Mind the Gap:

Time, Gender and Conflict in the Late Medieval Mystery Plays

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# CONTENTS

Abbreviations Used ................................................................. 3  
Abstract ..................................................................................... 4  
Declaration .................................................................................. 5  
Copyright Statement ................................................................... 5  
Dedication .................................................................................... 6  
Acknowledgements ....................................................................... 7  
Introduction ................................................................................ 8  
  Scattered in times ................................................................. 22  
  Play Time .............................................................................. 27  
Chapter One ............................................................................... 36  
  (When) Did History Shatter?................................................... 41  
  Reading Bodies, Reading Scripture ......................................... 49  
  Old Men, New Laws .............................................................. 56  
  Joseph: The First Christian ‘Convert’? .................................... 59  
  ‘Who xall expownd þis oute?’ Mixed Theologies in the Marriage play.................................................. 66  
  Whose Time? ......................................................................... 71  

Chapter Two ............................................................................... 75  
  Unruly Woman or Woman Out of Time? ............................... 80  
  Noah’s Fantasies of Supersession ............................................ 84  
  York’s Christ-Noah: The Ark’s Typological Imaginary ............. 86  
  Beginning by Ending .............................................................. 92  
  The ‘Dyn’ of York’s Explosive Questions ................................. 98  
  ‘Good’ Gossips? Collapsed Time in Chester’s Noyes Fludd .......... 106  
  Facing the Past ...................................................................... 122  

Chapter Three .......................................................................... 124  
  Scripture, Prophecy and Legitimacy in the Gospel of Matthew .... 129  
  Temporal Origami: Making Moments Meet ............................ 135  
  Herod: A True King of the ‘Jews’? .......................................... 141  
  Mothers who Mourn and Mothers who Fight ......................... 154  
  A Time for Unruliness? .......................................................... 163  

Conclusion .................................................................................. 168  

Bibliography .............................................................................. 184
ABBREVIATIONS USED

EETS  Early English Text Society. EETS volumes are all designated 'o.s.' (original series), 'e.s.' (extra series) or 's.s.' (supplementary series). The various publishers and places of publication will be given separately for each text.

GLQ  GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies

JEGP  Journal of English and Germanic Philology

JMEMS  Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies

MLQ  Modern Language Quarterly: A Journal of Literary History

MLAA  The Modern Language Association of America

NLH  New Literary History

PMLA  Publications of the Modern Language Association of America

REED  Records of Early English Drama

RORD  Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama

TCR  The Chaucer Review

WSIQ  Women’s Studies International Quarterly

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the relationship between time, gender and moments of conflict in the Mystery Plays.

Examining a range of encounters between male and female characters in the plays, I propose that characters’ differing and subjective experiences of time are often at the heart of their conflict. Time, moreover, provides a new methodology with which to understand the ways in which both gender and narrative operate within the plays.

In doing so, I chart a number of conflicts staged between characters in plays concerned with biblical narratives which signify transition or rupture: the Incarnation; the Flood; and the slaughter of the Bethlehem Innocents. Engaging with established critical approaches towards medieval models of supersession and typology, as well as recent works in the field of Jewish Studies concerning the medieval Christian preoccupation with what it asserted was a superseded, yet nevertheless ‘present’ Jewish past, I interrogate the ways in which such models are subverted when placed into dialogue with characters whose world-view supports alternative readings of time.

First, I provide a reading of Joseph’s age and error in the N-Town Joseph’s Doubt as a meeting of ‘Old’ and ‘New’ theologies. I argue that Joseph’s journey from disbelief in Mary’s virgin pregnancy to eventual acceptance performs as a primarily linear conversion narrative, whilst also proposing that, as a medieval performance of a New Testament time, the N-Town Marian plays’ engagements with multiple levels of time work to complicate models of temporal, supersessionary linearity. I then examine Noah and his wife in the Chester and York Flood plays as participating in very different understandings of time from each other. While Noah adheres to a supersessionary understanding of the Flood which demands a full erasure of the past in order to begin the world anew, his Wife engages with temporal models that promote collapse between medieval and Old Testament times and command the explosive ability to performatively recall the past into the present. Finally, I engage with Serres’ model of topological time in examining the highly complex, multi-linked times operating in the Towneley play Herod the Great. Here, I examine how the play amplifies the ways in which its biblical sources work to bring together events from the Old and New Testaments in processes of prophecy and validation, whilst also asking whether characters such as Herod and the mothers defending their children from him may be said to command agency over their time.

In bringing together theories of time, gender, antisemitism and periodization, I not only nuance the ways in which moments of conflict between the mystery plays’ male and female biblical characters are analysed, but also highlight the complex ways in which the late medieval producers and audiences of the mystery plays were themselves encouraged to question, experience, read and understand time.
DE CLARATION

No portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

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DEDICATION

For Nora Scruby, Alice Black, and Peggy Young, three strong women.
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INTRODUCTION

And did those feet in ancient time
Walk upon England’s mountains green:
And was the holy Lamb of God,
On England’s pleasant pastures seen!

And did the Countenance Divine,
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?
And was Jerusalem builded here,
Among these dark Satanic Mills?

Bring me my Bow of burning gold;
Bring me my Arrows of desire:
Bring me my Spear: O clouds unfold!
Bring me my Chariot of fire!

I will not cease from Mental Fight,
Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand:
Till we have built Jerusalem,
In England’s green & pleasant Land.¹

I have always had a problem with the ways in which Blake’s 1808 poem and its subsequent adaptation by Hubert Parry into the popular hymn Jerusalem have been appropriated by popular culture. The hymn has become something of a political and national anthem, occupying a prominent place within the hymnaries of the Church of England, appearing at royal weddings and sung at the Last Night of the Proms. It also holds a special significance in the history of women’s rights, being adopted as part of the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies. It thus demonstrates an astonishing versatility of applications – used to celebrate English history and English-ness whilst also employed to advocate change. However, there has always been something about Jerusalem that jars with me. My main problem with the poem and its hymn adaptation is that it is too often used to glorify English nationalism at the expense of overlooking the blunt fact that, if Jerusalem had been in England, our experience of this country would be very different. We would have had to deal with the legacy of past and present conflicts between the Jewish, Christian and Muslim groups who stake claims upon the city. The landscape of England would be marked by crusades, invasions, civil wars, and histories of conflict from which we are

currently comfortably distanced by time and space – not to mention the political and spiritual responsibilities of hosting pilgrims from across the globe: religious tourists hoping to connect with their faith through tracing the narratives of their scriptures in the landscape.

Of course, I recognise that my dislike of the ways in which Blake’s poem has been used is grounded almost entirely upon the ideas of Jerusalem that my own cultural context has produced, rather than the city appearing in the poem itself. This results in my reaction being involuntarily based on a perhaps over-literal interpretation, transposing onto Blake’s more vague and heavenly city the concrete and contemporary associations of the city of my present day. My objection consequently chiefly lies in a disjunction between the ways in which I, shaped by the late twentieth and early twenty-first century news bulletins and campaigns surrounding Israel, Palestine and Gaza, experience the workings of time in Jerusalem, and the ways in which the nineteenth-century poem is today attributed meaning at a national level.² My response is likewise informed by my own questions concerning Jerusalem’s relationship with other religions, for which an anglicised ‘Lamb of God’ figure might act as an exclusionary force.

My reaction, embedded as it is within the preoccupations of my own time, is therefore apt to miss the point of Blake’s poem, which is not to claim to situate Jerusalem in England, but to bring together different, if apparently contradictory, moments in time. Blake’s Jerusalem is a place caught between a hypothetical past and an anticipated future. Time in the poem thus flits between past, present and future, beginning with a reference to a medieval legend in which Jesus was said to have visited Britain with his uncle, Joseph of Arimathea, and concluding by presenting the heavenly city as an apocalyptic inspiration for the future.³ The opening two stanzas question the possibility of a meeting between ‘those feet’ and

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‘England’s mountains green’, yet in doing so ultimately stress the difference between that time and Blake’s, with its dark ‘Satanic Mills’ and the obfuscating smoke clouds of the industrial revolution. The contrast between this clouded landscape and the green mountains not only enacts an implicit denial even as it asks the question ‘was Jerusalem builded here’, but also underlines the loss of a former, idyllic landscape. This then gives way to a drive for apocalyptic activity, as bow, arrows, spear and chariot are called for and the poem concludes by aspiring to make a second Jerusalem – a place that, until this point, has participated in a shadowy and legendary past – and opening out the possibility of a longed-for future.

The preface to the poem acknowledges its performance as an exercise of temporal and textual juxtaposition, introducing ‘The Stolen and Perverted Writings of Homer & Ovid: of Plato & Cicero […] set up by artifice against the Sublime of the Bible’. Blake’s language here – featuring the words ‘stolen’, ‘perverted’ and ‘artifice’ – appears to draw attention to the constructedness of his exercise in bringing times together, whilst even suggesting that this process may be in some way reprehensible. However, the poem itself, with its ability to accrue meanings throughout the political and social changes of two centuries, indicates an underlying desire to experience physical, spatial and temporal connections with the divine: a desire not only to invest biblical times and events with meaning for the ‘now’ of Jerusalem’s audiences, but also to use the poem as a promise for the future. This investment in the relationships between different times therefore opens the poem up to a wide range of responses and uses.

I find that my response to Jerusalem provokes two questions. The first is, what happens when moments in time are not universally experienced in the same way? I respond to an 1811 poem via my understanding of twenty-first century Israeli-Palestinian politics and my knowledge of the twelfth- and thirteenth-century crusade literature of the Middle Ages: associations which, on a linear model of time, would lie in the original poem’s past and future, and my own past and present. But perhaps a woman living before 1928, singing the hymn as part of the Women’s Suffrage movement, would find the hymn expressing a hope for the future; for her, it

might act as a command to build a new Jerusalem in England. My second question is also related to the temporal experiences of individuals, and asks, what tensions emerge when the times of the Bible are introduced to the present of a different time? This thesis asks these questions of the late medieval mystery plays which, like the twelfth-century grail literature concerning Joseph of Arimathea, also sought to link biblical events to a medieval English context.  

This thesis contends that the characters of the mystery plays demonstrate a range of responses to the biblical and medieval times in which they participate. In doing so, I wish to make it clear that I analyse the concept of ‘time’, not as a property of the world, but as a feature of the subjective experience of the world. Time is a slippery concept, particularly when it comes to differentiating between the quantitative temporality of mathematically constructed time (a scientific time used as a tool of measurement for the calculation of change), and the qualitative temporality of lived time (time as perceived, experienced and engaged with by an individual). In doing so, I align my methodology with arguments that claim a temporality rooted in a person’s (or in this case, a character’s) experience and understanding of the world. I find this approach useful in examining the workings of time in medieval drama because, as a medium that necessarily relies upon acts of communication between characters and the audience, as well as between the characters themselves, dramatic performance offers multiple possibilities for interpretation and, thus, multiple perspectives on time and characters’ perceptions of their own place in time.

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5 Although it briefly refers to the Cornish mystery the Gwreans an bys, this thesis primarily focuses on the English mystery plays.
6 Here, I move away from Newtonian models of time as a unit measuring change. This is not to discount the value of approaches concerning time-as-measurement in examinations of drama, but this project’s focus on moments of conflict between characters subscribing to different models of time requires an analysis of time as subjective.
7 Experiential models of time have a long critical history, encompassing existential, historicist and phenomenological philosophical debates. For a coherent overview of the development of these theories, including those of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), Georg Hegel (1770-1831), Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), see Barbara Adam, Time (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), pp. 34-64. For arguments concerning the religious significance of Husserl’s work, see James G. Hart, ‘Phenomenological Time: Its Religious Significance’, in Religion and Time, ed. by Anindita Niyogi Balslev and J. N. Mohanty (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1993), pp. 17-45. See also Mark Currie’s discussion of Heidegger in About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 52: ‘For Heidegger, [...] time is not something which exists in the world and is then reflected in the human mind, but something which arises from a human being (Dasein) and is then projected onto the world’.
While medieval scholarship has touched upon subjective models of time in other areas, drama criticism has tended to focus principally on communal experiences of time. Comparatively little criticism has examined what happens to characters’ experiences of time when they are placed in dialogue with differing or opposing understandings – particularly where time is experienced differently by two characters inhabiting the same moment. This omission is particularly surprising because, this thesis finds, questions of time often lie behind some of the most fraught depictions of conflict staged between biblical characters in the mystery cycles. For example, one character might define their time in a way that does not hold true for another character. Characters might also seek to manage the ways in which they and those around them experience time, invest their own time with meaning through recourse to prior (and future) times, or highlight the differences and similarities between the biblical times from which their narratives derive and the late medieval times in which they are performed. Characters may be observed changing their own temporal approaches by learning to read their time differently, as well as consciously attempting to assert control over time through violent action. Temporal subjectivity is therefore central, both to the ways in which characters relate to each other and to the biblical narratives in which they participate. Moreover, this thesis finds that, when two characters experiencing or interpreting time differently from one another are placed in dialogue, the resulting conflict threatens to destabilise one of their temporal perspectives.

One of the more famous examples of a dramatic scene in which competing temporal states co-exist occurs in the York Crucifixion play, which encourages its audience to experience the Crucifixion through the struggles of the soldiers as they,  

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8 The bulk of work on subjectivity in relation to medieval experiences of time has until recently focused on theological debates concerning time (for example, within the works of St Augustine). However, medieval literary criticism is beginning to recognise time’s relevance in relation to constructions of poetic and authorial identity. See for example the discussions of Lydgate and Hoccleve’s very different approaches to time-awareness in Karen Elaine Smyth, Imaginings of Time in Lydgate and Hoccleve’s Verse (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2011), and Gerhardt Jaritz and Gerson Moreno-Riaño’s acknowledgement of the variety of medieval conceptualisations of time and of the relationship of time to self-knowledge in ‘Time and Eternity: Where Doubt Continues to Exist’, in Time and Eternity: The Medieval Discourse, ed. by Gerhard Jaritz and Gerson Moreno-Riaño (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003), pp. 3-6 (p. 5): ‘self-knowledge was inextricably bound to the individual’s relationship to time – past, present, future, and hereafter. To understand the human experience involved understanding the flow of time and the ways in which this flow affected people’.
rather incompetently, carry out their task. The importance of the Crucifixion as part of an overarching narrative of salvation, indeed, the central event of the mystery cycle, is somewhat obscured by the early developments of the play. Rather than dramatising an event of theological rupture and historical change, the play focuses instead upon the mundane and the everyday, inviting its audience to experience the Crucifixion through the actions of a crew of bungling soldiers/late medieval guildsmen who are performing what is, for them, a messy and tedious daily task.

Yet the soldiers’ approach to the time of the Crucifixion is not sustained as the only focus of the play. When the Cross is raised and the hitherto silent Christ speaks to his audience, the time of the Crucifixion and the time of the medieval street collapse in the direct address of one moment:

JESUS:  
Al men that walkis byaye or strete,  
Takes tente se schalle no trauayle tyne [...]  
My fadir, þat alle bales may bete,  
Forgiffis þes men þat dois me pyne.  
What þai wirke wotte þai noght;  
Therfore, my fadir, I craue  
Latte neuere ther synnys be sought,  
But see þe saules to saue.

Spoken directly over the heads of the soldiers who, until now, have commanded the majority of the audience’s attention, Jesus’ much commented-upon speech deftly moves between the time of the Crucifixion and that of York’s late medieval streets. It also opens the play up to the future implications of what the Crucifixion will come to mean: the relieving of ‘alle bales’ and the concept of divine forgiveness. ‘What thai wirke wotte thai noght’, says Jesus, and he is right. The soldiers understand neither their work, nor its ability to engage with times beyond their own. These

9. The York ‘Crucifixion’ is one of the few plays to have received multiple analyses of the way in which time is experienced by the different characters. See for example Greg Walker, ‘Medieval Drama: the Corpus Christi in York and Croxton’, in Readings in Medieval Texts: Interpreting Old and Middle English Literature, ed. by David Johnson and Elaine Treharne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 370-85 (p. 375), who notes that the body of Christ remains hidden from the audience for much of the play. See also the discussions of the play’s use of topology in Isabel Davis, “Ye that pasen by þe Weiye”: Time, Topology and the Medieval Use of Lamentations 1.12’, Textual Practice, 25.3 (2011), 437-72.


two temporal perspectives are mutually disruptive, yet co-habit the dramatic space. Even as the audience is invited to imagine the Crucifixion as an example of shoddy civic craftsmanship, Christ’s speech reminds them of the act’s historical and theological importance. This temporal tension is never fully resolved in the play.

The medieval performance of a biblical past therefore involves a number of temporal negotiations, which aim to elicit responses from both the characters and their audience. Yet, while several scholars have offered readings of the different times involved in the relationships between the audience, soldiers and Christ in the York Crucifixion, far less attention has been paid to the workings of time in plays depicting direct confrontations between two characters who view the world and their temporal place within it in different ways. Moreover, while the Crucifixion stages a performance of the moment Kathleen Davis has claimed became the centre of historical perspectives on time, this thesis finds that conflicts unfold rather differently when they are set in plays occupying a less easily definable historical place. These include Old Testament times, which fall before Christ, yet are performed for an audience informed by Christianity, and times immediately before the birth or during the early infancy of Christ. The title of this thesis – Mind the Gap – draws attention to the fact that, in the mystery plays, time does its most interesting work during episodes of transition, supersession or communion between moments which, on a linear and non-dramatic model of time, would otherwise be organised into the categories of past, present and future. My first chapter is specifically concerned with attempts to define such ambiguous times, examining how the N-Town Joseph, coming from a time which offers little precedent for the virgin birth, is shown to rationalise his wife’s miraculously pregnant body. The result is, of course, a performance of ‘Joseph’s doubt’. The holy couple participate in an argument that, given that they are arguing from pre- and post-Christian viewpoints

132): ‘In the line “What þei wirke, wotte þei noght”, Jesus is simultaneously pleading with God to forgive the soldiers who crucify him, and making fun of their incompetence’.
13 See Davis, Periodization and Sovereignty, p. 1.
14 As I explain in Chapter One, any Old Testament precedent for the Virgin Birth relies on later typological readings of Isaiah – readings which are, presumably, not available to the N-Town Joseph at the Incarnation. The York Joseph does demonstrate some knowledge of a ‘propichie / A maiden clene suld bere a childe’ – however, he dismisses this, convinced that his wife has beguiled him. See Beadle, ‘Joseph’s Trouble About Mary’, in The York Plays, pp. 117-24 (ll. 61-4).
(essentially across a ‘gap’ in temporal understanding), cannot be reconciled without divine intervention.

The texts that form the basis for this study are all concerned with questions of theological transition – both in biblical narrative and in the plays’ own manuscript and performance contexts.\textsuperscript{15} For example, Chapter One deals with the depiction of Joseph’s doubt about Mary in the N-Town Marian plays. Manuscript evidence suggests that the N-Town collection of plays was compiled and performed between 1460 and 1520 – a time when East Anglia witnessed accusations of heresy, non-conformist thought and political treason whilst maintaining a flourishing Marian devotional culture.\textsuperscript{16} While these plays negotiate a moment of change by using Joseph’s doubt to ask \textit{when}, exactly, Christian law replaced Jewish law, they were also produced in an environment which was considering its own questions of theological change. Supersession, through which one state is replaced, or succeeded by another, is a key principle throughout the course of this thesis. As I show in Chapters One and Two, there are several different types of supersessionary model, and, moreover, these models are often shown to be fragile when placed in dialogue with different understandings of time. In mystery drama, these models are also influenced by the preoccupations of the plays’ performance contexts. By enacting a drama of doubt through the conflict between the holy couple, the N-Town plays therefore use biblical figures to explore the anxieties of their own time. In doing so, the couple’s argument becomes as much about the time of its own performance space as it is about the ambiguous Hebrew/Christian time of its setting.

Chapter Two considers the arguments between Noah and his wife in the dramatic portrayals of the Flood in the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century York and

\textsuperscript{15} While this thesis engages with the plays’ performance contexts (where known) it is also worth stating here that the manuscripts’ dates are also important, as the act of copying the play also holds implications for the plays’ engagement with time. While there is no space to analyse this in detail here, it would nevertheless benefit from further investigation.

Chester cycles. The third chapter is concerned with the conflict between mothers and soldiers in the slaughter of the Innocents portrayed in the mid-fifteenth-century Towneley manuscript, examining what happens when Herod recognises that he occupies a time of theological transition (the birth of Christ) and takes steps to prevent it. As each of these events confronts a series of ‘gaps’ – between Judaism and Christianity, pre- and post-Flood contexts and the birth and death of Christ – their theological status is unclear and they offer opportunities for characters to hold conflicting viewpoints on how their own time should be defined. I argue that multiple ways of experiencing and extracting meaning from time are amplified during such moments of liminality or transition, as ‘gaps’ invite characters to identify with either one temporal state or another. Moreover, as I argue towards the end of this thesis, the ambiguous nature of these times is also apt to encourage characters to bring times together in order to close such ‘gaps’ and bring all times into one continuous narrative.

Of course, many of the mystery plays within the extant corpus deal directly with questions of time, the most obvious of these being those concerning Creation and Doomsday. However, this project is particularly interested in examining the ways in which subjective character perspectives of time influence depictions of episodes of conflict between men and women. This interest is based on two hypotheses. First, time provides a fresh perspective from which the frequently complex gender relations in the mystery plays can be approached – one which, I

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18 For a recent review of the problems of dating the Towneley plays and their connections to the York cycle and the town of Wakefield, see Peter Happé, The Towneley Cycle: Unity and Diversity (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007), pp. 1-17.

19 This project’s focus on conflict between characters’ understandings of time necessarily prevents an analysis of the entirety of mystery drama. Nevertheless, concepts of beginning and ending will be considered throughout this thesis, particularly in Chapter Two, where the problem of ‘beginning again’ is addressed. I intend that a consideration of plays depicting the four major points of temporal change – Creation, Fall, Crucifixion and Doomsday – will constitute a natural extension of this project at a later date.
hope, will encourage the movement of scholarly debates away from recourses to stock characterisations (such as the militant, disobedient woman and the impotent, jealous husband) – in order to consider the ways in which characters may be shaped and informed by their relationship to time. While little has been written on concepts of subjective time in medieval biblical drama, incidents of conflict between the two sexes have long received critical attention. This study finds that time is an overlooked and yet highly important part of episodes of gender conflict, as not only does it expand the potential for discussions of the characters’ motivations, but it also encourages a movement away from familiar readings that define moments of altercation as participating in ‘unruliness’, and instead looks for other meanings in the conflict. This is not to say that this thesis will not engage with performances of ‘unruly’ behaviour but, rather, that it seeks to situate them within the plays’ often complex theological, biblical and medieval temporal negotiations.

Second, I will show that gender also has the ability to change the ways in which we look at time. Female experiences of time in the plays often differ from male experiences, and these different ways of interacting with time can lead to conflict. This is not to suggest that time is consistently ‘gendered’ in the mystery plays. Yet the thesis does find that the male characters it encounters tend to expect time to be structured – whether this involves the passive assumption of a linear continuation of a certain state of time, the anticipation of the beginning of a new era, 22

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20 Criticism concerning interactions between men and women in the mystery plays will be examined throughout this thesis. I acknowledge here the importance of Katie Normington’s comprehensive investigation of gender in the plays in *Gender and Medieval Drama* (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), particularly her chapters on what she terms ‘holy women’ and ‘vulgar women’. Studies of men and women in medieval drama do examine some elements of time, but these are usually limited to discussions of their relation to biblical men and women, husbands and wives rather than investigating the other kinds of time these characters engage with.


22 This operates as a natural extension to works which have identified a difference in the ways in which medieval men’s and women’s roles in processes of memorisation and recollection – themselves methods of managing and responding to the past – operate. See for example Elisabeth Van Houts, *Memory and Gender in Medieval Europe 900-1200* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 1999) and Mette B. Bruun, and Stephanie Glaser, eds., *Negotiating Heritage: Memories of the Middle Ages* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008).
or an active attempt to direct the course of time. In doing so, these characters try to order something that is, essentially, un-orderable, and their perspective is consequently challenged or dismantled by the plays’ female characters, who provide alternative temporal viewpoints. However, while all the plays examined offer overarching models of a Christological, typological time which brings events from the Old and New Testaments into one narrative, this is not consistently or exclusively the approach of the men in the plays. While criticism often identifies women as participating in disruptive behaviour, Chapters One and Three give examples of men who threaten to interfere with the Christological narrative because of their relationship to time: Joseph, who does so unconsciously by adhering to a pre-Christian belief system, and Herod, who takes deliberate action to prevent a (Christian) future from happening. Moreover, while the women in the plays I examine – the pregnant Mary, the vocal Noah’s wife and the militant mothers of the massacre of the Innocents – are involved in forms of temporal ‘unruliness’, it does not always follow that the resulting conflict is depicted negatively. A study of time therefore has the ability to expand and interrogate the terminology surrounding late medieval depictions of disruptive women whilst contributing to an examination of what makes a character ‘unruly’. I contend that it is difficult to understand conflicts between characters fully without taking each character’s temporal perspectives into account. A closer understanding of the ways in which temporality operates within the plays would lead to a fuller comprehension of the characters themselves and the possible causes of their strife. I thus identify some of the ways in which discussions of time can be made to challenge, rather than confirm, questions of ‘unruliness’ in readings of gendered conflict.

The episodes of conflict examined in this thesis are likewise engaging with theological questions concerning time, and a great part of this involves defining what ‘Christian’ time is and what it is not. These conflicts, which centre upon the way in which the past is understood and experienced, consequently also reflect the ways in which medieval Christianity approached the Hebrew scriptures of the Old Testament. The past proves troublesome in all of the plays studied, particularly where they involve the performance of Hebrew scripture in a late medieval Christian environment, or depict characters that, according to the Bible, were historically Jewish and not Christian. Like the spouses examined in Chapters One and Two,
Hebrew and Christian times are shown to be mutually troubling, yet interdependent. The negotiation of scriptural time is therefore a crucial part of this thesis’ primary question concerning late medieval performances of the Bible. Yet it, too, is also a largely understudied subject. While portrayals of Judaism in the more obviously antisemitic Croxton Play of the Sacrament have received a great deal of critical attention, comparatively little work has been done on medieval depictions of Jews, the Jewish faith, or the Hebrew scripture in the mystery cycles.23 Those works that do consider this subject tend to focus only on antisemitic portrayals of those specifically named as ‘Jews’ in the plays. For example, although Stephen Spector has noted that ‘most of the characters in the mystery plays are ethnically Jewish, comparatively few are referred to as Jews’, he only engages with those characters unambiguously identified as Jews in the plays’ dialogue, stage directions or headings.24 As a consequence, his analysis covers only representations of Jews placed in specifically antagonistic roles, particularly those appearing as persecutors of Christ.25 In examining negotiations between Old and New Testament times, this thesis therefore hopes to call attention to those characters who, while part of the Christian narrative, are also ‘ethnically Jewish’. I suggest that this creates interesting temporal tensions within the plays, as such characters hold the potential to contradict Christian supersessionary ideologies or are otherwise themselves subject to

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antisemitic expressions (for example, in portrayals of Joseph as ageing, impotent and backward-looking). As well as examining conflict between men and women, my discussion of the ways in which time is experienced and understood in the mystery plays hinges on questions concerning what, exactly, constitutes a ‘biblical past’, what kind of ‘past’ is under discussion, and how it is presented.

My discussions of temporality are thus engaging in dialogue with methodologies devised in the field of Jewish Studies, which has long observed the ambivalent nature of medieval Christianity’s perceptions of Judaism. This is a relatively new avenue of enquiry for discussions of both time and gender in the mystery plays. However, I find that recent works conducted in Jewish studies, concerned as they are with the paradoxical nature of a medieval Christianity that saw Judaism as both a superseded anachronism and as crucial for the formation of Christian identity, have much to offer my examination of temporal conflict. The past twenty to thirty years have witnessed exciting developments in the study of medieval Christian approaches to Judaism, particularly concerning what Gavin Langmuir has termed the ‘birth trauma’ of medieval Christianity.26 This comprised a set of beliefs that relied upon the Old Testament past to validate the Christian present, while struggling with Judaism’s continued presence beyond the resurrection of Jesus. By the time of the mystery plays, Judaism had long ceased to have a physical presence in England.27 However, throughout the following centuries, constructions of ‘Jews’ continued to undergo a series of social, political and literary resurrections and defeats – from their characterisations as violent torturers in blood libel and host desecration narratives, to depictions of the learned but ultimately defeated verbal combatants of disputation literature.28

26 See Gavin I. Langmuir, History, Religion, and Antisemitism (London: I.B. Tauris and Co. Ltd., 1990), p. 282: ‘Although Jews posed no serious or enduring physical threat to the survival of Pauline Christianity, the very existence of Jewish religiosity and Judaic religions posed a fundamental problem for Christians and the new Christian religions, for it was an internal problem, a birth trauma’.


28 See Anthony Bale, The Jew in the Medieval Book: English Antisemitisms, 1350-1500 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 165: ‘Jews were nowhere to be found in medieval England, and
‘Jewish’ times, like Old Testament times, were perceived to operate somewhat differently to ‘Christian’ times. Due to its multiple roles in Christian society, teaching, self-justification and literary heritage, the Jewish past could neither remain in the past nor operate fully within the present. As a result, it was repeatedly resurrected, re-imagined, woven into typological discourses and both cut away from and reattached to medieval Christian faith. These multiple imaginings of Judaism in a country that no longer contained any ‘real’ Jews have been awarded a range of terminologies, including ‘spectral’, ‘figurative’, ‘protean’ and ‘virtual’. Each of these terms seeks to encapsulate something that flits ambiguously between presence and absence, or, in the case of spectrality, between past and present. Medieval configurations of ‘Judaism’ and ‘Christianity’ thus have the ability to produce their own kind of ‘gap’ – one that may be either magnified to stress distance and difference or become so small that the two are not only able to touch, but even overlap. Throughout this thesis, it will be shown that characters’ treatments of the past, whether ‘Jewish’, pre-diluvian, or scriptural, likewise seek to make sense of something that is both present and absent, close and distant. The past may likewise become authorising or threatening as it is alternately used to either bolster or to

yet the Jew was everywhere: intermedial, easily recognised, serviceable in a spectrum of contexts both spiritual and worldly’.  

29 Although this thesis engages with Christian perceptions of ‘Jewish’ time, I wish to acknowledge here that the models of time developed within Jewish culture and those projected upon Judaism by medieval Christianity were very different. For example, studies of Rabbinical literature highlight the distinction between the time-frames of Christian scripture and those of Hebrew scripture and discourse. Sacha Stern argues that, in the works of early Rabbinic writers, the concept of time as a separate entity did not exist, and finds that writers between the third to the seventh centuries subjected temporal reality to process, change and motion. See Sacha Stern, ‘The Rabbinic Concept of Time from Antiquity to the Middle Ages’, in Time and Eternity, ed. by Jaritz and Moreno-Riaño, pp. 129-45. This underlines the point I have made above about time not being universally experienced by all individuals, or indeed, by all cultures.

30 See Rubin, Gentile Tales, p. 7 and Anna Sapir Abulafia, Christians and Jews in Dispute: Disputational Literature and the Rise of Anti-Judaism in the West (c. 1000-1150) (Aldershot: Valourium, Ashgate Publishing Limited, 1998), pp. 34-42. Lisa Lampert has also recently engaged with medieval Christian constructions of Judaism in debates concerning gender, arguing that both women and Judaism represented a point of origin for (male-centric) Christianity, and yet nevertheless also acted as obstacles to narratives of Christian supersession. See Lisa Lampert, Gender and Jewish Difference from Paul to Shakespeare (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), pp. 1-17.

31 See the various arguments of Sheila Delany, Denise L. Despres, Timothy S. Jones and Sylvia Tomash in Sheila Delany, ed., Chaucer and the Jews: Sources, Contexts, Meanings (London: Routledge, 2002). For discussions of Jewish spectrality, see Steven Kruger, The Spectral Jew: Conversion and Embodiment in Medieval Europe (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p. xvii, which identifies ‘a dependence upon the Jewish ancestor that is simultaneously an erasure. […] Jewishness is a spectral presence, strongly felt and yet just as strongly derealized’. 
destabilise the values of the present. Performances of Old Testament narratives for an audience whose faith was primarily informed by the New Testament were therefore rooted in a quest for good time management.

**Scattered in times**

Before this analysis of biblical and medieval times can proceed, a more fundamental question must be asked: what is a medieval understanding of time? In chapter eleven of his *Confessions*, St Augustine acknowledges a disjunction between the ways in which he believes eternal, divine time operates, and his own lived experiences when he writes, ‘You are my eternal Father, but I am scattered in times whose order I do not understand’. Recognising a difference between God’s ‘eternal’ time and his own, Augustine’s description of himself as ‘scattered’ suggests that his personal experience of time was not one of an orderly progression of moments. Nevertheless, some of the earliest criticism on the subject of medieval perspectives on time has drawn upon models of either cyclical or linear time, in which events unfold in a coherent order. For example, J. A. Burrow’s influential work on the six ages of man discusses medieval schemata which order the changes taking place during a man’s life span into a progressive sequence of episodes, while A. J. Gurevich argues for both linear and cyclical time models: one in which the birth of Christ determines the direction of all subsequent developments, and the other, which witnesses the cyclical journey of the man and the world, ending with mankind’s return to the Creator and time’s own return to eternity.

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32 As I note towards the end of this thesis, these discourses are not related solely to Jewish pasts, but may also be engaged in relation to other pasts, for example, heretical or Catholic pasts in post-Reformation England. See also the discussion of Derridean spectrality in L.O. Fradenburg, ‘Making, Mourning, and the Love of Idols’, in *Images, Idolatry and Iconoclasm in Late Medieval England: Textuality and the Visual Image*, ed. by Jeremy Dimnick, James Simpson and Nicolette Zeeman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 25-42 (p. 27): ‘It is a function of the ‘trace’, which is to indicate something that cannot or will not be fully present. Nevertheless, the spectre affirms the existence of that something, despite its absence’.


Since the growth of interest in these debates in the 1980s, a multiplicity of medieval understandings of time has been identified, particularly towards the end of the fifteenth century. For example, Jacques Le Goff has noted that, from the twelfth century, there was a growing recognition of the co-existence of different understandings of time.\(^{35}\) This was in part due to twelfth-century theological developments that promoted a vertical model of ‘divine’ time, in which biblical events were not only placed in typological dialogue with one another, with the present informing and re-forming the past, but in which they could also be experienced in the present of medieval Christians during ceremonies such as the Mass.\(^{36}\) Theological debates concerning eternity and divine time thus ran alongside the cyclical ‘church time’ of the religious year, which enabled certain historical moments (such as the Crucifixion on Good Friday) to be re-experienced annually. The following centuries saw a further shift in the way in which time was experienced in the secular world, as the rise of the merchant classes and introduction of mechanical clocks to town centres in the fourteenth century meant that a person living, working and worshipping in a town was also aware of the multiple, pliable and unpliable times of secular trade, work and economic reckoning: ‘The time in which [they] worked professionally was not the time in which [they] lived religiously’.\(^{37}\) The installation of town clocks brought time-consciousness into the


\(^{36}\) The Feast of Corpus Christi, for which the York and Chester cycles were performed, is a celebration of this miraculous, simultaneous time. See Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 271-87. Bakhtin also expands upon this kind of divine time regarding Langland’s *Piers Plowman*, where, he claims, ‘everything that on earth is divided by time, here, in this verticality, coalesces into eternity, into pure simultaneous coexistence’. See Mikhail Bakhtin, ‘Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel’, in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. and trans. by Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 84-258 (p. 157). Curiously, these religious, simultaneous approaches to time were reconsidered during the Protestant reformation, where the earlier, linear model of a human’s progress towards reconciliation with God was preferred. See Alec Ryrie, *Being Protestant in Reformation Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 410-27.

\(^{37}\) Le Goff, *Time, Work and Culture in the Middle Ages*, p. 37. See also G. J. Whitrow, *Time in History: Views of Time from Prehistory to the Present Day* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 71-86, which notes that the invention of the mechanical clock was preceded by an increased belief in discontinuous, atomic time which could be split into minutes. Erica Magnus has drawn upon this early work to explain the mystery plays’ ‘intersection between church time and merchant time’ as a presentation of ‘the entire space and time of the Christian world’: a time which is dramatised as both cyclical (with a narrative starting and returning to a reunion with God) and vertical, as the plays’
public and economic sphere, thus encouraging people to consider where they and their activities stood in relation to time.

The past fifteen years have witnessed a flourishing of critical interest in a number of fields concerning the computation and perception of time in the medieval period, and many of these enquiries have worked to complicate earlier ideas that proposed a universal medieval understanding of time as historical, linear or cyclical. For example, enquiries into medieval narratives of national origin have suggested that a beginning was never absolute, indicating a consciousness that time resisted linear arrangement even within texts attempting to order it as such. 38 This has contributed to a view of medieval experiences of time in which multiple times were continuously overlapping, with the past present in the everyday and the sacred times of the Bible rubbing shoulders with the secular times of the medieval street. 39 New discussions have also emerged introducing the concept of ‘palimpsested’ time, which suggests that the certain works are formed by layers of temporal accretions that ‘cross-pollinate with their predecessors, contemporaries, and successors’. 40 These developments, alongside the rise of memory theory as a critical tool and an increased interest in works dealing with medieval attitudes to prophecy and the future, have helped to complicate and nuance previous models of linear and cyclical temporalities. Medieval time has emerged as polychronic, overlapping and simultaneous. 41

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Accompanying these models of temporal multiplicity has been an acknowledgement within historical and literary studies that a variety of temporal perspectives may be present in a single medieval text.\textsuperscript{42} As a result, discourses have begun to focus more on the temporal experiences of small groups or individuals, as well as articulating a growing suspicion that ecclesiastical or secular depictions of historical linearity, narratives of origin or discourses of supersession exercise what Kathleen Davis has called an ‘exclusionary force’ – one which distorts or occludes minority histories.\textsuperscript{43} This idea of certain arrangements of time acting to obfuscate the times of others is particularly pertinent to this study. For example, this process may be seen at work when the York Noah’s insistence that the Flood constitutes a new beginning struggles to override his wife’s remembrance of her former friends, when the N-Town Mary’s Christian time over-writes the Hebrew time of Joseph, and when the Towneley Herod attempts to alter the course of scriptural time by murdering children. Each of the plays I examine engages with the concept that there might be an ‘official’ or ‘authorised’ way of reading time (usually, though not exclusively, through following the narrative as it is presented in the Bible), but yet it is not the only way of reading them.\textsuperscript{44}

The question of times being subject to this ‘exclusionary force’ has led to a search for different temporal models that facilitate the recovery of these minority

\textsuperscript{42} So far, the bulk of this work has been done in the field of history, though it is now also beginning to influence medieval literary analysis. See Paul Strohm, \textit{Theory and the Premodern Text} (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 66 on ‘the different temporal implications of described actions’; Currie, \textit{About Time}, pp 1-10 on the workings of time in narrative fiction, and Smyth, \textit{Imaginings of Time in Lydgate and Hoccleve’s Verse}, p. 1, which argues that ‘Late Middle English texts [...] act as both agents and products of this hybrid and sophisticated secular time consciousness’.

\textsuperscript{43} Davis, \textit{Periodization and Sovereignty}, p. 3. See also Caroline Walker Bynum’s call for a ‘female’ approach to history – ‘history in the comic mode’ – as a response to what she considers to be the masculinity of the linear tragic narrative. Although this thesis finds that time models and narratives within the mystery plays are not consistently gendered, Walker Bynum’s definition of comic narrative holds surprising resonances with some of the models of temporal multiplicity considered in this thesis: ‘If tragedy tells a cogent story, with a moral and a hero, and undergirds our sense of the nobility of humanity, comedy tells many stories [...] Comedy is about compromise. In comedy there is resolution only for a moment’. See Caroline Walker Bynum, \textit{Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion} (New York, NY: Zone Books, 1991), p. 24.

\textsuperscript{44} The idea of history operating to exclude or re-fashion the times of certain groups or people has been bolstered by postcolonial approaches towards time, nationhood and space. See for example Kathleen Biddick, \textit{The Typological Imaginary: Circumcision, Technology, History} (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), pp. 21-44 and Jennifer Summit’s discussion of the Reformation’s cartographic attempts to erase the Catholic past in Jennifer Summit, ‘Leland’s \textit{Itinerary} and the remains of the medieval past’, in \textit{Reading the Medieval in Early Modern England}, ed. by McMullan and Matthews, pp. 159-76.
histories. One of the most exciting attempts to do this can be found in Carolyn Dinshaw’s discussions of simultaneous, collapsed and asynchronous time. Dinshaw works on the queer experiences of individuals who find they are out of sync with their own time. While this thesis does not aim to argue that gendered experiences of time may be unambiguously identified as either queer or normative, what is particularly helpful for this study is Dinshaw’s examination of temporal experience as subjective – often unique to the person experiencing it, and occasionally out of sync with the times of the others around them. My arguments concerning the ways in which conflict arises between characters when biblical times are dramatised are therefore based upon two main principles identified by scholarship on medieval time. First, the possibility that individuals in the Middle Ages may have experienced time differently from one another is becoming increasingly well-established, and some studies appear to indicate that these individuals may have been aware of this difference. Second, potential areas of conflict have been identified which may have resulted in a perceived need to suppress certain temporal experiences regarded as potentially troubling. Yet despite these developments, a sustained examination has yet to be made of the ways in which they operate when incidents of temporal conflict occur in performances of characters already invested in biblical time – or what happens when temporal problems are articulated by the biblical characters themselves. I hope to further discussions of subjective experiences of time by examining the temporal possibilities that arise.


46 In How Soon is Now?, Dinshaw focuses on characters such as Margery Kempe, John Mandeville and Rip van Winkle, whom she interprets as experiencing asynchrony within their times. This particular kind of temporal experience will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Two, with regard to the Chester Noah’s wife and her Gossips.

47 In a conflict between two characters, it is rare for one particular reading of time to remain uncomplicated by its encounter with another, particularly where one of these times is invested in models of supersession. This justifies my caution concerning the designation of a particular reading of time as ‘normative’ or ‘queer’, as it is not always immediately obvious which character’s experience of time constitutes the ‘norm’.

when the mystery plays depict biblical characters engaging in moments of conflict. In doing so, I aim to move away from examinations of either small group’s or individual’s, relationships with time in order to consider the negotiations that take place when one experience of time is placed in dialogue with another. This, I anticipate, will lead to a more thorough consideration of time’s effect on relationships between individuals, as well as contributing towards a more complex understanding of the ways in which the medieval communities producing the plays understood, experienced, engaged with and performed time.

**Play Time**

Staged during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the mystery plays participated in an era that witnessed many changes in the ways in which time was available to be used, experienced, measured, commoditised, performed and dedicated either to secular or sacred matters.\(^{49}\) The plays themselves promote the intersection of mercantile time with religious time; moreover, an awareness of numerous methods of approaching time and time’s various responsibilities and uses would have been part of the daily experience of the citizens producing and watching the mystery plays. In some cases, drama was itself used to mark time, with the York and Chester cycles being performed during the annual feast of Corpus Christi.\(^{50}\) By choosing to mark the cities’ adoration of the Eucharist with drama depicting, as David Mills elegantly puts it, ‘the reassuring framework of universal history from the beginning of Creation to the end of historical time’, the cycles of York and Chester dealt with a complex array of times as they brought Eucharistic and biblical time together with the temporal rhythms of urban life.\(^{51}\) As shown in the York *Crucifixion*, it is sometimes difficult to untangle the civic time of the guilds from the biblical time of the Crucifixion narrative. Even when Christ speaks above the heads of his bungling

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\(^{50}\) While guild records show that the Chester and York cycles held set relationships to an annual event – normally being performed on Corpus Christi day, and, in the case of the York plays, beginning at dawn and probably not ending, as Richard Beadle notes, until long after midnight, the performance times of the N-Town and Townley plays are less certain. See Richard Beadle, ‘The York Cycle’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. by Richard Beadle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 85-108 (p. 88).

persecutors to remind his audience of the significance of the scene they are witnessing, he is addressing a street medieval of onlookers who, as participants of the Corpus Christi feast, would have been aware of the simultaneously civic and spiritual resonance of his performance.

Because dramatic performance involves dialogue between characters and thus contains multiple voices, it also offers an opportunity for temporal conflicts that historical or biblical narratives do not so easily admit. Narratives that pull times together into patterns of cause and effect tend to provide us with a singular model of time: one that must necessarily disregard simultaneity in favour of succession. Drama, however, admits many more dimensions. Giving voice to many characters and inviting their varying viewpoints of roles within, and relationships to their time, as well as an audience who, individually and collectively, bring to the play their own associations, dramatic performance has the ability to bring multiple moments into close proximity.

As I have already indicated, while works in other areas of medieval studies have shown a growing interest in matters of time, there has yet to be a sustained focus on the different forms and properties of time within mystery drama. This is somewhat surprising given that time has, whether directly or obliquely, become a recurring theme in drama criticism. Although only a few articles have time as their primary object of study, medieval drama criticism has nevertheless broadly

52 This debate is an old one. See for example the nineteenth-century lecture of Thomas Carlyle, ‘On History’, in The Varieties of History, from Voltaire to the Present, ed. by F. R. Stern (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1970), pp. 91-101 (p. 95), and the introduction to Bernd Herzogenrath, ed., Time and History in Deleuze and Serres (London: Continuum, 2012), pp. 1-16. However, it is worth noting the difference between this narrative approach to history and the medieval recording of history in chronicle form, which, seeking a complete record of events, did not necessarily establish causal relationships between them. Nor did chroniclers restrict their accounts to contemporary events, but reconciled their work with earlier chronicles. Some chronicles even included descriptions of the Last Judgement so as not to leave their narrative incomplete. See Gurevich, Categories of Medieval Culture, pp. 114-15. For an overview of the development of ‘modern’ approaches to history, the increase of historical organisation into causal patterns and the drive to reconcile sacred and secular histories into complementary and continuous narratives, see Lynn Hunt, Measuring Time, Making History (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2008), pp. 52-65.

53 As many of these texts will be engaged with in more detail where appropriate, this section only gives a brief overview of some of the ways developments in drama criticism have shaped this thesis’ analysis of time. It does not, therefore, focus on works discussing modern productions of the plays. These have developed since the 1950s re-introduction of regular performances of mystery cycles in Toronto, York and Chester, and, while these have proven highly useful in collaboration with work on the plays’ original performance contexts, they do not form a central part of this study.
approached time in five main contexts: discussions of anachronism in the plays;\(^{54}\) work on the plays’ performance contexts;\(^{55}\) work assessing the ways in which the plays altered during the religious changes of the sixteenth century;\(^{56}\) work on the challenges of staging the plays in post-medieval / contemporary contexts;\(^{57}\) and work examining the ways in which specific temporal models (such as typology or topology) operate within the plays.\(^{58}\) Four of these areas are thus primarily concerned with the times encountered through the process of dramatic production. This thesis, however, is most interested in those approaches that draw attention to anachronism and some of the other temporal models operating within the play texts, as these engage with the experiences of time operating within the very fabric of the plays themselves.

The presence of anachronism and prolepsis in the mystery plays has been a subject of ongoing scholarly interest. V. A. Kolve initiated this discussion in his chapter ‘Medieval Time and English Place’ which, as its title suggests, aimed to situate the plays within medieval discourses of time, including concepts of eternity and a seven-epoch history of the world. Listing the many kinds of anachronisms found within the plays (including medieval settings and costumes, figures of speech and references to local figures, places and buildings), he argues that the plays were performed as part of an ongoing Christian narrative, and that ‘the past was played as an image of the present time’.\(^{59}\) Because Kolve makes a convincing argument for the plays’ staging of biblical times as if they were part of medieval time, his primary

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\(^{54}\) Discussions of anachronism constituted some of the earliest temporal approaches to the plays and indeed continue to be an important element of medieval drama criticism. See Elisabeth Dutton, ‘Secular Medieval Drama’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Medieval Literature in English*, ed. by Elaine Treharne and Greg Walker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 384-94 (p. 384); ‘The presentation of ecclesiastical power in the cycles is strategically anachronistic and aligned with the oppressive power of biblical tyrants like Herod: regimes ecclesiastical and secular, biblical and contemporary are thus exposed all together’.

\(^{55}\) For examples of contextual approaches, see Clifford Davidson, *Material Culture and Medieval Drama* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1999) and McMurray Gibson, *The Theater of Devotion*.


\(^{59}\) Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi*, p. 110.
focus is therefore on the imaginings of similarities, rather than potential areas of conflict between these times. Subsequent scholarship has tended to continue to approach dramatic anachronism by assuming that it arises from a need to establish similarity between medieval and biblical times, although this has also acknowledged the ways in which anachronism may be used in order to negatively allude to certain aspects of the plays’ performance contexts – for example, by identifying where the plays draw unfavourable comparisons between local powers and biblical tyrants.

Discussions of the role of anachronism in the mystery plays have continued to inform historicist approaches to the plays. Historicist, or contextual, approaches have formed the bulk of medieval drama criticism since the publication of Gail McMurray Gibson’s groundbreaking work, *The Theater of Devotion* (1995), which discussed the N-Town cycle in relation to its late fifteenth-century East Anglian performance context. Through their focus on the plays’ contexts, these studies have expanded the possibilities of dramatic anachronism by identifying more opportunities for interaction between biblical and medieval times. Studies of the plays’ performance contexts have also benefited from parallel investigations into aspects of the plays’ modern performances, including staging, costuming and cross-playing. The contextual details these studies make available have opened the plays up to consideration of the different ways in which audience members and actors might experience performances of a biblical narrative. These approaches have recently been broadened by works seeking to establish how medieval drama

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60 Kolve’s description of anachronism identifies moments of deliberate ‘blurring’ between times: ‘The dramatists knew that Christ lived His life in Judea, not in England, but some of them blurred the distinction to make a doctrinal point’. See Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi*, p. 116.


62 McMurray Gibson, *The Theater of Devotion*.

63 The works of Clifford Davidson and Meg Twycross have provided some of the most extensive contributions to discussions of staging and costume in the mystery cycles since the late 1970s. See for example Clifford Davidson’s publications *Drama and Art: an introduction to the use of evidence from the visual arts for the study of Early Drama* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1977); *Illustrations of the Stage and Acting in England to 1580* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1991) and *Gesture in Medieval Drama and Art* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2001). See also Meg Twycross’ initiation of debates concerning cross-playing in her article “‘Transvestism’ in the Mystery Plays”, *Medieval English Theatre*, 5.2 (1983), 123-80.

responded to, and was shaped by, the religious changes of the sixteenth century. These demonstrate that, as audiences and authorities changed, the telling of biblical narratives changed too.\textsuperscript{65} The focus of this thesis is thus made possible by the wide range of approaches that have worked to elucidate the historical, civic and religious contexts of late medieval mystery drama, particularly those concerning gender in the plays, the play’s original performance contexts, and dramatic receptions of biblical narrative. While such investigations have therefore identified the potential multiplicity of perspectives within audience, local authority and national political responses to the mystery plays, a need surely now arises for a corresponding analysis of the ways in which the characters themselves operate under multiple agendas and temporal perspectives. In addressing the influence of time and gender upon characterisation and conflict, this work examines one aspect of this much larger undertaking.

Given the established importance of analyses of instances and uses of anachronism within the mystery plays, I find the relative lack of discussion of incidents of anachronism that deliberately jar with their contexts, rather than promote similarities between them, particularly puzzling. What, for example, are we to make of the Chester Noah’s wife when she anachronistically swears by Christ in a manner which both defies medieval sermons against swearing and demonstrates a knowledge of the New Testament (a knowledge her husband does not appear to share)? As I argue in Chapter Two, similarities drawn between the time of the Flood and that of the Crucifixion are inherently troubling, while her swearing by Christ invests speech with a violent agency that threatens to disrupt Noah’s own interpretation of the Flood. While acknowledging the importance of debates concerning anachronistic similarity, this thesis therefore contends that anachronistic difference can be just as important.

As I recognise above, where drama criticism has specifically engaged with questions of time in the mystery plays, it has tended to focus on only one aspect of time, without asking whether the play also supports other temporal ‘truths’ that may co-exist. For example, Pamela Sheingorn has noted that biblical typology constitutes one of the most popular topics of medieval drama criticism. She finds that typological readings of the mystery plays rely on ‘filling in the gaps’ in biblical narrative, and transform the Old Testament into a foreshadowing of Christ:

Typology, in effect, subsumes the Old Testament in the New Testament, insisting that from the divine perspective – and, therefore, the only correct perspective – events in the Hebrew bible point toward and foreshadow the life of Christ.

While I do not, at this stage, wish to challenge Sheingorn’s definition of typology, I do wish to note that work on dramatic typology has not yet interrogated how successful it actually is within the plays. Throughout this thesis, I demonstrate that typological machinations within the plays are vulnerable to contradiction, and that processes bringing together events from the Old and New Testaments are just as likely to highlight the disjunctions between these times as they do elements of Christological foreshadowing or anticipation. This is often due to the presence of a character who either unconsciously contradicts typological readings by responding to time in a different way, or is otherwise actively trying to deny typological processes. Moreover, this kind of typological contradiction frequently occurs when the plays are, in Sheingorn’s words, ‘filling in the gaps’ of biblical narrative – particularly when they are showing things that do not appear in the Bible, such as Joseph confronting Mary about her pregnancy, Herod’s decision process before he orders the slaughter of the Innocents, or the members of the community who are drowned by the Flood.

66 Typological readings are particularly popular in analyses of plays concerning Abraham and Isaac. However, little attention has been paid to the less typologically secure Old Testament narratives such as the Flood, which this thesis addresses in its second chapter. See Sheingorn, ‘Typology and the Teaching of Medieval Drama’, pp. 90-100; Walter Meyers, ‘Typology and the Audience of the English Cycle Plays’, Studies in the Literary Imagination, 81 (1975), 5-17 and Rosemary Woolf, ‘The Effect of Typology on the English Medieval Plays of Abraham and Isaac’, Speculum, 32 (1957), 805-25.

While typological readings of the plays have been by far the most popular of those approaches that do consider questions of time, discussions of other experiences of time are also starting to appear. For example, one of the more exciting approaches appears in Pamela King’s article situating the York Cycle within the fifteenth-century liturgical calendar which, she argues, informed the plays’ approaches towards their biblical material. In doing so, she identifies that several plays and liturgies link together episodes from the New and Old Testaments (for example, the Flood and Christ’s baptism), and argues that the plays ordered their narratives so that all events derived meaning from the Christian ‘centre’ – that is, from Redemption.68 While I later address some of the issues raised by such typological juxtapositions throughout the course of this thesis, I also find that the concept of a temporal ‘centre’ invites ambiguity, and that this ambiguity is one of the sources of temporal conflict between characters.69 Moreover, works addressing typology in the mystery plays are presently limited by the fact that, while articles tend to consider a single aspect or experience of typology within a play or cycle, they do not address what happens to these typological models when they are placed in dialogue with alternative views of time.70 This thesis therefore offers an in-depth consideration of some of the many possible ways of approaching time in mystery drama – in particular, the consequences of staging multiple experiences of time within the same play. This will also be the first work to make relationships between gender and time the primary focus of its analysis of the mystery plays. I argue that a discussion of time

68 See Pamela M. King, ‘Calendar and Text: Christ’s Ministry in the York Plays and the Liturgy’, Medium Aevum, 67.1 (1998), 30-59 (p. 40): ‘The rationale of the cycle depends on a historical narrative in which certain events are elevated to symbolic significance because they derive meaning from the centre, the Redemption’. I discuss some of the problems raised by the plays’ linking of the Flood narrative with the sacrament of baptism in Chapter Two.

69 For example, as I explain in Chapter One regarding the ambiguities accompanying the medieval historiographical placing of Christ as a centre-point in history, King’s identification of this centre as being at the Redemption, rather than the Incarnation, produces a rather different reading of the plays to those which see the Incarnation as the centre of Christian time.

70 This is in contrast to the more diverse work on time being done in the field of Early Modern drama, in which models of temporal collapse, typology, spectrality and medievalism have informed the criticism of the past ten years as scholars focus on plays which dramatise or respond to the medieval religious past. See for example Stephen Greenblatt, Hamlet in Purgatory (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Jonathan Gil Harris, Unimely Matter in the Time of Shakespeare (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); Sarah Beckwith, Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011) and the discussion of Shakespeare’s Chaucerian sources in Gordon McMullan and David Matthews, eds., ‘Introduction’, in Reading the Medieval in Early Modern England (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 1-14. I will therefore be engaging with some of the methodologies developed in Early Modern theatre criticism in the following chapters.
constitutes a crucial element in understanding both the gendered conflicts of the mystery cycles and medieval attitudes to the biblical episodes with which they engage.

To summarise thus far: I have identified some of the main gaps in critical approaches to time in medieval drama, and these will be addressed in the following chapters. Few works consider more than one model of time at once, or, where they do, they do not investigate how time is affected by the co-presence of different temporal understandings. As I have outlined above, the importance of this work is indicated by the fact that other areas of medieval literary studies have increasingly emphasised the importance of subjectivity in assessing medieval experiences of time. This has a great deal to offer to the medium of drama, with its many voices and opportunities for debate and conflict. But drama itself also has the potential to challenge the ways in which we currently think about multi-temporality. Moreover, my examination of time and gender together in transitional episodes from the mystery plays amplifies the possibilities for examining moments of conflict. If time is a fundamental contributor to the discord between men and women in the mystery plays, then an examination of the role of time in these incidents will expand the critical possibilities for examining broader depictions of gendered conflict and difference.\(^{71}\)

Appropriately for a thesis which discusses conflicts that complicate linear models of time, I structure my argument out of sync with biblical chronology. My first chapter considers the Incarnation at the beginning of the gospels; my second chapter moves ‘backwards’ in scripture to examine the Flood; and I conclude with

\(^{71}\) I would also like to note the lack of work on experiences of time in the broader structuring of the cycles themselves. While there is not scope to deal with this much larger subject here, I have identified that the repetitive performances of plays in cycles such as York and Chester participate in very different relationships to narrative time in comparison to static, non-cyclic plays, which tend to take a more linear direction. An audience at the York or Chester cycles might encounter episodes out of chronological order, in which Old and New Testament plays could be performed at adjacent stations and thus invite visual and aural comparison (and competition). Moreover, even repeated performances of biblical episodes would have appeared differently in each new space. For a discussion of the ways in which the times of the play transform the spaces they pass through, see Sarah Beckwith, *Signifying God: Social Relation and Symbolic Act in the York Corpus Christi Plays* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2001), pp. xv-xvi.
the slaughter of the Innocents. This is chiefly in order to study the increasingly complex relationships to time exhibited in plays depicting each of these episodes. The first chapter, which considers the argument between the N-Town Mary and Joseph concerning Mary’s pregnancy seeks to establish the ways in which their dialogue confronts the temporal problem of the Incarnation as a moment of supersession which effectively ‘undoes’, or replaces, former understandings and laws. The couple’s debate is here invested in questions concerning the present – how to ‘read’ Mary’s body correctly, and then, how to respond to it. The second chapter, which witnesses Noah and his wife’s altercations before, during and after the Flood in the York and Chester cycles, complicates supersessionary models by introducing further, competing models of temporal understanding. The plays of this chapter demonstrate an ongoing concern with the past – how it is to be managed, recollected or forgotten – and question what happens when characters experience an act of destructive divine punishment differently from one another. The final chapter moves away from conflict between husbands and wives to consider encounters between the mothers of the Bethlehem Innocents and Herod’s soldiers. This chapter analyses the complex topology of times operating within the Towneley *Herod the Great*, which brings together Hebrew prophecy, the massacre at Bethlehem, and the Crucifixion. It also examines the tragic consequences that arise when Herod is caught between the prophecies of the past and his fears for the future and attempts to alter time – only to bring times more securely together in one prophetic and prefigurative narrative.

In doing so, this thesis recognises that supersessionary and linear perceptions of Christian and medieval time are frequently challenged, particularly through the admission of spectres of the past, be they antediluvian pasts, the ‘prophetic’ pasts of Hebrew scripture, or medieval constructions of ‘Judaism’ as past. The concept of a ‘gap’ which separates past from present is dearly-held within the plays, as the Incarnation, the Flood and the Bethlehem slaughter are all presented, at least initially, as lines which distinguish the ‘now’ from the ‘then’. Yet these gaps are mere fantasies, and, without maintenance, are apt to dissolve and allow past, present and future to mingle.
CHAPTER ONE

The Old Man and the Pregnant Virgin: the ‘Christian’ Mary and the ‘Jewish’ Joseph of the N-Town Plays

In December 2009, a church in New Zealand celebrated Christmas with a new billboard. It depicted Mary and Joseph in bed together. A disgruntled-looking Mary was staring primly off into the top right-hand corner of the frame, while Joseph gazed wearily out at the viewer. The image was captioned: ‘Poor Joseph. God was a hard act to follow’. Within hours, the board had provoked angry complaints from churchgoers and non-believers alike, and the image of the couple was defaced with brown paint.¹

With a spectacular misjudgement of its audience, the billboard outside St Matthew-in-the-City Church invited its viewers to participate in the domestic life of the Holy family in a way which many found uncomfortable. The Archdeacon defending the board claimed it was intended to provoke debate and lampoon the literal interpretation of the conception story – but his statement met with criticism from the Catholic Church and other Christian groups who found the image disrespectful. Yet with its emphasis upon ‘Poor Joseph’, the image appears to be less concerned about launching an attack on Mary’s status than it is about exploring Joseph’s often ambiguous role within the nativity narrative. It invites both sympathy and ridicule. Presenting Joseph as a modern man with understandable insecurities about his sexual performance, the billboard raises questions which have for many ages been the subject of debate in imagery, literature, criticism and drama. It asks, first, how would Joseph have interpreted the changes wrought upon his wife’s body through her virginal conception of Christ, and second, what effect might this conception have had upon their relationship?

These questions also form the basis of late medieval dramatisations of Joseph’s doubt about Mary. Mystery plays dealing with the early stages of the nativity story often imagine a moment of domestic conflict when Joseph interprets Mary’s newly pregnant body as unfaithful. The Chester, Coventry, N-Town, ¹ For a full report of this incident, see the BBC News article <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8417963.stm> [accessed 17 January 2009].
Towneley and York plays all include depictions of Joseph’s doubt about Mary, with York and N-Town dedicating entire plays to this purpose.² Of these, Towneley, Coventry, York and N-Town feature dialogues between the holy couple in which Joseph, claiming Mary’s pregnancy as evidence, accuses his wife of sleeping with another man.³ Mary assiduously denies this and attempts to convince Joseph of the miracle of Christ’s virgin conception. However, while the holy couple in each of these plays suffers conflict as a result of their seemingly irreconcilable interpretations of Mary’s pregnant body, the N-Town plays amplify this conflict further by situating the couple’s argument within a pattern of doubters.⁴ Of all the surviving late medieval dramas, the N-Town plays confront Mary with the most stringent interrogation from a line of sceptical characters. These characters include her husband Joseph, the detractors who accuse her in a public trial, and a suspicious midwife.⁵ To balance these accusations, the N-Town Mary has an equally impressive number of defendants. An array of prophetic and divine characters stress her veracity, as do the three plays detailing her own immaculate birth and childhood and the dramatisation of a parliament of heaven preceding The Salutation and


³ The Chester cycle chooses instead to portray Joseph’s doubt through a monologue. While his speech is written as a reaction to Mary’s altered state, the Chester Joseph does not address Mary at all. Instead, he speaks about her and tells the audience of his plans to quietly leave his wife. This solitary confessional tone is very different from the dialogue of the other cycles. Nevertheless, the fact that the Chester Joseph retreats into monologue before being enlightened by an angel is similar to the character’s withdrawal from Mary in the N-Town play, which will be considered later in this chapter. See Lumiansky and Mills, ‘The Wrightes Playe’, ll. 123-68.

⁴ Following Peter Meredith’s publication of The Mary Play from the N-Town Manuscript and Alan J. Fletcher’s arguments concerning the composition of Cotton MS Vespasian D. 8, I shall not be referring to the N-Town plays as a ‘cycle’, as it is unlikely that they were performed as such. However, the fact that the plays were collated within one manuscript, potentially for use as a sourcebook for later productions, admits inter-play comparison amongst what Fletcher calls the ‘Marian’ plays of the N-Town collection (i.e. the plays chiefly dealing with the life of the Virgin Mary). See Alan J. Fletcher, ‘The N-Town Plays’, in The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre, ed. by Beadle, pp. 163-88; Peter Meredith, The Mary Play from the N-Town Manuscript (London: Longman, 1987), pp. 1-23 and Katie Normington’s theory discussing the N-Town plays as touring but fixed-place dramas in Katie Normington, Medieval English Drama (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), pp. 106-10.


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Conception. The N-Town Joseph’s domestic troubles are therefore placed within a broader and repetitive narrative arc of doubt, detraction, enlightenment and eventual belief.

Yet it is not just Mary’s body that comes under scrutiny in the N-Town plays. Joseph’s elderly, decrepit body also becomes an object of slander, ridicule and doubt, not least from Joseph himself. Just like his New Zealand billboard counterpart, the medieval Joseph is dogged by questions of impotence. All the mystery plays featuring scenes of Joseph’s doubt cite Joseph’s age as a ‘proof’ of his lack of responsibility for his wife’s present condition, but in the N-Town plays Joseph’s elderly impotence is not only much emphasised by the character himself, but also forms the basis of speculation both inside the temple and in the wider community. Depictions of Joseph’s doubt have therefore traditionally been read in relation to the popular comical medieval ‘elderly husband with a young wife’ narrative trope, in which the advanced age of the husband more or less guarantees the infidelity of the wife.7 This trope dates back to antiquity, but became particularly popular in the literature of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.8 The N-Town Joseph certainly reads his own situation in relation to this tradition. Fearing that he will be called a cuckold, he warns his audience: ‘all olde men to me take tent, / And weddyth no wyff in no kynnys wyse / þat is a ɜonge wench’.9 Joseph’s awareness of his own intertextuality in relation to medieval narratives concerning mismatched marriages therefore appears to participate in a form of genre collapse, in which medieval literary devices are projected on to the situation of New Testament characters. That

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7 An analysis of this trope is by far the most prominent critical response to plays depicting Joseph’s doubt. See for example V. A. Kolve’s discussion of comical characterisations of Joseph as a man too old for ‘preuy play’ in Kolve, The Play Called Corpus Christi, p. 249 and Normington, Medieval English Drama, pp. 108-9, which argues that Joseph solicits audience sympathy by appealing to a common shared knowledge of narratives in which a young bride is unsuccessfully matched with an elderly husband. For further work on medieval ageism and regarding this particular literary trope, see Brandon Alakas, ‘Seniority and Mastery: The Politics of Ageism in the Coventry Cycle’, Early Theatre, 9.1 (2006), 15-36.
8 Patrick J. Geary dates the emergence of depictions of Joseph as elderly back to the second-century Greek Protoevangelium of James, which develops Mary’s genealogy and narrative at the expense of Joseph’s in an attempt to navigate questions concerning Mary’s virginity, Jesus’ ‘brothers’; and Joseph’s role as father of Christ. See Patrick J. Geary, Women at the Beginning: Origin Myths from the Amazons to the Virgin Mary (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 71-73 (p. 73): ‘his age, emphasized in the Protoevangelium and the Pseudo-Matthew, increases, as does his infirmity’.
is, Joseph reads Mary’s body as if he were a medieval man – a reading which proves erroneous when applied to the mother of God.

This kind of collapse is akin to the forms of temporal collapse I will be considering in more detail with regard to the Flood in Chapter Two of this thesis. Bringing the biblical and the medieval into simultaneous existence, the N-Town play imagines a Joseph whose perspectives on marriage are informed by popular medieval literature depicting wifely infidelity. As I later argue concerning the arguments between Noah and his wife, the introduction of medieval perspectives into a biblical situation not only causes friction between husband and wife, it also introduces doubt into the biblical narrative itself. However, I argue that the tension between Mary and Joseph is concerned with something more temporally complex than Joseph’s doubts being merely an (anachronistic) product of medieval misogynistic literature. Instead, I will consider a further possible meaning behind representations of the aged Joseph’s doubt. I contend that the depiction of Joseph’s old age navigates a temporal and religious problem by casting him as the representative of an older law which offers little scope for comprehending the possibility of a virgin pregnancy – a law which Christian law is about to supersede. Joseph therefore paradoxically represents both an older, prior, law even as his accusations bring the Incarnation into the medieval present of his audience.

The importance of time in this characterisation of the holy couple has been briefly identified by J.A. Burrow’s claim that ‘[Joseph’s] ill-matched marriage […] is a portent marking a time when the order of nature is to be utterly transcended in the Virgin Birth’. However, the significance of this new ‘order of nature’, and what it means within the context of the plays, has yet to be explored. This critical omission is surprising given that questions of temporal order and transcendence constitute one of the primary reasons behind Joseph and Mary’s conflict. The first part of this chapter contends that Mary and Joseph initially experience the present of their own time very differently from one another, and that their understandings of this time are articulated through their readings of Mary’s pregnant body. I argue that the N-Town

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10 Burrow, The Ages of Man, p. 159.
Joseph’s Doubt exposes a disjunction between Joseph’s reading of Mary’s body according to his knowledge of a pre-Christian law, and Mary’s physical embodiment of a new law. In doing so, I examine the influence of late medieval Christian attitudes towards its scriptural past in the form of a prior, Hebrew law, as well as the play’s utilisation of medieval antisemitic tropes to navigate potentially troublesome doubts about Mary. In seeking to understand these times and the characters’ relationships with them, I therefore examine the implications of Christ’s Incarnation as a moment of historical change which instigated a ‘split’ between Jewish and Christian theologies. Returning to this thesis’ central question concerning what happens when characters experience time differently to one another, I thus contend that this couple’s differences actually provoke further, more fundamental questions, namely, what happens to understandings of time during moments of historical change, and also, how is it even possible to identify exactly when such a change has taken place? The dramatisation of a moment of change within the play itself through Joseph’s transition from a position of doubt to eventual belief in his wife frames a narrative of supersessionary ‘conversion’ which attempts to lay the doubts the play has raised to rest. However, I find that the time of the N-Town Marian plays remains ambiguous, and that this ambiguity, coupled with a legacy of Christian doubt concerning ‘Jewish’ conversion, retains the ability to further undermine supersessionary narratives even as it appears to confirm them.

While the N-Town Joseph’s Doubt play, with its linear narrative of doubt, conviction and conversion, appears to support discourses of supersession, the second part of this chapter argues that the plays preceding it, which deal with the couple’s marriage and the Root of Jesse, configure the relationship between ‘Hebrew’ and ‘Christian’ times and theologies very differently. Looking at the earlier play in the N-Town codex, The Marriage of Mary and Joseph, I examine Mary and Joseph’s participation in religious laws and customs which, falling before the Incarnation, are historically ‘Jewish’, and yet are informed and structured by medieval Christian ecclesiastical traditions. Here, I demonstrate that models of linear, or supersessionary time, are often complicated even within narratives heavily invested in promoting them, as past and present times are rendered interdependent through the very processes that seek to advance one era over the other. However, before I can move on to consider these lines of enquiry, it is first important to raise the questions
of what, exactly, Christian ‘supersession’ entails, and, more importantly, when it was understood to have taken place.

*(When) Did History Shatter?*

There appears to be a consensus among both medieval theologians and modern commentators that the coming of Christ acted as a historical caesura. As I briefly explained in the Introduction to this thesis, this idea had informed medieval English historiography since Bede’s placing of Jesus at the centre of chronological history. However, studies have since characterised the effects of this caesura, or break, very differently from one another. For example, A. J. Gurevich has argued that the birth of Christ had a structuring effect on history by separating it into two epochs, BC and AD. This separation, moreover, also gave a new meaning to the times on either side of this structure.¹¹ For Michel Serres, whose model of topological time I discuss in the final chapter of this thesis, Christ does not so much represent a break in time, but rather appears in philosophical and historical works as the only fixed point in a time which Serres otherwise represents as unfixed, malleable and ever-changing.¹² Anindita Niyogi Balslev and J. N. Mohanty, however, view Christian perspectives of time as interrupting the more linear fashioning of time in the Old Testament, due to the fact that Jesus’ appearance constitutes a meeting between time and eternity and between human and divine existence.¹³ Contrary to Serres and Gurevich, this perspective appears to suggest that, rather than imposing structure on time, Christ introduces an element of timelessness into human history – that his time is different precisely because it does not operate as time.

¹¹ See Gurevich, *Categories of Medieval Culture*, p. 111: ‘In the centre of this process is the decisive sacramental fact, which determines its direction, giving it a new meaning and predetermining all subsequent developments’. On the ability of Christ to impose (new) structure on time, see Peter Manchester, ‘Time in Christianity’, in *Religion and Time*, ed. by Balslev and Mohanty, pp. 109-37 (p. 116), which identifies the establishment of ‘a chronology whose descending and ascending numbers grow from the express idea that the time of Jesus’ life is a kind of permanent center of history, radiant of divine presence’.

¹² See Serres’ response to Pascal’s *Pensées* in Michel Serres and Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*, trans. by. Roxanne Lapidus (Michigan, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1995), p. 95: ‘Wherever God is absent, in physical or earthly space, there is no fixed point, but nevertheless there is a fixed point on whom we can rely: Jesus Christ, who is somewhere called the centre towards which all gravitates’.

¹³ See Anindita Niyogi Balslev and J. N. Mohanty, eds., *Religion and Time* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1993), p. 9: ‘for Christianity time and eternity meet, and it is at this meeting point that Jesus announces his presence. Eternity is thus, for Christianity, within time’.
However, Kathleen Davis’ description of New Testament teaching is particularly interesting from the perspective of this chapter. Situating the notion of ‘Christ-as break’ as developing before Bede and during the time of Augustine, she suggests that:

Christ’s birth shattered once and for all the whole frame of history: a temporal break from which a secular and incarnate, rather than a spiritual world destiny was imagined with increasing intensity from the time of Augustine.  

Davis’ reading, which is chiefly concerned with the political uses made of processes of periodization, argues that Christ’s birth performed as a violent ‘shattering’ of history. Her focus on the ‘secular and incarnate’ makes this reading distinct from arguments viewing the birth as the introduction of eternity into time. In those readings, the Incarnation brings all times into one, continuous, narrative; but in Davis’ interpretation, time continues to exist, albeit in a ‘shattered’ form.  

Moreover, the ‘temporal break’ Davis identifies might perform different roles: it might indicate a moment of change – a definitive rift between ‘before’ and ‘after’, or it could also suggest a ‘stop’ in time – a moment of stasis when the frame of history is broken. But what is certain is that, in each of these models of supersession, time is altered by Christ’s entry into it. A ‘shattering’ implies the messy dispersal and deformation of the times that have gone before, suggesting that, after the Incarnation, all times, and what they signify, are irrevocably altered. I argue that the N-Town plays’ depiction of the fraught relationship between Joseph and Mary, whose narrative appears at the very centre of the Incarnation narrative, works somewhere between these two versions of supersessionary time. Their conflict in Joseph’s Doubt, and Joseph’s initial inability to understand the meaning of Mary, suggests that Mary’s time is in the process of ‘shattering’ that of Joseph, but until he is enlightened by the angel he cannot see the warning cracks. However, I argue that the

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14 Kathleen Davis, Periodization and Sovereignty, p. 84.
15 A medieval consciousness of divine eternity provides a particular challenge for this thesis’ discussion of character experiences of time in the mystery plays, as it admits temporal complexity by essentially allowing all times to be staged as ‘one’, thus mimicking a ‘divine’ approach to time. Just as this thesis argues for a great diversity in medieval subjective experiences of time, so medieval accounts of eternity demonstrate a similar diverse complexity. For example, eternity may be presented as the divine experience of the human temporal state (with God experiencing all events as part of eternity, while humans only experience, and observe, time); it may be conceived as a concept entirely outside of time; or time and eternity may be constructed as antithetical and moralised concepts belonging to the pre- and post-Fall worlds. See for example the diverse approaches collated in Jaritz and Moreno-Riaño, eds., Time and Eternity: The Medieval Discourse.
mutually-validating elements of Hebrew and Christian times that are present in the earlier play *The Marriage of Mary and Joseph* suggest that, even before Christ’s entry into time, a concept of an eternal, divine narrative is at work. This eternal perspective may be observed forging continuity between past and present and binding Hebrew and Christian times together even before the Incarnation.

If there is critical indecision as to the precise effect of the time of Christ on subsequent perspectives on time, it is mirrored in the uncertainties concerning when, exactly, during Christ’s life and death this moment of temporal change was supposed to have taken place. Did Bede’s *anno domini* refer to the Incarnation, the birth, or the death, of Jesus? For example, Giorgio Agamben’s history of the early development of messianic law places this change, not at the time of the birth of Christ, but at the Pauline reworking of Christ as messiah: a development which ultimately split the Jews from the Jewish-Christians. Furthermore, he argues that, in the letters of Romans and 1 Corinthians, Paul situates the beginning of messianic time (or the ‘messianic caesura’) at the resurrection, and not the birth, of Christ. However, medieval sources seem to concur with a belief that ‘Christian’ time started during the human life of Christ. How early this time occurs, however, is not entirely clear. Leofranc Holford-Strevens has noted that even Bede’s ‘divisive’

16 See Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. by Patricia Dailey (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 63: ‘First, you have secular time, which Paul usually refers to as *chronos*, which spans from creation to the messianic event (for Paul, this is not the birth of Jesus, but his resurrection). Here time contracts itself and begins to end. But this contracted time, which Paul refers to in the expression *ho nyn kairos*, “the time of the now,” lasts until the *parousia*, the full presence of the Messiah. The latter coincides with the Day of Wrath and the end of time’. See also the detailed history of *Anno Domini* and its Dionysian origins in Daniel P. McCarthy, ‘The Emergence of *Anno Domini*’, in *Time and Eternity*, ed. by Jaritz and Moreno-Riaño, pp. 31-53.

17 This is not to claim that there was a uniform late medieval belief concerning temporal periodization. As Davis notes, periodizing structures tended to be a response to the independent needs of the social, political and religious contexts that constructed them. See Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty*, p. 16: ‘Augustine had little need to theorize a place and time for Christian kingship and political history, but in eighth-century Britain the very existence of the Church was precarious, and in Bede’s estimation it required active kings as much, sometimes more, than monks and monasteries. For this reason it is no accident that Bede became the first author to use *anno domini* dating in a political and institutional history, and thus to link – in a way that Augustine does not – the incarnation with political time’. See also Jennifer A. Harris’ discussion of the Bible’s influence over approaches to writing history in the Middle Ages in Jennifer A. Harris, ‘The Bible and the Meaning of History in the Middle Ages’, in *The Practice of the Bible in the Middle Ages: Production, Reception and Performance in Western Christianity*, ed. by Susan Boynton and Diane J. Reilly (Columbia, NY: Columbia University Press, 2011), pp. 84-104 (p. 93): ‘The Bible provided the narrative for a shared sense of the past and a means for understanding present events in its light’.
moment of time is uncertain, and that it took some time for his Western readers to recognise the difference between the Incarnation and the Nativity.\textsuperscript{18}

This raises a problem for my discussion of Mary and Joseph. If this moment of historical change is dated from the Incarnation (and, therefore, the angel’s Annunciation to Mary), then this would partially explain the episodes of doubt the N-Town Mary encounters over the several plays involving her husband, a community of detractors, and a suspicious midwife. In this reading, Mary and her body have changed, but the rest of the world has yet to recognise this change and can only apply the logic of pre-Christian understanding. This thus places immense importance on Mary’s role in establishing a new, ‘Christian’ perception of time. However, if historical change occurs after the nativity of Christ, this lends weight to the objections of Joseph and Mary’s other detractors – for in their experience, after all, there has been no fundamental shift to a time in which it is possible for a virgin to become pregnant.\textsuperscript{19} Given the Marian focus of the early N-Town plays, and bearing in mind the fifteenth-century East Anglian ‘incarnational aesthetic’ identified by Gail McMurray Gibson, I propose that, in the culture producing and performing \textit{Joseph’s Doubt}, this moment of change was believed to have occurred at the Annunciation.\textsuperscript{20} Nevertheless, the idea of the conception of Christ as a theological and temporal transition leaves space for negotiation: the ‘new law’ of Mary’s virginal pregnancy has not yet been consolidated, whilst the ‘old law’ receives its first challenge.

Belief in the pregnant Mary as the bearer of change also informed medieval perspectives on the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. As is evident from the emphasis placed upon it in the Jewish-Christian debates of the twelfth

\textsuperscript{18} See Leofranc Holford-Strevens, \textit{The History of Time: A Very Short Introduction} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 127, which notes that, while today’s preachers tend to imagine that the nativity of Christ was 2014 years ago, thus dating ‘AD’ from the advent of his birth, ‘It was quite frequent for years to be reckoned, not from 1 January AD 1 – a date disliked by the Church on account of the pagan festivities it had failed to suppress – but from 7 days previously, the 25th December 1 BC. This was the process in Anglo-Saxon England, [...] but it was ultimately supplanted by the rival principle of counting from the Incarnation proper on 25th March, the Annunciation, or Lady Day’.

\textsuperscript{19} Of course, the typological mis-translation of ‘young woman’ as ‘virgin’ in Isaiah 7. 14 and in Matthew 1. 23 suggested that there was a precedent in Hebrew scripture for the virgin pregnancy. See Jaroslav Pelikan, \textit{Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture} (New Haven: CT: Yale University Press, 1996). For an overview of the history of Christianity’s use of the book of Isaiah, including its use in Passion iconography and in the cult of the Virgin Mary, see John F. A. Sawyer, \textit{The Fifth Gospel: Isaiah in the History of Christianity} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 65-99.

\textsuperscript{20} See McMurray Gibson, \textit{The Theater of Devotion}, pp. 1-16.
century, Mary’s virginal pregnancy was increasingly held to mark a religious transition between the Jewish laws of the Old Testament and the Christian laws of the New Testament. The virgin conception likewise became a fundamental signifier of Christian belief, becoming something of a ‘sticking-point’ for both Christians and Jews who found Mary’s virginity difficult to believe in. As Gavin Langmuir and others have noted, Christian doubts concerning both the Virgin birth and the Eucharistic miracle of transubstantiation following the proscription of these doctrines in 1215 were frequently projected onto ‘Jews’, who, as I later argue, were not only accused of overly literal interpretations of scripture and doctrine, but were frequently characterised as carrying out physical tests in narratives seeking to prove the veracity of these doctrines. Such projections of Judaism were therefore designed for a Christian audience and intended to allay Christian doubts. Moreover, if, as I have suggested above, discourses of succession in medieval historiography hinged upon a perceived division in time at the Incarnation of Christ, then this in part explains why the figure of Mary came to play a prominent role in medieval narratives of Christian-Jewish conflict and supersession.

While belief in her virginity separated ‘Christian’ from ‘non-Christian’ belief structures, medieval miracle literature also ascribed to Mary a long narrative history

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21 See Abulafia, *Christians and Jews in Dispute*, pp. 123-37, which discusses the Talmudic denials of Mary’s virginal pregnancy. For further examples of Jewish denunciations of the Christian birth narrative, see Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (St Ives: Allen Lane, 2009), pp. 57-63.


23 It should be emphasised at this stage that my usage of ‘Jewish’ here, and throughout this thesis, refers to medieval Christian constructions of Judaism, rather than the practices of real Jews. In a country which had not contained any real Jews since 1290, such constructions were more influenced by antisemitic stereotypes than drawn from encounters with real Jews or a deep familiarity with Jewish theology. Where I use the term ‘antisemitic’, I adopt the definition of antisemitism proposed by Gavin Langmuir, which distinguishes anti-Judaism (a hostility towards the Jewish religion) from antisemitism (an irrational hostility directed against imagined characteristics of Jews which were fantastical and not visible in the practices of ‘real’ Jews): ‘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 had been observed to possess or engage in, then antisemitism first appeared in medieval Europe in the twelfth century. By then, the symbol “Jew” was evoking religious hostility, even though, or partly because, most Christians knew little about them’. See Langmuir, *History, Religion, and Antisemitism*, pp. 297-8.
of conflict with doubting ‘Jews’. These conflicts comprised of a series of narratives featuring Jews in antagonistic stances towards either Mary or Marian devotion. For example, such narratives might feature depictions of Jews desecrating an image or statue of Mary, or, in the development of blood libel accounts, attacking a Christian (often a child) who exhibited a particular devotion to Mary. As Miri Rubin has noted, narratives detailing these episodes of conflict tend to conclude with the Jews ‘disappearing’ from the narrative – either through voluntary or forced conversion (itself a form of supersession), or through death. This process of Jewish removal and Marian supersession also had a physical effect on the medieval landscape. The eleventh and twelfth-century growth of Mary as a public image coincided with the increasing number of Jewish expulsions throughout Europe, and the sites of former synagogues were frequently replaced with Marian shrines. Encounters between Mary and those participating in what were seen as pre-Christian belief-structures therefore tended to generate narratives of conversion, eradication or supersession. This demonstrates a certain literary assumption that narratives in which Mary is placed in conflict with antagonistic Jewish agencies will result in the contradiction, conversion or destruction of these agencies. I argue that elements of this narrative model direct the plot of Joseph’s Doubt, as the husband of Mary moves through a similar process of denial, contradiction and a conversion in which he renounces his former beliefs.

My decision to focus on the N-Town drama with regard to the ‘Joseph’s doubt’ narrative is based on two aspects of East Anglian devotional culture which encompass the debate between Joseph and Mary. Home to the internationally

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26 See Rubin, Emotion and Devotion, p. 13, and Kathleen Biddick’s description of the levelling of the Jewish quarter of Nuremberg after the expulsion of its population in 1349. The Frauenkirche was subsequently built over the foundations of the former Synagogue. Biddick, The Typological Imaginary, pp. 45-59.

27 While Peter Meredith has noted that these plays, unlike the York and Chester Cycles, come to us ‘without theatrical or social context and without indication of specific place or calendar time’, he
popular pilgrim shrine of Our Lady at Walsingham and supporting the highest
density of churches dedicated to Mary anywhere in England, fifteenth-century East
Anglia sustained a complex relationship to Marian devotion. This devotional culture
placed specific emphasis on the veneration of Mary’s virginal but maternal body, yet,
in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, coupled this devotion with political and
religious debate.\textsuperscript{28} The area witnessed several accusations of heresy and treason,
including the 1411 heresy trials of Norwich, and, a century later, the implication of
the Marian shrine itself in the Walsingham Conspiracy.\textsuperscript{29} The manifestation of these
disputes has already been examined in relation to the N-Town plays, suggesting that
the dramatisation of Mary and Joseph’s conflict articulated the some of the concerns
of their medieval performance time.\textsuperscript{30}

As often happened in places of Marian devotion, East Anglia also sustained a
particularly full history of antisemitic religious and political practice. Home to the
rival twelfth-century cults of William of Norwich and Robert of Bury, narratives of
Jewish ritual child-murder instigated localised practices of East Anglian devotion
which survived through four centuries as well as contributing towards violence

\textsuperscript{28} For example, J. A. Tasioulas has argued that the Walsingham shrine, with its relic of Mary’s milk,
encouraged a devotion to the Virgin Mary that was particularly concerned with the tangible. See J. A.
Tasioulas, ‘Between Doctrine and Domesticity: the Portrayal of Mary in the N-Town Plays’, in
\textit{Medieval Women in their Communities}, ed. by Diane Watt (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997),
pp. 222-45, (p. 223).

\textsuperscript{29} The failed Walsingham Conspiracy of 1536-7 planned an uprising to defend the monasteries and
protest against the abuses of gentry landowners. Several of those accused of being participants were
also involved with the Marian shrine, for example the main organiser Ralph Rogerson, who was a lay
chorister at Walsingham priory. See C. E. Moreton, ‘The Walsingham Conspiracy of 1537’,
\textit{Historical Research}, 63.150 (1990), 29-43 (p. 29) and McMurray Gibson, \textit{Theater of Devotion}, pp.
26-34.

\textsuperscript{30} See Theresa Coletti, ‘Purity and Danger: The Paradox of Mary’s Body and the En-gendering of the
Infancy Narrative in the English Mystery Cycles’, in \textit{Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval
Literature}, ed. by Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania
Press, 1993), pp. 65-95 (p. 79).
against Jews living there. Reproduced in East Anglian book illumination, painted on church walls and performed in dramatic productions (of which the late fifteenth-century Croxton Play of the Sacrament is the most well known), narratives of Jewish doubt and malevolence continued long after the Jews’ expulsion from England in 1290. East Anglia’s antisemitic culture has consequently been identified as an influence on the N-Town plays, though these discussions have so far been concerned with episodes featuring the midwife Salome and the Jewish priests who attack Mary’s bier in The Assumption of Mary. I argue that East Anglian religious concerns – which venerated Mary, resisted the changes of Protestantism, and exhibited a fear of Judaism which had manifested in the early development of child-murder cults, narratives of host desecration and localised expulsions – are brought together in the anxieties raised in the dialogue between the N-Town Mary and Joseph. This dialogue, which appears to promote the supersession of ‘Jewish’ time through the ‘Christian’ space of Mary’s body, is thus informed by the time of the plays’ performance contexts. Three possible times therefore emerge as being in operation here: the ‘Jewish’ time of pre-Christian belief, the ‘Christian’ time of the New Testament, and the late medieval East Anglian time of the N-Town plays’ production and performance. Performing a moment of transition between the Old and New Testament laws, the N-Town Joseph and Mary’s conflict also reflects the potential transitions inherent in their performance context.

31 For example, the year 1190 saw the plunder and murder of the Jewry at Lynn, the slaughter of Jews in Norwich on Shrove Tuesday and the execution of fifty-seven Jews in Bury St Edmunds on Palm Sunday. In the same year, Bury St Edmunds became the first town in England to expel its Jewish population. See Joe Hillaby, ‘Jewish Colonisation in the Twelfth Century’, in The Jews in Medieval Britain, ed. by Skinner, pp. 15-40 (p. 30). On the narratives of ritual child murder, see also Anthony Bale, ‘Fictions of Judaism in England before 1290’, in The Jews in Medieval Britain, ed. by Skinner, pp. 129-44.

32 See Merrall Llewelyn Price, ‘Re-membering the Jews: Theatrical Violence in the N-Town Marian Plays’, Comparative Drama, 41.4 (2007-8), 439-63. While acknowledging that Mary is herself a Jewish woman, Llewelyn Price’s discussion of depictions of ‘Jewish’ disbelief in and enmity against the N-Town Mary does not feature a discussion of Joseph’s doubts concerning his wife.

33 There is also a case to be made for a link between East Anglia’s hatred of Judaism and its fear of Protestantism. Although contested, Cecelia Cutts’ article has identified the potential usage of ‘Jewish’ characters in the Croxton Play as a method of contradicting Lollard doctrines concerning transubstantiation. See Cutts, ‘The Croxton Play: An Anti-Lollard Piece’, 45-60. However, I find that, while the Croxton Jews do serve the familiar narrative purpose of acting as the physical testers of otherwise intangible doctrines and thus allaying wider doubt, Cutts’ argument undermines the historical power of the host desecration narrative as being a familiar anti-Jewish narrative. Nevertheless, her argument concerning the projection of fear onto malevolent Jewish characters does have some value. As I argue in the Conclusion to this thesis, the ‘Jew’ was a remarkably malleable figure, and, as representative of a troublesome past, could be used to represent recalcitrant Catholicism in later, Protestant drama.
In the speech above, N-Town’s Joseph articulates the essential paradox at the heart of a drama that is simultaneously domestic and spiritual. While he wants to think that his meek and mild wife remains chaste, Joseph believes her pregnancy to be impossible without ‘mannys company’. But this is not simply an appeal to the laws of nature. It is also a question of spiritual understanding. The N-Town plays depict both Mary and Joseph as loyal observers of the religious laws of their community. Mary recites these laws on her entry into the temple, and both she and Joseph agree (albeit reluctantly) to marry when Joseph’s staff flowers, fulfilling the ‘prophecy’ of Isaiah. However, the virgin conception of Christ marks the beginning of a new kind of law: one that Joseph is spectacularly ill-equipped to encounter.

Joseph’s first encounter with Mary’s pregnant body in Joseph’s Doubt is initially performed as a negotiation of closed spaces. The play operates through a series of spatial exclusions: first, Joseph’s voluntary exclusion from his wife’s body, then his exclusion from her house, and, finally, from Mary’s presence until he is able to learn a new way of reading her. In this initial encounter, Joseph returns from a far country and is confronted with a locked door. He is only able to gain access to his wife after much shouting and persuading of Mary’s maid, Susanna, of his identity. From the beginning, then, Joseph is distance both spatially and temporally from Mary. His travels abroad not only leave a period of absence during which Mary

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35 Although, as I note later in this chapter, the temporal status of these laws is unclear, as the ‘Hebrew’ truths presented are filtered through medieval Christianity.
36 In using the term ‘prophecy’ in inverted commas, I indicate where medieval typology refers to Old Testament texts and aligns them with New Testament events, thus figuring them as prophecies. This is to distinguish them from the prophecies of the Old Testament, in which God reveals knowledge to a human being. So while chapters One and Three are chiefly concerned with typological ‘prophecy’, Chapter Two, which deals with the Flood, engages with the knowledge revealed to Noah by God concerning the Flood and the end of the world.
37 Immediately, spatial as well as temporal distance is established between the couple. While it is not explicitly stated what Joseph has been doing in his ‘fer countre’, other than earning the couple’s living, the medieval association of travelling and distance with religious viewpoints that threaten or diverge from that of Christianity is well documented. For example the famously antisemitic Croxton Play of the Sacrament, which is set in Aragon, shows the greedy Christian merchant Aristorius become involved in the corrupt activity of selling the host through his travelling and business.
has fundamentally changed, but which also physically separate Joseph from his wife’s domestic spaces, while hinting at other female spaces he has been absent from. The consequence of this absence is a conflict of both interpretation and of experience. Joseph has not experienced the Annunciation, and so can therefore only respond to the (spatial and anatomical) changes in his wife’s body one way: his ‘meke and mylde’ wife must have slept with another man during his absence.

Yet even as Joseph dwells on the physical signs of her pregnancy, Mary reconfigures his observations to reflect their significance within the context of the Christian narrative. This process begins when Joseph observes the glow of the pregnant Mary:

JOSEPH: Me merveylyth, wyff, surely! soure face I cannot se
But as þe sonne with his bemys quan he is most bryth.

MARIA: Housbond, it is as it plesyth oure Lord, þat grace of hym grew.
Who þat evyr beholdyth me, veryly,
They xal be grettly steryd to vertu.38

While observing the physical changes in his wife, Joseph unconsciously hints at the spiritual nature of Mary’s condition. His description of the brightness of his wife’s face signifies both the physical glow of pregnancy and the fact that she now carries the Incarnation of a god – a god whose status as ‘sonne’ is hinted at through Joseph’s unwitting pun. Yet his words also work at a temporal level that Joseph is not yet aware of. In describing Mary’s shining face – a face so bright he cannot see it properly – Joseph’s speech acts as a prefiguration of a later moment in Christian time in which the divine and human meet. Joseph’s encounter with the shining Mary and, more importantly, his misunderstanding of the greater spiritual meaning of what has happened to her, echoes the disciples’ experience of the Transfiguration of Christ in three of the gospels:

And he was transfigured before them. And his face did shine as the sun: and his garments became white as snow. And behold there appeared to them Moses and


Elias talking with him. And Peter answering, said to Jesus: Lord, it is good for us to be here: if thou wilt, let us make here three tabernacles, one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias. And as he was yet speaking, behold a bright cloud overshadowed them. And lo, a voice out of the cloud, saying: This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased: hear ye him. And the disciples hearing, fell upon their face, and were very much afraid.39

This meeting between Christ and the Old Testament prophets is one of the gospel’s central biblical demonstrations of continuance between the Old and New Testaments.40 The presence of Moses, the giver of the first law, and the prophet Elijah, who was said to herald the second, testifies to the legitimacy of Christ as bringer of the new law.41 As Joseph’s allusive speech unconsciously transposes this meeting of prophets into his present encounter with Mary, it prefigures this meeting between Hebrew and Christian authorities. It also tacitly suggests that Joseph’s encounter with Mary is a similar meeting of Hebrew and Christian perspectives, for Mary’s reply is situated within the Christian time her pregnancy signifies. It likewise acknowledges her new status as mother of God, recalling the powers attributed to Marian iconography to inspire its viewers to virtuous behaviour, whilst aligning her time with a Christian theology that recognised the concept of grace.42

Mary’s words


40 This is particularly the case in the gospel of Matthew, which, as I discuss in Chapter Three, was written for Jewish-Christians and was thus invested in promoting continuity between the theologies of Jesus and those of Hebrew scripture. This meeting also looks towards Christ’s death even as it justifies his authority as law-maker. See J. Andrew Overman, Matthew’s Gospel and Formative Judaism: the Social World of the Matthean Community (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990). Eamon Duffy argues that there was an increased interest in devotional practices and iconography concerning the Transfiguration in the late fifteenth century, after a new feast of the Transfiguration was introduced between 1480 and 1490. See Eamon Duffy, The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580 (London: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 45-6 and R. W. Pfaff, New Liturgical Feasts in Later Medieval England (London: Clarendon Press, 1970).

41 Despite the increasingly important role held by the Transfiguration in medieval iconography, it only appears in one York cycle play. See Beadle, ‘The Transfiguration’, in The York Plays, pp. 192-98. Here, the characters Helyas and Moses are granted extra-biblical speeches testifying to Christ’s authority as law-maker, as well as confirming their different places in the afterlife – Elijah is in the Earthly Paradise, while Moses is in limbo, awaiting the Harrowing of Hell. See Edmund Reiss, ‘The Tradition of Moses in the Underworld and the York Plays of the Transfiguration and Harrowing’, Mediaevalia, 5 (1979), 141-64 and Pamela M. King’s discussion of the Transfiguration play in the York Cycle in ‘Calendar and text: Christ's ministry in the York plays and the Liturgy’, pp. 46-7.

42 For discussions of Mary’s iconographical power as intercessor and inspirer of virtue, see Madeline H. Caviness, Visualizing Women in the Middle Ages: Sight, Spectacle and Scopic Economy (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), pp. 1-15; Marina Warner, Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary (Reading: Picador, 1976; repr. 1985), pp. 285-98 and Simpson, Reform and Cultural Revolution, pp. 383-457. Theresa Coletti has also identified the operation of what she calls ‘stage iconography’ in the Marian plays of the N-Town Cycle, and
therefore redefine the changes in her body within the wider context of the salvation narrative, as well as acknowledging her later, medieval iconographical context. Even before Joseph has recognised that Mary is pregnant, the couple’s encounter has therefore been framed by processes of literal interpretation and Christian re-interpretation. Joseph’s words describe, while Mary’s words redefine.

Already, Joseph and Mary’s words are working on a level which resists a linear temporal reading of their situation as they bring together the times of the Transfiguration, the Incarnation and late medieval devotion. Yet what is also important here is the reaction of the onlookers in the moments they bring together – the disciples gazing on the transfigured Christ as well as the N-Town Joseph looking at his changed wife. The disciples’ reaction is different in each of the gospel accounts. In the gospel of Luke, they sleep through much of the Transfiguration, and in Mark they are struck with fear and do not know what to say. There is something about this meeting between times and biblical authorities that renders the onlookers either speechless or (in the case of Peter’s blundering bid to build dwellings for the three spiritual figures) only able to comprehend the most mundane aspects of the miraculous apparition. It is the same for Joseph. Confronted with the ‘evidence’ of his wife’s miraculous condition, he can only marvel at it before, like Peter, going on to approach a spiritual mystery with a comically erroneous worldliness.

When he does notice Mary’s changed shape, Joseph’s reaction focuses on what is material and visible:

**JOSEPH:**  
That semyth evyl, I am afayd.  
þi wombe to hye doth stonde!  
I drede me sore I am betrayd.  
Sum other man þe had in honde  
Hens sythe þat I went!  
Thy wombe is gret, it gynneth to rise.  
Than hast þu begowan a synfull gyse.^[43]  

His understanding of Mary’s pregnancy progresses logically, from a physical observation, through his fear of betrayal, to the conclusion that Mary has committed

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adultery and ‘begownne a synfull gyse’. This begins a debate in which Joseph repeatedly asks for the name of the child’s father, only to be told it is God’s child – and his. But, for Joseph, Mary’s body is proof of her sinful behaviour. By reading Mary’s body literally, Joseph consolidates his role as a character encountering a new approach to a faith which places a different value on his wife’s pregnant body. With its emphasis upon belief in the unseen (particularly regarding the central doctrines of transubstantiation and the virgin birth), medieval doctrine taught that, while a thing’s physical appearances might convey one message, an accompanying act of faith was required to understand its deeper, spiritual significance. It also claimed that ‘Jewish’ scriptural traditions were limited to literal and carnal ways of reading, even to the point of spiritual blindness. As Jews were frequently depicted as unable to interpret Mary as anything other than adulterous, this accusation was turned back upon its imagined instigators and Jewish scriptural tradition was represented as excessively carnal and stubbornly backwards-looking.

With his concern regarding Mary’s ‘to hyɜe’ womb, the N-Town Joseph therefore performs what, in medieval depictions, constituted a ‘Jewish’ reading of Mary’s body by understanding her pregnancy as evidence of carnal sin, rather than of spiritual grace. Much of the play’s humour derives from the fact that most medieval men would read the situation in the same way – Mary is after all the sole exception to this rule – so, in effect, Joseph uses Mary’s body as a signifier of both post- and pre-Christian times. But Mary commands a different understanding of time – one

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44 See Rubin’s discussion of faith, the Eucharist and Jewish conversion in Rubin, *Gentile Tales*, pp. 170-88.

45 For example, the Jewish Talmud came under ecclesiastical censure in the 1230s for containing claims that Mary was an adulteress and whore. See Kruger, *The Spectral Jew*, p. 171 and Jeremy Cohen, *The Friars and the Jews: The Evolution of Medieval Anti-Judaism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), pp. 19-32. In some cases, accusations of scriptural ‘carnality’ were even extended to implicate the Hebrew scriptures of the Old Testament. For example, one of the objections in the famous attack on mystery drama, ‘A Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge’ (1380-1425) concerns the playing of episodes from the Old and New Testaments in parallel, as ‘the Olde Testament, that is testament of the fleysh, may not ben holdun with the Newe Testament, that is testament of the spirit’. See Clifford Davidson, ed., ‘A Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge’, *Early Drama, Art and Music Monograph Series* Vol. 19 (Kalamazzo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1993), pp. 93-115 (ll. 474-76).

46 While there is not space in this chapter to provide a fuller summary of medieval misogynistic writing concerning marriage, Alcuin Blamires provides a useful review of the origins and development of antifeminist narrative and satire in Alcuin Blamires, Karen Pratt and C. W. Marx, eds., *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992). For works dealing specifically with dramatic interpretations of Mary within the context of contemporary anti-feminist literature, see Richard Beadle and Pamela King, eds., *York Mystery Plays: A Selection in Modern Spelling* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 48; Normington,
which paradoxically depends on the authority of older laws even as it brings about their supersession. Mary is able to read her own body typologically.

Based upon the need to accommodate Jewish history within the Christian faith narrative, this form of reading is an important constituent of supersessionary models of time. Discourses asserting a temporal break which fundamentally altered the times preceding and following Christ used typological methods of reading the past to re-assimilate pre-Christian times.47 Where supersessionary models of temporality apply a linear model of time which views the past as either replaced, redefined or succeeded by the theologies or ideologies of the present, typological readings of events in the Hebrew Bible bring these times back into one continuous narrative. A typological understanding thus tended to approach scriptures falling before the Incarnation as prefiguring Christ. As Kathleen Biddick argues, this: ‘subsumed the Hebrew Bible into an “Old Testament” and conceived of this Old Testament as a text anterior to the New Testament’.48 Of course, this definition of typology poses something of a conundrum for an analysis of the N-Town couple. Joseph, as the earthly father of Jesus, cannot be considered ‘anterior’ to the New Testament because his role is essentially interior – he occupies a time which is firmly at the heart of the Christian narrative. It is not his time which is at fault: rather, it is his understanding of time. He must therefore learn to ‘read’ the events of his own time differently. In order to do this, he must himself undergo the dual processes of being assimilated into Mary’s narrative, as well as learning to re-work the past to recognise a precedent for the miracle of the virgin birth.

As the embodiment of the Hebrew text Isaiah 7. 14, which, in Christian typology, was held to predict the virgin birth of Christ, Mary is able to conduct a reading of her own time which approaches the Old Law, not as a contradiction, but as

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47 These are, of course, only two of several possible ways of reading Christ’s birth. As I discuss in Chapter Three, other medieval models of time see the times of the Old and New Testaments, not in terms of ‘before’ and ‘after’, but as part of a narrative in which different moments in time may be folded together. See also Harris’ description of Augustinian and earlier organisations of biblical time into chronologies separated into six epochs. Harris, ‘The Bible and the Meaning of History in the Middle Ages’, pp. 86-93.

a prefigurative verification of her new status.\textsuperscript{49} This is consistent with late medieval iconographical depictions of the young Mary at the Annunciation, in which she is often shown reading a book, the pages open at Isaiah 7. 14 – unaware that she is reading her own story even at the moment this ‘prophecy’ is fulfilled.\textsuperscript{50} These images, of course, contradict the N-Town Joseph’s argument that there is no precedent for the virgin birth, as typological readings are designed to find this precedent in earlier scriptures. By the time of the couple’s confrontation in Joseph’s \textit{Doubt}, Mary is privy to knowledge that Joseph is not. Attempting to convince her husband of a new truth, she therefore performs an act of typological reading by reconfiguring his observations about her changed body to hold a ‘Christian’ significance.

This reading puts Joseph in an impossible position. His retention of the laws which inform his experience of the present ensures he can only read his wife’s body one way. He validates this interpretation by his belief that, ‘God dede nevyr jape so with may!’\textsuperscript{51} Joseph’s reaction is understandable, not only because, in every case but Mary’s, such a literal reading of a woman’s pregnancy would be valid, but also because he has not learnt to read scripture typologically. Absent in a distant land during \textit{The Salutation and Conception} and with only his prior experience to refer to, Joseph can only understand Mary’s body from a pre-Christian perspective. He is therefore unaware that his own belief-structure has been superseded by one in which a virgin may become pregnant and time is experienced differently. The N-Town Mary’s body is therefore configured as a site of dramatic debate in which Mary herself takes part.

\textsuperscript{49} See Isaiah 7. 14: ‘Behold a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel’.


\textsuperscript{51} Spector, ‘Joseph’s Doubt’, l. 44.
Bearing in mind this thesis’ primary concern with what happens when times are not universally experienced, a wealth of new critical and theological possibilities emerge if the conflict between N-Town’s Mary and Joseph is read as a clash of temporal (and theological) perspectives. Joseph’s experience of the Incarnation is very different from Mary’s, and his accusations of infidelity underline the fact that, for him, the laws of religion (and nature) have not yet changed. Joseph’s perspective, which initially refuses to read Mary’s pregnancy as part of an overarching, Christ-centric history of salvation, muddies the idea of Christ’s birth as a point of transition as Old and New perspectives grapple over Mary’s pregnant body. These perspectives are also articulated through visual, as well as vocal, experiences of time, with the consequence that it is not just Mary’s body that becomes a site of debate in the N-Town Joseph’s Doubt.

Old Men, New Laws

While Joseph and Mary offer polemical interpretations of Mary’s pregnant body, the bodies of both characters also act as visual exemplars of this meeting between the Old and the New. Even before Mary’s pregnancy becomes a point of contention, the difference between the spouses is consolidated through a polemic of age and youth. Joseph is an old man in the N-Town plays. Indeed, age appears to be his defining characteristic. Ten of Joseph’s sixteen speeches in The Marriage of Mary and Joseph mention his advanced years, including his very first speech in N-Town, where he complains: ‘For febylnesse of age my jorney I may nat spede’. 52 Joseph then goes on to blame his old age for the apparent infidelity of his wife in Joseph’s Doubt, and it later provides bawdy material for his detractors in The Trial of Mary and Joseph. 53 Joseph’s elderly body is thus constructed as the visual opposite of Mary’s pregnant body and is, I contend, of almost equal importance.

53 See Spector, ‘The Trial of Mary and Joseph’, in The N-Town Play, pp. 139-52 (ll. 267-9), where the detractor mocks Joseph: ‘Hese leggys here do folde for age. / But with þis damysel whan he dede dawns, / þe olde charle had ryght gret corage!’
As I have explained above, by the fifteenth century the figure of the elderly Joseph had long been a part of popular medieval depictions of the holy family. The focus on Joseph’s age and infirmity in the Marian N-Town plays functions as yet another ‘proof’ of Mary’s virginity, as the attendant suggestions of impotence remove from him the possibility of being Christ’s father. Yet Joseph’s age also functions as a marker of difference between a theology which was increasingly depicted as aged and decrepit and the new theology figured in the virgin birth. I contend that juxtapositions of Mary’s young, fertile body with Joseph’s decrepit, impotent and initially blind one recall iconographic and literary approaches which attempted to differentiate between an older, Jewish religion and its more recent Christian successor. The bodies of the N-Town Joseph and Mary visually echo properties of the female figures of Ecclesia of the New Law – triumphant, glorious and bearing a resemblance to the Virgin Mary as Queen of Heaven – and Synagoga of the Old Law, who was frequently depicted as broken, blind and defeated. Such depictions of Synagoga reflected the deterioration of the Jewish image in England after the 1290 expulsion. By the fifteenth century she had moved from being a blind but beautiful ancestor to being depicted as corrupt, disfigured and facing away from the centre of a composition. This deterioration was also mirrored in artistic representations of male Jews, who, by the fifteenth century, had become disfigured stereotypes placed in visual as well as physical opposition to the more regular features of the Christian figures they share spaces with.

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54 The development of depictions of Joseph as elderly coincided with both the growth of Marian popular devotion and the popularity of narratives which pitted Mary against Jewish doubters and persecutors. See Rubin, Emotion and Devotion, p.13 and Llewelyn Price, ‘Re-membering the Jews’, pp. 455-6. On the physical decline of the figure of Joseph in fifteenth-century iconography, see Geary, Women at the Beginning, p. 74: ‘The representation of Joseph and the flight into Egypt could be read, by the fifteenth century, as old, spent, broken, a fool’.

55 Questions of physical as well as theological differentiation between Christianity and its Jewish origins have come to the forefront of debates about Judaism in the past ten years. See Christine M. Rose, ‘The Jewish Mother-in-Law: Synagoga and the Man of Law’s Tale’, in Chaucer and the Jews, ed. by Delany, pp. 3-23. See also Bale, The Jew in the Medieval Book, p. 1, which views the figures of Ecclesia and Synagoga as ‘a supreme articulation of the dichotomous similarity which lies at the heart of the relationship between Christianity and Judaism’.

56 See Bale, Feeling Persecuted, pp. 65-88 (p. 73): ‘Jews prevent a fully focused, uninterrupted gaze on Christ and they interrupt the harmony and delicacy of the book. In this way, the reader-viewer undergoes their own Passion within their memoria passionis, oscillating between grace and ugliness, beauty and pain, good and evil, Christian and Jew’. See also Higgs-Strickland, Saracens, Demons and Jews, p. 108, who says of medieval depictions of Jews: ‘Of the various distorted facial features, particular significance was assigned to exaggerated, elongated, broad, or hooked noses or beards [...] as a principal means by which Jews are insulted, ridiculed, and condemned’.

57
Despite their gender difference, representations of Joseph and Synagoga hold several similarities, as Synagoga’s visual decline was paralleled by depictions of an increasingly aged Joseph. By the fifteenth century, Joseph was usually shown as an elderly man and placed in the background of compositions featuring the holy family. Moreover, Sylvia Tomasch notes that, in certain illustrations of Joseph’s doubt, Joseph is shown bearing specifically ‘Jewish’ attributes in bearing and clothing, which he then loses after his reconciliation with Mary. This suggests that his eventual belief in Mary was held to signify his belief in Christian doctrine. A reading of the N-Town Joseph’s visual characterisation as ‘Jewish’ therefore lends a broader meaning to the ‘old-man-with-a-young-wife’ polemic identified at the beginning of this chapter. Their characterisation likewise reflects the dichotomy of medieval Christianity’s relationship with its Jewish spiritual past. United through their marital relationship, Mary and Joseph are nonetheless markedly different from one another. It also, moreover, suggests that historical change is figured through both Mary and Joseph’s bodies, and not merely that of Mary. This complicates arguments which hold female bodies up as projections of historical change, instead articulating change through the visual and verbal conflict between a man and a woman.

Of course, polemical interpretations of Mary and Joseph along the lines of the Synagoga / Ecclesia iconographic representation are invariably problematic. They disrupt the gendered similarity implied by the female figures by casting the ageing ‘Jewish’ figure as a man. More crucially, plays depicting Joseph’s doubt are not static, but hinge upon his ability to move from one state of belief to another. Despite its age, Joseph’s body is not a stagnant repository of time, or even an outdated remnant of a rapidly superseded past. Instead, he acts as a conduit of time by

58 Sylvia Tomasch, ‘Postcolonial Chaucer and the Virtual Jew’, in *Chaucer and the Jews*, ed. by Delany, pp. 69-85 (p. 73). Examining a 1215 panelled illustration showing Joseph’s transition from incredulous Jew to believing Christian in British Library Ms. Add. 46780, f.12, Tomasch argues that ‘Joseph attests not only to the multiple Jewish figurations available to Christian artists of the time but also to the continuing centrality of Jews to Christian self-definition’.
performing a transition from a state of doubt to a state of belief. His journey of doubt, conviction and conversion ends, not in Joseph’s broken defeat, but confirmed in his role as Mary’s partner and the human father of Christ. Unlike Synagoga, Joseph does not remain blind.

**Joseph: The First Christian ‘Convert’?**

The argument between Joseph and Mary leaves both characters at a kind of temporal stalemate which can only be resolved through an act of divine intercession. In order for reconciliation between the couple to be possible, Joseph must therefore move from one understanding of time to another; essentially becoming the first Hebrew convert to one of the most fundamental principles in medieval Christian belief: the belief in the virgin birth of Christ. This is the only play encountered in this thesis in which one character moves from one understanding of time to another.\(^{60}\) Joseph’s theological transition from a literal to a spiritual understanding of Mary’s body involves divine intercession, and the process is not an easy one. It also involves a number of different movements across the playing space to be staged in order for Joseph to encounter the angel who secures his belief in his wife’s truth. First, Joseph physically removes himself from the area of domestic confrontation and the pregnant body that is the source of his mistaken interpretation. Then, Mary’s prayer that her husband might know the truth moves between her own domestic sphere and that of the heavens, where God is shown tasking his angel with enlightening Joseph.\(^{61}\) The angel then presumably leaves the heavens to enter Joseph’s space, where he attests to Mary’s innocence. Even before the angel speaks, this staging of movement through real, physical spaces works to validate Mary’s simultaneously spiritual and physical

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\(^{60}\) The characters examined throughout this thesis all experience conflict as a result of their different temporal experiences and agendas. However, while, as the following chapters demonstrate, troublesome characters may be silenced, ignored, suppressed or removed from the stage, only Joseph is shown undergoing a process of change and reconciliation.

\(^{61}\) Mary’s prayer configures Joseph’s disbelief as a form of illness which has the potential to be cured through divine intercession: ‘For vnknowlage he is deseysyd, / And perfore, help þat he were esyd’. See Spector, ‘Joseph’s Doubt’, ll. 130-31. By calling her husband’s ‘vnknowlaje’ a disease, Mary connotes that his ignorance also holds negative, bodily connotations – thus feeding back into antisemitic tropes concerning corrupt, diseased ‘Jewish’ bodies. See Joshua Trachtenburg, *The Devil and the Jews: The Medieval Conception of the Jew and Its Relation to Modern Anti-Semitism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970), pp. 50-51 and Young Gregg, *Devils, Women and Jews*, pp. 177-78: ‘Several sermon exempla mark or associate Jews with physical corruption, disease, or disability, symbolic of their spiritual corruption; these conditions can only be cured by conversion and/or baptism’.
cognition. This therefore begins to break down some of the closed spaces encountered at the play’s beginning.

What happens next bears some similarities to medieval literary accounts of the conversion of Jews. First, a miraculous occurrence – in this case, the appearance of an angel – directly contradicts Joseph’s previous, erroneous belief by informing him that Mary is a ‘clene mayd as she was beforn’. While the process of conviction often takes longer in other miracle narratives of Jewish conversion (for example, it might involve a series of debates, the threat of death or even a protracted spectacle of violence), Joseph’s conviction takes only seventeen lines. Although he is initially crying too much to recognise the angel, when Joseph does listen to the angel’s words, his conviction is instant. His language then moves to that of the Christian penitent:

JOSEPH: A, Lord God, benedicté. Of þi gret conforte I thank the þat þu sent me þis space. I myght wel a wysyt, pardé So good a creature as she Wold neyr a don trespace For sche is ful of grace I know wel I haue myswright. I walk to my pore place And ask forgyynes, I haue mysthought.

Joseph’s speech follows a similar pattern to that of the speeches of the newly convinced Jews in the Croxton Play of the Sacrament. When Jonathas and his companions are addressed by an image of Jesus, like Joseph, their first response is to cry out to God. Both then admit their own error in the face of an abundant performance of the ‘truth’ before going on to confess, repent of their erroneous belief and ask for forgiveness from the spiritual figure they have wronged. In the Croxton

63 See the conversion narratives collated in the sermon exemplar of Young Gregg, Devils, Women and Jews, pp. 203-33, particularly the exemplar ‘A Jew Debates the Virginity of Mary’, in which a Jew disputing with a Christian man about Mary’s virginity is convinced when a lily flowers out of the wine pot that stands between them. See also Anthony Bale’s discussion of different versions of the Marian miracle of the boy singer in Bale, The Jew in the Medieval Book, pp. 57-103 (p. 72): ‘the Jews are displaced by the boy’s singing, they disappear from the narrative, they are killed, or they are converted’.
Jews’ case, this is forgiveness from Jesus; in Joseph’s, he asks Mary for forgiveness.65

Through a combination of physical movement, spiritual intervention and repentance, Joseph therefore navigates his uncertain position within the Jewish / Christian narrative by becoming the first to believe Mary, and, after his wife, the second human to partake in New Testament time. But in order to do this, Joseph must deny the time of his former disbelief. When he returns to Mary, Joseph retracts his previous words and replaces them with the repetitive speech of a penitent:

JOSEPH: A, mercy, mercy, my jentyl make,
      Mercy, I haue seyd al amys!
      All þat I haue seyd, here I forsake.
      ȝoure swete fete now lete me kys.

MARY: Nay, lett be my fete, not þo ȝe take;
      My mowthe ȝe may kys, iwys,
      And welcom onto me.66

When Joseph returns to beg Mary’s forgiveness, he approaches Mary as a medieval sinner, asking her for mercy and offering her veneration. As well as looking forward to Mary’s (later) role as the ultimate intercessor between penitents and Christ, Joseph’s retraction – ‘All þat I haue seyd, here I forsake’ – marks his abandonment of the language with which he formerly accused her and contrasts it with his new, penitent, speech. In so doing, Joseph not only acknowledges the superior truth of Christianity, but also defines his former words as erroneous – essentially cutting them away from his present time. The removal of his ‘vnknowlage’ thus reinstates Mary to her place as a figure of devotion, whilst also restoring Joseph to his role as husband and fitting adoptive father of the unborn Christ. Joseph’s willingness to enact the first transition between pre-Christian and Christian belief therefore concludes with a temporary resolution of these ideologies. But Mary’s response to

See Davis, ed., ‘The Play of the Sacrament’, ll. 741-6 and Rubin, Gentile Tales, p. 170: ‘The Croxton play [...] holds up the Jew as a didactic prop, as he conveniently converts to Christianity in the face of Eucharistic miraculous manifestation’. This process, particularly the characters’ begging of forgiveness from Jesus and from Mary, is markedly different from Early Modern dramatic characterisations of the Jewish men, whose ‘conversions’ are very often forced or reluctant and they eschew any opportunity to repent or ask for forgiveness. Female Jewish characters in these plays are, however, presented as more open to conversion, usually through marriage to a Christian man. See Shapiro, Shakespeare and the Jews, pp. 131-65.

Joseph’s speech, in which she refuses to allow Joseph to kiss her feet and instead tells him to kiss her mouth, also works to reconcile Mary’s dual roles as the spiritual intercessor of medieval devotional practices with her role as the human wife of Joseph. So although Joseph’s penitent gesture underlines his experience of Mary’s own transition from a human woman accused of adultery to the elevated role of worshipped icon, Mary’s request for Joseph to kiss her mouth reasserts her human status by reinstating their husband-wife relationship.67

Nevertheless, Joseph’s ‘wilful’ denunciation of all he has previously said and believed suggests that, while he now recognises the truth of his wife’s condition, he continues to experience time somewhat differently from her. He wishes to forsake his former beliefs now that he has adopted new ones. Mary, on the other hand, refashions the past in the service of the present – a practice for which the conversion and assimilation of her ageing, irascible and doubting husband to the service of Christ provides an exemplar. Moreover, while a reading of Joseph’s reconciliation with Mary as part of a supersessionary narrative extends an understanding of the times (and conflicts) operating within the play, the ‘conversion’ staged does not necessarily show a clear-cut movement from one understanding of time to another. Although the ‘conversion’ of Joseph in Joseph’s Doubt appears to confirm what Lisa Lampert calls the ‘supersessionary trajectory’ of the N-Town plays, supersession here, as in other medieval narratives of Jewish conversion, is a process that must be endlessly performed.68

While the play ends with Joseph reconciled with his wife’s ‘Christian’ experience of time, his subsequent appearances in the N-Town plays show him continuing to struggle with what this entails. For example, Joseph remains an old man married to a younger woman and still has to deal with the social ridicule that comes with this position. He is therefore mercilessly ridiculed in public by the

67 This fluctuation between the divine and human roles of Mary is neatly summarised by Katie Normington: ‘On the one hand, they [versions of Mary] are icons shaped by religious and cultural forces to represent remote and unattainable images of womanhood. On the other hand, they are humanised through their public presentation in the dramas and demonstrate concern with aspects of medieval women’s daily life’. See Normington, Gender and Medieval Drama, p. 4. See also Teresa Reed, Shadows of Mary: Understanding Images of the Virgin Mary in Medieval Texts (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), pp. 1-15, which interrogates the ways in which depictions of Mary’s humanity came to represent an ideal of womanhood.
68 Lampert, Gender and Jewish Difference, p. 104.
detractors in the subsequent Trial of Mary and Joseph. In the Nativity play, Joseph is characterised as an irritable, put-upon man, and it is clear that the question of paternity still rankles with him. When Mary asks him to fetch her some cherries from a tree, he tells her that it is too high, ‘þerfore lete hym pluk ɜow cheryes begatt ɜow with childe!’ The tree, of course obligingly bows down, giving Joseph yet another cause to lament the fact that, through his unkind words to Mary, he has offended ‘God in Trinýté’. By the play of the Purification, Joseph demonstrates that he is finally beginning to understand what Mary’s miraculous pregnancy entails by telling her that, as her pregnancy was ‘clene’, she has no need ‘to kepe þe lawe on Moyses wyse’. While Joseph’s speech here appears to recognise that the laws of Moses have been superseded when it comes to his wife, Mary’s willingness to participate in the Purification rites yet again shows her husband’s error – despite her special case, the Hebrew laws must still be performed. Joseph’s conversion is therefore not the work of an instant. It is a continuous pattern of doubt, misunderstanding and error that is repeated in each of his appearances in the N-Town cycle, as well as contributing towards N-Town’s larger narrative pattern of episodes of doubt and enlightenment.

Joseph’s experience of conviction is, moreover, consistent with current debates in the field of Jewish Studies, which, over the past fifteen years, have made the observation that medieval narratives of Jewish conversion rarely ended with a comfortable assimilation and closure. For example, Robert Stacey identifies a Christian fear that it is impossible to fully eradicate ‘Jewishness’, even through conversion. Steven Kruger also contends that medieval antisemitic constructions of

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70 Spector, ‘The Nativity’, l. 44. Of course, this reference to the Trinity appears to signify that Joseph is becoming increasingly aware of theologies which extend beyond his own immediate time.
72 As such, Joseph’s progress through the plays bears a striking resemblance to later Protestant narratives of conversion, in which conversion is seen as a lifelong, ongoing practice, rather than a hinge-point in one’s life. See Ryrie, Being Protestant in Medieval Britain, p. 440: ‘It was acknowledged that conversion was indeed a process. [...] thunderclap conversions were strictly for Saul on his road or Augustine in his garden. For real early modern Protestants, and indeed for most of the idealized ones too, the business was often drawn out – sometimes agonizingly so’.
73 See also Llewelyn Price’s discussion of N-Town’s repetitive narratives of ‘Jewish’ doubt and punishment as she examines the midwives, detractors and Jewish priests who oppose and doubt Mary in ‘Re-membering the Jews’, 439-63.
74 See Stacey, ‘The Conversion of the Jews to Christianity in Thirteenth-Century England’, p. 278: ‘By the middle of the thirteenth century in England, there was clearly an irreducible element to Jewish
Judaism as blind, feminised, and resistant to change hampered the movement of an individual’s identity from ‘Jewish’ to Christian:

While conversion to Christianity was repeatedly encouraged, and indeed often coerced, converts clearly occupied an uncomfortable position in relation to both their old and their new religions, and perhaps particularly when it came to the possibility of being integrated into Christian sexual and familial structures. These beliefs left many Jewish coverts to Christianity in a place much like that of the N-Town Joseph – a liminal ‘gap’ between two faiths. Moreover, when Joseph’s process of conversion is staged as part of a larger narrative arc spanning several plays, it makes us question not only how successfully Joseph has moved between ‘Hebrew’ and ‘Christian’ times, but also how successful a linear, transitional model of time actually is within the plays. While, by the end of Joseph’s Doubt, change has taken place for Joseph, it does not ‘stick’, but must be constantly performed and re-iterated. This also leads me to ask whether a moment of historical transition has taken place, or whether it is really only Joseph’s reading of his own time that has changed.

I therefore argue that the concept of Jewish-to-Christian conversion as a continuous process, rather than a definable moment of epiphany, is a plausible model of the way in which the Marian N-Town plays configure the introduction of Christ to time. This brings me back to the second supersessionary model I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, which, rather than decisively replacing one time with another, instead read the appearance of Christ as introducing an element of eternity that makes it possible to read all times as part of the Christian narrative. This is consistent with the wider practice of the N-Town plays to bring times together in a identity in the eyes of many Christians, which no amount of baptismal water could entirely eradicate, at least from a layman. Through baptism, converts from Judaism became Christians, but this did not mean that they had entirely ceased to be Jews in the eyes of their brothers and sisters in Christ. See also Steven Kruger’s argument that the bodies of Jews (and Saracens) resisted conversion due to the fact that they were so heavily gendered as ‘feminine’. See Kruger, The Spectral Jew, pp. 69-105. In a similar manner, although Joseph is able to ‘transcend’ his former belief in Mary’s infidelity, the fact that he remains an old man with a significantly younger wife continues to cause problems throughout the N-Town Marian plays.


This lack of completion, or closure, in narratives of supersession is also identified by Lisa Lampert with regards to the N-Town midwives and the Croxton Jews. See Lampert, Gender and Jewish Difference, p. 14: ‘These figures are presented as doubters who are converted through faith, as supersession is literally inscribed into their very bodies. But despite their endings in conversion, these narratives do not find easy closure’.
representation of Christological eternity. Above all the surviving mystery plays, the N-Town plays are particularly determined to locate Christian belief structures far earlier than either the birth or the Incarnation by performing the apocryphal narratives concerning Mary’s own Immaculate Conception and early childhood. This structure becomes particularly important at the end of Joseph’s Doubt because Joseph’s return to domestic harmony with his wife relies just as much upon the couple’s continued retention of former laws as it does the supersession of them.\(^77\) With no knowledge of the later theologies of Jesus’ ministry or the complexities of grace realised in the Crucifixion, Mary and Joseph continue to live in a world governed by Hebrew law – even if this law is characterised by the late medieval Christian audience of the plays’ performance context. Rather than demanding a supersessionary rupture with or replacement of the laws of past, the couple’s narrative of doubt, conviction and conversion ends, not with the elderly Joseph defeated, but reinstated as his wife’s partner.\(^78\) Joseph has not, therefore, experienced a jump across an imagined ‘break’ in time, but rather participates in an ongoing reconfiguration of his approach to time which retains much of the past.

The preceding analysis has approached the N-Town performance of Joseph’s Doubt through a linear model of time which supports an event, or events, of transition from one state of belief to another. However, as this thesis will increasingly demonstrate, linear models of time provide only one, very limited reading of the temporal possibilities of medieval dramatisations of biblical texts. So whilst Joseph’s Doubt sustains some supersessionary ideas by making Joseph old, ignorant and doubting, it simultaneously troubles this idea by making Joseph’s objections understandable: until the narrative of the New Testament unfolds, there is no clear law to supersede that of the Old. Moreover, as I have demonstrated above concerning the theological and temporal debates about the effect of the birth of Christ on time, it is difficult to chart the progress of a character from a clear state of Jewish belief to one of Christian belief. If the relationship between Mary and Joseph in the earlier Marian N-Town plays is considered, the religious status of the characters present at, or just before, the birth of Christ, becomes far more ambiguous.

\(^77\) Hence Mary’s continued obedience to the Hebrew rites of childbirth in The Purification.

\(^78\) Models of supersession as a moment of rupture will be discussed further in the following chapter concerning the Flood.
As historical or biblical figures existing, literally, at the time of the birth of the New Testament, and well before the resurrection and development of Christian Messianic law, they cannot be called Christians. Yet, as dramatic characters produced by a medieval Christian society, they are informed and directed by the needs and preoccupations of a Christian audience. Despite his encounter with the angel, Joseph’s ‘conversion’ is therefore no linear, Pauline conversion from one state of belief to another, whilst even Mary’s status has famously been shown to fluctuate ambiguously between gendered and religious categories. The time of the Marian N-Town plays is therefore more complex than the broadly supersessionary narrative arc of Joseph’s Doubt would suggest. In the concluding section to this chapter, I therefore examine the ways in which The Marriage of Mary and Joseph – the play in which Mary and Joseph meet for the first time – imagines Hebrew time to be an indivisible part of a Christian present. It thus further complicates the idea of a clear break between pre and post-Christ times, as ‘Christian’ time is shown to inform and direct times occurring long before the Incarnation.

‘Who xall expownd þis oute?’ Mixed Theologies in the Marriage play

As I have argued, the depiction of Judaism in the mystery plays has usually been examined in relation to characters who are either specifically named as Jews or those who are depicted as performing a ‘Jewish’ role by being antagonistic to Christ. These characters, (for example, Herod, Annas, Caiaphas and the soldiers who persecute Christ), have been identified as performing to an antisemitic stereotype which casts Jews as rejecting Jesus’ divinity and opposing change. But as I noted in the Introduction to this thesis, these studies either do not include characters who are ethnically Jewish, or identify them as doubting, but open to conviction and thus,
essentially, as not Jewish. Nevertheless, while such characters are not vociferous deniers of Christ, they are participants in a law that is not yet Christian. The questions of religious identity raised by the ambivalent status of the time around the Incarnation and birth of Christ perhaps explain this relative lack of critical work on ‘ethnically Jewish’ characters. While characters such as the Joseph discussed above are depicted as ignorant of the implications of their own time, they are ultimately open to conversion and are not the stubborn adherents of a superseded faith that appear in medieval depictions of Jews living after the death of Christ. However, religious statuses become even less clear in the N-Town plays preceding the Salutation and Conception, where all characters, including Mary, are historically Jewish and depicted as following ‘Jewish’ law – although this is, of course, a representation of Judaism heavily invested in Christian theology. Moreover, even before the first gospel miracle of Mary’s impossibly pregnant body is encountered, doubt remains one of the defining characteristics of this performance of Judaism at the brink of Christian time.

The early Marian plays of the N-Town manuscript initially present the holy couple as part of an Old Testament community and obedient to its laws. A temple virgin, the young Mary is depicted as well-versed in the articles of her faith, even if her recitation of the ‘fyftene psalmys’ is anachronistically filtered through Catholic doctrine, especially concepts of confession, grace and good deeds. Likewise, the

82 These characters cannot therefore be accommodated comfortably by the two most common ways medieval culture categorised ‘Jewish’ characters: either the grotesque characterisations given to the post-scriptural characters that rejected Jesus, or representations of Old Testament Jews as a chosen people who prefigure or predict the life of Christ. See William Chester Jordan, ‘The Pardoner’s “Holy Jew”’, in Chaucer and the Jews, ed. by Delany, pp. 25-42 (p. 31): ‘A few of these Jews were paragons and, even if marred by sin, like David’s adultery and Solomon’s idolatry, were regarded by Christians as exemplary figures. […] Post-scriptural Jews, with rare exceptions […], were different. They authorized the killing of Jesus’.
83 See Coletti, ‘Purity and Danger’, p. 74, which claims Mary’s obedience to Jewish rites such as the Purification stresses her retention of Jewish laws even when her ‘sinless’ pregnancy renders them obsolete.
84 In this sense, Mary is a Christian before her time. See Spector, ‘The Presentation of Mary’, in The N-Town Play, pp. 81-94 (ll. 101-61). There have been many readings of the elements of Christian teaching and doctrine appearing in the depiction of Mary’s childhood in the N-Town cycle – particularly of her entry into the temple, where she exhibits a comprehensive knowledge of late medieval Catholic doctrine. See Frank M. Napolitano, ‘The N-Town Presentation of Mary in the Temple and the Production of Rhetorical Knowledge’, Studies in Philology, 110.1 (2013), 1-17, and McMurray Gibson, The Theater of Devotion, pp. 128-33.
play’s focus on Joseph’s genealogy as a descendant of David acknowledges a lineage invested in bringing together the biblical Hebrew race with the approaching theology of Jesus. The importance of Joseph’s genealogy, outlined in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, places a specific emphasis on promoting continuity between Jesus, his ‘earthly’ father, and the race of David. However, the N-Town Marriage is relatively unusual in stressing the importance of this genealogy, particularly as the earlier N-Town Marian plays extend Mary’s own genealogy backwards to her apocryphal parents, Anna and Joachim. Patrick Geary has noted the popular marginalization of Joseph’s genealogy and his status as a father-figure throughout the Middle Ages, and argues that the genealogies were increasingly seen to conflict with Mary’s status as Virgin mother. However, the N-Town plays appear to celebrate Joseph’s descent, whilst the flowering of his staff, signifying the Jesse Root of Isaiah 11.1, suggests that the plays are invested in presenting the impending Incarnation as a continuation of the preceding laws, rather than a point of rupture. This is consolidated by the fact that Jesse Root, the play marking the ‘bridge’ in the N-Town manuscript between the plays of Moses and those dealing with the early life of Mary, depicts a succession of Hebrew prophets and kings, including Isaiah, David, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, testifying to the coming of a new king born of a maiden. Jesus, Mary and Joseph thus enter into the N-Town plays fully validated by the book of Isaiah. As such, the emphasis on Joseph’s Davidic line in The Marriage of Mary and Joseph performs a more affirmative than disruptive role, suggesting that Jesus’ temporal authority is manifested through genealogical coherence on earth as well as in heaven. This stressing of continuity and establishing of connections between

86 See Matthew 1. 1-16, which traces the Davidic line back to Abraham, and Luke 3. 23-38, which traces Jesus’ genealogy back to Adam. Although the genealogies differ in content, both gospels record Joseph’s genealogical line, rather than Mary’s.
87 Geary, Women at the Beginning, p. 63: ‘Centuries of apologists and exegetes sought to resolve the paradox of how to place Mary as the only human parent of Jesus and yet preserve his descent from David’.
88 See Spector, ‘Jesse Root’, in The N-Town Play, pp. 65-70. See also Lisa Lampert’s discussion of N-Town’s ‘supersessionary trajectory’ in Lampert, Gender and Jewish Difference, p. 104: ‘the overall structure of the N-Town cycle is also shaped by supersession, as enactments of events from the “Old Testament” are presented as types of the New Testament and biblical Jews actively proclaim Christian prophecy, voicing justification of the supersessionary trajectory of Christian salvation history’.
89 See the Introduction to Bruun and Glaser, eds., Negotiating Heritage, pp 1-17 (p. 1): ‘The Tree of Jesse portrays Jesus Christ as the present culmination of a generative past and as the future of which that past spoke’.
past and present through processes of prediction and genealogy does not, at this point, disrupt the play’s investment in a successive, linear time model.

However, this is not always the case. As the bishop’s speech in The Marriage of Mary and Joseph indicates, the bringing together of Hebrew and Christian theologies presents a problem for the temple laws:

EPISCOPUS: Who xal expownd þis oute?  
þe lawe doth after lyff of clennes;  
þe lawe doth bydde such maydenes expres  
hat to spowsyng they xulde hem dres.  
God help us in þis dowhte!90

Mary’s vow of chastity constitutes a seemingly insurmountable challenge to the laws demanding her marriage. The contradiction of laws – one supporting her vow of virginity and another commanding all maidens to wed – occurs because they are drawn from different traditions. Hebrew law, unlike the Christian Pauline texts, advocated marriage and not chastity, so the bishop’s question, while presented as part of Old Testament law, is actually part of a Christian value system.91 Thus, while both the temple and its laws would have been Jewish at the time of Mary and Joseph’s union, it is here ascribed laws which are at odds with a Jewish time.

N-Town’s presentation of pre-Christian law is complicated by the fact that the plays’ communities seem unsure of their own religious and temporal status. This is unsurprising, given that they participate in a baffling mixture of Hebrew and Christian traditions. The temple authorities, named ‘Episcopus’ and ‘Minister’, perform their equivalent positions in the medieval Catholic Church. Nevertheless, both the temple and its laws are presented as pre-Christian, and Mary’s reluctance to relinquish her virginal state prefigures her imminent role as a bearer of a new religious law even as it exposes the fragility of ‘Jewish’ laws. Furthermore, the bishop’s question, ‘who xall expownd þis oute?’, also anticipates the end of these laws in Christ, bringer of a new law. Neither the Bishop nor his minister can answer this question, but can only reiterate their unwillingness to cross ‘law and custom’ or

91 See Cynthia Kraman, ‘Communities of Otherness in Chaucer’s Merchant’s Tale’, in Medieval Women in their Communities, ed. by Watt, pp. 138-54, (p. 145): ‘For Judaism, marriage began and remained the sacred model. Celibacy was not encouraged; in fact, it was not allowed’.
to ‘do aæn Scrypture’. This suggests that their understanding of law and scripture becomes obsolete when they attempt to legislate over Mary’s virginal body. They cling to texts that, within a biblical time frame, are on the brink of being superseded, but which, in the time frame of the Christian society performing this depiction of Jewish law, have already undergone this process. The very proposition of the marriage between Mary and Joseph therefore has the ability to trouble linear time by exposing the contradictions between the ‘Jewish’ requirement that they marry and later Christian ideals concerning virginity and chastity.

If Mary and Joseph’s desire for chastity initially promises to interrupt the bishop’s promotion of the linear life-pattern of marriage and the continuation of Davidic genealogy, it also works to reconcile the apparent discrepancy in laws. The bishop’s theological conundrum is resolved when both parties state that they wish to remain virgins – thus allowing for the distinctly medieval Christian idea of the chaste marriage. Nevertheless, this does not obscure the fact that, even under these circumstances, Joseph remains unwilling to marry:

EPISCOPUS:    Joseph, wole ȝe haue þis maydon to ȝoure wyff
           And here honour and kepe as ȝe howe to do?

JOSEPH:       Nay, sere, so mote I thryff!
           I haue ryght no need þerto.

Although he eventually concedes to perform according to the will of God, Joseph’s answering of his marital vows with the comically brusque ‘Nay sere, so mote I thryff!’, sets a precedent of stubbornness which is evident in his approach both to these ‘Hebrew’ laws and those he is to encounter in the Christian mystery of the virgin pregnancy. Resistant to the assertion of any authority concerning his marriage, Joseph’s denial articulates the instabilities inherent in both religions.

92 Spector, ‘The Marriage of Mary and Joseph’, ll. 100-01.
93 This mitigates their ‘fault’ for failing to read Mary and Joseph’s situation as a prefiguration of Christian doctrine, as Christ, for them, is utterly new.
The *Marriage* play thus presents Judaism as on the brink of supersession, and yet also as a crucial product and consolidator of later Christian theology and ecclesiastical culture. In this sense, it is possible to argue that, while the characters of the *Marriage* believe they are engaged in the linear performance of an established law, the exposure of fissures in this law suggest that their audience experiences this time as typological – a time in which glimpses of a Christian future may be identified (or subsequently placed) in the Hebrew past. The audience, like Mary in *Joseph’s Doubt*, is able to partake in a typological approach to time because their different temporal perspective allows them the benefit of hindsight: they know what is to happen later. Furthermore, the fact that Mary and Joseph *are* obedient to this older law despite the fact that it initially appears contradictory reflects medieval Christianity’s own approach to the Old Testament. While considering the birth of Christ as a point of historical change, Christianity nevertheless relied upon its Jewish origins and scriptures for validation, demonstrating recognition even at the point of supersession. But the characters in the *Marriage* play do not yet possess their audience’s knowledge of a different kind of time. From their perspective, until the drama of the New Testament unfolds, there *is* no other law.

**Whose Time?**

In her work *Gender and Jewish Difference*, Lisa Lampert observes that representations of medieval Christians and Christianity are rarely subjected to the same kind of scrutiny as those of Jews and Judaism, and yet ‘Christian’ may be as constructed a term of scholarly identity as ‘Jew’. She also draws attention to the fact that medieval texts depict both Jews and women as:

split into two halves. Idealized Jewish patriarchs contrast sharply with demonized contemporary Jews; likewise, virgin and whore regard each other across a conceptual chasm. Current scholarship tends to examine these bifurcations separately, but I see them as related complications of an exegetical tradition that links the spiritual, masculine, and Christian and defines them in opposition to the carnal, feminine, and Jewish.

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96 See Kruger’s discussion of Jewish ‘spectrality’, which recognises ‘a dependence upon the Jewish ancestor that is simultaneously an erasure [...] Jewishness is a *spectral* presence, strongly felt and yet just as strongly derealized’. Kruger, *The Spectral Jew*, p. xvii.

97 Lampert, *Gender and Jewish Difference*, p. 2.
As Lampert notes, medieval works often present the Virgin and the Jew as mutually reliant on, and yet also threatened by, each other’s presence. If the Jew functions as an articulation of doubt necessitated by a Christian desire to ascertain the truth about Mary’s virginity, it is likewise only through this process of interrogation and doubt that her virginity can be proven. Yet while the consolidation of a Christian ‘truth’ frequently leads to an act of conversion, this chapter has found that oppositional models, between Jew and Virgin, old husband and young wife, are just as likely to be either dismantled or reconciled in the N-Town plays.

*The Marriage of Mary and Joseph* and *Joseph’s Doubt* are therefore deeply concerned with the ways in which biblical figures might have experienced a period often identified as the one during which Christianity comes into being. They choose to dramatise this moment through an argument between an ageing man who demonstrates a loyalty to a pre-Christian belief system and a young woman who embodies the miracle of Christ’s virginal birth. In this manner, the N-Town plays unflinchingly admit ‘the carnal, the feminine, and the Jewish’ to the very heart of the Christian narrative, but not, as Lampert suggests, in order to define them as being in opposition. Moreover, while the characterisations of Mary and Joseph do admit elements of the medieval dichotomies of virgin/whore and idealized patriarch/demonized contemporary Jew, these characters nevertheless tend to inhabit a far more complex middle ground in which Christian and Hebrew identities and times interweave with one another.98

It is perhaps inevitable that a series of plays which show Mary and Joseph reluctantly united through a complex process which negotiates the legitimising devices of Hebrew genealogy and marital law as well as the Christian virtue of celibacy, should later feature a play in which this couple are divided again through their different understandings of theological time. There has been a tendency to view the Mary of the N-Town plays (and indeed, Mary as a figure in general) as a symbol of immutable, constant, unchanging purity. And it is the case that, until – and even

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at – the birth of Christ, Mary is repeatedly challenged by a series of doubters who themselves undergo processes of change, conviction and conversion to a belief in her state of sinless pregnancy. It is therefore tempting to read her as a constant, and provocative, point around which the perspectives of the rest of the world move. 99 Yet in Joseph’s experience of time, Mary has changed. At the time of her conception of Christ, Mary is the only human aware that theological and natural laws have radically altered. The only change Joseph initially perceives, however, is physical: during his absence, his virgin wife has become pregnant. This initial disjunction between the couple’s experiences of time, and their subsequent conflict, calls into question the role of the virgin birth as a historical caesura which re-works the times before it.

This chapter has therefore shown that, despite Joseph’s eventual ‘conversion’, the argument between Mary and Joseph disturbs depictions of the Incarnation as either a dramatic rupture or a seamless transition from Hebrew faith to a ‘Christian’ belief-structure. The dramatisation of the couple’s debate concerning the legitimacy of Mary’s virginity cannot therefore be viewed as a straightforward, antisemitic narrative pattern of doubt and conversion. This is chiefly due to the fact that the plays’ performance context is conscious that such a transition has already taken place. The characters’ experiences of time thus remain informed and directed by a drive to assimilate pre-Christian times into a single, overarching narrative of salvation. Rather than merely setting two different interpretations of time in a dialogue of opposition and eventual conviction, the N-Town plays demand a more complex negotiation of time which admits the intermingling of Hebrew and Christian times.

This works very differently to the supersessionary discourses considered in the following chapter, in which Noah interprets the Flood as a moment of change which cuts the former world away from his present. N-Town depicts change through assimilation, bringing Hebrew scripture, ‘Jewish’ readings and early doubters into

99 If the Virgin Mary is seen as eternal and unchanging, then the implication arises that Judaism, the construction which affirms her validity through its difference, must also remain unchanging. While I have indicated that this was to some extent the case, particularly concerning conversion narratives and doubts about the possibility of a Jew ever becoming a ‘true’ Christian, it can not comfortably apply to Joseph, who, despite his flaws, must perform as a father-figure to Christ.
situations in which religious and temporal states blur. In this case, Joseph’s ‘conversion’ from a position of doubt to one of faith and veneration does not so much participate in a linear narrative of personal change, but rather in ongoing, continuous processes of change. As a consequence of this process, doubt in both *Joseph’s Doubt* and in *The Marriage of Mary and Joseph* provides opportunities to create knots in the biblical narrative. And as the Auckland New Zealanders’ iconoclastic reaction towards a billboard that dared to probe such questions demonstrates, such knots have retained their potential to spark humour, controversy, and hostility.
CHAPTER TWO

Persistent Pasts and Timely Speech:
Navigating Marital Dispute in the York and Chester Flood Plays

NOAH’S WIFE
is doing her usual for comic relief
She doesn’t
see why she should get on the boat, etc.,

etc., while life as we know it hangs by a thread. [...] 

The woman’s disobedience is good for
plot,
as also for restoring plot to human
scale: three hundred cubits by fifty
by what?
What’s that in inches exactly? [...] 

We find the Creator in an awkward bind.
Washed back
to oblivion? Think again. The housewife

at her laundry tub has got a better grip.
Which may
be why we’ve tried to find her laughable,

she’s such an unhappy reminder of what
understanding
 costs.¹

Inspired by the appearance of Noah’s wife in late medieval Flood pageants, Linda Gregerson’s poem responds to several debates concerning her characterisation. The verbose woman, who finds her husband building a large boat and filling it with animals, and wonders whether he is drunk or mad, has been the subject of much critical debate. She has long been cited as an example of comic disobedience or unruliness,² yet her ability to ‘restor[e] plot to human scale’ has also been recognised as potentially broadening an audience’s possible responses to the Flood.³ Moreover,

² See for example Kolve, The Play Called Corpus Christi, pp. 146-51 and Craig, English Religious Drama of the Middle Ages, pp. 8-11, which locate the domestic rebellion of Noah’s wife within a carnivalesque tradition.
³ This viewpoint has emerged since the early 1990s, when criticism began to engage with the role of Noah’s wife within the late medieval social and economic civic community. See for example Ruth Evans, ‘Feminist Re-Enactments: Gender and the Towneley Vxor Noe’, in A Wyf Ther Was: Essays in
she has the ability to pose a challenge to her husband, to God and even to the Flood itself. As Gregerson’s poem wryly suggests, the Wife knows that neither God nor his Flood has the ability to wash away the former world completely.

Arguments between Noah and his wife in the mystery plays develop the Genesis account of the Flood, which provides little information about the humans surviving it. The Genesis narrative consists of God’s language of command and its fulfilment in Noah’s obedient but silent action.⁴ A sinful race disappears beneath the waters, the world is swiftly repopulated by Noah’s offspring and no dissenting voice is raised against the act of divine violence.⁵ Yet when performed on the late medieval stage, this simple, linear narrative is often interrupted by the objections of Noah’s wife. In four of the existing Flood plays, the boarding (and, in the Towneley and Newcastle plays, the building) of the ark is accompanied by verbal and physical altercation as Noah and his wife engage in a battle of perspectives. While the rest of her family rejoice in their salvation, the Wife’s reluctance to leave the flooded world becomes the means of ensuring its remembrance.⁶ This chapter contends that conflict in the Flood plays is linked to the ways in which characters comprehend the ‘time’ of the Flood itself. Like Mary and Joseph, Noah and his wife often have different ways of experiencing time, and their differing perspectives instigate frictions between them. In the following chapter, I demonstrate that Noah subscribes to a supersessionary fantasy that is never fully realised, while his wife admits alternative ways of reading time. The resulting frictions may be indicative of broader anxieties—concerning marital gender roles, relationships between domestic, economic and spiritual duties, divided responsibilities between family and the wider community, individual engagement with scripture and domestic and public violence—all of

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⁴ Noah’s wife is only mentioned twice in God’s description of those who are to be saved, but chiefly in relation to Noah: ‘And I will establish my covenant with thee, and thou shalt enter into the ark, thou and thy sons, and thy wife, and the wives of thy sons with thee’. See Genesis 6. 18.

⁵ Medieval tradition held that Noah’s three sons founded the peoples of Asia, Africa and Europe. See Bernau, ‘Britain’: Originary Myths and the Stories of Peoples’, p. 630.

⁶ The plays’ attempts to suppress the Wife’s evocation of the past appear to wryly reflect upon scholarly traditions employing the ark as an aide-memoir. The ark commands a history of mnemonic significance in practices of medieval instruction, appearing as a tool to structure memory patterns for theological learning. See Mary Carruthers, The Book of Memory, pp. 231- 33; Theodore K. Lerud on dramatic performance and devotional memory in Memory, Images, and the English Corpus Christi Drama, pp. 43-4 and J. A. H. Lewis, ‘History and Everlastingness in Hugh of St Victor’s Figures of Noah’s Ark’, in Time and Eternity, ed. by Jaritz and Moreno-Riaño, pp. 203-22.
which have received critical attention in the past decades. Nevertheless, these avenues of enquiry all rely to some extent upon the fundamental question, ‘what is the time of the Flood?’ I extend this further by asking more specifically, ‘is the time of the Flood a Hebrew, Christian, late medieval, secular or divine time?’ The conflict between Noah and his Wife is centred upon their mutual inability to answer these questions as they process the event of the Flood.

For the Flood also provokes its own series of questions. When the waters rise over the world, are they cleansing or destructive? Do they make the terrain fertile, promising a fruitful future, or silt it over with the deposits and debris of the past? Is the surface of the water cloudy, concealing what was there before, or transparent? Are the waters physically represented, or do they exist in the space between the actors’ words and audiences’ imaginations, thus linking the flooded landscape with the medieval towns in which it was staged? The answers to these questions depend on the characters’ understanding of the temporal contexts in which the Flood play was performed. Some characters, particularly Noah, subscribe to a largely linear model of time which sees the punished world as truly annihilated and the Flood as a new beginning from which the survivors’ present and future emerges. This is performed as part of a larger pattern of supersession and salvation within Christian historical understanding, which, as Chapter One has shown, developed a typological reading based upon the need to accommodate a Hebrew Old Testament within the Christian faith narrative. Yet Noah’s supersessionary perspective appears to be more absolute than that at work in the N-Town Joseph’s Doubt. While both Mary and Noah are depicted as future-orientated, they differ in the ways in which they approach the past. Mary is shown attempting to convince Joseph in order to bring him (and, by extension, the old order) with her into a new state of belief. Noah, however, is often portrayed as wishing to cut the past away from the present completely. Furthermore, characters such as Noah’s wife experience the Flood

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8 The York Register suggests that the Flood plays were the most expensive to produce in their cycle. While it is probable that elaborate staging was used to portray the ark and its animals, it is not clear whether props were used to signify the water. See Clifford Davidson, Material Culture and Medieval Drama (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1999), pp. 1-15.
within non-linear models of time; for example, by viewing themselves as remnants of a past world, by recollecting what has disappeared and thus bringing the past into the present, by acknowledging their historically situated (Christian) performance contexts, and by contrasting Old and New Testament models of punishment, faith and salvation. The spouses’ conflict as they negotiate these multiple ways of reading their own time testifies to the insufficiency of human relational structures to accommodate an event of supernatural destruction and the temporal and social transitions this event enforces.

In Chapter One, I have shown the consequences of staging a character’s transition between ‘times’, and the conflict which occurs when one character belongs to a state of belief which is staged as superseding the other’s. To some extent, the Flood performs as a similar narrative of movement between two distinct moments in time, as the waters change the world irrevocably. However, conflict in the Flood plays most often occurs when readings of temporality are introduced which dismantle or challenge the idea of a supersessionary Flood narrative and thus prevent such a transition from fully taking place. While Noah’s wife is often depicted as reluctant to leave her possessions, work and friends, Noah believes that worldly attachments carried onto the ark jeopardise God’s act of divine destruction by enabling fragments of the supposedly eradicated world to survive. The resulting juxtaposition of different temporal perspectives is perhaps most poignantly expressed in the question of Noah’s wife in the York *The Flood*:

VXOR: But Noye, wher are nowe all oure kynne
And companye we knwe before?

NOE: Dame, all ar drowned, late be thy dyne,
And sone þei bouhte þer synnes sore. ⁹

Noah’s ‘late be thy dyne’ recognises the danger of the Wife’s question. He swiftly justifies the drowning and illustrates his desire that their ‘kynne and companye’ be forgotten. The Wife’s question concerning the past world threatens Noah’s transition to the new time and challenges the idea of a beginning by referring to an earlier age.

⁹ See Beadle, ‘The Flood’, in *The York Plays*, pp. 83-90, (ll. 269-72). As Noah’s reminder of his wife’s sex, ‘Dame’ suggests, these differing viewpoints are often, but not exclusively, articulated by female characters.
Reducing his wife’s speech to ‘dyne’, Noah seeks to distance past from present. A similar moment occurs in the Chester Third Pageant of Noyes Fludd, where the Wife’s Gossips stage a chorus so disruptive that the stage directions state: ‘Then shall Noe shutt the windowe of the arke’.\(^\text{10}\) Visual as well as aural reminders of what will disappear thus become the key points of contention in the plays.

Troubling speeches concerning the flooded world are not always spoken by female characters; nor do they evoke the past in an uncomplicated fashion. In the Towneley Noah and the Ark, the sparring couple reconcile in a chorus-like lament for all that has been lost.\(^\text{11}\) The landscape they recall, with its ploughs and buildings, simultaneously belongs to the narrow band of time between Fall and Flood as well as to the medieval present of the play. While the N-Town Noah play depicts harmonious family relationships, the family’s praise of God and justification of his Flood is juxtaposed with expressions of sorrow for the drowned:

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NOAH: And all is for synne of mannys wylde mood
but God hath ordeyned pis dredfull vengeaunce.
In pis flood spylt is many a mannys blood.
For synfull levynge of man we haue gret grevauns!\(^\text{12}\)
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Although Noah is careful to stress that this ‘gret grevauns’ is for man’s sin rather than for God’s vengeance, salvation, even for the worthy, appears tentative and uncertain. Unlike his York equivalent, the N-Town Noah acknowledges the destruction of what has gone before even as he recognises a distinction between his own salvation and those outside it. While this reflection does momentarily interrupt the Genesis narrative, the remembrance of what has disappeared acts to bring Noah’s family together rather than introducing points of antagonism between them. The recollection of the drowned past therefore only becomes uncomfortable or antagonistic when the Noah family are not united in their responses to the Flood.

The first chapter of this thesis examined a debate at a moment of supersession: the Old and the New theologies conflicting in their interpretations of Mary’s pregnant body. Nevertheless, Joseph’s Doubt concluded with Joseph and

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Mary united, albeit tentatively, in a mutual supersessionary understanding. Focussing on the York and Chester Flood plays, this chapter contends that Noah and his Wife have entirely different ways of reading time from one another, and that no such moment of reconciliation or understanding is reached. I begin by securing this argument within previous approaches to the Flood plays, finding that, while time has not yet been a primary focus in these works, questions of time have nevertheless informed and directed investigations into characterisations of Noah and his wife. The second section examines typological and supersessionary models of time in relation to Noah and his need to understand the Flood as a moment of rupture, separating him from what came before. It then discusses instances in which the alternative temporal models introduced by the Wife challenge Noah’s understanding. I argue that the York Wife’s speech has the ability to perform explosively, as it demonstrates the ability to recall troublesome remnants of the past. However, the Wife and Gossips appearing in the Chester Noyes Fludd engage with processes of temporal collapse, in which multiple temporalities are supported within a single moment. Interrogating the ways time is used, experienced and performed in the plays, alongside the Wife’s ability not only to remember, but to repeat or resurrect the past, I thus hope to understand why the Wife appears so troublesome for contemporary critics and Old Testament patriarchs alike.

**Unruly Woman or Woman Out of Time?**

While none of the works on mystery plays concerning the Flood make temporality a central focus, critics have touched upon, if not fully engaged with, temporal perspectives within the plays. The arguments between Noah and his wife have a long history of critical attention, which has loosely centred on four main areas of concern. The earliest works track the history of the rebellious wife figure to the fourth

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13 ‘Explosive’ time is a category identified by Jonathan Gil Harris as ‘the untimely interruption of a past that disputes the present, and with explosive consequences’. See Gil Harris, *Untimely Matter in the Time of Shakespeare*, p. 91.

14 Carolyn Dinshaw has initiated readings of multiple temporalities which can be experienced in one simultaneous moment. Her ideas in this respect were first introduced in her article, Dinshaw, ‘Temporalities’, pp. 107-23, and have recently been expanded in her more detailed study of asynchrony and ‘queer’ experiences of time, *How Soon is Now?*
century. Finding early versions in Christian Western European manuscript illumination as well as in Jewish and Muslim folklore, this research situates the disobedience legend within earlier structures of popular belief. While later criticism aligns Noah’s wife with a history of medieval unruly women, these early enquiries demonstrate that her rebellion was rooted in earlier, and not exclusively Christian, contexts. The question of what is ‘past’ in the Flood plays therefore extends beyond the world beneath the waters. Conflict between the spouses may be read as a depiction of a biblical family attempting to reconcile pre- and post-Flood worlds, as an Old Testament narrative performed by and for late medieval Christians, and as an engagement with characters of theological origins which may themselves be considered scripturally and temporally ‘prior’.

However, the most influential critical approach over the last five decades has been concerned with categorising Noah’s wife as an ‘unruly woman’. The earliest work in this area views the couple’s conflict as a continuation of the Fall, linking the Wife’s behaviour with the disobedience of Eve and gendering the disruptive voice as historically female. This methodology reads the couple’s argument as retrospective and repetitive: Noah’s wife repeats the Fall’s pattern of human (female) transgression and divine punishment. Yet patterns of repetition hold the potential to disrupt ideas of the Flood as a supersessionary performance of erasure followed by renewal – not

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18 See Woolf, *The English Mystery Plays*, p. 133 and Richard J. Daniels, “‘Uxor” Noah: a Raven or a Dove?’, *TCR*, 14.1 (1979), 23-32. See also Craig, *English Religious Drama of the Middle Ages*, pp. 8-11. Readings aligning Noah’s wife with Eve hold the potential to overlook Noah’s not inconsiderable contributions towards the conflict, the violence he employs to get his wife to board and the anxieties this reveals about his own status, not to mention the fact that the Wife *is* allowed onto the ark and thus cannot be considered unproblematically sinful.
least because, despite her disobedience towards both Noah and God, the Wife is nevertheless saved from the waters. The ‘unruly woman’ character type has long been noted for its ability to encourage change by disrupting male-directed processes of order:

It was a multivalent image [...]. Play with the concept of the unruly woman is partly a chance for a temporary release from traditional and stable hierarchy; but it is also part and parcel of conflict over efforts to change the basic distribution of power within the society.  

The idea of a ‘temporary release’ – a suspension of time in the service of laughter – views the Wife’s function as articulating a desire for change whilst expressing the assumption that, as a temporary condition, any such change will be short-lived. Melvin Storm’s work develops this theory when he examines Noah’s wife and Chaucer’s Wife of Bath as fighting ‘against the constraints of [their] history’, while Anthony Gash finds that, unlike Eve, Noah’s wife eludes punishment and becomes a ‘liminal’ or threshold figure in the salvation narrative. These views prepare the ground for my reading, which sees the Wife as objecting to her place in Genesis by resisting the supersessionary history of the Flood she comes to occupy.

Feminist and gendered readings developed since the 1980s have increasingly found the category of the ‘unruly women’ unstable, as it relies upon the assumption of a fixed social norm against which the figure rebels. In the process of expanding

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20 The concept of laughter causing a temporary interruption of the status quo has a long heritage, heavily influenced by Mikhail Bakhtin’s work on the ways in which laughter and the grotesque challenged medieval hierarchy. The grotesque itself is, he notes, equally susceptible to the processes of time, and gained a ‘new, historic sense’ and meaning during the Renaissance. See Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, trans. by Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), pp. 24-5 (p. 25). I contend that characters often viewed as ‘comic’ also have the ability to briefly interrupt narrative and, thus, time.


22 I here adopt Storm’s use of the word ‘history’ to denote the linear arrangement of time: a system which is challenged by the Wife’s alternative ways of experiencing time. See Storm, ‘Uxor and Alison’, p. 314.

23 It is doubtful whether such a norm existed in an environment that witnessed great change in social, religious and economic roles within marriage. See Anna Dronzek, ‘Gender Roles and the Marriage Market in Fifteenth-Century England: Ideals and Practices’, in Love, Marriage, and Family Ties in the Later Middle Ages, ed. by Isabel Davis, Miriam Müller and Sarah Rees Jones (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003), pp. 63-76 and Neil Cartlidge, Medieval Marriage: Literary Approaches, 1100-1300.
and complicating the ‘unruly’ category, this research raises new questions concerning the ‘time’ of the Flood plays, as it draws attention to their late medieval performance and production contexts. One aspect of this has questioned the production of the plays, including their construction, financing, performance and the ‘transvestite’ effect of male actors playing female roles.\(^{24}\) Meanwhile, another line of enquiry examines the Wife’s relation to contemporary socio-economic positions of women.\(^{25}\) This work has opened up the ‘now’ of the plays’ performance contexts, enabling readings of Noah’s wife as a late medieval working woman holding certain affinities with the lives of the men and women watching and producing the plays.\(^{26}\) In doing so, it broadens the kinds of ‘unruliness’ to be found in the plays – moving from an assessment of the Wife’s disobedience towards her husband and towards God to identify specific areas of social tension in the medieval performance space (for example, concerning women’s trade and economic powers). The addition of these perspectives thus paves the way for my overarching argument which finds that Noah’s wife (and indeed, all cycle characters), potentially inhabits several different times simultaneously. The plays and the scriptures upon which they are based may be opened to readings involving different kinds of temporality: for instance, ‘historical’ readings of the plays presuppose a different kind of temporality to allegorical ones.\(^{27}\) However, as my first chapter has demonstrated, the characters in

\(^{1}\) (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997), pp. 1-32. The portrayal of a biblical marriage as a site of conflict also has the potential to disturb medieval beliefs in marriage as a union between Christ and the Church. A breakdown of spousal understanding may potentially reflect concerns about the poor communication of information, ignorance and idolatry – concerns which were increasingly being voiced towards the end of the fifteenth century. See Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, pp. 401-14.


the plays, like their audiences, are also able to ‘read’ the narratives in which they perform, and, as a consequence, these readings engage in different kinds of time.

**Noah’s Fantasies of Supersession**

Poor Noah. Attempting to perform the simple Genesis narrative of command and action, he is given as an accomplice a wife who, by acknowledging a multiplicity of parallel narratives and times, threatens to disrupt his story. Nevertheless, the time of the Genesis Flood is itself characterised by aspects of temporal multiplicity. A narrative of divine destruction situated between the Fall, the division of nations and the Babylonian proliferation of languages, the Flood is part of an early biblical history that narrates ongoing and repetitive processes of erasure, re-formation and redefinition.²⁸ Yet this time, which is postlapsarian and pre-Christ, occupies a troubled place within the overarching salvation narrative of the late medieval cycles. This is partly due to the Flood’s uneasy relationship with Christianity. Although part of the Hebrew scripture, the narrative falls before the establishment of the Mosaic Law that came to represent the foundation of the race of Israel. Within this early narrative context, then, religious identities are uncertain. While they are definitely not Christian, neither are they recognisably ‘Jewish’. While Noah’s wife, with her attachment to the past, displays some traits consistent with medieval constructions of ‘Jewish’ backward-looking perceptions of time I have already discussed, the chronology of the Flood resists attempts at definite religious categorisation. As a consequence, Noah and his wife occupy an ambiguous place in the Christian-Jewish narrative.

²⁸ See Genesis 10 for the record of the division of the lands between Noah’s offspring, and the subsequent account of the scattering of the people of Babel in Genesis 11. 1-9. Narratives of the dispersal of the nations of Israel were adapted in early Christian theological discourses to justify their claimed supersession of Judaism. The fifth-century works of St Augustine see these early events as prefiguring the later dispersals of Jewish populations after Christ’s death, and thus as a confirmation that God had withdrawn his blessing from his former people:

> We see that this sentence concerning this division of the people of Israel, divinely uttered in these words, has been altogether irreremediable and quite perpetual. [...] Israelites that persist in being His enemies even to the end of this life, [...] shall for ever remain in the separation which is here foretold.

As the first chapter showed, medieval Christian theology devised various means of understanding the Old Testament. The behaviour and belief-structures of the Flood play characters are consistent with two complementary medieval theological approaches: the belief in the supersession of one order by another and the practice of typological reading. As I have noted concerning depictions of Joseph’s doubt and ‘conversion’, these readings fall within broader traditions of medieval exegesis, with the Flood narrative being of a particular type that lent itself to supersessionary temporal models. With its destruction of an old world and the saving of a few chosen people, the account of the deluge follows a narrative pattern which is not only repeated throughout the Old Testament, but also appears in medieval approaches to secular historiography.  

Both approaches seek to reconcile the past with the concerns of the present, whilst accommodating traumatic or destructive events that are seen to have instigated social rupture or change. Several medieval depictions of Noah thus understand him typologically (and anachronistically) as a saviour-figure and, as such, a precursor to Christ. This encourages audiences to see the plays as foreshadowing Christian salvation (the narratives of which were performed alongside, though often out of sequence with, the Old Testament narratives). As I shall demonstrate, the Noah in the York and Chester cycle plays subscribes to the idea of a Flood which cleanses the world of a sinful population and leaves a blank space in which his family can start anew. This belief requires his full acceptance of God’s decision, unhesitating obedience and a refusal to look back. Essentially, it rests upon his ability either to

29 On secular uses of supersessionary temporal models, see Kathleen Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty*. See also Jeanie C. Craun’s argument that the book of Genesis frequently employed the repetition of events and recursion as literary devices. Craun claims that Noah’s narrative follows a pattern similar to that of Adam and Eve: ‘Another example of recursion occurs in the stories of the Fall (Gen. 2-3) and the incident of Noah’s drunkenness. The parallels exist in the garden (2.8) and the orchard (9.20), the eating from the fruit of the tree (3.6) and the drinking of wine (9.21), the nakedness (3.7, 9.23), the “knowing” as a result of the action taken (3.7, 9.24), the curse (3.14, 9.25), and the presence of three sons’. Jeanie C. Crain, *Reading the Bible as Literature* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), p. 38.

forget or to cut himself away from what the Flood has destroyed. This viewpoint is consequently challenged when his wife chooses not to forget.

**York’s Christ-Noah: The Ark’s Typological Imaginary**

The York *The Building of the Ark* begins by situating the Flood within its early Old Testament context. God’s opening speech recounts his creation of the world. He regrets having made ‘outhir man or wiffe’ due to their sinfulness, and, calling upon the ‘cleyn’ Noah, reveals his intention to flood the world and begin again: ‘wirke þis werke I wille al newe’. This speech places the play within a linear narrative of creation and divine determination since the beginning of the world. A version of it appears in all the surviving Flood plays, which open with a monologue from either God or Noah, telling of creation and its descent into disobedience. But, uniquely, the speech of the York cycle’s God suggests that, in these early days, he believes it is possible to erase his earlier work and begin again. The speech anticipates a supersessionary narrative, with a ‘newe’ world following the Flood. Yet as the play develops it becomes clear that an *entirely* new beginning is not God’s plan, as the new world must necessarily accommodate remnants of the old.

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31 Discourses of erasure and beginning are employed by those seeking to annihilate the past as well as by those wishing to forget a culturally traumatic event, as evidenced by discussions of recent American history as ‘post 9/11’ (a moment of ‘cultural caesura’ which is currently being re-evaluated): ‘Human history is full of such attempts to erase history and create a new world. In the twentieth century they have taken a destructive form, such as the Taliban bombing the ancient Buddha statues of Afghanistan, the allied forces carpet bombing Nazi Germany, or the Nazi attempt to erase the Jewish population and culture from the world’s memory’. Wim Verbaal, ‘Bernard of Clairvaux’s School of Oblivion’, in *Negotiating Heritage*, ed. by Bruun and Glaser, pp. 221-37 (p. 221). See also Dunja M. Mohr and Sylvia Mayer, eds., ‘9/11 as Catalyst – American and British Cultural Responses’, ZAA, 58.1 (2010), 1-4 and proceedings from a 2011 conference review of the question: Meike Zwingenburger, ‘9/11 Ten Years After: History, Narrative, Memory’, *H.Net Reviews* (2011) at <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=34427> [accessed 25 April, 2012].

32 I take the terminology for this subheading from Biddick’s examination of Christian attempts to control time (and particularly pre-Christian, Hebrew time) through supersessionary thinking and typology. See Biddick, *The Typological Imaginary*, p. 2.


God’s choice of Noah as a means of preserving this remnant is initially met with doubt, as the reticent Noah believes his shipbuilding skills are not up to the task. It has long been noted that the Shipwright’s *The Building of the Ark* reads as an exercise in boat building, with the uncertain apprentice Noah following the instructions of his irascible ‘maister’ shipwright, God. Yet the Noah of the following play, *The Flood*, is very different. Confident in his role, he views himself as part of a greater salvation narrative. In an opening speech echoing that of God in *The Building of the Ark*, Noah recounts his own ancestry. Narrating how his father, Lamech, prayed for a son, Noah’s account and his own legitimacy hinge on his father’s prediction:

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NOE: When I was borne Noye named he me,
    And said pees wordes with mekill wynne:
    ‘Loo’, he saide, ‘þis ilke is he
    That shalle be conforte to mankynne’.
    Syrs, by þis wele witte may ye,
    My fadir knewe both more and mynne
    By sarteyne signes he couthe wele see,
    That al þis worlde shuld synke for synne.
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Lamech’s reported speech invites a typological parallel between Noah and Christ. The vision of Noah as a ‘comforte to mankynne’ suggests that the Flood might be understood as a prefiguration of the New Testament salvation. However, while the presence of theological typology in the cycles has been much discussed, critics do not always agree on its function. Pamela Sheingorn’s succinct summary of early developments in this debate works particularly well alongside both *The Flood* Noah’s history and God’s plan to begin the world anew in *The Building of the Ark*. As I have noted in my Introduction, Sheingorn views typological readings as both comparative and supersessionary, with newer scripture assimilating and succeeding the older to ‘foreshadow the life of Christ’. Thus, a late medieval performance paradoxically allows the Old Testament Noah to read his own role typologically, even if this hints that he is in possession of information he cannot possibly have. Just as Christ was said to fulfil the messianic predictions of the prophets of the Old

35 Beadle, ‘The Building of the Ark’, l. 104. This play also performs its own movement in time through locating the relationship between Genesis’ Noah and God within an easily recognisable late medieval trading context.
Testament, so Noah is given his own prophetic father as he plays out his smaller-scale version of the salvation narrative as well as Lamech’s prediction of the Flood.

Yet typology can also perform a revisionist function. Making Noah a kind of proto-Christ figure shows continuity with the Christian present of the play’s performance context whilst attempting to make the Old Testament Flood theologically ‘safe’ by situating it in a larger narrative of human disobedience and salvation. As Erica W. Magnus argues, this allows ‘a type of revisionist history whereby the Christian framework colonized and claimed ownership of all time. The entire Old Testament in this light is merely a prefiguration of the New’.38 This is an unstable process. While Rosemary Woolf claims that the Flood plays’ narrow foci on the saved family are ‘justified by typological interpretations of the story, which saw Noah as a type of Christ, [...] the ark a type of the Cross [...]’, and occasionally in Noah’s wife a type of the Virgin’, I argue that such readings invite contrast as well as comparison.39 The York Noah’s typological ideal can only be sustained for the length of his speech. When his monologue is replaced with dialogue, the audience meets a character for whom this version of events does not work. Noah’s wife challenges her husband’s role as a ‘comforte to mankynne’ by conducting a debate in which Noah is unable to offer any comfort concerning the drowned world.40 This reaches its denouement when she announces her intention to fetch her cousins and friends:

38 Magnus, ‘Time on the Stage’, p. 110. See also the use of this concept in Renaissance studies to address post-reformation attitudes towards a superseded, yet uncomfortably recent, Catholic past. See Greg Walker, ‘When Did ‘the Medieval’ End?’, pp. 725-38.
39 See Woolf, The English Mystery Plays, p. 133.
40 Beadle, ‘The Flood’, l. 32.
Stressing the words ‘skape’, ‘skathe’ and ‘saffyd’, the Wife disturbs the typology of Noah’s opening speech by emphasising the fact that, on the ark, salvation is exclusive. When her family seeks to reassure her, it becomes increasingly clear that her definition of being ‘saffyd’ does not match theirs. She also, of course, misses the point of the Flood as a mechanism of divine punishment.

Moreover, the fact that Noah’s wife sees her survival as an unwelcome continuance of her life after changes she cannot accept constitutes an even greater challenge to discourses of supersession and typology, as it suggests that something has been left over from the Flood – something which refuses to be assimilated into the new order easily. Her line – ‘Allas, my lyff me is full lath / I lyffe ouere-lange þis lare to lere’ – suggests that Noah’s wife feels she has lived beyond the end of her allotted time, and also that she is ill-equipped to learn a new ‘lare’. This reluctance, or inability, to learn beyond a point of supersession echoes the medieval readings of Judaism considered in my first chapter. Medieval depictions of Judaism frequently showed a people lingering on past the advent of Christianity but refusing to adopt the new laws of their successors. Noah’s wife, however, experiences a

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42 A similar contradiction occurs in the Chester play. Katie Normington notes, ‘[the Wife] is the only character in the Chester deluge pageant to show consideration for other human beings’. See Normington, Gender and Medieval Drama, p. 127. See also Jane Tolmie on the ways Noah’s wife makes the cruelties of the play apparent in Tolmie, ‘Mrs Noah and Didactic Abuses’, 11-15.
very different sort of lingering. She does not undergo the replacement (or displacement) of law, but rather the re-fashioning of human existence.

If it is primarily the Wife, and not Noah, who engages with practices of remembrance and recollection, the question arises whether she, like the N-Town Joseph, should be read as a kind of troublesome ‘Jewish’ character. Such a reading makes sense of the York couple’s arguments early in the play, which uphold the Wife’s complaint that she has been kept ignorant of her husband’s knowledge of the Flood. This early conflict has been read as expressing an ongoing theme of exclusion from knowledge – a theme which fits Noah’s attempt to verbally ‘cut off’ his wife’s questions even as he cuts off the flooded world. While the York Noah is celebrated for his master-apprentice relationship with God, it appears that his wife has been sitting quietly at home wondering why her husband has developed a passion for large-scale carpentry. If her ignorance is read as participating in medieval discourses on Judaism’s wilful ignorance of Christian salvation, two possibilities emerge. The first is that Noah had informed his wife about the Flood and she has forgotten, misunderstood, or, like the rest of the condemned community, has refused to acknowledge his message. In this reading, she is only saved as accessory to her husband. This argument is supported by the fact that, even when convinced of the truth of the Flood, she still returns to collect her tools, thus misrecognising the Flood’s imminency. However, this theory is problematized by the Wife’s rebuke of Noah, which hints at a more serious communication failure:

45 See Tolmie, ‘Mrs Noah and Didactic Abuses’, p. 12: ‘Mrs Noah’s trouble-making highlights the loss of life caused by the Flood, and hints at some painful exclusions – of wives from the inner lives of husbands, of persons from life itself and from salvation as well’. Such exclusions also support a further typological parallel within the book of Genesis: if Eve is blamed for the Fall, women are subsequently excluded from divine knowledge.

46 The depiction of a husband and wife divided in knowledge and priorities appears in several dramatic versions of the Flood, most spectacularly in the fragmentary The Newcastle Play, which depicts Noah taking directions from God while his wife is persuaded by the devil into tricking Noah into telling her what he is up to. See Davis, ‘The Newcastle Play’, in Non-Cycle Plays and Fragments, pp. 19-31.

47 Beadle, ‘The Flood’, ll. 109-10. The functions of tools in this play could command a chapter to themselves. Normington argues that they signify the Wife’s commitment to worldly industry and society. See Normington, Gender and Medieval Drama, pp. 125-32. While Noah’s tools are used to construct the vehicle of salvation, the Wife’s represent folly and her economic connection to the sinful world. Yet tools also reference a further concern regarding the ability of man to create (and re-create), thus feeding into discourses concerning idolatry and the construction of images as sites of historical memory. See Shannon Gayk, Image, Text, and Religious Reform in Fifteenth-Century England (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 123-54 (p. 125).
NOE: Dame, þou holde me excused of itt,
It was Goddis wille withowten douette.48

Noah’s reason for the century-long gap between his knowledge of the Flood and telling his wife is disturbing. Like the York cycle’s portrayal of Adam in *The Fall of Man*, Noah instinctively seeks to assign blame for his oversight elsewhere – yet his reference to God is ambiguous.49 His defence – ‘it was Goddis wille’ – might refer to the Flood itself (which is undoubtedly God’s will). However, the rhyme and alliteration sequence of the accusation ‘were wele aboutte’ is reproduced in Noah’s reply ‘wille withowten doutte’, indicating that his excuse directly answers her charge. This therefore implies that the Wife’s ignorance is commanded by God. Although no such command appears in either pageant, the concept of God-ordained silence holds an affinity with medieval exegetical readings of John 20.37–40, which argued that the God of the Jews had blinded his people to the meaning of their own scriptures as punishment for their failure to recognise Christ. The Wife’s ignorance therefore enables a typological Christian reading of the Hebrew narrative as a whole. She rejects the salvation of the ‘New’ world through her ongoing concern for the ‘Old’.50 But unlike the elderly Joseph of the N-Town plays, who, despite his own advanced age, eventually accepts the new law, the York Wife believes she has lived too long to learn. This is partly due to the more painful circumstances of her learning. Unlike Joseph, she does not have recourse to an angelic counsellor. Moreover, she finds out about the Flood so late that she has

49 See Beadle, ‘The Fall of Man’, in *The York Plays*, pp. 64–69, (ll. 141-2). Here, as in Genesis, Adam responds to God’s question ‘þis werke, why hast þou wrought?’ by blaming Eve: ‘Lorde, Eue garte me do wronge’. The York Noah essentially reverses this dynamic. His excuse provides an inverted model of Adam’s excuse, in a manner which reflects poorly on Noah. Where Adam excuses himself to God by blaming his wife, Noah excuses himself to his wife by blaming God.
50 The characterisation of Noah’s wife as someone who problematically remembers the past is consistent with Elisabeth van Houts’ argument that early medieval women performed a central role in the preservation of community memory: ‘women were crucial links in the chain of traditions binding one generation to another’. See van Houts, *Memory and Gender in Medieval Europe 900-1200*, p. 147. This female promotion of social and familial memory became particularly important after traumatic historical changes (for example, in maintaining historical rights to land post-1066). This theory complements that of James Simpson concerning the late medieval development of the female figure as a paradoxical symbol of social and religious change and retention. See James Simpson, *Reform and Cultural Revolution*, pp. 406-12.
comparatively less time to become used to the idea – certainly not enough time to
forget her old ‘lare’. Of course, this is part of the fundamental problem with Noah’s
wife – if she were obedient in her faith, as Noah is, she would not need any time to
adjust or learn.

Yet a reading of the Wife as a ‘Jewish’ character narrows the temporal
possibilities of the narrative, and also sits uneasily with the fact that, even though she
refuses to recant or convert, the Wife is brought onto the ark (albeit forcibly).
Moreover, the Wife’s questions work to dismantle, rather than assert, typological
readings of the Old Testament text. They trouble the idea of Noah as Christ-like,
reasserting distance between Old and New Testament salvation narratives. The Noah
who fights with his wife does not behave as a passive Christ figure; the enclosed
space of the ark proves a more selective vehicle of salvation than the open arms of
the Cross, and those ‘baptised’ in the purging waters of the Flood are not those who
are saved.

**Beginning by Ending**

While *The Flood’s* typological interpretation of Noah as a Christ-like saviour is
challenged by the interjections of his wife, Noah’s reading of the Flood as an
opportunity for a new beginning also becomes a point of spousal conflict. Noah’s
attitude towards the flooded world exhibits a curious affinity with the ways in which
medieval Christians articulated their association with their Jewish theological past.
My first chapter has already identified the uneasy relationship between late medieval
perspectives of Judaism and Christianity dramatised in the N-Town’s *Joseph’s
Doubt*. There, marital conflict is principally concerned with staging the conception
of Christ as a point of theological transition. Yet, while Joseph and Mary’s debate
is resolved with Joseph’s eventual conviction, conversion and assimilation, Noah’s
response to the Flood attempts to entirely remove the past from his experience of the
present. Kathleen Biddick’s study of Christian attempts to distinguish themselves

51 See for example Kruger’s identification of ‘a dependence upon a Jewish ancestor that is
simultaneously an erasure’ in *The Spectral Jew*, p. xvii. There was also an attempt to freeze Judaism
in a certain state of time; to preserve it as it was at the time of Christ’s death and thus ensure its
from Jews through discussions of temporality captures several of the key features of this kind of supersessionary model:

Early Christians straightened out the unfolding of temporality (with its gaps and vicissitudes) into a theological timeline fantastically based on two distinct but related notions. First, they posited a present (“this is now”) exclusively as a Christian present. They cut off a Jewish “that was then” from a Christian “this is now”. They also imagined a specific direction to Christian time. They believed that the Christian new time – a “this is now” – superseded a “that was then” of Israel.  

Several ideas emerge here, which are pertinent to the York Noah’s experience of the Flood. First, Biddick’s image of temporality being artificially straightened in Christian exegesis explains Noah’s need to assume the role of comforter to mankind – thus enabling the York plays to map an Old Testament act of destruction onto a theological timeline directed towards fulfilment in Christianity. Second, the York Noah views his own time in terms of a linear history which demands an active ‘cutting off’ of one time from another at an identifiable point – in this case, the Flood. In this manner, the Flood constitutes a more definite moment of change than the Incarnation.

Nevertheless, both strands of supersession, as Biddick argues, are ‘imaginary’ and, as such, vulnerable to contradiction and contestation. Indeed, it is difficult to find a critical model of supersessionary temporality that does not also acknowledge its fragility. As I noted in Chapter One, Lisa Lampert’s work finds that supersessionary and typological models were challenged by figures who were difficult to assimilate – particularly women and Jews, who embodied uncomfortable ‘residues’ of the past. This is pertinent given that, in the York, Chester, Newcastle and Towneley plays, most of the interjections interrupting Noah’s supersessionary ideal come from the figure of the Wife, while the later Cornish play Gwreans an Bys (1611) uses male characters bearing ‘Jewish’ names in the same role. But

53 Lampert calls these troublesome figures the ‘hermeneutical Jew and hermeneutical Woman, whose residues stubbornly challenged the transformative Christian paradigm’. Lampert, Gender and Jewish Difference, p. 14. The idea of women as ‘prior’, however, need not necessarily constitute a troublesome challenge to the status quo. Women featuring in myths of origin may, as Patrick Geary’s discussion of Mary demonstrates, be used to consolidate societies even as they advocate their supersession. See Geary, Women at the Beginning, pp. 60-75.
54 See Whitley Stokes, ed. and trans., Gwreans an Bys / The Creation of the World: A Cornish Mystery (London: Williams and Norgate, 1864), ll. 2294-408, in which Noah is mocked by two characters bearing the names Tubal and Tubal Cain, who were descendents of Cain. Although the
supersessionary time models also prove fragile within the Flood plays’ performance contexts. Performed within a community whose faith was primarily informed by the New Testament, the cycles’ Old Testament plays are presented as part of a continuous history of salvation. At the same time, they are populated with characters resisting this understanding of time. The characters on the ark thus effectively grapple with two ‘drowned’ pasts which challenge a linear supersessionary temporality: the past of the pre-deluge world and the Hebrew past of their religion, of which the Flood is a part.

While the supersessionary model may be destabilised whenever remnants of a previous time resurface, such moments of destabilisation operate differently depending on their context. For example, they may be used, as Joseph’s doubt is, to momentarily contradict supersession, only to demonstrate its validity when the contradiction is eventually shown to be erroneous. These kinds of remnants are therefore either condemned, cut away or otherwise assimilated. The case of Noah’s wife proves rather more tricky, as, while her behaviour may be read as reprehensible (after all, she lacks the faith of her husband), she is still brought onto the ark and constitutes part of the new, saved world. Whether she is to be read as erroneous or not, the remnant embodied in Noah’s wife nevertheless succeeds in challenging Noah’s idea of the Flood as a new beginning. This is consolidated by the fact that, while Noah is often portrayed as resolutely living in the present or looking to the future, his new beginning proves elusive. This is partly because Noah’s view of the function of the Flood is different from that of God. The York play is the only one in which God explicitly claims that the Flood’s objective is a new beginning. In the N-Town, Newcastle and Chester plays, the Flood is an act of punishment from which God intends to spare Noah’s family, but it is not made explicit whether it is also an

As Pamela King has argued, few late medieval men and women had access to the Bible as a book, so their understanding of it would have been based upon what they had heard through the readings in the Latin liturgies and through exposition in sermons. The arrangement of scripture in the liturgy, King notes, invited the juxtaposition of ‘equivalent’ moments from the Old and New Testaments: ‘The matter of biblical text was arranged in a recurrent interwoven pattern of significances which vicariously measured the passage of time’. See King, ‘Calendar and Text’, p. 31.
opportunity to purge and renew. The Towneley *Noah and the Ark* likewise emphasises the sinful decline of the world and God’s resolution to ‘make end / of all that beris life, / Sayf noe and his wife’.

The Flood of these plays is an end, then, not a beginning, and Noah’s family do not know whether they can expect a new start or whether they are merely survivors, left in a world stripped of its past. While the Noah characters in these plays often choose to respond to the Flood as a beginning, their wives view themselves as remnants of what was there before. While Christina Fitzgerald has suggested that the Flood provides a ‘joyful new beginning’ for Noah, but not for his wife, I would argue that neither Noah nor his wife experiences a new beginning, let alone a joyful one.

For Noah, beginning anew depends upon his ability to forget, or at the very least block out, what existed before. The past fifteen years have witnessed an increased scholarly interest in medieval narratives of beginning and origin, particularly in the ways in which these functioned to stabilise or legitimise emerging powers by erasing what was prior to them. Beginnings, particularly the theological and historical beginnings imagined in medieval exegesis and historiography, often relied upon discourses of erasure and oblivion. Yet these narratives rarely succeed in

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57 See England and Pollard, ‘Noah and the Ark’, ll. 104-6. This view of the Flood as a punishment for specific sins frequently appears in medieval literature (although this does not necessarily preclude an audience’s pity for the drowned world). See for example imagining of the deluge in the poem ‘Cleanness’, which sees in the Old Testament a re-occurring pattern of humans soiling themselves with sin and God’s responding punishment. Despite the divine justice of the punishment, the poem’s description of human suffering as the people attempt to escape the Flood admits sympathy: ‘Frendez fellen in fere and falmed togeder, / To drys her delful destyné and dyñen all samen; / Luf lokez to luf and his leue takez, / For to ende all at onez and for euer twynee. / By forty dayez wern faren, on folde no flesch styrred’. Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, eds., *Cleanness*, in *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press; 1978, repr. 2007), pp. 111-84 (ll. 399-403).

58 The ability of remnants from the past to destabilise supersedionary models of time is a growing area of critical interest, though developments have so far tended to remain within thing theory and discussions of the belatedness, or anachronism, of objects. See for example Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance* (New York, NY: Zone Books, 2010), pp. 13-32, which argues that certain objects exist out of time in that they are able to point to the past, yet also anticipate their successive re-presentation.


constructing an absolute beginning. They are, in the end, repetitions of earlier firsts, and can only be treated as beginnings if what existed before is completely and collectively forgotten.\(^{61}\) D. Vance Smith’s extensive study of the different beginnings in *Piers Plowman*, for instance, finds that the Flood requires such an absolute beginning. He argues that the divine act of erasure makes it possible to begin again:

> God [*in Piers Plowman*] presents the Flood to Noah as an opportunity to cleanse the legacy of Cain, to erase the beginning that is commemorated in Cain’s descendants.\(^{62}\)

Elsewhere, Smith contends that the Flood is the ultimate act of historical erasure whose ‘obliteration marks not the terminus of knowledge but its beginning’.\(^{63}\) Yet this reading establishes a contradiction: the Flood is the beginning of history, but yet time is lost in it as Cain’s legacy is said to be expunged. It is also not consistent with the portrayals of the Flood in the majority of the mystery plays. With the exception of York, the God of the mystery plays does not offer promises of erasure and rebirth. In light of this, the Noah character’s propensity to repress his wife’s recollections of the past suggests that this idea of beginning again, this supersessionary ideal, is more frequently created by Noah himself than by God, and does not accurately reflect the true function of the Flood.

Beginnings reliant upon willed forgetting are frail. Mary Carruthers’ study of medieval memory theory interrogates the many medieval techniques for training the mind in understanding and learning through memory, but spends far less time on the art of forgetting. This is principally because, in the texts she studies, forgetting is primarily seen as an involuntary action to be combated through rigorous mental training.\(^{64}\) Nevertheless, she does indicate that willed forgetting was thought to be incredibly difficult, and argues that the forgetting or ‘purging’ of memories relied not so much upon their negation, or obliteration, but rather on their transformation.\(^{65}\)

\(^{61}\) See Anke Bernau in “Britain’: Originary Myths and the Stories of Peoples’, p. 634, which finds that beginnings are invariably linked to both the need to forget and the need to repeat: ‘Two aspects of origin stories and narratives of beginning stand out as a result of such a comparison: the role of forgetting and the prevalence of return, or repetition’.


\(^{64}\) See Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, pp. 75-77.

This idea is expanded upon by Wim Verbaal, who, analysing Bernard of Clairvaux’s advice that new monks cultivate forgetfulness concerning their previous secular lives, identifies a spiritual longing to be free of the past. Both theorists find that the past is never truly obliterated, but rather transformed, as secular memories are adapted to illustrate truths relevant to the present life of the monk. Again, we return to a model of assimilation and personal transformation similar to that undergone by the N-Town Joseph. While ideas of purgation and oblivion initially seem consistent with Noah’s own longing to forget and begin again, his repeated refusal to confront the past does not free him from it. ‘Willed’ forgetting suggests the requirement for an active engagement with the past which is not unlike the typological readings considered so far: the past is retained, but refashioned. Unlike the more malleable Joseph, who eventually proves able to move between times, Noah’s more rigid approach to prior times cannot achieve such a refashioning. Instead, he attempts to cut away the past by shutting down any avenues of speech which threaten to resuscitate it.

The difficult nature of beginnings, particularly within supersessionary discourses which simultaneously acknowledge and invalidate what has gone before, goes some distance towards explaining why, in the Towneley, Chester and York cycles, Noah is so anxious that his wife be silent about the time before the Flood. He believes that, to fashion a new beginning, the signifiers of the sinful past should be abandoned to the waves. In the following section, I contend that the fact that the York Noah’s family are essentially remnants of the old world troubles such a ‘beginning’. However much he may wish to, even the York God cannot ‘wirk þis wirk al newe’.  

in this tradition as a matter of largely willed “re-placement” and displacement’. This ‘re-placement’ is a good description of how the N-Town Joseph’s ‘conversion’ works – he learns to read his time differently, but his former preoccupations are not expunged.


The chief challenge for Noah’s supersessionary ideal is that his wife keeps asking questions concerning the drowned world. In recalling the past, these questions enact a refusal of Noah’s perception of a supersessionary, forward-looking biblical time. This is important, not only because the characters’ differing attitudes towards the past form the crux of their dissent, but also because the Wife’s vocal retention of elements of the past calls into question the success of the Flood as a mode of divine punishment and/or an act of expurgation. This consequently allows the past to intrude upon the present, casting doubt on both the efficacy of God’s act and on Noah’s desire to start anew. The questions of the Wife therefore participate in a different understanding of time from that of her husband. Her engagement in retrospection in the York, Chester and Towneley plays, particularly through questions concerning missing objects and people, demonstrates an ability to re-call what is absent. Moreover, her questions also work to create, as her words and Noah’s responses to them confirm the presence of the waters now concealing what had once been present. Her words have this power because of the way in which the Flood itself is figured through language within the plays.

With the exception of the Chester Noyes Fludd, the punished world is invisible in the Flood plays. As it features only through the dialogue of the ‘saved’ protagonists, the world’s existence is tied to speech. Character discourse therefore performs three roles in relation to the flooded world: first, it constructs the world itself; second, it announces the appearance of the Flood; and third, it enables the past world to be re-called into the present. As there is little evidence to suggest that the plays featured staging other than that verbally described by the characters or noted in the play records, it appears that the Flood was, at least in part, ‘created’ for its

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68 Here, I acknowledge the ‘perlocutionary’ performative speech acts identified by J. L. Austin, which, unlike ‘illocutionary’ speech (performing at the moment of utterance) produces effects as a consequence of utterance. In this case, a character’s speech provokes the audience’s imagining of the community or landscape decimated by the Flood. See J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), p. 52. Speech acts do not necessarily have fixed meanings, but perform differently according to the contexts in which they are used. For example, Sarah Beckwith has noted that certain religious speech acts underwent processes of change during the reforms of the sixteenth century. See Beckwith, *Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness*, p. 4: ‘Confessing, forgiving, absolving, initiating, swearing, blessing, baptizing, ordaining – these are a mere few of the speech acts so transformed by the English Reformation’.
audience through words of the actors. Consequently, the world may be erased and reinstated through speech acts. This relationship between speech and staging does particularly intriguing things to time. A second reading of the passage discussed in relation to the York Wife’s destabilising of Noah’s assumed role as an early saviour-figure reveals a further connection between the speech of the play and its ability to recall and banish the recent past. Here, the Flood is not present until Noah says it is:

VXOR: Nowe certis, and we shulde skape fro skathe, And so be saffyd as ye saye here, My commodrys and my cosynes bathe, þam wolde I wente with vs in feere.

NOE: To wende in þe water it were wathe, Loke in and loke wit

There is no time during which characters comment upon the gradually rising water levels as there is in the Chester, N-Town or Towneley plays. Here, the Flood is brought into being at the moment of speech. Noah’s words simultaneously flood the landscape of the play and make it impossible for the Wife to reach her ‘friendis’. As she looks to the world (a world which she has been experiencing as present), Noah categorises it as past. Noah’s reply therefore acts performatively across the time of the play, defining the Wife’s time as past and introducing the new present, or presence, of the Flood. Later, the Wife confirms this transition, removing her friends from the landscape with her words: ‘My frendis þat I fra yoode / Are ouere flowen wi

Yet while Noah’s statement invites his wife to redefine her temporal tense (the Flood as present), her statement secures the present in a relationship with the past, retaining the memory of her friends even as she acknowledges their disappearance. Thus, the couple’s words do not merely describe:

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69 The dramatic use of speech acts to create and to remove here provides an interesting parallel to the ways in which the York God is depicted creating the world through monologue. See Beadle, ‘The Creation’ in The York Plays, pp. 54-8. It appears that the speech between Noah and his wife inherits God’s divine (and dramatic) ability to speak things into being.


71 Noah’s speech admits the ritualistic element of illocutionary speech identified by Judith Butler, who claims that ‘the “moment” in ritual is a condensed historicity: it exceeds itself in past and future directions, an effect of prior and future invocations that constitute and escape the instance of utterance’. See Judith Butler, Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative (New York, NY: Routledge, 1997), p. 3.

they hold the ability to both create and destroy. As a consequence, the dialogue between Noah and his wife negotiates between and establishes new temporal states.

Yet while the language of the York family banishes the world from the scene, replacing it with water, worlds existing only through speech acts may as easily be recalled. It appears that Noah, with his repetitive attempts to silence his wife, recognises the potential danger of this. The many objections of Noah’s wife are centred upon her perceived duties concerning the distant ‘towne’ – a town which is both submerged by the waters and, of course, still present in the medieval town in which her narrative is played. By expressing her desire for people who are lost, the Wife threatens to summon them back into the present of the play. I have already considered the potentially disruptive implications of Noah’s wife understanding herself as a survivor from the past, but her ability to repeatedly summon the past into the post-Flood world provides an even more direct challenge to Noah’s supersessionary ideal. Such a challenge occurs through the York Wife’s portrayal of her absent ‘frendis’. These friends are mentioned three times in the play. The first two instances appear in the passages discussed above, as Noah’s wife recalls a lost people even as Noah confirms their disappearance. If the Flood in the York

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73 I disagree here with Austin’s theory, which excludes consideration of performatives uttered in dramatic performance. This has been productively challenged by later studies of performatice speech acts and methods of performance. See Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, eds., *Performativity and Performance* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 1 and John R. Searle, ‘How Performatives Work’, *Linguistics and Philosophy*, 12 (1989), 535-58. While there is no space here to include a full consideration of the relationship between performance and performativity, I contend that, in the Flood plays, the performative ability of the characters’ speech hinges upon the theatrical quality famously termed by Brecht ‘the suspension of disbelief’ (an implied agreement between the audience and performers that what is being created for them on stage occupies the status of ‘truth’ for the duration of the play). See Bertolt Brecht, ‘Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction’, in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. by John Willett (London: Methuen Publishing, 2001), pp. 69-77.

74 This kind of performative recollection is not always disruptive. A similar event occurs in the more peaceful exchanges of the Towneley Noah family. When they recall the ploughs and castles of their former landscape, they are not merely reminiscing: they are bringing them into being. Their speech evokes a plough, a cart and a castle, pulling local objects and buildings from the medieval audience’s memories into the Flooded landscape of the Old Testament play. See England and Pollard, ‘Noah and the Ark’, ll. 534–40:

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NOE: Behald on this greyn / nowder cart ne plogh
is left, as I weyn / nowder tre then bogh,
Ne other thyng,
Bot all is away;
Many castels, I say,
Grete townes of aray,
flitt has this flowyng.
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cycle ‘appears’ through the performative speech of the characters on the ark, the fact that the Wife is temporarily silent after Noah’s announcement suggests an effort on behalf of the rest of her family to leave the past behind them. In the 111 lines following the announcement of the Flood, the hitherto vocal Wife speaks only twice, praising God’s preservation of her family. The transformation of her speech from objection to praise initially suggests an acceptance of the Flood, as well as an investment in the present. This is the only point in the play during which the Noah family are depicted as united and experiencing one time together. They focus concertedly on their present experiences, which include the giving of thanks to God, the practical designation of tasks on board the ark, and the sighting of the first hills. This section of the play is also dedicated to illustrating the passage of time, as the six months of their voyage are compressed within their speech, establishing both temporal and spatial distance between the ark and the beginning of the Flood.

Yet six months are not long enough for the Wife to forget what she has left behind. 75 Shortly after the first sighting of land, another question concerning her friends resurfaces: ‘But Noye, wher are nowe all oure kynne / And companye we knwe before?’ 76 Even as Noah catches his first glimpse of what he hopes will be the new world, his wife recalls the old. This third reference to the drowned community receives a different response from the others the Wife has made. Her previous wishes to fetch her friends were denied as they were not only untimely (being expressed after the waters had already risen), but also doctrinally incorrect – only God could dictate who was to be saved on the ark. But when the matter arises for the third time, Noah reacts in a manner which suggests that his wife’s repetition of this question is not only highly troublesome, but that it requires urgent silencing: ‘Dame, all ar drowned, late be thy dyne, / And sone þei boughte þer synnes sore’. 77 Given that the Wife has been silent during most of the voyage, Noah’s reduction of her question to ‘dyn’ appears strangely repressive. Refusing to recognise her question as speech, he tries to dismiss it as discordant noise, thus negating the performative potential of her question. Perhaps afraid that his wife’s words, like his own when he

75 Or indeed, long enough for the audience, whose experience of these six months has been condensed into a section of dialogue which occupies less performance time than the entirety of the dialogue before the Flood.
announced the Flood, might dramatically re-create the absent ‘kynne and companye’ in the imaginations of the audience, Noah swiftly acts to silence her before her recollections can assume a more tangible form. There is, of course, a slight irony in this. The speech act which announced the Flood relies upon the presence of an audience, who are called upon to create the waters in their minds. Yet here, this same audience which enables the actors’ speech to be performative through their participation in the play themselves also constitute a ‘kynne and companye’ and ‘towne’ which remain, paradoxically, outside the ark and yet visibly present and unscathed. If Noah reduces his wife’s speech to the category of ‘dyn’, he is therefore not only denying its referentiality, but also exorcising its performative capacity. It is also disregarding the ability of the audience to provide an illustration of the drowned company.

Yet, despite his desire to prevent his wife from re-calling the past through his categorisation of her speech as meaningless noise, Noah’s response simultaneously invests her ‘dyn’ with meaning when he re-iterates the sinfulness of the drowned world. The fact that Noah feels the need to condemn the drowned company even at the risk of acknowledging the performative capacity of his wife’s words suggests that her third question poses a challenge which the others did not. The source of this challenge might lie in the fact that Noah cannot answer her question: where are they? While the York cycle includes the Fall of the Angels, and thus, it is to be assumed, has established a concept of hell, this information is apparently not available to the Noah of Genesis, whose story does not feature any theology of the afterlife. In Genesis, the dead of the Flood are erased in a way in which a Christian theology, with its concepts of an afterlife and, moreover, specific destinations for this afterlife, does not support. So when Noah’s wife asks where her kin and company are, she gives voice to a temporal and theological conundrum which Noah, who is in this case unaware of the later doctrines of heaven, hell and purgatory, cannot possibly answer. This uncertainty concerning the dead of the Old Testament therefore further complicates the ‘time’ of the Flood, stressing that, though it bears some of the trappings of late medieval ‘Christian’ time, it is also very different from it. Noah’s

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78 For an overview of the changes developing in late medieval Christian theologies of the afterlife, see Duffy, The Stripping of the Altars, pp. 301-78.
response thus hastens to shut down this potentially problematic avenue of enquiry. Nevertheless, his ‘all ar drowned’ can only answer *what* the absent people are, not *where* they are.

A second reason for Noah’s silencing of this third question lies in the fact that the Wife’s attachment to the world after the Flood constitutes a challenge to God. The Wife’s dedication to her ‘towne’ at the beginning of the play appears misguided but understandable; as I have noted, she is not, at this stage, aware that there will be a Flood. Her willingness to save her friends as the waters rise may again be construed as misguided, but ultimately related to feelings of pity rather than rebelliousness. However, if she seeks to recall this world *after* it has been flooded, this becomes potentially blasphemous: she longs for something that God has chosen to destroy. Moreover, through the dramatic performativity of language in the play, her words also hold the potential to recall these things into the minds of the audience. Given that it is not only Noah, but also the York God, who has chosen to see the Flood as an opportunity to destroy the sinful and create an opportunity to begin anew, the Wife’s vocalised retention of the past promotes a direct denial of God’s will. In order to re-assert God’s plan for renewal, Noah must therefore remove meaning from his wife’s speech, reconfiguring it as noise whilst anxiously justifying God’s destruction of the past.

The dialogue between Noah and his wife concerning the drowned world therefore participates in a repeated pattern. A question which interrupts Noah’s forward-orientated approach to the Flood is asked, Noah denies or obstructs this question, and the question is eventually neutralised or reconfigured (for, after all, the Wife never actually succeeds in physically recalling the drowned community). This patterning of their interaction, in addition to the apparently disruptive nature of the Wife’s recourses to the past, has much in common with what Jonathan Gil Harris has termed the ‘temporality of explosion’. Defining this as ‘the untimely interruption of a past that disputes the present, and with explosive consequences’, Harris asserts that such experiences work within, but not *with* the supersessionary temporalities they destabilise:

Those who subscribe to the temporality of supersession respond to polychronicity by reworking traces of the past-in-the-present as dead or obsolete matter, subordinated to
the agency of a progressive present and future [...] [P]ractitioners of supersessionary time often revivify that which they wish to pronounce dead, thereby granting the supposedly superseded past a new lease of life in the present. Those who practice what I am calling the temporality of explosion seize on this possibility and amplify it. In explosive time, the traces of the past acquire a living agency within, and against, the present.79

Harris’ work, which is chiefly concerned with Early Modern sources, examines what he terms the ‘untimely’ ability of objects from the past (in his work, objects from a pre-Reformation past) to accrue different meanings and so to challenge supersessionary discourses.80 Harris’ work raises interesting questions concerning the disruptive temporalities of a dramatic performance’s drive to make meaning out of time. However, I find that the possibilities of temporal explosiveness are widened when ‘untimeliness’ is communicated, not through objects, but through characters that have their own ability to accrue and articulate meanings.

The concept of explosive time is useful in assessing the different ways in which Noah and his wife experience (and seek to manage each other’s responses) to the time of the Flood for several reasons. To begin with, it acknowledges that elements of what Harris terms ‘the past-in-the-present’ can provide a direct challenge to supersessionary models of time by delaying, or preventing, future-orientated progression – even where the past has been recalled in aid of supersession. In the case of the York Flood, the Wife’s third past-orientated question interrupts her family’s joy at the promise expressed in their sighting of the first hills and returns their discussion to the ‘woo’ of the Flood.81 This requires swift action from Noah, whose dedication to a model of time which allows him to participate in a new beginning requires him to stress the absence of what his wife’s speech threatens to resurrect, or, as Harris argues, to rework traces of the past as ‘dead or obsolete’. He therefore uses her interjection as an opportunity to repeat the original moment of supersession. But this process must be repeated each time the Wife refers to those outside the ark, with Noah’s responses increasingly emphasising the ‘dead-ness’ of their friends and kin. Initially, he does this by deflecting emphasis from the friends

79 Gil Harris, Untimely Matter in the Time of Shakespeare, p. 91. It is worth noting here that Gil Harris’ theories are chiefly concerned with objects, rather than dialogue, and have not before been applied to speech acts which imply, but do not necessarily require, the physical presence of something (be it object, landscape, or person).
80 See also Nagel and Wood, Anachronic Renaissance, pp. 13-32.
81 See Beadle, ‘The Flood’, l. 268.
to the waters, but his last reply – ‘all ar drownèd’ – affirms incontrovertibly their absence from the present. Noah ultimately attempts to manage the explosive potential of his wife’s experience of time by shutting down her speech. Moreover, a reading of the Wife’s vocal commitment to the past as ‘explosive’ would suggest that, while she and Noah relate to time differently, each has the ability to influence the temporal experience of the other. This is rather different from the conflicting temporal experiences I addressed in Chapter One. There, Joseph moved from one understanding of time to another, but this change was one-way, as Mary’s experience of time remained unchanged throughout the encounter. Yet the dialogue of Noah and his wife provokes a response from both characters which briefly alters the direction of the play. For example, each time the Wife mentions the community left outside the ark after the waters have risen, it has the effect of directing the speech of the others away from praising God. By explosively introducing an element of the past, the Wife therefore enables one element of the former world’s disobedience to alter the course of God’s ‘new’ present.

This explosive temporal agency is not located solely in the questions of the Wife. The York Flood concludes with the appearance of a rainbow. The characters interpret this symbol differently from one another, but they all choose to read it in relation to their future. Here, the play’s emphasis shifts slightly from the parents to the sons, who will be tasked with carrying on this new world. The rainbow causes the family on the ark to reconsider their own relationships to time, suggesting that, in the York Flood play, time is not only a gendered debate between Noah and his wife. The second son believes that the rainbow signifies that the world is eternal, while Noah predicts that the world will end in fire. The Wife doubts the rainbow, fearing that further ‘myscheffe’ will follow. Noah’s reply to this doubt provides little comfort; he tells her to not be afraid as ‘ẽe sall noght lyffe þan yore / Be many hundreth yhere’. Again, Noah trusts God in a way his wife does not. Moreover, Noah’s pragmatic temporal approach is rooted in (his own) experiences of a human

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lifespan. He does not share his wife’s fear of the end of the world, and, just as he wishes to disengage himself from the recent past of the Flood, from which he has been saved, he likewise feels little connection to the distant end of the world, for which he will not be present. Yet the Wife’s view of time invests both past and future with personal meaning. Her remembrance of the past has not taught her to rely upon God’s providence as her husband does, but rather to anticipate further acts of divine destruction. Consequently, she responds to Noah: ‘owre hertis are soore / For þes sawes that ȝe say here’. Just as the Wife’s appeals on behalf of her friends demonstrate a personal, emotional experience of a biblical event, so Noah’s apocalyptic vision of the future affects her emotionally. A figure prone to experiencing non-linear time, she cannot disassociate herself from the suffering of future generations, however distant. While her concerns for the past world interrupted her family’s praise for their own salvation, the Wife’s new preoccupation with the fate of future generations compromises the position of the rainbow as a symbol of God’s covenant.

‘Good’ Gossips? Collapsed Time in Chester’s Noyes Fludd

As I have shown, the confrontation between the York Noah and his wife is underpinned by the different ways in which they respond to the time of the Flood. The questioning by Noah’s wife challenges Noah’s attempts to adhere to God’s (and Genesis’) linear narrative of disobedience, punishment and (selective) salvation. However, this challenge is only enabled by the fact that the flooded world is chiefly actualised within the descriptive and occasionally performative speech of Noah and his wife. As a result, the drowned world of the York Flood depends upon these characters’ personal relationships with it, and the values they place on concepts of past and present, what is visible and what is recollected. But the dynamics between

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85 Though of course Noah, who lived to nine hundred and fifty years, does not experience an average human’s lifespan – and certainly not a medieval man’s lifespan. See Genesis 9. 29.
87 Tellingly, Noah’s apocalyptic vision does not feature Christ, underlining once again his inability to perform as a comforter of mankind within the context of the Flood.
88 While Noah’s wife refers twice to her ‘gossips’, the full title ‘Good Gossips’ only appears in the titling of characters in the Chester play script and is not attributed to them in the dialogue. It is therefore not potentially a title the audience would hear applied to them. See Lumiansky and Mills, ‘The Thirde Pageante of Noyes Fludd’, ll. 224-25.
Noah, his wife, and time change significantly when a play makes the flooded world physically present on stage. While the Wife of the York play longs to, but cannot actually, make her kin and company part of her new present, the Wife of the Chester Noyes Fludd adopts an approach to time which enables past and present to exist simultaneously. This, I argue, is partly due to the fact that her dissent is reinforced by the presence of ‘Gossips’, who both embody those who will be drowned and identify, in ways that prove to be problematic, the time of the Flood with a future, Christian, female community. The following section will therefore examine the different ways in which the presence of these Gossips affects understandings of time and conflict between Noah and his wife in the Chester cycle.

In the Chester Noyes Fludd a chorus of Gossips enact a refusal of repentance and a rejection of salvation, thus providing visual justification for God’s decision to flood the sinful world. While the drowned people of the York play are presented through the (conflicting) responses of others – God’s condemnation of them, Noah’s judgement of them, and the Wife’s desire to save them – the Chester Gossips engage in an unambiguously flamboyant performance of female disobedience and sin. Yet while the drowned world in York is primarily figured as past, the Chester Gossips also work within the future of the narrative’s medieval performance context. Their name, ‘gossips’, brings the Old Testament narrative into the medieval Catholic present of its performance, whilst aligning the drowned world with medieval female communities associated with birth, motherhood, and Christian baptism. Unlike the models of time examined so far, in which Noah and his wife engage with concepts of past and future as distinct from their current state (Noah, by refusing the past and looking forward to the future; the Wife by looking back to the past and defining the present through its absence), the Chester Gossips and their relationship with the Wife partake in temporal processes which collapse the medieval ‘future’ into the present of the Old Testament Flood.

As I outlined in the Introduction to this thesis, the conception of a time which collapses different historical points into the experience of one moment not only constituted part of theological discussions of divine time (a time dependent on what was imagined to be God’s experience of time and the many definitions of eternity as either a timeless state, being outside of time, or as a state of being in all times at
once), but was also part of the everyday lived experience of medieval people. While, as I outlined earlier, discussions of multi-temporality have informed critical and historical approaches to medieval time for the past five decades, ‘collapsed time’ is a relatively recent concept. The first sustained discussion of temporal collapse being experienced by an individual appears in the work of Carolyn Dinshaw, initially in a chapter discussing Margery Kempe’s emotive experience of the pietà. Noting that Margery responds to the pietà as if she were in the actual presence of the crucified Christ, Dinshaw argues that: ‘In Margery’s narrative world, past-present-future times are collapsed into a very capacious now’. This way of experiencing all times as simultaneous proves problematic for the priest who attempts to console the distraught woman. While Margery is performing according to Christian models of divine time she is also performing a denial of historical time by collapsing the space in between events.

Dinshaw proceeds to claim that Margery’s ‘capacious now’ constitutes a ‘queer’ manner of temporal experience which is out of sync with that of the priest, who assures her that ‘Ihesu is ded long sithyn’.

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89 It is also, of course, the nature of dramatic performance to bring moments from the past and present into a single moment of experience. This might occur during a performance of the mystery plays themselves, or during religious events such as the celebration of the Corpus Christi, for which the plays of Chester and York were performed. It is plausible that audiences, who were already encouraged to experience the temporal conflation of the Last Supper and Crucifixion in celebrating the Eucharist, would likewise be open to similar conflations between the Old Testament Flood and the ‘Gossips’ of their own time. On the Eucharist’s ‘intersection of history and eternity’, see Daniel P. Poteet II, ‘Time, Eternity, and Dramatic Form in the Ludus Coventriae “Passion Play I”’, Comparative Drama, 8.4 (1974-5), 369-85 (p. 369); Dutton, ‘Secular Medieval Drama’, pp. 384-94, and Magnus, ‘Time on the Stage’, pp. 117-20.

90 As I note in my Introduction, discussions of temporal collapse have been present in medieval drama criticism since the work of V. A. Kolve. However, until recently works have tended to focus on moments of collapse which are experienced collectively – for example, by an entire audience attending a play or by a congregation partaking in the Eucharist. Dinshaw is the first to examine what happens when an individual experiences a moment of temporal collapse and those around them do not. Her work is therefore particularly useful for this enquiry into Noah and his wife’s experiences of the Flood, as temporal collapse, when it occurs, is principally experienced by Noah’s wife.

91 Dinshaw, ‘Temporalities’, p. 109. This same incident has also been used by Margaret Rogerson to make a convincing case for the possibility of medieval actors using the methods learnt through affective piety to prepare for their roles by imagining themselves as experiencing various moments in biblical time. See Margaret Rogerson, ‘Affective Piety: A ‘Method’ for Medieval Actors in the Chester Cycle’, in The Chester Cycle in Context, ed. by Dell, Klausner and Ostovich, pp. 93-107.

92 I here refer to D. Vance Smith’s discussion of history as the measurement of intervals in Vance Smith, ‘Irregular Histories’, p. 164.

work into a much broader study of a range of ‘queer’ and individualistic experiences of time, which, she explains, encompass:

forms of desirous, embodied being that are out of sync with the ordinary linear measurements of everyday life, that engage heterogeneous temporalities or that precipitate out of time altogether – forms of being that I shall argue are queer by virtue of their peculiar engagements with time.\textsuperscript{94}

The idea that queer forms of time are characterised by being ‘out of sync with ordinary linear time’ – indeed, actively desiring a past that is not part of the ‘now’ – is particularly interesting considering my previous discussion of the York Noah’s wife, as it goes some way to explaining why, desiring the past, the Wife responds very differently to the present from Noah. However, I am more cautious concerning Dinshaw’s claim that experiences of collapsed time are to be read as ‘queer’, nor do I agree with her implied assertion that ‘everyday life’ is normally experienced as linear – as this thesis demonstrates throughout, there is no clear normative way of experiencing time. Incidents of temporal collapse may be observed throughout the cycle plays and are used for a multiplicity of purposes, from the direct address of the icon/actor Christ in the York Crucifixion and the staging of an ecclesiastical court in the N-Town Trial and Mary and Joseph, to the depiction of the Towneley Cain as a medieval ploughman.\textsuperscript{95} The many contexts in which such moments occur suggest that collapsed time is a standard part of the plays’ dramatic arsenal, and thus can not necessarily be always considered disruptive, marginalised, unusual or ‘queer’.\textsuperscript{96}

Whether queer or not, processes of temporal collapse do have the effect of altering all of the times they bring together. Such an alteration occurs in the Chester Noyes Fludd, in which the Gossips of Noah’s wife make an appearance which collapses the play’s performance context into that of the Flood.\textsuperscript{97} Temporal collapse

\textsuperscript{94} Dinshaw, \textit{How Soon is Now?}, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{96} This is not to say that, in some instances, these collapsed times cannot achieve ‘queer’ or disruptive effects, only that it is not their primary role. Here I recognise Annamarie Jagose’s argument that the characteristics of collapsed time have long been theorised as being at the heart of ‘time’ or ‘history’ (for example, in Derrida’s spectrality, in Lacanian fantasy and in postcolonial criticism): ‘Acknowledging these and other intellectual traditions might make us hesitate to annex the queerness of time for ourselves’. See Elizabeth Freeman and others, ‘Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion’, \textit{GLQ}, 13.2-3 (2007), 177-95 (p. 186).
\textsuperscript{97} This ability of the past to both imprint upon and be itself altered by the present forms the focus of Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s enquiry into medieval encounters with pasts from beyond human memory.
therefore has the potential to operate slightly differently from dramatic uses of anachronism, which also feature throughout the play. For example, the Chester Noah anachronistically employs medieval misogynist tropes to joke with the men in his audience about the obtuseness of wives, while his wife swears by Christ and St John. Each of these incidents forms a momentary reference to the context of their medieval playing spaces, but they do not necessarily alter the progression of the Old Testament narrative. Furthermore, when times are collapsed, as happens when the sinful community of Genesis is characterised as a specifically medieval (and Christian) group of women, a series of new associations emerge which have the ability to further problematise typological readings of the ark as a prefiguration of the Cross.

The appearance of the Chester Gossips situates the sinful world, not as external or prior to the medieval community watching the plays, but squarely within it. This is reflected in their name ‘Good Gossips’, as well as in the women’s relationship with Noah’s wife. The word ‘gossip’ identifies them with a Christian, medieval, female community which performed an important pastoral and spiritual function:

In Middle English, “gossip” refers not to speech but to a pastoral office, connoting not triviality but spiritual responsibility. A gossip was a godparent, a baptismal sponsor bound in spiritual kinship to both the godchild and its parents.

This kinship was deep-rooted. As well as acting as spiritual sponsors and guides during the lives of children, godmothers would accompany the mother-to-be through the lying-in stage of her pregnancy. This promoted the formation of close-knit female communities of godmothers and mothers – communities which, Christina Cohen claims that objects from times out of memory have the ability to be changed through their meanings for their present context. See Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, ‘Time Out of Memory’, in The Post-Historical Middle Ages, ed. by Elizabeth Scala and Sylvia Federico (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 37–62 (p. 384).

By saying ‘appearance’, rather than ‘entry’, I note that there is nothing to indicate the Gossips’ entrance or exit. It is unclear whether they are present from the start in the vicinity of the pageant wagon, or whether they speak from within the audience. If the former, they would witness the ark building, and yet deliberately choose to reject it, compounding their foolishness and error. If the latter, they become part of the Chester community watching the plays.

Susan E. Phillips, Transforming Talk: The Problem with Gossip in Late Medieval England (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), p. 6. The definition ‘god-sib(be n.)’ in the Middle English Dictionary centres the term on both spiritual and a social relationships: ‘(a) One's sponsor at baptism or confirmation, a godparent [...] A close friend, companion, pal [...] as item of direct address’. See <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/mec-idx?type=id&id=MED18998> [accessed 12 September 2013].
Fitzgerald argues, provoked a misogynist fear of female communal speech: ‘[they constitute] a female community that quickly becomes an unruly counterpart to the ordered microcosm of Noah’s patriarchal guild-family’. Their disruptive potential therefore extends beyond their influence over the Chester Noah’s wife when they draw her away from the ark, and suggests that they also threaten the social order of their medieval performance context. It is therefore fitting that the Gossips, and the dedication of Noah’s wife to saving them, interrupt the Genesis narrative by forming an obstacle to God’s command concerning those permitted aboard the ark: ‘thou [Noah] shalt enter into the ark, thou and thy sons, and thy wife, and the wives of thy sons with thee’. Until physical force is used to drag the Chester Wife onto the ark, it appears that the ark will either have to leave without her (contrary to God’s edict), or that she might succeed in bringing her Gossips aboard, thus compromising the Flood’s purpose.

Even more disturbing to the progression of the Genesis narrative (and to later typological models seeking to assimilate it within a pattern of Christological salvation), is the way in which the Gossips’ appearance in the play prompts the collapse of three times – the time of the Flood, the time of the late medieval playing space, and the time of the Crucifixion – into one moment. Drinking together despite the rising water, the Gossips are presented as neglectful pleasure-seeking exemplars of the sinful world:

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100 Fitzgerald, ‘Manning the Ark in York and Chester’, p. 365.
101 Genesis 6. 18.
THE GOOD GOSSIPS: The fludd comes fleetinge in full faste, one evere syde that spredeth full farre. For fere of drowninge I am agaste; good gossippe, lett us draw nere.

And lett us drinke or wee departhe, for oftetymes wee have done soe. For at one draught thou drinke a quarte, and soe will I doe or I goe.

Here is a pottell full of malnesaye good and stronge; yt will rejoyse both harte and tongue. Though Noe thinke us never soe longe, yett wee wyll drynke atyte.  

Speaking with one voice as they carouse in the water and dull their fear with ‘malnesay’, the Gossips offer a memorable image of drunken and verbose resistance. Turning to drink (ironically a form of self-drowning) the Gossips create their own microcosmic Flood as they continue to engage in the activity that, the play suggests, provoked their punishment in the first place. Yet their speech also contains several temporal markers which draw into question the way in which they interpret the time of the Flood. Although they are on the brink of extinction, the Gossips refer to a futurity that is somewhat ambiguous. The lines ‘or wee departhe’ and ‘or I go’ suggest that they know that something is going to happen, and realise that they only have a limited amount of time left in which to conclude their drinking. It is not obvious from these lines what they think is going to happen. If they believe they are waiting for death, then the defiant language of their speech acts as a refusal to repent (a concept which is in any case not readily available to them as God’s edict has already been passed). Their behaviour therefore works as a rejection of a form of salvation that excludes them from the ark. However, their penultimate line, ‘though Noe thinke us never soe longe’, lends itself to a different interpretation: they mistakenly think that Noah is waiting for them. This reading suggests that they, like Noah’s wife, believe that there is a real chance that they will be saved, whilst

103 The Gossips’ drunkenness also appears to prefigure Noah’s own drunkenness in Genesis 9. 20-25: an event otherwise absent in the Flood plays. Although The Newcastle Play hints at this later event when the demonically-influenced wife gives her husband a drink, Noah’s drunkenness is otherwise absent in the Flood plays. See Norman Davis, ed., ‘The Newcastle Play’, ll. 56-60 and Genesis 9. 20 – 25.
highlighting their own foolishness by delaying their own salvation for the sake of a good stiff drink.

The Gossips therefore engage with the Flood, but appear to not understand their own position in relation to it. Like the N-Town Joseph, with his erroneous speeches concerning Mary’s pregnancy, the Gossips also fail to read their time correctly and do not recognise that their destruction is the object of the Flood. But whether they realise they are doomed and seek to blunt the process through drink, or are merely testing Noah’s patience because they believe he is waiting for them, the Gossips also remain unaware of the wider (and temporal) implications of their speech. Their ignorance is compounded by the fact that their speech looks back to God’s original announcement of his decision to flood the world by directly echoing the versification of his speech at the beginning of the play. The a/b/a/b rhyme scheme of the first two stanzas concludes with the triple rhymes of the third stanza’s line endings. This final stanza, with its triplet followed by a shorter, unrhymed, line, mimics the verse structure employed in the opening speeches of God.106 In this moment of aural recollection, the drinking speeches of the Gossips unconsciously mimic the rhythm of the words which determine who will live and who will drown. Their speech thus has the ability to bring together different moments of the Flood narrative into an act of rebellion which nevertheless confirms their own demise even as they utter it.

Although they are located firmly within the Flood narrative, those punished in Noyes Fludd are simultaneously depicted as holding a resonance with medieval sinners. Making excessive loquaciousness and drinking the sins the Flood punishes, the Chester Gossips perform as products of, and referents to, the play’s performance context. They internalise and embody the sins they are committing. While much

work has been done on Chester’s characterisation of the drowned community and the late medieval stereotype of the garrulous alewife, the temporal implications of this characterisation have not yet been explored. As with the York Noah’s wife, the momentary threat posed by the Gossips to the narrative of supersession lies chiefly in their speech. While they cannot be read through the sixteenth-century concept of ‘gossip’, their representation nevertheless hints at a female speech community which resists silencing whilst also promoting continuity with the past.107 Late medieval discourses increasingly reference the dangers attending unruly, public female speech, which, they held, was potentially dangerous to both speaker and listener.108 This preoccupation is evident in the variety of material produced on the subject, including sermons, exasperated attempts to stop ‘janglyng’ in church, conduct literature concerning the dangers of idle talk, misogynistic narratives featuring the inability of women to keep secrets and court prosecutions of public slander and scolding.109 In the twelfth century, idle talk was even assigned its own demon to record it.110 Of course, the root of all transgressive speech would surely be in the minds of those watching the Chester Noyes Fludd. If they had witnessed a performance of the Fall beforehand, the performance of the Chester Gossips might have recalled Eve’s transgressive, persuasive speech and its consequences. This, in turn, might have also prompted an audience to look forward to an argument used by St Paul in the New Testament concerning the dangers of female public speech and their holding


109 For court prosecutions of idle female speech, see Bardsley, ed., Venomous Tongues, p. 46. Fears of women’s speech also appear in popular fifteenth-century lyrics such as those collated in Salisbury, ed., The Trials and Joys of Marriage. For preachers’ arguments against chattering in Church, see Susan E. Phillips, ‘“Janglyng in cherce”: Gossip and the Exemplum’, in The Hands of the Tongue: Essays on Deviant Speech, ed. by Edwin D. Craun (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007), pp. 61-94.

authority over men.\textsuperscript{111} The Gossips’ excessive speech and outright rejection of God and Noah’s authority could thus appear as a continuation of Eve’s disobedience as well as a Pauline nightmare come true – essentially bringing themes from Old and New Testaments together into one condemnation of female fault.

The Gossips, and their drowning, also bring together the punishments of different times. Transgressive female speech was increasingly legislated against towards the end of the fourteenth century and Sandy Bardsley reports that late medieval jurisdiction often resorted to the ducking stool as a form of punishment. This could involve the ‘ducking’ or submerging of a scold in a river, lake or other expanse of water, with the dual intention of silencing and humiliating her.\textsuperscript{112} The punishment of the Chester Gossips through drowning therefore not only operates on the level of the Genesis narrative, but also references contemporary medieval penalties designed to curb the tongues of unruly women. Making the Gossips recognisably contemporary characters traditionally associated with rebellious speech and watery punishment thus allows the play to bring audience time and Flood time into simultaneity. The Gossips are being punished as the sinful community of Genesis, but they are also being punished as late medieval wrongdoers. In the time of the play, they can thus be punished for both simultaneously. The effect this temporal collapse might have had upon the audience is hinted at when, having forced his wife onto the ark, Noah shuts the window: ‘Then shall Noe shutt the windowe of the arke, and for a little space within the bordes hee shalbe scylent’.\textsuperscript{113} Old Testament sinners, Gossips, and audience are all shut out of the ark together. During this ‘little space’ which brings the ‘now’ of the Flood to the medieval street, the audience occupy the place of the drowned. They are then held in a kind of stasis at the actors’ discretion until the action onstage is resumed. Presumably, this would have given the audience ample opportunity to reflect upon their own misdemeanours, and to consider whether they, too, would have found themselves outside the ark.

\textsuperscript{111} See 1 Timothy 2. 11-14: ‘Let the woman learn in silence, with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to use authority over the man: but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed; then Eve. And Adam was not seduced; but the woman being seduced, was in the transgression’.

\textsuperscript{112} Its popularity as a punishment is attested in court records and with the rise of prosecutions for scolding in the fourteenth century. See Bardsley, \textit{Venomous Tongues}, pp. 142-43.

\textsuperscript{113} See the stage directions in Lumiansky and Mills, ‘The Thirde Pageante of Noyes Fludd’, ll. 260-61.
They are therefore encouraged to judge their own conduct against a past event – participating themselves in the play’s moment of temporal collapse.

While this collapse fulfils a didactic purpose, the presence of Gossips also acknowledges a third time operating within the play, to more troubling effect. This chapter has already examined the conflict between Old and New Testament models of salvation in relation to the ‘explosive’ temporalities of the York *Flood*. However, when this debate arises during moments of temporal collapse a new set of tensions emerge. Despite the fact that the Gossips are presented unambiguously as sinners, the presence of the medieval baptismal sponsor in a narrative about waters which proclaims, not eternal life, but death, evokes a later religious context which momentarily calls Noah’s desire to shut the ark door into question. This context hinges on the Gossips’ relationship with Noah’s wife. As I have shown, the Chester play depicts a female social community in which the Wife is emotionally invested, but with which Noah and his sons have little involvement. Nevertheless, calling these women ‘Gossips’ hints at deeper familial relationships and social responsibilities, indicating that the sons who encourage their mother to abandon her friends are turning away from those who were present at their birth and who were intended to provide them with spiritual guidance throughout their lives. Of course, the characterisation of the women prevents this implied social kinship from being developed: it is to be assumed that these Gossips, despite the ‘good’ in their title, have failed in their role as moral instructors and instead have occupied their time in leading the mother astray. There is a certain temporal irony in operation here: the Gossips are condemned for their failure as godparents through an Old Testament purgation of sin which provides an inverted foreshadowing of baptism.

The Gossips, with whom Noah’s wife identifies, provide the chief source of the conflict between the Chester Noah and his wife. The Chester Wife initially collaborates in the building of the ark, which demands the whole family’s participation.¹¹⁴ The conflict between the spouses only occurs when she refuses to

¹¹⁴ The play still maintains a gendered hierarchy, however. The women of the play are given less skilled work than the men, as Noah’s wife claims: ‘women bynne weake to underfoe / any great travell’. Lumiansky and Mills, ‘The Thirde Pageante of Noyes Fludd’, ll. 67–68. This argument is undermined by the fact that the female characters do perform most of the carrying of heavy building materials for the ark, suggesting that they are weak in skill, rather than in strength.
board the ark – initially out of a desire to disobey Noah, and, later, because of her intention to fetch her ‘gossips everyechone’. In this sense, the Wife fails where the rest of her family succeed – they are able to put ‘sin’ behind them, but she remains attached to it, and refuses to leave her erring community behind. Putting her loyalty towards the Gossips above both family duty and her duty to God, she says:

NOES WYFFE: But I have my gossips everyechone, one foot further I will not gone. They shall not drowne, by saynt John, and I may save there life. The loved me full well, by Christe. But thou wilt let them into thy chiste, elles rowe forthe, Noe, when thy liste and get thee a newe wife.

Again, the image of baptism is never far away, as the Wife chooses to swear by Christ and by St John, who baptised Jesus. Yet these words, spoken in a context which has already witnessed moments of collapse between late medieval, Old Testament and Christian times, admit the rather more disturbing parallel between the violence of the Flood and that of the Crucifixion. Both New Testament figures, Christ and St John, are killed in order to either procure or spread the news of salvation for others. The Wife’s erroneous willingness to die for her sinful community therefore enacts a parodic inversion of a form of salvation that is not yet open to those she wishes to save. Undoubtedly this distorted prefiguration contributes to consolidating her own error, as she is threatening to die for (and among) unrepentant sinners. Nevertheless, in referencing events beyond her own narrative and historical frame, she highlights both disjunction and similarity between the divine destruction narrative of the Old Testament and the state of ‘Christian’ salvation available to the medieval audience for which it is played. Moreover, the fact that the Chester Wife, like the York Noah, also places herself in the role of

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116 Or, as Susan Phillips notes, Noah’s wife ‘justifies her subordination by asserting the mutual support that gossips owe one another [...] this female alliance supersedes her matrimonial bonds [...] In fact, her responsibilities as a gossip trump all others’. See Phillips, Transforming Talk, p. 147.
118 On iconographical representations of John the Baptist as both precursor to Christ and as a sacrifice in his own right, see Miri Rubin, Corpus Christi, p. 315.
saviour indicates a similar need for her to identify herself within a religious culture beyond her Old Testament time frame. Moments of temporal collapse are therefore not always invested in stressing similarity or continuity between times where they occur in the mystery plays. They can also stress difference.

Temporal collapse also does not always work in the way in which the characters might expect it to. In expressing her wish to save her Gossips through threatening a self-exclusion from the ark and casting it as a kind of martyrdom, the Wife’s speech identifies her, not as a Christ-like figure, but as one of his torturers: an association that is underlined by her commitment to past relationships and past times. This is because the specific speech form through which this relationship is enabled – the act of swearing – holds one further, more troubling, ability to collapse time.

From the late fourteenth century, the act of swearing by Christ or by parts of his body was depicted as an act of mystical violence, through which swearers physically tore the body of Christ in their present time. This belief gave rise to sermons, exegetical literature and images representing a mutilated Christ surrounded by men clutching the dismembered body parts they have torn off by swearing. The frequency with which this kind of anachronistic swearing appears in the mystery cycles could command a chapter to itself, and, as the following chapter demonstrates, may fulfil many different roles. Swearing is almost exclusively placed in the mouths of characters portrayed as subversive or evil, particularly characters such as Cain, Herod, Anna, Caiaphas and the soldiers who crucify Christ. In these instances,

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119 While there is not space within the remit of this thesis to consider all aspects of swearing, it is worth noting that its ability to injure Christ poses interesting problems for discussions of performative speech. If the speech inflicts injury at the moment of utterance, it falls into Austin’s illocutionary category of performative speech. Yet Searle’s more recent article argues that one of the principal features of illocutionary performatives is that they are spoken with intent. Medieval beliefs regarding swearing occupy a more ambiguous position – although swearing performs an act of violence at utterance, it is not the primary intention of that speech act (which might be a desire to prove veracity, to validate other speech, or, in this case, to illustrate the vehemence of the Wife’s misplaced attachment). See Austin, How To Do Things With Words, p. 45 and Searle, ‘How Performatives Work’, 535-58.

120 See Gill, ‘From Urban Myth to Didactic Image: The Warning to Swearers’, pp. 137-60. These scenes also bear a disturbing resemblance to similar depictions of Jewish torturers mocking Christ at his Crucifixion, images of host torture (which again collapse Crucifixion and Eucharist into one temporal space) and images of the arma Christi. See Anthony Bale, The Jew in the Medieval Book, pp. 145-68, and Lampert, ‘The Once and Future Jew’, p. 243: ‘In this way, the Crucifixion, the related crimes of host-desecration and ritual murder, and the Mass are all perpetual and simultaneous, existing beyond a linear temporal frame’.

121 It is also usually placed in the mouths of men, thus raising questions concerning the gendered depiction of Noah’s wife. One of the reasons swearing was configured as a performative, physical
swearing is almost always temporally ironic. Either characters swear by a saint or deity that does not yet exist in their time, or they swear ‘by Christe’ or by ‘hym that me dere boght’ whilst failing to perceive that the man in front of them – the man they are persecuting, torturing or crucifying – is he by whom they swear. Given the prevalence of swearing in medieval drama, it is possible to argue that belief in the performative violence of swearing did not extend to words spoken in dramatic performance, though there is evidence that performances raised broader anxieties concerning the relationship between Crucifixion-time and medieval time through the ‘playing out’ of Christ’s tortures. The swearing of the Chester Noah’s wife as she attempts to save her Gossips therefore accrues multiple associations which not only consolidate her role as an erring antagonist, but also align her with Christ’s torturers as well as a number of other dramatic personae who occupy erring and often temporally ambiguous positions. Her engagement with the ‘violent speech’ of swearing thus collapses multiple biblical events and medieval speech patterns together into one moment in a manner which enables both times to inform one other.

Yet Noah’s wife is not Margery Kempe, identifying with Christ, or even imagining herself in his place. Instead, the Wife’s misdirected pity for the Gossips compounds her sin by potentially making her one of Christ’s torturers. It also has the effect of showing that the Wife, with her love for the worldly Gossips, participates in a catalogue of social and spiritual sins specifically feared in the medieval ‘now’ of her performance context. She is a woman drawn away from salvation by the drunken excesses of the world; she rates her female friendships above her duties as mother and wife; she argues with her husband in the public streets; and she engages in speech forms which were believed to tear the body of Christ. As such, the Wife performs as a negative exemplar for her late medieval audience. As Noah explains,

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action was that it neatly circumvented the gendering of disruptive speech as female. See Craun, ed., *The Hands of the Tongue*, p. xiii-xiv. Swearing could also be legally quantified and punished in the same way as violent action. This suggests that the Chester Noah’s wife is participating in a male, rather than female, speech form. Yet on the whole, socially disruptive speech was largely coded female, with the consequence that men heard to be partaking in such speech risked appearing un-masculine. See Patricia Parker, ‘On the Tongue: Cross Gendering, Effeminacy, and the Art of Words’, *Style*, 23 (1989), 445-65 and Lochrie, *Covert Operations*, p. 57.

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122 See Davidson, ed., ‘A Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge’, p. 97 (ll. 133-5), which maintains that, ‘sithen thes miraclis playeris taken in bourde the ernestful werks of God, no doute that ne they scorned God as diden the Jewis that bobidden Crist’.

123 Chapter Three will examine the conduct of the Towneley Herod: another character with a tendency to accrue unfavourable temporal associations.
she provides a warning to the men of the ‘crabbed’ nature of all women and the dangers of allowing them mastery, while also warning the women of the consequences of improper wifely conduct and an over-reliance upon female company.\textsuperscript{124} The play’s characterisation of an Old Testament figure thereby has the potential to direct the behaviour of a medieval audience, even as she remains both its product and the embodiment of its fears. Moments of temporal collapse therefore have consequences reaching far beyond an individual character’s understanding of the time in which they participate. The Wife’s stand against Noah concerning the fate of her Gossips brings the Flood, the Crucifixion and medieval time together in a moment which, like Margery Kempe’s \textit{pietà}, engages with the idea that Christ suffers because of human sin throughout \textit{all} time, even when the sin in question occurred at a historical moment preceding his sacrifice.

A reading of collapsed time in the Chester \textit{Noyes Fludd} therefore makes sense of what would otherwise be a set of paradoxes. The sinners punished by the Flood perform multiple roles. They are unruly medieval women receiving the punishment of ducking, and godparents for a religion that does not yet exist. They are accessories to a baptism which is not yet a religious rite and objects of the misplaced sacrificial love of a woman who vocally tears the body of another – an unborn deity whose sacrifice and salvation is wholly inaccessible to those who die unrepentant. Through her engagement with the Gossips, the Chester Noah’s wife therefore finds a very different way of challenging the linear narrative form of the Genesis Flood to that of the York Wife. Nevertheless, while the Chester Wife’s rebelliousness is more overt than that of her York counterpart (whose threat to linear, supersessionary time lies chiefly in her untimely questioning rather than outright refusal of the ark), it is also less successful. Instead of disruptively recalling what Noah wishes to remain drowned, the Chester Wife’s attempt to bring the condemned

\textsuperscript{124} See Lumiansky and Mills, ‘The Thirde Pageante of Noyes Fludd’, ll. 105-8:

\begin{verbatim}
NOAH: Lord, that weomen bine crabbed aye, and non are meeke, I dare well saye. That is well seene by mee todaye in winnesse of you eychone. Good wiffe, lett be all this beare that thou makest in this place here, for all the weene that thou arte mastere – and soe thou arte, by sayncte John.
\end{verbatim}
community onto the ark holds temporal connotations which only serve to stress the justness of God’s ruling whilst compounding her own error. Her rebellion merely provides further opportunities for God, and Noah, to cut away the past. As a consequence, while the Flood narrative of the York play remains, until the end, vulnerable to temporally explosive questions concerning the drowned world, performances of collapsed time in Chester cease after the Wife is forcibly carried onto the ark. This is primarily because, from this point on, she is silent. Nevertheless, her resistance has, albeit briefly, managed to disrupt Noah’s perception of time, even if it has not God’s. When she boards the ark, Noah expresses his grievance at his wife’s delay:

NOAH:  Our tarryinge here mee highly greeves.  
     Over the lande the water spreades;  
     God doe hee as hee will.  

Here, the Wife’s ‘tarryinge’, that is, the illicit passage of time or wasting of it, is placed in the context of God’s inexorable, unstoppable experience of time. While the Wife’s protest has threatened to waste the few precious minutes she has to board before the waters rise, it does not jeopardise the process of the Flood itself. Noah’s description of the waters moving over the land, ‘God doe hee as he will’, demonstrates his recognition that, in the broader scheme of God’s plans, his Wife’s procrastination has had little effect. Despite the Wife’s bid to bring unsanctioned cast members onto the ark, by the end of the Chester play, the saved family are exactly where they should be at the end of Genesis 8. Husband, wife, sons and daughters-in-law are all finally aboard, while the waters spread over the rest of the land. The Wife’s silence following this demonstrates her own, unwilling, acceptance of God’s supersessionary time – unlike the York Wife, she has no need to ask her husband where her kin and company are, as she is fully aware of the consequences of her failure to save them. Yet despite this, the collapsed time she experiences does come with a small victory for her bid to bring the Gossips onto the ark. The Gossips vanish from the dialogue and, presumably, from the stage, but the medieval

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audience, for whom they act both as warning and as caricature, remains – living proof that the sin of the ‘old’ world continues.126

**Facing the Past**

Throughout the plays discussed in this chapter, models of time which offer alternative views to linear or supersessionary models have the potential to interrupt concepts of the Flood as a mode of destruction and new beginning. Unlike the conflict between Mary and Joseph, the conflicts between Noah and his wife tend to end with the silencing of one character, rather than a reconciliation or eventual conviction. These silences meet with varying degrees of success.127 In York, the dialogue between Noah and his wife becomes increasingly fraught as both seek to advocate what appear to be irreconcilable temporal perspectives. The Wife of this play exhibits a desire to look backwards, and the Flood’s violence fails to fully or permanently suppress her verbal recollections of the past. Her past-orientated questions chiefly pose a challenge because the God of the York Flood narrative expresses his desire that the Flood will permit him to begin the world anew – a perspective eagerly adopted by the forward-looking speeches of Noah. But such a beginning would rely upon a process of complete erasure. Instead, the repetitive, backward-looking recollections of the Wife permit the continuation and proliferation of remnants from the past – remnants which, as I have shown, problematise the play’s conclusion with the anticipation of further repetitions of human sin and divine punishment. The Wife of the Chester play, however, has a more forward-looking

126 While there is no space here to go into theories concerning the staging of ‘Noyes Fludd’, the question of where the Gossips go bears some consideration. For example, if they were to merge into the audience but continue watching the play, this would hold very different implications from a complete disappearance from the set, or even a mimed performance of drowning. In the latter, their destruction, and supersession, would be visually complete. In the former, the sense of their sin continuing and their being ‘part’ of the late medieval audience would be compounded.  
127 The different ways in which silence, and silencing, operates in these plays is unsurprising given the context of the Flood. As Diarmaid MacCulloch has explained in his exhaustive study of the history of silence, silence holds a variety of meanings and performs many functions throughout Hebrew and Christian scripture, but he notes that, in the Old Testament, it often accompanies and follows divine acts of destruction and defeat. See Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Silence: A Christian History* (St Ives: Allen Lane, 2013), pp. 11-29. As a dramatic device, silence can even give a character more subversive power than a character who is speaking. See for example the discussions of Isabella’s famous silence at the end of Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure* in Pascale Aebischer, ‘Silence, Rape and Politics in Measure for Measure: Close Readings in Theatre History’, *Shakespeare Bulletin*, 26.4 (2008), 1-19 and Philip C. McGuire’s broader review of dramatic silence in *Speechless Dialect: Shakespeare’s Open Silences* (Berkeley, LA: University of California Press, 1985).
approach to time. Her speeches, along with those of the rebellious Gossips, instigate moments of temporal collapse which resist the linearity of the Genesis Flood narrative. As a consequence, they highlight differences between Old and New Testament models of salvation, whilst re-working the time of the Flood into a performance of temporal simultaneity which raises the possibility of engaging with divine (and civic) punishment as a constant, everyday experience. This is in part because the Chester God never claims to wish to make the world anew – his Flood is entirely constructed as a punishment for the malicious sin of his people. Collapsed time thus presents a rather different challenge to narratives of erasure. While recollection in the York play troubles God’s desire to begin again, Chester’s conflation of the sinful world together with Christ’s torturers and a medieval audience performs an outright suggestion that God’s punishment has failed. The waters rise, the Gossips disappear, but human sin continues.

None of the mystery plays depicting the Flood continue the story of Noah and his family past the landing of the ark. They are left gazing out at a radically changed landscape, uncertainly wondering at their places within it. Narrating an unstable beginning, the Flood plays cannot end convincingly. Instead, they progress into an ever-widening future, the future of their audience, but leave the survivors of the old world unsure of what to do with the empty, ‘new’ one. In Chester and York, they are, however, equipped with a promise, as both plays feature the rainbow. God’s promise that he will never again destroy the entire world is a symbol designed to move Christian audiences throughout all times, its appearance in the sky directing the peoples of later eras back to God’s covenant with Noah. In doing so, it continually refreshes both the event and the remembrance of what was lost in it. In this manner, God himself indulges in the promotion of temporal collapse, whilst turning processes of recollection into a confirmation of his own ability to work in all moments of time.

128 For example, in Lumiansky and Mills, ‘The Thirde Pageante of Noyes Fludd’, ll. 309-24 (ll. 319-20), God promises that his bow will appear in the sky whenever storm clouds arrive, ‘in tokeninge that my wrath and teene / shall never thus wroken bee’.
CHAPTER THREE

Passion or Passover? Bethlehem’s Fighting Mothers and Crumpled Time in the Towneley Herod the Great.

No medieval play could be more immediately and horrifyingly relevant to our time.¹

Directing the York Cycle’s Slaughter of the Innocents for the 1999 University of Toronto festival, Roland Reed could not fail to explore the similarities between what he felt was a medieval portrayal of ‘state sponsored terrorism’ and contemporary incidents of violence in Afghanistan, Chechnya, Iraq, Kosovo, Rwanda and Somalia. This awareness directed his production; his intention, he argued, was to ‘liberat[e] the biblical story from the prison of the past’.² For Reed, this liberation involved two understandings of ‘past’: a biblical past and a medieval past. Yet when directing my own version of the narrative in 2012, I envisaged my role as being less about ‘liberating’ the play, and more as performing a similar action to the medieval playmakers by making the narrative part of my own time. My version therefore focused heavily on the aftermath of the massacre, particularly the status of Mary and Joseph as ‘asylum seekers’. Performed to a soundtrack that included extracts from Pink Floyd’s The Wall and folk protest songs, this re-imagining was intended to work as a commentary on social exclusion and politically sanctioned violence in the United Kingdom of the twenty-first century.³ While Reed focused on contemporary conflicts that were spatially distant from the place of his performance, my production aimed to bring the narrative’s themes even closer to home. Although Reed and I both saw the potential to draw links between biblical times and our own times, we therefore approached our material slightly differently. Nevertheless, in using the story to speak of the abuses of our own generations, we followed the journey of the

³ My production took place as part of the International Carol Service at St Peter’s Chaplaincy, the University of Manchester, on the 9th December 2012. Many of the attendees and participants either had first-hand experience of the asylum system or had their origins in other countries, so the production was not only designed with this specific audience in mind but also required the audience to think outside familiar depictions of a comfortable ‘Christmas card nativity’ and acknowledge that the birth narrative of Jesus was followed by political genocide and the flight of the holy family – a family who would today be termed ‘refugees’. Audience feedback from the event proclaimed it to be “startling” and “terrifying”, and one audience member said “it made me wonder how the [holy] family would have fared if they’d applied for asylum in the UK instead of Egypt”. In this case, the drama worked to allow audiences to engage with biblical narratives across times.
medieval playmakers, who, as the previous chapters have shown, likewise used a variety of methods to make biblical narratives part of their own time.

Late medieval mystery plays depicting the slaughter of the Innocents demonstrate complex relationships with time. Based on the gospel of Matthew’s account of Herod’s massacre of Bethlehem’s male infants and performed under the influence of the medieval liturgical and devotional practices surrounding the feasts of Corpus Christi and the Holy Innocents, the slaughter plays in the Towneley, Chester, York and N-Town manuscripts oscillate between many moments, including an act of violence in Bethlehem, the Crucifixion, events in the lives (and after the lives) of Moses, Rachel and Jesus, and the liturgical and social practices of their medieval performance contexts. While the plays considered so far deal with time in ways which, at least initially, present some kind of rupture between a distinct ‘before’ or ‘after’, plays dealing with the slaughter of the children at Bethlehem occupy a less fixed temporal moment in the Christian narrative. This thesis has shown so far that certain characters have the ability to trouble ideas of linearity and supersession by admitting a multiplicity of temporal experiences. It has found that this has been an important feature of the biblical narratives’ translocation to the stage, as the mystery performances allow the development of characters and conflicts which work to resist a singular reading of the various complexities of biblical (and medieval) time. Nevertheless, these narratives have begun with a concept of fundamental rupture and change: either through the birth of Christ or through the destructive possibilities of the Flood.

Yet, despite the fact that it presents an act of violence, the slaughter narrative does not do this, engaging instead with discourses of fulfilment and continuity. As a consequence, it invites a very different approach to time from the outset – one which makes all times interdependent on one another. Moreover, unlike many of the major acts of biblical violence depicted in the mystery plays, such as the Fall, Flood, Crucifixion, or Doomsday, the slaughter of the Innocents does not substantially change the laws of its world. This is partly due to the fact that it occupies a curious time between prophecy and fulfilment. Occurring after Christ’s birth, but before his teaching begins to mark any difference in religious law and well before the Crucifixion, the slaughter partakes of the liminal space between Jewish and Christian
theologies. To a certain extent, this liminality explains the actions of the mystery plays’ favourite tyrant, Herod. Hearing of Hebrew scriptures announcing the birth of the King of the Jews in Bethlehem, Herod attempts to prevent the prophecy from coming to fruition by commanding a massacre of all the boys in Bethlehem under the age of two years. In doing so, he hopes to change both past and future – discrediting the Old Law while preventing any progression to the New. Ever the supreme egotist, Herod appears to believe his intervention can change scriptural time. However, as this chapter shows, Herod’s temporal machinations only have the effect of binding moments in Christian and Hebrew history even more securely together.

Jesus and his family escape to Egypt, thus rendering Herod’s act of slaughter pointless. But what has been given little attention in works concerning medieval depictions of this incident is the way in which the slaughter acts to knit together further scriptural moments that validate Jesus’ authority by upholding the scriptures of the past. Because of this escape, Jesus is able to re-enact the same journey as that attributed to Moses, the founder of the Hebrew law, and thus, on his return, bring another, new, law out of Egypt and into Israel. The slaughter of the Innocents also projects forward to later events in Christian history, including the Crucifixion of the one child to escape the slaughter and the later development of the Eucharistic significance of the Corpus Christi child. In addition to this, late medieval dramatisations of the slaughter show Herod’s soldiers facing opposition from the mothers of the Innocents. While the mothers of the gospel are only recorded as weeping, the mothers of the mystery plays will not let their children die without a fight. During this encounter, their grief becomes instrumental in furthering the meetings between scriptural times that Herod is attempting to suppress. This provides an intriguing extension of works that seek to examine the role of grief as a means of female resistance. Although the mothers lose their children, they nevertheless participate in temporal and scriptural processes that challenge Herod’s control within the play. Despite Herod’s attempts to alter time through commanding

4 Most of this work has so far centred on plays concerning the rising of Lazarus and the grief of the three Marys. For a discussion of the role and agency of mourning women in the mystery plays and the gendered conflict between ‘female grief and male control’, see Katharine Goodland, ‘‘Vs for to wepe no man may lett’’: Accommodating Female Grief in the Medieval English Lazarus Plays’, Early Theatre, 8.1 (2005), 69-94 (p. 69).
an act of violent rupture, the slaughter instead provides a space in which past and future times overlap and encounter one another.

This chapter focuses chiefly on the depiction of the Bethlehem slaughter performed in the Towneley *Herod the Great*. My choice of this play is primarily due to the fact that its approach to time works rather differently from the narrative’s counterparts in the other mysteries, in that the Towneley play’s protagonist does not merely experience time, he interacts directly with it. The Towneley Herod exhibits an awareness of how his situation is influenced by, and is to some extent reliant upon, Hebrew time and prophecy. The play gives the past a textual nature which has the ability to both threaten and inform present action, as Herod’s councillors scour the pages of Hebrew scripture in order to guide the king’s actions regarding the reported son of God. As will be discussed in the second part of this chapter, *Herod the Great* is also unusual in that, while its massacre features the vibrantly verbose mothers who are common to all the mystery plays dealing with this narrative, the processional nature of the mother/soldier encounters retains some of the formal aspects of the earlier liturgical plays of the *Ordo Rachelis*. This secures the mothers within an older dramatic tradition while also subtly emphasising their links to both the Hebrew figure of Rachel and to the Virgin Mary.

Although criticism has found evidence that the plays of the Towneley manuscript were performed in the small town of Wakefield, far less information about their performance contexts survives than for the York or Chester cycles. This accounts for the comparatively few contextual studies of the play, as opposed to the material produced on the massacre plays of the other cycles. Recent studies also indicate that the plays in the Towneley manuscript were not performed as part of a

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5 Developed as part of the commemoration of Holy Innocents Day, the eleventh-century *Ordo Rachelis* was performed in church by clerics and choirboys, and sung in Latin. See the plays collected in Karl Young, ed. and trans., *Ordo Rachelis* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1919).

6 On locating the plays of the Towneley manuscript in Wakefield, see Peter Meredith, ‘The Towneley Cycle’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. by Beadle, pp. 134-62. For the purposes of this chapter, I am sensitive to critics positing Wakefield as the most likely location for their performance, but continue to refer to the collection of plays as the ‘Towneley Plays’, as this is the most frequently used name for them.

7 There have been several attempts at conducting a cultural criticism of the Towneley plays, though not of ‘Herod the Great’. See for example Robert S. Sturges, “‘Nerehand Noothyng to Pay or to Take’: Poverty, Labor, and Money in Four Towneley Plays”, in *Money, Morality, and Culture in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Juliann Vitullo and Diane Wolfthal (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 13-32.
guild cycle, which leaves the details of its performance context more uncertain. It may have been performed in a public space, or as a touring production, or as part of a pageant in a private house. It may have been part of the Corpus Christi celebrations, as were the more documented York and Chester plays, or it may have constituted part of Easter celebrations. It is not unrealistic to suggest that, if the pageants were performed in Wakefield, they would have played to a far smaller audience than the Chester or York plays, and this may be reflected in the plays’ smaller casts.

These unknown elements about the Towneley plays contribute towards a different understanding of the ways in which time was treated and managed in the plays in comparison to those, for example, documented in York, where play lengths were managed and guilds fined if they erred beyond their allotted times. The plays of the Towneley manuscript also vary considerably in length, with comparatively brief plays such as the Flight into Egypt preceding the far longer Herod the Great. While it has been argued that the brevity of certain plays might not necessarily be obvious to an audience member watching the plays performed in a sequence, their apparent isolation in the manuscript suggests that the Flight, for example, was demarcated as ‘separate’ from the massacre narrative which followed – perhaps with the intention of rendering Herod’s efforts futile before he even reads the scriptures that so alarm him. It is therefore difficult to establish how time was treated in the Towneley plays as a whole, as it appears that they do not comfortably constitute a ‘whole’. Nevertheless, an investigation of Herod the Great does give an idea of the ways in which the complexities of staging time, particularly the multiplicity of scriptural and liturgical times attending the Bethlehem massacre, were navigated. However, before discussing the shaping of time in Herod the Great, it is important to examine first the way time is presented in the original gospel story.

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9 On the differing lengths of plays in the Towneley manuscript as well as the difference in performance time between plays presented as pageants and those forming a continuous narrative, see Meredith, ‘The Towneley Cycle’, pp. 157-8 (p. 158): ‘Pageant performance involves the isolation of incidents and episodes while at the same time allowing them to be part of the same story. Their temporal and spatial relation to the whole is therefore not the same as scenes in continuous action’.

10 See Rosemary Woolf’s discussion of the different styles and revisions in the Towneley plays in *The English Mystery Plays*, p. 310.
Scripture, Prophecy and Legitimacy in the Gospel of Matthew

The propensity of late medieval mystery plays to present the slaughter of the Innocents as a meeting point between several different times is partly a result of the way time works in the gospel in which the narrative originates. The account detailing the killing of Bethlehem’s male children at the behest of a jealous Herod is only present in the gospel of Matthew – a collection of texts which presents the story of Jesus from the perspective of Jewish Christianity.\(^{11}\) It is therefore invested in an Old Testament typology designed to persuade a Jewish audience of Christ’s legitimacy. It does this through a number of parallels that align Christ with Moses, thus suggesting that he is both a continuation of, and successor to, Mosaic Law. As a consequence, the gospel became a popular resource in medieval Jewish-Christian disputation literature, and one of the most popular gospels used in support of medieval Christian typological readings.\(^{12}\) However, because the gospel was initially designed for a Jewish audience, it tends to depict Christ, not as abolisher or replacement of the Old Law, but as the fulfilment of it.\(^{13}\) It therefore frequently uses formulaic phrases designed to link past and present, such as ‘you have heard it said [...] but I say unto you [...]’, and ‘this fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet [...]’\(^{14}\). Rather than promoting a theology of rupture, these phrases express a desire for continuity. Nonetheless, Delbert Burkett has argued that this process of validating the present through the scriptures of the past often did not take their original contexts into account:


\(^{12}\) See Abulafia, *Christians and Jews in Dispute*, p. 35; Biddick, *The Typological Imaginary*, pp. 4-8 and the discussion of Nicholas of Lyra’s 1330s anti-Jewish treatises in Cohen, *The Friars and the Jews*, pp. 180-191 (p. 185), which struggle with the question, ‘if the writings of the Jews offer irrefutable proof of Christianity, why did and do the Jews remain blind and unyielding to it?’

\(^{13}\) The gospel of Matthew appears particularly anxious to stress this point, and is the only gospel to feature an assertion of Jesus’ intention to fulfil, rather than destroy, the Law: ‘Do not think that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets. I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. For amen I say unto you, till heaven and earth pass, one jot, or one tittle shall not pass of the law, till all be fulfilled’. See Matthew 5. 17-18.

\(^{14}\) See for example Matthew 5. 21-22 and Matthew 2. 23. According to Balslev and Mohanty, this reading of time is characteristic of Jewish scholarship, which reads scripture as part of a prophetic time that maintains historical patterns without losing a sense of linearity. So when God does something he has done before, such as the killing of the firstborn, it is a new event, but part of a historically repeated pattern. See Balslev and Mohanty, eds., *Religion and Time*, p. 9: ‘time for Judaism is not a uniform, linear flow, it is rather a series of leaps. Likewise, history is not a linear, continuous progression, but “an eternal improvisation.”’
The interpreter did not seek to determine the meaning of the scriptural text in its original historical setting, but applied it directly to the situation of the interpreter’s community.\textsuperscript{15}

While the New Testament relies upon the scriptures of the past for validation, it therefore also engages in a process of dislocating certain moments from Old Testament scripture in a manner that heralds the ways in which both the late medieval playmakers adapted scripture according to the needs of their own communities, and in which Reed’s production of the slaughter aimed to ‘liberate’ the narrative from the past. Moments of historical dislocation, in which one moment in time is moved from one context to authenticate another, thus have a New Testament precedent. It is also worth acknowledging at this point the looseness of the term ‘prophecy’ when referring to fragments of the Old Testament having been taken out of their original contexts and aligned with New Testament events. This kind of scriptural interaction might more properly be called ‘typology’, as it does not follow the pattern of God’s direct revelation of divine knowledge to a human as is seen in the Old Testament prophecy narratives.\textsuperscript{16} However, as the gospel of Matthew and, indeed, the Herod of the Towneley play, read these Old Testament extracts as prophecies fulfilled by Christ, I shall continue to refer to them as such.\textsuperscript{17}

Although used in a new scriptural context, the original meaning of the Hebrew scripture is not necessarily lost in the gospel of Matthew. While studies in medieval typology have suggested that the New Testament attempted to subsume the Old through processes of cutting off and refiguring, Matthew’s account of the


\textsuperscript{17} While there has been much interest in the function of prophecy in the Middle Ages (particularly concerning discourses of millenarianism and calculations of the apocalypse), less has been written on medieval responses to the ‘prophecies’ and fulfilments of the New Testament. For a sample of the many discourses on prophecy, millenarianism and apocalyptic literature, see Richard K. Emmerson and Bernard McGinn, eds., The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992); Ann Williams, ed., Prophecy and Millenarianism: Essays in Honour of Marjorie Reeves (Harlow: Longman, 1980) and Marjorie Reeves, The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages: A Study in Joachimism (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969). For more recent discussions of secular and political uses of prophecy, see Lesley A. Coote, Prophecy and Public Affairs in Later Medieval England (Woodbridge: York Medieval Press, 2000).
slaughter of the Innocents works rather differently. The slaughter episode is depicted as progression, not supersession. This involves the construction of a number of narrative parallels, and is nowhere more evident than in the account of the slaughter at Bethlehem. Matthew 2. 13 – 23 follows a number of movements in both time and space, which turn several different events from Hebrew scriptures into a series of prophecies that work within the timeframe of the events unfolding at Bethlehem. These prophecies inform (and, to some extent determine) the New Testament events; meanwhile, the events of the New Testament gain validity from these ‘prophecies’ even as they claim to fulfil them.

The gospel account begins with an angel warning Joseph to take Jesus and Mary into Egypt, ‘for it will come to pass that Herod will seek the child to destroy him’. Having made this intratexual prophecy (the angel predicting Herod’s actions even before Herod is recorded as making this decision), Matthew then validates the removal of the holy family to Egypt by claiming that these events occurred ‘that it might be fulfilled which the Lord spoke by the prophet, saying: Out of Egypt have I called my son’. This first ‘prophecy’ of the sequence cites Hosea 2. 1, which refers to God bringing the nation of Israel out of Egypt. Matthew applies this prophecy directly to Jesus’ return from Egypt, thus making Jesus a ‘second Moses’ figure and, by extension, a worthy bearer of a new law, as well as stressing his status as God’s ‘son’. By reading the journey of the young Jesus as a fulfilment of Hosea, Matthew performs an act of typological interpretation, taking an event concerning a race’s journey and re-assigning it to an individual. I would therefore argue that, in order for the Bethlehem-born Jesus to come from Egypt as Moses, the bringer of the first Law, did, he first needs a reason to go there. Herod’s killing spree provides that reason. This potentially shifts the significance of the events at Bethlehem from being a record of a moment of tyrannical violence to a crucial and causal linking event between Hebrew and Christian scriptures. The male children of Bethlehem are killed in order that Jesus may be read as a continuation of the Hebrew law.

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18 See my discussions of medieval processes of typological reading in Chapters One and Two.
19 Matthew 2. 13.
20 Matthew 2. 15.
After finding that the wise men do not return with news of the new king, Herod orders all of Bethlehem’s male children of two years old and under to be killed. Matthew refers to a second Hebrew scripture here in recording the grief of the murdered children’s mothers:

Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremias the prophet, saying: A voice in Rama was heard, lamentation and great mourning; Rachel bewailing her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not. 21

Referencing Jeremiah 31. 15, this second prophecy brings the Bethlehem massacre together with two other moments in Israel’s history. Just as Matthew articulates the maternal grief at Bethlehem by referring back to a previous moment in scripture, so Jeremiah 31. 15 also records Israel’s being taken into captivity by the Assyrians by referencing yet another time. Using the motif of Rachel weeping, the Jeremiah passage imagines the Hebrew matriarch Rachel, the mother from whom the northern tribes of Israel were descended, mourning for her children. Motherhood had been a particularly fraught experience for Rachel, who, marrying the patriarch Jacob, mourned her childless state for a long time before eventually giving birth to Joseph and dying bearing Benjamin. 22 Rachel’s motherhood was therefore closely linked to mourning in two ways: initially, through her inability to bear children for many years, and later, when she had borne sons, through her own painful death, which caused her to name her second son ‘Benoni’, or ‘the son of my pain’. 23

21 Matthew 2. 17-18.
22 See Genesis 30. 1-25 and Genesis 35. 16-20. See also W. M. Temple, ‘The Weeping Rachel’, Medium Aevum, 28.2 (1959), 81-6 (p. 81): ‘Rachel, then, established herself as an image of mourning in Hebrew minds, gained as a wife after long waiting, and yet unable to give Jacob the children they desired’.
23 See Genesis 35. 18: ‘And when her soul was departing for pain, and death was now at hand, she called the name of her son Benoni, that is, The son of my pain: but his father called him Benjamin, that is, ‘The son of the right hand’. Further typological links may also be drawn between Jesus and Benjamin, as Jesus is likewise depicted in medieval devotional literature as the son at the right hand of the father, but for Mary, a son of pain. See for example the depiction of Mary’s sorrow as she gazes at her crucified son in Susanna Grier Fein, ed., ‘The Dispute Between Mary and the Cross’, in Moral Love Songs and Laments (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1998), <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/fein-moral-love-songs-and-laments-dispute-between-mary-and-the-cross> [accessed 6 January 2012]. Grier Fein’s introduction to the poem argues that ‘the piety of the poem links Nativity and Passion, both being birthing events for the God who took flesh. The first birth is joyous, Jesus is, and shared with Mary [...] The second birth through the Cross is, in contrast, filled with the labor pains of both mother and son [...] Mary feels the brunt of this torturous “birth” emotionally and physically, while the Cross bears the part of encumbered pregnancy, but it is Christ who is the actual Parent who births a new life for humanity’.
Yet Rachel’s motherhood of Joseph (who was to become the first Israelite sold into Egyptian slavery) also joins Rachel to another event involving grieving mothers and dead children: the Passover. In referencing Rachel, Matthew’s telling of the Bethlehem massacre thus also looks back to the sparing of the Israelites from the tenth plague visited upon Egypt and the death of the first-born of ‘both man and beast.’ The death of the firstborn was the final plague visited upon the Egyptians by Yahweh, and directly preceded Moses’ leading the Israelites out of Egypt. Yet later, apocryphal versions of the Passover narrative came to hold links to a second Rachel. W. M. Temple’s review of the weeping Rachel figure recognises another Rachel from the tribe of Levi, who miscarried her child the night before the Passover as a result of her slavery. While the other Israelites rejoiced, she wept, alone, for her dead child. This narrative is particularly pertinent in explaining the ways in which the mothers of the Innocents might have been understood by a late medieval audience. While medieval Christians reading the slaughter narrative were encouraged to celebrate the escape of Jesus and honour the Innocents as the first Christian martyrs, the grief of the mothers – who were not party to this knowledge – was also acknowledged. During the Feast of the Holy Innocents, these mothers, like Egypt’s Rachel, were also depicted grieving amongst the celebrations.

Through a figure of maternal grief, Matthew’s description of Bethlehem opens out sections of the past much like a folding telescope: extending backwards into scripture and jointing together three different scriptural moments into one literary and temporal trajectory. A medieval approach to the gospel also bore the

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24 See Exodus 11.1-10, particularly the description of the Egyptians mourning, which resembles that in Bethlehem: ‘and there shall be a great cry in all the land of Egypt’.

25 See Temple, ‘The Weeping Rachel’, p. 82. This incident comes from an early Sahidic fragment of The Life of the Virgin, and is recounted in Forbes Robinson, Coptic Apocryphal Gospels (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1896), pp. 22-3:

The preacher then explains the meaning of Rachel’s weeping for her children. Rachel was the wife of a man of the tribe of Levi named Eleazar, who lived at the time when the children of Israel were in Egypt. He was diseased in his feet, and unable to work at making bricks. The taskmasters struck his wife, and compelled her to work. She was in a state of pregnancy, and the work was beyond her strength. Her child was prematurely born. The next night God smote the firstborn, and the Egyptians in fear sent the Israelites forth. The Israelites were joyful; but Rachel was weeping for her child in the midst of the children of Israel, and no one could comfort her.

accretions of later apocryphal texts as well as a consciousness of its own feast days and liturgical practices. In this sense, the processes at work within medieval imaginings of the Bethlehem massacre might potentially be described as palimpsestuous, with Christ’s birth contributing the top ‘layer’ of meaning to a series of moments throughout Hebrew history that are read by Matthew within the context of Jesus’ re-enactment of Moses’ role. However, I find that the figure of the palimpsest is rather too rigid a model with which to investigate the processes at work in both Matthew 2 and in the Towneley presentation of the Bethlehem slaughter. This is partly because a palimpsest suggests a superimposition of one thing over another. Although, unlike certain models of supersession, this does not necessarily intend to efface entirely the thing underneath, it does impose a hierarchy of meaning: the thing on top, being the most recent, is also the most legible. Yet the times brought together by the Bethlehem slaughter defy such structure. They are woven together by the Matthew scribe as being mutually interdependent: a sequence of prophecy and fulfilment that suggests that one time cannot easily be scraped away from the other without disrupting Matthew’s depiction of Christ as law-giver. Nevertheless, these times also retain their ability to stand alone as separate, distinct entities. This chapter argues that the differences between the times are just as important as the similarities drawn, the most obvious example of this being Matthew’s depiction of the slaughter at Bethlehem, which essentially provides a reversal, rather than re-enactment, of the Passover narrative. In this telling, God’s hitherto chosen race is left mourning, while the holy family escape to, rather than from, Egypt.

After the massacre, Matthew tells of Herod’s death and the holy family’s return. Mary and Joseph hear that Herod’s son, Archelaus, reigns in Judea, and so

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27 I accredit the term ‘palimpsestuous’ to Gérard Genette, who uses it to describe literature in which the value of a palimpsest’s layers lies in their relation to one another (as opposed to something which merely has a layered structure). In the case of Matthew’s gospel, each ‘layer’ of scriptural quotation is employed to validate and fulfil the other. See Gérard Genette, Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree, trans. by Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), pp. 398-9.

28 See Raeleen Chai-Elsholz’ description of the ways in which palimpsests may be read as both testimonies of scribal choices causing a disappearance of former texts and as holding the ability to recall them: ‘Palimpsests fascinate as witnesses to the disappearance of a text, a scribal hand, or a provenance, and for their potential to yield them up again’. See Raeleen Chai-Elsholz, ‘Introduction: Palimpsests and “Palimpsestuous” Reinscriptions’, in Palimpsests and the Literary Imagination of Medieval England, ed. by Carruthers, Chai-Elsholz and Silec, pp. 1-17 (p. 1).
continue on to Galilee. This is said to fulfil a third prophecy, although ‘He shall be called the Nazarene’ does not have an identifiable Hebrew source. The gospel’s account of the killing of Bethlehem’s children therefore incorporates three different scriptural references and presents them as ‘prophecies’ intended to consolidate the young Jesus’ position as a new prophet and law-maker, whilst also consolidating the gospel’s own textual links to previous scripture. We are therefore encouraged to read the events of Matthew 2 retrospectively. This presents a very different view of the Hebrew past from those this thesis has discussed in relation to medieval biblical exegesis on the Flood and the birth of Jesus. While the constructions of Judaism discussed in Chapters One and Two were concerned with depicting the Hebrew religion as either backward-looking or valuable only through processes of typological reading, the structures of ‘prophecy’ and ‘fulfilment’ established in Matthew 2 suggest that the gospel is not overwriting the Hebrew past but validating it through this very process of looking back. This likewise influences the late medieval plays dealing with the slaughter of the Innocents. In these plays, events from different moments in time are not placed in opposition, as they are in dramatisations of conflict between Mary and Joseph; nor are they superseded, or collapsed into one moment, as they are in performances of the Flood. Instead, this chapter finds that they ‘touch’, but, unlike palimpsests, also remain distinct from one another. I therefore employ a model of time which allows moments to encounter – but without competing with or fundamentally changing one another.

**Temporal Origami: Making Moments Meet**

This thesis has so far examined mystery plays in which encounters between times have resulted in changes taking place. As established in Chapter One, this is particularly the case where times or events perceived as specifically ‘Jewish’ and ‘Christian’ encounter one another. At these moments, either one time is seen to succeed the other through processes of conversion or supersession, or both times are collapsed into simultaneity. But this thesis has also shown that such temporal models are often unstable and unsustainable, particularly when the drama has to deal

29 Matthew 2. 23.
30 This usually occurs to promote the collapse of Hebrew time into Christian time. See Spector, ‘Anti-Semitism and the English Mystery Plays’, 3-16.
with temporal ‘survivors’ from the past, be they Jews, the old man married to a pregnant virgin, or the wife who steps out into a new world haunted by her memories of the old one. Moreover, models of collapsed or supersessionary time do not necessarily retain or allow for distinctions to be made between times as they are brought together. Alternatively, in cases where a distinction is made, it is chiefly in order to assert the superiority of one time over another. This chapter, however, argues that the Innocents plays are invested in maintaining temporal difference even when moments are brought into proximity. Rather than being represented as a singular, progressive narrative, time in these plays tends to shift, bringing together distant moments. But while moments are permitted to meet, they do not necessarily become as one. The Innocents plays are therefore important as, unlike the predominantly linear approaches of the plays examined so far, they show evidence of a more complex medieval understanding of the way in which religious and scriptural time works. In this understanding, the past is not so much troublesome, as affirming.

This chapter therefore moves away from questions of supersession, rupture and assimilation in order to consider a temporal model that privileges topology over typology. In doing so, it finds a starting point in a model of time developed by a philosopher whose work moves between classical literature, mathematics, science and religion. Michel Serres explains his topological understanding of time using the now-famous metaphor of the crumpled handkerchief:

If you take a handkerchief and spread it out in order to iron it, you can see in it certain fixed distances and proximities. If you sketch a circle in one area, you can mark out nearby points and measure far-off distances. Then take the same handkerchief and crumple it, by putting it in your pocket. Two distant points are suddenly close, even superimposed. If, further, you tear it in certain places, two points that were close can become very distant. This science of nearness and rifts is called topology, while the science of stable and well-defined distances is called metrical geometry.31

Serres’ model, exemplified by the topological handkerchief and influenced by chaos theory, is one of several he offers as alternatives to the concept of linear time.32

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32 His others include time as percolating (a model which defies the directionality implied by the popular model of time as flowing), and time as a complexity of random wells, accelerations, gaps, proximities and distances. Serres and Latour, *Conversations*, pp. 57-9. For an overview of Serres and chaos theory, see Maria L. Assad, *Reading with Michel Serres: An Encounter With Time* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999) and Herzogenrath, ed., *Time and History in Deleuze*.
What is noticeable, however, is that those working to refine understandings of topological time (which, for Serres, primarily began as a method of defending his own academic practice of oscillating between theories from different cultures and times), have often chosen to eliminate the possibility of tearing mentioned above, as this appears to counter to Serres’ parallel concept of percolating time, in which there is no concept of break or rupture. For example, Steven Connor defines topology as ‘the study of the spatial properties of an object that remain invariant under homeomorphic deformation, which is to say, broadly, actions of stretching, squeezing, or folding, but not tearing or breaking’.33

Connor’s squeamishness concerning the topological possibilities of ‘tearing’ time is perhaps justified when their associations with concepts of temporal ‘break’ are taken into account.34 Until the point of tearing, Serres’ handkerchief metaphor offers a model of time that can be shaped and folded, but essentially retains its status as a unified piece of cloth. An act of tearing or breaking, however, appears to have more in common with supersessionary narratives of time. It bespeaks a violent agency aimed at permanently deforming or altering the shape of time, which an act of folding does not. A tear or break initiates a distortion which cannot be easily re-assimilated into the former fabric of time. Nevertheless, I would like to reconsider the concept of tearing as an example of topological movement, even if it is a movement which, in the Towneley Herod the Great, is not successful. Topological time is relevant to a reading of the slaughter plays for a number of reasons, and section one of this chapter examines the depiction of the Towneley Herod, who

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34 The problems of navigating questions of temporal ‘break’ have been documented throughout this thesis, and are increasingly becoming a concern of historiographical practice. In a web discussion with Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, Ellen Joy calls for an end to scholarship labouring to inscribe a definitive break between ‘then’ and ‘now’: ‘every present moment is inhabited by and also inhabits (consciously and unconsciously) multiple, heterogeneous temporalities – some at a distant remove and others more contiguous’, <http://www.inthemedievalmiddle.com/2009/03/signaling-to-each-other-from.html> [accessed 9 May 2013]. Joy’s call for a breaking down of divisions neatly summarises a long historiographical debate. See for example Peter Burke, ‘Reflections on the Cultural History of Time’, Viator, 35 (2004), 617-26 and Vance Smith, ‘Irregular Histories: Forgetting Ourselves’, pp. 161-4.
attempts to take control of his present by denying the Hebrew prophecies of the past and trying to prevent a king of the future. It contends that, in doing so, Herod is essentially trying to enact a ‘tearing of time’. What makes this very different from Noah’s attempt at disassociating himself from the flooded world in Chapter Two, or Joseph’s eventual conversion in Chapter One, is that Herod is shown to be working against, rather than with, scriptural narrative. He is violently ripping his own time out of the pages of scripture, disassociating it from the Hebrew texts that precede it, and the Christian texts which follow.

One further under-explored aspect of Serres’ topology is the implicit idea that a handkerchief can always be straightened and ironed flat again. While acts of crumpling and folding bring different moments into proximity, the moments themselves appear not to be permanently altered by these encounters. Again, this crumpling is very different from the models of collapsed time discussed in Chapter Two. Collapsed times bring moments into a single fabric: they are experienced as a continuous ‘now’. Crumpled time, however many moments it brings into contact, retains difference between these moments. This ability of crumpled time to retain distinctions informs my discussion of the several ways of reading the mothers of the Innocents in the second section of this chapter. Here, I contend that, while the time of the Bethlehem mothers is folded to lie alongside the grief of Rachel and Mary, and is depicted through the medieval figure of the ‘unruly woman’, each of these circumstances nevertheless retains its own temporal individuality. Moreover, the mothers’ vociferous and violent opposition to Herod’s soldiers constitutes an act of temporal resistance by securing the Bethlehem massacre’s place in the Old and New Testaments even during the act that attempts to dislocate it. There is a certain irony to Herod’s actions: trying to affect an act of rupture, he actually promotes continuation. Both Herod and the mothers are therefore part of a larger theological time that they cannot control, but they respond differently to this situation: Herod attempts to control time, while the mothers participate in it. Again, the inability of a (male) character to impose structure onto time is due to the involvement of female characters. However, in this instance, as in Mary’s, the women are with God.

When considering topological crumpling, it is important to note that the space folded between each point (that is, the time that has passed between the occurrences
of each event) does not disappear, as it does in collapsed time models, but remains folded between the points that have been drawn together. With its propensity to forge connections between different moments in time and subject matter, Serres’ topology is particularly suited to the discussion of such intermediary spaces, or what Kathleen Biddick has called ‘unhistorical temporalities’. The Nativity plays partake of such an intermediary space because Christ has come, but has not yet died. As discussed in Chapter One, Christ has been traditionally understood as a theological ‘turning point’ – a concept also adopted by Serres, who, in discussing Pascal’s *Pensées*, argues that, despite its percolating or crumpling movement, time nevertheless has ‘a fixed point on whom we can rely: Jesus Christ, who is somewhere called the centre towards which all gravitates’. Yet, as I have already argued, it is not clear when, exactly, this turning point occurs. Indeed, I would argue that the Innocents plays do not acknowledge Christ’s birth as an indisputably fixed point which fundamentally changes the times that have gone before. Like the account in the gospel of Matthew, the plays are concerned with promoting continuation, not rupture. Jesus, cast as the new Moses, is essentially more of the same. Yet because difference is maintained between Hebrew and Christian times, time does not shatter by coming into contact with eternity.

Moreover, for the mothers of the murdered children, concepts of eternal time or Christological salvation are inaccessible. Some of their earlier counterparts in the liturgical plays of the *Ordo Rachelis* were granted this insight, with a visitation from an angelic consoler, who tells them that their sons have been granted bliss in heaven. Yet the grieving mothers of the mystery plays receive no words of divine consolation; vengeance is denied to them and their children, unlike Mary’s son, will


36 See Serres and Latour, *Conversations*, p. 95 and Manchester, ‘Time in Christianity’, p. 116. Kathleen Davis also argues that early perceptions of the birth of Christ saw it as a divide that had a shattering effect on medieval perceptions of historical time and attempted to secure difference between Old and New Testament times. See Kathleen Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty*, p. 84.

not rise again. Despite the fact that they partake in the meeting of many moments in scriptural time, they themselves are left in the uncomfortable gap between the Old Testament Passover and Christ’s sacrifice. Serresian time, with its participation in ‘in-betweeness’ even as it brings temporally distant points into contact, is therefore a particularly apt model with which to interrogate a play that falls between Passover and Passion, Old and New Testament law, Incarnation and Crucifixion, and prophecy and prefiguration.38

While Serres’ model of crumpled time has recently become a recognised method of approaching time in Early Modern drama scholarship, it has received limited critical attention with regard to medieval drama.39 Discussions of malleable, topological time do, however, share some common ground with arguments claiming that medieval drama depicted all times as part of a God-like concept of eternity.40 Daniel Poteet II has come close to engaging with topological encounters in his study of time, eternity and the dramatic dislocation of scriptural sequence in the Coventry Passion Play I. However, because he considers time and history as linear, he can only read dramatic depictions of the Paschal feast and the Eucharist as displacing one another, rather than as complementary.41 Pamela Sheingorn also makes a reference to topological time as the ‘antitype’ of cumulative typological patterns, where, rather like the palimpsests discussed above, times are layered but remain visible.42 One of the few texts to engage directly with topology in the criticism of medieval drama is

38 Further study might extend this consideration of topological ‘in-betweeness’ to discuss the mystery plays and their performance contexts as a whole. They too were performed in the socially intermediary spaces between church and public space: percolating between trade, faith and civic relationships. See Gurevich, Categories of Medieval Culture, pp. 26-46.
39 See for example the discussion of material stage properties and crumpled time in Jonathan Gil Harris, Untimely Matter in the Time of Shakespeare, (pp. 169-87).
41 See Poteet II, ‘Time, Eternity, and Dramatic Form in Ludus Coventriae “Passion Play I”’, p. 372, which argues that the play establishes conflict between ‘the sanctity of Jewish law, precedent, and history against the far simpler timeless morality of Jesus’. Poteet’s argument contributes to a range of studies concerning the medieval motif by which the lamb of the Jewish Passover was said to have been replaced by the bread/body of the Eucharist. See also Leah Sinanoglou, ‘The Christ Child as Sacrifice: A Medieval Tradition and the Corpus Christi Plays’, Speculum, 48.3 (1973), 491-509 (p. 503) and the antisemitic adaptations of the Eucharist to accuse Jews of child-murder in Merrall Llewelyn Price, Consuming Passions: The Uses of Cannibalism in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 31.
42 See Sheingorn, ‘Typology and the Teaching of Medieval Drama’, p. 99: ‘the antitype [is] serving as a culminative pattern within which the outlines of chronologically earlier images are seen. Thus, behind the image of the Annunciation one sees the burning bush, and behind the harrowing of hell one sees Moses freeing the Israelites from Egypt’. See also King, ‘Calendar and Text’, 30-59.
Isabel Davis’ discussion of the use of Lamentations at the death of Christ. She suggests that the ‘layering’ effect produced by medieval scriptural reading and the cyclical liturgical year brings distant moments into close proximity.\textsuperscript{43} Davis turns Serres’ handkerchief metaphor into stretched and folded skin (arguing that medieval time also held elastic properties, as opposed to the un-stretchy fabric of a handkerchief). This informs her discussion of time’s relationship to both the vellum surface of a page of scripture and the stretched skin of Christ upon which it was metaphorically written.

However, the inelastic property of crumpled time is particularly helpful in relation to \textit{Herod the Great}, as it suggests that, though time may be structurally distorted in a number of ways (for instance, through Herod’s violent attempt at tearing), there is always the possibility that the ‘handkerchief’ may be ironed and fixed distances and proximities re-asserted. The play’s numerous biblical and historical moments therefore retain their properties throughout their encounter without being fundamentally distorted. While moments may overlay one another, the idea that there \textit{is} time between them is essential in retaining their individuality. In this respect, I am responding to Bruno Latour’s rather exasperated assessment of Serres’ ‘time-machine’ approach to his work – ‘you are absolutely indifferent to temporal distances’ – by suggesting that, often, it is the difference that matters.\textsuperscript{44}

\textbf{Herod: A True King of the ‘Jews’?}

The Herod of the mystery plays has arguably attracted more critical attention than any other character. This compendium of condensed rage, spouting blasphemous, bodily and violent speech, first emerged from the liturgical traditions of the \textit{Ordo Rachelis} and boasts (along with his own power and supremacy) an impressive intertextual legacy, appearing in medieval and Early Modern sources beyond the mystery plays.\textsuperscript{45} These appearances indicate that characterisations of the king tended

\textsuperscript{43} Davis, ‘‘Ye that pasen by þe Weiye’’, p. 438.
\textsuperscript{44} Serres and Latour, \textit{Conversations}, p. 44.
\textsuperscript{45} On the exaggerated aspects of Herod’s characterisation in earlier liturgical drama, see Jacobus, ‘Motherhood and Massacre’, p. 40: ‘This element of farce was present at the origins of liturgical drama, for it seems to have been felt appropriate to portray non-Christians and the enemies of Christ as being ridiculously over the top’. 
towards the ridiculous, as Chaucer gives his role to the hapless lover Absolon in *The Miller’s Tale*, and Herod famously survives the final performances of the mystery plays by appearing as an example of bad acting in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. While it is fair to say that Hamlet’s referencing of Herod first brought his mystery play character to the attention of the earliest drama criticism, later studies have gone on to find in Herod a complex character.

Moving away from readings of Herod as a mad sinner, critics have addressed the fact that there is, as David Staines argues, a ‘diversity in the presentation of Herod in the mystery cycles’, which imagine him in roles as diverse as comic braggart, tragic ruler, hero and antihero. Miriam Skey has also compared the ‘arrogant, blustering, blasphemous tyrant’ of the English plays to his representation in wider Europe, where he is often presented in drama and narrative as a sophisticated medieval ruler. More recently, approaches to Herod have been concerned with locating his performance in relation to his medieval context, identifying his function as a safe conduit for the articulation of grievances concerning local abuses of power, as well as engaging with the audience in a way which brings them directly into the action of the drama. Broadening the possibilities beyond viewing Herod as a comic ‘type’, later works have therefore noted diversity in English and European depictions of the king which suggest a certain malleability. Each of these readings builds on a concept of Herod as a multi-

46 See Geoffrey Chaucer, ‘The Miller’s Tale’, in *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. by Boenig and Taylor, pp. 91-102 (II. 3383-4): ‘Somtyme, to shewe his lightnesse and maistrye / He pleyeth Herodes upon a scaffold hye’. Here, it is to be assumed that Chaucer gives this role to Absolon for comic effect, as the speeches of Herod in the mystery plays indicate that they would not have been played with ‘lightnesse’. This supports Chaucer’s characterisation of Absolon, who also fails to adequately perform the role of lover. See also William Shakespeare, ‘The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark’, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. by G. Blakemore Evans (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997), pp. 1189-245 (III. 2. 13-14).


49 As this chapter will note, some of these courtly attributes remain visible even in the English plays. See Miriam Anne Skey, ‘Herod the Great in Medieval European Drama’, *Comparative Drama*, 13.4 (1979), 330-64 (p. 333).

textual, multi-layered character: one who has the ability to interact with different moments in time. Medieval depictions of Herod thus work multiple contemporary associations into the portrayal of a king who often has very little in common with the sparse depiction of the ruler in the gospel of Matthew.

What has not received much attention is the fact that Herod’s identity – and, crucially for this thesis, his *temporal* identity – is further complicated by the fact that the mystery plays often conflate two historical kings in their characterisations of him. King Herod the Great (*c.* 74 – 4 BC), the Roman-appointed King of Judea who ordered the massacre at Bethlehem, is often not distinguishable in the plays from Herod Antipas (*c.* 20BC – 40AD), to whom is attributed the death of John the Baptist and the interrogation of Jesus. This conflation lends the character Herod/Herods a curious sense of somehow having transcended a specific historical moment, in order to act as an ongoing malevolent force throughout the life of Jesus. Herod thus appears as a persecutor at both the beginning and end of Jesus’ life, bringing the Nativity and Passion together. This character conflation also extends beyond Herod’s roles in the gospel narratives, as he is depicted in a way that recalls the characterisation of Lucifer in plays dealing with the Fall of the Angels. Both characters are proud, and boast of their own majesty; moreover, Lucifer becomes the first adversary of God in the same way that Herod becomes the first adversary of Jesus.\(^{51}\) The plays therefore seek to construct Herod, or Herod’s role, through associations that move *across* scriptural times.

Furthermore, Herod equally and inevitably performs as a compendium of medieval social and spiritual ‘sins’. He is presented as an extreme figure of sinful excess, exhibiting the deadly sins of pride and wrath, as well as an unquenchable hatred of Christ. The violence of this hatred is expressed in a manner not dissimilar to antisemitic medieval constructions of ‘Jewish’ antagonism towards Christ’s body in the sacrament and on the Cross.\(^{52}\) Indeed, the mystery plays’ Herod does appear


\(^{52}\) For example, in host desecration narratives, Jews are depicted performing excessive acts of torture on the host. The narratives often imply that this is not done in order to probe the presence of Christ’s body, but as a means to persecute Christ still further, thus inferring a belief in transubstantiation from...
to exhibit several of the more extreme elements of medieval Christian
caracterisations of ‘Jews’. In the York, N-Town, Chester and Towneley plays, for
instance, he swears anachronistically (and incorrectly) by a God he names
‘Mohammed’. It is intriguing that, while vocally and violently attempting to
suppress one ‘King of the Jews’, Herod the Great should be depicted as swearing by
the later prophet of yet another religion. This is not necessarily surprising, however,
given the medieval tendency to conflate Islam and Judaism into one religion of
antagonistic ‘otherness’. The interchangeable nature of medieval depictions of
Jews and Saracens has also been identified as specifically associated with the
slaughter of the Innocents in medieval artwork. From the thirteenth century, visual
images increasingly show Herod’s soldiers performing the massacre in a manner that
evokes both earlier medieval accusations of Jewish ritual child murder and crusade
imagery depicting Saracens spearing babies.

The figure of Herod, therefore, appears to draw together a multiplicity of
associations, both scriptural and medieval. This aspect of his character performs an
important role in the dramatisation of the slaughter. As research into medieval blood
libel and host desecration accusations has noted, accusations against Jews were
frequently made in order to validate the violence inherent in Christian cultural and

455, in which Jasdon claims, ‘with owr strokys we shal fray hym as he was on þe rood’.
53 See Herod’s violent speeches concerning what he intends to do to Christ’s body in England and
Pollard, ‘Herod the Great’, in *The Towneley Plays*, pp. 166-81 (ll. 107-08): ‘I shuld with this steyyl
brand / Byrky an his bonyes’.
54 See Beadle, ‘The Slaughter of the Innocents’, pp. 167-73 (l. 19); Spector, ‘The Slaughter of the
Innocents: the Death of Herod’, in *The N-Town Play*, pp. 187-97 (l. 36) and Lumiansky and Mills,
55 See Spector, ‘Anti-Semitism and the English Mystery Plays’, p. 13, in which Spector describes this
confusion of the Jew and the Saracen, claiming that ‘Historicity is far less important than doctrine in
the plays, and the integrity of the historical Jew (like that of the Old Testament Hebrew) is sacrificed
to the imperatives of doctrine’. See also Heng, ‘The Romance of England: Richard Coeur de Lyon,
56 For the relationship between the slaughter of the Innocents and depictions of Saracens, see Heather
Blurton, *Cannibalism in High Medieval English Literature* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan,
2007), p. 105, which examines the appearance of a Saracen figure in the depiction of the Bethlehem
massacre in the 1161 Winchester Psalter: ‘The function of the Winchester Psalter’s massacre of the
innocents overlays one narrative of slaughter in the Holy Land with another’. See also the
introduction to Higgs-Strickland, *Saracens, Demons and Jews*, pp. 7-59. For depictions of violent
excess in Jewish blood libel narratives, see Anthony Bale, *The Jew in the Medieval Book*, pp. 54-72
and Daniel Baraz, *Medieval Cruelty: Changing Perceptions, Late Antiquity to the Early Modern
57 For work on Herod’s character as a rhetorical device, see David Mills, ‘Characterisation in the
spiritual practices. I have already argued that the Bethlehem massacre is necessary for the verification of Christian theology: in order for Jesus to return as a second Moses, he must have a reason to escape to Egypt. It therefore follows that, in projecting the violence necessary to validate Jesus onto a ‘Jewish’ Herod, the mystery plays bolster Christian belief at the expense of an exaggerated ‘other’. Yet it is difficult to isolate one time’s influence from another in the composition of Herod. Each of his different character traits (jealous tyrant, follower of Mohammed, child-murderer and Christ-persecutor) bears the influence of a number of times, all of which contribute to a cumulative performance of antagonism towards Christ. In doing so, they nonetheless serve to confirm Christ’s role as saviour.

Yet the Herod appearing in the Towneley *Herod the Great* appears unconscious of his own multi-temporality, and claims instead a very different relationship to time. What makes the Towneley Herod particularly interesting from the point of view of this study is his active engagement with scripture and prophecy. He consults scripture, suggesting an element of faith in its validity; yet he also believes he holds the power to change it. This belief is clear from the beginning, when Herod tries to interfere with the audience’s time by attempting to regulate their speech and movement. This is due to his messenger’s report that the people will not stop ‘chateryng’ of a king. Herod responds by telling the audience to cease both speech and movement, threatening them with a violent death should they continue:

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58 The medieval Herod may also be examined as the ultimate ‘protean’ character, given that he is able to accrue associations from a variety of times.
59 This echoes Serres’ assertion that nothing is truly ‘contemporary’, as all things are built of knowledge and components from many different periods, even when they are all brought together to perform a new role. Serres uses the example of the motor car to demonstrate this point, arguing that, while the car is seen to be a modern invention, it is actually composed of inventions and products from different ages, such as the wheel and the engine. See Serres and Latour, *Conversations*, p. 45.
By commanding silence and stillness, Herod is effectively attempting to enforce stasis, thereby quenching any rumours of a new king which might threaten his own status. In seeking to control the audience, scripture and time, Herod attempts to inflate his kingly authority to divine proportions. This is partly successful, as, by directly addressing the audience, Herod does bring them into his own performance time. But these words simultaneously guarantee his failure by provoking disobedience, as it is to be assumed that the audience would be more likely to respond to his words with laughter and noise than with the respectful silence Herod desires. Nevertheless, Herod’s opening attempt to control temporal progression expresses a belief that he has the power to thwart the spread and fulfilment of prophecy through using violence to silence it – a belief that reaches tragic proportions in the following episodes of the play.

Even from the opening of the play, then, time is not on Herod’s side. Moreover, although the Towneley Herod attempts to control his audience’s time, he remains unconscious of the fact that he himself moves freely in time. In one of the common anachronisms given to morally dubious characters in the mystery plays, Herod swears ‘by gottys dere nalys’. This oath works on several different levels. First, as I argued in Chapter Two, this kind of anachronistic swearing functioned as a violent speech act which collapsed time by physically tearing the body of Christ.

61 England and Pollard, ‘Herod the Great’, ll. 94-9. With its cannibalistic associations, Herod’s threat to ‘clefe’ his audience ‘small as flesh to pott’ partakes in yet another antisemitic stereotype, in that it alludes to the alleged Jewish child-murders during the Paschal feast. See Llewelyn Price, Consuming Passions, pp. 30-3.

62 Of course, the Towneley audience are not Herod’s subjects, and he actually has no control whatsoever over their actions. He misrecognises them as his subjects in another temporal disjunction. Herod’s condemnation of the audience’s ‘chateryng’ also reveals a medieval fear about seditious public speech acts, some of which I touched upon in relation to the Chester Gossips in Chapter Two. Public speech, and the many uses to which it may be put, clearly forms an important concern for the mystery characters’ relationships with their medieval audiences. For more about the social problems and powers of public speech, see Bardsley, Venomous Tongues, pp. 1-25.


The performance of an act of violence upon Christ’s adult body is of course particularly apt for Herod, who is here shown contemplating violence against the infant Christ. Yet the speech act is also highly ironic, as by referring to the nails which pierced Christ on the Cross, Herod actually refers to the event he most fears. His words bring the Crucifixion, the scriptural moment when Jesus is ‘crowned’ and named ‘King of the Jews’, into immediate proximity with Herod’s own time: something that all of Herod’s other actions within the play try to prevent. From the beginning, then, the Towneley Herod’s attempts to control time are undermined by his own speech acts, which reference later scriptural episodes and thereby deny his attempt to organise time to his own advantage.

When Herod’s bid to silence the rumours of a new king fails to allay his fear, he tries a different approach. While other plays depicting the Bethlehem massacre see Herod ordering the slaughter on the basis of the wise men’s report, the Towneley Herod does his homework first. Herod the Great presents a slaughter of the Innocents that is highly textual in nature, by showing Herod consulting his books for information about the prophesied king. In a unique episode, Herod asks his counsellors to search for information about a virgin giving birth to a child:

**HERODUS:**

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Oone spake in myne eere / A wonderful talkyng,
And sayde a mayde shuld bere / another to be kyng;
Syrs, I pray yow inquere / in all wrytyng,
In vrygyll, in homere / And all other thyng
Bot legende;
Sekys poece tayllys;
lefe pystyls and grales;
Mes, matyns, noght avalys,
All these I defende.
I pray you tell heyndley / now what ye fynde.
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Although he has heard the report of the three wise men concerning prophecies of a king born in Bethlehem, Herod’s speech demonstrates a need for literary confirmation before he grants credence to their words and takes action. The references to Virgil and Homer, as well as epistles and collections of myths, suggest he has access to a library fit for a late medieval nobleman, but Herod is careful to

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66 Jesus is mocked as ‘king of the Jews’ by his torturers and, in John 19, Pilate hangs a sign over his head saying ‘this is the king of the Jews’. See John 19. 19-22. By referring to the Crucifixion, Herod’s words therefore prefigure the application of the title he is so afraid of.

direct his counsellors to look in specific places, showing that he values some texts over others. Herod’s choice of literary material is particularly interesting. He does not mention any of the Old Testament scriptures in which his counsellors go on to find their typologically-constructed references to the birth of Christ. Instead, he directs them to look in the tales of poets, and ‘in vyrgyll, in homere / and all other thyng / Bot legende’. The fact that Herod does not consider the works of Virgil and Homer to be ‘legende’ consolidates his historical position as a Roman-appointed leader for whom the Classical works are viewed as histories, rather than fiction. Yet in advocating these non-Christian authorities, Herod’s choice of books also reflects the ambivalence with which these texts were approached in medieval Christian literary culture. Christopher Baswell notes that Virgil inspired both rejection and reverence: he was subject to being read as a being forerunner of the apostle St Paul, and yet he was just as frequently condemned as a pagan whose works were apt to lead Christian scholars astray. Given this chapter’s discussion of Herod’s poor moral character, it is likely that his audience would have associated his faith in these texts with the second of these interpretations. However, there is also an inherent irony in the fact that Virgil is connected to St Paul, the writer of the very ‘pystels’ Herod’s speech rejects. Moreover, Herod’s reliance on classical ‘poece taylles’ also forms a kind of prophecy of its own. Referring to two poets whose work is heavily invested in the workings of prophecy and fate surrounding the destruction of Troy, his reading choice anticipates Herod’s own destructively violent response to his Bethlehem problem.

While recognising the authority of pagan authors, Herod exhibits a cautiousness regarding texts that hold a specifically Christian significance. These include the epistles, the ‘grales’ (a service book containing the scriptural and sung parts of the mass), and the liturgical texts of the mass and matins. The reference to

70 My definition of ‘grales’ (a derivative of ‘grail’) comes from the Middle English Dictionary, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED19201> [accessed 5 June 2013].
these texts is, of course anachronistic, but it is also ironic, as their presence affirms the fulfilment of Christian time even as Herod searches for scriptures that deny it. Herod therefore appears to be performing according to the kinds of ‘Jewish’ approaches to scriptural reading I examined in the other chapters of this thesis: choosing to read selectively in order to refuse those texts that affirm Christian theologies.\(^\text{71}\) Moreover, faced with the problem of change, Herod’s initial response is to read backwards, effectively deferring his recognition of the child-king outside his doors by searching for answers in the older texts. Reading retrospectively, he seeks a prophecy that will allay his fears and defend his own position as King of the Jews.\(^\text{72}\) Yet despite his ‘Jewish’ reading approach, Herod’s relationship to ‘wryting’ nevertheless also participates in Christian methods of approaching scripture and prophecy. An unconscious product of the structural devices of the gospel of Matthew, the Towneley Herod is unable to progress in his own narrative until he has first referred to a prophecy. Moreover, in seeking to increase his own authority through recourse to the past, Herod is performing an act of typological reading which is distinctly Christian.\(^\text{73}\) He hopes to subsume the authority of older texts into his own present and consolidate his status by addressing the threat posed by a virgin birth.

Herod does not like what he finds. Diligent academics, his counsellors quickly find the prophecy of Isaiah 7. 14 about the virgin birth of the messiah, and a second prophecy concerning the birth of a king at Bethlehem.\(^\text{74}\) His fears confirmed, Herod’s reactions are predictably violent. But this violence is not initially directed at the prophesied child, but instead against his counsellors and against the scriptures themselves:

\(^{71}\) See my discussion of medieval Christian accusations of Jewish scriptural exegesis as backwards-looking in Chapter One.

\(^{72}\) On the importance of prophecy in early Christianity, see Adam, Time, p. 83, which notes that elements of Christ’s life are read as prophesied by the Hebrew Scriptures. Prophecy is a highly distinctive feature of both the Old Testament, with its stories of prophecy, dreams and revelations, and the New: ‘In the New Testament too, all the significant elements of Christ’s life are prophesied, as are the end of the world and Judgement Day’.

\(^{73}\) See Giorgio Agamben’s discussion of early Christian concepts of ‘Messianic time’ and the ways in which Paul constructs typological relations between his time as a Jew persecuting Christians and his time as an early follower of Christ in 1 Corinthians, 10.11 in The Time That Remains, p. 74.

HERODUS: Thou can not half thi crede! 
outt, theyfys, fro my wonys! 
ffy, knafys! 
ffy, dotty-pols, with youre bookys! 
Go kast thaym in the brookys?75

Herod’s attack first attempts to discredit the readings of his counsellors by calling them ‘dotty-pols’ (simpletons) and claiming that they do not know half their creed – another anachronistic reference to Christian knowledge that confirms Herod’s future throughout his attempts to prevent it.76 But he then directs his anger against the books themselves, ordering the counsellors to throw them into the stream. His reaction to the Hebrew books gives the impression that Herod is quarrelling with the past. He is also quarrelling with God by refusing to recognise the eternal truth of his ‘prophecy’. When he cannot make this truth perform according to his typological agenda, he aims to obliterate it. He therefore tells the counsellors to throw the books in the water, perhaps in the hope that, by physically smudging the ink from the pages, the Hebrew prophecies will be obscured and not come to pass.

Yet if this passage is considered in the light of Serres’ discussions of the possibility of tearing topological time, another reading emerges. Returning to the handkerchief metaphor, Serres claims: ‘if [...] you tear it in certain places, two points that were close can become very distant’.77 Herod’s command to destroy the books articulates a desire to refuse the prophecies of the Hebrew scripture and deny any possible proximity to his own situation by tearing them away from his current time. The Towneley Herod wishes to remove his own pages from the Bible, to detach his own time not only from those times preceding it, but also from any potential future fulfilment through the scriptures a new ‘king of the Jews’ might produce. Of course, the underlying irony here is that, unlike his audience, Herod does not know that he

76 Moreover, Herod’s accusation, ‘thou can not half thi crede’ mimics the charges of scriptural misreading, ignorance and heresy (particularly concerning the ultimate ‘creed’, the Eucharist) which held such an influence over late medieval literature. See Andrew Cole, Literature and Heresy in the Age of Chaucer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 56-60.
77 Serres and Latour, Conversations, p. 60.
already is secured in scriptural time, and that, in the gospel of Matthew, his actions only entangle him further with the Hebrew scripture he is trying to deny. 78

Herod’s proposed attack on the books is a lesser version of the action that follows it. It is striking that, in both the Towneley and York versions of this narrative, it is the counsellors, rather than Herod, who first suggest the idea of the slaughter. In Herod the Great, the counsellors offer the idea to Herod as if it were a solution to his textual problem: if Herod kills every child under the age of two, then the prophesied child will also necessarily be destroyed. 79 This suggestion escalates Herod’s desire to destroy his books into a still more violent attempt to prevent prophetic fulfilment, yet it is presented here as a problem of ‘wyttys’: a way of outwitting scripture. The counsellor’s suggestion, moreover, performs yet another critique of what was perceived in the Middle Ages as a ‘Jewish’ scholarly denial of the Christological significance of their own scriptures. By making the massacre the idea of an educated counsellor, rather than the impatient and illogical Herod, the Towneley play presents this attempt at tearing away scripture as part of what Poteet and Spector have identified as the Jewish ‘fear of change’ in the mystery plays. 80

Just as Jews in other miracle narratives are often depicted as inadvertently perpetuating the worship of that which they seek to destroy, so Herod and his counsellors’ attempt to tear time by preventing the Hebrew prophecies from coming to fruition only succeeds in folding their present together with other moments from the Hebrew past. This underlines their error, whilst failing to interrupt the workings of scriptural time.

78 For a character invested in classical literature, it appears that Herod is guilty of misreading his pre-Christian texts too. In many ways, his actions follow the pattern of classical victims of divine prophecy. Like Virgil’s Priam, Achilles and Hector, the more Herod struggles to prevent the fulfilment of prophecy, the more securely he ensures its realisation. See Terry Eagleton, Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), pp. 101-52, which addresses issues of character agency, prophecy and fate in tragic narrative.


80 See Spector, ‘Anti-Semitism and the English Mystery Plays’, p. 10; ‘The Jews are repeatedly made to hear of and witness [a] miracle only to reject it’, and Poteet, ‘Time, Eternity, and Dramatic Form in Ludus Coventriae “Passion Play I”’, p. 380, which sees the Jewish conspirators Annas and Caiaphas as ‘burdened by precedent and fears of change’.
Herod’s attempt to interfere with time is always too late. In all the mystery plays depicting the Bethlehem massacre, Herod’s orders are thwarted by time even before they are carried out. For example, the Chester and N-Town plays show an angel warning the holy family to flee before Herod’s soldiers reach Bethlehem. In Towneley and York, their escape is further distanced from Herod’s decision to massacre Bethlehem’s infants since the escape to Egypt is performed in a separate play which takes place before the slaughter. Moreover, in his attempt to negate two prophecies concerning the virgin birth and the birth of the king of the Jews in Bethlehem, the Towneley Herod’s ordering of the slaughter crumples together three other Hebrew scriptures with the life of Jesus: the mourning of Rachel, the return of God’s son from Egypt, and Jesus’ eventual naming as ‘the Nazarene’. The performance of the massacre thus initiates further opportunities for temporal encounter.

Perhaps the problem for Herod is one of linear reading. Reading his scriptures in terms of cause and effect, he believes that, if he takes the right course of action, it is possible to forestall prophecy. Yet as my previous arguments have shown, this method of scriptural reading is open to non-linear consequences. As Jonathan Gil Harris argues regarding Serres’ fashioning of topographical meetings between distant times:

Serres thus allows us to recognize how our critical activities create the past and the present, less in the sense of making them up than of persistently transforming the web of relations that tether the past to us – and us to it.81

Because relationships between past and present are configured as a web, Herod cannot arrange them retrospectively into cause and effect. The actions intended to secure Herod’s kingship are therefore often seen as leading to his demise. The mystery plays all feature different endings for Herod, and in all but the Towneley play, he does not get off lightly. York’s Herod recognises that his exertions have failed to kill the prophesied child, and realises the bloodshed has been futile.82 The N-Town Herod’s celebratory feast is interrupted by the Devil and a personified Death, who carry him off, while in the Chester Gouldsmythes Playe, Herod’s

81 Gil Harris, Untimely Matter in the Time of Shakespeare, p. 174.
‘victory’ is marred by the fact that he discovers his own son has also been killed in the massacre.\textsuperscript{83} Here, the grief of Bethlehem’s bereaved mothers is transposed onto Herod, who feels his body decay soon after receiving the news and is eventually taken to hell by a demon.\textsuperscript{84} In seeking to manufacture a tear between scriptural past and present, the Herod of these plays only succeeds in ‘tearing’ his own dynasty and timeline.\textsuperscript{85}

Only the Towneley Herod the Great concludes with a triumphant king: alive, unpunished, and (erroneously) believing he has succeeded in thwarting the prophecy. Yet the Towneley Herod’s closing speech, boasting of the numbers he has had killed, continues to deny linear time by returning to his audience address at the beginning of the play. He returns to the chattering speech of his audience, but anticipates that, this time, it will be himself, and not the new king, who will form its subject: ‘It shul haue bene spokyn / how I did me wrokyn, / were I dede and rotyn / with many a tong’.\textsuperscript{85} This speech places Herod in an ambiguous relationship with the events that have transpired. There is uncertainty concerning \textit{where} ‘it shul haue bene spokyn’: is Herod talking about the medieval audience or the Old Testament scriptures he has been referring to? If the former, the conditional ‘should’ both acts as a rebuke to the audience and contradicts Herod’s own perception of temporal linearity by suggesting that, instead of chattering about a new king, they would have better spoken of Herod’s violent deeds (effectively placing the effect before the cause). If the latter, it appears that he remains unaware of Rachel weeping for her children in Matthew 2. 17–18, and believes that he has succeeded in disassociating himself from the prophecies of the past. Moreover, Herod’s use of the word ‘were’ also projects into his own literary future, anticipating his continuing fame long after his death. Of course, such fame depends upon the writing of the very scriptures that Herod has taken such pains to suppress.

\textsuperscript{83} See Spector, ‘The Slaughter of the Innocents’, ll. 233-85 and Lumiansky and Mills, ‘The Gouldsmythes Play’, ll. 377-457. The inclusion of the accidental killing of Herod’s son also appears in the French Passion d’Arras, and here, as in the Chester play, the discovery that he has killed his son prompts the onset of madness and disfiguring bodily illness. See Skey, ‘Herod the Great in Medieval European Drama’, pp. 343-44.

\textsuperscript{84} See Lumiansky and Mills, ‘The Gouldsmythes Play’, ll. 409-33. For further discussions of the cultural and spiritual implications of the decay of Herod’s body, see Carolyn Elaine Coulson-Grigsby, “‘Wormys mete is his body’: Enacting the Diseased Spirit of Herod the Great on the Late Medieval English Stage’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Connecticut, 2006).

\textsuperscript{85} England and Pollard, ‘Herod the Great’, ll. 492-95.
The futility of the Towneley Herod’s attempt to prevent the meetings of past and present times is ultimately demonstrated during the scenes of the massacre itself. It is here that meetings between moments in Hebrew time and the time of Herod’s Bethlehem multiply. Moreover, the soldiers’ encounters with the fighting mothers of the town create new folds in time that bring the medieval, the biblical, the Christian and the Hebrew, into a violent dialogue which defies Herod’s attempt to enforce temporal distance. The next section therefore examines how the mothers’ resistance to Herod’s soldiers works beyond their verbal and physical altercation by jeopardising the order the massacre was intended to enforce. This occurs through the mothers’ relationships with Old Testament time and the figure of Rachel, their role as prefigurations of Mary, and their portrayal as medieval ‘unruly women’, who, for once, are permitted to rebel.

**Mothers who Mourn and Mothers who Fight**

With their defiant language and brandishing of distaffs and other domestic implements, the mothers of the Innocents have long been read as carnivalesque female counterparts to Herod’s male excesses.\(^6\) Like Noah’s wife, they have traditionally been placed in the conveniently elastic category of the ‘unruly woman’.\(^7\) To this end, it is perhaps not surprising that more attention has been given to the mothers of the York and Chester cycles than to those in the Towneley play, where they perform a less obviously flamboyant role. Examinations of what exactly makes the Bethlehem mothers so ‘unruly’ have tended to focus principally on the performance context of the Chester and York plays. For Theresa Coletti, for instance, this has meant addressing the implied inversion of gender roles when the Chester mothers ‘adopt male attributes of combat to challenge, taunt and mimic

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\(^6\) See for example Katie Normington’s description of the mothers as being ‘undignified and often read comically’ in Normington, *Gender and Medieval Drama*, p. 78; Rebecca Krug, ‘Natural Feeling and Unnatural Mothers: Herod the Great, The Life of Saint Bridget, and Chaucer’s Clerk’s Tale’, in *Laments for the Lost in Medieval Literature*, ed. by Jane Tolmie, M. J. Toswell and Derek Pearsall (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), pp. 225-41 and Jacobus, ‘Motherhood and Massacre’, pp. 50-52, which observes that artistic and dramatic depictions of the mothers become increasingly ‘virago-like’ and comical during the course of the fifteenth century.

Herod’s soldiers’. Denise Ryan, in contrast, has directed attention to the mothers’ use of insult and accusation, which she claims is a specifically feminine model of attack, while Claire Sponsler has addressed the play’s civic economic context by reading the mothers’ struggle to protect their children as a contest between men’s and women’s work.

As I have demonstrated, the ‘unruly woman’ category can be unstable, particularly when the specific contexts in which these characters operate are taken into account. While the mysteries’ mothers of Bethlehem are unruly in that they disrupt the machinations of the play’s male characters, they are nevertheless rare examples of ‘fighting women’ acting as a positive force. Unlike Noah’s wife, whose rebelliousness is troublesome because it disturbs Noah and God’s supersessionary plan for the world, the Bethlehem mothers disrupt the temporal pretensions of Herod, a character who is unambiguously evil. They therefore pose a challenge to critical readings that strive to categorise them as unruly, as the tragic act of violence in Bethlehem creates a unique environment in which such behaviour is permissible.

But the thing that makes the Towneley mothers a threat to Herod is not the vocal and physical means by which they attempt to defend their children. In addition to the oaths, insults and blows so closely examined in studies concerning the Innocents plays, there is another weapon in the mothers’ arsenal: time.

Having decided to defy scriptural prophecy by extinguishing the boy-king born in Bethlehem, the Towneley Herod sends for ‘the flowre of knyghtede’ to carry out the deed.

Herod’s relationship with his knights and counsellors appears as part of a medieval courtly structure. Raging speeches aside, the Towneley

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88 Theresa Coletti, “‘Ther Be But Women”: Gender Conflict and Gender Identity in the Middle English Innocents Plays’, Mediaevalia, 18 (1995), pp. 245-62. (p. 247). Discussions of ‘women’ fighting in the mystery plays are invariably complicated by the fact that there were no female bodies on stage. See my earlier references concerning crossdressing in Chapter Two.
90 In this, I contest Laura Jacobus’ claim that the massacre was ‘clearly played for laughs’ in medieval English drama. See Jacobus, ‘Motherhood and Massacre’, p. 50.
92 While the English plays tend to portray Herod as a short-tempered tyrant, nativity plays from France, Spain, Germany and Italy more frequently present him as a courteous and gracious regal figure. This medieval courtly aspect of his folkloric character is retained even in plays which also
Herod is generous to those who serve him, though his kingly generosity jars with the murderous acts he is rewarding. This section of the play therefore works rather differently from the interactions between medieval and biblical time considered so far. When the Chester Noah’s wife ‘collapses’ the time of her Gossips into the Old Testament Flood, the staging of the two times as one involves a process of mutual change. It not only encourages the play’s audience to reflect upon the social sins of their own time, but, by bringing the idea of godparentage into a narrative of divine punishment, raises complex questions concerning baptism, social duty and annihilation. Yet in the ‘medieval’ court of Herod the Great, times brought into proximity are never fully collapsed. This is chiefly because the time of the medieval court becomes comically and troublingly inappropriate when placed in the context of the massacre. For example, Herod rewards the counsellor who suggests the massacre with promises of castles, lands and even the title of Pope. This anachronistically brings the Bethlehem massacre together with a range of rewards – the kind a powerful medieval king might be able to dispense. The fact that ‘Pope’ appears as one of the titles at Herod’s disposal reflects contemporary anxieties concerning political and divinely-appointed powers following the Papal Schism of 1378 to 1417, during which Urban IV and Clement VII both claimed the title of Pope. Giving the (clearly corrupt) Towneley Herod the apparent ability to appoint Popes therefore partakes of a satirical commentary on Rome’s politics concerning Papal elections. Moreover, the fact that Herod offers the counsellor the title of ‘Pope’ proves to be one anachronism too many insofar as Herod’s plan to murder Christ is concerned. Not only does the offer underline the futility of the counsellor’s suggestion (for, in order for the title of Pope to be awarded, Christ must survive the massacre), but Herod’s offer of this title to the man who proposed the killing of Christ produces a temporal blasphemy that stresses the incongruity between the two times even as they are brought together. Courtly time may be folded to meet biblical time in Herod the Great, but they may not be experienced as simultaneous.

show him as narcissistic, violent or unhinged. See Skey, ‘Herod the Great in Medieval European Drama’, p. 333.
94 See C. M. D Crowder, Unity, Heresy And Reform, 1378-1460: The Conciliar Response to the Great Schism (London: Edward Arnold Publishers, 1977). This particular line clearly remained provocative even after the Reformation, as is evidenced by the fact that the Towneley manuscript’s later Protestant owners partially erased the word ‘Pope’ from Herod’s speech.
This temporal disjunction extends into the portrayal of the massacre itself, when the first soldier’s knightly identity is immediately undermined by his encounter with the first mother:

**PRIMUS MILES:** Dame, thynk it notyll, thy knafe if I kyll.

**PRIMA MULIER:** What, thefe! agans my wyll? Lord, kepe hym in qwarte!95

The soldier’s polite speech as he asks forgiveness for the deed he is about to perform is more suited to a minor social misdemeanour than the murder of a child. The mother’s reaction immediately demonstrates the fragility of this courtly veneer by calling the soldier ‘thefe’. Her insult also projects forward in time by referring to the fate of the child who provoked and escapes the slaughter, only to be crucified flanked by two thieves and in the place of thieves. The mother’s protest thus crumples several times and places together: it brings the soldier’s courtly language into contact with an accusation used to raise a hue and cry on a medieval street; anticipates the killing of another mother’s child at Golgotha and reasserts the time of the massacre, in which the soldiers are participating in a highly dishonourable mission of child-murder, not a demonstration of knightly prowess.96 The bringing together of the soldier’s identification with courtly time with a biblical massacre and the insults of the medieval street thus jars in a way that many of the anachronisms identified so far have not. This is because the mother directly and unambiguously contradicts the soldier’s courtly language by reminding him that he is employed in an act of violence against a woman and her child. Their encounter therefore emphasises the disjunction between the soldier’s assumed time and the mother’s defiance of it. Although Serres’ model of crumpled time was proposed as an alternative to the implied antagonism of linear, supersessionary time, crumpled time can, therefore, also

96 On the raising of hue and cry as a method of social defence, see Bardsley, *Venomous Tongues*, p. 40. The accusation of ‘thief’ is used in a multiplicity of medieval contexts, and also held sexual connotations as it was used in situations of rape as well as material theft. See Gila Aloni, ‘Palimpsestic Philomela: Reinscription in Chaucer’s “Legend of Philomela”’, in *Palimpsests and the Literary Imagination of Medieval England*, ed. by Carruthers, Chai-Elsholz, and Silec, pp. 157-73 (p. 159): ‘Rape in Chaucer’s time, then, was also related to theft, to moving something from one space to another’. See also Ryan’s discussion of the Chester mothers’ use of sexual insult and the word ‘thief’ in Ryan, ‘Womanly Weaponry’, pp. 86-8.
behave antagonistically or violently, particularly when placed *in response* to another act of violence.\(^97\)

Unlike the more chaotic clashes between soldiers and mothers in Chester and York, the massacre scene in Towneley resembles the order of earlier liturgical performances of the *Ordo Rachelis*, in that it stages the massacre as a series of repetitive individual encounters. The *Herod the Great* massacre condenses the reported slaughter of 144,000 infants into three encounters.\(^98\) Rather than having the soldiers attack the mothers all together, the violence is arranged into three separate encounters. These encounters follow a pattern. A soldier approaches a mother. The mother expresses apprehension. The soldier reveals his intention to kill the child. The mother responds by insulting and threatening the soldier. The mother attacks part of the soldier’s body. The soldier kills the child. At this point, the interaction between the soldier and mother ceases and the mother exclaims over her dead child.

Even the laments follow a repetitive structure: first, the women exclaim over what has happened and abuse the soldiers, then they express their grief and, finally, they call to God for vengeance. Certain words recur in each of these three laments, particularly the exclamatory ‘out! out!’ and references to ‘my chyldys bloode’.\(^99\)

While repetition has long been identified as a component of public performances of female lamentation, it is unusual that, here, the entirety of the mothers’ encounters with the soldiers and not just their lament is subject to formal processes of repetition.\(^100\) Moreover, the staging of the Towneley massacre not only presents the massacre as an event which is repeated several times, it also invites its audience to understand it within a context which links the figure of the bereft and grieving mother to the figures of Rachel and Mary.

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\(^97\) See Serres and Latour, *Conversations*, p. 49: ‘Why replace temporality, duration, with a quarrel? *The first to arrive, the winner of the battle, obtains as his prize the right to reinvent history to his own advantage*.’ The paradoxical relationship between performances of violence and the reversal of dramatic intention is discussed in more detail in Enders, *The Medieval Theater of Cruelty*, p. 58, where she examines the Jews’ tortures of Christ in medieval Passion plays: ‘[a] paradox is also evident in medieval religious dramas which stage pre-Christian cultures attempting to eradicate pain by creating it – even as the mystery play participates in the creation and recreation of pain’.

\(^98\) The number of children killed during the Bethlehem massacre varies according to different sources. In the Towneley *Herod the Great*, Herod claims that he has killed 144,000 infants. See England and Pollard, ‘Herod the Great’, ll. 487-8.

\(^99\) England and Pollard, ‘Herod the Great’, ll. 343-89.

\(^100\) On structural devices and female performances of grief, see Velma Bourgeois Richmond, *Laments for the Dead in Medieval Narrative* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1966) and Goodland, ‘‘Vs for to wepe no man may lett’’, pp. 69-71.
The structured, repetitive performance of the Towneley massacre resembles the dramatic devices used in the twelfth and thirteenth-century liturgical Ordo Rachelis plays in a number of ways. First, little distinction is made between the individual soldiers or mothers. Although the language of the dialogues varies slightly, it does not do so in content or structure, and the characters perform identical roles throughout the massacre. Second, the processional structure of the Towneley massacre means that one performance of bloodshed is followed by another in quick succession. The successive nature of this violence recalls the processional nature of the earlier liturgical drama. Surviving texts of the Ordo Rachelis direct that choristers, in some instances carrying a lamb to represent both the lamb of the Passover and Christ, Lamb of God, are shown to be killed, one by one, by soldiers.\(^{101}\) This was either done as part of a dumb show, or accompanied by words of pleading (from either the Innocents or their mothers), which were repeated with each encounter.\(^{102}\) The mothers or, as in the case in the Laon Officium Stella, a single mother named Rachel, are then left to grieve, thus dramatising the fulfilment of the ‘prophecy’ of Jeremiah and providing a prefiguration of the grief of Mary for the death of her own son on the Cross.\(^{103}\) The performance of killing and grieving in the liturgy is likewise highly repetitive, often involving identical words and phrases. The appearance of similar patterns of encounter in Herod the Great therefore looks back to a religious dramatic form which was heavily invested in linking the Bethlehem slaughter to the grief of both the Old Testament Rachel and that of the Virgin Mary. This gives the impression that this pattern of maternal bereavement is one that is repeated again and again through scriptural time.\(^{104}\) But there is another way of reading this. Rather than simply enacting repetitions of the grief of Rachel and a prefiguration of Mary’s grief at the Cross (which would require the supposition

\(^{101}\) On the significance of the lamb, see Paul in 1 Corinthians, 5. 7, which sees the lamb of the Passover replaced by Christ’s body ‘For Christ our pasch is sacrificed’. See also Sinanoglou, ‘The Christ Child as Sacrifice’, pp. 491-509.

\(^{102}\) This summary of action is drawn from the plays collected in Young, Ordo Rachelis.

\(^{103}\) See Young, ‘Ordo Stella’ in Ordo Rachelis, pp. 13-7.

\(^{104}\) For discussions of the ambiguities surrounding dramatisations of female grief, see Jacobus, ‘Motherhood and Massacre’, pp. 47-9, which contends that, in line with restrictions placed on female public mourning during the fifteenth century, depictions of the mourning mothers of the Innocents increasingly sought to minimise their display of excessive grief. Katharine Goodland has likewise noted a variation in the ways in which plays concerning the death and resurrection of Lazarus depict the grief of Mary and Martha. Here, their grief may be condemned by other characters as excessive, or otherwise, as it is in the Towneley Herod the Great, become a form of female resistance to the men who would control their actions. See Goodland, ‘Vs for to wepe no man may lett’, pp. 69-94.
of a forward-moving linear time model), the grief of the mothers at Bethlehem brings these temporally distant moments together.

Unlike the Ordo Rachelis liturgies, which feature Rachel as a major character, the weeping Rachel figure has all but disappeared in the mystery plays’ depiction of the slaughter of the Innocents. Instead, a figure associated with collective grief is replaced by a community of mothers. Yet in mimicking the dramatic structure of the earlier Rachel plays by depicting each mother’s struggle and grief, the Towneley plays retain much of the sense of Matthew 2. 18, which features Rachel’s weeping in order to situate the Bethlehem massacre in relation to earlier scriptures, or, in this case, also to link it to earlier dramatic forms. The repetitive laments of the Towneley mothers continue to provide structures in which different scriptural moments meet. For example, the second mother’s speech brings together several of the scriptural moments that Herod’s massacre is trying to prevent:

SECUNDA MULIER: Out! morder! man I say / strang tratoure and thefe!
Out! alas! and waloway! / my child that was me lefe!
My luf, my blood, my play / that neuer dyd man grefe!
Alas, alas, this day! / I wold my hart shuld clefe / In sонder!
Venance I cry and call,
on herode and his knyghtys all!
veniance, lord, agayn thaym fall,
And mekyll warldys wonder!105

This lament folds the times of Rachel and Mary to meet in the experience of the Bethlehem mothers. Stressing the innocence of her child ‘that neuer dyd man grefe’, the second mother’s speech anticipates the grief of the Virgin Mary watching her sinless son die on the Cross. From the early thirteenth century onwards, representations of the Crucifixion paid an increasing amount of attention to the suffering of Mary.106 Crucifixion imagery shows her body becoming agitated as she swoons, cries, and clasps the Cross, while lyrics imagine her witnessing the tortures

106 See the descriptions of the growth of Mary as Mater Dolorosa in Miri Rubin, Mother of God, pp. 243-55. See also Donna Spivey Ellington, From Sacred Body to Angelic Soul: Understanding Mary in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe (Washington DC, WA: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001), p. 79, which sees Mary as both imitator of Christ’s sufferings at his Passion and a model for Christians also seeking to experience the suffering of Jesus: ‘Through her laments at the cross, the Virgin gave public, ritual expression to the people’s grief for the innocent suffering of her son on their behalf’.
performed upon her son’s body and lamenting his death. These more elaborate depictions of Mary’s grief also saw a corresponding elaboration of the pain suffered by Christ on the Cross. This reinforces the idea that the grief Mary has avoided through her family’s escape to Egypt is only a temporary reprieve. The Innocents, and their grieving mothers, are the prototypes for an act of violence that has yet to happen.

While the fact that all three Towneley mothers mention the spilling of their children’s blood anticipates the sacrifice of Christ, it also looks back to two Old Testament events: the Hebrew sacrifice of the Passover and Cain’s murder of Abel. This aspect of the Innocents’ slaughter emerges in the mothers’ call to God for vengeance. This does not appear in the *Ordo Rachelis* plays (although these do sometimes show an angel consoling the mothers), or in the Innocents plays of the other mysteries. In *Herod the Great*, the mothers’ call for vengeance against those who have spilt the blood of their children draws their time together with the very first murder in scripture. In Genesis 4. 10, God says that the blood of the murdered Abel ‘crieth to me from the earth’, thus prompting his punishment of Cain. However, the cry of the Towneley mothers articulates a difference between the Bethlehem massacre and the justice structures of the Old Testament. While the Herod of the other mystery plays is punished, their cry will be unheard – at least within their own time. They are also denied the protection given by the blood of the Passover in Exodus, where the blood of a sacrificial lamb protected the Israelites from the act of divine vengeance which killed the firstborn of the Egyptians during the tenth plague of Egypt. Although their narrative bears some resemblance to these other scriptural accounts of premature death and maternal bereavement, the mothers of the

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107 See for example the speeches of Mary in ‘The Dispute Between Mary and the Cross’, ll. 300-50 which, like those of the Towneley mothers, partly articulate her grief through accusing her son’s attackers for the suffering they have inflicted. See also Karen Saupe, ed., ‘O litel whyle lesteneh to me’, in *Middle English Marian Lyrics* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1999), ll. 14-30, in which Mary stresses the innocence of her child as well as focussing on the blood of her son’s Passion.

108 In the Chester ‘Gouldsmythes Play’, for example, the mothers do not call on God at all, but rather rely on their own strength and words to avenge the deaths of their children. See Lumiansky and Mills, ‘The Gouldsmythes Play’, ll. 281-396.

109 Genesis 4. 10. See also Bettina Bildhauer, *Medieval Blood* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2006), p. 46, which suggests that the spilling of blood in itself prompts retribution: ‘The notion of blood crying out thus suggests not only that it cannot be hidden, but that it always has to be avenged’.

110 See Exodus 11. 1-10
Innocents find themselves tragically in between this earlier sacrificial blood and the blood of salvation that is to be spilt at the Crucifixion.

The folding together of the times of the figures of Rachel and the Bethlehem mothers therefore underlines the difference between narratives in which God fights for and saves his chosen people, and those in which he allows them to suffer. Moreover, the mothers’ unanswered cries suggest that, despite the crucial role of Hebrew scripture in the playing out of the massacre, at this moment in time God no longer privileges the race of Israel. The God of the New Testament does not protect his former ‘chosen people’ from violence, but instead offers his protection to the fleeing holy family who escape the bloodshed. Even this escape is relentlessly brought into proximity with the idea that Mary’s freedom from maternal grief will be but brief. The restitution the Bethlehem mothers call for comes, not through divine vengeance, but through the spilling of yet another child’s blood as he takes the place of the Passover lamb and dies flanked by two thieves.

Although several moments in medieval and biblical time are folded alongside the narrative of the Bethlehem massacre, it is therefore often the difference between them that is important. The Towneley mothers’ articulation of grief at the death of their children folds together the times of the Crucifixion, Passover, and the first murder in Genesis, but this process tends to articulate dissimilarity as frequently as it does alignment. For example, the slaughter of the Innocents performs as the inverse of the Crucifixion. During the Bethlehem slaughter, many children are shown to die for the sake of one child; later, that child dies for the sake of all men. Likewise, late medieval depictions of Mary’s intense grief at the foot of the Cross are a long way from the mothers who desperately clout the heads, noses and groins of their assailants in the Towneley play. But despite this difference, these actions do not invite censure because they operate within the context of a massacre. Violent female behaviour is allowed because it is justified by the circumstances.

111 The difference between depictions of the grieving Mary and the Bethlehem mothers grew even more pronounced from the thirteenth century, as the massacre was increasingly depicted in art and drama as a ‘battle scene’ in which the mothers were active participants. During these changes, the solitary figure of the mourning Rachel became less significant. See Jacobus, ‘Motherhood and Massacre’, pp. 48-9.

112 A similar argument has been made by Denise Ryan with regard to the fighting mothers of Chester: ‘They represent, on one level, the parodic figure of the scolding woman who has assumed unnatural,
Towneley mothers are permitted to fight for their children before they weep for them. Just as Serres finds that his crumpled handkerchief may be straightened, so distance and difference between moments may be retained and re-asserted in *Herod the Great*. Topological time is consequently dynamic and unfixed. The mothers’ unconscious bringing together of times therefore performs several different functions – without necessarily undermining itself or becoming contradictory – for example, by denying the soldiers’ knightly aspirations, opposing Herod’s attempt to suppress prophetic fulfilment, engaging with questions of vengeance and presenting a legitimate reason for women to brawl in the street.

**A Time for Unruliness?**

While differences between events are preserved, the mothers’ laments in *Herod the Great* nevertheless act to thwart Herod’s attempt to prevent the fulfilment of prophetic Hebrew scripture. The language used by the mothers in response to the massacre denies Herod temporal control by enabling different times to touch. This is mainly because Herod imagines that time works as it does in his books: running in a straight line but composed of easily detachable pages. He ends the play deluded and unrepentant, believing that the prophesied king has been slain among the 144,000 children of Bethlehem. But what he does not realise is that time is pliable, and that the voices of the three grieving mothers have amplified this property. As quickly as Herod tries to iron out his timeline or tear distances between his own present, the scriptural past and the prophesied future, the mothers’ reactions form new folds, bringing Passion, Passover and matriarchs from Hebrew and Christian scriptures into dizzying proximity. In this manner, neither Herod nor the mothers are able to sustain any agency over their own times. Despite their dual attempt to fight the progression of scripture (Herod by his bid to avoid prophetic fulfilment and the mothers by attempting to prevent the act that enables Christ to return as a second Moses), both parties meet with failure.
I would like to draw three conclusions regarding experiences of time in the Towneley plays. First, through topological interactions, the Towneley mothers find more ways to be unruly than merely by acting pugnaciously. The crumpled topological time their speech encourages, played in opposition to the soldiers and in resistance to Herod’s torn time, secures the Bethlehem massacre’s place in relation to Hebrew and Christian times even as the act itself attempts to dislocate it. Yet the mothers’ relationship to time also differs significantly from Herod’s because, while Herod mistakenly believes he has the ability to interfere with scriptural time, the mothers’ topological engagement with time is unconscious and unpremeditated. Experiencing the ‘now’ of the massacre, they do not realise that their articulations of anger, resistance and grief partake in scriptural, liturgical and devotional traditions which enable their grief to ‘touch’ that of the Hebrew matriarch Rachel and the sorrow of the Virgin Mary. Herod tries to manage time, while the mothers respond to it and through it. By underlining the error of Herod’s attempt to prevent the fulfilment of prophetic scripture, the folding of time in the mothers’ speeches undoubtedly plays out as the most successful element of their resistance to the soldiers – yet it is not consciously intended as such.

If the Towneley mothers can therefore be considered to be ‘unruly’, then they perform a different kind of unruliness to those examined earlier in this thesis. While the preceding chapters have explored conflicts between men and women in which the behaviour of one of the participants is portrayed as disrupting divine narrative, the temporal folding in the speeches of the Bethlehem mothers performs a more ambiguous role. They undoubtedly provide a socially disruptive force within the play, and, like Noah’s wife, partake in a form of temporal unruliness by emphasising the futility of a male character’s attempt to direct or dictate how biblical time should be read. Yet the Bethlehem mothers lack the temporal agency of Noah’s wife. Noah’s wife directly engages with the past through recollection and by re-introducing the past into the present in the form of questions, but the mothers of the Innocents seem unaware that they are communicating with any time beyond their own.114 Nevertheless, however inadvertently, the mothers do participate in their own

114 Moreover, while the patriarch Noah occupies a respected place in both the Bible and the mystery plays, Herod is presented as unquestionably erring.
rebellious attempt to direct time. Trying to prevent the killing of their sons, the mothers make their own bid to thwart scriptural development. If they had succeeded, the typological processes of scriptural prophecy fulfilment, which, as shown, were essential to the emergence of Jesus as the bringing of a new law, would not have been possible. Like Herod, the mothers fail in their struggle as, without the death of the Innocents, Christ cannot emerge as the new Moses or eventually match the Passover with the Crucifixion.

The mothers’ vocal resistance to Herod’s soldiers therefore facilitates the progression of biblical narrative. With the topological folding together of scriptural events, their speeches act as a confirmation of these same scriptures, and thus partake of, rather than work against, the structure of the gospel of Matthew. The mothers’ struggle against violence and their grief when they fail to save their children thus forms the basis for the play’s depiction of the fulfilment of prophecy. Their resistance works in a similar way to Herod’s bid to murder all of Bethlehem’s male infants: both attempt to resist biblical narrative but end by confirming it. The reason that time works so differently here in comparison to the plays examined in my earlier chapters, which show characters attempting to negotiate the complexities of a theological divide between different moments of scripture, is that Herod the Great actively denies such a divide. Instead, it presents Hebrew and Christian scriptural times as mutually prophetic and fulfilling: a homogenous time in which characters are inescapably enmeshed.

Second, the mothers’ resistance to the soldiers is depicted in the play as permissible, as opposed to unruly, because the violence of the slaughter, while touching other times, nevertheless retains its context. Both violence and time in the massacre of the Innocents work very differently to the way they do in the Flood. Although, in ordering the massacre, Herod attempts an expurgation of an ‘old’ scripture which threatens to jeopardise his present purpose, he is not God constructing a new beginning through erasure. He is instead attempting to maintain

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115 As Jody Enders has argued, violence, disorder, women, and birth were also linked together in depictions of early theatre, thus suggesting that, for the Towneley mothers, topological time is just as reliant upon the experience of violence as it is maternity. See Enders, The Medieval Theater of Cruelty, p. 89, which links together the creational violence of memory with the production of theatre, stressing ‘anxieties about the ways in which violence, disorder, women, and birth are symbolized by a theatre that has the capacity to threaten the continuation of the populace’.
the status quo. Moreover, unlike the many other moments of biblical violence depicted in the mystery plays, the slaughter plays provide a comparatively rare example of an act of violence that does not stress rupture, but rather promotes continuation.\textsuperscript{116} Herod the Great presents a violent incident which, contrary to models of linear time, is not accompanied by rupture, collapse or historical change. Moreover, while the mothers of the Innocents can be read as Hebrew Rachels, Christian Maries, or late medieval women, these roles bring times together in a way that does not promote supersession or collapse. The play thus provides an example of violence working to pull together, rather than to create ruptures in, time.

It is perhaps strange that, in addressing a narrative that promotes continuity, this chapter works with a model of time which, Serres acknowledges, was itself prompted by what he experienced as the violent rupture of Hiroshima.\textsuperscript{117} Given what I have argued in Chapters One and Two concerning the impossibility of fully creating a break in time, and in this chapter, concerning an act of violence which promotes, rather than prevents, continuity, it appears that topology offers a reconsideration of violence as unifying, rather than time-shattering. Yet the thing that has made Serres’ topology so productive for a reading of the behaviour of Herod and the Bethlehem mothers is the fact that the characters’ approaches to time are both passive and active. Characters may try to aggressively tear time, or they may be unconscious of the crumples and folds their actions form.

The success of these topological processes often depends upon who is participating in them, and whether or not they are consciously attempting to manipulate time. Despite the fact that Serres’ topology was introduced as a way of theorising his own approaches to time in his academic work, the importance of individual engagement in topological construction has not been addressed until now. My concluding point is therefore that models of crumpled topology necessarily

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{116} For example, plays of the Flood, Crucifixion, and Apocalypse all feature violence as a necessary element of radical temporal change.
\item \textsuperscript{117} Serres and Latour, \textit{Conversations}, p. 15: ‘I ask my readers to hear the explosion of this problem in every page of my books. Hiroshima remains the sole object of my philosophy’. See also Donald Wesling, ‘Michel Serres, Bruno Latour, and the Edges of Historical Periods’, \textit{CLIO}, 26.2 (1997), 189-200 (p. 192), who argues that, despite his drive to align different historical moments, Serres’ philosophy is actually about reconciling the break he felt the violence of Hiroshima had made in the history of the world.
\end{itemize}
demand some kind of human interaction with the deforming and re-forming of time, whether this comes from the writer of the gospel of Matthew, a medieval playwright’s imagining of a biblical king, a twenty-first century philosopher or a Mancunian medievalist and director attempting to evoke horror, empathy and guilt in her audience by introducing Pink Floyd to Bethlehem. Characters in Herod the Great likewise situate themselves differently in relation to the many possible moments raised within the massacre story. For Herod, it is imperative that past and future scriptural times are prevented from touching, and to achieve this he tries to violently tear Bethlehem’s king out of the scripture. For his counsellors, time is a political tool: the prophecies of the past may be studied in order to gain rewards and favour, or just as quickly discarded or altered. The soldiers, operating within the language values of the medieval court, discover a temporal disjunction when their knightly ideals conflict with the task they are being asked to perform. For the mothers, time is something that is unconsciously crumpled through their expression of grief. Despite all these interactions and manipulations, differences between moments in time are maintained even through the very processes that bring them together: nevertheless, they are still woven from the same piece of cloth.
CONCLUSION

Getting Exceedingly Tense

During the final months of this thesis, my colleague told me the following joke:

Q: What happened when the past, present and future all walked into a bar together?

A: Things got exceedingly tense.¹

This joke works on several different levels, all of which prove particularly apt considering the aspects of time I have encountered during the course of this project. First, the joke operates on the premise that all three states of time – the past, the present, and the future – have the ability to be in one place together. Moreover, while both tense and tension are products of the times’ co-presence in the bar, the times do not cancel one another out, but rather open the possibility for interaction. As I have demonstrated in my consideration of certain characters’ experiences of time in the mystery plays, moments of interaction between different aspects of time make the narratives in which they occur more complex. Sometimes, times interact constructively, for example, when aspects of the past are used to validate the present, or all times are assimilated into an ongoing medieval ‘present’, thus suggesting a closeness and congruity between the biblical times of the narratives being performed and the places in which the performances take place. Sometimes, they interact disruptively, for example, when one time is considered more ‘valid’ than another, when the appearance of the past in the present is treated as an unwelcome or frightening intrusion, or when steps are taken to prevent a feared future from coming to pass. The meeting of past, present and future, the joke reminds us, is apt to lead to a certain amount of tension, but it is a tension that may be employed creatively. It is as apt to construct and consolidate its present as it is to destabilise it.

The everyday setting of both the joke above, and of the mystery plays, also underlines the fact that such temporal encounters happen in mundane, everyday spaces. The comedic ‘bar’ of the twentieth and twenty-first century joke is a space

¹ I am indebted to my colleague Kathy Frances for this joke, which is among many we have shared during the course of this thesis.
both highly familiar to its listeners and yet also able to admit the strange due to the fact it is so heavily populated by the fantastic and anthropomorphic figures of the joke world. Likewise, the familiar late medieval spaces in which the plays I have examined were performed would have been temporarily and temporally altered when used as settings for biblical drama. As the previous chapters have shown, such meetings of different moments in and forms of time have the ability to create tensions between biblical and medieval spaces, as well as admitting their potential for transformation.

The joke’s punchline, moreover, acts as a reminder that any conflict or tension produced by the meeting of times is a conflict that is primarily based on language – on articulation, on giving a name to time. Throughout this thesis, I have shown that one of the principal causes of antagonism between the biblical characters of the mystery plays has centred upon their ability (or inability) to define, and thus to manage, time. As I noted in my Introduction regarding Augustine’s belief in his own ignorance concerning time, part of the nature of time is our inability to adequately express or define it, and this is, in turn, reflected in the troubled communication that results when one individual’s experiences of time encounter those of another. This dual problem of temporal definition and management has been a recurring element of each of the episodes of conflict I have examined. The N-Town Joseph argues with Mary while remaining unaware that he is participating in a theology that, to her, constitutes part of the past. The Bishop marrying the holy couple is similarly uncertain which theology, and which law, he is supposed to be enforcing. The York Noah struggles with his wife’s verbal recollection of the things he is attempting to define as past, while, in the

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2 The modern bar joke has recently and memorably been brought into contact with the medieval through the comedian Bill Bailey’s ‘Chaucer Pubbe Gagge’, which he introduces with the statement, ‘this is where the joke enters the realm of Geoffrey Chaucer’. In doing so, the joke engages in processes of temporal (and genre) collapse – indeed, the main joke is temporal collapse. The joke formed part of Bailey’s 2001 Bewilderness tour. See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mNEWatD0viw> [accessed 29 October 2013].

3 See Lerud, Memory, Images and the English Corpus Christi Drama, pp. 63-75 on the mnemonic and political consequences of the drama’s transformation of familiar public spaces. See also Sharon Aronson-Lehavi, Street Scenes: Late Medieval Acting and Performance (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 57-67 (p. 57): ‘the religious vernacular theatre simultaneously occupied different ontological levels during performance, most notably, the interplay between religious texts and context on the one hand and folklore and playfulness on the other. This theatre comfortably brought together the highest, most sacred metaphysical themes alongside society’s mundane and concrete concerns’.

4 See Stevens, ‘A present sense of things past: Quid est enim tempus?’, p. 10: ‘It is an intriguing puzzle for [Augustine] and for us that one may feel and measure periods of time, perhaps even understand time, but also lack the concepts to explain it, the right words to clarify it’.
Chester cycle, the Wife’s Gossips collapse an Old Testament event into a medieval, Christian future in a manner which questions not only Noah’s perspectives on salvation, but also the effectiveness of God’s Flood. The Towneley Herod, terrified of both past and future (or rather, what the ‘prophecies’ of the past tell him about the future) enacts a devastating and futile act of violence in his present, even as the mothers fighting his soldiers participate in their own struggle to resist the temporal implications of both Herod’s order and the gospel of Matthew’s engagement with Old Testament ‘prophecy’. All of these incidents are concerned with the correct ways to read, articulate and respond to time.

As a consequence, this thesis has encountered a variety of subjective responses to time, as each character I have examined has defined, experienced and responded to time in different ways. Bearing in mind that this range of temporal experiences was presented to the audiences watching the plays, it is fair to assert that the plays demand that those in the audience, too, participate in and respond to these times in their own present. The audience is thus asked to judge which is the correct way of reading time – the biblical times performed in front of them and those they experience in their own, everyday lives. The questions this might pose to a late medieval audience watching the plays is therefore akin to my own, rather prosaic, response to my colleague’s joke. By casting the past, present and future as characters in her little anthropomorphic drama, she offered me an element of choice, or differentiation, between the three states of time. After groaning at the joke’s pun, I felt that surely the next question I might logically ask of the joke was, ‘who would the bartender serve first?’

As the passages above demonstrate, if you analyse a joke too heavily, it very rapidly becomes unfunny. However, I argue that the propensity of analysis to make a figure or thing unfunny is precisely what makes my enquiry into the workings of time during episodes of gender conflict in the mystery plays so important. This thesis has worked alongside, and occasionally against, some of the ‘big themes’ of medieval studies, including discussions of gender, antisemitism, social conflict, periodization, and processes of memory and forgetting. Yet I contend that the questions asked at the beginning of this study – ‘what happens when moments in time are not universally experienced in the same way?’ and, ‘what tensions emerge when the times of the Bible are introduced to the present of a different time?’ – have introduced a new
perspective to incidents of male and female conflict in the mystery plays. This perspective moves away from a straightforward discussion of whether or not characters are to be considered comic, rebellious, or unruly, and instead examines the characters in relation to their place in time(s). While their views might still be considered disruptive, reprehensible or problematic within the context of a biblical narrative, Joseph, Noah’s wife, the Mothers of the Innocents and even Herod all become less funny when their approaches to time are taken into consideration. This is due to the fact than an analysis of time offers alternative, and perhaps more plausible, explanations for their behaviour.  

I would therefore like to draw several observations about the ways in which the three performances I have examined complicate ways of thinking about both gender and time. First, I would like to emphasise the importance of reading beyond the dramatic character ‘types’ operating at moments of conflict in the mystery cycles in order to take a character’s subjective experience of time into account. As I have demonstrated, the importance of a character’s ability to read, or misread, time not only permits a new avenue through which we might understand their characterisation, but also broadens our understanding of medieval approaches towards the scripture. In my first chapter, I therefore engaged with the conflict between the N-Town Mary and Joseph by reading it as a confrontation between two very different experiences of time, whilst taking into consideration the moment of transition required for them to be united. This involved first examining each character’s subjective experience of time, and then what happened to it when it was placed in dialogue. I discovered that both characters demonstrated an ability to engage with several different approaches to time. Their debate, with its engagement with typology, prefiguration, symbolism and literalism, also placed a certain value on being able to ‘read’ time (and, indeed, Mary’s body) correctly.

This reading of time is not easy – particularly in plays in which religious status is ambiguous. While noting that Joseph’s Doubt has a broadly linear, supersessionary

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5 This is not to dismiss the validity of examinations of the comic, or the unruly, in the episodes discussed in this thesis. As I have noted throughout concerning moments of anachronism, comedy is often one of the effects of moments of temporal collapse, typology and topology – particularly where it is designed to demonstrate a character’s ignorance or error. My argument here is rather that analysis of a character’s unruliness or comic potential is one of the multiple possibilities for analysis that are opened up if the ways in which time operates in the plays is examined.
structure charting a character’s transition from a position of doubt to one of belief, I also identified certain frailties in a narrative that takes place at an uncertain moment of change. The identification of Christ’s entry into time as the moment of scriptural and theological change proves problematic due to the uncertainty concerning when such a transition was believed to have taken place. This leads to my second observation – that this uncertainty is amplified when these narratives are dramatised, as characters are shown responding to miraculous events in a way they do not in the Bible. Moreover, the fact that it is not always clear what constitutes ‘Hebrew’ and ‘Christian’ time in the plays creates an inherent problem for narratives relying on supersessionary or linear time patterns. For example, while Joseph and Mary’s viewpoints were placed in opposition in Joseph’s Doubt, other N-Town Marian plays suggest that pre-and post-Christian times may be assimilated into one continuous narrative through processes of typological reading and the projection of a medieval Christian performance present onto scriptural and apocryphal events.

This observation therefore contributes to discussions concerning the ways late medieval communities understood and performed the relationship between their own time and the times of the Old and New Testaments. It exposes further the complex nature of medieval understandings of a universal time, which assimilated all moments in history and scripture into one structure, and understandings which placed great importance on the ability of one time to supersede, or convert one order into another. Moreover, as the N-Town plays leave it unclear as to whether a moment of historical transition has taken place, or whether it is only Joseph’s reading of his own time that has changed, a thorough review of what supersession is in the N-Town Marian plays is demanded. This chapter therefore identified an inherent problem in critical models which point to Bede’s usage of anno domini as constituting a definitive ‘break’ in time by questioning the tensions that such an ambiguous act of periodization places upon the dramatisation of events from the early lives of Mary, Joseph, and Christ.  

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6 See Harris, ‘The Bible and the Meaning of History in the Middle Ages’, p. 98 on the historiographical difficulty of reconciling change with eternity: ‘historians had to grapple with the meaning of change within a worldview conditioned to esteem stability and continuity’.  
7 While it is not within the scope of this present work, I contend that it would be worth extending this analysis to ascertain whether this holds true for visual and textual, as well as dramatic depictions of the holy family. For example, in Chapter One I briefly discussed devotional images of Mary engaging in typology by reading Isaiah at the moment of the Annunciation. For a review of some of the ways in
My discussion of the dramatisation of the Flood in the York and Chester cycle plays complicated these questions of supersession and transition further. The narrative of the Flood is markedly different from that of Joseph’s Doubt, as its moment of transition is not subject to the ambiguities of an eighth-century monk’s desire to mark a point in history, but instead comes from what is, in Genesis, a relatively straightforward narrative of the destruction of a sinful order. Through staging and use of performative language, the Flood plays’ action is therefore split into states which may be clearly identified as either pre- or post-deluge. Character conflicts in these plays are therefore less a consequence of temporal ambiguity and rather due to the presence of characters who resist supersessionary models through other means. Analysing the York The Flood, I argued that the presence of remnants of the past in the form of Noah’s wife challenge supersession as they threaten to muddy the distinction between ‘before’ and ‘after’ by suggesting that some elements of the flooded world have survived. This, in turn, drew attention to the difficulty of securely defining the end of one time and the beginning of another. The relationships between Noah, his wife, and time also differed from those experienced by the N-Town holy couple because, while Mary and Joseph end Joseph’s Doubt in accord due to Joseph’s ‘conversion’, Noah and his wife’s conflicting experiences of time interfere with one another and are never reconciled. Supersession in these plays does not, therefore, perform in the same way as the linear plot structure of the Flood in Genesis, but is instead presented as a ‘fantasy’ held by one character and contradicted by another. This was due to the ways in which the narrative was staged – particularly its blurring of performance and performativity.8

I therefore wish to question whether it is ever possible to successfully stage a moment of supersession. As I have demonstrated throughout this thesis, narratives which are presented as linear in the Bible are complicated – even to the point of becoming non-linear – when they are placed on stage. I have also argued that, in both the N-Town Marian plays and in the Flood plays, past times cannot always be assimilated comfortably into an overarching Christological typology. This, again, is

which medieval art has the ability to present multiple moments in a single image, see Peter Nesteruk, ‘When Space is Time. The Rhetoric of Eternity: Hierarchy and Narrative in Medieval and Renaissance Art’, in Time and Eternity, ed. by Jaritz and Moreno-Riaño, pp. 403-25.
8 See Parker and Kosofsky Sedgwick, eds., Performativity and Performance, p. 1 and my discussion of the operation of performatives in dramatic performance in Chapter Two.
due to the presence of characters who challenge typological readings by stressing difference – for example, the character of Noah’s wife or the Chester Gossips. Non-linear ways of understanding time thus tend to disrupt discourses of linearity.\(^9\)

Moreover, times which prove disruptive to linearity are often experienced by characters who are consequently themselves characterised as disruptive, as they introduce elements of conflict or ambiguity which are not present in the biblical narratives.\(^{10}\)

Having established some of the complications which attend the staging of moments of supersession, change or transition, my final chapter moved away from supersessionary narratives and instead examined a play in which another kind of time was in operation. Here, I addressed the ways in which medieval drama responded to and amplified the gospel of Matthew’s bringing together of many moments from Old and New Testaments in a legitimising narrative that is prefigurative, prophetic, typological and topological. My discussion of Serres’ folded time here suggested that the Towneley dramatisation of the Bethlehem slaughter secured a potentially liminal time – between the birth and the teaching of Christ – together with other moments in scripture and medieval devotional culture. This chapter reiterated several of the arguments that have appeared throughout this thesis. The past in *Herod the Great* is simultaneously a source of fear, used to legitimise the present and something that must be managed. Likewise, acts of temporal and scriptural misreading occur – first in Herod’s reliance on classical texts, second, in his wish to destroy the Old Testament scriptures and thus negate their power, and, finally, in his belief that he can tear apart the past, present and future by acting, he thinks, to contradict these texts.

Yet this play was unusual in that it featured a character who believes that he has agency over time. In the previous chapters, Joseph, Mary, the Bishop, Noah and his wife all respond to the divinely-directed times in which they participate, but they do not believe they have the power to effect lasting change in their own times. Mary and Joseph do not even have control over their own marriage. I argue that Herod’s

\(^{9}\) See my discussion in Chapter Two and Gil Harris, *Untimely Matter in the Time of Shakespeare*, p. 91.

\(^{10}\) Of course, none of the episodes of conflict examined in this thesis are present in the Bible. Mary and Joseph’s argument, the resistance of Noah’s wife and the mothers’ fight with Herod’s soldiers are all based on later narratives and apocrypha.
active, if failed, attempt to direct time exposes a belief that time could potentially be consciously managed and responded to, even if time is ultimately directed by God. This consciousness of a potential human agency over, and responsibility for, time, became a prominent feature of the Protestant discourses of the Reformation. For example, Alec Ryrie has noted that a Protestant fear of repetitive devotional actions and prayers – anything that might lead to spiritual stagnation – co-existed alongside drives always to treat the present moment as a time of repentance and a great fear of idleness and wasting divinely-allotted time. He also notes a difference in opinion between Protestant theologians, some of whom argued that all time was the property of God, while others claimed that time was the only thing that humans truly owned in the world.11

However, while Protestant exegesis increasingly promoted the importance of individual time-consciousness and responsibility, the mystery plays offer few positive demonstrations of characters consciously acting to direct scriptural time, and the human assumption of temporal agency remains a rather fraught concept. The fact that, in the Towneley Herod the Great, an attempt to exercise power over time originates from an unambiguously sinful character, casts the process of human time-management into doubt. In opposing scripture and attempting to direct time to meet his own needs, Herod stands in opposition to God.12 He is also, as I have shown, unsuccessful, as the mothers of the slaughtered children – characters who act responsively to events rather than attempting to direct them – have the ability to cast bridges across the moments of time Herod is trying to violently break asunder. Despite its initial suggestion that it is possible for a human to assert agency over time, the Towneley play therefore enmeshes its characters ever more securely in the ‘divine’ time of the scripture. Yet, given the works I have recognised in the fields of medieval memory studies and studies of prophetic and apocalyptic literature (themselves investigations into personal and collective methods of time management),

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11 Ryrie, Being Protestant in Reformation Britain, pp. 420-46 (p. 445): ‘The particular force of the image of redemption was that, in this struggle for time, everyone started from behind, like a runner slow off the blocks. Everyone could look back at their childhood and see a mere wasteland of squandered time. [...] And the relentless ‘sliding of minutes’ into the past never stopped’.

12 ‘This resonates with medieval discourses condemning human attempts to exert agency over time in the form of usury – another ‘Jewish’ practice. It was argued that the charging of interest over time was sinful because all times belonged to God. See Le Goff, Time, Work and Culture in the Middle Ages, pp. 29-30.’
I contend that there is now scope for a fuller investigation into the ways in which late medieval literature provides evidence of a belief in an individual’s ability not just to experience, but to actively engage with time. This would help us to chart the development of models of time-consciousness and agency under Protestantism.\(^\text{13}\)

As I have argued in my Introduction, the temporal tensions introduced into biblical narratives by the presence of characters such as Herod, Joseph and Noah’s wife have traditionally been overlooked due to a critical tendency to analyse them as unruly, erroneous, ludicrous, sinful or foolish. However, I have shown throughout this thesis that examinations of time trouble these categories even as the characters themselves trouble time. For example, questions of time tend to either break apart the category of the ‘unruly woman’ or extend it to improbably elastic proportions. It may thus be argued that the N-Town Mary is a temporally ‘unruly’ woman, as, in Joseph’s Doubt she is the only person in her world partaking of Christian law. However, this ‘unruly’ experience of time has very little in common with that of the York Noah’s wife, who fears she is too old to learn a new law and keeps looking back, or the Bethlehem mothers who, whilst failing to defend their children, provide the most conclusive resistance to Herod’s temporal scheming in Herod the Great by unwittingly bringing together the very moments he is trying to prevent meeting.

Moreover, this thesis has also drawn attention to the fact that temporal unruliness works across genders, as both male and female characters have the propensity to resist their own times. Thus, Joseph’s aged impotence performs a theological and a temporal function within the N-Town plays, whilst Herod’s complex place within the gospels and in medieval culture moves beyond his role as comic braggart and instead enables a study of him as a character faced with a choice about how he might protect his power in the incredibly complex Judeo-Christian time he inhabits. In addition to exploring the gendered implications of time during moments of conflict, I have thus also broadened the possible methods of interrogating polemical

tropes such as the marriage of the elderly man and young woman and the narrative opposition of the ‘Jew’ and the ‘Christian’. These tropes, which are as reliant on principles of interdependence as they are on mutual rejection, in turn reflect the ways in which the biblical narratives of the mystery plays sought to reconcile the anxieties of their performance contexts concerning the relationships between the present, future and past.

This thesis therefore highlights some of the diverse ways of performing and experiencing time and gender in the Middle Ages, and paves the way for a reconsideration of medieval responses to time and how it is used in dramatic performance. To summarise, I have therefore demonstrated, first, that discussions of a character’s subjective experience of time hold the ability to expand the possibilities for analysing a character’s motivation, as well as an audience’s possible response to them. Second, that the staging of the plays introduces an element of temporal ambiguity into biblical narratives, as it is often no longer clear whether the time being staged is to be read as Hebrew, Christian or medieval. This temporal ambiguity contributes towards episodes of conflict between characters in the plays, as well as troubling concepts of linearity, typology or supersession. Third, that the plays hold uneasy relationships with the past – be this a ‘Jewish’, scriptural, or recent past. Finally, I contend that this thesis raises new questions concerning late medieval perspectives of, personal experiences of, and engagements with, time.

In bringing together dialogues and methodologies from a number of fields, this thesis also draws attention to the need for further interdisciplinary research into the function of time in late medieval drama. Moreover, the scope of this project has inevitably meant that many texts dealing with equally pertinent moments of transition or conflict could not be discussed. For example, while the focus of this thesis has been primarily concerned with plays depicting confrontations between male and female characters, it would be worth extending this investigation to examine what happens to time and gender when two male characters or two female characters are engaged in conflict. When Salome confronts Mary in the N-Town and Chester plays, does her movement from a state of testing doubt to a state of belief differ from that taking place between husband and wife in Joseph’s Doubt? If so, is the dramatisation
of female conversion different from dramatisations of male conversion? When the silent Christ of the York cycle is tried before Herod Antipas, how is this encounter between Herod and the Incarnated God different from Herod the Great’s attack on the children of Bethlehem? When Lucifer seeks to usurp God in the Chester Tanners Playe, are he and God aware of the temporal irony of the Creator’s earlier words as he blessed Lucifer, his first-made, immediately before the Fall of the Angels?

If this thesis highlights the complex ways in which characters respond to the various kinds of past appearing in the late medieval mystery plays, then it also draws attention to the need for further research into the ways in which the past is manifest in other drama performed during and after the Reformation. As I have outlined in my Introduction, recent years have produced a flurry of works seeking to close the academic ‘gap’ between the ‘Medieval’ and the ‘Early Modern’ – a ‘gap’ which the plays featured in this thesis themselves bridge. As a consequence, studies of mystery drama have been among some of the earliest and most exciting approaches resisting attempts at periodization. However, given that this thesis has identified a rich diversity of ways in which dramatic characters seek to accommodate, assimilate, deny, protect themselves from or attempt to violently obliterate the past, I suggest that this thesis might provide a valuable model with which to approach the ways in which post-Reformation drama constructed its recent, Catholic, past.

Although I have shown that subjective experiences of time are open to challenge and change in the mystery plays, it appears that, on a collective level, methods for dealing with the past alter very little. It has long been observed that the drive to either subsume or supersede previous times was as important a part of Reformation theology and historiography as it was for medieval Christian approaches

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14 Investigations in the field of Jewish studies suggests that this is true of other texts, but though Salome has been a popular figure in critical approaches to the mystery plays, no work has fully addressed the relationship between gender and the staging of doubt and conversion. On gender and Jewish conversion, see Simha Goldin, Jewish Women in Europe in the Middle Ages: A Quiet Revolution (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), pp. 26-50 and Rubin, Gentile Tales, p. 41.


to Judaism. James Simpson’s account of Protestant ‘evangelical reading’ (itself
typology by another name) may have as easily suited the dramatisations of the Flood
discussed in Chapter Two:

Like many other revolutionary cultures, it demanded a clean break with the
obscurantist past, and correlatively praised novelty. Its personal model was one
of rebirth and conversion, which also produced a historical model of the sudden,
absolute turn.\footnote{James Simpson, \textit{Burning to Read}, p. 184.}

Despite the fact that, as I have shown, models of supersessionary time advocating a
‘clean break’ frequently invite challenge, they have nevertheless continued to
influence periodization and polemic throughout historical practices. Whilst
acknowledging the validity of arguments which chart the development of new
perspectives on time throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, I would
therefore like to argue that it is worth asking whether Catholics essentially became the
new ‘Jews’, as post-Reformation drama attempted to accommodate another kind of
uncomfortably present past.\footnote{For overviews of the development of time theory in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, see
Adam, \textit{Time}; Currie, \textit{About Time}; and Hepworth Holland, \textit{The Idea of Time}.}

This enquiry already has some critical precedent. Lisa Lampert has argued
that Protestant authors adopted supersessionary models that had formerly been applied
to Judaism in their condemnation of Catholic practices, while Brett D. Hirsch has
recently examined the transposition of the figure of the owl (a bird associated with
medieval antisemitic portrayals of Jews) to both the Roman Catholic Church and to
Puritan groups who were considered to be participating in subversive practices.\footnote{See Lampert, \textit{Gender and Jewish Difference}, pp. 65-100 and Brett D. Hirsch, ‘From Jew to Puritan:
The Emblematic Owl in Early English Culture’, in \textit{This Earthly Stage}, ed. by Hirsch and Wortham, pp.
131-71.}

Moreover, the dramatic character’s encounter with a difficult theological past has
been famously and thoroughly examined in Shakespearean criticism addressing the
ambiguous nature of Hamlet’s meeting with the ghost of his dead father, as well as in
studies concerned with the troubling portrayal of a religious and justice culture that
operates uncomfortably between Catholic and Puritan values in \textit{Measure for
Catholic past via an examination of the ways in which it appears in the discourse of characters who, like the characters examined in this thesis, experience time differently from one another. Given that this thesis highlights a late medieval dramatic corpus that evokes subjective experiences of time as a source of dramatic conflict, a logical extension of this investigation would be to examine whether time may be employed as a cause and/or a catalyst for conflict between individuals in other dramatic texts.

With this in mind, I would like to conclude by addressing a short episode from the 1611 manuscript of the Cornish play the Gwreans an bys (The Creation of the World). Thought to have been performed until the 1550s, the Gwreans an Bys is the first and only surviving part of an earlier two-part drama performed on consecutive days, and spanning the (Christian) history of the world from Creation to Redemption. Partly because of its incompleteness, and partly because the earliest copy of the manuscript dates from 1611 and is thus too often viewed as late Cornish drama ‘in decline’, the Gwreans an bys has received less attention than the late fourteenth-century Cornish Ordinalia. Yet the play also contains three episodes that one might not expect to find in a drama performed well after the first wave of Protestant reform, as well as frequent references to Catholic religious practices such as pilgrimage, Marian iconography, and otherworldly visions.

The first of these extra-biblical episodes is the narrative of Lamech’s accidental shooting of Cain. The second is the Oil of Mercy narrative, which charts Seth’s return to Eden for the Oil of Mercy, with which he hopes to anoint the dying Adam. The final episode, however, takes place immediately before the Flood. After

Grammar of Forgiveness, pp. 59-81 (p. 73). Beckwith notes that the Duke’s disguise as a Friar in Measure for Measure is particularly troubling, as, while playing into anti-fraternalist conventions associating friars with deceit, it also allows him to exploit the Catholic practice of Confession and make ‘the secrets of the soul [...] fully available to the sovereign state’. 21 For discussions of both plays’ performance context and manuscripts, see Brian O. Murdoch, ‘The Cornish Medieval Drama’, in The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre, ed. by Beadle, pp. 211-39; Brian O. Murdoch, ‘Creation, Fall and After in the Cornish Gwreans an bys’, Studi Medievali, 29 (1981), 822-36 and Normington, Medieval English Drama, pp. 110-12.

22 As I have argued elsewhere, this narrative brings together multiple moments within Christian and Jewish theologies, as well as engaging heavily with Catholic devotional practices. See my forthcoming article ‘The Time of the Tree: Returning to Eden after the Fall in the Cornish Creation of the World’, Medieval Feminist Forum (Special Edition, 2014). The Oil of Mercy narrative originates in early Jewish legend, and became popular during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in highly-copied texts such as The Golden Legend, which drew further connections between the Tree of Life and the Cross. See E. Casier Quinn, The Quest of Seth for the Oil of Life (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1962).
Adam’s death, Seth wants to preserve what he has learnt about the history of the world, and, in an episode unique to this play, he founds the world’s first ‘library’. Anticipating the Flood, Seth deposits ‘loyal records’ of the past in a place resistant to both fire and water:

SETH: Written for me is everything
From (the) beginning of this world,
So that there may be loyal records
Of all things that are done in it.

The books behold them here
Ye see them wondrous large;
And everything in this world
is written in these:
Fear not that they shall be forgotten.\(^{23}\)

This speech, which reveals Seth’s desire to preserve historical records in preparation for the impending event of divinely justified annihilation, is interesting in a number of ways. First, Seth’s words of comfort to his audience, ‘fear not that they shall be forgotten’, exhibit a somewhat different attitude towards the past from those I have considered throughout the course of this thesis. In the York and Chester Flood plays, both God and Noah seemed to suggest that forgetting is a desirable thing if the world is to transition to a cleansed, post-Flood era, unhampered by recollections of the sinful past. Moreover, while the different kinds of past examined throughout this thesis have been sources of fear for certain characters, this is rarely a fear that they will be completely and irrevocably forgotten. Second, the Cornish Seth is another character shown attempting to assert control over time, and he, unlike the Towneley Herod, succeeds. Seth is subject to prophetic, divine knowledge about the impending Flood, and takes steps to preserve knowledge beyond it. In doing so, his actions also provide a narrative explaining the survival of the Genesis chapters chronicling the events that took place before the Flood, suggesting that, although part of a sinful and punished world, the records of these times are still valuable. Time, in the Cornish play, is therefore not lost in the Flood. I maintain that the reason behind Seth’s desire to retain and record his past, and the reason for his audience’s potential fear that the past might be lost, lies in the way the manuscript recording the *Gwreans an bys* interacts with its own time.

\(^{23}\) Stokes, ed. and trans., *Gwreans an Bys*, pp. 168-9 (ll. 2171-9). The citation here is translated from the original Cornish text by Whitley Stokes.
The play survives in four manuscripts, the earliest dating from 1611, and was probably transcribed from the prompt copy of an earlier script. The copying of this manuscript, and the fact it was considered important enough to be reproduced four times, suggests that the play, like Seth’s books, participates in an attempt not only to preserve the past, but to recognise its ability to release meaning for future generations. The fact that the manuscript dates well after the last recorded performance of religious drama in England suggests that it also participates in a form of cultural preservation. But this is not merely an act of pleasurable nostalgia: it also operates as an act of resistance. The presence of three apocryphal episodes in a play that was performed until 1550 produces a deliberate anachronism – resisting the political and religious changes which, under Protestant reform, were increasingly discrediting apocryphal narratives, or those narratives which had no scriptural basis. Moreover, their inclusion, coupled with the depiction of Seth’s act of literary preservation, indicates an attempt on behalf of both the 1550 playmakers and the 1611 scribe to resist consigning the popular stories of the old faith to the past. Faced with its own ‘flood’ of political and religious reform, the play, like Seth’s library, draws together the knowledge of times threatening to disappear. The *Gwreans an bys* thus engages in its own act of temporal resistance by working narratives about preservation and the interlinked nature of Christian time into the theologically fraught fabric of its own time. It is therefore possible that both the scribes and performers of the *Gwreans an bys*, like Seth before the Flood, saw the narrative as about to become extinct, but yet hoped for its future resurrection. In doing so, a single character’s understanding of the importance of his pre-Flood time is used to bind together sixteenth and seventeenth century moments and prevent narratives and dramatic traditions from being lost through the ‘gaps’ advocated by supersessionary discourses of reform. My argument that linear, supersessionary narratives cease to be linear when they are performed on stage may therefore be expanded to suggest that dramatic performances can be actively employed as a means of resisting change.

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24 See for example the account of the removal of non-biblical material from the Chester cycle in Coletti, ‘The Chester Cycle in Sixteenth-Century Religious Culture’, 531-47.
I therefore admit to an element of misdirection in titling this thesis *Mind the Gap*, by suggesting that the characters contained in this study are engaged in the navigation of gaps that, in the end, are *not* gaps. While the conflicts I have examined are framed by questions concerning moments of transition from one state to another, these moments are not always demarcated and, as a consequence, characters are preoccupied with how to identify and maintain them. Conversely, I have also shown that the ‘gaps’ featured in the mystery plays really *do* need to be minded – to be constantly reinforced, defended, performed – otherwise they are apt to draw shut and instead bring multiple times into interwoven folds. Character attempts to maintain distance between events, or to articulate a break in time, are thus met with contradictory experiences of time in which events from the past refuse to remain in the past. They are equally unable to escape topological or prophetic processes as moments are brought together and bridge past, present and future. This leaves me with a paradoxical answer to the glib question I asked of my friend’s joke:

If the past, present and future walked into a bar, who would the bartender serve first?

I suspect that he would serve all of them at once.
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