

Crossing the Line: Transgression and Communion in the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*

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The East Anglian Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* is extant in only one manuscript: Trinity College, Dublin, MS F.4.20 (Catalogue No. 652), folios 338^r–356^r.¹ The modern appellation of the “Croxton” Play is due to the internal reference in the bans which states that the performance will take place ‘At Croxston on Monday’ (line 74).² The Croxton referred to is most likely the one in Norfolk, two miles north of Thetford. Another internal reference to ‘the colkote . . . / A lytyll beside Babwell Myll’ (lines 620–21) indicates that this miracle play would have been performed in the vicinity of Bury St Edmunds (Suffolk), which is some fourteen miles from Croxton.³ Gail McMurray Gibson has, however, convincingly argued for the plausibility of the play being originally intended for performance *in* Bury St Edmunds.⁴ This non-cycle drama was likely written after 1461 for performance at the feast of Corpus Christi (introduced to England in the 1320s).⁵

¹ John Coldewey, *Early English Drama: An Anthology* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993), p. 274.

² For the text of the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*, and for all references and quotations, see Coldewey, *Early English Drama*, pp. 277–305.

³ Gail McMurray Gibson, *The Theater of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 34.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 34; for more on the feast of Corpus Christi, see Francis Mersham, ‘Feast of Corpus Christi’, *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 17 vols (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1907–), vol. 4.

The focus of the action is a consecrated communion wafer, the host. Aristorius, a Christian merchant, steals a consecrated host from a church. He sells it to a group of Jewish merchants (who instigated the theft) as they wish to use the host in order to disprove the dogma of transubstantiation. The Jewish characters (Jonathas, Jason, Jasdon, Masphat and Malchus), led by Jonathas, subject the host to a number of tests which parallel the Passion in various ways. For example, the host is stabbed five times which corresponds with the traditional Five Wounds of Christ. As a result, the host begins to bleed and then sticks to Jonathas's hand. In an attempt to free him, his associates nail the host to a post and try to separate his hand from the host. In the process, Jonathas's hand is accidentally detached. They then throw the host into a cauldron of boiling oil and the oil becomes bloody. The host is then placed in an oven which explodes and a vision of the Christ-child appears and addresses them. They repent their sins and Jonathas is miraculously healed. As a result, they convert to Christianity. Aristorius confesses his sacrilegious theft and the host is returned to its rightful place in the local church: a happy ending for all, in medieval Christian terms.

The Croxton Play has been studied from a variety of perspectives. Cecilia Cutts considered it in terms of 'anti-Lollard propaganda',⁶ while Ann Nichols has argued against this view.⁷ It has further been explored as an *exemplum* and for the devotional themes in its humour and violence.⁸

⁶ Cecilia Cutts, 'The Croxton Play: An Anti-Lollard Piece', *Modern Language Quarterly* 5 (1944): 45–60; See also Sister Nicholas Maltman, 'Meaning and Art in the Croxton Play of the Sacrament', *English Literary History* 41 (1974): 149–64.

⁷ Ann Eljenholm Nichols, 'The Croxton Play of the Sacrament: A Re-Reading', *Comparative Drama* 22 (1988): 117–37; 'Lollard Language in the Croxton Play of the Sacrament', *Notes and Queries* 234 (1989): 23–25.

⁸ Richard Homan, 'Two Exempla: Analogues to the *Play of the Sacrament* and *Dux Moraud*', *Comparative Drama* 18 (1984): 241–51; 'Devotional Themes in the Violence and Humor of the *Play of the Sacrament*', *Comparative Drama* 20 (1986): 327–40.

The idea of the host's absorption into mercantilism,⁹ the allusions to Christ as a physician,¹⁰ the spiritual implications of the medicinal allusions in the play,¹¹ as well as the play's theatrical history and theatricality have also been examined.¹² Other investigations have included: the stereotyping 'of the Jew as perpetual murderer' with reference to both the Passion of Christ and the alleged ritual killing of young Robert of Bury;¹³ the text as a form of documentation of the perceived identity of the Jew in late medieval English society;¹⁴ and the 'racial cross-dressing' inherent in the drama.¹⁵ More recently, Derrick Higginbotham has considered the play in terms of the textual and historical context of late medieval mercantilism and English anxieties concerning international trade.¹⁶

I will argue that, in the Croxton Play, "crossing the line", or transgression, is presented as necessary for communion and reaching out to the Other. According to Gail McMurray Gibson:

⁹ Alexandra Reid-Schwartz, 'Economies of Salvation: Commerce and the Eucharist in *The Profanation of the Host* and the *Croxton Play of the Sacrament*', *Comitatus* 25 (1994):1–20.

¹⁰ Victor Scherb, 'The Earthly and Divine Physicians: *Christus Medicus* in the *Croxton Play of the Sacrament*', in *The Body and the Text: Comparative Essays in Literature and Medicine*, ed. Bruce Clarke and Wendell Aycock (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1990), pp. 161–71.

¹¹ Katharine L. Geldenhuys and Margaret Raftery, 'Moral and Medical "Prescriptions" in a Fifteenth-century Sacrament Play', *Acta Academica* 35 (2003): 81–102.

¹² Michael Jones, 'Theatrical History in the *Croxton Play of the Sacrament*', *English Literary History* 66 (1999): 223–60; David Lawton, 'Sacrilege and Theatricality: the *Croxton Play of the Sacrament*', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 33 (2003): 281–309.

¹³ Lisa Lampert, 'The Once and Future Jew: The *Croxton Play of the Sacrament*, Little Robert of Bury and Historical Memory', *Jewish History* 15 (2001): 235–55.

¹⁴ Donnalee Dox, 'Medieval Drama as Documentation: "Real Presence" in the *Croxton Conversion of Ser Jonathas the Jewe by the Myracle of the Blissed Sacrament*', *Theatre Survey* 38 (1997): 97–115.

¹⁵ Robert Clark and Claire Sponsler, 'Othered Bodies: Racial Cross-Dressing in the *Mistere de la Sainte Hostie* and the *Croxton Play of the Sacrament*', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 29 (1999): 61–87.

¹⁶ Derrick Higginbotham, 'Impersonators in the Market: Merchants and the Premodern Nation in the *Croxton Play of the Sacrament*', *Exemplaria* 19 (2007): 163–82.

It is important to observe that the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* is not a play about judgement and punishment, but about penance and healing acceptance. It is a play that assumes the presence of doubt and is just as forthright about assuming the power of drama to restore from doubt. The mimetic conversion and baptism of the denying “Jews” ends with the bishop’s charge to the audience to serve God with devotion and prayer and to keep God’s commandments.¹⁷

Of particular interest here is the idea of Christ as the transgressor of boundaries, especially in the form of the host. Certainly, the play appears to contain a proliferation of transgressions. As a dramatic presentation and exploration of imagined potential interactions with various Others (both human and divine), the Croxton Play allows multiple layers of interpretation, which can, perhaps, offer a modern reader insight into medieval English attitudes to, and negotiation with, the medieval “Other”. The Jewish Other supposedly mimicked in the play would, most likely, have been truly imaginary as the Jewish community had been expelled from England in 1290. Although referred to as Jews, the Other in this play remains fundamentally undifferentiated. Though referred to as Jews, they speak of their god as ‘Machomet’ (line 149), ‘Machomete’ (line 209) or ‘Machomyth’ (line 453) indicating that they are, in fact, Muslim. They may even have been intended to represent the heretical Lollard Others within the East Anglian community.¹⁸

Transgression will thus not be approached as a necessarily negative act but rather in terms of exceeding generally accepted limits (thus, the “crossing of lines”), while communion may be understood in terms of both the

¹⁷ McMurray Gibson, *Theater of Devotion*, p. 38.

¹⁸ For a more in-depth treatment of mutability of identity in this play, see Stephen Spector, ‘Time, Space, and Identity in the *Play of the Sacrament*’, in *The Stage as Mirror: Civic Theatre in Late Medieval Europe* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997), ed. Alan E. Knight, pp. 189–200, and Clark and Sponsler, ‘Othered Bodies’.

Eucharist and inter-personal exchange. In the Croxton Play the “appropriation” of the identities of multiple Others allows the playwright to address numerous concerns about Church doctrine and the interactions between different groups of people, as well as between divine and human.

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According to the doctrine of transubstantiation (which is central to the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*), Christ crosses the boundary between the divine and inanimate object on a regular basis. The Middle Ages was an era of controversy and reflection upon the Eucharist. From around the ninth century it continually occupied a chief position in the theological discussions which progressively composed a theory of the character of the sacraments, their method of operation, their effects and their place in religion.¹⁹ The Catholic doctrine was formulated at the Lateran Council of 1216. The belief was renewed at the Council of Constance in 1415 and again at the Council of Trent in 1551, where it was declared that

by consecration of the bread and wine a conversion of the whole substance of the bread is made into the substance of the Body of Christ our Lord, and of the whole substance of His Blood . . .²⁰

After the consecration, Christ becomes fully present in every particle of the bread and wine of the Eucharist.²¹ Thus the representation of the host in the Croxton Play is to be understood to be the *real* body of Christ, referred to as the Real Presence.

¹⁹ James Srawley, ‘Eucharist (to end of Middle Ages)’, in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings, 13 vols (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1971–), 5: 540–63, pp. 556–57.

²⁰ Cit. in Montgomery Hitchcock, *Transubstantiation: The Roman Dogma Examined* (London: Church Book Room Press, 1948), p. 59.

²¹ See the ‘Catholic Doctrinal Guide’, in *The Holy Bible*, Catholic Life Edition (Chicago: Good Counsel Publishers, 1966), p. 23.

Two prominent authorities frequently appealed to by medieval writers on the topic, were Saint Augustine (354–430) and Saint Ambrose (c. 339–397). The teaching of St Augustine served as the point of departure for those who made a sharp distinction between the sign and the thing signified and who tended toward a belief in a spiritual presence of efficacy and power. Those who inclined to a view of the conversion of the elements in a miraculous manner into the body and blood of Christ were more inclined to the teachings of St Ambrose. In general, however, both parties endeavoured to make the teachings of these Church Fathers mutually compatible and to explain them in terms of their own standpoint on the consecration.²² James Srawley proposes three reasons for the popularity of the transubstantiation doctrine in the Middle Ages. First, it allowed an easy and literal interpretation of the words ‘This is my body’ and ‘This is my blood’, suitable for the generally uneducated laity. Secondly, it was in agreement with the ‘realism of popular thought’ which viewed the world in concrete terms. Thirdly and finally, ‘the language of conversion lent itself to the growing love of the miraculous.’²³ This being so, the Croxton Play (judging by the text and stage directions) takes advantage of all of these qualities by staging a host miracle drama which presents visually spectacular and physical drama, appealing to a popular audience.

It has been suggested that the play was written as ‘a deliberate piece of anti-Lollard propaganda.’²⁴ The heretical Lollard sect (active during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries) rejected the belief in transubstantiation. Other doctrinal issues on which they disagreed with the Church included the sacraments of penance, confession and baptism; the veneration of saints,

²² Srawley, ‘Eucharist (to end of Middle Ages)’, p. 556.

²³ *Ibidem.*

²⁴ Cutts, ‘The Croxton Play: An Anti-Lollard Piece’, p. 45.

relics and images; and the authority of the clergy. However, the principal point of dispute was “the sacrament of the altar”.²⁵ Thus the play could be equally intended to quell the doubts of the faithful and to attempt to persuade wayward Christians of the veracity of Catholic dogma.

According to Montgomery Hitchcock, reports of hosts and corporals stained with blood were familiar at the time and also in agreement with the prevailing Roman Catholic view, and states that there is no doubt that sixteenth-century Roman Catholic writers associated the sacrament with blood.²⁶ John Kelly views it as only natural that early Christians should have thought of the Eucharist as a sacrifice, the rite itself being shrouded in the sacrificial aura with which Christ invested it at the Last Supper. Since the Eucharist brings Christians into union with Christ, it is a bond and mediates communion among them.²⁷ St Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556) describes the Eucharist as ‘an antidote against death which enables us to live in the Lord forever’, while St Cyprian (*d.* 258) speaks of the terrible consequences for those who profane the sacrament, recounting stories confirming his literal belief in the Real Presence.²⁸ These beliefs are of concern here as the Croxton Play deals not only with the profanation of a consecrated host and the consequences of this, due to the Real Presence, but also with the Eucharist and the Passion (which are closely related to one another). The drama aims to reveal that the host is indeed Christ.

St Gregory (*c.* 540–604), the first Pope of that name, saw the service of the Mass as a literal re-creation of Christ’s Passion, a renewal of the sacrificial act so as to gain renewed absolution from sin for all Christians.²⁹ Others,

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 51–52.

²⁶ Hitchcock, *Transubstantiation*, pp. 60–61.

²⁷ John Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 4th ed. (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1968), p. 196.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 197–98, 212.

²⁹ John Harris, *Medieval Theatre in Context: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 7.

such as St Cyprian, seem to have held similar views. The priest was seen as sacramentally re-enacting ‘the oblation of His [Christ’s] passion which the Saviour originally presented to the Father.’³⁰ Thus the Eucharistic feast was sometimes seen as a new Passion in itself. This view instils the Eucharist with a sense of transgression by linking it so explicitly with the murder of a deity. In addition, it makes the re-creation of the Passion in drama through the use of a Eucharistic host in the Croxton Play not only possible, but probable. The concept would not have been alien to the play audience because they were also the Mass “audience”, and participants in the sacramental re-enactment of the transgression against Christ for which the Jews were traditionally demonised during the Middle Ages. (An unconsecrated host, or a prop of similar appearance, would have been used to represent the consecrated host so as to avoid sacrilege, even though sacrilege is what they were, indeed, depicting.)

In the play, the theft and sale of the host initially brings Aristorius and Jonathas (and his compatriots) together in an illicit economic exchange. As Alexandra Reid-Schwartz argues, ‘Aristorius and Jonathas, in effect, conflate commerce and religion, not simply by buying or selling religious icons, but by interpreting religion itself as a kind of commercial economy’. Religion is viewed as profit-based with both characters thanking God for their vast material assets (see lines 117–18, 157–59).³¹ She argues that there is an innate similarity between the operation of money and religious symbols, quoting Mary Douglas’s seminal work on taboo:³²

Money can only perform its role in intensifying economic interaction if the public has faith in it. If faith is shaken, the

³⁰ Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, p. 215.

³¹ Reid-Schwartz, ‘Economies of Salvation’, p. 12.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 3.

currency is useless. So too with ritual; its symbols can only have effect so long as they command confidence.³³

Significantly for a stage production, there are visual similarities between a coin and the communion wafer. In addition, as Higginbotham states, Aristorius' 'ability to treat himself as an Other by alienating himself from his faith expresses the culmination of [his] readiness to cross boundaries, whether geographic, social, or spiritual, in the pursuit of profit.'³⁴ He considers Jonathas and his associates to be similarly able to inhabit the position of the Other as a result of their demonstrable intimacy with Catholic doctrine even before their conversion (see lines 393–448).³⁵

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The Christian merchant Aristorius can be associated with Judas. Both are ostensibly supporters of Christ but then betray his body to the Jews for personal monetary gain. The parallel is emphasised by the playwright by interposing a scene where Aristorius shares a meal of bread and red wine with Isoder, the chaplain of the church from which the host will be stolen (lines 336–55). This takes place between Aristorius' negotiation to sell a consecrated host to Jonathas (lines 285–331) and the actual theft and sale of the host (lines 360–84) which is followed by its "torture" (lines 391–740). The associations between the meal in the play and the communion meal as celebrated during Mass and the Last Supper, are evident. All, of course, have links to the body of Christ and his Passion.

³³ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Culture and Taboo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 69.

³⁴ Higginbotham, 'Impersonators in the Market', p. 178.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

These transgressions, however, ultimately lead to social and spiritual cohesion or communion. The conversion and baptism of the Jewish characters brings them into line with the dominant spiritual vision of medieval East Anglia. They are, therefore, no longer Other, but part of the body of Christ in the Christian Church, in accordance with Colossians 1:17–18, where the bodies of all Christians are described as being Christ's body: 'he [Christ] is bifor alle, and alle thingis ben in hym. And he is heed of the bodi of the chirche.'³⁶ Through their conversion the Jewish characters are also, simultaneously, "crossing the line" by abandoning their Jewish faith, a negative transgression from that perspective. Aristorius repents his sin against Christ and the Catholic Church, and "gets back into line" by agreeing to live for good deeds in the future and to renounce his career as a merchant (lines 914–15, 972–73).

In a discussion of the social body in the Croxton Play, Victor Scherb asserts:

The Sacrament, as one body of Christ, has an intimate symbolic relation with that other body of Christ – the community of worshipers, and an attack on the Host could be looked upon not only as sacrilege, but as an attack on the community.³⁷

The playwright takes advantage of these correlations by using the dramatic representation of violence against the host to exemplify rifts and/or doubts within the East Anglian community (such as the Lollard heresies). As a final act of communion the audience is invited to join in a procession as the host (having reverted to its pre-torture state) is returned to the church

³⁶ *The Bible*, trans. John Wycliffe, *Wesley Center Online: Wesley Center for Applied Theology* (Northwest Nazarene University, 1993–2005: http://wesley.nnu.edu/biblical_studies/wycliffe/ accessed 21 September 2009).

³⁷ Victor I. Scherb, 'Violence and the social body in the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*', in *Violence in Drama*, ed. James Redmond (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 69–78, p.71.

(lines 834–41). This ‘allows the spectators to objectively express their community of faith’, thereby signifying the unity of the body of Christ in the Church as they follow the body of Christ in the host.³⁸ As Mary Douglas argues, ‘rituals work upon the body politic through the symbolic medium of the physical body.’³⁹

This idea is clearly evident in the comic “quack doctor” scene, where the physician, Master Brundyche of Brabant, and his assistant Colle, appear and discuss the doctor’s skill in healing. The long and detailed list of the curative abilities he claims resembles those in quack doctor scenes in folk plays.⁴⁰ The position of the quack doctor scene in the play clearly identifies it with the folk drama tradition as well as supporting the notion of Christ as the true Physician (both physical and spiritual) of humankind (the *Christus Medicus* motif, which is prevalent in the play). The doctor was traditionally a character in sword dances and would usually come forward to resurrect whichever character was “beheaded”.⁴¹ As André Lascombes points out, the dramatist’s use of the ‘notoriously incompetent . . . folk doctor demonstrates the absurd irrelevance of any paltry human medicine to heal spiritual damage.’⁴² So, in this scene, a humorous and light-hearted discussion of the potential medical treatment of a person who is physically ill is used as a symbolic reference to spiritual health.⁴³

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 74, 76.

³⁹ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, p. 128.

⁴⁰ Scherb, ‘The Earthly and Divine Physicians’, p. 167.

⁴¹ Edmund Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage*, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1903), 1: 206–07.

⁴² André Lascombes, ‘Revisiting the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*: Spectacle and the Other’s Voice’, in *European Medieval Drama 2: Papers from the Second International Conference on European Medieval Drama, Camerino, 4–6 July 1997*, ed. Sydney Higgins (Turnhout: Brepols, 1998), 261–75, p. 269.

⁴³ For a detailed discussion of the use of the *Christus Medicus* motif, as well as the spiritual significance of the various herbal remedies discussed in the “quack doctor” scene, see Geldenhuys & Raftery, ‘Moral and Medical “Prescriptions”’, pp. 81–102.

Various scholars have argued that this scene is a later addition to the play⁴⁴ and, in the past, it has received strong criticism on both doctrinal and dramatic grounds.⁴⁵ At the end of the quack doctor scene, Jonathas exclaims:

Avoyde, fealows, I love not yowr bable!
 Brushe them hens bothe and that anon!
 Gyff them ther reward that they were gone!
 (lines 650–52)

The Jews then chase Master Brundyche and Colle from the stage. Clearly, the Jewish characters do not appreciate their intrusion. Nevertheless, the scene is not, as some have suggested, simply a comic interpolation of no inherent value or interest, but an important scene which, by means of its “transgressive” characteristics, actively contributes to the drama’s instructive theme by means of its subtle references to the “medicinal” and healing aspects of the Passion, for humanity.

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While the sacrilegious transgressions of the human characters in the Croxton Play are evident, the transgressions of Christ are perhaps less clear. However, the play presents the reader/audience with what may be perceived as a transgressive god. The idea of a god “crossing the line” is one that perhaps sits more comfortably with the likes of Zeus and his pantheon, rather than with Jesus Christ. If we consider the definition of “transgress”: to ‘go beyond the limits prescribed by (a law, command, etc.)’,⁴⁶ then quite

⁴⁴ See, for example: Coldewey, *Early English Drama*, p. 274; Hardin Craig, *English Religious Drama of the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), p. 326; Norman Davis, *Non-Cycle Plays and Fragments* (London: Oxford University Press for The Early English Text Society, 1970), p. lxxv.

⁴⁵ For example, see Craig, *English Religious Drama*, pp. 326–27.

⁴⁶ *OED* transgress, *v.* 1a.

clearly Christ can be seen as a positively transgressive divinity – not one to “toe the line”. As indicated by the Croxton Play, even after his Resurrection he keeps reaching out to the human Other in spectacular ways.

The most obvious way in which the divine traverses the boundaries between God and humanity, is through miracles. According to Christian doctrine, the Incarnation, Passion and Resurrection were divinely-ordained and necessary for the salvation of humanity. These miracles, as well as miracles of healing, may be regarded as transgressions into the usual order of the experience of humanity.

Even the Church Fathers did not always agree on the precise nature of miracles. According to St Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–74), for example:

Nothing is called a miracle by comparison with the Divine Power; because no action is of any account compared with the power of God . . . But a thing is called a miracle by comparison with the power of nature which it surpasses. So the more the power of nature is surpassed, the greater is the miracle.⁴⁷

On the other hand, St Augustine argued:

[W]e say that all portents are contrary to nature; but they are not so. For how is that contrary to nature which happens by the will of God, since the will of so mighty a Creator is certainly the nature of each created thing? A portent, therefore, happens not contrary to nature, but contrary to what we know as nature.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 2 vols (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947), 1: 521.

⁴⁸ Augustine, *City of God*, Book xxi, chap. 8, trans. Marcus Dods, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, vol. 2, ed. Philip Schaff (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887; rev. and ed. for New Advent by Kevin Knight, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/120121.htm> accessed 21 September 2009).

Despite any differences of opinion, they appear to have recognized the innate human tendency to understand miracles in terms of some sort of a breach of the boundary between divine and human, by God. In the Croxton Play, therefore, miracles may be understood as the divine means of the transgression (or, at least, what is *perceived by humanity* as transgression) of the margins between the divine and the human (and inanimate) Other in order to create a spiritual union between God and humanity. It is due to their extraordinary character that miracles impose themselves upon human experience, compelling attention.

Miracles were integral to medieval belief (as mentioned earlier, this was one of the reasons for the popularity of the theory of transubstantiation during the Middle Ages). According to Miri Rubin:

It has often been said that a “miraculous mood” prevailed in medieval culture . . . more popular interpretations saw miracles as instrumental occurrences, as weapons against adversaries, through the interpretation of irregularities in nature as divine intervention in punishment for their misdeeds . . . a eucharistic miracle tale was not only a story about the host, it was a manifestation of just how regular and reliable intervention was.⁴⁹

The Croxton Play abounds with miraculous events as well as allusions to miraculous occurrences. The Incarnation, Passion and Resurrection are figuratively evoked through the attacks on the host. The consequences of the attacks not only argue for the truth of transubstantiation but also place Christ's Passion (in particular) within the medieval context, perhaps making its implications more accessible to a medieval audience. Thus the prop representing the consecrated host alludes to Christ's Real Presence, while the tortures to which the host is subjected parallel those of the

⁴⁹ Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 112–13.

Passion: for example, the ‘woundys fyve’ (line 458) recalling the Five Wounds of Christ (as mentioned previously).

As a result of the five wounds, the host bleeds and sticks to Jonathas’s hand. In an echo of the crucifixion, Jason, Jasdon, Masphat and Malchus nail the host to a post with three nails (lines 507–11) in an attempt to free Jonathas from the host but his hand is torn from his body instead. Sarah Beckwith has argued that Jonathas can be regarded as a grotesque parody of Christ as he is “crucified” with him; ‘the Jew with Christ’s body on his hands is irrevocably implicated in the act of crucifixion.’⁵⁰ According to André Lascombes, this scene illustrates in visual terms the belief that the body of the Redeemer and the body of the sinner are one.⁵¹ Furthermore, as Richard Homan notes, the playwright has Jonathas echo Christ’s words at the end of the scene of his suffering: ‘Ther ys no more; I must enduer!’ (line 520).⁵² This serves to emphasise further the parody of the Passion, which in itself may be seen as a violation of generally accepted behaviour towards a deity.

After receiving these wounds, the host again bleeds and they decide to throw it into a ‘cawdron full of oyle!’ (line 486) to boil for ‘thre howrys’ (line 488). This functions as a cooking metaphor of Hell, which was common in medieval drama in particular.⁵³ As a result, the cauldron of boiling oil can be seen as a reminder that Christ had to descend to Hell, while the three hours’ cooking time can be understood as a reference to the belief that Christ was dead for three days. The Jewish characters then place

⁵⁰ Sarah Beckwith, ‘Ritual, Church and Theatre: Medieval Dramas of the Sacramental Body’, in *Culture and History 1350–1600: Essays on Communities, Identities and Writing*, ed. David Aers (London: Harvester-Wheatsheaf, 1992), 65–89, p. 75.

⁵¹ Lascombes, ‘Revisiting the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*’, p. 269.

⁵² Homan, ‘Devotional Themes’, p. 332.

⁵³ See Margaret Raftery, ‘Aspects of Dramatic Development in the Roles of Devil Characters in the Religious Drama of the Netherlands, with particular reference to *Mariken van Nieumeghen*’, *The Southern African Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 6 (1996): 72–102, p. 78.

'straw and thornys' (line 693) in a fire to heat up the oven, recalling both Christ's birth in a stable and the crown of thorns of the Passion. The eventual explosion of the oven (at which the Christ-child appears) may be seen as a representation of the Harrowing of Hell, while William Tydeman views it as symbolising the Resurrection.⁵⁴ The miraculous presence of the Christ-child also evokes the Incarnation. Thomas Aquinas argues that such apparitions or transformations of the consecrated host into a child are wrought by God in order 'to represent the truth, namely, to show by this miraculous apparition that Christ's body and blood are truly in this sacrament'.⁵⁵ In addition, Christ's healing of Jonathas's severed hand corresponds with his Biblical healings and by far exceeds what was medically possible in the Middle Ages.

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Transgression is repeated and multiplied in the Croxton Play. The transubstantiated host is mistreated in a number of ways. Various characters abuse it and these abuses echo the transgressions committed against Christ in his Incarnated form during the Passion. All this recalls Christ's crossing of the line between divine and human in his Incarnation and between divine being and inanimate objects in every particle of the bread and wine at every Mass. The transgressions seem to proliferate through time and space from the apparently simple white disk of the communion wafer at the start of the play.

This proliferation manifests another noteworthy feature of the transgression of taboo in the religious context: that of excess.⁵⁶ According

⁵⁴ William Tydeman, *English Medieval Theatre 1400–1500* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), p. 56.

⁵⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 2: 2462.

⁵⁶ Michael Taussig, 'Transgression', in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. M. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 349–64, pp. 359–60.

to Georges Bataille's theory of *dépense* or "expenditure", all human communities tend toward excess, to careless, extravagant expenditure, an inclination applicable to both economics and religion.⁵⁷ The attacks of the Jewish characters on the host in the play seem excessive and appear to become more frenzied, escalating with the severing of Jonathas's hand and culminating, after his healing via divine intervention, in the conversion of the Jewish characters to Christianity. These events seem to bear out Michael Taussig's assertion that

it is the drama involved in the revelation of the mysteries that ensures a person's initiation. In addition, such revelation ensures not disenchantment but further enchantment thanks to a mystical illumination.⁵⁸

It is the Jewish characters' dramatic attacks on the host that verify the mystery of transubstantiation to them (and the audience). This leads to their spiritual illumination and subsequent conversion (which, as has been noted, makes them a part of the body of Christ in the Church). They now become part of the Christian community and can legitimately share in the Eucharistic feast in the Christian Church. The Church considers 'the Mass and Communion' to be 'the visible bond between people, priest and bishop, who are all one body who share the one Bread'.⁵⁹ They have consequently entered into both social and spiritual communion with the Christians.

The prevalence of lists also stands in marked contrast to the visual simplicity of the consecrated host, which finally brings everyone together with their attention fixed upon this solitary (yet deeply meaningful) symbol.⁶⁰ The lengthy secular lists – such as Aristorius' alphabetical

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 359.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 355.

⁵⁹ Adrian Fortescue, 'Liturgy of the Mass', in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 9.

⁶⁰ Thanks to Victor Houlston for drawing my attention to this possible interpretation.

recitation of the international centres where he has traded (lines 89–124); Jonathas's catalogue of treasures (lines 157–88); and Colle's advertisement of Master Brundyche's medical abilities (lines 608–21) – finally give way to the Christ-child's list of traditional reproaches against his attackers (lines 719–40) before He once more takes on the form of the host, subsuming a proliferation of meanings into this single symbol.

* * *

In the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*, then, the traditional doctrines of transubstantiation and miracles generate numerous dramatic representations of transgression. The consequent conversion and incorporation, the communion with the Other, can, however, be seen as complacent and illusory. Clark and Sponsler assert:

In the *Play of the Sacrament* issues of body and embodiment are played out in a fantasy of ever-widening circles of inclusion and incorporation – the body of the Host, the body of Christ, the body of believers, the *bodies* of believers, and, finally, the othered bodies hovering on the outer edge of the circle who, this time anyway, are absorbed into it.⁶¹

My argument is that without the transgression of boundaries there would be no meeting of Others, no conflict, no communion. Mary Douglas's analysis of taboo is relevant here. She asserts:

The danger which is risked by boundary transgression is power. Those vulnerable margins and those attacking forces which threaten to destroy good order represent the powers inhering in the cosmos. Ritual which can harness these for good is harnessing

⁶¹ Clark and Sponsler, 'Othered Bodies,' p. 69.

power indeed . . . The quest for purity is pursued by rejection . . .
Purity is the enemy of change, of ambiguity and compromise.⁶²

Thus, in the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* the Christian playwright enacts a ritual of transgression (and thus of impurity) that neutralises the threat of religious heterodoxy. Making use of a dramatic representation of imaginary Jewish characters, the playwright ponders the nature of the doctrine of transubstantiation, and possible Christian doubts and anxieties concerning it (such as the Lollard heresy), at a safe remove. Again, the Christian uses a representation of a Jewish/Muslim Other to consider the divine Other, thereby crossing social and spiritual boundaries, while Christ may also be perceived as reaching out to the human Other by transgressing limits.

⁶² Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, pp. 161–62.