

**'The precious body of Crist that they treytyn in ther hondis':
'Miraclis Pleyinge' and the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*¹**

Contained in the British Library's Tenison Manuscript (a collection of documents copied in the early fifteenth century),² the *Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge* divides into two parts, each composed by a different author.³ While both sections have potentially Lollard or Wyclifite leanings, each also contains ideas in keeping with orthodox beliefs.⁴ Even if, as Clifford Davidson has argued, Part I is 'not demonstrably heterodox' and Part II 'much more characteristic of Wyclifite writings',⁵ the two authors share a number of concerns regarding the activity of 'miraclis pleyinge'. Both assert that 'miraclis pleyinge', because it stages sacred topics and miracles, assumes an improper intimacy between humans and the divine.⁶ Encouraging a likewise improper mingling of flesh and spirit – a conflation achieved only by Christ – 'miraclis pleyinge', according to the writers of the *Tretise*, encourages its participants to treat Christian doctrines lightly, to disregard the authority of Christianity's leaders, and to ignore important distinctions between humanity and divinity. Whether condemning 'miraclis pleyinge' for its potential to usurp the sacramental priority of the church and its leaders, a possible concern of an orthodox writer, or for its misuse of a sacramental power in which a Lollard writer might not believe, both writers see 'miraclis pleyinge' as a challenge to the larger Christian community – an activity that disrupts fundamental Christian structure and authority.

In the *Tretise*, Christ's Passion, despite its fortunate result for humanity, emerges as the ultimate, condemning result of humans assuming an irreverent access to the divine – an irreverent access (resulting, in this case, in the torture of divine flesh at human hands) that both writers of the text describe as a chief characteristic of 'miraclis pleyinge'. Similarly, in the late fifteenth-century Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*,⁷ cursory treatment of Christian doctrines, disregard for church leaders, and assumed access to the divine – embodied in the sacred object of the host – result in a bloody version of Christ's Passion, marked by human mishandling of sacred objects and topics. The *Tretise* thus

offers the Passion and the soldiers' brutal treatment of Christ as a damning end to and ultimate condemnation of the evils of 'miraclis pleyinge', yet the Croxton play transforms what seems an inadvertent reenactment of the Passion into an opportunity for redemption, carefully shepherded and controlled by church representatives who invoke the very doctrines and embody the very structure that the writers of the *Tretise* see as threatened or undermined by 'miraclis pleyinge'. While the Croxton play does not condone the behaviour of its misbehaving 'players', it does not portray their actions as ultimately threatening to the larger Christian community. Instead, that Christian community – its beliefs, doctrines, and authority embodied by an audience and sponsorship of believers – enables the story of the Croxton play to be told without fear of damnation. As a point of comparison to the issues raised in the *Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge*, I suggest that the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* stages and illuminates a number of the chief points of the *Tretise* writers. However, what the writers of the *Tretise* see as the dangerous precedent of 'miraclis pleyinge' – inappropriate human engagement of sacred objects and topics – the Croxton play embraces as potential site for indulging spiritual desires and exploring religious belief, while reassuringly asserting the fundamental stability and authority of Christianity.⁸

To illustrate the dangerous nature of 'miraclis pleyinge', both writers of the *Tretise* invoke various analogies, but the most visceral portrayal of the threat of 'miraclis pleyinge' comes when the writer of Part I compares those who engage in 'miraclis pleyinge' to the Jewish soldiers who tortured Christ in the Passion: 'sithen thes miraclis pleyeris taken in bourde the ernestful werkis of God, no doute that ne they scornen God as diden the Jewis that bobbiden Crist, for they lowen at his passioun as these lowyn and japen of the miraclis of God' (133–7).⁹ Like the soldiers who treated divine spirit as mere human flesh and thus beat and tormented Christ, participants in 'miraclis pleyinge' also mistreat the divine and injure the centre of Christianity. The Passion is also singled out for special comment in Part II, whose writer asserts that 'men schulden not bourden with the figure of the passion of Crist' (683–4; 689) because such 'pleyinge of the passion of Crist is but verre scorning of Crist' (692–3). For both writers, the threat of 'miraclis pleyinge' emerges from the apparent attempt of its players to do Christ's work. Staging religious themes requires human representation and engagement of sacred topics – acts which for the writers of the *Tretise* are unlawful mingling of flesh and spirit. Such acts scorn Christ because, in essence, they potentially usurp Christ's singularity as divine flesh and miracle maker. In Part I, for example, the writer asserts that

Christ and his saints performed miracles 'heere in erthe' (11), whereas humans who 'usen in bourde and pleye the miraculis and werkis that Crist so ernystfully wroughte to oure helthe ... errith in the byleve, reversith Crist, and scornyth God' (24–7). Similarly, the writer of Part II describes the effect of 'miraculis pleyinge' as a reversal of Old and New Testaments. Identifying 'miraculis pleyinge' as 'pley of the fleysh' (472), he explains that 'the Olde Testament, that is testament of the fleysh, may not ben holdun with the Newe Testament, that is testament of the spirit; and yif it be hooly kept with the testament of the spirit, it doith away verre fredom and bynimmeth the heretage of hevене' (474–9). The reversal, it seems, stems from the attempt to bridge a gap through human flesh that only Christ can close through divine spirit. Throughout the *Tretise*, the mingling of flesh and spirit, of human and divine bodies, is described as a particularly dangerous, if not blasphemous, characteristic of 'miraculis pleyinge' – a characteristic that emboldens much of the critique of sacred enactment within the document.

For both writers of the *Tretise*, then, to engage in 'miraculis pleyinge' is to assume wrongly an intimacy with things divine and heavenly and to bridge what should be an inviolate gap between flesh and spirit. Thus, for the writer of the first part of the *Tretise*, one who plays at miracles is like a servant who plays with his lord – an objectionable action because of the difference in rank:

whanne we pleyin his miraculis as men don nowe on dayes, God takith more venjaunce on us than a lord that sodaynly sleeth his servaunt for he pleyide to homely with him. And right as that lord thanne in dede seith to his servaunt, 'Pley not with me but pley with thy pere', so whanne we takun in pley and in bourde the miraculis of God, he, fro us takinge his grace, seith more earnestfully to us than the forseid lord, 'Pley not with me but pley with thy pere'. (48–56)

A similar analogy asserts the importance of a schoolmaster's authority in relation to his pupils (76–86). Both examples communicate the loss of discipline and authority the writer sees accompanying 'miraculis pleyinge'. Dread of God is lost (41) as is the discipline required of faith and belief in God's authority (76–86). Similarly, the author of Part II sees the disruption of the lord-servant relationship as analogous to 'miraculis pleyinge' (501–5) and provides the story of Ismael and Isaac as another example of inappropriate acquaintance and breach of spiritual hierarchy as 'the pleyinge of Ismael with Isaac is figure of the pleyinge of the fleysh with the spirit' (496–7). These analogies communicate the writers' feelings about 'miraculis pleyinge' as a disruptive activity that encourages a disregard for a Christian authority and

structure based upon a fundamental distinction between divine and heavenly bodies – a distinction, according to Christian doctrine, only overcome by Christ himself.

When the writers of the *Tretise* condemn ‘miraclis pleyinge’ by comparing it to Christ’s Passion, they also point to its origins in the Incarnation, in the meeting of divine and physical bodies that those who play at miracles attempt.¹⁰ The text thus suggests both a regard for incarnational power, for its ability to maintain Christianity’s authority and structure, as well as a fear of its attraction for the lay population – those whom Christianity’s leaders sought to control. As Miri Rubin, Gail MacMurray Gibson, Sarah Beckwith and others have demonstrated, the later Middle Ages, encouraged by an emphasis upon Christ’s worldly and physical presence, reevaluated the spiritual potential of worldly and human experiences.¹¹ As the authors of the *Tretise* reveal, moreover, those who play at miracles seem to privilege these types of devotional values, seeking emotional and physical immediacy in their religious experiences. A section of Part I that describes a defence of ‘miraclis pleyinge’ demonstrates the high value placed on human emotion and interaction for participants: ‘by sicke miraclis pleyinge men and wymmen, seinge the passioun of Crist and of his seintis, ben movyd to compassion and devocion, wepyng bitere teris’ (162–4). Likewise, the devotional utility of ‘pleyinge’ is compared to the visual immediacy of paintings of sacred subjects:

sithen it is levelful to han the miraclis of God peintid, why is not as wel levelful to han the miraclis of God pleyed, sithen men mowen bettere reden the wille of God and his mervelous werkis in the pleyinge of hem than in the peyntyng? And betere they ben holden in mennes minde and oftere rehersed by the pleyinge of hem than by the peyntyng, for this is a deed bok, the tother a quick. (179–85)

The writer here refers to the then-current belief that ‘seeing’ meant coming into direct visual contact with the object;¹² he therefore describes the ‘pleyinge’ of ‘miraclis’ as a more lively and so more effective form of devotion than even that achieved through paintings that are ‘deed bok[s].’ While he will proceed to criticize the activity, this author of the *Tretise* is aware of the high value placed on ‘miraclis pleyinge’ as a devotional practice because of its emphasis upon visual, emotional, and physical immediacy, and the active involvement required of its participants. Connected, I believe, to what Gibson has called an ‘incarnational aesthetic’¹³ and what Rubin has described as ‘a sacramental world-view,’¹⁴ neither the powerful desires of ‘miraclis pleyinge’ nor its popu-

larity are denied by the writers, but rather the players' right to act on those desires using the meeting of divine and human as precedent.

The *Tretise of Miraculis Pleyinge* bears witness to the irony of a late medieval belief system where an emphasis upon Christ's humanity ensured Christianity's popularity among the laity but also encouraged them to see the divine and sacred as more directly accessible, and thus to engage in activities that bridged the gap between 'flesh' and 'spirit'. In the *Tretise*, 'miraculis pleyinge' is portrayed as one of the more alarming and revealing of those activities because, in part, it seems to proceed without the control and supervision the clerical establishment sought to maintain over its followers' belief patterns and worship practices. As the references to irreverent servants playing with lords attest, the writers of the *Tretise* perceived 'miraculis pleyinge' as a disruptive activity whose participants willingly disregarded the authority and structure of traditional Christian doctrine. According to the writer of Part I, 'miraculis pleyinge' is a disorderly activity that 'reversith discipline' (116), encourages lechery, debate, 'bodily mirthe,' and gluttony (118–22) while 'it suffrith not a man to beholden enterly the yerde of God over his heved, but makith to thenken on alle siche thingis that Crist by the dedis of his passion badde us to forgeten. Wherefore siche miraculis pleyinge, both in penaunce doying in very discipline and in pacience reversyn Cristis hestis and his dedis' (123–8). This disruption of authority and doctrine that seems to accompany 'miraculis pleyinge', coupled with what the writers of the *Tretise* represent as its participants' misuse of Christ's incarnational example, speak to what in the later Middle Ages was the paradoxical position of the Church in relation to an increased devotional attention to the Eucharist ironically encouraged by the Church. For in trying to ensure the special position of the priesthood as the sole handlers of Christ's body – as Beckwith describes, 'the keepers of its miraculous powers' and 'the necessary medium of transformation'¹⁵ – the Church placed special emphasis upon the sacrament thereby enabling the laity to embrace its more homely qualities.¹⁶ Connected with the worldly and physical nature of Christ that made the divine and spiritual seemingly more accessible, the host became tangible proof of incarnational belief and power – a tactile object that demonstrated the potential of humanity.¹⁷

Accompanied by a growing attention to the physical as well as spiritual nature of Christ's life, incarnated body and host came to represent and enact a fluid space between human life and spiritual redemption, mediating between the mundane details of this life and the eternal salvation yet to come. Seeking a contemporaneity between sacred topics and human life – between divine

forces and physical realities for which the Incarnation, Passion, and Eucharist provide powerful precedents – the laity engaged in activities that drew upon the power of the transubstantiation yet often proceeded unmediated by clear clerical presence or authority. Extending from the use of the host in healing rituals, folk remedies, and blessings of crops and animals to its encompassing and centralized presence in the Feast of Corpus Christi,¹⁸ it was an unmediated use of sacramental power – an unmediated mingling of divine and human bodies and of sacred and mundane properties – that captured the attention of the *Tretise* writers.

While these associations with the body draw our attention to the physical and emotional involvement required of participants in the playing of miracles, they also continue to reveal the complex relationship between ‘miraculis pleyinge’ and Christ’s body attested to in the *Tretise*. According to the writer of Part I, ‘miraculis pleyinge’ reduces divine bodies to human status so that the ‘pleyinge’ of religious topics actually ‘reverse[s]’ Christ’s actions and the use of his body for sinners in the Passion:

siche miraculis pleyinge reversith Crist. Firste in taking to pley that that he toke into most earnest. The secound in taking to miraculis of our fleys, of oure lustis, and of oure five wittis that that God tooc to the bringing in of his bitter deth and to teching of penaunse doinge, and to fleyinge of feding of oure wittis and to mortifying of hem. (57–62)

‘[T]aking to miraculis of oure fleys, of oure lustis, and of oure five wittis’ – using human senses and faculties to re-create and re-experience sacred scenes, topics, and meanings – encourages a spatial misuse of the physical body, of Christ’s form in the Incarnation, and of his actions in the Passion. ‘Pleyinge’, therefore, is a human corruption of Christ’s use of the human form. According to the difficult logic of the *Tretise*, human bodies ought not to play at the actions of the God-become-man because such play is merely disruptive mimicry that reduces – or reverses – spirit to flesh. Not only do human and divine bodies meet unsuitably, but the space of enactment comes dangerously close to reversing Christ himself. In the attempt to meld sacred and mundane, the space of performance is portrayed as a corruption of the original miracle of the Incarnation – a corruption due at least in part to the attempted engagement of a mediatory power intended for the priesthood alone.

While not seeking to enact the transubstantiation on their own, the laity, hopeful of redemption, nonetheless engage in devotional practices dedicated to enabling the sacrament’s transformative potential in other venues, including

perhaps the staging of miracles and sacred topics. Such stagings or enactments seem to have been infused with a 're-creative' potential, with a hope that representation might result in miracle. Much of Middle English religious drama bears witness to this 're-creative' potential, to the desire to meld present audience and playing space with events from sacred history, to invoke spiritual topics in order to access both their spiritual meaning and their miraculous potential.¹⁹ What troubles the writers of the *Tretise* is the indeterminate and independent nature of such activities, blending mundane realities with religion and worship. As David Mills has written, the 'danger' of 'miraclis pleyinge' 'lay in its still ambivalent status, its dangerous resemblance to functional forms of religious worship and instruction, and in its widespread appeal to a community, with all the dangers that the community would redirect it to serve its own self-interest'.²⁰ As I have argued, both writers of the *Tretise* are concerned with 'miraclis pleyinge' as an activity that ignores spiritual hierarchies and proceeds recklessly with little, if any regard, for a controlling religious authority. The orthodox writer of Part I seems particularly concerned with this unstructured and unchaperoned nature, and his attention to priests who actually engage in plays suggests his special interest in the threat of 'miraclis pleyinge' to clerical authority. Referring to the ability of an Old Testament woman such as Sara to keep herself away from plays and players in order to maintain her chastity and suitability for the sacrament of marriage, the writer asserts that a priest of the New Testament should strive even more to keep himself from plays and players in order to maintain his special position as minister of 'ne only ... the sacrament of matrimonye but alle othere sacramentis and namely sithen him owith to ministre to alle the puple the precious body of Crist' (274–7).²¹ Certainly, as Lawrence Clopper has asserted, this argument communicates the writer's belief that the priest who participates in plays encourages 'his parishioners [to] have regard neither for him nor for the sacraments'.²² Moreover, and more specifically, the writer's focus on the sacrament of the host reveals his special concern for the threat 'miraclis pleyinge' poses to clerical control over the host and the circulation of its sacramental powers. Not only, therefore, do priest and sacraments lose public regard, but such participation in playing relinquishes the priesthood's special connection to the host, as 'keepers of its miraculous powers' and 'necessary medium of [its] transformation':²³

this holy womman Sara at the day of dom schal dampnen the pristis of the Newe Testament that givis heem to pleyes, reversen hir holy maners aprovyd by God and al holiy chirche; therefore sore aughten pristis to be aschamyd that reversen

this gode holy womman and the precious body of Crist that they treytyn in ther hondis, the whiche body never gaf him to pley but to alle siche thing as is most contrarious to pley, as is penaunce and suffring of persecution. (280–8)

The priest who plays endangers his special claim to the Eucharist and its power. Indeed, such priests ‘reverse’ both their ‘holy maners’ as well as ‘the precious body of Crist’ because they relinquish their special authority over the transformative potential of Christ’s body. By indulging in plays and not distinguishing themselves from other players, such priests suggest that the Eucharist and its sacramental power are accessible. ‘Miraclis pleyinge’, understandably, became a special concern for those who sought to maintain the priesthood’s special claim to the Eucharist.

Responding to the apparent availability of sacramental power enabled by an increased emphasis on Christ’s body and primarily engineered by the clerical establishment, ‘miraclis pleyinge’, as described in the *Tretise*, becomes a particularly potent threat to what Rubin has called ‘the exclusive right of the clergy to mediate the grace of redemption, the shared Creator and Savior, to dispense of supernatural power through rituals performed by [the] clergy alone’.²⁴ Yet while the writers of the *Tretise* attempt to condemn ‘miraclis pleyinge’ as mere physical play, or as an activity that must always devolve into mere entertainment,²⁵ their critique does not conceal what seems to have been at least the initial desire of its participants to create a spatial miracle – to tap into the transformative power originally designated for the ‘clergy alone’. The participants in ‘miraclis pleyinge’ want to bring flesh into contact with spirit. They seek the kind of physical and emotional immediacy (162–5) that will help them to ‘bettere reden the wille of God and his mervelous werkis’ (181–2). Although the writers of the *Tretise* characterize its participants as irreverent, even impudent, revelers with slight regard for authority figures, they do not deny completely the participants’ reverent intentions for ‘miraclis pleyinge’ nor their hope for its ‘re-creative potential’ – that representation might result in actual miracle. Even the strongest condemnation of ‘miraclis pleyinge’ offered by the *Tretise*, its comparison to Christ’s Passion, while gruesomely frightening, maintains powerful connections between the spatial miracle of Christ’s body and the hope that ‘miraclis pleyinge’ can draw upon that miracle.

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In the *Tretise* the torture and mockery endured by Christ at the Passion come to represent the dangers of assuming too close an intimacy with the sacred – an intimacy that is invoked improperly when one plays at miracles. Yet, when

the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* stages a re-creation of the Passion, that closeness becomes a topic for exploration, complicating the assertion that miracles ought not to be re-enacted. The Croxton play presents its own contemporary versions of the Jewish mishandlers of Christ who, having purchased the host from a greedy (though Christian) merchant, put the host to 'a preve'.²⁶ As the Banns describe, these Jews 'grevyd our Lord gretly on grownd',

And put hym to a new passyoun;
With daggers gouen hym many a greuyos wound;
Nayled hym to a pyller, with pyynsons plukked hym doune. (37–40)

More than a bloody and sensational display, this treatment of the host, as enacted in the play, results in a miraculous re-creation of Crucifixion, Passion, and Resurrection – a re-creation that calls upon the audience as participants in and enablers of the miracle. Actors and audience play with and upon the space of Christ's body as the initially small and vulnerable wafer comes safely and surely to encompass both the redemptive potential of the Jews' own gruesome curiosity as well as the space and experience of the play's audience. While in the *Tretise*, access to Christ's body in the Passion comes to represent a blasphemous reversal of belief resulting from 'miraclis pleyinge' and its desire for contact with the sacred, the re-creation of the Passion in the Croxton play comes to represent a celebratory reassertion of belief, enabled by a tactile intimacy with the sacred object that is the host.²⁷

As a play about handlings and mishandlings of the host, the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* engages a number of the issues regarding concerns over the circulation of and access to sacramental power revealed in the *Tretise*. Indeed, we may view the Croxton play as a kind of treatise in its own right, but a treatise that explores sacramental access and the playing of miracles from a specifically East Anglian perspective.²⁸ Drawing upon a climate of spiritual confidence and curiosity enabled by the region's economic prosperity, the Croxton play approaches its subject with considerably less dread and fear than the *Tretise*. Where the *Tretise* writers portray 'miraclis pleyinge' as a misuse of Christ's body, accompanied by a loss of clerical control over the Eucharist, the Croxton staging plays at miracles in order to explore how such misuse can reveal the sacramental potential of the Eucharist as well as the stability of Christian belief.²⁹

When Aristorius, a wealthy merchant, opens the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* with an invocation to 'Cryst, þat ys our Creatour' (81), he seems a

good Christian, attentive to his subordinate position as layman and merchant. However, he quickly begins a boasting sequence, listing for the audience the cities and countries where he does business. Deeply involved in his secular pursuits and accomplishments, he resembles the familiar boosters and tyrants of the cycle plays; but, unlike most of these, he is also a Christian whose material success has curiously infiltrated his religious attitude and life. Financially successful, he believes that he has God's blessing on all of his activities: 'No man in thys world may weld more rychesse; / All I thank God of hys grace, for he Wat me sent' (117–18). Bridging mercantile activities and religious duty, Aristorius' enticing yet troubling conflation of worldly and spiritual abilities may have been particularly resonant for an East Anglian audience whose own centres of worship owed so much to the economic prosperity of the region's cloth trade. While the region's elaborately styled parish 'wool churches,' funded by wealthy cloth merchants, can be seen as a response to guilt over material prosperity, they also illustrate the entanglement of worldly and spiritual pride exhibited by Aristorius. With their complex (even ostentatious) architecture, East Anglia's 'wool churches' are monuments to the hope that material success might engender spiritual success and that both could be displayed together.³⁰

Given his confidence in both his worldly and religious dealings, Aristorius' wealth and prosperity, his 'weld' of 'rychesse', extends its influence to controlling his priest, Sir Isodor, who, Aristorius asserts, 'wayteth vpon me to knowe myn entent' (120). After drugging the ineffectual priest with food and wine, Aristorius obtains the host from the local church and, after bargaining over its price with five curious Jews, sells it to them. Such action illuminates intriguing parallels to the concerns expressed in the *Tretise* regarding clerical loss of sacramental power. Sir Isodor, whose slumbering and lack of authority over his parishioner enable the merchant to obtain the host, resembles those priests described in the *Tretise* who 'givis heem to pleyes' and who 'reversen ... the precious body of Crist that they treytyn in ther hondis' (282–6). Sir Isodor's behaviour exemplifies those inattentive and 'pleyinge' priests described in the *Tretise* whose actions result in compromising clerical authority and a loss of clerical control over the use and space of Christ's body. As described in the *Tretise*, and as enacted in the Croxton play, the laity – represented by Aristorius, whose vocation implicates the play's East Anglian audience – approach the sacred with little, if any, reverence. If in the *Tretise* 'miraclis pleyinge' abuses the potential of Christ's body, here Aristorius engages in an economically charged playing made possible by an attitude that has already dangerously

merged worldly with spiritual pursuits. Aristorius, in effect, takes the host into his own hands in a prideful conflation of economic and spiritual profit that the *Tretise* associates with the conflation of flesh and spirit characterizing ‘miraclis pleyinge’.³¹ His treatment of the host seems quite similar to those profit makers who ‘to han wherof to spenden on thes miraclis and to holden felawschipe of gloteny and lecherie in siche dayes of miraclis pleyinge ... bisien hem befor to more gredily bygilen ther neighbors in byinge and in selling’ (604–8). So entangled is his faith with his business, so confident is he in his material and spiritual success, that Aristorius seems to think himself perfectly justified in tricking his priest, obtaining the host, and selling it to his Jewish customers. In order to treat the host as a material object to be sold for economic profit, Aristorius must conflate the sacred with the mundane, the spiritual with the physical. Treating the host, the symbol and embodiment of the miracle of the Incarnation, as a material commodity is an example of placing sacred and mundane on the same level – the joining of spiritual and physical spaces, divine and human qualities that similarly describes the activity of ‘miraclis pleyinge’. However, unlike those who play at miracles to gain access to sacramental power – seemingly available through Christ and Eucharist – that will enable them to attempt on their own a redemptive meeting of flesh and spirit, Aristorius is so sure of his right of access that he exchanges sacramental power for earthly profit, confident that such profit reflects well on his spiritual as well as his worldly position.

Secure in his religious as well as his business success, Aristorius relinquishes the sacrament and its attendant power to his customers, the curious Jews who wish to put the host to a ‘preve’. Surely implicated in the Jews’ torturous treatment of the host – indeed his conflation of business and religion has enabled it – Aristorius is never directly involved in their physical abuse of the host. Although the merchant reveals attitudes regarding flesh and spirit that the *Tretise* writers associate with ‘miraclis pleyinge’, unlike its participants as they are described in the *Tretise* he remains at a safe distance from the playing – from the torture that enacts miracle in the play. Despite his heinous actions, Aristorius remains a part of the Christian community, clearly distinguished from the Jewish outsiders whose treatment of the host, while staged by Christian actors and viewed by a Christian audience, can be explained as the actions of non-believers, as those who in medieval Christian tradition consistently sought to desecrate the host and mock Christ.³² In holding its Jewish characters chiefly responsible for re-creating the Passion, the Croxton play ostensibly keeps all of its Christian participants at a safe distance from what

the writers of the *Tretise* assert is the precedent that condemns ‘miraclis pleyinge’ and its participants’ desire for contact with the divine. The re-created Passion of the Croxton play – in essence the staging of a staging – thus allows its audience and actors to examine, without direct recrimination, what amounts to the danger as well as the potential of ‘miraclis pleyinge’.

For all practical purposes, the audience of the Croxton play are mere observers of a staged scene of torture that, in turn, enacts a miracle. Even if they identify with Aristorius and question the impact of their material success upon their religious practices, their status as Christians and as viewers remains intact. Nevertheless, they are subjected to an extended scene that may very well have indulged their own spiritual desires and fears – from a safe distance. Influenced, as were many late medieval Christians, by an increased devotional attention to the physical nature of Christ, the audience of the Croxton play no doubt viewed the Jews’ intimate machinations with both dread and wonder. More specifically, the play’s presentation of the host as mercantile object whose nature and quality are priced, tested, and measured by human touch may have been particularly charged for East Anglians whose livelihoods were based upon a tactile good, cloth, whose quality was also a measure of human hands.³³ Though protected from culpability as Christian observers, the audience (and its actors) are thus partial participants, inheriting a role that the performance itself cannot always deny. The Jews’ diligent work, for example, is accompanied by a graphically specific narration which seemingly assumes little if any gap between actor and audience space (385–525, 653–716). In addition, at one point, in order to stop the host’s miraculous bleeding – the result of its physical piercing – Jonathas, the Jews’ leader, attempts to throw the wafer into a kettle of boiling oil, only to have it stick to his hand (489ff). When, according to the stage directions, ‘*re renneth wood, with þe Ost in hys hand*’ (sd after 503), no doubt he is meant to approach the audience directly, holding out for them the physical representation of the very miracle-enabling space that all participants currently (if temporarily) inhabit. The Jews may be represented as those who play at miracles, but the audience is also implicated in a process that extends the sacramental potential of the Eucharist to the space of the performance. The host and Jonathas’ crazed running about encircle all in the dangerous yet potentially miraculous power of unlicensed play within and upon the space of Christ’s body.

In the scene following Jonathas’ injury, the audience, in fact, is addressed directly by a physician’s servant who, along with his master, will remain attentive to the audience throughout the scene.³⁴ Full of descriptions of the doctor’s sexual pursuits and his inadequacies as a healer, the comic scene,

perhaps meant to offer a reprieve from the graphic scene that has preceded it, also presents a familiar parable to the audience, one that they are called upon to recognize and enable by refusing the doctor's request for patients (601–22). When Jonathas also refuses his services, he signals to the audience the possibility of his redemption; this refusal parallels the audience's response to the quack doctor and foreshadows the potential of true healing as well as the eventual appearance of Christ, the spiritual healer who replaces all fleshly physicians. Since the parable is never directly communicated, audience recognition is important for the progression of the scene and the play – their belief is called upon to help ensure a redemptive movement forward that, again, contrasts with the *Tretise* writers' assertions that flesh will reverse spirit.³⁵ Indeed, before Christ appears, Jonathas and his companions engage in additional flesh-oriented pursuits: throwing the host with attached hand into a cauldron that then boils over with blood, and then attempting to bake the host in an oven in order to stop the bleeding. When, instead, the host transforms into a bleeding and speaking image of Christ that bursts from the oven, the audience and their Christian belief system seem to have, in part, enabled and predicted the transformation – their belief transfigures the disbelief of the Jews and enables miracles. As a speaking image that offers forgiveness and redemption, physical and spiritual healing, the Christ image is a miraculous incarnation of the audience's recognition of the parable of the physician – a recognition enabled by their belief.

Like the bishop who is called in to return the Christ image to bread, to establish order, and to complete the Jews' conversion and redemption, the audience, by maintaining Christian belief, also contributes to the completion of the miracle process through an understanding of the Incarnation miracle that the Jews, despite their direct access to the host, do not have. While Episcopus thus mourns over the 'newe passyon' (803), he also sets about seeking its miraculous completion by calling for a display of belief that demonstrates an understanding of Christ's sufferings:

Now, all ye peple that here are,
I commande yow, euery man,
On yowr feet for to goo bare,
In the devoutest wyse that ye can. (810–13)

Called upon to help restore order, to join in a Corpus Christi procession to the local church, audience members assert their confidence in a belief system they have held all along – a belief system that, in contrast to the opinions

expressed in the *Tretise*, sees the human and fleshly elements of Christ's Passion not as a dangerous opportunity for reversal but as a step toward divine and spiritual redemption.³⁶ The gruesome acts displayed in the play, while a shocking example of disbelief, can also be seen as an opportunity to explore belief and to renew it, and to celebrate the depth and potential of the inherent sacramental power of the miracles of Incarnation, Passion, and Eucharist.³⁷ The Croxton play's staging of host desecration, of what amounts to an extreme example of unlicensed physical play with sacred object and divine body, may thus actually provide an opportunity for displaying and asserting that belief.³⁸

In their separate examinations of 'miracle playing', both the *Tretise of Miraculis Pleyinge* and the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* are concerned with clerical control of the Eucharist and with the Jews who mocked and tortured Christ at the Passion. In the *Tretise* these two issues reveal the dangers of 'miraculis pleyinge': the attempt of its participants to transfer, without authorization, the power of the Eucharist to sacred enactment is an abuse of Christ, a mocking of what he alone achieved in the Incarnation. In staging its own version of the Passion, set in motion by a priest's loss of the sacrament, the Croxton play elucidates the concerns expressed in the *Tretise* but also complicates their connection to the staging of miracles. Employed by the *Tretise* writers as doctrinal evidence against 'miraculis pleyinge', clerical control of the Eucharist and the Passion become in the Croxton play opportunities for performance and spiritual exploration precisely because they *are* points of doctrine. Included, in fact, in the Constitutions of the Fourth Lateran Council,³⁹ the document which in 1215 first defined transubstantiation as a point of faith for the Christian world, are decrees concerning the safe keeping of the Eucharist (number 20) and the punishment of contemporary Jews who mock the redemptive power of Christ (number 68). In emphasizing the importance of keeping chrism and Eucharist under lock and key so that they cannot be reached by any hand that might do them harm, Constitution 20 contains sentiments strikingly similar to those expressed by Episcopus as he restores order (and addresses the repentant Sir Isodor and Aristorius) near the end of the Croxton play:

And all yow creaturys and curatys that here be,
 Off thys dede yow may take example
 How that yowr pyxys lockyd ye shuld see,
 And be ware of the key of Goddys temple. (924–7)

In addition, the Constitutions contain two other decrees that are taken up by the Croxton play. Sir Isodor's gluttony and drunkenness – what enables Aristorius to obtain the host – is clearly in violation of the decree against clerical gluttony and drunkenness (number 15), and the scene that dispenses with an earthly healer in favour of the heavenly physician echoes the language of Constitution 22 which commands 'physicians of the body, when they are called to the sick, to warn and persuade them first of all to call in physicians of the soul'. Engaging issues that had, in essence, already been anticipated and legislated – that were, in essence, already 'on the books' – the Croxton play provides for its East Anglian audience yet another safe avenue for exploring contemporary religious concerns.

Encouraged by an economic prosperity that may have strengthened a fundamental confidence in Christianity's authority and structure (and that certainly encouraged the display of such confidence), the Croxton play may have been a planned staging of disbelief that allowed East Anglian Christians to indulge spiritual desires and concerns connected to that same economic prosperity and an increasingly material culture.⁴⁰ The Christian beliefs held by the play's audience and actors can thus be seen to enable the miracles, based upon liturgical language and the doctrine of transubstantiation, that result from the Jews' tampering with the host. As the play progresses from desecration to miracle to eventual redemption, it becomes increasingly dependent upon its audience of believers – the very audience whose belief status originally kept them from direct implication in the Jews' actions. In the *Tretise*, 'miraclis pleyinge' ends with and is condemned by the Passion, with what the *Tretise* writers assert is an abuse of Christ and the Christian faith on the part of its participants. In the Croxton play, however, the miracles that follow such abuse are fulfilled by a sacramental and redemptive power that enlists the emotional and physical participation of its believers in a process that perhaps redeems 'miraclis pleyinge' as well as Jew.

Notes

- 1 A version of this paper was presented at the session 'Between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: Fifteenth-Century Revisionisms and Disputed Person-ages' of the Modern Language Association Conference, Toronto, December 1997. The quotation is from Clifford Davidson (ed), *A Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge*. Early Drama, Art, and Music Monograph Series, No. 19 (Kalamazoo,

- MI, 1993), 101, l. 285. All future references are from this edition and will be cited parenthetically by line number.
- 2 Davidson, in his introduction to his edition of the *Tretise*, places the original writing of the *Tretise* between 1380 and 1425. The extant text, British Library MS Add. 24, 202, ff 14–21, was copied in the early fifteenth century. For a bibliography of scholarship on the dating of the manuscript, see Davidson's introduction, 34 n1. 285–6.
 - 3 See Davidson's introduction, 4–34, and Paul A. Johnston, Jr's discussion of the dialects of Parts I and II in 'The Dialect of *A Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge*' in Davidson's edition, 53–84. Lawrence M. Clopper in '*Miracula* and *The Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge*', *Speculum* 65 (1990), 896–8, sees a fundamental disparity between the two authors' attitudes regarding what makes 'play' appropriate.
 - 4 Davidson discusses this issue at length in his introduction as does Nicholas Davis in 'The *Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge*: On Milieu and Authorship', *Medieval English Theatre* 12 (1990), 124–51. Davis also argues that both parts of the *Tretise* were composed by a single author. Ann Hudson questions the Wyclifite characterization of the *Tretise* in *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History* (Oxford, 1988), 38. Ruth Nisse, in 'Reversing Discipline: The *Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge*, Lollard Exegesis, and the Failure of Representation', *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 11 (1997), 163–94, reasserts a Lollard origin for the text. See also Davis, 'Another View of the *Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge*', *Medieval English Theatre* 4 (1982), 48–85, and 'The Playing of Miracles in England between c 1350 and the Reformation', PhD thesis (Cambridge University, 1977). Clopper does not address the Lollard issue and, instead, follows a line of interpretation that anchors the objections to 'miraclis pleyinge' found in the *Tretise* in 'papal and ecclesiastical opposition to indecorous behavior and the sins that accrue from attendance on such affairs' (898).
 - 5 Davidson, *Tretise*, 4.
 - 6 While Clopper has raised important doubts about whether the religious drama was the *Tretise* writers' object of concern, most critics consider 'miraclis pleyinge' a reference to the religious drama and, in general, I agree with the majority opinion. The definition of 'miraclis pleyinge,' however, is not my chief concern in this paper but rather the beliefs and behaviour that, according to the writers, encourage and accompany the activity. It is my contention that the writers were concerned generally with a religious attitude and practice for which the religious drama provided a specific example. The term 'miraclis pleyinge', therefore might include other activities and behaviour that indulged

- the same desires as did the religious drama. Davidson also discusses the interpretive difficulty of defining 'miraculis' in his introduction, 1–4.
- 7 Norman Davis believes that the Croxton play was likely composed soon after 1461, the date presented in the manuscript for the events the play details. Davis dates the copy originally contained in Trinity College, Dublin, f 4.20 (Catalogue no 652), ff 338–56, now stored separately, to the early sixteenth century. See *Non-Cycle Plays and Fragments*, EETS ss1 (London, 1970), lxxxiv–lxxxv and lxx–lxxv.
 - 8 Despite my departure from a number of her assertions regarding the Croxton play, Sarah Beckwith's essay, 'Ritual, Church, and Theatre: Medieval Dramas of the Sacramental Body', *Medieval Literature: Criticism, Ideology, and History*, David Aers (ed) (Brighton, Sussex, 1986), 66–89, has informed my examination of these two texts. While I see Croxton as an exploration of belief, Beckwith sees it as an exploration of doubt.
 - 9 For the connection between the Passion and 'Hot Cockles', a children's game that seems to have its origins in the soldiers' torture of Christ, see Clifford Davidson, *From Creation to Doom: The York Cycle of Mystery Plays* (New York, 1984), 107–9.
 - 10 While in 'Carnival Against Lent: The Ambivalence of Medieval Drama', *Medieval Literature*, 74–98, Anthony Gash has explored the representation of Corpus Christi within the larger community of town and village in the later medieval period, I argue that the space of Christ's body and its conflicting meanings inform the mediatory space of the religious drama's performance. This performance space not only attempts access to the divine and sacred, but also determines the nature of that access. See also 'The Social Body of the Dramatic Christ in Medieval England', *Early Drama to 1600, Acta* 13 (1985), 17–36, where Peter Travis discusses the role of the social body of Christ in the cycle plays.
 - 11 See Gibson, *The Theatre of Devotion*, especially 1–18; Rubin, 'The Eucharist and the Construction of Medieval Identities', *Medieval Literature*, 43–63, and *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge, 1991); Beckwith, 'Ritual, Church, and Theatre: Medieval Dramas of the Sacramental Body', and *Christ's Body: Identity, Culture, and Society in Late Medieval Writings* (London, 1993); Charles Zita, 'Hosts, Processions and Pilgrimages: Controlling the Sacred in Fifteenth-Century Germany', *Past and Presence* 118 (1988), 38–66; J.W. Robinson, 'The Late Medieval Cult of Jesus and the Mystery Plays', *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 80 (1965), 508–14; and Gustav Aulén, *Christus Victor*, trans A.G. Herbert (New York, 1960).

- 12 Davidson, 133–4, note to lines 179–85.
- 13 Gibson, *The Theatre of Devotion*, 5–10, 16–18.
- 14 Rubin, ‘The Eucharist and the Construction of Medieval Identities’, 52.
- 15 ‘Ritual, Church and Theatre’, 66.
- 16 Rubin provides a detailed overview of Eucharist devotion and controversy originating in the eleventh century in ‘The Eucharist and the Construction of Medieval Identities’.
- 17 Devotion to the Eucharist was also, of course, linked to the affective piety movement in the later Middle Ages and the emphasis of the movement upon personal identification with Christ through his human sufferings and qualities. Clarissa W. Atkinson provides a religious and historical background of the affective piety tradition and movement in chapter 5 of her *Mystic and Pilgrim: The Book and the World of Margery Kempe*. (Ithaca, NY, 1983), 129–56. See also Sarah Beckwith, ‘A Very Material Mysticism: The Medieval Mysticism of Margery Kempe’, *Medieval Literature*, 34–57, and Elizabeth Salter, ‘Nicholas Love’s “Myrrour of the Blessed Lyf of Jesu Christ”’, *Analecta Cartusiana* 10 (1974), 55–118.
- 18 See Mervyn James, ‘Ritual, Drama, and Social Body in the Late Medieval Town’, *Past and Present* 98 (1983), 3–29.
- 19 I explore this ‘re-creative’ potential more extensively in ‘The Possibilities of Performance: Mediatory Styles in Middle English Religious Drama’, PhD thesis (University of Washington, 1997).
- 20 David Mills, ‘Medieval and Modern Views of Drama’, *The Revels History of Drama in English*, vol 1, A.C. Cawley, et al (eds) (London and New York, 1983), 91. Mills’ essay, which I read after beginning my examination of the *Tretise* and the Croxton play, contains the only other comparative study of these two texts of which I am aware.
- 21 See Clopper, ‘*Miracula* and *The Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge*’, 898–9, for a useful discussion of this passage.
- 22 Clopper, ‘*Miracula* and *The Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge*’, 899.
- 23 Beckwith, ‘Ritual, Church, and Theatre’, 66.
- 24 ‘The Eucharist and the Construction of Medieval Identities’, 46. See also Zita, ‘Hosts, Processions, and Pilgrimages: Controlling the Sacred in Fifteenth-Century Germany’, 60.
- 25 The author of Part II extends this point to include a comparison of ‘miraclis pleyinge’ with the Israelites’ worship of the golden calf (ll. 586–663).

- 26 Davis (ed), *Non-Cycle Plays and Fragments*, 64, ll. 208 and 442. All future references are from this edition and will be cited parenthetically by line number.
- 27 Thus, like Ann Eljenholm Nichols, I depart from those who have interpreted the play as a response to Lollardy and/or anti-Eucharist belief. See Nichols, 'The Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*: A Re-Reading', *Comparative Drama* 22 (1988), 117–37. Critics who see the Croxton play as a response to Lollardy or to sacramental doubt include Cecilia Cutts, 'The Croxton Play: An Anti-Lollard Piece', *Modern Language Quarterly* 5 (1944), 45–60; Gibson, *The Theatre of Devotion*, 34–42; and Beckwith, 'Ritual, Church and Theatre', 66–9. More recently, Donnalee Dox has re-opened this issue in 'Medieval Drama as Documentation: "Real Presence" in the Croxton *Conversion of Ser Jonathas the Jewe by the Myracle of the Blissed Sacrament*', *Theatre Survey* 38 (1997), 97–115.
- 28 Gibson examines the specific spiritual attitudes of fifteenth-century East Anglians in *The Theatre of Devotion*. In chapter 2, 34–42, she also considers the Croxton play a piece of anti-Lollard polemic, an interpretation from which I depart.
- 29 The Croxton play is self-commenting and self-reflexive. As Seth Lerer remarks, the play 'is ... a kind of metadrama, a play about the possibilities of theater and its symbols'. See "'Representyd Now in Yower Syght": The Culture of Spectatorship in Late Fifteenth-Century England', *Bodies and Disciplines: Intersections of Literature and History in Fifteenth-Century England*, Medieval Cultures, vol 9, Barbara Hanawalt and David Wallace (eds) (Minneapolis, 1996), 47.
- 30 See Gibson 23–8. Similarly, the detailed wills of East Anglians, also discussed by Gibson (67–106), with their elaborate provisions and bequests made possible by earthly acquisition, suggest a belief in the potential influence of worldly wealth upon one's final fate, a hope that earthly success might translate to heavenly achievement.
- 31 My characterization of Aristorius here and my analysis of the following passage has been aided by Davidson's gloss (152–3, n to ll. 607–8). He comments that 'sponsors of civic drama were hardly able to separate spiritual profit from economic profit gained from the festivities which brought a large crowd of outsiders to the city on such occasions as Corpus Christi' and asserts that the *Tretise* writers condemn such conflation as they do the mixing of flesh and spirit.
- 32 See Jeremy Cohen, 'The Jews as the Killers of Christ in the Latin Tradition, from Augustine to the Friars', *Traditio* 34 (1983), 1–27; Miri Rubin, 'Desecration of the Host: The Birth of an Accusation', *Christianity and Judaism*, Diana Wood (ed) (London, 1992), 169–86; and Norman Davis' introduction to the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*, lxxiii–lxxiv.

- 33 The motivations of the Jews might be seen as similar to those of the Doubting Thomas who, as Gibson explains in *The Theatre of Devotion*, was transformed, in the later Middle Ages, into a positive image of spiritual devotion among the laity. Embodying the ‘sensory concreteness’ of fifteenth-century piety in England (16), Thomas’ touching of Christ’s body and wounds can be seen as a precedent for the physical and tactile – if extreme – actions of the Jews. Furthermore, the empirical desires of the Jews to test the host rather than merely destroy it as do their continental counterparts, suggests that they have more in common with late medieval Christians than might immediately be expected. For a discussion of the Croxton Jews and other Jewish desecrators of the host, see Davis’ introduction to the play in *Non-Cycle Plays and Fragments*, lxxiii–lxxv. See also Beckwith, ‘Ritual, Church, and Theatre’, 68 and 83–4 n14.
- 34 The Doctor figure has no precedents in other versions of the play. See Davis, introduction to the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* in *Non-Cycle Plays and Fragments*, lxxv.
- 35 See *Tretise*, lines 57–62, 109–28, 461–544.
- 36 While it is possible that the procession is merely a staging that does not involve the audience, I believe that the audience become participants whose belief helps the narrative progression of the play to move from disbelief to belief. See also Beckwith, ‘Ritual, Church, and Theatre’, 77–80.
- 37 As Beckwith claims in ‘Ritual, Culture, and Theatre’, 68, the ‘very act of profanation, the very act of torture, has merely produced the means of salvation in this Christian economy of redemption’.
- 38 If, in fact, the *Tretise* writers’ examples of Ishmael and Isaac, Old Testament and New Testament represent, as Nicholas Davis describes in ‘On Milieu and Authorship’, 128, ‘the two human covenants with God, “fleshly” (Jewish) and “spiritual” (Christian),’ and their mixed play the persecution of ‘those born after the spirit’ by ‘those born after the flesh,’ the Croxton play seems to overcome this opposition with its communal procession, with a progression from Old Testament faith to New Testament belief (as both Jew and Christian participate) – a movement that proceeds from flesh to spirit but also incorporates both.
- 39 All references are to the on-line version of the Constitutions available at <http://www.ewtn.com/library/councils/latran4.htm>.
- 40 In a recent presentation at the International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, Michigan (May 2000), Mark D. Holtz explores a similar idea in relation to the larger phenomenon of bleeding hosts. In the later Middle Ages, he argues, bleeding hosts ‘do not need to bleed for believers’.