Mak's comic malignancy here – to be overcome only later in the play – fits well with the slightly parodic approach towards the properties of the object in Towneley, in the *Secunda* especially.[99] If all of these plays reference the powers of an Agnus Dei, the *Secunda* does it with a playfulness which could either denote an earnest anticipation of the powerful object, or an attempt to mock the supposed thaumaturgical powers which it offered.

Just as in the 'Virtues of the Agnus Dei' the *Offering,* as well as the *Prima* and *Secunda,* also appears to anticipate the medical protections offered by Christ, as mediated through the amuletic device. 'Christus Medicus', or Christ as doctor, was a popular motif in this period, established through the writings of St Ambrose and St. Augustine.[100] An Agnus Dei – a charm which drew on Christ's power – was thought to hold these properties of healing. In the York *Offering* this

[98] Corinne Saunders discusses the near-contemporary distinctions made between nefarious, prohibited magical practices and those which were considered enabled by God, the former destructive, the latter protective. See Corinne Saunders, *Magic and Witchcraft in Medieval English Romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2010), 152-59.
[99] For comments on Mak's villainous characterisation see Jeffrey Helterman, 'Satan as Everyshepherd: Comic Metamorphosis in The Second Shepherds' Play', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language,* 12:4 (1971), 515–30.
[100] See Carol Rawcliffe, *Medicine and Society in Later Medieval England* (Stroud: Allan Sutton, 1997), 14, cited in Byron Lee Rigby, *Pestilence in Medieval and Early Modern Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004*),* 22; also Murray Jones, 'Image, Word, and Medicine in the Middle Ages', 1–24.

imagery of Christ as doctor, with an invocation for Christ to heal both spiritually and physically, is made in lines 9–10: Christ will 'make mankynde clerly (clean/sinless) / To leche tham that are lorne' (ll. 9–10).

The word 'clerly' here suggests cleanliness in both physical and moral terms, with the phrase 'leche tham that are lorne' also presenting both medical and spiritual allusions. Physicians were often referred to as 'leches', and connections between the Chandlers and these figures – often apothecaries, or barbers – has already been drawn.[101] As Carole Rawcliffe has noted, in this period 'the idea of separating…the treatment of physical symptoms without addressing the spiritual malaise of the sufferer would have seemed both profane and pointless'.[102] The shepherds of the *Offering* anticipate a healing 'lamb', protecting its devotees from sickness. In the case of the Agnus Dei amulet, the spiritual, physical, and magical are firmly intertwined.

In the *Prima,* it is pestilence presented as sickness in the play, with Gyb complaining about the loss of his sheep: he is 'not left oone' because the 'rott has theym slone', and is forced to 'beg and borrow' (ll. 37–39). Sheep rot or 'moren' (murrain) caused potentially devastating problems for contemporary shepherds, and Gyb's speech is full of pathos and sorrow.[103] Oddly though, Gyb's sorrow is also presented in a comic way, as he begins to rouse an imaginary flock and argue over them with the Second Shepherd John Horne. Gyb angrily cries 'I wyll pasture my fe / Wheresoeuer lykys me' (ll. 153–54), before threatening to strike Jack if he does not move out of the way of the invisible flock:

> Gyb: Knafe, hens I byd flytt. As good that thou do,
> Or I shall the hytt on thi pate—lo,
> […] I say gyf the shepe space
> (ll. 174–79).

The tragedy of Gyb's situation is turned into a foolish squabble with John Horne, perhaps suggesting that unlike the more serious *Offering*, here the treatment of sickness is ambiguous. This is mirrored in the *Secunda*, where Mak's illness – clearly an exaggerated pretence – is also treated comically, not least because the troublesome character uses it as a means to distract from accusations that he has stolen a sheep:

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[101] Stell, 'Medical Practice in Medieval York', 6–10.
[102] Rawcliffe, *Medicine and Society in Later Medieval England*, 25
[103] See David Stone, 'The Productivity and Management of Sheep in Late Medieval England', *The Agricultural History Review*, 51:1 (2003), 1–22, esp. 14–18.

Mak: And I am trew as steyll,
All men waytt,
Bot a sekenes I feyll
That haldys me full haytt.
My belly farys not weyll;
It is out of astate.
[…] Ful sore am I and yll,
If I stande stone-styll
I ete not a nedyll
Thys moneth and more.
(ll. 326–331, 335–38).

The 'sekenes' professed by Mak stands in stark contrast to those 'lorne' in the *Offering*, and we may imagine that his suffering was mimed out for comic effect; the corporeally suggestive fullness of a 'belly' that 'farys not weyll' and is 'out of astate' is contrasted with the 'nedyll' which he claims he cannot eat. Like the *Prima,* the *Secunda* appears to be playing with the properties of the amulet, rather than looking earnestly to the healing which Christ will bring. We can understand both of these moments as a parodic foreshadowing, anticipating the curative powers of the Lamb of God, but making mirth of the suffering which precedes him.

The parodic illness suffered by Mak in the *Secunda* is mirrored by the imitation of the pains of childbirth suffered by his wife in the play. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries Agnus Dei amulets became increasingly particularly associated with childbirth.[104] Of course, the denouement of each of the 'shepherds' plays is their visit to the new-born Christ and the Virgin Mary, already making childbirth a central theme. In the context of the special apotropaic protection in childbirth held by the Agnus Dei, it is particularly interesting to consider the most familiar comic episode of the *Secunda*, the sheep-stealing scene.

In this famous episode the troublesome Mak and his wife Gyll devise a plan to swaddle a stolen sheep and hide it in a crib, passing it off as her new-born baby. The idea that the creature, as substitute for a baby, both parodies and prefigures the arrival of Christ as the Lamb of God has been well considered.[105] Indeed in the Towneley *Prima,* Jak Garcio criticises his fellow

[104] Cherry, 'Containers for Agnus Deis', 177.
[105] See Roney, 'The Wakefield First and Second Shepherds Plays as Complements in Psychology and Parody', 714–17; Warren Edminster, 'Punning and Political Parody in *The Second Shepherd's Play*', *English Language Note,* 40:4 (2003), 1–11.

shepherds by claiming that they could not be more foolish if their mothers had given birth to 'an hare, a shepe, or a lam' (l. 264). Yet more interesting is what this false birth, and the presence of the Lamb in the crib, could achieve in performances which the orthodox presentation of the birth of Christ by the Virgin could not. Although the Gyll's actions surrounding the 'sheep-baby' are farcical, they do stress the perils and pains of childbirth, which Agnus Dei amulets were renowned to protect women against. In Gyll's counterfeited confinement, we can find a parody of the real-life anxieties surrounding childbirth in the period, misgivings which the wearing of an Agnus Dei could help to alleviate.

After devising the plan, Gyll makes clear that she will stage the ill effects of pregnancy, or recent labour, in order to throw off any search for the missing sheep. She mentions that she will 'lyg beside in chylbed, and grone' (ll. 484–85), as well as 'cry out by the wall on Mary and Iohn, / for sore.' (ll. 540–41). This undoubtedly comic action is likely to have been presented in an over-exaggerated performance of labour pains by the (probably male) actor playing Gyll, which Mak's dialogue only emphasises:

Mak: As far as ye may,
Good, spekys soft [...]
Over a seke womans heede that is at maylleasse;
I had lever be dede or she had any dyseasse
Gyll: Go to anothere stede! I may not well qweasse;
Ich fote that ye trede goys thorow my nese.
(ll. 697–706)

Both Mak and Gyll forcefully assert that the shepherds should sympathise with a woman who has just given birth and felt the ill-effects of labour. The false father cries that their 'hartys shuld melt' at her 'gronys' (ll. 762–63), and that they 'do wrang' to a woman who has 'farne' so badly. He repeatedly talks of how Gyll has 'farne' (l. 765), expressing a particular concern with the pain and difficulties suffered in labour.

The performed pains of Gyll are presented as unquestionably false, and the audience always appreciate, unlike the Shepherds, that this is indeed fakery. Yet Gyll's groans, her cries to St. Mary and St. John, the possibilities of her sickness, 'maylleasse', 'dyseasse', and queasiness, all represent a visceral, painful and risky form of childbirth that the Virgin birth could not. Gyll's groans stand in stark contrast with the influential account of the nativity offered by Birgitta of

Sweden, which involves 'none of the bodily trauma of natural childbirth'.[106] The irony here – likely appreciated at least by certain spectators – was that although Gyll's performance of birth seemed more grimly real, it was patently absurd, whilst the birth of Christ by the Virgin was the divine and perfect truth. In presenting this fake birth, Gyll's actions play with the anxieties surrounding childbirth, referencing the role of the Agnus Dei in alleviating the anxieties, and protecting from these pains. Indeed, the painless childbirth felt by the Virgin Mary should be connected to her carrying the actual 'Agnus Dei' – Christ – within her womb.

The properties of the Agnus Dei amulets inform these plays, and the comic sufferings of the shepherds within them. In York, as the shepherds finally offer their gifts to the Christ child, the first gift 'a baren broche with a bell of tin' (l. 103) and the second 'two cobill nuts upon a bande' (l. 112) it is striking that both could be considered items of jewellery, or amulets. Further, the words which they use in proffering these gifts have a particular meaning in this context:

1 Pastor: And whenne ye shall welde all,
Gud Sonne, forget noght me
Yf any fordele falle.
(ll. 105–7)

2 Pastor: Loo, litill babe, what I have broght,
And whan ye shall be Lorde in land,
Dose good agayne, and forget me noght.
(ll. 113–115)

Both shepherds plead with the Christ child to 'forget them not', resonant with invocations on many surviving examples of jewellery; the words 'memento mei' signified both that the wearer should remember Jesus' sacrifice, and that He should remember them.[107] In fact, the 'barren broche' here may not just refer to an item without decoration, but to rather a brooch with an aperture or space inside, like those of gold, silver, or tin which contained the Agnus Dei. Further,

[106] Mary Dzon, 'Birgitta of Sweden and Christ's Clothing,' in *The Christ Child in Medieval Culture: Alpha es et O!,* ed. Mary Dzon and Theresa M. Kenney (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 134–135; see *The Liber Celestis of St. Bridget of Sweden: The Middle English Version in British Library MS Claudius B I, together with a life of the saint from the same manuscript,* Vol. I, ed. Roger Ellis, EETS 291 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 486.
[107] See Lightbown, *Mediaeval European Jewellery,* 99; James Robinson, 'From Altar to Amulet: Relics, Portability and Devotion', in *Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics and Devotion in Medieval Europe*, ed. Martina Bagnoli, Holger A. Klein, C. Griffith Mann, and James Robinson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 111–116, esp. 114.

the 'barren' nature of the brooch here is only temporary – though here it will not be filled with the wax Agnus Dei, but with the presence of the Christ child, the Lamb of God himself.

Talismanic Contexts

It is interesting in all of these cases that comic performance is intermingled with the invocation of these talismanic properties. Laughter makes more palatable the problems which beset the shepherds, reflecting the mundane ills of humanity, which are to be solved through the coming of Christ. Whilst considering the humour of the Towneley 'shepherds' plays in particular in the context of the Agnus Dei, we must remember also that as sacramental objects, the Agnus Dei were explicitly associated with Roman Catholicism, offering an interesting context for later performances, as we known the plays were recorded at some point nearer to the mid-sixteenth century. The 'Second Royal Injunctions', issued by Henry VIII in 1538, expressly forbade the use of such 'images of wax' and 'feigned relics', and a similar exhortation by Elizabeth in 1559 likely encouraged their widespread destruction.[108] In 1579 a pamphlet was published and widely

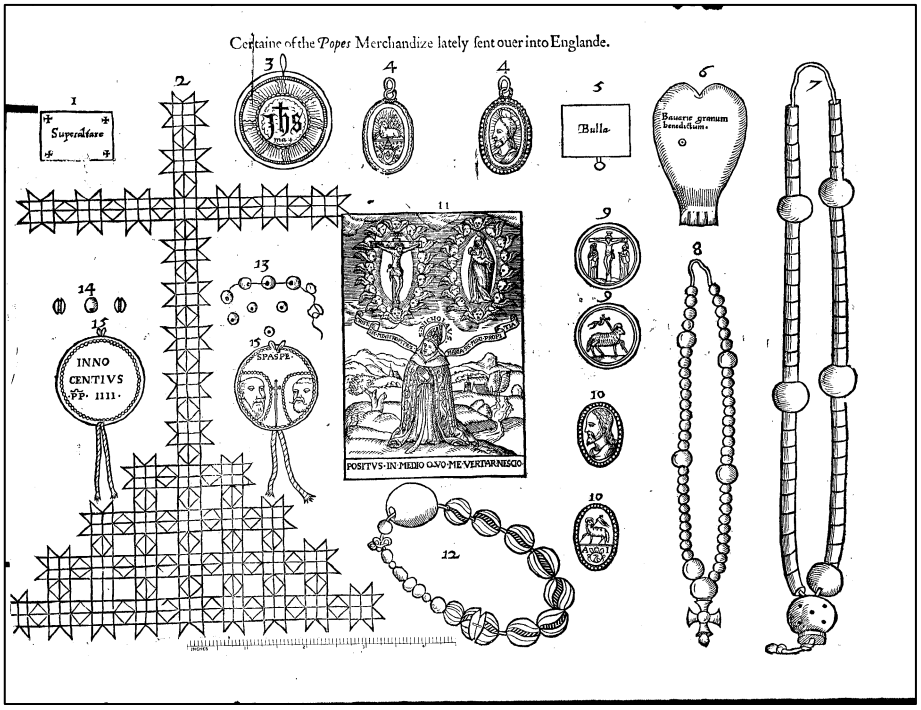

Figure 25: Anon., *A newyeares gifte dedicated to the Popes Holinesse…* (London: Henry Bynneman, 1579), 57.

[108] Cherry, 'Containers for Agnus Deis', 181; the second of Henry VIII's 'Royal Injunctions' explicitly bans 'feigned relic, or images', as well as 'images of wax': see C.H. Williams, ed. *English Historical Documents,* V. (London, 1967), 811–14; for Elizabeth's injunctions see H. Gee and W.J. Hardy eds, *Documents Illustrative of English History* (London, 1896), 428.

circulated entitled *A newyeares gifte dedicated to the Popes Holinesse*…, which condemned the pope's authority, and focuses on a fear of Catholic plots in England, offering a special pull-out woodcut with images of various 'popish trinkets' to watch out for, and showing no fewer than four Agnus Dei amulets.[109]

In his work on the Agnus Dei amulets, John Cherry has suggested that the items may have been more common in the north of England than in the south, perhaps reflecting the survival of the Roman Catholic faith and recusant practices in the area.[110] Within a period which can be characterised by its devotional contentiousness, we might consider the particular comic playfulness of both the *Prima* and *Secunda* in the light of this mixed contemporary response to the 'Agnus Dei' amulets. In these examples, the use of humour might have offered a clever means to negotiate reformist and traditionalist attitudes towards the thaumaturgic objects within performances.

Although we have no clear picture of how or for whom the dramatic works of the Towneley MS were performed, given the contemporary tumult of religious disagreement prospective spectators (or readers) would have held a variety of devotional identities or doctrinal positions. Phebe Jensen has established that contemporary play-texts could be composed in such a way, making them suitable for performances to Catholic and Protestant spectators alike.[111] Producers of the performances may reasonably have expected this, and allusions in the plays do not make their position particularly transparent. For the traditionalist, the associations drawn between the powers of the 'Agnus Dei'—relating to protections against foul weather, sickness, injustice, magic, and most importantly childbirth—and the 'shepherds' play could have reinforced the power of these objects, whose thaumaturgic properties were rooted in Christ: powers fulfilled accordingly in the plays with his birth.

Yet perhaps simultaneously, for the reformer the comic bluster of both works could represent a rejection of these properties, parodying the supposed powers of the Agnus Dei amulets as superstitions, to be cast aside with the coming of the Holy Child. Mockery certainly appears to have been part of this mid-sixteenth century rejection of the objects, as does their connection to the figure of the shepherd leading his flock. A sermon made by the staunchly

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[109] See David J. Davis, *Seeing Faith, Printing Pictures: Religious Identity during the English Reformation* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 109–112; see figure 25.
[110] Cherry, 'Containers for Agnus Deis', 177.
[111] Phebe Jensen, 'Recusancy, festivity, and community: The Simpsons at Gowthwaite Hall', in *Region, Religion and Patronage: Lancastrian Shakespeare,* ed. Richard Dutton, Alison Findlay, and Richard Wilson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 110.

Anglican John Jewel, Bishop of Salisbury, sometime between 1560 and his death in 1571 castigates the apotropaic object:

> O merciful God! What hath the Pope to doe with the lightening? what can a piece of wax prevail in the staying of a tempest? [...] O, what a shepherd is he, that now in this light of the day thus mocketh and deceiveth the lambs and sheep of Christ? [...] Is this the will of God, to commit our lives to so vile a cake? [112]

To many within the Church hierarchy these were threatening objects, which represented the danger of religiously-inspired rebellion and insurgency. But due to this, these amulets were items primed for mockery, something which the *Secunda* in particular seems to allow for.

As they appear to avoid taking a clear position on the objects, the humour of both of these plays may be read as a way to steer between two opposing approaches to the Agnus Dei. If interpreted in one way, audiences could see either of the plays as a means to condemn the magical amulets associated with Roman Catholic 'popery' and the misappropriation of the Lamb of God. Yet in another way, both the *Prima* and *Secunda* could be regarded as supportive of the traditionalist outlook. The shepherds eagerly anticipate the arrival of Christ and the powers of the Agnus Dei from their position of irreverence and folly, only to be transformed by the good news of the Lord. Importantly it is the comic capacity of the shepherds, and the humorous nature of their actions, which allows for this interpretive slipperiness.

The Agnus Dei amulets ultimately represent an aspect of medieval devotional life not generally acknowledged by modern readers of the play – the mystical, the magical, the apotropaic. These items were ubiquitous, and the ideas surrounding them were incredibly powerful, not just held by an uneducated minority. Ultimately, just as each of these plays anticipates the birth of Christ, they look to the protective amulets as part of Christ's power on Earth, and His personal connection to each of them in their devotions. In York the humour of the Chandler's *Offering* playfully pre-empts the coming of the Lamb of God, and the amuletic powers of the Agnus Dei with it. Both of the scripts from Towneley utillise playfully prefigure the arrival of this object, but the *Secunda* in particular goes even further, simultaneously anticipating and parodying the talismanic Agnus Dei, whilst stressing the centrality of Christ incarnate.

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[112] Sermon on Romans 13:12, St. Paul's Cross, London: see John Jewel, *The Works of John Jewel, Bishop of Salisbury: The Second Portion,* ed. John Ayre (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1847), 1045. See also Davis, *Seeing Faith, Printing*, 112.

Conclusions

The York *Offering,* as well as the Towneley *Prima* and *Secunda* are dynamic theatrical pieces, reflecting both the shifting commercial interests of the region, and the interaction of these interests with devotional practice. For York, a city often used as a case-study for late medieval economic patterns of rise and decline, the *Offering* represented the past glories of the wool trade, and the position of the city at the nexus of that trade. Recorded in the latter half of the fifteenth century, we find a city not only nostalgic about its past, but anticipating a new future of prosperity. In the association of the Chandlers with the *Offering*, we see the channel of hope for this regeneration, the city defining itself as a godly space, or a new centre of devotion.

In the Towneley *Prima* and *Secunda* we may find traces of a different context, vested in the new prosperity of the cloth trade to the West Riding. The shepherds here celebrate their position in the cloth-producing periphery, referring to the centre only for what it can offer to them – in the case of Bethlehem, the birth of Christ and salvation, and in the case of London, new wealth and prosperity in trade. The devotional impetus of the Towneley 'shepherds' plays is clearly linked to that which we see in York, but here again we find a change – this time led by the upheavals of the Reformation. The comic nature of the plays, especially the notorious *Secunda Pastorum*, marks not a shift to secular interest, but more a conscious attempt to appeal to both sides of the gulf – not presenting unity, but rather a humorous narrative by which both sides are appeased.

In all three of the plays the same basic narrative is adapted in different ways to negotiate a complex range of values and aspirations on the part of producers, and – we may speculate – spectators. In York we find the shepherds express a nostalgic concern for lost commercial pre-eminence, turning to rely on the city's status as a devotional centre for its rebirth. In the Towneley plays, the 'shepherds' comic antics represent not only the prosperity which the rise in the cloth trade brought to the West Riding, but the complexity of this position, which set their status not as a central hub of commerce, but as a provincial supplier. Further, each of the plays makes reference to the magically and devotionally loaded props known as Agnus Dei amulets, playing on their association with Christ and the 'shepherds'. Unable to rely on a devotionally consonant audience in the West Riding of the mid-sixteenth century, the *Prima* and *Secunda* also use humour as a way to play between Anglican and Recusant interests, using the anticipation of Christ as a unifying foil.

Chapter 4

Tyrannical Performances:

Looking to the (North) East

Herod and the other tyrants of York and the Towneley MS have always been considered comic villains. Bombastic and ridiculous, the pomp and anger which these characters are surrounded with – whether expressed through words, gestures, costume or staging – demonstrates that they are antithetical to the humble figure of Christ. A villainous antagonist can be among the most enjoyable characters of any given performance narrative. Evidence of payments made to the performance of Herod, as well as references to the renown and reputation of such performances in broader media, such as the much-cited comments on Absolon in Chaucer's *Miller's Tale,* or those made by the eponymous prince in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, attest to this.[1] Yet in this section I will question more closely how this dynamic between audience entertainment and the performance of evil worked in performances of a biblical nature.

Carpenter has established the possible similarities of experiencing early drama with attending modern-day pantomime performances, considering the extent to which spectators were expected to engage with the narrative enacted.[2] Whilst she clearly states that early drama did not hold any of twentieth-century pantomime's theatrical traditions, these conventions have clearly influenced scholarly readings of the relationship between performed tyrants and spectators in the plays. Heather Mitchell-Buck comments that the 'ranting tyrant' was 'the superstar of the early English stage', wearing lavish costumes, giving 'the longest and most elaborate speeches', and bringing the actors who performed them 'a substantial wage'.[3]

Herod and his tyrants appear to have been presented as both comical and villainous characters in these plays, much like a pantomime 'baddie'. But if we imagine that performances such as the York Cycle represented a staging of biblical history, a true re-enactment of the events of the past rather than a fictive story, how could it be justifiable to treat such evil figures as entertaining characters in the plays? Scholars have offered a series of justifications for this

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[1] Heather Mitchell-Buck points out that the actor playing Herod in the 1478 Coventry Smith's pageant was paid more than double what was given to the performer playing Jesus. Heather S. Mitchell-Buck, 'Tyrants, Tudors, and the Digby *Mary Magdalen', Comparative Drama,* 48 (2014), 256 n.1: she cites R. W. Ingram, ed., *REED: Coventry* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 61; see Geoffrey Chaucer, 'The Miller's Tale', in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). 70–71, ll.3383–86; William Shakespeare, *Hamlet,* ed. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (London: Thomson Learning for the Arden Shakespeare, 2006), 3.2. ll.13–14.

[2] Sarah Carpenter, 'New Evidence: Vives and Audience Response to Biblical Drama', *METh,* 31 (2009),10.

[3] Mitchell-Buck, 'Tyrants, Tudors, and the Digby *Mary Magdalen',* 241.

presentation of Herod as a comic figure, and specifically how spectators' enjoyment of the character could be justified.

In his influential work *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in Theater,* Weimann argues that Herod in York, Towneley and elsewhere represents a 'burlesque' imitation of tyranny, blending horror and humour to produce 'a liberating effect' where 'exaggerated authority becomes laughable'.[4] Gilhus similarly notes that the wickedness of Herod and the terror he could arouse was undermined by his comic portrayals, laughter taking 'the sting' out of evil and reducing the tyrant to a fool, judged by an audience from a position of 'superior knowledge'.[5] Essentially it has been suggested that Herod's presentation as a comic figure undermines the authority of his evil, a Christian audience mocking the tyrant, and thus remaining impervious to the threats he represents.

These scholars interpret the humour associated with Herod as mockery and scorn, which to some extent it clearly was: Herod is portrayed as a ridiculous figure, clearly at odds with the Christian truth. But they largely ignore the pleasure also associated with this comic portrayal, and the sense in which the actor performing Herod expected, desired, and drew on laughter in performances. In this section I argue that the laughter prompted by these tyrannical characters functioned in a far more complex way than merely undermining their authority. This laughter is ambiguous: it expresses enjoyment and entertainment, and does not act as a straightforward condemnation. Indeed, Herod and other tyrants in the plays should be understood as figures of temptation: foreign entities, characterised by their farcicality, but also their potential for subversion of Christian authority.

Firstly I will explore the presentation of Herod as a distinctly foreign body, a non-Christian figure claiming authority over the streets and performance spaces of north-east England in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. York's *Christ Before Herod* pageant is considered against contemporary discourses on marvellous exoticism and monstrousness, especially for the way it establishes the distinction between the performance site as Holy Land, and as foreign space. This opens up a wider discussion of what such a figure, monstrous yet attractive as a comic character, could represent in English performances. In the section following this, specific connotations held by Herod and other such figures are explored, drawing out an association between the tempting tyrant and a contemporary English conception of the founder of Islam. Repeated

[4] Robert Weimann, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater: Studies in the Social Dimension of Dramatic Form and Function* ed. Robert Schwartz (London: John Hopkins University Press, 1978) 70–71.
[5] Ingvild S. Gilhus, *Laughing Gods, Weeping Virgins: Laughter in the History of Religion* (London: Routledge, 1997), 97; see also Bob Godfrey, 'Herod's Reputation and the Killing of the Children: Some Theatrical Consequences', *Staging Scripture: Biblical Drama, 1350–1600,* ed. Peter Happé and Wim Hüsken (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 271.

invocations to 'Mahounde' are more than just signifiers of foreign villainy: they signify anxieties over religious worship fuelled by both Ottoman expansionism and Christian heterodoxy.

Finally, the comic nature of tyrannical characters in York and Towneley is considered as a way to understand the association of laughter and temptation in the play-texts. As loud and dangerous figures, these villainous tyrants were associated with heresy, attempting to regulate and reconfigure accepted Christian norms. Humour is wielded by these figures as a weapon, and within performances anxieties surrounding the relationship between speech, rhetoric and the nature of authority are explored. Humour not only mocked villainy and sinfulness in these performances. entertaining spectators. It also provoked them to engage cognitively with the biblical narrative being enacted, considering the attractiveness of sin, as well as its folly.

Section 4.1

Monsters and Marvels: Herod and Christ

In late medieval England there was a considerable interest in the lands of the East, an extensive – and to some extent imaginary – geographical region which held the sites of the Holy Land. Although the crusading enterprise had almost resolutely failed by this time, following the brief success of the late eleventh century, in England works inspired by the crusades appear to have gained special literary traction in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.[6] Alongside reports of the various crusades, historical and literary works followed the same template: the *Siege of Jerusalem*, for example, is a mid-fifteenth century work from Yorkshire which recounts the (apparently Christian) Roman devastation of the Middle-Eastern city.[7]

These interests were not strictly militaristic. Jerusalem appears regularly on medieval maps as a central landmark, and the city was often used as a model for the ideal urban metropolis.[8] Pilgrimage accounts of travel to the region proved to be extremely popular, with works published in England in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.[9] Wider travel writing and

[6] For an overview of the vast body of literature surrounding and inspired by the Crusades see Leila K. Norako, 'Crusades in Literature', *The Encyclopedia of Medieval Literature in Britain*, Vol. 1 (4 Vols.), ed. Siân Echard and Robert Rouse (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017), 575–83; for comments on accounts of the First Crusade see Christopher Tyerman, *God's War: A New History of the Crusades* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2006), 827.
[7] See Michael Johnston, 'Robert Thornton and *The Siege of* Jerusalem', in The *Yearbook of Langland Studies,* 23 (2009), 125–62, esp. 152–53.
[8] Keith D. Lilley, *City and Cosmos: The Medieval World in Urban Form* (London: Reaktion Books, 2009), 20–25, 78.
[9] See Colin Morris, 'Pilgrimage to Jerusalem in the Middle Ages', in *Pilgrimage: The English Experience from Becket to Bunyan*, ed. Colin Morris and Peter Roberts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 141–63, esp. 143–44; see also Elka Weber, *Travelling Through Text: Message and Method in Late Medieval Pilgrimage Accounts* (London: Routledge, 2005).

literary works shared this popularity, with audiences clearly taking pleasure in narratives exploring the geographical and ideological reaches of lands unknown to them, as well as the people who inhabited them.[10] It is within this tradition that I wish to place the York plays, and the ways they characterise the figure of Herod – and to a certain extent the other tyrants of the Cycle.

Akbari draws on many works of the High Medieval Romance tradition when she notes that English audiences felt a mix of fascination and contempt for 'Saracens' and other inhabitants of an imagined 'East' who seemed so similar to them, but also vitally different.[11] This dichotomy of fascination and contempt is reflected in the tyrants of York and Towneley: their unusual speech, manner, and costume were attractive to audiences, but also represented spiritual deviance, and an unwillingness to embrace the authority of Christ. In Herod we find a figure who was both threatening and attractive to contemporary spectators, evoking this broader treatment of Saracens in medieval literary culture.

But Herod is defined against Christ. It is easy to note the binary opposition between these two figures in performances, yet the characters would also have borne crucial similarities in their relation to spectators. In the York *Christ Before Herod,* both characters are constructed as 'marvels of the East', but this identification also demonstrates the essential distinction between them. Both are initially represented as objects of wonder and reverence – linked, I argue, to their position in this imagined Holy Land. It is the tensions inherent within this performatively biblical site – which operates both as a local space, and a foreign, non-Christian one – which these characters drew out in the performances.

A Medieval Orient?

Said has described Orientalism as 'a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient', predicated on the idea of an imperial Occident which both constructs and consumes a warped 'Orient', built as a reflection of itself. [12] The application of the theory has proved controversial in medieval studies; indeed, Said himself made clear that his methodological framework relies on a specific conception of the 'Orient' under Western colonialism, beginning

[10] See Linda Lomperis, 'Medieval Travel Writing and the Question of Race', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies,* 31:1 (2001),147–56, esp. 153–54; Sharon Kinoshita and Siobhain Bly Calkin, 'Saracens as idolaters in European vernacular literatures', in *Christian-Muslim Relations. A Bibliographical History. Volume 4 (1200–1350),* ed. David Thomas and Alexander Mallett (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 35.
[11] See Suzanne Conklin Akbari, *Idols in the East: European Representations of Islam and the Orient 1100–1450* (London: Cornell University Press, 2009)*,* 278–79.
[12] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 11, 8–12.

in the late-eighteenth century.[13] Yet scholars have argued for a 'pre-colonial' adaptation, making a case that discourses on race and Otherness circulating in the Middle Ages represent the seeds of Said's paradigm.[14] To pre-modern Western Christians, inhabitants of the East were presented as strange, alien figures, often described in ways which mirrored and critiqued aspects of Western Christian societies.[15] Therefore while aspects of Said's model make its application problematic, discussions of 'Orientalised Others' are pertinent in this earlier context.

In bringing the Holy Land to the streets of York, or to the playing spaces of Yorkshire, these late medieval dramatic productions participate in 'Orientalising' actions, both claiming authority over the Orient, and restructuring it for their own purposes. As has been established, in the process of doing this the sites and characters of the biblical Middle East are imagined onto the performance site, 'blending' local actors and spaces with scenes from biblical history.[16] This process brought contemporary spectators closer into the biblical site through personal recognition, and held the potential for comic incongruity in mimetic display. But far less attention has been given to the way characters from lands geographically (and culturally) distant, and often inaccessible to their spectators, were performed to either entrench or negate this distance.

Figures characterised as fanciful and clearly foreign entities challenged the idea of locality within the presentation of these biblical scenes. The menacing nature of the tyrannical Herod – using fantastical language and vicious threats – seems to reinforce essential differences between York and the Holy Land. However much these evil leaders were staged to satirise issues or tensions regarding local figures of authority, Herod and the tyrants undoubtedly represent a foreign 'Other', forcefully claiming power over an otherwise familiar space. Indeed, such negative associations drawn between figures of local authority and these 'Others' may have been used to reinforce implicit criticisms over the rights which the former held over those audience members that they presumed to rule. Through the portrayal of these tyrants local spaces may have become contested, raising questions over what could constitute the right to authority.

Portrayals of Herod and other tyrants in these plays fulfil the tropes of Orientalised bodies, defined as 'overemotional, irrational, and given to lascivious behaviour'.[17] Herod rants

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[13] 'Afterward to the 1995 printing', in Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin), 329–54, esp. 334.
[14] Suzanne Conklin Akbari, 'From Due East to True North: Orientalism and Orientation', in *The Postcolonial Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), 19–34, esp. 31.
[15] Michael Uebel, 'Unthinking the Monster: Twelfth–Century Responses to Saracen Alterity', in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture,* ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 272–3.
[16] See King, *The York Mystery Cycle*, 141; Stevenson, 'Embodied Enchantments', 91–112.
[17] Suzanne Conklin Akbari, 'Placing the Jews in Late Medieval English Literature', in *Orientalism and the Jews*, ed. Ivan Davidson Kalmar and Derek J. Penslar (London: University Press of New England, 2005), 33; Harris argues that Shakespeare uses Herod as a specific model of 'oriental histrionicism' in several of his plays, and ties this directly to

and raves at the news of Christ's coming and denies the reality of the Christian God in favour of 'Mahounde', surely fulfilling the first two criteria. In terms of lasciviousness, Herod is consistently portrayed as a figure of decadence and splendour in York and Towneley. York's Herod refers to himself as 'fairer of face' (York *Questioning*, l.17), indeed 'fairere be ferre' (York *Trial,* l.240) than all others, designating himself 'youre lovely lorde' (York *Massacre*, l.8). He describes wearing 'riche array' (York *Questioning,* l.147), and in Towneley being 'Clenly shapen, hyde and hare' (Towneley *Offering,* l.35). In the York *Trial Before Herod* the tyrant's request to be lain down softly by his counsellor in bed is ripe with sexual innuendo:

> Herod: Ya, but as thou luffes me hartely, laye me doune softeley,
> For though wotte full wele that I am full tenderly hydid.
> (ll. 48–49)

The decadence of Herod is suggestively related to his sexual appetites, part of his portrayal which we may imagine was heightened in performance. Williams suggests that in the late medieval period Herod was often linked to queerness and its contemporary association with pride and luxury, citing references to the tyrant's corporeal desires, and to his practice of sodomy.[18] Akbari marks the fifteenth century as the starting point of the association of the Orient with effeminacy, due to greater engagement by Western Christians with the East, driving a characterisation typified by decadence and sensual excess which developed in the sixteenth century.[19]

Within English performances it is likely that Herod's court was characterised by its decadence: he is a villainous sinner, who luxuriates in a court whose authority will wane with Christ's coming. Records from Coventry note that up to twenty shillings were spent on maintaining Herod's costume and props every year, whilst in York the Goldsmiths complained about the expense of staging both Herod's court and the finery of the Magi.[20] The Goldsmiths here seem to have retained the expensive costumes of these pageants, despite the fact that by 1561 it was the Minstrels performing the shows; the city's memorandum book records that

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the influence of the representation of Herod in the medieval dramatic tradition, especially in Coventry: see Jonathan Gil Harris, *Untimely Matter in the Time of Shakespeare* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 80–84.

[18] Deanne Williams, *The French Fetish from Chaucer to Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 64–67; see also John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980), 280–81.

[19] Akbari, *Idols in the East,* 284.

[20] See Mitchell-Buck, 'Maintaining the Realm', 184, *REED: Coventry*, 71; *REED: York,* I, 47–48. The proto-Christian nature of the Magi sets them in stark contrast to Herod, although all of them were probably portrayed as visually interesting 'Oriental' figures. See Kathleen M. Ashley, ' "Strange and Exotic" : Representing the Other in Medieval and Renaissance Performance', in *East of West: Cross-Cultural Performance and the Staging of Difference*, ed. Claire Sponsler and Xiomei Chen (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), 84–85.

'neither the Corones nor gownes' should be lent out for under 8d a piece.[21] The fact that the Goldsmiths chose to retain these items suggests that they were valuable commodities, evoking their splendour, but perhaps also their bespoke nature.

Figure 26: Christ Before Herod, Alabaster, (English, 15th Century).

Fantastical costumes, sets, and props afforded Herod a sense of pomp and grandeur, and might be considered evidence that his regal dress was also ostensibly foreign, or 'Other'.[22] A list of the plays performed in a biblical cycle at the regionally proximate town of Beverley refer to a play labelled 'Black Herod', which has roused speculation as to the nature of the eponymous character's costume and appearance.[23] In an early study A.F. Leach suggested that the 'much travestied potentate [was] always appearing with a black face, and continually in a rage', and later Woolf noted that this might either refer to his face being painted, the wearing of a mask, or

[21] *REED:York,* I, 334.

[22] Smith claims that after the mid-fifteenth century Herod was regularly portrayed as an Ottoman figure, citing Albrecht Dürer's influential 'Ecce Homo', from *Large Passion* (c.1497): Charlotte Colding Smith, *Images of Islam, 1453–1600: Turks in Germany and Central Europe* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2014), 94–5; see also Colum Hourihane, *Pontius Pilate, Anti–Semitism, and the Passion in Medieval Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 148, 153, 271–2. An early fifteenth century English alabaster labelled 'Christ Before Herod' shows Herod as an Ottoman, wearing a Turban and given a noticeably darkened face: see figure 26

[23] See Diana Wyatt, 'Three Play Titles without Play Texts: What Can They Tell Us, and How? An Investigation of the Evidence for the Beverley Corpus Christi Play', in *Staging Scripture: Biblical Drama 1350–1600*, ed. Peter Happé and Wim Hüsken (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 68–91, esp. 73.

merely the figurative use of the word black to denote evil.[24] Twycross and Carpenter cite a reference to the Coventry Smiths paying 'for peyntyng… Herodes face' in 1477, as well as in 1547, 1554, and possibly 1508, for the 'colour and coloyng of Arade'.[25] Herod's 'Otherness' may thus have been defined by the racially suggestive darkening of the character's skin, and so too might have been the foreign alterity of other tyrants or their dependents, clearly marking them out as distinct from other figures.

Resisting the sense in which the Holy Land is mapped onto the performance space, the tyrants stand out: they are rulers at the centre of their court, into which the audience is drawn. Even though the playing space has become a biblical site, Herod's court remains on the edge of Christian society. In the Towneley *Magnus Herodes* Nuncius announces that Herod is renowned across a number of sites.

Nuncius**:** Tuskane and turkey
All Inde and Italy
Cecyll and surry
Drede hym and dowtys
From Paradyse to Padwa
To Mownt Flascon
From Egyp to Mantua
Vnto Kemptowne,
From Sarceny to Susa
To Grece it abowne
Both Normondy and Norwa
Lowtys to his crowne.
(Towneley *Magnus Herodes,* ll. 62–73.)

These diverse locations – from Tuscany to Turkey, India to Italy, Sicily to Syria – mix Christian and non-Christian nations to demonstrate the fearsome reach of Herod's powers, as encroaching on Christendom as well as the spiritual 'paradyse'. Importantly, none of the locations are local or

[24] A. F. Leach, 'Some English Plays and Players', in *An English Miscellany: Presented to Dr. Furnivall in Honour of his Seventy-Fifth Birthday,* ed. William Paton Ker, Arthur S. Napier and Walter W. Skeat (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1901), 205–34, 213–34; Woolf, *English Mystery Plays*, 391–92, ft. 64.
[25] Meg Twycross and Sarah Carpenter, *Masks and Unmasking in Medieval and Early Tudor England* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 216; for a depiction of Herod and his soldiers portrayed as racially black, surrounded by white Magi, see *The Murthly Hours,* Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland MS 21000, fols.12r., 14r. John Higgitt, *The Murthly Hours: Devotion, Literacy and Luxury in Paris, England and the Gaelic West* (London: The British Library and University of Toronto Press, 2000), 201–202.

familiar: all express a sense of foreignness associated with the character. Yet through the biblical plays of York and Towneley, this defining geographical space becomes blurred with the site of the performance; as a result, these figures who are usually distant from the tangible Christian world became unsettlingly close to those within it, prompting audience members to question the limits of alterity.

In his work *Of Giants*, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen speaks of the 'semiotic slipperiness' of monstrousness, describing a monster as a figure who 'cannot be fully banished from, or integrated into' the identity which its body constructs. In particular, the giant is: '…at once a seemingly monolithic representation of otherness… and a figure whose indomitable corporeality suggests the difficulty of being merely human in a world that demands the austere discipline of minute self-regulation.'[26] Herod fits assuredly into the category of monstrousness: he is an 'Orientalised' figure placed directly into a northern English performance site, outlandishly claiming authority over it.

His bodily excess is not expressed through a physical largeness, but through the decadence which surrounds him: he is costumed elaborately, surrounded by an opulent court. Further to this, he wields immoderate speech forms. The alliterative splendour of Herod's lines has been much discussed, as has the idea that these dramatic monologues help to characterise the tyrant as a particularly erratic figure. His bombast, set alongside sharp shifts in tone – moving between eloquent grandeur and ranted ravings – express this denial of 'self-regulation'.[27]

Ashley notes that such monstrously foreign figures could also be considered pleasurably 'exotic' in spectacle or display; in this sense Herod could offer 'an alternative, pleasurable experience of otherness' to spectators.[28] We should read the character as both a monster and a marvel for audiences, an object of fascination drawn from the other side of the world. The popularity of stories relating to such marvellous figures throughout the Middle Ages can easily be attested, from the *Wonders of the East* to *The Travels of John Mandeville*.[29] For Cohen, the monstrous giant may rouse fear, yet also represent the pleasures of festive spectacle, bodily enjoyment and entertainment.[30] Herod and the tyrants, like the monstrous giant, are present on stage to shock

[26] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), xiv–xv.
[27] See Garrett Epp, 'Passion, Pomp, and Parody: Alliteration in the York Plays', *METh,* 11 (1992), esp.157; Clare Wright, 'Acoustic Tyranny: Metre, Alliteration, and Voice in *Christ before Herod*', *METh*, 34 (2012), esp. 10–14.
[28] Ashley, 'Representing the Other in Medieval and Renaissance Performance', 77.
[29] See Asa Mittman, *Maps and Monsters in Medieval England* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006); also Rudolf Wittkower, 'Marvels of the East. A Study in the History of Monsters', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes,* 5 (1942), 159–97; Lomperis, 'Medieval Travel Writing', 153–54.
[30] Cohen, *Of Giants*, 164–65.

and terrify, to act as a representation of alterity and Christian enmity, but they are also figures of laughter, to fascinate and entertain.

The nature of Herod as a fascinating and spectacular figure is suggested in the opening of the York *Questioning,* where he claims authority over 'Jubiter and Jovis, Martis and Mercurii' (l. 2) as well as 'Saturne' (l. 5) and 'Venus' (l. 10). In this period each region of the Earth was thought to be ruled over by one of these heavenly bodies alongside the sun and the moon; Herod projects, in Beadle's words, an 'intentionally incoherent and comic astro-meteorological fantasy' of this astrological concept, calling himself 'prince of planetis' (l. 12).[31] Simultaneously though, Herod's words invoke classical deities, objects of interest to late medieval audiences, as well as challenging pagan entities.[32]

Provocative and tantalising, reference to these gods displays the character's pretension to learning, but also reinforces the idea that he was supposed to represent both pagan vice and exotic temptation. Within late medieval civic culture a particular interest in subjects from the 'Matter of Rome' has been noted, and was not restricted to London's self-presentation as the New Troy.[33] Herod's references to classical deities cast him as an exotic figure of the East, but one also linked to antiquity: during the fifteenth century it became regular practice to portray Trojan warriors in 'Orientalised' Saracen dress.[34] This offers us an insight into the complicated host of associations figures such as Herod may have held: more than a monstrous Saracen, he may have also been connected to the glories of classical Rome.

If Herod and the tyrants were represented as both monsters and marvels in the plays, a problem occurs when we consider these characters against the figure whom they consistently mirror in the performances: Christ. Whether as a newborn babe or a condemned man, Christ is posed as a figural counterpoint to Herod and the tyrants in each of the plays; just as in the presentation of Saracens more generally, the evil and ridiculousness of these kingly characters is used to define in relief the goodness and humble piety of the Messiah. In the performances they

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[31] Beadle, *York Plays*, II, 131; Herod's feigned control of the skies is set up in contrast with the learned astronomical practices of the Magi.

[32] See for example: Helen Phillips, 'Medieval Classical Romances: The Perils of Inheritance', in *Christianity and Romance in Medieval England,* ed. Rosalind Field, Philippa Hardman, and Michelle Sweeney (Cambridge: Brewer, 2010), 3–25; John P. McCall, *Chaucer Among the Gods: The Poetics of Classical Myth* (London: Pennsylvania University Press, 1979), 1–17; Jamie Claire Fumo, *The Legacy of Apollo: Antiquity, Authority and Chaucerian Poetics* (London: University of Toronto Press, 2010), esp. 76–123.

[33] For an overview of this see Federico, *New Troy,* esp. 1–28; for a discussion of the relationship between late medieval society and the classical world espoused in the Chester plays see Sheila Christie, 'When in Rome: Shifting Conceptions of the Chester Cycle's Roman References in Pre- and Post-Reformation England', in *The Chester Cycle in Context, 1555–1575: Religion, Drama, and the Impact of Change*, ed. Jessica Dell, David Klausner, and Helen Ostovich (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2012), 149–59.

[34] See James Harper, 'Turks as Trojans, Trojans as Turks: Visual Imagery of the Trojan War and the Politics of Cultural Identity in Fifteenth-Century Europe', in *Translating Cultures: Postcolonial approaches to the Middle Ages,* ed. A.J. Kabir and D. Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 151–79.

are rivals in their claims of authority, Herod and the tyrants portraying false power against the divine truth of Christ.

In this dual presentation though, we can discern an anxiety over the presentation of Christ due to the similarities which might be drawn between him and Herod, rooted in their geographical positioning. The miracles associated with Christ, and his status as God incarnate, make his interpretation as a marvellous figure easy to understand to medieval audiences. However, Christ also frequently caused disquiet, carrying the unfulfilled potential for monstrousness as a 'category-defying' entity, both human and divine.[35]

Christ and Herod: Marvelous Creatures

In the York *Trial* we are introduced – as in the other plays of the tyrants – to a verbose and intimidating figure: carrying a 'bright' 'brande' Herod threatens to 'brest' the 'brayne' of spectators who deny his authority (l. 4); he will 'dress you to drede / with dasshis' (ll. 6–7); he will 'brittyn all youre bones' and lusshe all your lymmis with lasschis' (ll. 10, 11). Akin to the 'fee fi fo fum' of the fairytale giant, Herod's alliterative frenzy establishes the potency of his anger, and expresses his semi-comic claims of strength and authority. It is clear that, despite the fact that some years have passed since the incidents surrounding the Nativity, Herod remains essentially the same character of potent impotency, and manic deviousness.

After the comic verbosity of his threats the tyrant goes on to evoke genuine marvels, claiming for himself the role of explorer, or at least expounder of the mysterious beings at the edges of the world:

> Herod: Dragons that are dredfull schall derk in ther denne
> In wrathe when we writhe or in wrathenesse ar wapped
> Agaynste jeauntis ongentill have we joined with ingendis,
> And swannys that are swymmyng to oure swetnes schall be snapped
> (ll. 12–14)

Herod summons up these monstrous marvels in order to impress his audience, emphasising both the authority he has over these creatures, and the similarities which they bear to him. The

[35] See Bettina Bildhauer and Robert Mills, 'Introduction: Conceptualizing the Monstrous', in *The Monstrous Middle Ages,* ed. Bettina Bildhauer and Robert Mills (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), 13–14; Robert Mills, 'Jesus as Monster', in *The Monstrous Middle Ages,* ed. Bettina Bildhauer and Robert Mills (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), 28–9; Michael Camille, 'The Image and the Self: Unwriting Late Medieval Bodies', in *Framing Medieval Bodies,* ed. Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 72–74.

'jeauntis ongentill' and 'dredfull' dragons are fearsome creatures, but also exotic ones, the beings of bestiaries or later travel narratives. They are terrifying, unnatural, and ungodly. The tyrant presents himself as having subdued these marvellous creatures as a means to threaten others into subservience, calling out 'ye that luffis youre liffis, listen to me' (l. 21). Herod's words suggest that he is as much of a marvel as the creatures he can tame; having defeated them (a least in his imagination) he claims the powers of the giant and the dragon – even if this mysterious image is later undermined as the monstrous king is lulled to sleep and tucked up safely in bed (ll. 47–54).[36]

It is into this setting – where audiences have already been drawn to consider the characterisation and taxonomy of the marvellous – that Christ is led. Surrounding the entrance of Jesus, bound with a rope, come words of anticipation by both Herod, his counsellors, and the soldiers who bring him to the court. After hearing of Herod's treatment of giants and dragons, Christ is introduced by Miles I as a 'warlowe' (l. 56) or warlock, a word used in this period to denote treachery or wickedness, but also 'a monstrous creature'.[37] As Beadle notes, throughout the three York 'Trial' pageants (*Christ Before Annas and Cayphas; Christ Before Pilate I; Christ Before Herod*) there is an emphasis on the claim that Jesus is guilty of witchcraft and dark magic.[38] Yet in the *Trial Before Herod* this sorcerous aspect of the accusations mounted against Christ represents more than just claims that he has a treacherous or nefarious nature, as a wielder of sorcery.

Herod attempts to portray Jesus as a marvel akin to himself or his counsellors, whose purpose is to titillate and entertain. Dux I describes tales of Christ as 'uncouthe tythandes' (l. 77) or unusual news, and Herod states a desire to hear 'no tales but trewe' (l. 78), suggesting that accounts of Jesus are far-fetched and ridiculous. The men do not wish to hear of Jesus' miracles for the sake of spiritual education: Dux II comments that the figure 'bodus outhir bourdyng or bales to brewe' (l. 80), suggesting that he will either bring entertainment (games) or trouble. They anticipate that Christ will both amuse and threaten them, just as Herod acts for spectators of the pageant. Importantly, this dialogue draws the spectator to frame the marvellous Christ as these men do, and consider the way that Herod's conceptualisation of him might mirror their own.

Initially Herod is unconvinced in taking Christ from Pilate, who has been his enemy. Notably Jesus is described in an understated manner as a mere 'presente fro Pilate' (l. 95), an

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[36] The dramatic action of drinking wine before being put into bed is shared by the antagonists of the two preceding pageants, Cayphas and Pilate. It refers to a contemporary aristocratic ceremony named the *voide* or *voidée* where a cup of spiced wine was drunk to promote sound sleep: Beadle, *The York Plays* II, 244. Although recognisably partaking of this well-established ceremony, the dramatic portrayal of this intimate and domestic ritual in the open air on the streets of York, as well as claims by all three antagonists that they have gentle skin, offers much potential for comic business.

[37] See 'War-lou', *MED*. [Accessed 10.10.18].The word is also used to describe Jesus in *Christ Before Annas and Cayphas*, as well as several other of the Passion plays. See Beadle, *York Plays* II, 246–47.

[38] See Beadle, *The York Plays* II, 241; 241 f. 494; also R.H. Nicholson, 'The Trial of Christ the Sorcerer in the York Cycle,' *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies,* 16 (1986), 125–69.

object which the rival leader wishes to hear Herod's opinion on (l. 104). Dux II entreats his master that if 'this gedlyng go thus it will greve werre, / For he gares growe on this grounde grete velayne' (ll. 105–6). That the word of Christ is able to 'growe on this grounde' would be considered by spectators in a positive light, easily dismissing the claims that he spreads 'grete velayne'. Yet the manner in which this evangelism, or dissemination of the Word, is described also evokes the spread of rumours and tall-tales, central aspects of the 'wonder' narrative.

On finding out that it is Christ who has been brought to him, Herod confesses his interest: the tyrant looks forward to testing the 'farles' or marvels which he has heard Christ can work (l. 118); indeed he covets knowledge of Jesus because 'men carpis that the carle shulde be konnand' (ll. 137–38), and he is 'fayner of that freyke then othir fiftene' (l. 155). This corresponds with Luke 23:8, where Herod has heard much of Christ and longs to see a token of his miracles.[39] Yet importantly it is as 'games' that the tyrant treats these stories, objects of pleasure and fancy, rather than devotional importance (l. 119).

Herod's reference to the upcoming 'games' with Jesus again demonstrates his interest in the amusement and pleaure to be taken from this mysterious figure. Indeed, when Miles II warns that Christ will be 'of no bourdyng' (l. 147), or will not play, Herod replies that they 'schall lere hym' (l. 148) how to. As the object of a game, Christ must be taught how to play his role as a figure of entertainment. The playful language continues as the pageant progresses: Herod eagerly declares that his 'harte hoppis for joie' to have 'goode game with this boy' (ll. 163, 165). His excitement remains entirely superficial. In an act of resistance Christ remains silent, thereby not offering his accounts of miracles up to ridicule – narratives which Dux II refers to dismissively as the idle talk that 'grete bostyng men blawes' (l. 174). Refusing to speak, Jesus refuses the 'game' which Herod seeks for his entertainment, and the tyrant's attempts to categorise him in this way.

We see this played out further as Herod responds to what others tell him of Christ's miracles – stories in which the audience presumably had faith, but in which the tyrant steadily expresses growing disbelief. After Christ refuses to answer his first set of questions about 'ferleis' or marvels (l. 188) the knights who transported Jesus from Pilate begin to recount what they know of him instead:

Miles I:	My lorde, his mervaylis to more and to myne,
	Or musteres emange us both mydday and morne.
Miles II:	Mi lorde, it were to fele

[39] Beadle, *York Plays*, II, 270.

Of wonderes, he workith tham so wightely.
(ll. 191–94)

The knights express confidence in Christ's 'mervaylis' and 'wonderes' but cannot understand his reluctance to speak of them; they encourage him to 'Go to the kyng and tell hyme fro toppe unto tayle' (l. 196), but to no avail. Instead it is these men who recount Christ's 'mervayles' (l. 200), mentioning the 'Five thousand folke faire gon he feede / With five looffis and two fisshis to fange' (ll. 201–2). In report, Christ's miracles begin to circulate the imaginary space of Herod's court: Jesus himself silently refuses to be cast as a marvellous thing, a pawn in Herod's game.

Thus Herod's courtiers become defenders of Christ, spreading stories of his divinity, justifying his deeds and attesting to their veracity. After hearing of the loaves and fishes, Herod again demands 'But saie, sirs, art her sawis soth that thei saie?' (l. 215). Rather than bowing to his criticism, the knights claim that 'more selcouth wre schewed oure sight' (l. 216) and recount the miracle of the raising of Lazarus, supporting Christ rather than the doubts of their own lord. Christ's silence and stoicism set him in stark relief against the exuberant and erratic tyrant; he is not a foreign body, or strange figure of superficial entertainment.

No longer able to treat Jesus as a wondrous object, Herod begins to refer to him as a fool instead. The nature of the entertainment has changed, but Herod still seeks to gain enjoyment from Christ, mocking him with his words:

Herod: Comes nerre, kyng, into courte
Saie, can ye not knele?
We schalle have gaudis full goode and games or we goo.
(ll. 236–37)

Again here there is an emphasis on the desire for 'gaudis' and 'games', but this time Christ is treated as a fool who will not speak or participate. Beadle suggests that in the *Trial* the portrayal of Herod is a 'satirical portrait of a contemporary magnate's irresponsible desire for trivial diversion and amusement'.[40] Although Herod attempts to paint Christ as an Other, a figure of marvels and entertainment as well as falsity, he ultimately fails; all of his endeavours merely reflect back onto himself, emphasising his own deeply foreign nature.

[40] Beadle, *The York Plays* II, 270.

Herod grows increasingly irritated at Christ's refusal to speak, or otherwise comply with the game he wishes to play. The tyrant's lines become ever more erratic, mixing Middle English, Latin, and French:

Herod: I faute in my reverant in otill moy,
I am of favour, loo, fairer be ferre.
Kyte oute yugilment. Uta, oy, oy!
Be any wite that I watte it will waxe werre.

Servicia primet,
Such losellis and lurdaynes as thou, loo.
Respicias timet
What the devyll and his dame schall I now doo?

Do carpe on, carle, for I can thee cure,
Say, may though not here me? Oy, man, arte though woode?
Now telle me faithfully before howe thou fore;
Forthe, frende, be my faith, though arte a fonde foode.
(ll. 239–50)

Beadle has commented that Herod attempts to cast Jesus as a 'King of Fools' figure, seeking to mark him as a figure of ridicule.[41] If this is the case, we see Herod's attempts reflected back on himself. Confused phrases such as 'Uta, oy, oy!', or the question 'What the devyll and his dame schall I now doo?' appear unhinged. His erratic multilingualism – bouncing from Latin to macaronic French – establish him as an elite figure, distanced from the majority of spectators watching the pageant, but also as a crazed figure of unintelligible 'foreignness'. Herod is unsettled both by Jesus' silence, and the destabilizing influence he has gained over the rest of the court.

Herod's courtiers begin to look to the tyrant as a monstrous figure, a marvel who they understand as the cause Christ's silence. Dux I suggests that Herod has 'astonys' Jesus with his loud voice (l. 251), whilst Dux II thinks the prisoner might be scared by the 'fauchone' or sword which the tyrant wields (ll. 255–56). Miles I notes they will 'gete noght o worde' from Jesus as 'he is wraiste of his witte or will of his wone' (ll. 271–72), and even Herod's son, Filius III, says that

[41] Beadle, *York Plays* II, 274–75.

Christ 'is so ferde in youre face here' that he will not speak (l. 327). Having settled on the idea that Christ is 'a madman' (l. 336) it is decided that He should be dressed in a 'white garmente' (l. 343) and 'rayed like a roye' or king (l. 359), 'All faciound therefore foolis to feere' (l. 356).

Herod tries to frame Jesus as a false prophet: a figure of marvels with an unusual or exotic nature, or a foreign 'Other'. Yet it is made clear that Herod himself is this false figure, with little authority over his own court. The pageant stages a comparison of Christ and Herod, considering anxieties over the similarities of both figures in the context of the local performance site: both could be considered foreign eastern marvels, distant from the devotions of spectators. Christ's miracles and his moral authority – characterised here by his silence – are defined against non-Christian lies and villainy. Ultimately, and ironically, like other Eastern characters in this period, Herod's authority is represented as a sham – he becomes a verbose falsifier set against the silent Christ. His 'marvellous' nature is questionable, easier to observe from afar than close up.

Herod and his court occupy a liminal space, an eastern court brought into the northern English performance site, making them monstrous Saracen bodies, superficially entertaining, but bearing no solid authority. Christ's position is clearly distinguished from this by his refusal to be categorised at this superficial marvel: instead he is presented as a humble figure of real spiritual authority. Rather than a fanciful miracle worker from the East, Christ becomes a tangible body for local devotion. In the York *Trial* we can observe magnified the way the whole Cycle works more broadly in its relation to the Holy Land: the geography, figures and narratives of a foreign space are laid onto the city, but only the sacred and the orthodox can be absorbed, brought into stark contrast with and defined against the threatening forces of an antagonistic 'Other'. Still, with Herod presented as an eastern marvel, this dynamic is complicated: he remains a tempting figure, wielding deceptive power against the true authority of Christ.

Section 4.2

Deviant Speech: 'Mahounde', Herod and Heresy

In the surviving pageants of York and Towneley Herod was presented as a 'foreign' figure, claiming authority over sites in a land dedicated to Christian devotion. Yet the religious identity of Herod remains ambiguous. Herod professes to rule over the Jews, while also invoking classical Roman deities. The most prominent markers of Herod's faith are his repeated calls to the entity 'Mahounde'. Variously rendered 'Mahounde', 'Mahowne', 'Machamet', 'Mahomet' and 'Mowmet', this name denoted a pseudo-Islamic deity, commonly associated in late medieval

England with 'Saracen' worship in the Middle East, far distanced from the real Prophet of Islam. Analyses of the York and Towneley plays have usually only made fleeting reference to this invocation as a conventional means of characterising Herod as a non-Christian 'Other'. In this section I will make the case that the tyrant's invocation of 'Mahounde' held very specific meanings, pertinent to our understanding of Herod's relationship to Christ and to spectators in performances.[42]

The last study to focus on the significance which invocations of this pseudo-Islamic figure could have held in these early biblical dramas was an article by Michael Paull on 'Mahomet' in the Towneley plays, published in 1972.[43] Studies carried out in recent decades on both the plays and the reception of Islam in the Christian West offer us further avenues for detailed exploration. Of key importance to understanding the context of 'Mahounde' in the plays is the Fall of Constantinople in 1453. Conceptions of Islam in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were mostly concerned with a distant enemy of unsettling pagan beliefs, who had controlled the sites of the Holy Land following the ultimate failure of various Crusades. But from at least the middle of the fifteenth century, Islam – through the Ottoman empire – posed an expansionist threat. [44] Certainly York, one of the largest cities of England, filled with both clerical and mercantile inhabitants capable of receiving and disseminating such information, would have been aware of this encroachment into what had previously been regarded as the impermeable walls of Christendom.

The surviving scripts of the York Cycle were written at some point between 1463–77, and those of Towneley around 1550, thus both can be read as products of a period between the Fall of Constantinople and the emergence of 'Moors' or 'Turkes' on the professional stage in the later sixteenth century – the latter linked to the specific context of Elizabethan exploration and internationalised trade.[45] Against this backdrop, I will consider how Islam, and the late medieval English portrayal of 'Mahounde', are reflected in the York and Towneley performances. In the York and Towneley plays, then, we might read the invocation of 'Mahounde' – representing Islam – as something more than the generic marker of an Eastern potentate. It is not only Herod

[42] For a related recent analysis, see Michael Mark Chemers, 'Anti-Semitism, Surrogacy, and the Invocation of Mohammed in 'The Play of the Sacrament'', *Comparative Drama*, 41:1 (2007): 25–55.
[43] Michael Paull, 'The Figure of Mahomet in the Towneley Cycle', *Comparative Drama,* 6:3 (1972), 187–88.
[44] See Tolan, 'Looking East before 1453: The Saracen in the Medieval European Imagination', in *Cultural Encounters Between East and West, 1453–1699,* ed. Matthew Birchwood and Matthew Dimmock (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2005)
[45] A range of scholarship has developed on the Western perceptions of Islam in both the medieval and the early modern periods, though little has focussed on the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, generally a gap in these arbitrary periodizations. Various approaches to the relationship in the medieval period have already been cited, but for studies on these connections in Elizabethan England see for example Nabil Matar, *Turks, Moors and Englishmen in the Age of Discovery* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Matthew Dimmock, *New Turkes, Dramatizing Islam and the Ottomans in Early Modern England* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).

who invokes 'Mahounde' in these biblical plays – so too do Pharoah, Caesar Augustus, Pilate, and a range of minor characters, some twenty-five times in York, and a staggering fifty-nine times in Towneley. But Herod is notably the figure who calls on Mahounde the most, and professes to hold the closest relationship to him.

In the York *Massacre* Herod claims the pseudo-deity as his 'cheffe helpe', ruling alongside him (ll. 19–23), whereas in the Towneley *Magnus Herodes* Nuncius grandly extends their relationship, referring to Herod's 'cosyn mahowne' (l. 78). Although these invocations of 'Mahounde' establish the non-Christian nature of Herod, the further implications of this have not been fully recognised. In the period in which both the York and Towneley plays were staged 'Mahounde' represented a particular entity, whose characterisation in Western Christian sources is mirrored in the performance of Herod himself.

Mahounde and Herod: Speech and Authority

Influenced by the Romance tradition, scholars have previously tended to interpret 'Mahounde' in the plays as a pagan idol or demon, worshipped by Saracen figures who either suffer from the iniquities of their abhorrent anti-Christian worship, or turn to virtue through a conversion. 'Mahounde' was often found next to other pseudo-deities in a demonic pantheon which varied from text to text, with names drawn from sources on classical antiquity including 'Tervagen', 'Apollin', 'Jupiter', 'Nero', and even 'Plato'.[46] Tolan asserts that English drama portrayed enemies of Christ as polytheistic followers of 'Saracen idolatry', just as they were in romance works.[47]

This generalising notion has remained influential, but should be questioned. As Akbari points out, some understood Muslims as 'polytheistic idolaters', worshipping 'mauwmets' or 'mommets', but others held a more nuanced understanding, informed by access to Latin and vernacular accounts of the life of 'Mahomet'. This duality, reflecting different ways of thinking about Islam, cannot be explained as the difference between 'learned' and 'popular' understandings of the religion. Both reinforced the 'Otherness' of Islam in complementary ways, with Muslims conceived of alternately as pagans, or as worshippers tricked into following a false prophet.[48] It is the latter understanding of Islam, as a sect based on falsity and deception, which I wish to consider in the characterisation of Herod and the other tyrants.

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[46] See Siobhain Bly Calkin and Sharon Kinoshita, 'Saracens as idolaters in European Vernacular Literatures', in *Christian-Muslim Relations. A Bibliographical History*, *Volume IV (1200–1350),* ed. David Thomas and Alexander Mallett (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 29–44.
[47] John Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 130.
[48] See Suzanne Conklin Akbari, *Idols in the East: European Representations of Islam and the Orient 1100–1450* (London: Cornell University Press, 2009), 200–203.

Whilst the York and Towneley plays make no reference to the life of the Prophet 'Mohamet', the works suggest at least an engagement with the duality outlined above because they invoke the pseudo-Islamic Mahounde not as a tangible idol, to be worshipped or physically toppled onstage, but as an alternate focus of worship to Christ or God. In York the figure is referred to as 'Mahounde, my god and most of myght' in the *Questioning* (l. 157) and as 'allmighty Mahounde' in the *Massacre* (l. 15). More than this, references to Mahounde are regularly made as a parodic subversion of oaths to Christ. In the York *Trial* Herod swears 'by the bloode that Mahounde bledde' (l. 9), a travesty of Christ's sacrifice, whilst in the Towneley *Caesar Augustus* and *The Conspiracy* oaths are made 'by mahownes bloode' (l. 148; l.140). In *Magnus Herodes* by 'Mahowne in heuen' (l. 184) and in *The Dice* 'by myghty Mahounde' (ll. 184) and 'by mahownes bonys!' (l. 345). Characters referring to 'Mahounde' are not discussing a wooden idol: they frame the entity as a false equivalent to the tripartite Christian God. Their invocation represents evil, but also a distinct belief system – prompting spectators of the plays to consider their own devotional allegiances.

Both influencing and necessarily reflecting this perception of Islam were a variety of texts which circulated in the high to late medieval period in England, concerned with the origins of the religion. Various Latin, French, and Middle English texts of the eleventh to the fifteenth century circulated in Western Europe, from works such as the *Vita Mahumeti,* the *Otia Machomete* and the *Roman de Mahomet*, to the narratives of Muhammad's life set out in John Lydgate's *Fall of Princes* and Langland's *Piers Plowman.* Portrayals differ, but all portray 'Mohamet' as 'a deceptive magician, controlling his followers by means of false miracles', and a 'false messiah-figure who looks and seems like Christ…but proves to be an imposter'.[49] These so-called accounts of the Prophet's life were anti-hagiographies, grounded in a Western Christian perspective: in them 'Mahomet' is said to have been schooled by a monk or theologian expelled from Rome, who subverts orthodox religion in order to gain wealth and prestige through his protégé.

From this perspective, as Daniel argues, Latin Christians place this figure within a tradition of false prophets – entities whom Christ himself had warned against.[50] Support of the entity was used to show the skewed authority which all of the tyrants claimed, attempting to subvert Christian doctrine, and appropriate popular devotions for themselves. We have established that on stage Herod was portrayed as an exotic and attractive entity, superficially entertaining and popular as a figure of the Orient. Yet through his entertaining speeches and spectacular court,

[49] Suzanne Conklin Akbari, 'The Rhetoric of Antichrist in Western Lives of Muhammad', *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 8:3 (1997), 297–307; See also Reginald Hyatte, trans. and ed., *The Prophet of Islam in Old French: The Romance of Muhammad (1258) and the Book of Muhammad's Ladder (1264)* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 2–12; see also Paull, 'The Figure of Mahomet', 192, 197, 201.
[50] Daniel, *Islam and the West,* 98–99.

when Herod and the other tyrants invoke 'Mahounde', they also displayed their intention to lure spectators away from Christ.

Higden's Life of 'Machamet'

Considering the potential influence of contemporary accounts of the life of 'Mahounde' on the York and Towneley plays, it is useful to look to the narrative provided in Ranulf Higden's *Polychronicon,* a text popular amongst both lay and clerical readers in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The *Polychronicon* was written in the early thirteenth century by a monk of St. Werburgh's Abbey, Chester, and used antique, biblical, and medieval texts to provide a chronicle of world history up to the contemporary period. It was immensely popular, included within lay and religious libraries in England from the mid-fourteenth to sixteenth centuries.[51] Many manuscripts of the work survive, and at least three are recorded amongst the wills of York men in the mid-fifteenth century, including one in the city's Austin Friary – an institution associated with the writing of the plays.[52] The work's popularity was attested to and broadened by John Trevisa's translation into the vernacular, completed in 1387, which was printed by John Caxton in 1482, Wynkyn de Worde in 1495, and Peter Treveris in 1527.[53]

Higden's extensive account of 'Machamet' begins, in Trevisa's translation, with a description of '[th]e false prophete, duke and ledere of Saracenes and of Turkes'; by c.620 AD 'Machometis [th]e false prophete' (who Caxton also refers to as a 'witche') had 'bygiled [th]e Ismaeliis [and] Agarenes', schooled by a 'famous clerk…at the court of Rome'.[54] Christianity is placed at the centre of these narratives, as something 'Machomet' subverts to gain his own authority. The miracles he works are presented as false imitations of those performed by Christ: a dove is trained to 'fecche his mete in Machometis ere' to make it appear that the 'Holy Goost' was whispering to him, and a camel was goaded to approach him with a copy of '[th]at corsede book Alcoranum' tied around its neck, as if it were a new law 'i-sente from heuen'.[55]

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[51] John Taylor, *The Universal Chronicle of Ranulf Higden* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), 137–43.
[52] Lynda Dennison and Nicholas Rogers, 'A Medieval Best-Seller: Some Examples of Decorated Copies of Higden's *Polychronicon*', in *The Church and Learning in Later Medieval Society: Essays in Honour of R.B. Dobson : Proceedings of the 1999 Harlaxton Symposium,* ed. Caroline M. Barron and Jenny Stratford (Donington: Shaun Tyas, 2002), 80, 96, 98. It is also thought that the *Polychronicon* was particularly influential in the writings of other prominent history writers in north-east England, including the York Austin friar John Erghome, John of Tynemouth, and John of Brompton: see Taylor, *The Universal Chronicle,* 142–44.
[53] A.S.G. Edwards, 'The Influence and Audience of the *Polychronicon*: Some Observations', *Proceedings of the Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society: Literary and Historical Section,* Vol. XVII, Part VI (1980), 113–15.
[54] *Polychronicon Ranulphi Higden Monachi Cestrensis; together with the English translations of John Trevisa and of an unknown writer of the fifteenth century, 9 Vols., Rolls Series 27, 1865–86*, ed. Joseph Rawson Lumby (London: Longman, 1876), IV, 4, 16, 14.
[55] *Polychronicon*, IV, 19–20; 35–36.

Similar stories circulated in fifteenth-century England: in book nine of John Lydgate's *Fall of Princes,* composed in the 1430s and printed in 1493, 'Machomet' ties pots of milk and honey to a bull's horns, luring the beast to him amongst a crowd, and declaring it to be a sign of prosperity. Like Higden, Lydgate also reports that the Prophet suffered from falling sickness or epilepsy, and to excuse himself of the apparent dishonour of this falsely told others that he was visited by Gabriel and the Holy Ghost: 'for the aungel shewyd him silf so shene / To stonde upriht he myghte nat susteene'.[56] All of these artificial miracles are clearly connected to, yet distanced from, recognisable events of the Old and New Testaments, especially those related to Christ: falseness and deceit are central to late medieval English portrayals of the Prophet.

In York and Towneley, Herod and the other tyrants are characterised in a very similar way, making their association with 'Machomet' apparent. Herod's description of himself as 'fairer of face… worthy, witty and wise' (York *Questioning,* ll. 17, 22) is strikingly similar to Higden's description of 'Machomet' as 'a wonderfel man and fer castynge', with 'nobil ffacounde and faire speche' (23). Higden's 'Machomet' uses this 'faire speche' both to gain social standing, and the submission of other nations. Higden tells us that it was 'wi wicchecraft and wi faire wordes' that the false ruler won the affections of his wealthy wife (23), and that it was by his use of this speech, 'by crafte and by gile', that he gained the submission of Egypt, Libya, Arabia, and Syria (24–25). This authority was in part enabled by his abilities as a mimic, appropriating worthy voices to fulfil his own ends: Higden notes that Machomet took [th]e manere spekinge of trewe prophetes, as if [th]ey God hadde i-spoke in hym…' (23).[57]

This is comparable to the way Herod and the other tyrants use speech in the plays to dominate audiences, appropriating and establishing authority with their false speech. We may imagine that Herod was regarded as one of the most performatively challenging roles in early drama due to the bombastic nature of delivery required for the role: in Coventry the actor playing him was paid four shillings for the performance, over double the amount paid to the actor playing Christ.[58] Each of the plays involving the tyrants begins with a lengthy unbroken monologue given by the presiding figure. The York *Questioning* begins with a twenty-six-line announcement of his magnificence, making false claims about his control over the skies, the weather, and various powerful figures. In the *Massacre* the same character attempts, over twenty-

[56] John Lydgate, *Fall of Princes*, ed. Henry Bergen (Washington: Carnegie Institute of Washington: Washington, 1923), III, 921–22. See Higden, 39.
[57] *Polychronicon*, IV, 23, 24–5.
[58] *REED: Coventry*, 61, cited in Heather S. Mitchell-Buck, 'Maintaining the Realm: City, Commonwealth, and Crown in Chester's Midsummer Plays', in *The Chester Cycle in Context, 1555–1575: Religion, Drama, and the Impact of Change,* ed. Jessica Dell, David Klausner (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2012), 183–84.

four lines, to entice people to worship him: 'lere you lowe to lowte… youre lovely lord' (ll. 7–8) and the *Trial* uses similar techniques over twenty-six lines, as we have already discussed.

Of the Towneley tyrants, Caesar Augustus opens with forty-five lines to express his greatness, whereas in the *Offering* Herod takes an astonishing sixty-four lines, as does the tyrant of *Magnus Herodes*, after a similar seventy-two-line endorsement by the messenger Nuncius. Pilate takes fifty-three lines at the opening of the *Conspiracy,* whilst in *The Dice* the same character begins with a speech of seventy-two lines, grandly mixing Latin and English phrases. The long speeches of these characters are designed to confront the audience, and try to gain submission.[59] The verbally impressive monologues signify that – like Higden's 'Machomet' – the powers of these characters are vested in their oratorical abilities. These various speeches fulfilled the dual purpose of glorifying the tyrant and calling for silence; in a performative sense their lines were used to gain the attention of an audience, but also to reinforce the authority of their words.[60] But the importance of speech is not merely represented through the grandiloquence of the tyrants: it is also demonstrated in the performances where these figures make conscious attempts to control and silence the voices of others.

In the York *Massacre* Herod calls to the audience to 'stente of youre stevenes stoute', or stop their strong speaking, in order to listen to his 'carping' (ll. 3–5), and in the *Trial* he tells them that their 'tounges fro tretyng of triffillis [should] be trased' (l. 3). He disrespectfully refers to audience members as 'brothellis and browlys' (l. 1), the noisiness of the latter insult emphasising his desire for silence. Similarly, in Towneley *Caesar Augustus* demands that '…no man speke a word here now. Bot I my self alon' (ll. 2–3), and the Herod of the *Offering* threatens those 'that makys noyse' in the performance space 'shall dy' (ll. 3–4). In these plays the tyrants demand the exclusive right to speak, silencing all others.

Further than this though, Herod and the other tyrants try to use their words to silence news of Christ's coming, claiming that their speech is authoritative, and all dissent from this is false. In the York *Questioning* Herod refers to the Magi as 'unwitty men' who 'wise men will wene…madde' (ll. 166, 169) when they tell him of the babe they're searching for, later claiming that they 'roye and rave' (l. 178). In trying to undermine their lines as nonsense, Herod attempts to dismantle the threat posed by Christ's coming. In the Towneley *Offering* amongst his raging Herod responds to the news of Christ's birth comically, questioning the child's lineage and suitability for the role:

[59] Ramey, 'Audience-Interactive Games', 58–63.
[60] See Wright, 'Acoustic Tyranny', 8–9.

Herod: Kyng? What the dewyll, other then I
We, fy on dewyls! fy! fy!
Certys, that boy shall dere aby!
His ded is dight!
Shall he be kyng thus hasteley?
who the dewill made hym knyght?
(ll. 307–12)

Herod ridicules the idea of Christ through his garrulous speech, but in doing so the rhythm of his words begins to break down in exclamatory stammering: 'fy on dewyls! fy! fy!'. His attempt to mock Christ is particularly interesting as it comes from a figure whose speech is, itself, so laughable. Herod's character is made more comic through his buffoonish insistence that the words of his enemies – essentially the news of Christ's coming – can be so easily undermined.

In the York *Massacre* it is telling that Herod orders 'That none for speche be spared' (l. 188) by his knights, representing his attempt to silence the word of Christ in the mouths of all of his enemies. In the York *Questioning* Herod refers to his enemies as 'rebaldes that unrewly are rownand' (l. 35), the latter word suggesting murmured speech, or slander, and the tyrant's Second Counsellor speaks of the need to 'fell this foule defame' and to let 'all there hye wordis falle on hande' (ll. 193–94). Herod's retinue describe Christ as a 'traytoure untrewe' or a 'faitoure, in faithe' (ll. 25, 47, 27), using language which emphasises falsity, and in the Towneley *Offering* Herod similarly refers to his enemies as 'fals faturs' (l. 29). In a challenge to the beliefs of audience members, Herod argues that he and 'Mahowne' are the arbiters of truth, whilst Christ and his followers represent falsity.

Those delivering messages of Christ's coming are also regularly referred to as 'fals'. In his comic dialogue with Nuncius in the York *Questioning*, Herod refers to the boy as a 'false harlott' as he is about to deliver news of the coming of the Three Kings (l. 132), repeating this same curse on the Magi in what was presumably an aside to the audience, declaring 'fals harlottis…hye you hame' (l. 191). In the *Massacre,* Herod cries out that these men have escaped, 'Fy on thaym, faytours, fy!' (l. 115), referring to them as liars before angrily labelling Nuncius 'false traytoure strange' (l. 125), and calling for him to be hanged alongside 'that faitour' (l. 128), Jesus. The name of the character 'Nuncius' may be literally interpreted as 'the Messenger', and it is entirely pertinent that the tyrant should target this character, alongside the Magi – those will spread word of Christ's coming – in this way. Herod makes a conscious (if ridiculous) effort to control information of Christ's coming, claiming all to be false that he does not wish to be true.

The irony of these claims of Christian falsity is made abundantly clear. Just as Pilate in the Towneley *Scourging* vainly characterises himself as 'full of sotelty, / ffalshed, gyll, and trechery' (ll. 10–11), in the York *Questioning* Herod boasts to his second counsellor that his fooling the Kings 'certis … is a sotell trayne' (l. 261). The ridiculous falseness of Herod's position is made clear to the audience: he who has accused others of dishonesty has himself 'feyned falsed' (l. 387). Within the plays the root of this falsity is, according to these tyrants, the rejection of divinely-inspired authority: the spiritual sovereignty of 'Mahounde'.

The power of these tyrants is, as they attest, bound up with the truth of the pseudo-Islamic deity: an anachronistic choice by producers of the plays, but one with indisputable contemporary relevance considering the rise of the Ottoman empire. In the imaginary world presented, Herod and the tyrants draw on the divine authority of 'Mahounde', a false reflection of the lawgivers Moses or Christ, so fundamental to Christian worship.[61] In the York *Questioning* Herod speaks of the 'lawes' and 'any feloune' who might go against them (ll. 34, 55–56). Herod threatens the Magi to 'Loke noght ye legge agaynste oure laye, / Uppon payne to lose both lymme and lith' (ll. 203–4), a recourse to dismemberment which displays a violent authority at odds with the gentleness of the new-born Christ. The competing centres of authority in the pageant are established by Herod's sycophantic courtiers, who talk of his law as 'lodsterne on hight' (l. 24), parodically foreshadowing the 'sterne with lemys bright' (l. 61) followed by the Magi, to the true Christ.

In the Towneley *Caesar Augustus* the eponymous tyrant claims that an enemy may 'neuer dystroy' his laws (l. 56), yet in the *Conspiracy* Pilate is concerned that Christ 'legys agans oure law, / tempys oure folk and turnys vs fro' (ll. 120–21). Jesus is feared as a subversive influence who will destroy the law. In a sense these fears are ironic, as to late medieval audiences the status quo represented in these plays – with 'Mahounde' falsely asserted as a figure of divine authority – was already a subversion of the truth of Christ. Although Herod and the other tyrants consistently invoke 'Mahounde' throughout the plays, alongside this they also represent the laws of the Jews: as noted in the York *Questioning,* Herod is 'jugge of all Jurie' (l. 183). To amalgamate Jewish and Islamic identities was not uncommon in late medieval Christian literary representation, brought together as non-Christian 'Others'.[62] Indeed, Higden's account talks of the way 'Machamet' drew on Judaism in establishing Islamic customs, and many considered the latter religion as a renewal of the former.[63] The laws of Herod and the other tyrants represented more than just the authority of eastern potentates unwilling to support Christ; they signified any oppositional forces

[61] For similar subversions of the Christian 'lawgiver' see Tolan, 'European accounts of Muhammad's life', 229.
[62] See for example Chemers, 'Anti-Semitism, Surrogacy, and the Invocation of Mohammed', 25–55; also Johnston, 'Robert Thornton and *The Siege of Jerusalem*', 128–33, 152–53.
[63] *Polychronicon,* IV, 25; se Akbari, *Idols in the East,* 227.

to Christian power, addressing both old anxieties over the much-vilified Jews, and new ones located further East.

The Many Faces of Herod

Scholars of early drama have considered Herod as a typological expression of the Antichrist, a 'parodic and false approximation' of the incoming saviour, leading Christians to sin.[64] The Antichrist was a figure of no small importance in late medieval Christian belief, a leader antithetical to Christ whose rise would prefigure the Second Coming and the onset of the Apocalypse.[65] Indeed, the Antichrist appears as a character in the Chester Cycle, eventually defeated and carried into hell.[66] The characterisation of Herod which makes him fulfil the typology of the Antichrist is inextricably linked to his association with 'Mahounde' and Islam.

Like Chester's Antichrist, 'Mahounde' is a worker of false miracles, who misappropriates Christian devotion: Lydgate, Langland, and other writers depict the Prophet as this antithetical manifestation of Christ.[67] Herod, Muhammad, and the Antichrist were presented as three of the seven heads of 'the Beast' by Joachim of Fiore, alongside the Emperors Nero and Constantius, Melsemutus (the Sultan of Morocco), and Saladin.[68] All of these figures were considered infamous for leading those under their authority away from the Christian faith. Throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the Antichrist and 'Machomet' represented genuine anxieties in their own right: combined, the military incursions of Ottoman Islam into the 'Christian West' were read as harbingers of the eschatological process of the Apocalypse. The similarities between Christianity and Islam – not least monotheism and the reverence of Jesus and Mary – raised certain anxieties, and fears that followers of the former could be tempted by the heresies of the latter, 'turning Turk'.[69]

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[64] John Parker, *The Aesthetics of Antichrist: From Christian Drama to Christopher Marlowe* (London: Cornell University Press, 2007) 95–96; see also Thomas P. Campbell, 'Eschatology and the Nativity in the English Mystery Plays', *American Benedictine Review* 27 (1976): 297–320; Christopher Taylor, 'The Once and Future Herod: Vernacular Typology and the Unfolding of Middle English Cycle Drama', *New Medieval Literatures,* 15 (2013), 126–27.

[65] See Richard K. Emmerson, *Antichrist in the Middle Ages: A Study of Medieval Apocalypticism, Art, and Literature* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981).

[66] Woolf, *The English Mystery Plays,* 291–94; see also Cameron Hunt McNabb, 'Night of the Living Bread: Unstable Signs in Chester's "Antichrist"', *Early Theatre: A Journal associated with the Records of Early English Drama,* 19:2 (2016), 9–30.

[67] Akbari, 'The Rhetoric of Antichrist', 297–307.

[68] See Marjorie Reebes and Beatrice Hirsch-Reich, *The 'Figurae' of Joachim of Fiore* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 86–88; Michelina Di Cesare, *The Pseudo-Historical Image of the Prophet Muhammad in Medieval Latin Literature: A Repertory* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 189–90. As evidence of the influence of Joachim of Fiore in Yorkshire, Roger of Howden cites this interpretation of the Antichrist in *The Chronicle of the Reigns of Henry II and Richard I,* ed. William Stubbs, Rolls Series 49, 2 Vols. (London: Longman, Green, Reader and Dyer, 1867), II, 151–2.

[69] John Tolan discusses the anxieties that Christian people would 'turn Turk': see Tolan, 'Looking East before 1453', 13–15.

But as Islam was popularly categorised as a Christian heresy rather than a pagan religion, it was also used more widely in religious discourses surrounding proper devotional practice.[70] Siobhain Bly Calkin has suggested that the popularity of certain portrayals of 'Saracens' in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was in part driven by their use as forms to express critiques of the established Church. For example, whilst Western medieval accounts which suggested that adherents to the faith venerated images and relics in no way reflected Islamic practices, they did tap into misgivings among Christian theologians for the use of saintly images and relics in the established Church.[71] For fourteenth-century writers like John Wyclif and William Langland, discussions of 'Mahomet' are especially relevant as 'he represents for them the god of the corrupt English clergy' who 'follow his principles of war, litigation, and the accumulation of material goods'.[72] In *Piers Plowman* Langland asserts that 'English clerks feed a dove called covetousness, and behave like Muhammad so that no man holds the truth', using Islam to express anticlerical criticisms, and call for Church reform.[73]

Herod's use of 'Mahounde', then, implicates the character in aspects of contemporary religious dialectic. Whether Lollards or priests abusing their authority, those who misled Christian worshippers might all be considered in the same light as Herod: voices attempting to establish a warped spiritual authority, expropriating existing models of devotion for their own nefarious ends. Within performances, if we imagine that Herod was dressed as a particularly Eastern potentate, his assent to the demands of Annas and Cayphas – dressed as contemporary clergy – would have heightened this associative relationship between Islamic heresy and the abuses of the Church.[74] As Akbari notes, the alignment of Islam and its adherents to heresy was utilised as a rhetorical tool 'to demonise' any who appeared to dissent from or undermine the values of the Christian Church.[75]

Miriam Skey has drawn attention to an iconographical tradition which depicts Herod wearing a so-called 'demon-crown', a cap on which is depicted a demon or devil, which as M.D. Anderson suggests, highlights the 'diabolical thoughts in the mind of the wearer'.[76] But this crown, depicted in fifteenth-century glass on a figure likely to be Herod at St. Michael's

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[70] John V. Tolan, 'European accounts of Muhammad's life', in *The Cambridge Companion to Muhammad*, ed. Jonathan E. Brockopp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 226–250 esp. 232; see Paull, 'The Figure of Mahomet', 187–88.
[71] Siobhain Bly Calkin, 'Saracens as idolaters in European vernacular literatures', 39–40.
[72] Paull, 'The Figure of Mahomet', 191.
[73] Akbari, 'Rhetoric', 303–4.
[74] That Annas and Cayphas were portrayed as contemporary clergymen becomes especially interesting if we consider members of the clergy were also spectators of the pageants: see King, *The York Mystery Cycle,* 192–93.
[75] Akbari, 'Rhetoric of the Antichrist', 298, 302–3.
[76] Miriam Skey, 'Herod's Demon-Crown', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 40 (1977), 247–76; M.D. Anderson, *Drama and Imagery in English Medieval Churches* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 163. A depiction also survives in the stained-glass of All Saints Church, Gresford, Denbighshire: see figures 27 and 28.

Spurriergate, York, might also be associated with the so-called 'heretic's cap'. Kubíková suggests that such a cap, decorated with images of demons, was associated with the condemnation of heretics in the late medieval period, citing its use in the trial of the Bohemian reformer Jan Hus after he was condemned for heresy.[77] Certainly Herod was often depicted surrounded by devils, sometimes whispering in his ears.[78] Such a crown, as is depicted in the window of St. Michael's, may have been worn by Herod in York to visually assert his identity as a heresiarch.

Figure 27: Massacre of the Innocents, detail, panel s.5.2b.,
St. Michael's Spurriergate, York (c.1450).

Figure 28: Herod Presented with the Head of John the Baptist, detail,
All Saints Church, Gresford, Denbighshire (early 15th Century).

[77] Kubiková, Milena, 'The Heretic's Cap of Hus', *The Bohemian Reformation and Religious Practice* 4 (2002), 143–50, esp. 144–45.
[78] Williams, *The French Fetish from Chaucer to Shakespeare*, 59.

By the time of the Towneley plays, around the middle of the sixteenth century, Islam was still being used within religious polemical discussion in England, but the use of 'Mahomet' or 'Mahounde' had by this time grown highly complex. It was increasingly weaponised in the politicised discourse surrounding Roman Catholicism and the rise of Protestantism, with both sides using this non-Christian faith as a means to criticise the other.[79] Martin Luther drew direct comparisons between Islam and Roman Catholicism to express what he viewed as the shared heresies of each religion; in a work of 1541 he asserted that papists, like 'Turks', were doomed for 'placing their hope in ceremonies, indulgences, fasting and the like, rather than in faith'.[80] As early as 1529 he drew on the tradition of Christian apocalyptic writings associated with Islam in criticism of Roman Catholic heresies, stating that the 'Pope is the spirit of Antichrist and the Turk the body of Antichrist', engaging with the same themes as in earlier centuries, but positioned to attack different targets.[81]

In England specifically, Islam – or the threat of 'the Turk' – was used within hostile religious debate between Traditionalists and Reformers. In a work of 1529 Thomas More directly compared the threat of Luther and his followers to the Turk, highlighting the divisions instigated by heresy.[82] As a councillor of Henry VIII More held considerable influence, but his views met with much opposition in court and elsewhere. The scholar and polemicist William Tyndale went even further than Luther, suggesting that followers of Islam were in many ways morally superior to 'papists', a view which exemplifies the increasingly polarising discourse.[83] The influential English writer Christopher St. German, in works such as *A Lytyll Treatyse against Mahumet and His Cursed Secte* (1531), attempted to mediate these differences, stressing the difference of Islam in an attempt to drive the unity of Christian worship.[84] Whether used to call for unity, or to represent the worst excesses of the heretical opposition, Islam played a major role within English polemical discourse. These polemicists regularly invoked adherents of the faith – often referred to as 'the Turk' – when discussing heresy and false claims of spiritual authority. If the Towneley plays involving Herod and the tyrants were recorded in the same socio-religious context, we might speculate that invocations to 'Mahounde' were directly engaging with the same complex discourses.

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[79] Daniel Eppley, 'A New Perspective on Islam in Henrician England: The Polemics of Christopher St. German', *Sixteenth Century Journal,* 46:3 (2015), 593; Margaret Meserve, *Empires of Islam in Renaissance Historical Thought* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2008), 9–14.
[80] Tolan, 'Looking East before 1453', 13.
[81] Akbari, 'Rhetoric of Antichrist', 297–98.
[82] Eppley, 'A New Perspective', 593–94.
[83] Dimmock, *New Turkes*, 22, 32.
[84] For a discussion of this printed work, see Eppley, 'A New Perspective', 595–605.

References to 'Mahounde' are particularly frequent in Towneley, and in *Magnus Herodes* we do find the tyrant aligning himself with the Pope, perhaps betraying Protestant sentiments. This fleeting reference occurs just after Herod has been told of the prophesies of Christ's coming, following a prime example of the tyrant's self-confessed raving: 'My guttys will out thryng / Bot I this lad hyng… Shuld a carll in a kafe / bot of oone yere aga / Thus make me to rafe?' (ll. 348–49, 352–54). In response to this, Secundus Consultus advises that he send out knights into Bethlehem to '…put unto dede / All knave chyldren / Of two yerys brede' (ll. 370–72). A horrifying suggestion, Herod responds with praise and gratitude for the idea:

Herod: A right nobyll gyn.
If I lyf in land
Good lyfe, as I hope,
This dar I the warand:
To make thee a pope.
O, my hart is rysand
Now in a glope.
For this nobyll tythand
Thou shall haue a drope
Of my good grace:
Markys, rentys, and powndys,
Greatt castels & groundys
Thrugh all sees and soundys
I gyf the chace.
(ll. 377–90)

Herod's offer to make his counseller 'Pope', as well as give him 'Markys, rentys, and powndys, / Greatt castels & groundys' across 'all sees and sandys' of the world expresses the tyrant's claims to far-reaching authority, spiritual, economic, and temporal. Certainly Herod's words seem to evoke Luther's warnings that the temptations of Islam are aligned with the pomp of Roman Catholic worship.[85] This reference allows us to consider Herod within Reformation-era discourses, as the play draws parallels between his heretical orientalised power and that of the Pope himself. Further confusing matters, attempts appear to have been made to erase the word

[85] Tolan, 'Looking East before 1453', 13.

'Pope' here at some point.[86] Whether this was carried out by zealous Reformers, or by Traditionalists unwilling to allow Herod to refer to the Pontiff in this way, remains unclear. Whilst not necessarily expressing the 'Reformist' sympathies of Luther, the Towneley Herod here – with his many invocations of 'Mahounde' – gains a foothold in the contemporary polemics of religious debate, contrasting Islam with proper devotion to Christ.

Section 4.3
Laughter as Threat:
Herod's Problematic Authority

Whereas many scholars have considered the comic nature of Herod as something which dismisses the authority which he claims, this conclusion must be problematised. Unlike the modern-day pantomime villain or Disney antagonist, Herod in the performances represents an evil figure who threatens Christ and his followers, and orders the slaughter of children onstage. He represents the antithesis of Christ, and of the Christian belief system, making him anything but a comfortable comic figure. Although we know that Herod was a popular and entertaining character, we may read further into his position of entertainment and argue that, rather than holding accidental popularity, the humorous nature of Herod held a certain didactic purpose further linked to his heretical voice.

Staines argues that the development of Herod as a dramatic character was directly shaped by the expectations of spectators, leading to the comic representation which survives uniquely in the English plays:

> As Herod becomes the great creation of farce in medieval English drama, it is clearly evident that many dramatists are heeding the pressure of the final force shaping the figure of Herod, namely the audience. His expanded role reflects the delight he gave to his audience and the dramatists' ability to cater to this delight.[87]

Herod's character relies on an audience who respond to his posturing with delight – essentially they must enjoy the performance of an evil character. Again, this particular presentation of

[86] Meredith, 'The Towneley Cycle', 136, 140.
[87] David Staines, 'To Out-Herod Herod: The Development of a Dramatic Character', *Comparative Drama* 10:1 (1976), 50.

Herod was not inevitable; in performances outside England, he was generally characterised by tragic courtliness, or aristocratic evil.[88] As a comic figure Herod is enjoyed by the audience, who also implicitly become his courtiers. Yet the performed nature of Herod in York and Towneley offers certain interpretive problems. If, as has been established, the tyrant represented a foreign 'Other', associated both with contemporary enemies and with the tangible evil of the 'Mahounde' or the Antichrist, how could he be constructed as a comic figure? Staines' argument that this entertaining nature was a result of audience demands on the character provides a tempting hypothesis, though it seems odd that these plays – as conduits of popular devotion, as well as biblical entertainment – would have allowed for the comic development of such an ostensibly evil character.

Although mocked and scorned, it is important to emphasise that as a dramatic character Herod was really enjoyed. It has already been noted that surviving records of payments to the actor playing Herod at Coventry show a far higher wage for this performance than for the playing of any other figures, including Christ. Both material and technical investments were ploughed into the performance of the character, whose impressive alliterative speeches are well-designed to impress audiences, making them laugh at the pomposity of the words. Given the nature of these performances, it is difficult to separate this popularity of performance of Herod from the positive associations this risked projecting onto the biblical figure outside of the drama. Williams notes that as early as the twelfth century Gerhoh of Reichersberg criticised the embodied performance of Herod, claiming that dramatic entertainment which focussed on the character often held little didactic purpose, and drove both actors and spectators to imaginatively indulge in 'manifold sins and fleshly pleasures' instead.[89]

We might interpret the comic presentation of Herod as a means to undermine his authority, more to be mocked than feared. But this is to ignore a different effect of the laughter raised by Herod in these performances, especially in York. As a tyrant whose words are designed to dominate audience members, and draw them into his court, Herod's comic nature allows him to accomplish his aims and gain a level of complicity. As Ramey notes, Herod is 'more than… a send-up of the political class or an occasion for mocking'; he is also 'an enactment of real power over the crowd', allowing the audience to 'experience and experiment with the coercive realities of temporal power'.[90] In this sense, laughter at Herod does not simply represent mockery by the audience, an expression of their Christian superiority over his tyrannical otherness. It also

[88] Miriam Skey, 'Herod the Great in Medieval European Drama', *Comparative Drama,* 13:4 (1979), 333.
[89] Deanne Williams, *The French Fetish from Chaucer to Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 58–59.
[90] Peter Ramey, 'The Audience-Interactive Games of Middle English Religious Drama', *Comparative Drama,* 47:1 (2013), 60.

directly feeds into the dramatic power of the character, implicitly feeding into the authority of the court.

In calling for attention and bringing contemporary spectators into his court, Herod gains a platform on which to speak, and use his deviant voice. We might expect that his calls were met with approbation, loud heckles or other negative rejoinders from the audience, who already knew that Herod signified a villainous figure, to be hated and not praised. But his verbal acrobatics and impressive courtly stature help the character gain the complicity of audience members. Whether spectators listened in awe at the character's speeches or vocally rebuked him, these responses all contributed to the 'acoustic chaos' of the court, and so became 'constituent of Herod's subjugating force'.[91]

Whereas Herod was clearly a character to hate, if we note the attention given to the construction of his impressive speeches, and his overwhelming popularity as a dramatic entity – as attested to above – he was also clearly a figure to be listened to within performances. Although a figure worthy of mockery and disgust, Herod is given some of the most entertaining lines and memorable features of all of the characters of either York or Towneley, making his calls for silence and authority, said for the sake of vanity but likely not in vain, particularly complex.

Whilst we might interpret the comic nature of Herod as a 'burlesque' of tyranny, we might also regard it as a form of temptation: his words act as a draw on audiences to become courtiers, and laugh along with their bombastic tyrant. Certainly we can see this dynamic at the beginning of each of the plays, where the threats and claims of power in Herod's speeches are, if not authoritative, at least entertaining. Clare Wright and David Staines have both noted that the character of Herod in these plays actually represents a conflation of three historical rulers of Judea, each known for their for their rage and cruelty: Herod the Great, Herod Antipas and Herod Agrippa. Although some contemporary works distinguished between the figures, here the three generations of the Herod dynasty were conflated to establish a unitary character type, suffused with malevolent dynamism and wickedness.[92] As a character type rather than a specific historical figure, Herod becomes a consciously dramatic form, something which emphasises his wickedness but also further develops his nature as a figure of game or play.

To borrow again from Ramey, 'the tyrant's real coercive power does not consist in compelling audience members to *obey* him but in his ability to force the audience to *recognize* him and *react* to him.[93] We must consider this alongside McGavin's comment on the 'ethical

[91] Wright, 'Acoustic Tyranny', 18, 21.
[92] Staines, 'To Out-Herod Herod', 31-32; Wright, 'Acoustic Tyranny', 4-7.
[93] Ramey, 'The Audience-Interactive Games', 58.

implications' of watching to medieval spectators, where – as in modern legislation on offensive images – 'the spectator's desire to watch encourages the production of the abuse on which it is based'.[94] Certainly similar concerns are raised in the early-fifteenth-century *Treatise of Miraculis Pleying,* when the writer criticises those spectators of performances who mistake the 'worschipyng of [th]eire maumetrie' for true devotion.[95] Herod is characterised as a 'maumet' (a word itself derived from 'Mahomet', meaning a false idol) who spectators loved to view, but who represented considerable evil. Audiences were not merely complicit in Herod's actions as his crowd of courtiers; we may imagine that such a dynamic made them imagine themselves as unwilling drivers of the tyrant's evil, goading him on. Their laughter in this sense does not express the mocking of authority, but the propagation of it.

Complicity and the Endgame

It is only towards the end of our time with Herod that his true nature is exposed, and the tyrant demonstrates his loss of control, his desperation, and his ultimate evil. In the York *Massacre of the Innocents*, the nature of Herod as a slightly comic trickster, as developed in the *Questioning*, gives way to the presentation of a more serious and desperate tyrant. From the entrance of Nuncius (l. 78) we are told that Herod's plan has failed – the boisterous and scheming tyrant becomes 'lorne' (l. 114) and full of 'sorowe' (l. 136): as Nuncius states, 'that daunce is done' (l. 96). The use of 'daunce' here evokes the previous entertainment of Herod's court, now dispelled – for the tyrant and his courtiers of both stage and audience – through the news of failure.

Although there are moments of angry bluster in the York *Massacre*, Herod's speech becomes markedly less comic than in the *Questioning* pageant. This movement from entertainment to sorrow in the court prefigures the main event of the pageant, the Slaughter of the Innocents: here the skirmishes between Herod's knights and the children's mothers are presented briefly and brutally as a 'lothly strife' (l. 210). Unlike the dramatic version of the scene in the Digby plays, where a comic note is introduced through the mishandlings of the would-be knight Watkyn, the York *Massacre* is characterised by the failure of Herod, and the brutality resulting from his desperation.[96] The pageant ends with Herod's realisation of further failure, that the boy Christ 'be fledde' (l. 270). Godfrey argues that due to the comic nature of Herod, the audience can experience a sense of superiority over him 'even while being startled and possibly

[94] McGavin, 'Medieval Theatricality and Spectatorship', 194.
[95] *Medieval Drama: An Anthology*, ed. Greg Walker (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 200, l.115.
[96] On the comic character Watkyn, see Gail McMurray Gibson, *The Theater of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 42.

horrified by the matter of the slaughter itself'.[97] But it is important to note here that by the time of the slaughter Herod' comic value, and entertainment imbued within his court, has been withdrawn. This shift in portrayal of the court – from a space of entertainment to one of horrifying death – allows the scene of the *Massacre* a greater emotional impact, with those formerly laughing at Herod, sucked in by his comic nature, now reeling from the tragic outcome of his rhetoric.

The Towneley *Magnus Herodes*, in contrast, presents less of a shift between the performances of Herod's meeting with the Three Kings and his decision to slaughter the Innocents. Raging and raving in an increasingly uncontrolled way, Herod greets the suggestion that he kill all 'knaue-chyldren of two yerys brede' (l. 371) with great enthusiasm. The promises of the York Herod to the knights after the killings, that 'Ye schall fynde me youre frende, / And ye this tyme be trewe.' (York *Massacre,* ll. 165–66), are understated in comparison to the offers of lands, money, and the papal crown made in Towneley, which had already been discussed (*Magnus,* ll. 380–90). Unlike the sorrowful tyrant of the York *Massacre*, here Herod appears unhinged and dangerous, his lengthy speeches asserting that the slaughter be a suitable act for the 'flowre of knyghthede' (l. 393), clearly a parodic rendering of chivalric culture.[98]

The fairly extensive length of the scene given over to the actual slaughter, and the dispute between knights and mothers (ll. 480–572), suggests that it was intended to prompt a strong emotional impact. The eloquence of the lengthy speaking parts afforded to the mothers in this scene contrasts with Herod's raving:

> II Mulier: Outt! mordor-man, I say, strand tratoure and thefe!
> Out, alas, and waloway! my child that was me lefe!
> My luf, my blood, my play, that neuer dyd man grefe!
> …Veniance I cry and call
> On Herode and his knyghtys all:
> Veniance, Lord, apon thaym fall,
> And mekyll warldys wonder!
> (ll. 521–26, 532–33.)

Accusations that Herod is a 'tratoure and thefe', and appeals made to the Christian 'Lord' against the tyrant and his men, contrast with Herod's invocations to 'Mahowne', and his claims of

[97] Godfrey, 'Herod's Reputation and the Killing of the Children', 271.
[98] Warren E. Edminster, *The Preaching Fox: Elements of Festive Subversion in the Plays of the Wakefield Master* (London: Routledge, 2005), 165–67.

worthy rule. Indeed, the violence which the mothers wreak on the knights, driving these chivalrous figures to cry 'Peasse now, no more!' (l. 557) is set in contrast with the clearly false position of Herod following the slaughter, as he exclaims 'Now in peasse may I stand / I thank the, Mahowne!' (ll. 664–65).

Magnus Herodes ends with a speech by Herod directly to the audience, exhibiting the flamboyance of his opening monologue. But following the scene of the slaughter, Herod's words are more threatening – no longer designed to delight the audience. Just as the spectators have previously been drawn in to laugh at him, so Herod consciously calls now for them to join in the court again, to be entertained. Yet now the implications of this are revealed:

Herod: Draw therfor nerehande,
Both of burgh and of towne:
Markys, ilkon, a thowsande,
When I am bowne,
Shall ye haue.
I shall be full fayn
To gyf that I sayn;
Wate when I com agayn,
And then may ye craue.
(ll. 668–676)

Directly asking spectators to draw nearer to him, in this closing speech Herod directly implores those who have witnessed his massacre of the children to come into his court again, and revel in the rewards he can offer them. But the superficial fun of Herod's domain is now tainted by the blood of those children massacred on his orders. He rightly – yet cynically – comments that the spectators will 'crave' him to 'com agayn', uncomfortable given the popularity we know Herod's performances held, which here is consciously being played upon.

In his final speech Herod draws attention explicitly to the laughter of the spectators, and how this response should be evaluated. Despite his responsibility for the slaughter, Herod asserts that the horrifying act 'Mefys nothyng my mode / I lagh that I whese!' (l. 683–84). His laughter turns to wheezing, excessive and shocking in its profligacy. Invoking 'Mahowne', he claims 'So light is my saull / That all of sugar is my gall' (ll. 686–87), suggesting that he regards the atrocities committed as superficial and unimportant. Through his words Herod makes known that the laughter of these spectators has not undermined his tyrannical power. Quite the

opposite is true: instead it has authorised and allowed his reprehensible character to thrive. Audience members are forced to understand that their responses have made them complicit in the massacre. Herod's speech represents a metatheatrical confrontation where, staring down the barrell of his direct address, spectators are shown the grim results of failing to truly challenge the performance of evil authority.

This allows us a new way to consider the humour in presentation of villains in these biblical plays more generally. Characters such as Herod are exotic figures, whose popularity is determined by the spectacle which they offer in performance. Laughter at such a character cannot merely represent a means to undermine the authority which this popularity feeds, tied up with the idea of the audience as court. Instead, the mixture of comic entertainment and brutal action in these plays drives spectators to engage with the narrative being enacted, if only through the incongruity of these elements. These plays encouraged a nuanced understanding of tyrants such as Herod, who appear superficially attractive, but threaten sin through the complicity which their words try to gain from spectators. Not only entertaining villains, they also represent the threat of temptation, or of being seduced away from Christ.

Believing that he has killed Jesus and silenced 'many a tong' (l. 715), Herod's voice ends this play with the same claims of authority, and no recognition of reproof. But at the end of *Magnus Herodes* the tyrant is no longer a figure of comic fury: his threats have been realised, and laughter directed towards him has done nothing to undermine his power. By ending on this defiant, troublesome note, the Towneley *Magnus Herodes* poses questions over the function of laughter, and the complicity of the audiences. It is only when the laughter stops, and the haze of superficial entertainment is removed through the slaughter of the innocents, that Herod is shown to be a tyrant whose comic nature only veils his horrifying potential.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter I have tried to reassess the way the York and Towneley plays characterise Herod and the tyrants. Rather than just aesthetically comic 'Others', the humorous way in which these characters are presented also expresses their tempting nature: the laughter prompted by their speech does not undermine them, as others have argued, but actually feeds their authority in performances. Regularly invoking 'Mahounde', the characterisation of these enemies of Christ expresses rising worries over Islam and the new threat of the Ottoman Empire in Christendom, but also anxieties over those within England who were using heretical speech to distract or draw people away from true devotion. These plays reflect the manner in which

Islamic figures were used in popular socio-religious discourses specific to a period between the late fifteenth and mid-sixteenth century. The plays provide evidence of English responses to Islam which challenge existing paradigms, distinct both from earlier medieval romance traditions, so influenced by Crusades literature, and the emergence of 'Turks' and 'Moors' in performances of the Elizabethan period, connected to new exploration and trade.

Herod and his tyrannical counterparts ultimately performed as heresiarchs, using false words and deviant speech to lead spectators astray. Humour was part of the glamour and temptation of such figures, even if audiences appear to have laughed *at* them rather than with them. As Ramey observes, Herod and the tyrants play games with the audience, rousing delight and fear in equal measure, but the significance of this was to demonstrate the tempting nature of sin, and the risk of making oneself complicit in such villainy.[99] Humour is not a dismissive force, but as a threatening one, where through laughter spectators propagated the authority of such evil.

Distracted by the comic nature of their performances, the threat of these tyrants – real figures, taken from biblical history – becomes obscured. In both York and Towneley, Herod and his court lose their entertainment value only during the slaughter of the innocents, when the threats which their comic posturing only suggested are finally realised, and the veil of humour slips. Christ's silence in the face of Herod in dramatisations of the later 'Trial' scenes demonstrates worthy resistance to such action, which spectators could only hope to emulate.[100] The plays ultimately encouraged audiences to consider more closely just how they should respond to these troublesome, tempting figures.

[99] Ramey, 'Audience-Interactive Games', 58–63.
[100] See Wright, 'Acoustic Tyranny', 21.

Chapter 5

Laughter and the Virgin:

Humour Between the 'Hevenly' and 'Erthly'

In the York and Towneley plays humour was not reserved for peripheral characters; even members of the Holy Family could be so presented. In the following two chapters I investigate why humour often surrounds Jesus, Mary and Joseph on stage, and how comic elements functioned in such moments. In discussions surrounding comic treatment of these figures, V.A. Kolve's approach has remained influential, asserting that humour rarely touches the holy and inviolate bodies of the Virgin and Christ in the plays:

> …we need only notice that never in these plays is one invited to laugh at God the Father, Christ, or the Virgin. They move in a mimetic world which includes the comic, the violent, the noisy, the grotesque, but though the world acts upon them, it never really touches their characters. They were reverently conceived and have about them a sanctity that defies circumstance…Laughter in these cycles was never, in an empirical sense, irreverent.[1]

Kolve's assumption first appears to hold some sense: why, we may ask, would audiences ever be drawn to laugh at these holy figures? If Mary and Christ were to be revered in performances, how could laughter play a role in their characterisation?

These questions, and Kolve's statement, are predicated on the notion that to derive amusement from such figures would be to in some way mock them, or cast them as 'irreverent', threatening to undermine their divinity.[2] In some ways this position shares in the carnivalesque 'topsy-turverydom' proffered by Bakhtin, where it was supposed that any 'culture of laughter' was constructed in opposition to religious forms.[3] Kolve did regard the comic elements of the plays as useful for 'making doctrine memorable' and argued persuasively that humour was considered a useful tool for teaching. But he notes that it also threatened to 'submerge serious

[1] V.A. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966), 138–39.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World,* trans. Helen Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press), 82.

meaning and doctrinal instruction', and it is in this sense that he views the threat of laughter with regards to Joseph, Mary and Christ.[4]

Yet this understanding of the dramatic use of laughter is reductive. Kolve asserts strongly that audiences would never laugh *at* such holy figures, and this is unobjectional; clearly, neither Christ nor the Virgin would be characterised in the same terms as many of the 'comic' figures already discussed in this thesis, whose humorous nature could be associated with a certain baseness. But characters need not be laughed *at* in order to raise laughter. To suggest that Mary and Christ were 'so reverently conceived' as to defy the 'circumstance' of humour, and remain entirely aloof from it, is inconsistent with the content of the plays. Kolve's comments are suggestive of the conceptual frame within Humour Studies known as 'Superiority Theory', which suggests that all laughter derives from a feeling of superiority (on the part of the laugher) at the sight of comic inferiority (the figure to be laughed at).[5] It follows that laughter is prompted exclusively by a realisation of the inferiority of others – whether in terms of status, appearance, or understanding.

It could be argued that audiences of York or the Towneley MS laughed only when certain characters betrayed a misunderstanding of God. But this ignores the wider comic action which characterises them. It is Herod's entertaining portrayal, featuring his initially impressive performance of pomp to the crowd, that chiefly secures comic appeal. The 'shepherds', Uxor, and her husband are funny because they compete and bicker with each other, reflecting arguments of the everyday in a context of reverence. It is not simply ignorance which defines the comic portrayal of these figures. Various scholars of humour have taken pains to outline the problematic nature of superiority theory, and the precedence it gives to mockery over all other comic forms.[6] I have argued that the pageants and plays drew humour from mixing the everyday with universal and sacred history, where performances, intimately involving local inhabitants, incorporated aspects of the daily lives of both actors and audiences within a biblical history. 'Conceptual blending' brought religious knowledge and devotion closer to lived experience, and it is this concept – rather than that of superiority – which allows us to better understand the humour of play-scripts which focus on Mary, Joseph, and Christ.[7]

In these plays humour bridged the divide between the spiritual and the everyday – or, more accurately, the 'hevenly' and the 'erthly'. This dichotomy was a contemporary concern, most clearly outlined in the early fifteenth-century *Tretise of Miraculis Pleyinge*, which criticised

[4] Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi*, 128–30.
[5] For an overview see Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002), 2–3.
[6] See for example John Morreall, 'Humor as Cognitive Play', *Journal of Literary Theory,* 3:2 (2009), 241–44.
[7] Stevenson, 'Embodied Enchantments: Cognitive Theory and The York Mystery Plays', *The York Mystery Plays: Performance in the City,* ed. Margaret Rogerson (Woodbridge: York Medieval Press, 2011), 93–98.

biblical drama for its prioritisation of 'bodily' excess over 'gostly' spirituality.[8] Yet humour might not only have catered for frivolous entertainment; it could have facilitated devotional engagement, as a dramatic tool allowing spectators to engage both physically and imaginatively with the events of biblical history. Comic play elements allowed for a specific form of access to the past, encouraging individuals to rely on lived experiences to better comprehend, engage with, and even re-evaluate, universal history, both personally and within a collective audience.

In this sense humour was neither simple mockery of the sacred, nor did it work purely as a way to distinguish the spiritual superiority of devout spectators over profane or ignorant characters; instead, it provided an approach to the narratives of biblical history which was dialogic, stimulating discourse rather than passive acceptance. The humour of these pageants represents a cognitive challenge to audiences, aiding a better comprehension of the spiritual and devotionally practical significance of the stories themselves.[9] Humour could aid devotion, provoking spectators to think for themselves about their personal responses to biblical narratives. Rather than reinforcing a binary of the 'comic' and the 'divine', the former always threatening to undermine the latter, the York and Townley plays brought together the 'erthly' and the 'hevenly'. The following discussion will develop a model for understanding how they combined the holy and the comic.

Section 5.1

Humorous Liaisons with Joseph and Mary

The narrative best known as 'Joseph's Troubles About Mary' derives from a brief account in Matthew 1:18–25 which was elaborated in the Protoevangelium of James and the gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, both early apocryphal works focused on Christ's infancy. From there it was widely retold in late medieval accounts, including the *Legenda Aurea*.[10] Considering the aftermath of the Annunciation, it tells the story of Joseph's worries about the pregnancy of the Virgin Mary, as well as his doubts over the paternity of her child. The 'Troubles' narrative is presented in a number of surviving performance collections, notably in York, Towneley, and the N-Town

[8] '*The Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge* (Extracts)', in *Medieval Drama: An Anthology*, ed. Greg Walker (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 200, l.115.
[9] See Greg Walker, 'The Cultural Work of Early Drama', in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. Richard Beadle and Alan J. Fletcher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 94–95.
[10] Beadle, *York Plays* II, 90–91. See 'The Protoevangelium of James' and 'The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew', in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, Vol. 8 (New York: Scribner, 1916), 361–67, 368–83.

plays – associated with East Anglia, and well-known for their special emphasis on Marian devotion.[11] These dramatic narratives are based largely on Joseph's ignorance of the Annunciation, and his growing frustration at being unable – as he thinks – to elicit the name of the baby's father from his young wife. Comic elements dominate these performances, the ignorant Joseph accusing the Virgin of various transgressions and fearing for his reputation, until he is informed by an angel of the veracity of Mary's explanation.

Humour is undoubtedly present in these works, but exactly how it functions remains a matter of scholarly disagreement. A consensus still holds that Joseph's character – the foolish old man, who imagines himself cuckolded – is the comic centre-point of the plays, with the Virgin Mary remaining somehow detached. This idea is best expressed by Kolve: 'Joseph's doubts *are* funny, because of his grumpy, aged incomprehension, and his insinuations to the audience that there have been cuckolds before him. But Mary knows she is pure and so do we – she is untouched by our laughter.' He suggests that Mary does not participate in the humour of the largely risible pageant which surrounds her, as if she is placed on 'a green island in a turbulent and dirty sea'. She remains aloof from Joseph's comic questioning, performing sacred purity in contrast to his imagined improprieties.[12] Maggie Solberg has recently questioned Kolve's reading of the episode, looking to the N-Town version of the play. She argues that just because the larger framework of the narrative vindicates the Virgin, spectators were still prompted to laugh at the blasphemous aspersions cast against her during the performance.[13]

Solberg's approach in part provides a response to a prevailing scholarly discourse on the plays of Joseph's doubts which have largely ignored the Virgin – something which I also respond to here. Much has been written on the part which Joseph's comic ignorance holds in these plays; in late medieval literature and the visual arts, Joseph was characterised dualistically, as both a tired old buffoon and the 'hard-working foster-father of Christ'.[14] Following the theory of superiority, it has been assumed that the plays' comic nature derives from Joseph's age and ignorance; yet the performed situation is far more nuanced, also affecting his relationship with Mary. She is not, I argue, 'untouched by our laughter', but instead participates fully in its

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[11] See Gail McMurray Gibson, *The Theater of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 139; although the East Anglian N-Town plays are beyond the regional parameters of this thesis, it is noteworthy that in an area known especially for its emphasis on Marian devotion, the episode was treated particularly comically, and featured a particularly pronounced onslaught of accusations against Mary's chastity..

[12] Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi*, 139.

[13] See Maggie Solberg, 'Madonna, Whore: Mary's Sexuality in the N-Town Plays', *Comparative Drama*, 48:3 (2014), 191–219.

[14] Cynthia Hahn, '"Joseph Will Perfect, Mary Enlighten and Jesus Save Thee": The Holy Family as Marriage Model in the Merode Triptych', *The Art Bulletin*, 68:1 (1986), 54–66; see also Pamela Sheingorn, 'The Maternal Behavior of God the Divine Father as Fantasy Husband', in *Medieval Mothering*, ed. John Cami Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler (London: Garland, 1996), 77–100.

provocation. The accepted role of humour in biblical drama still suffers from an anachronistic imposition of a binary between the comic and the sacred. In these plays Joseph is presented as grumbling and amusingly confused over the details of the Annunciation (which spectators would necessarily have known already). Yet at the same time the plays are mediated through Joseph's perspective, and thus allow audience members to consider Mary as a young woman who – like those living in the world outside of the performance – is open to suspicion.

Whilst not designed to seriously undermine belief in Mary's virginity, such humour posed daring questions, driving spectators to re-evaluate – and ultimately communally reconsolidate – their devotional understanding. Tellingly, Mary's responses to Joseph are not simply meek and mild but playful, comic, and suggestive. The 'Troubles' plays, as well as others featuring Mary and Joseph as a married couple, represent the meeting point of the sacred and the everyday: the comically playful relationship of Mary and Joseph, contributed to by both partners, helps to bridge this gap between the 'erthly' and the 'hevenly' – emblematic of the concept of lay devotion.

Joseph the 'Erthly' Father

Joseph, the mortal husband of Mary and foster-father of Christ, had a complicated reputation in the late medieval period. An official cult of Joseph was established in 1479 and prospered over the course of the sixteenth century; even so, Anne L. Williams notes, the figure was probably the focus of popular devotion a great deal earlier. From at least the early thirteenth century the relic of Joseph's *Hosen*, represented as stockings, trousers, or even boots, began to be venerated at Aachen cathedral.[15] The *Hosen* (Williams continues) were considered to be the swaddling clothes of Christ, donated by the solicitous father, which may be the reason why dramatizations of the Nativity in Germany, France, and the Low Countries often saw Joseph go bare-legged and mocked by other characters. This detail may add a facet to the duality in English late medieval portrayals of Joseph, which treated him partly humorously and partly with reverence, as the guardian of Christ and Mary.

In late medieval English drama Joseph is often presented as a doddering old man, full of ignorance and primed for mockery: Gibson describes him as a figure 'so ruefully comic and human in his assumption of Mary's adultery and guilt that it will take an angel to still his

[15] Anne L. Williams, 'Satirizing the Sacred: Humor in Saint Joseph's Veneration and Early Modern Art', *Journal of Netherlandish Art*, 10:1 (2018), 4.

doubts'.[16] Critics see the narrative of 'Joseph's Troubles' as evocative of the fabliaux tradition, in which the character of the Old Man is taken advantage of by his new Young Wife, carrying out an affair under his nose – as in Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale*. The Virgin Mary is made pregnant by a mysterious figure, and Joseph is indeed cuckolded, but by God.[17] Joseph is initially ignorant of Christ's divinity, and this ignorance results in his portrayal as a fool. It is only when he realizes the divine truth of the virgin birth that Joseph becomes the protective and steadfast guardian of his wife and foster-son, a human father parallel to God in the 'earthly Trinity'.[18]

Scholars have claimed that Joseph's dual nature – comic buffoon and venerated guardian – shifted between the late medieval period and the seventeenth century. For Hale he came to represent the 'locus of guardianship for the Church' as his official cult flourished in the sixteenth century, driven in no small part by the construction of a 'new Joseph' by theologians such as Pierre d'Atilly, Jean Gerson, and Bernadino da Siena. These men cast Joseph akin to the contemporary civic leader or wealthy, middle-aged, well-established burgher.[19]

The pageants from York and Towneley sit between these period-specific characterizations of Joseph. But, as Williams persuasively argues, the comic foibles associated with the character – his old age, his grumbling, and suggestions of cuckoldry – worked jointly as a means to raise humour and to emphasise the figure's saintly qualities.[20] Williams' work convincingly demonstrates that in late medieval devotional culture, humour was used both to mock and to venerate the foster-father of Christ, problematizing Kolve's notion that comic elements would not ever 'touch' the divine.

Physical Ignorance and Comic Perspective

Humorous conventions of characterizing Joseph were well-established by the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, directly influencing the York and Towneley 'Troubles' plays. Both pageants begin with Joseph's direct address to the audience, firmly establishing his status as a 'bewildered everyman'.[21] Joseph dominates the opening of York's pageant, continuing for over seventy-four lines and occupying just under a quarter of the entire script. These lines appeal directly to the audience for sympathy, and are full of mock-pathos, surely designed to raise laughter. Joseph

[16] Gail McMurray Gibson, *The Theater of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 155–56.
[17] See, for example, Francesca Alberti, 'Divine Cuckolds: Joseph and Vulcan in Renaissance Art and Literature', in *Cuckoldry, Impotence and Adultery in Europe (15th–17th Century)*, ed. Sara F. Matthews-Grieco (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 149–82; C.P. Deasy, *St. Joseph in the English Mystery Plays* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1937), 63–68.
[18] Rosemary Drage Hale, 'Joseph as Mother: Adaptation and Appropriation in the Construction of Male Virtue', in *Medieval Mothering*, ed. John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler (London: Garland, 1996), 111–12.
[19] Hale, 'Joseph as Mother', 102, 107–11.
[20] Williams, 'Satirizing the Sacred', 18.
[21] Gibson, *Theatre of Devotion*, 164.

draws attention to the physical aspects of his situation – a perspective grounded in the everyday experience of his spectators. He is weighed down by the seriousness of his circumstances: he walks 'full werily' (l. 2) onto the stage, 'rete elde, / Wayke and al unwelde' (ll. 5–6). His lugubrious words convey a haggard man in his 'alde dase' (l. 11), with bones as 'hevy als lede' (l. 15).

Towneley's Joseph is similarly world-weary, imploring the audience to feel his pains. His opening speech is, at twenty-six lines, considerably shorter. Two rhetorical questions address God and the spectators:

> Joseph: Allmyghty God, what may this be?
> Of Mary my wife marvels me:
> Alas, what has she wroght?
> (ll. 1–3)

Joseph portrays himself directly as a victim, both of God and his wife. His opening appeal to God about his wife is ironic, as he does not yet know that it is these two figures who have, so to speak, cuckolded him.[22]

In Towneley we are not offered the dramatised moment of Joseph's realization that Mary is indeed pregnant; instead he develops at leisure his comic physicality, suffering with a sexualised edge. He is 'sore with […] lyfe' (l. 7) because of his ill-matched marriage. An 'old' man, he has 'Passed all [...] prevay play', noting that 'game fro me ar gane' (ll. 13–14). Joseph's reference to sexual 'play' and 'game' is painfully comic, as he makes clear that he is 'unwelde' (l. 17), an impotent player. York's Joseph merely describes himself as unfit, but Towneley's gets to the comic root of the matter, making clear that he is physically incapable of having impregnated Mary. Importantly, though, in both York and Towneley, Joseph's words are direct appeals to spectators to understand his pain feelingly. Joseph's words also establish him as recognizably human: his problems are rooted in lived experiences which audience members might disparage, but also readily understand, even share. Joseph's lines comprise just over two thirds of the York *Troubles*, and almost ninety per cent of the Towneley pageant.[23]

Unlike devotional narratives or visual depictions, the York and Towneley plays allow audiences to view the 'Troubles' not as objective outsiders, but from the perspective of Joseph.

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[22] Scholars have pointed out that interpretation of Joseph a being made a 'cuckold' by God, playing into the fabliaux tradition, was firmly established in the late medieval period. See for example Alberti, 'Divine Cuckolds: Joseph and Vulcan', 149–82; Solberg, 'Madonna, Whore', 200–201.

[23] In the York *Joseph's Troubles About Mary* his character has 206 lines out of 305, whilst in Towneley the character holds 194 out of the 219 lines.

The comic dramatization of Joseph, rooted in the character's physicality, allows spectators to better access or imagine themselves within the biblical narrative. This does little to negate the ignorance which characterises Joseph, but it does help to establish him as an empathetic figure, with understandable concerns. Spectators are pressed to laugh at Joseph and his grumbling, but also to empathize with him, as a figure of the world outside of the performance.

The utility of Joseph's perspective – and his comic characterisation – to the devotional purpose of the plays become apparent only when we are introduced to the character of the Virgin, likely performed by a male youth. It is extremely unlikely that those watching the pageant would have been unaware of the Annunciation, and of Mary's all-important virginal status.[24] But the comic doubts of Joseph enabled audiences to enter the world of the play, and see the familiar story of the virgin birth through his sceptical eyes. The plays achieve this initially through Joseph's framing of Mary as a purely physical entity (like himself), made even more carnally apparent by her pregnancy.

In York Joseph first refers to Mary's pregnancy as her being 'wit childe full grete' (l. 43), his description implying a threatening largeness of her body, both physically imposing to him and comic to spectators. Joseph marvels how her 'wombe waxen grete' (l. 95) and how 'Hir sidis shewe she is with childe' (l. 102). Her imposing and inappropriate body betrays her ('thy wombe allway […] wreyes thee', l.165); her maidenhead has been marred (l. 182) or 'had' by another (l. 207). This highlights a large, corruptible physique, at odds with ideas of the Virgin as a spiritual force, thus drawing Mary – comically, and incongruously – into the world of the spectator. Revered as Queen of Heaven, Mary is here allowed to be considered in distinctly human terms, playing on the tension between the physical and spiritual worlds which her body – as the vehicle for God incarnate – ultimately represented.

Throughout the plays, spectators are consciously prompted, through Joseph's apparently profane questioning, to consider the relationship between the spiritual and the physical worlds. In York Mary is introduced, via the handmaiden Puella 1, as a young woman who 'sittis at hir boke full faste prayand' (l. 81). As well as suggesting her coy innocence, the presence of the 'boke' in Mary's hands alludes to her piety and literacy: she is a figure of spiritual knowledge, couched in the civilised domestic space of the household, whilst Joseph is a figure of the outside world, who before the end of the pageant will return to the 'wildirnesse' (l. 239). A contrast between the characters of Joseph and Mary is quickly established, the former a rough old man, the latter a saintly young woman. Mary may stand in for the figure of Ecclesia, often present in

[24] See Michael W. George, 'Religion, Sexuality and Representation in the York *Joseph's Troubles* Pageant', in *Intersections of Sexuality and the Divine in Medieval Culture: The World Made Flesh*, ed. Susanna Mary Chewning (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 9–12.

late medieval iconography as a young woman holding the writings of the New Law and representing the Church, juxtaposed with the blindfolded and lame Synagoga, the latter akin to Joseph, a representative of the Old Law of Judaism.[25] Certainly here the spiritual and the physical appear to be at tension with each other, though we are always aware that the blindfold will ultimately be lifted from Joseph's eyes.

Joseph argues that he 'nevere fylid' her 'flesshely' (l. 106), and II Puella – one of Mary's handmaidens – agrees that no man has been allowed 'To touche that berde so bright' (l. 122). The metaphorical allusion to Mary as a 'berde' ('bird') both makes reference to her spirituality, flying above the baseness of the physical world, and to the winged creature often depicted flying to her womb at the point of the Annunciation. We may compare the 'berde' directly with the 'wilde bestes' which Joseph fears would 'sla hir' (l. 69) if, as he imagines, he abandoned her to 'som wodes wilde' (l. 67). Joseph is earthly, his use of language turning metaphor to the literal, rendering Mary physical.

In Towneley Joseph also emphasises the carnal nature of Mary's body and her pregnancy, similarly asserting that 'Thi body fames thee openly' (l. 59). Her physical form is a distinct entity, threatening to overwhelm the Virgin's reputation. Here Joseph consciously makes reference to a separation between the physical and spiritual worlds:

> Joseph: Shuld an angell this dede have wroght?
> Sich excusing helpys noght,
> For no craft that thay can.
> A hevenly thing forsothe is he
> And she is erthly; this may not be
> It is som othere man.
> (l. 139–44)

Joseph encounters what the audience know to be the truth of the Annunciation, yet rejects it out of hand. He contrasts the 'erthly' identity he assumes Mary bears with the 'hevenly' one, which he perceives to be out of reach. Again, it is only when Joseph talks of turning to the 'wyldernes' (l. 167) that the Angel comes to him, and verifies Mary's words. Although the audience are always aware that Mary is a virgin, and that Joseph's accusations are false, his perspective poses a comic sexualization of his young wife. Solberg has noted that slurs against the Virgin Mary's

[25] Solberg, 'Madonna, Whore: Mary's Sexuality', 201, 204; Daisy Black, "'Nayles Large and Lang": Masculine Identity and the Anachronic Object in the York *Crucifixion* Play', *Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality*, 50:2 (2015), 57.

chastity are particularly pronounced in the N-Town Plays, contemporary to York, and draws attention to the clear humorous intent of this'.[26]

Mary's sexualization plays into a trend towards 'eroticised' accounts of her Annunciation, Nativity, and Assumption, part of a surge in Mariological devotion from the twelfth century onwards.[27] In the 'Troubles' plays in York and Towneley, the Virgin Mary remains a reverenced and sacred figure, but audiences imaginatively participate in the idea – rooted in Joseph's words – that she has indeed transgressed. Through comic treatment, Mary's body is used as a way to consider her imaginary infidelity, playing on a tension between the spiritual and the physical eroticization of the Virgin.

In the York *Troubles*, Joseph knows the prophecy that 'A maiden clene suld bere a childe' (l. 62) but insists that this maiden surely could not be Mary ('But it nought sho, sekirly', l.63). Rooted in the physical rather than spiritual world, Joseph comically privileges common, mundane expectations over divine truth. His perspective evokes a closeness to the spectators who exist outside of the world of the play. Although not devotionally orthodox, his attitudes provide a dissenting voice evocative of their everyday expectations, over the miraculous nature of the divine. This sceptical viewpoint provides a useful source of tension in the pageant; the virgin birth is indeed past all 'wordly witte' or understanding, and Joseph's character does not refrain from pointing this out, even at the cost of defaming his young wife. Joseph's doubt functions dialogically, allowing spectators the space to consider the specifics of the Annunciation anew from a position of assumed ignorance.

This discursive treatment of the 'Troubles' narrative is especially important given the dramatic medium. Embodied, physical performances of biblical history themselves blurred the boundaries between the 'erthly' and the 'hevenly', posing the threat of the former overshadowing the meaning of the latter. As has been noted, contemporary figures – inhabitants or actors – merged with biblical characters through 'conceptual blending'.[28] In the 'Troubles' plays, the danger of this blending was that audiences might begin to question Mary's virginity and the Annunciation after seeing it performed by recognizable mortal figures, testing the ambiguous parameters around imitation and truth. As we have seen, Joseph doubts the story of the Annunciation in Towneley, but we can see this tension in action particularly when the angel Gabriel is discussed in the York *Troubles*.

In York, it is the character I Puella who describes the Annunciation to Joseph, speaking of 'no man' coming to Mary, 'Save an aungell ilke a day anes' (ll. 123, 125). Whilst she stresses that

[26] Solberg, 'Madonna, Whore: Mary's Sexuality', 191–95, 199–207.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Stevenson, 'Embodied Enchantments', 93–98; Fauconnier and Turner, *The Way We Think*, 266–67.

the handmaidens know of no way in which Mary could have been visited by any entity but the 'Haly Gaste' (l. 129), Joseph is far more sceptical.

> Joseph: Thanne se I wele youre menyng is:
> The aungell has made hir with childe.
> Nay, som man in aungellis liknesse
> With somkyn gawde has hir begiled,
> And that trow I.
> (ll. 134–38)

Here Joseph's criticism that 'som man in aungellis liknesse' has impregnated Mary rings awkwardly true, a nod to the meta-dramatic nature of Gabriel here as both real-life actor and performed, spiritual character. Joseph's accusation that the angelic Gabriel is actually a hearty boy, performing as an angel, had precedents in theological writings, but in both the York and Towneley plays this takes on a new edge.

Spectators of the York *Troubles* would have already encountered Gabriel in the previous pageant *The Annunciation to Mary* and the *Visitation*, produced by the Spicers, where, as it is pointed out, they indeed saw 'som man' in angelic costume. Although surely ignored by some, other spectators may have understood this line with some metatheatrical awareness and drawn mirth from the irony of Joseph's accusation. His words are a self-aware nod to the travesty – and potentially destabilizing nature of – the performance. As Solberg notes, a youth playing Gabriel would have been more than capable of getting a maidenly figure such as Mary into trouble – had not the Virgin herself been played by another young man.[29]

The doubled identities of actor and character threaten to destabilize the verisimilitude of the biblical portrayal, but in doing so invigorate the comic tension of the scene.[30] This situation forces certain spectators to ponder anew the nature of the Virgin birth, even if only – as most readings would have it – to conservatively resolve these thoughts with orthodox conclusions. It is only through performance that both Gabriel's veracity and Mary's virginity can fully be drawn into question, and resolved through comic treatment. The narrative of Joseph's 'Troubles' is not treated comically in its scriptural source, nor in either of the apocryphal bases of the work or late medieval written accounts of the scene. Humour was used specifically in these plays, I argue,

[29] Solberg, 'Madonna: Whore, Mary's Sexuality', 211.
[30] McGavin and Walker describe the dramatic energy resulting from those moments 'when an audience member might renege on that tacit agreement to collaborate in a fiction, and go rogue, crossing the line between audience and stage, play world and real world'. See McGavin and Walker, *Imagining Spectatorship*, 170–71.

because such performances could bring together the everyday world with the divine, and make the suspension of disbelief more difficult. Turning to humour – Joseph's ignorant perspective – allows spectators to laugh at the incongruity of these two worlds, but ultimately decide that the sacred bears more meaning and divine truth than the expectations of the everyday.

Joseph's perspective, and his words, are rooted entirely in discussions of the physical rather than the spiritual, and it is only when these two sides are drawn together that the tension of the performance is resolved. His graphic descriptions of the Virgin Mary and his imaginings of her infidelity help to bridge the gap between the real world and the sacred within the performance. Joseph's doubt over the role of the angel Gabriel, and his scepticism over the Virgin's divine role, are mirrored by Mary herself in the 'Annunciation' plays of both York and Towneley.

In York Mary questions Gabriel with the lines 'Howe sulde it be, I thee praye, / That I sulde consayve a childe / Of any man by nyght or daye?' (ll. 183–85), whilst in Towneley the Virgin similarly exclaims to the angel 'A child to bere thou me hetys? / How shuld it be? / I cam never by mans syde' (ll. 111–113). Like Joseph, Mary must query the facts of the Annunciation, and she requires angelic reassurance. It is this questioning, and the ultimate acceptance of the truth of Christ, that defines these plays.

Section 5.2
The Virgin Mary as a Comic Character

Moving beyond the physical body of Mary, comic aspects of the York *Troubles* also rely on her characterisation and performance within the pageant. This has largely been ignored. The Virgin is not merely 'untouched', as Kolve claims – she plays an active, comprehensive role in the humour of the plays. Joseph is not a buffoon in isolation, weary in the upbringing of Christ; I argue that the humour of the plays emerges in his dialogue with Mary. After his long speech direct to the audience, Joseph enters the house where Mary and her handmaidens reside. There, Mary is introduced by 1 Puella as praying 'For you and us, and for all tha / That oght had nede' (ll. 81–83). Mary addresses a simple greeting to Joseph: 'Welcome, als God me spede. / Dredeles to me he is full dere, / Joseph my spouse, welcome er yhe' (ll. 89–91). The opening casts Mary as pious, honest, and warm towards her husband. She is poised and calm, in contrast with Joseph's flurried speech questioning both her virginity and his role in the household (ll. 65–70).

Although Mary has relatively few lines in the pageant – just over ten per cent – she is a major presence. The accusations against her chastity form the key themes of the performance, with this scene pitting her against her husband. While 'meke and mylde' (l. 70), characteristics attributed to her even by Joseph, she rebuts the accusations of her husband, demonstrating a spiritual fortitude and devotional authority of her own. Importantly though, Mary's character participates in the pageant's humour through refusing to play along fully with Joseph's questions.

Joseph: Trowe it noght arme?
Lefe wenche, do way.
Hir sidis shewes she is with childe.
Whose ist, Marie?
Mary: Sir, Goddis and youres.
(ll. 101–105)

Mary: To my witnesse grete God I call,
That in mynde wroght nevere na mysse
Joseph: Whose is the childe thou arte withal?
Mary: Youres, sir, and the kyngis of blisse.
(ll. 156–59)

Joseph: Whose is it, als faire mot thee befall?
Mary: Sir, it is youres and Goddis will.
Joseph: Nay, I ne have noght ado withall.
Neme it na more to me, be still.
(ll. 167–70)

Although Joseph has substantially more dialogue than Mary, her lines – short, pithy, and reiterative – have a particular impact on the rhythm of the performance. They resolve his discordant ranting in harmony, emphasising her collectedness against his mounting frustration. Joseph's words speed out of him, overflowing and gaining in fury through their momentum: something comically set in contrast with Mary's continued string of curt, modest replies. Although sparse and few, each one of Mary's short lines of speech is a challenge to Joseph: his assumed authority as head of the household is put into question by these words, as she refuses to (or cannot) fully explain exactly how the pregnancy occurred.

Mary was a figure of huge spiritual and devotional significance in this period, but Joseph's words characterise her as a physical, young wife. In York (as elsewhere at the time), the desire to control the bodies of young women was established in the broader framework of civic ideology, where contemporary regulation responded to anxieties over female infidelity or loss of patriarchal dominance.[31] On the one hand, in both plays Mary is a girl found 'in trouble', yet on the other she holds authority as Queen of Heaven. Drawing on both the wily young wife from the fabliaux tradition, and her status as a devotional icon, Mary does not bow down to Joseph's accusations. She firmly holds her position both as holy mother of Christ and a living, breathing woman, not a detached spiritual figure. She participates in the 'games' (l. 196) of the pageant with Joseph, thus helping bridge the gap between the 'erthly' and the 'hevenly'.

Mary never offers Joseph the kind of answer that he desires, but as the pageant (and their argument) continues, her replies grow longer as if to goad him on further in his apoplexy. Her responses begin to point meekly – yet infuriatingly – from her husband to God for the answers.

Joseph: Therfore, telle me in privité,
Whos is the childe thou is with nowe?
Sertis, ther sall non witte but we;
I drede the law als wele as thou.
Mary: Nowe grete God of his myght,
That all may dresse and dight,
Mekely to thee I bowe.
Rewe on this wery wight
That in his herte myght light
The soth to ken and trowe.
(ll. 197–206)

Joseph's ironic request for 'privité' – his words growing louder and turning into a public spectacle – is met with Mary's more quiet calls to God's 'myght'. Mary's lines comically emphasise the powerlessness of Joseph in comparison to God. As if ignoring Joseph, she beseeches God to 'Rewe on this wery wight', to take pity on the poor, frustrated creature her husband is becoming.

[31] See, for example Goldberg, 'Pigs and Prostitutes', 172–74; also Goldberg, 'Coventry's "Lollard" Programme of 1492 and the Making of Utopia', in *Pragmatic Utopias: Ideals and Communities 1200–1630*, ed. Rosemary Horrox and Sarah Rees Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 97–116.

This dispute between Mary and Joseph continues over the course of the pageant, the comic centre-piece of the performance. Mary's responses begin to mirror Joseph's questions, following his histrionic rhymes in comic rebuttal.

Joseph: A maiden to be with childe!
Thase werkis fra thee ar wilde,
Sho is not borne, I wene.
Mary: Joseph, yhe ar begiled:
With synne was I never filid,
Goddis sande is on me sene.
(ll. 211–216)

Joseph argues that for the Virgin to be with child is 'wilde' or mad, which Mary counters directly, calling Joseph 'begiled', or equally deranged. This form of verbal jousting represents Joseph's ignorance meeting the divine humility and truth espoused by the Virgin, in the shape of an entertaining quarrel. In this dispute we see again the meeting of the two worlds espoused by Mary and Joseph, the 'hevenly' and the 'erthly'. It is only when the angel appears to Joseph that the quarrel finally ends, and the gap between the physical and the spiritual closes. Importantly though, both Mary and Joseph participate in this closure: the Virgin does not merely meet her earthly husband's accusations with dignified silence, but with carefully chosen and assertive words.

Mary: Forgiffnesse, sir, late be for shame;
Slike wordis suld all gud women lakke.
Joseph: Yha, Marie, I am to blame,
For wordis lang are I to thee spak.
(ll. 296–99)

Just as Mary refuses the idea that Joseph needs her 'Forgiffnesse', Joseph admits he has spoken too many 'wordis lang'. Their reconciliation is not a triumph in domination for either figure, but rather an acceptance that two viewpoints have now been joined in a pacified holy household. As Solberg has argued, 'the extent to which [early] drama domesticates the marriage of Mary and Joseph has not been fully appreciated'.[32]

[32] Solberg, 'Madonna, Whore', 203.

In Towneley, Mary and Joseph's relationship is similar, though here the Virgin is given only four interjections. Her responses align with Joseph's rhymes, yet are curt and offer less comic potential.

Joseph:	Bot of a thyng frayn thee I shall:
	Who owe this child thou gose withall?
Mary:	Syr, ye and God of heven.
Joseph:	Myne, Mary? Do way thi dyn.
	That I shuld oght have parte therin
	Thou nedys it not to neven.
	(ll. 31–36)

Joseph:	How shuld it then be myne?
	Whos is that chyld, so God thee spede?
Mary:	Syr, Godys and yowrs, withouten drede.
Joseph:	That word had thou to tyne,
	(ll. 39–42)

Joseph:	Thi body fames thee openly
	That thou has done amys.
Mary:	Yee, God he knowys all my doyng.
Joseph:	Wé, now, this is a wonder thyng.
	(ll. 59–62)

Here Mary is afforded far less room for disputation, and as a result the quarrel's comic properties – essentially contained within the frustration of Joseph – are less apparent. Rather than looking to his wife, Joseph turns directly to the audience and to God to question the Virgin's fidelity.

Rehearsing her words, Joseph comments: 'Godyes and myn she says it is. / I will not fader it; she says amys' (ll. 67–68). Here Joseph is more reflective than combative, greatly reducing the development of comic disharmony between the couple. Rather than the equity we see in York after the Angel's intervention, Towneley's Joseph asserts his guardianship, vowing 'May wife and hir swete yong wight / To kepe to my lyfys ende' (ll. 218–19). In Towneley, then, Mary is given less of a chance to embody fully the living, breathing, physical woman that Joseph's words

suggest. Comic dialogue re–asserts, above all, the separation of their spiritual and physical identities: expressing Mary's sanctity and Joseph's as her earthly guardian.

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Marital Disagreements between York and Towneley

Many differences in the dramatic treatment of Mary and Joseph in York and Towneley may arise from differences in contemporary idealised domestic models. In York Mary and Joseph are presented as distinct figures couched in different worlds, the spiritual Virgin sheltered in the domestic space of the household, and the grumbling old carpenter come in from the 'wildirnesse'. Yet their comic quarrels draw both worlds to meet: by the end of the pageant Mary and Joseph are a co-operative force, denying a strictly gendered hierarchy in favour of shared authority within the household. Mary and Joseph share power, as evinced through their comic discussions or quarrels. This portrayal of their relationship continues throughout other pageants in the York cycle, where, in a variety of situations, an emphasis is put upon their discussions: both maintain distinct voices, interacting with, yet never subsuming, each other.

In the York *Flight into Egypt*, Joseph is informed by an angel that they must flee from Herod's forces, and Mary reacts with fear. Yet the pageant consists largely of the portrayal of a co-operative marital relationship: a two-sided discussion in which Joseph takes pains to explain to Mary exactly why they must leave, and both consider how they are to cope and support each other. After the angel has visited Joseph, Mary asks her husband 'what chere?' (l. 86), before he reveals to her that they 'most flee / Owte of oure kyth where we are known' (ll. 90–91). Just as Noah informed Uxor that they must leave their friends and acquaintances to be drowned, so too does Joseph make clear that they must part from their home in order to survive. Unlike Noah and Uxor though, here Joseph patiently answers Mary's flurry of questions over why they are making their escape; in a discussion carried out over the course of 144 lines, the characters are portrayed as a co-operative marital couple. Joseph asks Mary if he might carry Jesus: 'Gyff me hym, late me bere hym awhile' (l. 198)'; they share responsibilities and support each other.

This is shown further in the later pageant *Christ and the Doctors*, where Mary and Joseph have mislaid their 'semeley Sone' (l. 15), somewhere on their travels back from Jerusalem. The couple are comically domestic, their quarrels paying little heed to ideas of a gendered hierarchy between them. Mary notes that her 'wittis be waste as wynde' (l. 16) for losing Jesus, and when Joseph tries to calm her the Virgin objects that 'such gabbyngis may me noght begyle' (l. 26), chastising him for his fruitless words. As in the *Troubles* pageant, Mary and Joseph are presented as quarrelsome, worrying parents, resonant of the world outside of the play, figures for spectators to empathize with in the context of the grand biblical narrative. Again their roles are

shared, non-hierarchical: it is the Virgin who takes charge when her husband decides he is too meek to 'mell' with 'men of myght' (l. 229), as she goes to visit the Doctors.

The relationship between Mary and Joseph is presented as complex and nuanced in the York Cycle, their domesticity and faintly disputatious nature humorously coming to the fore. We may speculate that this portrayal in some ways reflected relations in an artisanal household of the period. The crafts who produced the York *Troubles* pageant were artisanal: both the Pewterers and Founders were fairly wealthy groups throughout the fifteenth century, the former particularly focused on the production of domestic goods.[33] As we have already explored in discussion of the Noah plays, the marital household was the central unit of the urban economy in the fifteenth century, where both husband and wife held authority through their commercial participation.[34] In highlighting a discursive couple pushing against the gendered hierarchy (presupposed by similar marital pairs like Noah and Uxor), Mary and Joseph's semi-comic relationship is suggestively similar to that of the contemporary productive household.

By comparison, the treatment of Mary and Joseph's marital relationship in Towneley is subtly at odds with this portrayal. The difference may be connected to shifts in the functioning of the commercial household in the sixteenth century, and to the rootedness of the Towneley MS beyond the large urban centre of York. In the Towneley *Troubles* Mary is given less of a part in the discourse of the play: Joseph dominates the scene, and thus his ignorance forms the locus of humour in the performance. As I have noted, Mary and Joseph are characterised respectively as 'hevenly' and 'erthly', and no comic quarrels are present to bridge the gap between them. Whilst the Towneley *Doctors* play is copied almost exactly from York, *The Flight into Egypt* emphasises Joseph's grumbling and age, contrasted with Mary's innocence and naivety. Joseph even comically complains again about his marriage, warning 'Yong men' that 'Wedyng makys me all wan' (ll. 149–50).

Rather than participating in a discussion with her husband, in the Towneley *Flight* Mary is characterised by her sharp laments at the news of Herod's men coming for her child. She speaks of her 'doyllys' (l. 80) or sorrows, as well as the way she will 'lurk and dare' (l. 83) or cower, and repeats the line 'full wo is me', or derivatives of it (ll. 157, 107, 131). The differences of Mary and Joseph are stressed here, rather than their ability to co-operate as partners. Joseph repeatedly attempts to pacify his wife's prolonged sorrowful speeches, stating – somewhat brusquely – 'Now leyfe Mary, be styll' (l. 90); 'Forthi let be thi dyn / And cry' (ll. 114–15). Mary's emotions are heightened to appear almost as hysteria, set against Joseph's eventual gloomy resolve to take

[33] Heather Swanson, 'Craftsmen and Industry in Late Medieval York', Ph.D. Thesis (York, 1980), 190–94.
[34] See Martha C. Howell, *Women, Production and Patriarchy in Late Medieval Cities* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 9–26, 27–32.

control of the situation. He agrees to carry the 'pak' (l. 174), and thus share some of Mary's burden, even only at the end of the play.[35] Substantively Towneley and York are similar; yet, significantly, Towneley's Joseph ends up carrying the couple's physical possessions, while York allows him to carry the holy body of Christ.

Towneley heightens rather than resolves the contrast between Mary and Joseph. 'Erthly' Joseph interacts little with 'hevenly' Mary; instead, his character adopts the role of physical guardian, complementing the intimate and spiritual concerns of the Virgin. The Towneley MS was composed in a more rural environment than urban York, the latter allowing wives a degree of autonomy unseen elsewhere: this necessarily influenced a shift in the portrayal of Mary and Joseph's marital relationship. Furthermore, the Towneley plays derive from a mid-sixteenth century context where wives' status held less autonomy, in part due to the changed role of the household in economy and society. From the later fifteenth century the household became less of a public, economic unit and more of a private area, changing the access women had to commercial power through domestic spheres.[36] In Towneley Mary has less influence on Joseph's choices, and their roles as protector and protected figures become more distinct.

On the other hand, the growth of the cult of Joseph likely also influenced this shift in characterisation. Although still portrayed as old and ignorant, Joseph gained traction in his role of steadfast guardian over the early sixteenth century.[37] Reciprocally, in this tradition Mary – although still of immense spiritual importance – became a far less dynamic and authoritative figure in the physical world, with many of her former characteristics now taken by Joseph as the earthly patriarch.[38] It is likely that changes in both the devotional understanding of characters, and in contemporary attitudes to marriage, effected the change we see in the portrayal of Mary and Joseph, and the resultant differences in the use of humour in the plays.

Conclusions

The 'Troubles' plays of York and Towneley are undoubtedly comic, centred around the ignorance of Joseph over Mary's virginity and the Annunciation. Yet their humour is derived not merely from Joseph's buffoonish nature and misapprehension of the divine. In these plays, Joseph represented the 'erthly' physical world as inhabited by audiences, and his character provides a means for spectators to access the world of the play, whilst at the same time offering

[35] Garett Epp, 'The Flight to Egypt', *The Towneley Plays*, n.121. TEAMS Middle English Texts Series, Robbins Library Digital Projects, <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/epp-the-flight-into-egypt> [Accessed 05.11.17].
[36] Howell, *Women, Production and Patriarchy*, 43, 178–83;
[37] See Drage Hale, 'Joseph as Mother', 107–8.
[38] Ibid., 110–12.

them a perspective of ignorance from which to consider (or reconsolidate) their own beliefs. Mary is not, as Kolve previously argued, 'untouched' by the humour of the 'Troubles' plays; rather, conspicuously physical, she is parodically sexualised. Both plays perform the meeting of the 'erthly' and the 'hevenly' in the relationship of Mary and Joseph. Humour mediates these two spheres, bridging the gap between the sacred and the everyday, man and the divine. Humour presents the 'erthly' world of Joseph as flawed, but also brings the Virgin Mary closer to her 'erthly' spectators.

Towneley's Mary remains more distinct from the play's 'erthly' elements, more separate and aloof from audiences. The marital relationship is less co-operative and equitable, and more a pairing of two distinct entities: one physically protective, the other spiritually nurturing. Representative of a growing disjunction between Mary's sacred and pure body, and Joseph's earthy and paternalistic one, Towneley is a product of changes in devotional understanding. Still, in both York and Towneley, the plays concerning Joseph's Troubles cast Mary as integral to the performances' humour. Joseph's comic actions work in tandem with the pithy responses of the Virgin. Fully participating in the disputations, and helping to construct the comic dialogue, Mary humorously stresses both her authority and the truth of the Annunciation.

Chapter 6
Conflicting Passions:
Humour and the Crucifixion

The relationship between the comic and the holy can be complicated, and sometimes uncomfortable. In this chapter I turn to the Crucifixion, an unexpected site of humour which has consistently challenged scholars and modern readers or audiences. The Crucifixion is at the heart of Christian history and doctrine, the moment at which Christ suffers torture and sacrifice in order to secure the salvation of humanity and atone for the sins of the world. Yet in the York Cycle, the pageant of *Crucifixio Christi* – produced by the craft of the Pinners – is known both for its expressive realism in depicting the solemn intensity of Christ on the cross, and for the comic actions of the Soldiers who crucify him.[39]

Setting the 'Crucifixion' and 'Troubles' plays side by side, it is possible to recognise a similar dynamic: their humour draws on a tension between the physical world of the spectators and the spiritual world embodied in certain characters, such as Christ. York's Soldiers are particularly 'erthly': workmen carrying out the job of the Crucifixion. Their actions are intensely physical as they struggle to attach Jesus to the wooden rood and hoist it up into view. As in Joseph's case, their emphasis on the physical world is comic, but for different reasons: their work repeatedly goes wrong and causes squabbles; yet given that the abused body of Christ is the object of their attention, the comic purpose of their outbursts is difficult to understand. Christ clearly does not remain 'untouched' by gross humour, as Kolve contended; on the contrary, His body, as an object of humour, allows audiences to gain access to the divine.

In the York *Crucifixio Christi*, scholars generally agree, the Soldiers' comic nature initially obscures the torturous abuse being carried out on Christ's body. The Soldiers treat their endeavours as work, largely ignoring the significance (and even the humanity) of the figure they are working with, handling Jesus' body as an inanimate object or tool.[40] This obscuration of His humanity is emphasised by the stage actions which necessitate that the actor playing Christ is laid down for much of the first part of the pageant, on the cross placed flat either on the waggon or the city street. Spectators – laughing at the comic scene of the soldiers' work – cannot see the

[39] Richard Beadle, 'The York Corpus Christi Play', in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. Richard Beadle and Alan J. Fletcher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 116.
[40] Andrea Boboc, 'Lay Performances of Work and Salvation in the York Cycle', *Comparative Drama,* 43:2 (2009), 255–57; David Klausner, 'Staging the Unstageable: Performing the Crucifixion in Late Medieval and Early Modern England', *METh,* 30 (2008), 67, 77.

body clearly as it is laid down, so only as the cross is raised into the mortise do they realise that they have laughed over the body of Christ, now shown in all its glory.[41]

This sudden shift between carnal humour and the still sobriety of Christ's pain, as well as His calm words of redemption on the cross, heightens the separation drawn between the comic and the sacred in the *Crucifixio* pageant. In short, the humour of the Soldiers at the beginning of the pageant captures the attention of spectators, and causes them to forget about Christ's suffering, before they are prompted to realise the terrible mistake they have made through their laughter. Ward refers to this as the 'humour-laughter-guilt progression': according to this model the humour of the pageant is present to distract audiences from the sacred body, only to be exposed later as a shallow and superficial gloss which obscures the message of true salvation.[42] This interpretation relies on the obscuring and revealing of Christ's body; the soldiers were portrayed in a humorous or entertaining way, we are told, to aid the process of obscuration, and accentuate the chilling iconography of the Crucifixion when it was finally revealed.[43] Yet this dynamic – of obscuring and revealing – is problematic.

Each time it was performed on the feast of Corpus Christi, the York *Crucifixio* pageant was the first to depict Christ on the cross: a particularly important moment. Outside the world of the play, where Christ's body is made less visible before being raised up for the crowd, the pageant itself must have been a source of anticipation. Of considerable iconographic importance, Christ on the cross was a powerful devotional image in the late medieval period and beyond, and the raising of Christ into view must have borne a revelatory appeal.[44] For these reasons, I question whether it is plausible to theorise that at any point in the pageant the body of Christ would have actually been not only physically obscured, but hidden, to the extent that it was forgotten about – however briefly – by spectators.

Accounts of the late medieval period attest to the importance of visuality in religious experience. We hear of laypeople craving the sight of the Host, the sacred body of Christ –

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[41] Greg Walker, 'Medieval Drama: The Corpus Christi in York and Croxton', in *Readings in Medieval Texts: Interpreting Old and Middle English Literature*, ed. David Johnson and Elaine Treharne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 375.

[42] Karen Ward, 'Polysemy, Metatheatricality, and Affective Piety: A Study of Conceptual Blending in the York Play of "The Crucifixion"', in *Spiritual Temporalities in Late-Medieval Europe*, ed. Michael Foster (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2010), 127–38.

[43] Greg Walker and John McGavin have recently observed that the difference in perspective, or the varied positioning, of spectators would have had on their engagement with Christ's pain. Yet they continue to argue for a shift from 'ignorance to understanding, from worldly indifference to repentant self-knowledge'. See John J. McGavin and Greg Walker, *Imagining Spectatorship: From the Mysteries to the Shakespearean Stage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 8-18, esp. 12.

[44] Pamela King, *The York Mystery Cycle and the Worship of the City* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2006), 19-20.

especially in the fifteenth century, when the priest carried out the act of transubstantiation screened from the view of the non-clerical.[45] As I will discuss later, meditation on the body of Christ was an important aspect of the *devotio moderna*, especially the Passion. In a festival at least nominally celebrating the Corpus Christi, it is difficult to conceive of how the body of the actor playing Christ could really become unnoticed as a result of comic words and action – especially as we must assume that the humour of the pageant was performed in much the same way year after year, by the same craft group.[46] How then could Christ's body be plausibly 'hidden' and 'revealed', performance after performance, year after year, if the majority of all those watching knew what was going to happen?

Preceding the *Crucifixio* in the York Cycle, Christ is present as a character in five different pageants staged by various producers: in all of these he talks little, or not at all.[47] Nevertheless he is not obscured or hidden in these performances; he is at the centre of the pageants, either on trial by successive figures of malign authority (who are usually presented comically) or bearing the cross to Calvary. In the York *Crucifixio* Christ's lines consist of two speeches to the audience, half of these delivered before the comic business of the Soldiers. Although stoic and relatively quiet, the character of Jesus has more lines in this pageant than any of the six preceding it, and it is unlikely that the comic action of the Soldiers could obscure His presence on stage, even if largely hidden from view.

The suggestion that the actor playing Christ was 'hidden' and then 'revealed' is central to this interpretation of humour in the pageant: the comic dialogue and actions of the Soldiers help to 'hide' the importance of Christ's body, and the pain he suffers, before he is 'revealed' to the feelings of guilt and complicity suffered by the crowd. Yet the idea that spectators' laughter relied on an ignorance of, or distraction from, Christ's ultimate sacrifice is highly questionable. The pageant was about Christ, the Cycle was about Christ, and Christ is unlikely to have been forgotten anywhere throughout the performance, however briefly. I am not convinced that comic moments merely distract and then fade away to emphasize the solemn sanctity of Christ's Crucifixion. Instead I argue that humour may have also worked in a different way. To consider this I will analyse the role of 'affective piety' in this devotionally important play, and how it

[45] See, for example, Kristen Van Ausdall, 'Communicating with the Host: Imagery and Eucharistic Contact in Late Medieval and Early Renaissance Italy', in *Push Me, Pull You: Imaginative and Emotional Interaction in Late Medieval and Renaissance Art*, ed. Sarah Blick and Laura D. Gelfand, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 447–86.
[46] For comments on the association of the Pinners and the pageant, see Black, '"Nayles Large and Lang": Masculine Identity and the Anachronic Object in the York *Crucifixion* Play', 85–104.
[47] Of the five pageants, consisting of 'The Trial before Cayphas and Anna', 'The First Trial Before Pilate', 'The First Trial Before Herod', 'The Second Trial Before Pilate' and 'The Road to Calvary' (discounting pageant 32, 'The Remorse of Judas', where his character is not present), Christ speaks 51 out of 2,201 lines.

compares to the Towneley *Crucifixion,* against the backdrop of the History of Emotions over the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Section 6.1
Pleasurable Affect

In the York *Crucifixio* we find not only the wounding of Christ's body described, but also the utter irreverence with which it is treated. The Soldiers talk of the way they try to 'tugge hym to, by toppe and taile' (l. 114), 'rugge hym doune' (l. 131) and cause His 'synnous and veynis' to come 'assoundir' (l. 147). The extensive focus on the physical handling of Christ in the York *Crucifixio* emerges from the late medieval devotional model of affective piety. Affective piety worked as a means for Christians to gain a sensory and physical understanding of the suffering of Christ, and through this grow closer both to Him and to the salvation He offered.[48]

The Torturers' descriptions of straining and pulling Christ's limbs onto the wooden cross are designed to allow audience members to experience the Crucifixion as contemporary onlookers, and even to imagine themselves in the place of the suffering Christ. They speak of the way they will hammer nails 'Thurgh bones and senous' (l. 103), doing damage to a holy body which was likely already shown to be wounded by the previous 'Trial' scenes. As witnesses, spectators could experience the pain inflicted on Christ.

Early media encouraged affective piety by accentuating Christ's intense suffering throughout His trials and torture, as well as His execution on the cross. Klausner, Johnston and others have pointed to Nicholas Love's influential *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ* as an example of the devotional literature conceived to this end.[49] Love's work both describes and discusses the meditative experience of the bodily suffering of Christ, 'seeyng hym so tormented / that fro the sole of the fote . in to the hyhest parte of the hede / there was in him none hole place . ne membre withoute passion'.[50] The graphic stress which Christ's body is going through in these works resembles the physical descriptions of the Soldiers' wrangling in the York

[48] See Sarah McNamer, *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), esp. 1–25.
[49] Klausner, 'Staging the Unstageable', 64–66; Alexandra Johnston, 'An Introduction to Medieval English Theatre', in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. Pamela M. King (London: Routledge, 2017), 6–7; Meg Twycross, 'Books for the Unlearned', in *Drama and Religion*, ed. James Redmond (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 65–110.
[50] Nicholas Love, *Speculum Vitae Christi* (Westminster, London: William Caxton, 1484), chapter XVIIII.

Crucifixio. Yet whilst the description of intense pain is a dominant feature of the devotional literature informing affective piety, it is not the exclusive focus.

Nicholas Love makes clear that the Crucifixion is a complicated event, which only meditative embodiment can help the devout to understand. Sarah Beckwith regards the text as 'a work of meditation…staged as a participatory drama', in which readers (or listeners) should feel enabled to directly engage with the events of the Passion.[51] Love's narrative of Christ's suffering is both descriptive and proscriptive, advising readers how best to re-imagine and meditatively experience His ordeals:

> This is a pyteous syghte and a Joyeful syghte / A pyteous syghte in hym for that hard passion . that he suffred for oure sauacion / But it is a lykynge syghte to vs / for the mater & the effecte that we haue ther by of oure redempcion. Sothely this syghte of our lorde jhesu chryst hangyng so on the crosse by deuoute ymagynacion of soule is so lykyng to somme creatures that after long exercyse of soroufull compassion they felen somtyme so grete likyng not only in the soule / but also in the body that they canne not telle / and that maye no man knowe…but he only that by experience feleth it. / And thenne maye he well say with the Apostle / Betyde me neuer to be Joyeful . but in the crosse of my lorde Jheu Cryste amen.[52]

Love refers to the Crucifixion as a 'pyteous' sight but, importantly, it is also described as a 'Joyeful' experience – the text conveys the need for readers to not only focus on the horror of the event, but also the pleasurable associations it carried. The reason for Love's feelings of joyfulness is the 'saluation' which Christ has suffered for: 'redempcyon' for the sins of mankind. After the use of 'deuout ymagynacion', he claims, those meditating on the scene of the Crucifixion would feel both 'sorowfull compassyon' and alongside this a 'grete lykynge' in both soul and body. He goes as far as to say that like the 'appostle', the devout can never really feel 'joyeful' except when they are thinking about the cross.

The joyous element of affective piety may be unpalatable to modern readers, as it is described directly alongside, and as a result of, the intensity of suffering and pain felt by Christ. This consideration of joy, or pleasure, at the suffering of Christ draws in part on the work of Sarah Kay, who argues convincingly that in certain medieval texts of martyrdom, the intense violence dealt on saintly bodies is not simply repulsive or unsettling to the reader, but 'something

[51] Sarah Beckwith, *Christ's Body: Identity, Culture and Society in Late Medieval Writings* (London: Routledge, 1993), 42.
[52] Love, *Speculum Vitae Christi*, ca. XVIIII.

both desired and enjoyed'.[53] Although Kay focusses on the sexualization of pain inflicted on martyrs, the idea that audiences fully expect the description of enacted abuse, and take pleasure in the ability of such bodies to withstand these pains, is also relevant here. Readers or spectators looked to Christ's Passion in order to grow closer to him, to access both the intensity of pain withstood by His body, and the joy of His sacrifice.

Christ's Passion represents horror and pain, yet in the *Mirrour* the joy of the Crucifixion is stressed alongside sorrow. The iconography of the Crucifixion represents not only painful, carnal torture, but also a spiritual act. The late-fourteenth-century mystic Julian of Norwich echoes this sentiment through the narrative of her own visionary experience of the Crucifixion. After describing the intensity of the damage done to Christ's body, Julian's ninth vision talks of the response Jesus offered:

> Suddenly, as I looked at the same cross, *he changed to an appearance of joy***.** The change in his blessed countenance changed mine, and *I was as glad and joyful as I could possibly be*. And then cheerfully our Lord suggested to my mind: 'Where is now any instant of your pain or of your grief?' And *I was very joyful* […]
>
> Then our good Lord put a question to me: 'Are you well satisfied that I suffered for you?' I said: 'Yes, good Lord, all my thanks to you; yes, good Lord, blessed may you be.' Then Jesus our good Lord said: 'If you are satisfied, I am satisfied**.** *It is a joy, a bliss, an endless delight to me that ever I suffered my Passion for you;* and if I could suffer more, I would suffer more.'[54]

Julian switches swiftly between the intense bodily harm done to Christ and the subsequent joy experienced as a result of His sacrifice. Julian describes her personal joy as an onlooker, but also Christ's feelings of joy as a figure willingly sacrificing himself for the sins of the world. The 'endless delight' taken from physical abuse is not malicious but the joy of salvation. Rather than affective piety focussing only on pain and suffering, devotional texts could present joy as an

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[53] Sarah Kay, 'The Sublime Body of the Martyr: Violence in Early Modern Saints' Lives', in *Violence in Medieval Society*, ed. Richard Kaeuper (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2000), 4–5, 16–18.

[54] My own emphasis. Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, trans. Barry Windeatt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 68. For the original text see *The Shewings of Julian of Norwich,* ed. Georgia Ronan Crampton, part I (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1994), ch. 22, ll.758–62, 777–84. TEAMS: Middle English Texts Series: Robbins Digital Library Project. <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/the-shewings-of-julian-of-norwich-part-1> [Accessed 20.01.18].

integral part of the Crucifixion alongside the bodily tribulations of Christ.[55]

Caroline Walker Bynum notes the paradoxical emotional response which could result from this kind of embodied stimulus. Visual or verbal enactments of the Passion of Christ had the capacity to be multi-layered, beyond simply sorrow and pain. The focus on blood and wounds represented 'not solution or resolution but the simultaneity of opposites: life and death, glory and agony, salvation and sin […] The wounds, the blood of Christ, are present then even in heaven; they are access, condemnation, and recompense.'[56] An experience of pain should therefore not simply be dismissed as self-righteous flagellation of the soul, or masochistic purification resulting in closeness to the Divine.

A Comic Passion?

'Joy', as an aspect of affective piety, allows us to approach the York *Crucifixio* from a new perspective. When the cross was fully erected, spectators to the York *Crucifixio* could have felt guilt and remorse for their laughter at the comic action of the Soldiers, and even a sense of complicity with these figures. But, as Bynum has pointed out, joy was equally rooted in Christ's wounds, physical markers of abuse and yet a pathway to salvation. This allows us to consider the comic performance of the Soldiers differently. The feeling of joy is not the same as laughter at the ridiculous, but happiness in the face of a sorrowful scene is certainly complex. Indeed, Julian of Norwich notes her reaction to Christ's Passion, and its effect of scorning the devil: she 'lauhyd migtily, and […] made hem to layhyn that were about me'.[57] In this way humour can rouse feelings of joy in an audience, not in opposition to the spiritual potency of Christ's sacrifice, but as an integral part of it.

Contemporary commentators on the staging of the Crucifixion reflect certain anxieties which may support this reading. Although broadly skeptical of biblical drama altogether, the early fifteenth-century *Tretise of Miraculis Pleyinge* stresses that Christ himself 'reprovyde [th]e wymmen [th]at wepten upon Hym in His Passioun'; likewise it criticises the 'bitere teris' such plays provoked.[58] The *Treatise* deplores the lack of conscious devotional thinking in such responses: sorrow at a depiction of suffering was not all that Christ's damaged body should

[55] Caroline Walker Bynum, *Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 15–17, 270 ft.94.
[56] Caroline Walker Bynum, 'Violent Imagery in Late Medieval Piety', *German Historical Institute Bulletin*, 30 (2002), 23. Bynum refers to violence in spirituality, constituting 'a religiosity of blame and self-reproach as well as ecstasy and love' (31).
[57] *The Shewings of Julian of Norwich*, ch. 13, ll.514–20.
[58] 'The Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge (extracts)', in *Medieval Drama: An Anthology*, ed. Greg Walker (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 198–99 ll.63, 107–8.

signify. The dramatic presentation of Christ's Passion appears to have been fraught with difficulties: in the early sixteenth century the humanist Juan Luis Vives talks disdainfully of a Passion scene where the character playing Jesus was so 'serious and seuere' that he moved the audience only to apathy.[59]

When we consider the York *Crucifixio* as an embodied performance rather than an example of devotional writing, we can begin to think about the humour of the Soldiers as a dramaturgical device designed to arouse specific reactions among spectators. Readers of devotional texts were encouraged to imagine the pain visited on Christ alongside the joy of His sacrifice. Yet it may have been more difficult to appreciate the simultaneity of suffering and joy through an embodied performance of the Passion. To see a body abused, tortured and crucified on streets that saw similar violence in far more 'erthly' or everyday circumstances may have been more difficult to associate with the joy of salvation – threatening to elicit the kind of superficial response which the *Tretise* criticises.

In a thirteenth-century account the Italian mystic Angela of Foligno expressed her surprise at feeling great 'delight' and 'joy' at a performance of the Passion in her home town, out of step with the weeping of those surrounding her.[60] Despite, or perhaps in part because of, the embodied representation of the pains of the Crucifixion, joy is found by Angela of Foligno just as it was by Julian of Norwich, or Nicholas Love. Clearly her experience represented exceptional devotional closeness to the Passion's spiritual essence rather than bodily degradation. Prompted to find laughter in the performance of the Soldiers in York, spectators may have been better enabled to understand the Crucifixion as, at least in part, a joyful event.

Rather than a grim and unrelenting performance, as the Towneley *Crucifixion* can be characterised, in York the presence of the Soldiers may have been used as a way to rouse feelings of pleasure and joy against the horrors of real, physical torment. Whilst the contemplative joy experienced by those observing the crucified form of Christ as a symbol of salvation cannot have been the same as the laughter which the performance of the soldiers evoked, the bodily humour of these charracters may have offered a way to approach the joy of the scene. Indeed, their wrangling draws attention to the 'material nature of Christ's passion', evoking the contemplative device of the *arma Christi.*[61] Whilst not ignoring His pain on the Cross, this spirit of laughter

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[59] See Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, comm. J. L. Vives (Basle: Frobenius, 1522), bk. 8, ch. 27, 266–7; cited in Carpenter, 'New Evidence: Vives and Audience-Response', 3–4.

[60] *Angela of Foligno: Complete Works*, trans. Paul Lachance (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1993), 176; cited in Margaret Rogerson, 'Audience Responses and the York Corpus Christi Play', in *Staging Scripture: Biblical Drama, 1350–1600*, ed. Peter Happé and Wim Hüsken (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2016), 370.

[61] Lisa H. Cooper and Andrea Denny-Brown, 'Introduction: *Arma Christi*: The Material Culture of the Passion', in *The Arma Christi in Medieval and Early Modern Material Culture, with a Critical Edition of 'O Vernicle'*, ed. Lisa H. Cooper and Andrea Denny-Brown (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 10-11.

could thus have aided spectators to negotiate the complex range of emotional responses hoped for at the dramatisation of Christ's sacrifice.

The York *Crucifixio* begins with four Soldiers who lead Christ into the areas of the performance. They do not announce their intentions with any great fanfare (unlike their counterparts in the Towneley *Crucifixion*). Talking amongst themselves, they give little sign of recognition that they are tasked with killing Christ.

I Miles: Sir knyghtis, take heede hydir in hye:
This dede on dergh we may noght drawe.
Ye wootte yourselffe als wele as I
How lordis and leders of owrde lawe
Have geven dome that this dote schall dye.
(ll. 1–6)

These opening lines characterise the initially subdued manner of the pageant. The Crucifixion is referred to euphemistically as 'this dede', not given exposition as the other Soldiers already 'wootte' what is to be done. There is also, in the second line, a reference to the short time expected to do the deed, which they – as good workmen – should 'noght drawe' out. The Soldiers assent: 'wele we knawe' (l. 6), 'all redy' (l. 9), 'go we tyte' (l. 12) and 'noght […] to hone' (l. 13).

Apparently ignorant, the Soldiers speak of the accusations against Christ in general terms only.[62] His 'dynne' or speech is referred to (l. 18), as well as 'his dedis' (l. 22). He is a 'traitoure strange' (l. 32) and a 'faitoure' (l. 6), but the Soldiers still show no real knowledge of who it is they are about to crucify. After Christ's first speech from the cross he is described as a 'warlowe', who 'waxis were than woode' (l. 63), whose words are 'sauntering' (l. 70) or meaningless; he is charged to stop making up sayings (l. 68) and advised to think on His 'wikkid werkis' (l. 66) before death. Only the character of I Miles notes that Christ 'claymeth kyngdome with croune' and pretends to be a king (ll. 79–80). Throughout the pageant, the Soldiers refer very little to their victim, focussing on the physical work of attaching of His body to the cross.

The Soldiers have been viewed as 'sadistic bullies who go out of their way to torment and cause pain'.[63] Yet it is more convincing to interpret their actions as workmanlike as they

[62] See Klausner, 'Staging the Unstageable', 67.
[63] Clifford Davidson, 'Play 35 *Crucifixio Christi*: Explanatory Notes 25–26', in *The York Corpus Christi Plays*, TEAMS Middle English Texts Series, Robbins Library Digital Projects, <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/davidson-play-35-crucifixio-christi>, [Accessed 05.05.18].

struggle to fit Christ to the cross: they are there to complete a job, within allotted hours.[64] As the *Crucifixio* continues, it is specifically the Soldiers' frustration with the task of handling Christ's body which becomes the increasingly comic focus of the pageant. The characters begin by presenting themselves as consummate professionals, a 'perverted community of effort and action'.[65] II Miles comments that they must 'take heede' of the task ahead, so that their 'wirkyng be noght wronge' (ll. 25–26). III Miles makes clear that 'ilke a thing es right arrayed', whilst IV Miles notes that 'The crosse on grounde is goodely graied, / And boorede even as it awith to be' (ll. 39–40). As III Miles asserts, 'This forward may not faile' because they are 'right arraide' (ll. 93–94).

Following the tradition in which the cross itself resists being used in the Crucifixion, though, the Soldiers do struggle with the process.[66] I Miles repeatedly asks how the other Soldiers are progressing (ll. 97, 105), and things begin to go wrong. First the cross 'failis a foote and more' (l. 107), as the 'marke amisse be bored' (l. 109). III Miles comments that the wood was 'overe skantely scored', making it 'fouly for to faile' (ll. 111–12), and argues with I Miles:

I Miles:	Why carpe ye so? Faste on a corde
	And tugge hym to, by toppe and taile
III Miles:	Ya, thou comaundis lightly as a lorde.
	Come helpe to hale, with ille haile.
I Miles:	Nowe certis, that schall I doo,
	Full suerly as a snayle.
	(ll. 113–18)

Resonating with his previous criticism of Christ's speech, I Miles begins to squabble with his co-worker. His authority as foreman is questioned as III Miles mocks him as a 'lorde', and tells him to 'come helpe to hale' rather than merely talk. I Miles offers to help, but adds – possibly as aside – that he will do so as 'slowly as a snail'. The professionalism and unity of the Soldiers is questioned from this point in the pageant, their bad relations (and workmanship) made comic.[67] After IV Miles complains that 'this werke is all unmeete' (l. 127), I Miles scrambles to regain his authority, ordering a rope to pull the body into the right position.

[64] Boboc, 'Lay Performances of Work and Salvation', 247–57.
[65] Beckwith, *Signifying God*, 65–66.
[66] See Robert S. Sturges, *The Circulation of Power in Medieval Biblical Drama: Theaters of Authority* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 46–48.
[67] Boboc, 'Lay Performances', 255–56.

The stichomythia of the Soldiers' dialogue evokes the misspent dynamism of the torture which the characters carry out, the strains on Christ's body in parallel with the new strains in their relationship.

I Miles: Feste on, thanne, faste that all be fytte;
It is no force howe felle he feele.
II Miles: Lugge on ye both a litill yitt.
III Miles: I schalle nought sese, as I have seele.
IV Miles: And I schall fonde hym for to hitte.
II Miles: Owe, haylle!
IV Miles: Hoo, nowe, I halde it wele.
I Miles: Have done, dryve in that nayle
So that no faute be foune.
(ll. 135–43.)

The words of the Soldiers imply stage directions.[68] But this does not detract from the comic potential of their actions and words, as the clearly-flustered Soldiers 'lugge', 'dryve' and generally strain at their work, the jerkiness of their actions suggested by the exclaimations of 'Owe haylle!' and 'Hoo, nowe'. I Miles says of Christ's suffering, 'It is no force howe felle he feele' (l. 135). When their work is done, the Soldiers comment on the way they have 'evil encressed his paynes' (l. 145) and torn 'bothe synnous and veynis' asunder (l. 147). Importantly, comedy does not obscure abuse: the Soldiers do not distract the audience from their violent action but regularly note it throughout the performance.

After all the work of attaching the body to the cross, the Soldiers must still raise it up (ll. 151–56). Aronson-Lehavi has commented on the challenge of staging this moment, and comically operating across metatheatrical boundaries, the words of the York Soldiers accentuate this difficulty.[69] II Miles replies drolly to his superior I Miles that the 'dede will do us dere' (l. 158). IV Miles continues to sow the seeds of dissent in the group, commenting that 'it wolle nevere come thore / We foure rayse it noght right to-yere' (l. 162–64). Again the raising of the cross creates tension between the Soldiers:

[68] Beckwith, *Signifying God*, 66.
[69] Sharon Aronson-Lehavi, 'Raising the Cross: Pre-Textual Theatricality and the York Crucifixion Play', in *The York Mystery Plays: Performance in the City*, ed. Margaret Rogerson (Woodbridge: York Medieval Press, 2011), 168–74.

III Miles: We are redy.
IV Miles: Gode sirs, abide,
And late me first his fete up fang.
II Miles: Why tente ye so to tales this tyde?
I Miles: Lifte uppe!
IV Miles: Latte see!
II Miles: Owe, lifte alang!
(ll. 183–86)

Apparently still holding the cross, the Soldiers discuss their various pains: I Miles' 'schuldir is in soundre' (l. 190); II Miles is 'schente', or exhausted; III Miles claims he must lay it aside or 'brekis my bakke' (l. 194). Their predicaments are of course comically contrasted with those put upon Christ, again undermining the Soldiers' status as skilled artisans. Again the structure of their dialogue suggests not only physical movement ('lifte', 'loo', 'holde'), but also the humorous dynamism with which their lines are delivered.

III Miles: Owe, lifte!
I Miles: We, loo!
IV Miles: A litill more.
II Miles: Holde thanne!
I Miles: Howe nowe!
II Miles: The werste is paste.
III Miles: He weyes a wikkid weght.
(ll. 210–14)

The Soldiers who formerly represented themselves as professionals with the task in hand are reduced to whining and bickering fools. They describe Christ's weight as 'wikkid', something matched by IV Miles' suggestion that the tortured figure may have cast some 'cautellis' or spell (l. 106). These complaints are clearly designed to make the Soldiers seem pathetic, their physical pains acting as a parody of those which they have described Christ suffering.

The raising of the cross – of upmost importance to the iconography of the pageant – becomes the comic pinnacle of the play. But at no point can we assume that spectators lost sight or understanding of Christ: rather, the comic wrangling of the Soldiers emphasises their ridiculousness, stripping away any claims to authority or professionalism they might have

claimed within the performance. Each of their short staccato lines are comic, but they also represent blows to the body of Christ. As the cross is finally raised, IV Miles comments again on how Christ's bones are 'asoundre' (l. 224), and I Miles notes how painful 'fallyng' (l. 225) into the mortise must have been.

The dialogue of the Soldiers makes clear that they care little for Christ – not out of malice but ignorance. Through the unknowing nature of their actions the stupidity of the soldiers is brought to the fore rather than their malevolence, enabling spectators to find amusement in the characters even while they create Christ's wounds. The words of the soldiers still emphasise the painful abuse of His body, with sometimes startling intensity. Like Joseph in the 'Troubles' pageants, the Soldiers are firmly rooted in the contemporary moment, estranged from the spiritual significance of what they do. Spectators are able to laugh at and take pleasure in the comic actions of the Soldiers, whilst still appreciating – simultaneously – the damage being done to Christ. Delivered through the Soldier's perspective, we find the simultaneity of joy (through comic action) and sorrow which Bynum notes elsewhere.

In this pageant Christ is represented as a stoic figure, His speech evoking the soteriological aspect of His crucified form.[70] Importantly, the character never makes any reference to personal pain nor the wrongdoing of His executioners: these pains are, in a sense, ventriloquised through the Soldiers' words. In this initial speech, Christ expresses exactly why he has come to be crucified, telling of the salvation which His execution will bring to humanity. Although Jesus talks of 'Adam plyght', he does not address the sins of the audience before him. Instead, here Jesus beseeches God for 'favoure', in order to bring 'welthe withouten ende' to mankind, and 'saffe' their 'saules'.

Jesus: Almyghty God, my Fadir free,
Late this materes be made in mynde:
Thou badde that I schulde buxsome be,
For Adam plyght for to be pyned.
Here to dede I obblisshe me
Fro that synne for to save mankynde,
And soveraynely beseke I thee
That thai for me may favoure fynde,
And fro the fende thame fende

[70] Alexandra Johnston, '"His language is lorne": The Silent Centre of the York Cycle', *Early Theatre*, 3 (2000), 185–95.

So that ther saules be saffe
In welthe withouten ende.
I kepe nought ellis to crave.
(ll. 49–60)

This speech does not nullify the effect of the harm which will be put on Christ, but it does draw attention to the joy that His sacrifice will bring. Although we cannot know whether the actor performing as Christ was venting sounds of pain not present within the recorded dialogue, His written speeches exude a sense of calm, and of love.

Throughout the pageant, the damage done to Christ's body is only represented through the Soldiers, and their imagined ideas of His pain. IV Miles asks Jesus directly 'howe / Ye fele, or faynte ye ought?' (ll. 251–52), and it is noteworthy that the latter responds with no heed of His own suffering.

Jesus: Al men that walke by waye or street,
Takes tente ye schalle no travayle tyne,
Byholdes myn heede, myne handis, and my feete,
And fully feele nowe, or ye fine,
Yf any mourning may be meete
Or myscheve measured unto myne
My Fadir, that alle bales may bete,
Forgiffis thes men that dois me pyne.
What thai wirke wotte thai noght
Therfore, my Fadir, I crave
Let never ether synys be sought
But see their saules to save.
(ll. 253–64.)

Rather than condemning the spectators, Christ offers them a joyful salvation and the prospect of God the Father's forgiveness. Christ does not interact much with the 'erthly' Soldiers, just as they interact very little with him. Yet through the wounding of Christ, and through their comic struggles, the Soldiers allow spectators direct access to Him in this speech. Contemporary devotional texts on Christ and the Passion helped readers to mediate between the 'ghostli' and

the 'bodily', a focus on Jesus' carnality offering a means for laypeople to access the Divine.[71] Just as Joseph's physical (and pseudo-sexualised) descriptions of the Virgin Mary offered a way to bridge the gap between the 'erthly' and the 'hevenly' worlds, so the actions of the Soldiers – jointly comic and abusive – offer a way for audiences to approach Christ as a physical entity.

Christ calls on spectators to 'Byholdes myn heede, myne handis, and my feete, / And fully feele nowe, or ye fyne': essentially he asks them to look to His wounds, and experience the bloodied marks upon him. Christ's wounds act as devotional entry-points to salvation. Richard Rolle describes the wounds of Christ variously as the holes in a net, the openings in a dovecote, a meadow of flowers, or the cells in a honeycomb.[72] These extravagant and highly sensual descriptions highlight the wounds of Christ as stations to the sweetness of redemption.[73] We must consider that even the bloodied body of Christ, in such an intensely devotionally important pageant, signified joy as much as suffering.

The humour of the Soldiers in the York Crucifixio allows a pageant about the abominable nature of Christ's suffering to transcend the physical nature of the portrayal. The Crucifixion was a bloody, degrading abuse of the Corpus Christi but simultaneously a spiritual panacea, allowing all Christians access to salvation. Although the comic nature of the Soldiers is in no way presented as an analogue to the joy of salvation, the pleasure of laughing at the workmen's foibles allows further possibilities for pleasure and joy, helping spectators to better mediate disparate feelings of regret at Christ's suffering with happiness at the result of this sacrifice: the salvation of mankind.

In the York *Crucifixio* comic elements, specifically delivered through the 'erthly' Soldiers, who on different levels act as shoddy workmen and torturers of Christ, are used in the mediation of the complex responses expected from audiences of the Passion. As Bynum argues with reference to violent iconography, joy does not simply replace pain; rather, the emotional response is composite. To laugh at the inept wrangling of the Soldiers with the body of Christ may have provoked guilt in the hearts of spectators. Yet it may have also provided them with a way to enjoy the performance more easily, and negotiate simultaneous feelings of remorse and joy at the Crucifixion. We may regard laughter in this pageant as evoking a vital part of late medieval devotional practice: experiencing the sacred through extreme bodily stress and response.[74] The York *Crucifixio* presents a horrific act, but also a devotionally pleasurable and joyous one, and the use of humour may have been a key part thereof.

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[71] Beckwith, *Christ's Body: Identity, culture and society in late medieval writings*, 56–65.
[72] Richard Rolle, 'Meditations on the Passion', in *Richard Rolle: The English Writings*, trans. and ed. Rosamund S. Allen (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 112–14.
[73] See Beckwith, *Christ's Body: Identity, Culture and Society,* 62.
[74] See Bynum, *Wonderful Blood*, 209.

Section 6.2

Reformations of Suffering

Although distinct, the similarity of the York and Towneley Crucifixion plays has been noted, and it has been suggested that the latter dramatic text may have been influenced by the former.[75] Recent dating of the Towneley MS to the mid-sixteenth century allows us to consider its *Crucifixion* in a new light.[76] In this period we see a shift in the role and significance of suffering in a devotional context, something evident in the *Crucifixion* play, and entirely altering the use of humour in the performed narrative. The Towneley *Crucifixion* only uses humour to mock the Torturers of Christ, rather than, like York, dwelling on the professional frustrations of York's workmen-cum-Soldiers. No longer simply bridging the gap between the 'erthly' and the 'hevely', comic elements of the performances become difficult to find.

In pre-Reformation England, as in the rest of Christian Europe, suffering was considered to hold a 'soteriological efficacy': that is, the tribulations of the body brought with them salvation, as evinced through examples of saintly martyrdom, and ultimately through Christ's Passion.[77] This emphasis on the suffering of Jesus was deeply influenced by Franciscan teaching, and brought not only identification with Christ but also a way to reach for mystical union with God, mediated through the *imitatio Christi*.[78] This movement considered suffering as a spiritually meaningful process, a means by which the affective imagining of Christ would allow the faithful to gain access to salvation.[79] Following on from and to some extent still participating in late medieval affective piety, in the sixteenth century both Protestants and Catholics in England developed, and drew on, divergent responses to this central concern.[80] Often influenced by and responding to each other, suffering became a method to define devotional identity in a fraught theological climate, forming what van Dijkhuizen refers to as new discourses on the 'Reformed theologies of pain'.[81]

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[75] Klausner, 'Staging the Unstageable', 74; Garett Epp, '"Thus am I rent on rode": Taking Apart the Towneley Crucifixion', *METh*, 36 (2015), 119–33.
[76] Theresa Coletti and Gail McMurray Gibson, 'The Tudor Origins of Medieval Drama', *A Companion to Tudor Literature*, ed. Kent Cartwright (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 228–45.
[77] Alexandra Walsham, 'The Happiness of Suffering: Adversity, Providence, and Agency in Early Modern England', in *Suffering and Happiness in England, 1550–1850: Narratives and Representations*, ed. Michael J. Braddick and Joanna Innes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 47.
[78] Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Reformation: Europe's House Divided 1490–1700* (London: Allen Lane, 2003), 20.
[79] E. Cohen, 'Towards a History of European Physical Sensibility: Pain in the Later Middle Ages', *Science in Context*, 8 (1995), 47–74.
[80] Bynum, *Wonderful Blood*, 226.
[81] Jan Frans van Dijkhuizen, 'Partakers of Pain: Religious Meanings of Pain in Early Modern England', in *The Sense of Suffering: Constructions of Physical Pain in Early Modern* Culture, ed. Jan Frans van Dijkhuizen and Karl A.E. Enenkel (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 216; Walsham, 'Happiness of Suffering', 45.

As attitudes of both Protestants and Roman Catholics towards suffering shifted, so too did the conception of the central episode of suffering in Christian faith: the Crucifixion. It has been suggested that the Towneley MS was produced for a Catholic audience (whether spectators or readers).[82] If we consider the Towneley *Crucifixion* to be the product of a resilient English Catholic community, the emphasis placed on Christ's intense expressions of pain and suffering may be a reaction to what Gayk refers to as 'the Reformation erasure of the holy body'.[83]

Over the course of the sixteenth century Protestant theologians emphasised the spiritual importance of Christ's suffering over its physical nature. Suffering had previously played an essential role in what might be referred to as the late medieval economy of salvation.[84] But following Luther, Calvin and other theologians, the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone broke the causal link between suffering and salvation.[85] The image of Christ on the Cross was still devotionally valued, and it could not be denied that the pains which Jesus suffered at the Crucifixion offered salvation. But affective piety, and the imagination of suffering, was no longer considered a viable means to gain access to God. In part affective piety was anathema to Protestant thinkers, who eschewed the relevance of visionary or meditative texts – as well as their stress on embodied experience of the divine, most readily accessed by lay worshippers – in favour of a reliance on Scripture.[86] It was asserted that people could not reach salvation by their own efforts, but instead only through God's divine grace.[87]

A contemporary of Luther and Calvin, the German-born Martin Bucer published his influential *Treatise on Images* in 1535 in London, which wholly decried the use of visual portrayals in devotion. A popular work, the *Treatise* debated the use of images in churches rather than biblical drama, but it is representative of the contemporary Protestant focus on the spiritual aspects of Christ's suffering, rather than the bodily pain.[88] Throughout the *Treatise* Bucer asserts that rather than through distinct imagery of religious scenes, the faithful should be inspired by the world, and their own tribulations within it, to remember Christ; he goes as far as to claim that Christ's 'bodily presence was nothing profytable' on Earth, arguing that it was through the

[82] See Gibson and Coletti, 'The Tudor Origins of Medieval Drama', 228–45.
[83] Shannon Gayk, 'Early Modern Afterlives of the *Arma Christi*', in *The Arma Christi in Medieval and Early Modern Material Culture, with a Critical Edition of 'O Vernicle'*, ed. Lisa H. Cooper and Andrea Denny-Brown (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 303.
[84] Ronald K. Rittgers, *The Reformation of Suffering: Pastoral Theology and Lay Piety in Late Medieval and Early Modern Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 23–32, 63–83.
[85] van Dijkhuizen, 'Partakers of Pain', 215, 219.
[86] James Simpson, '1534–1550s: Texts', in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Mysticism*, ed. Samuel Fanous and Vincent Gillespie (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011), 250–53.
[87] Walsham, 'Happiness of Suffering', 47.
[88] See William A. Dyrness, *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture: The Protestant Imagination from Calvin to Edwards* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 92, n.7.

spirit alone that Christ ascended to God.[89] Protestant thinkers moved further towards abstract representations of the Crucifixion throughout the sixteenth century, focusing far less on the wounds of Christ and images of the Passion – which became associated with Catholic idolatry – and more on devices emblematic of his suffering.[90]

Yet we should perhaps resist understanding the Towneley *Crucifixion* in the context of a starkly drawn binary between Protestant and Catholic representations. In response to the Protestant devaluation of meditation on Christ's bodily suffering, Catholic thinkers – including Teresa of Avila, Luis of Granada, and Ignatius of Loyola – only emphasised the importance of Christ's carnal suffering further, building on late medieval treatments of the Passion to elaborate and intensify descriptions of Jesus' pain.[91] Yet even if the Towneley *Crucifixion* was recorded by a Catholic household within the reign of Mary I, as has been suggested, the manuscript was created too early to have been influenced by these trends: translations of these largely Spanish texts into English occurred far later, and in an entirely different political context. Just as Catholic positions on representation had yet to reach the zeal of post-Tridentine devotional trends, neither was Protestantism a fixed 'cultural entity' in this period: as White explains, some followers were characterised by excessive zeal and iconoclastic tendencies, whilst others were 'more conservative and accommodating of traditional beliefs and practices'.[92] The Towneley *Crucifixion* was recorded during a period of religious tumult in England, but it would not be wise to consider it as a decidedly 'Catholic' text, reacting to 'Protestant' limitations.

Instead, it may be more useful to consider the portrayal of Christ in the Towneley *Crucifixion* as an expression of the form of religious suffering which became increasingly important in this period: martyrdom. Through the reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI and Mary I, both Protestants and Catholics underwent religious persecution of 'unprecedented intensity'; both Catholics and Protestants had claimed a considerable numbers of martyrs in the years to the end of Mary's rule, circulating works which Monta has described as 'competing martyrologies'.[93] The sheer volume and wide popularity of these had a profound effect on early

[89] Martin Bucer, *A treatise declaring and showing Images are not to be suffered in churches* (London: W. Marshall, 1535); see David J. Davis, *From Icons to Idols: Documents on the Image Debate in Reformation England* (Cambridge: Clarke, 2015), 39–40.
[90] See Gayk, 'Early Modern Afterlives of the *Arma Christi*', 273–307; Davis, *Seeing Faith, Printing Pictures,* 131–32.
[91] Jan Frans van Dijkhuizen and Karl Enenkel, 'Introduction: Constructions of Physical Pain in Early Modern Culture', in *The Sense of Suffering*, ed. van Dijkhuizen and Enenkel, 10.
[92] Paul Whitfield White, 'The Bible as Play in Reformation England', in *The Cambridge History of British Theatre: Volume 1, Origins to 1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 87–88; Susannah Brietz Monta, *Martyrdom and Literature in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 2.
[93] Monta, *Martyrdom and Literature in Early Modern England*, 1–2.

modern religious culture, and much has been written on the way in which both Protestants and Catholics began to use the language of martyrdom to define their religious beliefs.[94]

Whilst theologians ruled that suffering did not bring about salvation, martyrdom still played an important role in the construction of Protestant devotional identity. The faithful were urged to embrace suffering as 'a divine gift sent to mortify sin, conform the true believer to Christ, and test his or her faith' – something not to be sought out, but experienced as an opportunity to build up temperance and fortitude.[95] Persecution was regarded as evidence of intense faith, a demonstration of righteousness in the face of adversity. For Catholics too, suffering through martyrdom may have offered access to salvation, but it was also a model for the persecuted, an evidential means to show steadfast religious faith.[96] In the words of Walsham, this 'theology of affliction' was a 'lens through which [people] viewed the vicissitudes of their daily lives, and which enabled them to find meaning and purpose in even the most distressing of events'.[97]

Less reflective of the mutable and conflicting doctrinal positions of the period, and more concerned with lay devotional practice and identification, martyrdom gives us a useful frame through which to consider the York and Towneley Crucifixion plays. This is made all the more apparent when we consider that within this competitive discourse on persecution and righteousness Christ represented the paradigmatic martyr. Gregory goes as far as to assert that the 'renaissance' of Christian martyrdom in the sixteenth century – for Anabaptists, Protestants, and Catholics – was rooted in the late medieval practice of 'Imitatio Christi', where Christians used the Passion as an 'experiential training ground'.[98] Following this idea, it is interesting to consider how the Towneley plays, themselves the product of a late medieval tradition, adapted the dramatic portrayal of Christ's suffering in the *Crucifixion* to reflect these new devotional interests.

Martyrs to the Comic

As discussed above, the York *Crucifixio* is in many ways an intimate play, with only Christ and the four workmanlike Soldiers present who carry out a task whose significance they cannot

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[94] See Walsham, 'Happiness of Suffering', 50–54; also Thomas Freeman, '"*Imitation Christi* with a Vengeance": The Politicization of Martyrdom in Early Modern England', in *Martyrs and Martyrdom in England, 1400–1700*, ed. Thomas S. Freeman and Thomas F. Mayer (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2007), 35–69.
[95] Walsham, 'Happiness of Suffering', 48, 51.
[96] See Anne Dillon, *The Construction of Martyrdom in the English Catholic Community, 1535–1603* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 369; Monta, *Martyrdom and Literature*, 117–18.
[97] Walsham, 'Happiness of Suffering', 55.
[98] See Brad S. Gregory, 'Persecutions and Martyrdom', in *The Cambridge History of Christianity: Reform and Expansion, 1500–1660*, ed. R. Po-Chia Hsia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 261–82, esp. 267–70.

understand. Through its humour, the pageant expresses the simultaneous feelings of sorrow and joy associated with the Crucifixion in late medieval devotion. Christ willingly places himself on the cross, and all along acts as a teacher, extolling the value of his Father and the salvation he will bring.[99] Here the spectator was allowed intimate contact with Christ, much like Rolle's honeycomb: the intimacy of the performance, matched by the laughter and sorrow it could evoke, aided the participation of audience members in affective piety.

In Towneley the *Crucifixion* is consciously framed to accentuate the theme of suffering. The play begins with the villainous Pilate threatening the audience with his 'brand burnyshyd so bright' (l. 7). Both Pilate and Torturer 1 call for 'peasse' (ll. 1, 29), silencing both the real-life spectators and imaginary audience to set the scene for a grand spectacle. Unlike the workmanlike Soldiers of York, here the Torturers begin with grandiose speeches describing the actions of Christ as a 'wonder thyng' (l. 41) and a 'fals chuffer' (l. 31), before swearing 'by Mahowne' (l. 44) that there will be no rest until Christ is crucified. The Torturers here are ever aware that they are creating a spectacle of Christ's Crucifixion; unlike the York Soldiers who speak only amongst themselves, here their counterparts play to the surrounding crowd.

Unlike in York, here from the offset the soldiers, now referred to as 'Torturers', make clear that they know exactly who Christ is and why they should oppose Him:

> Torturer 1: He cals himself a prophett,
> And says that he can bales bete
> And make all thyngys amende,
> […] Bot by Mahowne, whils may I lyf
> Those prowde words shall I never forgyf
> Tyll he be hanged on he.
> (ll. 35–37, 44–46.)

Whilst still referring to Christ as 'fals' (as in York), Torturer I is specific in his identification of Christ's crimes, showing knowing malice. Christ must be 'hanged on he' to be displayed to all for His supposed offences. The Torturers are far more cognitively involved in their condemnation of Christ, and thus associated with the villainous figures of the preceding Trial scenes in the Towneley MS.

Towneley's Torturers relish their mockery of Christ. The Torturers repeatedly attempt to test Christ with cruel questions such as why – if He is king – He does not joust in tournaments

[99] Johnston, '"His language is lorne"', 87.

(ll. 89–118). The image of Christ as a knight, or *miles*, was an established motif in late medieval devotional writing, but here the Torturers use it to jeer at Christ's authority and strength.[100]

Torturer 1: In faith, syr, sen ye callyd you a kyng,
You must prufe a worthy thing
That falls unto the were:
You must just in a tornamente.
Bot ye sytt fast else be ye shentt,
Els downe I shall you bere.
(ll. 89–94.)

Torturer 4: Do rase hym up now when we may,
For I hope he and his palfray
Shall not twyn this nyght.
(ll. 200–202.)

The Torturers' mockery, to some extent based on Scripture, is diegetic, part of the world of the play in which the soldiers share laughter between themselves, but which the spectators are not expected to find humorous.

As Klausner argues, York's dialogues attempt to reconcile the Soldiers' humanity with their actions, presenting them as jobbing workmen, while Towneley's Torturers are 'playing a sadistic game'.[101] The Torturers' squabbles and initial failure to raise the cross are in some senses comic, but the audience is ever aware that they are intentionally harming Jesus. The Torturers' blasphemies cast their physical actions not as laughable examples of a workman's frustration, but as willful abuse of Christ.

Torturer 3 Draw out hys lymmes — let se, have at!
Torturer 4 That was well drawen, that that!
Fare fall hym that so puld
For to have getten it to the marke;
I trow lewde man ne clerk
Nothyng better shuld…

[100] Epp, 'Thus I am rent on rode', 128–29.
[101] Klausner, 'Staging the Unstageable', 75.

Torturer 3 …So that is well; it will not brest.
Bot let now se who dos the best
With any slegthe of hand.
(ll. 143–48, 155–57.)

The Towneley Torturers inflict significant damage on Christ's body in the process of stretching Him on the cross and raising Him up. Yet what is comic frustration in York becomes violent pleasure in Towneley. Phrases such as 'let se, have at!' and 'That as well drawen, that that!' read as if the Torturers treated the Crucifixion as sport, something reinforced by Torturer 4's reference to 'the marke' and his favorable self-assessment. When Torturer 3 asks who 'dos the best / With any slegthe of hand' the character plays on this idea of sport, as well as reflecting ironically on the alleged magical powers of Christ.

Their failure to raise the cross, the point of greatest comic action in York, has a divergent effect in Towneley. Instead of foolish workmen whose shoddy laboring is played for comic purposes, here the Torturers's vicious sport with Christ is far more difficult to justify in comic terms. Torturer 3 declares 'Nay, felowse, this is no gam' (l. 167): as the audience are made very aware of, the actions of the Torturers may be buffoonish, yet their intentions are not.

At a time when one's devotional identity could be defined against the sufferance of persecution, it is perhaps more suitable for soldiers to be presented as malicious sadists who revel in the bodily pain of Christ. The Towneley Torturers were extremely antagonistic persecutors against whom the sanctity of Christ could be defined through His suffering. For this reason, humour plays far less of a role in this later play, the aggressive nature of the soldiers and their malicious approach to Christ characterising them as figures with little identificatory appeal for audiences.

In Towneley the *Crucifixion* is staged consciously as a spectacle, rather than an episode in the process of the Passion. It is not only the soldiers who are represented differently, with this imagined audience in mind, but also – significantly – the character of Jesus. The York Christ is stoic and silent on his pain, his first speech of 12 lines stressing that he will 'save mankynde' (l. 54). Yet in Towneley Christ's suffering is made clear over the course of 62 lines. The Towneley Christ criticises those who lead their lives 'so lykandly' (or pleasantly), and explicitly calls upon the spectators to look upon his battered body:

Jesus: Hefe up youre hartys on hight.
Behold if ever ye sagh body

Buffet and bett thus blody,
Or yit thus dulfully dight;
In warld was never no wight
That suffred half so sare.
My mayn, my mode, my might
Is noght bot sorrow to sight,
And comforth none bot care.
(ll. 235–43)

Towneley's Christ – like Pilate and the Torturers – calls on audiences to look at him as a bloodied spectacle, 'Buffet and bett sagh blody'. Rather than offers of salvation, the character draws attention to the intensity of his suffering ('no wight / […] suffred half so sare'), the soreness of his body and his lack of comfort. The Towneley *Crucifixion* emphasizes Christ's utmost pain, and rather than merely allowing spectators to understand this through the representation of the Soldiers physically damaging His body, here He actively performs, and speaks, His suffering.

In Towneley, Christ is full of recrimination: 'My folk, what have I done to thee / That thou all thus shall tormente me? (ll. 245–46). In York Christ is a peaceable figure, emphasizing the love and salvation which His sacrifice will bring. Whereas in Towneley Jesus will take on the 'syn' of humankind, rather than talking generally of 'Adam's plyght' *(Crucifixio,* l.53), He explicitly refers to the faults of the audience members: 'thyn errour' (ll. 246, 249). Repeatedly Christ asks the audience whether indeed He should be offering Himself, and exposes the spectators to the pain which their sin has personally caused Him:

Jesus: What kyndnes shuld I kyth theyn to?
Have I not done that I aght to do,
[…] Se thus thi wekydnes;
Loke how thou me dyspytys.
(ll. 266–67, 274–75.)

Christ rails against the sins of humankind, the injustice of His fate, and those who have 'dight me drerely' and 'byspytt me spytusly' (ll. 289–90). As His speech comes to a close Christ does finally call on the Father: 'Forgyf thou them this gylt / […] Thay wote not what thay doyn' (ll. 293, 295). In Towneley the figure on the cross is clearly in pain, both physically and spiritually. A

price must be paid for the salvation of mankind, and this is through pain and bloodshed. In the York *Crucifixio*, an earlier text, Christ's wounds are portrayed as access points to salvation; in Towneley, the emphasis placed on Christ's torture and pain reflects a later development, where the physical suffering of the martyred Jesus had become a source for practical emulation.

Conclusions

The Towneley *Crucifixion*, so often compared with its counterpart in York, offers us an entirely different dynamic within performances. In York the *Crucifixio* is an intimate affair. With only the Soldiers and Christ on stage, the pageant presents us with a private execution, all quiet but for the workmanlike discussions and squabbles of the Soldiers, and the potently calm speeches of Christ. The intimacy of this scene brings it closer to the necessary aspects of 'affective piety', where spectators might have used the performances to mediate the experiences of Christ's Passion, the intensity of visceral sorrow, and the joy of salvation. The ignorance of the Soldiers, and specifically their focus on the physical situation, allowed the actions of these figures to be understood as a comic means to gain access to salvation, through the wounds of Christ. Humour might have elicited in spectators mixed feelings of pleasure, pain and joy, as described by Julian of Norwich or Nicholas Love.

In Towneley, by contrast, we are presented with the Crucifixion as a public spectacle, the torture and execution of Christ made into a spectator sport. The Towneley *Crucifixion* is both a dramatisation of the iconography central to Christological faith, and the conscious performance of the archetypal martyrdom. In Towneley we do not simply find the peaceable and redemptive figure of York. Whilst in this earlier play Jesus' pain is of secondary importance to the salvation His wounds will bring, Towneley's Christ brings His agonised personal suffering to the forefront of the play. His words loudly declare the cause He is dying for, playing the part of the paradigmatic martyr. By the mid-sixteenth century, Jesus' crucified body represented more than a catalyst for salvation: it was presented to be imitated, a model for how to 'undergo the physical pain and agony of execution'.[102]

In York Christ's wounded body allows physical access to God; by the time Towneley was written, the characterisation of Jesus had changed. Whether overtly Roman Catholic or not, the performed figure of Christ became not only an object of reverence, but also a figure of bloody persecution. We may speculate that audience interpretation of Christ's Passion progressed from imaginatively engaging with the Crucifixion, to using it as a model for physical emulation. This

[102] Dillon, *Construction of Martyrdom*, 101.

completely shifts the treatment of suffering in the surviving plays – as well as the way in which producers wished audiences to think about them.

Between the writing of the York and the Towneley Crucifixion plays, the significance of Christ's wounds changed. In the earlier drama they were a way to offer physical access to the spiritual world of salvation, portals in the wounded body of Christ; by the mid-sixteenth century they began to evoke the politicised suffering of the martyr, becoming more emblematic of the lived experience of pain. As a result of this shift, in the latter play humour does not attempt to rouse laughter, and the joy of salvation, in audiences. Instead humour is exclusively weaponised, provoking spectators to feel anger rather than joy, as the Torturers themselves mock and laugh at Christ, their derisive word-play mirroring physical blows to Jesus' body.

In both York and Towneley humour offered a way for audiences (or readers) to grow closer to Christ. As in the 'Troubles' pageants, humour is positioned as a physical or 'erthly' force which allows a figure of immense spiritual significance (whether the Virgin Mary or Christ) to be understood in more human terms. The 'Troubles' plays and the York *Crucifixion* employed humour as a method to bridge the gap between the 'erthly' and the 'hevenly'; yet in the Towneley *Crucifixion* humour is a force against which the spiritual identity of Christ can be defined: rather than pleasure, it brings mockery and pain, a force to be endured rather than enjoyed.

Conclusion:
Humour and Cognitive Play

Over the course of this thesis I have considered elements of humour which are present within a broad variety of the York and Towneley plays, drawing on a mixture of contextual factors in an attempt to better understand how comic aspects of these performances aided in the construction of devotional meaning. This endeavour has drawn on the work of a number of scholarly disciplines, collecting and interrogating narratives – be they historic, literary, commercial, or socio-economic – which impacted on, or came to inhabit, the same cognitive space as the biblical stories which were ostensibly being performed. As Carol Symes notes:

> …the study of medieval theatre, broadly conceived, contributes materially to the study of medieval societies, especially the histories of communication, cross-cultural conflict and exchange, politics, popular piety, space, embodiment, the senses, agency, identity, memory, emotion – the list goes on: however limited their manuscript witnesses might be, the components of medieval theatre are the closest things we have to mass media'.[1]

I cannot hope to have provided a comprehensive approach to the phenomenon of 'mass media' which the performances represent, but I have highlighted a limited aspect of the great scope of contemporary influences on comic elements of the works in particular. This thesis has drawn attention to the wide variety of potential uses for humour in these biblical plays, and problematised critical assumptions which have tended to attach minimal value to comic aspects of the works.[2]

The plays I have considered – all now known for their relation to humour or laughter – use comic elements in ways beyond aesthetic entertainment. Whilst scholars have previously argued that humour functions to obscure or distract from devotional meaning in these works, I maintain that it could also provide a way to encourage cognitive engagement with spectators, and lead them to consider how biblical narratives met with the embodied world of north-east

[1] Carol Symes, 'The History of Medieval Theatre / Theatre of Medieval History: Dramatic Documents and the Performance of the Past', *History Compass,* 7:3 (2009), 1037.
[2] My basic argument that humour holds far more complexity and relevance than is often assumed has followed the recent work of a number of scholars, including Theresa, Hamilton, *Humorous Structures of English Narratives: 1200–1600* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2013); Maggie Solberg, 'Madonna, Whore: Mary's Sexuality in the N-Town Plays', *Comparative Drama*, 48:3 (2014), 191–219; Stephen Halliwell, *Greek Laughter: A Study of Cultural Psychology from Homer to Early Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Mary Beard, *Laughter in Ancient Rome: On Joking, Tickling, and Cracking Up* (London: University of California Press, 2014).

England in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Through these performances 'those watching would be drawn into the dramatic action' to 'explore questions of social and spiritual participation'.[3] I have demonstrated specifically the humorous elements of the plays prompted spectators to more readily engage with the narratives being performed, drawing on the potential incongruities between biblical history and contemporary adaptation. This thesis has in no way offered an exhaustive account of humour in York or Towneley, but it has shown that comic adaptations were regularly made to scenes of biblical history to suit the purposes of spectators and producers, even if this meant also telling an entirely different story.

Such drama had the potential to go beyond the orthodox biblical narrative in order to convey other messages, or raise questions concerning devotional narratives, from a distinctly lay, bourgeois perspective. Humour was a vital aspect of dramatic storytelling, and in these works it even provided a vehicle for the expression of dissent from aspects of the scriptural narratives being performed. Yet the use of humour should not be understood as a way that lay audiences and producers undermined religious works. Rather, humour was used to draw attention to the possible incongruities inherent in the act of performing biblical history in contemporary forms: spectators were prompted to laugh when figures or subjects of the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries had to deal with events of the biblical past.

This laughter did not merely mask a disjunct between contemporary time and the temporal boundaries of the Old and New Testaments, painting over any misgivings which this raised. Instead, it operated through reference to the incongruity of this performed situation, motivating spectators to cognitively engage with the tensions before them, and attempt to negotiate these differences. In this sense, comic aspects presented a way in which audiences could be drawn to interact more closely with the biblical narrative, with their bodies and their minds. Noting the difference between the contemporary and biblical 'frames', those experiencing the plays might think about how their own values fit with the basic narratives of devotional practice: how they would act if – along with the streets or performance sites – they were transported to the biblical Holy Land themselves.

In the first section I considered the 'missing' York pageant of the *Funeral of the Virgin*, and provided a theory to understand what could have caused it to become a controversial performance whose significance was fought out on the streets. The *Funeral,* and the particular role played by the character Fergus in this performance, allows us to think about how cultural narratives existing beyond a performance had the potential to destabilise or challenge its

[3] Peter Ramey, 'The Audience-Interactive Games of Middle English Religious Drama', *Comparative Drama,* 47:1 (2013), 57.

meaning, or the established pseudo-biblical story it portrayed. If we accept that the characterisation of Fergus, the Jewish antagonist in the *Funeral*, was also informed by the historical Fergus of Galloway, we must also consider how firmly rooted the meaning of these performances could be in the geographic sites where they were staged. Biblical drama enacted the stories of a universal history of the world, but localised performances offered a means to make those narratives tangible for local people.

The *Funeral* also forces us to consider how performances were not fixed sites of meaning, but negotiated events, where interpretation was defined at least in part by collaboration between actors, producers, and audience members. The 'quarrels, disagreements and fights' between spectators represent a particularly strident example of this negotiation of meaning. Failing to bring the audience together as a communal entity, and failing to create the illusion of unity through mutually-shared interpretation, the *Funeral* was a performance where the laughter which producers wanted or expected – directed towards the character of the antagonistic Jewish prince – became a risible response to the idea of the performance itself. The Masons' complaint of 1432 gives us an insight into a performance gone wrong, and shows how uncontrolled comic forms could indeed raise 'more noise and laughter than devotion'.[4]

The second chapter has re-interpreted the much-analysed Noah plays of York and Towneley, focusing not on the customary critical binary drawn between the righteous husband and the shrewish wife, but rather on an evaluation of their marital relationship and the way it is staged. The Noah plays used humour to negotiate elements of the traditional biblical narrative with the realities of marriage, an institution at the heart of the new bourgeois culture of lay devotion: a culture which shaped the pageants of York – and likely the plays of Towneley – from their origins. The tensions between the realities of lay voices (represented by Uxor) and biblical history (seen in Noah) are treated comically. Humour did not mask apparent incongruities: it drew attention to them, allowing spectators to engage with Scripture, and meditate on how their lives might come to align with the latter.

Uxor and Noah are both treated as figures complicit in marital misconduct, which should influence our understanding of both characters. A persistent scholarly notion holds that Noah was portrayed as a wholly good man, in contrast to his sinner wife. Yet the story of Noah's drunkenness – as biblically sound as that of the Great Flood, and likely popular with those who would have watched the plays – would also have influenced medieval understandings of the diluvian narrative. We must not assume that the York and Towneley plays were read as exclusive renditions of biblically-grounded universal history, but rather as individual pieces of a larger

[4] *REED: York*, II, 732.

jigsaw, elements or interpretations of the narratives which producers wished audiences to see. Performances were adapted to fit particular contextual settings and communities: evocations of biblical history beyond the plays would also have influenced audiences and perhaps – in the case of the intransigent Uxor – also their staging.

The York *Offering of the 'Shepherds'* and the popular Towneley *Prima and Secunda Pastorum* offer us a different way to think about how the values of lay culture, invested in economic as well as spiritual prosperity, could be cited in biblical performances. Comic figures, the 'shepherds' can be appreciated for their game and play, but also as a reflection of a socio-economic system that involved producers and spectators alike. The plays of York are known to have been staged mutually for the worship of God and the praise of the city.[5] Through the *Offering* we can consider how biblical narratives could also function as nostalgic pieces, looking back to economic success, as well as anticipating renewal and reform through godly prosperity.

One of the utilities of humour within performances is its inherent ambiguity. As modern scholars, we may interpret comic aspects of play scripts in a variety of ways. But importantly, so might those who originally experienced the plays. The dramatic medium, distinct from other forms of contemporary representation, offered producers and spectators a complex and malleable form of narrative storytelling which they utilised in a variety of sophisticated ways. As an integral part of this, the cognitive slipperiness of performed humour allowed for a varied set of interpretations of the York and Towneley plays. Although these were perhaps more rigidly defined in performance, when producers or actors could 'read the crowd', their humour allowed for the enactment of the same play-scripts to produce entirely different meanings.

Laughter could provoke thought without restricting or committing the producer, actor, or spectator to a particular position of orthodoxy or dissent. In discussions of the York *Offering* and the Towneley *Prima* and *Secunda Pastorum* comic action appears to have prompted spectators to engage cognitively with the anticipation of Christ whilst also considering the broader material objects of the devotional culture surrounding them. Comic elements could help producers and audiences to negotiate the tumult of mid-sixteenth-century religious polemic. Whilst humour can formally resist clear interpretation or classification, it still enables individuals to take meaning from it, influenced largely by what they wish to hear. Like the famously suggestive line attributed to the Victorian music-hall star Marie Lloyd, singing about a character who 'sits among the cabbages and peas', humour's properties allowed for both radical subversion, or an entirely conservative interpretation.[6]

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[5] *REED: York,* I, 11.

[6] Ned Sherrin, ed., *Oxford Dictionary of Humorous Quotations*, 4th edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 45.

Performances of Herod also fed off this multiplicity of interpretations which could be taken from presentations of the comic character. The characterisation of Herod and the tyrants as figures who are both humorous and threatening raises the question of how malignant characters, killers of children and murderers of Christ, could be the popular stars of biblical performances. This question was as relevant to contemporary viewers of the plays as it should be to modern readers. Through acknowledging the comic attractiveness of Herod, we can consider how humour functioned in these plays not merely as a means to undermine the monstrous tyrant, but to also make him a tempting figure, drawn from the tyrant's association with the pseudo-Islamic 'Mahounde', and, through this, the seductive notion of heresy. Humour forced spectators to choose which side they were on: the comically superficial, or the holy.

Finally, this draws us to the use of humour in plays associated with figures of particular holiness, the Virgin Mary and Christ. A pervasive notion insists that laughter sometimes surrounds these characters but never actually interacts with them, nor influences their presentation. Yet humour expressed important lay approaches to devotion in these plays. Jorge, the ascetic antagonist of Umberto Eco's *The Romance of the Rose*, was famously a fierce proponent of John Chrysostom's remark that 'Christ never laughed'.[7] As the title of this thesis makes clear, in these plays Jesus certainly did (Towneley *Secunda Pastorum*, 1032–33). In dramatisations of 'Joseph's Troubles' in York and Towneley, humour provides a means for audiences to access the 'hevenly' Mary, through the 'erthly' Joseph. Ironically it is Joseph's unrelenting focus on physicality which casts him as an intermediary to the divine, helping York spectators to understand Mary as both the Virgin Mother and a bourgeois wife.

In the plays of the Crucifixion humour functions similarly, offering spectators access to the divine in a way which, to modern readers, is difficult to comprehend. Whilst Christ was not laughed at, humour could be used to condition the response of audience members, negotiating the scenes of barbaric torture with contemporary ideas of affective piety. The York *Crucifixio* moderated the joy of salvation through Christ's sacrifice with the Soldiers' practical humour; in Towneley the dynamic was altered. Studies in the History of Emotions have acknowledged shifts in devotional response and affective piety in the period between the writing of the York and Towneley manuscripts. In the later work, humour is used to sharpen Christ's definition as the paradigmatic martyr, the laughter of his Torturers presented as an intolerable evil.

Humour marks tensions between the biblical narrative and other influences on the plays, challenging audiences to form a response to this disjunction, rather than unthinkingly accept the story presented to them. Spectatorship can never truly be characterised as a passive act, and an

[7] Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose* (London: Vintage, 2004), 88.

exploration of the potential for humour within these play-texts has only reiterated this point. As Clare Wright has noted, the plays were 'not merely didactic presentations that taught a supposedly illiterate laity basic Christian tenets'.[8] Using humour, performances of biblical narratives could push at the bounds of possible interpretation. Yet in fully realising the interpretative slipperiness of comic forms, humour could simultaneously function as a conservative force, with the capacity to negotiate both meaning and censure.

Just as the performances of biblical drama allowed for a blending of local performance spaces with the sites of the distant Holy Land, humour might bridge a gap between the contemporary world of the play and the biblical time being re-enacted. It entertained, but not superficially. Comic moments in these dramas could act as catalysts for devotion, enabling spectators to better engage with the stories of Christian history put before them: an essential aspect of contemporary life.

[8] Clare Wright, 'Ontologies of Play: Reconstructing the Relationship between Audience and Act in Early English Drama', *Shakespeare Bulletin* 35:2 (2017), 193.

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