

*The Reading Medievalist: A Postgraduate Journal*

The Graduate Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Reading

Selected Proceedings from 'The Maladies, Miracles and  
Medicine of the Middle Ages', March 2014

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Smith, H. F. 'The Afflicted Jewish Body: Cure and Conversion in Medieval Drama' *Selected Proceedings from 'The Maladies, Miracles and Medicine of the Middle Ages', March 2014. The Reading Medievalist: A Postgraduate Journal*, vol.2. Salter, R. (ed.) (March 2015) pp.109-34.

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## The Afflicted Jewish Body: Cure and Conversion in Medieval Drama

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The Jews held an ambiguous place in medieval cultural and religious thought. The mixed reception towards both contemporary Jews and the Jews of the Old Testament can be seen in the thirteenth century *Annals of Burton*.<sup>1</sup> Among the diverse entries of this text, contemporary English Jews were considered to be Judas' demonic descendants, but there was a distinction made between these Jews and their 'praise-worthy ancestors'.<sup>2</sup> Thus, despite their common ancestral heritage, Old Testament Jews were acknowledged with respect when, for the same reason, contemporary Jews were derided. Since the birth of Christ, Jews who had not converted to Christianity were interpreted as both morally and spiritually impaired, even though contemporary Jews could be valued and respected members of their communities, the employees and employers of Christians, and the close friends of bishops and archbishops.<sup>3</sup> These responses to the Jews were clearly contradictory, providing evidence of how the medieval Christian representation of Jewish identity could be particularly complex, for the figure of the Jew was unfixed, inconsistent, and constructed in the endeavour to portray the superiority of Christianity.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to the moral and spiritual impairments that could be associated with the Jews during the late-medieval period, Jewish physiology was also connected to a number of different physical and psychological disabilities and impairments. This included blindness, madness, a humoral excess of melancholy, leprosy, physical deformity, haemorrhoids, and even male menstruation. Attitudes towards the perception of Jews as disabled or impaired is exemplified in the writing of Bede in *On Tobit and on the Canticle of Habakkuk*:

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<sup>1</sup> These are the annals of the Benedictine abbey of Burton-upon-Trent.

<sup>2</sup> As cited in: Tomasch, S. 'Postcolonial Chaucer and the Virtual Jew' in J. Cohen (ed.) *The Postcolonial Middle Ages* (New York, 2000) p.245.

<sup>3</sup> Roth, N. *Daily Life of the Jews in the Middle Ages* (Connecticut, 2005) p.209.

<sup>4</sup> This construction has been termed the 'hermeneutical Jew' by Cohen and is recognised throughout the academic community. See: Cohen, J. *Living Letters of the Law: Ideas of the Jew in Medieval Christianity*. (California, 1999) pp.2-3. For a discussion of this term, see also: Lampert, L. *Gender and Jewish Difference from Paul to Shakespeare* (Pennsylvania, 2004) p.9.

Tobit, blind as he was and preaching God's word, is said to signify both reprobate and elect alike. For the patriarch Jacob too, while wrestling with the angel, was both lamed and blessed, signifying, that is, by his limping the unbelievers of his nation, and by his blessing the believers.

Bede. *On Tobit and on the Canticle of Habakkuk*.<sup>5</sup>

Here, Bede represents that no unconverted Jew can be considered physically 'complete' until he converts to Christianity. It is important to note that the physical and psychological disabilities and impairments associated with the Jews reflect upon their moral impairment and spiritual alterity, as is evident in Bede.

The ambiguities of the Jewish identity can be seen throughout medieval drama. For many characters there is an 'invisibility' of their Jewish ancestral or religious heritage if they are held as significant figures within Christianity. As Christ and the Virgin Mary were not considered Jewish in late-medieval cultural thought, this (racial) aspect of their identity did not affect their characterisation in medieval drama. Instead, it was the unconverted Jews of medieval drama that embodied cultural constructions of Jewishness. In medieval drama, the moral and spiritual impairment of these characters is always connected to their Jewish identity, and in examples where these unconverted Jews are afflicted with physical or psychological disability or impairment, this, too, is attached to their racial and spiritual alterity.

It seems clear that that the unconverted Jewish body is associated with a range of disabilities and impairments. This paper argues that although disability can be responded to as devotional suffering in the Christian body, the disabled Jewish body in medieval drama always signifies moral impairment and spiritual alterity. I will examine the role of disability, particularly in the context of Jewish conversion, in the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* [PotS] and the N-Town *Assumption of Mary* [AoM].

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<sup>5</sup> Bede. *On Tobit and on the Canticle of Habakkuk*. Connolly, S. (trans.) (Dublin, 1997) p.43.

The associations made between the medieval cultural constructions of Jewish identity and particular physical, psychological, behavioural and moral traits, allow us to define how the Jews fit into ideas about impairment. A wide range of physical impairments was associated with the contemporary Jewish body throughout medieval cultural thought.

The Jewish identity was synonymous with both blindness and sickness through the allegorical symbol of the owl. As Strickland has observed, owls were associated with blindness as a nocturnal species (that were considered to be blind during daylight), and have been compared to the Jews who 'cling to the darkness of their ignorance and shun the bright light of Christ'.<sup>6</sup> The 'darkness' of the Jews is also referenced in words attributed to God in the *Acts of the Apostles*, in which he asks Paul to:

open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light  
and from the power of Satan to God.

*Acts of the Apostles* 26:18.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, the 'darkness' of the Jews reflects both the spiritual and moral impairment of the race, which is represented through their physical inability to see Christ as the true Messiah. In medieval visual culture, this association with blindness through its metaphorical meaning could be represented in manuscript images through the obscured vision of the Jews such as with blindfolds, or with demons covering their eyes (see fig. 1). In literary culture, this metaphor could also be represented through genuine blindness, as is the case in the N-Town *Assumption of Mary*.

St. Paul is the most notable example of a blind Jew, and the Digby *Conversion of St. Paul* is a play that demonstrates a clear relationship between disability and disbelief, followed by healing upon conversion. Yet, blindness could be responded to as being an exemplary quality in the Christian body. For St. Francis, rather than being stigmatised for his

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<sup>6</sup> Strickland, B. *Saracens, Demons & Jews: Making Monsters in Medieval Art* (Princeton, 2003) p.137

<sup>7</sup> *The Acts of the Apostles* in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*. Coogan, M., Brettler, M., Newsom, C. and Perkins, P. (eds.) (New York, 2007).

blindness, texts such as St. Bonaventure's *Major Legend of Saint Francis* represent it as a result of his religious devotion, for:

He preferred to lose his sight rather than to repress the devotion of his spirit and hold back the tears which cleansed his interior vision so that he could see God.

St. Bonaventure. *Major Legend of Saint Francis*.<sup>8</sup>

St. Bonaventure's attribution of Francis' blindness to severe penitential and cleansing weeping completely reverses the signification of the blindness of the Jews, who are unable to see and understand the validity of Christianity. In St. Francis' case, blindness is a means of penitential suffering to see God more clearly. Although blind Jews such as St. Paul are represented as finding God through their affliction and suffering in medieval drama (just as St. Francis does), images of the blindfolded Synagoga are a case-in-point that the association between blindness and Jewishness is firmly rooted in their spiritual alterity.<sup>9</sup> This response to the blindness of St. Francis exemplifies that the signification of disability in the virtuous Christian body has a much greater variability than in the unconverted Jewish body.

Owls were synonymous with sickness in part due to the etymological coincidence that the Latin for owl, *bubo*, was the same as the Greek term for the swelling caused by colorectal cancer.<sup>10</sup> As a consequence, owls appeared throughout a number of medieval medical manuscripts as a symbol of reference for ailment in general. The medical iconography of owls is particularly interesting not only in the context of the range of disability, sickness and impairment with which the Jewish body was associated, but their connection to the swelling caused by colorectal cancer is also highly significant in consideration of the Jews' (perceived) medical susceptibility to haemorrhoids. Significantly, in the twelfth century Roger de Baron identified in the *Practica Maior* that

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<sup>8</sup> As cited in: Wells, S., 'The Exemplary Blindness of Francis of Assisi' in: *Disability in the Middle Ages: Reconsiderations and Reverberations*, Eyler, J. (ed.), (Surrey, 2010) p.77.

<sup>9</sup> Synagoga is a female personification of Judaism traditionally attributed with a blindfold in iconographic tradition.

<sup>10</sup> Biggs, S., 'Bad News Birds' on the British Library's *Medieval Manuscripts Blog* <<http://britishlibrary.typepad.co.uk/digitisedmanuscripts/2012/10/bad-news-birds.html>> October 2012.

Jewish men bled from haemorrhoids in a monthly pattern as a divine punishment for deicide, so even this medical condition has a moral interpretation.<sup>11</sup> Owls became so associated with the Jews that in medieval manuscript images (such as fig. 2), they could be portrayed with large or exaggerated noses and with their ears curved like devil horns, therefore emulating stereotypes of Jewish physiological characteristics in addition to symbolising Jewish moral and spiritual impairment.<sup>12</sup>

It was thought that Jewish physiology was predisposed to diseases such as leprosy because of the belief that the disease was caused through the circulation of corrupt and melancholy humors throughout the body.<sup>13</sup> The Jews were believed to have an excess of melancholic humor, as can be seen in Albert the Great's opinion that the large amount of black bile found in melancholic males 'is found in Jews more than in others, for their natures are more melancholic'.<sup>14</sup> Among many afflictions, the melancholic humor was associated with susceptibility to physical and mental illness, avarice, and idleness. Although the excess of melancholic humor is never directly used to explain the Jewish association with madness, there are clear connections between madness and melancholy (and between madness and Jewishness). In influential medical texts such as Platearius' *Practica Brevis* from the twelfth century, madness is described as being an:

infection of the anterior cell of the head with loss of the imaginative faculty, just as melancholy is an infection of the middle cell with loss of reason.

Platearius. *Practica Brevis*.<sup>15</sup>

It is this symptom of impaired reason that the Jewish characters demonstrate in the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*, as they commit an act of host desecration in the endeavour to disprove the doctrine of transubstantiation. Just as in the *Play of the Sacrament*, the Jews are associated with impaired cognitive abilities through their inability to properly interpret and understand the prophecy of Isaiah, as is also portrayed in fig. 1. In the

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<sup>11</sup> Resnick, I. *Marks of Distinction: Christian Perceptions of Jews in the High Middle Ages*, (Washington DC, 2012) p.182.

<sup>12</sup> Biggs. 'Bad News Birds'.

<sup>13</sup> Resnick, *Marks of Distinction* p.118.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* p.182.

<sup>15</sup> Wallis, F. (ed.) *Medieval Medicine: A Reader*. (Toronto, 2010) p.253.

twelfth century writings of William of Newburgh, the historian associates madness with historical and contemporary Jews, which he asserts they have demonstrated in their mass suicide in York in 1190, for he specifically comments that:

Truly, the person that reads Josephus' history of the Jewish war will gain sufficient understanding that such madness, arising from the ancient superstition of the Jews, has persisted down to our own time.

William of Newburgh. *The History of William of Newburgh*. Book 4, Chapter 10:4.<sup>16</sup>

An excess of melancholy was also associated with predisposition to sins and vices, and could signify a lack of belief in the final redemption.<sup>17</sup> In fact, melancholic humor was so associated with spiritual belief that in the thirteenth century Robert of Soest, canon of the church of Soest, is said to have converted from Christianity to Judaism after succumbing to melancholic infection.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the humoral composition of his body was perceived as directly causing his conversion to Judaism. Writing in the fourteenth century, Raymond de Tarrega describes that:

demons are attached to human bodies because of bad disposition and corrupt humor, or, because of melancholic infection which generates evil, black and horrible images in fantasy, and disturbs the intellect, for the demons habitually habit such forms.

Raymond de Tarrega. *On the Secrets of Nature, or, on the Fifth Essence*.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> As cited in Rees Jones, S. and Watson, S. *Christians and Jews in Angevin England: The York Massacre of 1190* (Suffolk, 2013) p.63.

<sup>17</sup> Lazda-Cazers, R. 'Old Age in Wolfram von Eschenbach's Parzival and Titurel' in Classen, A. (ed.) *Old Age in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: Interdisciplinary Approaches to a Neglected Topic*. (Gottingen, 2007), p.214.

<sup>18</sup> Resnick. *Marks of Distinction* p.193.

<sup>19</sup> As cited in: Resnick. *Marks of Distinction* p.193.

This is indicative of the association between the ill health of the body and non-Christian alterity that existed in medieval medical and cultural perceptions. This description of melancholic infection is also important for the connections it makes between impaired intellect, and demons, since the Jews were also considered to be morally impaired through their numerous associations with demons and the devil. These associations can be traced back to the Bible, as evident from my earlier citation from the *Acts of the Apostles* 26:18, in which the Jews are described to be under the 'power of Satan'.<sup>20</sup> This same perception of the Jews can also be found in medieval drama, in which the traditional role of the Jews is as the enemies, torturers and murderers of Christ, following Satan's plan. Thus, in the Digby *Conversion of St. Paul*, Paul's initial endeavour to persecute the Christians, which fulfils the ambitions of the demon Belial, has a specific meaning for the Jews due to their historical association as the murderers of Christ.



Figure 1. The Blindness of the Jews, 14<sup>th</sup> Century. Spanish. Yates Thompson 31, f.131<sup>r</sup> (detail). © The British Library Board

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<sup>20</sup> *The Acts of the Apostles* 26:18.





Figure 2. Allegorical Owl, 13<sup>th</sup> Century. English. Medieval Bestiary. Aberdeen University Library MS.24, f.50<sup>r</sup> (detail). © The University of Aberdeen.

### *Plays*

It is worth noting that not all unconverted Jews are explicitly, or notably disabled or impaired in medieval drama. However, this does not contradict the argument I have presented that the identity of unconverted Jews was synonymous with disability and impairment. Some of these impairments are 'unseen' such as the excess of melancholy, insanity, hemorrhoids and male-menstruation, which may be why (with the exception of insanity), none of these conditions are represented in medieval drama. Whilst medieval social responses towards the Jews as morally and spiritually impaired can be symbolised by visual forms of physical disability and impairment, these associations of Jewish moral and spiritual impairment clearly exist beyond its visual symbolisation in the disabled or impaired body. If the symbol of the owl alone can convey Jewish metaphorical blindness and sickness, then these associations clearly exist beyond and outside of the Jewish body. So, too, can the non-disabled bodies of Jews signify this meaning, just through being portrayed as Jewish, either via context, clothing, or physical characteristics. This paper argues that the disabled or impaired (unconverted) Jewish body in medieval drama always signifies moral impairment and spiritual alterity.

Not all of the disabilities and impairments associated with the Jews and discussed in this chapter appear in medieval drama. This may be due to the fact that some of these conditions are 'unseen' although it may also reflect that these interpretations of Jewish

physiology are less dominant cultural perceptions and are therefore less symbolic. Interestingly, in the two of the plays I discuss, the Jews are physically afflicted in a way that is not directly associated with Jewish physiology. In the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*, Jonathas the Jew loses his hand, and the First Prince is afflicted with a withered hand in the N-Town *Assumption of Mary*. Both of these forms of disability are used as a symbol of spiritual incompleteness, and the hands are restored again upon conversion to Christianity. Thus, it is significant that the spiritual incompleteness of these Jews is symbolised through their impaired bodies, considering the extent to which the Jewish body was synonymous with forms of sickness, disability and impairment.

#### *The Croxton Play of the Sacrament*

The Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* [PotS], is a fifteenth century play-text which dramatises the conversion of a group of Syrian Jews to Christianity. The five Jewish characters of the play are all defined as Jewish through their names: Jonathas, (Judeus Primus, Magister), Jason (Judeus Secundus), Jasdon (Judeus Tertius), Masphat (Judeus Quartus), and Malchus (Judeus Quintus), which suggests their function as an embodiment of Jewish identity in the eyes of medieval Christianity.

Within the play, the Jews endeavour to test the doctrine of transubstantiation by desecrating a communion wafer. The scene of violent host desecration presents the Jews symbolically re-enacting the crucifixion of Christ, stabbing the wafer five times. This symbolic action recapitulates the typical role of the Jews in medieval drama as the enemies, torturers and murderers of Christ.

It is especially through their bodies that the Jewish characters reflect a social criticism of Jewishness. The scene of host desecration in this play not only portrays the Jews as morally and spiritually impaired, it is also the catalyst for the physical and psychological disability and impairment with which they are afflicted. It is in this respect that the play provides an insight into how Jewish racial and spiritual alterity interacts with sinfulness as well as disability and impairment.

*Disbelief and the Desire to Desecrate the Wafer*

The idea to procure the host wafer and desecrate it in order to disprove the doctrine of transubstantiation begins with Jonathas, who is a wealthy merchant and the '*chief merchant of Jews*'.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, of all the Jews, it is Jonathas who suffers the most impairment in this play. The characterisation of the Jews as both spiritually and morally impaired is used to justify the physical and psychological impairments and afflictions that they endure.

At many points throughout the play up to the point of the host desecration, Jonathas ridicules the capacity of Christians to '*believe on a cake*'.<sup>22</sup> The word 'cake' is used by the Jews on numerous occasions to describe the wafer, and has the effect of portraying their misunderstanding of its spiritual function and value. Jonathas represents the belief in transubstantiation as a form of disability, since he reflects that the Christians would have to make the Jews mad if they were to be convinced of its reality when he states:

their faith is false:  
that was never He that on Calvary was killed  
Or in bread for to be blood: it is untrue also.  
But yet with their wiles they wish we were mad.

*PotS*, II.213–16.<sup>23</sup>

This ironically foreshadows the madness the Jews come to be afflicted with prior to their conversion. Moreover, it is interesting to note that Jonathas uses a disability that is normally connected to Jewish spiritual alterity in order to represent the insanity of Christianity in its false beliefs. Jonathas' association of faith and belief in Christianity with insanity heightens the irony of his words, for the Jews' incapacity for faith is connected with their own afflictions of insanity later in the play.

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<sup>21</sup>'*chefe merchaunte of Jewes*' *PotS*, I.196. Sebastian, J. (ed.) *The Croxton Play of the Sacrament* (Kalamazoo, 2012). All further references are to this edition.

<sup>22</sup>'*beleve on a cake*' *PotS*, I.200.

<sup>23</sup>'*ther feyth ys false: / That was never He that on Calvery was kyld / Or in bred for to be blode: yt ys ontrewre als. / But yet with ther wyles thei wold we were wyld*' *PotS*, II.213–216.

*Mutilating the Wafer, Maiming and Madness*

The Jews begin to suffer from physical and psychological impairments shortly after their tests upon the host wafer have begun. After Jason, Jasdon, Masphat, and Malchus have each stabbed the host wafer, Jonathas delivers its fifth wound, equivalent to the side wound in the body of Christ. With this symbolic fifth wound, the host begins to bleed. Jonathas responds with confusion and fear, and the other Jews prepare a cauldron of boiling oil in which to cast the wafer. As Jonathas is due to cast in the wafer, he finds that it will not come away from his hand:

I may not remove it from my hand!  
I will go drown myself in a lake,  
And I begin to go mad:  
I run, I leap over this land!

*PotS*, II.500-3.<sup>24</sup>

Jonathas is so troubled at these events that he feels as if he is going mad and considers committing suicide. His mention of committing suicide also corresponds to William of Newburgh's remarks about the madness of the Jews. The madness of the character also features in the stage directions: [s.d. Here he runs mad with the Host Wafer in his hand] which describes the physical performance of his condition through his erratic movements. The dramatisation of Jonathas' affliction uses his insane gestures and behaviour to emphasise his incapacity for faith in transubstantiation. Since insanity was a condition that was particularly associated with the Jews, the madness of Jonathas is not only attached to his spiritual alterity, but his racial alterity as a Jew.

Even whilst the wafer continues to be stuck to Jonathas' hand, the Jews are still compelled to violently desecrate it. As Jasdon commands the other Jews to strike nails through Jonathas' hand, Jonathas begins to suffer the physical wounds of Christ's crucifixion:

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<sup>24</sup>*I may not awoyde yt owte of my hond! / I wylle goo drenche me in a lake, / And in woodnesse I gynne to wake: / I renne, I lepe over this lond!* *PotS*, II.500-503.

Here is a hammer and nails three, I say.  
Lift up his arms, fellows, on high  
While I drive these nails, I you pray,  
With strong strokes fast.

*PotS*, II.508-11.<sup>25</sup>

This parallel to the torture of Christ reinforces popular cultural stereotypes about the Jews as Christ's torturers and murderers. It is following this violence towards Jonathas that his hand physically comes away from his arm as is indicated in the stage directions: [s.d. Here shall they pull the arm and the hand shall still remain with the Sacrament]. The interpretation of Jonathas' dismembered hand as a symbol of his spiritual, as well as physical, incompleteness, becomes particularly apparent during its role within his cure and conversion.

#### *Crucifying Christ and the Cruelty of Host Desecration*

The parallel between the scene of the host desecration and the Passion of Christ is specifically drawn attention to in the banns of the play. Notably, the First Vexillator speaks of how the Jews:

injured our Lord severely on the ground  
And put Him to a new passion,  
With daggers gave Him many a grievous wound,  
Nailed Him to a pillar, with pincers pulled Him down.

*PotS*, II.37-40.<sup>26</sup>

Therefore, this parallel act of desecrating the wafer and crucifying Christ anew is a connection that the dramatist specifically intends to convey to the audience. Since

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<sup>25</sup>'Here is an hamer and naylys three, I seye. / Lyffte up hys armys, felawe, on hey / Whyll I dryve thes nayles, I yow praye, / With strong strokys fast' *PotS*, II.508-511.

<sup>26</sup>'grevid our Lord gretly on grownd / And put Hym to a new passyoun, / With daggers goven Hym many a grevyos wound, / Nayled Hym to a pyller, with pynsons plukked Hym doune' *PotS*, II. 37-40.

transubstantiation is a doctrine that is focused on Christ's resurrected body, it is significant that the Jews' desecration of the host parallels the Passion of Christ, and causes their own physical impairment in this process. It is through the pain and suffering of the Jews during the host desecration that they can be morally awakened. When the other Jews are compelled to stab Jonathas through the hand, he experiences the same suffering as Christ, with the Jews and their spiritual alterity to blame. The miraculous bleeding of the host wafer and the appearance of Christ as the Man of Sorrows visually re-educates the Jews in the validity of Christ and the reality of the doctrine of transubstantiation. As Jonathas loses his hand in the act of host desecration, his disability also reflects his spiritual incompleteness.

The Jews are only cured of their afflictions becoming physically 'whole' again in the moment that they convert, symbolising the spiritual 'wholeness' that they attain through belief in Christianity. Like Christ, their suffering is necessary to bring about redemption.

#### *Cure and Conversion*

Jonathas' conversion to Christianity occurs after an image of Christ as the Man of Sorrows appears before the Jews and delivers a speech in which he asks them:

Why do you blaspheme me? Why do you this?  
Why subject me to a new torture,  
And I died for you on the Cross?

*PotS*, II.731-3.<sup>27</sup>

In prompting the Jews to think upon their moral wrongdoings, Christ begins to reform them spiritually and morally. Interestingly, Christ also asks the Jews '*Why are you so unstable in your mind?*' connecting the Jews' cognitive processes to their persecution of Christianity and lack of faith, which is symbolised by their insanity in the play.<sup>28</sup> Then,

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<sup>27</sup>'Why blaspheme yow me? Why do ye thus? / Why put yow me to a newe tormentry, / And I dyed for yow on the Crosse?' *PotS*, II.731-733.

<sup>28</sup>'Why are ye so unstedfast in yor mynde?' *PotS*, I.725.

towards the end of his speech to the Jews, Christ specifically draws attention to his bloody and wounded body as he offers the Jews mercy:

I show you the seriousness of my injury,  
And all to move you to my mercy.

*PotS, II.739-40.*<sup>29</sup>

With this invitation to contemplate Christ's body as the Man of Sorrows, which was an important aspect of late-medieval religious devotion, the Jews recognise the validity of Christ and ask for mercy for their sins. The Jews then atone for their sins through penitential weeping (II. 746-749).

Significantly, once Jonathas has converted to Christianity, Christ emphasises Jonathas' own blame for the afflictions that he has suffered:

Jonathas, on your hand you are but lame,  
And is through your own cruelty,  
For your hurt you may yourself blame.

*PotS, II.770-2.*<sup>30</sup>

As Christ heals Jonathas, he instructs him that it is through touching his detached hand that he will be healed. The detached hand becomes a symbol for Christ's own wounded body since it is this area of Jonathas' body that has experienced the same suffering as Christ. Touching his own body in this process of healing echoes numerous examples of healing miracles in which healing occurs upon touching Christ. The restoration of Jonathas' body therefore proves and parallels the resurrection of Christ. Significantly, it is in touching his hand that Jonathas is able to become both physically and spiritually 'whole' again:

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<sup>29</sup>*I shew yow the streytnesse of my grevaunce, / And all to meve yow to my mercy' PotS, II.739-740.*

<sup>30</sup>*Jonathas, on thyn hand thow art but lame, / And ys thorow thyn own cruelnesse, / For thyn hurt thu mayest thiselfe blame' PotS, II.770-772.*

You wash your heart with great contrition.

Go to the cauldron — your care shall be the less —  
And touch your hand to your salvation.

*PotS, II.776-7.*<sup>31</sup>

Here, the text emphasises that Jonathas is reaching into the cauldron to ‘wash’ his heart with contrition, which is symbolic of his baptism and connects this absolution of sin to the restoration of his body. As Christ’s heart wound is symbolic of his love for mankind, and Jonathas was himself wounded after delivering the fifth wound of Christ, it is particularly interesting that Jonathas’ love and acceptance of Christ into his heart is specifically connected to his own wounded and ‘spiritually penetrable’ body.

In repenting for his offences against Christianity, Jonathas makes further reference to his insanity:

Alas that ever I did against Your will,  
In my wit to be so mad  
That I should so dishonourably offend your work!

*PotS, II.786-8.*<sup>32</sup>

Significantly, after his conversion Christianity, Jonathas is able to recover from his madness. This demonstrates the association of psychological impairment and non-Christian alterity that was specifically attached to the Jewish identity in late-medieval cultural thought.

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<sup>31</sup>*‘Thow wasshest thyn hart with grete contrycion. / Go to the cawdron — thi care shal be the lesse — / And towche thyn hand to thy salvacion’ PotS, II.776-777.*

<sup>32</sup>*‘Alas that ever I dyd agaynst Thy wyll, / In my wytt to be soo wood / That I so ongoodly wyrk shuld soo gryll!’ PotS, II.786-788.*



### *The N-Town Assumption of Mary*

The *Assumption of Mary* [AoM] dramatises the death, assumption and coronation of the Virgin Mary. In this apocryphal account of Mary's funeral, the Jews engage in graphic conversations about the ways in which they intend to maim and disrespect Mary's body in death. Through their attempts to sabotage the funeral of the Virgin the Jewish characters are afflicted with physical and psychological impairments, but recover upon their conversion.

Psychological impairment is the affliction that is the most widely suffered among the unconverted Jews of this play, once again reflecting a social criticism of Jewishness through the associations made between the devil, the Jews' incapacity for faith, and the insanity with which they are afflicted. Unlike the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*, there is one Jew in the play that does not convert to Christianity, and is subsequently led into Hell by Demons. The Jews' intention to impair and disrespect the body of the Virgin is the background against which the moral and spiritual impairment of the Jews is highlighted, and it is their attempts to action their enmity that is the catalyst for the physical and psychological disability and impairment with which the Jews are afflicted in this play.

### *Jewish Barbarity and the Burden of Mary's Body*

The opening words of the play describe the life of the Virgin Mary to the audience. However, no sooner has the Doctor finished speaking (l. 26) than the Jewish Soldier (Miles) protests about the account as he exclaims:

Peace now your blabbering in the devil's name!

What lousy bitches may you not see.

AoM, II.27-8.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>*Pes now youre blaberyng in the develis name! What lousy begchis mow ye not se'* AoM, II.27-28. *Assumption of Mary* in Sugano, D (ed.) *The N-Town Plays*. (Kalamazoo, 2007) <<http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/sugano-n-town-plays-play-41-assumption-of-mary>> n.d.. All further references are to this edition.

In making this remark, the Soldier defines his character as spiritually corrupt in his invocation of the devil and his blasphemous and misogynistic disrespect to the Virgin Mary. As the Soldier continues to speak, he outlines his religious and political opposition to Christianity, and his intentions for violence to be used against those that defame Jewish laws (l. 33):

They shall be slain, as they say, or willing to flee!  
Wherefore in peace be you,  
And pay attention onto them, must still I.  
For what boy boasts out, him spill I  
As knave with this jagged club, him kill I!

AoM, II.34-8.<sup>34</sup>

The Soldier not only describes his intent to murder and torture the opponents of Judaism, but also provides detail of the jagged club he would use. This aspect of the staging and performance of the unconverted Jews therefore portrays them as barbaric and bloodthirsty from the beginning of the play.

As with the host desecration in the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*, the Jews ironically direct their enmity towards impairing the body of the Virgin. The Jews' desire for violence continues to escalate until the High Priest develops a plan to burn and disrespect the corpse of the Virgin Mary, and dismember the disciples:

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<sup>34</sup> 'They schul ben slayn, as they say, or fayn for to fle! / Wherfore in pes be ye, / And herkenyth onto hem, moste stille I. / For what boy bragge outh, hym spille I / As knave wyth this craggyd knad, hym kylle I!' AoM, II.34-38.

But be that sister dead — Mary, that fart —  
We shall burn her body and the ashes hide,  
And do her all the contempt we can here devise,  
And then slay those disciples that wander so widely,  
And their bodies divide!

AoM, II.83-7.<sup>35</sup>

The intent to physically destroy Mary's body is significant in the context of the Jews' disbelief in the validity of Christ as the prophesied Messiah. Similarly, in Jacobus de Voragine's *The Golden Legend*, which is a source for the play, Mary herself is aware of a Jewish conspiracy and describes how she has heard the Jews saying:

Men and brothers, let us wait until the woman who bore  
Jesus dies. Then we will seize her body, throw it into the fire,  
and burn it up.

Jacobus de Voragine. *The Golden Legend*.<sup>36</sup>

Therefore, this characterisation of the Jews as conspiring to desecrate Mary's corpse was popularised throughout medieval culture, and links back to the Jews' traditional roles in medieval drama as the enemies and torturers of Christ. The connections that are made between Jewish moral impairment and the devil are also significant due to the connections that are made between Jewish psychological impairment and the devil later within the play.

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<sup>35</sup> 'But be that seustere ded — Mary, that fise — / We shal brenne her body and the aschis hide, / And don her all the dispith we can here devise, / And than sle tho disciplis that walkyn so wyde, / And here bodyes devyde!' AoM, II.83-87.

<sup>36</sup> Jacobus de Voragine. *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*. Ryan, W. (trans.) (Princeton, 2012) p.465.

*Taking Action, Receiving Affliction*

Even after Mary's death, the Jews still interpret her body as a threat against Judaism due to the amount of attention she receives, for the Third Prince is concerned that:

The disciples carry her in great ceremony now,  
And make all this spiritual joy in humiliation of our dignity.

AoM, II.386-7.<sup>37</sup>

Consequently, the High Priest attempts to provoke the Jews into immediate action. It is at this point that he is first represented as suffering psychologically. Like the Digby *Conversion of St. Paul* and the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*, the *Assumption of Mary* is a play in which we see the pattern of unconverted Jews who are intent on harming Christians themselves suffering affliction in the process. Just as in these other plays, the suffering of the unconverted Jews becomes a punishment through which they can atone and convert to Christianity.

As the High Priest begins to lose his sanity he likens his suffering to having the devil in his head, for he declares: '*Out! Harrow! The devil is in my head!*'.<sup>38</sup> With these words, he demands the Princes to '*bring me that vile body, I tell you!*' before he acknowledges his insanity: '*Out! Harrow! All mad now I go!*'.<sup>39</sup> <sup>40</sup> This representation of the High Priest's madness foreshadows the madness of the other Jews, as they attempt to obey these orders to obtain Mary's corpse. Following the High Priest's descent into madness, all of the other Jewish characters then proceed to display and perform their own insanity. The Latin stage directions translate as: [s.d. Here the rulers with their attendants descend like wild beasts dashing their heads against rocks]. The madness with which the Jews are afflicted can be seen to be directly linked to their identity as Jews, particularly in terms of the medieval medical ideas about melancholia, since melancholy patients may 'cry out and jump around, and wound themselves or others'.<sup>41</sup> This description from Constantine's *On Melancholy* is a close match to the behaviour of the Jews. Since the

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<sup>37</sup> '*The disciplis her beryn in gret aray now, / And makyn alle this merthe in spyth of oure hed*' AoM, II.386-387.

<sup>38</sup> '*Outh! Harrow! The devyl is in myn hed!*' AoM, I.389.

<sup>39</sup> '*brynge me that bychyd body, I red!*' AoM, I.396.

<sup>40</sup> '*Outh! Harrow! Al wod now I go!*' AoM, I.409.

<sup>41</sup> Wallis, *Medieval Medicine* p.254.

melancholic humor is also associated with the Jew's physiological susceptibility to insanity, the portrayal of the Jews suffering from this condition can be seen to reflect on their Jewish racial and spiritual alterity.

Following these stage directions, the Second Prince expresses his affliction of insanity in addition to another disability commonly associated with the Jews, blindness:

What, devil! Where is this company?  
I hear their noise, but I see nothing!  
Alas! I have completely lost my strength!  
I am full of woe! Mad is my thought!

AoM, II.410-13.<sup>42</sup>

In his blindness and insanity, the Second Prince's afflictions reflect his Jewish racial and spiritual alterity in his 'blindness' to the validity of Christianity. Following the Second Prince, the Third Prince is the next to display his madness:

I run! I rush about — so woe is me  
Raving madness has caught me up!  
I don't care if I die.

AoM, II.416-18.<sup>43</sup>

This suggests that the Third Prince exhibits his madness in another physical display of frantic movement, portraying his absence of rational thought. However, in contrast to the other Jews, the First Prince (who has not succumbed to madness) still intends to go through with the plan to desecrate Mary's body. Echoing the earlier dismissal of the

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<sup>42</sup> *'What, devyl! Where is this mené? / I here here noyse, but I se ryth nouth! / Allas! I have clene lost my posté! / I am ful wo! Mad is my thowth!'* AoM, II.410-413.

<sup>43</sup> *'I renne! I rappe — so wo is me / Wyndand wod — wo hath me wrouth! / To deye I ne routh'* AoM, II.416-18.

threat of the Virgin Mary against Judaism, the character expresses his fearlessness before jumping onto Mary's bier:

Cowards! Upon you, now for shame!  
Are you afraid of a dead body?  
I shall go there boldly!  
All that company, I fear not at all!

AoM, II.419-22.<sup>44</sup>

In performing this action he is specifically described as 'the madman' in the stage-directions, thus defining the character by his mental affliction. The hands of the First Prince become attached to Mary's bier, just as Jonathas the Jew becomes attached to the host wafer in the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*. As the First Prince hangs from the bier, he experiences physical pain in his body and is afflicted with withered hands:

Alas, my body is full of pain!  
I am fastened in agony to this bier!  
Both of my hands are withered.

AoM, II.423-5.<sup>45</sup>

In his suffering, the First Prince calls on the disciple Peter for help, as he pleads for him to: 'pray to your God for me here' and bring him 'Teach me some medicine'.<sup>46 47</sup> Within the *Golden Legend*, it is the Jewish priest who leaps to Mary's bier and is subsequently afflicted with pain. His disability is even justified in that:

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<sup>44</sup> 'A, cowardis! Upon you, now fy! / Are ye ferd of a ded body? / I schal sterte therto manly! / Alle that company, fere I ryth nouth!' AoM, II.419-22.

<sup>45</sup> 'Allas, my body is ful of peyne! / I am fastened sore to this bere! / Myn handys are ser, bothe tweyne' AoM, II.423-5.

<sup>46</sup> 'pray to your God for me here!' AoM, I.426.

<sup>47</sup> 'Sum medycyn me lere!' AoM, I.431.

because he had impiously tried to touch the corpse, his hands lost the power of touch. Both hands tore away at the elbows and clung to the litter, and the attacker was stricken with horrible pain.

Jacobus de Voragine. *The Golden Legend*.<sup>48</sup>

This provides evidence that physical disability and psychological impairment were considered to be justified punishments for acts of opposition to Christianity.

### *Cure and Conversion*

In response to the First Prince's plea for help, St. Peter expresses that the only thing he can do to save himself is to 'believe in Jesus Christ our Saviour'.<sup>49</sup> Upon his declaration of belief in Christ, the First Prince is able to come down from the bier, physically intact. Once again we see that the disabled and impaired bodies of the Jews are restored and made physically 'whole' again once they convert and are, therefore, spiritually 'whole'. Then, the First Prince must demonstrate his new found spiritual beliefs by following Peter's instructions, which are directed at all the Jewish people:

take this holy palm and go to your nation  
And bid them believe in God if they will be pure,  
And touch them there with both head, hand, and face.  
And of their sickness, they shall have cure,  
And otherwise in their pains endure.

AoM, II.440-4.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> *The Golden Legend* p.477.

<sup>49</sup> 'beleve in Jhesu Criste, oure Saveyour' AoM, I.434.

<sup>50</sup> 'take yone holy palme and go to thi nacyon / And bid hem beleve in God yif they wyl be pure, / And towche hem ther wyth both hed, hand, and facyon. / And of her sekenesse, they schal have cure, / And ellis in here peynys indure' AoM, II.440-4.

With these words, Peter represents Judaism as a sickness and painful affliction that the Jewish people will be cured of through a state of purity and faith in God. After his conversion, the First Prince follows the directions of Peter and attempts to convert the other Jews. As the First Prince addresses the Second and Third Princes, not only does he specifically define them as Jewish, but he also connects their Jewish identity to the impaired bodily condition of the unbelievers of their race:

You Jews that languor in this great infirmity,  
Believe in Jesus Christ, and you shall have health!  
Through virtue of this holy palm that comes from the Trinity  
Your sickness shall be relieved and restore you to prosperity.

AoM, II.464-7.<sup>51</sup>

The First Prince represents the Jews as suffering from languor and infirmity as non-believers, which are states that are both associated with melancholy, a humor which we know Albert the Great specifically attached to the Jewish body. Judaism is also represented as a sickness destroying the physical body. Following this speech, although the fate of the High Priest is not represented within the play, the First Prince's attempt to convert the other Jews is successful in the case of the Second Prince, who renounces his faith in Judaism and is subsequently healed when he is touched with the palm of St. Peter. The Third Prince, however, who is portrayed to be so overcome with madness that he does not care if he dies (II.416-18), has lost his sanity to such an extent that he does not convert. Consequently, the First and Second Demons take the Third Prince to Hell. The inconsistency of the madness of the Jews is particularly interesting, since although the insane Second Prince converts to Christianity, this same disability does not have the same effect for the Third Prince. As no Jews are taken to Hell in the *Assumption of the Virgin* from the *Golden Legend*, this is the playwright's intentional dramatisation of the fate of the Jew that fails to convert. This could therefore imply that the Jews who do not convert are too impaired ever to be capable of belief in Christianity.

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<sup>51</sup>'Ye Jewys that langour in this gret infyrmyté, / Belevyth in Crist Jhesu, and ye schal have helthe! / Throw vertu of this holy palme that com fro the Trinyté / Yowur sekenesse schal aswage and restore yow to welthe' AoM, II.464-7.



This paper demonstrates that the disability and impairment of the unconverted Jewish characters within medieval drama signifies their moral impairment as well as their racial and spiritual alterity. The portrayal of unconverted Jews in medieval drama corresponds with medieval constructions of contemporary Jewishness. For example, the madness and blindness of the Jewish characters discussed in this paper can be understood to signify Jewish irrationality and impaired spiritual understanding, aspects of Jewish identity that correspond with medieval medical constructions of Jewish physiology. Furthermore, the dismemberment of Jonathas in the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* and the First Prince in the N-Town *Assumption of Mary* both have strong connections to the manifold cultural associations of Jewish physiology with disability and impairment. Although dismembered hands are not specifically associated with the Jewish body, it follows a pattern of perceiving Jewish physiology in terms of its impairments and incompleteness. The loss of hands, just like the loss of sanity, is used metaphorically to reflect on the spiritual incompleteness of the unconverted Jews. Moreover, the disabilities and impairments suffered by the unconverted Jews of medieval drama also reflect on their immorality and their historical offences against Christ and Christianity.

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