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The Croxton Play of the Sacrament: *Paradox and Scandal Made Spectacle*

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This paper discusses a play which, sometimes seen as a crudely didactic and unaesthetic tract, has also been labelled anti-Lollard or anti-Jewish.[1] It takes into account various evaluations insisting on the play's positive aspects and, concentrating on relatively undernoticed points, argues that this highly original dramatic and theatrical elaboration, of some cultural and artistic complexity, well deserves a complement of critical attention and numerous stage productions to boot. My re-reading first examines its argumentative line, in the hope of showing that the play-text largely belies some of the views expressed by previous critics and possibly points in a fairly different direction. Then, in a second section, I turn to elements which, intimately linked to the subject-matter of the play, arguably produce its spectacular efficacy.

An Ideological Issue Shaped by Contrast and Paradox

My observations derive from Iuri Lotman's fundamental remarks on the artistic text as structured by contradiction (pp. 407-12), views related to the

1 For two contradictory assessments of the play, see Cutts and Nichols.

Bakhtinian notion of heteroglossia and dialogism, *i.e.*, irruptions and disruptions competing with the normative text. Such dialogical apparent contradictions are part and parcel of the argumentative strategy of this play. They essentially concern the respective status of the two merchants, who, though traditionally viewed as equivalent (even if antagonistic) figures, may be shown to be strongly differentiated from their first appearance, with the contrast kept to the fore throughout as the semantic and functional basis of the play.

The initial speeches of the two merchants, Sir Aristorius the Christian and Jonathas the Jew, trading, respectively, between the eastern and western shores of the Mediterranean, Syria ("Surré" [l. 251]) and Spain ("Arigon" [l. 267]), have been mainly regarded as two pieces of boasting in the tradition of medieval comic tyrants. Yet their comparable length (sixty-seven and forty-seven lines) and the near-identity of topic conceal a substantial difference in structure and meaning. Aristorius Mercator (a high-sounding name, whereas Jonathas is called the Jew Master) characteristically speaks first, devoting most of his forty-seven alliterative lines to the description and praise of his commercial empire. In a way that would be strongly linked in audience memory to tyrannical assertions of secular power in the cycle plays, his speech recalls his territorial influence with a complacent outspokenness evocative of the Temptation scenes or of Herod's ranting bouts. Immediately introducing himself by name (ll. 89-94), as good tyrants do, Aristorius has a long stretch of lines of perfect syntactic and syntagmatic regularity, which assert his activity, reputation and authority over lands and peoples. Beyond this, the circular structure of the speech, opening and closing on his triumphal sense of owning an imperial dominion, confirms the restricted moral sense which afflicts the master of such a boundless world. The other striking semantic element is the assertion that Aristorius lords it over the religious world, which Presbiter the chaplain at once confirms (ll. 125-32). Apart from a conventional sense of glee, the only flicker of emotion comes from the exhilarating rounds of alliterated commercial places he commands, plus perhaps two incipient images (ll. 102 and 116) adding just a touch of poetical vision to what had hitherto read rather like a no-nonsense business balance-sheet.[2]

In contradistinction, Jonathas the Jew begins by voicing in twelve lines his love for Mahomet, his firm desire to abide by Mahomet's laws, and his thanks

2 L. 102 possibly alludes to "fresshe … flower[ys]" decorating his ship-hulls and/or sails, whereas, in l. 116, the two alliterating monosyllables "set" and "sale" forcefully evoke these ships' presence throughout the *oikoumene*.

for the prodigious wealth this god has "sent" (l. 157) and "lent" (l. 159) him (the pointed rhyme reinforcing the effect). The initial recognition by the devotee that his god owns everything in this world qualifies in advance the sense we might get that the Jew possesses these treasures, which he describes in one long sentence sprawling over four stanzas (ll. 160-88). The affirmation "I have", repeated four times only, nearly disappears in the paratactic piling-up of direct objects (sumptuous jewels, fragrant spices, luscious fruits and exotic perfumes) evocative of the wonders of the East (ll. 161-88). This keeps the owner's presence to an unobtrusive minimum. The Jew here speaks much more in the spirit of the Wakefield Adam, walking in wonder through the garden of Eden, spelling out in his litany a tribute to the Almighty's divine splendour, than in the tone of Everyman the miser, viewing his Goods piled up in coffers and bags in the eponymous play (ll. 414-34). Finally, the contrast sharply distinguishing the two merchants' religious and moral stances is thematically emphasized by the Jew's carefully distancing his superfluity of gems and spices from any idea of terrestrial and geographical possession. Except for one mention of his laden ships (l. 174), his wealth is as much delocalized as it is exoticized, totally estranged from the geographical world. Described in ways that evoke shape, size, colour or fragrance, it is offered to contemplation and desire for the sole enjoyment of the inward eye. What structurally crowns the difference is that Jonathas, contrary to Aristorius, mentions his name and mastership over four servants only at the very end of his speech.

It is difficult not to think that this pointed disjunction of the two merchants' ways of thinking, and of their traditional religious and racial images, is meant to estrange the audience from an automatic approbation of the Christian and rejection of the Jew. To me, the obvious result of such a splitting-up of the two stereotypes (making the familiar Christian a greedy materialist bloated with pride, and the despicable Jew a provider of beauty and luxury) is to "defamiliarize" them in audience minds, thereby inducing an ambivalent feeling of attraction and repulsion for the two figures. This conclusion may seem less far-fetched when one notices that the splitting-up is maintained throughout the play. Instantly shifting (l. 196) from public address to an appeal to his four servants, Jonathas tells them of his insistent doubt as to whether Christ may actually dwell in a consecrated host. This will lead him to submit a consecrated wafer to a new Passion in an attempt to disprove the central Catholic tenet: Christ's redemption of mankind (ll. 205-28) and its main consequence, Christ's spiritual presence in any consecrated

host. The perfect knowledge of Christian dogma displayed by the Jews strengthens the impression of Jonathas' appeal for believing Christians. By contrast, in the next scene, the Christian merchant's exquisite scruples are unable to resist the Jew's offer of a hundred pounds, readily counted down on the spot (ll. 315-22), as a bribe for pilfering a host in church overnight. When Aristorius invites his chaplain home to a supper of *bread* and good Romney *wine* (ll. 338-55), this parody of the Last Supper is as much of a blasphemy as the sacrilegious Passion the Jew inflicts upon the host. Indeed, it is distinctly worse in being part and parcel of Aristorius' simoniac programme. In clear contrast, Jonathas' sacrilegious attempt is insistently presented as springing from spiritual unrest.

Thus renewed at every significant point of the traditional fiction, as revamped by the apparently East Anglian playwright, this chiastic dissociation of the two religious merchant figures is finally pointedly recalled in the parallel but distinct verdicts passed upon the two culprits by Christ's representative, the bishop Episcopus. After Aristorius explicitly acknowledges his fault for what it is, namely, the precise reiteration of Judas' crime ("I sold yon same Jewys owr Lord full right / For couytyse of good, as a cursed wyght" [ll. 853-54]; "I have offendyd in the syn of couytys: / I sold owr Lordys body for lucre of mony" [ll. 901-2]), the bishop's sanction is precisely meted out to fit it: "Euer whyll pou lyuest good dedys for to done / And neuermore for to bye nor sell" (ll. 914-15). Like the eponymous hero of the nearly contemporary play *Everyman*, Aristorius is a member and representative of the active and affluent bourgeois middle class, so that the play's severe indictment is seemingly levelled too at that social category, if not at the increasingly lay-minded society then flourishing in England and Northern Europe. Though coloured by the anti-Jewish prejudices of the day, Christ's verdict (in the bishop's words) is just as precisely suited to the nature of Jonathas' fault. Once christened in church (ll. 952-59), the Jew is carefully confined to the outskirts of Christian society and invited to roam about, while spiritually earning his new status as a Christian.

In keeping with the increasingly blatant irony of Aristorius' name and the ecclesiastical sanctions thus neatly tailored to the social status of the two culprits, another dimension of the continued contrast between the two merchants must finally be highlighted. While theatrically re-enacting the pivotal article of dogma—transubstantiation—so dangerously shaken by the thinking of Wyclif and his successors, *The Croxton Play* makes it clear that the antithetical roles of the merchants (split up by the initial dialogism) eventuate in what must be seen as

a spiritual, as well as a cultural, paradox, reversing the current doxa about the two categories. More precisely, however, the paradoxical garb dresses up what truly ranks as scandal.

Although commonly reduced in lay usage to the sense of morally shocking behaviour, or the report of such, the term "scandal" retains in its biblical and religious context the original meaning of an unmoveable obstacle unexpectedly tripping up the spirit and numbing, or thwarting, its response. Lay dictionaries often ignore the ambivalence.[3] But sources such as the *Vocabulaire de théologie biblique* and *Dictionnaire Encyclopédique de la Bible* show greater sensitivity to the dual inner mechanism associated with "scandal" in the theological context. In that context, the phenomenon necessarily involves a criminal twosome: he who sets the trap, and the victim who fails adequately to respond.[4] It should therefore be recognised that in a fiction astutely combining two crimes into one plot, the two merchants are similarly linked in the scandalous process.[5] If the archetypal Other, the Jew, first envisages the desecration of the host, the scandal can be realised only by the compliance of a "nominal" Christian whose dormant avarice is roused by the Jew's doubt. In such a reading, the Jew might be much more than a bugbear and an archetype of the European medieval fears, the threatening figure of the Other, as Walker suggests in a carefully enigmatic phrase, reading his function as a "useful index to prevailing anxieties about racial and religious difference in medieval English culture" (Walker, ed., p. 213). I would argue that, beyond that essentially atmospheric function, Jonathas comes to the fore, not only as a caricatural and eminent figure of fun, but also as the finally defeated and ridiculed, yet nevertheless pivotal, agent that bears the load of the whole plot up to its potentially tragic close, and additionally provides most of the spectacle through his maddening propensity to excess.

3 Translated from the Hebrew *mikshôl* by the Greek *skandalon* in the Septante Bible, the *scandalum* of Christian theology is fraught with an ambivalence that lay dictionaries hardly reflect, as is obvious in the *OED* (*s.v.* "scandal", 1a and b).

4 *Vocabulaire de théologie biblique* and *Dictionnaire Encyclopédique de la Bible* both gloss the term. The latter more clearly lists two main series, those proceeding from Satan, and those born from the very teaching of God, or Christ, whose salvation design from Incarnation until Ascension is misunderstood by man. Hence: "l'épreuve où Dieu met son peuple ou son enfant, … envoyant le Christ pour être un scandale pour l'homme"; and, quoting Christ:"Heureux celui pour qui je ne suis pas un scandale"(Mat. 11-6) (pp. 1199-1202).

5 Davidson is one of the very few critics to openly acknowledge the link (*Festivals*, p. 7).

Beyond Paradox: Scandal Made Spectacle

While essays by David Bevington, David Mills and Clifford Davidson have provided generally influential readings of the play, which are willingly acknowledged here, it is Ann Eljenholm Nichols' and Janette Dillon's fine studies that have particularly fed and closely influenced my own commentary. Dillon, in a bold comparison with contemporary body-art, throws a new light on various aspects of the play. To begin with, she emphasizes the potent contrast (described as *confrontational presence*) between a material reality constantly insisted upon and a spiritually significant invisible unendingly sought after (Dillon, pp. 169-70). Of the four points I would like to go into in this second section, the first and third owe much to her views.

I. Contradiction as a Structural Element

This principle, as argued from the first, is embodied by the contrasting images of the two merchants. Aristorius deliberately confines himself to acts of material exchange and mercantile values (hence his symbolic resemblance to Judas), whereas Jonathas—a Thomas-like figure, in Davidson's parlance (*Festivals*, p. 73)—obsessively digs at the Christian dogma, searching for a response to the spiritual and rational contradiction he resents. Davidson's suggestion can even be pushed a bit further, since that Thomas-figure is recurrently busy in late medieval English drama in the similar function of professional doubter, one who, reputedly close to his master's thought, often plays the honest broker under his, at times, scandalous guise, hastening, through his obdurate questioning, the shocking recognition of Christ's teaching.[6]

But contradiction emerges as even more obviously structural by way of the inset piece, which, suspending the main plot, obliquely reflects and distorts it in burlesque replica. Mills propounded such a view years ago, insisting that the episode (ll. 525-652) establishes another time-space universe, distinctly dividing the drama into two play-areas: the scaffolds where the main plot is enacted, and the *platea*, which is successively invaded by Colle, the quack doctor's man, and

6 Davidson insists that "The English playwright has … made the Jews in his play to be doubters, like 'Doubting' Thomas, whose belief was revived by the miracle of seeing and touching the risen Christ … (John 20:24-29)"(*Festivals*, pp. 73-74). For the functions of the doubter in the English medieval plays, see my "Elements of a Persuasion Strategy", pp. 150-56.

Master Brundyche of Brabant himself.[7] Readily following Dillon's supplementary proposal that such an interruption is no chance addition but a minutely-timed commentary (Dillon, p. 175), I also fully subscribe to her repeated suggestion that the play moves between alternating tones of burlesque and reverence.[8] In that respect, she excellently describes the brief visual exchange opposing, during the closing moments of the inset, two very different forms of physical presence: the image of Jonathas on his scaffold, "severed from his dangling hand", and that of "the disruptive doctor and his man, attempting physically to invade the scaffold of the sacred fiction" (Dillon, p. 173). I would further suggest, however, that, excellent as this single image is, the core of the contrast is essentially between the business of the two frauds and what passes in the main fiction at the moment of its interruption when Jonathas runs away (ll. 501-15), only to return when they are beaten out of the *platea* (ll. 653-75). At this point, Jonathas, obviously in the grip of some insane fear at seeing the normal rules of material life suspended and abnormality warp each of the Jews' acts, exclaims, "I wylle go drenche me in a lake. / And in woodnesse I gynne to wake! / I renne, I lepe ouer þis lond" (ll. 501-3), whereas the stage direction says, "Here he renneth wood, with þe Ost in hys hond" (l. 504 SD). After the two quacks' departure, he says again, "For dowte of drede what after befall! / I am nere masyd, my wytte ys gon; / Therfor of helpe I pray you all" (ll. 654-56).

When the Jew master confesses to being momentarily estranged from his rational self at this moment of maximised emotion—very probably sensed as such by the audience—the bracketed episode of the burlesque pair opens, proposing in derisive denegation the genuine vulgarity of quack remedies, which are mechanically rattled off in grandiloquent patter as cures for petty ailments and ills. Here is precisely the point the Croxton playwright wants to make; he maximizes the distance between the two levels of reality—one everyday and only too visible, the other clerically asserted (and possibly yearned for by some), but invisible, baffling to reason and in hot dispute. By this means, the Croxton playwright for a few moments mentally suspends his audience between two incompatible worlds, allowing spectators to share, ever so briefly, the demented extravaganza of the Jewish hero. Likewise, by imposing upon his rural audience

7 Mills evokes "a structure which is based on a dual consciousness of time" (p. 147).

8 After noting, as her starting point, that "the play is centred on the notion of the real and the true, ... but the location of the real is slippery" (p. 169), Dillon remarks on the play's paradoxical effect: "being a call for reverence" and concurrently "offering the thrill of outraging taboo" (p. 171).

of possible doubters the undeniable trivial presence of the derisive pair in the inset, he allows them time for mental resistance to the unseen presence of the disputed truth, making room in the process for its ensuing acceptance in the form of the obviously theatrical fabrication of the miracle, which, by explicit convention, is but *a sign* of the real thing.[9] Thanks to an astute implementation of that rhetorical resource which Gérard Genette has called "narrative metalepsis", he can secure a measure of theatrical efficiency, engrafting upon the forbidding dogmatic demonstration its laughable vulgarised inversion.[10]

One last structural remark may be added to this. The spectacular efficiency of such a suspension is still further heightened, if need be, by the accessory trick of textual distancing or framing. As in most medieval pieces, whether dramatic or narrative, the artistic distance between work and receptive audience is carefully underlined by this. If we return to Aristorius' very first words, we notice that his so-called boasting does not start right away, but is in fact pushed back to the sixth line. The first five lines are a framing segment isolating the fiction from the introductory matter (banns and list of players). This is, of course, much more to be sensed in the reading than in performance. But this initial bracketing-off is complemented by another sign of liminal closure, this time perceptible by hearers, which is made explicit at the close of the play by the two antagonists, Jonathas and Aristorius. Jonathas, thanking the bishop for his christening and acknowledging his faults, declares, "Now wyll we walke by contré and cost, / Owr wyckyd lyuyng for to restore" (ll. 964-65), and reiterates, "Now we take owr leave at lesse and mare / Forward on owr vyage we wyll vs dresse" (ll. 970-71). Aristorius immediately follows suit, saying, "Into my contré now wyll I fare / For to amende myn wyckyd lyfe" (ll. 972-73), then walks away (ll. 976-77). Such lines carefully blur the question of to which outer space the two culprits will proceed, so that, according to their understanding, spectators are kept mentally wavering between Aragon or Syria and East Anglia.

II. Two Basic Isotopies: Blindness and Vision

Besides this essentially structural division, another powerful contrast, linguistic and thematic this time, further reinforces the structural partition, emphasiz-

9 See Dillon, pp. 174-75.

10 See Genette, pp. 14-16. For similar use of a referential slippage in a comparable place-and-scaffold staging, see my "Play-area as Mediation".

ing the meaning of the play, as well as enhancing its theatrical effectiveness. It proceeds from the insistent presence of the two antagonistic isotopies of sight and blindness, which are linked to the two distinct fictional levels: that of the material reality which Aristorius serves and Jonathas investigates, and that of the spiritual truth which affronts that outer reality. The way in which the Jew's boast dwells specifically on the visual splendour of the gems he traffics in (ll. 81-92), and of other oriental luxuries (ll. 93-106), may at first pass unnoticed, but it will be noticed when right afterwards Jonathas broaches the theme of the incredible mystery of the Christian host with the complaint that "it makes us blynd" (l. 123)—and later again: "make us thus blind" (l. 388).

Davidson usefully reminds his reader (*Festivals*, p. 73) that Nichols, in her groundbreaking re-examination of the play, had previously drawn attention to the pictorial and linguistic frequency in the Christian tradition of the reproach addressed to the Jews about their spiritual and theological blindness, and that they were "proverbial for demanding signs" (Nichols, p. 127). Thus the thematic contrast helps to insert the play in the long chain of renditions of a legendary fiction. Much more importantly, it also emphasizes the enduring link established in Christian practice, from the prophets to the Apostles (Mat. 13:14-17, Luke 24:25-35), between vision and faith—the link so soberly celebrated in the *Visitatio Sepulchri* plays in a mere few words. While late medieval religious mores so exaggerated the conflation of vision and devotional emotion as to make late nineteenth- and twentieth-century criticism reluctant to interpret it as other than morally degrading, its prevalence, conclusively demonstrated, has finally been critically acclimatised.[11] Regarding *The Croxton Play*, Davidson, again citing Nichols, underlines the nearly co-substantial link late medieval Christians made between seeing and eating, with whole congregations often taking communion just by gazing at the Host at the moment of the Eucharist (*Festivals*, p. 65). The suggestion undoubtedly sheds light on the ocular empathy potentially triggered among the audience of such a play, with the gory images of host and cauldron continuously kept centre-stage, even at the moment of the Jews' reverent communion.

Finally, the contrastive isotopy supports the governing paradox of the discerning Outsider, who, in the person of the evangelical Publican, proves more

11 Robinson may well be one of the first Anglo-Saxon critics to read that topic in the Late Middle Age cultural perspective. Various well-documented studies on popular devotional mores in Northern Europe, including Marrow's *Passion Iconography* (1979), echo Alphonse Dupront's magisterial ruminations on the breadth of *la sphère sacrale* in vernacular European cultures.

perceptive and genuine than his Pharisianic counterpart. Such an echo of the evangelical theme (see, *e.g.*, Luke 13:25-30 or even Mat. 7:1-5) may have appealed in a flattering way to the not-particularly-observant Christians in East Anglian audiences, which may not have been substantially different from those of *The Castle of Perseverance* or *Mankind.*

III. Dialogue and Commentary

My third set of observations hinges upon this question and will try to account for two final remarks by Dillon, which though insistently stated, are, to my mind, left scantily argued. She discerns something of a mutual mirroring effect in the steady presence of the visual and the aural aspects of the play-text, an effect which may be sensed even today, and from the very act of reading. Dillon also rather obscurely points out the play's capacity to move audiences and glue them to the scene in what she calls their "fetishtic mode of looking" (Dillon, p. 173). Before paying attention to these intuitions in her study, I had been struck by the extent to which the Croxton playwright continuously keeps the audience close to the action. In a brief study ("La fonction 'Commentateur'") closely exploiting one of Jean-Paul Débax's inspiring papers ("The Function Called 'Commentator'"), I had remarked on the way in which the anonymous authors of plays of the early period use the alternate linguistic techniques of dialogue and commentary to the ends of spectacular efficiency. Whereas dialogue, the staple substance of dramatic action, is, of course, important in the play, it is not, by a long chalk, the dominant or most influential form of exchange. Apart from the two opening speeches by the merchants (semi-direct addresses and semi-exchanges with their followers [ll. 89-124 and 133-40, by Aristorius; ll. 149-96 by Jonathas]), and after the negotiating exchanges leading to the delivery of the wafer (ll. 197-379)—that is, a total of 300 lines alternately composed of dialogue and commentary—Jonathas, as main inspirer of the action, yields to an increasing preference for commenting on his acts to come or in the making. Lines 381-480 and 481-524 are two blocks unfolding the sacrilegious acts that submit the "cake", as the Jews call it, to a new Passion. The commentary here serves both to attract attention and to whip up emotion, as the audience hear the precise and specific account Jonathas gives of the basic elements of Christian doctrine and their unavoidable consequence: the miracle of the Host. When the Jews resume their part at the close of the inset (l. 652) and, in a last desperate move, light up a fire under the cauldron, whose contents instantly turn to blood and overflow, the final acts of the last section (ll. 525-716)

are similarly commented on, mostly by Jonathas. The commentary here seems to have a triple virtue. First, given the fairly wide play-area, such verbal duplication heightens the visibility of each action for most of the audience. Secondly, in focussing their attention, it binds their eyes to the mix of images and words thus emphasized. Thirdly, the paradoxical nature of the drama staged, as used by the playwright for doctrinal purposes in that mix of dialogue and commentary, obviously favours a close intrication of the two antinomic dimensions of the realistic action staged and of its supernatural significance. Hence, the simultaneous effort to bolster two antagonistic effects in audience reception: the rational impulse which is in ordinary minds to cling to appearances, and, close upon its heels, the concurrent amazement (possibly welling up into feverish dismay) when some stronger force seems to pervert the laws governing the real and play havoc with normality.

This is especially the case in the successive rounds of descriptive commentary on the acts carried out by Jonathas' four servants after the end of the inset and the appearance of the image of the Christ-child, wounded (l. 713). In that interval, the contrast is maximized between the expected normality of each casual act carried out in execution of the master's orders and its ensuing result. Thus, Jasdon's and Masphat's last lines (ll. 668 and 672) in their respective speeches (ll. 661-68, 669-712), carefully pointing out the result to be expected by a public thoroughly familiar with the acts described, are strikingly belied in the event. Instantly proclaimed, such a discord magnifies and spectacularises the bizarre response of the most casual things. It should be noted that two additional factors further heighten the effect: the four men under Jonathas' authority alternate action and commentary from dramatic agent to agent, adding a sort of contagious effect. These fluctuations of faith and disbelief about *what is there* spread from one participant to another, as if weakening their individual resistances. That this finally works upon the gazing crowd I take to be noticeable in the increasingly daring emphasis which the playwright places upon the distance between appearances created and factual reality. Thus Dillon usefully points out (p. 174) the increasingly patent divorce in the stage directions between spurious semiotic fabrications and matter-of-fact props. Though such a discord is, or course, inaccessible to spectators, these notations (obviously instructing the players in what they should achieve) at least suggest the audience reactions thereby expected.

It must finally be pointed out that this constant flickering of audience minds between two referential levels (from semiotic subterfuge at the level of

the fiction staged to the underlying myth, and back again to the immediate reality) is akin to what may be regarded as the basic phenomenon of spectacular reception. By thus glossing the actually visible present (divine gore bubbling in the cauldron, the infant Christ floating above the stove, Jonathas' maiming and recovery), but also obliquely referring to a possible unseen, the playwright astutely broadens the spectacular "now" to include the past and future of myth and desire. One may also lastly suggest that such an intricate blending of direct and indirect exchanges, constantly trying to direct and redirect audience attention, may emotionally involve spectators more deeply than would constant exchanges between the characters staging the fiction with less attention paid to audience reactions.

IV. Taboo and Excess: A Neglected but Capital Question

Because it lies at the core of her comparison between *The Croxton Play* and Franko B's show of body art, *I'm Not Your Babe*, Dillon repeatedly evokes the question of excess, which is intimately linked to the breaking of the religious taboo in the East Anglian play, and yet never frontally discusses it. Before her, in a lucid essay centring on the totally different issue of the fifteenth-century climate of Eucharistic piety, Nichols had strongly emphasized the "the emotionally-charged affective tone" colouring what she called the "narrative movement" of the play. She then studies its relation to late medieval popular devotion before returning to the theme at the close of her second section, analysing that "intensively affective tone" as intimately linked to the "liturgical metachronology" which, in her view, suffuses the second part of the narrative, after the Jews return and light a fire under the cauldron" (Nichols, pp. 117-18 and 126). Apart from those two recent voices, rare indeed are critical allusions to, or sustained analyses of, the topic. Given such constant silence, one may wonder whether Anglo-Saxon critics of the late twentieth century have not felt embarrassed at discussing a question so redolent of papist superstition, and tacitly confined it to the subordinate function of a mere spectacular frill. There is no doubt, in any case, that Jonathas, as the pivotal character, should be recognised for what he is: a well of *energy*. Whether one takes the Greek term *energeia* in its basic sense, as referring to the brilliancy of a rhetorically emphasized object, or adopts the modern semantics of *dynamic force*, the term unmistakably fits Jonathas to perfection. As the most visible actor in the cast, he may also be said to propel the play forward from start to finish, thanks to his obsessive refusal of Christian dogma's founding article:

the principle of Incarnation, with its inference that divine essence is miscible in human nature. Such incapacity to accommodate such a belief into his thinking he expresses as early as lines 201-4, whereupon his four acolytes repeat it *ad lib* (ll. 205-20), then while rehearsing the whole disquieting fable, from Incarnation to Resurrection (ll. 385-456).

What is striking indeed for us today in that essentially notional attitude is the intense affectivity which pervades it. Nowadays, in this self-styled age of rationality, we tend to oppose affectivity and reason as two antagonistic forces actuating the human psyche, with a premium naturally accorded the latter. After Robinson's pioneering article on the subject and Davidson's ensuing studies, Nichols convincingly emphasized that affective intensity, demonstrating its close relation to the emotional physicality of late medieval popular devotion. The critical current she thus countenances proposes that, in opposition to our modern stand-point associating extreme inconic susceptibility with sex rather than with the after-life, for the contemporaries of *The Croxton Play*, rational activity and emotional intensity may be in a direct ratio to one another where religious life is concerned. For Jonathas and the pack of Jews serving him, the insuperable intellectual contradiction is between the materiality of the host, seen as a vulgar piece of bread or "cake", and its capacity to encapsulate anything like divine essence. That contradiction, inherent in the new mental paradigm proposed by Wyclif, is steadily refused acceptance as a paradoxical mystery by the five Jews, and that refusal brings about their decision to submit the ambiguous but potentially terrific object—the consecrated host—to the test of a new Passion. In this way, the Croxton playwright only achieves anew what the Cycles do time and again when developing, in their episodes related to the Incarnation, Passion, Resurrection and Salvation, characters of energetic doubters who chemically precipitate the process of conversion.

It may well be, however, that the extension of the representation of the gory miracle to a nearly one-thousand-line episode, together with the conjunction (to us paradoxical) of the two crises of intellect and emotion and, to crown it all, the explicit assigning to a Jew of the testimonial function, gives *The Croxton Play* a highly specific spectacular impact.

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