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Damned If You Do: Judas Iscariot And The Invention Of Medieval Literary Character

Mariah Min

University of Pennsylvania, mariahjmin@gmail.com

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Abstract

This project explores medieval literature as a site to disentangle the longstanding critical conflation of character and psychology. I use the figure of Judas Iscariot as a case study to argue that the seeming incoherence of medieval characters can reframe characterization as a tactic deployed by the text, rather than an unmediated reflection of human subjectivity.

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Emily Steiner

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Rita Copeland

DAMNED IF YOU DO: JUDAS ISCARIOT
AND THE INVENTION OF MEDIEVAL LITERARY CHARACTER

Mariah Min

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Supervisor of Dissertation

Emily Steiner
Professor of English

Co-Supervisor of Dissertation

Rita Copeland
Sheli Z. and Burton X.
Rosenberg Professor of the
Humanities, Professor of
Classical Studies, English,
and Comparative Literature

Graduate Group Chairperson

David L. Eng, Richard L. Fisher Professor of English

Dissertation Committee

David Wallace, Judith Rodin Professor of English

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To my family, for waiting.

ABSTRACT

DAMNED IF YOU DO: JUDAS ISCARIOT AND THE INVENTION OF MEDIEVAL LITERARY CHARACTER

Mariah Min

Emily Steiner, Rita Copeland

This project explores medieval literature as a site to disentangle the longstanding critical conflation of character and psychology. I use the figure of Judas Iscariot as a case study to argue that the seeming incoherence of medieval characters can reframe characterization as a tactic deployed by the text, rather than an unmediated reflection of human subjectivity.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	II
ABSTRACT	III
TABLE OF CONTENTS	IV
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 1	13
CHAPTER 2	35
CHAPTER 3	65
CHAPTER 4	95
BIBLIOGRAPHY	139

INTRODUCTION

Judas Iscariot and the Invention of Medieval Literary Character

What does it mean to study medieval literary character?

The concept of “character” we often see used in both academic and popular usage is, by and large, a kind of back-formation from the novel. As a generic space, the novel values the representation of coherent human consciousness in the portrayal of its characters, which has in turn reified character as something that must inherently possess the trait of psychological coherence. To recognize something as a character, then, becomes a qualitative judgment, an aesthetic yardstick that measures how well it conforms to novelistic conventions of rendering a psychology presumed to exist outside of the text. This is, for example, what leads poststructuralist critics such as Hélène Cixous to rail against character for being “an ‘I’ who is a *whole* subject” (385) that enables the ideological subjugation of the reader. Character is that which is coherent.

In a 2006 forum issue of *Shakespeare Studies*, Raphael Falco asks: “Is There Character After Theory?” To ask the question at all presupposes that character is outside of theory, that it is not made of the same stuff as the text around it. In the introduction to the issue, Falco equates the phrase “a coherent individual subject” (21) to the concept of character, using the two interchangeably. The quality of coherence as embodied by the novelistic character has undergone a cultural process of metonymy; the novel is a modern form, the thinking goes, and realism in the portrayal of human psychology is therefore a

modern technique that ought to surface when modernity does. As much as some scholars of the early modern have historicized the association between the Renaissance and human subjectivity, many others¹, in staking a claim for the era as the earliest phase of modernity, have therefore argued that early modern literary characters—9 times out of 10, Shakespearean characters—are coherent individual subjects who are therefore markers of that modernity.

But conflating psychology and character like this only impoverishes our reading practices. Placing character outside of the text prevents us from being able to see what rhetorical effects are being achieved through the processes of characterization, what ideological work is being done, and what interpretive wormholes open up through which we might glimpse a way to read a text against its own grain. I argue that attending to moments in medieval texts where a character is depicted incoherently in some manner shows us how incoherent characterization achieves specific effects that bear interpretive consequences for the text. That is, the “incoherence” of medieval character is a productive attribute, not merely an aesthetic shortcoming that indicates a failure to reach novelistic expectations.

My aim in examining and theorizing medieval character, therefore, is to bring character into focus as a critical category that is not beholden to the reflection of human psychology. I seek to return characters to their texts, and to read them critically as we read literary texts. This is, to be clear, different from saying that characters do not exist; it seems futile to deny that we have readerly experiences of character. Just because a

¹ See Bloom and Greenblatt.

building is something constructed doesn't mean that it's not there, but on the other hand, buildings—and characters—*are* constructed. Through medieval literature, which in critical tradition is less burdened with trying to prove its genealogical ties to modernity, we are able to better trace the seams of this construction. What those seams remind us is that all representations are mediated; even realist portrayals of human subjectivity are portrayals that come to us through intervening literary layers.

The medieval Judas Iscariot is a perfect inroad to medieval character because of the variety and complexity of his depiction in texts. As a figure of enduring fascination for the Middle Ages, portrayals of Judas reveal important intersections between performativity, affect, religion, and race as they constitute his character across languages and genres. He is given elaborate backstories, his motives are questioned, his posthumous futures are imagined in detail, and he makes repeat appearances in one narrative after another; the medieval Judas Iscariot is treated with the significance of a character. The incoherence of Judas, therefore, functions here as a magnifying lens through which I explore the generative potential of incoherence in medieval literary characters.

This project consists of four chapters, organized around four sites of incoherence. Chapter 1, “Thirty Silver Pieces: Avarice, Interiority, Opacity”, concerns the incoherence of motive of the York Judas Iscariot. Chapter 2, “Hangman’s Knot: Performance, Mercy, History”, examines the incoherence of time experienced by the Judas of the N-Town Passion Plays. Chapter 3, “Oedipus at Akeldama: Despair, Backstory, Compassion”, traces the incoherence of narrative continuity present in the apocryphal Oedipal Judas legends. Chapter 4, “Holy Rood: Race, Empire, Conversion”, considers the incoherence

of racial identity displayed by Judas Cyriacus in Cynewulf's *Elene*. In each, I analyze the repercussions of the incoherence in question, thinking through what is made possible by incoherence instead of what is denied or hindered by it. That is, I treat the word "invention" in the subtitle to the project as it might be used in classical rhetoric; medieval character is already *there* in all its productive incoherence, ready to be discovered.

Chapter 1, "Thirty Silver Pieces: Avarice, Interiority, Opacity"

The Judas of the York Plays displays a tendency to take money too personally. He enters the Cutlers' Play of the Conspiracy demanding that he receive a restitution of thirty pence, since that is the amount that he would have embezzled from the common coffers, had the ointment used for Jesus's feet been sold instead for three hundred pence. To request to be subsidized for a planned act of theft is logically incomprehensible, and the emotional force with which Judas reacts—repeatedly expressing his grief, vowing to see Jesus killed—is in great excess of the circumstances that have produced his reaction. There is a mismatch of cause and effect, an incoherence of motive that does not adequately account for the vehemence of Judas's response.

A desire for money could be simply read as avarice, but I argue that the avarice of the York Judas works distinctly from an embodiment of avarice in the form of personification allegory, such as found in the Confession of the Sins episode in *Piers Plowman*. The Sins perform their respective vices, but do not evince any emotional reactions either by craving the objects of their want or by delighting in their own actions. Because the Sins are wholly composed of their sins, no part of them is left available to

observe and reflect upon their sinning, which is necessary in order to produce an emotional reaction. The Sins are only able to react emotionally in the moment of their penitence, when the seed of something self-contradictory—a Sin that has repented of itself—begins to germinate within them.

Time, too, is a crucial factor; a reaction requires the sinner to commit a sin, cease at some point to commit the act, reflect upon the act they have committed, and then to react. The Sins exist in a continuous present, in which their unchanging sinful states function to highlight the iterative nature of confession as a sacrament. Once again, they are only able to conceptualize existing within the passage of time when they entertain penitence as an option that could change them from what they are in the current moment. Judas, on the other hand, is famously a changed man at the end of his story, repenting and resorting to suicide in his despair. By the Play of the Remorse of Judas, the York Judas has lost his former tendency to take money too personally, demanding over and over again that his co-conspirators return Jesus to him in exchange for thirty pence, since the initial trade has established their equivalence. He also offers to serve as Pilate's bondsman in the place of Jesus, not comprehending that there might be any difference in identity between Jesus and himself.

I see his emotional relationship to money and his understanding of identity as being fundamentally linked, with the former making the latter possible in the world of the York Plays. The disproportionate strength of Judas's emotion is inexplicable in terms of the information provided by the text, and thus he is ultimately unknowable in full; his opacity imbues him with an effect of interiority which structures him as a character. This

suggests that a literary character may be something defined by what they do not disclose—what is durably incomprehensible about them. An incoherence of motive, then, is what gives birth to the York Judas as a character.

Judas's opacity, furthermore, is what allows medieval writers to engage with him *as* a character. They question his motives through direct address and place themselves within the narrative of the Passion, able to perform their investment precisely because Judas cannot and will not provide them with a final satisfactory answer that might elucidate his opacity.

Chapter 2, “Hangman’s Knot: Performance, Mercy, History”

Temporality surrounding the Judas of the N-Town Passion Plays flows irregularly. At the scene of the Last Supper, the Apostles progressively divulge details about the betrayal of Jesus that they have could not have heard yet or experienced; Judas's co-conspirators already appear to be familiar with him and his plot even before any communication occurs between them. The N-Town Judas is repeatedly portrayed as a character who has already done the things he will be said to do, existing in an incoherence of time that encourages slippages between the present and the future.

Following Richard Schechner's formulation, I see the Passion—especially in this dramatic context—as being a kind of *restored behavior* in that it has always already happened, only to be re-enacted. Most often used to draw attention to the performative quality that underlies many everyday non-aesthetic behaviors, the term *restored behavior* resonates here in that there are multiple layers of predetermination that make up the N-

Town Judas. The N-Town Passion Plays are just one of countless renditions of the same pre-existing biblical narrative, which is also, in turn, a recounting of what was taken to be a historical event; the event is also, in its own turn, the playing out of a divine plan. The Passion as we know it never occurs for the first time.

These determinative constraints have the effect of pinning Judas in place in biblical history, preventing access to a counterfactual subjunctive space that would allow for narrative divergence. I argue that the N-Town Judas seems to have already done the things he will be said to do, because he may as well have already done them when so many constraints preclude him from ever acting otherwise. There are additional constraints that contribute to his stasis as well, barring him from the kinds of mobility typically allowed literary characters: the hermeneutics of typology that construe him as the New Testament fulfillment of Old Testament characters, the Christian conferral of the authority of historicity on biblical events, and the blurry (if at all extant) dividing lines between the Bible itself and the vernacular texts of the “medieval popular Bible.”

I suggest that the stasis of the N-Town Judas is made necessary precisely because of N-Town’s emphasis on the power of mercy, which threatens to destabilize this fixity. Because characters such as Mary Magdalene and John the Baptist are used in N-Town to foreground the importance of mercy in Christian doctrine, the possibility of redemption is also held out dangerously close for Judas, requiring a dissipation of salvific energy in order to prevent a serious consideration of Judas as a figure deserving of forgiveness. The change in heart displayed by Judas at the end of his life is only the most static kind of change possible, since his turn towards the sin of despair—a refusal to accept that one is

capable of change—is what hinders him from being saved.

However, Judas does achieve a kind of mobility across time, through the specificity of the actor's body and its non-coterminous relationship to the body of the character. The "fifth wall," which normally separates the material components of performance from what they represent onstage, becomes permeable through Judas; his pastness is informed by his own future, and the fictional sphere of the play becomes marked by the material sphere of performance. The play knows how things turn out because the Middle Ages knows. Thus, the irregular temporality that pins Judas in place can be read as the present medieval time of the actor's body—and its knowledge of the Passion—inflecting the past historical time of the character's body.

Chapter 3, "Oedipus at Akeldama: Despair, Backstory, Compassion"

In medieval apocrypha, Judas is imbued with an Oedipal backstory in which he is abandoned to die as an infant due to his mother's prophetic dream, raised in a foreign land where he murders his adoptive brother, then recruited by Pilate back home where he commits patricide and incest before becoming a disciple of Christ—at which point he commits avarice-induced betrayal and then sinks into despair. In this chapter, I pivot away from the majority of critical work on this subject, which has been concerned with the provenance of the Oedipal link; rather, I ask what the function of such an elaborate backstory is, and what ramifications it has.

The Oedipal backstory of Judas is notable in that he repents sincerely after each bout of sin—once when he leaves his adopted home after fratricide, once after he

discovers his patricide and incest, and once when he regrets his betrayal of Jesus—but he still can't seem to stop sinning over and over again. Penitence does not improve him. At the same time, the narrative persistently seems to forget his previous sins, as his former wrongdoings are never mentioned again once he moves on to new ones. He is at once unaffected by his heartfelt moments of repentance, yet discontinuous with his own established past.

I argue that this incoherence of narrative continuity dramatizes a struggle within character that occurs between the two poles of recognizability and change, between the “mimetic” and “synthetic” components of character that respectively stem from particularity and generality. As exemplum, Judas must somehow be both specific and thematic all at once, and thus oscillates incoherently between recognizability and change through the course of his backstory, proposing that character may be something created through internal tension. I also suggest that the mandates of recognizability and change are traceable to discourses of rhetoric and penitence; classical and medieval rhetorical theory requires that a figure be depicted with consistency in order for their actions to be plausible, and the sacrament of penitence requires a subject who is capable of becoming a changed person.

In addition to rhetoric, Judas is also bound to his sinfulness by the biblical account of his life, by the assumption of his damnation in theological reception, and even by the contours of the Oedipal myth. However, in spite of such constraints, he is paradoxically able to escape the constraints of his determined narrative by the very sins and misfortunes that pin him in place. His final and lasting sin, despair, becomes a focal

point that elicits compassion from the reader and demands the creation of new narratives that answer to this affective response. The medieval texts that respond to Judas's despair undertake audacious theological aims, such as imagining a saint providing him temporary reprieve from hell, or asserting that Judas was forgiven by Jesus and resides in heaven with all the other saved souls. In these texts that take Judas as a starting point from which to generate new narratives, character is shown to be a literary-critical category that becomes most visible in the space between the text and its audience.

Chapter 4, "Holy Rood: Race, Empire, Conversion"

Cynewulf's *Elene* is an instance of the most widely circulated version of the medieval Finding of the Holy Cross legends, one in which Judas, a Jew with knowledge of the whereabouts of the Cross, is tortured by Saint Helena until he reveals its location. When the relic is unearthed, he converts to Christianity and becomes a bishop by the name of Cyriacus, who then goes on to also find the nails used in the Crucifixion. I argue that although Cyriacus and Iscariot are asserted—by these legends and medievalist scholarship—to be Judases diametrically opposed, they in fact both function to uphold the antisemitic fantasy of conquest through conversion.

Christianity in *Elene* revolves around the power of the Church Militant, and is portrayed from the poem's very first lines as an enabling condition of empire. Constantine is guaranteed victory over the pagans through the sign of the Cross, and Helena's journey to Jerusalem is depicted in martial terms even in the absence of outright armed conflict. Conquest is at the heart of the Christian mission in *Elene*; Helena's quest

to recover the True Cross is inseparable from the collateral objective of the mass conversion of the Jews. When Cyriacus is brought forward as an interlocutor that she can question as to the location of the Cross, he then becomes a target of conversion activity as much as a source from which information can be mined.

However, Cyriacus turns out to be a racially liminal character whose pre-conversion status variously morphs from “crypto-Christian” to “lapsed Christian” to “uninformed Jew.” There is an incoherence of racial identity in his portrayal, since he initially appears to possess more Christian knowledge than any other Christian in the poem, and specifically possesses it because of the Christianity of his father and grandfather, whose beliefs Cyriacus is also shown to empathize with. But as the narrative progresses, he echoes the language of the rededicated believer that Cynewulf uses in his epilogue to the poem, and eventually—by the moment of his conversion—is described by Helena as a Jew who never held any Christian knowledge at all.

The racial incoherence of Cyriacus is useful for the text in ultimately imagining a mass conversion of the Jews that can occur instantaneously and with no effort on the part of the converter. Cyriacus is an atypical “Jew for Jesus” fantasy whose conversion needs no convincing and involves no doctrinal hurdles to overcome, since the beliefs he holds are already Christian. And yet, by the time he admonishes the Devil and garners Helena’s admiration, he has become a visible instance of an exemplary converted Jew. Once he models this sort of conversion process, in which a Jew becomes a Christian with very little fuss, it paves the way for others in the text to follow suit.

I resist the traditional scholarly reading that the mass conversion of the Jews is a

peaceful resolution, and propose that cleaving too closely to allegorical modes of reading—such as interpreting Helena as a figure of the Christian church and Cyriacus as a figure of the individual believing soul—only results in reproducing the power dynamics at work within the text. Instead, I propose that our ethical task, when faced with hegemonic texts, is to become consciously *bad* readers who use tools such as anachronism and critical frameworks to avoid simply replicating the ideologies espoused by our objects of study.

CHAPTER 1

Thirty Silver Pieces: Avarice, Interiority, Opacity

Input/Output

The York Judas Iscariot enters the Cutlers' Play of the Conspiracy at the top of his lungs. In lieu of introducing himself at this moment—his first scene as a character in the Corpus Christi cycle—he vigorously protests the wrongs that have been done against him and hurls accusations at Jesus Christ:

JUDAS. *Ingenti pro injuria*, hym Jesus, that Jewe,
Unjust unto me, Judas, I juge to be lathe,
For at oure soper as we satte, the sothe to pursewe
With Symond Luprus full sone,
my skiffte come to scathe. (26.127-30)

“Skiffte” is glossed by the TEAMS edition of the York Plays as “conspiracy,” which is helpful in context if slightly overdetermined; in medieval use the word is more neutral in valence, and the MED defines it simply as “an effort, attempt, a try.” So far, at least, things are still comprehensible. Jesus has allegedly done something at this supper that has interfered with a plan Judas had in mind, whatever that plan may have been. But Judas’s account of the events that now bring him to Pilate’s court begins to sound suspicious

before long, as he describes the anointing of Jesus's feet and why this act would scathe his skiffte:

JUDAS. And this, to discover, was my skill,
For of his penys purser was I,
And what that me taught was untill
The tente parte that stale I ay still.
But nowe for me wantis of my will
That bargayne with bale schall he by. (135-40)

In other words, it was Judas's custom to steal the tenth part of the common treasury, and he was not able to pocket the "thirty pens of three hundereth" (146) that the expensive ointment would have sold for had it not been used. What Jesus must recompense with bale, according to Judas's logic, is a sum of money that would never have rightfully belonged to Judas in the first place. He argues that he is owed the thirty pieces of silver because he would have embezzled it anyway.

The mental gymnastics required to justify this line of reasoning does not come easy. If the sole justification given for Judas's plot is that he "wantis of [his] will" (139)—if there is an absence of any additional or more consequential reasons—this places an enormous amount of importance on the emotional reaction he has to the loss of thirty pence. That is, if the circumstances themselves do not necessarily merit the response, it must be the case that his *reaction to* the circumstances does. It *feels* justified

to him. In Play 26 and beyond, he repeatedly displays a tendency to take money too personally, conflating his desire for the lost silver and his desire to make Jesus suffer. “And for I mysse this mony I morne on this molde” (147), he says in order to explain why he has come to see the High Priests, and then expresses his hoped-for outcome as: “Thusgatis full wele schall [Jesus] witte / That of my wretthe wreke me I will” (158-59). He mourns for the money, but cannot be content with merely being financially compensated. Jesus must suffer for it, and what is more, know that he is suffering because of Judas. When Pilate hands him the payment of silver, Judas rejoices with “Ya, nowe is my grete greffe overegone”; but instead of then being “lyght” (277) and satisfied for this reason as the soldier suggests, he says, “Yis, latte me allone, / For tytte schall that taynte be tone, / And therto jocounde and joly I am” (278-80). The celebration is not complete until Jesus is arrested.

In the Gospels, Judas’s regret comes when he witnesses the sight of Jesus under arrest: “Then Judas, who betrayed him, seeing that he was condemned, repenting himself, brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and ancients, saying: I have sinned in betraying innocent blood” (*Douay-Rheims Bible*, Matt. 27.3-4). The York Judas harbors no such delusions, demanding of Annas and Caiaphas, “But lokis by youre lewty no liffe ye hym lenne. / Qwhat man som I kys, that corse schall ye kyll” (28.178-79). He is fully resolved to see Jesus killed, a vindictive reaction in great excess of the circumstances that have produced it. There is an asymmetry of relations that is produced here between incentive and action, a deadly inflation that occurs in the black box between what goes in and what comes out. In this chapter, I argue that the opacity of Judas—the

incomprehensibility of the engine that turns a matter of fraud of murder—is the opacity that constructs an effect of interiority, and forms what we call literary character.

Ultimately the York Judas proposes that literary character may be less a figure in possession of a coherent and recognizable psyche that appears to reflect human complexity in fullness, and more the demonstrated inability or strategic refusal to represent such a thing.

Me, Myself, and the Seven Deadly Sins

The York Judas, as we have seen, does react in great excess of the circumstances he finds himself in; but is *opacity* the most effective way to describe this phenomenon? Might it not also be explained by way of different attributions for his seeming irrationality, such as medieval antisemitism or the possibility that he may be functioning as an embodiment of avarice? My contention is that these alternative explanations are less complete and less pertinent for the particular case at hand, though both are significant factors that influence many other medieval representations of Judas.

The two alternate suggestions—antisemitism and avarice—are in fact so closely linked in medieval Christian thought as to accompany each other as one indistinguishable coagulate of blame, more often than not. Perhaps, the suggestion might go, the York Judas responds with such intense emotion because medieval antisemitic tradition saw him as inherently avaricious, a sinful nature ascribed to the paradigmatic member and forefather of the likewise avaricious Jews. Is his avarice what amplifies his reaction? Does avarice bridge the gap between his input and output? Certainly, the figure of Judas

has long served as an engine for racist vitriol, allowing bigotry to find a focal point through which to defend and perpetuate itself². The Jewishness of Judas Iscariot is a long-established weapon of antisemitisms both medieval and modern.

On the other hand, especially in late medieval representations, Judas is a liminal figure who drifts in and out of Jewishness as a foregrounded identity marker. At times, in texts in which he is less racially marked, he is put to use as a character in order to explore facets of Christian identity such as penitence, the recrudescence of sin, and lack of fortitude in belief³. To be clear, I see this as distinct from the kinds of allegorical reading that elide the Jewishness of characters clearly presented as Jewish—and significant within the text for being Jewish—in order to interpret them solely as stand-ins for facets of Christian identity. Thoroughly allegorical readings of Jewish characters erase the significance of textual (and real-world) antisemitic violence committed on their bodies. The case of Judas, however, is somewhat different in that he is not always emphasized—or, on occasion, even explicitly identified at all—as being Jewish, such as in the example of the York plays. These texts themselves understand Judas to be positioned liminally in how constitutive Jewishness is of his character, in contradistinction to the fixedly racialized portraits found in other contemporaneous texts.

But it is, of course, possible to still be an embodiment of avarice without necessarily standing in for Jewish avarice in particular. In order to argue that sin does not appear adequate as an account of what happens with the York Judas, I read the York plays in conjunction with the Confession of the Seven Deadly Sins episode from *Piers*

² See Maccoby.

³ For an example of scholarship detailing the late medieval interest in Judas as the figure of a penitent, see Mize.

Plowman B.5, examining in particular how a character who possesses certain traits resembles and diverges from the expression of the same traits in the form of personification allegory. Although I suspect no one would insist that Judas as an embodiment of avarice would be indistinguishable from a personification of avarice, this juxtaposition is productive because of what it reveals about the role of emotion in creating an effect of interiority.

Much of the efficacy of *Piers* as an interlocutor text is due to the somewhat unclassifiable nature of its Sins as personifications. When compared to the allegorical figures that populate a text such as the *Psychomachia*, for example, *Piers*'s Sins are deemed lively and well-rounded, somehow more worthy of attention. While I recognize that these terms used to describe characters—"lively," "well-rounded," "worthy"—are more often than not subjective experiences of the text spun into qualitative aesthetic judgments⁴, the very circumstance that *Piers*'s Sins find themselves in lends their story a dramatic dimension not frequently found in other allegorical texts. The Sins hear Reason's sermon on penitence and are moved to confess; they are shown to be eager to negate their fundamental existence. This is personification allegory, but *strange* personification allegory. *Piers* is home to an allegorical vision of the Sins that helps us think of personifications as not being categorically alien to other kinds of characters, but as occupying a through line of character that extends to the York Judas and beyond, a gradient that charts to what degree a character is able to contradict themselves.

Suzanne Conklin Akbari uses the established dichotomy of "vertical" and

⁴ Virginia Woolf writes: "But, I ask myself, what is reality? And who are the judges of reality? A character may be real to Mr. Bennett and quite unreal to me" (26).

“horizontal” to distinguish between types of allegory: vertical allegory being one in which “word and thing are seated within a hierarchy, one above the other” and horizontal allegory, one in which word and thing are “on an equal footing, existing side by side” (13). Hence, “vertical allegory includes personifications that consistently conform to the abstraction they are supposed to embody; in horizontal allegory, personifications lose their fixed identity as embodied abstraction and behave in ways that suggest they are less personifications than personae, fictional characters with motivations and emotions” (14). As such, there is something of horizontal allegory evident in *Piers’s* Sins, whose impulse to repent is at odds with the sinful abstractions they are meant to embody.

Rather than see this as pushing them towards the *character* pole away from the *personification* pole, however, I understand character to be a capacious category that encompasses all fictional representations of varying fixities. This view is informed by James Phelan’s rhetorical theorization of the three elements of character: that all characters are differently balanced admixtures of the *synthetic* (“knowing that he/she/(it?) is a construct”), the *mimetic* (“the way characters are images of possible people” (2)), and the *thematic* (“expressing a significant attitude concerning man and/or his relation to the universe” (3)) components. A vertically allegorical personification, in this sense, would be a character with a strongly stressed thematic component and minimized mimetic component. Therefore, highlighting the differences in the construction of the York Judas and the Sins of *Piers Plowman* is not meant to valorize a concept of character as something qualitatively more complex than a personification can ever be, but to study how distinct types of characters result in achieving distinct ends.

The Janitor guarding the gates to Pilate's court in the York Play of the Conspiracy calls Judas a "bittilbrowed bribour" (26.169), a physiognomic feature that an early modern miscellany helpfully explicates: "that man that ys byttell browed be ware of hym for he ys lyke vnto the gogell yed man he ys a shrowe in in all manner of companye he ys deseuable and lyme handed be ware of hym" (Wolfe). The lime-handedness is an especially appropriate trait, as beetle brows recur in portrayals of avaricious persons, including *Piers's* Coveitise: "He was bitelbrowed and baberlipped, with two blered eighen" (V.188). There is descriptive language shared between Judas and Coveitise, but what does not carry over is the excessive amount of emotion that Judas displays in response to money. Rather, when Coveitise relates the various measures he took to cheat his customers, the acts are enumerated in a matter-of-fact list unencumbered by what exactly motivated him or how he felt about his successful hustle:

First I lerned to lye a leef outhur tweyne:

Wikkedly to weye was my first lesson.

.....

Thanne drough I me among drapiers, my donet to lerne,

To drawe the liser along—the lenger it semed;

Among the rich rayes I rendred a lesson—

To broche hem with a bat-nedle, and playted hem togideres,

And putte hem in a press[our] and pyne hem therinne

Til ten yerdes or twelve tolled out thrittene. (199-210)

The wicked weighing, the drawing of the selvedge, turning ten or twelve yards to thirteen; all are things he does, but how he responds to his own actions is never conveyed. Overall, surprisingly few of the Sins evince an emotional component to their identity. Even Gloton, whom one might expect to indulge in his vice with a kind of bon vivant cheer, goes about his business vividly but reticently (albeit reticent only at one end of his body):

And seten so til evensong, and songen umwhile,
Til Gloton hadde yglubbed a galon and a gille.
His guttes gonne to gothelen as two grede sowes;
He pissed a potel in a *Paternoster*-while,
And blew his rounde ruwet at his ruggebones ende (341-45).

Envy is a notable exception to the rule, narrating his sin as an overtly emotional roller-coaster: “of his lesynge I laugh—that li[th]eth myn herte; / Ac for his wynnynge I wepe and waille the tyme” (111-12). However, it is also the case that the emotions Envy recounts are not so much emotional reactions to the sin of envy as they are envious emotions themselves. The reaction *is* the sin in this example. It takes the moment of penitence for the floodgates to open, for Coveitise to finally hear Repentaunce urging him to make restitution to his victims, and to respond to it by “weex[ing] ... in wanhope”⁵ (279). Once the Sins let the ritual of penance suggest the possibility that they might cease

⁵ And attempting to hang himself in this despair, an act also closely associated with Judas.

to be sinful—that they could be something other than what they are—contrition takes hold. Gloton begins to “greete, and gret doel to make” (380) and Sleuthe “swown[s]” (442).

The display of emotion imbues a character with an effect of interiority for several reasons, the most evident of which is that the emotion is assumed to arise from somewhere inside the character prior to being outwardly expressed. To feel is to appear to have depth. There is also an interiority-effect created through self-reflexivity, in that for someone sinful to have an emotional reaction to their sin, some part of themselves must be that which is *not* that sin. Envye verbalizes this problem when he says, “I am evere sorry ... I am but selde oother” (126); reaction requires an “oother” inside Envye to act as observer and appraiser of his envious acts, but his status as allegorical personification means that he is wholly his sin with no spare eye to turn upon himself. Hence emotional reaction is able to emanate from Coveitise, Gloton, and Sleuthe in the moment of penitence, when the seed of something self-contradictory—a Sin that has repented of itself—germinates within them.

The unique value of *Piers* pondering the subject of confession through a cast of personified Sins relates to the temporal dimension of this self-reflexivity. For someone sinful to have an emotional reaction to their sin, they must also exist within time. A reaction requires them to commit a sinful act, cease at some point to commit the act, reflect upon the act they have committed, and then to react. But as Emily Steiner writes, “for a personified Sin, the time of sin is identical to the nature of the sin: it is not what a Sin has done but what he always does. ... [Envye] is envious not in the past but in the

continuous present” (73). Far from being a limitation or a sign of unsophistication, this atemporal existence proves to be the very thing that gives the personifications their power; confession is a sacrament that thrives on repetition, and “it is in the failure of a Sin to perform penance that readers receive their penitential education: they can learn about sin because it never goes away” (72). The iterative ritual performance of confession creates a community of believers, and derives its power from being endlessly reproducible, enabling the community to perpetuate itself by performing itself.

Pernele Proud-herte’s confession is a compact example of the other side of the same coin: the necessity of the passage of time to the penitential project.

Shal nevere heigh herte me hente, but holde me lowe
And suffre to be mysseyd—and so dide I nevere.
But now wole I meke me and mercy biseche
For al that I have hated in myn herte. (67-70)

In this short speech, the past, the present, and the future are distinguished from one another by both discrete verb tenses and discrete ethical positions. Pernele’s presentation of her sinful past (“so dide I nevere,” “I have hated”), striving present (“now wole I”), and reformed future (“Shal nevere”)—though the last of these never actually comes to pass, it is nonetheless a horizon imagined in specificity—demands a movement of time onto which an ethical change can be mapped. It is again the moment of penitence that proves exceptional; just as the Sins are able to express emotion at that juncture, Pernele

here briefly exists within (or at least ventriloquizes) a passage of time.

This temporal dimension to self-reflexivity is also where the Sins diverge most significantly from Judas. Because Judas's contrition directly leads him down the troubled road to despair and suicide, no early theologian was particularly eager to praise him for it. The marginal Origen, a stalwart proponent of the belief that the election and contrition of Judas indicated "that Judas did not belong totally to evil" (387), is still careful to state that "it was none other who made Judas hang himself than the one who had put it into his heart to betray the Savior. He gave place indeed to the devil on both counts" (388). Jerome is similarly circumspect, qualifying "let those ... who say that Judas became a traitor by his evil nature, and that he was unable to be saved by his election to the apostleship, explain how an evil nature could have repented" ("Book Four" 309) with "Judas offended the Lord more by hanging himself than by betraying Him. His prayer should have been repentance, but it turned into sin" ("Homily 35" 259). Augustine and the Augustine-inflected Peter Abelard make less bones about it, with Augustine writing, "Judas by hanging himself heightened rather than expiated that crime of dastardly betrayal—because by despairing of God's mercy he abandoned himself to an impertinent remorse and left no room in his soul for saving sorrow" (46). Abelard denies even the possibility that Judas's regret might reflect a shard of goodness, likening it to instances in which people repent "not so much out of love of God whom they have offended or out of hatred of the sin which they have committed as out of fear of the punishment into which they are afraid of being hurled" (79).

It's bad penitence, they say, maybe even penitence in bad faith. But it's a kind of

change nonetheless. The atemporality of the Sins makes them continually available for recognition and identification, and the temporal boundedness of confession licenses change through time. The end of Judas's story must show him having transformed, for better or for worse, on the outskirts of town with a noose around his neck. York is an especially noteworthy site for the dramatization of this change, because of the exigencies of performance associated with the Corpus Christi cycle; since the performers on their wagons must play their parts and leave for the next station, the Judas of Play 26 is quite literally a different person from the Judas of Play 32. Sharon Aronson-Lehavi, tracking the four plays in the York cycle that portray Adam and Eve, points out that the changes in actor are accompanied by corresponding changes in character: "Each of the four episodes of Adam and Eve not only depicts a different event in their lives, but changed moral behavior and personality development . . . from one episode to the next. In other words, each segment presents Adam and Eve in a changed mental state" (96). Every version of Adam and Eve is increasingly more fallible than the last, more complex and more human.

So what exactly is the Judas of Play 32 like? Who is he when he returns to Pilate's court in the Play of the Remorse of Judas—what has happened to him in the meanwhile? He is certainly regretful, entering the scene lamenting, "Allas, for woo that I was wrought / Or evere I come be kynde or kynne" (32.130-31). When he offers to return the thirty pieces of silver to the High Priests, their answer is as unobliging as it is in all incarnations of the story:

JUDAS. I praie you, goode lorde, late hym gaa,

And here is of me youre paymente hale.

KAYPHAS. Naie, we will nocht so.

We bought hym for he schulde be slayne. (173-76)

The transaction of Jesus for silver has been completed, and the High Priests are unwilling to acquiesce to his request for a refund. Margaret Aziza Pappano, in her reading of Judas in the York Plays as “a bad servant, an uppity worker who attempts to regulate trade according to his own literal understanding of monetary gain” (340), sees this scene as an extension of the original sale in Play 26 in that it “depicts Judas as the disloyal servant” (342). But even as he does remain a worker no master is excited to hire, there is a certain gear shift; if Judas’s prevailing mood in Play 26 is an excess of emotion, here it is instead an excess of confusion.

Even after the attempt to return the money in line 174, he does not seem to be able to take no for an answer. “Why will ye thanne nocht latte hym passe / And have of me agayne youre paie?” (192-93) he asks Pilate. Just a few lines later, he pleads, “To save his bloode, sirs, I saie youe, / And takes you thare youre payment hole” (199-200). Then “Agayne, sirs, here, I giffe it you, / And save hym that he be nocht schent” (208-09) and—at long last, one final time—“Take it agayne that ye toke me, / And save hym fro that bittir braide, / Than were I fayne” (270-72). Five separate times he attempts to conduct the inverse of the earlier transaction, though Pilate and the High Priests verbally refute him all five times. The frustration is palpable in Pilate’s reply: “Nay, heriste thou,

Judas, thou schall agayne, / We will it nought, what devyll art thou?" (203-04) In his inability to grasp why what was once valued at thirty pence is no longer reducible to thirty pence, Judas demonstrates that he has lost his erstwhile tendency to take money too personally. The silver has become all exchange value, a placeholder that he assumes can be traded back and forth for Jesus since the initial exchange has established this equivalence.

When he is not engaged in an endless cycle of moneybag hot potato with the other conspirators, Judas is offering them yet another thing they have no intention of receiving: himself.

JUDAS. Might I hym save of any wise,

Wele were me than;

Save hym, sirs, to youre service

I will me bynde to be your man.

Youre bondeman, lorde, to be

Nowe evere will I bynde me,

Sir Pilate, ye may trowe me,

Full faithfull schall ye fynde me. (217-24)

As might be expected, Pilate declines the offer. Judas's expectation that he can be an acceptable substitute for Jesus is theologically presumptuous, as Pappano points out: "His

ignorance that Christ's body is both human flesh and blood and God at the same time expresses itself in the servile, materialistic assumption that one body (or pair of shoes) is the same as another" (347). But it also speaks to the second thing that Judas has lost in the intervening time; that is, he is unable to see what makes people non-interchangeable. A similar account in Genesis 44—when Joseph's silver cup is found in Benjamin's sack, Judah offers himself in servitude to Joseph in the stead of Benjamin—may have been the template for this scene, but there it is precisely the distinctiveness of Benjamin that motivates Judah: "I thy servant will stay instead of the boy in the service of my lord, and let the boy go up with his brethren. For I cannot return to my father without the boy, lest I be a witness of the calamity that will oppress my father" (Gen. 44.33-34). Judah makes the effort to replace Benjamin because as far as Jacob their father is concerned, no one can replace Benjamin. This sense of identity is missing from Judas's proposition.

An emotional relationship to money and an understanding of identity: I want to suggest that the two do not merely occur alongside each other, but that for the York Judas—further, rather, for the world of these pageants at large—the former is what makes the latter possible. The disproportionate strength of Judas's reaction to the loss of thirty pence is inexplicable, if it is to be explained in terms of the information provided by the text. Thus he is unknowable in full, and this opacity imbues him with an effect of interiority whose precise contents are unfathomable but which structures him as a character nonetheless. That is, Judas's unreasonable attachment to money opens up the possibility that a literary character may be something defined by what they do not disclose, what is durably incomprehensible about them. For Judas to no longer desire

money is for him to lose the partition that previously allowed the reader to believe that there was a back room they did not have access to. Without this interiority-effect, the distinctiveness of character breaks down, and all figures are liable to blur into an indeterminate haze.

Moreover, the haze proves to be contagious. After Judas throws the silver at the conspirators, Pilate forbids it from being put back into the coffers, since “it is price of the bloode” (32.330). Instead, he decides that it will be used “a spotte of erthe for to by ... To berie in pilgrimes that by the wey dies” (333-4). Fortuitously, at that exact moment, an Armiger enters to talk to them about a plot of land he owns: “Calvary locus men callis it,” he says, “I wolle it wedde sette, but not for to selle you” (351-52). He is looking to mortgage his land only—for thirty pence, as it happens—but instead Pilate takes the deed from him and acts as though he has bought the land at the low low price of thirty pence, declaring, “fro this place, bewschere, I soile thee for evere” (362). Minus the inclusion of the Armiger and the business of the mortgage, this is a dramatization of the account given in Matthew; but the account is of how the conspirators acquire Akeldama, or as Pilate helpfully explicates the Aramaic name, “the Felde of Bloode” (371). When harmonized with Peter’s retelling of Judas’s death in Acts⁶, as it often was, Akeldama becomes both the product of Judas’s betrayal and his burial place. The problem being, however, that this isn’t Akeldama. The land that the Armiger wants to mortgage is *Calvary*, which is named by all four Gospels as where the crucifixion of Jesus occurred. Two locations are

⁶ “And [Judas] indeed hath possessed a field of the reward of iniquity, and being hanged, burst asunder in the midst: and all his bowels gushed out. And it became known to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem: so that the same field was called in their tongue, Haceldama, that is to say, The field of blood” (Acts 1.18-19).

conflated in this moment, two different sites of death for two different characters. It is uncertain for what purpose or for whom the land is meant to be used, or indeed whether the various ends can be distinguished at all. The post-greed world is a blurry one.

Clear and Present Stranger

Character, as an object of literary study, has had its ups and downs. It is no longer under active attack as it was during the height of poststructuralism, and the last twenty years have seen scholars pay it renewed attention, resulting in field-defining works such as Deidre Lynch's *The Economy of Character*, Elizabeth Fowler's *Literary Character*, and Alex Woloch's *The One vs. The Many*. What has been relatively stable—to the assumed chagrin of L.C. Knights and his acolytes—is the enduring link between character and Shakespearean scholarship. In the introductory remarks to a 2006 forum in *Shakespeare Studies*, Raphael Falco states that “Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatic texts support a determination of character, and, more to the point, of character criticism” (23). Or, if the literature of a period evinces an awareness of a concept, then by virtue of that awareness, the concept is critically viable with regard to the period.

Although Falco speaks expansively of Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatic texts, widening the sphere of inquiry beyond Shakespeare with one vigilant eye turned against bardolatry, Shakespeare remains the go-to archive for character by virtue of the same legitimizing principle Falco proposes. Shakespeare seems to have an awareness of character, the thinking goes, and thus Shakespeare's characters are worth looking at. The locus classicus for Shakespearean character is of course Hamlet, “the very model of the

inwardness of character” (Frow 125). On the basis of Hamlet’s incomprehensibility, T.S. Eliot famously judged the play “an artistic failure” (47) due to the lack of an “objective correlative,” or an “adequacy of the external to the emotion.” Hamlet’s emotions are “in *excess* of the facts as they appear” (48), which is a symptom of Shakespeare having bitten off more than he could artistically chew. Pace all this unsubtle posturing on Eliot’s part, John Frow addresses the same subject of Hamlet’s incomprehensibility by sidestepping the question of how or whether it can be explained; he writes, “the question of whether Hamlet is ‘really’ mad or not is the wrong one to ask: Hamlet is mad because the conventions of the genre require it” (137). But to say that Hamlet is the way he is because he is the protagonist of a revenge tragedy is still an attempt at an explanation. Not of what is beyond the madness, to be sure, but of what purpose the madness serves. Not why Hamlet *is* mad, but why Hamlet *has to be* mad.

Perhaps Judas is less Hamlet than he is Iago, a figure for whom opacity is not madness at all. The view of Iago as something like a force of evil or a natural disaster takes him to be opaque in a way that resists explanation. The “motive-hunting of a motiveless malignity” (388), Coleridge calls his 3.1 soliloquy. Joel B. Altman, in his reading of *Othello* as a “psychogenetic drama . . . trac[ing] the evolution of a human self out of an allegory of evil” (158), sees the motivelessness as the Vice tradition out of which Iago shapes himself. For Altman, such psychogenesis is possible in this historical moment thanks to early modern rhetorical humanism and its conduciveness to thinking of oneself as composed of two distinct kinds of identity: a *self* that is “an unbounded entity that perceives, feels, and generates meaning out of its feelings and perceptions” and a

subject that “has a gendered, social, and historical position” (18). On the other hand, it can hardly be the case that such duality is the exclusive domain of rhetorical humanism. The interiority-effect of Judas, were we to read it as the birth of character or “subject formation” (19) or another horse of a comparable color, might just as well be the product of other dualities encountered in late medieval life. A member of a local guild appears onstage as a biblical character; further, the character is condemned for an act of treason that he is divinely ordained to commit; the determinative layers that make up an individual are manifold on either side of the periodization divide.

What the York Judas proposes is that opacity, rather than something that needs to be explained away or sculpted into a recognizable subject, could be the *sine qua non* of literary character. To somewhat opportunistically borrow Valerie Traub’s phrasing on early modern sex: sometimes a character seems like it is there, not because it permits us access, but because it doesn’t. Steven Justice posits that a device very much like this is at work in Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*, a “subjectivity-effect [that] entails and depends upon a history-effect” (185). By portraying characters as making reference to a shared history that remains unexplained to the reader, *Troilus* creates for them “a subjectivity that conceals ... unexpressed mental content” (170) and imbues them with the impression of depth. A similar “investigative desire to discern the principles of coherence” (184) that Justice identifies as fueling a readerly experience of character subjectivity also surfaces diegetically in other medieval texts about Judas Iscariot. Diegetic, in these examples, because the narrative voices of the texts explicitly attempt to produce an interiority for Judas. The work of questioning is made visible in the text, not displaced onto the

interpretive space between the text and the reader.

The late thirteenth-century metrical paraphrase of the Gospels, *La Estorie del Euangelië*, contains the familiar description of Judas hanging himself in despair and his body bursting open. But despite summoning the irreproachable authority of Jerome and Bede in order to emphasize the importance of asking for mercy, the poem appears unsatisfied with this exemplum and abruptly switches into a direct address in this moment to ask Judas a question he can't answer.

Iudas what was þi wikked wille
In wan-hope þi-self to spille
Pat þou noldest merci calle
.....
But þine hert was so drie
Pat þou ne mightest merci crie
Of god þi lord for þi mys-dede
Perfor helle is þi mede. (1275-1302 qtd. in Campbell)

A similar move occurs in the *South English Ministry and Passion* from roughly the same period. There the lines are: “Wrecchid Iudas, qwy askid þou not of mercy to affonge? / Qwy þou3ttyst þou not on his grace or þou þiself þe honge?” (2377-78) Even more strikingly (and quite a bit earlier), in Leo the Great’s Sermon 58, the apostrophe is accompanied by a shift into the present tense. “Why, unhappy Judas, dost thou not make

use of so great long-suffering? Behold, the Lord spares thy wicked attempts; Christ betrays thee to none save thyself. Neither thy name nor thy person is discovered, but only the secrets of thy heart are touched by the word of truth and mercy. The honour of the apostolic rank is not denied thee, nor yet a share in the Sacraments. Return to thy right mind; lay aside thy madness and be wise. Mercy invites thee, Salvation knocks at the door, Life recalls thee to life”⁷ (“Homily 58” 169).

To ask Judas why—of his despair or of his betrayal—all the while knowing that at the end of just a few lines you will need to return to the dry heart, the finality of the perfect tense, is to engage emotionally with the opacity that precludes any answers. Everyone knows how this story turns out. Leo plunges headfirst into the narrative as an observer at the Last Supper, pleading for Judas to do the right thing, for all the world as though change were still possible in this moment. *Return to thy right mind*: the urgency with which he addresses Judas belies the absolute immutability of the Passion sequence. Judas will never reply, but he gives voice to a silence which teems with the potentiality of unknowing. So as long as Judas never replies, there is space for Leo to perform his investment, to entertain the *what if* no matter how briefly, to attempt to extend to him the mercy he did not receive the first time around. Opacity is what allows Judas to be spoken to. Leo goes knocking on the door; sometimes, the way you know that someone is home is that they do not answer.

⁷ Cur, infelix Juda, tanta benignitate non uteris? Ecce parcit ausibus tuis Dominus, et nulli te, nisi tibi, indicat Christus: nec nomen tuum, nec persona detegitur, sed veritatis et misericordiae verbo, cordis tantum tui arcana tanguntur. Non apostolici ordinis honor, non sacramentorum tibi communitio denegatur. Redi in integrum, et deposito furore respisce. Clementia invitat, salus pulsatur, ad vitam vitam te revocat.

CHAPTER 2

Hangman's Knot: Performance, Mercy, History

Introduction

VEXILLATOR 3 . . . A Sunday next, yf that we may,

At six of the belle we gynne oure play

In N. town, wherfore we pray

That God now be youre spede. (*N-Town* Banns 525-8)

Surviving in just one manuscript—BL Cotton MS Vespasian D VIII—the N-Town Plays have only been the N-Town Plays for scarce over thirty years. Long known as the “Ludus Coventriae,” a name that was meant to reflect their supposed provenance of Coventry, they are now generally accepted to be a late 15C to early 16C East Anglian scribal compilation rather than a guild-sponsored Creation-to-Doomsday cycle in the mold of the York or Chester plays. The suggestion of the name “N-Town” was a much-needed (yet too slowly adopted) intervention made by W. W. Greg¹, following the Third Vexillator’s proclamation in the Banns that the play would begin the following Sunday “in N. town.” The “N” here is understood to be an abbreviation for “Nomen”, indicating that the reader of the manuscript—or the actor in the role of the Third Vexillator, if the plays were taken on tour—could replace this placeholder with the name (*nomen*) of whichever town they

¹ See Greg 110.

found themselves in. This indication of performance history must be considered in conjunction with the manuscript evidence suggesting that the Mary Play (plays 8-11 and 13) and the two Passion Plays (plays 26-28 and 29-34, respectively) were among a number of late additions to an extant cycle. As Douglas Sugano says of the Passion Plays in the introduction to the TEAMS edition of the N-Town Plays, “it is clear from the Banns and from other parts of the manuscript that these plays had lived lives independent of the compiled manuscript” (10), and what appears in compiled form to resemble a Corpus Christi cycle was never performed from beginning to end as a whole.

It is to these two interpolated Passion Plays that I want to turn in this chapter. Since there are indications that they were composed and performed as units, it is reasonable to believe that there are consistent through lines of theme and character that allow the various plays to be analyzed in tandem. As mentioned, Passion Play 1 spans from plays 26 to 28, and the TEAMS edition² of N-Town has regularized their titles as follows:

26: Conspiracy; Entry into Jerusalem

27: Last Supper; Conspiracy with Judas

28: Betrayal; Procession of Saints

Similarly, the titles for Passion Play 2 are:

² The titles used in the TEAMS edition are not drastically different from those in Meredith and Kahrl’s 1977 facsimile edition; however, the two editions differ in their numbering of the Passion Play components because of the absence of Play 17 from the manuscript. Thus, for consistency’s sake, I refer to the titles and numbers of the TEAMS edition here and elsewhere.

- 29: Herod; Trial before Annas and Cayphas
- 30: Death of Judas; Trials before Pilate and Herod
- 31: Satan and Pilate's Wife; Second Trial before Pilate
- 32: Procession to Calvary; Crucifixion
- 33: Harrowing of Hell (1)
- 34: Burial; Guarding of the Sepulcher

My aim in this chapter is to explore how the character of Judas Iscariot is constructed in these plays, what “experiment[ing] with a certain degree of ill fit between contemporary performance studies and medieval studies” (Chaganti 252) can do for our understanding of medieval biblical drama, and how a combination of character criticism and performance studies might lead us to an ethical re-evaluation of scholarly reading practices.

In thinking about “character”, I follow the framework set out by Barthes in *S/Z*, wherein the smallest building block of character is the “seme” (“the unit of the signifier”)—“a shifting element which can combine with other similar elements to create characters” (17). It is this particular melange of semes that gives each character distinctiveness, that “determines the character’s ‘personality,’ which is just as much a combination as the odor of a dish or the bouquet of a wine” (67), and it is the character’s proper name that “enables the person to exist outside the semes, whose sum nonetheless constitutes it entirely” (191). This mechanism of aggregation is broadly echoed in

Elizabeth Fowler's theory of characters as social forms, assembled through invoking a variety of "social persons" ("models of the person, familiar concepts of social being that attain currency through common use" (2)) and positioning the character within the resulting constellation. The difference lies in Fowler locating the character within the social dimension as opposed to Barthes' semiotic, and Fowler's corresponding concern with what implications the construction of character inside the text might have for the reader outside of the text.

Barthes' view of character is fundamentally internal to the text—although he advocates for the "writerly text" (4) which each reader must undertake the work of reading in order to produce for themselves—in that character does not accompany the reader beyond the text. Character, in the Barthesian view, is analytically valuable for the reason that it both produces and is produced by narrative discourse; "From a critical point of view, therefore, it is as wrong to suppress the character as it is to take him off the page in order to turn him into a psychological character" (178). It is not to the latter part of this statement that I want to hitch my wagon, however, as I am skeptical that there is a correct or proper reading practice from which I or a "reader on the street" may deviate when we dare to conceive of character as something more than a discursive site. As Suzanne Keen writes, "Even though readers know perfectly well that fictional characters are make-believe, they go on caring about them, lending them the bodies that they do not possess, feeling with them in emotional fusion that paradoxically calls into embodiment a psychic corporeality vouched for in readers' own bodily responses" (309). In using *S/Z* as my starting point, I do not want to deny the legitimacy or prevalence of this paradoxically

realist reading practice that Keen describes. I find the Barthesian framework useful for this analysis not because I regard character to be completely reducible to discourse, but because the discursive construction of Judas Iscariot in the N-Town Passion Plays is visible yet peculiar, modeling a relationship between character and discourse that is far from straightforward—and, at times, too tortuous to easily classify as mutually constitutive.

Judas is a particularly apposite target on which to turn the lens of character theory, as the medieval Judas has a habit of escaping the bounds of his originary context. The other Apostles go on to have their deeds recorded in biblical narratives such as the Acts of the Apostles, and those among them with especially illustrious careers also provide ample material to be reworked into various texts in the saints' lives genre. However, medieval portrayals of Judas more often than not establish his death as happening within the temporal bounds of the Passion. The scene itself as imagined is an amalgamation of two differing accounts, with Matthew's version providing the Middle Ages with the timeframe and the cause:

And when morning was come, all the chief priests and ancients of the people took counsel against Jesus, that they might put him to death. And they brought him bound, and delivered him to Pontius Pilate the governor. Then Judas, who betrayed him, seeing that he was condemned, repenting himself, brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and ancients, saying: I have sinned in betraying innocent blood. But they said: What is that to us? look thou to it. And

casting down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed: and went and hanged himself with an halter. (*Douay-Rheims Bible*, Matt. 27:1-5)

And the version in Acts with the detailed physical circumstances: “And he indeed hath possessed a field of the reward of iniquity, and being hanged, burst asunder in the midst: and all his bowels gushed out” (Acts 1:18)³. Since the story of Judas comes to a close before the end of the Passion, it is possible to relate everything about him as part of a telling of the Passion narrative; and yet the medieval Judas has stories told about him that occur before and after the Passion—dealing with his childhood as an adopted prince, his punishment in hell of being gnawed by Satan, his encounter with St. Brendan in the middle of the ocean—and stories that follow him through the events of the Passion instead of keeping its eyes on Jesus, lingering with him when he is robbed of thirty pieces of silver in his sleep. He lyrically repents of his sins in drama and rises with Christ to heaven in sermons, becoming a focal point for both theological thought and literary imagination. I think of Judas through character theory not in small part because the Middle Ages thought of Judas as a character.

How to Build a Character

Some 50 lines before the N-Town Judas speaks for the first time, Mary Magdalene bursts into the scene of the Last Supper and introduces herself:

³ The Vulgate—and consequently, the Douay-Rheims—translates the Greek “πρηνής γενόμενος” as “suspensus” (being hanged), where a more literal correspondence would likely have “fell headlong”; this is already a harmonizing attempt that borrows from Matthew’s “hanged himself with an halter.”

MARIA MAGDALENE. As a cursyd creature closyd all in care,
And as a wyckyd wrecche all wrappyd in wo,
Of blysse was nevyr no berde so bare
As I, myself, that here now go. (27.141-44)

The alliteration is dense and forceful, especially in her first two lines, where the effect is intensified by the extraneous presence of a second stressed lift in the b-verse; that is, the metrical position occupied by “care” and “wo” here would ordinarily be taken by a nonalliterative syllable. In early English drama, alliterative meter is often the form of choice for tyrants and devils, with the excessive ranting quality of such sonic repetition serving as a stylistic reflection of their arrogance and bluster.

Mary Magdalene may not be a tyrant or a devil, but her sojourn through the alliterative mode here is fitting, as she is in her uncleansed state still a “cursyd creature” housing “sefne develys” (174) within herself. Although her penitence figures her sinfulness as a transient quality unlike the essential moral deficiency of tyrants and devils, Mary Magdalene’s explosive alliteration would nonetheless have something of an analogous initial impact in performance. She steals the scene, as the devils do. Alliteration arrests. Weeping and pleading, demanding the attention of Jesus and the audience alike, straining to touch Jesus’s body with her own, even her speech almost corporeal in its insistent thickness of sound—Mary Magdalene is an undeniable presence, drawing in the audience towards her miniature drama of exorcism and redemption. “For

now myn hert is clensyd from thought / That fyrst was combryd with care” (191-92), she says when Jesus has driven the devils out of her, summing up the compelling feel-good transformation that has just occurred onstage.

Naturally, Judas ruins the moment. He interrupts with “Lord, me thynkyth thu dost ryght ylle / To lete this oynement so spylle” (193-94), and says that it would have made more sense to sell it and use the proceeds to feed the poor. Because this argument when taken in good faith sounds confusingly charitable coming from a man most famous for an act of sale, nearly all medieval texts append to it the explanation that the Gospel of John gives for Judas’s motives⁴: “Now he said this, not because he cared for the poor; but because he was a thief, and having the purse, carried the things that were put therein” (John 12:6). Although this caveat is not present in N-Town, the high level of emotional investment with which the audience has followed Mary Magdalene’s redemption—and the immediately antagonistic position that Judas takes in relation to her—effectively turns audience allegiance away from him even in the absence of Scripture-backed exhortation. No one likes a wet blanket. Thus the first seme that Judas collects is a diffuse sort of *villainy*, the culmination of a series of operations that occur just underneath the surface of the text itself. It could have been *miserliness*, except that his stated (and never explicitly contradicted) aim is to “bye mete to poer men” (196); *thievery*, only the Johannine clarification is not included here; *poor comprehension of Jesus’s teachings*, but the gospels are so strewn with stories of the Apostles being chastised by Jesus for their various misunderstandings that this sort of error seems too commonplace to be notable.

⁴ Note that John is the only gospel that has any need to explain Judas’s motives at all, as this is the only account in which Judas is specified as the one who objects to the lavish ointment.

The adherence of the *villainy* (or *antagonism*) to the character of Judas happens almost incidentally in these lines, an effect without a clear cause. It is the combined product of Mary Magdalene's captivating poetics and bodily presence, his own ill-timed intrusion, and the audience's frustrated desire for a tidy happy ending. Rather than stemming directly from what he says or what is said about him—an appeal to charity, a light reprimand from Jesus—the *seme* drifts out of the cracks of the text, settles over him like a miasma. It is a *villainy* whose source is only made traceable through an attention to form and the affective rhythms of the text. Similarly, another major method of *seme* accretion for the N-Town Judas also makes use of the blurring of cause and effect; but if the former method blurs the categories of cause and effect by deriving a result entirely from subtextual causes, this latter method blurs them by deriving a result from causes that have not happened yet. Instead of labeling Judas an antagonist by encouraging the audience to cleave to the target of his hostility, this method lades him with attributes through a kind of clairvoyance or time travel, repeatedly portraying him as a man who has somehow *already* done the things that he will be said to do.

As he partakes of the Last Supper with Mary Magdalene and the Apostles, Jesus foretells his imminent betrayal: “On of yow here syttynge, my treson shal tras; / On of yow is besy, my deth here to dyth” (209-10). Following the account of the gospels, the Apostles then begin to wonder who it is that Jesus is referring to, a scene which is greatly expanded in N-Town from its various biblical incarnations. Each of the twelve is given the space of a quatrain to express his astonishment and outrage. At first glance the section might seem a tad repetitive, the tenor of the Apostles' speeches consistent from Peter's

“Whiche of us ys he that treson shal do?” (214) to Jude’s “I woundyr ryght sore who that he shuld be” (253), or even to Judas’s “Which of us all here, that traytour may be?” (263)

But in context, the progression of Peter’s questions makes an unsettling leap of logic:

JHESUS. Myn herte is ryght sory, and no wondyr is.

Too deth I shal go and nevyr dyd trespas.

But yitt, most grevyth myn hert evyr of this:

On of my bretheryn shal werke this manas;

On of yow here syttyng, my treson shal tras;

On of yow is besy, my deth here to dyth.

And yitt was I nevyr in no synful plas

Wherefore my deth shuld so shamfully be pyght.

PETRUS. My dere Lord, I pray thee, the trewth for to telle:

Whiche of us ys he that treson shal do?

Whatt traytour is he that his Lord that wold selle?

Expresse his name, Lord, that shal werke this woo. (205-16)

At no point before Peter’s mention of it is there any indication in the text that the betrayal of Jesus will involve him being sold; Jesus himself certainly has not provided any details beyond the eight lines quoted here. The next Apostle to bring up the specific method of betrayal is Matthew, who asks, “what man is so wood / For gold or for sylvyr hymself so to spylle” (229-30). If any vagueness in Peter’s use of “selle” could have allowed the

word to be written off as a metaphor, Matthew removes that possibility by making explicit the material nature of the sale. By the time Philip has his turn, the question has become, “A, Lord, who is that wyl chaffare thee for monay?” (239); the action described is very much a commercial exchange, commodity for currency. The Apostles make continual references to the particulars of a future event that they have neither experienced nor had described to them. The knowledge that Jesus will be sold off in a financial transaction creeps into their speech piece by piece—with none of the revelatory momentum of prophecy, but in slow fragments, like a returning memory. The traitor, whose identity is as yet unrevealed, has the seme *commerce* pinned to him before he has carried out the act of sale in question.

Even Judas himself and the conspirators exist in this uncertain temporal frame that encourages slippages between the present and the future. “Now cowntyrfetyd, I have a prevy treson, / My maysterys power for to felle” (269-70), says Judas in a soliloquy when he rises from the meal to make his way to the council house. The implication is that he has hatched this plot relatively recently, which would be supported by his later “I wyl go tellyn hem myn entent; / I trow ful mery I shal hem make” (279-80) and the “Heyl, prynsesse and prestys that ben present! / New tydyngys to yow I come to telle” (285-86) he extends as a greeting when he has crossed the playing field. Yet Gamaliel is already acquainted with him; “Now, welcome, Judas, oure owyn frende!” (293) is the first thing he says to Judas, which may merely be shorthand for the connection of ill will that binds Judas to the other conspirators, but is still a far cry from the 77 lines of explanation,

argument, and abuse it takes for the York Judas just to be allowed in past the janitor.⁵ Not only has the *commerce* of the betrayal entered the traitor's repository of senses before the chronologically plausible point in time, Judas becomes associated with the *betrayal* before he has enacted it. Rewfyn also tells Judas as soon as they have exchanged greetings that the "sylver is redy" (298), which is either a phenomenally fast reaction to the offer of sale or a readiness that seems strangely informed, once again, by future events. Or, possibly, a third interpretation: "Here is thretty platys of sylver bryth / Fast knyth withinne this glove" (305-06), Rewfyn says as he hands the money to Judas. Perhaps the quick payment indicates the ease of access to glovesilver in this court of law, and is an indictment of the judicial systems of both Jerusalem and medieval England. If this is the case, however, the customary bribe of the silver-stuffed glove places this particular transaction in the middle of a long series of similar transactions that exchange money for favors. The betrayal becomes a piece in a patchwork quilt, an instance in a pattern of repetition.

Performance is an inherently repetitive act. Richard Schechner explains his influential concept of *performance as restored behavior* in these terms: "Restored behavior is living behavior treated as a film director treats a strip of film. . . . some behaviors . . . exist separate from the performers who 'do' these behaviors. Because the behavior is separate from those who are behaving, the behavior can be stored, transmitted, manipulated, transformed. The performers get in touch with, recover, remember, or even invent these strips of behavior and then rebehave according to these strips." This theory

⁵ See York 26.127-204.

has been most influential in drawing attention to the performative quality that underlies many everyday non-aesthetic behaviors as well as aesthetic spectacle, but in both cases, Schechner argues, “restored behavior is the main characteristic of performance” (69). Medieval drama, as an aesthetic example of performative behavior, overtly engages in restored behavior during every rehearsal and public performance. The multiplying of instances caused by the presence of glovesilver—the giving of which, as a customary act, is itself performative—is further multiplied when we consider that the script containing this scene was acted out repeatedly in rehearsal. The N-Town Passion Plays in some form were also put on for the same audience year after year, as evidenced by Contemplacio announcing at the beginning of the Herod play, “We intendyn to procede the matere that we left the last yere” (29.6).

Thus when Jesus says, “Judas is redy with pepyl strong, / And doth his part, me to betray” (28.71-72), the performative context in which Judas has his part can invoke several different levels of restored behavior. The Passion Plays are enactments of a dramatic script, were rehearsed, and were performed for an audience multiple times over the years. In all of these, Judas exists as a role to be played. And yet, of course, the direct referent in these lines is not any of these but the diegetic level; what Jesus is saying is that Judas has the part of the traitor in the Christian narrative of the Passion. To say so opens up the interpretive possibility that the Passion is a kind of performance, and therefore—following Schechner—that it is also a kind of restored behavior. Which is to say, the Passion as we know it never occurs, *has* never occurred, for the first time. Just as the glovesilver intimates that this is hardly the first (or the last) time that money has changed

hands unjustly, neither is any story of the Passion ever told from scratch. The N-Town Passion Plays are just one among countless successive renditions of the same pre-existing biblical narrative, which is also, in turn, a recounting of what was taken to be a historical event; which is also, in its own turn, a playing out of a predetermined divine plan. Whether the word “part” is used in the dramatic sense or otherwise, the whole must already be in place before a part can be apportioned.

Trapped in this endless loop of a world where his story has always already been told, Judas’s attempts to undo his mistakes are even more futile than they would be otherwise. “Here is youre mony agen” (30.27), he says to the priests as he attempts to hand over the thirty pieces of silver. For him, every action is an “agen”, open to repetition but never to revocation; he is unable to conceptualize an undoing that does not take the form of a redoing. Jesus’s famous rebuke of Judas—“it were better for him, if that man had not been born” (Matt. 26:24)—is essentially structured around the impossibility of revocation, implying that nothing less than a complete rewriting of past events would be necessary to nullify the act of betrayal. That’s how far you would need to go back, Jesus suggests, in order to keep the story of the betrayal from being written. You’d need to get rid of Judas altogether. But the demand is for further still, in N-Town: the initial condemnation is that the unnamed traitor would “whysshe hymself unborn for that synful ded” (27.260), but when Jesus returns to the prophecy after the lesson on the Eucharist, he says, “Bettyr it hadde hym for to a be / Both unborn and unbegete” (459-60). As though a mere lack of birth is no longer deterrent enough against the inevitability of this predetermined sin, the wish is now to rewind time all the way back to the moment of

conception. By the time the expression surfaces for the third time—“Thu haddyst be bettyr a ben unborn now” (28.111), Jesus says to Judas as he is being arrested—it has become a stock phrase, so closely linked to Judas as to almost be an epithet for him. It is, to some degree, idiomatic; Job invokes it in the Bible several times in anguish, cursing the day of his birth. The phrase does not originate with Judas. But whereas it is used much more often in the York Cycle to refer to Jesus and the hardships he will suffer at the hands of the torturers⁶, in N-Town it is appended to Judas in all three occurrences, serving as an identity marker for him. Judas is the one who can never go back.

Stasis

What consequence does this sort of some collection through time travel have for the figure of Judas? There is a kind of stasis that results from only continuing to be what you already are, from always already being associated with *betrayal*, with *commerce*, always already a sinner. In this section, I want to explore the types of mobility that are available to literary characters, and the ways in which the medieval understanding of Judas makes it particularly difficult to imbue him with them. Whether through a change of heart that transforms his personality or through a display of idiosyncrasy that unveils depth—whether horizontal or vertical, whether on the axis of time or interiority—the medieval Judas is incapable of demonstrating mobility without, in one way or another, ceasing to be Judas altogether.

One potential mechanism of mobility through depth available to characters,

⁶ See York 26.118, 28.226, and 30.141 for Jesus regretting his birth; see 32.132 for the only instance the expression is used for Judas.

particularly in medieval literature, is literary typology. In *The Cast of Character*, Warren Ginsberg notes that the Tristan of Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan* is intentionally written to resemble that other harpist so important to the Middle Ages, King David. Ultimately, "the resemblance between the two heroes . . . is an element of moral structure" (75) in that the ethical shape of Tristan's life will eventually conform to David's, who serves as Tristan's forerunner in much the same way that Old Testament types prefigure New Testament antitypes in biblical exegesis. By employing the method of typology in textual creation, literary typology "rechannels a system of foreshadowings and prefiguration into the formation of living character" (78). Tristan, because he resembles David in temperament and musical talent, carries within him the seed of David's career—a story of "broken loyalties, impossible allegiances, and the division which sunders the closest bonds of parenthood and family" (74)—like a gene awaiting its expression at just the right moment. The end result, according to Ginsberg, is that "in a text structured by literary typology, characters will necessarily possess depth, a sense of implication and complexity" (79).

Judas is not without his typological forbearers. Most frequently, Ahitophel and Absalom serve as his types in the domains of both crime and punishment, as in Bede's Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles:

[Judas] also got the death-place that he deserved, for *in hatred of both heaven and earth* (as though he would be associated only with the spirits of the air), he had betrayed the Lord of men and angels to death, and so *he perished in the middle of*

the air, following the example of Ahithophel and Absalom, who proceeded against King David. (18, emphasis in original)

Judas's demise, in its spatial liminality, is deemed appropriate for his sin; betrayal unmoors you from allegiance, sets you adrift into the no-man's-land of disloyalty. Just as you belong to no one, you die in no place in particular. In the York plays as well, the catalogue of those whom Jesus will not harrow from Hell includes "And all that hastis hemselve to hange / Als Judas and Archedefell" (37.307-08), knitting them together in the tight space of the eight-syllable line.

However, although the typological strands that compose him may become visible under the scrutiny of exegesis, Judas is rendered too much of an archetype in most contexts to consist of anyone other than himself. Ahitophel and Absalom are swallowed up by the totalizing notoriety of Judas Iscariot. The most frequent form that Judas takes in texts is that of the byword; certainly this application of his name is prevalent in modern contexts, such as in the angry "you liar, you Judas" (Rice) delivered by the Jesus of *Jesus Christ Superstar* when the two confront each other at the Last Supper over the prophecy of the betrayal. Even in medieval usage, Chaucer's Nun's Priest—near the end of his tale—denounces daun Russell for lying in wait to attack Chauntecleer, calling the fox a "newe Scariot" (3227) and a "False dissymulour" (3228). In these examples, Judas is less human than linguistic symbol, an invective that stands in for any deceitful or traitorous quality the target may evince. His name is here used "connotatively . . . stand[ing] as a shorthand for whatever characteristics a specific individual may at one time have been

associated with”⁷ (Marmaridou 355). The inevitable consequence of playing such a central part in the best-known story of medieval Western Europe is that you become typecast, rendered synonymous with the central action that elevated you to stardom.

Ginsberg’s notion of literary typology also requires a hierarchy of primacy between the two texts, like a difference in height that allows water to flow from one place to another. The knowledge embedded in character must be able to travel from the well-established figure to the newcomer counterpart, or from “the one we have met before” to “the one we are meeting now.” But it is implicit in Ginsberg’s theorization that the direction of revelation is inverted in the Christian and literary-secular strains of typology; in Christian typology “symbols . . . make sense out of history” (77), and in literary typology “a secular character repeats the experiences of another character . . . providing a frame of reference in which to understand the full implications of the [secular] character’s actions” (96). Christian typology uses what is being encountered in the present—the events of the New Testament—to explicate the past, and literary typology uses the past to explicate what is being encountered in the present, the literary character. The N-Town Plays, despite the work of literary reimagining that they perform, are structured by the ideological investments of their source material. The typological relationship that Christianity formulates between the Old Testament and the New is fundamentally distinct from the relationship that would exist between the Hebrew Bible and a literary work based on the Hebrew Bible, and the Ahitophel and Absalom who are

⁷ It’s worth noting that the customary example given to showcase the movement of a proper name from its referential to connotative function—used in the cited paper as well as in other scholarship that deals with the same subject—is, in fact, this quote from Oscar Wilde: “Every great man nowadays has his disciples, but it is always Judas who writes the biography.”

configured as types of Judas are specifically their Old Testament incarnations, tasked with populating their end of the typological seesaw. There is no Play of King David in N-Town or in any other early English dramatic compilation⁸; the N-Town banns proclaim seven pageants based on Old Testament material and 33 based on the New. That is to say, the scale of N-Town is weighted toward the New Testament, just as typology inherently is as a Christian hermeneutic method. Thus the typology that lies behind the Judas of N-Town is not interested in forming him in the mold of Ahitophel and Absalom, as literary typology might, but sees the career of Judas as being a clarification and fulfillment of the rebellion of Absalom against David. The literary typology that might have allowed Judas mobility through depth is set aside in favor of Christian typology.

The stasis demonstrated by Judas is thus in part an effect of his iconic status, which renders him too symbolic to be represented in detail with much frequency or ease. In terms of Fowler's theory of character, Judas participates in creating his own social person: that of the *traitor*. But this inapplicability of literary typology to the N-Town Passion Plays also calls attention to the question of genre; is biblical drama more "biblical" or "drama"? Certainly the question is a reductive one, and can only be asked by momentarily bracketing concerns such as the literariness of the Bible. But what I mean to achieve by asking this reductive question, in essence, is explore what ramifications for Judas's character there may be in classifying N-Town as "biblical," particularly in relation to the term's attendant connotations of historicity.

⁸ David only appears briefly in other pageants as part of the Tree of Jesse or as one of the prophets who tell of the coming of Jesus. He has a rare starring role in the *Origo Mundi* of the Cornish *Ordinalia*, but much of his story deals with his quest for the three rods that would eventually be used to make the cross—that is, his relationship to New Testament interests.

The understanding of biblical events as historical fact is ubiquitously attested by medieval writings on the matter, and is traceable as the intellectual impulse behind the creation and consumption of universal histories, which place recorded human history in the larger context of the time that has elapsed since the creation of the world. Even without venturing very far afield, the lines spoken by Contemplacio in the N-Town play of the Parliament of Heaven illustrate this view clearly: “Fowre thowsand, sex undryd, foure yere, I telle, / Man, for his offens and fowle foly / Hath loyn yerys in the peynes of helle” (11.1-3), he says. The number of years between the Creation and the Nativity are mapped out with mathematical exactitude, and assurance is found in the precision with which dates can be ascertained. It seems of relatively little importance that—as Sugano points out—“None of the early calculations of time between Creation and the Nativity fit the play’s assertion of 4604 years” (369). Historicity, as conferred by numerical value, matters more as a function of authority than for the specific content of its claims.

As Brian Murdoch has argued in his work, medieval drama can be understood as a type of the “medieval popular Bible” in that these vernacular texts—despite the often remarkable degree of creative play in which they engage Scripture—function with the full authority of the Bible for their audiences. Murdoch writes of Genesis, his case study:

. . . medieval authors working in the vernacular but under the methodological aegis of the *sensus litteralis* expanded, re- or de-emphasised elements of, and reworked, and quite frequently re-created their own Genesis, whilst ostensibly mediating to an audience unable to understand Latin, Greek or Hebrew something

which is at the same time presented to that audience as a definitive biblical text.

Thus, “However much and in however many different ways the vernacular writer may have moved these stories away from the biblical text, works like these *are*, for their audiences, the medieval Genesis” (176).

But if the medieval popular Bible serves as instantiations of Scripture for the audience, and if Scripture is taken to be historical record, then it follows that even dramatic texts such as *N-Town* are imbued with the quality of facticity that generates historical authority. What does this mean for Judas, as a historical character in a historical narrative? Historical persons, when appearing as characters in historical fiction, play by a different set of rules from the ones that apply to characters with fully fictional status. Catherine Gallagher points out one such rule when she describes the difference fictionality makes for a reader encountering characters on the page: “‘Competent readers do not first encounter the names of well-known historical figures in novels, for example ‘Napoleon,’ with the same suspension of semantic expectations we have when first reading the names of fictional characters’” (318). Historical characters always enter the narrative with historical baggage, the senses that have already converged on their proper name during the course of their historical existence. They are characters that precede their texts. A second constraint on the fictional life of a historical character is that “it cannot contradict the historical record”; unless the text in question is a work of alternate history, what is recorded as having happened must happen in the fictionalized account as well. For historical characters, “‘History’ is their horizon of possibility, the ground against we

judge them probable or improbable” (320).

Thus the moment Judas voices his first line—“Lord, me thynkyth thu dost ryght ylle” (27.193)—he comes into existence as Judas Iscariot, immobilized under the weight of his historical baggage and by the tight confines of what he was recorded to have said and done. But on the other hand, what about audience members who may resemble the old man in the oft-repeated anecdote related in a 1664 letter by the preacher John Shaw?

I asked him ‘How many Gods there were?’ he said he knew not . . . I told him that the way to salvation was by Jesus Christ, God-Man, Who, as He was man, shed His blood for us on the cross, &c. ‘Oh sir,’ said he, ‘I think I heard of that man you spake of, once in a play at Kendall, called Corpus Christi play, where there was a man on a tree, and blood ran down,’ &c. And after that he professed that tho’ he was a good churchman, that is, he constantly went to Common-Prayer at their chappel, yet he could not remember that ever he heard of salvation by Jesus Christ, but in that play. (138-39)

For an audience member with no previous knowledge of who Judas Iscariot was or what he was said to have done, wouldn’t considerations such as semantic baggage or the horizons of fact have been irrelevant⁹? Initially, perhaps. But it remains the case that all

⁹ When asked about a book of hours (UPenn Ms. Codex 1566) in which the figures of all conspirators associated with the Passion have been defaced with the sole exception of Judas, Roger Wieck posited some degree of religious illiteracy as a possible explanation. Indeed, an illumination (such as that on fol. 29v of this codex) depicting Judas in the moment of placing the kiss of betrayal on Jesus could seem—to the untrained eye—as though the two were sharing a moment of affection.

those involved with the creation of the N-Town Passion Plays—from the writers to the producers to the actors involved in each staging—were unable to remain similarly innocent. To quote Schechner’s formulation again, performance is restored behavior, already experienced by the performers and recreated by them. The knowledge they have of Judas is what constrains him to that knowledge, and it is this informed portrayal of him to which the audience responds. In other words, it is possible that a naive audience member will begin their encounter with the character of Judas in something of a vacuum, but the character is never created in a vacuum. Ultimately, the play’s knowledge of Judas is contagious.

Moreover, when biblical drama is taken to be history instead of historical fiction, the restrictions Judas faces as a character become even more stringent than the rules set out thus far. Gallagher writes of the experience of reading historical novels, “we make a distinction between the fictional bits, the moments of novelistic characterization that convey judgments and opinions, which seem to come to us in the *subjunctive* voice, and the historical parts, representing the established facts that are under interpretation.” Historical fiction deals with its historical characters by implicitly moving its readers through this “*modal arc*” (321, emphasis in original), fleshing out figures such as Napoleon without contradicting history by letting their fictional qualities hover in the subjunctive space of conjecture and hypothesis.¹⁰ On the other hand, biblical historical fiction—which the medieval popular Bible is, on all accounts—then has no subjunctive

¹⁰ This vocabulary echoes Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Indeed, Gallagher cites it in the same article in order to demonstrate that alternate histories operate under the poetic precept that probability ought to govern the actions of a character, as opposed to the accidental (and therefore at times inexplicable, in terms of the self-consistency of character) occurrences of history.

mood. Its narrative exists in the indicative, all history. This has crucial implications for the relationship between character and plot, in that the subjunctive mood is what allows a character room to act in ways that the historically shaped plot does not require. The subjunctive mood is the privacy of the attic crawl space where a character can take a brief break from the party downstairs, from intersecting with and adhering to the indicative of history. So as long as what happens in the subjunctive does not contradict the indicative, historical characters are able to indulge in fictionality¹¹.

For a character who has no subjunctive space to resort to, every move is subject to the demands of the indicative, which in turn must answer to history. The genre of the history that N-Town operates in keeps Judas from displaying mobility on the axis of time, the change of heart that could transform him. And yet, a central aspect of the understanding of Judas in the Middle Ages—perhaps the most important trait associated with him—was precisely his change of heart, the remorse he feels over his betrayal and the subsequent despair he falls into. N-Town also verbalizes this interpretation of his character in the Banns:

For gret whanhope—as ye shal se—

He hangyth hymself upon a tre.

For he noth trostyth in Godys peté,

¹¹ I see texts such as the Middle English “Judas” ballad (Child ballad 23) engaging in a somewhat different relationship with the subjunctive, as the events experienced by Judas in that narrative—being given thirty pieces of silver by Jesus to buy food, getting hoodwinked by a woman, and selling Jesus to Pilate in order to make up the money he has lost—are counterfactual to biblical accounts and therefore more in line with the genre of alternate history.

To Helle his sowle is browth. (Banns 369-72)

In the wake of Lateran IV, “[a] misguided but not altogether evil Judas, Judas as a failed penitent with whom the devout could partially identify or whom they could at least recognize as a sinful fellow Christian capable of responding morally to his own wrongdoing, became useful to the church” (Mize 102). In the case of texts such as the *Southern Passion*, their penitential program leads them to showcase Judas’s movement towards regret in order to stress the soteriological importance of the asking of mercy and the rejection of despair. Where Judas is thought to go horribly, irrevocably wrong is not with the betrayal, but with his denial of the power of divine mercy to forgive his betrayal. But at this juncture, I want to propose that—perversely enough—the stasis of the N-Town Judas is made necessary precisely because N-Town’s emphasis on the availability of mercy threatens to destabilize the narrative of the Passion.

In the play immediately preceding the Last Supper, John the Baptist addresses the audience in order to explain how crucial the careful balance between hope and dread is: “Betwyx these tweyn may be no dysseverawns: / For hope withoutyn drede is maner of presumpcyon, / And drede withowtyn hope is maner of dysperacyon” (26.159-61). Tilting too heavily in either the direction of hope or dread is sinful in its own particular way, and must be avoided. The character who best demonstrates this tightrope act is Mary Magdalene, who bursts into the scene of the Last Supper to implore Jesus to cleanse her of her past sins—an event unique to N-Town among surviving English dramatic texts. Significantly, her redemption is figured in terms of a movement between

two distinct points of enclosure; as a sinner she is “closyd all in care” (27.141) and “wrappyd in wo” (142), caught in the claustrophobic grasp of “the fendys brace” (184). After Jesus has cast the seven devils out of her, she describes herself as being “in thy grett mercy, closyd and shytt” (185), and adds, “I shal nevyr returne to synful trace / That shulde me dampne to hell pytt” (187). Mercy works through moving someone from the inertness of sin to the restfulness of salvation. But when the same shytt-pytt rhyme pair surfaces again later in the play, the Apostle Thomas is using it to condemn the traitor whose identity is as yet unknown: “For his fals treson, the fendys so blake / Shal bere his sowle depe down into helle pytt. / Resste shal he non have, but evyrmore wake, / Brennyng in hoot fyre, in preson evyr shytt” (249-52). For Judas, the gates have already been closed and barred.

When the N-Town Passion Plays are so deeply concerned with the possibility of God’s grace, to the extent that Mary Magdalene is brought on at the pivotal moment of the Last Supper to explicate the importance of penitence, the prospect of salvation hovers like a thought in the back of your mind. All proceedings then have the hue of redemptive potential cast over them. However, the fate that the Apostles imagine for the traitor is always invariably hell, from Andrew asserting that “For that fals treson to helle, he shal synke” (223) to Thomas lingering on the image of the culprit “Brennyng in hoot fyre.” When the existence of grace is finally acknowledged by Thaddeus, the last Apostle to speak, it is held out only to be explicitly denied: “Alas, he is lorn; ther may no grace be” (255). After all, what is the alternative? To consider the possibility that mercy may truly be an available option for all sinners is to go down a dangerous path, into the anxious

unknown of a story in which Judas ends up in heaven with the best of them¹².

As Britt Mize writes, “The old, wicked Judas, simple betrayer of Jesus and enemy to Christian interests, never went away” (101), even in the later Middle Ages when the augmented pastoral role of the clergy in administering sacramental confession was accompanied by a corresponding ascendancy in the literary depiction of a remorseful Judas. The reluctance to entertain the notion of a successfully redeemed Judas, one who recognizes penitence as the appropriate channel for his remorse, may thus be related to an enduring distaste for a character who acts as the catalyst for Jesus’s torture and Crucifixion. The intensity of emotion fostered by affective piety—that other great Christian strain of the later Middle Ages—likely would not have been oriented kindly towards the man responsible for Jesus’s grisly suffering, either. The prospect of a redeemed Judas carries with it the peril of reducing all this to rubble; any version of him that doesn’t eventually end up hanging from a tree on the outskirts of town can—like a loose strand of yarn—unravel the fantasy of biblical history.

In a narrative that has its parameters so clearly outlined by the ways in which it has been told before, even a change of heart can be reconfigured as stasis—*must* be reconfigured as stasis, to be able to contain the boundlessness of the mercy that is doctrinally so central to N-Town. The change of heart in question, at that, is the most static kind of change possible; a change towards the unchanging. Despair is the refusal of the hand that reaches out to you, the rejection of the movement of mercy in favor of

¹² St. Vincent Ferrer was brought before the Inquisition as a heretic for preaching this possibility—also mentioned in the introduction to this chapter—so the path is a dangerous one indeed.

remaining in the stasis of remorse. It assures the sinner that their sin is beyond forgiveness, at times literally when Despair takes on an allegorical form, as in the case of the dialogue between Despair and Judas in Arnoul Gréban's *Mystère de la Passion*:

JUDAS. I never heard him preach
other than to forgive, to forgive;
it is a sign that he likes the offering.

DESPAIR. As much as he may enjoin pardon,
he can never give it to you.

Betrayal receives no pardon. (21775-80)

The implication is that Judas, even in his repentance, is a misguided believer and a lousy theologian. He might have been saved if he had been a good enough Christian to believe in his own capacity to be saved, it's really too bad for him that he wasn't. But this is a self-negating premise, to assert that mercy was ever held out for a character who was condemned to hell before he even sinned. The Judas of N-Town may as well fall into despair, having been written into a narrative that offers him nothing but damnation as an option. Despair is the condition that the N-Town Passion produces in Judas; he is, in concluding that he cannot be saved, only being an attentive reader of his own text.

Yet this cloud is not entirely without its silver lining. Paradoxically, what allows Judas access at last to the indeterminacy of subjunctive space is the specificity of the performing body. Aronson-Lehavi finds the Brechtian concept of "epic theatre" at work

in medieval biblical drama, in that “the actor/character differentiation [is] an underlying aesthetic principle of the mystery plays” and “the doubleness of the performer and the character is intentionally overt” (86) in this context. Judas may be written to tread a narrow one-way path to hell, but the actor who plays Judas is not Judas; the actor is something not quite coterminous with the character. The medieval actor does not attempt to “become” their character as in realistic theatre, but acts “as though” they are their character, leaving open a subjunctive gap that allows for a kind of freer play. The body of the actor in medieval biblical drama is not a site for concretization but for dissolution, displaying “a lack of ontological certainty about the status of the body and its identity” (Evans 206).

This permission to slip into the subjunctive results in Judas being granted another kind of movement altogether, through historical time that lies outside of the documentation of Scripture. Jerzy Limon defines his concept of the theatrical “fifth wall” as that which separates “the material substance from the fictional sphere”; the physical elements of what is onstage exist in the present of the audience, but because the narrative of the play is understood to occur in a time that is the audience’s past, these physical elements fictionally signal the matter of the past even as they exist in the present. In other words, among other things, the fifth wall separates the character—who belongs to the past—from the present body of the actor. Because the fifth wall creates dual temporal streams that cannot exist in the human experience of the world, “within the given time and the given space, an actor becomes a sign of a figure, his costume signifies real garment, his wig real hair, and the stage speech real language and so on” (216). The art of

theatre is predicated on the agreed-upon convention that the actors' work is "a re-creation of the past as a continuous, evolving present of the recipient" (217). But because the dual temporalities exist side by side in medieval biblical drama without the attempt to subsume one to the other, the past retains its pastness as distinct from the present of the actor. The two temporal streams are simultaneously visible, held in tension.

But the N-Town Judas, whose pastness is informed by his own future, allows the post-biblical temporality of dramatic performance to leave the marks of its knowledge on biblical events. That is, the play knows how things turn out because the Middle Ages knows. Judas is the liminal juncture through which the fifth wall becomes permeable, where the medieval temporality of the actor comes into contact with the biblical temporality of the character. And if he is damned from the moment he walks out onstage to die unshriven, suspended between heaven and earth, at least the stretch of his body bridges fourteen hundred years. Maybe that's something to look forward to.

CHAPTER 3

Oedipus at Akeldama: Despair, Backstory, Compassion

A Certain Apocryphal History

This story may sound familiar: a husband and wife, to their dismay, receive a prophecy that their infant child will one day grow up to commit unspeakable atrocities. Although they cannot allow the child to live in their care, knowing what they now know about his destiny, neither can they bring themselves to murder their own offspring. The child is abandoned to die, but somehow survives nonetheless; he is raised far from the place of his birth and becomes an impressive young man of some accomplishment. Despite all the promise he shows, he ends up returning to his native land without meaning to, where he proceeds to kill his father and marry his mother. Unwittingly, he falls into the sins of patricide and incest.

If this summary seems more or less straightforward in its evocation of Oedipal resonances, consider this continuation to the story: the incestuous nature of their relationship eventually becomes clear to the unhappy man and his wife-mother, who are aghast at the moral squalor in which they find themselves living. But even through all of this personal drama, news has reached the two of them that a certain locally based savior by the name of Jesus Christ has been accepting and forgiving all those who are willing to repent of their former wrongdoings. Accordingly penitent, the man leaves his home to become a follower of Jesus and a member of the apostolic circle. Yet he does not last

long before he slides back into his old sinful ways, stealing from the common coffers, then betraying Jesus for thirty pieces of silver, then hanging himself when he is overcome with remorse over his betrayal. This is how it ends; Judas Iscariot dies suspended between heaven and earth, his carcass cloven in two, spilling out his innards to the ground.

This slice of apocrypha—in which Judas is imbued with a backstory that resembles the classical myth of Oedipus—enjoyed a surprising amount of popularity in the Middle Ages. Calling it the “mediæval legend of Judas Iscariot” (571) in his sweeping survey of the theme, Paull Franklin Baum traced its inclusion to 42 surviving Latin manuscripts, to say nothing of the vernacular renditions of the motif or the manuscripts of the *Legenda Aurea* which contains it as part of the life of Saint Matthias. A frequently raised hypothesis regarding the source of the linkage between Judas and Oedipus points to Book II, Chapter 20 of Origen’s “Against Celsus,” in which he references Judas and Laius in the same breath in order to argue that a prophecy gestures to “simple futurity” and does not inflexibly bind the named parties from acting otherwise than prophesied. In the case of Judas, “it was possible for him to show mercy, and not to persecute him whom he did persecute,” and in the case of Laius, “it was within [his] power ... not to try to beget children” (440).

Necessarily, if this passage from Origen is at the root of the Oedipal Judas of the Middle Ages, it implies that the use of the Oedipal Judas is a conscious intent to invoke the myth of Oedipus. Elizabeth Archibald writes that “the combination of motifs—exposure, prophecy of disaster, parricide, mother-son incest—seems to be beyond the

bounds of coincidence or even polygenesis” (109). Baum also deems the theory of this direct line of descent “perfectly tenable”; that is, so as long as “the legend is granted to be of a literary or ecclesiastical character” (617), since “It cannot be shown with the slightest degree of probability that the Œdipus myth was familiar to the folk in the early Middle Ages” (614). On the other hand, Lowell Edmunds grants that an early twelfth-century form of the legend may stem from a literary Oedipal tradition, but argues that “The other form of the Judas folktale ... suggests unlearned provenience” (18).

Although the issue of provenance occupies much of the critical work on the Oedipal Judas, my suggestion is that we shift our approach in order to sidestep this potentially unanswerable question. Whether or not the Oedipal echoes are consciously Oedipal—regardless of how the story came to take the shape that it took—we can pursue a more generative line of inquiry by asking instead: what function does the figure of the Oedipal Judas perform? That is, once this backstory for the character of Judas has been established and put into currency, what does it *do*? What effect does it have? In this article, I argue that the persistent cycles of sin and repentance that constitute Judas’s Oedipal past dramatize a struggle within character that occurs between the two poles of recognizability and change, between stability and movement. The Oedipal Judas proposes that character may be something created through this internal tension; further, that character is a literary-critical category that particularly demands engagement and response from the reader, and becomes most visible in the space between the text and its audience.

Wanhope on a Rope

In order to eventually make our way back to the tension of literary character, however, we must first journey through the valley of despair, as it is the relationship between Judas and despair that structures his cycles of sin and repentance. Judas and despair were intimately linked concepts in the medieval imagination⁸. Any mention of despair would call Judas to mind as the paradigmatic despairing soul, as can be seen in the effortless allusion to him that Chaucer's Parson makes in the *Parson's Tale*: "Now comth wanhope, that is despeir of the mercy of God ... This horrible synne is so perilous that he that is despeired, ther nys no felonye ne no synne that he douteth for to do, as shewed wel by Judas" (694-95). Conversely, any mention of Judas would carry with it the understanding that despair was as much a part of his character as betrayal, if not an even weightier part. Jerome's pronouncement that "Judas offended the Lord more by hanging himself than by betraying Him" (259) underlies many medieval assertions about the centrality of despair to Judas's damnation, and the thirteenth-century *La Estorie del Euangelie* quotes it directly in relating Judas's suicide:

More synned iudas of þis dede
as we of seint Ierom rede
þan he did þat ilke while
þat he wold ihesu bigyle. (1271-74 qtd. in Campbell)

⁸ For an overview of theological writings on despair and more on despair as a theological and secular concept persisting through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, see Snyder.

William Caxton's translation of the *Legenda Aurea* into Middle English also stresses despair, departing from Jacobus de Voragine's original Latin by omitting and modifying certain passages from the scene of Judas's death. De Voragine writes:

Quos tamen penitentia ductus retulit et abiens laqueo se suspendit et suspensus crepuit medius et diffusa sunt uiscera eius. In hoc delatum est ori ne per os effunderetur: non etiam dignum erat ut os tam uiliter inquinaretur quod tam gloriosum os, scilicet Christi, contingerat. Dignum etiam erat ut uiscera que prodicionem conceperant rupta caderent et guttur a quo uox prodicionis exierat laqueo artaretur. (da Varazze 328)

(However, he was sorry for what he had done, threw back the money, and hanged himself with a halter, and, as the gospel tells us, "burst asunder in the middle and all his bowels gushed out." Thus his mouth was spared defilement since nothing came out through it, for it would have been incongruous that a mouth which had touched the glorious lips of Christ should be so foully soiled. It also was fitting that the bowels which had conceived the betrayal should burst and spill out, and that the throat from which had emerged the voice of the traitor should be strangled by a rope. (de Voragine 168-69))

In contrast, this is rendered in the Caxton as merely "and nevertheless at the last he brought them again to the temple, and after hung himself in despair, and his body opened

and cleft asunder and his bowels fell out. And so it appertained well that it should so be, for the mouth which God had kissed ought not to be defouled in touching” (58). The motivation for suicide, in de Voragine’s version, is presented as remorse—“he was sorry for what he had done”—whereas in Caxton, it is specified to be despair; or, a loss of hope in his own potential salvation. Caxton also omits de Voragine’s mentions to “the bowels which had conceived the betrayal” and “the throat from which had emerged the voice of the traitor.” At this crucial final moment of Judas’s life, Caxton eliminates overt references to the betrayal in favor of emphasizing the role of despair in Judas’s death and damnation. One of the most succinct and assertive statements to this effect comes from the *South English Ministry and Passion*:

For non oper þing he was dampned but for þat wanhope on,
For he schrof hym al alowd to þe Iewis of his wowþ,
& þat mysgete siluer he ȝeld aȝen, & sory was anowþ.
Pese þre þingis w[ere] anoþ [a] mannys synne to amende,
But for Iudas hadde wanhope a deuele wey he wende. (2382-86)

“For non oper þing” is a powerful categorical claim, and it is bolstered by the subsequent enumeration of the ways in which Judas was otherwise in accordance with the orthodox process of penance. Betraying Jesus is just a sin like any other, subject to mercy if only Judas had known how to ask.

When identified as the ultimate cause of Judas’s downfall, despair possesses an

enormous amount of interpretive utility. One of the thorniest theological questions that plagued the Christian mind was that of the relationship between free will and divine knowledge, which we have already seen addressed by Origen with reference to Judas, Laius, and divine prophecy. In essence—as articulated here by the fifteenth-century dialogue *Lucidus and Dubius*—the conundrum is this:

God wolde that his *sonne Iesus*
for man deed be sholde.
Than y wolde wyte what dede Iudas a-mys
that hym be-tray wolde. (351-54)

If the Crucifixion was merely part of the divine plan, was the betrayal that led to the Crucifixion also not divinely ordained? How can Judas, whose actions accomplished what God wished to see accomplished, be blamed for his part in this scheme of salvation? The party line answer to this frequently asked question is also provided in *Lucidus and Dubius*, as Lucidus responds by distinguishing between the motivations of the actors involved in the drama: “charité and loue” (364) on the part of God, and “fals couetyse” (366) on the part of Judas. The seemingly identical acts of delivering up are considered to be fundamentally different due to their differing motives. This was a common enough explanation, favored by Patristic and medieval theologians alike, as in an Augustinian homily: “There was a ‘*traditio*’ (delivering up) by the Father; there was a ‘*traditio*’ by the Son; there was a ‘*traditio*’ by Judas: the thing done is the same, but ... the Father and the

Son did it in love, but Judas did this in treacherous betrayal” (504).

But as Dubius reminds Lucidus, “euery clerk is dubius” (342). The fact that this explication needed to be constantly reproduced is a testament to the persistence of a certain kind of hesitation regarding the paradox of Judas. Here is where the interpretive utility of despair enters the equation: the usefulness of despair comes from its ability to draw attention away from Judas’s betrayal towards the moment of his death. If he is damned primarily because he did not sue for mercy, because his despair was the most grievous and unforgivable sin of all, then it no longer matters as much whether his actions were foreordained by God or not. Linking Judas so intimately to despair creates a valve through which some theological steam can escape.

If at First You Don’t Succeed

On the other hand, at least in the Oedipal tales of his past that we are interested in here, Judas is not someone who is averse to asking for mercy. He only joins the Ministry of Jesus at all because he wishes to make amends for his crimes of patricide and incest, and he has heard that Jesus will extend his mercy to every repentant sinner. It is also significant that nowhere in the Oedipal texts are there ever any issues taken with this first scene of penitence. No writer challenges the validity of the moment by pointing out that we do not witness the formal steps of contrition, confession, and satisfaction, nor is the sincerity of Judas’s intent brought into question. In fact, this generally seems understood to be a repentance undertaken in good faith. In the *Scottish Legendary*, when Judas recognizes what he has done through his mother’s account of the child she relegated to

the sea and the husband she found dead in their yard, he simultaneously and spontaneously recalls his childhood murder of his adoptive brother:

& also rane hyme þane to mynd
Pat he as a wykyt mane & vnkynd
Had slane hyre sone, þat of þe flud
Hyme tuke & dyd sa mekile gud.
Pane hyme for-thocht he had done Ill. (219-23)

As Eva von Contzen writes of this passage, “in his thoughts Judas refers to himself as a wicked and unkind man. This negative evaluation, indeed self-awareness, is part of Judas’s self-conception at that moment. Judas is presented in sympathetic terms, as a man who is well able to recognise his mistakes and be ashamed of them ... Negative connotations are avoided in the passage altogether” (157). Even a text like the *South English Legendary*, which is extremely insistent on the evil nature of Judas—it calls him “luþer” (1) in the very first line, and an additional time every six lines or so—still concedes that in the moment of setting out towards Jesus, “Repentaunt & wyllyngge he was [·] hys lyf to amende” (110). The repentance is presumed heartfelt.

A backstory so spattered by sin, then, creates a character who cannot seem to change despite his own heartfelt repentance. The Oedipal Judas is someone who continues to return to sin, someone for whom penitence doesn’t quite take. Lee Patterson reads this recursive compulsion as itself an Oedipal wish to return to maternal fulfillment

by departing from the “paternal injunction of penance” (414), a desire that becomes in the mouth of the Pardoner a mocking critique against the fourteenth-century religious formalism that demanded interminable penitential effort from the Christian subject. In the *Pardoner’s Tale*, the echo of Judas stands “Against the religious assertion that rebirth can be achieved only through submission to the paternal law and a consequent penitential suffering,” alongside “all those who groan under the burden of their inevitable and finally unavoidable sinfulness” (419). That is, the impulse towards recursion shown in the Pardoner, his Tale, and its undercurrent of the Oedipal Judas gives voice to the exhaustion produced in the Christian subject by the ceaseless mandate of sacramental penance. It’s worth emphasizing that in Patterson’s formulation, this resistance is neither aberrant nor blameworthy; in Chaucer and elsewhere, Judas’s status as a medieval exemplum makes him useful not because he is unthinkable deviant, but because something about him is familiar. As Larry Scanlon has pointed out, “the exemplum’s enactment of authority in fact assumes a process of identification on the part of its audience. That is to say, the exemplum expects the members of its audience to be convinced by its *sententia* precisely because it expects them to put themselves in the position of its protagonists” (35). The frustration at how easily and persistently one finds oneself slipping back into sin, the sensation of the constant slide backwards, is a darkness that is shared by Judas and his readers.

What’s odd, however, is *how* his Oedipal past illustrates the recrudescence of sin. The way in which his Oedipal history sits uneasily with his post-Oedipal biblical career raises questions about the role that the backstory plays within the larger tale. There is a

vividness and a specificity to the backstory that does a great deal to flesh out Judas; his character is created through the conferral of narrative, by way of the accumulation of all the particularities provided by the Oedipal account. The most memorable of these particularities are the most morally reprehensible ones—his murder of his adoptive brother and father, his incestuous union with his mother—which lie dotted across a temporal sea like islands of iniquity. These sins are the touchstones that guide the account along. It is curious, therefore, that they more or less blink out of existence after his first repentance and his admission into the apostolic fold. The post-Oedipal phase of Judas's life is defined by his avarice, and much is made of his supposed gospel harmony tendency to pilfer from the Ministry's common coffers by taking a tenth of the money therein. This light-fingered tithe is designed to provide a narrative explanation for the conceptual numeric link between the price of the ointment (three hundred pence) that Judas objects to and the reward for the betrayal (thirty pence). But there is almost never any precedent for avarice before his first repentance, since the sins that define the first phase of his life are murder and incest, not thievery; there is a disconnect between the Judas of the Oedipal shape and the Judas of the Bible.

What I want to point out here is that although it is the specificity of the Oedipal link that is used to construct Judas as a character in these texts, that specificity is then promptly abandoned at the moment of his first repentance. All that vivid backstory becomes just a faint trace of sin, merely a general propensity for evil that only matters inasmuch as it is a moral valence that he reverts to. The *South English Legendary*, which takes pleasure in the gruesome detail of lines such as “So þat he smot him mid a ston ·

bihinde in þe pate / Ðat all þe scolle toda3ste · þe brayn veol out þer ate” (83-84) (So that he struck him with a stone · behind in the pate / That the whole skull was smashed to pieces · and the brain fell out thereat), signs off with “Schulde ous fram þe lufere stude · þat we weneþ he inne beo” (146) (Shield us from that evil place · that we believe him to be in), an anodyne blur of a moral that bears very little relation to the drama of the backstory it relished so much. *Gregorius*, the legend of Pope Gregory as told by Hartmann von Aue, references Judas by name while describing the consternation that Gregory and his wife-mother feel when they realize that they are blood relations:

Ich weiz wol daz Jûdas
nicht riuwiger was
dô er sich vor leide hie
danne *den zwei* hie. (2623-26)

(I know well that Judas
Was not more sorrowful
When he hanged himself for grief
Than these two.)

In the introduction to his edition, Edwin Zeydel proposes that von Aue likely was not familiar with the Oedipal Judas, and that this reference only gestures to Judas as an emblematic figure of despair whose emotional state can be compared to that of Gregory

and his mother. Be that as it may, it is nonetheless evocative that even in this tale of mother-son incest—a motif that could not be more relevant to the Oedipal Judas—he can only be invoked in terms of his final sin. He seems to have left his past selves behind.

Why, then, does Judas need to slough off earlier versions of himself? In *Reading People, Reading Plots*, James Phelan proposes that fictional characters consist of three components: the synthetic, the mimetic, and the thematic. I want to draw our attention to the mimetic and the thematic components, which he respectively defines as “the way characters are images of possible people” (2) and the way they “support ... some proposition or assertion allegedly made ... through [the] text” (3). Of the interaction between these two components, he writes that “the mimetic function of characters will act as a kind of weight which resists ... high-flying generalizing” (78); the movement of the narrative, “and especially the way it makes use of the mimetic function, determines the point at which the generalizing move of thematism should stop” (105). That is, the particularity of a character is in tension with its ability to serve the thematic function, and the symbolic dimension of a character can only extend so far before it begins to chafe against the character’s individuality. Something similar is asserted by Ingrid Nelson: as an exemplum’s “narrative accrues specificity, contingency, and subjectivity, its moral attempts to totalize and abstract these particularities. To some extent, these two components of the exemplum are irreconcilable” (118). It is not possible for Judas to function as a conduit of moral instruction while retaining all the specificity that gathers around his form. He sheds his Oedipal layer in order to join Jesus, then shuffles off his avarice when he moves onto despair. His two moments of repentance partition his life

into three separate periods of sin, composed of three separate categories of sin.

Such a shift in character is not a product of simple inconsistency or convenience. Rather, the progressive molting of the Oedipal Judas dramatizes the tension created when an immovable object meets an unstoppable force: when a conception of character as *that which is selfsame* comes into contact with a conception of character as a *site for change*. Penitence is a process that creates change, but how can we recognize Judas as himself if he repents successfully? In the rhetorical texts most beloved of the Middle Ages, consistency of character was considered key for painting a credible portrait of a person, one whose actions correspond to their natures. As Cicero writes, “there can be little foundation for a motive for crime unless such suspicion is cast on the character of the accused that it will seem not to be inconsistent with such a fault” (193), since “Inferences may be drawn from the person of the accused if the attributes of persons are carefully taken into account” (189). This notion of character endures into Quintilian, who writes that the orator must “represent our persons, at the same time, as of a character in accordance with the facts which we wish to be believed of them—a person accused of theft, for instance, as covetous; of adultery, as libidinous; of homicide, as rash” (IV.2.52). Because “Each of these crimes proceeds from a peculiar cast, as it were, of character” (V.10.19), the character of the person in question must be reverse-engineered from the result of belief—or disbelief—that the orator wishes to induce in their audience. Further, Matthew of Vendôme’s *Ars versificatoria* continues this tradition by translating the *inventio* of rhetorical principle into the *descriptio* of poetic mandate: “if anything is to be described,” he writes, “when articulating the description let the greatest support for

credibility be presented” (73). In rhetoric and poetics, the two most prominent medieval arts to formulate the composition and ramifications of character, consistency is credibility is effectiveness.

Thus the challenge is for Judas to inherit this understanding of character while still letting his double experiences of repentance affect him, demonstrating the efficacy and paramount importance of penitence in reforming even a sinner as wretched as he is. He must remain himself, and yet change. In some sense, it is precisely because he remains himself that he is available to undergo change multiple times. There would be no second repentance—no story of the Passion at all, perhaps—had Judas never again sinned so egregiously after entering the company of Jesus. He verbalizes the hope for this not-to-be-realized fictional future in Jean Michel’s *Le mystère de la Passion* when he vows to himself that he will be different if only he might be forgiven by Jesus:

Je luy seray le plus loyal,
le plus devot, le plus saint homme
qui soit d’ycy jusques a Romme
et loyaulment le serviray;
au grant jamais ne pecheray
si mes pechés me sont remys. (4895-900)

(I will be to him the most loyal,
The most devout, the most virtuous man

From here to Rome
And I will serve him loyally;
Never will I sin again
If my sins are taken away from me.)

But instead of branching off into a counterfactual version of events in which he does indeed become the most loyal servant of Jesus, Judas ends up embodying the cyclical movement he describes a few lines earlier in the same speech: his lot is “Nouveau dueil, nouveau vitupere, / nouvelle raige composee” (4866-67) (a new pain, a new dishonor, / a new-created rage). As penitence peels away his former self, the emerging new self is already headed towards a different sin that preserves the consistency of his wayward core.

Thou Sayest

Self-consistency, for Judas, does not merely inhere in rhetorical theory. biblical narrative is foremost in a series of other determinative layers he must answer to, ways in which his story has always already been written. On a basic logical level, that makes sense; whatever else Judas does with his life, he must in the end make his way to the betrayal and his subsequent suicide, if his story is not to directly contradict the content of the Bible. This concern is adumbrated even in tales of his Oedipal past, which lie outside of the temporal bounds of the biblical account. The *Legenda Aurea* relates the prophetic dream of Judas’s mother, which turns out to diverge categorically from the prophecy of the Oedipal myth:

Quadam igitur nocte cum sibi mutuo debitum exoluissent, Cyborea obdormiens sompnum uidit quod perterrita cum gemitibus et suspiriis uiro suo retulit dicens: “Videbatur mihi quod filium flagitiosum parerem qui totius gentis nostre perditionis causa existeret.” (da Varazze 324)

(One night, after they had paid each other the marital debt, Cyborea fell asleep and had a dream that she related, terrified, sobbing and groaning, to her husband. She said: “I dreamed that I was going to bear a son so wicked that he would bring ruin upon our whole people.” (de Voragine 167))

What is revealed through her dream is not the patricide and incest that affects them on a more immediately personal and chronological level. The dream points instead to Judas’s role in the Passion and his subsequent condemnation in Christianity⁹; the course of Judas’s life may not run smooth, but from the moment he is engendered in the womb, it does run implacably on a one-way street toward what is written of him in the Bible.

Not only is he bound by biblical narrative, but also by theological reception. Perhaps the distinction is a fine one, but the fourteenth-century *Titus and Vespasian* contains examples of both: Judas’s mother dreams, as she so often does after the *Legenda Aurea* tradition, that “Pis childe schulde be Jewes bale; / Thruh hym shall þei sorwe

⁹ This dream is notable in that it simultaneously makes visible the constructed contours of Christian antisemitism—as distinct from an apologia that insists Christian antisemitism is “natural” and “deserved”—and yet justifies it by pronouncing it inevitable.

fynde, / All þat ben of Jewes kynde” (4500-02). But the prospect of calamity has a slightly different referent when the poem addresses Judas’s refusal to ask for mercy:

Sithen he knewe hym, and is fame,
He was þe more for to blame;
For he sawe hym ay curteys
To all þat sechen hym allweyes,
Pat were seek, oþur in trespas;
Merciable to hem he was.
But he most nedes be lorn,
As it was lokede hym biforn. (4831-38)

To say that Judas was foreseen to be “lorn,” or—as the MED defines the word—to foresee that he would “come to perdition, be damned” is not precisely the same thing as saying that he is destined to commit villainous acts. What is intimated here is his posthumous destination, and thus a detail about him that is assumed to follow seamlessly from his biblical career but is nonetheless an extrapolation by later theological deliberations. Nowhere in the Bible does it outright say that Judas was damned to hell. The snag is not so much that it is unreasonable for a sinner to refuse mercy, commit suicide, and end up in hell; it is that this is something that needs to be reasoned out at all, connecting the dots with lines that venture (if just a small step or two) outside of Scripture. Paradoxically, the foreseeing in these lines is done by observers in his future.

An even more striking instance occurs in Arnoul Gréban's *Le mystère de la Passion*. After his return of the silver is denied by his co-conspirators, Judas requests that the devils either kill him or advise him on how to kill himself. Lucifer dispatches Despair to answer the call: the dialogue takes the form of a debate in which Judas argues that he might still be able to receive mercy, and Despair attempts to convince him that God would never forgive him. His final claim, before he succumbs to her influence, is that there is hope for him yet because he correctly followed the penitential steps of contrition, confession, and satisfaction. Yet Despair is unmoved, countering this assertion with reasons why his adherence to procedure was ultimately ineffectual:

Ceste confesse instituas
sans devocion de pensee;
et tout l'argent restituas
non pas a partie offensee;
du contraire t'esvertuas,
mes ce fut par rage amasee;
par quoy quanque brassé tu as
n'est riens: la fleur en est passee. (21876-83)

(You performed this confession
without devotion of thought;
and restored all the money

not to the offended party;
you strove for contrition,
but in an amassing rage;
and so everything you've been brewing
has come to nothing: your time is up.)

The objections raised in these lines are, however, back-formations stemming from the received conclusion of Judas's damnation. They echo theological writings that sought to reconcile the penitential attitude of Judas at the end of his life with the assumption that he belonged in hell, as found in thinkers such as Ambrose: "For I suppose that even Judas might through the exceeding mercy of God not have been shut out from forgiveness, if he had expressed his sorrow not before the Jews but before Christ" (348). Or as Augustine writes, "the prayer which is not made through Christ, not only cannot blot out sin, but is itself turned into sin ... For after [Judas] betrayed him, and repented of it, if he prayed through Christ ... he would not have hanged himself in despair" (538). In this scene, what tells Judas he is damned is the knowledge that he is damned; despair produces itself, and like a self-fulfilling prophecy, his theological reception works to create the justification for its own existence. Judas falls into despair because he falls into despair.

Such a catalogue of biblical and theological constraints makes it seem as though an inflexibility of Christian orthodoxy is the sole responsible party, but the contours of the Oedipal tradition is itself a kind of binding force. The *Provençal Passion* is an outlier among Oedipal Judas texts for a variety of reasons, all having to do with the uniqueness

of the backstory it presents. Cyborea never dreams her prophetic dream, Judas never murders his adoptive brother, and Pilate never presses Judas into service. This last omission has repercussions for the incest portion of the story, since in all other versions, it is Pilate who orders the marriage between Judas and his mother. In the *Scottish Legendary*, the marriage is described as being “Maugre hyrris & aganis his will” (212) which—in light of Pilate’s domineering influence over the marriage in other texts, and the fact that the previous line refers to the “mane [Pilate] had gewyne hyre til” (211) (man Pilate had given her to)—it would not be implausible to read as referring to the unwillingness of both parties involved. However, the marriage in the *Provençal Passion* is one of mutual attraction and consent:

Ma mayre azautec se de mi

E heu d’ela atresi.

De tal guiza nos azautem

Que aqui meteys nos ajustem. (487-90)

(My mother found me attractive

and I was attracted to her as well.

In this way, we were attracted to each other,

and then and there we united ourselves.¹⁰⁾

¹⁰ Unpublished translation by Samantha Pious.

There is a “dignity and compassion” (Axton 189) here that is characteristic of the *Provençal Passion*, but—to what end? All that dignity and compassion leads to the same pain, the same dishonor. Judas is still sent away at birth to live in a foreign land where he comes into his own as a troubled man, still murders his father and commits incest with his mother, still enters the Ministry and becomes upset about the cost of the ointment, betrays Jesus, despairs, kills himself. Jesus urges Judas to take a tenth of the common coffers in order to support his wife-mother and their two children, but wanting that tenth proves to be his downfall regardless of whether he craves it out of avarice or necessity. Even when so many shows of narrative constraint are absent, the Oedipal legend itself remains a tradition and a pattern to be followed.

The Ties that Bind

Whither Judas, then, if he cannot help but be what he is said to be? Is he able to do no more than retread his familiar steps in every textual life he leads, pushed by coercive forces—rhetorical theory, biblical narrative, theological reception, Oedipal tradition—toward a self-consistency that immures him? Or perhaps, does he come to enjoy a little more freedom of movement than that, at least in certain texts? Some characters, as it turns out, are unruly by nature; they resist the interpretations and boundaries imposed upon them, exceeding the functions they were created for, escaping their originary narratives to endlessly propagate new stories out of themselves. They allow themselves to be put to different uses and dreamed into different endings. One way in which Judas achieves this mobility is, ironically, through the very sins and misfortunes that pin him in

place. The inimitable specificity of these sins and misfortunes that flesh him out as a character—the Oedipal and the biblical alike—must be cast aside in order for Judas to become an effective exemplum that readers can make use of. Not many people lead lives that require them to stay ever-vigilant lest they trip and perpetrate patricide, incest, and the betrayal of the Messiah. What remains for the reader to feel, after all these thousand details have been discarded, is his despair. Take the Hanging of Judas from the Towneley Plays:

Alas, alas, and walaway!
Waryd and cursyd I have beyn ay.
I slew my father and syn bylay
My moder der,
And falsly aftur I can betray
Myn awn mayster. (1-6)

Though it is doubtful whether the Hanging is an actual record of a dramatic pageant¹¹, it is still true that—even without much action and with only one speaker present—it is a highly performative text. With its first-person speaking voice and theme of lamentation over misfortune, it resembles an instance of the *planctus* tradition, such as the twelfth-century poem *Planctus Oedipi* and the Christian examples of the *Planctus Mariae*. The emotive and perspective-taking qualities of such texts render them performative, and the

¹¹ See Meredith; see also Epp.

reader of the Hanging is encouraged to take on the role of Judas when they encounter the text on the page, as they are with the roles of Oedipus and the Virgin Mary.

To attempt to inhabit Judas's subject-position, to imagine if just for a moment that his sorrow is understandable and reproducible, elicits a compassion for him that transcends any impulse towards censure. We are meant to feel sorry for him, and to mourn with his mourning. This is the response shown by Brendan the Navigator in the Anglo-Norman *Voyage of St. Brendan* by Benedeit, when he encounters Judas in the middle of the ocean and witnesses him clinging to a rock battered by an unceasing sea-storm. There is "Peril devant, peril desus, / Peril detriers, peril dejus" (1237-38) (Danger before, danger above, / Danger behind, danger below), and Judas is beaten every which way by waves, barely managing not to drown. Even before Judas reveals that this agony is in fact not so much a punishment as it is a brief break from the worse fate that awaits him in hell, Brendan is already moved by his plight and his vocal despair over his own sins:

Quant le oit Brandans issi plaindre,

Unches dolur nen out graindre

.....

Pur le plurer Brandans ne pout

Avant parler, mais dunc se tout. (1255-68)

(When Brendan had heard him complain thus,

Never before had he felt so great a pain

.....

For weeping Brendan could not

Speak further, and thus fell silent.)

The Judas that Brendan meets and weeps over is, however—as briefly mentioned above—a man already in hell. This is a Judas who exists outside of his biblical lifespan, experiencing an *after* much as he experiences a *before* in his Oedipal backstory. This is yet another form of mobility; Judas is the sort of character that, like a cutting from a plant, has the ability to be transposed elsewhere to sprout a new narrative. The questions, anxieties, and desires that are not neatly tied up within the confines of the biblical story are then able to stretch their legs again in these character-focused sequels. The Judas episode of the *Voyage* is the exploration of a number of curiosities: What happened to this repentant sinner after his death? How horrifying might hell be for one of the greatest criminals in Christian history? And what does it mean to feel sorry for a character like that—what are the consequences of readerly compassion? The Brendan tradition imagines that, in the relative freedom afforded by operating outside of biblical events, Judas’s damnation may not be uncompromisingly absolute. Judas is permitted to leave his two hells for the ocean on certain liturgical days, and what is more, Brendan’s compassionate response grants him a benevolent if temporary reprieve from the customary routine:

Veit i venir deiables mil

Od turmentes e grant peril

.....

Brendans lur dist: 'Laissez l'ici

Desque al matin que seit lunsdi.

.....

Jol vus comant,

E de Jesu faz mun guarant.'

Cil le laisent, e a force

.....

Brandans estait iloc la nuit. (1471-83)

([Brendan] sees a thousand devils coming

With torments and much danger

.....

Brendan told them: "Let [Judas] stay here

Until Monday morning.

.....

I command you,

And call upon Jesus as my protector."

.....

Brendan spent the night there.)

Holding at bay the devils that are ready to drag him back to hell, Brendan extends Judas's soggy recess by keeping watch over him. Though we have already been told that the seas are rough, that the cloth given to Judas as a reward for his few good deeds in life is the only thing that allows him to be merely tortured instead of outright drowned, yet the storm unaccountably seems to quiet after these lines. The devils grumble, but are rebuked. The rest, until the break of day, is blissful silence and stillness. Ultimately, the compassion that others feel for him may be Judas's saving grace.

This phrase—*saving grace*—is taken to a thrillingly literal degree in an infamous lost sermon by Vincent Ferrer, which only survives in the form of two memoranda produced against him and his supposedly heretical inclinations. The gist of the sermon is reported to be as follows:

That on a certain Easter Day he [Vincent] preached before a huge popular multitude that the traitor, Judas, after selling Christ and after [Christ had been] sentenced to execution by the cross, was moved by true, contrite, and salutary penitence; that Judas sought with all his might to get access to Christ and have pardon for his treacherous greed; but that he was unable to get near Christ on Mount Calvary because of the throng of people behind and around him, and therefore said in his heart 'since I cannot get near Christ with my corporeal feet at least I shall meet him on Calvary by journeying in my mind, and once there I shall humbly beg pardon from him'; and that he did this by hanging himself with a

noose, and his soul flew thence to Christ on Calvary aforesaid, and there he begged for pardon, which Christ granted at once; and that from thence Judas rose with Christ into Heaven, where his soul is blessed with those of the other elect.

(Murray 361)

The fact that no text of this sermon exists is a further testament to the marginality of the position taken in it, what dangers and difficulties are attendant in making a claim for Judas's salvation. But compassion is capable of feats as tremendous as this; Vincent extends to Judas the mercy that he could not bring himself to ask for, in effect momentarily standing in for the divine and gifting him with a posthumous pardon. What Vincent and Brendan feel for Judas in his attitude of remorse underscores the fact that despair has an affective dimension as well as the theological, and even as it is a spiritual error to be condemned, it is also an emotion that demands an emotional response in return. The miraculous paradox of these texts is that despair, the one anvil around the neck that will without exception drag a sinner down to hell, that unforgivable sin turns out to be the tie of compassion that binds us to Judas. The hangman's knot, lashing us together like an embrace.

Doing Character

We have examined how the tension between stability and movement structures the character of the Oedipal Judas; as he oscillates between these poles, he also produces the kind of episodic medieval narrative that is filled to the brim with recurrent incidents. Sin

follows sin after sin in his backstory, and repentance follows repentance after repentance. But with each swing of the pendulum, each cyclical return to sin and repentance, what endures and accumulates—even as the specificities of his offenses fade away—is the despair that he feels at his continued relapses, and the compassion this arouses in his readers. The interaction between despair and compassion helps the reader engage with Judas and perceive him as a character.

In this brief coda, I want to touch upon that last statement and address the place of the reader in creating character. Earlier in this article, I proposed that some characters are unruly by nature, allowing themselves to be put to different uses and dreamed into different endings. This is only a partial view of the story; it elides the role of the reader who is the hidden subject of that sentence, who undertakes the task of putting these characters to different uses and dreaming them into different endings. It is the reader who finds some characters to be unruly; it is Benedeit and Vincent Ferrer that see Judas as someone who can be planted elsewhere, newly intended for gentler climes. The reader is deeply implicated in these creations of character.

I take my cue from Suzanne Keen, who points out that there is a “high degree of variability in reactions to fictional characters” (295) since readers variously “cocreate fictional characters” (296) according to their own distinct temperaments and personalities. Character, as a literary-critical category, is one that insists on the involvement of the reader. As figures that exist on the page, characters can be analyzed for how they have been put together, as I have hoped to show by attending to the Oedipal Judas and how he comes into being through a tension between stability and movement. But character is also

something we *do*; it is a concept that becomes most visible in the space between the text and its audience, in the set of interactive processes negotiated between the figures in a text and the readers who encounter them. In the case of Judas, Benedeit and Vincent Ferrer “do” character through their imaginative output, demonstrating a readerly compassion more limitless than the divine and giving voice to audacious theological claims. To recognize the verb form of character is to give ourselves as readers the license to engage with our texts with more freedom and intensity, and to trust that intellectual work can—and often does—begin with feeling.

CHAPTER 4

Holy Rood: Race, Empire, Conversion

Introduction

Deep in his anxious sleep on the eve of a great battle, the Emperor Constantine—as the story goes—is visited in his dream by an angelic messenger. Showing him a vision of a radiant and fulsomely ornamented cross, the angel informs him that God will guarantee him victory. True to promise, Constantine and his army defeat the pagan forces; upon his return to Rome, he inquires after the mysterious symbol from his dream, learns of the Passion of Jesus Christ, and converts to Christianity. His next act is to enlist his mother Helena in a search for that holiest of relics, the True Cross on which Christ was crucified. When she arrives in Jerusalem, she summons to council all the wisest Jews in the land, and repeatedly demands that they produce for her the very wisest of all their wise ranks to answer the question she would put to them. In the end, the group is winnowed down to one man named Judas, who is the only one who has realized that her as-yet unformulated question will be about the location of the True Cross. However, when she fails to obtain from him the answer to this question, she starves him in a pit for a week until he finally agrees to find the cross for her. Through prayer, he discovers where the three crosses from Calvary are buried, one of which is revealed to be the True Cross when it resurrects a dead passerby. In this moment, the Devil materializes in a fury and delivers a complaint along these lines, quoted here from Cynewulf's *Elene*:

Hƿæt, se hælend me
in þam enġan ham oft ġetynde
ġeomrum to sorġe. Ic þurh Iudas ær
hyhtful ġepearð 7 nu ġehyned eom
ġóda ġeasne þurh Iudas eft,
fáh 7 freondleas. (919b-24a)

(And so the Savior has shut me up again in my narrow and mournful home, to my sorrow! I was once made hopeful through Judas, and now again through Judas I am brought low, deprived of goods, outcast and friendless.)

The legend of the finding of the True Cross continues, with Judas becoming the bishop of Jerusalem under his Christian name of Cyriacus, unearthing as well the nails that were used in the Crucifixion, and—in later instantiations of the tale—suffering dismemberment and martyrdom under the Emperor Julian. But it is this scene of the interruption from the Devil that I want to dwell on as an entry point into the narrative, and the link the speech draws between the two characters of Judas Iscariot and Judas Cyriacus.

In *Judas Iscariot and the Myth of Jewish Evil*, Hyam Maccoby traces the intimate association between the figure of Judas Iscariot (hereafter simply Iscariot, for ease of reference) and the long history of antisemitism from early Christian theology to modern

“secular” movements. Arguing that “the deadly part played by the figure of Judas Iscariot and the semantic charge of the word ‘Judas’, meaning ‘traitor’” (8) occupies a central role in the rhetoric of antisemitic persecution, Maccoby ends the monograph with a hopeful image of what could be possible if this semantic connection were severed and Iscariot were to be understood as something other than a mythical traitor-figure. “And the rehabilitation of Judas Iscariot too will have its effect: the restoration of honour to the name Judas, and to the people of Judah who still bear this name” (168), he writes. This, then, raises the question of whether Judas Cyriacus (hereafter simply Cyriacus) might be able to hasten this kind of longed-for rehabilitation. Held up as mirror opposites of each other, two divergent paths crossing at the sign of their shared name, wouldn’t Cyriacus necessarily serve as an antidote for the poison that Iscariot has been for Jews in Christian thought? After all, that is precisely the Devil’s objection—Cyriacus undoes what Iscariot has achieved.

In this chapter, I argue that this is not the case; on the contrary, the character of Cyriacus ultimately serves to uphold the antisemitic fantasy of conquest through conversion. In particular, I focus my analysis on Cynewulf’s *Elene* and how it constructs for Cyriacus an incoherent, liminal identity in which he is variously portrayed as a Christian believer, a spiritually deadened Christian, and a Jew with no knowledge of Christian history. This incoherence, I suggest, makes possible in the text multiple moments for conversion—even mass conversion—to be imagined as instantaneous and effortless on the part of the converter, since all those who undergo the experience of conversion are always already Christian in some form.

In circumscribing the scope of the present piece to *Elene* rather than encompassing all the numerous instantiations of the *Inventio Crucis* legend that flourished throughout the medieval period, my aim is not to relate my textual observations to local historical context. For one thing, the geographical and temporal circumstances of *Elene*'s composition cannot be pinned down with precision¹, though the general consensus is that it is a ninth-century Mercian work². There is the alternative option to historicize the poem, as Stacy S. Klein does, with reference to “the period of the manuscript’s reception” (51)—the eleventh century, when the Vercelli Book was in residence in England—but my own larger objective here is to bracket the question of how a specific text is shaped in order to look toward how a specific text works *to shape*. That is, what kinds of thinking does a text like *Elene* make possible? How have generations of medievalist scholars read the poem precisely as it wished to be read, and what are the stakes of reproducing in our scholarship the kind of reader that the poem desires?

Enabling Terms

Earlier in the introduction, I used the phrase “antisemitic fantasy” to describe conquest through conversion; the employment of the term “antisemitism” in reference to medieval attitudes towards Jews has not been without its share of controversy, and even now may be a move that requires some clarification to explain its use over potential substitutes such as “anti-Judaism” or “animosity towards Jews.” To place the use of the term within

¹ See Klein 50.

² See Gameson 665.

medieval scholarship at this current moment, I first survey some of the literature that has formed the landscape of the study of medieval Jewish-Christian relations over the past few decades.

Works on the subject produced into the '80s tend to be in broad agreement that there was a shift in Christian attitudes towards Jews in the early Middle Ages, but they either use “anti-Judaism” to refer to the antagonism or avoid putting a name on the phenomenon. For example, Lester K. Little argues that “the relative stability and charity that characterized Christian-Jewish relations in the post-Carolingian era began to deteriorate in the eleventh century” (46), due to a Christian inability to reconcile religious ethics with the commercial demands of urbanization: “The Jews functioned as a scapegoat for Christian failure to adapt successfully to the profit economy” (54). Jeremy Cohen sees the shift as happening “in the thirteenth century with the inquisitorial and missionary efforts of Dominican and Franciscan friars” (*The Friars* 32) to condemn rabbinic literature, which was seen as a distortion of biblically sanctioned Judaism. R.I. Moore, on the other hand, writes that Jews, heretics, and lepers began to be persecuted in very similar ways in the twelfth century, as “victims of a zeal for persecution which seized European society at this time” (63) due to the institutionalized violence fostered by literate culture.

In two monographs published in 1990, Gavin Langmuir directly interrogates what differences distinguish antisemitism from anti-Judaism, and at what point in history the latter grew into the former. In *History, Religion, and Antisemitism*, he identifies irrationality—fueled by Christian self-doubt—as being the fundamental difference

between anti-Judaism and antisemitism: “If antisemitism is defined as chimerical beliefs or fantasies about ‘Jews,’ as irrational beliefs that attribute to all those symbolized as ‘Jews’ menacing characteristics or conduct that no Jews have been observed to possess or engage in, then antisemitism first appeared in medieval Europe in the twelfth century” (297). Similarly, *Toward a Definition of Antisemitism* posits that “Jews did indeed become the target of an unusual kind of hostility in northern Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and that that hostility was the same in kind as Hitler’s hostility” (17), that is, modern antisemitism.

This focus on irrationality is countered by Anna Sapir Abulafia, who—though not in disagreement with Langmuir regarding the claim that chimerical antisemitism arose in the twelfth century—responds that the Christian emphasis on rationality at that time and its “universalist construct of humanity based on reason” (6) was the driving force behind the dehumanization of Jews. David Nirenberg also takes issue with the charge of irrationality (and with much of previous scholarship in the field) arguing that “stressing the fundamental continuity between collective systems of thought across historical time” (5) has the effect of “suppress[ing] analysis” (43) by flattening spatiotemporal contexts. Rather than eruptions of cataclysmic social change, he views most violence against minorities in fourteenth-century France and the Crown of Aragon as “the everyday functional violence of a relatively stable society” (231), violence which is “quotidian, strategic, controlled, and stabilizing” (249). Robert Chazan calls for the need for context as well, suggesting that it was the locally specific responses to twelfth-century Ashkenazic communities in northern Europe that “embedded themselves in Western

consciousness and played a substantial role in the evolution of subsequent anti-Jewish thinking, eventually influencing nineteenth- and twentieth-century antisemitism” (xiii).

Despite praising Langmuir for having been the only person in his estimation to define terms such as “antisemitism” and “anti-Judaism” with nuance and clarity, Chazan refrains from using either. Overall, although Langmuir’s introduction of the terms into the discourse of the field as defined language did demand engagement, it—perhaps understandably—did not lead to any consensus on the matter. Starting with Cohen’s *Living Letters of the Law* in 1999, scholarly attention turned largely to the production of a different set of terms; adjectives to describe how post-expulsion Christians made use of the figure of “the Jew,” often in the absence of sustained contact with a robust Jewish population. Cohen proposes the “hermeneutical Jew,” or “the Jew as constructed in the discourse of Christian theology, and above all in Christian theologians’ interpretation of Scripture” (*Living Letters* viii). Sylvia Tomasch uses the lens of the “virtual Jew” to analyze constructions of Jewishness in post-expulsion England, which defined its own identity through the absence of Jews: “rather than being surprised at or having to explain the continuation of English reference to Jews after the expulsion, we might better acknowledge that Jewish absence is likely the best precondition for virtual presence” (78). Denise L. Despres offers the “protean Jew,” “a Jew whose danger is located in his protean nature, in his very ability to play the wide roles assigned to him in an evolving and wide-ranging literature about Jews in relation to Christian identity” (146); Steven F. Kruger’s “spectral Jew” stresses that even for the supersessionally oriented medieval Christian mind, “Jews and Judaism are not fully past, but rather still disturbing and

disruptive—‘haunting’—enough to Christianity’s sense of its own hegemony to necessitate the act of conjuration” (11).

Through the first decade of the 2000s, Anthony Bale grapples most directly with the implications behind what to call medieval bigotry against Jews. His earlier position is to opt for “antisemitism,” conceding that “the term is admittedly a modern one applied retrospectively, but the fact that the label did not exist does not mean that antisemitism was absent; it simply had not yet been categorised” (“Fictions” 129). In 2006 he draws this distinction to explain his use of “antisemitism”: “To argue against the usury practised by the Jews of Norwich on the grounds of Judaism as opposed to Christianity might be called ‘anti-Judaism’. To represent Moshe as Mosse-Mokke in this fictive, grotesquely physical register, in which an imagined ‘Jewish’ body is the cynosure for a range of vices, is antisemitic” (*Medieval Book 3*). Interestingly, by 2010 he has moved away from the term, writing that it “is not neutral or critically helpful and has become an anti-critical, ahistorical and totalizing term which obscures more than it illuminates” (*Feeling* 184) and that “equating medieval violence—symbolic or real—with modern persecution is lazy history which reifies ‘anti-Semitism’ as a constant” (185). As in the case of other objections to “antisemitism” as vocabulary, the worry is that historical context would be lost by conflating multiple forms of differently produced persecutions.

Especially since the text I read here is *Elene*—written neither during the presence of Jews in England nor after their forceful expulsion, but before the settlement date of the Norman Conquest—it is worth pausing to consider the potential of studying representations of Jews in the Anglo-Saxon period. Samantha Zacher’s 2016 edited

collection, *Imagining the Jew in Anglo-Saxon Literature & Culture*, addresses this question. In the introduction to the volume, Zacher points out that “despite the complete absence of evidence for the presence of Jews in pre-Conquest England, early English authors nevertheless wrote copiously, and at times, even obsessively about them” (6). She allows that “one might reasonably conclude that Anglo-Saxon conceptions of Jews had little in common with the derisive and far more damaging stereotypes that emerged in the centuries after Jewish settlement in England” (5), but adds that “these new ‘anti-Semitism’ did not replace, but rather supplemented, older forms of ‘anti-Judaic rhetoric’” (6), emphasizing the presence of historical continuity rather than a decisive early medieval break. This embrace of continuity echoes the recent turn in medieval studies towards recognizing and explicitly naming the racialization of Jews and other minorities in the Middle Ages.

The move to identify continuities across disparate situations aims not to flatten circumstances, but to underscore the historical motility and capaciousness of categories such as race by juxtaposing the heterogeneity of the cases in which we see similar processes at work. About a decade earlier in 2004, tracing the ambivalent and contradictory nature of Anglo-Saxon attitudes towards Jews and the widespread *populus Israhel* tradition, Andrew P. Scheil decides to “follow Langmuir’s distinction between the anti-Judaism of the early Middle Ages, characterized by ‘logical’ (albeit nonrational) conclusions about the Jews that are derived from empirical thinking, and the antisemitism of the centuries following 1100, characterized by more fantastic, irrational suppositions” (8). But he also acknowledges that the “virulent expressions of antisemitism in the later

Middle Ages can be seen as the manifestations of the fragmentary tendencies, the hermeneutic *in potentia*, represented by the Jews of Vercelli and Blickling” (203).

It is this “hermeneutic *in potentia*” that scholars such as Kathy Lavezzo and Geraldine Heng have consistently flagged. Lavezzo explicitly chooses to “depart from Langmuir and other scholars—and those who originally coined the term antisemitism—in viewing as antisemitic not only the ‘irrational’ libels that first emerged in the High Middle Ages but also earlier more theological, yet still mythic and offensive, conceptions promulgated by church fathers and other writers about Judaism” (261). She writes: “To stress the mythic quality of antisemitism is not to erase its heterogeneity and contingency. Rather, like historical acts of aggression against Jews, offensive cultural constructions emerge from particular moments and locations. Attending to the specific contexts that gave rise to antisemitic texts reveals various and even conflicting motivations that affirm how antisemitism is no singular and unchanging entity but rather a complicated, unpredictable, and contradictory phenomenon” (7). Heng, hypothesizing race as “a structural relationship for the articulation and management of human differences, rather than a substantive content” (19), notes that “*religion*—the paramount source of authority in the Middle Ages—can function both socioculturally *and* biopolitically: subjecting peoples of a detested faith, for instance, to a political theology that can biologize, define, and essentialize an entire community as fundamentally and absolutely different in an interknotted cluster of ways” (27). In other words, that there was a theological element to how Christians perceived the difference between themselves and Jews does not prevent the resulting categories from being forms of race.

The refusal to cordon off the past is a gesture Kathleen Biddick has made as well, finding in nearly every work of previous scholarship on Jewish-Christian relations a persistent “Christian typological imaginary” that produces a “Christian reduction of temporality into a binary of past and present,” even after the purported secularization of Western society. Thus she calls for taking on “the ethical and historical challenge of unbinding the typological imaginary” by “thinking of new and rich temporalities that are not bound to the rigidity of supersession” (2). Heng also identifies the ethical core of naming medieval race *as* race, asserting that “the use of the term *race* continues to bear witness to important strategic, epistemological, and political commitments not adequately served by the invocation of categories of greater generality (such as *otherness* or *difference*) or greater benignity in our understanding of human culture and society. *Not* to use the term *race* would be to sustain the reproduction of a certain kind of past, while keeping the door shut to tools, analyses, and resources that can name the past differently” (23).

Ultimately, this is what informs my own use of the term “antisemitism” in this chapter; I focus on the ideological possibilities that *Elene* holds out to readers embedded in all time periods, not only the commitments that lie behind the creation of the text. As such, I reject the assumption that we as modern scholars are ever capable of reading medieval literature through medieval eyes, free of all post-medieval influence and our own knowledge of—for example—what antagonism against Jews looks like after the Middle Ages. We have an ethical mandate to acknowledge our subjectivities as readers, to be honest about what shapes the viewpoints through which we read our texts, and

situating ourselves in time is part and parcel of that same effort. To call *Elene* an antisemitic text, therefore, is more a political choice than a historicist one—or at least more political than a certain kind of painstakingly apolitical choice that insists on quarantining texts in the past without considering how our reading reshapes them.

Elene's Church Militant

The *Inventio Crucis* legend as retold earlier has a fairly complicated transmission history, with many branching paths, missing texts, translated versions, and potential source languages³. In brief: The earliest form of the core story survives in Ambrose's 395 funeral oration for Theodosius the Great, though it is thought to have been set down some years prior to this by Gelasius of Caesarea. Although Gelasius's text has been lost, its section on the Constantinian dynasty was translated from the Greek into Latin by Rufinus of Aquileia and incorporated into fifth-century *Historia Ecclesiastica*. This version, however, does not contain the figure of Cyriacus; Macarius, Bishop of Jerusalem, performs a miracle with the aid of the Cross but this is only a fraction of the role that Cyriacus plays in the *Inventio* legend. The early fifth century saw the development of the second main branch, involving Protonike—fictional wife of Emperor Claudius—journeying to Jerusalem instead of Helena and finding the remnants of the Cross. The Protonike tradition does not appear in Greek or Latin, and it is presumed that it was current only in Syriac-speaking regions.

The third and latest development is that of the Cyriacus branch, the *Inventio*

³ See Borgehammar, J. Drijvers, H. Drijvers, Harbus, and Baert.

legend that takes the shape now familiar to us. In addition to the introduction of Cyriacus as a character—or rather, inextricably related to the introduction of Cyriacus as a character—it is notable for its antisemitism, remarked upon by all who have compared the content of the various branches⁴. For decades the scholarly consensus was that the *Inventio* legend arose originally in Syriac; in the past twenty or so years, more credence has been given to the hypothesis that the language of the original text was Greek. The source that Cynewulf most directly draws from is likely to be a version of the *Acta Cyriaci*, which can be found under the May 4th date in the *Acta Sanctorum*. In this chapter, in order to most effectively highlight the features of the text that are unique to Cynewulf, I make occasional reference to the text of the *Acta Cyriaci*⁵ and an eleventh-century Old English homiletic translation of the same⁶.

From its earliest versions—even before the creation of the Cyriacus strand—the story of the finding of the Cross has always been inseparable from the imperial designs of Christianity as a state religion. In Ambrose’s funeral oration, he relates how Helena searched for the nails from the True Cross after the Cross itself was found, and how she placed the nails into the bridle of Constantine’s war horse and a piece of the Cross into his diadem. As Barbara Baert writes: “To Ambrose the incorporation of the nail into a bridle (image of just rule) and the Cross into a diadem (image of faith) is an authoritative fact. They are material and commemorative symbols for the first empire to be governed

⁴ “Strong anti-Jewish tendency” (H. Drijvers 19); “the blatantly anti-Jewish character of the story” (Harbus 22), among others. See also Heckman for how *Elene* in particular places an emphasis on Jews that is not replicated in other Anglo-Saxon tellings of the legend.

⁵ As presented in the edition *Elene: An Old English Poem* (Kent 1902).

⁶ As presented in the edition *The Old English Finding of the True Cross* (Bodden 1987).

under the aegis of the Christian God” (27-28). The exemplum of Helena serves as a reminder of how Christianity was the initial enabling condition for empire, and thus the glue that might continue to hold the Roman Empire together after the death of Theodosius.

The work that Cynewulf does as poet is to expand upon this ideological pith, to surround it with skeins of literary language. The legend always begins with Constantine on the edge of battle, but literature creates the excuse for indulgence; *amplificatio* provides the opportunity for the narrative to dwell on moments of military force.

Constantine’s rise to power is described with these lines:

Hine ȝod trymede
mærdum 7 mihtum þæt he manezum pearð
ȝeond middanȝeard mannum to hroðer
perþeodum to præce syððan pæpen ahóf
pið hetendum. (14b-18a)

(God strengthened him with greatness and power so that he became a comfort to many men throughout the world, and a torment to nations when he raised his sword against his enemies.)

Divine power is identified as the force behind Constantine’s fearsome strength almost as soon as the poem begins, setting up an alliance that continues to run through the entire

narrative. This divine aegis does not sanitize war; rather, *Elene* lingers on the anticipation of violence as the conventions of Old English epic might dictate.

fyrðleoð aȝól
pulf on pealde, pælrunne ne mað;
urigfeðera earn sanȝ ahóf
laðum on laste. (27b-30a)

(The wolf in the wood sang a war-song, hiding not the runes of slaughter; the wet-feathered eagle raised his song in the track of the hateful.)

In the wake of the angelic messenger and the promise of victory, Constantine enters into battle, which is related with a level of granularity unparalleled in other texts dealing with the *Inventio* legend.

þær pæs borda ȝebrec 7 beorna ȝeþrec,
heard handȝespinȝ 7 herȝa ȝrinȝ
syððan heo earhfære ærest metton;
on þæt fæȝe folc flana scuras,
ȝaras ofer ȝeolorand on ȝramra ȝemanȝ,
hetend heor[u]ȝrimme hildenædran
þurh finȝra ȝepeald forð onsendan. (114-20)

(There was a clash of shields and a press of men, harsh hand-swinging and slaughtering of armies, when first they met the flight of arrows; through the power of their fingers, they sent forth onto that doomed people showers of darts, spears over the yellow shield into the throng of foes, war-adders into fierce enemies.)

So important is the literal level of the Church Militant in *Elene* that military strength is foregrounded even in passages without any active battle to speak of. When Constantine tasks Helena with finding the True Cross, her journey overseas is described through the language of war, as though the intensity of the drive for combat overflows into channels not ordinarily meant for strife:

fearoðhenzestas
ymb zeofenes stæð gearpe stodon,
sælde sæmearas sunde zetenzē.
.....
bord oft onfenȝ
ofer earhzeblond yða spenzas.
Sæ spinsade. Ne hyrde ic sið ne ær
on eȝstreame idese lædan,
on merestræte mæzen fæȝ[e]rre. (226b-42)

(The wave-stallions stood ready about the banks of the ocean, bridled sea-mares near to the water. ... Often the deck endured the blows of the surf over the wave-mingling. The sea thundered. Never have I heard since or before that a lady led a fairer force upon the water-stream, upon the sea-road.)

Although the Old English homily mentions that Constantine dispatched Helena to Jerusalem “mid myclum werode” (75) (with a great army), and the *Acta Cyriaci* says that Helena entered the city “cum exercitu magno” (28) (with a great army), the bold aggression displayed in the sea-journey itself is unique to *Elene*. This is commensurate with the verbs used in these other texts to specify Helena’s intentions in Jerusalem. The *Acta Cyriaci* has Constantine send Helena so that she may “exquireret” (26) (search for) the Cross, and the OE homily writes that she will “ofaxian” (76) (find out about) it. In either case, the pugnacious spirit so prevalent in the *Elene* passage is absent.

As Bale notes, “*Elene* makes anachronism and violence the defining motifs of Helena’s enterprise ... Helena is a battle-queen commanding her troops, come to rule over the Jewish kingdom with might and force” (*Feeling* 145). John P. Hermann writes that “in *Elene*, Church means not only those motivated by *caritas*, as in Augustine, but something more worldly as well. Hence the importance of descriptions of battle, of torture descriptions, of the sea-journey of Anglo-Saxon traditional epic, of the bit for the emperor’s horse” (110). This “worldly” dimension of Christianity, as Hermann points out, is imperial conquest. *Elene* uses the idiom of Old English epic poetry to portray in greatly intensified fashion what A. Linder has observed across the *Inventio* legends: “Helen’s

activity represents, in effect, the vigorous intervention of the State in the religious confrontation between Christianity and Judaism” (1038-39). With Christianity established as a state religion, the Roman will to conquer and the Christian will to convert become funneled towards the same goal, coalescing into a single desire to establish a Christian empire that spans the entire world. Moreover, “placing the State’s physical means of coercion at the service of the Church ... legitimizes the idea of the conversion of the Jews by force” (1039). The bellicose Christianity at work in *Elene* contains within it, as its natural endgame, the imprisonment and torture of Cyriacus.

The Christian Naming of the Jews

In order to embark upon the quest to forcibly convert the Jews, first *Elene*’s Christians must answer: who are the Jews exactly, and what is their relationship to Christianity? Scholars have called attention to the historical entanglement of Jewish and Christian identity during the Late Antique period, and the impossibility of separating the two neatly when they were consciously invented as bounded categories in order to distinguish Christianity from Judaism⁷. Appropriately for a set of religious positions with such a closely intertwined past, “ambivalence” occurs very frequently as a descriptor in studies of Christian attitudes towards Jews. For instance, Zygmunt Bauman proposes popularizing Artur Sandauer’s concept of “allosemitism,” as it is a “radically *ambivalent* attitude” that “does not unambiguously determine either hatred or love of Jews, but contains the seeds of both, and assures that whichever of the two appears, is intense and

⁷ See Boyarin’s work in particular, such as “Martyrdom” (1998) and “Rethinking” (2009).

extreme” (143). Elisa Narin van Court similarly finds that late medieval texts featuring Jews exhibit a “lively, ongoing, and deeply ambivalent concern about their role in Christendom” (“Socially Marginal” 295) that reflect “the ambivalent nature of Christian doctrine about the Jews” (300), which stems from Pauline distinctions between Jews as scriptural symbols who prefigure Christ and historical actors who are blamed for the death of Christ⁸.

Specifically in the Anglo-Saxon context, Scheil sees in Bede’s writings an attitude of “contradiction, ambivalence, and ambiguity” when it comes to the assignment of culpability over the Crucifixion. Bede condemns Jews for “their conscious choice to deny God,” but simultaneously writes them off for “not hav[ing] the capacity to understand the incarnation” (26). This creates a logical paradox; how can someone both intentionally reject something while also not being aware of it? How can Jews be excoriated for two things that cannot be held in the mind at the same time? Scheil reads texts that participate in this paradox—*Elene*, as a poem in the Vercelli Book, is one of them—as being less interested in reasoning out any contradictions than in letting the “emotional response to the Passion override ... the finer distinctions of logic.” The continued presence of contradictions only allows Anglo-Saxon writers to use the ambiguity as fuel for literary production, so that “a dark space, like a Rorschach blot, open[s] for the free play of the imagination” (218).

⁸ Tomasch writes that “all stereotypical assertions, both positive and negative, are merely isotopic variants” (75); that is, antisemitism always stereotypes, whether antisemitically or philosemitically. Conversely, Lavezzo’s position is to understand the philosemitic kind of stereotyping—spotted, for example, in Augustine’s *Doctrine of Relative Toleration*—as a form of antisemitism, as “dissenting Jews became in Augustine’s thought less sentient beings than insensible forms of providential technology” (10).

On the other hand, at times the space between the two sides of the contradiction is pried apart to a gap of greater difference. After the vision of the Cross brings him victory, Constantine summons a council of learned men to ask them what the symbol signifies. The *Acta Cyriaci* uses the phrase “omnes Sacerdotes omnium deorum vel idolorum” (24) (all the priests of all gods and idols) to denote the composition of this council. The OE homily, in turn, has “ealle þa ealdormæn and þa boceras þæs Iudeiscan folces” (44-45) (all the elders and scribes of the Jewish people]; *Elene* has simply “þa wisestan” (153) (the wisest). As certain choice members of this council—in all versions—reveal to Constantine how the Cross is a symbol of the Christian God, it stands to reason that they possess knowledge of the Crucifixion. The divergence is this: *Elene* minimizes the potential religious difference present in the *Acta Cyriaci* text by grouping all members of the council under the title of “the wisest,” whereas the OE homily maximizes it by explicitly naming “the Jewish people.” How does this divergence function in *Elene*? When the pronouncement from the council is followed by a scene of Christians rejoicing that they can now convert Constantine, the OE homily makes it evident that Jewish knowledge of the Crucifixion still endures into the narrative present. In the world of *Elene*, without that indication, it is possible that the knowledge has been completely lost.

Constantine’s study of Christian doctrine leads him to the point that

se ealda feond

forlærde ligesearpum, leode fortyhte,

Iudea cyn þæt hie ȝod sylfne

ahenȝon herȝa fruman; þæs hie in hynðum sculon
to pidan feore þerȝðu dreoȝan. (207b-10)

(the old fiend had deceived the people with his wiles, led astray the Jewish kind
so that they hanged God himself the prince of hosts; wherefore they must in
disgrace suffer damnation to the length of their lives.)

This passage pinpointing the role of the Jews is particular to *Elene*. Both the *Acta Cyriaci* and the OE homily are more concerned with the location of the Crucifixion, less with the story behind it or who is to be blamed for it. In *Elene*, the Jews of the narrative present are portrayed as more genuinely unaware of Christian history, but also more vilified due to the imputation of inherited guilt in these lines. The contradiction that Scheil notes in Anglo-Saxon texts is turned up to a greater magnitude in *Elene*, which envisions a Jewish population that is doubly defamed, somehow both more oblivious and more malicious than in parallel versions.

In the lengthy disputation sequence in Jerusalem, it seems that Helena's line of questioning demands a resolution to this heightened ambivalence. The first group she summons sits through thirty-one lines of Helena excoriating them for the humiliation and death of Christ, then is sent back with this order from her:

ȝanȝaþ nú snude, snyttro ȝeþencaþ
peras pifæste, pordes cræftiȝe,

þa ðe eopre æ, æðelum cræftige,
on ferhðsefan fyrmest hæbben
þa me soðlice secgan cunnon,
andspare cyðan for eop[ic] forð
tacna gehpylces þe ic him to sece. (313-19)

(Go now at once, consider in prudence the wise-fast men, skilled in words, nobly skilled, those who hold your law foremost in their minds and can speak to me truly, who can reveal an answer on your behalf for every question I ask of them.)

Significantly, she never verbalizes the question itself. The pattern reiterates after the regrouping, this time with one thousand men instead of three thousand; then, once more when an even smaller group of five hundred men return. The obfuscation leads the five hundred Jews to protest “ánmode” (396) (with one heart) that her evident anger is only a source of confusion:

ne þe eare cunnon
þurh hpæt ðu ðus hearde, hlæfdige, us
eorre purde; þe ðæt ábylǵð nyton
þe þe gefremedon on þysse folcscere,
þeodenbealpa pið þec æfre. (399b-403)

(Nor do we readily know why in such hardness, lady, you have been wrathful against us; we do not know what offense we have committed among this folk-share, nor what wickedness we have ever wrought against you.)

This third time, Cyriacus speaks up and tells the group, “Ic þat ȝeare / þæt hio pile secan be ðam siȝebeame” (419b-20) (I know readily that she wishes to ask about that victory-tree). It is only when they volunteer him and his knowledge to be a lightning rod for Helena that her interrogation begins in earnest, demanding that he reveal

hpær seo rod puniȝe radorcyniȝes,
halig under hrusan þe ȝe hpile nú
þurh morðres mán mannum dyrndun. (624-26)

(where the rood of the heaven-king lies holy under the earth, which you have concealed from men for a while now because of the guilt of murder.)

The Cross is *concealed*, Helena thinks; not lost or forgotten. By repeatedly refusing to ask her question, it is as though she is seeking independent confirmation of the Christian account of the Passion more than the actual Cross. If the Jews that she has assembled have knowledge of the Passion, then the guilt she ascribes to them—for the Crucifixion and for the concealment of the Cross—would be corroborated and thus supposedly justified. In Scheil’s formulation, it would divulge “their conscious choice to deny God”

(26). She seems to be waiting for the admission that will tip her scale of ambivalence, validating her foregone conclusion by unmasking a grand Jewish plan to erase Christian history, and Cyriacus offers it to her.

Or does he? What is the relationship between Cyriacus and the rest of the Jewish council? Certainly, critics have been in broad agreement on the matter: the verdict is that he is “a typical figure representing the Jewish nation outside the Church” (Hill, “Sapiential Structure” 163), “a figure for all the Jews” (Fish 3), “their ‘type’” (Linder 1038), “the paradigmatic Jew” (Borgehammar 171), “the archetypal Jew” (Limor 62), someone who “exemplifies all Jews” (Baert 49) and is “representative of the antagonistic Jews of the narrative” (Scheil 219). But I want to suggest that the link is not so straightforward as that; rather, Cyriacus in *Elene* is a figure incoherent in religious and racial identity, sliding in and out of both Jewish and Christian states of being. Helena sets up the terms of the disputation as a contest over who is allowed to claim the cultural and epistemological cachet of Judaism. Who is the true heir to the Jewish prophets who—according to Christian exegesis—foretold the coming of Christ? Helena says to the final assembly of five hundred Jews:

Oft ȝe dyslice dæd ȝefremedon,
perȝe præcmæcȝȝas 7 ȝepritu herpdon,
fædera lare næfre furður þonne nu
ða ȝe blindnesse bote forseȝon
7 ȝe piðsocon soðe 7 rihte,

þæt in Bethleme bearn pealdendes,
cyninȝ ánboren cenned pære,
æðelinga ord; þeah ȝe þa æ cuðon,
pitȝena pord ȝe ne poldon þa,
synpyrcende soð oncnapan. (386-95)

(Often you accursed wretches have wrought foolish deeds and despised the writings, the teachings of your fathers, but never more than now when you reject the cure for your blindness and you deny the truth and the right, that in Bethlehem was born the child of the sovereign, the only-begotten king, the prince of princes; though you know the law, the word of the prophets, you, sin-working, do not wish to recognize the truth.)

The response of the Jews is, as we have seen, one of befuddlement. “Hpæt pe Ebreisce æ leornedon / þa on fyrndaȝum fæderas cuðon” (397-98) (Listen, we have learned the Hebrew law, which in days of old our fathers have known), they tell Helena. Their understanding of Judeo-Christian religious genealogy—an unbroken chain of Judaism that endures through the constancy of Mosaic law—comes into conflict with Helena’s, which sees Christ as a teleological endpoint towards which everything before him was always already headed. For Helena, because the prophets of the Hebrew Bible possessed knowledge of Christ, the whereabouts of the Cross is also a *Jewish* knowledge that the Jews of the narrative present should be privy to. This echoes “the popular conviction, as

well as the theological conclusion, that the early and primary sources of the Christian truth are to be found in Judaism” (Linder 1038); in the role of gatekeeper to knowledge, “the Jew is the constitutor of Christian identity” (Limor 77).

And yet Cyriacus, the one person that does know where the Cross is buried, knows it under a set of circumstances that does very little to portray him as “the paradigmatic Jew.” As it turns out, he is the descendant of a long line of men who have witnessed and passed on accounts of events in Christian history. The possibility that someone would come looking for the Cross has been family lore for generations:

Spa þa þæt ilce ȝio mīn yldra fæder
siȝerof sæȝde— þam pæs Sachius nama—
frod fyrnpiota fæder minum,
[fæder min] eaferan. (436-39)

(So likewise of old said my grandfather, famous in victory, a wise old counselor—Zacchaeus was his name—unto my father, and my father unto his son.)

Not only have they always been aware of Christian events, the other men in his family have also been vocal in their support of Christianity. His father Simon apparently spoke out against the priests regarding the treatment of Jesus:

Næfre ic þa ȝeþeahte þe þeos þeod onȝan
secan wolde ac ic symle mec
ásced þara scylda, nales sceame porhte
ȝaste minum; ic him ȝeorne oft
þæs unrihtes andsæc fremede. (468-72)

(Never did I seek the counsels that those people followed, but I always held myself apart from those sins, working no shame in my spirit; eagerly and often I mounted resistance against their injustice.)

Simon also proves to be well-versed in Christian doctrine, explaining to Cyriacus how Jesus arose from the dead after three days and left his tomb empty. Even more strangely, Cyriacus's brother is the renowned Protomartyr Stephen, who was baptized into Christianity and eventually stoned to death for his beliefs under the watch of Saul (later Paul the Apostle). At this point, what is it that distinguishes Cyriacus's family from being Christians, or crypto-Christians? Simon articulates his Christian beliefs very clearly, and urges Cyriacus to accept the same:

Forðan ic soðlice 7 mín spæs fæder
syðþan ȝelyfdon
þæt ȝeþropade eallra þrymma ȝod,
lifes láttiop laðlic þite

for oferþearfe ilda cynnes.
Forðan ic þe lære þurh leoðorune,
hyse leofesta, þæt ðu hospcpide,
æfst ne eofulsæc æfre ne fremme,
ǵrimne ǵeaǵncpide pið ǵodes bearne;
þonne ðu ǵeearnast þæt þe bið ece líf,
selust siǵeleana seald in heofonum. (517-27)

(Therefore my dear father and I have truly believed since that the God of all glories, the guide of life, suffered loathly torment for the grievous need of mankind. Therefore I will teach you through verse-song, dearest boy, that you never work contemptuous words, envy, blasphemy, or grim response against the child of God; then will you earn the eternal life that will be given to you in heaven, the best victory-prize.)

The knowledge of the Cross, which Helena sets up to be a Jewish knowledge, turns out to be a knowledge guarded by a family of Jews who are—for all intents and purposes—Christians. The secret is passed down through generation *because* of their Christian belief.

Cyriacus himself does not profess Christian belief in his recollections, but the language he uses to frame the account is not neutral by any means. The first lines he speaks as an individuated character are full of specifically Christian interpretations of the Crucifixion and Christian registers of emotion:

Ic þat ȝeare
þæt hio þile secan be ðam siȝebeame
on ðam þropode þeoda paldend
eallra ȝnyrna leas, ȝodes aȝen bearn
þone [or]scyld[ne] eofota ȝehpylces
þurh hete henȝon on heanne beam
in fyrndaȝum fæderas usse.
þæt pæs þrealic ȝeþoht! (419b-26a)

(I know readily that she wishes to ask about that victory-tree on which suffered the sovereign of nations, free of all sins, God's own child, who—innocent of any crimes—was hanged on a high beam in days of old through the hate of our fathers. That was a woeful thought!)

The spontaneous outburst of emotion from Cyriacus is only present in *Elene*. In addition, as he closes out his flashback, he refers to his father's doctrinal teachings as "soðcpidum" (530a) (true sayings). Moments like these complicate his reluctance and eventual refusal to provide Helena with information about the Cross, and his adherence to the heirloom warning that if he divulge this information,

Ne bið lang ofer ðæt

þæt Israhela æðelu moten
ofer middanƷeard má ricsian,
ácræft eorla. (432b-35a)

(It will not be for long after that that the race of Israel or the law-craft of our earls
will be able to rule any more over middle-earth.)

It is as though it is impossible for Cyriacus to speak about Christian history without taking on its viewpoint, since the very knowledge of Christian doctrine seems to make him Christian⁹. Perhaps what Helena desires—rather than an admission that will allow her to hate with impunity—is the impossible simplicity of converting a Jewish population that turns out to have been Christians all along. The Christian perspectives held by Cyriacus imply this fantasy of ease; if only the Jews knew about Christ and the Crucifixion, they would all be Christians too, because the sheer truth of Christian doctrine will prove to be self-explanatory and self-catechizing.

What does it even mean for Cyriacus to convert, as he does upon his encounter with the vapor that signals the location of the Cross? If he was always a person who recognized the truth of Christian accounts, believed in Christ's divinity, and knew to fluently recite the tenets of Christian dogma, then what is he vowing with his pronouncement:

⁹ Critics such as Calder have noted that Cyriacus—particularly in his confinement and eventual rise from the pit—functions allegorically as a Christic figure. I focus instead on how even non-allegorical reading makes Cyriacus a Christian character.

ic ȝelyfe þe sel
 7 þy fæstlicor ferhð staðelige,
 hyht untpeondne on þone ahangnan Crist
 þæt he sie soðlice sapla nerȝend,
 éce ælmihtig, Israhela cining,
 palde pidan ferhð puldres on heofenum
 á butan ende ecra ȝestealda. (795b-801)

(I will believe in you the better and more steadfastly fix my spirit upon you, my hope undoubting upon the hanged Christ, that he may truly be the savior of my soul, eternal almighty, king of Israel, and rule in glory forever without end the eternal abodes in heaven.)

In the position of a man who was already aware of the Cross and its symbolism in Christian tradition, who now finds himself wholeheartedly rededicated to its religious import, Cyriacus resembles no one so much as Cynewulf in the epilogue to *Elene*. That Cynewulf's experience mirrors Cyriacus's—which, in turn, mirrors Constantine's—has been long remarked upon; Daniel Calder notes that the themes of “strife, revelation, and conversion” (201) reverberate throughout the poem, and that “Cynewulf's ‘confession’ is another refinement on the thematic movement in *Elene*” (208). Varda Fish writes that “Judas’ conversion from the bondage of the *littera* of the Old Law into spiritual freedom

is actually the same experience that both Constantine and Cynewulf the poet undergo”
(24). Cyriacus responds to his newfound Christianity by repenting of his former
misdeeds:

Nu ic þe, bearn ȝodes, biddan pille,
peoroda pillȝifa, nu ic pat þæt ðu eart
ȝecyðed 7 acenned allra cyninga þrym
þæt ðu ma ne sie minra ȝylta
þara þeic ȝefremede nalles feam siðum,
metud, ȝemyndiȝ. (813-18a)

(Now I wish to ask you, child of God, good-giver to hosts, now that I know that
you were revealed and begotten the glory of all kings—that you be no more
mindful of my sins, Lord, which I have committed no few times against you.)

Cynewulf’s rhetoric takes a similarly conventional shape, as he presents a litany of the
many ways he was lacking prior to his spiritual rebirth:

nysse ic ȝearpe,
be ðære [rode] riht ær me rumran ȝeþeaht,
þurh ða mæran miht, on modes þeaht,
pisdóm onpreah; ic pæs peorcum fáh,

synnum asæled, sorȝum ȝepæled,
bitrum ȝebunden, bisȝum beþrunȝen,
ær me lare onlaȝ þurh leohtne had. (1239b-45)

(I did not know well the truth about the rood before wisdom imparted ample counsel to the thoughts of my heart through that great power; I was stained by my deeds, bound fast by sins, afflicted by sorrows, bound with bitterness, encompassed with cares, before he granted me learning through the aspect of light.)

What I want to stress here is not merely the resemblances between what Cyriacus and Cynewulf undergo, but the improbable correspondence of their subject positions. Not only does Cyriacus come to a deeper understanding of Christianity much as Cynewulf does, he also shares with Cynewulf a prior knowledge of—and underdeveloped belief in—the Cross as Christian symbol.

Ic þæs puldres treopes
oft nales æne hæfde inȝemynd
ær ic þæt pundor onpriȝen hæfde
ymb þone beorhtan beam (1251b-54a)

(Often, not once, I had remembered that tree of glory before I uncovered the

miracle of the bright tree)

could apply to Cyriacus as well as Cynewulf. By giving Cyriacus a moment of conversion, *Elene* recasts him in the role of a spiritually deadened Christian, someone who—rather than feelingly exclaim “þæt pæs þrealic ȝeþoht!” (426a) (that was a woeful thought!) as he did while recalling the Crucifixion—is a Christian by rote, going through the motions. There is a slippage of identity here, an incoherence in what precisely Cyriacus’s relationship is to his own Christian belief.

His transformation is not yet complete, either. After the Devil emerges and rails against Cyriacus and Christ both, Cyriacus counters the Devil’s objection over his loss of influence by pointing out to him that the real loss he suffered was the divine love that he rejected along the way:

þite ðu þe ȝearþor
þæt ðu unsnyttrum ánforlete
leohta beorhtost 7 lufan dryhtnes,
þone fæȝran ȝefean 7 on fyrbæðe
suslum beþrunȝen syððan þunodest,
ade onæled 7 þær apa scealt,
piðerhycȝende, þerȝðu dreoȝan,
yrmðu butan ende. (945-52a)

(Know you the better that you have unwisely forsaken the brightest light and the love of the Lord, the fairer joy, and dwelled ever since in a fire-bath surrounded by torment, burned with fire, and shall, evil-thinking, endure punishment there forever, a misery without end.)

Hearing this counterargument from Cyriacus, Helena is impressed by the progress he has made. She is amazed at

hu he spa ȝeleafful, on spa lytlum fæce—
7 spa uncyðig— æfre purde,
ȝleapnesse þurhȝoten. (959-61a)

(how he became so full of faith in so brief a time, and—always so ignorant— now filled with such wisdom.)

Once again, the functionally Christian identity of Cyriacus undergoes a slippage; this time he slides even further afield, as he is called “uncyðig” (ignorant) despite having used his privileged knowledge to find the Cross only moments prior. Cyriacus knows and embodies more of Christian truth than anyone else in *Elene*. To merely echo the text by deeming that “the wisdom once so obviously lacking in Judas is now his in full measure” (Calder 207) overlooks the inconsistencies that make this moment possible. For Helena—who had no option but to rely on the hereditary understanding of the Cyriacus family line

to gain access to the Cross—to call his conversion a move from ignorance to wisdom is to thoroughly reconstruct what was already established about his character.

Noting that an initial resistance to Helena coexists within Cyriacus alongside his diegetic knowledge that the Christian version of events is historical truth, Lavezzo sees the two enmeshed in a causal relationship: “Judas’s knowledge of the ‘truth’ of Christianity seems to render him all the more obstinate in refusing to assist Helena” (35). However, I want to put some pressure on the work that the word “seems” is doing in this formulation; Cyriacus himself never makes a connection between his knowledge and his refusal. There is no real attempt in *Elene* to reconcile the incoherence of Cyriacus as a character, although our interpretive schemata push us to find some overarching reason that could stitch together the fragments and create a whole picture for us to perceive¹⁰. My suggestion is that the very incoherence of Cyriacus, the way that he seems to morph at *Elene*’s will—variously from Christian believer to rededicated Christian to “ignorant” Jew back to Christian believer—is useful for the text in ultimately imagining a mass conversion of the Jews that can occur instantaneously and with no effort on the part of the converter. Cyriacus is an atypical “Jew for Jesus”¹¹ fantasy whose conversion needs no convincing and involves no doctrinal hurdles to overcome, since the beliefs he holds are already Christian. And yet, by the time he admonishes the Devil and garners Helena’s admiration, he has become a visible instance of an exemplary converted Jew. Once he

¹⁰ For example, Hill also finds that Cyriacus is composed of various inconsistencies—some historical, some theological, some psychological—but his conclusion is that these inconsistencies can be explained through Cyriacus being “a typical figure representing the Jewish nation outside the Church” (164), which is different from my understanding.

¹¹ See Hall for a reading of Nathan in the *Vindicta Salvatoris* tradition as a “Jew for Jesus.”

models this sort of conversion process, in which a Jew becomes a Christian with very little fuss¹², it paves the way for others in the text to follow suit.

Christina M. Heckman describes *Elene*'s scene of mass conversion in these terms: "Upon Judas's appointment as bishop, the other Jews convert, acknowledging Christ and rejecting their former error" (478). The passage quoted is:

Nu þe seolfe ȝeseoð siȝores tacen,
soðpundor ȝodes þeah þe piðsocun ær
mid leasingum. Nu is in leoht cymen,
onpriȝen pyrda biȝanȝ; puldor þæs aȝe
on heannesse heofonrices ȝod. (1120-24)

(Now we ourselves see the sign of victory, God's true miracle, though we falsely rejected it before. Now the course of fate is come into the light and revealed; glory be in the highest to the God of heaven.)

This is, indubitably, the language of conversion. It structures a temporal movement from an "ær" (before) to a "nu" (now), during which the Christian truth is seen and revealed.

On the other hand, when this group first sets out to accompany Cyriacus in the search for the nails used in the Cross, they are called "ȝumena þreate / ȝod herȝendra" (1095b-96a)

¹² As I go into more detail in the final section of this piece, I actively aim to resist minimizing the torture that Cyriacus undergoes at Helena's hands. But I see this coercion as producing cooperation, not conversion.

(a throng of men praising God), where “hergendra” (praising) grammatically accords in number and case with “gumena” (of men). This crowd of people embarked on their journey with Cyriacus already praising God. *Elene* has made it abundantly clear up to this point that the “God” in the poem is a Christian God, because under its assumption that Christianity is the only truthful religion, there can be no Hebrew God that does not conform to Christian doctrine. The poem has repeated multiple times that the Devil has “leode fortyhte / Iudea cyn” (208b-09a) (led astray the Jewish kind), and mere lines before this exultant conversion, the people are said to have been “þurh deofles spild in ȝedpolan lanȝe, / acyrred fram Criste” (1118-19a) (through the devil’s destruction long in error, turned away from Christ). The conversion shown at the discovery of the nails is a conversion of the already converted, Cyriacus’s retreading movement writ large.

The nails set into the bridle of Constantine’s war horse and sent to Rome, Helena then proceeds to facilitate the easiest and least complicated instance of conversion of all:

Heht þa tosomne þa heo seleste
mid Iudeum ȝumena piste,
hæleða cynnes, to þære halȝan byriȝ
cuman in þa ceastre; þa seo cpen onȝan
læran leofra heap þæt hie lufan dryhtnes
7 sybbe spa same sylfra betpeonum,
freondræddenne fæste ȝelæston,
leahtorlease in hira lifes tíð

ond þæs latteopes larum hyrdon
cristenum þeapum þe him Cyriacus
bude, boca ȝleap; þæs se bisceop had
fæȝere befæsted. (1201-12a)

(Then she called together those she knew to be the best men among the Jews, of that race of people, to come to the holy city, into the fortress; then the queen began to teach the dear company so that they should firmly maintain the love of the Lord, similarly peace among themselves and friendship, free from sin for all their lives; and to heed their guide's teaching in Christian practice, as Cyriacus—wise in books—bade them; so was the bishopric established fairly.)

After so many antecedent models for what an unresisting conversion looks like, all it takes for Helena to make Christianity the order of the day is to open the doors and to say that it has to be so. No more miracles are even necessary, since the instant she decrees it, a bishopric with a self-sustaining ecosystem of a flock springs up in Jerusalem.

Cyriacus's incoherence as a character leads to this: the fantasy of mass conversion—perhaps even universal conversion—in which Christianity is not so much learned for the first time as it is remembered, and religiously motivated imperial rule spreads as quickly and effortlessly as a drop of blood in water.

Coda: The Dangers of Allegorical Reading

Elene is a text that carries within itself the methods of its own reading. As Klein points out, “abstract, symbolic interpretation is precisely the kind of reading that Cynewulf encourages throughout the poem.” This is “the kind of interpretive practice privileged in *Elene*: the acceptance of Christianity inscribes a necessary movement from literal to more symbolic orders of representation” (53). For *Elene*, to be an allegorical reader is to be a good reader, in the sense that the allegorical mode is the type of reading that lives up to the expectations of the text. But in this coda, I want to shake loose this notion of “good reading,” and to question what kinds of intellectual and ethical issues are at stake in reading a text as it wants to be read. What acts of epistemological violence could we be performing by opting not to read literally?

Regarding the character of Helena in *Elene*, Jackson J. Campbell has claimed that “probably those who react negatively to her are victims of two pitfalls: that of reading too literally, and that of not reading closely enough” (257). Helena on the surface of the text is difficult *not* to react negatively to, seeing as how she throws a man in a pit and starves him for a week in order to get the answer she wants from him. But if a close and allegorical reading suggests that “Cynewulf viewed *Elene* at least partly as a type of the Church” (264), does that suddenly vanish the literal level of the text into thin air, leaving no trace of the persecution she inflicts on Cyriacus and the agenda of conquest with which she approaches the Jews? Even on the allegorical level, what Campbell neglects to take into account is that “the Church” is not an uninflected institution with values that are unquestionably neutral (or positive) merely because it considers itself to be. Instead, he admonishes those who take issue with Helena: “Now some modern interpretations of

Christian principles seem to deny that punishment exists in Christian terms, and that it is evil when it appears. This lovely sentimental view certainly does not hold up when one views the life of man on this earth, where punishment is an existential reality and evil acts often contain within themselves their own punishment” (266). Helena is, apparently, the long arm of holy law that only does what it must to restore moral balance to the world. A pronouncement such as this can only issue from a perspective that considers Cyriacus to be a sinner who commits evil and must be punished for it: that is, an ideologically Christian perspective. This is the perspective that allows Campbell to call Helena’s speeches to the Jews “serious and firm, but by no means vindictive” and “calm and reasonable,” to react with suspicion to the Jewish assembly by saying, “one wonders if the others are completely candid when they say they have never heard of it” (265), and to refer to the conversion of Cyriacus and the Jews as a “salubrious” (267) result of Helena’s torture.

Reading Cyriacus as allegorically as Helena leads Catharine A. Regan to the conclusion that *Elene* is “a poem about the Church and its mission to lead men to salvation through acceptance of the Cross, the symbol of the redemptive act” (29), and that Helena’s interactions with Cyriacus are a “dramatization of the relationship between the teaching Church and the individual soul” (35). Campbell and Regan use allegorical reading to clear out the poem of the presence of literal bodies; if Helena is the Church and Cyriacus is the individual soul in need of instruction, there are no bodies to inflict or receive torture, no bodies that separate the Christian from the Jew, and no bodies that linger to ask the reader whose perspectives are being suppressed by taking on the insider

Christian mindset that Cynewulf promotes. Just as Cyriacus cannot seem to speak about Christian history without replicating Christian responses to his subject matter, critical practices that center too heavily around allegorical reading cannot speak about *Elene* without replicating the poem's own stances¹³.

What would it look like, then, to read the poem while deliberately distancing ourselves from the eliding force of allegory? A literal engagement of *Elene* involves troubling at every turn what we are being asked to take for granted, what assumptions about the Middle Ages—or medieval studies—still underwrite our understanding of what is and is not an acceptable way to read a medieval text. Once we are able to acknowledge that the jubilant ending of the poem is only happy “from Cynewulf’s Christian perspective,” we can question why we would gravitate towards the thought that the fantasy at work is one of “reconciliation” (Hill, “Time” 166) rather than conquest. If what Cynewulf wants us to do is read symbolically, as Klein says, then our task is to see what is possible when we *don't*; it is up to us to make ourselves bad readers who do not read as we should, aided by anachronistic concepts and critical frameworks that are able to identify the structures of power propping up a text.

“The likelihood that a medieval or Renaissance reader did not identify ambiguity in a text doesn’t mean that we should ignore such tensions, particularly when ethics and politics prompt our inquiry” (Lavezzo 9). On the contrary, the fact that ambiguities are much less visible from inside an ideological system means that we must constantly look

¹³ See Lavezzo 61 for a reading that suggests Cynewulf’s portrayal of Helena is intentionally ambivalent; if so, allegorical reading replicates Helena’s viewpoint more than it does Cynewulf’s, but my argument about critical practices still stands.

for such points of tension, while also paying heed to the ideological systems that we exist within. We must be alive to the ways in which we are not like our texts. As so trenchantly articulated by John P. Hermann in his critique of previous scholarship on *Elene*, “imaginary identification with Cynewulfian rhetoric never permits the Jews to be seen as anything other than creatures of error, ignorance, recalcitrance, and lies” (114), and “after we grasp the symbolic dimension of battle, we must rise to the literal level” (106). In reference to *The Siege of Jerusalem* and late medieval textual depictions of Jews, Narin van Court writes: “I do not want to suggest that the Jews are never used as a trope for other heterodox, heretical, or marginal groups. Nonetheless, I fear that this kind of interpretive supersession elides the very real issue of Jewish presence in Christendom that continues to concern the Christian community even in the absence of Jews” (166). It is remaining within the symbolic dimension—never looking outside of the way Jews are used as medieval Christian tropes—that dulls our critical eye and makes for complacent arguments. “We cannot really ignore *Elene*’s literal role” (DiNapoli 623) nor Cyriacus’s: when we do, we end up producing our own modern versions of Cohen’s “hermeneutical Jew,” chimerical creations that exist for the sake of supporting Christian modes of reading.

More than four decades have passed since Campbell and Regan’s pieces cited here, and three decades since Hermann’s rebuttal. And yet, many medievalist classrooms—in particular, Anglo-Saxonist classrooms—still too often avoid discussions of race, citing worries over anachronism and irrelevance. “Why would I teach race when no Old English texts are concerned with race?” and “the Middle Ages is a pre-racial

period and should be taught as such” are just two common statements of resistance that have been heard. But not calling medieval race by its name has made it too easy for the Anglo-Saxon landscape to be seen as one without bodies at all, in which allegorical reading can subsume everything under its capacious umbrella and turn it to Christian meaning. So when Maccoby writes that the modern incarnations of Judas Iscariot that humanize him are “missing the point” (4) because it is not a “valid interpretation of the Gospel narrative itself” (169), perhaps the precise point of these modern Judases is to spectacularly miss the point. It wouldn’t be any great surprise that the Christian Bible has no designs to make Judas a figure to be explored, an ongoing question that generates more questions, and at times even the object of sympathy. But to be a good reader is to be a docile reader, which is the easy part; the real work lies in not reading as we’re told.

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CHAPTER 4

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