Playing the Victim: Mockery, compassion, and racialization in premodern English Buffeting plays

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Abstract   Passion episodes such as the Buffeting are known for the powerful acts of compassion they occasioned within audiences through their performance of violence on the person of Jesus. Few critics, however, have considered that these episodes depend on antisemitic, Islamophobic, and anti-Black depictions of antagonists when engendering such emotional dispositions. By investigating the dynamics of mockery through a deeper look into the composite identities of Jesus's antagonists, this study reveals that these plays and the communities that produced them rely on a disingenuous stance of victimhood for their effectiveness. This 'victim play'—the collaborative community effort to claim the status of victim while simultaneously participating in the victimization of others—obscures that those who are attributed cruel acts of mockery are actually its targets. The powerful rhetorical strategies of the premodern English episodes are thus unearthed in this study.

Suth stoked Hym on a stole	with styf mannes hondis,
Blyndfelled Hym as a be	and boffetis Hym raghte:
'Gif thou be prophete of pris,	prophecie!' they sayde,

'Whiche berne here aboute   bolled Thee laste?' (Livingston 2004, 1316)
[Then [they] thrust him onto a stool   with powerful men's hands
Blindfolded him as a bee   and gave Him buffets.
'If you are a prophet of worth,   prophecy!' they said,
'Which man about here   struck You last?'][1]

The opening of the fourteenth-century *Siege of Jerusalem* fixes on a pervasively depicted scene of late medieval Christianity—the figure of Jesus, mocked and beaten by his enemies. The outstanding features of the episode known as the Buffeting are its interweaving of physical violence with derisive speech. Its format, constructed around the disparity of standing, mobile figures and the seated, visually obstructed Jesus, (the proverbial blind bee as the *Siege* has it) is designed to foreground the latter's status as the victim of this situation. The scene's presence in the early lines of the *Siege* is essential to this motive and establishes the basis on which a reader should engage with the alliterative poem. Situated before the account of the destruction of the Jewish city by Roman forces is given, the image of Jesus as the ultimate victim attempts to extend culpability to the Jewish inhabitants of the city, who are soon to be brutally expelled. Such a strategy is intended to shape the relationship between reader and text, requiring that a lens of prior suffering be held in mind, but only that of Jesus. Enjoying the targeted violence toward the Jews of Jerusalem at the same time is, however, an option that the *Siege* makes available.

The disposition of victimhood fostered in the person of Jesus, which I will refer to as 'victim play' in this article, relies for its efficacy on the dehumanization of antagonist figures that are generally constructed as racially distinct via what Geraldine Heng identifies as a heterogeneous combination of religious and physical markers of difference.[2] This difference is measured against an often implicit white, English Christianity. That the construction of scenes of the Passion is underpinned by some configuration of antisemitism, Islamophobia, and anti-Blackness is a fact that has received insufficient critical attention. Indeed, critics have referred to the *Siege* and its fantasized violence against Jewish people as a text that 'stains the good name of medieval piety', suggesting that its viciousness is a textual aberration. The editor of the *Siege,* Michael Livingston, however, cautions against considering the text as an isolated case. The violence of the Passion scene that opens the *Siege* is, as Livingston notes, 'a conventional account' that would be found in all extant play-texts that deal with the Passion and rendered familiar through other contemporary narrative forms (Livingston 2004, Introduction n.p.).

[1] My translation from Middle English here and throughout.

[2] I follow Geraldine Heng's contention that premodern classifications of race and racism involve complex intersections of the sociocultural and biopolitical that can involve religious, social, and corporeal features, and that 'race is ...a structural relationship for the management of human differences rather than substantive content' (2018, 3).

That the punitive aggression the *Siege* imagines against Jews had counterparts in English history further suggests its social acceptability. Critics must accept that this kind of narrative may have provoked no discomfort amongst its contemporary readers and audiences, and likely afforded a pleasurable experience for some. Imagined or real violence against Jewish people has long been framed as the justified actions of a vulnerability and victimhood that is distinctly Christian. In rehearsing this victimhood, medieval Christians would intimately connect their present status and the historical fate of their tortured and executed saviour, regardless of the manifold aspects of social, political, and economic power they were in possession of at a given time and place. This link would be evoked during dark periods in which many English Christians believed the antisemitic myth of blood libel, a period that unfortunately has not been entirely left behind. These fabrications included the alleged murder of children by a local Jewish population, who medieval Christians perceived as naturally and vindictively violent. Such accusations bolstered claims that Jewish communities extended the suffering of Jesus to contemporary Christians, especially via their children.

The ugly fiction of blood libel would also manifest as a result of the violence perpetrated during the Crusades, alongside a host of other baseless accusations. Christians also alleged that groups of Muslims carried out indiscriminate slaughtering of a given city's inhabitants or acts of cannibalism (which in the *Siege* is also attributed to Jews), when in fact such actions had been carried out by various groups of crusaders, as contemporary historians had recorded (Stacey 1999; Heng 2018, 120–21, 166). These bad faith claims allowed medieval Christians to assume the status of victim when violence, murder, and persecution based on erroneous depictions of a different religious identity were the remit of the same groups. Presenting such a distorted version of events as truth is a choice, one that is re-made and reinforced using a variety of strategies to maintain the fiction. Literary texts, iconography, and plays have been integral to upholding these distortions. This article will investigate the contribution that plays and performance made to this effort.

The Buffeting is one of the central episodes of the Passion, distinguishable not just by its violence, but more specifically by the importance attributed to physical and verbal mockery as part of that violence. Late medieval devotional texts and vernacular drama would repeatedly rehearse the cruelty of this mockery, often in graphic and degrading scenes. This article is not interested in tracing a standard narrative of the victimization put on display in performance and what it required of readers or spectators, but instead asks that we, as critics, become attuned to the rhetorical power that lies behind such portraits of victimization (Ciobanu 2018). I ask why medieval Christian cultures were compelled to

produce plays in which the most powerful members of a society viewed themselves through a lens of powerlessness and attempted to establish a logic for this posture. I consider what the role of performance is—in terms of its creation, enacting, and audience experience—and how the performance of mockery is instrumental to cultivating a successful image of victimhood. In that regard, it is essential to put the constructed identities of the mockers into the picture. I pose the question of what the power dynamics of these plays are, and for whom those dynamics were designed and, indeed, worked.

When performance is the object of inquiry, critics need to make distinctions between a historical social practice and a staged presentation of that practice in specific places and times, by and for a delimited group of people. Current scholarship on premodern English drama posits that these plays, which were performed in different sized cycles on specific feast days (e.g. York, Chester, Coventry, Beverley, Lincoln) or as more discrete episodes in specific locales or private households (the manuscripts of N-Town and Towneley may attest to such practices), were tailored to local circumstances, interests, and histories. Evidence for play-making in English cities and towns shows the ingrained participation of guilds, suggesting that the construction of a certain vision of community and place was often a crucial part of the work that the plays and their various patrons, performers, and audiences were cultivating. Having powerful social groups brought into the service of putting forth a specific vision of a community's beliefs might give critics pause when considering how identities that are not included for the express purpose of celebration might be treated.

It is noteworthy that the play episodes of the Buffeting in the three extant versions this article will focus on (York, N-Town, and Towneley) rely on similar schema of identification for staging Jesus's enemies. Criticism on these plays, and Passion narratives more generally, has often considered who performs mockery to be a reliable barometer of the power dynamics that the plays are constructing: Jesus is weak and his buffeters are strong. This perspective has routinely ignored or downplayed the fact that mockery is almost exclusively performed by those perceived as enemies of Christianity, whose constructed embodiment is explained away neither by historic nor biblical precedent. Contemporaneous practices of mockery do not offer a close analogue, though must be accounted for to clarify the plays' intentions. Evidence from the play-texts and the wider cultural contexts of the Buffeting points to the interweaving of contemporaneously antisemitic, Islamophobic,[3] and anti-Black[4] elements within the cohort of the buffeters; Annas, Caiaphas, and Herod—the most regularly occurring figures of this episode. Moreover, many figures within the plays feature some combination of these maligned identities, rather

3 I avoid 'Saracen' unless it is relevant. The term 'Muslim' refers to people adhering to the religion of Islam. Shokoofeh Rajabzadeh advises that 'all qualified and unqualified uses of Saracen should be replaced with the word Muslim in scholarship on European representation of Muslims in the Middle Ages' (2019, 1).

4 I capitalize 'Black' and 'Blackness' when referring to people, while recognizing that this category is, as Kwame Anthony Appiah writes, a 'historically created racial identity' (2020).

than a single tidy stereotype. It is my contention that bringing together these targeted aspects of already dehumanized identities in premodern English society with antagonistic figures from biblical narratives served a purpose relative to the acts of mockery these episodes attribute to them. Indebted to scholarship on Premodern Critical Race Studies (Hendricks and Parker 1994; Hendricks 2022; Hall 1995; Habib 2000; Chapman 2017; Heng 2018; Rambaran-Olm et al. 2020; Thompson 2021a, b; Kim 2019, 2021, 2022; Mejia-LaPerle 2022), I also suggest that these figures are racialized with the specific purpose of demonizing and dehumanizing them, an action that encourages audiences to empathize exclusively with the surface level target of mockery, Jesus.

In the arena of dramatic performance, a medium for which bodily presence is essential to the craft, the fabricated bodies of the buffeters—Annas, Caiaphas, and Herod—play a significant role in the cultivation not only of the figure of Jesus, but of his victimhood more precisely. These figures are racialized and dehumanized through specific choices related to costuming, painted face masks or fake heads, prostheses of other kinds, specific styles of movement and gesture, and dialogue. These details are either directly evident from the plays and their historical documentation or can be hypothesized based on pertinent representations in adjacent mediums such as iconography. The significance of imposing racialized and dehumanizing elements on these well-known biblical figures within performances, which has been under-recognized in early drama scholarship to date, is what this article intends to establish. That these figures are the main instruments of mockery should be noted as being inseparable from how their bodies are constructed for performance by and for premodern English communities.

Passion narratives and their media are known to have engaged worshippers on an affective level, with compassion, pity, or other terms for fellow feeling considered as the mainstay through which intellectual and sensory connections to the pain of Jesus were established. This kind of engagement, under the mantle of what contemporary criticism might refer to as empathy, has perhaps had the effect of stymying considerations of the power dynamics at work in Passion narratives. Recent scholars of empathy, in studies of books, film, and other media (e.g. Cohen 2021), have treated it 'as the feeling precursor to and prerequisite for liberal aspirations to greater humanitarianism,' or according to the 'empathy-altruism hypothesis,' in the words of Suzanne Keen (2006, 208). As scholar of medieval emotion Juanita Feros Ruys adds, 'It can be hard to conceive of empathy as a negative emotion in the twenty-first century West, given our long inheritance of the positive values of sympathy, moral sentiment, charity and altruism, particularly since the eighteenth century' (2018, 193). These observations can be extended to studies on empathy

and devotion in the Middle Ages. Sarah McNamer's *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion*, with its attention on 'richly emotional, script-like texts' and 'the feelings elicited toward that suffering figure… in a private drama of the heart' (2010, 1) is indicative of scholarship that takes such a view on the emotion. The exclusive focus on a suffering Jesus, his victimhood, and the complex feelings it should engender in its Christian audience goes to great lengths to avoid considering how Passion narratives might cultivate those feelings. The avoidance of engaging with the composition of the scenes, which rely to a great extent on highly prejudicial, and even racist characterisations of antagonists, shows the partial work that such investigations of emotion carry out.[5]

In the present article, I contend that an appreciation of the work mockery does in Passion narratives requires a less benevolent view on empathy, or its Latin cognate compassion, and how it might function for certain social groups. Keen's work on narrative empathy is extremely pertinent in that the critic is interested in moving beyond unproven links between empathy and altruism, a position also taken by Ruys in her historicization of medieval views of empathy. Within her labelling of how narratives engage the emotion, Keen's category of 'bounded strategic empathy' is resonant for Passion plays. Keen writes:

> bounded strategic empathy occurs within an in-group, stemming from experiences of mutuality, and leading to feeling with familiar others. The bards of the in-group call upon bounded empathy, and lack of familiarity may indeed prevent outsiders from joining the empathic circle. (2006, 224)

That strategic uses of empathy create or engage an in-group which functions to exclude others opens up critical perspectives on the kinds of work empathy can accomplish. Keen's view on empathy is not incompatible with positions such as McNamer's on medieval compassion either; in many ways the latter's work is making similar claims for the exclusionary operation of such emotional dispositions within Christian communities. The difference, however, is that medievalist critics have generally viewed empathy or compassion as exclusively praiseworthy and have ignored the potential for violence that could be part of its functionality.

A final aspect that this study must broach is the relationship that the Buffeting and its mockery have toward the humorous,—a link that critics have regularly made but have rarely developed at length in scholarship. Although mockery has been categorized as a form of humour, and has a relationship with laughter in many of the words that form its expansive premodern lexicon (e.g. 'buffet' as noun can refer to speech or a blow, with earlier forms connecting these actions to mockery),[6] labelling a

5 Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields clarify that 'Racism is first and foremost a social practice, which means that it is an action or a rationale for action, or both' (2012, 17). Ayanna Thompson adds that 'Racism produces race as a concept' (2021a, b, 8).

6 *Middle English Compendium* (*MEC*) 'buffett' n. (1a), derived from the Old French, *Dictionnaire du Moyen Français* (*DMF*), 'buffet' n. (2), 'a slap'. The proto-Romance meanings range from 'mouth', 'cheeks', 'a slap', to 'a joke' (*Französiches Etymologisches Wörterbuch* (*FEW*), 597–98).

practice as humorous does not unpack how it functions, or what kinds of intentionality lie behind its deployment. These questions must be part of the investigation and not assumed from the outset. Recent studies on humour have recognized the emotional force it can carry and the rhetorical power of that force, especially in the context of performance. Patricia Akhimie's treatment of humour in Shakespearean drama devotes attention to how it elicits strong emotional engagements in audiences.[7] Akhimie writes, quoting the sociologist of racism and humour theorist Raúl Pérez (2017), that humour 'creates divisions; it "functions politically to divide social groups, particularly in generating and reinforcing social boundaries, social distance, and inequalities"' (2021, 51). Passion narratives are known to have stimulated specific emotional states, yet any divisive effort that may have been striven for is a neglected area in critical discussions. Mockery, and the compassionate dispositions it may have engendered, could function to unite certain groups, whether present or imagined, to the detriment of those who did not fit into some social or cultural categorizations. This article intends to show how the deployment of mockery works to perform the kind of divisions that Akhimie identifies in later drama, and to make a case for a similarity with the Buffeting plays' rhetorical strategies.

Three plays deal at length with the Buffeting: those found in the York cycle and the N-Town and Towneley manuscripts. The Buffeting episode is attached to Annas' and Caiaphas' trial of Jesus. Herod's trial and Peter's denial of Jesus often feature too. The prisoner is generally brought on in bindings, fresh from his arrest at the Garden of Gethsemane; Jesus has some kind of interrogation, mainly with Caiaphas; he is then beaten in a mocking form by a group of soldiers or henchmen. Though the plays range in dates from the late fifteenth to mid-sixteenth century and evince regional specificities, their deployment of mockery through antagonistic figures is a notable similarity. To trace their rhetorical strategies, I will begin by detailing the interweaving of mockery on a surface level in these episodes before problematizing that surface level. Probing what mockery meant in terms of historically attested instances as well as literary constructions shows how much the plays depart from contemporaneous practices and understandings. This departure, I argue, rests heavily on how the antagonists are constructed in the plays and how that construction, in turn, impacts the figure of Jesus.

7 Early medievalists have discussed the cultivation of emotion in relation to liturgy and its connection to drama and performance. See: Bedingfield (2002), Bedingfield and Gittos (2005), and Rambaran-Olm (2014).

Cultivating the victim: mockery in the plays

One of the definitive features of mockery in the Buffeting is evident in how Jesus is spoken to. Though mocking language featured in the Gospel episodes (Matthew. 26:67–68; Mark. 14:65; Luke. 22:63–64), there is noteworthy overlapping of language related to physical violence and mockery in the play-texts. In the York *Trial Before Cayphas and Anna* (Davidson 2011a), Cayphas, Anna, and several of the soldier figures characterise the Buffeting as a game ('gome' or 'game') (204, 205, 288, 355) of 'popse' (blows, strikes) (355) that they will play, and a 'layke' (sport) (377) designed to displease its target. Cayphas calls the engagement with Jesus a 'hething' (a mockery or jest) on two occasions in relation to both of their dispositions (33, 325). Meanwhile, Cayphas and Jesus use 'b(o)urde' (jest, joke, trick) (243, 331) to refer to the beating; it is also an accusation that *I Miles* (Soldier I) levels against Jesus in his treatment of Cayphas (327). The Towneley and N-Town plays label the Buffeting as a specific kind of game. The Towneley *Buffeting* (or *Coliphizacio*) has Caiaphas call Jesus the 'Kyng Copyn in our game' (potentially meaning 'king of blows') (241) (Epp 2017, 241).[8] In the N-Town *Herod; Trial before Annas and Cayphas*, the equivalent game is called 'whele and pylle' (spin and pluck/ strike) (Sugano 2007, 190). The overlay of game and physical violence underpins all three presentations of the Buffeting, as it did elsewhere in premodern English treatments. The game of 'bobben' (to mock, to strike/ beat), or the variant 'abbobyd,' frequently appear as synonyms for the Buffeting, and bear this semantic overlap.

All plays have a Jesus that is blindfolded, which is also a biblical detail. The blindfold obstructs the vision of Jesus and enables the guessing game of who struck him last, a mocking question that ridicules his claims to prophetic knowledge (Derbes, 94–112). Towneley makes the most of this feature, and over the course of a lengthy exchange, the servant character Froward acquires the veil and commentates as he places it over Jesus's eyes. The seating and veiling aspects work to cultivate Jesus's status as victim in multiple ways. That he is encircled by a group of standing figures uses height and numerical difference to establish the group's pernicious action, and the obscuring of his sight adds to the imbalance of capacities. The scene draws on Psalm 21:17, 'Many dogs have encompassed me,' which was a fixture in the Good Friday liturgy (Davidson 2011b, Introduction n.p.; Marrow 1979, 132–34). This psalmic connection, which notably emphasizes the victimhood of Jesus by insisting on the depravity of his so-called animalistic persecutors (a detail I will return to in greater depth), would thus have contributed toward how the scene was understood. This composition is also seen in imagery (Figure 1), such as

8 Epp notes that the verb *coupen* (*MEC* v. 1), 'to come to blows', is one of the most likely meanings at work in this name.

Figure 1: Christ mocked and scourged, *Holkham Picture Bible*, British Library MS 47682 (1327–35) fol. 29v. British Library Board. Reproduced with permission.

the *Holkham Picture Bible* (British Library, MS 47682, fol. 29v; 1327-35), which Clifford Davidson has compared to the equivalent scene in the York play (2011b, Introduction n.p.).

Images of the Buffeting such as those found in Books of Hours or psalters generally present a seated Jesus. This detail forges a typological connection to the Old Testament prophet Job seated on a dung pile

(Derbes 1996, 94–112), a link intended to reinforce Jesus's status as victim. The York, N-Town, and Towneley plays utilize this detail to different degrees. The most notable instance is Towneley in which Froward questions the reasoning of placing Jesus on a stool (which is also punningly referred to as a 'buffit' (507)) and complains that it will render him too comfortable. He receives an answer that exemplifies the buffeters' cruelty:

> TORTURER 1 If he stode up on loft
> We must hop and dawnse
> As cokys in a croft. (512–14)
> [If he stode up high
> We would need to hop and dance
> Like cocks in a courtyard.]

The arrangement reduces the physical effort of striking Jesus.

The simulation of violence also contributes to the surface level mockery. In line with the biblical detail of the head being struck, and the visual conventions of closed fist and open-handed strikes (Marrow 1979, 133), the York text relays that the striking consists of 'flappe[s]' (slaps) (363) and 'neffes' (fists) (367). This is rendered into a playful counting that the group perform: 'Playes faire in feere, and ther is one and ther is – two /… And there is – three, and there is – four' (Play honourably in company, and there is one [strike] and there is two / and there is three, and there is – four) (362–64). N-Town's more efficient stage directions (British Library Cotton MS Vespasian DVIII, fol. 168v; 1450–1515) condense its violent game into a brief line: in Middle English, 'Here thei shal bete Jhesus about the hed and the body' (Here they shall beat Jesus on the head and on the body), and in Latin, '*Et percuciet super caput*' (And they strike him on the head). Towneley's text is again the longest, with the strikes and a perversely drawn-out interest in the blows' effectiveness, or lack thereof, woven into the three-person dialogue:

> TORTURER 1 Now sen he is blynfeld,
> I fall to begyn,
> And thus was I counseld
> The mastry to wyn.
> TORTURER 2 Nay, wrang has thou teld;
> Thus shuld thou com in.
> FROWARD
> I stode and beheld;
> Thou towchid not the skyn
> Bot fowl.
> TORTURER 1 How will thou I do?

TORURER 2 On this manere, lo. (Epp 2017, 573–83)
[**TORTURER 1** Now since he is blindfolded
I come to commence,
And thus was I advised
The victory to gain.
TORTURER 2 No, you have declared wrongly,
This is how you should proceed.
FROWARD I stood and watched,
You did not touch the skin
Except poorly.
TORTURER 1 What do you wish me to do?
TORTURER 2 This way, please.]

Part of drawing attention to the ineffectiveness of the first torturer's strikes is a self-reflexive underscoring of the performative, simulated nature of the action. Adjacent dimensions are the focus on the cruelty of the event and the physical harm caused to Jesus as a result of the blows: 'Ther start up a cowl' (A lump is rising quickly there) (585). The play-texts notably omit the characterisation of Jesus that devotional texts insist on. His patience and status as sacrificial lamb are front and centre in Nicholas Love's *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ* (Sargent 2005, 165–66), whereas they need to be inferred from the buffeters' actions and dialogue. The totalizing focus on the beatings Jesus receives, and the cruel mockery that is part of their delivery, shows a one-sided violence that works to present a victimized Jesus at the centre of the action.

Beyond the surface I: mockery and its cultural contexts

Mockery in its physical and verbal forms constitutes a major part of all three plays, and its cruelty, illegality, and erroneous target have been major critical preoccupations in modern interpretations. The influential study of V. A. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi*, typifies much of the prevailing critical stance, in which attention to the language of mockery is summarized as effecting how Jesus 'dies the victim of a playful, uncommitted, sham enmity' (1966, 199). The way a play intends its mockery to be read versus how it actually functions are two different things. Yet teasing out this disparity is a tricky endeavour. Looking to mockery's wider cultural operations might seem like a ready solution to clarify its rhetorical function within plays, but this critical strategy has limitations that arise from a lack of resemblance between historical instances and what we find in the plays. Literary counterparts too are little

alike the plays' deployment and outcome of mocking Jesus. Taking account of what these differences are can nevertheless help critics to be more precise about what the plays do with mockery and get beyond a surface level reading.

Looking firstly to historical instances of mockery, editors of *La Dérision au Moyen Age*, Elisabeth Crouzet-Pavan and Jacques Verger, designate mockery as a weapon that was most often aimed at one's equals or inferiors in the Middle Ages. The dangers of potentially violent retaliations as a consequence of attacking name and reputation underscore this tendency and insist on its careful and strategic deployment (Crouzet-Pavan and Verger 2007, 8). A tension with the plays' presentation of mockery should already be evident. In the plays of the Buffeting, mockery is distinctive for having neither a target that is a social inferior, nor one who takes action to defend name and reputation or offense at its damage. Nor does this lack of rebuttal pose a legitimate challenge to that name or bear the threat of shame.

Examples of peoples targeted for mocking in premodern contexts show the gap between contemporary codifications and what the plays enact. Historian Jean-Claude Schmitt is emphatic about the high social impact and cost of mockery and that it is above all a publicly performed action. He cites the *charivari* as an example of mockery in one of its most elaborate forms. Schmitt goes on to note that historically attested victims were often socially marginalized individuals or groups (2007, 264), in line with Crouzet-Pavan and Verger's contention that it was a form of attack best used on those who were not in a position to respond. *Charivari*, or its English equivalent 'skimmington', was a social practice in which a group of townspeople publicly paraded individuals in a state of undress or other kinds of humiliating displays. The targets were generally chosen on the basis of being judged to have exceeded the bounds of normative, often sexual, behaviour. A marital relationship in which spouses had a large age gap is a regularly cited example (Crane 2002; Hickerson 2013; Lavéant 2017). Disabled people were also targets for public displays of mockery. Edward Wheatley attests the public parading of a group of blind men in 1425 Paris the day before they were given sticks with which they could win a pig if they killed it. The chronicle record of the incident presents the event as defined by these individuals hitting and injuring each other more than the pig, however. At the heart of the entertainment seems to be the performance of the physical impairment of blindness and bodily limitations for a sighted audience's likely scornful amusement (Wheatley 2010,

1–2). Once again, it is hard to find any kind of direct resonance with how the Passion plays present mockery.

Considering mockery within devotional contexts has important implications for how it might be understood. Mockery could be framed as a form of irony in medieval theological terms and considered as a divine and necessary course of action (Derbes 1996, 106–11; Schmitt 2007, 264; Knox 1989, 84). Such a stance might underwrite Jesus's own deployment of mocking speech. While biblical scholars have contended this was an important aspect of his attacks on powerful institutions in the Gospels (Neufeld 2014, 2–3; Bednarz 2015, 10), identifying Jesus's speech as mockery in the plays is not supported by parallels with contemporary devotional texts. He is generally presented as a patiently forbearing figure, whose sanctity is indicated by the depravity he endures. Contrarily, the mockers of Jesus were often held up in sermons and exempla as the perpetrators of inherently sinful actions that should be avoided (Schmitt 2007, 263; Siggins 2009, 231).

Late medieval literary depictions of mockery and mocking practices reinforce their social and public stakes, but once again give a sense of how unusual the mocking of Jesus is in that it goes without response. Literary counterparts constantly show that the targeting of reputation incited a verbal or physical response to avoid shame or damage to one's name. Mockery is often involved in texts concerned with reputation and prestige. Gawain's intervention during the Green Knight's mocking of Arthur in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* shows the stakes of such an attack on the court. Having repeatedly had his own name put into question at Bertilak's castle, Gawain's later loss of control at the Green Chapel in the face of the continued mockery of the Green Knight evinces the emotional turmoil and interference with social persona that mockery can achieve. Similarly, what pushes Malory's Launcelot into action in France subsequent to the revelation of his affair with Guinevere is not the invasion of his territory and slaughtering of its inhabitants but a mocking of his reputation. After Gawain calls him a 'false traytour' and a 'cowarde' (Shepherd 2004, 675), Launcelot and his knights decide that he must respond by fighting Gawain. By contrast, the silence that characterises Jesus's response to his mocking is valorised as emblematic of his patient forbearance of sinful actions in the wider devotional reading. Damage to his name is never part of interpretations of the episode, and thus mockery does not function in its normative social capacity.

Beyond the surface II: constructing Jesus's antagonists

Critical discussions of Passion plays and narratives have been surprisingly reticent to investigate how Jesus's antagonists are constructed, yet turning one's attention to such work gives an immediate sense that there is something pernicious at play. The cultivation of Jesus's status as victim has led to his antagonists bodying forth a complex, often incongruous set of attributes. These were in line with late medieval and early modern ideas of who his, and Christianity's, enemies were—a designation that is culturally and temporally variable. Foremost among these attributes in the English plays is an emphasis that these figures were Jewish, an identification that was not taken from the Gospels, but which issued out of medieval exegetical traditions (Winter 1963; Davidson 2011, 97). Subsequent to the Crusades, and the many disastrous military losses to various Islamic forces that the Latin West suffered, it is perhaps unsurprising that an interlocking aspect of the characterisation involves a distorted presentation of Islam as part of an antagonist's religious identity. Another variously combined factor is that one or more of the antagonists' physical presentations can involve Black or brown skin tones. These details, it must be emphasized, were not included for the purpose of accurate representation, and had little to do with real world people, their religious practices, or physical difference from white English Christians. The question is not whether a Black person could be Jewish or Muslim, for example, and it says nothing about the presence of people in premodern England who were racially or religiously diverse. Mary Rambaran-Olm's research into Abbot Hadrian highlights a tradition of scholarly whitewashing of English history that must be avoided in these investigations and in medieval history more widely (2021). In the following section, I will argue that these variously combined identifiers were integrated into the antagonists' characterisation to create a logic for demonizing those identifiers. The purpose of this demonization, furthermore, needs to be understood in the context of enhancing the victim status of Jesus and the contemporary Christian communities enacting the plays.

Antisemitism and constructing Jesus's enemies

One of the most recurring identifiers of Jesus's antagonists in the Buffeting episode is that they are Jewish. They are often named as such in the plays. The York *Trial* labels the henchmen as *Miles* (soldier) in speech headings and refers to them as knights in the dialogue. Importantly, though, in the earlier document known as the *Ordo Paginarium* (Order of the Pageants)

(c. 1415), most attendants in the Passion plays, including the Buffeting episode within the *Trial*, are specified as being *Iudei* (Jews) (Stevens and Dorrell 1974, 49). The N-Town Passion plays (fols. 167v–69r), including *Herod; Trial*, name similar figures as *Judeus* (Jew) in the Latinate speech headings and *Jewys* (Jews) in the English stage directions. The Chester *Trial and Flagellation*, preserved in multiple manuscripts between the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, labels the four attendants as *Judeus* (Lumiansky and Mills 1974, 284–303). Although the mid-sixteenth century Towneley manuscript's *Buffeting* speech headings have *Torturers* (Huntington Library MS HM 1, fols. 73v–78v; c. 1550s), this may not preclude a Jewish identity, which could have been visually signalled by stage practices.

To appreciate the importance of naming these antagonists as Jewish, the context of the historical challenges Jewish people faced in medieval England prior to their expulsion is essential and enables a working through of how 'victim play' manifests itself in Passion plays. How their absence is incorporated into devotional and fictional contexts is also key (Tomasch 2000; Kruger 2005). Denise Despres has made essential interventions in this regard, pointing out that although practicing Jews no longer had a viable place in England after their expulsion in 1290, 'their presence was a necessary element in the devotional world of the later medieval English laity' (1998, 47). Sylvia Tomasch tenders that '"the Jew" was central… to the construction of Englishness itself' (2000, 244). Holly Crocker has also remarked on the disjunction between what was enacted in premodern Passion episodes and the historic vulnerabilities of communities of Jews in Europe. Terming the Passion narrative as a 'replayed scene of violence [that] justifies the real and imagined persecution of medieval Jews,' it is, in Crocker's words, 'a stunning historical inversion' (2017, 85).

Literature and drama played important roles in sustaining this inversion (Black 2020, 16–17). Many of the cities that staged religious plays, York included, have horrific histories of murderous violence against the Jewish communities that once lived there. Alongside historians such as Robert C. Stacey (2000) and Despres (1998), Geraldine Heng (2018) has written about the precocious aggression of English crown policies devised for its Jewish residents, who monarchs of England had placed within their realm from the late eleventh century until their formal expulsion. Hagiography and martyr narratives written during this period paint a picture of distorted inversion in the service of 'victim play'. With regard to the antisemitic trope of ritual child murder, or blood libel, Thomas of Monmouth's (1150–73) hagiography of William of Norwich in 1144 was the first to accuse English Jews of murdering a Christian child. By the thirteenth century, this form of writing was primed for positioning the

Christian as a perpetual victim (Despres 2010; Rubin 2014), with the same justification trotted out for the accidental death of Hugh of Lincoln in 1255 (Despres 1998, 53). Chaucer's later *Prioress's Tale* would name the murdered Hugh a 'martir' (Benson 1987, 579, 680). The popularity of the blood libel narrative, which could also involve ritual crucifixion, continued to shape perceptions of Jewish people as inherently violent and predisposed to turn that violence against Christians in England even after their expulsion (Lipton 2014, 242; Heng 2018, 81–96). Heng argues with regard to literary artifacts that 'the plotting…can be made to bear emphases that demonstrate how the manipulation of Jews actual and virtual crucially served the national community of England' (2018, 81). The Lincoln case, for example, instilled a lasting sense of victimhood among English Christians, even though it led to royal intervention and the execution without trial of nineteen English Jews (Little 1991, 287).

Moving back to the plays, the gravity of labelling an antagonist as Jewish should become more apparent. Naming, however, is just part of the negative characterisation. Turning to consider how scenes of the Buffeting were composed in Books of Hours, psalters, or picture Bibles gives information about how the plays may have staged these figures, as religious imagery often had similar strategies of presenting scenes and figures as drama. Images of the Buffeting such as in the *Holkham Picture Bible* (Figure 1) insist on its violence and convey the depravity of the attackers through physical, often racialized, attributes. The buffeters are regularly depicted with exaggerated, distorted facial gestures such as open mouths, bared teeth, or exposed tongues, and attributed grotesque facial features such as large noses shown in profile or snout-like noses shown in front view. Scholars have identified these details elsewhere in antisemitic constructions of Jewish bodies (Mellinkoff 1993, 42–43, 65–67; Strickland 2003; Bale 2010, 65–89; Lipton 2014; Lumbrich 2015; Phillips 2017).[9] Mouths are often open for the purpose of suggesting vicious, mocking speech, which is attributed to these figures in play-texts via their exclamatory register, the repetition of certain words or phrases, and short, staccato words and lines. Regarding physical features, there is no historical record of an attempt to alter performers' faces with specific prostheses, but fake heads and other body parts are an attested part of early dramatic practices (Butterworth 2014, 109–25) and may have been employed in these plays.

Clothing also worked to define certain bodies as Jewish, and specific costuming may have been used with, or in place of, other physical identifiers. Yellow and red parti-coloured or striped clothing was a common visual identifier for Jews, as these colours were used to negatively connote individuals (Mellinkoff 1993, 42–43, 65–67; Strickland 2003,

9 In this essay I follow critics such as Bale (2010), Heng (2018), and Stacey (2000) in their labeling of the kinds of prejudices against Jewish people.

Figure 2: Jesus Before Caiaphas, Salvin Hours, British Library MS 48985 (1275) fol. 29r. British Library Board. Reproduced with permission.

110). Headwear was another pervasively used item to visually identify Jews. Deborah Higgs Strickland notes that:

> A medieval Jewish hat is usually pointed and in modern academic parlance is often referred to as a *pileum cornutum, Judenhat*, or a Phrygian cap. The Jewish hats encompass a wide variety, from round caps, to the softly folded Phrygian type, to various pointed types with or without surmounting knobs. The most exaggerated types look like inverted funnels (2003, 105).

The cited example (Figure 2) from the *Salvin Hours* (British Library MS 48985, fol. 29r; 1275) shows two different forms of conical hat used in tandem with beards to identify Caiaphas and one of his henchmen as Jewish (Strickland, 111). Beards are a consistent, though not necessarily

exclusive identifier of Jews in imagery (see Figure 4), and an abundance of documentary evidence exists for the use of fake beards in early drama, making this a viable costuming strategy (Butterworth 2014).

The choreographing of certain patterns of gesture and movement is more clearly implied in the play-texts and attempts to communicate the inherent and senseless violence of Caiaphas and the buffeters, an attribute medieval Christians regularly apportioned to Jewish people. Caiaphas is either a figure of almost unrestrained violence, having to be dissuaded from direct physical aggression against Jesus as in the Towneley play, or is the vicious orchestrator of the group attack as in the other plays. The most dynamic figures of the Buffeting proper are Caiaphas's henchmen. As has already been discussed, an essential part of the Buffeting episode is the simulation of violence toward the person of Jesus. Coupled with the mocking dialogue of the plays, it works to build a picture of senseless and pernicious aggression that would have been attributable to Jewish people for premodern English audiences. These depictions and the mockery attributed to them can thus be understood as propaganda tools that conveyed an antisemitic worldview.

The Islamophobic dimension

Although many aspects of negative characterisation render antagonistic figures in the Buffeting Jewish, Jews were not the exclusive targets in Passion episodes. Nonetheless, Judaism remains part of the picture in the incoherent visions of Christian enemies. In line with the contours of post-eleventh century constructions of Jewish identity was its association with distorted aspects of Islam. Suzanne Conklin Akbari (2009) and John Tolan (2002, 2019), whose research builds on the foundational work of Edward Said (1978), have discussed the purpose of conflating Muslims and Jews in legal and imaginative instances. Akbari, drawing on Jeremy Cohen's research on the melding of Muslim and Jewish identities in Christian theology, synthesizes:

> Such overlapping... is far from uncommon... in the medieval 'classification of the Jews together with the Muslims,' both are merely 'subsets in a larger genus of hermeneutically constructed *infideles* who undermined the unity of the Christian faith.' In canon law, regulations limiting the interactions of Christians with Jews and Muslims treated the latter two as equivalents. (1999, 124)

Devotional literature contains references to damning groupings of non-Christian enemies; Jews, 'Saracens,' and heretics often appear as a malevolent trio, thus imaginatively implying an inherent connection

between the three.[10] The derogatory term 'Saracen' is part of a long-standing Christian tradition of maligning Muslims, with its appearance and the company it keeps signalling an antipathic disposition (Rajabzadeh 2019, 1). Herod's dialogue in the N-Town *Herod; Trial* play evinces a Jewish-Muslim conflation. The self-proclaimed 'Jewys kyng' (Jew's king) (25) states that his power issues from Muhammad:

> The lawys of Mahownde, my powers shal fortefye,
> Reverens to that lord of grace moost excyllent,
> For be his powere allthinge doth multyplye. (26–28)
> [The laws of Muhammad, my powers shall strengthen
> Veneration to that lord of most excellent grace
> For by his power do all things prosper.]

While these imaginative meldings were often used for fictional vilifications, there were real world implications, too. It is noteworthy that during the Crusades, Latin Christians perpetrated horrific violence against Muslim peoples (Heng 2018, 119–21). Back in England, the severe losses suffered against Islamic forces had violent repercussions for some English Jews, who were murdered by returning crusaders (Stacey 1999).

Jesus's antagonists bear aspects that are uniquely attributable to Muslim identities and which need to be taken into account in their own right. Many of these emerge out of the dialogue of the plays. The most notable references to Islam come from citing the name of the Prophet Muhammad to position him as a false deity or idol (Daniel 1980; Tolan 2002, 2019). Indeed, the language medieval Christians used to refer to Muhammad often parodies references to Jesus or the Christian god. The York Cayphas alludes to Muhammad as the source of Jesus's miraculous healing powers 'A, this makes he by the myghtis of Mahounde' (Ah, he does this by the power of Muhammad) (265), while *II Miles* invokes Muhammad's name to entreat Cayphas to finish the interrogation with Jesus: 'My lorde, will ye here, for Mahounde? / No more now for to neven that it nedis' (My lord, do you hear, by Muhammad? / No more is needed to be said now) (332–33). Herod's invocations to 'Mahownde' (26, 58) in the N-Town *Herod; Trial* play do something similar. The despot refers to 'gloryous' Muhammad as being his 'sovereyn savyour' (58). As these plays were produced subsequent to an already long history of Islamic-Christian interaction, the bad-faith presentation of the Prophet Muhammad as a Muslim deity says more about its accusers than it does about practitioners of the religion.

The plays incorporate malevolent perspectives on the prophet Muhammad into the attacks that are levelled against Jesus, creating what might be a surprising link between the two figures. Established Christian accusations against Muhammad as a figure of trickery and deception, a fake

10 This kind of grouping is conventional in devotional literature. An example is evident in the prayers of Margery Kempe and Windeatt (2000, 365).

prophet or fake messiah, a sorcerer and/or a heresiarch are echoed in many of the allegations put to Jesus in the plays (Tolan 2002, 135–70). He is called a witch, a warlock (*York*, 37, 183), or a practitioner of magic (*York*, 96, 238; *Towneley*, 124, 130), accusations which generally relate to his performance of miracles. The aforementioned reference to Muhammad as his source of power with regard to miracles in the York *Trial* (265) confirms the connection. Jesus is also accused of undermining right religion by being a traitor (*Towneley*, 89, 247; *York*, 323), attacking religious law (*York*, 42, 387; *N-Town*, 147; *Towneley*, 25, 32, 97, 134, 173) by spreading false 'dottryne' (doctrine) through preaching (*N-Town*, 131), and uttering blasphemy (*N-Town*, 174, 180). Using standard attacks on the Prophet Muhammad against Jesus evinces the complex interweaving of a Christian worldview into all aspects of its slanderous accusations against Islam. These fabricated identities thus bear the traces of their creators, as much as they attempt to construct alterity.

Other facets of stagecraft may have been relied upon to signal Islamic aspects of antagonists' identities, as there were established visual conventions to that end in late medieval European iconography. Beards once again figure in visual codes for Muslims, and they could be paired with unsightly facial features or specific headwear (Strickland 2003, 173, 187). Strickland notes the 'special importance' of the turban and the headband known as the *tortil* in late medieval iconography (2003, 174, 181). Marginalia (Figure 3) in the *Luttrell Psalter* (British Library Add MS 42130, fol. 157r; c. 1325–40) contains a figure with these features (Strickland 2003, 89). The *Belles Heures of Jean de France* by the Limbourg Brothers (Figure 4) features a Buffeting scene in which several figures wear turbans (Metropolitan Museum of Art, MS 54.1.1, fol. 131v; c. 1405–09). Joyce Kubiski comments on the symbolic use of costume in these miniatures, noting that they serve the principal purpose of signalling alterity, rather than being attempts at faithfully rendering different cultural identities (2001, 170–72). While not explicit from play-texts or historical records, some of these strategies may have been drawn on in staged presentations of antagonists to cultivate antipathy in audiences.

Anti-Blackness in the buffeting plays

Negatively characterising antagonists through religious alterity was not the only strategy that these plays pursued. Attributing Black skin to antagonist figures is another facet of the same effort (de Weever 1998). Once again, what is being done regarding Blackness must be accounted for on its own terms. Only then can its relevance to blended or hybrid identities be appreciated. Scholars have noted tendencies to connect Black
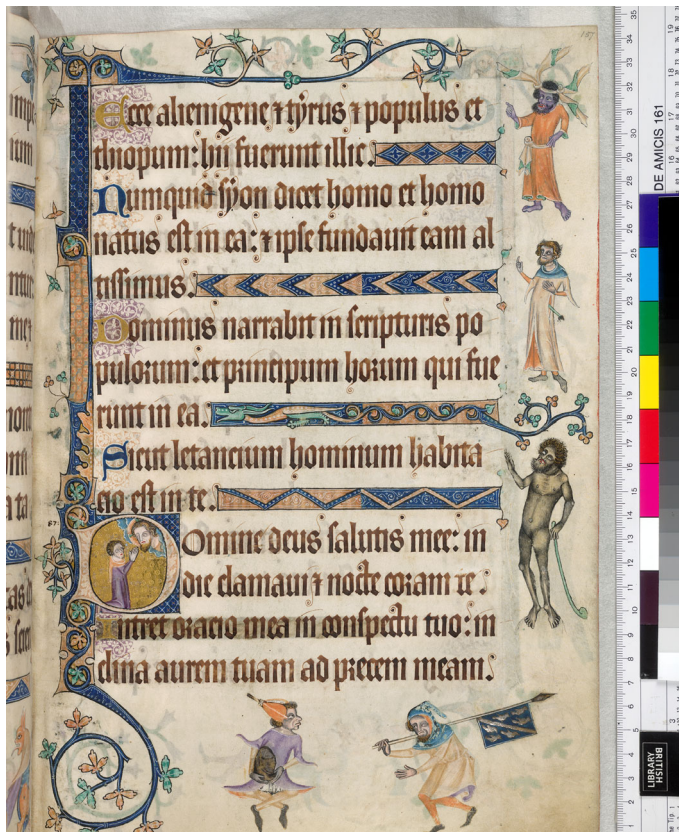
Figure 3: Marginalia of Muslim man with beard and elaborate headwear, Luttrell Psalter, British Library Add MS 42130 (1325–1340) fol. 157r. British Library Board. Reproduced with permission.

skin to sin or other negative moral conditions in early Christian authorities such as Jerome, Augustine, and Gregory the Great, whose essentializing links persist in later Christian thought (Devisse 1979; Hood 1994; de Weever 1998; Goldenberg 2003; Chapman 2017; Kaplan 2019). Art historians have commented on the frequent portrayal of Jesus's enemies as Black in medieval art, and thus we might anticipate that it was a practice that implicates religious drama too. The appearance of a Black figure within a religious play, then, must be considered as having the potential to impart a moral judgment that would have been available for audience members to take on board. Though not the exclusive meaning of Black skin in a medieval English context, Cord Whitaker has shown that 'the notion that blackness indicates sin, or moral deficiency' held weight in medieval literature (2019, 3). Erik Wade explains that 'English writers associated Blackness with sin and the demonic, and they often called devils

Figure 4: Belles Heures of Jean de France, Metropolitan Museum of Art, MS 54.1.1 (1405–09) fol. 131v. Reproduced with permission.

Ethiopians' (2019, 66), a practice Jacqueline de Weever has traced from early biblical exegesis to medieval French epic literature (1998). This theological tradition is explicit in plays such as the tenth-century *Dulcitius* by Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, which names the governor Dulcitius as an Ethiopian and a devil when he covers himself in soot in a deranged attempt to rape three Christian virgins (Berschin 2001, 170). It persists through to the York *Fall of the Angels*, where the transforming Lucifer refers to his 'bryghtnes es blakkeste and blo nowe' (brightness is blackest and blue now) (100). In a play supremely concerned with the bright face of the premier angel (Brazil 2017, 189–90), the necessity of his adopting a Black appearance suggests a stagecraft that could convey the moral implications

of the ontological transformation. Blackface and costume changes are likely to have played a role in dramatic presentation (Vaughan 2005, 9; Wade 2019, 23; Thompson 2021a, b, 19–20). Farah Karim-Cooper argues in relation to the application of cosmetics to achieve a Black complexion in performance that 'race and staged blackness are inextricable in an early modern dramatic context' (2007, 140), a point worth considering in relation to earlier forms of drama.

Verbal associations to devils may connect the buffeters, Annas, and Caiaphas to anti-Black stagecraft in the York *Trial* play. As Satan had done in the *Fall*, the York soldiers identify themselves as 'a frende' (*Fall*, 27; *Trial*, 179). Anna swears by the devil Belial's 'blood and his bonys' (blood and bones) (286) when inciting violence against Jesus, while Cayphas's address to *I Miles*, regarding the impending journey to Herod, makes a connection between their movement and devilishness: 'Sir, youre faire felawschippe we betake to the fende. / Goose onne nowe and daunce forth in the devyll way' (Sir, your fair company we deliver to Satan. / Go on now and dance on in the devil's manner) (394–95). One of the strongest cases for the use of blackface in the Passion plays relates to Herod, whose associations with two religious minorities and Blackness in medieval constructions makes his vilified 'Otherness' a particularly intersectional one (Crenshaw 1989). Scholars have argued that the Beverley play *Blak Herod* potentially features Herod with black face-paint or a painted, artificial head. A similar approach has been suggested in Coventry, where records indicate this practice may have been integral to Herod's dramatic presentation (Leach 1901, 213; Twycross and Carpenter 2002, 216, 316, 331). Iconography depicting Herod with a grey or black face to denote his moral state may be an influence here (Skey 1976, 329).

Scholars have long-since conjectured that this episode employed Blackness for the purpose of maligning antagonists, though few seem concerned with the racism behind these portrayals. W. L. Hildburgh made a connection between 'the very dark faces of the torturers and other iniquitous persons' in alabaster sculptures and suggested that this presentation likely extended to drama (1949, 76). Art historians have noted the practice of making some buffeters Black (Devisse 1979, 62, 64). Ruth Mellinkoff writes that 'thick lips and tightly curled hair are combined for a mocker in the *Mocking of Christ* of the M. R. James Memorial Psalter, an English manuscript of the late fourteenth century' (1993, 127). She clarifies that 'the urgent point is… [that] they draw on stereotyped associations of these features' (127).

Few medievalist critics of these plays employ the term 'blackface' to explain the racially loaded practice of putting black materials on the face and/or body, which Ayanna Thompson defines as 'the application of any prosthetic…to imitate the complexion of another race' (2021, 19).

Thompson traces the long history of blackface to medieval plays, especially in terms of staging devils (19–20). A small number of medievalists have considered the implications of these practices in a rigorous manner, encapsulating the race-making at work (Sponsler 1997a, b; Vaughan 2005; Wade 2019). Literary treatments of Black figures, and of adopting Blackness for the purpose of its demonization, can also inform on what these plays do (de Weever 1998; Cohen 2001; Campbell 2006; Ramey 2014; Whitaker 2015, 2019; Vernon 2018; Heng 2018; Wade 2022). Blackface has been more thoroughly treated by early modern scholars of Premodern Critical Race Theory (Hendricks 2022) such as Thompson, who are interested in historicizing a practice of race-making that was well established by the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Hall 1991; Habib 2007; Karim-Cooper 2007; Hornback 2012; Minor & Thompson 2013; Chapman 2017; Thompson 2021a, b; Ndiaye 2021). The argument early modernist Kim F. Hall makes in *Things of Darkness* on how 'the language of dark and light is racialized' (1995, 2) holds crucial insights and directions for earlier forms of drama. Medievalists must incorporate existing research on race-making when considering why a given figure is rendered Black in line with a theological tradition that could have impinged on dramatic presentations.

In addition to deploying established, pernicious connections between Blackness and the demonic, links to the animal were also used. Matthieu Chapman's contention in relation to early modern drama that 'representations of black characters... regardless of the conventions used, established a dichotomy between human and nonhuman' (2017, 10) is a point that chimes with how the buffeters are portrayed in medieval iconography. The Buffeting scene in the *Holkham Picture Bible* (Figure 1) shows some buffeters with Black complexions and faces that are not simply distorted or grotesque, but also animalistic. Going back to the Good Friday Psalm, 'Many dogs have encompassed me (21:17)', which led to visual conventions of depicting the buffeters as animal-like, gives some insight into how the plays' creators approached these figures. As with the demonic, this negative animalization was also a functional container to intersect Blackness with Muslim or Jewish identifiers. In addition to implying that the racialized figures are not human in the eyes of the plays' creators, and possibly their audiences too, there could have been other motives at work. Christian authorities were aware of the culturally low position that dogs held in the Islamic world, and thus that any association of a Muslim figure with a dog would have been a grievous insult. *Chansons de geste* such as the *Roman de Roland* and romance texts like *Kyng Alisaunder* and *Richard Coer de Lion* often figured Muslim enemies as dog-like in speech or appearance (Strickland, 160). Images of the Buffeting also configured Jewish-identified bodies as dog-like, echoing Psalm 21:17 in its most literal

sense. Strickland notes that the intention here goes beyond cultivating links to scripture: 'they also merge the idea of the Jews with that of the monstrous' (2003, 160). That Blackness was attributed to animalized Muslim or Jewish figures gives insight into the depth of anti-Blackness at work via intersecting identities. For de Weever, 'When skin color is linked to ideas of inferiority…to relegations to the category of the marginal and uncivilised… racism is born' (100).

The many stranded histories to these three major identifiers of antagonists culminate in their purpose of making these figures as detestable as possible. Keeping in mind that these depictions draw neither on biblical precedent nor contemporary realities should occasion a reflection as to their function. Strickland has put forward an important explanation for depictions of antagonist figures in Books of Hours that resonates with Passion plays. She writes in relation to the thirteenth-century *Salvin Hours* (Figure 2) that the overlaying of grotesque facial features and Black skin 'should… be viewed as inflammatory and as a form of political propaganda' and that through its 'use of a well-recognized pictorial code, it also mocks and condemns contemporary Jews' (2003, 111). The suggestion that mockery functions in an inverse way to its surface level messaging is an instance of looking beyond the rhetorical messaging of this episode to see its mechanics. Each aspect of the mocker's physicality is chosen to mock and dehumanize these figures on the basis of religion, physical features, and skin colour. The possibility of having real world consequences for all those implicated in these functionally hybrid identities is also a crucial point to hold in mind.

Mockery, compassion, and 'victim play'

The valence of mockery within these plays cannot be grasped without insight into who the mockers are for the communities that imagined them. Although mockery in the Gospels is a multifarious, high stakes social practice, and as much a tool of Jesus as a weapon against him, its role in premodern Passion episodes is repeatedly the inverse of what the surface level presents. The plays vilify the enactors of mockery to such an extent that it impacts its legibility as a social practice and differentiates it from quotidian and literary uses. Although the history and cultural relevance of mockery provide essential context, without having a sense of the English Christian communities' propensity toward what I have called 'victim play' in Passion narratives—performing the status of victim from a position of social strength—its import within these plays remains elusive. Such 'victim play,' and the desired compassionate engagement that is so often exhorted in devotional manuals, need to be recognized as inseparable from the

strategic demonization, and dehumanization, of figures such as the buffeters.

It is noteworthy, then, that in contrast to the abundance of negative characterisations apportioned to antagonistic figures, the plays offer little evidence for how Jesus was portrayed. Despite this dearth of detail, he is consistently the central focus of critical studies on the episode. Considering the stagecraft of the plays with a more neutral eye, however, opens up the fact that the attention of an audience was likely to have been predominantly directed at those enacting verbal and physical violence. Much like iconographic renderings, the buffeters, Annas, Caiaphas, and Herod, are the dynamic agents of the play, with the majority of dialogue and movements in play-texts attributable to them. They are the likely wearers of more colourful and culturally distinctive costumes and of having the most elaborate props in hand. Jesus is always a seated, mostly silent, blindfolded figure, likely wearing white clothes, and may have worn a golden facemask or paint to indicate sanctity. It is the actions of the oppressors that the playwrights and producers elaborated on to such a great extent. Thus, if critics are to assess how emotional states such as compassion might be facilitated, they would do well to consider that this 'victim play' could manipulate audiences to respond negatively to otherness and to target marginalized people in a given play's community. As it stands, the preponderance of critical studies on compassion have Jesus as the sole referent for the affective dispositions an audience might cultivate, and neglect these other, more malevolent possibilities (Beckwith 1993, 2003; Johnston 2000; Stevenson 2010; Pfeiffer 2012; Davidson 2002, 2013; Mazzon 2018, 168; Lipton 2019).[11]

11 These studies tend to focus on Jesus's suffering body and the empathy it engenders. Lipton and Pfeiffer present limited circumstances in which audiences might engage with aggressor figures, but neither take the construction of their identities into account.

A troubling consequence of this critical position is that it can replicate the emotional agendas of the plays rather than identifying that agenda and teasing out its implications. In McNamer's study on compassion, the default explanation is that an individual's experience of the emotion through the Passion cultivates a similar compassionate disposition within the wider Christian community (2010, 150–52). Such an argument, which recognizes only in a single endnote that depictions of the Passion were largely grounded in antisemitism (not to mention Islamophobia and anti-Blackness), configures the economy of compassion as closed—exclusively produced by and for Christians. McNamer does approach the limits of this compassionate dynamic in order to acknowledge its 'nontransferability' with regard to Jews and Muslims (256). The critic's explanation of this stance as one of 'withholding,' which is the 'structural obverse of compassion,' however, fails to recognize that Passion narratives actively cultivate antagonism toward Jesus's enemies (2010, 256). That antagonism could carry through in real-world violence toward contemporary Jewish, Muslim, or Black individuals because of the choices made in

depicting the Passion. This is a feature of the plays that the American Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs has recognized with regards to pre-modern Jewish communities and should be borne in mind for all identities implicated (Bishops' Committee 1988).

McNamer's claim about 'withholding' compassion seems based on a misreading of Lauren Berlant's discussion of the emotion. Berlant writes the following:

> We are taught, from the time that we are taught anything, to measure the scale of pain and attachment, to feel appropriately compassionate... [that] we are being trained in stinginess, in not caring, in not knowing what we know about the claim on us to act... all too human. (2004, 9)

Far from being a negation of how compassion works, Berlant's contention is that withholding compassion is a choice that is directed by a myriad of social training. Such an action is not the inverse of what compassion is, but part of its functionality. What McNamer and other scholars of medieval compassion avoid here is an acknowledgement that refusing compassion on the basis of faith, physical difference, or on any other discriminatory ground, is part of how compassion works in Passion narratives. Its deployment is bounded and strategic, to go back to Keen's terminology (2006). Episodes such as the Buffeting give evidence for how divergent emotional dispositions can be cultivated in the same instance. That compassion is buoyed by antagonistic sentiments must be recognized as part of its mechanics.

The altruistic bedfellow of compassion in premodern drama scholarship has been an appreciation of how communities came together to produce these plays. What have been referred to as 'utopian' views of the social unity created by drama (Sponsler 1992), espoused most notably by Mervyn James (1983) in relation to the feast and drama of Corpus Christi, have been extremely influential. While the shortcomings of this perspective have not escaped critics, the majority limit their identification of tensions to those issuing from within a given urban space (Sponsler 1992; Beckwith 1993; Evans 1994; Lindenbaum 1996). Other named factors for divergence are disparities in wealth, guild association, gender relations, and political or social power and its inherent tensions, rendering invisible the reliance of English Christians on Jewish, Muslim, and Black figures in devotional expressions (Sponsler 1992; King 2006; Sanok 2007; Fitzgerald 2007; Rice and Pappano 2015). Any community cohesion achieved through drama must be considered as a tool for constructing boundaries that exclude, that marginalize, that discriminate—a series of actions that problematize the surface of altruism that community acts are often granted. Even one of the most adept readers of premodern drama, Clare

Sponsler, has read the simulated attacks on Jesus's body as the 'central irony' of Corpus Christi plays. Sponsler claims that this body

> does not unilaterally and unambiguously support the communal or economic ideals it was intended to serve: Christ's body does not articulate the image of the body corporate that underpinned the mercantile elite's preferred view of the town, but instead undercuts it. (1997a, 138)

Yet, if we are to take full account of the way that antagonistic characterisation is put to work, especially in the episodes of Jesus's most intense vulnerability, such a stance of undercutting the body corporate through simulated violence becomes difficult to accept. Part of the discussion must include what the stakes of 'victim play' are in these episodes, and whom it admits and excludes from its emotional operation.

'Victim play' is thus something that can be done by consumers of Passion narratives, and involves a locating of oneself in a scene of persecution regardless of one's actual situation. Anthony Bale's work on the subject of persecution in medieval Christian and Jewish contexts nuances the spectrum of affective experiences that Passion plays and associated iconographies of torture encouraged—a subject that Jody Enders has also considered at length in relation to medieval French drama (1999).[12] Bale points out the contradictions at work in an English context with his observation that the

12 See Enders' rich discussion of the Scourging episode and the complex consideration of dramatic audiences in relation to pleasure (1999, 170–85).

> desire to feel persecuted – to imagine fear, to remember repeatedly the pain to which one's community and one's most precious symbols have been subjected, to put oneself in a scene of torture – contrasts with the 'formation of a persecuting society' described and developed around the year 1100. (2010, 185)

Bale's placing into the picture the pleasure that a person or community might feel by imaginatively positioning themselves as vulnerable within a situation in which there is no actual threat strikes at the heart of what these plays do. The consonance of the plays with structures of power that use socially sanctioned, celebrated memories of pain and moments of powerlessness to dehumanize groups deemed to fall outside community lines is vital to understanding what these plays are, and who they are for. The rehearsal of Jesus's victimization through simulated attacks on corporeal and personal integrity gifts Christian communities a shared ideological victim status and arms them with a narrative that justifies acts of vengeance. What Sponsler reads as resistance may be intended to be read as such, but is a resistance that is often cast, controlled, and performed from within centres of civic power. What plays encourage readers and spectators to understand and feel should not be taken at face

value. Jesus's tortured, broken, and mocked body is central to the power structures that upheld these communities and their plays, and it formed a pole around which to demarcate the boundaries of specific communal values and interests.

Returning to the image of the Buffeting that opens the *Siege of Jerusalem* at the other side of this study should give a renewed focus on the valence of 'victim play' in a narrative that will grotesquely, and even pleasurably, detail the destruction of the Jewish city of Jerusalem by Roman forces in 70 CE. Framing such a narrative with one intended to dwarf the suffering of a city with the pain of an individual bespeaks the power of that pain for the Christian communities that deployed it. They did so, moreover, to assume their status of victim through a claimed inheritance and co-experiencing of that pain. Passion plays follow this template, and position contemporaneously persecuted or maligned identities as persecutors in their cultivation of antagonists.

That the effects of such choices include an antagonism occasioned through compassion for Jesus should give critics pause before celebrating the emotion as inherently positive. It should also draw attention to the powerful rhetorical strategies of the plays, which have long-since seduced critics into advocating for their emotional generosity. Taking an approach from a little explored route, however, yields different perspectives. Revealing the dynamics of mockery through a deeper investigation into the composite identities of the mockers gives insight into how these plays were constructed. Who certain forms of humour are attributed to or used against, and to what ends, are vital questions to pose. Engaging with the histories of Jewish, Muslim, and Black representations in the premodern period, and the propensity that English communities had toward racializing these identities to malign them, is an essential part of such an investigation. While there is much to dislike about the image of premodern dramatic culture that emerges in such a study, there is also much to find reprehensible about critical reticence to understand objects of inquiry in their fullest form. That the action of mockery is attributed to such a group of figures is not a coincidence, nor can it be explained away as a biblical inheritance. The act of playing becomes one of the mediums through which the denigration of these supposed mockers is achieved. 'Victim play' in such a context refers to the collaborative community effort to claim the status of victim while simultaneously participating in the victimization of others, whether real or imagined. The act of claiming victimhood, then, should be viewed by critics with suspicion, for it often belies acts of aggression that are obscured by the very act of assuming such a stance.

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