Book Section:
Steenbrugge, C. (2022) Medieval English drama and performance. In: Radulescu, R. and Rikhardsdottir, S., (eds.) The Routledge Companion to Medieval English Literature. Routledge Literature Companions. Routledge, pp. 345-355. ISBN: 9780367186494.

https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429197390-33

28

Medieval English Drama and Performance

Charlotte Steenbrugge

When looking at the surviving body of evidence for medieval European plays and performances, the similarities between the English and Continental traditions are apparent. We find biblical plays, saint plays, miracle plays, and moral plays using personification (the so-called morality plays) on both sides of the Channel for instance. There is also considerable overlap in semi-dramatic activities, such as royal entries, elaborate processions when dignitaries entered a particular city for the first time. We have documentary evidence giving insight into what mummings might have been like in England (as well as Lydgate's texts for more formal mummings) and visual representations from the Low Countries in the form of manuscript miniatures by Simon Bening that suggest a markedly similar tradition. At times, these similarities have given rise to suggestions of direct influence or borrowing but these have, with a few exceptions, been difficult to prove.

It is of course likely that there was knowledge of other dramatic traditions in England and on the Continent. Some audience members, producers, actors, and participants of semi-dramatic activities are likely to have travelled and to have experienced (semi-)dramatic performances elsewhere during their journeys. This may well have resulted in a level of influence. We know performances travelled, although seemingly primarily within a local range. Play texts were also mobile, although as far as we can tell the range here is again usually more confined. The Chester and Brome Abraham and Isaac plays are related; plays from the York Corpus Christi Play (a sequence of relatively short plays depicting Christian history from the

Fall of the Angels to the Last Judgement that was performed more or less annually from 1377 to 1569, perhaps with significant changes in its long life) are adapted and incorporated into the Towneley manuscript; a play from Antwerp makes it into a Haarlem drama compilation. Cross-national and cross-linguistic movement seems to have been rarer. There is some evidence here too, from the early Cambridge Prologue (manuscript c. 1300), the opening of a play which survives – without accompanying play – in Anglo French and Middle English, to the late *Everyman* (earliest surviving prints date from the sixteenth century), which is a translation of the Dutch *Elckerlijc*. But the evidence is sparse, and not all translations were necessarily intended for dramatic performances. The Middle English immediately follows the Anglo French version of the Cambridge Prologue, suggesting perhaps a translation exercise rather than a script intended for performance. The preamble of *Everyman* on the title page ('Here begynneth a treatyse […] and is in maner of a morall playe') may suggest that the English text is envisaged primarily as reading matter (2007: lines 00-00?). Generally speaking, it is better to treat each dramatic tradition as a unique and largely independent phenomenon. The similarities between medieval English and other European dramatic traditions are more likely to be due to a shared cultural and religious background than direct influence.

In fact, despite important similarities, there are also crucial differences between medieval European dramatic traditions. We may find biblical drama in medieval England and France, but where the surviving English plays are often relatively short and performed or collated as a Creation to Doomsday cycle, French biblical drama tends to be much longer, often lasting days if not weeks, and normally has a clear focus on the Ministry and Passion of Christ. Passion plays were indeed popular throughout Western Europe (including England, as the N-Town Passion Plays and documentary evidence suggests) but apparently not in Low

Countries (with the exception of the French-speaking province of Hainault). Carnival plays seem to have been especially popular in German-speaking regions (*Fastnachtspiele*). Dramatic competitions appear to have been the preserve of the Chambers of Rhetoric in the Low Countries. In fact, differences in dramatic traditions can be regional rather than national (or linguistic). In northern England, there was an interest in biblical cycles where several short plays on biblical stories were staged as part of the same occasion, as in York and Chester, but that trend was (the evidence would suggest) not replicated elsewhere in the country. All but one of the surviving English morality plays are from East Anglia, which may indicate that East Anglian communities were particularly keen on this genre.[1]

These notable differences were at least partly due to the fact that medieval drama and performances were usually deeply embedded in their community. Many plays and semi-dramatic events were put on as part and parcel of other communal events, such as religious processions or guild celebrations. Some performances were expressly staged in order to generate income for the community, such as Church Ales which raised funds for the upkeep of the church. Although putting on lavish (semi-)dramatic performances was expensive, there are indications that the organising town or city, as a whole, profited financially from such events, and that this was one of the reasons for putting on such shows. A spectator of a Passion play in Issoudun in 1535 noted that 'the citizens there had done such good business that several thousand francs were left, over and above all the expenses' (Muir 1999: 13). The receipts of four days for the Passion play at New Romney in Kent in 1560 amounted to £25 12s 10d, which suggests that impressive numbers of visitors flocked to New Romney for the

[1] The exception is Beadle 2001 which is linked to Winchester. I see what this has been changed, would '*Occupation and Idleness* (Beadle 2001)' be better?

performance (Gibson 2002: lx). The boost was not simply economic: 'For a town suffering from economic decline, the reputation of the passion play brought increased revenue and boosted civic pride' (Gibson 2002: lx).

As there were no purposefully built permanent theatres, the playing spaces were usually in and of the community: the churchyard, the village green, the market square, the guild hall, the streets of the city. The meaning and experience of these spaces and of performances staged therein were shaped by everyday life and conversely (semi-)dramatic performances affected those everyday spaces.

Moreover, plays, *tableaux vivants*, and the like were often put on by pre-existing groups, like trade guilds, religious fraternities, neighbourhoods, and villages. In York different trade guilds staged the different pageants that together make up the York Corpus Christi Play, for example. As a result, these events were also about showcasing the identity, talent, and wealth of the group staging the performance to spectators and about fostering a sense of community within the group staging the performance. Modern enactments of the York pageants have been noted to do just that: the Scriveners mentioned 'building team spirit within the Guild and a camaraderie amongst those who were involved' as one of the largest benefits to taking part in the Mystery Plays '98 (Oakshott 1999: 284). Another noted benefit was raising the profile of the guild and the city (Oakshott 1999: 278, 287). Specially good examples of how (semi-)dramatic performances were seen to project and ideally raise the status of the producing group are the regional dramatic competitions held by the Chambers of Rhetoric (*rederijkerskamers*) in the Low Countries, where participants clearly represented the honour of their chamber and town or village. Much as performances helped shape their communities, so communities shaped performances.

It is therefore difficult to situate Middle English drama in its European context, as there is no unified dramatic tradition in England or on the Continent. However, these plays all emerge from a cultural and religious background that is broadly shared and thus contain important similarities. Comparing plays and evidence of performance across traditions can be very fruitful. But (semi-)dramatic events were also shaped by their communities, and situating plays and performances in their specific setting is highly illuminating too.

A good case in point is the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* as this is a play that is both deeply embedded in its local context and in a broader, European culture. It is an East Anglian play representing a series of miracles associated with a eucharistic wafer and the subsequent conversion of the Jews who test the wafer. We do not know on what occasion, date, or in what setting it was performed – or indeed if it was ever staged in the Middle Ages at all (a timely reminder of how fragmentary our knowledge of medieval drama is). The miracle it depicts supposedly happened in 1461 and linguistic evidence points to a date later in the same century; the play text survives in a sixteenth-century copy (Dublin, Trinity College MS F.4.20, ff. 338-356).

The Croxton play evidently comes out of a late medieval emphasis on the body of Christ. This emphasis is perhaps best evidenced in the Feast of Corpus Christi (celebrated on the first Thursday after Trinity Sunday) which gathered widespread popularity in the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The connection between Corpus Christi and drama are clear throughout Europe: celebrations on this feast day often involved processions, *tableaux vivants*, and plays. We have evidence for such (semi-)dramatic celebrations in Lille, Béthune, Oudenaarde, Bologna, Valencia, Freiburg, and Friedberg amongst others (Muir 1999: 10-12).

In England the most famous examples are the cycles of biblical plays in York and Chester which were performed throughout the city on the Feast of Corpus Christi.[2] Even though these cycles cover the broadest range of the history of the world (in the medieval understanding), starting with the Fall of the Angels and ending with the Last Judgment, Christ, and the body of Christ, stand at the very centre. Other plays with a more tenuous link to the actual feast day can also put the spotlight on the body of Christ, like some of the French and German Passion plays and the N-Town anthology of biblical plays. In the N-Town *Last Supper*, the sacrament of the Eucharist is carefully explained by Jesus to the disciples and, of course, to the play's audience:

> Takyth hed now, bretheryn, what I haue do:
>
> With my flesch and blood I haue ȝow fed.
>
> […]
>
> Ȝevyth hem my body, as I haue to ȝow,
>
> Qweche xal be sacryd be my worde.
>
> […]
>
> Hoso etyth my body and drynkyth my blood,
>
> Hol God and man he xal me take.
>
> […]
>
> Kepe wel þis in mende for ȝoure good,
>
> And every man save himself wele. (*The N-Town Play* 1991, lines 492-511)

We cannot tell, from the evidence currently available to us, whether the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* was associated with the Feast of Corpus Christi though that is certainly a

[2] The plays were later postponed to Whitsun or Pentecost (seventh Sunday after Easter) in Chester.

possibility; in any case, the play emphatically deals with the body of Christ. And, unlike the biblical plays just mentioned, the Croxton play also expressly engages with belief and unbelief in the eucharist.

Issues around belief and communal identity converge in late medieval debates on the eucharist; the play, then, has didacticism and community at its heart. Besides the communal aspect, a didactic aspect is in fact also a common denominator for much of the surviving corpus of medieval drama. Even farces, typically short comical plays often featuring 'trickster-tricked' plotlines, have been linked with legal training in France, for example (Frank 1967: 249-50). Dramatic and semi-dramatic activities that engage in a topsy-turvy world are usually seen as a way of reinforcing the *status quo* in the community.[3] This communal and didactic aspect comes to the fore most clearly in relation to late medieval religious drama in England and elsewhere. Medieval sources, while usually reticent about the reasons for putting on performances or their effects, occasionally mention the communal and didactic aspects of drama and semi-dramatic religious performances. In York, the city authorities mention that the Corpus Christi Play, was brought forth 'ob comodum ciuium eiusdem ciuitatis & omnium extraneorum illuc veniencium' ('for the benefit of the citizens of the same city and of all strangers coming there') and 'ob magnam deuocionis causam & viciorum extirpacionem morumque reformacionem' ('for the important cause of devotion and for the extirpation of vice and the reformation of customs') (*REED* 1977: 28, 37, 713, 722). We have no spectator accounts from late medieval England, but Continental evidence suggests that drama was an efficient tool for stirring devotion. In the mid-sixteenth century,

[3] Note that Humphrey 1999 has reservations about this model.

the Frenchman Jean Bouchet took time to reflect on his own use and appreciation of religious drama:

> I am content, considering my age, yet, while I say my rosary, I much desire to see the Acts of the Apostles performed […] It is true that I see them written down and hear them preached; [but] the mind is more satisfied by seeing than by hearing: matter that is seen live is more easily apprehended when you hear it. (Tydeman 2001: 328)

Clearly, there is something about the 'live' visual and acoustic representation of drama that stimulated Jean Bouchet's religious experiences in a way that mere reading or listening did not achieve. A somewhat similar picture is conveyed in the Middle Dutch *Mariken van Nieumeghen*, where at least one specific play is said to be better than some sermons: 'Ic heb mijnen oom horen seggen op ander saisoenen | Dat dit spel beter is dan sommige sermoenen.' ('I have previously heard my uncle say | That this play is better than some sermons'; lines 717-718) (Coigneau 1996). Moreover, the efficacy of this dramatic performance is further highlighted in the story as the heroine is converted from her sinful life – she has been living with a devil for several years by this point – by watching the play. A play like the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*, which clearly aims at stirring a community to devotion, is typical in this regard.

Advocates of medieval drama praised its efficacy in stimulating devotion, but detractors expressed concern on this head too. The power of plays to convert, while widely accepted, was also deemed dangerous at the time. The Middle English *Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge* (c. 1380-1425) is an anti-theatrical tract that lists the reasons pro and contra religious drama.[4]

[4] Exactly what is understood by 'miraclis pleyinge' in unclear, but it seems to include Passions plays and other religious plays.

Reasons in favour of religious drama very much focus on the plays' ability to have an impact on their audiences, but so do the reasons against religious drama. Because, according to the *Tretise*, that impact is sinful. For instance, the *Tretise* does not dispute that audiences weep upon seeing the Passion of Christ enacted but points out that those tears are misguided:

> siche miraclis pleyinge giveth noon occasioun of werrey wepinge and medeful, but the weping that fallith to men and wymmen by the sighte of siche miraclis pleyinge, as they ben not principaly for theire oune sinnes ne of theire gode feith withinneforthe, but more of theire sight withouteforth is not alowable byfore God but more reprowable. For sithen Crist himself reprovyde the wymmen that wepten upon him at his passioun, myche more they ben reprovable that wepen for the pley of Cristis passioun, leevinge to wepen for the sinnes of hemsilf and of theire children, as Crist bad the wymmen that wepten on him. (1993: 102)

It is not just the misleading didactic effect of dramatic performances, but also their communal reach that is a source for concern. It is indeed the ability of religious drama to cause the perversion 'not onely of oon singular persone but of al an hool comynte' (1993: 100) that the authors of this *Tretise* find most worrisome. On the Continent, similar expressions of concern about how the audiences are affected can be found. The Synod of Badajoz in Spain, for one, worried that 'under the guise of commemorating holy and contemplative things, *representaciones* of the *misterios* of the Birth and of the Passion and Resurrection of Our Lord […] take place which […] distract [the public] from contemplation and proper devotion' (Tydeman 2001: 566). On a more mundane level, the *Tretise* also frowns upon the cost involved in staging such plays, especially as that money could be better spent: 'for that that they shulden spendyn upon the nedis of ther negheboris, they spenden upon the pleyis' (1993: 111). Community and devotion, two aspects that seem crucial to the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*, are then also integral in the wider debate about the (mis)use of drama.

The eucharist was, of course, a source of conflict and controversy, leading to fractures in the community and significantly different experiences of devotion. The miracle of transubstantiation was widely contested by heretics and non-heretics alike. John Arnold mentions several unbelievers who object to transubstantiation on logical or material grounds: Christ would have to be the size of a mountain, and rodents would not be able to eat the body of Christ yet cannot distinguish between consecrated and unconsecrated hosts. Some of these objectors are Lollards in an English contexts, but these doubts and objections occur on the Continent as well (Arnold 2005: 222-24). Celebrations of the body of Christ are therefore particularly interesting focal nodes to investigate the importance of devotion and community in late medieval (semi-)dramatic performances. What makes them even more interesting is that (semi-)dramatic events were on occasion used to counter unbelief in transubstantiation: at least one convicted Lollard was commanded to take part in a Corpus Christi procession in fifteenth-century Lincolnshire as part of his punishment, and perhaps this kind of requirement was rather routine (Gibson 1989: 34). The Croxton play is the only surviving English play to portray a eucharistic miracle, but plays on this topic survive in Italian, French, and Dutch (and there were likely more such plays which have not survived). The *Play of the Sacrament* is clearly part and parcel of a European-wide tradition of miracle host stories. Several of these stories also circulated in non-dramatic form both in England and on the Continent. The stories' and plays' purposes were multifaceted, but in the context of East Anglia, where we know there was much controversy around the eucharist, the Croxton play's didactic impact seems to signal both the presence of unbelief and doubt, and a conscious effort to use drama to counter such doubts and unbelief. The play is then part of a wider European tradition, yet its specific meaning is intimately related to its East Anglian context.

Not only is the Croxton play the only surviving Middle English play to deal with a eucharistic miracle, it is also the only surviving medieval English play to be set in (near-)contemporary Europe, allegedly depicting a miracle which happened in Aragon in 1461. Scholars have yet to find which Heraclean event this play references; it is indeed possible that there was no such event. But the play seems to draw on specific Continental stories even if that is the case. The name Jonathan is associated with host desecration stories in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries; these stories are explicitly located on the Continent. For example, the 1290 story is set in Paris and in 1370 at least two Jews called Jonathan were implicated by witnessed (who saw neither the theft nor the miracle!) in a host desecration; both were executed in Brussels where the alleged events had taken place (Chemers 2007: 41-45). This event was celebrated and commemorated, including in dramatic form, throughout the fifteenth century. The name Jonathas seems to be a slightly exotic version of Jonathan; it is in any case similar enough that it may have recalled some of the Jonathans of Continental host desecration stories. In some ways, the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* is then an unusually outward looking play, being set in Spain and featuring Syrian Jews as well as a doctor of questionable repute from Brabant, and possibly drawing on specific events which happened on the Continent. The fact that the play manuscript has clear links with Ireland through John Madden (who may have incorporated it in the miscellany in which it survives) and John Stearne, Bishop of Clogher (who donated the miscellany to Trinity College Dublin) adds to its European credentials (Sebastian 2012).

At the same time, the play is also emphatically East Anglian through linguistic features and placenames mentioned within the dialogue. The presence of a quack from Brabant also makes more sense in the context of contemporary East Anglia than fifteenth-century Aragon. East Anglian economy relied on strong links with the Low Countries which resulted in a level

of competition and rivalry between English merchants and those from the Low Countries. Trade, like that between East Anglia and the Low Countries, also resulted in the presence of 'aliens' in England. Some of these were merchants, many of them were tradesmen and craftsmen; but the records also indicate that a number of these immigrants were impoverished and iterant. Evidence from tax records from 1440 as well as other sources show that there was indeed a level of immigration of people from the Low Countries into East Anglia (Thrupp 1957: 266). The presence of an itinerant immigrant from the Low Countries likely seemed highly realistic to the contemporary East Anglian audience of the play.

Both well-to-do and vagabond immigrants were a cause for concern for most of the fifteenth century in England as demonstrated by numerous complaints about these foreigners, and physical attacks against alien population and businesses. In 1436, for instance, several breweries belonging to people from Zeeland and Holland were attacked in London after a rumour had spread claiming that Dutch beer was poisoned. The government seems to have responded by asking Flemings to take an oath of fealty; many people from neighbouring Dutch-speaking areas, such as Brabant, also took the oath (Thrupp 1957: 265). Some of the objections to aliens rely on reasonably realistic concerns, like the common's petition from 1484 which maintained that some of the Dutch and Flemish immigrants came to England only for a time and with an eye to profit (Thrupp 1957: 269). But other anxieties are rather more far-fetched, like the rumour about the poisoned beer, or the fear voiced by the Good Parliament (1376) that Jews, Saracens and 'privy spies' mingled among the Lombards (Thrupp 1957: 264). In the context of fifteenth-century East Anglia with its reliance on trade with the Low Countries and presence of immigrants from the Low Countries, the negative presentation of Master Brundych (brown-ditch) from Brabant is especially potent. His portrayal is comic, but it still suggests a strong prejudice against people from the Low

Countries that may well have reflected day-to-day interactions between these aliens and locals and may in turn have influenced these interactions (Gibson 1989: 37). Even the Jew Jonathas is indirectly linked with the Low Countries given his connection with international trade in luxury goods, because such trade in East Anglia was usually conducted through ports in the Low Countries.

The presence of unbelieving Jews in the play is also affected by the play's East Anglian context in other ways. Cecilia Cutts was the first to make a link between the play and East Anglian anti-Lollard propaganda. In this reading, the Jews stand for Lollards, giving the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* the aim of 'confirming the people in the Catholic faith or of winning them back to it' (Cutts 1944: 60). While it was not just Lollards who questioned the reality of the eucharistic miracle, the rejection of transubstantiation was a key tenet for many Lollards and East Anglia was an area with a longstanding tradition of Lollardy and anti-Lollard persecutions. Believing or not believing that the consecrated host changed into the body of Christ was especially loaded in this setting, and arguably a defining criterion of which community one did (not) belong to. Putting on a play reaffirming belief in the host can signal towards a fractured society with believers and unbelievers, as well as a push to encourage orthodox devotion, all of which fits nicely with our knowledge of fifteenth-century East Anglia.

Of course, plays asserting the truth of transubstantiation, as the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* does, are not unique to East Anglia and a Lollard context. We have similar plays from the Continent, many unpalatable because of the virulent anti-Semitism contained in

them. These plays usually affirm the Christian community by demonising the Jewish Other.[5] The English play also features unbelieving Jews. This is somewhat problematic as Jews had been expelled from England centuries before the play was written. It seems that the Expulsion of 1290 was effective because, although there is some sporadic evidence to suggest the (temporary) presence of some Jews in England in the following centuries, 'the existence of any kind of substantial religiously observant community after 1290 is impossible' (Bale 2006: 15). But this absence was no deterrent for anti-Semitism and, as Anthony Bale has shown, the events of 1290 had remarkably little impact on the representation of Jews, with motifs developed in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries being continued and in some cases intensified in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (Bale 2006: 16). There has been much scholarly debate about who or what the Jews in the Croxton play represent: real Jews (English? Spanish? Syrian?), imagined Jews, Lollards, unbelievers?[6] But as Cameron Hunt McNabb argues: 'While the play's protagonists are certainly Jews, and signify as such, they can also simultaneously signify as Lollards. Critics needs not pick and choose the play's heretics – there are enough to go around' (McNabb 2014: 17).

[5] The exception seems to be Jan Smeeken's *Tspel vanden heiligen sacramente van der nyeuwer vaert* (*The Play of the Holy Sacrament of Nyeuwervaert*), performed as part of a religious procession in Breda in 1500 (and possibly in previous and following years), which does not stage unbelieving Jews. It features heathens in Prussia as Other in the second part, but the main antagonist is in fact a priest, Macharijs, sent by his bishop to test the sacrament in the first section of the play.

[6] For a good overview of the different positions, see Sebastian 2012, Intro.

While the link with Lollardy is hard to deny altogether, the Jewishness of the Croxton Jews is also potent in a local context, even if a contemporary audience might never have encountered a Jew. East Anglia had two anti-Semitic boy-martyr cults (William of Norwich and Robert of Bury St Edmunds; not much further afield was Hugh of Lincoln), where Jews had supposedly killed a young Christian child in a re-enactment of the Passion of Christ. Bale has noted how these cults contributed to 'this normalcy, this community suffused with the image of the murderous Jew' (Bale 2006: 118). Although the Jews in the Croxton play may well represent Lollards, or doubters more generally, as well as reference 'the figure of "the Jew" against which Christian identity is created', we must not downplay the likely impact of the contemporary East Anglian anti-Semitic devotional cults in a contemporary audience's reception of the play (Lampert 2001: 236).[7] The playwright's choice to portray the image of Christ as a wounded, bleeding child specifically ('A Child apperyng with wondys blody!', line 804) is likely to have created strong overtones of the Bury and Norwich child-martyrs and must have called to mind the allegations of past local Jewish violence (Lampert 2001: 240). The presentation of the Croxton Jews therefore comes out of a wider European phenomenon and is peculiarly East Anglian (both in their interpretation as Lollards and in their interpretation as Jews) at the same time.

Unlike in Continental plays featuring this type of story line, where the Jewish protagonist is standardly executed – and indeed this has a historical counterpart, as we have seen in relation

[7] Croxton is approximately 14 miles north of Bury St Edmunds and 29 miles west of Norwich; Gibson has suggested the play was intended for performance in Bury's market square which would make the geographical and cultural connection with at least one centre of such a cult even more pronounced (1989: 35).

to the 1370 Brussels events –, the Jews in this play convert and are thus absorbed into the Christian community. Host desecration, and indeed boy-martyr, stories were often used to support attacks on actual Jews. In Brussels, Jonathan of Enghien who was seen as the main conspirator of the host desecration and ostensibly killed for that offence in 1370, was a banker who was in all probability killed by debtors seeking to cancel their debts (Chemers 2007: 44). The English play's relative leniency towards its Jewish protagonists can perhaps be attributed to the official absence of Jews in late medieval England, which presumably reduced the perception of Jews as a concrete, immediate danger. There is an even more localised explanation: perhaps this more lenient punishment of the Jews can be seen in the contemporary East Anglia setting as a gesture that Lollards could be welcomed back into the community.

However, while the Croxton play ostensibly aims to heal fractures by dissolving doubts and thus reintegrating unbelievers in the orthodox Christian community, it could in fact serve to reinforce divisions by drawing attention to these very differences. Furthermore, the assimilation at the end of the play is not perfect: as soon they are converted the former Jews leave the stage, and apparently the community of Heraclea in Aragon as well:

> Now ar we bownd to kepe Crystys lawe
> And to serve the Father, the Son, and the Holy Gost.
> Now wyll we walke by contré and cost,
> Owr wyckyd lyvyng for to restore,
> […]
> Now we take owr leave at lesse and mare;
> Forward on owr vyage we wyll us dresse. (lines 962-68)

Whether they are setting out on a (self-imposed) pilgrimage or a more permanent exile is unclear; it is also unclear if they intend ever to return to Heraclea, where the miracle occurred and where they were converted, or to the 'cyté of Surry' (Syria, line 19), from whence they come. Moreover, the corrupt Christian merchant, Aristorius, who sold the host to Jonathas, also sets off on a (self-imposed) exile or pilgrimage at the close of the play: 'I wyll go walke my penaunce to fullfyll.' (line 977). Plays on host miracles are widely seen as a way of reinforcing an ideal Christian, orthodox, unified community through the rejection of the threatening Other (most often by means of execution). In the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* this also happens as the Jews are converted to Christianity and the sinful Christian is converted to the rightful way of living, but their instantaneous dispatch after their conversion is rather odd in this regard. The ideal Christian, orthodox, unified community at the end of the play appears to consist of the Presbyter(-actor), the Episcopus(-actor), and the audience. The confirmation of the audience's belonging to this ideal, orthodox, unified community is on the one hand very efficacious, especially so if spectators join in the *ad hoc* Corpus Christi procession staged towards the end of the play and join in with *Te Deum Laudamus* which closes the play. But, on the other hand, the expulsion of the converts and Aristorius suggests there is little scope for reabsorbing erring members of the community, staged or real. Perhaps the dismissal of the quack 'Mayster Brendyche of Braban' (line 532) not only gestures towards dangerous outside influences that infiltrate the community, but affirms that the only way to deal with these dangers is to remove them. Conversion may be possible (though there is no conversion in the case of the doctor), but welcoming these souls into the community does not seem possible. This play may then suggest a less flexible stance towards Lollardy and religious doubt than has sometimes been noted in an East Anglian context (Gibson 1989: 30).

Another difficult feature of the didactic, communal aspect of this play relates to its very use of theatre to promote belief in transubstantiation and host miracles: 'Despite the play's didactic purpose in shoring up belief in the real presence of Christ in the Host, its theatrical form implicitly undermines its doctrinal message' (Sofer 2003: ix). This is a problem for all such plays: if the miracles are staged poorly, the plays falter qualitatively as plays and also in their didactic message by staging unconvincing miracles and, in the Croxton play and some others, unwarranted conversions. The danger of badly staged plays became very obvious in Paris with the *Actes des Apôtres*, when the stage machinery for the descent of the Holy Spirit malfunctioned. What should have been the theatrical and spiritual highlight of the play became an occasion for the audience's derision and complaints that this was a 'public mockery of holy events' (Runnalls 1999: 33). Such technically challenged performances were likely an anomaly; we know enough about medieval technology to be reasonably certain that the elaborate stage effects some plays call for could be staged successfully.[8] We also have accounts that express admiration for well-produced special effects.

But if the play is staged well, the danger of undermining the very intent of the play arguably becomes greater in the case of a play like the Croxton one: if the stage miracles are convincing, the performance runs the risk of showing how easy it is to fake miracles. It is perhaps worth recalling Arnold's findings about the importance of materiality – and the very clear materiality of stage props and miracles – in generating and sustaining doubt and unbelief. Of course, it is likely that most spectators were able to suspend disbelief in a theatrical context in order to confirm their belief in transubstantiation and miracles. It is one of these peculiar aspects of theatre that spectators can at the same time appreciate they are

[8] See, for example, Butterworth 1998 and 2005.

watching a play and judge the play as performance, and engage with the story staged. An account from Metz shows us an audience member doing just that in relation to a host miracle play: Philippe de Vigneulles, a devour Christian in favour of religious drama, comments approvingly on the stage effects used in a eucharistic miracle play without expressing any doubt as to the efficacy of the play's religious message or doubt about the genuine nature of 'real' miracles (*Gedenkbuch* 1852: 244-45).

The Croxton play requires quite some miracles: profuse blood coming from the stabbed wafer, a detachable hand which is later reattached, a cauldron boiling over with blood, an exploding oven from which emerges yet more blood and a speaking and bleeding image of the Christ-child ('Here the owyn must ryve asunder and blede owt at the crenys and an image appere owt, with woundys bledyng', stage direction after line 712) which later changes 'agayn into brede' (stage direction after line 825). It clearly requires a prop that at least looks like and perhaps is an eucharistic wafer, consecrated or not. This is true for all plays on host miracles. But in the English play, there is the added problem that the host is placed upon an altar by the bishop towards the end of the play and it is unclear whether that altar is a theatrical representation of an altar on a stage-scaffold or a real altar in a church; possibly, different performances used a church or scaffold depending on what was most practical. But as Andrew Sofer remarks:

> What of the wafer itself, placed on altar or scaffold? Its final status (as property? as sacrament? as 'unsubstantiated' oble?) is ambiguous. Orthodox spectators could understand the bishop's miracle as the confirmation of the priest's divinely inspired power – he can even turn the Sacrament back into bread! – while skeptical spectators could view the play as a demystification of real presence that exposed

> transubstantiation as a spectacular conjuring-trick performed by a lay actor pranked up in priestly garb. (2003: 48)

There is a real danger, if a church was used, of extending the realm of theatre into the church (Sofer 2003: 47). People like Philippe de Vigneulles, who was evidently committed to religious drama and processions as spectator and participant, would presumably not have faltered over this play, but he was neither a sceptic nor a heretic. Lollards often charged the Church with staging dramatic hocus pocus (especially in relation to priestly absolution and transubstantiation); this play, for all its probable orthodox intent at reinforcing belief in transubstantiation, seems to confirm that transubstantiation is – or, at least, can be – indeed an elaborate stage trick. How Lollards, or people with doubts about transubstantiation more generally, may have seen the play is open to question – and it is possible that some found it persuasive and some did not. This issue is not confined to the play's specific origin but it is, again, especially important in the contemporary East Anglian context.

The Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* remains, then, an endlessly fascinating play which is both intensely local and undeniably part of a wider European tradition, which welcomes resistance as much as it condemns it – and these ambiguities are features shared by much drama and performance in late medieval Europe. All of this brings us back to the *Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge* with its anti-theatrical concerns about plays misappropriating money (all the special effects and fancy costumes must have made the Croxton play expensive to stage), misleading the devotions of spectators by focusing on external matter (the blood, the exploding oven), and potentially even leading spectators away from the true faith (though it is unlikely 'al an hool comynte' (1993: 100) would ever be so misled). The live, material, spectacular, communal nature of theatre made its didacticism fraught. One can appreciate why the authors

of the *Tretise*, as well as several others across Europe, preferred the sermon and liturgy to drama as a safer mode of religious communication.

Bibliography

Manuscripts

Dublin, Trinity College MS F.4.20, ff. 338-356

Primary Sources

Beadle, Richard. 2001. '*Occupation and Idleness*', *Leeds Studies in English*, n.s. 32: 7-47

Coigneau, Dirk (ed.). 1996. *Mariken van Nieumeghen* (Hilversum: Verloren)

Everyman and its Dutch Original, Elckerlijc. 2007. ed. by Clifford Davidson, Martin W. Walsh and Ton J. Broos (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications)

Gedenkbuch des Metzer Bürgers Philippe von Vigneulles aus den Jahren 1471 bis 1522 nach der Handschrift des Verfassers. 1852. ed. By Heinrich Michelant (Stuttgart: Litterarischer Verein)

The N-Town Play: Cotton MS Vespasian D. 8. 1991. ed. by Stephen Spector, 2 vols, EETS s.s. 11-12 (Oxford: Oxford UP)

Records of Early English Drama: York. 1977. ed. by Alexandra F. Johnston and Margaret Rogerson, 2 vols (Toronto: University of Toronto Press)

Sebastian, John T. 2012. *Croxton 'Play of the Sacrament'* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications)

A Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge. 1993. ed. by Clifford Davidson (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute)

Tydeman, William (ed.). 2001. *The Medieval European Stage: 500-1550* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP)

Secondary Sources

Arnold, John H. 2005. *Belief and Unbelief in Medieval Europe* (London: Hodder)

Bale, Anthony. 2006. *The Jew in the Medieval Book: English Antisemitism, 1350-1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP)

Butterworth, Philip. 2005. *Magic on the Early English Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP)

—— 1998. *Theatre of Fire: Special Effects in Early English and Scottish Theatre* (London: Society for Theatre Research)

Chemers, Michael Mark. 2007. 'Anti-Semitism, Surrogacy and the Invocation of Mohammed in the *Play of the Sacrament*', *Comparative Drama*, 41: 25-55

Cutts, Cecilia. 1944. 'The Croxton Play: An Anti-Lollard Piece', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 5.1: 45-60

Frank, Grace. 1967. *The Medieval French Drama* (Oxford: Clarendon Press)

Gibson, Gail McMurray. 1989. *The Theatre of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press)

Gibson, James M. (ed.). 2002. *Records of Early English Drama. Kent: Diocese of Canterbury* (3 vols; Toronto: University of Toronto Press)

Humphrey, Chris. 1999. 'Festive drama and community politics in late medieval Coventry', in *Drama and Community: People and Plays in Medieval Europe*, ed. by Alan Hindley (Brepols: Turnhout), pp. 217-30

Lampert, Lisa. 2001. 'The Once and Future Jew: The Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*, Little Robert of Bury and Historical Memory', *Jewish History* 15: 235-55

McNabb, Cameron Hunt. 2014. 'Hocus Pocus and the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*', *Early Theatre* 17: 11-33

Muir, Lynette. 1999. 'European communities and medieval drama', in *Drama and Community: People and Plays in Medieval Europe*, ed. by Alan Hindley (Brepols: Turnhout), pp. 1-17

Oakshott, Jane. 1999. 'York Guilds' Mystery Plays 1998: the rebuilding of dramatic community', in *Drama and Community: People and Plays in Medieval Europe*, ed. by Alan Hindley (Brepols: Turnhout), pp. 270-87

Runnalls, Graham A. 1999. 'Drama and community in late medieval Paris', in *Drama and Community: People and Plays in Medieval Europe*, ed. by Alan Hindley (Brepols: Turnhout)

Sofer, Andrew. 2003. *The Stage Life of Props* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press)

Thrupp, Sylvia L. 1957. 'A Survey of the Alien Population of England in 1440', *Speculum* 32: 262-73