DIDACTIC ANTI-SEMITISM IN MEDIEVAL ENGLISH DRAMA

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Abstract: English medieval theatre was not only a realm of entertainment, but one of education. Moreover, as England was a Christian nation, it is no surprise that its plays functioned in didactic accordance with religious teachings of the time. Christianity, however grounded in love and forgiveness it may have been, was not without its perceived enemies, one of which in medieval England was "the Jew". The ideology and practice of anti-Semitism both developed and flourished in medieval England, and was reinforced by and reflected in the didactic power of its plays. As is especially apparent in *The Nativity* of N-Town, the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*, and York Mystery play *The Resurrection*, medieval English dramatists didactically imparted to their audiences anti-Semitic doctrine using myths, the physicality of performance, parallelism in rhetorical construction of dialogue, alliteration, and more to situate the Jew as a literal, rationalist, sacrilegious *Other*.

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as England's moral, faithful, and superior ideological framework, but also to exorcise its own demons and project them onto Judaism – a powerful, hateful ideological practice of dispossession that continues to negatively resonate in today's world.

Without question, a marriage of entertainment and instruction was at play within medieval English drama: moralities and mystery cycle plays alike were "unashamedly informative, didactic productions" aimed at the "moral betterment of their audiences" (Walker, 2008, p. 79). This moral bettering had spiritual dimensions, which manifested in Christian England as performances "for the greater glory of God" (Walker, 2008, p. 79). Medieval English didacticism, religious or not, presented itself in a variety of forms and employed "a range of devices to make its points". Further, it was wielded by "'elite' interest groups" that were "implicitly critical" of other institutions (Walker, 2008, p. 79). Because Christians constructed the Jew as representing medieval England's primary elite interest group, Judaism becomes the seat of alterity, and by extension, a grandly criticized system of beliefs — with the consequence that those who adhere to it are quite vilified. Interestingly, importantly, and problematically, witnessing these plays had the effect of reducing playgoers' "reliance upon the priesthood as the sole mediators" of doctrine, encouraging a "personal investment" and greater "localism in religious life" (Walker, 2008, p. 82). In other words, English medieval drama delivered anti-Semitism into the hands (and into the heads) of the masses, from which point they were theoretically free to make and propagate their own interpretations.

Understanding the Jew's position in medieval England is integral to fully comprehending the didactic anti-Semitism in the mystery and Miracle plays. From the onset of the religion, Christians felt the need to "differentiate themselves from their older brother" – the Jew – and "demonstrate that [their] new religion was superior in important and even cosmic ways" (Katz, 1994, p. 55). This would

eventually result in an "ideological anti-Jewish attitude" (Katz, 1994, p. 59). By the late medieval period, "English devotional culture [was] rife with images of Jews," ranging from the "patriarchies of the Old Testament in plays presented by guilds as an increasingly intrinsic part of Corpus Christi festival celebrations each spring to the "blasphemous, terrifying [Host] desecrators dramatized in the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*" (Despres, 1998, p. 47). While the "tradition of anti-Judaism" grew in English literature, so too did the image of the Jew as "a generic 'Other'" in an effort to displace England's growing Lollardism. As a result, Jews were "not merely symbols of alterity," but were a "necessary element in the devotional world of the later medieval English laity" (Despres, 1998, p. 47). In other words, the Jew was both reviled and used – feared, and yet, *crucial* to medieval English Christian doctrine, discourse, rhetoric, and by extension, literature and plays.

As a result, English medieval drama – designed to comfort and sustain the believing Christian – projects "unrelenting hostility . . . toward the disbeliever, the Jew," to the degree that these plays are considered some of the most "vehemently anti-Jewish genres in the history of English literature" (Spector, 1979, p. 3). This systemic anti-Semitism manifests as distortions and stereotypes of the Jew, as well as the assignment to the Jew of "unwanted aspects of the Christian community," resulting in his execration (Spector, 1979, p. 3). While critics such as M.J. Landa (1926) argue that "medieval drama vilified the Jew" in the wake of "fanaticism, intolerance, and ignorance" (as cited in Spector, 1979, p. 4), it is more properly a matter of scapegoating — the Christian's externalization of "inner conflicts" (Spector, 1979, p. 4). Essentially, elaborates Spector, the anti-Semite "seizes on the Jew because the Jew is the available or culturally-defined target, the suspect, the alien element in the community, and he projects onto the Jew dangers that the anti-Semite finds threatening" (Spector, 1979, p. 4). Ultimately, in English medieval drama, the Jew is transformed into an "external and convenient repository" for Christian fears (Spector, 1979, p. 4).

The processes, results, and effects of this dramatic, dramaturgical Jewish scapegoating are myriad. Effectively, the Jew was made to "represent precisely and only those evils that were most threatening to the goals of the plays," rendering the Jew "unassimilable" by his manner of being "entrapped in reason and as thus . . . incapable of accepting Truth as *faith*" (Spector, 1979, p. 5). Simply put, the Jew's "inability to perceive higher truth" made him different, deficient, and "therefore dangerous" (Spector, 1979, p. 5). After King Edward V's edict in 1290 expelling all Jews from the country, there were only a "few [Jews] at best" by the fifteenth century in England (Spector, 1979, p. 6). Dramatists practically invented them, "consciously selecting specific models of the Jew . . . altering them to serve the didactic purposes of the plays" (Spector, 1979, p. 6). In this process, the Jew eventually became associated with the devil, twisting the matter into a "conflict between Evil and Good" (Spector, 1979, p. 5). Within such drama, Jews, "identified by dialogue, stage directions, and speaker headings," were figures who utterly rejected "Jesus' divinity and fervently oppose[d] any alteration of the Old Law" (Spector, 1979, p. 6). Essentially, the Jew as character was more of a spiritual construction, rather than "'racial,' ethnic, or cultural" (Spector, 1979, p. 6). It seems, then, the Jew of medieval English drama was a construct of religious Otherness (and as such, a fountain of heresy) intended for its utility in illustrating Christian dogma.

The alterity of the Jew (and his respective evilness) in medieval English drama is elsewhere clearly and consistently established, albeit in varying ways. In all of the mystery cycles, "the Jews are made to bear full responsibility for virtually every aspect of Jesus' death, even the part played by Pilate's soldiers according to gospel accounts" (6). In the Towneley manuscript, Mary "characterizes the Crucifixion as strife between the Jews and Jesus", while the risen Jesus himself later blames "only 'the [Jews]'" (in Spector, 1979, p. 6). Both of these examples demonstrate a sort of theatrical counter-gospel that suggests the writers as well as those who mounted the plays had few qualms about taking liberties with Scripture, in order to portray

the Jew in a more negative light. Jews were also portrayed as rationalizing the miraculous (Spector, 1979, p. 6), especially in the Miracle plays. Additionally, the Jew was regularly linked to the inappropriately physical — or rather — bodily evil. Playing off of Mary as "mediatrix and defender of the Church's bodily boundaries", the Jew was depicted as "desecrating the Host" and thus taking part in "willful acts of desecration," effectively establishing their "literalist" nature versus that of "spiritual" Christians (Despres, 1998, p. 57; Despres, 1998, p. 50). This imposed, invented, barbarous bodily nature manifests throughout English drama – in scenes such as Jews dancing "gleefully around the cross in the Crucifixion plays" (Spector, 1979, p. 6) – further Othering the Jew, and earning him even greater revilement in centres of Christian devotion.

The depiction of the Jew's refutation of miracles, a common means of the exposition of didactic anti-Semitism in medieval English drama, is present in the N-Town play *The Nativity*. As a part of the dramatic action, the virginity of Mary is to be physically confirmed by two (female) Jews who, preferring "evidence to faith", are Othered by their preference of rationality over religiosity (Price 2007, p. 440). Initially, the two Jews refuse to even enter Mary's cave, fearing the divine light emitting from it:

> SALOME. We dare not enter this lodge, in faith!
> There is therein so great brightness!
> Moon by night nor sun by day
> Shone never so clear in their lightness!
>
> ZELOMY. Into this house dare I not go.
> The wonderful light does me affray!
>
> (*The Nativity*, 162–167)

Eventually, the Jew Zelomy *must* satisfy her rationality and verify Mary's intact virginhood physically. Once Mary provokes an examination with the words "Test with your hand yourself alone" (*The Nativity*, 225), Zelomy exclaims

> Here openly I feel and see:
>
> A fair child of a maiden is born
> …
> His mother, not hurt of virginity.

> (*The Nativity*, 228–9, 233)

Yet, Salome, the other Jew in this scene, "following the Pauline stereotype of the Jew as stubbornly blind to the truth, prefers to place her faith in her own common sense and experience of the world" (Price, 2007, p. 441), totally distrusting Zelomy's claims:

> SALOME. It is not true, it may never be
>   That both be clean! I cannot believe!
>   …
>   I shall never trow it but I it prove;
>   With hand touching but I assay,
>   In my conscience it may never cleave
>   That she has child and is a maid.

> (*The Nativity*, 242–243, 246–249)

What next occurs in *The Nativity* is an ultimate damning of the rational, experimental, miracle-questioning Jew. Upon verifying Mary's virginity herself, Salome is treated to a *hierosphthitic* experience, as Price describes it, a "physical withering or crippling as divine punishment for touching a holy object with sacrilegious hands" (Price, 2007, pp. 439–440). While such experiences in Christian theology were "often mortal," hierosphthitic experiences with the Virgin were instead "'typically corrective' rather than vengeful," offering restoration via repentance rather than death as punishment – however, this lenience is not to be

interpreted as any less anti-Semitic, as it simply depicts Christians "not [killing] Jews with knives, but with words" (Price, 2007, p. 440). Eventually, Mary invites Salome to verify her virginity, stating "Wisely ransack and try the true oath / Whether I be fouled or a clean maid" (*The Nativity* 252–253). Expectantly, Salome proceeds, and then states the following:

> SALOME.   Alas, alas, and wellaway!
> For my great doubt and false belief
> My hand is dead and dry as clay.
> My false distrust has wrought mischief!
> . . .
> For I did tempt this maid so bright
> And held against her pure cleanness.
> In great mischief now am I pight.
> Alas, alas for my lewdness!
>
> (*The Nativity*, 254–257, 262–265)

Here, afflicted with a hierosphthitic penalty, Salome's hand is left "withering" and "useless" (Price, 2007, p. 441). Evidently, Salome's attempt "to prove through experience what should have been believed through faith" is indicative of the Jew's faulty, anti-miracle rationality, sacrilege, and ultimately, his (or her) alterity (Price, 2007, p. 442). However, the play's didacticism does not end there, as Jesus – illustrating Christian dogma – heals Salome's hand: "The Son of God, forsooth he is, / Has healed my hand that was forlorn" (*The Nativity*, 295–296). Clearly, the Jew is not only Othered in this exchange, but used as a demonstrative tool to show the validity and value of Christianity, including its miracles, the Virgin, and its ultimate Goodness.

Depicting the Jew as physically barbarous and hostile to the Eucharist is another key method of didactic anti-Semitism in medieval English drama. This strategy is

easily observable in the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*. In *Sacrament*, a group of Jews (illegally) procure a Host and – once again, illustrating their supposed rationality, wish to "test the efficacy of Christian belief in 'a cake'" (Lampert, 2001, p. 235). The Jews' tests, which include stabbing and attempted burning, is evocative of a "tradition of Host desecration legends circulating in late-medieval Europe" concerning Judaism, as well as accusations of Jewish "ritual murder", such as in Bury St. Edmunds, where this play was likely initially put on (*Sacrament*, 236–237). Thus, one can infer that anti-Semitic tales and drama were perpetually and mutually self-reinforcing: each tale leading to greater belief in the drama, leading back to belief in the tale, and so on. Moreover, *Sacrament* does work to "reinforce the charge that Jews [were] the killers of Christ" by its way of turning the Jews' desecration of the Host into a "new Passion" (*Sacrament*, 239):

> They grieved our Lord greatly on ground
> And put him to a new passion,
> With daggers gave him many a grievous wound,
> Nailed him to a pillar, with pinsons plucked him down
>
> (*Sacrament*, 37–40)

Here, because the Host that the Jews purchase is "regarded as the body of Christ," a "constellation of . . . Jewish crimes" is formed, including "ritual murder accusation and blood libel," in addition to the aforementioned Host desecration (Lampert, 2001, p. 240). Anti-Semitic work such as this helped contribute to a fifteenth-century "standardization" of "ritual murders [being] identified with Host desecrations" – a "fusion" that is apparent in the *Play of the Sacrament*'s "central act of alleged Jewish perfidy, the Crucifixion" (Lampert, 2001, p. 241).

In *The Play of the Sacrament*, the Crucifixion is essentially "re-enacted," paralleled in the Jews' testing of the Host, didactically imparting Jewish blasphemy, heinous physicality, and the aforementioned perfidy, resulting in the Jew being regarded as a "once, future, and present threat to the body of Christ" (Lampert, 2001, p. 242). Over the course of the play, the Jews purchase the Body of Christ just as "the

Romans bought Jesus from Judas" (Lampert, 2001, p. 242), after which they "smite thereon wounds five" (*Sacrament*, 458), echoing the five wounds of Christ on the Cross. Next, the Jews mirror the Crucifixion itself, nailing the Host to a post:

> JASDON.   Here is an hammer and nails three, I say.
> Lift his arms, fellow, on hey
> While I drive these nails, I you pray,
> With strong strokes fast.
>
> MASPHAT.   Now set on, fellows, with main and might,
> And pluck his arms away in fight.
> What if the twitch, fellows, aright!
>
>   (*Sacrament*, 508–514)

Then, the Jews burn the Host in an oven, "symbolizing the Harrowing of Hell" (Lampert, 2001, p. 242):

> MALCHUS.   Ah, how this fire ginneth to brenne clear!
> This over right hot I think to make.
> Now, Jason, to the cauldron that ye steer,
> And fast fetch hither that ilka cake.
>
> JASON.   I shall with these pinsons, without doubt,
> Shake this cake out of this cloth,
> And to the oven I shall it rout
> And stop hi there, though he be loth
>
>   (*Sacrament*, 697–704)

Finally, the Host "transforms into Christ himself, paralleling the ultimate miracle of the Resurrection," functioning as the final "iterative re-enactment" – or rather, the final stage of the *new passion* the Banns foretell near the play's outset (Lampert, 2001, p. 242).

Interestingly (and damningly) the *Play of the Sacrament* links the Mass with the Crucifixion, taking the "iterative nature of the Jews' crime[s] even further" (Lampert, 2001, p. 243). When Masphat – the legitimacy of the Eucharist not yet apparent to him – says, "Yea, I dare say faithfully that their faith is false: / That never he on that Calvary was killed / Or in bread for to be blood: it is untrue als" (*Sacrament*, 213–215), he, in these consecutive lines, ties "Mass and the miracle of transubstantiation to the sacrifice of the Crucifixion" (Lampert, 2001, p. 243). This conjoining implies that "every celebration of the Mass is a re-enactment of Christ's sacrifice and, consequently, of the Jews' crime" against him" (Lampert, 2001, p. 243). This is a powerful and ideological sentiment, to be sure. Masphat's allusion to the Mass at the start of the play is revived by the song at the play's conclusion (Lampert, 2001, p. 243), leaving the association fresh in playgoers' minds. As a result, the *Play of the Sacrament* didactically imparts "the Crucifixion, the related crimes of host desecration and ritual murder, and the Mass [as] perpetual and simultaneous" (Lampert, 2001, p. 243), binding the Jew to perfidy, the death of Christ, and more in a highly infectious manner.

While the *Play of the Sacrament*'s established Mass-Host-Crucifixion-Jew linkage is its primary form of anti-Semitic didacticism, there is also a secondary, minor form of *Jewishness-as-carnalism* at work here. In medieval English drama, narratives of the Jew established frequent distinctions between apparent carnality in the Jew, and Christian corporeality (Despres, 1998, p. 58). Jewish carnality tended to manifest as "bodily waste," or more specifically, "feces, spittle, or [as] festering sores and physical ailments" (Despres, 1998, p. 58), effectively demeaning the Jew as both Other and lesser. Once Jonathas the Jew finds himself burned in *The Play of the Sacrament*, Colle enters, expounding on the services of his employer, Doctor Brundich. Colle's first line reads "Aha, here is a fair fellowship" (*Sacrament*, 525), making it clear he is addressing the entire group of Jews (and perhaps every Jew,

including those external to the play). Afterward, Colle begins to spout a carnal discourse, beginning by declaring Brundich to be "the most famous physician / That ever saw urine!" (*Sacrament*, 535–536), and then delivering the following passage:

> COLLE. All manner of men that have any sickness,
>
> To Master Brenbercly look that you redress.
>
> What disease or sickness that ever ye have,
>
> He will never leave you till ye be in your grave!
>
> Who hat the canker, the collick, or the lax,
>
> The tertian, the quartan, or the brining axs,
>
> For worms, for gnawing, grinding in the womb or in the boldryo,
>
> All manner red eyen, bleared eyen, and the migraine also,
>
> For headache, boneache, and thereto the toothache
>
> The colt-evil and the brosten men he will undertake
>
> (*Sacrament*, 608–617)

Here, it is important to recognize that Colle's proclamation is aimed at a party of Jews, and thus, all of these grotesque bodily ailments are ascribed to their character. As a result, the *Jewishness as carnality* myth is didactically re-enforced, imparting to Christian playgoers their apparent physical superiority.

Finally, not all didactic anti-Semitism in medieval English drama was so overt – instead, as observation of alliteration (and where it is absent) in the plays of the York cycle will demonstrate that, sometimes, the Christian dramatist's work was instead more subliminal. Recent study of the anonymously authored York cycle has led scholars to posit both a "great metrist" and "great dramatist" working simultaneously on the cycle's initial construction (Reese, 1951, pp. 643–644). The latter playwright – identifiable by his "anapaestic ease," "excessive alliteration," "not [being] governed by any syllabic rules," stresses "coinciding with . . . the alliterated

sound" (Reese, 1951, p. 645), and influence from the Gospel of Nicodemus (Reese, 1951, p. 641) – has been understood by C.M. Gayley (1907) as "marked by his observation of life" (cited in Reese, 1951, p. 641), and thus, working in "rhetoric and rant" (Reese, 1951, p. 644). This playwright's dramatic tendencies have earned him the titles *York realist* and the *Passion Playwright of York* (Reese, 1951, p. 641).

In his noted observation of life and in his rhetorical approach to the composition of dramatic verse, this York realist not only disseminated of anti-Semitism, but also employed a subtle didactic approach, particularly evident in his use of alliterative verse conventions in the York play *The Resurrection.* Over the course of *Resurrection,* Pontius Pilate converses with Caiaphas, the latter rallying for the placement of guards at Christ's tomb. Closely examined, this exchange reveals contrasting levels of alliterative verse that designate Caiaphas as lesser:

> PILATE. Centurion, be withal,
> Ye wot our clerks the eclipses they call
> Such sudden sight.
> Both sun and moon that season shall
> Lack of their light.
>
> CAIAPHAS. Yea, and if dead men rose bodily
> That might be done through sorcery,
> Therefore we set nothing thereby
> To be abashed.
>
> (*Resurrection,* 98–106)

Here, the treatment of Pilate's dialogue shows stronger alliteration than does that of Caiaphas, the Jew. More specifically, Pilate's lines feature "what might be called . . . a vertical alliterative pattern," as sounds in one line are "carried over into

the next" (Reese, 1951, pp. 652–653). Conversely, in this passage, Caiaphas the Jew is treated to no such (or, one might concede, a less powerful) linguistic luxury. The language of Pilate is *elevated* over that of Caiaphas, thus imparting a *lesser* position to the Jew. Hearing this alliterative subtlety, audiences were given a lesson in Christian superiority, contrasting with comparative Jewish inferiority.

The anti-Semitic didacticism outlined above is only a fraction of what can be found in the York Cycle. And yet, the point is clear: anti-Semitism was taught in the drama of the time. Greg Walker (2008) points out that, problematically, "a play can be read or received in unintended ways, or have long-term cultural consequences of which no one was initially aware when the performance itself took place" (Walker, 2008, p. 82). Such long-term cultural consequences are the highly unfortunate case evident with medieval English anti-Semitism, as such hate continues to pervade and infect contemporary society — well beyond England's borders. Perhaps, such discourse and its ideological consequences were inevitable. Jean-Paul Sarte informs us that "if the Jews did not exist the anti-Semite would have to invent them" (as cited in Spector, 1979, p. 6). Regardless, it is undeniable that English dramatists indeed developed a "constellation of myths about Jews and Judaism," rather than "reflecting either historical or theological reality" (Price, 2007, p. 439). As Croxton's *Play of the Sacrament*, *The Nativity* of N-Town, and the York Cycle's *The Resurrection* all demonstrate, medieval English anti-Semitism was certainly present, and was dangerously powerful.

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