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Christ's Birth and Infancy in Middle English

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A dissertation submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy 2010
The dissertation does not exceed the regulation length, including footnotes, references and appendices but excluding the bibliography. It is all my own work.

Abstract

The dissertation reconstructs a version of Christ's early life from Middle English narratives of his Birth and Infancy, with a chapter structure that follows the chronology of events in the canonical and apocryphal gospels. After an introduction, the chapters are arranged as follows: 1) Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem, the significance of Bethlehem and the role of the census; 2) the Birth of Christ, its location and popular iconography; 3) the legend of the midwives; 4) the shepherds; 5) the Circumcision and the Presentation in the Temple; 6) the Magi; 7) the Slaughter of the Innocents and the Flight into Egypt. An epilogue briefly discusses Middle English versions of the apocryphal events from Christ's childhood.

Each chapter synthesizes all variables of episodes in the life and aims to recreate the way that it would have existed in medieval English mindsets. The thesis thus provides new insight into the culture of Christian devotion as it was encountered by diverse social and geographic groups in England from c.1200 through to the sixteenth century. By analysing Middle English versions of bible stories, apocryphal and canonical, the thesis shows that such stories are fully part of orthodox devotion. Recognising that the vernacular texts of this period cannot be read in isolation from visual and material culture, my methodology embraces all media, from apocryphal gospels to roof bosses, tiles to mystery plays.

Close reading of poetry, prose and drama from the twelfth- to sixteenth- centuries presents a picture of religion as people would have experienced it; this does not support binary opposition of orthodox and heterodox. Such dichotomies fail to allow for the heavily-populated middle ground between the Wycliffite Bible translations and Arundel's 1409 Constitutions that attempted to suppress them. Continuities and discontinuities are demonstrated across each chapter by examining the development of the various facets of the story under discussion, from the sources inherited by the earliest English writers through to the late medieval drama. Therefore, the dissertation places the plays in their vernacular literary contexts and traces changing attitudes to the relationship of canonical and apocryphal material, as the events of Christ's Birth and Infancy were told, adapted and assimilated in various media. The holistic picture thus gleaned serves to show the breadth of doctrine accepted, albeit tacitly, by the Church in England.
Acknowledgements

The research for this dissertation was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. I am indebted to the staff and fellows of Trinity Hall, Cambridge, to colleagues in the Faculty of English at Cambridge and to the librarians at Cambridge University Library whose expertise has been an invaluable resource.

I am extremely grateful to my supervisor, Professor Barry Windeatt, for the encouragement and inspiration (and photographs of Nativity scenes!) that he has given me over the past four years and to Dr Charles Moseley who, during a single term in 2003, managed to turn me from an ordinary English student into an aspiring medievalist.

The following people have been extraordinary friends to me while I have been writing this dissertation and have made it possible in various intangible ways. To Ruth Ahnert, Richard and Judy Bates, Katie Brokaw, the Harrison family (Becky, George, Tessa, Hope and Ben), Virginia Langum, and Dr Kate Townsend: thank you.

This is dedicated to my parents, Peter and Susan Bates.
Abbreviations
CM: Cursor Mundi
CVMA: Corpus Vitrearum Medii Aevi
EETS: Early English Text Society
EWS: English Wycliffite Sermons
GiL: Gilte Legende
(N)IMEV: (New) Index of Middle English Verse
IPMEP: Index of Printed Middle English Prose
LgA: Legenda Aurea
LL: Life of Our Lady
MED: Middle English Dictionary
MLC: The Metrical Life of Christ
MLPC: Meditations on the Life and Passion of Christ
NHC: The Northern Homily Cycle
PGH: The Pepysian Gospel Harmony
PJ: Protoevangelium of James
PM: Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew
REED: Records of Early English Drama
SEN: South English Nativity of Mary and Christ
SLA: Stanzaic Life of St Anne (editorial title given to NIMEV 208 or the Phillipps poem)
SLC: A Stanzaic Life of Christ
SpecD: Speculum Devotorum
TKC: Middle English Three Kings of Cologne
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'Our God contracted to a span/ Incomprehensibly made man'.

Plate 1: St Peter Mancroft, Norwich: window 1, panel 2c; c.1450-55.

1 Charles Wesley (1707-88), 'Let earth and heaven combine', *Hymns and Psalms* (Methodist Publishing House, 1983), 109, ll.5-6.

2 CVMA Inv No 006169.
Introduction

This dissertation traces motifs in the various episodes of Christ’s early life, told in England in a diversity of genres, in the period 1200-1550. Despite the proliferation and variety of such texts in Middle English, there has not, as yet, been a complete examination of the ways in which Christ’s life was told and encountered in medieval England. Since the accounts are based on common biblical sources, there are underlying narrative continuities. However, the sheer range of ways in which the stories of the Birth and Infancy are represented in texts and images from medieval England leads to some unexpected variations. In these apparent discrepancies, it is possible to probe the role of literary texts in the creation and maintenance of both orthodox and heterodox devotion.

By reading across genres, we become aware of parallel versions of the same story that generate numerous inconsistencies. This, in turn, creates questions for authors to answer, thus engendering further mythology. For example, the celebration of Epiphany on 6th January leads most authors to date the visit of the Magi to the thirteenth day after Christ’s Birth, compressing the two years that elapse in older texts. Many writers explain that the Magi were able to travel so quickly because of their camels, thus providing a neat solution both to the seemingly impossible geographical constraints of the newly compressed timeframe and to the appearance of camels in iconography. Similar stories evolve to provide a back story for how the ubiquitous ox and ass come to figure in images of the Nativity.

Sometimes, the work of writers stands in opposition to the conventions that prevail in visual representations. Manuscript illuminations of Christ’s Birth tend to emphasise the elevated status of Mother and Child with rich garments, whereas devotional texts seek to prompt affect through concentration on the humility of the circumstances of the Birth. These competing emphases derive from the same impetus to convey doctrine. In visual art, Mary and her baby lie on richly-appointed furnishings, consistent with their status as heavenly royalty and in keeping with the increased devotion to Mary that is concomitant with

1 Cf. The summary of the generic range of Lives in Elizabeth Salter (1974), pp.73-118. Ian Johnson (1989) discusses theory and translation in several versions of Christ’s life, pp.69-85. The current ‘Geographies of Orthodoxy’ project underway at Queen’s University, Belfast will provide codicological and textual analysis of the corpus of English pseudo-Bonaventurian Lives of Christ: http://www.qub.ac.uk/geographies-of-orthodoxy/discuss/about-the-project/. Papers from conference held to mark the project’s culmination, ‘Mapping Late Medieval Lives of Christ’, Q.U.B., 10th-13th June 2010, will be published by Brepols. Forthcoming volumes from Maureen Boulton (on insular French Lives) and from Mary Dzon (on the relationship of Middle English texts with the apocrypha) will further contribute to this field.

2 See chapter 6 below.

3 See chapter 1 below.
developing Christology. That Christology simultaneously creates a mood for telling (and experiencing) Christ’s life in particularly affective terms. This leads writers to focus their readers’ attention on the ways in which the suffering inherent in the process of Redemption begins at the Nativity, for example in extreme cold and poverty. This can reflect both an attempt to be historically accurate (as in the detail of Joseph’s struggle to pay the penny tribute to Caesar Augustus) and a blurring of temporal and geographic boundaries (with the cold of the stable perhaps more suggestive of medieval England than biblical Bethlehem).4

Many of the texts through which Christ’s life is encountered in this period are episodic in nature, with homilies or passages appointed to be read or told on particular days. Information is thus provided in ways different from the modes that might be expected of a strongly linear narrative. Furthermore, divergence from the core story can occur through the different genres used by writers to tell the same incident. For example, the dissertation shows that the compression of the shepherds narrative into lyric form leads to text and characterization markedly different from that found in the Towneley Second Shepherds Play. By probing across genres and across centuries, less obvious comparisons have emerged whereby longer narrative accounts of Christ’s life demonstrate very little interest in shepherds qua shepherds; the carol ‘Joly Wat’ provides the only comparable characterization to the drama. My analysis of the broad spectrum of Middle English versions of the shepherds suggests that the critical attention that has been focused on a few plays from the cycles gives a false impression of the way in which this part of Christ’s life was more usually understood in medieval England; the episode is included in accounts for a variety of reasons including the symbolic communion between angel and man ending the division begun at the Fall.5 Moreover, the shepherds in drama undergo a trajectory from fallible doubting men into believing evangelists that sits alongside many other similar trajectories in the Infancy stories, such as the midwife Salome’s.

These trajectories are integral to the way in which narrative works to enact complex doctrinal ideas, including Christ’s dual nature and Mary’s perpetual virginity.6 These two

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4 See chapter 1 below. Anselmian Christology ‘found in Christ’s suffering not merely a theme for grateful and penitent reflection, but the ultimate manifestation of his human nature, and therefore his credentials as Saviour of humankind’ (Duffy (2005), p.235). For medieval Christians, the mystery of Incarnation had been considered influentially by Anselm’s work of 1098: Cur dens homo. This circulated in monasteries and beyond their walls into the cities nearby (Rubin (2009), p.134). This mode of devotion has been linked to the economic and agricultural hardships in Europe in the thirteenth- and fourteenth centuries (MacCulloch (2009), p.416).

5 See chapter 4.

6 Dzon comments that ‘medieval writers had ambiguous views of Christ’s childhood, imagining him as both a normal child and an exceptional one’ (Dzon, p.7); this both results from and exemplifies the paradox of the Incarnation.
concepts are inextricable, since the latter is an essential part of the explanation of the former.

The notion of Christ’s dual nature, that divinity and humanity co-existed in his person, has been articulated and contended from the early days of the Church.\(^7\) In order that a woman could give birth to such a child, doctrine developed to explain her freedom from sin. Firstly, Mary’s perpetual virginity was declared.\(^8\) Later, Marian devotion and the doctrine of the dual nature came together in a concept articulated by Eadmer of Canterbury: the Immaculate Conception.\(^9\) Incarnational theology such as this is at the heart of the Christian experience yet is immensely hard to understand.

Middle English versions of Christ’s Birth and Infancy frequently enable the audience to see such aspects of doctrine tested and validated by incorporating stories of characters who seek proof of the mysteries that they experience. Their proof is unwittingly gained on behalf of later Christians, sometimes drawing on the notion of trial by ordeal (as in the N-Town Trial of Mary and Joseph),\(^10\) or by appealing to the evidence of the senses and anatomical knowledge, as in the legend of the midwives, wherein Mary’s virginity is proven when a midwife transgressively examines her, is punished with a withered hand and then healed in Christ’s first miracle.\(^11\) Once gained, proof brings with it an impetus to tell.

Testimony and evangelism are intricately linked; words of affirmation, describing the

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\(^7\) In the second century AD, letters written by Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, outlined concern at the gnostic heresies that prevailed in some areas: ‘To combat this, he emphasized the reality of both Christ’s divinity and his humanity, which he saw best expressed in the Church’s continuing celebration of the Eucharist’\(^7\), suggesting that the Church (and Bishops in particular) had a crucial role in maintaining this practice and attendant doctrine. In 451, the Council of Chalcedon ‘constructed a carefully balanced definition of how to view the mystery of Christ: “the same perfect in divinity and perfect in body; consubstantial with the Father as regards his divinity, and the same consubstantial with us as regards his humanity…”’; the Chalcedonian Definition is still accepted by Christians in the twenty-first century. (MacCulloch (2009), p.226).

\(^8\) Whereas Eastern Christianity translated theotokos as God-bearer, the movement to a Latin phrase in the West gave Mary status as the “Mother of God”, which, in turn, led to deeper concern about the question of her purity (MacCulloch (2009), p.393). This question, too, is characterized by the subtleties of translation: ‘[t]he tangle of preoccupations with Mary’s virginity centres on Matthew’s quotation from a Greek version of words of the prophet Isaiah in the Septuagint […] “Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel”. This alters or refines the meaning of Isaiah’s original Hebrew: where the prophet had talked only of “a young woman” conceiving and bearing a son, the Septuagint projected “young woman” into the Greek word for “virgin”’ (MacCulloch (2009), p.81).

\(^9\) Rubin (2009), p.173. The feast of Mary’s conception was ‘authorized, with papal approval’ by the Council of London in 1139, (p.174); This notion suggested that ‘Mary had been conceived without the normal human correlation of concupiscence (lust); because her conception was immaculate, unspotted by sin, so was her flesh’; it remained sufficiently controversial that influential theologians including Bernard of Clairvaux maintained ‘that no conception, not even [Mary’s], could be separated from carnal pleasure’ (MacCulloch (2009), pp.398-4). ‘Mary had not been conceived like other humans, hence she did not carry the stain (macula) of original sin. God dwelt in Mary and so she had to be spotless, perfect. [...] The Franciscan theologian Duns Scotus (c.1266-1308) elaborated most clearly the necessity of Mary’s Conception without sin: God prepared Mary as a fitting mother of God’ (Rubin, p.303). The conception is important precisely because of the difficulty of redeeming the debt of original sin; this must be done by a human since it is the result of the Fall; however the human in question must not, himself, be tainted by the sin that is the inevitable result of being born human. By removing the sexual act from Mary’s conception, theologians were able to make her a spotless vessel for the divine baby, who could therefore carry out the work of Redemption.


\(^11\) See chapter 3, below. Middle English versions of these stories are augmented by concepts from medicine and law and my dissertation locates them in relevant critical contexts; cf. Monica Green (2008), The Trotula, ed. by Green (2001); Women’s Healthcare in the Medieval West, ed. by Green (2000).
movement from doubt to faith, seek at once to convince readers and audiences of doctrinal truth and to prove the importance of words (and implicitly literature) in Christian culture.

Later medieval England produced many versions of Christ’s life in text and image alike; surviving examples speak to us of the practice of devotion in a period when such expression could be particularly contested. Critical discussion has focused on John Wycliffe, his followers and the question of whether Arundel’s Constitutions marked any sort of end to ‘an impressively innovative tradition’ of devotional writing in England. As a complement to this debate, examination of episodes from Christ’s life can help us to conceptualize the ‘provisional “Bible” in the popular imagination’, as vibrant in vernacular texts and images from within the Church, as in those that have been classified as Lollard. The binary of orthodox and heterodox is now widely accepted to be too simplistic, and yet neither is the situation one of easy continuities. Rather, the provisional Bible encompasses a range of narratives that compete as well as complement each other, and anomalous stories co-exist even in single compilations. Examination of episodes, such as the crucial narrative of Christ’s Birth, which we might expect to exist in fixed versions, within and part of the Church, in fact attests to a sheer variability and ‘mouvance’ of accounts; perhaps, in practice, vernacularity was more multiple than concepts of orthodoxy allow.

Lives of Christ

The basic information about Christ’s life is contained in the gospels, books of the New Testament believed to have been written in the first half century after his death. It is surprising that no ‘full and detailed narrative of Christ’s Life, utilising all possible sources’, appeared in the first centuries of the Church; the earliest texts were ‘strict Gospel Harmonies,

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12 Nicholas Watson (1995), p.823. Many scholars have refuted and/or refined Watson’s argument in the fifteen years since the publication of the Speculum article. For example, as Somerset comments, ‘As far as we can tell from the paucity of prosecution records, from records of book-ownership, and from manuscripts still extant, higher-status laity continued with impunity to own books of the prohibited kind’ (Fiona Somerset, pp.145-57, p.153). Recent contributions to the topic include Ian Johnson’s response to Watson’s article at the ‘Educating the Laity’ colloquium, University of Kent at Canterbury, Dec 2007, the ‘After Arundel’ conference, University of Oxford, 16th-18th April 2009, and Vincent Gillespie’s ‘Fatherless Books: Authorship, Attribution and Orthodoxy in Late Medieval England’ at ‘Mapping Lives’, 11th June 2010.


14 Michael Sargent discusses the possibility of allowing readers to experience manuscript heteroglossia through electronic ‘editions mouvantes’ in his paper, ‘Will the real Nicholas Love please stand up?’, forthcoming in the Mapping Lives proceedings.

15 The etymology of gospel (in Greek evangelloν) is ‘good news’, which reminds us that these accounts were composed for a particular purpose and should not, therefore, be confused with history (cf. MacCulloch (2009), p.770).
containing no extra Biblical subject matter. My dissertation makes reference to a Middle English harmony, edited from a manuscript in the Pepys library. Harmonies serve a purpose in synthesising the stories from the four gospels, yet they cannot answer curiosity about that which is excluded from the canon. The Nativity and Infancy are rather isolated from the Ministry and Passion portions of the canonical gospels; over a decade separates the flight into Egypt from Christ’s meeting with the doctors at the Temple. The episodes of Christ’s early life are thus particularly ripe for authors and artists to expand upon the template provided by the evangelists. The lacuna was gradually filled by a range of apocryphal writing, including texts such as the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, which were regarded as authoritative up until the Council of Trent.

My focus here has been close reading of texts; I aim to augment this work with attention to codicology and patterns of readership at a later stage. Limiting my corpus of texts to Middle English from the later medieval period (c.1200-1550) serves two purposes: firstly, it enables a closer reading than would be possible if attempting to cover a wider range of years or languages; secondly, the concentrated reading thus achieved enables the dissertation more fully to trace chronological developments (where and if such developments exist) in the centuries leading up to the English Reformation. However it is important to note that the Middle English texts discussed in the dissertation do not exist in an isolated cultural bubble. Influential Latin sources include the first two chapters of Matthew and of Luke told in the Vulgate Bible, alongside the most influential apocryphal infancy gospel available in medieval England the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, and two thirteenth-century Latin texts, Jacobus de

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16 Salter, p.57. The two texts that Salter considers to be ‘outstanding’ are Tatian’s Diatessaron of roughly 170 A.D., originally in Greek, but now only extant in translation, and Victor of Capua’s sixth century Latin Harmony, based largely on the Diatessaron. A current project at the University of Groningen, ‘Holy Writ and Lay Readers: A Social History of Vernacular Bible Translations in the Late Middle Ages’, is examining the diffusion of Bible translations across Europe.

17 Pepysian Gospel Harmony, ed. by Theodore Erbe, EETS os 157 (1922): ‘Ovve suete lord Jhesu Crist his godhede he was tofore all creatures’, IPMF 550, Manual 2.iv.51; Gospels an Hundred and Sex, a harmony of the gospels narrating the life of Christ, translated from the French, s.xxv.

18 There are no references back to the Birth during later stories; this suggests that events from Christ’s early life have been tacked on to the existing narratives (cf. MacCulloch (2009), p.79).


20 Some was authorized as Apocrypha by the Church; other texts, outside this category, which ‘flitted in and out of Christian consciousness, particularly if they provided a good story or memorable images or information not otherwise found in canonical scripture’ are usefully (if confusingly) described as ‘apocryphal’ gospels (MacCulloch (2009), p.129).

21 The importance of apocryphal material to medieval Christians derives in part from the fact that the canonicity of the Bible was not decided until the Council of Trent in the mid sixteenth century (cf. David John Gale Freemantle (2001), p.70).

22 Pseudo-Matthew is an expanded translation of the earlier, Greek Protevangelium of James; it is through PM (and the texts that it influenced) that the apocryphal developments in FJ were circulated more widely in medieval England.
Voragine’s *Legenda Aurea* (1263) and Ralph Higden’s *Polychronicon*. *Legenda Aurea* and Jean de Vignay’s translation into French, the *Legende Dorée* (c.1333-40), circulated widely in the fourteenth- and fifteenth-centuries. Constraints of space do not allow this dissertation to account for the contemporary vernacular French versions; Maureen Boulton’s forthcoming volume on apocryphal Lives of Christ in Old and Middle French, provisionally entitled *Pious Fictions*, will provide valuable detail on such texts. Tracing the development of various aspects of each narrative through the Old French as well as Latin will form an important later extension to my work because it is through French that many of the Latin sources here cited reach medieval England. Vernacular biblical versions in Anglo-Norman also speak to the dynamic and polyglot manner in which Latin and French co-mingled with the Middle English accounts cited here. At a later date, I will expand the dissertation to include reference to such texts as the *Li Quatre Livre des Reis*, the *Anglo-Norman Bible*, the *Bible Historiale* and *Bible Historiale Complète*, the *Stories of Mary and Jesus*, the *Life of Christ* in BL Cotton Domitian A.XI, ff.45b-82a, Herman de Valenciennes’ *Roman de Dieu et de sa mere* and the two Anglo-Norman versions of Christ’s childhood. During my research, I have consulted the comprehensive databases of visual and material sources that combine to provide an excellent cultural barometer of medieval art, including *Corpus vitrearum medii aevi*, the catalogues of the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum, the database of the International Center for Medieval Art, and the Warburg Institute Photographic Collection. By viewing the broad spectrum of examples of contemporary visual and material culture across these databases, I have selected relevant images to illustrate pertinent points within the literary culture of medieval England. A full list of Middle English texts cited in this dissertation is provided by the bibliography; this chapter will conclude by introducing the works that feature most often throughout the dissertation.

Perhaps the most famous medieval account of Christ’s life is found in John de Caulibus’s *Meditationes Vitae Christi*, translated into English by Nicholas Love in the first

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23 I assume, for the purposes of the dissertation, that *Legenda aurea* grew in popularity from the date of its composition onwards. I cite the text from the best extant Middle English translation, *Gilte Legende* (1438) edited from BL Egerton 876 by Richard Hamer, EETS os 527 (2006); vol 2 with Vida Russell os 828 (2007). Despite translating de Voragine via de Vignay, it provides the closest and fullest version of the *Legenda* in Middle English.

24 For a brief account of apocryphal sources in Old French, see the introduction to Boulton’s edition of *Evangile de l’Enfance* (1984), pp.4-6.

decade of the fifteenth century. While the Meditationes provides some particularly striking examples of affective detail, such as Mary washing her baby son in the milk from her breasts, this dissertation looks beyond the pseudo-Bonaventuran tradition and examines a range of genres including: simple gospel harmony; narrative poetry from the South English Nativity in the thirteenth century to Lydgate’s fifteenth-century Life of Our Lady; lyrics; homilies in verse taken from the Expanded Northern version of the Northern Homily Cycle and in prose taken from Mirk’s Festiak; sermons and material for preaching written by those within the Church and those estranged from it; devotional prose including meditations, hagiography and “life” writing. The demands of different genres and forms account for some of the variance between versions of the same story. For example, a brief lyric with a single stanza telling the story of the shepherds will be vastly different from a lengthy play dedicated to the episode; while both are in verse, the role of the shepherds for the writers (and their audiences) diverge: in a play, shepherds can become representative of fallible humanity, pastoral or a particular social group; in the lyric, the men’s occupation may be less important than their passive role as the recipients of news from angels, thus instantiating the rapprochement of heaven and earth brought about by Christ’s Birth. Frequent illustration is provided from visual media. Again, this creates its own problems of methodology: how can we use an alabaster fragment or a richly appointed manuscript illumination to say anything about the ways in which English people experienced religion? Rather than focussing on the problems caused by the contrasting demands of various media and the decimation of visual material in the sixteenth century, I choose to use the examples of English iconography that survived the Reformation to illustrate the kind of image that people may have been able to see. The dissertation reads those Middle English texts that survived in manuscript form and have subsequently been edited (and are therefore an imagined version of the textual culture

26 The Meditationes are the product of a movement of preaching associated with St Francis. The corpus of pseudo-Bonaventuran Lives of Christ is being analyzed by a current project (cited in note 5 above) that will result in an invaluable picture of the ways in which religious manuscripts were produced and received. I use Love’s translation to represent the Pseudo-Bonaventurian tradition in the dissertation, reading also the Speculum Devotorum, edited as Myrror to Devout People (Speculum Devotorum) by Paul J. Patterson (2005) and from from Cambridge UL Gg.1.6 and Foyle by James Hogg (1973).


28 For comment on the diversity of sources available to people in medieval England see Duffy (2005), p.3 and Rubin (2009), pp.198-99. O.S. Pickering observes: ‘Whereas the majority of saints’ lives remain straightforward narrative stories, the Life of Christ, although usually narrative, also supplies material for other forms of Middle English literature, for example lyric, meditation and homily. The difficulty of categorizing even the narrative Lives of Christ may be seen from the revised Manual of Writings in Middle English, Vol. 2, where the Romance of the Resurrection of MS Ashmole 61 and the Metrical Life of Christ of BM Addit. MS 49996 are classed with the prose Pseudo-Gospel Harmony under “Translations and Paraphrases of the Bible”, whilst the Harrowing of Hell and the various poems on the Childhood of Christ must be sought under “Legends of Jesus and Mary”. This artificial distinction between Biblical and apocryphal sources is not useful, for these are poems of the same style and kind.” (Pickering (1973), p.425).
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of late medieval England) alongside a construction of the visual culture contemporary to them.

Sources

Christ's Birth and Infancy are included in many long poems, in a variety of verse forms. Parameters had to be set for the episodes from the Life to be covered in this dissertation. In selecting the Birth itself as the start of the Life rather than the Annunciation, I made the decision also to include the surrounding stories, narrated by Luke and expanded further by later writers, about the census that necessitated the move of Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem. I chose to conclude with apocryphal stories from Christ's Infancy rather than the appearance of Jesus at 12 in the gospels: Christ's disputation with the doctors in the temple in Jerusalem (Luke 2.42-51). This choice was difficult, but my reasoning for finishing with the Infancy stories has been that Christ's maturity begins with his journey to the temple and therefore Luke 2.42-51 does not belong in an account of his childhood.

The earliest Nativity poem of the South English Legendary, edited by O.S. Pickering (1975) from MS Stowe 949 as South English Nativity of Mary and Christ,29 is 'a largely original Middle English composition' in couplets.30 Cursor Mundi, a history of the world told in couplets over 23000 lines, has been dated to the late thirteenth- or early fourteenth-centuries.31 The poem is a comprehensive synthesis of Biblical material, in Northern

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29 The poem exists in three versions: a) Stowe 949; b) Cambridge SJC B.6; c) Lambeth 223: a) conception, birth of Mary, presentation, life in temple, betrothal, sojourn with maidens, Annunciation, Joseph's trouble, trial of Mary and Joseph, Journey to Bethlehem, birth of Christ, signs, magi, purification, Herod, massacre and Flight, miracles on Journey, return from Egypt, Christ and Doctors; b) as a + prologue, 244-5 Annunciation to Zacharias, visitation, birth of John, 626-3, Annunciation to shepherds and circumcision. Pickering says that the additions are 'not part of original poem', (Pickering (1975), p.10); based on b; departs at 620.

30 Pickering (1975), p.23, it has not historically been seen as an independent poem from the South English Legendary, and is described in NIMEV in its various parts: NIMEV 3997 'Whanne men heren tellic of Jung bat hi louen, oye bat habben and blisse' 1.88v (Stowe), prologue to Long Life; NIMEV 213 'Al bat pe prophetes tolde whyleen in heore prophacie'; NIMEV 386 'fourieth dayes after crist was borne was candelmasse day' Purificacio beate marie, in a MS of the SEL. cf. NIMEV 386 'Candelmasse ys a beste whyte & holy borde alle yng' in another MS of SEL; NIMEV 3554 'pe xi day bat pe child was born as on Candelmasse day' (cf. NIMEV 2717); NIMEV 1801 'Joseph was bore in Bethleem in pe londe of Iudee: Peter domini, a section of the narrative of the Birth of Christ incorporated into the SEL; 120 lines; couplets. indexed as narrative of Nativity in NIMEV 2743 (couplet only in Stowe and Lambeth); NIMEV 5452 'The prophetes tolde sumtyme in heere prophesye' The Long Life of Christ; NIMEV 3559 'pes pre kinges anher wey toward here lond nome' Innocents in Stowe-Lambeth (cf. Horstmann's Geburt Jesu); 9 MSS; c.1350 Auchenbeck 19.2.1; LALME i.88 LP 6510 (ed. Turnbull 1840); a1450 Bodley 779 (Bod. SC2567) LALME 1.146 LP 5470; 1425 Bodl Add. C.220 (Bod SC25430); LALME 1.145 LP 6960; Glouc; Bodl Rawl Poetry 225 (Bod SC14716); LALME 1.152 LP 73; c.1400 Lambeth 222 LALME 1.118 LP 140 Derbyshire; a1450 Cambridge SJC B.6 LALME 1.64 LP 4646 Norfolk; a1425 London BL Add 10626; a1425 Cambridge Trinity R.3.25 LALME 1.65 LP 5320; London BL Stowe 949 LALME 1.116 LP 6950 Gloucs. SEN is also preserved in 4 derivative temporale poems (Conception of Mary; Expanded Nativity "Geburt Jesu", Abridged Life of Christ; Feast of Christmas).

31 Dzon, pp.124-25; NIMEV 2153, Manual 7.xx.31; 'Men Serned istes for to here & romance rede etc'. Cursor Mundi, ed. by Richard Morris, 6 vols (ETTS 57 (1874); 59 (1875), 62 (1876), 66 (1877), 68 (1878)); vol 2 includes: Christ's early life. Preferred MS Cotton Vespasian A.iii, ff.2-163; Bodl Fairfax 14 (SC 3894), ff.1-123v, TCC R.3.8 (558), ff.1-142v; Bl. Add. 31042, ff.3-32 (extracts); Bl. Add 36983, ff.1-117v, 127v-158v; London, College of Physicians NHC and Cursor Mundii, ff. 57-50v, 1-10; Gottingen Ul. Theol. 107, ff.2-169v.
dialect. Juxtaposing citations from the early Cotton Vespuian A.III manuscript version of *Cursor Mundi* with those from the *South English Nativity* allows an insight into vernacular writing from various geographical areas of the late thirteenth-century England.

The next two texts have similar dates but the poets arrange their material according to very different criteria. *A Stanzaic Life of Christ* is a fourteenth-century compilation of Books I and IV of the *Polychronicon* and of the life of Christ material from *Legenda Aurea*. The episodes selected for inclusion in the poem ‘are those which the Church ordinarily chose for lay instruction, and bear a close resemblance to the subjects in church sculpture and glass’. The *Stanzaic Life* has a singular method of organization, frequently using numerical schemes in order to tell its story; it ‘moralizes and expounds and divides themes after the manner of the sermon in order to elucidate the life of Jesus’. The SLC-poet therefore brings an, at times, unexpected emphasis to elements of the story. For example, the shepherds episode is told only to exemplify the rapprochement of angels with men. In contrast, another fourteenth-century text, *The Metrical Life of Christ*, narrates the life in a chronological fashion, consonant with the aims of a Gospel harmony. It is ‘a homogenous religious poem, and indeed the work of a single author’.

Both of the narrative poems that I cite from the fifteenth century make use of apocryphal material. In this way, they are more like the much earlier *Cursor Mundi* than the *Stanzaic* and *Metrical* lives. John Lydgate’s *Life of Our Lady* of c.1421-22 contains, in addition to two books describing Mary’s childhood as told by *Pseudo-Matthew*, lengthy accounts of Christ’s early life: books III (Nativity) and IV (Circumcision) are based on

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32 The later Southern version (i.e. Cambridge Trinity MS) is available in a recent edition ed. by Horrall et al., Ottawa (1978-).
33 NIMEV 1755 ‘lies et pat borne was of a may /In amendement of mankynde’; Life of Christ and the Feasts of the Church; 10840 lines, quatrains. A *Stanzaic Life of Christ*, ed by Foster, EETS 126 (1926), p.ix. Octosyllabic, 4-line stanzas (abab), often combined into octave stanzas of ababab, ababaca, ababcbc. Extant in 5 MSS, each of which is the source for different parts of Foster’s edition: lines 1-66: Bl. Additional 38666, ff.5-179v c.1450 (?a1400) LALME 1.102 LP223; lines 67-9624 Harley 3909, ff.1-151v, LALME 1.112; 4 hands, Cheshire, a1500 (7a1400); lines 9625-10840: Harley 2250, f.44, LALME 1.111 LP17 Cheshire a1500 (a71400) omits half of Nativity.
34 SLC, p.xvii.
37 *MLC*, p.16. Sauer notes the poet’s “originality”, which appears to stem more from the poet’s inaccurate recollection and confusion than from deliberate imaginative individuality” (*MLC*, p.21). This poem ‘has no traceable connection with other Middle English or Old French *temporal* poems or dramatic cycles. The text frequently evades precise source analysis due to the liberty the author takes with his otherwise conventionalized material’ (*MLC*, p.27).
38 NIMEV 2574; Manual 6.6xi.108. Extant in 42 MSS. ed. from Durham University MS Cosin V. ii.16 by Joseph A. Laurens, Ralph A. Klinefelter, Vernon F. Gallagher (Ouspenke, 1961) (see p.57 for description of the relation of PM to books I and II).
Pseudo-Matthew, Legenda Aurea, Vulgate and pseudo-Bonaventuran Meditatio

n uses Legenda and its sources for the material. 40 Lydgate does not narrate the events of Christ’s childhood. 41 However, these stories are found in a twelve-line stanzaic poem of the mid-fifteenth century, 42 NIMEV 208 or the Phillipps poem, alongside the canonical Nativity narratives. 43

The dissertation is illustrated by material found in two of the most famous Middle English homily collections: firstly, the verse Northern Homily Cycle (in the expanded Northern version); 44 secondly, John Mirk’s prose Festial, believed to have been written in the 1380s by an Augustinian priest in Shropshire, derived from Legenda Aurea. 45 The scribe of one manuscript of NHC seems to have deliberately rearranged the homilies from the order of

39 Lydgate, p.97.
40 Lydgate, p.147.
41 Lydgate is one of the few named authors of the texts discussed in this dissertation. The relative lateness of his work may fit with Gillespie’s suggestion that one way in which authors circumvented the restrictions of the Constitutions was in ascribing authority to their work (Fatherless Books, 11th June 2010).
42 Edited by Parker as one of the Middle English Stanzaic Lives of St Anne, EETS 174 (1928), 1-89. It is by far the longest of the extant versions of the Life of St Anne in Parker’s collection and is perhaps not best described by this title since the text narrates the lives of Mary and Christ as well as of Anne (see Dzon, pp. 118-21). NIMEV 208 ‘Alle pat haues lykyng fro to here’; Manual 2.V.117 (a) Minnesota ZS22 N81, fl.185v-215r; LALME 1.139. Its previous shelfmark was Phillips MS 8122 and, for clarity, I refer to NIMEV 208 as ‘the Phillipps poem’ in the dissertation. The text is an insertion into a Northern Homily Collection, at fl.185b-215a. The poem appears to be a copy by a Midlands scribe of an existing Northern poem (Dzon, p.119; Parker, pp.xvi; xxvi). It is classified as IMEV 2904 and Manual 2.V.117 (a); LALME vol 1, 139. The other poems edited by Parker with the Life of St Anne title are: two copies of a rime royal version are found in Cambridge Trinity 601 (E.3.21, fl.221a-30a, 13th century) and Chetham Library 8009 (A.6.31, 2nd half 15th century); two copies of the four line stanza are Oxford Bodleian 10234 (MS Tanner 407, fl.21a-29b, 16th century); BL Harley 4102 (ff. 130v-139v, c.1400).
43 Dzon, p.120; Parker, pp.xxvii-xxx. Cursor Mundi similarly narrates the Childhood as an extension of the Nativity. The two other childhood texts (NIMEV 2632, Prologistic to Concepcio Marie (188) in SEL ‘A god mon pat het isacar was bi olde dawes’, ed. Geburt Jesu by Horstmann (1875), and NIMEV 1550 (“Apocryphal History of Christ’s infancy”); Manual 2.V.1; ‘In pe fonurante of swete thess /bat is louerd ful of werta’, ed. Kindheit Jesu by Horstmann) contain little Nativity material so do not feature as heavily in the majority of the dissertation.
44 The Northern Homily Cycle, ed. by Saara Nevalinna (1972); MSS: 1. BL Cotton Tiberius E7; 2. Harley 4196. LALME 1.113; Manual cp 2.V.504, Wells 5.18. Each homily is identified separately in NIMEV: NIMEV 876; NIMEV 1547: In he emparirus dis Octoetane (23539) /When five thousand 3eres war gane /Gospel, In gallocantun natalis domini, in ‘expanded’ NHC. MS 1. f.107v-108; 2. ff.12-14. Diff from U and V; NIMEV 1800: Joseph and Mari maiden gude / Had mekl meruellin in buire mode (3610); Gospel, Dominica infra octabuis natalitatis Christi, in ‘expanded’ NHC. MS 1. f.115r-v; 2.ff.26v-27 (cf. NIMEV 3593; 3556). Diff from U and V; NIMEV 3941: When agh tides war al fullidle (37659) /Of Jesi birth right als he wilde, Gospel, In circumspiritone domini, in ‘expanded’ NHC [cf. 2977]. MS 1. fl.110v-111; 2. f.27r-v. Not in U; diff from V; NIMEV 3953: When lue jus had made endyng / And Archilaw was corond king, (3889); Gospel, In vigilia Epiphanie, in ‘expanded’ NHC. MS 1. f.118v-r; 2. f.28. Not in U; diff from V; NIMEV 4002: When oure Lord Jesi so fre / Was born in Bedleem of Jude, Gospel, In die Epiphanie, in ‘expanded’ NHC. MS 1. fl.111-113; 2. ff.28-30 (ed. Heuser, pp. 293-97). Diff from U and V; NIMEV 4049: When pis mayden milde and trew /Fe moder of oure Lord Jesi, Gospel, In virgilia natalis domini, in ‘expanded’ NHC. MS 1. fl.106v-107v; 2. fl.10-11. Not in U; diff from V.

NHC exists in three versions. The first, edited as The Northern Homily Cycle for TEAMS, by Anne B. Thompson, (2008) and known as the Unexpanded NHC, was written in the late thirteenth- or early fourteenth- century by a friar or monk using Miroir as a model (Nevalinna, p.2). The first expanded text, described as V, is translated into a Midland dialect by a poet who seems to have known Sarnum Missal. It is extant in 2 closely connected MSS from same scriptorium: Vernon MS (c.1350) and BL Addit. 22825 (Simon MS) and remains unedited (Nevalinna, pp.3-4).
Pseudo-Matthew, Vulgate and pseudo-Bonaventuran Meditations\textsuperscript{39} books V (Magi) and VI (Purification) use Legenda and its sources for the material.\textsuperscript{40} Lydgate does not narrate the events of Christ's childhood.\textsuperscript{41} However, these stories are found in a twelve-line stanzaic poem of the mid-fifteenth century,\textsuperscript{42} NIMEV 208 or the Phillipps poem, alongside the canonical Nativity narratives.\textsuperscript{43}

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\textsuperscript{43} The Northern Homily Cycle, ed. by Saara Nevalinna (1972); MSS: 1. BL Cotton Tiberius E7; 2. Harley 4196. LALME 1.113; Manual cp V.304, Wells 5.18. Each homily is identified separately in NIMEV: NIMEV 876: LALME 1547; In je empriuye datis Octouane (2355)/When five thousand Sere sere ware gone; Gospel, In gallicantu natalis domini, in 'expanded' NHC. MS 1. f.107v-108; 2. ff.12-14. Diff from U and V; NIMEV 1800: Joseph and Mari maiden gude /Had mekel meruail in jaire mode (3610); Gospel, Dominica infra octabu nativitatis Christi, in 'expanded' NHC. MS 1. f.115v-v; 2 ff.26v-27 [cf. NIMEV 3593; 3556]. Diff from U and V; NIMEV 3941: When aight dyales war al fulfilde (3765)/Of Jesu birth right als he wilde, Gospel, In circuncisione domini, in 'expanded' NHC [cf. 2977]. MS 1. ff.110v-111/2; f.27v-v. Not in U; diff from V; NIMEV 3953: When he bus had made ending /And Archilaw was coron king, (3880); Gospel, In vigilia Epiphanie, in 'expanded' NHC. MS 1. f.118v-v; 2. f.28. Not in U; diff from V; NIMEV 4002: When outre Lord Jesu so tre /Was born in Bedlem of Jude; Gospel, In die Epiphanie, in 'expanded' NHC. MS 1. ff.111-113; 2. ff.28-30 (ed. Heuser, 1904, 293-97). Diff from U and V; NIMEV 4049: When his mayden milde and trew, /pe moder of oure Lord Jesu, Gospel, In vigilia natalis domini, in 'expanded' NHC. MS 1. ff.106v-107v; 2. ff.10-11. Not in U; diff from V.

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\textsuperscript{44} John Mirk's Festial, ed. by BL Cotton Claudius A II by Susan Powell, vol 1 (2009); IPMEP 734, Manual 9.xxv.21 (IPMEP, 248) also ed. by Theodore Erbe from Bodl. MS Gough Ecclesiastical, Top.4 (a1500). EETS es 96 (1905). 26 extant MSS including Cambridge Caen 168/89—LALME 1.65. NE Notts; BL Cotton Claudius A.2 (pref MS) (a1450) (a1415).
the York Missal (preferred by the Harley scribe) to fit the chronology of Christ’s life.\(^46\) The Birth and Infancy homilies in this version of \textit{NHC} ‘have their models in older historical Bibles, such as Petrus Comestor’s \textit{Historia Scholastica};\(^47\) there is no homogeneity in the date and composition of the collection as a whole.\(^48\) \textit{NHC} includes an exemplum alongside explication of each biblical passage; constraints of space in this dissertation prevent discussion of the exempla; I concentrate instead on the narrative directly related to the events in Christ’s life.

As with the selection criteria applied to literary texts, constraints of space mean that my dissertation concentrates on sermons from edited sermon collections rather than the many that exist in manuscripts.\(^49\) Preaching from within the orthodox tradition is represented by BL Royal 18. Bxxiii.\(^50\) The editor believes that the sermons are designed to be preached and not read, and are intended for a lay audience.\(^51\) The Nativity and Epiphany sermons are part of editorial group V, ‘preached by an unusually educated preacher to audiences of unusually high social status’.\(^52\) The collection seems to have been written at some point during the Schism of 1378-1417. Examples of heterodox preaching come from Anne Hudson and Pamela Gradon’s edition of MS Cambridge Pepys 2616,\(^53\) and an edition of \textit{Lollard Sermons} by Gloria Cigman.\(^54\) Cigman comments that these sermons are ‘talking about and not to the audience’, which implies that the manuscripts were designed not for

\(^{46}\) The Harley manuscript follows the arrangement of York Missal, whereas Tiberius’s scribe rearranges the order to fit the chronology of Christ’s life (Nevalinna, pp.23, 27). So while Harley does not have a dedicated homily for the Purification (although there is a version on f.141a.), it is therefore in Tiberius after Matthew 2.1-2 and before Luke 2.33-39 (Nevalinna, p.28).

\(^{47}\) Nevalinna, p.125. Also includes \textit{Legenda Aurea} as a source and notes parallels with the York plays.

\(^{48}\) Nevalinna, p.124.

\(^{49}\) G.R. Owest’s \textit{Preaching in Medieval England} (1926) and \textit{Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England: a neglected chapter in the history of English letters & of the English people} (1953, 2nd edn 1966) remain the most comprehensive account of the extant preaching manuscripts. More recently, Claire Waters comments that ‘Works written by and for preachers in this period show them engaged in a delicate balancing act. Standing between the church hierarchy and the laity in both a mediatory and a liminal sense, preachers needed access to both of these worlds in order to make them accessible to one another’ (Waters (2008), p.31).

\(^{50}\) II.51-72, 74-148,149v-157. c.1450 (c.1415); IPMEP 2G, Wells 5.16 i.68) ‘Adest nomen huum et mannera tua accepta crunt … Good men and wywmen that Lord hat made all thynge’; LALME ‘six hands all in similar language’ LP 6751 Berks; ed. by Woodburn. O. Ross, EETS os 209 (1940).

\(^{51}\) Ross, xviii-xix

\(^{52}\) Ross, xxii.

\(^{53}\) ‘pis gospel tellij moute Wisdom jat is hid to many men and speciali for pis cause jat it is not al red in pe Church’: part of the cycle is described as IPMEP 738: \textit{Of Mynystries in pe Church}, Wyclifithe exposition of Matthew 24, xxiv ex. Manual 2, pp.560-61, 522-33.

\(^{54}\) BL Additional 41321 – end of xvi century (?) (a1400) source for sermons 1-12; John Rylands Eng 412 (al425); Bodleian Library C.751 sermons 8-16. The dialect of the collection is South Central Midlands with South-West Midlands ‘colouring’ (Cigman, xxxvii-ix). The three hands of Additional and Rawlinson are written in the Central Midlands Standard that is ‘a form of written English found in many religious texts from the middle of the fourteenth century to the middle of the fifteenth’ (Cigman, xii).
oral delivery but partly for guidance of the preacher.\textsuperscript{55} The sermons in the Pepys manuscript are famous as ‘the largest and most systematic body of Lollard teaching, a stupendous and learned labour providing 294 sermons for the whole year, produced in Oxford or in some aristocratic Lollard household in the last years of the fourteenth century’.\textsuperscript{56}

Of the events covered by the dissertation, only the Circumcision and childhood stories are not found in any extant plays so most chapters in this study culminate with examples of plays from the cycle drama. The drama represents an exceptional mode of devotional expression. By concentrating on the cycles that have survived most completely, the dissertation can read episodes from Christ’s early life alongside Old Testament events and the ministry and Passion. The earliest cycle manuscript is \textit{The York Play}.\textsuperscript{57} The text was probably compiled from the play books of guilds (i.e. all texts are records of past productions).\textsuperscript{58} York has some similarities with the cycle known as the Towneley Plays, whose relationship with the civic cycle in particular towns is impossible to assert definitely.\textsuperscript{59} The manuscript is a compilation written for reading, perhaps as late as the reign of Mary Tudor. The Chester manuscript dates from the 1590s, suggesting that the manuscript functions as a record and memorialization after the fact.\textsuperscript{60} \textit{The N-Town Play} does not sit easily in the category of cycle

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\textsuperscript{55} Cigman, xiv.

\textsuperscript{56} See Kantik Ghosh (2002): ‘That they were composed as parts of a single unified whole seems, on the evidence supplied by Anne Hudson, beyond doubt. Not only are they found in the extant manuscripts either in the form of the full cycle or in the form of selections based on comprehensible liturgical patterns, but there is also no evidence that any part of the cycle was allowed to circulate before the whole was complete. The sheer volume of material would suggest a collaborative effort, but authorship, whether single or multiple, remains obscure’, chapter 4, pp. 112–16, (p. 112). From a different perspective, Duffy comments that the cycle ‘is a chilling and depressing body of material, all too obviously infected by the spiritual dyspepsia of the movement’s founder, monotonous in its moralism and its relentless polemic against the religious orders and the “folly of prelates”, entirely lacking in the affective warmth and devotion to the suffering humanity of Christ which is the distinctive mark of late medieval popular Christianity’ (Duffy, 2005 preface, xxv).

\textsuperscript{57} Manuscripts are dated to: York 1463–77; N-Town 1468; Towneley 1475–1500; Chester 16th century. York, ed. by Beadle (2009); IMEV 1273; Manual 5.xii.10; BL Additional 35290; dated1463–77; LALME vol. 1. 102 (three entries, q.v.). “Hand A. Language 1 ... probably of York area or a little west.” York. “Hand A. Language 2 ... possibly from far N Lancs.” “Hand B (main hand) ...”. Language apparently from considerably S of York.

\textsuperscript{58} Pamela King’s recent suggestion that the emergence of pageants in York in the late fourteenth century as a theatrical rather than textual spectacle, with dialogue accreted over time following the Council of Constance, provides a very plausible account of the evolution of the drama from the earliest civic records to the text as noted in the York manuscript (‘Plays: Reception and Re-production’ in the forthcoming proceedings of ‘Mapping Lives’); cf. possible analogue in Procession of Holy Blood, Bruges (video from 1995, produced by Meg Twycross and filmed by David Blacow). King argues for a distinction between play texts and performative texts (including Love’s Mirror): in plays, an actor is a surrogate for the reader/viewer’s participation in the Biblical events making us audience rather than participant, whereas authors of devotional texts place themselves in the action. For example, Margery Kempe imagines herself as an assistant to Mary at Christ’s birth (see chapter 2, below).

\textsuperscript{59} ed. by Martin Stevens and A.C. Cawley (1994). IMEV 715; Manual 5.xii.11; San Marino, Huntington HM1; LALME vol. 1. 122; London: 121. WRY. (1475–1500). \textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{60} ed. by R.M. Lumiansky and David Mills (1974). IMEV 716; Manual 5.xii.9: BL Additional 10305; BL Harley 2013 (\textit{Pref. MS for part of text}); BL Harley 2124; Oxford; Bodl. 175; San Marino, Huntington HM 2 (\textit{Pref. MS for part of text}), LALME vol. 1. 122. Cheshire. Three other manuscripts contain a fragment (Manchester 822.11C2, ‘The Resurrection’), Play XXIII ‘Antichrist’ (Peniarth 399) and Play XVI ‘The Trial and Flagellation’ (Chester, Coopers’ Guild).
drama; critics continue to discuss the origins of the plays in BL Cotton Vespasian D.8, suggesting variously that it is a compilation of a Passion Play from 1425-40 and a (later) Mary Play, that it was performed by a troupe of travelling players, and that it was intended for private liturgical reading. Using the cycle drama in its edited forms clearly cannot allow one authoritatively to state that certain things would have been seen or heard by populations of a particular place at a particular time. However these texts usefully show a variety of ways in which vernacular narratives representing different genres combine to provide a multi-faceted provisional version of Christ’s early life that can accommodate and subsume contradictions and is accessible by many people on many levels.

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62 See Peter Meredith’s editions of The Mary Play and The Passion Play.
63 Penny Granger (2009).
Plate 2: BL Arundel 83 II (De Lisle Psalter), f.124, c.1310.
Plate 3: Cambridge University Library Dd.4.17, f.6r, 14th century.
The Nativity: Journey to Bethlehem

The story of Christ’s Birth is found in seven scant verses in the second chapter of Luke. However the dissemination of apocrypha, writings of the Church Fathers and later theologians, and the growing comprehensiveness of an iconographical interpretation of the Gospel account of Christ’s life ensured that Middle English authors had much scope to expand upon the canonical skeleton. This chapter will first examine the prophetic and political role of Bethlehem, family and lineage of Joseph and Mary, Octavian’s decree, and the mechanics of and motivation for the census; it will then consider aspects of the Journey, including the Two Nations and Cherry Tree episodes and the crucial role of the ox and ass.

The decree from Caesar Augustus, Bethlehem’s status as the city of David, Joseph’s lineage from David and consequent need to take his betrothed, Mary, there for the census all come directly from Luke’s Gospel. Matthew chapter 1 provides further information on Joseph’s family line. The Apocryphal Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew takes this lineage and applies it to Mary also. The ass appears first in Proto-James. The stories of the Two Nations and the Cherry Tree both reach Middle English via Pseudo-Matthew, and, with Pseudo-Matthew’s inclusion of the detail that the census required payment of a penny, the story developed so that Legenda aurea mentions an ox with the ass at the stable, which the Holy Family have brought along to pay the tribute.

Reasons for Journey

Bethlehem: place and history

Bethlehem’s name and history combine to prove that Jesus’ birth is the coming of the Messiah. Matthew waits until after the Birth has occurred to name Bethlehem as the place of the Nativity: in Bethlehem Iudaeae (Matthew 2.1). The bareness of this description contrasts with an effort in Luke to situate the Birth in time and place by narrating the geography and culture of Bethlehem and Judea. Luke’s text points to the Old Testament significance of the city; it is civitatem David, qua vocatur Bethlehem (Luke 2.4). This recalls the prophecies of the Old Testament, including Micah: et tu Bethlehem Ephrata parvulus es in milibus Iuda ex te mihi egredietur qui sit dominator in Israel et egressus eius ab initio a diebus aeternitati

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64 MacCulloch (2009), comments on the explicit arguments in John’s Gospel that contradict the narratives of Matthew and Luke (p.78).
65 For further discussion of the historical period in which Jesus was born, see MacCulloch (2009), ‘Rome and the Coming of the Roman Empire’ pp.41-46; ‘Israel (c.1000-BCE – 100CE)’ (pp.47-73).
Bethlehem is the city of David and thus affirms the family connection necessary for the fulfilment of Isaiah 11.1: *et egressit virga de radice lesse et flos de radice eius ascendet*. Furthermore, Bethlehem’s name etymologically conveys a connection with bread, which is uniquely appropriate for the birth of the ‘bread of life’ who will be commemorated and instantiated in the bread of the Eucharist. This theme is articulated in one fifteenth-century carol, which mirrors the consonants of ‘bedlem’ with ‘berde of lyf’ in the second half of the line: ‘In bedlem pys berde of lyf/ Is born of Marye, maydyn and wyf’ (CB15.76, 1-2). The echoed ‘b’ of ‘born’ emphasises the connection of Christ’s birth to the place and the Eucharist mentioned in the first line of the couplet.

One might expect that Bethlehem’s particular significance in Christ’s birth would render it immune to the blurring of place and time that, according to V.A. Kolve, characterizes Middle English accounts of the historically and geographically distant events of the Bible. Localisation such as this, Kolve states, fulfils the needs of a developing religion: by customising Biblical stories to fit with local detail, Christians can reject the Judaic reality of their history just as they believed that the Jewish people rejected Christ in his lifetime.

However, while Bethlehem must remain Bethlehem in order to be the City of David, similarities between the taxation in Judea that sends Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem and the levies that accreted with the changing relationship of king and parliament in medieval England can provide a subtler version of this localisation. In such parallels, the doctrinal significance of Christ’s Birth can be made fully real for the audiences of these Middle English narratives. Since the individual realisation of Christ’s redeeming sacrifice motivates many attempts to tackle religious material in the vernacular (we need only think of Langland’s devil’s acknowledgement that Christ can ‘save men from synne if hemself wolde’), the version of Bethlehem portrayed in these narratives often combines localising detail (such as

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66 MacCulloch (2009) suggests that one ‘motive for locating the birth in Bethlehem might be precisely to settle the argument noted in John’s Gospel about Jesus’s status as Messiah of his people Israel: it answered the sceptics who pointed out the problem with Micah’s prophecy’ (p.79).

67 cf. Gertrud Schiller (1971): ‘Isaiah 11.1 uses the image of the rod (shoot) springing from the stem to express the idea of the Messiah who was to come from the royal house of David. [...] Tertullian (*De carne Christi*) applied the prophecy to Christ, equating the stem (*radix*) with Jesse, father of David, the rod or shoot (*virga*) with Mary (*virgo = virgin*) and the fruit or flower (*flora*) of the rod with Christ’ (p.150).


69 NIMLY 1473 (CB15.76) ‘In bedlem pys berde of lyf/ Is born of marye maydyn & wyf’; Bodl Arch. Selden B.26 (Sc.3540), f.27v; Cambridge, Trinity O.5.58 (1230), no.2.


71 Kolve, p.114.

English vocabulary like ‘shiren’) with a clear sense of the historical situation of Roman occupation. Biblical events thus become more immediate for readers and offer an opportunity for a writer to (in Kolve’s words) ‘hold a mirror to their own society and its moral nature’. This opportunity exists not only in the portrayal of the prophesied location (Bethlehem) in an English setting, but also in the reasons for Mary and Joseph’s journey to this city.

**Lineage of Mary and Joseph**

The census that removes Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem draws attention, in Luke’s gospel, to the genealogy that underlines their eligibility to be the parents of the Messiah: *Ascendit autem et Joseph a Galilaea de civitate Nazareth, in Iudaeam cивитatem David, quae vocatur Bethlehem: eo quod esset de domo et familia David* (Luke 2.4). Matthew’s first chapter delineates Joseph’s genealogy more fully. At the time of the composition of the gospels, in the first century AD, the doctrine of the virgin birth was as yet undeveloped. The paradox of connecting Christ to David through a man biologically unrelated to him does not worry Matthew or Luke. However, the apocryphal gospel of *Pseudo-Matthew* dates from the ninth century, by which time the cult of Mary had spread to Europe from its origins in Eastern Christianity in the fifth century. *Pseudo-Matthew* reflects this by taking Luke’s description of Joseph’s genealogy and applying it to Mary: they are both ‘*de tribu Iuda et de domo et familia David*’ (*PM* p.73). This detail is inherited by medieval authors, including the compiler of the expanded *Northern Homily Cycle*, who states that ‘Joseph and Mari [were] / Cumen of be same progeny’ as David (3003-4).

The Middle English translator of the Anglo-Norman *Miroir* muddies the genealogical water by commenting that Mary and Joseph travel to Bethlehem because of ‘her kinde’. It is not clear whether this pronoun privileges Mary in the singular or whether it refers to both Mary and Joseph. Similarly, the *Pepysian Gospel Harmony*, which elsewhere is characterized

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73 See analysis of SEL and SLC below.  
74 Kolve, p.113.  
75 MacCulloch (2009) comments on the ‘implausibilities’ of the census: ‘the Roman authorities would not have held a census in a client kingdom of his empire such as Herod’s, and in any case there is no record elsewhere of such an empire-wide census, which would certainly have left traces around the Mediterranean’ (p.79).  
76 Matthew 1.17. The lists in Matthew and Luke ‘agree very little in the personnel involved and whose distinct patterns seem to have different preoccupations’ (MacCulloch (2009), p.80).  
77 From ‘the sixth century onwards, the Mother of God represented the second focal centre of composition [in iconography of the Nativity] after the Child’ (Schiller, p.61).  
78 *Middle English Mirror*, ed. by Thomas G. Duncan and Margaret Connolly (2005), sermon 5, p.57.
by its faithfulness to the canonical accounts, states that Joseph ‘was comen of be kynde of kyng David that was of Bedleem, & his wif also’ (PGH, 3. pp.4-5). The final subclause’s suspension in relation to the verb leaves ambiguous whether ‘his wif also’ refers back to the travel to Bethlehem of earlier in the sentence or whether Mary was also ‘comen of be kynde of kyng David’.

The pervasiveness of *Pseudo-Matthew*’s amendment of the canonical story is clear from a thirteenth-century lyric, which mentions Mary’s ancestry without reference to Joseph: ‘Of a meide he was iborin, /y-comin of heiye cunne’ (CB13.24, 11-12). The syntactical proximity of ‘meide’ and ‘he’ allows ‘y-comin’ to apply equally to both Mary and Jesus. Likewise, in the fifteenth-century *Metrical Life of Christ*, Jesus is linked to David by his mother rather than Joseph and the poet explains the need for the couple to travel to Bethlehem solely through Mary’s lineage:

\[
\text{Oure Lady was of pat cuntre,}
\text{berfore she moste nede here be,}
\text{And Joseph schold also}
\text{Redily ben pider go. (MLC, 65-8)}
\]

Marian devotion has relegated Joseph to an afterthought.

**Octavian’s rule**

In thirteenth-century English narratives, the character of Caesar Augustus (or Octavian), as emperor and king, has begun to be established as an anti-type of the ideal ruler. Implicit comparison between the kingdoms of heaven and earth is accompanied by often explicitly critical portrayals of Octavian’s behaviour as a ruler. The portrait of Octavian in Middle English texts is frequently expanded from the scant information of the gospel account; it is therefore able to pose the question of how the expected Messiah will contrast with the ruler of the world into which he is to be born (MLC 27-52). Furthermore, the depiction of Octavian’s decree presents an opportunity for authors either to draw a reader’s attention to the historical specificity of this event or to use it to make political comment with potential contemporary resonance. Middle English texts provide their readers with a wealth of information both about Octavian as a man and about the operation of the census and its role in taxation. In the Chester and Towneley mystery cycles, the character of Octavian becomes a variant of the standard mystery play tyrant.79 Towneley has an entire play

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79 The ubiquity of such characters is clear from fragment I of the *Canterbury Tales*: the Miller refuses to take off his hat and ‘in Pilates voys he gan to crie’ (L.3124); when he tells his tale, part of the characterisation of Absalon depends upon the notion that ‘[h]e playeth Herodes upon a scaffold hye’ (L.3385).
dedicated to him, which precedes even the Annunciation pageant and thus frames the whole Nativity narrative in the context of the Roman Empire and its relationship with occupied Judea. This range and depth of material poses a question: why do Octavian and the census merit so much attention in Middle English texts when the Journey to Bethlehem and the reasons for it are barely mentioned at all in the gospels? This section will examine the ways in which a Middle English responses to the decree tend to follow chronological and generic patterns.

Luke’s concept of Messiah is not identical to the medieval version that had evolved after a millennium of Christian theological writing. Luke describes the political context into which Jesus was born:

`factum est autem in diebus illis exitium a Caesare Augsuto ut describeretur universus orbis. haec descriptio prima facta est praeside Syriae Cyrino. et ibant omnes ut profiteretur singuli in suam civilatem. ascendit autem et Joseph a Galilaea de civitate Nazareth in Judaciam civilatem David quam vocatur Bethlehem eo quod esset de domo et familia David ut profiteretur cum Maria despansa sibi uxor praegnate. (Luke 2.1-5)`

By showing the reality of occupied Judea, Luke inflects his portrait of the Messiah. Rather than hinting at Christ’s role as redeemer of heaven, Luke shows him as a figure who might deliver the Jews from their present and real political oppression. He thus reflects the prevailing Maccabean view of the Messiah. Old Testament prophets, including Isaiah, tend to propagate this version of the anointed one, which looked forward to the day when He would liberate Jews from the constant yoke of earthly oppression. The Messiah would establish God’s kingdom on earth and provide a return to the glory days of King David, reinforcing the expectation that the Messiah would be a descendant of David.80

In contrast, Middle English authors inherited the concept of a Christ whose incarnation is inextricable from his role as heavenly redeemer. He is not, for them, a figure who will release the Jews from Roman oppression. Their Christ has developed from Pauline writings, the ideas of the Church Fathers and the wealth of apocryphal material from the Early Church. *Protevangelium of James* is unconcerned with the political implications of the decree and what is says about Jewish oppression; instead the author uses it as an opportunity to air Joseph’s anxieties about his new wife. After the decree is issued, Joseph says of Mary:

‘I shall enrol my sons, but what shall I do with this child? How shall I enrol her? As my wife? I am ashamed to do that. Or as my daughter? But all the children of Israel know she is not my daughter. On this day of the Lord the Lord will do as he wills.’ (Ff 17.1, p.63)

80 Cf. 1 and 2 Maccabbeus; thanks to Revd Peter Bates for discussing this with me.
Joseph is worried primarily about how others will perceive their relationship. By this point in the gospel of *Pseudo-Matthew*, Joseph has aired, if not resolved, his doubts, so the decree has a different role in the Nativity story. It provides a space for genealogical connections to be delineated, and, like his predecessors, *Pseudo-Matthew* avoids any political inflection.  

Middle English authors here diverge from their apocryphal sources, using the Roman Empire as a site to critique the operation of a political regime in its role as imperial ruler over a subject nation. Furthermore, the identification of Rome with ecclesiastical authority allows an author’s portrayal of Octavian and his regime to hint at his view of the Church. Verse accounts of Christ’s life from the late thirteenth- and early fourteenth- centuries often reflect the shifting political environment. Devotional prose, most of which dates from a century later, exhibits very little of this tension.

Texts that treat the Biblical events as history draw not only on the canonical and apocryphal gospels but also on material from contemporary chronicles. Higden’s *Polychronicon* gives a detailed picture of the mechanics of gathering the tribute and thus creates an insight into Roman systems of governance:

That tyne a commandemente was sende from Octouian, emperour of Rome, that alle pe worlde scholde be describde. *Petrus*. Octouian the emperour, wylle to knowe the nowmbre of regiones in the worlde sujette to the empire of Rome, and the nowmbre of cites in every region, and the nowmbre of men and women in the cites, commaundede that every man of suburbes, stretes, villages, townes, and of cites scholde comme to the place of his byrthe, and ofre a peny in valoure of oure x.d. usualle, and take hit to the presidente of the prouince, knowlenge hym sujette to the empyre of Rome.

The repetition of ‘nowmbre’ (translated directly from a repeated *numerum* in the Latin) conveys Octavian’s urgent anxiety to have the extent of his power delineated. In the *Legenda*, de Voragine makes the connection between the tribute and Matthew 22.21:

*Caesar igitur Augustus universo presidens orbi scire voluit quot prouincie, quot ciuitates, quot castra, quot ille, quot homines in toto orbe essent iussitque, ut dicitur in hastioris scholasticis, ut omnes homines ad urbe unde trahebant originem pergerent et quilibet denarium argenteum, qui ualebat decem nummos usuales unde et denarius dicebatur. Presidi prouincie tradens se subditum Romano imperio profleretur. Nam et nummus ymaginem preferebat cesaris et superscriptionem nominis.*

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81 *Factum est ante muniram tempus ut fieret professio exedicto Caesaris Augusti, ut profleretur universus orbis, unuisquie in patria sua. Hac professo fact est a praeide Syriae Cyripo. Hui ergo necesse ut Joseph profleretur cuin beata Maria in Bethlehem, quia inde erat Joseph et Maria, de tribu luda et de domo et familia David.* (XIII.1, p.73).


83 Matthew 22.21: *dicunt ei Cesaris tunc ait illis reddite ergo quae sunt Caesaris Caesari et quae sunt Dei Deo.*

84 *Lgd*, vol 1, p.64; cf. *Gk*: ‘Cesar that was lord of alle the world wolde wete how many provinces, how many citemes, how many castellis and townes, and how myche peple were in the world, and as it is saide in the Stories he had commaunded that alle men schulde go to thaire citemes where thei hadde be born and that eueri man schulde yewe a peny of siluer to the proust of the prouince, whiche peny schulde hewe the ymage of Cesar and his name wretin aboute’ (p.35).
The payment of tax prefigures the moment when Christ will *reddite [...] quae sunt Caesaris Caesari*. Since Caesar is a uniform title for the Roman rulers, the author is able to recall that later moment in the present of the Nativity. By reminding his readers of Matthew 22.21, de Voragine mitigates the criticism of the census since Christ himself validates the collection of Roman taxes. However, criticism remains implicit in the detailed account of the ramifications of the tax, cited here in the closest Middle English translation:

> Sche was seid profession, for whanne eueri man schulde yelde that peny he schulde leie it vpon his hede and knowlache to the provost with the his propre mouthe that he was soget to the emperour of Rome, and this profession was opin confession for it shulde be done before alle the peple.\(^{85}\)

The concepts of ‘propre mouth’ and ‘opin confession’ recall the importance of witness to the enactment of justice in medieval England.\(^{86}\) This use of a legal framework ensures that the power of the temporal ruler is as fully acknowledged as when Christ makes his famous statement later in the gospel narratives. With the payment of his tax, ‘eueri man’ enacts his submission to an earthly king but at this stage in incarnational history (i.e. prior to Jesus’s Birth) there is no earthly instantiation of a heavenly alternative.

The *South English Nativity* takes the decree as an opportunity to describe Octavian and the extent of his control over his empire:

> Ærafter he emperour of Rome (as we fynde) lwryte
> A certeyn nombre of alle þe world he seide he wolde ywite;
> How many schiren in eche lond were, and lounes in eche schire.
> And how many men in eche town – he was a gret sire.
> To þe prince of eche lond is messagers he seide:
> Pat eche men þercas he was ybore þoru beste of him wende,
> Pat eche payde a peny to trewage, and þat me him þe penyes bere
> Pat he wiste þerþoru how many men in al þe world were. (SEN, 325-33)

Octavian’s desire to count the population becomes particularly personal in the repetition of the second person pronoun in ‘he seide he wolde ywite’. The repetition ‘schiren [...] schire’ creates a particularly English set of regions.\(^{87}\) However, these are ruled by a ‘gret sire’ and since ‘sire’ derives from Old French, this vocabulary of governance recreates the thirteenth-century hierarchy between Anglo-Norman ruling elite and the population of England. While the poet firstly cites the traditional reason of ease of counting for the order for each man to

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85 *Gil*, p.33. Cf. *IgA: Professio enim dicebatur quia quilibet quando reddebat presidi provincie censi caput, id est denarium illum qui sic vocabatur, ponere illud super caput suum et proprio ore profitebatur se esse substitutum Romano imperio; unde dicebatur quia numeros corum qui censum capitis verebant certo determinabatur numero et redgebatur in scriptis* (p.64).


87 *MED*: ‘shir’ (n). Old English etymology: ‘scir, scyr’.
pay 'a peny to trewage', he explicitly suggests that this method may have been preferred 'as wel penne /For loue of pe penies, as to wyte pe noumbr e of eche manne' (334-35). So the decree and its newly expanded terms become, in the South English poem, evidence of the emperor's greed while pointing simultaneously to the imperial desire to control the populace.

The late thirteenth-century political reality also inflects the portrayal of Caesar in Cursor Mundi. The poet explains that the 'emparour, sir augustus' was

A man men had of mikel dute
And dred ouerall his werld aboute.
Oueral pe werld he mad statut,
Ti al bat was his vnderlutte,
Pat ilk kynd suld mak þam boun
To cum in-to pair kyndli tun,
To mak knaulage wit sum-thing
Til sir augost, þair ouer-king.
A baili tok þis werce on hand,
Pat cald cirinus in þat land,
Pat did mens names for to writte
Pat aght þis eild al for to quitte. (CM, 11177-98)

'Sir augustus' is not only 'emparour' but 'her aller kyng' and his employment of Cyrinius as his 'baily' strongly echoes the late thirteenth-century English administration of fiscal authority. Edward I had sheriffs in each region who appeared bi-annually to provide the financial dues from his area of responsibility. This method of controlling the kingdom through division into regional areas of responsibility is evident in Cyrinius's role in Cursor Mundi: to write down 'alle mennes names' so that their number might be recorded for taxation. While these lines from Cursor Mundi reflect the necessary division of power in the Roman empire, the poet makes contemporary and local resonance clear with 'bailly': 'an official of the English crown with delegated administrative or judicial authority; the king's officer in a county, hundred, or town; the keeper of a royal castle, gate, or forest'. In the decade preceding Cursor Mundi's estimated date of 1300, questions of taxation and governance were extremely current. Edward I needed to provide for an enormous expenditure during his campaign against France and the associated conflicts in Wales and Scotland; this necessitated the collection of payments by the 'crown's local servants'. After the 1290s, the level of military activity was less intense, but the 'recurrent need for financial aid to meet military expenditure was the key factor, over the years from 1290 to 1340, in parliament's development into an institution, the primary significance of whose meetings

88 Maurice Keen (2003), pp. 4-5.
89 MED, 'baili' (n) 1 (a); MED cites another occurrence of the word in CM (Trinity MS line 12914) for meaning 'a minor officer of justice under a sheriff or judge'.
90 Keen, p. 5.
was fiscal and political, rather than judicial.  

Whether or not contemporary opinion about the changing nature of governance influenced the Cursor-poet’s writing about Luke 2, it is evident that the technical vocabulary of collecting taxes was accessible to him and to his readers.

A century later, the SLC-Octavian chooses to hold a census at once to quantify and to articulate the extent of his authority:

This time was sent a maundement from Octouian pe emperour that al the world, als he hade ment, shuld writen be, both ioun 7 tour.

Petrus comestor in historiis scolasticus capitulo xxxvǐ  
The emperour coueitet forto knowe the nomes of reumes redily thurgh-out pe world al on a Rowe of quich Rome hade ful maistry.

ffor that time al pe world I-wys tributarie to Rome was. (SLC, 309-18)

The verb ‘coueitet’, which carries with it a reminder of one of the deadly sins and points to a desire for something ‘not rightfully one’s own,’ indicates how Octavian’s power trespasses on the territory of God.  

Furthermore, the repetition of ‘al’ and ‘als’ across these stanzas connects Octavian’s imperial ambition with its extent (‘al pe world’) and, implicitly its limit: it can only be temporal. Thus a contrast is established with the heavenly realm of the baby to be born later in the narrative. The poet furthers the comparison of the heavenly and the temporal by detailing the division of local administrations in notably English vocabulary:

therefore pe emperour in his blis wold haue writen iche place,

Prouince, shire, 7 eke cite, how mony thur3e the world þer were, and iche þede, als leue 3e me, that shulden tribute to hym bere (319-24).

While ‘prouince’ carries Roman history in its Latin etymology, ‘shire’ is a direct anglicisation.  

The vocabulary of the poem thus reflects the dual culture of the period of composition as well as of its author. The poet increases the amount of the tribute from the conventional single penny tribute to a higher denomination of coin: ‘of siluer shuld þat peny be, /ten comune penys hit was worthy’ (SLC, 329-30). The contrast between the ‘comune

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91 Keen, p.6.
92 MED coueiten (v), 1.
93 MED ‘province’ (n): derives from OF province and L provincia.
94 MED ‘shire’ (n): derives from OE scir, scyr.
was fiscal and political, rather than judicial.\footnote{Keen, p.6.} Whether or not contemporary opinion about
the changing nature of governance influenced the Cursor-poet’s writing about Luke 2, it is
evident that the technical vocabulary of collecting taxes was accessible to him and to his
readers.

A century later, the SLC-Octavian chooses to hold a census at once to quantify and to
articulate the extent of his authority:

This time was sent a maundement
from Octouian ũe emperour
that al the world, als he hade ment,
shuld writen be, both toun 7 tour.

\textit{Petrus comestor in historiis scolasticus capitulo xxxiiij}°
The emperour coueitet fortó knowe
the nomes of reumes redily
thurgh-out þe world al on a Rowe
of quich Rome hade ful maistry.

ffor that time al þe world I-wys
tributarie to Rome was. (SLC, 309-18)

The verb ‘coueitet’, which carries with it a reminder of one of the deadly sins and points to a
desire for something ‘not rightfully one’s own,’ indicates how Octavian’s power trespasses on
the territory of God.\footnote{MED coueiten (v), 1.} Furthermore, the repetition of ‘al’ and ‘als’ across these stanzas
connects Octavian’s imperial ambition with its extent (‘al þe world’) and, implicitly its limit:
it can only be temporal. Thus a contrast is established with the heavenly realm of the baby to
be born later in the narrative. The poet furthers the comparison of the heavenly and the
temporal by detailing the division of local administrations in notably English vocabulary:

therefore þe emperour in his blis
wold haue writen iche place,

\begin{quote}
Provinc, shire, 7 eke cite,
how mony thur3e the word þe were,
and iche hede, als leue 3e me,
thath shulden tribute to hym bere (319-24).
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wold haue written iche place,

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\end{footnotesize}
peny' of ordinary currency and the type demanded by Octavian makes his covetousness extend from desire of God's kingdom to include a desire for the possessions of his subjects. With the payment of this coin, each family must make a substantial monetary sacrifice, while participating in an articulation of Jewish submission to Roman power:

And by þat peny bounden wer thay
fiorte to be obedient
to be emperour of Rome for ay,
be that 3yft with gode entent (333-36).

As we saw in the description of the 'peny' and its role in the census in *South English Legendary*, taxation in the *Stanzaic Life* symbolises submission: 'tribute' is at once the 'payment, tax' itself and the 'acknowledgement of submission' to another power.95

The trend of augmenting Octavian's role reaches its peak in the mystery plays. In the Chester cycle, for example, the dramatist draws on *A Stanzaic Life of Christ* but expands the character of Octavian. He frames the appearances of Mary and Joseph with lengthy treatment of the emperor, who is paired with the character of Sybil explicitly to situate the events of the Nativity in a prophetic frame. Octavian calls the census 'to preve my might and my postee' (VI.242). Octavian's boasting words invite the audience to laugh at him in the knowledge, shared with the dramatist, that the assessment he makes of his power crucially fails to take account of Christ's birth: 'I, prevede prince most of powere, / under heaven highest am I here; /[...] All this world, withowten were – / kinge, prync, baron, batchlere – / I may destroy in great dangere / through vertue of my degree' (VI.176-83).

The middle of Octavian's long opening speech is punctuated by two Anglo-Norman stanzas (VI.209-17). The language of England's law and politics is rarely used in the Chester cycle and so its appearance here heightens the difference of Octavian, his elevated status and his foreignness: he rules in Judea as an emperor from abroad. Furthermore, the writing down of names necessary for a census offers an opportunity to examine the role of language in governance. Later in the Chester play, Octavian explains his decision to call a census to his counsellors and thus to the audience:

Therefore as lorde nowe likes mee
to preeve my might and my postee,
for I will send about and see
how many heades I have (VI.241-44).

95 MED, 'tribute' (n) (a). The OED records further meanings including the more positive 'acknowledgement of affection or esteem' (2a) or 'a praiseworthy thing' (2b). The latter sense only becomes current in the twentieth century and 2a's shift from a thing paid to something associated with esteem seems to happen only in the early nineteenth century.
Despite his earlier braggadocio, he still needs to ‘preve’ his power. As he further details his plan, the vocabulary of ‘shire’ is carried over from *A Stanzaic Life*.

All the world shall written bee,  
great and smale in eych degree  
that dwell in shire or in citye –  
king, clarke, knight, and knave. (VI.245-8)

The emperor wishes to contain the world so he can truly believe in his control of it. And the way he chooses to do this is language: ‘All the world shall written bee’. He will use words to delineate the extent of his power, and his own words, borrowed from Anglo-Norman, hint at the way that language is a tool of the conqueror.

Eych man one penye shall paye.  
Therefore, my bedell, doe as I saye.  
In middest the world by anye waye  
this gammon shall begine. (VI.249-52)

His choice of subordinate to carry out this plan, his ‘bedell’, reflects the linguistic heritage of England in the 1400s: its etymology includes Old French, Old English and Medieval Latin. Yet ‘gammon’, derived from Old English ‘gamen, gomen’, shows that the serious implications of the census touch Augustus only as a festivity or pastime. Towneley’s Augustus is granted an entire play to himself. His credentials as a raging tyrant are established in the play’s opening, during which he speaks, uninterrupted, for seven stanzas (9.1-45). However, the dramatist enriches this standard portrayal with irony that places the depiction of a worldly power firmly in the context of the salvation to come:

I am lord and syr ouer all;  
All bowys to me, both grete and small,  
As lord of euery land.  
Is none so comly on to call;  
Whoso this agane-says fowll shall befall  
And therto heremy hand. (9.13-24)

With the repetition of ‘all’ (ouer all/All bowys) Octavian asserts control over this world. An audience’s laughter when Octavian says these words depends on their realisation that he cannot see the limitations of his rule. The dramatist thus invites the audience to supply the knowledge that their Christian experience has given them: Augustus may rule ‘ouer all’ but God (and his person in Christ) rules over him.

This conceit receives further refinement when Augustus claims that he holds men’s fates in his control: ‘Both ryche and poore, more and les, /At my lykyng for to redres, /Whether I wyll saue or spyll’ (9.25-30). The verb ‘saue’ points directly to the redemptive

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purpose of Christ’s birth: God is made incarnate to save men’s souls. So the Caesur Augustus play, positioned before even the Annunciation play in the cycle, opens the Nativity sequence with an ironic reference to the redemptive purpose of the Incarnation. Since Christ is, as yet, unborn in the temporal unfolding of the cycle, Octavian is correct to suggest that there is not ‘sych anothere’ as him ‘in all thys warld’; but the cyclic form of the mysteries enacts the eternal present wherein Christ is in the world, even before the time of his birth.

The theme of salvation is reinforced when the emperor and his advisors plan the death of the unborn baby. This blood lust pre-echoes both the Slaughter of the Innocents and the Passion. Syrinus’s stock oath, ‘as ete I brede’, reminds the audience of the Eucharist (and therefore of Christ’s sacrifice) in the very words in which the murder is planned:

I counsell you, as ete I brede,
What best therof may be:
Gar serche youre land in euery stede,
And byd that boy be done to dede,
Who the fyrst may hym see. (9.181-85)

Later in this speech, the Resurrection is recalled when Syrinus suggests that the census must be achieved ‘by the thyrde day’:

That this be done by the thyrde day,
Then may none of his freyndys say
Bot he has mayde homage.
If ye do thus, syr, permafay,
Youre worship shall ye wyn for ay,
If thay make you trowage. (9.193-98)

Syrinus cannot know that the third day will, in Christian belief, be integral to Christ winning worship ‘for ay’. Another purpose of the Incarnation, suggested by Christ’s words in the gospels (nolite putare quoniam veni solvere legem aut prophetas non veni solvere sed adimplere) also receives ironic reference in Octavian’s utterance earlier in this play:

For all the bost men of hym blowys,
He shall neuer dystroy my lawes,
Were he the dwyll of hell. (9.94-96)

The audience knows that the baby ‘shall neuer dystroy’ the law, for he comes to fulfil it.

Middle English authors are not uniformly interested in the political climate at the time of Christ’s Birth. Emphasis can be placed instead on the contrast between the power wielded by Octavian and the humility of the circumstances into which the child will be born. Love’s meditation for Monday, which covers Christ’s Birth, does not offer much explicit

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99 Matthew 5.17.
comment on Augustus as ruler. However by doubling nouns and verbs in his translation of the pseudo-Bonaventuran text,100 Love emphasises the totality of Octavian’s power:

Cesar Auguste be emperoure of Rome send oute a mandment or an heste, pat alle be world suget to him shold be descryuet, so pat he mi3t knowe be noumber of Regiones, of Cites & of he hedes longyng to hem, pat weren subdite to be Empire of Rome. And herfore he ordeynet & batde pat al men where so euere be duelde, shold go to be Citee of hire first birpe & propre lynage. (Love, chap. iv, p.37)

Some words in Love’s translation, such as ‘mandment’ and ‘heste’ convey compulsion without being overtly perjorative;101 others, especially the echoing ‘suget’ and ‘subdite’, hint at the potential difficulty of the master/subject relationship.102 Love’s use of hendiadys creates a concentration of the words of power and submission and the rhetorical structure suggests the difficulties that accompany subjection to a foreign power. However, the meditation for Monday is more concerned to make readers fully comprehend the extreme poverty of Christ’s Birth and thus to learn about the false value of worldly wealth.103 This is typical of devotional prose, which tends to offer a differing emphasis from the verse discussed thus far.

The priestly author of Book to a Mother chooses not to linger on the circumstance of the census. Instead, Christ is given agency. He ‘ches to be bore, in cold wynter at mydny3t, and not in a kynges halle ne in his owne modir hous but in a comyn stable before he oxe and be asse. And here a man may rede meknes and po/uert and pen-auce’.104 This ‘kynges halle’, allowed into the narrative only as a negative comparison, calls to mind the excess of Octavian as portrayed by poets in, for example, the Stanzaic Life of Christ. Octavian’s version of kingship is rejected so that ‘mekenes and pouert’ can be championed.105

Octavian’s role is, in devotional texts including sermon material and texts for private devotion, frequently prophetic: he has brought, through the extent of his dominion, the universal peace necessary for the Messiah’s birth.106 Fifteenth-century sermons, whether

100 Compare with Speculum Devotorum, which does not contain doublings (SpecD 2006, chap 5, p.97).
101 MED ‘maundement’ (n) and ‘heste’ (n1): both these nouns were used to describe the Ten Commandments.
102 MED ‘suget’ (n) 1. ‘one who is absolutely under the control of’ or answerable to another’ (my emphasis) and ‘subdite’ (adj) ‘Under the rule of another), subject (to another)?; ‘ordeynet’ from ‘ordeinen’ (v) also suggests being ‘subordinate’ to another (1).
103 Ghosh suggests that Love frames the poverty in openness: ‘pouerte and buxumnesse’ are ‘opynly shewed’ in the life of simplicity led by Mary and Joseph’ (p.160).
104 Book to a Mother, ed. by Adrian James McCarthy (1981), f.3b, pp.33-34 (IFMEP 767).
105 A similar characterisation of Christ’s birth becomes typical in Middle English accounts; see chapter 2 below. Indeed the detail of the ‘cold wynter at mydny3t’ exemplifies a trend to locate the Messiah’s birth in a very English version of winter. The potential effect that this may have on a reader is particularly important in didactic pieces like Book to a Mother. The instructive purpose of the text is explicit in the verb phrase ‘men may rede’, because not only does it imply the possibility of reading these qualities in the text but also carries with it the idea of advice. MED ‘reden’ (v1): 1 ‘to read’ including (c) ‘to read with understanding’ and 6 ‘to interpret’; 7 ‘to perceive something’; 8 ‘to counsel, give advice, advise’.
106 One theme that de Voragine draws out is the idea of a universal peace established for Christ’s birth: ‘in the tyme of Octavian emperor, whanne the sole of God come into this wordle, alle peple ioweden that the only emperours of Romayns lordschipped oover all. He was called Octauyan, and Cesar also after Iulius Cesar that

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classed as heterodox or orthodox by their current editors, do not portray Octavian as the
tyrant-figure we have seen elsewhere. Rather they choose to concentrate on how the
dominion of Rome created the necessary conditions of peace for the Messiah’s birth. The
connection of these texts with a contemporary Roman imperium (the Church) may affect
their choice of emphasis. John Mirk tells us that Christ was born for three reasons: ‘for to
3eue pees to men of good wylle, for te lyghton ham pat lokon ylle, and for te draw vs wyth
love hym ylle’ (6, p.23). The peace is then connected with Octavian and the extent of Roman
power:

a3eyn þe tyme þat he wolde be bore, he made so grete pes al þe world þat, þeras
kyngdames and contrees were at þe bate and werre vchon wyth odur, in hys tyme of
burth wes so grete pees þat on mon, þat was called Octauyan, was imperour of Rome
and hadde þe gouernans of al þe world - for alle þe world was suget to þe emperour
of Rome – and dured so þryty wyntur (6, p.24).

This positive portrayal of Rome may reflect Mirk’s position in the Church. Yet the
inclusion of a similar theme in sermons classified by modern editors as heterodox or Lollard
indicates that universal peace is emphasised for its theological significance rather than
because of a concern to please Rome. One Lollard preacher cites the prophecy:

[... ] pus Crist was boren in tyme of grete pees, as Davuid seide bi hym tofore, seynghe in
pis manere: Orietur in diebus eius iusticia et habunancia pacis (Ps.71,17). pat is: ‘In
his dayes rì3wisnesse schal sprynghe, and plente of pees.’ And resonable it was, and
hi3ly ordeyned of þe wyt of God, þat þer schulde be grete pees in tyme of þe birpe of
‘þe Prince of Pees’, as Ysaye seide.107

We saw the importance of a time of peace in the passage from The Metrical Life, and here
the preacher fully delineates its prophetic significance; it is one of the markers by which
people can know that this baby is the awaited Messiah. Since the peace has come about
because of Octavian’s tenure of power, sermons that pick up on this theme tend not to
demonstrate the same contemptuousness for his governance that characterises the narrative
poetry. The same sermon continues to give further details of his reign:

it was in þe two and fourti 3er of Octouian, þat was þe emperoure of Rome, whycch
also was cleped August Cesar, as þis gospel makep mencion. First ‘August’, þat is:
echinge, for he echide in his tyme moost þe emperrie of Rome. And ‘Cesar’ he was
clepid, aftur Julius Cesar, a gret conqueroure whiche was emperoure tofore hym. Þis
Octourian, what þi rial power, what þi gret wit, sugetide þe more part of þe world in
his tyme to hym, so þat þer was in þat tyme a gret vniersal pees in þe world to alle
peple þat were suget to þe emperrie of Rome. (p.54, f.41.r)

Octavian’s power not only brings ‘gret vniersal pees’ but has reached this state ‘þi rial
power’ and ‘þi gret wit’. The preacher’s choice of verb, ‘sugetide’, draws attention to the

was his vncl, also he was calle Augustus for the encresing of the comune of Rome, for the dignite of the
emperor honour that was furst enamed with the name fro the difference of other kynnges. For as oure Lorde
wolde be bore to yewe us everlastine pees, right so he wolde that the tyme of pees schulde worship his natyntie’
(GIL, p.32).

107 Cigman (1989), sermon 5, f.41r, p.54.
agency of Octavian rather than the oppression of those under his control. He does not forget the ‘pepel pat were suget’, but emphasises the ‘gret vniuersal pees’ from which they benefit. While the preacher does go on to tell his congregation of the tribute that must be paid (including the variation of the costlier coin of ten pence) the tone of the sermon fails to portray Octavian as a tyrant.

By emperour, Octouian, wanne he saw pat myche peple was suget to his emperrie, he commaunded alle rewmes to be noumbride, pat he miȝte knowe þe quantite of peple in eueri lond and how miȝte tribute eueri long miȝte to þe emperrie of Rome. And eueri persone schulde paye a manere of moneye pat pai vseden, þis manere of noumbrynge moneye, whycy conteyneþe in hit ten pens of suche moneye as þei vseden. (ff.41r-41v, pp.54-55)

In common with other didactic texts of the period, the sermon also comments on the privilege bestowed on the region that is ordered to participate in the census; this represents its special position as ‘þe naule of þe world’:

By cuntree of Syrie was miȝþ þe middel, as þe naule of þe world, and þerfor it was bigunne þere, and also to eue þer reumes aboute ensample þat þe prophecie of Davíd were fulfilled, seyynge: Operatus salutem in medio terre. þat is: ‘He wrouȝte helþe in middel of þe erþe.’ And þus sumwhat bi þis process it is schewid what tyme Crist was boron. (f.41v, p.55)

Even when the Journey to Bethlehem is not framed by a portrayal of Octavian that points to Christ’s saving role, the episode retains a typological link with the Passion. For example, the Cursor-poet connects the decision to leave with the episode of Mary and Joseph’s trial by the people of Nazareth. Rather than reacting to news of the decree, ‘at moneþes nyne’:

Joseph diȝte him for to go
To bedleem wip mary þo
Lenger þere noþde he dwelle
For wordis of þe ieweþ felle
For to felle his false fame
To bedleem went þei same
In þat tyme þat þei went þus
Was emperoure sir augustus (CM, 11177-86).

The verbs ‘diȝte’ and ‘noþde’ give agency to the Holy Family and place the Journey to Bethlehem, like the Flight to Egypt, in the pattern of suffering that characterizes Christ’s life in medieval tellings and thus contributes to the redemptive sacrifice. The persecution of Mary by ‘þe ieweþ’ prefigures her son’s trial in the Passion sequence. So only after Mary and Joseph are given responsibility, and clear motivation, for their journey, do we learn of the decree that men should ‘come to hir kyndely toun /To make knowleche wip sunþing /To augustus her aller king’ (CM, 11192-94).

The York playwright compresses several episodes by inserting the command to leave in the words of an angel at the end of Joseph’s Trouble About Mary. The Nativity play then
opens with the couple already in Bethlehem. Similarly, the N-Town cycle does not show the issuing of Octavian’s decree, relating it instead through Joseph’s words:

Lord, what travayl to man is wrought!
Rest in his word beovyth hym non.
Octauyan, oure emperour, sadly hath besought;
Oure trybute hym to bere folk must forth ichon;
It is cryed in every bourgh and cety be name,
I pat am a pore tymbre-wryth
Born of pe blood of Dauyd,
pe emperorys comawndement I must holde with,
And ellys I were to blame. (15.1-9)

The dramatist juxtaposes Joseph’s humble status (‘pore tymbre-wryth’) with his royal lineage (‘pe blood of Dauyd’) to point to the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies in Christ’s Birth while simultaneously satisfying the necessity that his worldly existence should be poor.

However, despite a conventional emphasis on Joseph’s genealogy, Mary articulares her desires in N-Town. She tells Joseph that ‘with 3ow wyl I wende;

A syght of þat cyté fayn wolde I se,
If I myght of myn alye ony þer fynde,
It wold be grett joye onto me (15.14-17).

Mary’s assertion that she would like a ‘syght of þat cyté’ interestingly gives her agency for her decision to travel without reference either to the political situation or to her theological role. Instead she speaks of the ‘joye’ she would feel on seeing kindred in Bethlehem.108

En route to Bethlehem

A leaf from the De Lisle psalter of c.1310 is the first of three such pages visually delineating the events of Christ’s Life.109 The Life, for this artist, begins with the scene in the stable, and is followed by the Annunciation to the Shepherds, the Circumcision, the Adoration of the Magi, the Presentation at the Temple and the Flight into Egypt.110 It would be quite reasonable to point out the logic of beginning the scenes of an individual’s life with his birth. However, examples from other traditions and the ubiquity of Annunciation images combine to make the absence of the Journey to Bethlehem marked.111 Nonetheless, some Middle English texts include significant episodes on the Journey: Mary’s prophetic vision of

108 MED ‘allie’ (n) 2(b) relatives or kinsmen as a group; kindred; family.
110 The Flight does, of course, feature frequently in iconography.
111 The earlier tradition of Eastern Christian art does include the journey in montages of Christ’s life. The pre-birth existence of Christ is given a lot of focus in such iconography, perhaps reflecting the devotion to Mary that prevailed in Byzantine Christianity before spreading to Catholicism.
opens with the couple already in Bethlehem. Similarly, the N-Town cycle does not show the issuing of Octavian's decree, relating it instead through Joseph's words:

Lord, what travayl to man is wrought!
Rest in his word behovyth hym non.
Octauyan, oure empourer, sadly hath besought;
Oure trybute hym to bere folk must forth ichon;
It is cryed in every bough and cety be name,
I pat am a pore tymbrere-wryth
Born of pe blood of Dauyd,
pe emperorys comawndement I must holde with,
And ellys I were to blame. (1.5.1-9)

The dramatist juxtaposes Joseph's humble status ('pore tymbrere-wryth') with his royal lineage ('pe blood of Dauyd') to point to the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies in Christ's Birth while simultaneously satisfying the necessity that his worldly existence should be poor. However, despite a conventional emphasis on Joseph's genealogy, Mary articulares her desires in N-Town. She tells Joseph that 'with 3ow wyl I wende;

A syght of þat cyté fayn wolde I se,
If I myght of myn alye ony þer fynde,
It wolde be grett joye onto me (15.14-17).

Mary's assertion that she would like a 'syght of þat cyté' interestingly gives her agency for her decision to travel without reference either to the political situation or to her theological role. Instead she speaks of the 'joye' she would feel on seeing kindred in Bethlehem.106

En route to Bethlehem

A leaf from the De Lisle psalter of c.1310 is the first of three such pages visually delineating the events of Christ's Life.109 The Life, for this artist, begins with the scene in the stable, and is followed by the Annunciation to the Shepherds, the Circumcision, the Adoration of the Magi, the Presentation at the Temple and the Flight into Egypt.110 It would be quite reasonable to point out the logic of beginning the scenes of an individual's life with his birth. However, examples from other traditions and the ubiquity of Annunciation images combine to make the absence of the Journey to Bethlehem marked.111 Nonetheless, some Middle English texts include significant episodes on the Journey: Mary's prophetic vision of

106 MED 'allie' (n) 2(lb) relatives or kinsmen as a group; kindred; family.
110 The Flight does, of course, feature frequently in iconography.
111 The earlier tradition of Eastern Christian art does include the journey in montages of Christ's life. The pre-birth existence of Christ is given a lot of focus in such iconography, perhaps reflecting the devotion to Mary that prevailed in Byzantine Christianity before spreading to Catholicism.
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Two Nations; the cherry tree that bows to Mary; and the ox and ass that accompany the Holy Family.

**Two Nations**

Mary's piety is evident in the telling of the Two Nations that Mary sees en-route to Bethlehem, since it contrasts Mary's foresight with the human ignorance of Joseph. This episode is found first in the gospel of *Pseudo-Matthew*, which augments the canonically scant account of the journey itself with the inclusion of Mary's words to Joseph: ‘*Duos populos ante me video, unum fleantem et alium gaudentem?*’ (PM XIII.1) Already cast by this time as representative of fallible humanity, Joseph is unable to answer his wife's question. An angel therefore appears directly to explain the forthcoming birth as the expected Emmanuel of the Jewish people: *Populum enim Iudaecorum flentem vidit, qui recessit a deo suo, et populum gentium gaudentem, qui iam accessit et prope a domino factus est, secundum quod promisit patribus nostris Abraam, Isaac et Iacob: tempus enim advenit ut in semine Abraham ribuatur omnibus gentibus benedictio* (PM XIII.1). *Pseudo-Matthew* thus hints at the shift from the advent of a Christ for the chosen people, to one who will ‘lighten the gentiles’. This detail reaches medieval England via *Legenda Aurea*,\(^{112}\) as we can see from its translation into English in *Gilde Legende*:

> the Virgine seigh whanne sche neighed to Bethlem the toon parti of the peple wepte and that other partie lough. Thanne the angell expowned to her the cause and saide: “The partie of the peple of paynymes that schull resseie blessyng in the sede of Abraham reioysen hem, and the partie that wepen is the partie of lues that bene reprobred of God bi thaire deserties”\(^ {113}\)

*Gilde Legende* is, though, uncommon; the episode is ignored by most Middle English texts.\(^ {114}\) In the fifteenth century, Lydgate dedicates his *Life of Our Lady* to Mary, and thus this scene is given a lengthy exposition in order fully to demonstrate her virtue.

Sodenly Mary full sone she abrayede, And vnto Joseph evyn thus she sayde:

> “I wys,” quod she, “me thynkyth hat I see Two folkys gretly discordyng, Vpon the waye aperen vnto me. The tone Reioysysng, that othr compleynyng,” To whome Joseph benygly lokynge, Ansewerde agayne and bad hir Ryde in pees; And prayd hir also nat to be recalles,

\(^ {112}\) Schiller, p.58.

\(^ {113}\) *GiL*, p.33; cf. *LgA*, p.65.

\(^ {114}\) Two texts that do include the episode, *A Stanzaic Life of Christ* and the Chester *Nativity* play, are, of course, related.
Joseph fails to perceive the significance of what his wife is telling him but, in Lydgate’s telling, his attitude to her remains one of ‘benyn’ paternalism. Lydgate describes the Angel in sensual terms: he has a ‘face sterne and bryght’; his beauty emits ‘a plesant lyght’ and ‘a sote odoure’; his ‘clothyng like the lely floure /Was whit in sothe, as snowe that fallith newe’ (III.102, 103, 106-7). This combines to enact the drastic change in the atmosphere experienced by Mary and Joseph within the words of the poem. Picking up on the misplaced condescension of Joseph when he ‘bad hir Ryde in pess’ and the new reliance of the evidence of the senses,

[the Angel] with a chaunged hewe,
By-gan also Joseph to repreve.
And shortly bad his wordes that he leve,
And sayde, in sothe, that he was to blame
For to be bolde any wordes to atame

Ayens Marye; thorough his necligence
To saye that she spak any worde in vayne.
For that she sawe was non apperance,
But verrey sothe as she hath it seyne. (III.108-16)

By giving Joseph his own vision that is ‘non apperance /But verrey sothe’, Lydgate, via the Angel, gives him experiential proof that his wife speaks the truth. The Angel goes on to delineate the significance of the vision (III.122-51).

**Cherry tree**

The prophecy of the Jesse rod, whose iconographic significance has been fully demonstrated by Schiller, does not receive detailed treatment in the majority of the narrative accounts of Christ’s birth; Jesse does feature in Towneley *First Shepherds’ Play* (12.491-96) and in Marian lyrics. For example ‘Ecce virgo Radix Jesse’ forms a refrain in CB15.38.115 The exception occurs during the journey in the *N-Town* cycle, when Mary spots a cherry tree.

Maria A, my swete husband, wolde 3e telle to me
What tre is 3on standynge vpon 3on hylle?

Joseph Forsothe, Mary, it is clepyd a chery tre;
In tyme of 3ere 3e myght fede 3ow 3eron 3oure file.

Maria Turne ageyn, husbond, and beholde 3on tre,
How pat it blomyght now so swetly.

Joseph Cum on, Mary, pat we worn at 3on cyté,

---

Emphasis on proof through miracle, as seen also in the N-Town Trial of Mary and Joseph and the legend of the Midwives, is evident in this episode. Joseph cannot reach the fruit and exclaims ‘le te hym pluk 3ow cheryes begatt 3ow with childel’ (39). This conveys his difficulty in accepting the origin of Mary’s pregnancy and presents yet another opportunity for the ‘truth’ to be proven. God’s paternity is demonstrated in a grand gesture that further reminds the audience, and Joseph, of Mary’s innocence.

Maria
Now I thank it God, his tre bowyth to me down! I may now gaderyn anowe and etyn my fylle.

Joseph
Owl I know weyl I haue offendyd my God in Trinitye Spekyng to my spowse these vnkynde wur dys.
For now I beleve wel it may non other be
But bat my spowse beryght pe Kyngys Son of Blys;
He help us now at oure nede.
Of pe kynrede of Jesse worthely were 3e bore,
Kyngys and patryarkys 3ow before. (15.42-50)

Joseph’s affirmation of belief extends the episode to recall Isaiah’s prophecy and thus to link this proven virginity with the Jesse root. The N-Town dramatist’s use of the cherry tree is unique only in its chronological position; the episode occurs in Pseudo-Matthew during the flight into Egypt and is narrated in many accounts of the Flight.116

Ox and Ass

The ox and ass are ubiquitous in depictions of the birth. An illumination in a fourteenth-century Book of Hours shows Mary and Joseph sleeping while sitting at the side of their newly born son.117 Joseph sits as though he has dozed off while minding the baby; Mary’s entire body is turned away from her son. But she does not need to keep a watch over him because the artist has provided childcare in the form of the attentive ox and ass, whose noses peer over the baby’s crib. Their breath keeps him warm.118 Similar portrayals of the ox and ass are a constant feature of Christian imagery from a fourth-century Hellenistic

118 A similar image emerges from Nicholas Love’s description of the stable after the Nativity: ‘anone pe Ox & pe Asse kneyling done leiden hir mouipes on pe crach, breyng at hir neses vpon pe child, at pei kewnyn by reson bat in pat colde tyne pe child so simply hiled hade nede to be hatte in pat manere.’ (f.18r, p.38); see chapter 2, below.
sarcophagus through to children's Nativity plays in the present.\textsuperscript{119} This ubiquity in depictions of the birth seems to have inspired an addition to medieval narratives of the journey to Bethlehem: if an ox and ass are present at the birth, authors must account for how or why they got there?

The ass is seen in depictions of the journey from \textit{Protevangelium of James} onwards, which mentions the ass in order to describe how the pregnant Mary was able to travel: 'And he saddled his she-ass and sat her on it; his son led, and Joseph followed' (PJ 17.2, p.63). A 1339 manuscript illumination, showing the Journey to Bethlehem and including one of the few extant images of the decree, indicates how the iconography of the Journey had developed during the thirteenth century: Mary sits on an ass, accompanied by Joseph, not with his son or an angel but an ox.\textsuperscript{120} While the ass continues to play the role established in \textit{Proto-James}, the ox is given a more particular function: it provides the wherewithal for Joseph to pay the penny tribute to Caesar. Since the payment demanded only becomes a given in descriptions of the decree from \textit{Pseudo-Matthew} onwards, it seems natural for the idea to have developed so that later texts raise the question of how Joseph will be able to pay.

De Voragine chooses to add an explanation of why these creatures are present after mentioning the ox and ass in its description of the post-birth scene:

\begin{quote}
For whanne Ioseph went to Bethlem with Marie with childe he ledde with hym an oxse and anasse, peraenture for to selle for to paie money for hym and for the Virgine and for to live with the remenaunt, and the asse for to bere the Virgine. And thanne the oxe and the ass knewnoure Lorde bi myracle and worshipped hym vpon her knees.\textsuperscript{121}
\end{quote}

\textit{Legenda Aurea}’s popularity after its compilation in the late thirteenth century may account for the incorporation of the ox’s practical purpose in most Middle English narratives.\textsuperscript{122} And, while de Voragine includes the detail as an afterthought, Middle English authors shift the explanation to their accounts of the Journey itself: for the ox and ass to be present at the Birth, logic demands that they must accompany Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem.

\textsuperscript{119} Emile Mâle (1978): ‘the ox and ass warm the newborn child with their breath’ (p.63); sarcophagus fig.51 (p.65).

\textsuperscript{120} Schiller, p.58; figure 140 M$\textsuperscript{S}$ Illumination 1339: Plerarium of Otto the Mild (Caesar Augustus’s taxation decree, Journey to Bethlehem); in a Norwich roof boss, Joseph leads the ox and ass (Anderson (1963), pl. 10f., p.93).

\textsuperscript{121} \textit{Gil}, p.58; \textit{LgA}: \textit{Proficiscens enim Joseph in Betlehim cum Maria pregnante duxit secum hauem, forte ut ipsum adieret et consum pro se et pro uirgine solneret et de residuo uinercet, et unam asinum, forte ut uirgo super cum uechetur: Bos iigar et asinus miraculose dominum cogoscentes flexis genibus ipsum adorerauerunt.} Ante etiam Christ natuetiem per atiques dies, ut ali Eusebis in chronica, cum quidam arante, boves ad aratores ducerunt: \textit{Homines deficient, vegetes proficistis}. Quarto per creationem que habet esse, uinere, sentire et discernere, ut est homo, sicut per pastores (p.71).

\textsuperscript{122} Schiller, p.58.
The symbolism that can be drawn from this addition to the journey is clear in the

*South English Nativity:*

> be tym was ney pat oure leuedy here leue child bere scholde,
> perfore Josep hire nam wip him; fram hire wende he nolde.
> An oxe and an asse he hadde; bope wip him he ladde,
> be oxe dat he sulle myyte whanne he neode hadde
> To habbe is spense and is treuwage – be asse also he nam
> pat oure leuedy ride myhte whanne febliese to hire cam (343-48).

As delineated above, ‘spense’ may refer to the tribute or to general costs of living while away from home; ‘treuwage’ is, in contrast, derived from Old French and specifically refers to the taxes paid by a subject nation.\(^{123}\) The linking of treuwage with spense, i.e. of the tribute payable by a subject nation with the funds needed simply to exist, demonstrates how texts simultaneously can speak to a contemporary situation, holding up Kolve’s mirror to the poet’s society, and can perform the didactic role that we would expect from a religious text.

The political detail, above all, heightens a reader’s awareness that the baby saviour is born as a member of a subjected people, into poverty and suffering, just as he will suffer later, for their sins, dying in a Roman crucifixion.

The ox and its role in practicalities of the census can be found in most Middle English accounts, including *A Stanzaic Life of Christ*, which is characterized by a focus on the poverty of Mary and Joseph:

> And an oxe with hym toke he
> to selle 7 to lif þeropon
> quyþ þat duellide in that cite,
>
> And also tribute forto pay
> of that he shuld take for that best,
> for simple 7 pore both wer thay,
> ffor God wold lȝȝt þer pride wer lest. (350-56)

The detail of the ox emphasises the material effects of the journey: money must be found to live and pay tribute while in Bethlehem. Similarly, Love’s consistent focus in the *Mirror* on the human reality of Christ’s experience of life is evident when he emphasises Mary and Joseph’s few ‘worldly gude[s]’: ‘And so ledyng with hem an Ox & an Asse, þei wenten al þat longe wey to gedire, als pore folk hauyng no more worldly gude bot þo tweyn bestes’ (vi p.38). This ox and ass are crucial to Love’s depiction of the humility of Jesus’s Birth: their breath is needed to keep the tiny baby warm. Yet here he is able to use them also to convey Mary and Joseph’s social status: these two creatures are all their ‘worldly gude’. Whereas

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\(^{123}\) MED ‘spense’ (n1) a) ‘Funds, money for expenses; a monetary payment or reward’; ‘treuwage’ (n) 1. a) ‘Payment in money, goods, people, etc. owed by one nation or its ruler to another or exacted from one nation by another by virtue and in token of the former’s subordinate status, tribute’. By 1400, MED cites a possible usage of ‘treuage’ to convey servitude or subjection.
most accounts attribute the uncertainty of the length of their time away from Nazareth to Octavian and the political situation, the MLC-poet makes the uncertainty Christocentric:

He toke wip him an oxe to selle,  
For he ne wist how longe to dwelle.  
For our Lady meke and mylde  
Was so grete þen with childe,  
Sche ne wist which day withal  
Pat sche child haue schal.  
Perfore he wolde for anyþinge  
Haue þere redy spendinge. (69-76)

The date of Christ’s Birth rather than the whim of Caesar will determine the length of their stay but money from the sale of the ox will provide the necessary sustenance.

So from its first appearance in the thirteenth century Legenda Aurea, the ox has, by the early fifteenth century, become crucial to the portrayal of the humility of Christ’s Birth, reflecting the increased concern with devotional affect. The presence of the ox and ass has been noted by authors and depicted by artists in most accounts of the Birth from the fourth century.\textsuperscript{124} They are central to the iconography of humility since their presence reminds us that the baby is born in a place for beasts, and their breath can warm him against the cold. Therefore, the practical reasons given for their inclusion in the journey (to transport Mary and to pay the taxes), may have been post-facto attempts to account for their ubiquity in the scene of the Birth. This exemplifies the trend in Middle English narratives of making the wonders of Christ’s early life explicable in real and human terms.

\textsuperscript{124} Schiller notes that from the fourth century ‘the ox and ass are always present in renderings of the Nativity, even when neither Mary nor a shepherd is depicted’ (p.59).

35
Plate 4: East Harling, chancel, east window, panel 4c, 1480.
Plate 5: BL Add 47682 (Holkham), f.12v.
The Nativity: The Birth of Christ

factum est autem cum essent ibi impleti sunt dies ut pararet. et peperit filium suum primogenitum et pannis eum involvit et reclinavit eum in praesepio quia non erat eis locus in diversorio. (Luke 2.6-7)

In words whose many translations are echoed every year in Nativity plays and church services, Luke states that Mary gave birth to her firstborn son and laid him in a manger because there was no room in the inn. Christ’s Birth is thus contained in a few sentences, creating an information vacuum that allows for the growth of apocrypha and legend.\(^{125}\) We will see a wide variety of responses from medieval England, even though the Birth itself defies physical description. This chapter will first examine Mary’s location at the Birth, and the significance drawn from it. It will then delineate the various strategies used to narrate the Birth of the Messiah, when that Birth is, by definition, indescribable: Joseph’s departure; the moment of Birth; miraculous light; other miracles that mark the Birth; the portrayal of the Virgin with the newly-born Child. These variants are the natural result of the disparate source material available to Middle English authors. While Luke hints that the Birth takes place in an outbuilding, \textit{Proto-James} describes its location as a cave. \textit{Pseudo-Matthew} further notes that the Holy Family move from the cave to a stable after several days. Both \textit{Proto-James} and \textit{Pseudo-Matthew} comment on a remarkable light that accompanies Jesus’ Birth. In Luke, Joseph appears to be with Mary when she gives birth but both apocryphal gospels emphasize that Joseph departs so that the Birth takes place in solitude without assistance. The larger collection of miracles accompanying the Birth are first delineated in \textit{Legenda Aurea}.

The Stable

Once Mary and Joseph arrive in Bethlehem, they must find somewhere to stay. Luke hints at the location with a subclause: the baby is laid in a manger \textit{quia non erat eis locus in diversorio} (Luke 2.7). The specified manger (\textit{praesepio}) hints at a location in an outbuilding, and this detail begins to prompt further description of place in the apocryphal gospels. In \textit{Pseudo-Matthew}, the angel who has explained the story of the Two Nations to Mary and Joseph \textit{iussit stare iumentum, quia tempus pariendi advenaret; et pracecepit beatae Mariae caverna, in qua lux nunquam erat sed semper tenebrae, quia lumen dici recipere non poterat} (PM XIII.2). For \textit{Pseudo-Matthew}, the Birth takes place in a cave, because this is where the

\(^{125}\) Murdoch and Tasioulas (2002) note how the Reformation drew such an effective line under extra-biblical material that it is now “hard to imagine” its earlier pervasiveness (\textit{The Apocryphal Lives of Adam and Eve}, p.13).
couple happen to be when *tempus pariendi advenerat*. The darkness that is a feature of this situation provides a symbolic as well as actual contrast to a bright light that accompanies the Birth. Several days after the birth, *Pseudo-Matthew* moves the Holy Family from the cave to a stable. However, while the light that accompanies the arrival of the newly-born baby, dismissing the darkness of the place, remains a feature of medieval English texts and iconography, the cave location has disappeared and the distinction between cave and stable is lost.\textsuperscript{126}

The setting that Middle English writers describe is much influenced by St Francis’s early thirteenth-century Nativity scene.\textsuperscript{127} This crib, described by MacCulloch as a ‘celebration of the everyday’, establishes many of the iconographic ‘givens’ of the period,\textsuperscript{128} and the way in which its influence grows can be seen from comparing the earliest surviving Middle English descriptions of the Nativity with later material. For example, in *Cursor Mundi*, no description of the place of Birth is given; and the poet of the *South English Nativity* merely relates how Joseph leaves Mary with the ox and ass ‘[a]t a cracche’.\textsuperscript{129}

In contrast with the paucity of description in these thirteenth-century poems, affective details first seen in Francis’s crib (and retold in the *Legenda Aurea*) begin to proliferate in Middle English texts of the 1300s. De Voragine frames Mary and Joseph’s inability to find lodging in terms of their poverty: ‘And whanne thei come bothe into Bethlem thei myght gete hem no hous, for thei were pore and multitude of other hadde all take up.’\textsuperscript{130} This begins to encourage the reader’s pity and this mood continues in the explanation of the Latin word ‘diersorie’ used in Luke’s gospel:

*Thanne thei turned hem to a comon place that was bitwene ii. howses was hille abowe and called the diuersorie, wher men of the citee assembled togederis to speke and to dyne in idell dayes, or ellis for distemperance of the tyme, or ellis as som sayn that the churches of the contrey, whanne they come to the market, thei wolde teye there thaire bestis, and for that cause was there a crache redie made.* (p.34)

None of the purposes of the ‘diuersorie’ suggest that it is an ideal place for any baby to be born, and the connection with ‘churches’ points to a humility that contrasts sharply with expectations of a divine birth. This sets up the symbolism that will continue when shepherds

\textsuperscript{126} Schiller, p.62 citing Justin Martyr BKV, p.128 as an example and on the light ‘even the doctors of the church, beginning with Irenaeus in the third century, connected the cave of the Nativity with the cave of Hades – in which the dead of the Old Covenant awaited salvation – and, by the same token, Christ’s Incarnation with His Descent into Limbo’.

\textsuperscript{127} ‘during the last years of his life in the forest of Greccio, [Francis] brought in an ox and an ass and set up a manger with hay’, Schiller, p.76. cf. MacCulloch (2009), pp.417-18.

\textsuperscript{128} MacCulloch (2009), p.418.

\textsuperscript{129} Joseph’s departure fits with two other aspects of the story that will be discussed later: Joseph’s absence at the Birth and the legend of the midwives.

\textsuperscript{130} *Gil*, p.34.
are chosen by God to worship his son; shepherds are ‘churles of the country’, marked by their difference from the townsfolk, and in their usual visits to town, they would not be welcomed into respectable dwellings. Yet the reader’s reaction to this humility is given a model in Mary’s own response: ‘sche that was ladi of alle the world was content withe that litell hous’ (p.34). Likewise, Nicholas Love comments on the attitude of both Mother and Child at the Birth: ‘pei were not sqweymes of pe stable, nor of pe beestes nor of hey, & seche ope abieete sympelines. Bot þis vertue of mekenes bope our lord & our lady kepten peritely in alle hir dedes & commende it souereynly to vs’ (vi, p.39).131 This meekness sets a pattern towards which future Christians should aspire; Christ and Mary ‘commende it souereynly to vs’. Love is careful to articulate that their ‘mekenes’ is a voluntary state, chosen by Christ himself; at the moment of Incarnation, he ‘hade in his owne fre wille’ to choose the time and situation:

he chese þe tyme þat was most noyus & hard as þe cold wyntour; namelich to a 3onge childe & pore womans son, þat skarsly hade clopes to wrappe him inne, & a cracche as for a credile to lay him inne, & 3it þow þer was so mich nede. I fynde no mynde of fureres or pilches. (vi, pp.39-40)

Love’s explicit rejection of furs and animal skins in the scene stands in opposition to much contemporary iconography, which depicts Mary in fine clothes. For example, while the Adoration of the Shepherds panel of the fifteenth-century east window of East Harling Church, Norfolk, depicts an ox and ass peering at the Holy Family from behind the shepherds, which suggests a stable-setting, Mary is wearing rich clothes, seemingly decorated with gold braid, and a tiara.132 Despite the popularity of such dress in contemporary iconography, Middle English texts more usually demonstrate an interest in the poor circumstances of the birth.

The Northern Homily Cycle tells readers that Mary and Joseph stop in ‘ane ald hows in a strete /Wharethurgh ilk man might al day mete’ (2659-60). Even Joseph is aware that this lodging is ‘febill herber’ because

be hows was opin on sides thre,
A wall þare was withow[th]en ma,
þarto þai band þare bestes twa,
And Mari sit right þam bside. (2659-75)

In addition to describing the simple inconvenience of the open-sided building, the homilist heightens the affective tone by locating Christ’s Birth in winter, as medieval Christians would expect from the liturgical year. This emerges through an alliterative pattern over two lines;

131 Ghosh, p.160.
132 East Harling, chancel, east window, panel 4c. CMVA 014367 (plate 4).
Mary and Joseph ‘ware weri and will of wane, / For it was winter and weders grete,’ (2662-63); their tiredness seems inextricable from the poor weather. Furthermore, the homilist specifies that it ‘was on midwinter night’. By choosing this particular date, the winter equinox, he ensures that his Mary and Joseph face the ‘most cald and kene’ weather of the year (2467) and are therefore particularly deserving of the audience’s pity since ‘pai had nowper fire ne mete / To pam ne to paiere bestes’ (2664-5).

Similarly, the Middle English translation of Edmund of Abingdon’s Speculum ecclesiae takes all conditions to superlative extremes: ‘pe tyne was in myd-wynter, when it was maste calde; pe houre was at mydnyghte, pe hardest houre pat es; pe stede was in mydwarde pe strete, in a house with-owten walles.’ Each detail is matched syntactically by a clause that conveys to Edmund’s readers the ultimate sacrifice paid by the baby saviour. Unusually, the Speculum Devotorum explains the place as a ‘Couerde Strete’: ‘for grete hete of pe sonne [...] hit was couerde aboue with blake clothes’ (SpecD, chap 5, p.97), Yet, as in other texts, this places the Holy Family at the mercy of the weather and the open-sided building ‘with-owten walles’ becomes a means through which the humility of the birth is proven. It is, though, worth noting that the open sides are a necessary component of the scene in iconography in order for the viewer to see inside. The work to which the absence of walls is put by authors therefore may result from an attempt to explain the iconography that they themselves encountered. In the cycle drama, the setting is similarly utilitarian, and can be imagined from the illustration in the Holkham Bible Picture Book.

The significance of the stable becomes clear through the characters’ reactions to it: Joseph, for example, exemplifies blind humanity’s inability to see the deeper significance of the paucity of shelter. In the York play, Joseph comments on the poor state of ‘pe ruffe ... rayued aboven oure hede’ when the couple have found makeshift accommodation (14.18). His distress at being forced to lodge ‘with pere bestes’ contrasts with Mary’s calm acceptance of the situation. As in the Legenda Aurea, she provides a model of humility:

[...] Joseph, be of gud chere,
For in his place borne will he be
bat sall] vs saue fro sorowes sere,
Bope even and mornes.
Sir, witte 3e wele pe tyne is nere
He will be borne (14.30-35).

133 St Edmund’s Mirror in Religious Pieces in Prose and Verse (EETS, 1867, 1914), p.42.
134 BL Add 47682 (The Holkham Bible Picture Book), f.13r (plate 5); image discussed in relation to midwives in Chap 3.
Mary's response to the roughness of 'pis place' is inflected by her deeper understanding of
the redeeming work that will be done by her son's Birth; the baby will 'saue' humanity from
everal hardship. The stanza's monosyllabic final line conveys her emphatic certainty that
God will make all things well. Joseph's inability to perceive a deeper truth is seen also in N-
Town, where his lament at the situation contrasts the wonder of what is about to occur with
their shabby surroundings:

God be pin help, spowse, it swenyth me sore,
bus febly loggyd and in so pore degré.
Goddys sone amonghe bestys for to be bore –
His woundyr werkys fulfillyd must be –
In an hous pat is desolat, withowty[n] any wall;
Fyer nor wood non here is. (15.98-103)

Joseph's use of the stock oath 'God be pin help' ironically points to the saving grace of this
situation; it is of God and therefore all will be well.

A belief that such help will be sent can be seen in iconography of the period. In the
Nativity panel of the Great East Window at the church of St Peter Mancroft, Norwich, we can
see two small angels on the roof; this may, according to a scholar of medieval stained glass,
have been influenced by the N-Town play: ‘[T]he one on the left appears to be patting down
the thatch, and the one on the right brings a fresh bundle of thatch to mend the hole in the
roof.' This iconography is not unique to St Peter Mancroft and can be seen elsewhere in
Medieval England as well as in the Netherlands.

So far, the accounts at which we have looked use the location principally for its
potential affect. Other texts are more clearly didactic in their treatment of the stable. In a
fourteenth-century lyric the paradox of a prince born in poverty becomes an example for
readers:

Wol loweliche þat lord gan lihtte
þou he were comen of kenne;
In pouerct þat prince him pithe
to ben born in a byrne.

þis ensample he hat vs broth
to liyen in lounesse,
& pride to puten out of oure þouth,
þat broth vs in bitternesse.137

---

136 King, (lxxvi); ub King mentions the potential connection between N-Town and St Peter Mancroft and
concludes that nothing is proven, yet the windows may have been influenced by the plays (lxxvi-viii).
137 CB14.57 (lines 21-28): NIMEV 1472 'In bedlem is a child i-born /sal comen amongus vs'; MS Advocates
Library 18.7.21, f.4v-5v.
The primary Middle English meaning of ‘binne’ is a stall, stable, manger or crib; however it holds a secondary meaning of ‘a place of confinement’ which augments the lyricist’s affective aim, linking the suffering of birth to the suffering necessary for redemption.

For some authors, including the MLC-poet, the location is important because of the opportunity it offers to contrast the worldly and the spiritual. In a pre-echo of the confrontation in the temple on Palm Sunday, the poet describes the ‘litel place’ where the baby will be born which is situated within a centre of trade:

```
Joseph went aboute faste,
He fonde a place atte laste
In pe grete hous of marchaundye,
Was comyn to alle men to selle & bye.
Beryynne was a litel place
Pat for lomber closed was.
A cracche whay beryynne was sette,
Biside hit a fyre ybetee.
He brught oure Lady pider anon,
In pat hous was noon oper wone. (95-104)
```

The eternal present of Christianity, giving readers pre-existing knowledge of later events in the Biblical narrative, allows the parallel with the misuse of the temple to exist and further to establish a resonant comparison between the shallowness of earthly wealth and the spiritual richness that has been incarnated in earthly poverty.

This points to the ways in which the location of the Birth can be used by preachers. By the fifteenth century, the open sides of the stable have become such an accepted feature of Nativity iconography that a Lollard preacher is able to use them to illustrate a theological point. They demonstrate Christ’s openness to any man who comes to him for grace and mercy: ‘pat pis blesside chylde was born in a hous open oon euery side bitokenep pat God wole be closed fro no man pat wole come to his merci, but euere redi to alle men pat wolen clepe to hym of mercy and grace’ (5, p.60). As in other texts we have seen, this preacher is eager to point out that Christ was not at the mercy of circumstance: ‘he chees to be born in tyme of pis jorne’ (5, p.56). This choice encompasses time, place and circumstance, representing a voluntary embodiment of humility.

Absence of Joseph

Joseph’s ancillary role is nowhere more apparent than in the moment of Christ’s birth. His presence is simply not required. Neither of the canonical accounts is clear as to whether he is with Mary as she gives birth. From the more detailed Luke, we learn only that Mary peperit filium suum primogenitum. Comparable simplicity is rarely found in medieval English texts. A rare example is the four lines that encapsulate the Birth in Cursor Mundi:
Quat schal i tell yow, less or mare,
Bot ihesu críst hir barn sco bar,
Hir child, and maiden neuer less,
Wit-vten wemming of hir fless. (11205-8)

The poet ensures, even in this simple description, that his audience is fully aware of Mary’s virginity. The virginity and its concomitant doctrine helps explain why, elsewhere, writers are often careful to specify that Joseph departs on an errand of some kind, leaving Mary alone and, crucially, without assistance. This is a notably different emphasis from other texts which seek to make Mary’s virginity absolutely clear in the ways in which they describe (and avoid describing) the moment of birth itself.

In the Protevangelium of James, the expediency of having the mother alone to give birth has already been recognised: Joseph leaves Mary ‘to seek a Hebrew midwife’, suggesting that he wishes to see Judaic birth customs honoured (Pj 19.1, p.65). While Pseudo-Matthew translates a great deal of his source wholesale, he makes some small but significant alterations: *iam enim nativitas domini advenerat, et joseph perrexerat quaerere obstetrices* (XIII.3, p.74). The absence of the adjective ‘Hebrew’ immediately undermines Joseph’s motives in seeking help for Mary since it indicates that he has not appreciated the significance of Gabriel’s words at the Annunciation; he does not realise that Mary’s child will, because of her virginity, be born without the pain that makes midwives a necessary part of most human births.

Joseph’s imperfect understanding becomes a standard part of the scene in Middle English narratives. His anxiety is clear in the South English Nativity, when Mary calmly tells him ‘pat tyne it was pat be child were ybore’ and he responds with an exclamation: “Alas”, seide Josep, “wummanles what schulle [we] do þerfore?” (360). The poet implicitly condemns Joseph’s actions: ‘Alone he byleuede oure leuedy in þulke wylde hous þar’ (365); he doesn’t simply leave her since, with the prefix ‘by’, the verb is intensified to hint at a forsaking or abandoning at the very moment of Christ’s Birth.138

The SLC-poet articulates bafflement at Joseph’s decision to leave Mary by accumulating the phrases ‘al-þa3e’ and ‘neuer-þe-later’:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{al-þa3e Joseph wist witerly} \\
\text{that Marie Crist conceyuet has,} \\
\text{neuer-þe-later he went in hie,} \\
\text{for he segh ne3e hir time it was,} \\
\text{and two maidens wonyng bie} \\
\text{he bro3t to help hir in þat cas. (447-52)}
\end{align*}
\]

138 MED: bileven v1; ‘(a) To depart from or leave (a place, one’s people, a person); (b) to give up (possessions, Christianity, etc.); forsake (an obligation, etc.); abandon (bad habits, etc.); (c) to forego (activity), desist from.’
Joseph ‘wist witerly’ that the Birth will be painless but nonetheless seeks midwives. The
Chester Joseph expresses a similar confusion:

[he] will assaye
to gett too middwives yf I maye;
for though in thee bee God verey –
and commen against kynde –
for usage here of this citty
and manners sake, as thinkes mee,
too I will fetch anon to thee
yf I may any lynde. (VI.469-76)

He perceives that she carries ‘God verey’ and that the birth is therefore not subject to the
usual laws of ‘kynde’ but still he feels the impetus to seek help. The dramatist, like the author
of Protevangelium of James, thus chooses to connect the search for midwives more to the
strangeness of the place than to his failure to comprehend the significance of Mary’s
virginity. Yet Joseph’s faith is simultaneously affirmed and questioned when he returns with
the women:

Lord, welcome, sweete Jesu!
Thy name thow haddest or I thee knewe.
Nowe leve I the angells worde is trewe,
that thow arte a cleane maye. (VI.509-12)

With the word ‘nowe’, the poet shows that doubt still lingered previously. This
transformation from unbelief to faith makes Joseph a paradigm of the disbeliever who
becomes faithful.

A similar articulation of contradiction is explicit when the N-Town Joseph addresses
Mary as ‘clene may’ in the very speech where he announces that she will need midwives ‘to
ese’ her ‘trauayle’:

All redy, wyff, 3ow for to plese
I wyg go hens out of 3oure way,
And seke sum mydwyuys 3ow for to ese
Whan pat 3e traualye of childe pis day.
Farewell, trewe wyff and also clene may,
God be 3oure conforte in Trinylé. (15.118-23)

Ironically, his invocation for God to be her comfort indicates his failure to realise that this
will indeed be the case. However, Joseph’s role as unbeliever is not fully responsible for his
absence. The narrative felicity of his departure is suggested in the speech preceding this, in
which Mary herself requests privacy:

Therfore, husband, of 3oure honesté,
Avoyd 3ow hens out of pis place,
And I alone with humylité
Here xal abyde Goddy3 hy3 grace. (15.114-17)

Dignity demands that the virgin should deliver her child alone and an errand, whether for
midwives or light, provides a reasonable narrative excuse for Joseph to depart.
The moment of Birth

The problem of narrating the moment of Christ’s Birth is acute for medieval authors: the significance of the Incarnation, charged as it was in the medieval period with the legacy of Anselm’s *Cur Deus homo* and Eadmer’s work on the Immaculate Conception of Mary,\(^{139}\) makes efforts to encapsulate it in narrative form akin to attempts to describe the indescribable. One strategy is evident in the *South English Nativity*, in which the poet compresses time to announce simply that ‘he was ybore’, and then marks the wonder of the event with the arrival of angels:

***Psalm 87***

\[ \begin{align*}
\text{[I]n night at myddelhyht \vphantom{\@}}
\text{hat swete bern heo bar} \\
\text{= Godes sone, \vphantom{\@}}
\text{\[Sonne\] nyht} \\
\text{A myddewynter nyht he was ybore: \vphantom{\@}}
\text{yblessid be \vphantom{\@}} \text{pe stoundel} \\
\text{Aunges be} \text{comen anobre \vphantom{\@}} \text{wip gret companye,} \\
\text{To solacy our lord ybore and is moder Marie. (364-70)}
\end{align*} \]

As we have seen, the canonical gospels provide little amplification of the basic ‘facts’.

*Pseudo Matthew* adds to Luke’s narrative with a bright light:

\[ \text{Cumque ingressa fuit seta Maria in eam, coepit tota splendore clarescere, quasi hora diei Sexta esset: ita speluncam lux divina illustrabat ut nec in die nec in noce lux ibi defuerit, quamdiu ibi fuerat beata Maria. Et} \text{ibi peperit masculum, quem angeli statim circumderunt nascentum, quem natum et super pedes suos in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis. (PM XVIII.2, p.74)} \]

According to Schiller, ‘[I]t is one of the great articles of mankind’s ancient learning that a great light shone at the human birth of the divine Son (cf. Isaiah 60).’\(^{140}\) This light is a feature also of Bridget’s *Liber Celestis*.\(^{141}\) The translation of this work is the account that gets closest to a description of the Birth in Middle English. Paradoxically, the expansiveness of Bridget’s narrative is frustrated when the Birth occurs: ‘And it was so sodan, hat beringe of be child, hat I might no3t persauiue be passinge furthe of be childe.’\(^{142}\) Bridget’s vision of the Nativity offers a wealth of detail about the location and appearance of the ‘maiden with child’. Bridget witnesses Mary’s preparation for the Birth:

And when sho had made all redi, sho knelide downe with grete reueurens and prayed, and sett hir bake againe pe cribe, and turned hir visage to pe este and helde vp hir handes and hir een vp into pe heuen, and sho was raised in contemplacion with so grete a swetenes hat hard it is to tell. (VII.xxii, p.486)

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\(^{139}\) Eadmer, *Tractatus de conceptione sanctae Mariæ* (1904), pp.3-6 and passim.

\(^{140}\) Schiller, p.70.

\(^{141}\) SpecD retells Bridget’s narrative here (chap 5, p.99). See also the Norwich roof boss with a great light at the Nativity (Anderson (1963), pl. 10h., p.94).

\(^{142}\) *Liber Celestis*, ed. by Roger Ellis (1987), VII.xxii, p.486.
Mary enacts a liturgical ritual as she turns East, preparing the way for generations of worshippers to face East for the creed. The raising of her hands calls to mind the actions of the priest at the moment of transubstantiation in the Mass. Furthermore, the ambiguity of Bridget's conclusion 'pat hard it is to tell' conlates the mystery of the Mass with the mystery of the Birth. We are left to consider whether she means to say that the Birth is hard to describe, or hard to perceive. There can be no witnessing of the miracle of Incarnation in the moment that Christ is born. Bridget must use other imagery to convey the significance of her vision: 'And bare com so grete a light and brightnes pat it passed pe brightenes of pe son, and pe lightnes of pe candill pat Joseph sett on pe wall might no3t be sene' (VILxxii, p.486). The intensity of light creates a powerful expression of the wonder of God's presence on earth. It is a superlative light, greater than the natural light of the sun and making useless the artificial light of Joseph's candle. The baby is shown, therefore, to be greater than the sphere of creation as represented by the planets and further to render human 'making' in the form of a candle utterly irrelevant. The light from the baby not only points to the theological importance of the moment but also plays a crucial role in Bridget's narrative: its power literally affects Bridget's sight, allowing for the 'sodan [...] beringe of pe child' to remain unseen. A similar convention is found in iconography, including the East Harling Nativity panel where the baby, once born, emits rays of light.

Nicholas Love connects the painless 'goyng oute' to the holiness of the conception: 'when tyme of pat blessed birpe was come [...] goddus son of heuen as he was conceuyed in his modere wombe by pe holi gost, without sede of man, so goynge oute of pat wombe without traualie or sorowe. sodeynly was vpon hey at his modere feet' (p.38). In the adverb 'sodeynly', the time shift from the Old to the New Testament is compressed. Other narratives convey this by moving straight from the future tense to the perfect. In the Northern Homily Cycle, the 'tyme was cumen' when God's son 'wald of hir be born' is juxtaposed to a sentence describing events that took place 'When he was born':

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{he tyme was cumen to hir tayde} \\
\text{bat God-sun wald of hir be born} \\
\text{Als prophettes heere had talde biforn.} \\
\text{When he was born, bat maide[n] milde} \\
\text{In kloutes laped bat blisced childe,} \\
\text{And law bifor \textit{he} bestes him laid.} \\
\end{align*}
\]

\[\text{(2678-81)}\]

\[143\] Joseph's candle can be seen in a painting of 1400: ‘in einer sweiten (Bodensee, um 1400, Konstanz, Rosgarten Museum) ist Josef noch mit dem Licht beschäftigt, als das Kind eben schon geboren ist (Abb. 5)’ (de Coo, p.5, fig. 5); cf. fig. 28 (Kölner, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum) in which two small angels are holding tall candles.

\[144\] East Harling, chancel, east window, panel 4c (plate 4); CMVA 014367.
The lacuna in the narrative between lines 2678 and 2679 preserves Mary's dignity, omitting any practical consideration of childbirth, thus retaining a sense of mystery.

Dramatic form brings particular challenges for the representation of the Nativity. The extant cycles all tackled this problem in different ways. Christ's Birth is absent from the Towneley cycle; its Nativity sequence focuses on the famous pair of Shepherds' Plays. The Chester Nativity moves the action to Joseph and his search for midwives; when he returns, the Birth has already occurred. Similarly, in one of the extant plays from the Coventry cycle, the Birth takes place while the action of the pageant is with the shepherds. When the scene returns to the stable, Mary tells Joseph to 'cum heddur anon' for 'My chylde ys borne þat ys Kyng of blys' (268 -69).

The York playwright unusually represents the Birth onstage; Mary is left alone while Joseph departs to fetch some light. Her words shift tense from 'will be borne' to 'Nowe borne is he' to indicate that the Birth has happened:

Nowe in my sawle grete joie haue I,  
I am all cladde in conforte clere,  
Now will be borne of my body  
Both God and man togedir in feere,  
Blist mott he be.  
Jesu my sone þat is so dere,  
Nowe borne is he. (15.49-56)

In these lines, Mary further underlines the significance of the Birth by reminding the audience of her son's dual nature: 'Both God and man togedir in feere'. Despite being alone on the stage, preserving the impossibility of witness that we have seen in Bridget's account, Mary is, in fact, watched by the townspeople of York. Drama thus creates witnesses to Christ's Birth. The question of how the scene was depicted is not resolved by Mary's words in the York play, or by the stage direction in the N-Town Nativity: *Hic dum Joseph est absens parit Maria Filium Vnigenitum* (SD125). We cannot know what the audience would have seen at this moment and whether they are in any way privileged over Bridget, who cannot perceive because of the brightness of light, or Joseph, who has been dispatched on an errand.

John Lydgate's emphasis on the Virgin ensures that the purity of the Birth is central to his poem and he therefore provides one of the fuller narratives of the Birth itself. As Mary enters 'a stabbyll and a lytyll stall',

[...] a new soden light  
Gan the place enlumen envyron,  
That shone as bright as eny someres day,  
So that this lytyll humble mancion

Likewise, Mary speaks the words that tell the audience that her son has died in the York *Death of Christ* play: 'Allas, nowe my dere sone is dede' (36.264).
Was fresche of light as phebus is in may; (III.168-72)

The light arrives symbolically to announce the miracle of the Birth yet Lydgate augments this with an attempt to make the process of birth occur on the page with a lengthy sentence that travels across the boundary of the stanza from the moment of incarnation in the womb to an 'easily' transition that arrives at 'he was borne':

For tawarde mydnyght, shortly to devyse,
Whan all was huste, holy wrypt makyth mynde,
As solstely as he dyd hym wynde
In the sycles, of this holy mayde,
So casely this newe sonne abrayde,

Whan he was borne in to this mortall lyfe,
Vpon the erthe to shede his bryghtnesse,
Withoutyn helpe of any mydwyfie,
Or of his mothir, travell or sekenesse. (III.178-86)

Lydgate reminds his readers of Mary’s pureness and paradoxical state of ‘mayde, modir, and wife’ as he spends several stanzas contrasting her experience of giving birth with that of ‘oper wemen’

For she that firste conceyved in clennesse,
It sat right wele that she shulde also
With outyn trayvell or eny manere woo,

For to go quyte at hir delyueraunce,
And specially haue aprerogatife,
In hir childyng to tele no penaunce,
Sithe she was bothe mayde, modir, and wife,
Chosyn of god for to stynte our stryve,
Of all wyamen, by hir self aloon.
Wherfore it sat not hir for to crye and grone

Lyke oper wemen pat ben inli sike,
In the tymne of hir trvelyn.
Wherfore sithe she was to noon othir lyke,
No payne felte the houre of hir chldyng.
And, as I fynde, at hir delyeryng
Ther was no wight but hir self aloon (III.187-202).

**Mother and Child**

With the Virgin Birth itself proving too mysterious as well as too holy to describe, a wealth of literature and art chooses instead to focus on the conditions experienced by mother and child in the first hours of his life. Textual accounts of the Nativity frequently give a detailed picture of the scene that at once influence and are influenced by visual media. Bridget describes Christ’s appearance: ‘I sawe pat blisfull childe liinge naked on þe erthe, and he had þe fairest skin þat euir I sawe, withouten spot’ (VII.xxii, p.486). His superlative fairness is combined with a reminder of his freedom from sin: he is both literally and
metaphorically ‘withouten spot’. The theme of cleanliness is conveyed further in a
description of a remarkably unsoiled placenta: ‘I sawe þe seconde, þat is þe rim þat þe
child was born in, liand all white’ (VII.xxii, p.486). Following her vision of the child alone,
Bridget narrates the sight of the child with his mother, which opens up a new iconographical
seam of maternal devotion. The manger is absent from this image; the baby is open to his
mother and to worshippers on the bare ground. His proximity to the earth emphasises his
vulnerability and fragile humanity while simultaneously pointing to his status as creator and
created.

Cursor Mundi narrates how Mary takes care of her son once he is born:

Sli clathes als sco had to hand
Wit suilk sco suedeld hima dn ban,
Bituix tua cribbes sco him laid;
Was þar na riche geres graithed,
Was þar na pride o couerled,
chamber curtin ne tapit. (11235-40)
The repetition of ‘Was þar na’ underlines the humility of the circumstances. We have seen
the superlative cold included in descriptions of Mary and Joseph’s arrival in Bethlehem; the
potential affect of the poverty and humility of the stable is enhanced by the addition of a tiny
baby to the scene. In the South English Nativity, the ‘myddewynter’ date ensures that all
conditions are at their worst:

A myddewynter nyht he was ybore; yblessid be þe stounde
Angeles þer comen anon aboute wip gret companye,
To solacy our lord ybore and is moder Marie.
[Heo nadde] whariume our lord to wynde þo he was ybore,
Bote in feble [cloutes] þat sole were and eke al totoore.
[perinne] oure leuedy him word and bond him wip a liste;
Vppe a wispe of heo heo leyde hym (per was a pore giste!) (368-74)
The poignancy is heightened when the poet describes the particular poverty and humility of
the circumstances: Jesus’s swaddling bands are both ‘feble’ and ‘totorre’; even the hay on
which he is laid is merely a ‘wispe’.

Bridget turns her attention to the practicalities of the Birth after describing Mary’s
adoration of her son. She emphasises once again the themes of humility and cold: ‘þe child,
wepand and tremeland for colde and hardnes of þe pament, streked him to seke refresheinge’
(VII.xxii, p.486). The child’s full humanity becomes central to the vision here, and Mary
departs from her worshipping pose to tend to her son’s physical needs.

Margery Kempe brings the emotion of the baby’s death to his Birth, with her own
tears becoming integral to the unfolding of her vision of the Nativity:

Afyrrward sche swathyd hym wyth byttyr teerys of compassyon, havyng mend of the
scharp deth that he schuld suffyr for the lofe of synful men, seyng to hym:
'Lord I schal fare fayr wyth yow; I schal not byndyn yow soor. I pray yow beth not dyspleyd wyth me' (1.6, pp. 77-78).

We are used to Margery crying in response to her visions; here, her tears come from the knowledge of the future that she brings to the scene she imagines. She shows, through her participation in her own narrative, a model of devotional behaviour. Furthermore, prior to this effusion of tears, she has depicted herself taking on the role of assistant at the birth:

And than went the creatur forth wyth owyr Lady to Bedlem and purchaseyd hir herborwe every nyght wyth gret reverens, and owyr Lady was receyved wyth glad cher. Also sche beggyd owyr Lady fayr whyte clothys and kerchys for to swathyn in hir sone when he wer born; and whan Jhesu was born, sche ordeyned beddyng for owyr Lady to lyg in wyth hir blyssyd chyld.

Margery's vision owes much to Bridget's description of the birth with its emphasis on light and white, but Bridget's Mary obtains her own cloth and bedding so Margery's personal involvement is unique to her vision. It is an extension of her deeply reactive experience of religion: just as a thought of the Passion demands tears, a comfortless Mary demands assistance. The part that Margery plays, providing practical assistance to mitigate the cold, is in keeping with the emphasis placed in many Middle English texts on the harsh conditions of the place where Christ will be born. For example, in the Coventry Pageant of the Shearmen and Taylors, Mary articulates her concerns to Joseph: 'A, Josoff, husebond, my chyld waxith cold, /And we haue noo fyre to warme hym with' (273-74). This leads to the unusual scene of Joseph warming the child in his arms before the typical scene of the breath of the beasts providing extra heat:

Now in my narmys I schall hym fold,  
Kyng of all kyngis be tyld and be fyrth;  
He myght haue had bettur and hymselfe wold,  
Then the brethyng of these bestis to warm hym with. (275-9)

The instinct of the beasts to warm the child points to their knowledge of his importance and fits with the common miracle of their worship of him in the moments following the Birth. This vivid detail can be seen in many depictions including windows such as the St Peter Mancroft Nativity panel and Love's meditation wherein the ox and ass are 'breping at hir neses vpon þe child, at þei knewen by reson þat in þat colde tyme þe child so simply hiled hade nede to be hatte in þat manere' (p.38).

Unusually, this moment is preceded in Love's text by the astonishing image of Mary washing her son in her milk: 'þe anone she deoutly enclinande with souereyn ioy toke him

146 Continental European iconography frequently contains an image reminiscent of this scene, in which Joseph warms the baby in his hose (see Joseph de Coo (1963); Schiller, p.80).

147 See below for discussion of the miracles.
in hire armes, leide him in hir barme, & with a fulle pap, as she was taught of pe holi gost,
weshe him alle aboute with hir swete milke, & so wrapped him in pe kerchif of her hede, &
leide him in pe crach’ (lune.vi, p.38). This is a variation on the more usual image of Mary
barring her chest in order to nurse Christ. Such an image, which can be seen for example in a
panel of the nave’s west window at York Minster,148 and a window from Warndon Church,
Hereford and Worcester,149 may have prompted the idea of her using the milk to wash him.
Love seeks to make the Nativity scene memorable and meaningful by conveying its
unfamiliarity through the familiar routines of birth, swaddling clothes and midwives. Firstly
Love points his readers to Mary’s age; she is young, tired and unable to find rest:

Now take here gude hede & haue inwardly compassion of pat blessed lady & maiden
Marie, how she is so 3onge & of so tendire age; pat is to sey of xv 3ere & gret with
child as nehe pe birpe trauailep pat longe wey of lxti Mile and x or more, in so gret
pouerte, & 3it when she came to pe Cite forseide here she shold rest & asked
herburgh in diuerse place[s] shamefastly as among vnkep folk. alle pei werned hem
& let hem go. And so for nede at pe last pei toke as for herbergh, pat comune place
aforseide. (lune.vi, p.38)

Worldly poverty is, for Love’s Mary, insignificant: ‘Bot in pis pore & symple worldly aray
what gostly riches & inward confort & ioy she hade. may no tonge telle’ (lune.vi, p.39). This
has implications for the reader: ‘if we wole fele pe trew ioy & confort of Jesu. we most wip
him & wip modere loue. pouerte, mekenes & bodily penance os he gaf vs ensaumple of alle
pees here in his birpe & first comyng in to pis world’ (lune.vi, p.39). The exemplifying
impulse is clear from Love’s use of Bernard’s sermon further to delineate the significance of
the poverty, meekness and penance that he has chosen to emphasise. Mary provides a model
development in the attitude she assumes toward her newly born son:

[... ] And pat his modere knelyng done wirchiped & loued god, inwardly ponkyng &
seying in pis manere, Lord god holi fadere of heuen, I ponke pe with al my mi3t, pat
hast 3iue me pi dere sone, & I honour pe almi3ty god godus son & myn. Joseph also
honouryng & wichiyng pe child god & man, toke pe sadel of pe Asse, & made pe a quiscyn
oure lady to sitte on & a suppolye to leyn to. (lune.vi, pp.38-9)

Love’s description of Mary’s devoted gaze on her son is particularly reminiscent of
visual iconography: ‘And so sat pe lady of al pe worlde in pat simple araye byside pe crach,
hauyng hir mild mode & hir louely eyene, with her inward affeccion, vpon hir swete
derworth child’ (lune.vi, p.39). The ‘inward affeccion’ seems to contradict Schiller’s assertion
that from 1300, the Mother and Child ‘motif is now transformed into a devotional
relationship and despite the intimate and inspired expression a distance is maintained

148 York Minster, window w1, panel 9c; CVMA 003761.
between Mary and the divine Child. Likewise, in Bridget’s narrative, Mary turns to her son in adoration: ‘when pe maiden felide pat sho had born hir childe, sho bowed doune hir heed and held vp hir handes and wirshiped pe childe, and saide to hir: “Welcom mi God, mi lord, and mi son!”’ (VII.xxii, p.486). Here, Bridget reminds us of the duality of Mary’s devotion: while she worships the child as ‘mi God, mi lord’, she sees him simultaneously as ‘mi son’.

Depictions of Mary suckling Christ emphasise the closeness and intimacy of their relationship. In a fifteenth century lyric, the act of suckling is portrayed as an act of motherhood, along with dressing and the singing of a lullaby:

```
Thys mayden hy3th mary, she was full mylde,
  she knelyde by-fore here oune dere chylde.

  She lullyde, She lappye,
  she rullyde, she wrapped,
  She wepped wyth-owtyne nay;
  She rullyde hym, she dressyde hym,
  she lyssyd hym, she blessyd hym,
  She sange ‘dere sone, lullay’.151
```

Milk’s role in establishing Christ’s full humanity can be accompanied by further doctrinal import, as in The Meditations on the Life and Passion of Christ:

```
A maide, mikel is þi swetnesse;
  Thi mylk hath banned oure bitternesse.
  Hit is fer more delicous
  þan angeles mete, I preue it thus ;
  For he þat fedelit angeles alle
  Cam doun from þat hie halle ;
  In thi barm he tok his reste
  And seek mylk of thy blessed breste. (MLPC, 41-48)
```

The sweetness of the milk, which attracts Christ to earth, is given a saving role: it ‘banned oure bitternesse’. While this can be explained purely in the practicality of its function in nurturing the infant who would go on to die for mankind, it also hints to the connection between milk and blood that Caroline Walker Bynum has detected in iconography of the Passion: ‘Christ’s flesh was sometimes seen as female, as lactating and giving birth.’152

The potential to teach doctrine and inform devotion through the Mother and Child scenes is heightened by the frequent convention of Mary singing to her son. For example, in a fourteenth-century lyric she explains the extraordinary details of his conception to him:

```
‘Suete sone,’ sayde sche,
```

---

150 Schiller, p.77.
151 CB15.5, lines 1-8; NIMEY 3628: ‘Thys mayden hy3th mary, she was full mylde’; Bodl. Ashmole 189 (SC 6777), ff.106v-107. Dialogue between Virgín and Jesú; 36 lines in varying st.
152 Caroline Walker Bynum (1991), p.82.
Wer-offe suld i singge?
Wist i neiuræ set more of þe
But gabrielæs gretingge.153

Her knowledge of his role comes from Gabriel and she will pass this on to both her son and the reader:

"þer, als he seide, i þe bare
On midwenter nith,
In maydened with-outen kare,
Be grace of god almith." (49-52)

The rhyme of ‘bare’ and ‘kare’ indicates the inextricable connection between the two that is, nevertheless, broken ‘be grace of God almith’. Mary’s voice thus articulates doctrine for the reader. In many lyrics, the trend further developed by portraying a dialogue between Mary and Jesus, thus using the child’s own voice to articulate the scheme of suffering for man begun through the poverty of the birth. Another fourteenth-century lyric describes the baby’s words:

'Ler to louen as i loue þe
On al my limes þu mith i-se
Hou sore þei quaken for colde;
For þe i suffre michil wo.'154

The words of the last line resonate forwards to the Passion as well as expressing the fragility of the child in a harsh winter night. The Mary of this lyric replies to her son with an indication of personal responsibility:

'Ihesu, suete, be nout wroth,
I haue neiþer clut ne cloth
þe inne for to folde;
I ne haue but a clut of a lappe,
þerfore ley þi feet to my pappe,
& kep þe fro þe colde.

Cold þe taket, i may wel se.
For loue of man it mot be
þe to suffren wo,
For bet it is þu suffre þis
þan man for-bere heune blis –
þu most him bigen þer-to.’ (13-24)

Thus Mary becomes a model for a Christian’s response to Christ’s suffering. His Birth is an emblem of his willingness to suffer for man as a man, recalling for the reader the salvific purpose of his time on earth. The glance forward to the Passion is perhaps most vivid in CB14.56, in which the baby narrates his own future from the Circumcision (‘Kot sal i ben

153 CB14.56, 21-24; NIMEY 352 (CB14.56) ‘Als i lay vp-on a nith/ Alone in my longging’; from MS Advocates Library 18.7.21, f.3v-4v; CUL Add.5943, f.169 (fragment); Cambridge SJC 259 (S.54), l.4r-v; BL Harley 2330, f.120 (fragment). Lullaby carol; 37 quatrains and 2-line burden.

154 CB 14.75, 1-4; ‘Ler to louen as i loue þe’; from MS Advocates Library 18.7.21.
with a ston /In a wol tendre place’, 67-68) through to his death thirty years later: ‘Moder, 
þu salt maken michil mon /& seen me dey3e sore’ (115-16):

Samfully for i sal dey3e,  
Hangende on þe rode,  
For mannis ransoun sal i pay3e  
Myn owen herte blode. (121-24)

The condensing of salvation history into a narrative account of a life yet to be lived reminds
the reader of the baby’s divinity – he has divine foreknowledge and experiences the eternal
present – even at the very moment when his human fragility is most obvious.

Later in the fifteenth century, humility provides the vehicle through which authors
can explain the redemptive significance of the Incarnation. In lyrics, this frequently emerges
through dialogue:

Scho sayde, ‘scueit spows, Me thynk greuus  
Myn child sud lig In hay,  
Se ne he is kyng And mayd al thyng,  
And now Is powrest In aray.’¹⁵⁵

Mary’s words to Joseph articulate the baby’s poverty through a superlative ‘powrest’ that
contrasts sharply with the enormousness of ‘mayd al thyng’ in the previous line. The poet
places theological concepts into the mouths of the characters as they experience the moment.

This develops into a catechetical dialogue between the mother and her child:

‘Modere dere, amend ïoure chere’ –  
þus says hire sone Ihu hir till –  
‘Al-of I be In poure degre,  
It is my ffadris wyl,  
And sud be obey.’ (31-35)

The Nativity conditions are thus tied to a divine purpose and the child’s foreknowledge once
again indicates where this purpose will lead:

Sco sayd, ‘sweit sone, wen sal þis be [don],  
þate sal suffir al þis vo?’  
‘Moder fre, al sal 3e se  
With xxx 3er & thrio –  
It is no nay.’ (55-59)

In contrast to this extended dialogue, another fifteenth century lyric contracts the saving
purpose of the Nativity into three lines whose rhymes chime fully to connect the conditions
of the stable with redemption:

This lorde þat lay in asse stalle,  
Come to dye for vs alle,  
To make vs fre þat erst were pralle.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁵ CB15.4, 16-20
¹⁵⁶ CB15.80, 5-7; NIMEV 328:3: ‘That lord þat lay in asse stal-le’; Bodl. Arch. Selden B.26 (SC 3340), f.28v.  
Nativity carol; 5 quatrains and 2-line burden.
Miracles

One way of side-stepping the difficulty of narrating the Birth is to describe the miraculous events that surround it. Middle English authors inherit a collection of miracles from *Legenda Aurea*, but there is very little uniformity in their selection and interpretation of the signs. They function most usually to make known Christ's Birth to the various orders of being: 'Eche maner creature of his burthyme som tokenyng he let do: /Aungel and man, sonne and sterre, best and tre also' (*SEN*, 397-98). Since the signs operate as proof, their inclusion tends to make texts list-like because authors want their readers to know that these things happened and this desire overrides the impetus to provide narrative interest. Even when the signs are told in dramatic form, they are given voice by the Expositor rather than turned into action.

Perhaps the most common miracle in narrative and image is the recognition and worship of Jesus by the beasts of the stable. It is a constant feature from the *South English Nativity* onwards: ‘In þe asse cracche and þe oxes, and þo me him þider brouhte /þe bestes kneleden him aþen to honoury him þat hem wrouhte’ (375-76). We have seen the beasts breathing on the baby to warm him earlier in the chapter, and this detail is combined with the worship in the Phillipps poem: ‘þe ox & þe asþai bath knelid doun /& honored þat child with breth & soun; /þis was a meruyll grett’ (1114-16). The notion that the beasts honour the baby is so ubiquitous that even when the miracles are not described, the ox and ass are integral to the iconography of the Birth. However, few other miracles occur as frequently as the beasts kneeling in worship and each text mentions its own unique combination of signs and symbols.

It is not entirely clear from *Cursor Mundi* whether the miracles described occur at the moment of Birth or are simply illustrative of the divine power that makes it possible:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Pat al wroght and al mai reke,} \\
\text{And did þe dumb asse to speke,} \\
\text{And did þe see to cleue in tua} \\
\text{His wiperwines for to sla,}
\end{align*}
\]

157 The miracles are told in NIMEV 208, 1114-56. Only the ox and ass worshipping the child and the falling of the temple are specified but the poet comments that 'Many mo wondyrsw war shewed þat nyght' (1159) without telling his readers what they are. In *MLC*, an account of the miracles follows the legend of the midwives. It includes: the appearance of the bright star to the Kings; the angel's encounter with the shepherds; the falling of the temple; three suns appearing then vanishing away; the well running oil instead of water; Sibil's vision of the child in the sun (*MLC*, 175-307).

158 See Chester play VI.

159 See chapter 1. Chester Expositor includes a 2-line description of the ox and ass honouring Christ, VI.640-41.

160 A full account of all of the variations is beyond the scope of this thesis so I have included those miracles that are most common in Middle English texts.
Wel moght he ger witvten stemme,
Maiden ber bavn wi-vten wemme. (11221-6)

The use of miracles in Cursor Mundi is primarily metaphorical and the poet draws on the conventional image of the sunbeam passing through glass to explain the preservation of Mary’s virginity:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Pe liknes o his barn-teme,} \\
\text{Right als hou seiis pe sun beme} \\
\text{Gais thoru pe glas and cums again,} \\
\text{Wit-vten brest, right sua al plain,} \\
\text{Bot flescheliker he com and yede,} \\
\text{Sauand his moder hir maidenhede. (11227-32)}
\end{align*}
\]

In contrast, the sequence of wonders at the Birth described by the poet of the South English Nativity seems to have practical as well as didactic purpose. For example, three suns become one in a miracle that not only demonstrates the sun’s honouring of the Son but illustrates the doctrine of the Trinity:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{be sonne honourede him also, for in pulke mydwynter day} \\
\text{pre sonnen wel ver by este in heuene me ysay,} \\
\text{Eche by oper of gret leome, and gret 3eme men peorf nome;} \\
\text{In a lutel while togadre pei smiten and to one sonne bycome.} \\
\text{What myhte pulke pei sonnen be pat al to one weren ydo,} \\
\text{Bote Fader and Sone and Holy Gost pat al on bep also? (435-40)}
\end{align*}
\]

The same significance is drawn from the three suns in all the Middle English texts that describe them. For the MLC-poet, ‘bat signified pe Trinite’ (251) and for Lydgate it shows ‘That he was bore, in whome were founded thre’ (III.1164). The Chester Expositor merely states that the ‘three sonnes in the firmament, /and wonderslye together went /and turned into one’ (VI.637-39), implying that the symbolism is self-explanatory.

The SEN-poet introduces his account of the miracles by reminding his readers that we ‘happe iherd, of pe oxe and pe asse before: /Hou pei kneleden a3en him pat hem made, po he was ybore’ (399-400). He then describes the falling of the temple built to celebrate the twelve years of ‘good pes’ (406) that have occurred before the Birth: ‘pei honoureden perinne here false godes; gret ioye perinne pei wrouhte, /Ac euir pei dradden whan werre come pe temple to grounde scholde be brouhte’ (409-10). The worry of ‘hou longe it scholde be pere’ is answered by a promise:161 ‘pei hem seyden pat it scholde stonde fort a mayde a child bere. /‘pat is wel’, bis oper seiden, ‘pan it schal stonde euirmo; /For mayde may neuir bere child we ne douten of no fo’ (412-14). Thus the falling of the temple to the ground is another way in which the miracle of Christ’s Birth is proven: ‘ac po vr lord was ybore /Al pe

161 The apparently unattainable promise is akin to Dorigen’s rash promise in the Franklin’s Tale.
temple to grounde ful – wel sory were þei þeore; / þei ouertroweden þat it were sop þat a maide a child bere’ (415-17).

The Phillipps-poet gives a fuller account of the significance of this event: through it, ‘þe folk of Rome wyster þereby / þan was fulfyllyd þe prophecy / Of crystys beryng & kende’ (1145-49). This hints at the possible implications and complications of conversion that is a natural result of the birth of a new saviour. The opportunity to use this legend to criticise the beliefs of the Romans is taken by the MLC-poet, who writes that the Romans

for þe bileue þat þai hade
In honour of her mawmett a temple þai made,
þere to haue her mawmetrie,
Her wrecchednesse & her gylerie.
þat ilke day þat God was born
þe temple fel, & al was lorn. (233-8)

The temple falling down often, as in the Chester play, is compressed into a relatively small number of lines compared with the space devoted to description of the temple ‘of soe greate ryches’ and the statues and idols within it.162

In most versions of this miracle, the symbolism of the replacement of the old religion with Christianity is enacted by the construction of a church in Mary’s name on the land where the temple once stood: ‘Me arerid þereas þe temple stood þo Cristene lawes grewe, / A churche þat me clepiþ now Seynt Marie þe Newe’ (SEN, 421-22).163 However, before the new building claims the land, nature demonstrates its knowledge of Christ’s Birth in the South English Nativity:

Stones and tre, erpe and ire oure lord honourede þere
(pat was þong on erpe ybore), whanne þij hulde namore stonde
To susteyne þe lawe of þe false godeþ þat hadden to oure lord onde. (418-20)

Later in the poem, trees have another opportunity to honour the Birth in the miracle of baring ‘blosme and frut’ during winter:164

Tren also honoureden him, forin þe lond of Engadie
A tre of baume þer stoond longe – nel ich þerof lye.
Anon so our lord was ybore, a mydwinter nyht and day,
þe tre bar blosme and frut, as al þe contrey it say. (429-32)

The poet tells his readers that fruit in midwinter must ‘bytokne […] þat þe swete frut ybore was vs to saue and lere?’ (433-4) The same image is used by the Cursor-poet for a different

162 Description of the temple and its statues VI.572-629; description of its fall: VI.630-35.
163 Cf. MLC, 238-44. In SLC and the related Chester Nativity play, the church dedicated to Mary is, instead, built at the place where Sybil has the vision of Mary and Child above the sun: SLC 633-36; Chester VI.699-724.
164 Engadie presumably relates to En Gedi in Israel but has, in some manuscripts, become England (Pickering 1975, n.429).
purpose. God can make a dried-up twig bear fruit and therefore he can be born of Mary 'in chastete':

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{He that wald wand moght get} \\
\text{In a night leif and fruit ber,} \\
\text{Wrivten weke or erth a-bute,} \\
\text{And in a night sua did it sprute} \\
\text{To flur and fruit, (als ic hat said)} \\
\text{Moght he not ban, pat al puruaid,} \\
\text{Be born vte of a maiden eth,} \\
\text{At he time o nine moneth? (11213-20)}
\end{align*}
\]

The variety of ways in which the same incident can be used by poets is further illustrated by the telling of the story in *Stanzaic Life*, where the poet narrates it to show that plants knew of Christ's Birth and that God had been born, because balm from a vine tree is unnatural and the trees blossomed in less than an hour.\(^{165}\) Lydgate's use is different again; after several stanzas describing the 'freshe blossomes' of the right time of year 'when Bachus hathe power' (III.1253, 1259), he writes, almost as an afterthought, that God makes the vines produce balm in winter in order to fulfil the prophecy of Jeremy.\(^{166}\)

The *SEN*-poet relates a prophecy of an ancient well in Rome that stated that 'Whanne be water perof turnede to oyle' (425), people would know 'pat oure lord were ybore of a mayde.' Thus, the poet shows how the Romans were given proof of the Virgin Birth, and this proof is renewed for his readers: 'po oure lord ybore was pat water to oyle bycom, /And ous almost to be water of Tibre; gret 3eme me perof nom.' In the *Metrical Life*, the same miracle is explained thus:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{bat signified wibout les} \\
\text{bat day a child born wes} \\
\text{bat scholde for vs his blode schede,} \\
\text{And mankynde saue by bat dede (265-68).}
\end{align*}
\]

For Lydgate (and the *SLC*-poet), the same miracle fulfils Sybil's prophecy that the well would 'chaunge his lycour' for a day when 'of this worlde was borne the savyour, /In Bedlem of a mayde pure' (III.1149, 1151-2).

The *SLC*-poet's selection of miracles coincides in part with the five indications that Mary has given birth as a virgin in a lengthy section that repeats material several times but uses the numerical format to fix the doctrinal import into the memory of a reader.\(^{167}\) The

\(^{165}\) *SLC* 973-1008.

\(^{166}\) *LI*. III.1275-87.

\(^{167}\) *SLC*, 445-696; midwives legend; temple and eternal fire destroyed; well flowing with oil all day; three suns; Sybil's vision of Mary and Christ above the sun; statue of Romulus falls; ox and ass kneel before the baby. 877-1128: temples and images 'falling down' in Rome; vines of En Gedi bearing fruit and flowing with balm, ox and ass kneeling to the baby; men knew by prophecy and the signs sent to the emperor and the three kings; angels speak to the shepherds; angel appears to Octavian and Sybil as well as to the kings after they have visited the child.
quantity of lines devoted to explaining symbolic resonances and miraculous occurrences
masks the notable absence of a description of the Birth itself. It seems that it is beyond
narrative description and can be conveyed only by signs or in the simplicity of bare
statement: ‘and þat niȝt in þat simple plas /ber Marie Crist our heuen kyng’ (415-16). John
Lydgate devotes a similarly large portion of his narrative to the miracles, including the falling
down of the Temple and the statue of Romulus, the oil running through a well in Rome, the
dialogue between Sybil and Octavian, God making ‘the vynes [...] In Engady her bavme for to
shed, /Whan thay were most nakede and barayne /And out of season’ (III.1275-78), the
falling ‘to-braste’ of the idols in Egypt and the Roman false gods, and Sybil telling the Senate
of Christ’s birth with a vision of a bright sun.168 After the baby has been born and the episode
of the midwives has unfolded in the Chester Nativity play, the Expositor narrates a selection
of miracles to the audience leading into the culmination of Octavian’s encounter with Sybil
that began the play.

Sybil and her prophecies tie together the signs and symbols with the portrayal of
Octavian and the Roman Empire.169 Several texts narrate Octavian’s encounter with a
woman ‘þat het Sibile, a maner prophete iholde’ (SEN, 445). This dialogue (retold in A
Stanzaic Life, as noted in chapter 1) provides the frame for the Chester Nativity play. In the
South English version, Octavian asks her ‘3if euere a man ybore scholde be þat herre þan he
were’ (447). She describes a vision of a ‘gret cercle wip bryht leome’ inside the sun, in which
they see a ‘mayde bryhtore þan þe sonne’ (451): ‘A 3ong child heo huld in her barm, bryhter
þan he 3ut were’ (452).170 The prophetess explains the significance of the child: he ‘is nou
ybore’ on earth and has ‘more poer’ than Octavian. Her advice to Octavian is simple:
‘honoure him Y rede perfore’ (454).171 Lydgate augments the story by having Sybil address
the whole Senate ‘full opynly and clere’ (III.1389). She tells them that a virgin will give birth
to a child who will be ‘Bothe god and man to-gyder verrely’ (III.1424). Furthermore, she is
provoked to anger by the reaction of the Jewish priests, and rails against their ‘ignoaunce

168 LL, III.1065-1463. The miracles are preceded by an account of the various Old Testament prophecies of the
Birth and praise of the ‘holie sacrede nyght’ on which it occurs: III.554-1064, and followed by further
prophecies III.1464-1624.
169 For the portrayal of Octavian and Rome, see chapter 1.
170 This image is strikingly akin to the version of the Magi’s star that contains a child. See Chapter 6 below.
171 The final miracle delineated by the South English-poet occurs in no other Middle English text: all men who
‘wrouhte þe syne of sodomye /Sodeynliche diezene þo our lord was ybore of maiden Marie.’ (457-58). The
poet is particularly condemnatory of this practice: ‘So foul it was þat our lordde nóld þat þei biulden alye /In
maames fourne þat he hadde nome, þerfore he let hem todryne.’ (463-64). After this digression from the usual
pattern of the story, the poet discusses the appearance of the star and segues into the story of the Magi. Cf.
Pickering (1973), n.457-64.
and malice indurate’ (III.1444). This addition to the usual story of Sybil’s interaction with Octavian points to the anti-Semitic mood that Anthony Bale has detected in Lydgate’s work.\textsuperscript{172}

For the Chester dramatist, the episode allows an articulation of the baby’s worth by the emperor. Sybil tells him ‘that borne ys hee /that passeth thee of postee’ (VI.645-46) and points to a vision in the sky, in which Octavian sees

\begin{quote}
\begin{verbatim}
a mayden bright, 
a yonge chyld in her armes clight, 
a bright crosse in his head. 
Honour I wyll that sweete wight 
with incense throughout all my might (VI.652-6)
\end{verbatim}
\end{quote}

The extent of his transformation is clear when he asks the rhetorical question:

\begin{quote}
\begin{verbatim}
Should I bee God? Naye, naye, witterlye! 
Great wronge iwys yt were. 
For this childe is more worthye 
then such a thousands as am I. (VI.661-64)
\end{verbatim}
\end{quote}

The play’s action continues with the appearance of an angel, following which Octavian tells his senators to go home and tell all the people ‘that such worshipp I must forgonne /as they would doe to mee’ (VI.685-86). Instead they must worship the child ‘with full harte’ (VI.688). The play concludes with the words of the Expositor, who tells the audience that the ‘verey sygne’ (VI.700) proving the vision is that a church ‘in worshipp of Marye’ was built there ‘that yett lastes untyll this daye’ (VI.705).

The attention given to the signs and symbols by Middle English authors is less easy to explain than their interest in narrative additions to the stories (the Midwives legend, for example, is a good story and one can see why it merited retelling). Nonetheless, the inclusion of the miracles, albeit in list-like form, indicates the power of apocryphal legend and its ability to lend authority to the aspects of doctrine encapsulated in the Christmas story.

\textsuperscript{172} For discussion of Lydgate's portrayal of Jews at the Circumcision see Anthony Bale (2006), p.132.
Plate 6: V&A A.94-1946; Cheetham cat. 106, 1470-90.
The Midwives

Midwives are frequently present in accounts of Christ’s Birth. While entirely absent from canonical gospels, Salome and her colleague appear first in Proto-James and remain a popular part of the story throughout the medieval period. In early liturgical drama, the respondents to the shepherds’ *quem queritis* dialogue are denoted as *obstetrices*, and, in the fifteenth-century, Margery Kempe casts herself as an assistant to Mary in a vision of the Nativity, seeking cloths and supplies. Women who may have been midwives are also present in many of the visual depictions of this scene. For example, in the Nativity window at St Peter Mancroft [plate 1], a ‘diminutive servant or midwife wearing a robe, veil and caulcs warms a garment before a (restored) fire in a grate’, and, in a late fifteenth-century alabaster shows Tebel standing with praying hands while Salome sits at Mary’s feet. Such figures do not feature in post-Reformation depictions of the Nativity. This chapter will delineate how this represents a major change from the situation in the late medieval period, when the midwives are not only a visual component of the scene but also of key significance in bringing tested proof to the miraculous events of the Nativity. I will also suggest that the physical examination performed by Salome serves at once as the test of virginity needed to prove that Mary is free from original sin (implying but not stating the search for an intact hymen) but also as a transgression, intrusively reaching into a sanctified body. Yet the veneration of St Thomas who similarly sought tangible proof shows how an articulated failure of belief can assist others to believe; both Thomas and Salome touch a body that has become intangible for later Christians and so they perform a vital role in the retelling of the Christian story. They act out the doubt of the Christian, performing a test so that future Christians can believe.

The origins of the story

Canonical gospels contain no mention of midwives at the birth itself; nor do they relate the story of the two women who appear afterwards to test Mary’s virginity. The appearance of these women in *Protevangelium of James* may follow their inclusion in the

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173 Karl Young, vol 2 (1933), p.5 e.g. *Officium Pastorum* from Padua ed. in Young, p.9.
174 *Margery Kempe*, Book 1, Chap. 6 (578-89).
176 A.94-1946, Cheetham cat.106 (plate 6); Cf. Cheetham, p.179.
very early Bodmer Papyrus V.\footnote{177} In James, a single midwife is introduced in a section narrated by Joseph himself: ‘And behold, a woman came down from the hill-country and said to me, “Man, where are you going?” And I said, “I seek a Hebrew midwife”’ (\textit{Pj} 19.1, p.65). The adjective ‘Hebrew’ renders this passage less about Joseph’s inability to comprehend the ease of the Virgin Birth than about his attention to cultural detail. Mary and Joseph are away from their home and he wishes to ensure that his son’s birth complies with religious etiquette. He demonstrates his belief when the midwife asks him ‘who brings forth in the cave?’. ‘And I said to her, “She is Mary, […] she has conceived by the Holy Spirit”’ (\textit{Pj} 19.1, p.65).

This midwife immediately believes what she witnesses (‘the cloud disappeared from the cave and a great light appeared […] afterwards that light withdrew until the baby appeared, and it came and took the breast of its mother Mary’) and articulates the profound impact that this has had on her: “This day is great for me, because I have seen this new sight” (\textit{Pj} 19.2, p.65). Thus she becomes the first evangelist in her eagerness to tell the good news, firstly to her colleague Salome: ‘she said to her, “Salome, Salome, I have a new sight to tell you about; a virgin has brought forth, a thing which her condition does not allow”’ (19.3, p.65). The paradox of the final clause is insurmountable for the recipient of the news; Mary’s virginity ‘does not allow’ her to have given birth to a child so the sceptical Salome cannot believe. The only detail given about Salome is her name, yet it is her character, a prototype of Doubting Thomas, which will inspire many retellings of this story during the medieval period. She becomes the paradigm of human doubt, trusting logic rather than believing in the miraculous: ‘And Salome said, “As the Lord my God lives, unless I insert my finger and test her condition, I will not believe that a virgin has given birth”’ (19.3, p.65). The need to ‘insert my finger’ recalls Thomas’s inspection of Christ’s wounds after the resurrection.\footnote{178} In James, the narrative reaches a conclusion with three significant incidents: Salome’s hand is withered by her attempt to test Mary’s virginity; she is cured by touching the baby after an angel instructs her to; and she is told never to speak of what has happened. This framework is maintained in the later gospel of \textit{Pseudo-Matthew}, the Latin text via which the legend was disseminated in Medieval Europe.

\footnote{177}Elliott, p.49.
Pseudo-Matthew makes slight yet significant alterations. Firstly, he makes both
women midwives, and introduces them simultaneously:

IAM ENIM NATIVITAS DOMINI ADVENERAT, ET IOSEPH PERREXERAT QUÆRERE OBSTETRICES. QUI
CUM INVENisset, reversus est AD SPELUNCAM ET INVENit CUM MARIA INFANTEM QUAM
GENEerat. EL DIXIT Ioseph ad bealam Mariam Ego Zelomi et Salome adduxi tibi
OBSTETRICES, quae stant foris ante ostium speluncæ, prae nimio splendore non
AUDentes HUC INGREDi. (PM XVIII.3-4 pp.73-74)

Since they are together from the beginning of their story, Salome cannot help but witness her
colleague’s examination of the new mother. Her disbelief, therefore, is not of a reported
incident (as in James) but of something that she has seen. The evidence of her eyes and ears
are disregarded in favour of the only evidence that she will trust: ‘AUDIENS AUTEM HANC
VOCE Salome DIXIT PERMUTETE UT PALPEM TE ET PROBEM ITTRUM VERUM DIXERIT Zelomi’ (PM
XVIII.4, p.75). The healing miracle does not vary substantially from its source until the very
end of the episode. In James, the author emphasises the need for Salome to remain silent:
‘BEHOLD, ANGEL OF THE LORD CRIED, “SALOME, SALOME, DO NOT REPORT WHAT MARVELS YOU HAVE
SEEN, UNTIL THE CHILD HAS COME TO JERUSALEM’” (J 20.4, p.65). In contrast, the Pseudo-Matthew
Salome ‘COEPIIT CLAMARE DICENS MAGNALIA QUAE VIDERAT ET QUAE PASSA Fuerat, ET QUEMADMODUM
CURATA FUERAT’ (PM XVIII.5, p.76). Like the first woman in James, she takes on an evangelising
role. Pseudo-Matthew comments on the effects of her evangelism: ‘EIUS MULTI CREDERENT’ (PM
XVIII.5, p.76). This suggests a similar conversion paradigm for the legend itself: through its
propagation, writers can bring their audiences to believe in the truth and the implications of
the Virgin Birth.

The apocryphal sources provide a basic template for the story but, when told in
Middle English, there is potential for variation. The legend reaches England in a skeletal form
in the Legenda Aurea as one of the ‘FYVE maners’ in which Mary’s pure virginity is shown:179

FERTHELY BI VERRAY PROFYE, FOR AS IT IS REDDE IN THE BOKE OF Oure Saeoure of Childehode,
WHAN THE TYME OF CHILDEYNG OF THE BLESSED VIRGINE WAS COME, Ioseph kepyng the
custume of women went oute to call mydwives, of the whiche that one hight Zebel
And thanne whanne Zebel myde her and founde her virgine sche cried and saied that a virgine hathe born a childe, and Salome leued her not but
Wolde haue proved it, and anone her honde dried vp. And thanne the angel apperid
to her and comauonded that she shulde touche the childe and anone sche shulde be
hole. (Gl., 5 p.34)

Middle English authors inherit, from de Voragine, the constituent elements of the story: once
the couple have settled in the stable, Joseph departs to seek midwives; Mary laughs in

179 LgA: Quarto per experientiam. Cum enim, ut in compilatione Bartholomei habetur et de libro infantie
salutaris simpium fuisse uidetur, pariens est tempus instaret, Ioseph licet drem de virgine nasitum nun
dubitaret, morem tenet genres patris obstetrices uocavit, quarn unu vocalatur Zebel et altera Salome. Zebel
igitur considerans et inquirens et ipsum uirginem inveniens exclamavit uirginem peperisse. Salome autem dian
non crederet, sed hoc similiter probare voluit, continuo aruid manus eius. Lassit tenen anegli sibi apparente
puerum tertiigr et continuo sanatem recepist. p.66.
response to Joseph’s return; two midwives are brought in; each midwife reacts separately; the nature of the test is uncertain; the punishment of Salome; the intervention of an angel or of Mary; the miraculous cure; the midwives’ possible role as evangelist. The midwives legend performed a useful didactic function in explaining Christ’s birth and it is thus ubiquitous in medieval Nativity stories. It raises the question not only of women’s potential role in preaching but also of the ways in which they may have been involved as assistants for women in childbirth.

** Medieval midwifery**

The first recorded occurrence of the noun ‘mid-wif’ is at the turn of the fourteenth century. Over the next two hundred years it comes to signify not only the assistant at a birth that we might expect but also a saint who aids women in childbirth and the art of midwifery. The noun’s use, as detailed in the MED, gives one clue to the importance of female birthing assistants during the later part of the Middle Ages. We can glean further evidence from the circulation of medical texts in England, their contents and their audience. Monica Green’s work over the past thirty years has given us a much clearer picture of this material. Among her many contributions to the field, she has delineated the quantity and nature of manuscripts containing gynaecological texts in Middle English. These include five separate translations of *The Trotula* as well as Gilbertus Anglicus’s “The Sekenesse of Women”: ‘the gynecological text that was most widely disseminated in late-medieval England’. Handbooks such as this and *The Trotula* provide the detail concerning childbirth that is only treated briefly in the Salernitan masters’ *Practicae*. The sheer number of extant English versions indicates that practices had developed to alleviate specific problems with reference to anatomical knowledge and theories of physiology. And these may speak to us of particular local traditions:

> The translators and composers of the Middle English gynecological and obstetrical texts also drew on local medical traditions and occasionally their own experience or therapies they had learned from others. These contemporary additions will probably prove to be the most interesting aspects of the texts, not simply because they provide illuminating bits of “local color” but also because they demonstrate how very much

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180 This is some forty years after *Legenda Aurea*; MED ‘mid-wif’ (n).
182 Green (1992), 53-88.
184 *The Trotula*, p.12.
alive and dynamic were the theoretical and practical traditions of medicine in medieval England.\textsuperscript{185}

However, we should be wary of assuming that handbooks are fully indicative of practice, since the texts are often fairly stable from their Latin or Greek originals.\textsuperscript{186} We are, though, able to glean from these texts confirmation that women would have assisted with childbirth in medieval England.

The very fact that medical texts were translated into the vernacular has been used to support the argument for a female readership,\textsuperscript{187} and `there is plenty of evidence to suggest that women practiced medicine in eleventh- and twelfth-century Salerno` even if the evidence for female authorship of one of the Trotula texts remains tenuous.\textsuperscript{188} Codicological work also points to the utility of the manuscripts for female use:

the structure of some of the codices leaves open the possibility that they may have been initially intended for female readers. A notable feature of several manuscripts of the texts addressed to women is that they are separate fascicles, which conceivably could have circulated independently among midwives or laywomen with medical interests.\textsuperscript{189}

If women are to be assisted in their labour, it clear that the `deth dredyng` to which God has sentenced them can be alleviated and its worst dangers prevented, even if it cannot be avoided. In the Conditions of Women section of The Trotula alone, there are:

discussions on the causes of miscarriage (88), care of the pregnant woman (88a; 79 in the present edition), common disorders of pregnancy (88b and 88c; in the present edition 80 and 81, respectively), followed by a brief statement on the process of birth itself (89), then aids for difficult birth (90-91). Then, perhaps referring to Muscio's Gynecology, the author adds the specific instruction that `the women who assist her ought not look her in the face, for many women are ashamed to be looked upon during birth` (92). Detailed instructions for repositioning the malpresented fetus then follow (93). These, in turn, are followed by twelve remedies for extracting the fetus that has died in utero (94-103). Recipes for removing the afterbirth (104-5 and 107-11) and treating postpartum pain (112) follow, while a test to determine the sex of the fetus closes the text (113-14).\textsuperscript{190}

The evidence of these texts makes it unsurprising that in medieval images of birth scenes, even those depicting legendary or biblical material, a midwife is often shown. This can be seen, for example, in the illustration of the mother of Knight of the Swan,\textsuperscript{191} and in the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[186] See The Knowing of Woman's Kind in Childing, ed. by Alexandra Barratt (2001): `Some of the material in the Middle English text in fact goes straight back to Soranus, to the quite different world of second-century Imperial Rome` p.8.
\item[187] The Trotula, p.61.
\item[188] The Trotula, p.48.
\item[190] The Trotula, pp.34-35.
\item[191] BL Royal 15, EVI, f.273, France (c.1445).
\end{footnotes}
Ranworth Antiphoner. However, while female assistants are a familiar sight in birth scenes, the actual examination performed by Salome in the apocryphal gospels is not portrayed in visual images. Indeed, Salome’s test does not derive from the instructions for testing virginity that are found in medical handbooks. Midwives are advised to insert their hands into a woman’s birth passage if complications are present during childbirth but not as a test for virginity.

The legend

The role of midwives in the Birth of Christ builds upon the doctrine of the Fall. After Eve has eaten the fruit in the N-Town Fall of Man play, God tells her that she will always be subject to man’s bidding and that she must ‘bere þi chylde þere with gret gronynge, /In daunyere and in deth-dredynge /Into þi lyvys ende’. This ‘gret gronynge’, the pain and danger of childbirth, is the result of and punishment for woman’s sin. So the need for midwives to assist at a birth is traceable to Eve’s actions in Eden. Mary, however, does not require help since she is free from original sin. Joseph’s departure to seek help thus points to his incomplete understanding of her superlative goodness, which will ensure that she will not inherit the pain of Eve when she gives birth.

The MLC-poet makes the cleanness and ease of the Birth clear with a doubling pattern:

\[ \text{pat tyne þat schuld haue ben dawine} \\\	ext{Wipout any maner demainynge,} \\\	ext{Wipout payne, wipout wo,} \\\	ext{Oure Lady was delynered þo.} \\\	ext{[...] Mydwyf ne hade sche none} \\\	ext{Til þe day was forpe on gon.} \\\	ext{þere come þen oure Lady to se} \\\	ext{Two wymmen of þat cite. (123-38)} \]

The anaphoric repetition of ‘wipout’ is matched later by the doubling of negatives when the poet tells us that midwife ‘ne hade sche none’. Since she experiences no pain or woe, she does not need assistance and the poet explicitly comments on the absence of midwives from the scene until after the baby’s birth was complete. However, he does speak of the ‘two wymmen’

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192 Ranworth Antiphoner, f.257: initial of Mary being presented to her mother Anne, c.1460-1480 (Scott 1996, pp.325-6).

193 The test for virginity suggested in the Trotula is far less practical and seems to rely on received wisdom or superstition; it does not include physical examination and is misattributed to the cure for scabium manuum: Accipe lapatrium acutum et posse ad ignem ut ante feminam ardent, mineat uelit nolit. (Likewise in another fashion. Take red dock and place it on the fire so that it burns in front of the woman; she will urinate whether she wants to or not [if she is no longer a virgin].)

194 N-Town, play 2.256-58.
who eventually arrive; their inclusion at this late stage, after the reader has been told that the birth has happened, poses the question of why they necessitate a mention.

The answer can be found in the idea that truth can be discovered or confirmed through a process of trial and proof. A simple declaration that Mary is a virgin might lack the persuasive power necessary to bring true faith to a reader or viewer. So authors need a narrative that will prove that the 'daungere and deth-dredynge' of Eve's inheritance is absent as Mary gives birth. Sometimes proof is demonstrated visually through images of cleanliness and light, as in Bridget's Liber, wherein Mary's purity and the miracle of the birth are conveyed by the spotlessness of the placenta. Furthermore, as also noted in the York Nativity play, Bridget describes a wondrous light that overpowers the candle found by Joseph, to show that the light of the world has arrived in this place. The dramatist of the N-Town play gives an extremely detailed exposition of the aftermath of the birth. The light, which provides proof of the miracle for Bridget and for the York Joseph, is present here also, but it is commented on by one of the two midwives that Joseph has brought with him:

We dare not entre bis logge, in fay -
per is berin so gret bryghtnes!
Mone be nyght nor sunne be day
Shone nevyr so clere in per lyghntnes! (15.162-65).

While the York dramatist and Bridget are content with the inherent significance of the light, the N-Town playwright augments it with a version of the midwives legend containing two examinations of Mary. The addition of this legend, with its description of a sensory trial to enhance the visual image of the light, indicates the importance of experiential proof. It provides an opportunity to include in the narrative witness and testimony, through which confirmation of doctrine can emerge. As the characters in the story testify to their direct experience of Mary's virginity after they have tested her, the narratives use these witnesses to prove this doctrine and, thence, Christ's dual nature and his consequent ability to save mankind from the devil.

To trace the Middle English instantiations of the legend, we need to look back to the late thirteenth century, when the midwives episode is included in the South English Nativity. While absent from Cursor Mundi, the legend is ubiquitous in fourteenth-century narrative poems including A Stanzaic Life of Christ, The Metrical Life of Christ, and the Phillipps poem.

195 *Liber Celestis* 'Neuir Pesesse I sawe pat blisfull childe liinge naked on pe erthe, and he had pe fairest skin pat enir I sawe, withouten spot. Also I sawe pe secondine, pat is pe rim pat pe child was born in, land all white. Pan herde I sange of angells wounder swete and likinge' (p.486).

196 See chapter 2 above. York (14.78).

197 Cf. The Mary Play, ed. by Peter Meredith (1997).
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196 See chapter 2 above. York (14.78).

197 Cf. The Mary Play, ed. by Peter Meredith (1997).
One would expect the Mystery Plays to include midwives since *obstetrix*ces were crucial to the original liturgical drama for Christmas.➀ The episode also has potential for much dramatic humour as the physical testing is portrayed. It is hard, though, to know quite how ubiquitous they were, due to the patchy survival of texts. Out of the four cycles that survive almost in their entirety, two (N Town and Chester) contain a dramatisation of the Salome legend.

Towneley’s Nativity sequence is, of course, dominated by its Shepherds’ Plays and the manuscript of its ancestor at York has only a simple Nativity Play. However, the evidence of the York civic records points to the inclusion of midwives in an earlier or different version of its Nativity Play [REED York: 1415 York memorandum book: “Tylers {Maria [cum <...>]

Joseph: obstetrix / puer natus * iacens in presepio * inter bouen & azinum & angelus loquens *pastoribus* & ludentibus in pagina sequente”]. An idea of how the withering and healing of hand may have been shown on stage can be gleaned from Holkham Bible Picture book’s Anestace and has been used inversely to tie the Book to the dramatic culture of England: the artist’s ‘portrayal of an incident which probably took place on the English stage exactly as he portrays it, with the false hand or glove ready to be slipped from the midwife’s wrist, would seem to be one more shred of evidence in support of the English origin of the Holkham Bible Picture Book.’

Arrival of the midwives

From the *South English Nativity* onwards, the number of the midwives is fixed at two, usually named as Tebel and Salome.

po pe child was ibore, Iosep hider brouhte
Tuo wymmen pat coude on pe craft pat wel wyde he souhte.
Here names were Tebel and Salome – losep to oure lauded sede:
’Tuo wymmen ichabbe here ybrouht pat schulle pe helpe and rede.’ (379-82)

Texts such as *The Trotula* are recalled in the verb phrase ‘coude on pe craft’; ‘connen’ implies both being capable and having knowledge of a particular ‘craft’. The *SEN*-poet’s use of this phrase points to the need for specifically trained women, corroborating the idea of midwifery as a craft (instead of a role for an untrained neighbour or relation). Furthermore, the

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➀ Young, p.5

➀ REED: York, ed. by Alexandra F. Johnston and Margaret Rogerson, 2 vols (1979), p.18; no cast list is given for later years in the civic records.


201 MED ‘connen’ (v): 1. (a) to have ability, capability or skill; 3 (a) to have mastery of (a skill); be versed or competent in (a craft, occupation, activity); 4 (a) To know or have mastery of (a field of learning, a body of doctrines, etc.); ~ *lare*, possess learning, be learned; ~ *artic*, ~ *craftes*, be versed in the arts or sciences; --- with obj. or of phrase; (b) to possess knowledge or understanding; (c) as noun: ability to know or understand.
doubled verb-phrase ‘helpe and rede’ indicates an advisory role for the women in addition to the practical help they can give. Yet since the preceding lines of the poem have indicated that Joseph no longer believes he has been cuckolded, it is not clear why he still thinks that Mary will need assistance.

In the Phillipps poem, Joseph brings ‘two mydwyves þat can /Of women preuytes know’ (1004-5) to his wife. Mary’s response (she ‘smyled’, 1006) befuddles him until ‘He saw a knaue child on hyr kne’ (1007). He realises that he ‘was ouer slaw’ carrying out his errand but still wishes her to permit the women to examine her:

Neuerpelesse my counsels or þai fare
Speke with þam boyth interfere
& shew þam þi preuytes of þis dede
þat yow no mydicyns hereafter nede,
Ffor þat wald cost ouer dere. (1010-14)

Even though Mary appears well, he is concerned about the potential costs associated with medical problems that may ensue if she is not treated now, pointing to a lack of understanding of her purity.

Lydgate’s Joseph demonstrates his failure to believe when he goes to seek midwives; yet in the presence of the new baby, his faith becomes strong. His behaviour thus provides a template for the way to worship:

[...]sodenly, whan he the childe dothe se,
Full humbly knelyng on his knee,
Worshipped hym with all his hert and myght,
With all his will, and all his full thought (III.293-6).

His midwives have not entered ‘for fer of the lyȝght’ (III.297); this detail incorporates the Brigittine symbolic light with the legend of the Midwives. The same scenario occurs in the The Three Kings of Cologne: ‘Than seyd Joseph to Marie, “Y have broght þe mydwyves, Zelony and Salone, which stond without for þe grete light that is wiþ þe herwipin”’ (p.51).

Joseph’s focus on the practicality of the situation is contrasted in The Three Kings with Mary’s reaction: ‘heryng þat, [she] softly loghe. To whom seyd Joseph, “Marie, laghe not so, but pray hem to come visite the, in auenture if þow nede her help or medicine”’ (p.51). Such laughter is especially a feature of texts of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and serves to illustrate the redundancy of midwives when Mary has both conceived and been conceived without original sin. Mary is so content following the birth that the idea of needing help is amusing to her. The SEN-poet emphasises Joseph’s failure fully to understand his wife and her actions: when ‘gan our leuedy a lutel to leyhe; Iosep hire blamede þo’ (383). Mary remains the epitome of virtue, and her compliance in suffering Tebel to examine her points
to the passive suffering she will undergo later: ‘Oure leuedy [polede] pat pis o wumman pat yhote was Tebel, /To loke to hire priuete, as to hire craft byfel’ (385-86).

The idea that Mary could laugh has disappeared in Lydgate’s Life of Our Lady, possibly because the poem is dedicated to praising an idealised concept of the Virgin. So her response to Joseph’s arrival with the women is markedly different from earlier passages. Here she moves to welcome the women into the cave:

[..] when she dyd se
The mydwyfes, full benygnely
She brought hem in with all humylite,
Seephora and also Solomee,
And hem welcomyth in full lawe manere. (III.352-6)

Lydgate’s Mary exemplifies ‘humylite’ even when faced with the evidence that Joseph does not understand her freedom from original sin.

The examination

The first midwife’s examination of the Virgin is permitted and therefore not punished.

To heighten the contrast between the two midwives, the MLC-poet omits this first examination and Sibil believes the evidence of her eyes alone:

Oure Lady sche [Sibil] segh and saide,
A, pis is a clene mayde
pat lithe here so meke & mylde,
Delyuered wipout payne of childe. (143-46)

Sight is sufficient for this woman, just as sight of the risen Christ is enough to convince most disciples that the Resurrection has occurred. The Chester play follows the same pattern as the Metrical Life. Tebell articulates an immediate and complete faith:

A, dere lord, heaven kinge,
that this is a marvelous thinge!
Withowten teene or travaylinge,
a fayre sonne shee hasse one.
I dare well saye, forsooth iwyys,
that clene mayden this woman ys,
for shee hath borne a chyld with blys;
soe wiste I never none. (VI.525-32)

Her clear statement reiterates the doctrine of the Virgin Birth to the audience without any ambiguity. This contrasts with the words of Salome, who depends on her knowledge of human ‘kynde’:

Be styll, Tebell, I thee praye,
for that is false, in good faye.
Was never woman cleane maye
and chyld without man.
But never the latter, I will assaye
whether shee bee cleane maye,
and knowe yt if I cann. (VI.533-39)
Immediate faith as shown by the first midwife in the *Metrical Life* and the Chester play is a less effective didactic tool than a trajectory from doubt to belief through testing. The more common pattern is for texts to depict an examination by both women.

The *South English Nativity* establishes the nature of the test, reminding us at the same time of the midwife's special training and knowledge: 'as to hire craft bytel' (386). Tebel examines 'hire priuete', which suggests the kind of intimate testing of the genital area that is detailed for assistance in birth in the *Trotula*. Later authors will shy from being this explicit but the *SEN*-poet has no such modesty. The test itself becomes less invasive in the two centuries between the *South English Nativity* and Lydgate, with authors choosing either to remain tacit about the way in which the examination is performed or to move the site of the test to Mary's chest, with the midwife touching to see if her breasts are filled with milk. While this variant can prove that Mary has given birth, corroboration is needed from other evidence in the Phillipps poem to enable the first midwife to extrapolate that here 'hys a meruayll was neuer none swylke' (1021). She 'felt hyr two pappes full of milke' (1022) but notices also that ‘wymbe of birth es here non sene’ and therefore concludes that 'Scho moder es als a mayden clene. /pis was neuer sene beforne' (1025-6). Tebel does not need to probe Mary's vagina because the cleanliness of the room affirms that the birth has been exceptional; the image of the absent 'wymbe of birth' recalls for the reader the spotless placenta in Bridget's vision while simultaneously pointing to the sinless and asexual conception.202

The movement to a more modest examination is complete in Lydgate's *Life of Our Lady*. The whys and hows of the gaining of knowledge are left virtually tacit, except for a reference to the 'hevenly mylke' in 'hir pappes', the visual signs in the stable that a miracle has occurred and, again, the absence of 'wem':

And when that thay these signes sawe in-fere,

Of the sterre and the beste3 knele
Tawarde the childe to do hym Reuereence,
And gan also by othir tokens fele
Of maydnyhede ther was none ofence,
But that she stode hole in the excellence
Of perfyte clennesse and hool virgynyte,
Mothir to be and floure in chastite,

Withoutyn wem on eny party founde,
For all the preves that thay make coude;
And whan thay sawe hir pappes so abonde
With hevenly mylke sent from above the cloude,

202 MED wem (n) 1(a) : defect or spot; 3(b) sexual defilement; 4 (a) sin, guilt, moral impurity.
The doubling of ‘hert and hole’ with its emphatic repeated ‘h’ sets up the first midwife as an exemplary believer and her testimony points to the evangelising role that we will see both women take on as the episode concludes.

Both of the N-Town midwives, confusingly called Zelomy and Salome, transform from sceptic to believer. The movement from doubt to faith is thus offered twice to the audience. Zelomy says that ‘[i]n byrth trauayle muste sche nedys haue, /Or ellys no chylde of here is born’ (15.206-7), and therefore requests the chance to test Mary’s womb, ostensibly to see whether she needs their medical assistance: ‘With honde lete me now towch and fele /Yf 3e haue ned of medycyn’ (15.218-9). Mary welcomes this first examination (‘I am clene mayde and pure virgyn; /Tast with 3oure hand 3oureself alon’, 15.222-3) and Zelomy receives no ill effects. She is transformed from sceptic to believer after her test and gives an unequivocal affirmation of the truth of the Virgin Birth (15.226-33).

In case the audience fails to be convinced by this model of the metamorphosis from doubt to belief, the dramatist replays the incident. Salome does not believe what she has witnessed from her friend and so Mary invites her also to ‘towch’ with her hand and ‘wele asay’:

3ow for to putt clene out of dowth,  
Towch with 3oure hand and wele asay.  
Wysely ransake and trye be trewthe owth  
Whethyr I be fowlyd or a clene may. (15.250-53)

Since Mary herself has volunteered to be examined by Salome, the punishment from God is rather unexpected. Her fault appears to be that the first miracle was not enough to convince her.

Alas, alas, and weleawaye!  
For my grett dowth and fals beleve  
Myne hand is ded and drye as claye –  
My fals vntrost hath wrought myschevel (15.254-57)
Salome herself articulates her sins: ‘grett dowth’; ‘fals beleve’; ‘fals vntrost’ and explains what has happened to her arm in terms that recall the Creation with a reminder of the ‘claye’ from which mankind was made.

**Salome’s punishment**

The withering of the hand is a constant in all these texts but the moment when it occurs varies, as does the way in which poets and playwrights ascribe it to particular sins. The SEN-poet compresses the two examinations, first by Tebel and then by Salome, into a single examination by Tebel, who ‘fond þat heo maide was and a child hadde ybore’. Salome is punished for the expression of her disbelief, so the withering of her hand makes less sense than in texts where it results from that hand’s transgressive testing of Mary’s body: “‘þat may nout be!’ þis oþer seyde – anon myd þilke word /Hire honden bycomen stif and ded, as it were a reud bord’ (387-90). The punishment for mere articulation of disbelief occurs also in later works including the *Metrical Life*:

Right as sche hade so sayde,
Hir honders were croked at a braide,
Boþe togeder bynomen were
Right into hir body þere. (151-54)

The verb ‘bynomen’ conveys paralysis of the hands; it also holds with it the idea of a more severe punishment, since its varied definitions include the removal of the hand, beheading and putting to death. In other texts, Salome’s hands or hand only dry up when she attempts to examine Mary herself. The texts where Salome progresses to belief through touching pre-echo more obviously the episode of Doubting Thomas, as we see in the *Stanzaic Life*:

But sone hir honders flesch 7 bone
þor that ilk presupmioun
drieden vp, 7 þat onon
for veniaunce, as 3 leue moun,

þor felyng of hom clene was gone,
til an angel li3t adoun,
that counselief hir to leue opon,
7 mercy aske with denuicioun. (469-76)

The *Stanzaic Life*-poet’s explicit condemnation of Salome (the sin of ‘presumcioune’ leads her to be punished for ‘veniaunce’) is typical of many tellings of this legend, but sometimes she more obviously represents the ordinary fallibility of a human. Her weakness is implicit in the fact that there are two women and that the other is able to believe straightaway. In The

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203 MED: binimen (v)
Metrical Life, the doubling of negatives noted earlier in the phrase ‘wipout Payne, wipout wo’ recurs in Salome’s sceptical response that a virgin birth has occurred:

Salame pen saide, nay,
Hit myght not be by no way,
Of mayde was never child born
But sche had hade a man biforn. (147-50)

The poet concentrates the verse in these lines, with repeated ‘m’ and ‘b’ sounds reinforcing the emphasis of Salome’s denial in contrast to the words of awe previously spoken by Tebel.

The parallels between the two women are made explicit in a different way in the Phillipps poem; here the contrast is not in the fact that one believes and the other does not but in the transgressive nature of the test. While, as noted above, the site of the examination is later said to be safely above waist-level, the poet, at first, does not fully explain where Mary is touched:

Mary bad call pam hyder bath,
3ebell entyrd, be thother thought layth,
Bot stude out all inwere.
& 3ebell come & graped mary. (1015-18)

This verb, ‘gropen’, from the Old English ‘grapian’, is first cited in MED in an 1150 text to describe Thomas’s test of Christ’s wounds after the Resurrection. The first meaning of ‘touch with hands’ later develops to encompass a wider gamut of meaning based on the concept of testing, including ‘feel one’s way in dark’, ‘examine, ponder, consider’, ‘question’, ‘investigate’ or ‘learn, know, experience’.204 Chaucer’s use of these senses in various parts of The Canterbury Tales points to movement between ‘touch’ and ‘investigation’ in the last decade or so of the fourteenth century.205 So Tebell’s actions are cast, like Thomas’s, as an attempt to ‘learn, know, experience’ through touch. Salome uses the same verb, ‘gropen’, as her colleague whose examination was initiated by Mary, but Salome’s touch is taboo because it has not been invited by the divine or sanctified being:

To tell salome scho was full yhape;
& salome sayd, bot I yr graype
I hald pi salk bot scorne.
When scho to grape mary was comen,
Hyr hend, yr armes war all benomen.
Alias, scho sayd, I am lorne. (1027-32)

The compression of sin and punishment into a single couplet maintains an ambiguity about whether Salome even achieves her aim. Her intention is enough to ‘benomen’ her arms. Once this confession has been made, the narrative can move forward to the divine intervention that will effect a cure.

204 MED: gropon (v).

205 The MED definitions are found as follows 1(a) SumT III.2141 (1392-95); 3 ReeveT I.4217; 5(a) CYP VIII.679 (1386-1400); 5(b) GP L.644
While Lydgate praises the belief of the first midwife, in contrast her companion is immediately described in a pejorative manner; she behaves as she does ‘for wantruste’:

And than a-noon, for the grete offence
And for wantruste, hir felowe Solomee
Opynly, that all myght it see,
Waxe in that Arme dede and colde as stone,
With the whiche she was hardy for to gone

The childe to touche of presumpcion; (III.381-86)

This is akin to the ‘wanhope’ of Doubting Thomas in *The Metrical Life*. Yet, while Thomas becomes a model for Christians, the extremity of Salome’s failure to give any due reverence to the divine mother and child sets her up as an antitype of worshipper in Lydgate’s poem and her punishment is explicitly and remarkably public: ‘for hir high trespace, /All opynly in the same place, /She punishede was, that all myghten se’ (III.391-93).

The convention of confession demands that a sinner owns his sins before he can be forgiven and in the Middle English *Three Kings of Cologne*, Salome articulates her wrongdoing before the narrative moves to the miracle of the cure:

And whan Marie had suffrid Salome touche her and Salome withdrew her honde from Marie, anone her hondis bothe were drye and dede, and for sorow crying and wepyng seyde, ‘O Lord, pou wost that Y haue euere dreed pe, and all women to whom Y have comY have cryd. And lo now how wrecchid Y am bycomyn for myn vnbyleve, for Y was so hardy to taste and fele thy mayde’. (p.52)

Similarly, the Chester Salome’s acknowledgement of her fault once her hand as been ‘dryed up’ (VI.542) (‘Vengeance on mee ys nowe light, /for I would tempte Goddes might’ (VI.544-45)) allows her to receive forgiveness and healing. The Phillipps poem places the confession and healing miracle in adjacent stanzas, thus providing an unambiguous route to forgiveness: confession; penance; praying to Mary; healing from Christ:

Ifull wele I wote I haue done mys,
For my mystrowyng all haf I pis
bat I lyfed in a drede;
& god þu wote I uted nyght & day
Women & chylder to help þam ay;
Helpe nowe me in þis nede.

Gabrell bad hyr aske mary forgynes
And sayde, touche þe þat borne es,
þu sall be hale gude spede.
Scho dyd sone als þe annegil bad
& was all hale; þan was scho glad
& loued god of þat dede. (1033-44)

The variations to this pattern that we see in other texts may omit one or more element but the message of the legend demands that Salome is cured and that Christ heals his first invalid.

206 Christ accuses Thomas of ‘wanhope’ at line 3700 of MLC; see p.79, below.
The miracle

In the *South English Nativity*, Salome is cured by touching the infant Jesus; she has a natural impulse to turn to him in her distress at her sudden ailment:

> For deol and for sorunesse merci heo gan crie,
> 3if heo hadde [nyspouht] oper myssed our leydy Marie.
> And [as] our lord here 3af grace to be child heo gan gon,
> And handelede him wip here dede honden, and bei bycomen hole anon.
> Anon as ho asket mercy
> And touchide Ihesu that born was,
> hole ho was onon in he
> and thonket God of al his grace. (472-80)

She cries for mercy; having asked for forgiveness she is thus able to receive the cure that results from a permitted touch of the divine. Other texts add a stage to the cure, adding either an angel’s appearance to direct the woman to Christ or, as in the *Metrical Life*, dialogue with Mary, thus establishing Mary’s role as intercessor for future Christians. There is an interesting variation in the *Three Kings*: a similar child to the one who will appear to the Magi to tell them to travel to Bethlehem tells Salome how she can be cured:207

> And whan she had seyd so, a wondur fayr child appering to her seyd, ‘Go, woman, to pe child, and byseche hym praying and touche hym, & of thin hondis he shal hele the. He forsothe is pe saviour of the world’. Which Salome goyng hastily to the child wurschipid hym and touchid the hemme of his clothis yn which he was wrappid and anone her hondis were helid. (p.52)

It is also worth noting the explicit pre-echo of Christ’s healing miracles as an adult in the detail of the ‘hemme of his clothis’ that Salome ‘touchid’.208

The *MLC*-poet describes both Salome’s appeal to the mother and a heavenly messenger; ‘Oure Lady’ tells Salome that she intends ‘[t]o pray for þee’ (160), which prompts divine intervention in the form of a disembodied ‘voyce’:

> A voyce spake to hir þo,
> Bade sche schuld radly go
> Touche þe childe a litel wight,
> And haue hir hondes bope aȝcyn right.
> To touche þe childe sche was ful fayn,
> And hade hir hondes bope aȝayn. (165-70)

The wholeness of her cure is affirmed when she uses her newly restored hands to hold the baby while speaking to him. Thus the reader is given the visual image of a healed woman alongside the evidence of hearing her testify to the miracle:

> Sche toke hym in hir hondes right,
> Lord, sche saide, God Almyght,
> Wele I leve þat þou art he

---

207 I examine the child in the star more closely in chapter 5 below.

208 Mark 5.25-29; Matthew 9.20-22; 14.36.
A similar combination of visual and verbal is necessary to convince a mystery play audience of the cure and its significance. In the Chester Nativity play, the cured Salome speaks of her new and strong faith:

```
Ah, sweete child, I aske mercye,
for thy mothers love, Marye.
Though I have wrought wretchedlye,
sweete childe, forgive yt mee.
Ah blessed bee God! All whole am I
Nowe leeve I well and sickerlye
that God is commen, man to forbye.
And thou, lord, thou are hee. (VI.556-63)
```

Salome’s assertion of belief (‘Nowe leeve I well’) directly recalls the words spoken by Joseph who believes ‘Nowe’ when he returns from his errand and sees the child. The significance of the miracle is emphasised by the metrical shift in the final line of the stanza, which demands stress on each of the three monosyllables ‘thou, lord, thou’, and thus directs attention to the baby. After the conclusion of the Sybil and Octavian section of the play, which borrows directly from *A Stanzaic Life of Christ*,209 the Expositor returns to use Salome’s example as a warning against sin:

```
when Salome attempted to knowe
whether shee was a maye,
hyr hand roted, as you have seene.
Wherby you may take good teene
that unbeleeffe is a towele sinne,
as you have seene within this playe. (VI.717-22)
```

This final speech transforms the midwife incident from a demonstration of Mary’s virginity into a fable about human sin.

In contrast, the N-Town dramatist keeps the incident firmly centred in questions of proof and faith.210 Salome’s action and words combine to articulate proof of Christ’s divinity (his ability to heal) and his mother’s virginity (which, of course, augments the concept of his dual nature):

```
Hic Salomae tangit fimbriam Christi dicens:
A, now blyssyd be his chylde euymore!
be Sone of God, forsothe he is,
Hath helyd myn hand bat was forlore
Thorwe fals beleve and demyne amys! (15.294-97)
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\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Hic Salomee tangit fimbriam Christi dicens:} \\
\text{A, now blyssyd be his chylde euymore!} \\
\text{be Sone of God, forsothe he is,} \\
\text{Hath helyd myn hand bat was forlore} \\
\text{Thorwe fals beleve and demyngye amys!} \quad (15.294-97)
\end{align*}
\]

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209 *SLC*, p.xxviii.

210 This focus is perhaps unsurprising given the cycle’s dramatisation of the Trial of Mary and Joseph, which suggests an interest in the way in which truth can be tangibly demonstrated (Cf. Emma Lipton (2002), pp.115-35).
Rather than focusing on Salome’s sin, the playwright uses her as a model of the transformation enacted by faith, and the ensuing impetus to communicate to others:

In every place I xal telle pis:
Of a clene mayde pat God is born,
And in oure lyknes God now clad is,
Mankend to saue pat was forlorn; (15.298-301)

The simple rhyme of ‘born’ and ‘forlorn’ ties Christ’s Birth to man’s salvation. So the two extant midwife plays use the legend to convey different messages. Nonetheless, in the N-Town Salome’s promise that in ‘every place I xal telle pis’ points to a common conclusion to the story in Middle English narratives: the women become evangelists.

The first Middle English midwives, in the *South English Nativity*, are given a clear evangelising role:

\[\text{pis wumman wente hom a3en and euere heo hadde in mynde}
\text{And wyde tolde pe childes beringe pat so moche was a3e kynde}
\text{Eche maner creature of his burptyne som tokenynge he let do:}
\text{Aungel [and] man, sonne and sterre, best and tre also. (395-98; f.98r)}\]

This is a problematic part of the story; while the preaching shepherds are authorized both by their gender and by the commonplace convergence of ‘preacher’ and ‘shepherd’ in the meanings of ‘pastor’, women preachers are not part of the Church at this time. Influentially, Thomas Aquinas devotes his mind to the question in his *Summa theologica*. He asks who can be the fitting recipients of the charism of speech and concludes that women can receive this grace:

\[\text{Videtur quod gratia sermonis, sapientiae et scientiae pertineat etiam ad mulieres. Ad}
\text{hujusmodi enim gratiam pertinent doctrina, sicut dictum est. Sed docere competit}
\text{mulieri: dicitur enim Prov. Unigenitus fui coram matre mea, et docebat me. Ergo hae}
\text{gratia competit mulieribus.}^{212}\]

However, he goes on to recall the teaching of Paul, which states that women should engage only in private speech so: *privatim ad unum vel paucos, familiariter colloquendo, et quantum ad hoc gratia sermonis potest competere mulieribus*.\(^{213}\) Therefore Aquinas allows for women to preach but only in a private setting:

\[\text{3. Ad tertium dicendum quod gratiam divinitus acceptam diversimode aliqui}
\text{administrant, secundum diversitatem conditionis ipsorum. Unde mulieres, si gratiam}
\text{sapientiae aut scientiae habeant, possunt eam administrare secundum privatam}
\text{doctrinam, non autem secundum publicam.}^{214}\]

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211 Thomas Aquinas (2a2ae.171-8), ed. by Roland Potter (1970).
212 Aquinas, p.132. [It seems that this grace belongs to women too. Teaching, as we have seen is attached to this grace. And a woman can teach: this Proverbs, I was an only-begotten in the sight of my mother; she taught me. p.139),]
213 ‘in this way the grace of speech becomes a woman’ but teaching publicly in church is the realm of prelates.
214 [The recipients of grace conferred by God administer it in different ways according to their various conditions. Hence women, if they have the grace of wisdom or of knowledge, can impart these by teaching privately but not publicly.] pp.134,135
Yet we saw that the early versions of the midwife story in the apocryphal gospels clearly narrate the women’s desire to preach of their experience and new faith. So this part of the narrative is maintained in many Middle English accounts. In the Phillipps poem, both women become preachers and speak of the new Messiah to people ‘thurghout þe land’, facilitating belief through the ‘trew’-ness of their physical and spiritual beings:

These women went þan both bedene,  
& all þat pai had herde or sene  
þat told thurghout þe land;  
& men & women trowed þam enew,  
For þei halden wer aþher full trew  
Boyth of tung and hand. (1045-50)

If men and women ‘trowed þam enew’ because of the unassailable combination of ‘tung and hand’ (that the reader too has witnessed), then the midwives’ preaching cannot be criticised.

Salome similarly becomes a preacher in Lydgate’s Life of Our Lady but the response she receives combines curiosity with scepticism:

And vp she Roos and may no longer fayn,  
But in the strete opnly gan creye,  
Howe the lorde that all the worlde may gye,  
Discendyd is and become man.  
And while3 that she thus in the strete ran,  
Tellyng the byrthe, and of the sterre also,  
And of hir Arme, and of hir soden cure,  
The peple gan to drawen faste hir to,  
To herken more of this aventure; (III.430-38)

Lydgate does not offer his readers a simple trajectory of testimony to belief for the recipients of Salome’s evangelism; these people need visual proof to augment the testimony of an individual witness:

And in her speche som gan hem assure,  
And thought hir wordes myght be credible,  
And specially, for alway so visible,  
The sterre shone euere above the house,  
1-lyche fixe withouten mocion, -  
So bright, so large, so glad, and so loyus,  
pat alle þat hadden þer of inspeccioun,  
In hert perfyte, and trwe of entencion,  
Thoughten thy they were Reioysyd and made light (III.439-47).

The star confirms Salome’s words and a first community of believers is established.

Sometimes, though, the potentially problematic nature of women as preachers is evident in the emotional nature of Salome’s response. The Salome of the Middle English Three Kings ‘than goyng out bygan for to crie lowd the merveilles which she had seyn and what she had suffrid and how she was helyd, so that by her prechyng mych peple turnyd to the byleve herof’ (pp.52-53). Scholars of Middle English devotional texts cannot help but
recall the reaction to the East Anglian woman who similarly would ‘crie loud’ of her religious experiences. Thus while Salome brings people ‘to the byleyve’, she does so with uncomfortable echoes, for us, of Margery Kempe’s extremely vivid and incessant version of evangelism.

The Doubt of Thomas in Middle English

The texts we have examined so far suggest that Salome tells people what she has learnt from the miracle she has undergone. This fits with the idea, popular in the canonisation of St Thomas, that the experience of touch provides a kind of sensory proof that can privilege a person’s testimony and enable him to preach of it to others. However, Thomas seems to have been a less ambiguous symbol; Salome’s actions do not make her a saint in the eyes of the Church and the legend appears to drop out of common usage after the fifteenth century.215 This should not be overstated: even though orthodox religion fails to embrace Salome as an exemplary figure, tellings of this story in medieval England unambiguously champion Salome’s future role: ‘by her prechyng mych peple turnyed to the byleyve herof.’216

In Nicholas Love’s Mirror, Thomas’s absence at the initial meeting with the disciples carries the same importance as Salome’s absence from the cave in the initial model of the midwives story: because of this circumstance, both Thomas and Salome have to trust their ears rather than their eyes and since they hear only reported facts rather than having direct access through the evidence of their own senses, doubt remains:

When pe viij day of his resurrexion was come,oure lorde Jesus aperede eft to hees disciples in pe forseide place, & pe 3ates closede, where Thomas was þan present with hem, þat was not so þe first day before seide, & after hees felawes hade tolde him howe þei hadden seene hir lorde, & he not byleyung bot if he mith touch him as þe processe of þe gospel pleynly telleþ þan þe gode heredeman of his erryng shepe bysye & hauynge compassion, suideynly standyng in middes of hem saluede hem & seide, Pees to Beowe. (Dominica, lviii, p.206)

Thomas now has sight and hearing of the risen Jesus but Christ himself invites him to perform the test on which he, rhetorically, had said his ‘byleyung’ would be contingent:

And þerwip turnyung him specialy to Thomas seide, put in þi finger hider & se, & touch my handes, & bringe forþ þi hande & put in to my side, & be nomore of misbyleyue, bot helpen toward the trently byleyung. And þan Thomas reurently knelyng don wip bope ioy & drede touchede hees wounds as he bade seide, My lorde & my gode. He sauie him man & beleued him gode, & þan also he knowlechede his gilt, in þat he had forsaken him as opere also diden, & oure lord godely takyng him vp; seide, Drede not alle þi sinnes bene bene for3iue. (p.206)

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215 Whilst the Chester and N-Town manuscripts both contain dramatisation of the incident, it is clear that the Reformation would have led to the demise of this legend.

216 TKC, p.53.
recall the reaction to the East Anglian woman who similarly would ‘crie lowd’ of her religious experiences. Thus while Salome brings people ‘to the byleve’, she does so with uncomfortable echoes, for us, of Margery Kempe’s extremely vivid and incessant version of evangelism.

The Doubt of Thomas in Middle English

The texts we have examined so far suggest that Salome tells people what she has learnt from the miracle she has undergone. This fits with the idea, popular in the canonisation of St Thomas, that the experience of touch provides a kind of sensory proof that can privilege a person’s testimony and enable him to preach of it to others. However, Thomas seems to have been a less ambiguous symbol; Salome’s actions do not make her a saint in the eyes of the Church and the legend appears to drop out of common usage after the fifteenth century.\(^\text{215}\) This should not be overstated: even though orthodox religion fails to embrace Salome as an exemplary figure, tellings of this story in medieval England unambiguously champion Salome’s future role: ‘by her prechyng mych peple turnyd to the byleve herof.’\(^\text{216}\)

In Nicholas Love’s *Mirror*, Thomas’s absence at the initial meeting with the disciples carries the same importance as Salome’s absence from the cave in the initial model of the midwives story: because of this circumstance, both Thomas and Salome have to trust their ears rather than their eyes and since they hear only reported facts rather than having direct access through the evidence of their own senses, doubt remains:

*When \(\text{he viij day of his resurrexion was come, oure lorde Jesus apered eft to hees disciples in \(\text{be forseide place, }& \text{be 3ates closede, where Thomas was pan present with hem, pat was not so \(\text{be first day before seide, }& \text{after hees felawes hade tolde him howe \(\text{beij hadden seen hir lorde, }& \text{he not byleuyng bot if he miht touch him as be processe of \(\text{be gospel pleynly tellep; }& \text{pan \(\text{be gode herdeman of his erryng shepe }\text{bysye }& \text{hauyng compassion, sudeynly standingyng in middes of hem saluede hem }& \text{seide, Pees to Sowe. (Dominica, lviii, p.206)}\)*}

Thomas now has sight and hearing of the risen Jesus but Christ himself invites him to perform the test on which he, rhetorically, had said his ‘byleuyng’ would be contingent:

*And perwip turnyng him specialy to Thomas seide, put in \(\text{ji finger hider }& \text{se, }& \text{touch my handes, }& \text{bringe for\(\text{p} \text{ji hande }& \text{put in to my side, }& \text{be nomore of misbyleue, bot hepen towarde treuly byleuyng. And pan Thomas reuerently kneuyng don wip bope ioy }& \text{andre touchede hees woundes as he badde }& \text{seide, My lorde }& \text{my god. He sauhe him man }& \text{beleuede him god, }& \text{pan also he knoweleche his gilt, in \(\text{jiat he hade forsaken him as opere also diden, }& \text{oure lord godely takeyng him vp; }\)seide, Drede not alle \(\text{ji sinnes bene for3iue. (p.206)}\)*

\(^{215}\) Whilst the Chester and N-Town manuscripts both contain dramatisation of the incident, it is clear that the Reformation would have led to the demise of this legend.

\(^{216}\) TKC, p.53.
Love, as usual, attaches a practical application to this story. The doubt is divinely ordained for the purpose of ‘opun preue’ for all believers and so that disbelief could be banished:

And pis longe dout & misbyleue of Thomas was of pe grete gudenes of oure lorde, in pat maner suffredre for oure profite, to pe more opun preue & certeyne of his verrey Resurrexion.

And so we mowe se here pe grete benignyte, mekenes & feruent loue of oure lord Jesu, in pat pat he shewep to Thomas & his oper disciples so opunly hees wondes fort put awey fro hir hertes alle maner derkenes of misbyleue to bope heren & oures grete profite. (p.206)

Thomas is, in the Mirror, purely a conduit for God’s purpose to be enacted and, as such, Christ remains the focus of the piece; Thomas’s preaching role is not mentioned at all.

In contrast, Thomas is, for the MLC-poet, a type for the doubting Christian and his movement to faith prompts a movement to evangelism that sets an example for the reader. Christ characterises Thomas’s doubt as ‘wanhope’, which is a ‘dampnable synne’ in Chaucer’s Parson’s delineation of the sins;217 He ‘saide þen’

Miche wanhope man þou has,
Come hider to me as I stonde,
Hondel me bope fote and hond,
And my body ech a quytte,
And ech a wounde hope mych & litte,
And putt þi fynger in my hert,
þere þe spere smote so smert. (3700-7)

Significantly, Jesus does not condemn the despair but rather invites the disbeliever to seek proof of the Resurrection through touch. After proof, evangelism follows:

Þe aposle went oueral aboute,
And tolde in ech a place þorghout
pat Crist was risen witterly,
And went about in Galeye. (3724-27)

Here Thomas’s preaching role recalls, for us, the impulse to tell that we have seen in the midwives episode and implicitly affirms the role of the poet, since words are seen to be a vehicle through which truth can be made known; he has gained proof with his hands and the testimony of his mouth becomes proof for those to whom he speaks.

The SLC-poet uses Thomas’s conversion as part of his description of the Resurrection miracles. Interestingly, the tomb is likened to Mary’s womb:

For ry3t as he went close body
out of his modur womb i-wys,
so close sepulcour sicurly
he went out of, 3e leue wel this. (7269-72)

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217 It is a ‘twigge’ of the ‘braunchie’ of ‘accidie’ or sloth in the penitential scheme of The Parson’s Tale (X.387; 693). This tale follows the pattern of a typical penitential or confessional manual, which were produced in large numbers in the years after Lateran IV made annual confession obligatory. C.f. Canterbury Tales, ed. Mann, p.1089.
The poet explicitly connects the Resurrection to the birth to remind his readers that this rising again can be compared directly to his first entry into life. Thomas's role is, like Salome's, to enact proof on behalf of the readers, the 'wytnes saynt Thomas [...] put his honde' into Christ's side:

And therby mon may ful wel se
that he ros in that selue body
that de3et before on rode tre
And born was of a virgyn Mary. (7313-16)

Through use of his sense of touch, Thomas enables later Christians to believe through sight of this text. And while Thomas is thus given the privileged position of 'witnes', his doubt nonetheless plays a role in his exemplarity since he 'betokenes men myssbeleuyng' as we saw in the *Metrical Life*. Thomas 'nold not leue in no maner [...] til he hade sene his wondes sor / and felet hom'; yet men who fear 'right as Thomas' are shown '[t]he faiithe that Crist in vrthe con bring' (7658-64).

The Chester Christ allows the other disciples to 'Handle me, both all and one' before Thomas arrives at the Upper Room (XIX.184). Thomas is therefore asked to believe without the evidence of his own senses that his peers have been granted. This puts him very clearly into the role of later Christians, including the audience in medieval Chester who are separated in time from the events of the Bible and therefore must depend on the testimony of others in the formation of faith. Thomas's words in the Chester play are particularly reminiscent of the expression of doubt made by Salome earlier in the cycle:

Shall I neuer leave that this ys trewe,
by God omnypotent
but I see in his handes two
holes the nayles can in goe
and put my fynger eke alsoe
thereas the nayfes went.
[...]
I leve not tell I see. (XIX.218-31)

Finally, Christ *subito apparebit*. His words invite touch to prove that he has risen and the nature of the tactile experience reminds the audience of his bodily humanity:

Come hither, Thomas; to thee I call.
Shoue forthe, for ought that maye befall,
thy hand and put in here;
and see my handes and my feete,
and put in thy hand; thou ne lett.
My woundes are yett freshe and wett
as the first were. (XIX.241-47)

From the extant text, it is not clear whether Thomas does actually touch the actor playing Christ. There is no stage direction to indicate physical contact; rather, he articulates
immediate belief after Christ has spoken to him: ‘My God, my lord, my Christ, my kingel/
Nowe leeve I withowt weeninge’ (XIX.250-51).

This brief glimpse at the similarities between the doubts of Thomas and of Salome does not account for their differing reputations. The continued prominence of Thomas must be attributable, at least in part, to the simple fact that his doubt is told in the canonical gospels and that, as an apostle, his role in the story of Christ’s Life is not limited to this single episode. Furthermore, the instantaneous physical punishment given to Salome separates the episodes, making it unarguable that Salome has transgressed, whereas we have seen that Thomas’s ‘wanhope’ does not lead to undesirable consequences. However, the popularity of both stories in Middle English accounts of Christ’s life points to an interest in questions of proof and testimony, which frames the way in which stories are told and which lends itself to the dramatic form of the Mystery Cycles.
Plate 7: MS Gough MS, f.14, c.1300-1310.
Plate 8: Emmanuel MS 252, f.7v, c.1220-30.
Plate 9: Fitzwilliam MS 63, f.60b, c.1425-50.
Plate 9b: Fitzwilliam MS I-2005 (The Macclesfield Psalter), f.139v, c.1330.
Plate 10: V&A 2270-1900, c.1325-50.
Shepherds

Luke 2.8-20 tells of the shepherds’ encounter with the angels and their subsequent trip to Bethlehem to visit Jesus. We can divide the action of Luke’s narrative into the following subheadings: description of the shepherds and their location; the appearance and message of the angels; the reaction and ensuing action of the shepherds; the Adoration; the postscript. However, the closeness of many Middle English texts to the canonical gospel is surprising given that apocrypha fails to develop the story in any significant way. *Protevangelium of James* moves straight from the Midwives legend to the Magi; *Pseudo-Matthew* tells only of the Annunciation to the Shepherds, leaving the Adoration either implied or non-existent. *Legenda Aurea* depicts the Shepherds making the Journey to see the Holy Family and this detail, combined with the growing visual impact of liturgical drama with its tableaux of Adoration, may account for the increased popularity of Adoration scenes in later medieval versions of the Nativity.

This chapter addresses the role of shepherds in most Middle English Nativities and focuses less than might be expected on the Towneley *Second Shepherds’ Play*, its companion in the Towneley cycle and the Chester pageant. These plays are by far the best known and most discussed examples from medieval England, yet they are not typical. The shepherds are a very insignificant part of the story for many writers in the period. Lyrics of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, for example, frequently allocate just one stanza to the shepherds, suggesting that their inclusion is part of an attempt to synthesise the gospel narratives accurately rather than being part of a theological or social programme for a particular writer.

The brevity of this treatment fits with the similarly scant accounts in the apocryphal gospels. Without the Adoration, the episode is rather static and separate from the main narrative of Christ’s life. Extant iconography tends only to depict the Annunciation, with shepherds included in a few general Nativity scenes such as the panels at Peter Mancroft and East Harling,218 and the Ranworth Antiphonal, f.22. The long narrative poems and compilations of legendary material of the late thirteenth- and fourteenth centuries are similarly perfunctory in their treatment; they present verbal descriptions of the visual tableaux and do not amplify Luke with much extra detail or apocrypha. However in the

218 Plates 1 and 4.
shepherds plays from the Towneley and Chester cycles, the journey, the gift-giving and the shepherds’ return to their everyday lives provide an impetus and movement that augments the episode.\textsuperscript{219} This may account for their extraordinary critical popularity but it problematizes any attempt to produce a synthesis of Middle English shepherds narratives.

The shepherds

The Towneley and Chester versions of the story give far greater detail of the shepherds’ pre-Annunciation lives than is seen elsewhere. Yet even without the detailed characterization of the plays, the shepherds are usually recognisable as Everyman figures. Their story can thus represent the encounter of the divine baby with the common man. Unlike the Magi, whose distance from “normality” is apparent in their wealth, status and “foreignness”, the shepherd can represent ordinary humanity. Despite population and labour movements during the 1400s, England was a predominantly rural society, with a high proportion of agricultural labourers who could, quite reasonably, identify aspects of their own lives in the experience of the shepherds, especially when assisted by the temporally and geographically anachronistic detail given by the dramatists. Furthermore, the etymological connection of pastor (Latin shepherd) with the word applied to members of the clerical orders means that shepherds can represent the clergy as well as the laity.\textsuperscript{220}

Luke does not describe the shepherds in any detail: \textit{pastores erant in regione cadem vigilantes et custodientes vigilius noctis supra gregem suum} (Luke 2.8). His words suggest that the men are attentive and working hard, even in the darkness of night. Students of medieval literature have long noted the implication of being fit or unfit at one’s profession (most notably, of course, in relation to the General Prologue of \textit{Canterbury Tales}).\textsuperscript{221} And if being unfit at one’s job calls an individual’s character into question, then the shepherds’ diligence can lend them a credibility that points to two narrative opportunities in the shepherds episode: either the extant ‘goodness’ of the shepherds demonstrates that one must live a good life before meeting Christ (whether in a spiritual encounter or in a concept of heaven) or, if an author chooses not to make his shepherds hard-working, their laziness

\textsuperscript{219} Elizabeth Salter (1988) sums up the particularity of the drama: in the shepherds plays, ‘we begin to see a new kind of confrontation, perhaps even a conflict, between traditional roles and newly-emergent shaping forces – forces born first of all of changes in affective piety, but after that of the enthusiasms of the dramatists moving into independent and experimental areas of creative work’ (p.274).

\textsuperscript{220} \textit{MED} pastor (n) from OF ‘pastor’ and L ‘pastor, -oris’: 2 ‘(a) a shepherd of souls, pastor; a bishop; also, an abbot; also as a title; (b) a spiritual leader, adviser; (c) a ruler, arbiter, overseer’. The first citation for this usage is the 1387 translation of the \textit{Polychronicon}.

\textsuperscript{221} See Jill Mann (1973), for example.
allows for a conversion from sinner to devout Christian after their meeting with the new baby. While the latter option has obvious potential for dramatic effect (and might recall other conversions, for example, Noah’s wife’s), the former is by far the more usual portrayal in the extant Middle English shepherds texts. It also resonates with the idea of pastoral ‘not of withdrawal from the world but of social responsibility’. 

Manuscripts illustrate this engagement with the world. For example a thirteenth-century Gough manuscript shows three shepherds. Each is at a different stage of life (young man, middle aged, elderly) so that, between them, they encompass all of humanity. Their clothes are rough and they are accompanied by their sheep, a dog and some goats. A much sparser image from a Benedictine Psalter clearly shows men of three different age groups. However, until the characters of the shepherds begin to receive distinctive treatment in dramatic form, Middle English authors do not explicitly refer to the men’s ages. Most texts follow Legenda Aurea by referring to the men collectively as ‘the shepherds’; ‘the shepardes woken upon the keping of her beestis, so as thei were acustumed in the lengest and in the shortest nightes in the yere’ (Gil, p.38). Rather than distinguishing between them as individuals, writers are concerned to identify them through their occupation. In Cursor Mundi, they were ‘wonte to be /on feld’ and the MLC-poet relates that ‘te scheperdes þat were on þe wolde /Her schepe for to vnfolde’ (197-8). Lydgate comments on their ‘grete besynesse’ in the Life of Our Lady (III.460), and a similar picture emerges in the Northern Homily Cycle.

*Et pastores erant in regione eadem.*

Hyrdman in þat same cuntre
Woke þaie cours to kepe þaie fe.
Paie traualied þe tides of þe night,
To 3eme þaie store with all þaie might. (2745-48)

The shepherds’ virtue is clear; they work through the night. The Homilist uses their diligence as an example toward which his audience should aspire: Jesus shows ‘his cumyng right’ to shepherds

For als hird verry and gude
Seemes his schepe and findes þam fode.
And kindly, if we tak kepe,
He sett his life here for his schepe. (2809-12)

The exemplarity extends to the ‘hirdmen of haly kyrk’ who, just as the shepherds remain attentive through the night, must

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222 Helen Cooper (1977), p.47.
223 MS Gough liturg. 2, f.14 (plate 7; Sandler cat. 42; II, pp.48-9), c.1300-1310.
224 Emmanuel MS 252, f.7v (plate 8).
stodi and wake onang þaire schepe
How þai þaire bestes mai klenly kepe,
And to ordain with all þaire might
Ogains þe fende gastly to fight,
So þat oure fals emmy þe fende
Get no force þe folk to schende,
Swilk ioy and pese bese night and day
Vnto gude hirdes, þat es to say,
þat ouer þaire schepe wakes and stodlye,
þam for to fede with fude rightwise,
þat es gude techeing in all thing,
And ensample of gude lifing. (2809-28)

Similar themes emerge in a Lollard sermon on the same topic. This preacher contrasts the humility of the shepherds ‘to wham come first tylynge of þis birþe’ with the possessors of worldly renown.225 By sending the ‘first message and ioyful tylynge of his Sonus birþe to semple, pore schelperdes’, God shows that Christ ‘was not born in to þis world to regne on mennus bi worldly excellence and temperal power, but in pore estaat and semple to lede his iyi’ (5, p.61). The description of the shepherds as ‘pore men of semple craft’ leads to an explicit celebration of the virtues of every calling: ‘And so no riche man schulde despie ani pore man for his pouertee, eþer for his semple craft, 3ef he be vertueus in his lyuynge, 3ef þei biholde wel houþ he chees raper poore men to his knowlechynge þan rche.’ Notably, this Lollard preacher extols poverty and humility but only when they are found alongside diligence:

But to what maner of scheperdes aperide þis blesside messenger wiþ þese ioyful tylyngeþe? Not to necligent and sleufuly scheperdes lyinge in her beddes, and suffrynge þeues to stele her schep, eþer wilde beestes to deuoure hem, eþer elles to breke ouer þe folde and renne into mennen corn; but to diligent and wakynge scheperdes þat kepten þe wacche of þe miȝt vpon fer flokkes from alle þese forside mescheues. (5, p.61)

From this, the preacher notes belief and knowledge of Christ are given ‘to hem þat beþ diligent and wel ouceped in her degree, weþer it be spiritual eþer temperal, and specialli to hem þat beþ wakeris in keepinge of her cure whiche þei han vpon Cristis scheep.’

A different Wycliffite sermon focuses on God’s love for the shepherds even in their simplicity: God loved þes herde-men

þat lyuedon symple and hooly lif, and þes weron licly moo þan two, and nye þe staat of innocense; for God louede Abel betture þan Caym þat was his broþur. And þe furste was an herde, and þe toþur a tylynge man; and tylynge men han more of craft þan han herdus in þer dedis. And as God louede Iacobus sonys, þat weron alle herdemen, so he louede þes herdus þat camen for to visite Crist.226

Indeed, the very baseness of their profession brings them closer to an ideal state of innocence as the preacher shows by comparison with the Old Testament figure Abel.

225 Gorman, 5, p.61.
226 EWS, pp.209-10.
With the overwhelming majority of texts celebrating the shepherds for their hard work, the plays of York and N-Town seem to be a more natural development of the typical Middle English Nativity than the celebrated comedy found in the Towneley and Chester cycles. The York shepherds occupy their time by reciting messianic prophecies even before learning that one such Messiah has been born, as we see in the opening speech of the play:

Bredir, in haste takis heede and here
What I wille speke and specific;
Sen we walke pus, withouten were,
What mengis my moode nowe meve yt will I.
Oure formé-fadres faythfull in fere,
Bothe Osye and Isaye,
Preued pat a prins withouten pere
Shulde descende doune in a lady,
And to make mankynde clerly,
To leche þam þat are lorne.
And in Bedlemy hereby
Sall þat same barne by borne. (I-12)

These speeches function simultaneously to establish the pious character of the men and to remind the audience of the prophecies that contain important aspects of doctrine. The N-Town shepherds do not emerge as clearly defined characters because the play opens with the Angel's words of Annunciation. This means that the audience can have no idea how, if at all, the Annunciation affects its first listeners. Instead, the entire play is a response to the message. These shepherds are given a foreknowledge which allows them to ruminate on the deeper significance of Christ's birth. They understand that it is also the inception of the process of salvation.

The most notable example of a fully-characterized shepherd, outside of Towneley and Chester, is Joly Wat, whose portrayal with his companion dog has parallels in visual media, including MS Gough liturgy. 2, f.14. In Fitzwilliam MS 63, f.60b, a golden-coloured dog looking up at the Angel is tied to a shepherd's girdle as in Joly Wat: 'Hys doge to hys gyrdyll was tayd' (stanza 2, line 2). Joly Wat is, as his name implies, a jolly, attractive character; he is though demonstratively attentive to the needs of their flock: the poet describes him as 'a gud herdes boy' and he asks his dog to take care of the sheep when he departs for Bethlehem.

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227 Thomas P. Campbell uses the prophesying of the shepherds to argue that the Ordo Pasterum is integral to Christian liturgy rather than deriving from the Easter Visitatio as earlier critics, including Karl Young and Chambers argued (Campbell (1982), pp.169-82). Helen Cooper suggests that the prophesying before the annunciation is part of the indication that the shepherds are fit to be the first recipients of the news of Christ's birth (p.92).

228 Salters (1988) notes that in 1447 the city chamberlains at York made a payment to 'i ludenti cum Joly Wat and Malken' (p.287), which suggests the extent to which Joly Wat had become a generic shepherd's name. Cf. REED: York, pp.70, 748.

229 Plate 9: Salters (1988), plate 28. See also the decorated initial on f.139v of Fitzwilliam MS 1-2005 (The Macclesfield Psalter), c.1330 (plate 9b).
The Chester and Towneley plays are the only texts with shepherds that do not represent ideal examples of working life. These texts retain an ambiguity over the relative goodness of their shepherds. Some critics seek to recover the reputation of these individuals, whose incompetence accounts for much of the pre-annunciation humour. However, the structure of the plays depends upon the shepherds' trajectory from a sinful state to converted goodness after entering the presence of the newly-born baby. This has a parallel in the structure of the dream vision with the pre-annunciation segment like the pre-sleep preamble in dream poems. Similarly, the relationship between what is seen and experienced in the dream and the dreamer's life once he has awoken is akin to the way that the encounter with the angelic and the divine necessarily impacts upon the way that the shepherds live after they have left Bethlehem to return to their sheep. However, the comic ineptitude of the shepherds in these three plays threatens to overshadow the pattern of hard work common to most Middle English Nativity narratives. The eucharistic symbolism and typological characterisation in these plays is fascinating, but many people in medieval England would have encountered the shepherds as exemplary workers, forming a template for how to live well in order to see Christ in heaven.

Annunciation by the angels

The SLC-poet makes very little mention of the shepherds and their visit to Bethlehem. They are included in the narrative only in the context of the angelic visitation: it is ‘pe fift maner /how Cristes birth was made aperte /by heuenly creatur to vs her’ (1093-95). The poet sees this as especially significant because angels possess a different quality of knowledge from men: ‘thay moun knowe pat nomon may, /how thay knew God omnipotent, /In mony maners I shal say’ (1102-04). One such manner is the appearance to the shepherds, and the poet’s interjection, ‘rede we’, suggests a distance from this aspect of the story; he is depending on his sources for the information:

ffirst quen he was born onon,  
the shepherdes wakyng, rede we,  
An angel come 7 bad hom gone

230 For shepherds as 'bad pastors' see Warren Edminster (2000), 57-73; a more charitable view comes from Kathleen M. Ashley (1988), who places the shepherds in the context of, for example, Native American clowns to suggest that they perform a cultural role (and are therefore not at fault): 123-25. Helen Cooper's Pastoral also believes that the shepherds are essentially good; the dramatists 'all show a concern for making their shepherds fit to receive the first news of Christ's birth; their care for their sheep is stressed' (pp.91-92), and they make 'the shepherds themselves a living image of God's Providence' (p.92).

to Bethlehem Ihesu forto se. (1105-08)

Angelic intervention brings together the earthly and heavenly realms and the reaction of the shepherds (fear and dread) indicates the unexpected and awe-inspiring nature of this meeting. When incidental, the role of angels can include the repetition of prophecy, the articulation of the Nativity tableau (creating with words the image of crib and two beasts that is so familiar from iconography), and, of course, simply to notify the shepherds of the birth of the saviour. Through the education of these characters, who function as Everyman figures, the author has a chance to teach or remind his readers or audience of the salient facts about the Messiah’s birth, including his connection to the Old Testament King David, the poverty of the stable, the ‘twá bestys’ and the virginity of Mary. The Angel’s speech has this function in Cursor Mundi; he tells the shepherds that they will recognise ‘Be saucoeur be born of all’ by ‘takeninges’:

‘In a crib he sal be funden,
Ligand þar an asse es bunden.
Honurs him, for-qui he sal
Be sett in dauid king stall.’ (11252-56)

These words are notably close to the Biblical narrative. The appearance of an Angel, his words and the arrival of more angels singing Gloria is one of the fuller parts of Luke’s Nativity narrative:

Et ecce angelus Domini stetit iuxta illos, et claritas Dei circumfusit illos, et timuerunt timore magno. Et dixit illis angelus: nolite timere: ecce enim evangelizo vobis gaudium magnum, quod erit omni populo. quia natus est vobis hodie Salvator, qui est Christus Dominus, in civitate David. Et hoc vobis signum: invenietis infantem pannis involutum, et positum in praesepio. (Luke 2.9-12)

Legenda Aurea follows Luke almost exactly. In contrast, the entire shepherds episode is encapsulated by Pseudo-Matthew in his report of the shepherds’ assertion se angeles vidisse in medio noctis hymnum dicentes, deum coeli laudantes et benedicentes, et dicentes quia natus est salvator omnium, qui est Christus dominus, in quo restituetur salus Israel (PM p.76).

Retelling the greeting remains an important part of the narrative for Middle English authors. The Northern Homily Cycle devotes almost an entire homily to the Angel’s words. Firstly he reassures them that the shepherds should not be afraid: ‘Ne be noght murnand in 3oure thoght /Of þis brightnes and of þis light, /For it es made thurgh Goddes might’ (2760-
62). The homilist speaks through the Angel, teaching his audience of the salvation brought about by the birth: the Angel comes to show:

Pat thurgh þe werkes of his mercy,
And thurgh his birth wonderfully,
Man-saules sal saue and bring of sin,
And vnto welth ogain þam win. (2767-70)

The homilist uses the Angel’s words to remind the reader of Bethlehem’s connection to David the baby is born ‘in Dauid king cete’ and is ‘als out of kith /Of þe kin of King Dauid’ (2776-78). He then concentrates on the humility of the Nativity scene, using the ‘twa bestes’ as an identifying feature for the shepherds: the baby is

‘Lapped in clowtis and power wede,
Laid in a crib als fe to fede.
So sal 3e find þat worthy wonden
And laid bitwene twa bestes bunden.’ (2779-86)

The Angel is not given an extended role in any of the extant plays. His speech in each example is confined to a few discrete stanzas (the York MS has a leaf missing at the point where the Angel’s speech would have occurred so we cannot describe it in any certainty but since the Angel’s appearance is missing altogether, it is clear that he did not engage in any extended dialogue with the shepherds). In Chester, the Angel’s message is contained only in a stage direction: Tunc cantet Angelus: ‘Gloria in excelsis Deo et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis’ (VII SD357). In both Towneley plays, the Angel communicates a fairly typical litany of detail about the baby’s birth (First Shepherds’ Play, 426-38; Second Shepherds’ Play, 919-25) before instructing them to go to Bethlehem to see the baby lying in a crib between two beasts. N-Town, however, opens with a theologically denser passage, which eschews the more prosaic details of location, etc, in favour of a clear focus on the redemptive purpose of the Incarnation.

Joye to God þat sytt in hevyn,
And pes to man on erthe grownde.
A chylde is born benethe þe levyn,
Thurwe hym many folke xul be vnbownde!
Sacramentys þer xul be vij
Wonnyn þorwe þat childys wounde.
[...] He is gloryed mannys gost to wynne,
He hath sent salute to mannys synne;
Pes is comyn to mannys kynne
Thorwe Godlys sleytys sly3. (1-13)

The company of Angels

relates this passage without amplification \((IgA, p.71; Gil, p.38)\). One fourteenth-century lyric focuses on this part of the verse, omitting the first angel altogether:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{ye angels songen a mirie song,} \\
\text{Pat sepperdis hithen it here:} \\
\text{"Crist is comen vs among} \\
\text{Of loue vs for to lere."}
\end{align*}
\]

\‘Gloria in excelsis deo,’
for 'bei songen bus,
\‘& in terra,\’ bei songen al so,
\‘With pax hominibus.'\textsuperscript{233} (CB14.57, 32-36)

The lyric moves apace through the events of the Nativity and these two stanzas are the only space given to the shepherds. The pastoral theme is less important than the angelic visitation and its attendant music. The lyricist does not translate the words of the song, perhaps indicating that his audience would have been familiar with the Latin text. In \textit{Cursor Mundi}, the angels arrive ‘thic-fald’ to speak the English translation of the words:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Quils pis angel sli tipand tald,} \\
\text{hs ober lighted dun thic-fald,} \\
\text{Louand godd wit suilkyn saugh,} \\
\text{"On hei be loi, and pes on lagh." (11257-60)}
\end{align*}
\]

A more sombre picture emerges of the company of angels in \textit{Stanzaic Life of Christ}: the angels ‘songen with gret solemnite’ (1112). Nonetheless, the scene is characterized even here by its music: ‘Melody mich noumbre made, /As gospelle witnes, leue 3e me’ (1113-14). The ‘[g]rete multitude of angels bright’ (2789) articulate, in the \textit{Northern Homily Cycle}, a hymn of praise which ends with a further explanation of the purpose of the Birth, covering freedom from sin ([God] has sent his sun so dere /[...]Man-kind to clens [p]aire sin’, 2797-9), the wealth of heaven (‘vnto welth with him to win’, 2800), and, for ‘all men of willes gude [...] /Tai sal haue pese withouten end’, (2803-6).

John Mirk’s Nativity sermon from the \textit{Festial} uses the appearance of the angels to symbolise the cooling of the anger which has previously prevented man from entering heaven: ‘For when angelus syen pat here Lord was wroth wyth mon for hys vnbusonnes, pey weren al wroth wyth hym, for vnbusonnes ys a synne pat angelus haton heighly.

Wherfor pey kepton pe 3ates of paradise and letten no soule in tyll pey seyen here Lord borne yn monkynde’ (6, p.24). Mirk ascribes the rapprochement purely to the birth of God in the form of man; the angels’ anger ends and ‘euer sethon angelus han ben fryndes and seruandes to alle gode men and wemen, and alle in reuener of pe incarnacyon of oure Lord Ihesu Crist’ (6, p.24). This represents the orthodox interpretation of Luke 2. \textit{Glossa ordinaria} similarly

\textsuperscript{233} CB14.57, 32-6; NIMEV 1472 ‘In bedlém is a child i-born /sal comen amongus vs’; MS Advocates Library 18.7.21, f.4v-5v.
speaks of this moment as the point at which the estrangement of angel and man ends. For a Lollard preacher, the angels’ appearance signifies the gift of discernment: ‘pat þe aungel cam wiþ ly3t may also bitokene þat wanne prestes (þat beþ þe aungelis of God, as Malache þe prophet seþ) bryngeþ confortable messages to þe peple of truwe doctrine of Goddes lawe, þei schulde aþere wiþ ly3t of goode werkes[...]. And þi þi3t men moun knowe þe aungel of God fro þe aungel of Lucifer’ (Cigman, 5, pp.61-63).

Nicholas Love describes a ‘gret cumpany of angeles þat þere weren honouryng & wirchipyng hir lord god’ both on earth and in heaven, with a concatenation of clauses demonstrating the full complement of orders that worship the new baby:

And so with þat ioyful songe & miche mirþe þei wenten vp in to heuen, tellyng hir opere felaghes þese newe ioyful tipinges of hir lordes blessed birþe. Whereof al þe court of heuen ioyful & glade more þan tonge may telle or hert þenk: makyng a solempe fest & deuoutly þonkyng þe fadere almiþy god, as we mowen deuoutly þenk & ymage, comene alle after by ordre aþere ordre to se þat lounly face of goddus son hir lord, with gret reuerence wirchipyng him & his blessed modere. (lune, vi p.40)

**Action by the shepherds**

The eponymous hero of ‘Joly Wat’ exemplifies a diligent shepherd’s response to the annunciation: he makes adequate preparations to ensure that his flock is tended during his absence and he politely bids farewell to his friends.

[4] ‘Now farwell Mall, and also Will; For my love go ye all styll Vnto I cum agayn you fills, And euermore, Will, ryng well thy bell.’ Vith [etc]

[5] ‘Now must I go ther Cryst was borne; Farewell, I cum agayn tommorn; Dog, kepe well my shep fro the corn, And warne well, warroke, when I blow my horn.’ Vith [etc]

The detail of this lyric is unusual in the practicality of Joly Wat’s concern for his flock.

While most accounts expand on Luke’s swift transition from hearing the message and the consequent departure for Bethlehem, more commonly, authors emphasise the emotions of the shepherds. So one may read, for example, of the ‘ferid’ shepherds in Cursor Mundi:

Quen þai had said þat þai wald sai, Pir angels wited þam ewai, Feird was þaa hirdes for þat light Þai hede sene o þaa angels bright,

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234 For Luke 2.13, the gloss is: Quia vero deus et homo nascitur hominibus pax cum ipsis angelis; for verse 14, it glosses: Et in terra pax. Quoniam peccando eramus a deo extranei: extraneos nos angeli deputabant. Sed quia cognoscimus regem nostrum recognoverat nos angeli cives suos. Et timet angelis adorari ab humana natura. quam in suo rege considerat.

235 Balliol 354, f.224r, ed by Richard Leighton Greene, RLG 78.
For pai sagh neuer suilk a sight,
Sli visiting be-fur pai night. (11261-66)

The fear has clear visual parallels in stained glass, such as a fourteenth-century roundel where a look of concern is evident on the shepherd’s face. The illustration in Emmanuel 252, f.7v, portrays a sense of wonder and surprise rather than fear, and some texts similarly point to a positive reaction from the shepherds; in the Metrical Life, shepherds are made ‘blipe’ by the news. The common feature in these emotions is their intensity, which prompts the decision to leave the hills and find the baby. The reactive quality of the movement to Bethlehem detracts from any mention of what needs to be done before leaving: wonder replaces practicality.

From Luke, authors discover that the shepherds were speaking as they travelled to Bethlehem and this proves a catalyst for extended considerations of the words spoken: et factum est, ut discesserunt ab eis angeli in caelum, pastores loquebantur ad invicem: transeamus usque Bethlehem, et videamus hoc verbum, quod factum est, quod Dominus ostendit nobis (Luke 2.15). A Wycliffite sermon describes prosaically the shepherds’ words:

And whan pe aungelus wenton from hem pes herdis spakon to hemself: ‘Passe we into Bedleem, and see we pis word pat is maad, pat pe Lord hap maad and schewed to us’ (EWS, p.209). In longer accounts, including the shepherds’ pageants from the mystery plays, the shepherds discuss what they have heard. In such discussion, the Angel’s message can be decoded and re-evangelised for the audience, as we see in the expanded version of the Northern Homily Cycle:

And when pe angels þus had done
Fro þe hirdes to heuyn þai parted sone,
And þe hirdes efter þe angel-sang
Spak and said þus þam omang;
‘Pas we helpin vnto Bedleme,
For þepin cumes þis gleterand gleme.
Pas we helpin þe child to se
Pat born es new in pat cetel,
Als oure Lord, mighty and dere,
Schewed till vs on þis manere
Thurgh his angels schinand bright
Pat vnto vs has tald his might,
þe sertain soth in al kins thing
Of þat blisced barn bereing.
3one stern þat we se schinand bright
Will lede vs þeder euin and right.’ (2835-50)

The shepherds in the first of the Towneley pageants respond initially in fear but this then develops into a repetition of various aspects of Nativity symbolism including the Jesse
Root, Old Testament prophecy and even the passage from Virgil that was believed to display an unwitting foreknowledge. Later lyrics and carols often use the refrain or final stanza to transform the angel's message into a communal song. Similarly, in Towneley Second Shepherds', the music is integral to the effect of the message: the shepherds discuss its musical composition.\(^{257}\)

| 2 Pastor | Say, what was his song?  
|          | Hard ye not how he crakyd it,  
|          | Thre brefes to a long? |
| 3 Pastor | Yee, Mary, he hakt it:  
|          | Was no crochett wrong,  
|          | Nor nothyng that lakt it. |
| 1 Pastor | For to syng vs emong,  
|          | Right as he knakt it,  
|          | I can. (13.946-54) |

In the comparable moment in Chester, the topic of discussion is the actual words spoken. Comic mis-repetitions of the Latin allow for many possible interpretations such as a comment on lay failure to understand the Mass, an opportunity for an audience to supply correct readings of their own and for learning through repetition. In any case, the Angel's words literally become the words of Everyman as each shepherd seeks to articulate what he has heard.

| Secundus   | In 'glore' and in 'glere'?  
|            | Yeti noe man was nere  
|            | within our sight. |
| Tertius    | Naye, yt was a 'glorye.'  
|            | Nowe am I sorye  
|            | bowt more songe. |
| Garcius    | Of this strange storye  
|            | such mirth is merye;  
|            | I would have amonge. |
| Primus     | As I then deemed,  
|            | 'selsis' it seemed  
|            | that hee songe soc. (361-72) |

This kind of enactment of the considerable impact that the meeting has on the shepherds is found also in the second Towneley play, wherein the entire verse structure changes once the shepherds have seen the Angel. Rather than the split-stanza, multi-vocal interchanges that characterise the earlier portion of the play, the shepherds' register shifts and they each deliver a whole stanza at a time.

The York shepherds' previous articulation of prophecies is mirrored by their restatement of the words that they have heard, so that the audience is reminded of the 'tythandes newe': that 'A babe in Bedlem shulde be borne' (72-3). This discussion leads them

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to their wish to honour the new baby. The first shepherd wants to ‘giffe hym bothe hatte and horne’ (77). Once the third has pointed out that they will be able to find him because ‘3one sterne to þat lorde sall vs lede’ (81), the second sets the mode of celebratory worship that will characterize the Adoration; they will ‘make myrthe and melody, /With sange to sekeoure savyour’ (84-5).

**Adoration**

From Luke, we learn that the shepherds found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in the manger: *et venerunt festinantes: et invenerunt Mariam et Ioseph, et infantem positum in praesepeio. Videntes autem cognoverunt de verbo, quod dictum erat illis de puero hoc* (Luke 2.16). If Luke believes that an Adoration took place, he does not explicitly mention it. After seeing the baby, these shepherds immediately depart to make known abroad what they have seen. So Luke’s emphasis is on shepherds as evangelists rather than shepherds as worshippers. This fits the picture in *Pseudo-Matthew*, wherein we see shepherds receiving the news from the angel but there is no trip to Bethlehem (unless it is implicit). Later authors usually include a trip to Bethlehem but we can distinguish between two different approaches. Earlier texts, including *Legenda Aurea* and *Cursor Mundi*, depict the shepherds making the journey but once the men are in the stable, the sight that they see is described rather than an act of adoration. In *Legenda Aurea*, *Pastores ergo uenientes totum sicut angelus dixerat invenerunt:*258 in *Cursor Mundi*:

> Quen þai com þar, mari þai tond,  
> And wit hir ioseph hir husband,  
> And þe child þat suedeld was,  
> Lai in crib tuix ox and ass. (11269-72)

However, the visual impact of the liturgical drama, in which the stage directions indicate a tableau of Adoration (*quo cantato, adorent pueram*) can be detected in the later popularity of Adoration scenes, particularly following the growth of Franciscan piety: in Italy, ‘even before the middle of the fourteenth century, paintings representing the Adoration of the Shepherds as their sole theme were being executed’.259

Bridget’s account in the *Liber Celestis* is an early example of an Adoration distinct from the dramatic tradition. In her very brief vision of the shepherds, fascinatingly, they first have to ascertain whether the baby is male: ‘And þai asked whepir it was man or woman.

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258 L&A, p.71; Gil. ‘Thanne come the shepardes and founde alle as the angel hadde tolde hem’ (p.38).
259 Schiller, p.87.
And þe modir shewed to þaim þat it was a man. And þai fell downe and worshipe him with grete reuerens and ioi, and þan þai turned againe’ (Book VII, cap. xxiii, p.487). The rapidity implied by this final sentence has a parallel in the three-line encapsulation of the Adoration in the *Northern Homily Cycle*: ‘pær honorð him with al þaire might /With grete reuerence als it was right, /And þan þaire waies þai went again’ (2873-75). The confirmation of the words of the angel by the proof of their own eyes directly leads to their worship of the baby. This episode thus fits the pattern we have seen elsewhere of experience and witness leading to strengthening of faith.

This version of worship is seen in amplified form in the N-Town Shepherds’ play. Each shepherd praises the baby with a stanza punctuated by the apostrophe ‘heyl’. These stanzas articulate foreknowledge of Christ’s redemptive power and repeat conventional descriptions of the incarnated lord: ‘king of kings’, etc. The other cycle plays take the Adoration one step further by including gift-giving, borrowed from the later Adoration of the Magi. Once the York shepherds have identified the baby by what ‘be aungell saide’, each man addresses the baby with a stanza while presenting a small gift:

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Nowe loke on me, my lorde dere
bof all I putte me noght in pres,
Ye are a prince withouten pere,
I haue no presentte þat you may plees.
But lo, an horne spone þat haue I here –
And it will herbar fourty pese –
His will I giffe you with gud chere,
Slike novelte may nought disease.
Farewele þou swete swayne,
God graunte vs levynge lange,
And go we hame agayne.
And make mirthe as we gange. (15.120-131)
```

The alliteration of ‘putte’, ‘pres’, ‘prince’, ‘pere’, ‘present’, and ‘plees’ marks a shift to a higher register of rhetoric which indicates the appropriate decorum for speaking to the Messiah even while the humility of the gift reminds us that the giver and recipient both exemplify poverty in this world.

The Adorations of both Towneley plays are very similar despite the differences in the action prior to this point with formal apostrophes from each shepherd, the offering of gifts and a response from Mary (Play 12, lines 660-711; Play 13, lines 1024-75). We see the most elaborate Adoration scene in the sixteenth-century Chester manuscript. Not only do the three shepherds and their boy, Garcius, individually present gifts to the baby (VII.550-96), but each is accompanied by a child who also gives an offering (VII.596-40). These four boys give presents that suggest Christ will be a child in medieval England. His full humanity is never as
clear as when a child gives him a nuthook ‘To pull downe apples, payres and ploomes’ so that Joseph does not ‘neede to hurte his handes’ (VII.637-8).

**Action afterwards**

A Norwich roof boss shows the shepherds walking away from stable, ‘perhaps planning a life of devotion as they do in the *Chester Plays*’.²⁴⁰ Luke offers two concurrent reactions to the shepherds’ encounter with the baby: Mary holds the words *in corde suo*, the shepherds leaving praising God and speaking of the things that they have heard and seen: 

\[
\text{Et omnes qui audierunt mirati sunt, et de his quae dicta erant a pastoribus ad ipsos. Maria autem conservabat omnia verba haec, conferens in corde suo. Et reversi sunt pastores, glorificantes et laudantes Deum in omnibus quae audierant et viderant, sicut dictum est ad illos (Luke 2.18-20).}
\]

Mary’s inward contemplation is contrasted with the impetus to speak that characterizes the shepherds’ return to their lives. This transition back to normality is akin to the waking stage of a dream vision; the event of the dream gains its meaning fully only when its effect on the dreamer’s life has been told. From Luke onwards, the shepherds’ actions after seeing the baby are an important feature of the narrative. By writing that the men make known abroad what they have seen, Luke suggests the idea that ordinary men can evangelise while pointing also to the connection between shepherds and priests.

It is rare in Middle English texts for the post-Adoration stage to be neglected altogether. When this happens, it tends to be because the shepherds episode has been included to illustrate the intervention of angels rather than for the interest of shepherds *qua* shepherds, as in *Stanzaic Life of Christ*, or because the author prioritizes Mary’s reaction. Love writes that the shepherds ‘comen & wirchipe dede chel tellyng opunly what pe herden of pe angeles’; this prompts a focus on Mary: ‘his dere modere, as she þat was souereynly wise & witty, toke gude hede of alle þat was done, & kept priueyly in hir herte al þe wordes þat weren spoken of hir blessed son’ (lune, vi, p.40). Lydgate’s Marian focus similarly inflects his depiction of the end of the shepherds episode. He does narrate the effect of the stable on the shepherds: ‘they gan so grete loye haue, /That all at onys they gane magnyfie /God above, and hym to gloryfye, /Retornyng hem devoyde of euery smerte’ (III.528-31).

However, his interest is with Mary:

And Marye cloos within hir herte

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²⁴⁰ Anderson (1963), p.95.
Conserved all that she dyd see,-
Worde and dede, and every manere thyng
That be-felle in that Natvyte,-
Full secretly ther-on ymagenyng,
And prudently hir-self gouernyng,
Kept hir sonne with all byse cure (III.532-8).

Aside from these examples, there are interesting variations in the ways in which the shepherds’ return to worldly life is treated. One group of texts portrays the men resuming their previous life. In Bridget’s Liber, for example, we learn that after prostrating themselves before the child, ‘pan þāi turned againe’ (VII, cap.xxiii, p.487). Bridget’s vision (and therefore her description of the shepherds) ends here, but these words point to an ongoing movement for the shepherds, back into their ordinary existence but with new insight from their encounter with God. Joly Wat likewise goes back ‘to my fellowes’, picking up the job of tending the sheep that he had so carefully left before departing.

A second category concentrates on the infusion of joy that the shepherds experience on seeing the child. This is characteristic of many lyrics, which often end with the shepherds singing, through which we can imply an invitation for the reader/audience to sing also. For example, in RLG 81, the final refrain begins ‘Now seke we alle’. In the York play, the shepherds state that they will ‘make mirthe as we gange’. The Metrical Life poet tells his reader that ‘wenton þāi syngand a3eyn, /Of þat grace þai were ful fayn’ and in the Northern Homily Cycle, ‘al men God-sun glorifide’:

And þan þaire waies þai went again,
And of þas werk þai wald noght lain,
Bot trewly talde to allbidene
Haly als þai had herd and sene.
And all þe fold þat here-of herd
Had grete ferly how þat it ferd,
For swilk ferlise neuer are bifell
Als þe hirdes gan trewly tell.
And al men God-sun glorifide
For tales þat was talde in þar tide. (2875-84)

Thus, the joy simultaneously provides an inclusive ending to the episode, bringing the reader in to share in the glorifying, and also indicates how this experience brings with it an impetus to ‘share’ the news and the happiness widely. Some texts choose to narrate a transformation of the shepherds into preachers. This can be an implied evangelising role, as in Cursor Mundi, where their joyful singing and return to ordinary life suggests that they tell people of their experience while remaining as shepherds: ‘Quat þai had herd and sene þai tald, /All wondir on, bath yong and ald’ (11273-74). In contrast, the Chester shepherds all choose to leave their vocation to take up a Godly or meditative life. This interestingly rejects
the idea of the shepherd as an ideal Christ-type in favour of a more recognisably contemporary clerical existence.
Plate 11: BL Add 47682 (Holkham), f.13v.
Plate 13: East window, panel 3A. St Peter Mancroft, Norwich, c.1440-60.
Plate 14: Roof boss, church of St Peter and St Paul, Salle.
Circumcision and Presentation

Circumcision: Luke 2:21

Christ’s Circumcision is an unambiguous part of the canonical account of his Birth: Et postquam consummati sunt dies octo ut circumcideretur, vocatum est nomen eius Jesus, quod vocatum est ab angelo prius quam in utero conciperetur. The narrative is barely altered in Pseudo-Matthew and we shall see that, while the description of the event is not subject to any amplification, later authors attempt to portray the Circumcision alongside accounts of its theological significance inherited from writers of the Early Church including Paul and Augustine. Therefore the texts discussed in this chapter have a different focus for the Circumcision than for the episodes discussed thus far; in contrast to the narrative impetus that drives the retelling of the other stories, demanding logic and narrative satisfaction, the Circumcision texts are usually static and highly concentrated on exegetical material.

Circumcision is a difficult topic for two reasons: firstly it is subject to the taboos that surround any discussion of genitalia; secondly, as a still-current rite of passage in two of the Abrahamic faiths, it remains loaded with religious and cultural significance to this day. When the idea of Christ himself being circumcised is added to these problems, the level of potential controversy is sufficient to account for the relative scarcity of criticism tackling the Middle English texts that narrate Christ’s Circumcision. Indeed, the Circumcision often passes under the radar of events in Christ’s life for modern readers despite the event’s frequent depiction in late medieval visual art. According to Schiller, the earliest surviving image of the Circumcision is Byzantine, and dates from the tenth century.241 Apart from a few manuscript images, the subject is not a regular feature of the iconography of Western Christianity until the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Its popularity during these centuries and onwards is consonant with the growing attention paid to images of suffering at the Passion during the fourteenth century. The parallel between the Passion and Circumcision is evident in an image from the Holkham Bible Picture Book: Christ is depicted with the anatomy of a child much older than the eight days of scripture; red blood streams from his penis (which is obscured from sight) and he is held down by two adults.242

241 Schiller, p.89
242 Holkham, f.13v (plate 11); the text reads ‘Coment nostre sayeuer fu circumciese /E Ihesu par noun estoit nomee’.
Unusually, Mary wields the knife in an illustrated manuscript of the *Meditationes*, while the ox and ass eat from the manger and Joseph sits nearby; no priest is in attendance.\(^{243}\) This image is the only one in the Nativity sequence in which the baby appears unswaddled.\(^{244}\) The nakedness is important: sight of the sexual organs provides proof that the baby is fully human. Leo Steinberg, whose work on the topic in Renaissance art remains the most thorough piece of criticism examining its iconographic existence,\(^{245}\) tells us that images assign to

the penis of the Christ Child [...] a crucial positive role in the redemption, not only as proof of Christ’s humanization, but as the earnest of his self-sacrifice. The member exposed – or touched by the mystic lamb (Fig. 61) – stands for God’s life as man and for his man’s death, perhaps even for his Resurrection.\(^{246}\)

In a fifteenth-century alabaster, Mary holds Jesus on the altar (emphasizing the sacrificial symbolism of the act) as the priest performs the Circumcision with a knife and a block.\(^{247}\) In the East window at St Peter Mancroft, Christ sits willingly (albeit with turned-away head) on his mother’s lap as he is circumcised by a mitred bishop; Mary’s hands are lifted in prayer, perhaps indicating that the baby undergoes the rite of his own volition.\(^{248}\) The event is commemorated also in a fourteenth-century gold and enamel triptych,\(^{249}\) and in roof bosses at the church at Salle, Norfolk and in the South transept of Norwich Cathedral.\(^{250}\) The quantity of iconography may seem surprising in view of the absence of the Circumcision from the Nativity and Infancy sequences of medieval drama.\(^{251}\) However, in this instance, the plays are not representative of the wider range of writing in Middle English.

The Circumcision is described in many texts, from verse lives of Christ, to lyrics, devotional prose and sermons. Orrin’s detailed homily is the earliest Middle English account of Christ’s Circumcision, followed by *Cursor Mundi*'s 1300 version. No other thirteenth- or early fourteenth-century texts in Middle English, whether homilies, lyrics or carols, narrate

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\(^{243}\) Ragusa, image 34, p.42.

\(^{244}\) Ragusa, images 27-61, pp.33-72. Jesus is born in the first image with cloth conveniently draped around his lower body.

\(^{245}\) Leo Steinberg (1983, 1996); Steinberg uses contemporary sermons from the Vatican Library to explore the topic and includes art that could be classed as medieval rather than Renaissance.

\(^{246}\) Steinberg, p.48.

\(^{247}\) A.44-1946, Cheetham cat.116 (plate 12), p.189. Cheetham points out that the inclusion of an altar in the Temple is anachronistic. While he believes that it is used ‘wrongly’, it would fit with the typology of the scene: Christ sheds blood at the Circumcision as in the Passion and its commemoration in the Mass.

\(^{248}\) Panel 3a, East window, St Peter Mancroft, Norwich (plate 13); CVMA 016644.

\(^{249}\) c.1350-70 Campion Hall, Oxford. Alexander & Binski cat. 585.

\(^{250}\) Church of St Peter and St Paul, Salle (plate 14). See Anderson (1963), p.8; Cf. Norwich Cathedral boss STW7 (Rose and Hedgcock, p.115).

\(^{251}\) The absence of the episode from the mystery plays, is probably because it does not lend itself easily to drama.
this event (to my knowledge). The novelty of Orrm and *Cursor Mundi* is less surprising when
the encyclopaedic nature of both poems is considered. Later in the fourteenth century, a
growing number of texts retell Luke 2.21, perhaps due to the influence of *Legenda Aurea*
and to the developing genre of devotional writing: increased emphasis on affect and on
vernacular devotion find an appropriate vehicle in the Circumcision, since it offers a chance
to reflect on Christ’s suffering and his redemptive sacrifice while he is still a vulnerable
baby.\(^{252}\) Furthermore, the designation of January 1\(^{\text{st}}\) as a feast day led to the composition of
sermons and homilies on the Circumcision.\(^{253}\) The expanded *Northern Homily Cycle* of
\(^{c.1400}\) contains a homily *In circuncisione Domini* that is absent from the original *NHC* of
\(^{1300}.^{254}\) Its addition is indicative of the increased attention paid to this event during those
hundred years. Lyrics that mention the Circumcision exist from the fifteenth- and sixteenth-
centuries. This section attempts to examine how Middle English authors treat the following
aspects: description of the event; the naming of Christ; the covenant; the typology of
shedding blood and beginning of the work of salvation.

**Theological history**

Biblically, the ceremony is mentioned only in Luke 2.21: *Et postquam consummati
sunt dies octo ut circumcideretur, vocatum est nomen eius Iesus, quod vocatum est ab angelo
prius quam in utero conciperetur.* The source for much Middle English retelling of Christ’s
life is the apocryphal gospel of *Pseudo-Matthew*; however although *Pseudo-Matthew*
substantially adds to many other parts of the Nativity story, chapter XV barely alters the Luke
narrative: *Sexta autem die ingressi sunt Bethlehem, ubi impleverunt septimam diem. Octavo
vero die circumcidentes puemum, vocatum est nomen eius Iesus, quod vocatum est ab angelo
antequam in utero conciperetur* (*PM* XV, p.77). The *Glossa Ordinaria* on Luke 2.21 explains
that Circumcision came from the covenant of Abraham and that, while Christ himself was
free from sin and therefore did not need to be circumcised, Christ’s Circumcision brings all
people into glory and has been therefore replaced in this life by the washing of sins through

\[^{252}\] Cf. Steinberg, p.48.

\[^{253}\] ‘Circumcision’, Catholic Encyclopedia (1908; repr. 1913), 3.777a-79b; ‘Circumcision’, Dictionary of

\[^{254}\] Nevanlinna (1972), p.18; Cf. Unexpanded *NHC*, ed. by Anne B. Thompson (2008), Homily 13 ‘Purification’;
there is no homily for Luke 2.21.
baptism. This gloss reflects the amount of thought that had been given to the verse between biblical times and the medieval period.

Writers from the Early Church, including Paul and Augustine, delineated the significance of the Circumcision: firstly, from St Paul's typology, circumcision represents baptism and is a sign of the covenant; from Augustine, circumcision is an instrument of grace for the remission of Original Sin; circumcision is 'continuous with [Christ]'s work of redemption. Since the debt incurred by the sin of Adam cannot be met by Adam's insolvent progeny – and since Christ's blood pays the ransom – his Circumcision becomes, as it were, a first installment, a down payment on behalf of mankind; fourthly, since the Circumcision is volitional, it represents a voluntary gift of blood and is therefore a type for and initiation of the sacrifice; finally it happens on the eighth day and is associated with resurrection (because in numerology, 7+1 = renewal, regeneration).

The controversy of the Council of Jerusalem in AD 51 (as detailed in Acts 15) indicates the way that circumcision as a marker of cultural identity was an obstacle to the expansion of the young religion. Paul's involvement in the Jerusalem controversy is evident in several of his epistles (Galatians, Corinthians and Romans). These have at least one Middle English translator, whose work is collected in Parker MS 32. It is quite tempting to digress and discuss these texts and the history of commentary on the epistles and on the account of the Council of Jerusalem in Acts. Yet this section should really focus on what happened once the uncircumcised had been accepted as members of the Christian church and circumcision had been deemed unnecessary under the New Covenant: after this had become doctrinal orthodoxy, Christ's Circumcision had to be explained by those scholars and authors who chose to discuss or narrate his early life.

The event

The Cursor-poet gives his readers the bare facts: 'be aghtrand dai pis child was born /Was he circumcised and scorn' (11285-86). This implies that the reader possesses a degree of knowledge about circumcision. However, many of the poems that narrate Christ's Circumcision include an explanation of the procedure. Instructions on how to carry out the-

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256 Steinberg, pp.50-51.
257 ed. by Margaret Powell (1916).
operation can be found in surgical manuals such as Guy de Chauliac’s *Cyrurgie*. Such texts often explain the possible benefits of circumcision:

> to many opere it were profitable, for þat ðilpes schulde be gadered toigdré in þe rote of þe knoppe of þe 3ere and schulde chaute it. And þan be drawen with þi nayles as mykel as it is possible, and in es chewynge of þe knoppe, kyte it. And afterwarde be þe blode restreywed with þe rede powdre or with a cauterie, and hele it in þe maner of ðer wonden. ²⁵⁹

Guy has already delineated the cultural role of circumcision (of necessity ‘to lewes and to Sarasenes’), and in this passage not only does he reflect on its profitability for cleanliness but also instructs his reader on the method used in the operation.

Orrm in the mid-twelfth century contains an early example of the way that writers seek to explain the process of circumcision: ‘þe33 ummbeshaepenn Cristess shapp, /Swa summ þe boc hemm tahhte’ (4154-5). ‘Ummbeshaepenn’ is a descriptively self-explanatory verb whose rarity indicates how unusual is Orrm’s account of this procedure in early Middle English. However, despite this obvious difference and otherness (inescapable in the strangeness of words used to describe it), Orrm demonstrates a conscious effort to explain the event as part of the cultural heritage of Jesus’s family, ‘swa summ þe boc hemm tahhte’. Similarly, the *Northern Homily Cycle* portrays the Circumcision as an integral part of Jesus’s Jewish childhood. The homilist tells us that it was customary ‘when aght daies war went al out’ for boys to ‘be schorn about’ and places the ceremony in the context of its biblical history, narrating the Old Testament story of Abraham and the origins of the rite. ²⁶⁰

The *Speculum Devotorum* frames the Circumcision as proof of Christ’s dual nature: ‘yhe may thenke þat for payne of þat kytyngne he wepeth and cryeth, as þe maner of children is, for he hadde perfitey taken mankynde, in no wyse leuyng þe kynde of God’ (chap 6, p.103). A similar theological concern is evident in the lengthy Lollard sermon, which begins with an evident wish to describe and explain the various names and meanings of the festival:

> letterid men clepen þis day ‘Circumcioun Day’ for as miche as oure Lord Jesus Crist was circumsicioun þat day. But, for to haue more deere vnderstandyng in þis matere of circumsicioun, vs bihoueþ for to knowe þre þyngeþ. þe firste is þis: what is circumsicioun, and what tymne it was first oderneyed. þe seconde is: wharto circumsicioun was oderneyed, and whereof it seruede. þe þride is: whi þat Crist was circumcised. (Cigman, 6 p.66)

By distinguishing between the titles given to the day by the ‘comune peple’ and ‘letterid men’, and reaching the conclusion that the ‘comune’ title is wrong, he implicitly criticises the level of education that the ‘comune peple’ have so far received about the topic. He is careful to


²⁶⁰ NHC, 3765-3852 (3769-70).
ensure that he does not fail in the same way and explains what circumcision is, why it was valued, and, like Mirk and the other Wycliffite preacher, 'whi pat Crist was circumcidid.' He answers this with 'seuene resonable causis' of which the most interesting is the first: 'to schewe in him pe trupe of flesche a3en pe erroure of Manicheijs, pat seiden pat he hadde a fantastik bodi; and also a3en Valentyne, heretik, pat seide pat he hadde an heuenli bodi.'

Given the amount of literature on where Wycliffite and Lollard writing itself can be classified as heresy, this preacher’s decision to ascribe the necessity of Christ’s Circumcision to its potential to refute ‘pe erroure of Manicheijs’ is a clear example of the way that many authors classified by us as heterodox would see themselves as representing the true orthodoxy. The sermon gives the same details about thrice naming that we have seen in the other sermons, and concludes by reiterating that the reasons for celebrating this day are doctrinal (Christ’s naming, his shedding of blood, the octave of his Nativity, etc) rather than temporal (New Year – and its associations with the pre-Christian calendar).

Naming

Orrn and de Veragine explain the naming of Christ at the Circumcision, the different meanings of the name and the location of the Circumcision within the whole biblical

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261 "a ryte and a religion in Olde Lawe, comandid to pe chylde of Israel, pat in pe eyetlepe ‘daie’ aftur pat a chylde were born pe schulden knute away a lytel garland round aboute of pe vturnmure part of pe skyn of his 3erde. And what tyne pis rite oper ordnynce first bigan, pe firste book of Hooely Wrat (pe xii chapitre) tellep pleynly, where it seip pat God seide to Abraham: ‘Goo out of ji long, and of ji kynrede, and of pe hours of ji fadir, and come into pe lond whiche I schewe to pee.’ And Abraham obeyede, and wente for, and cam into pe lond of Chimsan. After pat, whanne pat God hadde seyn his holy lyf and his obedience, he bahi3te to 3eue him pat lond into eritage, and his seed after him. And forthermore, God, seyne pat Abraham encresede in goode werkes and hooi lyf fror day to day, he comandide him pat he schulde circumcidepe vturnmure part of his 3erde, seynge Jus: ‘Eueri male be he circumcide, pat it be a coenaut of my bound bitwix me and 3ou.’ And anon, Abraham, at pe biddinge of God, he circumcidohimself, and Israeil his sone, and alle pe males of his hous. And pis in pat tyne, as it is now schewid, pe sacurment of circumcisicion first took his bigynynge of pe blesse patriark, Abraham (Cigman, pp.66-67).

262 The rite was ordained so that ‘bi pe obiedence of pe comandement of circumcisicion Abraham schulde plese to God, to woom Adam displeside in brekynge of his comandement. […] also in token of pe foy of Abraham pat, in pe olde age of him and of his wyf bope, bileeude to haue a sone in whom schulde be maad pe blesynge of alle men. […]and for as mich as Abraham was pe first to whom expressly was maad bisechte of pe incarnacion of Crist, perfo it was resonable pat pe feyful peple pat schulde come of him of whom Crist schulde be born, to whom pe lawe schulde be Sune after woren knowen bi a certeyn signe fro vneyfely peple; and so, bi pe same signe, whane any of hem were ded in batayle, mi3te be knowe and so takene and bired wip her breperen.

And circumcisicion was comandid to be maad in pat part of pe bodi oneli for pis cause: for it was ordeyned in remedie a3en original synpe pat we token of oure formere faderis bi luste, whichhe hab most lordschipe in pat parte. For in pat parte pe firste man felide synpe of vnoobedience, perfo it was cordynge pat dere he schulde take pe synpe of obiedence. [The purpose] it sereyde bope to olde and 3erene of pe same seruice pat now doop baptem selppe it was not opene pe 3ates of heune to hem pat taken oneli circumcisicion, whichhe now doop baptem (Cigman, p.67).

263 ‘secunde […] to apprope circumcisicion’; ‘pride […] to scheewe pat he was of pe kynde of Abraham, pat was pe firste prince of circumcisicion; ‘fourfpe […] pat he were not put abak out of pe cunninge of [wes] for his prepuco’, ‘fifype […] to corende to vs obiedence, wile he pat was not setget fullifilde pe lawe’, ‘sixe […] as he cam in likenes of flesche of synpe, so he schulde take remedie for synpe’; ’setenipe […] he pat bar pe birpen of pe lawe in himself schulde delitere opere men fro pe charge of pe lawe’ (Cigman, p.68).

264 And, of course, the theological point emphasised is the same as that underlined by the orthodox SpecD.
teleology, but de Voragine is more systematic in his writing, expanding his themes with attention to numeric patterning. His delineation of the fivefold significance of the name, and his portrayal of the Circumcision as the first of Christ’s five effusions of blood sets a structural paradigm that forms the pattern of many later texts in Middle English (it also fits with the inclusion of circumcision in lyrics of the Five Sorrows of Mary). In *A Stanzaic Life of Christ*, the poet explains the many meanings of Christ’s name:

Bernarde witnes, as I rede I,
thre nomus he hade, þat nys no nay,
Goddis sone one is sikerly,
Crist 7 lhesus, þes thre in fay. (1197-1200)

The poet’s desire to be encyclopaedic is evident in the sheer quantity of verse (23 stanzas) he devotes to the meanings of the name given to the baby. This extended consideration of the naming serves two purposes. Firstly it draws the reader’s attention to the contrast between the newly incarnated God, whom we know by his name, and the distant God whose covenant established the rite of circumcision back in Genesis. Even in Exodus, when God makes himself known to Moses, the revelation of the name Yahweh oddly remains unsayable. However, this simultaneous distance and revelation also manifests itself in the long passage about naming since, through it, symbolism and titles are prioritised over the familiarising name, Jesus.

**Covenant**

Mirk’s homily for the Circumcision delineates where in the year the feast day is celebrated: ‘þys day ys called Newe 3erus Day’. The Christian should come to church ‘wythout any newe covenand makyng’ because when a servant has a good master, ‘he maketh but ones covenand wyth hym [but so holdeth forth fro 3er to 3er, hauryng full trayst in hys mayster þat he wol for hys gode seruyce 3eu hym a gode reward at hys ende and at hys nede’ (11, p.44). The baptismal covenant is prioritised in this paragraph, negating the need for the Old Covenant to continue. Mirk also explains why ‘Cryst was wythout synne cyrcumsysud’ since ‘cyrcumcyson was ordeyned in remedy of synne’, posing the question in terms of Christ’s free will: ‘why wold he ben cyrcumsysud?’ (11, p.45). He draws on Augustine in his response to the question, delineating the ‘foure causes’ of the Circumcision: firstly, it means that Jesus thus can legitimately fulfil the Old Law as a part of it without risk of being told ‘þou art not of oure lawe, wherfore we reseyue þe not ne consenton to þy

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techyng' (11, p.45); further it enables him to deceive the devil, to confirm the Old Law, and to prove that he was fully human in body.266

A Wycliffite sermon also explains that Christ had to fulfil the law: 'Sip Crist my3te not synne, and algatis in lecherye, Crist was circumcisud to fulfulle þe lawe, and to telle men aftur, how he clensuþ þer hertis fro synyns þat þei han don, in dede, in worde, and in þou3t'.267 The preacher recalls the sacrament of baptism, to make the process familiar to his listeners: Christ was named once 'whanne he was circumcisud, as we clepon children whanne þei ben baptymed' (EWS 41, p.231). This is particularly important since he has opened the sermon with an explanation of the Old Law, which draws attention to its difference from current practice: the Circumcision 'was don on þe eyþe day fro þat Crist was bore' and was a rite 'bygan at Abraham þe patriarche [and] was kept specially among þe lewys, but now we kepon it not, but þing þat it figureþ' (EWS 41, p.230). He narrates the Fall of Adam and Eve and the ensuing need for humans to be cleaned: 'þus God bad Abraham to þenke on þis synne, þat men schulden kutte awey þe skyn of þer þeerde, and þis kyttyng awey is clepud circumcision' (EWS 41, p.230). The preacher here demonstrates the way that the Circumcision fulfils the Old Law by giving his audience a detailed explanation of those laws and how and why they were instituted.

Salvation

For Orrm, theology of redemption and salvation is a primary concern; the Circumcision's occurrence on the eighth day points to a soterial parallel:

þehhtennde da33 beoþ Domess da33
þann all mannkinn shall risenn
Off þep, 7 comenn to þe dom,
7 takenn þe33re mede; (4196-9)

He goes on to draw out the significance further by describing the cleansing circumcision that all people will receive after death. Orrm portrays this act as an important part of becoming clean for eternal life. Thus circumcision is not, for Orrm, just about Jewishness (although lines 4232-55 show how the procedure is treated as part of Christ's cultural inheritance) but is rather a vehicle to convey the doctrine of salvation.

The matters raised in the works of the Church Fathers and by other theologians are, as we might expect, reflected in the concerns of sermon writers and homilists. There are

266 Mirk also describes the multitude significance of the day being the octave of the Nativity (pp.44-46).
267 EWS, pp.230-31. The preacher further comments on the way that Christ's circumcision serves to cleanse men's hearts and that the ceremony marks his thrice naming.
several extant heterodox sermons on the Feast of the Circumcision, and like their orthodox counterparts, these place the Circumcision in its historical and cultural context, use it to emphasise Christ’s sacrifice for his people and focus on the suffering of both mother and baby. Mirk suggests that the baby’s suffering is intensified by his young age: ‘he was cyrcumsysed and sched hys blod pys day for oure sake, for when hys flessche was kut fro hym he bledde Surne and was ful sor to hym, for he was but 3ong and tendur, not but eghte dayes old, and þerfore he bledde þe more’ (11, pp.44-45). He then ties this effusion of blood to later suffering, using the fivefold significance we have seen in Legenda Aurea: ‘he bled for vs fyue tymes’ (11, p.45). Similarly a Wycliffite preacher describes how the blood shed ‘is þe furste ermes þat Crist 3af for mannys kynde, and seyde þat he wolde saue it by blod of þis Godus lomb’ (EWS 41, p.231).

The SLC-poet delineates the Circumcision’s place in the process of redemption, describing it as the start of Christ’s sacrifice (1349-60). He then digresses further from the chronological structure of his narrative by including a large passage on the Passion, so that the Stanzaic version of the Circumcision reads as though the poet wished above all to include any relevant detail about the theology and significance of this event rather than assimilating it into an approachable or ‘naturalistic’ story of a childhood or to capitalise on its affective potential as later authors, including Lydgate and Love, do. The emphasis on explication over narration is seen further when the poet encapsulates the inextricability of Jesus’ flesh and his saving role: he was given the name ‘In fulle significacioun /that with þat flesch saue vs wold he, /that he toke with deuocioun /of Mary forto make vs fre’ (1325-28). Circumcision is particularly vital because, like baptism, it is a process of cleansing; and with Christ’s death, it is made redundant for future generations (1401-12). The symbolic washing during infant baptism will henceforth suffice to demonstrate that an individual will be thoroughly cleansed after death.

Manuscripts of the 1400s contain many lyrics which connect the Circumcision to the sacrifice necessary for salvation. A lyric in the Helmingham MS meditates on Christ’s suffering throughout his existence, which commences when he chooses to leave heaven to be incarnated, continues in the poverty of his birth and when he is

Brought to the temple after the Iues lawe
And circumsyed – this ys not to forrette,
I lede my yought wyth children in the strete,
Poorly a-rayed in clothes bare and thyne,
Suche as my mother for me dyde make & spyne.\textsuperscript{268}

The lyric covers Christ’s entire life so the brevity of this reference to circumcision may not indicate anything other than lack of space (although it is interesting to see once again that there is no overt censure of ‘the Iues lawe’). In contrast, a lyric found in Huntington MS 142 f.48r dedicates two full stanzas to the Circumcision interspersed with description of and meditation on other aspects of suffering in his life:

\begin{quote}
fferst, ihu lord, sone after þi byrthe,
The viii. day, named þi Circumcisioun,
Thow wepte in stede of yoles myrthe,
And in a maner began thi passion;
So was þou kutte for oure transgressyoun,
With a stone knyf aboue thi kne.
I louse þe, lord, with trewe affectioun,
\textit{for þus þi blode thow schedde for me.}\textsuperscript{269}
\end{quote}

The lyricist narrates the Passion and the story of Longinus before returning to the Circumcision:

\begin{quote}
Now, now, Ihu, for thi Circumcisioun,
When þou was kut so in fleshe & skyn,
Make with my soule suche a conclusion,
That I falle neuer in fleshly synne;

And for þe grete drede pat þou stode inne,
Prayinge thi fader yf deth myght passe,
Conforte my soule, þat I may wynn
Hope of þi mercy & drede þe lasse. (65-72)
\end{quote}

The turning inwards in this second Huntington stanza (‘make with my soule...’) indicates the way in which the lyricist envisages Christ’s pain prompting a devotional response in a reader.

In the \textit{Metrical Life of Christ}, the Circumcision is conflated with the Presentation in the Temple. The poet describes, with great tenderness, how Simeon

\begin{quote}
[... toke hym by þe 3erde right,
And carf þe ende a lytel wight,
And made hym wipout drede
þre blode dropes for to blede.
[f.5r] And toke hym vp, and forþe hym bere,
And presented hym to þe autere,
And saide, Iesus I calle þee
In þe name of þe hegh Trinite.
For oper fulloght was þer none
Er God was folewed in Flum Iordan.’ (317-25)
\end{quote}

The poet implies the baby’s volition by acknowledging that he is ‘wipout drede’ (a point made also by Orrm). The beginning of his blood sacrifice, indicated by the ‘þre blode dropes’,

\textsuperscript{268} lines 31-5; IMEV 550/ TM284 Brother, a-b[...]; 15CB.109, also in T.G. Duncan \textit{Late Medieval English Lyrics and Carols: 1400-1530} (London, 2000). Helmingham Hall MS Lj.L.10 ‘Brother a-byde, I the desire and pray’.

\textsuperscript{269} lines 9-16; NIMEV 1748 (CB15.92) ‘Ihu, that alle this worlke hast wroghte,’ BL Harley 1706, ff.210-11v; Longleat 30, ff.52-53; Huntington MS HM 142 f.48-49v.
resonates with trinitarian symbolism that is emphasised further in the quasi-baptismal presentation in ‘pe name of pe hegh Trinite’. Yet this remains only a hint at the suffering of the Passion. So, in the Metrical Life, the Circumcision reads more as a comfortable pre-echo of the baptismal sacrifice. Simeon thus appears in the role of kindly priest rather than of Jewish tormenter detected by critics in this episode (and certainly present in some portrayals of the events of the Crucifixion). Giving the job of priest to the familiar character of Simeon adds narrative interest to the telling, which is valuable because, in contrast with most other stories from Christ’s birth and infancy, the event of the Circumcision does not lend itself to extended narrative treatment.

Mother and Child

Nicholas Love prompts a compassionate response from his readers to the ‘day oure lord Jesus began to shedde his precious blode foroure sake [...and] to bere payne in his swete tendire body for oure synne’:

Miche owht we to haue compassion & wepe with him, for he wept pis day ful sore [...] pis day he shedde his blode, when pat aftur pe rite of pe lawe, his tendre flesh was kut, with a sharp stenen knife, & so pat 3onge child Jesus kyndly wept for pe sorow pat he felt perborh in his flesh. For without doute he hade verrey flesh & kyndely suffrable as haue oper children. (lune, vii, p.42)

The passage uses adjectives (‘tendre’, ‘precious’, ‘Songe’, ‘litel’) to elicit devotional affect, explicitly asking ‘Shold we þan not haue compassion of him?’ While his answer ‘3is, sopely’ is predictable, he interestingly guides his readers to think ‘also of his dere modere’:

when she sey hir louely sone wepe, she miȝt not withhold wepyng, & þan mowe we ymagyne & þenk how þat litel babe in his modere barme seynge hir wepe, put his litel hande to hire face, als he wold þat she shold not wepe [...] & so þorh þe compassion of þe modere, þe child sesed of sobbyng & wepyng. (lune, vii, p.42)

Mary’s tears in sympathy for Christ’s tears lead him to ‘sese’ crying, which enables Love to demonstrate that, even as a baby, Christ is the epitome of compassion.

The interaction of Mother and Child at the Circumcision also characterizes Book IV of Lydgate’s Life of Our Lady, which is fully devoted to the Circumcision. Lydgate, like Love, is more eager to draw on the devotional function of pity for the vulnerable baby and his mother than to the censure of the practice of circumcision. He depicts the ‘humylyte’ with which the child is brought to the temple. The operation itself is, though, described in a heightened register which contrasts the law, which ‘he ther-to mekely dyd obeye’ (IV.29), with the experience of mother and child:

And withe a knyfe made full sharpe of stone,
His mothr loking with a pytous eye,
The childe was corve ther-with all, a-non,
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> And withe a knyfe made full sharpe of stone,  
> His mothir lokyng with a pytous eye,  
> The childe was corwe ther-wit all, a-non,
That all a-boute the rede blode gan gon
Withoute a boode, as saythe Bonaventure,
That for the payne that he dyd endure,

And for sharpnes of the soden smerte,
The childe gan wepe pat pyte was to here. (IV.30-7)

Pity for the suffering baby is inextricable in Love’s description from the need for the reader to look forwards to the Passion and the tears and pain that will recur then. Lydgate amplifies the short moment of interaction between Christ and Mary, seen above in the Mirror, fully to convey the pain of the mother and the consequent compassion of the baby. The similarity to the Stabat Mater creates a pre-echo of the Crucifixion. The impetus for the reader inwardly to contemplate the meaning of the Circumcision is clear in the final fifty lines, wherein Lydgate shifts register to conclude the book with a prayer. He uses direct address and the first person plural to include himself and his readers in a plea for spiritual cleanliness that ‘With helpe of hir, graunt vs this newe yere, /So prudently with vertu vs provyde, /Our vices all pat we may circumcide’ (IV.383-85). So while poets and authors use the dramatic incidents in other parts of the Nativity story to demonstrate theological concepts to their audiences through experiential proof (for example in the legend of the Midwives or in the trial of Mary and Joseph), the Circumcision is used very differently. It prompts description of the affect on mother and child, and its typological significance leads to explanation of the doctrine of salvation. The occurrence of Christ’s Circumcision at Luke 2.21 is not skipped over in medieval texts; rather it allows authors to speak of its significance, developing complex theological concepts and situating this rite not as a criticism of a Jewish tradition but as an essential beginning for Christ’s redemptive suffering for mankind.
Plate 15: Queen Mary Psalter, BL Royal BVII, f.149.r, 1310-20.
Plate 16: Emmanuel 252, f.9v, c.1220-30.
Plate 17: East Harling, chancel, east window, panel 3b, c.1480.
The Presentation in the Temple


The confusion as to when the Purification occurs in relation to the Visiting of the Magi, Slaughter of the Innocents and Flight into Egypt (Matthew 2) results from the difficulty of assimilating into a single narrative the different events told by Matthew with those told by Luke. The liturgical calendar places Epiphany at twelve days and at Candlemas forty days after Christmas. Yet, as we will see in the next chapter, the Adoration of the Magi can be placed anywhere from thirteen days to two years after the Birth of Jesus. This chapter therefore follows Luke and juxtaposes the Presentation to the Circumcision. This pattern is maintained by \textit{Pseudo-Matthew}, where the forty days are not mentioned. In contrast, the mystery cycles place the Presentation after the sequence of Magi plays. Another confusion arises in the sometimes interchangeable use of the terms ‘Presentation’ and ‘Purification’, both of which can refer to the occasion of Mary taking her son to the temple to present him at the day appointed for a new mother to be purified. \textit{Legenda Aurea} makes clear that each name refers to a distinct part of the festival:

this feste is called bi thre names, Candelmas, Ipopant, and the Purificacion. She is called Purificacion for that atte the xxxi daye fro the natiuite of oure Lorde the blessed Virgine come to the Temple for to be purified after the lawe, though she were not bounde vnder suche lawe[...]. Secoundly this feste is saide Ipopante, that is to saie Presentacion, for that Ihesu Crist was presented into the Temple, or ellis Ipopant may be saide Metynge Togederes, for that Symeon and Anne went ayninst oure Lorde whanne he come to the Temple. (36, p.161)

Other texts do not delineate this so clearly and the terms are used interchangeably.

The Purification contains a number of constant elements: a description of the custom and the law, Mary’s decision to go to the temple, Joseph’s response to her, a description of the nature and symbolism of the offering, an introduction to the characters of Simeon and Anna including their prophetic knowledge of the baby, verbal and visual images of Simeon holding the baby, an account of the \textit{nunc dimittis}, a focus on the image of the sword. The episode also marks the first important role for the Holy Spirit after the Annunciation: the Spirit is the means by which Simeon and Anna recognise the baby. To provide proof of the Virgin Birth, an apocryphal story in two accounts, the \textit{Stanzaic Life of Christ} and the Chester play (which uses \textit{SLC} as a source), tells of Simeon’s transition from doubt (altering the prophecies because

\footnote{The entire Purification narrative can be found in Luke 2.22-39.}
he does not believe them) to faith (astonished at the miraculous return to the original version).

Candlemas

Candles are entirely absent from the second chapter of Luke. However, they are frequently included as part of the Purification, even in texts not explicitly appointed as homilies or sermons for Candlemas. Notably, the connection with candles is absent from the earliest of the texts discussed here (SEL, CM), perhaps because they are not tied to the liturgical year. De Voragine writes that the feast is called Candlemas because ‘man bere candelis brennyng in thaire hondes’ for four reasons: ‘to take awaye the custome of error’ caused by a Roman feast; ‘to shewe the purete of the Virgine’; to represent the procession made by Anna and Simeon with Mary and Joseph; to teach Christians that to be purified before God they must have ‘verrey faiithe, good werkes and good entencion’ (36, 167-69). As believers recreate the procession, each candle signifies ‘Ihesu Crist borne into the Temple’.

The three properties of the candles, ‘wexe, mache and fire’, point to distinct aspects of Christ: wax ‘signifiethe the fleshe of Ihesu Crist that was born of a virgine vncorrupt, right as the bees maken the hony withoute coniunccion of that one er that other; the wick (‘mache hidde in the wexe’) represents ‘the right white soule of hym hidde in the fleshe’; the flame ‘signifiethe the devinite, for oure Lorde is a fire wasting’ (36, p.169). This explanation is encapsulated poetically in A Stanzaic Life: wax is ‘Cristes flesch 7 blade, /that taken was of a clene may’ (2957-58):

ffor ri3t as bees of herbes clene
worchyng wax bout engendryng,
so bro3t Mary forth, as I mene,
Ihesu Crist our heuen kyng. (2961-4)

The wick, ‘pat in pe wax hid is, /to Cristes saule may liknet be’, since the soul was hidden in bodily form. The fire represents God ‘for, as pe boke sais, God almy3t /is a fuyr al

swolowyng.’(2971-2) In a similar consideration of the candle in the Festial, Mirk extends the symbolism to Mary and each Christian:

for a candel brenyng bytokeneth oure Lady and hure Sone and a monvs self. For a candel ys mad of weke and of wax brennyng wyth fere. þus Crystes swete soule was hude wyth hys monhed and brende wyth þe fyre of hys godhed. Hyt bytokeneth also oure Ladyes modurhed and maydonhed lyghtod wyth þe fyre of loue. Hyt bytokeneth also vch good mon and womon þat doth dedus wyth good entent and in ful loue and charyte to God and to hys euen-crysten. (14, p.58)

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271 There are no candles in the later Phillipps poem either.
It appears from words spoken by Joseph that candles were incorporated into performance of the N-Town play: ‘Take here these candelys thre, /Mary, Symeon, and Anne. /And I xal take /pe fowrte to me /To offre oure childe up thanne’ (19.163-66).

**The Purification**

While the idea of the Purification appears to need less explanation than Circumcision, most texts outline the exact requirements of the Judaic law that need to be fulfilled. An explanation of the custom features in many Middle English narratives. Mirk’s delineation of the meaning of the word ‘puryfycacyon’ suggests that it is not a familiar word to his audience:

> pys day, gode men, ys kalled pe puryfycacyon of oure Lady, bat ys in Englys, pe clansyng of oure Lady – for no nede pat heo hadde þerto, for heo was clansed so wyth pe wyrchyng of þe Holy Gost in þe consecuyng of hure Sone þat þer was laft in hure no mater of synne ne of non opur fulpe. (14, p.55)

The *Middle English Dictionary* records usage of ‘puryfycacyon’ in English only from the last quarter of the fourteenth century so Mirk’s decision to explain the term ‘yn Englys’ is not as unusual as it initially appears. The four definitions given by *MED* specifically refer to the ceremony of Purification, meaning either ‘ritual purification according to Jewish law’, ‘the ceremonial cleansing of a woman after childbirth’ from mosaic law, the feast itself (first recorded use in 1389) or the ‘churching of a woman after childbirth’ (from 1400).272 This points to the parallels between Purification and the custom of churching, which continued to be observed in certain areas of Britain until the twentieth century.273 The possible contemporary resonance is most evident in the *South English Nativity*: ‘pe fourtipe day þat þis child was ibore, as a Candelmasse day, /Oure Leuedy dude hide chirchesgong as it byful in þe lay’ (567-8). This term appears to be unique to the *Nativity*, it is not used in other Middle English works. Nonetheless, similar reasons for the practice are cited in *Legenda Aurea*, which connects it to Leviticus: ‘the lawe comaued in Leuitique that a woman that hadde conceuyed and brought forthe and eyre male was not clene ad that she shulde abstene her .vij. wokes fro the felawship of man and fro entering into the Temple’ (Gil, p.161).274

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272 Use of the verb ‘purify’ predates ‘purification’ only slightly, being first recorded in 1350.


274 ‘...t the philosophers sayn that in the .vij. ti day the bodi is made perfitt. The seconde reson is that right as the soule in the fourty daye is putte into the body and defouled with the body, that body and soule tgether... entering in the fourty daye into the Temple be clensed of that defouling by sacrifise. The .vij. that by that enter it is to vnderstonde tho the deserten to thene into the heuenly temple that kep the comauementes of the lawe withe the safte of the .vij. euuangelistes’ (pp.161-62).
However, while the MLC-poet explains the events to his readers in terms of 'be olde lay', the reasons for the ceremony are 'Honour and þonke' rather than cleansing of sin:

It was þe maner holden ay  
þat tym in þe olde lay  
Wymmen to þe temple to go,  
And bringe dowyes or turtles two,  
And to þe auter for to offre,  
And on þat wise to God profre  
Honour and þonke in tokenynge  
þat al come of his sendinge. (MLC, 542-49)

In the mystery plays, the law is explained by a character: Joseph in Towneley (17.115-126); Mary in N-Town (19.97-106) and Chester (XI.123-24). Unusually for drama, the York play does not start with Simeon. Instead, a priest articulates the practice of Purification: a new mother comes 'at the forty day /To be puryfied where she was fylde' (17.38-39).

**The offering**

The words of the York priest hint at the complex rules governing the offering to be made: the woman must 'bryng with her a lame, I say /And two dove-byrdes for her offerand' (17.40-41). However, he conflates the different offerings that Judaic law states should be presented by rich and poor women. Mary offers the turtle doves demanded from a poor woman, and this adds to the determined portrayal of worldly poverty as an active choice made by God for his Incarnation and as an emblem of Mary’s exemplary humility. In *South English Nativity*, Christ’s poverty throughout his life to ‘Siuen vs ensampe’ dictates the offering of ‘Twey culuer briddes [...] and a peire turtilen’ that Mary and Joseph take. If a woman had 'gret poer', 'A lomb offry wip here child whanne heo it to þe temple bere' (571-72); those women ‘þat pore were’ must take that which they had:

> Vr lord from þat he was ybore, al þe whyl þat he was here,  
> To Siuen vs ensample he siwed þe pore in eche manere.  
> þe offryng he tok of þe turtilen, for lomb nadde heo non. (575-7)

The poet makes a virtue of necessity: they do not have a lamb so cannot offer one, but in so doing, Christ exemplifies humility. The SLC-poet places responsibility for the choice of offering with Jesus: the gift of birds ‘tokenet pouert witerly, /for pore offring þer chese he’ (2653-4). The baby, at forty days old, is capable of making decisions to fit with his salvific purpose. In *Cursor Mundi*, it is more clearly Mary who chooses the gift; however the poet also uses it to point to the poverty that Christ ‘bides vs luue’:

> þis lagh maria wit iesus did,  
> Pouert gift can sco for him giue  
> þat com in pouert for to luue,  
> O pouert na dedeigne had he  
> þat bides vs luue wel pouerte,
For pouert that naman mislik
Quils he es in god truth rike. (11306-12)

The polyptoton of ‘Pouer ...pouert...pouerte’ transforms the potentially negative quality of the gift into something concomitant with living ‘in god truth’.

The dichotomy presented by the law’s differentiation between rich and poor women causes a potential problem for writers of devotional texts: Mary’s worldly poverty places her squarely in the latter category, yet this fails to recognise the nobility that sees her revered as the Queen of Heaven. Nicholas Love maintains an ambiguity in his version ‘at þe entre þeof þei bouhten tweyn turfures or elles tweyn douf briddes to ofre for him as þe maner was þe comune offryng of rich men. in token þat þei weren with þe porest folk’ (lune, ix, p.48). De Voragine is troubled by whether Mary ‘myght haue a well a lambe’ since she received a gret somme of golde’ from the Magi. He supposes that ‘the blessed Virgine withheled it not to herself but gaute it anone to the pore, or ellis perauenture thei kepte it for to make her puruiuance in the seuene yere that she was in Egipte, or elles perauenture thei offered not in gret quanitite for cause that thaire offering was in significacion’ (Gil, p.165). The offering made at the Presentation is one of three in Christ’s life: the Circumcision (‘made of hym bi his kynrede’), the birds, and thirdly the offering ‘he made in the crosse for all’. De Voragine delineates the significance of each: ‘The furste shewithe his humilite, for the lord of the lawe submitted hym to the lawe; the secounde his pouerte, for he chase the offering of the pore; and the thridde that he shewed his gret charitee, for he suffered for the sinfull’ (Gil, pp.165-66).\textsuperscript{275} This paradigm is also delineated in A Stanzaic Life; Christ offered himself: ‘to make an ende /of purificacioun vset so’ (2613-14):

\begin{quote}
for be-twene two lawes i-wyss\linebreak Crist come bothe to fulfulle,\linebreak the alder to do, no thing anysse,\linebreak The new to norishe was his wille. (2617-20)
\end{quote}

De Voragine describes the ‘propertees of the turtull’ that make it particularly apt for the offering: ‘she fleithee high, she waylithee in syngyng, the comyng of Ver she vouchithe, she liuithe chastely and hathe but one make, she norishithe her chikenes bi nyght, she fleithe al dede thing’. The dove is likewise appropriate: ‘he gaderithe the greynes, he fleithe in felawship, he hathe no gale, he wailetthe, and cherisithe and touchithe his felawe with his

\textsuperscript{275} In SpeeD, Mary demonstrates meekness when ‘chese þe offerynge of pore folke and noght of riche’ (Chap 8, p.114).
beke, he makithe his neste in stones, he fleithe the sparhauuke as his enemy, he hurtithe not with the beke, he norishith his pigones two and two' (Gil, p.166). These qualities are explicitly linked in the *Metrical Life of Christ* to Mary being 'ful clene of synne': she chooses it because

*be turtur was pe clenner in kynde.*
For sche is of pat kynde made,
When sche is of pat kynde made,
When sche a make halp ones hade,
And hit be dede away hir fro,
Sche wil neuermore haue moo,
But live in chaste in pat manere
Al hir lyf wipout fere. (555-61)

Mary and the 'turtur' are tied together by the pattern of 'mynede...kynde...kynde...kynde'. The chastity carries symbolism forward into the future to augment the idea that Mary's virginity is maintained through the life as well as in the Birth of Christ.

*As sche hade conceyued in virginite*  
*Goddes Sone by his poeste,*  
*And neuer after ne before*  
*Schuld bere childe more,*  
*But as pe turtur be stidfaste*  
*To lyve in clennesse & be chaste,*  
*[p]erfore two turtures oure Lady toke,*  
*...To pe temple of Jerusalem. (564-73)*

The *SEN*-poet's assertion that 'lomb nadde heo non' (577) can be read ironically (whether intended by the poet or not) because Christ's symbolic state as 'agnus dei' means that his parents do have a lamb. This notion is exploited by authors far less frequently than might be expected; however, in the York play, Joseph articulates the idea in answer to Mary's worry over the contents of their offering:

*And yf we haue not both in feer,*  
*The lame, the burd, as ryche men haue,*  
*Thynke that vs muste present here*  
*Oure babb Jesus, as we voutsauce*  
*Before Godes sight.*  
*He is our lame Mary, kare the not,*  
*For riche and power none better soght;*  
*Full well thowe hais hym hither broght,*  
*This is our offrand right.*  

*He is the lame of God I say,*  
*That all syns shall take away*  
*Of this worlde here.*  
*He is the lame of God verray*  
*That muste hus fend frome all our fray,*  
*Borne of thy wombe, all for our pay*  
*And for our chere. (17.254-69)*

**Mary's decision**

Long narratives such as the *Metrical Life*, which continue straight from one event in the Nativity to the next (i.e. without the natural break that occurs between different plays in
a mystery cycle), begin the Presentation episode by describing Mary and Joseph’s decision to attend the temple because the purpose of the Purification makes it irrelevant to Mary’s case: de Voragine points out that ‘she were not bounde vnder suche lawe’ because ‘she bare no childe by man but by devine enspering’ (Gil, pp.161-62). As the SLC-poet says, she does not need to be purified ‘for bout sede of mon i-wys /ho bare Crist’ (2895-6).

Mirk instructs his readers to ‘leue wel pat oure Lady hadde no nede to þys clansyng, for heo was clene of al maner fulpe touchyng conseyt of mon’ (14, p.56). He gives four reasons for her actions: to ‘fulfulen þe scripture’, to ‘fulfulle þe lawe’ as in the Circumcision, to ‘stoppon leue wel þis’ and ‘for ensampul to alle crysten wymmen þat þey schulden come to chyrche aftyr here burth and þonke God þat hadde saued ham fro perel of deth in hure trauaylyng of hure chylde’ (14, p.56). The ideas outlined by Mirk feature in other texts as the reasons why Mary goes to the temple. In Love’s Mirror, heavy use of adjectives and superlatives show Mary is not ‘anoper woman’ despite her wish to act as one. Love does not simply ask why she went to the temple but asks ‘whi hope we’ that Mary and Joseph ‘diden þus’, implying that the action is such that it should be the desire of all his readers (lune, ix, p.47). His answer is that they teach through example.

Due to the dialogic form of the drama, Mary’s choice to be purified offers another opportunity for Joseph to air his comic misunderstanding of his wife. However, the misunderstanding simultaneously allows him to articulate what he has learnt so far in the Nativity sequence. In York, his implicit disbelief in the purity of Mary, as explored through his departure to find light before the Birth, contrasts with a new strengthened belief. This, though, prevents him from seeing the ulterior motives behind her wish to fulfil the law when she wishes to present Jesus in the Temple. Joseph replies that the ceremony is necessary for those women ‘That hais conceyved with syn fleshely / To bere a chylde’ (17.203-04). But Mary, ‘neyd not soo [...] bee puryfiede’ (17.210). By reminding her that ‘thowe arte a clene vyrgyn’, Joseph ensures that the audience in York know that Mary does not require purification while giving her opportunity to explain her reasons: by doing so she will fulfil God’s law fully and further make herself a ‘sample of mekenes’, prompts him to a new articulation of her magnificence: ‘A, Mary, blyossed be thowe ay, /Thowe thynkes to do after Goddes wyll’ (17.223-24).

276 Earlier texts in Middle English (the South English Legendary, Cursor Mundi and Three Kings of Cologne) leave this fact unstated perhaps because they were composed during an earlier stage of Marian devotion. It is also absent from NIMEV 208.
Mary’s decision unfolds in similar ways in two of the other plays. Interestingly, in the Chester play, Mary’s words indicate that she has foreknowledge of at least some of the events in her child’s life, because as well as needing ‘Moyses lawe for to fulfill’, she knows that this will entail meeting Simeon: ‘my sonne to offer Simeon tyll’ (XI.123-24). Joseph reminds her that it is unnecessary for her to go but commends her decision because ‘yet yt is good to do as God bade /and worke after his sawe’ (XI.130). However, in Towneley, the Presentation is entirely Joseph’s idea (17.115-26), and neither his words nor Mary’s response fully indicate that the ritual is redundant for her: she states that she wills for the law to ‘Be fulfilled in me’ (17.129). This deviation from the normal pattern is perhaps due to the differing emphasis in Towneley, wherein the human experience of the Nativity (by the shepherds most notably) is prioritised over a focus on Mary’s holiness.

Simeon and Anna

Simeon and Anna are central to the Presentation in Luke, with Simeon’s words at the sight of the baby forming the first song of the New Testament, mirroring the Magnificat (the last song of the Old Testament):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Et ecce homo erat in Hierusalem, cui nomen Symeon: et homo iste iustus et timoratissimus, expectans consolationem Israel, et Spiritus Sanctus erat in eo. Et responsor acceperat ab Spiritu Sancto, non visirum se mortem, nisi prius videret Christum Domini. (Luke 2.25)} \\
\text{Et erat Anna prophetissa, filia Phanuel, de tribu Aser: haec procererat in diebus multis, et vixerat cum viro suo annis septem a virginitate sua. (Luke 2.36)}
\end{align*}
\]

The extreme age of both Simeon and Anna signifies the honouring of the new saviour by the Judaic tradition, and the further fulfillment of prophecy marking the arrival of the Messiah. In Legenda Aurea, de Voragine explains that ‘he that berithe al thingges bi the vertue of his word suffred hymself to be born in the armes of an olde man, notwithstanding that he sustained hym that bere hym, so as he saieth: “The olde man bere the child, and the childe governed the olde man”’ (Gil, p.166). The contrast between old and young, explicit in the verbal image of the newborn ‘in the armes of an olde man’ points to the paradox of the law upturned by the Incarnation, with old governed by young, even as the old man performs a rite dictated by the law. For a Wycliffite preacher, Simeon’s age shows that ‘Crist wolde haue wytnesse of agis and status of fole’: He ‘wolde haue wytnesse of oolde fole, as weron Anna and Symeon; and he hadde wytnesse of Sone fole, as weron innocentis, martirede for hym; and he hadde wytnesse of myddul fole, as weron his fadur and modur and herdus’ (EWS 40, pp.228-29).
The paucity of information about Simeon and Anna provided by Luke allows for much augmentation by Middle English authors (and their sources). Nicholas Love compares Simeon’s elderliness with Joseph’s: ‘po tweyn wirchepful olde men Joseph & Symeon goon before, ioyfuly eyber haldeyng ope r by pe handes’ (lune, xi, p.48). Simeon’s exact age varies from text to text;²⁷⁷ however the same emphasis is placed on the wait for Christ’s Birth. For the Cursor-poet, the number of years Simeon has lived is less significant than the idea that his life is extended beyond the normal range because of his desire to see the saviour:

[Simeon] had made mani hali bon,  
bat he moght in pe lites hel  
pe comforthe se of israel,  
bat mans rausmuning suld bere. (11316-19)

His holy works have privileged him with an answer to his prayer: ‘drightin had him giuen answer [...]|pat he o ded suld neuer dei, /Til he suld se crist self wit ei’ (11322-24). Mirk suggests a similar combination of privilege and burden: Simeon ‘prayed bysly day and nyght to God bat he most sen Crist bodely er he dyed and God grantud hym hys bone’ (14, p.56); the ‘bone’ brings endless age with incumbent physical frailties.

As we might expect, the potential humour of Simeon’s age is exploited most fully in drama. Furthermore, the episodic nature of cycle plays ensures that each new play can begin with a new perspective and the Towneley, Chester and N-Town plays begin with Simeon’s wait for the birth of the baby. The Chester Simeon points out that ‘Mych teene and incommoditie /followeth age, full well I see’ (XI.5-6). In N-Town, Simeon allows that waiting for the saviour is a privilege; however it appears that he had not realised quite how long his wait would be: ‘But bat it is so longe behynde, /It is grett dyscomforde onto me’ (19, 9-10). He then explains that he is losing strength and sight: ‘For I wax olde and wante my myght /And begynne to fayle my syght, /be more I sorwe þis tyde’ (19, 11-13).

The alliteration of the York play magnifies the complaints made by the old man (‘I ame wayke and all vnwelde, /My welth ay wayns and passeth away’), only resolved by the possibility that he will eventually ‘se hymne’, mirroring the process of salvation wherein the troubles of human life are resolved in eventual sight of God (17.91-102). Simeon’s words in the Towneley play echo the complaints made by the Towneley shepherds before they see the baby (17.25-72). Among his litany of discomforts he includes ‘Myn armes, my lymmes, ar stark for eld, /And all gray is my bergd’ (17.31-32); he also complains of blindness (‘My ees

²⁷⁷ He is 110 in the Phillipps poem: ‘So grete age was fallen hym apon /He was a C & x Shere’ (1190-1). This is two years short of the years he has lived in South English Nativity: ‘An hundred and twelve þer he was old’ (582). In Cursor Mundi, he is eight years older (‘sex scor yeire’). Mirk does not specify Simeon’s age beyond being ‘a passyng old mon’ (14, p.56).
ar warren both marke and blynd', 17.33); he needs to 'setty me downe, and granky and gronyse, /And lygys and restys my wery bonys' (17.45-46).

The humour in this portrait of the elderly man is trumped by an episode in the Chester play, from the *Stanzaic Life of Christ*, wherein Simeon doubts the prophecy and thus experiences a miraculous proof of its truth, in a trajectory similar to the one we have seen in the legend of the Midwives.278 The Chester version unfolds as follows. Simeon is tired of his wait since its length is unspecified: 'That Christe shall come well I wott, /but daye nor tyme may noe man wott' (XI.17-18). He therefore turns to his 'booke' to see 'When Esaye sayth' (XI.19-21). The stage direction indicates that Isaiah’s words are repeated for the audience: 

*Tunc repulsion librum legit prophetiam: Ecce virgo concipiet et pariet filium* etc (XI SD24).

The bluntness of the prophecy (that 'a mayden clean and cleare /shall conceive and beare /a sonne') leads Simeon to doubt: 'of this leeve I never a deale' (XI.30). Comically, Simeon calls Isaiah 'a fone /to writte “a virgin” hereupon /that should conceive without helpe of man’ (XI.33-5) and he attempts to alter the writing:

I will scrape this awaye anon;
thereas ‘a virgin’ is written on
I will write ‘a good woman’ –
for so yt should be. (XI.40)

The stage directions indicate that he deletes the word ‘virgin’ and writes over it; however an angel appears to rewrite the book and Anna states that her prophetic vision shows ‘that Christe shall come, our boote to be’ (XI.42). Since he cannot know the ‘tyme of his comynge’, Simeon consults his book to ‘fynde ought /what maner mankynde shalbe bought /and what tyme yt shalbe’ (XI.53-5). When he opens the book, he sees the angel’s alteration (XI SD55).

While Anna shows constant faith throughout the legend (cf. XI.72-79), Simeon appears deliberately to test God: he will ‘assaye /whether this miracle be verey’, changing the words back to ‘a good woman’ (XI.60-1). This is akin to the repetition of Tebel’s test by a disbelieving Salome in the midwives episode. Like Salome, Simeon undergoes a transformation and becomes a believer when he sees that his second rewrite has been undone:

This must needes by Godes grace,
for an angell this written hase.
Nowe leeve I a mayd in this case
shall beare a barron of blysse. (XI.91-95)

278 The editor of *Stanzaic Life* states the origin of the myth as the poet’s source ‘quadam epistola’. He notes that the Chester playwright adapts the story for the purposes of ‘dramatic effectiveness’: ‘the events of two days are compressed into one; Simeon’s book is placed on the altar instead of “vnder loken”; the angel appears to make the changes in the text; the angel’s writing, “faire” and unlike his own, in the play is “of redde letters”; and the intervals between Simeon’s reading his book are filled by the speech of Anna Vidua (SLC, xxxii-ix).
Whereas Salome's punishment in her withered hand provides the site for a miracle to occur, Simeon's miracle occurs in the proof he gains: the alteration of the words on the page.

Simeon testifies to his renewed belief:

Now, lord, syth that yt so is –
that thou wilt be borne with blisse
of a mad that never did amysse –
on mee, lord, thou have mynd.
Let me never death tast, lord full of grace,
tyll I have scene thy childes face
that prophecy is here in this place
to kever all mankinde. (XI.96-103)

Luke 2.29-39

We can assume familiarity with the Nunc dimittis (Luke 2.29-32) from attendance at church services. The N-Town connection with the liturgy has recently received much attention, so it is perhaps unsurprising that the combination of words and stage directions indicate a full rendition of all the verses of the piece. The N-Town play's use of Latin for the Nunc dimittis only has a parallel in the Middle English Three Kings: 'Symeon toke hym into his hondis seying, 'Nunc dimittis seruum [tuum], domine, secundum verbum tuum in pace' (p.79). Elsewhere Simeon speaks the words in English, sometimes briefly as in the Legenda Aurea: 'Thanne Symeon blessed hym and saide: 'Lorde, lete thi servaunt in pees after thi worde', and, as we saw in the previous section in Love's Mirrour: Simeon 'ros vp blessyng god & seying with glad spirite, Lord I ponk pe, for nowe beutest bi servaunt aftur bi word in pece. Forwhi I hav e seene with myn eyen bi blessed son oure sauyoure &c' (vi, p.48).

The importance of the sword ('et tuam ipsius animam pertransiet gladius ut revelentur ex multis cordibus cogitationes', Luke 2.35) lies in its connection to the events of the Passion; without it, the Purification could feel isolated from the strong current of affect that has characterised the Nativity episodes discussed thus far. Even in an event that is free from pain (except for the monetary inconvenience of making an offering), Mary cannot escape a glance forward to her future bereavement: the Cursor-Simeon tells her "pin aghen hert /A sorful suerd sal stik ouerthuert", signifying that 'be suerd o soru thoru hir stode, /Quen sco hir sun sagh hing on rode' (11369-72). Unusually for Love, the Mirror does

279 Granger (2009), p.79.
281 More commonly, an expanded form is used as in the South English Nativity (396-600) and the Phillipps poem (1198-1209). The Northern Homilist includes the fullest version of the Nunc (3635-80). Simeon speaks a translation of the Nunc in the Chester and York plays but not in the unfinished Towneley play.
282 Cf. SEN, 611-16; NHC, 3663-88; EWS, p.227.
not build on the potential affect of the image: ‘And afterwarde he prophecied of his passione, & of pe sorow [erof] pat shold as a swerde perch & wonde pe moder herte’ (lune, ix, p.48). In contrast, the N-Town Simeon speaks a stanza laden with affective words, loosely connected by a thread of alliteration and assonance (skorgyd... shedde... sharpe... smerte... swerd... herte):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{In pe temple of God, who vndyrstod,} \\
\text{his day xal be offeryd with mylde mood} \\
\text{Which pat is kynge of alle,} \\
\text{pat xal be skorgyd and shedde his blood} \\
\text{And aftyr dyen on pe rood} \\
\text{Withowtyn cawse to calle;} \\
\text{For whos Passyon per xal beffalle} \\
\text{Swych a sorwe bothe sharpe and smerte,} \\
\text{pat as a swerd perch it xalle} \\
\text{Sevne thorse his moderys herte. (19.81-90)}
\end{align*}
\]

**Anna**

Anna (Luke 2.36-38) is not included in all versions; she does not, for example, appear in the *Southern English Nativity* or the Phillipps poem. In the much later York play, she precedes Simeon in the action of the play, which lends her a certain importance that is not seen elsewhere. The aspects of Anna that attract most mention are the length of her widowhood and her status as a prophetess; both of these traits are mentioned by the Cursor-poet: she is ‘an ald womman’ and she ‘liued had foursith tuenti yeier /In viduid, and dais thre’ (11346):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Lele sco was ai in hir lede,} \\
\text{And neuer vte of pe temple yede,} \\
\text{Bot euer þar-in was sco bun} \\
\text{In almiscfede and orisun,} \\
\text{Quen þat sco þis can iæsus se,} \\
\text{Honurd him be-for his kne,} \\
\text{Sco said, ‘for-soth þis ilk es he} \\
\text{In quam þe welrd sal saued be.’} \\
\text{O propheci soth þis word es,} \\
\text{For þis anna was a prophetes. (11347-56)}
\end{align*}
\]

The usual 80 years of her widowhood only varies in York, where she says ‘I haue beyn a wyddo this threscore yere/ And foure yere to’ (17.61-2). Her character functions in the play to articulate theology for the audience on the street in York through her prophecies (17.64-86). Anna foretells the ‘solace’ that will come with salvation, the chastity of Mary, Christ’s honouring by Simeon and the role of the Holy Ghost, so that the audience are reminded of these aspects of the doctrine.

Once Anna has seen the Christchild, she articulates her renewed faith. In the

**Northern Homily Cycle,**

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{[Anna]} \text{ Of þat barm þus bare witnes,} \\
\text{And said in hir confession}
\end{align*}
\]
Anna’s urge to tell relies on the impetus to evangelise that previously characterized the reaction of midwives and shepherds to their experience of Christ. Anna’s confession can, though, remain the act of speaking to God, distinct from the words she ‘spac’ to other people about what she has seen: ‘And pis Anna cam þe same tym and made hire confession to God, and spac of Crist, as of God and man to alle ðeþ pat camen to hire, and weren in byleue, and abyden þe byyng aðen of mankynde’ (EWS 40, p.228).

The direct communication that we have seen between Anna and God coheres with a feeling that Anna and Simeon are privileged with a closeness to the Holy Spirit. The high incidence of references to the Holy Spirit in this extract is not matched by any other part of the Nativity story and serves to tie the Presentation (and therefore the Nunc dimittis) more clearly to the Annunciation (and the Magnificat). For example, when Simeon is questioning when he will see the baby in the South English Nativity, ‘Answere he hadde of þe Holy Gost, þat he ne scholde neuir dyen /Ar he yseye our lord ybore on erbe wyþ is eyen’ (589-90). The Spirit provides communication between man and God and tells Simeon and Anna that the child is in the temple:

For þi quen mari moder mild
In-to þe temple broght his child,
þis symeon þat had his tast
Toched o þe hali gost (11325-28).283

Once Simeon and Anna are in the temple, the Holy Ghost identifies the baby to them: ‘by þe holi gost he knewe /that hit was Crist that he so ber’ (SLC, 2715-6); ‘þis Anna, when scho saw Jesu, /Thurgh þe holi gaste scho him knew’ (SLC, 3719-20).

Images of Presentation

Often, writers describe Simeon carrying the child into the temple after receiving him from Mary: ‘In his armes þat swete child wip gret ioye he him nom. /He bar him into þe temple an hey and leyde him þere wel softe. /As his lord he honourede him; is fet he custe wel ofte’ (SEN, 594-96); at the Temple, Simeon ‘toke þe child in his armes two /& to þe auter wit hym gon go’ (Phillips poem, 1195-96). However, visual images tend to have Simeon

283 Cf. Mirk and Love: þen wen oure Lady com toward þe tempul wyth hure Son, þe Holy Gost warned Symeon and þis Anne. And he þen wyth mychul ioye þode aþeymes ham and broght hom into þe tempull’ (Mark, 14, p.56); ‘And he swip þat riþirisman Symeon, lad in spirite þy þe holi gost, came in to þe tempull, to se þat he had longe tyme desyre, crist godhus son, aftur þe byhlest & aþowre of þe holi gost’ (Love, vi, p.48).
receiving the baby once Mary and Joseph have brought him into the temple. In a thirteenth-century Psalter, the child sits upright, blessing Simeon, as his mother passes him to the old man. Simeon’s adoration of the baby manifests itself physically not just with the touch of holding him but also in kissing him: ‘pen Symeon toke hym yn hys armes wyth all pe reuerence pat he cowpe and kussed hym and þonked hym highly þat let hym lyuen tyl þat tymne for to sen hym bodly wyth hys eynon’ (Mirk, 14, p.56). And in Love’s Mirror, Simeon bows down before the child, who in turn indicates to Mary that he wishes to be held by the old man: ‘þe child blessed hym & lokyng vpon his modere, bowed towarde him in token þat he wold go to him, and so þe modere vndirstondyng þe childes wille, & þerof wonduryng. toke him to symeon’ (lune, ix, p.48).

In the East Harling panel, Simeon holds the child (a miniature adult) in an embrace while Mary and Joseph kneel as if receiving a blessing. A further image follows, which shows the child presented at the altar, recalling Love’s direction to take heed how ‘þe child Jesus sit vpon þe autre, as it were a noþer child of þe comune peple, & with þat louely face & sadde chere he lokeþ & beholdeþ vpon his dere modere & oþer þat þere were present paciently & mekely abidyng what þei wolden do with him’ (lune, ix, p.49). A similar image can be seen in a roof boss at Norwich Cathedral. Stage directions give clues as to the dramatic depiction of the scene, as in the N-Town play when the actor playing Simeon is told ‘Et accipiet Ihesum’ (19 SD132). He goes on to greet the child with an anaphoric ‘welcome’, which articulates three of Christ’s names, thus reminding the audience of the treble significance of his Birth:

Welcome, prynce withowte pere!
Welcome, Goddys owyn sone!
Welcome, my Lord so dere,
Welcome with me to wone. (19.133-36)

Similarly, the presentation at the altar is conveyed through action indicated by stage direction: ‘And per Mary offeryth lowlys onto þe autere and seyth’ (19 SD197).

The events of Luke 2.21-39 have demanded that this chapter reflect the different emphases in the Circumcision and Presentation than in other Middle English representations of events around Christ’s Birth and early life. The Circumcision (in particular) generates

284 Queen Mary Psalter, MS Royal BVI f.149.r (plate 15, Jesus held by Mary), Sandler cat. 56., 2, pp.64-66; BL Add 29705 f.95 (held by Mary).
285 Emmanuel MS 252, f.9v (plate 16), c.1220-30. Anderson believes that the large size of the baby Jesus in such images relates to the part being played by a small child in cycle plays (Anderson, p.134); this seems an unlikely explanation.
286 East Harling, Chancel, East window, panel 3b (plate 17); CMVA Inv No 014359.
287 Rose and Hedgcocke, pp.87-8; suggests contemporary with N-Town.
theological discussion rather than story; the Presentation similarly becomes complicated by the sheer number of points that authors wish to cover. In contrast, the surviving images of both episodes provide a welcome simplicity. The tiny child sitting on his mother’s lap, unrestrained, as the bishop circumcises him at St Peter Mancroft encapsulates the problematic human sacrifice of salvation.
Plate 18: Magi panels, St Peter Mancroft, c.1440-60.

Top: left panel; below: right panel
Plate 19: Emmanuel 252, f.8r, c1220-30.
Plate 19b: Emmanuel 252, f.8v, c1220-30.
Plate 21: East Harling, chancel, east window, panel 4e, c.1480.
Plate 23: V&A A.58-1925, Cheetham cat. 102, late 15th century.
Plate 24: BL Royal MS BVII (Queen Mary Psalter), f.112v, 1310-20.
Plate 25: BL Royal MS BVII (Queen Mary Psalter), f.131v, 1310-20.
Plate 26: BL Add 50000 (Oscott Psalter), f.9v, late 13th century.
The Magi: Matthew 2.1-12

The previous chapters have all used the gospel of Luke as their starting points. However, the story of the Magi is found in Matthew 2.1-12. The gospel gives no indication of the Magi’s names, their number or what kind of men they were. The information given by Pseudo-Matthew is similarly scant; it is augmented by a gospel commentary from the fourth- or fifth-century attributed to John Chrysostom, the Opus Imperfectum in Mattheum. Middle English versions frequently include the following main components: description of the Magi; the time elapsed between the Birth and the Adoration; arrival in Jerusalem and meeting with Herod; Adoration and gifts. Writers draw on prequel and backstory to move the canonical frame into the shape and (readerly) satisfaction of a narrative with a strong teleology and with gaps in logic conveniently filled. The narrative tradition derives in part from the Magi’s enshrinement in Cologne in 1164, when their supposed remains were translated to the city. The hugely influential Historia Trium Regum, written by John of Hildesheim (d.1375), survives in many vernacular versions including three Middle English texts. The story of the Magi is found also in narrative poetry and in the popular Magi plays in the mystery cycles. This wealth of textual material contrasts with the treatment of the Magi in the visual arts. While there are plenty of images of the Magi, they tend to be static and to dwell on the objects, attitudes and figures of the Adoration scene rather than the many aspects of the story covered by literary tellings.

Date

In Legenda Aurea, de Voragine delineates the four events from Jesus’s life that were commemorated by Epiphany in the thirteenth-century Church: Epiphany ‘is named by foure names. For on this day the iij kynges comen whanne thei hadde sain the sterre fro orient to worship ure Lorde in Bethlem, Seint Iohn baptised oure Lorde in the flode of Iordane, and the water was turned into wyne, and he fedde vM men with v loues’ (13 p.80). Pseudo-Matthew reasonably attributes a two-year time frame between Christ’s Birth and the arrival of the magi: ‘Transacto vero secundo anno venerunt magi ab oriente in Hierosolymam’ (PM XVI, p.83). However, the two years that elapse in the teleology of the Gospels between the Nativity and the arrival of the Magi were rarely still recognised by the medieval period. Only in the

288 Schae, p.21.
289 Schae, p.22.
290 Schae, p.11.
Phillipps poem do the Magi see the star ‘When ihesus was fuly two 3ere’ (1225) rather than after the twelve or thirteen days that separate Christmas and Epiphany in the liturgical calendar. The time between the two festivals in the Christian year is frequently supposed, in Middle English texts, to be the time taken for the Magi to journey from the East. The Northern homilist allows the movement of the narrative (with over two hundred lines passing between the description of the star appearing at Christ’s Birth and the arrival of the Magi) to reflect the passing of time until ‘be thretend day after his birth’ when the kings come ‘makand þis mirth /And to Bedleem þat tyme þai 3ede’ (4247-49). Not much is said about the journey itself and it is rarely the subject of iconography. A notable exception is the Holkham Bible Picture Book, whose format gives it space to show the Magi’s journey. Unusually, the Magi do not reach Bethlehem in this manuscript; it seems that a bifolium is missing at this point that would have shown the Adoration and possibly the Presentation in the Temple.

The journey attracts attention in texts mainly due to the speed with which it was undertaken. This speed is explained by (and in turn explains) the Magi’s decision to travel by camel (dromedaries) rather than by horse. The dromedaries become almost ubiquitous with the growing influence of Legenda Aurea, and its description of the mode of travel. De Voragine asks ‘how thei come in so shorte tyme as xiiij days the space of so many myles fro orient into Jerusalem that is in the middes of the worlde’ and cites Jerome as his source ‘that thei come vpnon dromedaries that bene swifte bestes and rennen more in a day thanne an horse in thre dayes’ (13, p.82). This detail is seen also in A Stanzaic Life, which says that ‘Ieron also berys witnes /dromedarys thay ridden opon’. These are ‘a best of gret swiftines / a hundredth myle one day to gone’ (1777-80). The camels are mentioned in virtually every Middle English text from the late thirteenth to the early fifteenth century. The SEN-poet, for example, comments that they reach Jerusalem in twelve days ‘From þe vurrest lond’ yet ‘many foles perfore ne leuep it nouht’: ‘Ac, as ich seide er, þe dromedaries þat þei vp wende

292 Cf. SEN 473-76; CM 11373-86; SLC 1769-72; Mirk 12 p.47.
293 Holkham, f.13v (plate 11). The Magi are shown on their horses adjacent to the image of the Circumcision.
294 Brown, p.48.
295 Possible post-facto explanation for camels in Adoration iconography (as we saw with the inclusion of ox and ass in Nativity narratives).
296 Woodburn Ross, p.227; NHC 3985-92; Lydgate, V.120-30.
/Swyfte were, and our lorde's grace so some hem ijder sende/ (517-18). In the *Metrical Life*,
we learn that they rode on ‘Deomedaryes swipe rennynge, /Of alle horses best durynge’:

Forpai were swifte & more durable
ben any ober hors in stable,
And on a day more to go
ben any ober hors in two. (345-50)

Magi

Cum ergo natus esset Iesus in Bethleem Iudaeae in diebus Herodis regis, ecce magi ab
oriente venerunt Hierosolymam dicentes: Ubi est qui natus est rex Iudaeorum?
vidimus enim stellam eius in oriente: et venimus adorare eum. (Matthew 2.1-2)

The Vulgate’s ‘magi’ is, in Middle English texts, variously interpreted to mean ‘wise
men’, ‘kings’ or even ‘wise kings’. The wisdom they possessed was largely (and reasonably,
given their association with the star) thought to be astronomical but the idea that they were
Solomon-esque wise rulers still persisted and the identification of the men as kings had
evolved from Old Testament passages such as Isaiah 55.3 and Psalm 71.9-10.297 Matthew’s
description of three gifts (gold, frankincense and myrrh) had led to an assumption that there
were three givers of the gifts: three Magi individually named as Caspar or Jaspar, Balthazar
and Melchior;298 The fixing of the number at three occurs in art from the second century
onwards and in writing from the time of Jerome,299 and traditions developed that each king
represented an age or a race.300

Many aspects of these components are evident in medieval visual depictions of the
scene where such differentiation is usual: in images, we meet the Magi at the Adoration and,
while we cannot know their names from a drawn depiction, their appearance can symbolize
a race, an age or even a gender of humanity.301 The Magi in the St Peter Mancroft panel have
differing amounts of facial hair: the youngest (on the left of the panel) is less hirsute than his
older companions; the eldest man, who is portrayed with an enormous beard, is closest to

297 Schae, p.21.

298 The names are found first in the ninth-century *Excerpta Latina Barbari*; Cf. Schae, p.21.

299 Schae, p.21.

300 Geoffrey Grigson (1954, repr. 1991). Grigson notes that the preserved bodies of the kings at Cologne (of a
15, a 30 and a 60 year old) lent credence to the notion that they represented three ages of man (p.31); for
pictures of female magi painted for female religious houses, see Richard Trexler (1997), (p.109). Trexler notes
the custom of generational play post-Christmas, which he links to the way in which the Magi came to represent
different ages: ‘in the two weeks before Epiphany, different ages and statuses contended among one another,
marking off turf through their creative, more or less intimidating behaviors. Such behaviors often featured the
assumption of princely regalia and titles by dependent groups and the bestowal of often extorted “gifts” upon
such “kings”’ (Trexler, pp.62-63).

301 Description of common types in iconography: Francis Cheetham (1984); see, for example, V&A A.26-1946,
cat. 107, p.180.
Christ and has cast his crown onto the floor as he kneels in worship. Similar variation in facial hair is evident in Emmanuel MS 252, ff.8r-v, whose three Magi represent variously youth, middle age and old age. Iconography such as an alabaster dating from the second half of the fifteenth century attests to the custom of depicting one magus as black after John of Hildesheim’s suggestion that Caspar was Ethiopian. This fits with the idea that the Adoration of the Magi symbolizes the meeting of the new saviour with Gentile races.

The breadth of meaning of the word ‘magus’ enables writers to use these men to exemplify a variety of aspects of Christ’s Birth: their failure to accord directly with any single English figure lends them extra symbolic force. In the *Legenda Aurea*, the three are introduced with their names in three languages: ‘the names bene in Ebrewe Arcellus, Damacus, and in Greke Gorgalath, Malgalach, Sarachi, and in Latyn Iaspar, Melchior, Balthasar’ (13, p.81). This is augmented by an extended definition of magus: ‘this name Magus is as moche to saie as an enchauntour, a scornere, or wise.’ They are ‘scorneres’ because they scorn Herod by not returning to him. Their connection with sorcery gives them further significance since it provides evidence of the conversion to faith: ‘thei hadde bene wicked does but thei were converted after, for whanne oure Lorde wolde shewe to hem his natuuite and bryng hem to hym so that be that signe he shewed that he wolde yeue pardon to synners.’ De Voragine further explains that magus means wise, ‘for Magus in Ebrewe is to saie scribe, in Greke philosophie, in Latin wise, and therfor bene said Magi as grete in wisdom’ (13, p.81). So it is clear that the Magi are figures in need of some definition and that, in such description, they can take on a variety of symbolic roles.

Some Middle English texts, such as the *South English Nativity*, give basic description about the men as their story begins:

> þre kynges come forþ by bulke sterre to loky þerafter þere,
> 3if þei myhten þerof ouht yse – þe on king hit Iaspar,
> þe ðer was yhote Melchior, þe pridde Balthasar. (474-76)

The uncertain ‘magi’ has been replaced with the hierarchically placeable ‘kynges’, thus enabling this Adoration to provide a contrast with the Adoration made by the humble shepherds. By juxtaposing the two Adorations, the poet is able simultaneously to demonstrate

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302 Magi panels, St Peter Mancroft (plate 18): window 1, panels 2e (CVMA Inv No 006170) and 2f (CVMA Inv No 006171).
303 Emmanuel 252, ff.8r (plate 19), 8v (plate 19b).
304 V&A A.39-1946, Cheetham cat. 114 (plate 20). John of Hildesheim’s suggestion that Gaspar was an Ethiopian is seen by Grigson as the reason for the popularity of such images in the fifteenth- and sixteenth-centuries (Grigson, p.32). ‘The kings also came to symbolize the parts of the known world, Europe, Africa and Asia’ (Cheetham, p.180).
that Christ embodies earthly poverty and that he is worshipped by temporal rulers, who recognise the superiority of his heavenly kingdom to their realms. The other popular approach to the introduction of the kings, in texts including *Cursor Mundi*, is to refer to the Magi collectively until the moment when they distinguish themselves by the giving of a particular gift, making the individuality of each magus inextricable from his gift.\textsuperscript{305}

Whereas narrative poetry must provide details of the kings’ biographies in order for their prophetic significance to resonate fully, in the Middle English Magi plays, the kings are able to introduce themselves and explain the reasons for their journey. As they meet one another *en route* to the stable, they are able not only to cite their own distinguishing features but also to rehearse their encounters with the star. For example, when the first king meets the second in Towneley, their dialogue tells the audience who they are:

1 Rex & A, syr, wheder ar ye away?  
Tell me, good syr, I you pray.  

2 Rex & Certys, I trow, the sothe to say,  
None wote bot I;  
I haue folowed yond starne, veray,  
From Araby.  
For I am kyng of that cuntre,  
And Melchor ther call men me.  

1 Rex & And kyng, syr, was I wont to be,  
In Tars at hame,  
Both of towne and cyté;  
Iaspar is my name. (14.115-26)\textsuperscript{306}

Texts, whether dramatic or narrative, are thus distinguished from the visual iconography which pays scant attention to the kings before their appearance in Bethlehem.

**Star**

Between the Shepherds and the Presentation panels of the Great East window of the church of St Peter and St Paul, East Harling, a panel shows the Adoration of the Magi.\textsuperscript{307} The clarity of the Nativity image shows the conventional depiction of the star, which resembles a swirling, flaming object. The rays descending from the star to the cradle are typical only of images of the Nativity itself (and are related to Bridget’s influential visions); in panels of the Magi, the star tends to resemble a comet without a tail. The unusual nature of the star is commented upon by many authors in narrative poetry and in prose alike. The author of the Middle English *Three Kings of Cologne* describes it thus: ‘that sterre as it is in that contre

\textsuperscript{305}See below for discussion of the gifts.  
\textsuperscript{306}Cf. Chester, VIII.1-48; N-Town, 18.21-68; Towneley, 14.85-168; York, 16.57-128.  
\textsuperscript{307}East Harling, chancel, East window, panel 4c (plate 21), CMVA inv 015846.
fourmyd and shapyn was not fourmyd as othir sterris, but it had meny long strakis more brennyngly yan fire brondis, and as an egle flyeng, the wynd wip he wenges betyng, so were the stremys and strakis of that sterre styring about' (TKC, p.55).

In the second chapter of Matthew, we learn of the star only from a passing reference when the Magi say to Herod that *vidimus enim stellam eius in oriente: et venimus adorare eum* (Matthew 2.2). By the time of *Pseudo-Matthew's* composition, the role of the star has expanded only slightly and is cast as a guide with a very basic narrative and geographical function.308 However, in the *Legenda Aurea*, Jacobus de Voragine articulates the doctrinal function of the star, attributing to it the ability to show Christ’s divine nature: ‘the sterre appered thanne an high and shewed well to these iij kyngges that Ihesu Crist was verray God’ (13, p.80). Later in the Epiphany narrative, de Voragine discusses the nature of the star summarising the theories of various theologians, including the idea that the star was the Holy Ghost or the angel that had appeared to the shepherds.309 The inclusion of a large section that outlines orthodox thought on the role and nature of the star in the *Legenda* means that a theological explanation of the star becomes part of the logical sequence by which Middle English authors explain the kings’ journey.

This influence is seen in *A Stanzaic Life of Christ*. The poet here, as elsewhere in the long poem, digresses from the essential story of Christ’s life in order fully to explain the teaching of theologians:

Now er that I firre go
And meue more of pis mater,
discreue pis sterre now I wil, so
As divers auctores con me ler. (1965-8)

He goes on to discuss the star in great detail, using a variety of sources to cover the various theories about the star’s nature: ‘Somme sayn this sterre that schone so bright /the holy gost was weterly, /for verray Crist in that light /was sene’ (1973-76); John Chrysostom says ‘that ilke sterre an aungel was, /the selue aungel forsoth i-wis /that to the schephirdes schewde hym has’ (1982-84). The poet chooses to give these theories space in his narrative (thus perhaps allowing them some authority) but tells his readers what he considers to be the truth:

But most verray opinion,

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308 *Sed et stella ingens a vesperae usque ad matutinum super speculum splendebat, curia magnitudo nunciam visa fuerat ab origine mundi. Et prophetae qui erant in Jerusalem hunc stellam dicebant Christi nativitatem indicare, qui restauraret promissionem non solum Israele sed et omnibus gentibus* (PM 15.7, p.76). This mention of the star precedes Pseudo-Matthew’s discussion of the Magi by an entire chapter.

309 See Gil 13, p.84: ‘Of this sterre and of what maner she was Remy putte iij opiniones...’ He also cites ‘Crisostomic’ and ‘Fulgens’. 
as clerkes hopen thys may be,
hit was new made, 3e leue moun, 
at Ihesu Cristes natiiuite

In knowyng he was comen doun
for to make mon-kynde fre,
And to fulful as was resoun
this propheci, as 3e may se. (1989-96)

In addition to the explanation of the star itself, this passage enables the poet to remind his readers of the salvific purpose of the Nativity. The way in which the star can bring a reminder of redemption into the telling of the Nativity is seen also in the York Magi play. When the kings meet, they discuss the star that has brought them all, separately, to this place. The first and third kings each articulate their knowledge that the star signifies an incarnation that will bring universal salvation. The first king’s ancestors

[...] saide a sterne with lenys bright
Owte of the eest shulde stabely stande,
And þat it shulde meffe mekill myght
Of one þat shulde be lorde in lande,
That men of synne shulde saff. (16.61-5)

By reminding his readers of the Psalms, the Northern Homilist makes the Magi and their journey an integral part of the way in which we can recognise the importance of Christ’s Birth. The star appears ‘to fulfil þe wordes algate /Pat Dauid in his psalmes wrate:
/ Reges Tharsis et insule mundera offerent, &c’ (3952-54). The homilist carefully shows how the star’s brightness and continuous illumination announces Christ’s Birth to the men from distant lands, but further uses the prophetic resonance of the Old Testament psalms to emphasise the way in which this aspect of Nativity has been foretold.

The necessity of amplifying the star’s significance is also seen in a sermon from MS Royal 18 B.xxiii, wherein its difference from the usual manner of announcing news (i.e. the angel) allows the preacher to demonstrate the ways in which the incarnation was made known across the world:

His ennombred wisdom was shewed in þat, þat he shewed a stere, þat is an vnresonable creature, to men of vnresonable feyth, to paynymys, as þise kynge were; bot to þe shepherdes, Iewes, þat were resonable of beleue, he ordeynyt angels, þe wiche þat ben resonable, to tell hem of is burthe and of is goodnes. (Ross, pp.225-26)

The idea that the star’s unreasonableness makes it a decorous way of announcing news of the saviour to an “vnresonable” people has an analogue in the Chester cycle, where the appearance of the star (marked by a Latin stage direction, Tunc apparebit stella) leads the kings’ language to change from Middle English to Anglo-Norman. This reminder of their “otherness” (indicating both their travel from other countries and their elevated social
status) is particularly resonant because the Chester Nativity sequence notably marks Caesar Augustus's power as ruler with speeches in Anglo-Norman:

\[\text{Tunc apparebit stella.}\]
Primus  A, syr roy, si vous ploitt,
gardes sus sur vostre teste.
Secundus  Une esteile issi est
    que syr vous reploiste.
Tertius  Aloies, soit luy une semblant
de une virgin portant,
    comme le semble, de une enfant
    em brace apportement. (VIII.65-72)

The three kings make clear the extraordinary nature of the star in their extraordinary (both in language and in content) discussion.

In fact, despite the clarity of its presence in narratives, the star itself is surprisingly not central to most images of the Magi. The very popular alabaster Adorations often do include the star,\(^{311}\) but it is represented as part of the furniture: on the canopy of Mary's bed, as we see in the Swansea Altarpiece.\(^{312}\) More usually, the star is missing entirely, as in another alabaster from the V&A and in Emmanuel MS 252, f.8v.\(^{313}\) Similarly, if we look at a set of scenes from the Life of Christ in the early fourteenth century De Lisle Psalter, in the close-up of the Magi picture, we see the second king is pointing to a star that is outside the boundary of the frame. This is a common convention and is also seen on f.131r of the Queen Mary Psalter from a similar date. So visual depictions give us the image of an intangible star, whose significance is partly revealed by the impossibility of attaining proximity to it.

This intangibility is accompanied by a static portrayal of the Magi themselves. The necessity of distilling narrative into single scenes means that the images do not tell us who the Magi are, how they met, how they knew where to go or any detailed information about the role of the star. So if one were to approach medieval accounts of Christ's Life purely from the perspective of art history, it would appear that there was little interest in the star's origin and nature or in what the Magi did before their arrival at the place of Christ's birth. Visual images of the star cannot explain either its significance or how the Magi were able to understand what it was telling them to do.

\(^{310}\) See chapter 1, above.
\(^{311}\) 'There are over one hundred other recorded examples of the [Adoration] in English alabaster' (Cheetham, p.180).
\(^{312}\) V&A A.89-1918, Cheetham cat. 112; Cf. V&A A.181-1946, Cheetham cat. 109 (plate 22). Anderson (1963) suggests that such iconography is influenced by the conventions of dramatic staging (pp.145-6).
\(^{313}\) V&A A.39-1936, Cheetham cat. 114 (plate 20); note that the scene is a mirror image of the standard iconography, with Mary on the right (cf. Cheetham, p.186).
However, through symbolism, the star does communicate information to the Magi: its position above the stable or house traditionally indicates to the kings that they have, at last, found the baby that they have been looking for. This is true in text and image alike. The Cursor-poet tells us that ‘Vte-ouer þat hüs þan stode þe stern, /þar iesus and his moder wern’ (11489-90). The poet emphasises the superlative quality of the star: ‘Sua fair a stern was neuer made’ (11487). From Cursor Mundi, we glean a picture of a moving star whose eventual position will signify the divine baby. This has a visual parallel in the two Magi panels of the St Peter Mancroft window.

The star is over the cradle, but the two panel format ensures that the Magi themselves are not depicted with their star.

We have seen that images rarely show us the Magi before their arrival in Jerusalem and that the opposite situation is true in written accounts; the quantity of text devoted to the Adoration is mostly far less extensive than the preamble, which (as we have seen) is missing from the art. The descriptions of the annunciation by star discussed thus far have merely been enhancements of the canonical star. However a variant exists that departs further from the gospel; the three kings of the South English Nativity notice a child inside the star: ‘Amydde þe sterre þei seye a child al blody on a rode’ (480). This striking image is not unique to the South English poem; similar versions can be found in Middle English texts dating from the thirteenth century through to Lydgate’s fifteenth-century Life of Our Lady. The star takes the form of a child, either hanging on or adorned with a cross. The child, like the angels of Annunciation scenes, speaks and thus articulates what it symbolises and the action that must be taken, both to the Magi and to the reader. The talking star demonstrates the divergence of written and visually depicted sources in the telling of biblical material, since its popularity in textual accounts is not matched by any comparable images.

The editor of the South English Nativity explains that the ‘child al blody on rode’ probably comes from Opus Imperfectum in Matheum, but little is known about how the legend became current in thirteenth-century England. The way in which the words of the star can be used to convey a quantity of information is evident in the South English poem, wherein it gives geographical directions along with description of Christ’s status:

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þo bygan þe child to speke with hem: ‘Goþ nou blyye’, he seide,
‘Toward þe lond of Iude; aþoþer sterre ou schal ledë.
þere 3e schulle fynde a child ybore, kynge of alle kynge,
Of whom 3e desireþ so moche to wyten sum maner tokenynge.’ (481-84)
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314 St Peter Mancroft, panels 2e and 2f (plate 18).
After this moment of animation and communication, the talking star is replaced with the star that will take the men forward on their journey. *Cursor Mundi* conflates these two stars into one, with the star that will eventually stop above the cave or stable being given an earlier history of a spoken message. *Cursor Mundi*'s kings, rewarded for their patience, are waiting on the hill, when eventually they see the star:

\[\begin{aligned}
&\text{jis ilk stern }\{\text{am come to warn,}\} \\
&\text{Apon }\{\text{at mont in forme o barn,}\} \\
&\text{And bar on it liknes of croise,}\} \\
&\text{And said to }\{\text{am wit mans voice,}\} \\
&\text{pat }\{\text{ai suld wend to Iuen land. (11417-21)}\]
\end{aligned}\]

This ‘barn’, miraculously in the star and, through the cross he wears pointing forward to the crucifixion and thence the resurrection, speaks ‘wit mans voice’, giving the authority of either the adult Jesus or the whole of humanity to a spectral baby. The Lambeth MS of the *Three Kings of Cologne* speaks of the child almost identically: ‘And <p>at sterre had in hymself the fourme of a yung child and aboue hym a crosse tokyn, and þer was herd in that sterre a voys seying, ‘Natus est hodie rex Iudeorum qui est <e>spectacio gencium et dominator. lte ad inquirendum eum et adorandum’ (TKC, p.55).

Lydgate implicitly contrasts the innocence of the child in the star with the blood of the cross he wears:

\[\begin{aligned}
&\text{They sawe a childe aboven the sterre apere:}\} \\
&\text{So yong, so fayre, in a golden spere,}\} \\
&\text{Full ryally stonde, and above his hede}\} \\
&\text{A large crosse that was of blode all rede. (V.95-98)}\]
\end{aligned}\]

The proximity of gold and red blood in this stanza ensure that the child’s death is present even in the announcement of his Birth. In the *Stanzaic Life*, identification with the Christ-child comes from a cross. However the connection with the Passion is left implicit and there is no mention of blood: the star ‘shapen was /like a childe, non fairer my3t be […] opon his hede he has /A shynyng croys as thay conen se’ (1757-60). The child ‘to the kynges apertly /spak þes wordes’. He does not, though, furnish them with many details about their quest: ‘gos into lude sone in hy, /ther þat 3e sechen 3e fynde may’ (1761-64). In contrast, Mirk’s star is responsible for telling the magi where to go and what they should offer as gifts. Mirk writes that the magi were ‘spytynge of þe sterre’ on the night that Christ was born, when

a sterre come to ham bryghtur þen any sonne, and in þe sterre a fayre chyld and vndur hys hed a bryght cros of gold, and sayde þus to ham: ‘Goght anon wyth alle hast into þe loud of Ievrye and takuth wyth how gold and ensense and myyre, and offreth þes þre to hym þat ys þer now ybornen kyng of Iewes, verey God and mon, and y wol ben 3oure gyde, and ledon 3ow þe neste wyth pydur’ (12, p.47).

The star tells the Magi (and us) of Christ’s dual nature (‘verey God and mon’). It obviates the need for the kings to have obscure astronomical knowledge: they know the significance of
this star because it tells them so. The baby in the star is never identified by name as Christ (but of course the cross symbol and the very fact that it is a baby in the Nativity narrative would make such an identification obvious).

My instinct has been that the doctrinal ambiguity about the nature of the star could explain the absence of the child-star from iconography. David King suggests that the texts with the child in the star could have derived from images that were influenced by St Bridget’s account of the moment of Christ’s birth bringing an infusion of light, as in the East Harling Nativity panel.\(^{315}\) This is an attractive theory but does not quite work chronologically because of the earlier dates of Opus imperfectum and, in Middle English, the examples we have seen in the South English Nativity and Cursor Mundi. One analogue is the idea of the child or infant Christ appearing in the Eucharistic wafer and the closest visual parallel I have found is in the Annunciation to Mary, wherein many artists depict the moment of conception with an airborne Jesus.\(^{316}\) The near complete destruction of those Annunciations that use a crucified baby may suggest that this child in the star was similarly erased by the Reformation.

Its absence from our stock of visual images should not, though, lead us to ignore its significance in written vernacular nativities. The talking star plays a crucial narrative role: its moment of animation allows it to explain directly what the Magi must do. The reader sees clearly how they knew to go to Judea, without needing to rely on the wisdom that is implied in their name or on seemingly abstract astronomy. The aims of texts and image are different regarding the Magi. When an artist is concerned simply to show the Adoration, his attention is focused on the fundamental aspects of the scene: age, racial (and perhaps gender) differences in the three figures, richness and otherness of clothing, portrayal of the gifts, attitude of mother and child as well as the “given” of the pointing to an absent star. In contrast, as elsewhere in Middle English Nativity accounts, writers are more concerned to explain the hows and whys. The child in the star is a convenient and memorable way of doing so, with the authority of a tradition built on the apocryphal gospels.

\(^{315}\) Conversation at Middle English seminar, Faculty of English, Cambridge, November 2008.

\(^{316}\) For example a fifteenth-century alabaster, V&A A.58–1925, Cheetham cat. 102 (plate 23) and, panel 2a of the east window at St Peter Mancroft (CVMA Inv No 006167). For discussion of this iconography, see Anderson (1963): ‘this convention was also denounced by the Church as tending to promote the heresy that Christ’s body was not formed in the Virgin’s womb’ (p.133).
Prophecy and waiting

The star’s ability to communicate information to the Magi canonically comes from the notion that its appearance had been prophesied and therefore its significance was understood by the Magi who had been waiting for it. The author of the Middle English Three Kings of Cologne shifts his readers back three days to the day of Christ’s birth, after the narrative has covered episodes including the Midwives legend, retroactively to send the star that passed by Balaam the prophet long before to the hill where the Magi gathered:

And whan in that Cave in Bedlem that same almighty God was man borne qui prope est semper omnibus innocentibus eum in veritate, that sterre by Balaam be prophete by long tymes passid by for and by the xij. astronomoers of Inde, Perse, and Caldee aboue the hille of Vaus sete longe tyme abdydn in that night that Crist was born of that same hille of Vaus in manere of a sonne shynyng bygan to rise in manere of an egle, vpon that hill assending, [and] by al that day in o certayn place stode wipout mevyng, so that bytwene be sonne at mydday and that sterre in clerenesse and brightnesse semyd no difference; so that, as some bokys seyn, in that day of that nativity of our Lord was seyn meny sonnys. And after be passyng of that day of nativity hit assendid vp to be firmament of heyn. (TKC, pp.54-55)

The long extract shows how the author is keen to include crucial aspects of the story:

Balaam’s prophecy, the astronomers whose lives have been dedicated to waiting for it, and the star’s superlative brightness. At this point in the Cologne text, the kings themselves have not been introduced. The author’s focus is the star and its role in the making known of the Messiah.

The Cursor-poet casts his Magi as penitential worshippers, undergoing a recognisably Advent or Lent-type period of fasting and prayer: on the mountain ‘pat offerd, praid, and suank, /Thre dais noþer ete ne dranc’ (11413-14). The period of ‘thre dais’ implicitly points to the other period of three days waiting, between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, which is an inevitable result of the incarnation begun in these Nativity narratives.

He sais pat in be bok he fand
Of a prophet of estrinland,
Hight balaam, crafti and bald;
And mikel of a stern he tald,
A sterne to cum pat suld be sene,
Was neuer nan suilk be-for su scene. (11387-92)

Balaam’s prophecy brings the authority of the Old Testament to the star and explains the seemingly inexplicable by setting it in the context of a time of waiting and anticipation, thus giving it an inherent and obvious significance. However, the connection with Balaam is a post-facto development that evolves to explain the appearance of the star in Matthew’s gospel.

In his Epiphany homily, Mirk builds on the idea of Balaam’s prophecy, writing that the ‘pre kyngus weron of þe lynage of Balaham’ (12, p.47). His prophecy ‘pat a sterre
schulde spryngen of Iacob’ means that even ‘pagh þey wern no lewes of kynde, nerþeles þey hodden yhorde by aunȝtrye of þe sterre.’ The expectation engendered by their prophetic ancestry leads them to ‘comen togedur vpon serteyn hullus for to dysspyte by astronomy of þys sterre’ (12, p.47). Rather than simply being illustrative of the wealthy or of gentiles, the Magi exemplify patience, teaching the medieval Christian the importance of a time of waiting.

Balaam’s words are rehearsed by the first king in Towneley when the Magi meet for the first time: ‘Balaam spekys of this thyng’. His re-articulation of the prophecy reminds the audience of the significance of this birth.3 Balaam says that ‘of Iacob a starne shall spryng

That shall ouercom kasar and kyng
Withouten stryfe;
All folk shal be to hym obeyling
That berys the lyfe. (14.205-10)

In the N-Town play, the story of Balaam’s prophecy emerges when the Magi are questioning Herod to discover the whereabouts of the new baby:

Balamam spak in prophecye
A sterre xulde ful louelye
Lythtyn upon mayd Marye,
Comyn of Jacobys kynne.
þe childe is born and lyth hereby,
Blomyd in a maidenys body. (18.159-64)

The York kings suggest that their sight of the star derives from the prophecy of their ancestors. The first king says that he has been privileged with a sight of which his kynrede ‘was coveytande’:

Thay saide a sterne with lemys bright
Owte of the eest shulde stabely stande,
And þat it shulde meffe mekill myght
Of one þat shulde be lorde in lande,
That men of synne shulde saff. (16.61-5)

Arrival in Jerusalem

Audiens autem Herodes rex, turbatus est et omnis Hierosolyma cum illo: et congregans omnes principes sacerdotum et scribas populi, sciscitabatur ab eis ubi Christus nasceretur. At illi dixerunt ei, In Bethlehem Iudaeae: sic enim scriptum est per prophetam:
Et tu Bethlehem terra Iuda,
nequaquam minima es in principibus Iuda: ex te enim exiet dux qui reget populum meum Israel. (Matthew 2:5-6).

The next point of interest to Middle English authors is the arrival of the Magi in Jerusalem and what happens while they are in that city. Many texts here recount the legend of the lost sight of the star. This brief disappearance serves to explain why the Magi needed

317 Trexler suggests in addition that ‘by the early twelfth century, the Magi in plays and in art taught the faithful how to pray’ (p.70).
to ask directions from the people of Jerusalem. With the questions of the Magi to the Jewish people, the kings impart knowledge of the new saviour to them. The provision of this knowledge removes, for a medieval audience, ignorance as a defence for the Jews’ failure immediately to worship God’s son. *Legenda Aurea* details this event only after the men have seen Herod at which point de Voragine explains that as ‘sone as thei were entered into Jerusalem thei loste the condit of the sterre for thre resones’ (*Gil*, 13 p.84). Their privileged access to the star is removed because ‘the certificacion of the prophesie’ requires them ‘to enquere the apperyng of the sterre’; in asking for the help of man, they lose the help of God; and the star had to be hidden while they were among the Jews because it was a token given to the magi representing ‘hem that were as yet misbileuers’. However, once these conditions have disappeared and the Magi have left Jerusalem, the star returns: ‘the sterre apered and went before hem til he come ouer the place wher pe childe was.’

The *South English Nativity* moves the explanation forward so that the disappearance occurs in a logical place, at which it forces them to ask for help from the people of Jerusalem. When ‘pei comen to lerusalem furst þe sterre hem was yhud / For þat þei scholden after vr lord esche þat is burptyme were ykud; /þat þe lewes scholde nout forsake þat he was among hem ybore’ (537-39). In the *Stanzaic Life*, the Latin rubric asks why the star disappeared and the stanzas provide the answer. The discussion of the star’s short absence is followed in *Legenda Aurea* by a consideration of the ‘foure reasons’ why they mistakenly came to Jerusalem: firstly, they knew the time of the Nativity but not the place and since Jerusalem was ‘a citee riall’, they suspected the noble child would be born there; ‘thei myght the sonner wete the place of his natiuite’ from the wise men and masters of the law that lived there; so that the ‘lwes myght not sain’ that their lack of belief was due to not knowing the place and time of the Nativity; ‘be the curiosite of the kyngges the slotthe of the iues shuld be condemnped, for the kyngges leuedyn oo onely prophete and the Iues wolde not leue many prophets; the kyngges soughten a straunge kynge and the Iues wolde not seke thaire owne; the kyngge come from ferre contre and the Iues weren nye’ (13, pp.81-82). The passage acknowledges the human frailty of these kings (they do not know all of the details of where they are going despite their great wisdom), while the reader is shown further the contrast between worldly and heavenly rulers with opposing ideas of the value of temporal riches.

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319 *SLC*, 1909-16.
This continues the theme of Christ’s earthly poverty that has been established in Nativity narratives.

*Tunc Herodes clam vocatis magis diligerent didicit ab eis tempus stellae quae apparuit eis: et mittens illos in Bethleem, dixit: Ite et interrogate diligenter de priero: et cum inveneritis renuntiate mihi, et et ego ueniens adorem eum. (Matthew 2.7-8)*

*The Holkham Bible Book* shows the three Magi approaching Herod, who is enthroned in canopied splendour.320 This is a rare example of this moment appearing in visual media but perhaps results from the influence on the book of the cycle plays.321 The Magi plays are an important part of each of the four main cycles and the centrality of Herod to them had led the character to become available in the cultural imagination as a type of storming anger. As we will see in the next chapter, the anger derives mainly from the depiction of Herod in the Slaughter of the Innocents. However, the interaction of the Magi with Herod in Jerusalem provides an opportunity to establish his character: Herod is a point of interest in a narrative ‘everywhere largely devoid of fun and dramatic content’.322

Portrayal of Herod interrogating the Magi enables writers to show that he feels deeply threatened by news of the child: ‘po Herodes herde pis anuyed he was wel sore’ *(SEN, 521)*: ‘pe kyng enquerede po of pe clerkes (for he was sore agast) /Why pe sterre so wonderful was, and hou longe heo hadde ylast’ *(SEN, 529-30).*323 The didactic usefulness of Herod extends further: the verbal exchanges between him and the kings offer writers a chance to rehearse the full resonance of the birth with catechistic insistence. Even though Herod’s rejection of Christ is extreme, his example can nonetheless be used to educate. The priestly author of *Book to a Mother* compares Herod to the kind of ‘comune womon’ towards which example his audience of nuns should not aspire.

Herod is as muche to seie as “ioyng in skinnes”, or “gloriouse skinny”: herof is seid a comune womon pat is ioyng in hure skyn, and gloriouse in pingus wipoute-forp; for she wolde seme feir to bigile folis, pou3 she stinke ful foule wipinne to God and his angelis. And bi Heroud mowen bitokened alle false feynynge nonnes, flateringe

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320 Holkham, f.13v.

321 See note on the midwife’s hand in chapter 3 above. Anderson suggests that the Norwich roof boss that shows the Magi holding cups while speaking to Herod corresponds with a scene added to the *Officium Stellae* ‘at an early date’ (Anderson, p.30).


323 The Northern Homilist describes the way in which the anger motivates Herod’s move to violence:

> When Herod by pasure wordes wist<br>Pat pis thing was pis pupilist,<br>His hert rase ful feimply<br>Oganys pis childe with grete enuy,<br>And in his hert ful fast he thought<br>How pis childe might to ded be broght,<br>And preuely how it might be<br>Pat name sold wit bot his men3e. *(4175-82)*
Adoration and gifts

Qui cum audissent regem abierunt: et ecce stella quam viderant in oriente antedebat eos, usque dum veniens staret supra ubi erat puer: videntes autem stellam gauisi sunt gaudio magno valde: et intrantes domum invenerunt puerum cum Maria matre eius: et proelientes adoraverunt eum: et apertos thesauris suis obtulerunt ei munera, aurum, tinas, et murram. Et responso accepto in somnis ne redirent ad Herodem, per aliam viam reversi sunt in regionem suam. (Matthew 2.9-12)

The arrival in Bethlehem and Adoration of the child is familiar from visual culture. The Convention allows for the scene to have moved indoors from the stable or cave setting of the Nativity proper, and the many fourteenth-century alabaster scenes depict Mary on a canopied bed at this point. In stained glass panels (e.g. Mancroft and Harling) parity is maintained between this episode and the other Nativity scenes by retaining the stable and the manger. Visually, the idea of temporal versus heavenly wealth is achieved by the contrast between the colours and rich array of the Magi with the muted stable scene.

The poet of the South English Nativity relates a simple scene of Adoration: when the star has become stationary ‘ouer pe stude pere pe child was ibore’, the Magi ‘come in and founde pat swete bern myd is moder Marie’ (552; 555). Interestingly, Joseph is absent from the stable so that there is no confusion over who is the baby’s father: ‘Ac Iosep ne founde pei nout lest pei pouhten folye /-pat pe child hadde is sone ybe, and pat pe moder vnclene were’ (556-57). Having entered, ‘pes pre kynes seten adoun on kne and here presauns him bere / (Gold and mirre and ensens, as Y tolde ou byfore); /For hire lord pe child pei helden pat pere was ybore’ (558-60). Cursor Mundi also focuses on Mary and Jesus alone: the star shows the Magi the place ‘par iesus and his moder wer. /pai kneld dun and broght in hand, /Ilkan him gaf worpi offrand’ (11490-2).

In the Phillipps poem, the Adoration is framed by the poet’s comments on the emotions of the Magi; firstly, he emphasises their absence of fear:

& when pai come into pe place
pe is sterne styn of hys pace
pai entred & ware no3t drade. (1321-23)

Both Mary and Joseph are present, and as in the standard adoration iconography: ‘pe child on hyr kne syttande’ (1325). We learn that the Magi ‘ware pai blyth & glade’ and this happiness seems to prompt their offerings. Firstly all three men kneel in a communal gesture:

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324 e.g. BI, Royal BVII, f.112v (plate 24), and alabasters listed above.
toke out of per tresore /& knelyd all thre be child before' (1327-8). Each gift is then individually explained. The act of giving is simultaneously a recognition of the baby's status: 'bus knew pai hym with per offerandes thre /Kyn, god, & man alway' (1340-41).

Love comments that his readers must take 'gude entent to be manere of spekyng in bope parties' (lune, viii, p.45). He notes 'how reuerently & how cureysly' the kings ask their questions and 'how oure lady with a mener of honest shamefastnes, holdyng done hir eyene toward pe erpe spekep & answerep sadly & shortly to hir askynges, for she halp no likynge to speke mekyll or elles to be scene' (lune, viii, p.45). Her words are important because the Magi 'representeden holi chirch, pat was than to come of be Jentiles as it is seid before' and therefore 'oure lord 3af hir strenght & special confor to speke more homely to hem' (lune, viii, p.45). Unsurprisingly, the baby 'spekep not'. However, his attitude recalls iconographic scenes: he 'stant with a maner of sad semblant & glad chere & als he vnrdurstode hem louely lokyng vpon hem, & tei haue gret likyng in pe siht of him, no3t also in his bodily si3t, withoute forp, for as Dauuid witnessep, He was faire & louely in body before al mennus sonnes' (lune, viii, p.45).325

The symbolism of the gifts had been an important facet of the scene from the time of Bede onwards.326 The kings are distinguished by the nature of their gifts and the symbolism is often fully delineated in the narratives to allow ideas such as Christ as king of kings and a foreshadowing of the Passion to resonate in the Adoration scene. In Cursor Mundi, each king is introduced as he makes his offering, and the offering is explained to the reader: 'pe first o paw | pat Jasper hight, /He gaf him gold' (11493-94) to show that he is the king of kings; Melchior brings frankincense that is 'brint in kirc to smell, /It es a gun pat cums o firr' (11498-50); Balthazar (or 'attropa' in the Cotton manuscript) brings myrrh, reminding the reader of the sacrifice that will come at the Passion.327

Bot attropa gaf gift o mir,
A smr1 o selcuth bitturnes,
pat dedman cors wit smerld es,
(For roting es na better rede)
In taken hie man was suld be ded. (11502-6)

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325 Ghosh includes the Epiphany as one of 'the Mirror's references to "openness"', it 'is the "opune shewying of oure lorde' (p.160).
326 Trexler, p 73.
327 The gifts have a similar identifying function in the Phillipps poem. The kings 'knelyd all thre be child before' (1328). Jaspar's gift of gold is 'taken' that Christ is a king who 'Ouer all kynges power had', 'Yelexhar ensens unto hym offerd' to show 'he was god verray'; 'Balty3ar offerd hym myr' and the properties of this gift allow the poet to remind his readers of the Passion and the salvation that will result from it; the myrrh shows 'pat he was man & sulde dy /When gret god dight ys day /Man sawle pat was thrall to make it fre' (1330-39).
The symbolism is also delineated in a Wycliffite sermon,\(^{328}\) which then allows the preacher to direct that the church should ‘syngu of pis; in gold ys Cristus regalye, in incence his presthede, and in myrrre he sepulture’ (EWS, pp.238-39). This then leads to an extrapolation that ‘pus alle men schulden worschipe hym’:

- seculer lordus schulden worschipe Crist, and þat þis gold schulde teche hem;
- preestus also schulden worschipe Crist, by þe lore of þis incense; and alle comunes schulden worschipe Crist, for we ben alle dedly, in tyme of oure dep, and afturward, we han noon help but hym. (EWS, p.239)

Nicholas Love is concerned about the fate of the gold after the Adoration. He asks ‘what hope we was done with þat gold of so gret prise? Wheþer oure lady reserved it & put it in tresory or elles bouht þerwiþ londes & rentes?’ He is quick to negate such a possibility:

‘Nay nay god forbede. For she þat was a perfite louere of pouerter, toke none hede of sech worldly godes’ (lune, viii, p.46). To demonstrate her love of poverty, to show that the Christ-child ‘loued not sech riches’ and because the keeping of gold ‘was to hir bot a gret burpen, & heuy charge’, Love explains that ‘withinne a fewe dayes & short tyme, she 3f it al to pore men’ (lune, viii, p.46). As we have seen in the previous chapter, the practical consideration of whether the gold makes Mary rich would have implications for the kind of offering she must give in the temple:

- for she made hem so bare of money, þat when she schold go to þe temple forto be not wherwiþ to bigge a lombe tort ofre for hir sone, bot only bouht turtures or downes of litel prys, þat was þe offryng of pore folk aftur þe lawe. And so we mowen resonably byleue, þat þe offryng of þe kynges was gret & riche, & þat oure lady lonyng pouerter & ful of charite 3af it in haste to pore men, as it is seide. (lune, viii, p.46)

The Adoration concludes with Mary’s gratitude to the Magi, and frequently includes an opportunity for the baby to demonstrate his extraordinary maturity. For example, in the Phillipps poem, ‘Mary thankyd þam þan with myld chere /& þer als þai knelyd all intere /þe chiles blyssyng had þai’ (1342-4). Similarly, in Cursor Mundi, the baby’s reaction is astonishingly grown-up; he takes the three gifts ‘At ans [...] Ful suetlik wit smiland chere, /Biheild þaa giftes riches and dere’ (11507-10).

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\(^{328}\) ‘By þe gold þei myȝten buyȝe þing þat was nedful to Crist; and by þe myrre þei myȝten strenkþ þe membrus of Crist; and by þe encence þei myȝten putten awey þe synch of þe stable’ (EWS, p.238).
The dream

An image in initial D for Psalm 38 of the Queen Mary Psalter, shows the three Magi lying in a single bed, looking up at an angel. This iconography is a standard pairing with the Adoration, as in two roundels on a leaf from the Oscott Psalter and two adjacent panels in Emmanuel 252. The angel in Emmanuel 252 has a scroll which, we assume, contains the warning about Herod’s bad intentions. The depiction of a scroll is a conventional way of showing communication through words. In order to show that the vision occurs in a dream, the artists of the Oscott and Emmanuel pictures depict the Magi in various states of wakefulness: one looks up at the angel, attending to his words; the others have their eyes closed as if asleep. This moment is widely depicted in texts including Cursor Mundi, where to underline the meeting of poverty with riches, the poet describes how the Magi go to bed in the poverty of the stable: ‘Had pai na bedd was spred wit pell, Bot pai faand, wi-vten want /pai tok, and thanked godd his sand’ (11516-18). It is here that the ‘kinges thre ar broght to bedd’ (11520). Their plan to ‘torn be herods’ that night is changed ‘quils pai slepand lai in bedd, /And angel com pai for-bedd /To wend pai bi him ani wai’. The angel notifies them that Herod is a ‘traitur, fals in fai’ and tells them to travel ‘A-noper wai [...]pe morun quen pai risen ware’ (11527-32). In the Phillipps poem, when ‘an anngell appered to pam pat nyght’ and tells them to ‘slepe no3t, syrs, bot wake; /Wendes noght to herode for nakyns thyng, /Ffor he es fals of hys sayng’ (1350-2), the angel points out that Herod’s anger extends to the Magi in addition to the danger posed to the child: ‘He haytes 3ow for ihesus sake; /Bayth 3ow & hym he thynkes to sla’. So they must go ‘anither way hame [...] /To passe fals herodes wrake’ (1353-6).

The implications of the angel’s message (Herod’s anger and his wish to kill Jesus) lead to two further episodes, which are widely depicted in the Middle English texts and iconography that will be described in the next chapter: the Slaughter of the Innocents and the Flight into Egypt.

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329 BL Royal BVII, f.131v (plate 25).
330 London BL Add 50000, f.9v (plate 26), Survey IV, no. 151, and Emmanuel 252, f.8v (plate 19).
Plate 27: Emmanuel 252, f.9r, c.1220-30.
Plate 28: BL Royal BVII (Queen Mary Psalter), f.132v, 1310-20.
Plate 28: BL Royal BVII (Queen Mary Psalter), f.132v, 1310-20.
Plate 29: BL Add 18850 (Bedford Hours), f.83, 15th century.
Plate 30: BL Royal BVII (Queen Mary Psalter), f.148v, 1310-20.
Slaughter of the Innocents and Flight into Egypt

The Slaughter

Matthew’s gospel narrates the Flight into Egypt in 2.13-15, before describing the Slaughter of the Innocents and Herod’s subsequent death (2.16-23). However, the structure of this chapter follows the narrative convention in Middle English, where the events surrounding Herod and the Slaughter of Innocents frequently precede the Holy Family’s departure for Egypt. The main elements in the Slaughter episode are inherited directly from Legenda Aurea and include: Herod as tyrant figure; Herod with soldiers; soldiers and mothers at the Slaughter; the number of children killed; Herod’s own children. Narratives of the Slaughter can conclude in various ways and there is no typical pattern.

The Slaughter of the Innocents is crucial to the story of Christ’s early life because it prompts the Holy Family’s Flight into Egypt and it foreshadows the Crucifixion: mothers mourn in place of Mary and children die as Christ-types, thus prefiguring in the Salvation narrative. The Slaughter is often interwoven with Joseph’s dream and the family’s consequent departure from Bethlehem. Iconographically, the two events are frequently paired, for example in Emmanuel MS 252, where an image of Herod sitting in a position of authority, pointing at a speared child, sits below a panel depicting the Holy Family’s Flight.331

Addressing firstly the chronology of this part of the story: in Legenda Aurea, the reader is told that once the kings had departed, Herod ‘beganne to ordeyne for the dethe of the children that were in Bethleham, for he wold sle with hem hym that knewe not’ (9, p.58). De Voragine then describes the family’s flight ‘by the techyng of the aungell’ (9, p.58). The mingling of the Slaughter of the Innocents and of the Flight in the Legenda reflects an inextricable connection between the two episodes that will also affect the construction of this part of the story in Middle English texts. For example, in the South English Nativity, the angel’s appearance to Joseph (‘An aungel þer cam to Iosep and hette him vp arise, /And wip þe moder wende into Egipte on alle wise’, 653-54) takes place in between Herod’s decision to ‘sle alle þe children þat wipinne two 3er were’ (651) and the description of Herod’s men travelling into the land and killing the children (659). This lends the narrative an urgency: without the angel’s message, the family would have been caught up in the Slaughter.

The centrality of Herod to the Slaughter of the Innocents episode is evident in an image in the Queen Mary Psalter: Herod and his oversize sword fill the image, centring

331 Emmanuel 252, f.9r (plate 27).
attention on his responsibility for the deaths of the children. A child is being killed by a soldier standing above a mother; but it is Herod’s sword that appears to make contact with the baby.332 A similarly detailed picture can emerge when authors narrate the Slaughter of the Innocents; they frequently mention Herod’s lineage, the nature of his rule and his reaction to the ‘threat’ of the new king’s birth. This may appear repetitive to us but is a result of the episodic nature of many texts.333

Legenda Aurea re-tells the details of Herod’s genealogy: ‘Antipater wedded the nece [...] he hadde a sone that he called Herodes that was after Askalonytees. And this same toke the reaulte of Iudee of Cesar August, and thanne was furst take away the ceptre of Iudee. And this Herodes hadde thre sones, Antipater, Alexander and Aristobole’ (9, p.57). The preponderance of Herods could lead to confusion between the Herod of the Nativity and the Herod of the Passion in some Middle English texts. However, because this Herod’s death must occur before the Holy Family can return home from Egypt, authors take care to differentiate between them when narrating the Slaughter. A reader of the Stanzaic Life learns that there were ‘Thre Erodes’ (3169) of whom

The furst As-calonita was, 
that regnet when that Crist was borne
7 slogh the Innocent3 bout trespas,
for whch dede his saule was lorne. (3173-6)

At this point in the narrative, the poet disrupts the chronology of his story to describe the two Herods who are yet to come; the second, Antipas, slew John the Baptist and reigned when Jesus was crucified (3177-80); the third was Agrippa who slew James and Peter (3185-88).

Once the identity of Herod has been established, authors must negotiate several difficult aspects of the story. Firstly, the chronology is dependent on the ambiguity that leads to confusion over the time scale of the Magi’s visit and to the slaughter of all children under two years of age. In texts where the Magi have followed the liturgical calendar and arrived twelve days after the Nativity, the writer needs to explain why Herod does not simply order that all newborn babies be killed immediately. One reason for delay comes from the unrest in Herod’s family that, apocryphally, leads the Roman emperor to demand Herod’s presence at court. Thus, Herod travels to Rome and back before finally giving his orders. De Voragine tells his readers that ‘as Herode ordeyned for the deth of the chyldren he was somned bi lettere to come before Cesar to answere to the accusacions of his sones’ (9, p.58). The

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332 BL, Royal 2 Bvii, f.132r (plate 28); Cf. St Peter Mancroft 1.2g (CVMA Inv No 016608, and also Anderson, pp.107, 122, pl.22b), where Herod leans over a table apparently to participate in the Slaughter.

333 See p.2, above.
summons allows the blame for the number of children eventually killed to extend upwards to Rome rather than lying solely with Herod. However, in most Middle English texts, Herod’s fault is emphasized.

In the *South English Nativity*, the actions of Herod’s sons are seen by the poet as an indictment of their father’s failings:

Sixe sones he hadde pater lüpare were, ðat þouhten him vnkyndliche dihte;
Bynyme him is kyndom myd poer ðeper quelle him 3if þei myhte.
bo Herodes þis vner3et, awey he drof hem anon;
þis lüper sones to þe emperour to playnte þei gonne gon.
(I not what scholde a lüper fader bote he lüpere sones by3ete). (623-27)

When the emperor decides to find out how much truth is in their complaints and summons Herod to him, Herod departs for Rome, with the anxiety about the summons overshadowing his plans for Jesus: ‘bo was Heroudes sore adrad; som del he for3et also /þe wreche þat he hadde ypouht by our lord to hau ydo’ (631-32). With Herod’s fear of his sons’ encounter with the emperor temporarily overshadowing his plan to harm the Christchild, it is, implicitly, his sinful concern for worldly power that delays action and leads to the eventual deaths of a greater number of children.

The *SLC*-poet makes his condemnation of Herod explicit in the verb ‘conjetting’, with its pejorative meaning of ‘to contrive’ or ‘to conspire or plot’, with which he plans the Slaughter: ‘Heroud was so conjetting /the childer deth bi hit entent’ (3341-42).³³⁴ At this point, the ‘lettres fro the emperoure /at sewte of his sones two’ consume him with fear: ‘so steret he was in þat stowr, /þat alle his thoght was on hit tho’ (3345-8). Therefore he ‘tariet to sle the innocente3 /til þat processe hade an ende’ (3349-50). Herod’s trip to Rome reminds the reader of the complexity of Judean law. We have already seen the role of Octavian’s decree in the journey of Mary and Joseph before Christ’s birth, indicating how every individual is subject to a distant emperor.³³⁵ The summons to Herod (and his obedient response to it) indicate how the temporal king of the Jews ironically must bow to the power of another temporal king even while we are learning how threatened he feels at the prospect of ceding power to the new-born baby.

The travel to Rome encompasses an incident at Thrace, wherein a prophecy is fulfilled and more evidence is provided of Jesus’s identity as the Messiah. In an English Wycliffite sermon, the event is included only as an aside as the preacher moves to his important point: that Herod ‘slow alle þe children þat weron of two 3eer’: ‘For, as men seyen comunly, þe

³³⁴ MED ‘conjeten’ (v). Particularly pejorative 2 ‘to contrive’/ ‘to conspire or plot’.
³³⁵ See chapter 1, above.
same 3eer ā pat Crist was born, Erowde wente to Rome and brente ās kynge's ship, and dwelte pere abowe two 3er, byfore he cam aSen' (EWS, p.221). Interestingly, this preacher tells his audience of this episode, despite assigning the detail of the story to common parlance: ‘as men seyen comunly’. De Voragine directly cites the Old Testament prophecy, which Herod fulfills; he burns the boats ‘in his madnesse like as Dauid hadde prophesied before, sayeng: ‘He shall brenne the shippes of Tharse by despit of wodenesse’ (9, p.58). The boat-burning takes place in Middle English in the South English Nativity and Stanziaic Life of Christ. In the Nativity, the incident augments the author’s portrayal of Herod’s wrath:

He cam bi þe see of Tars, and alle þe schipes þat he fond
To douste he let hom alle forberne oþer hauky al to grounde,
For he þouhte þat þe þre kynges þe forþ þolden wende.
þat Seint Dauid seide in þe Sauter, ybrouhte þat was to ende:
þat kynges of erpe wardry scholde and oure lord iknowe nouht,
Ac whanne þe him yseye drede sore scholde and ystourbled þe of here þouht,
And of anguyses as of a womman þat traauyle of childe were,
And defouly wiþ wel hasty red þe schipes of Tars þere.
þis was ysed by þe kyng Heroudes þat in angwisch was and drede,
And defoulede alle þe schipes of Tars wiþ wel hasty rede.
þo he muste hou he mihte more of þe þre kynges him awreke,
He þouhte hou he mihte oure lord sle, and þeþof he gan to speke. (637-48)

The polyptoton of ‘defouly...defoulede’, with the stem moving from adverb to verb, and the repetition of ‘wel hasty red’ combine to imply that Herod has little control over his extreme anger; thus the massacre of the children is a natural progression of the deadly sin within him. Similarly, the SLC-poet comments on Herod’s ‘foule wille’, incorporating this into David’s prophecy:

Then was endet that prophecy
that Dauid sais in his sauter:
‘with wode spirit he con destry
the shippes of Tarse in foule maner.’ (3361-4)

Even in texts where the burning boats are not mentioned, a constant feature in description of Herod is his anger. The Phillipps poem allows Herod possible mitigation for this sin by describing it as a form of madness: ‘Ffor wa almost herode wod was /pat þai so
gatte fro hym suld passe’ (1369-70). However, since he is only ‘almost’ mad, censure of his actions remains present. A similar hint of insanity is seen in the Metrical Life; Herod is ‘ful sore agast’ in case Jesus is proved ‘Aboue hym kyng to be / And lord of Iewes in Iudee’ (680-81). The word ‘agast’ implies a particularly strong type of fear: ‘terrified, frightened’.336

Thus, the MLC-Herod’s actions are prompted by an extremity of emotion that is akin to sickness; he ‘hade care and siked sore’ (recalling for us, perhaps, Troilus in the throes of

336 MED ‘agasten’ (v) 2, ppl agast: terrified, frightened, aghast; fearful, afraid.
love-sickness as a mental disorder). Yet such mitigation of Herod’s actions is atypical. In 
*Cursor Mundi*, the sentence construction ensures that the eventual action (‘on þe sakles he 
suld ta wrake’) is built on the wrath (‘Sua wa was him’):

```plaintext
Quen herods sagh he moght not sped,
Sua wa was him þat he wald wede,
For þat his wil sua moght not rise,
He thought him wenge on oþer wise.
He made a purpuance in hi,
þat mani saccles suld it bij,
For he moght find nan wil sak,
On þe sakles he suld ta wrake. (11547-54)
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The concentration on ‘sak’ with its antonym ‘saccles/sakles’ contrasts the sinful Herod with 
the innocence of those whom he kills.337

Portrayals of Herod as superlatively wrathful reach a zenith in the mystery drama. In 
the Chester play, the first sixteen lines from Herod bounce with repeated consonants.338

Similarly, the Towneley play starts with a long speech from Herod.339 Here, he praises 
‘Mahowne’ extensively, paradoxically becoming the Islamic as well as the Judaic Other.340

The N-Town dramatist makes full use of explosive alliteration in Herod’s speech and the 
king’s temper is conveyed by short staccato lines (20.15-27). From Chaucer, we inherit an 
idea of Herod's grandiloquence being humorous: Absolon in *Miller’s Tale* ‘to shewe his 
lightnesse and maiistrye, [...] pleyeth Herodes upon a scaffold hye’ (I.3383-84). This 
prompts us to ask how the Innocents play would have been viewed by a contemporary 
audience. Did laughter at a ‘raging Herod’ make an audience complicit in the death of the 
children later in the play?

Having established Herod’s extraordinary wrath, the narrative must now show how 
this progresses to the death of the children. *Legenda Aurea* portrays Herod as deliberate and 
unemotional in his action; after meeting Caesar and returning home, he ‘was more hardi bi 
confirmacion, and sent to syle alle the children that were in Bethlem fro the age of two yere 
vnto the age of one day’ (9, p.59). De Voragine calculates the age of the children thus:

‘Herode hadde herde of the thre kyngges the natuuite of the child fro the day that the sterre 
appered, and for the yere was passed and that he hadde be atte Rome annother yere he 
shewed his wodenesse ayeinst the children that were abothe the age of Ihesu Crist and 
binethe the age of .ij. yere’ (9, p.59). Notably, here, the full horror of Herod’s order derives

337 MED ‘sake’ (n) 3. blame, guilt, sin.  
338 Chester X.1-16.  
340 This is a counterbalance to the ideas of Catherine S. Cox who sees all “Others” as Judaic: Cox (2005).
not from necessity (i.e. to eliminate a real threat) but from spite: his ‘wodeness’ extends to all children ‘aboue the age of Ihesu Crist and binethe the age of ij yere’ indiscriminately. This contrasts with the South English Nativity, which links the age range of the slaughtered children to Herod’s limited knowledge of Christ’s identity:

He muste whare our lord was bote as me hadde him ytold;
Wel he wuste þat he nas nout fully tuo 3er old.
Sone he let sere alle þe children þat wipinne two 3er were
In alle þe contreyes of Bethleem, þat vr lord forbore nere. (649-52)

Dramatic form allows for a far more complex movement from anger to Slaughter, with Herod’s advisors sometimes prompting his decisions. In York, Herod reacts to the messenger with angry accusations: ‘Thou lyes, false traytoure strange’ (19.125). He vows to find Jesus himself and, having promised the messenger that ‘Full high I schall gar hym hange, /Both þe, harlott, and hym’ (19.129-30), he nonetheless asks his counsellors what ‘is best to do’. Their words calmly promise that the killings will be arranged: ‘We schall 3ou lely lere /pat ladde for to distroye, /Be counsaille if we cane’. Herod’s protestations that ‘it is past two 3ere /Sen þat þis bale begane’ (19.145-46) are met with further assurances: he should ‘haue no doute, /Ye it were foure or fyve’ years that had passed; he should bid his ‘knyghtis kene [...]dyenge to dede /Alle knave childir kepte in clowte /In Bedlem and all aboute’ (19.147-53). They instruct him to ‘saue none [...]pat are of ij 3ere age withinne’ (19.155-56) in order to ‘pat fandelyng felle’. The consolator unwittingly uses language resonant of redemption when he describes Christ’s fate at their hands: ‘Belye his blisse schall blynne, /With bale when he schull blede’ (19.158-59). Significantly, Herod uses their words to justify his actions (‘as 3e deme ilke dele /Shall I garre do indede’, 19.161-62), then calls immediately for soldiers, instructing them that they must go ‘That schorwe with schame to schende /pat menes to maistir me’ (19.169-70). A similar pattern of consultation with advisors, which potentially spreads blame for the Slaughter further than Herod alone, occurs in Chester (VIII.91-176) and Towneley (16.365-75).

The N-Town Herod seeks no advice. He launches straight into a highly alliterative passage that invokes ‘Mahound’, thus underlining his alienation from the audience in medieval England, in response to a messenger’s report that the kings have departed (20.28-36). As the scene progresses, the complexity of Herod’s syntax disintegrates. The soldiers are

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341 For further comment on unwitting irony in the Consolator’s words, see my short article ‘Irony as illumination: didactic communication in the verbal texture of the Mystery Cycles’, Marginalia 8 (2006): http://www.marginalia.co.uk/journal/06illumination/bates.php.
given their orders in a passage that exemplifies the extremity of Herod’s anger through an explosive collection of short lines:

Knyghtys wyse,
Chosyn ful chyse,
Aryse, aryse,
And take 3oure tolle!
And every page
Of ij 3ere age,
Or evyr 3e swage,
Sleyth ilke a foolf (20.41-8)

Continuing the staccato statements, Herod describes his specific target (‘On of hem alle /Was born in stalle’, 20.49-50) and outlines the threat that he perceives in the child (‘Folys hym calle /Kynge in crown’ 20.51-2). While Herod unwittingly foretells Christ’s eventual fate (‘Wyth yr gal le /He xall down fallef’ 20.53-4), his assertion of his own power is ironically misplaced (‘My myght in halle /Xal nevyr go down!’ 20.55-6), allowing the audience to laugh at him in a realisation that depends on their own knowledge of Christian doctrine.

The mothers and the Innocents

The distress of mothers as their children are killed is an essential feature of the story. The main iconography for the scene focuses on the Slaughter itself: the encounter with mothers and soldiers, with the visceral emotion of the women trying to prevent the murder of their babies. In contrast to images that we have seen of the newly-born Christ, these babies are depicted in the full vulnerability of babyhood, thus heightening the affective power of the scene.342 The extreme youth of the children lends them the aura of innocence that allows them fully to foreshadow Christ’s death on the cross.343 This theme is picked up by writers who wish to answer the question of the fate of the slain innocents, as in the South English Nativity.

Many a soris moder þer was, and many a reufol song;
þe children wenten to þe ioye of heuene, eche þat þer was among.
In here blod ycrstned þei were – swete was þe companye;
And sory and deoulf þat þe cry þat her modres gonne crye. (665-68)

They have been ‘ycrstned’, albeit in blood, and therefore they will escape limbo. The ‘swete’ company of slain children going to ‘þe ioye of heuene’ is sandwiched between clear reminders of the suffering that their deaths create in this world. In this passage, the distress

342 The Peter Mancroft panel has a lifelike baby, pinioned on a spear: CVMA Inv No 016608; window 1, panel 2g.

343 As well as being types for Christ, the Innocents in SpecD are types for persecuted Christians in the vocabulary used: ‘þe persecuyoun of þe Innocents’ (chap 9, p.119).
of the mothers is conveyed through their resort to inarticulate noise: they 'crye' with a 'sory and deolful' noise. By articulating distress, in the inarticulacy of a 'deolful' cry and the poetry of a 'reuel song', the women are placed in the tradition of Rachel and foreshadow the stabant mater utterances of Mary at the foot of the cross. The Cursor-poet gives Herod direct responsibility for the mothers' grief. His command and their woe are compressed into a single sentence ('He commandid til his knyghtes kene /To sla þa childer [...] ful waful made he mani wijf', 11559-64). This delineates the emotional impact of the Slaughter before the narrative moves on to explain that

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Wit-in þe land left he noght an,} \\
\text{O tua yeir eild þat he ne was slan,} \\
\text{Tua yeir or less, i tel it yow,} \\
\text{For suá he wend to sla iesu. (11565-68)}
\end{align*}
\]

The proximity of the repeated 'tua yeir' reminds a reader both of the young age of the children killed and of the paradoxically large number of children encompassed by the range.

The Stabant Mater resonance is explicit in the way that words spoken by mothers in the York play are echoed in the text spoken by Mary in the Death of Christ play. Mary laments the sight of her son 'so semely to see' (36.136) on the cross; I Mulier tells the soldier '3e slee my semely sone' (19.195); 11 Mulier asserts that 'Allas, for doule, I dye' (19.199); Mary says 'To dede I were done þis day' (36.160) [...] and asks how she can see her son 'Thus douffull a dede for to dye?' (36.173); II Mulier bemoans that the soldier has 'slayne my sone so swette' (19.213) and Mary's lament begins 'Allas, for my swete sone' (36.131). While these verbal parallels can be attributed to the demands of composing alliterative verse, they nonetheless serve to consolidate the Slaughter's role as a type of the Passion.344 The second N Town woman recalls an earlier image of Mary and Jesus when she laments the death of her 'lytyll childe [...] þat hullyd on my pappys' (20.100). She goes on unwittingly to remind the audience of the Fall that led to original sin; the pains of labour that she has endured result from it, and Mary will suffer equivalent pain when her son dies on the cross to redeem mankind:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{My founy wekys gronynge} \\
\text{Hath sent me sefne 3ere sorwyng.} \\
\text{Mykyl is my mornynge} \\
\text{And ryght hard arne myn happys. (20.101-04)}
\end{align*}
\]

Unusually, the women in the Chester play insult the soldiers: 'Saye, rotten hunter with thy gode /stytton stallon, styck-tode' (X.313-14). In such lines, they echo shrewish women such

344 Cf. N Town lines 89-96
as Noah’s wife rather than foreshadowing Mary at Christ’s Passion. Yet poignancy remains in the scene in other moments. As a soldier spears the first boy (Tunc miles transfodiet primum puerum et super lancea accipiet X SD344), his mother articulates her own distress (‘My chyld is dead; now I see /my sorrowe may not cease’, X.347-8) in the midst of wishing death on her son’s killer: ‘Thow shall be hanged on a tree /and all thy fellowes with thee’ (X.349-50). Such wished-for execution by crucifixion inevitably resonates with the Passion.

The Resurrection of the Innocents is, very unusually among surviving examples of iconography, depicted in a Norwich Cathedral roof boss. A similar concern with their fate after death occupies writers, and texts written in honour of the Feast of the Innocents emphasize the purity of the children who die thus allowing them entry to heaven. This is clear in the parallel that Mirk makes between worshippers as ‘Gode crysten chyldern’ in his invocation and in his explanation that the day is celebrated ‘for chyldren pat were slayn for Crystes loue þey ben kalled Innocentes, þat ys, wythout nye’ (9, p.35). The children are declared to be free from sin: ‘þey lyueden here clany wythout schame, þey dyedyn wythout blame, and were yfollewed in hure blod at hame’ (9, p.35). Mirk then compares the children, in their bodily innocence, to pre-lapsarian Adam and Eve, saying that since they were ‘alle wythinne too 3ere of age’, they were not ashamed of their bodies:

For whyr a chyld ys wythinne þe state of innocently, he ys not aschamed of hys schap, for he ys not defouled wyth fulþe of synne but wyth þe synne þat he hathe by þe draught of kynde of Adam and of Eue. For so ferdenn heo þe same wyse, for þey weren in paradise in þe stat of jnncens: þey weren naked but þey wer not schamed of here schap, for þey weren wythout synne. But as sone as þey hadden synned, þey seyen hure schapppe, and weren aschamed þerof, and hudden hit wyth leues of a fygge tre. þus, when synne bygynneth for te take rote in a chyld, þenne innocens went away. (9, pp.35-36)

The episode compresses symbolism of the Redemption from Fall to Passion; comparison of the children to Adam and Eve precedes their deaths in Christ’s place. The connection with the first parents furthermore extends outwards to include the reader; the example of the Innocents shows each human how his or her own state mirrors that of Adam and Eve: ‘þese chyldren leuet not so longe for to knowe good by þe euyl but weren yslayn wythinne þe dege of innocens’ (9, p.36). The Innocents, unlike the reader, benefited from a fortuitous escape into death before ‘synne bygynnynth to take rote’. The fate of the Innocents is not dependent solely on their guiltlessness; Mirk takes care to explain that they receive a version of Baptism through the shedding of their blood: ‘þey weren also folwed in hure same, þat ys, in hure owne blod, in no font but in schedyng of hure blod’ (9.37). He notes that ‘folth

345 Anderson (1963), pl. 11g., p.97; Hedgecoe, pp.125-6, NTC 22. The subject of this roof boss is apparently unique in British imagery.
cometh pre wayes: in watur, as we crysten men ben folwed in þe font ston at þe chyrch; in schedying of blod, as þese children and mony þowsand of opur martyres þat schedden hure blod for Crystes loue’ (9, p.37).346

A concern with the destination of the Innocents’ souls is found not only in orthodox texts. An English Wycliffite preacher casts the Innocents as martyrs, criticising men who ‘douton comunly hou alle þese weron martiris, sip circumcision was þanne as nedful as now is baptem’ (EWS, pp.222-23). He allows no leeway on the idea that baptism is ‘nedful’ but uses the detail of contemporary Jewish law to ascribe martyrdom to the children killed on Herod’s orders:

But licly monye of hem weren kyllud before þe ey þe day, and before þat þei schuld be beelisched not be circumcisad by þe lawe. Here monye men þenkon þat þær ben monye circumcisionus, as þær ben monye baptismys, as it is knowen comunly. And God is not so oblised to sensible sacramentis þat he may, wipowten hem, 3yue a man his grace. And as God 3f martitis grace, wipowte bapteme of watur, by bapteme of þe Hoole Gost, and by watur of Cristus syde, so may men suppose of circumcision. And so alle þes innocentus weron circumcisus in soule. þus men may suppose byneþe byleue (EWS, p.223).

The Wycliffite God, like his followers, is ‘not so oblised to sensible sacramentis’ that he would deny the children salvation. However, the passage does not suggest that Baptism is redundant in most cases.

In Revelation 7.3-8, the number of the Elect is set at 144,000; this is read symbolically in most Christian traditions but remains weighted with soterial resonance. So, when some writers assert that 144,000 is the number of infants killed in Bethlehem, they draw on these associations and thus hint further that the children’s souls will be saved. The Phillipps poem has the ‘Cxl and foure thowsande’ as the object of the sentence; death renders them anonymous: ‘So þat þai slow in bedlem lande /A Cxl and foure thowsande’ (1426-27). In contrast with the use of the compressed abbreviated number in the Phillipps poem, the South English-poet repeats ‘þousand’ and inverts the syntax to ensure that the reader’s attention is focused on the enormity of the Slaughter:

Heroudes men wenten al aboute into al þe lond wel blyue;  
Hij quilleden alle þe children wipinne tuo 3er – þer billete non alynue.  
An hundred þousand and fourti þousand and foure þosand þei slowe;  
So 3onge þei ne myyte ynde namo, ac me þinke þere were ynowe.  
Twelue monþe and foure dawes hit was after þat God was yeore  
þat þese children were yslawe, so 3ong wipouten hore. (659-64)

The unusual detail of the ‘Twelue monþe and foure dawes’ adds further resonance to the number of dead children; the two details combine to imply a particular ordaining of events

346 The third version of Baptism is, for Mirk, ‘folpe of feyth’. This category includes ‘al patriarchus and prophetus and al opur holy ladres þat weren byfore Crystes incarnacyon’ (9, p.37).
by God. While this numerical part of the story is only seen in these texts, other writers seek to use other ways to convey the vast number of deaths. One fairly common focus of emphasis is the social range affected by the Slaughter. As the MLC poet tells his readers, ‘al þe childer schuld be dede /[...]Were þai neuer so hegh of kyn, /þe pore mennes and þe riche’, neatly rhyming age and lineage to underscore the point: ‘Wipynne two 3eres age, /Was none spared for his lynam’ (690-713).

The indiscriminate nature of the Slaughter extends as far as royalty; Herod’s own children are frequently killed in these accounts. This helps to explain his suicide and therefore frees the Holy Family to return to Nazareth. The Phillipps-poet tells readers that ‘Childre of herodes [...]war no3t sparde, /Ffor two was slayn ful eueyn’ (1430-1). Despite their connection with Herod, they receive the same salvation as the other Innocents: ‘sene þai dyede for god sake /þer sawles er all in heuen’ (1433-4). The grief of their deaths directly prompts Herod’s suicide: ‘Herode had eftyr sorow jnogh, /Ffor with hys knyfye hymselfe he slogh; /He hade hym þat none sall neuen’ (1435-7). The progression of ‘eueyn...heuen...neuen’ in the 12-line stanzaic rhyme scheme ironically identifies the eternally saved state of the children with the finality of Herod’s damnation.

In the Chester play, the second soldier unwittingly kills Herod’s son but is immediately told of his error by the child’s nurse:

Owt, owt, owt, owt!
You shalbe hanged, the rowte.
Theves, be you never so stout,
[...] Hee was not myne, as you shall see;
hee was the kings sonne. (X.377-83)

Herod blames the nurse for not identifying his son to the soldiers (‘Fye, hoore, fyel! God give the pyne! /Why didest thou not say that child was myne?’ X.397-98) but sees it as payment for his actions: ‘yt is vengeance, as drinke I wyne, /and that is now well seene’ (X.399-400). The stock oath ‘as drinke I wyne’ points obliquely to the Eucharist with its inversion of the ‘vengeance’ that Herod sees in his son’s death. The news leads, in this play, directly to Herod’s death:

I wott I must dye soone.
Booteles is me to make mone,
for dampned I must bee.
[...]
I have donne so much woo
and never good syth I might goo;
therefore I se nowe comminge my foe
to fetch me to hell.
I bequeath here in this place
my soule to be with Sathanas.
I dye now; alas, alas!
I may no longer dwell. (419-33)
In the Festial, it is unclear whether Herod kills his children as part of the Slaughter or at a later time: ‘pen for he made mony a modur chyldlas and sore wepe for here deth, God wroght so for hym þat he made slen hys owne chyldeer’. However, Herod’s death does ensue: ‘And aftur, as he pared a nappul, wyth þat same knyf he styked hymself. þus he þat was lusty for te schedon gultles blod, at þe laste he sched hys owne herte-blod’. Mirk extrapolates a moral from the many deaths he has described in this paragraph: ‘he þat ys wythout mercy, vengyans falleth on hymself. And he þat loueth to do mercy, God wol 3eue hym mercy’ (9, p.37). Herod’s death is not unique to those texts that include his children’s death; it is even the subject of a roof boss in Norwich cathedral,347 and it seems, for Middle English authors, to be a logical conclusion to his sinful life (cf. SEN 671-76; SLA 1435-40). According to most Middle English accounts, his child’s death is an unplanned and unwanted by-product for Herod, even though it results from his orders. In contrast, the MLC-Herod actively demands that his own son is killed so that there is no possibility that the new king can escape. The soldiers tell Herod that ‘all were done to dep þo, /Sawe his sone without moo’. This news prompts an extraordinary act of infanticide:

be Kyng hym bypoght þare
pat he wolde none spare.
He made hem his sone to bringe,
To be siker in alle pingé
He made for to sle hym right
Anone in his owne sight. (718-25)

347 North transept, bay 4 (Martial and Rose, p.114), NTW22 fig. p.122.
Flight into Egypt

In the Bedford Hours of 1425, the subject of the Slaughter of the Innocents is relegated to a small roundel on the edge of a large central image of the Holy Family's arrival in Egypt; here, the suffering of the Innocents is of less importance than the safety of the Holy Family. The frame of the episode from the gospel of Matthew is retained in the brief account in *Legenda Aurea*: 'And thanne by the techynge of the aungell Joseph fledde into Egipt into the citee of Hermopolyn and was ther vii. yere vnto the dethe of Herode' ([Gil, p.58](#)).

While prose sources including the Middle English *Three Kings of Cologne* and sermons follow *Legenda Aurea* in their brevity, elsewhere in Middle English, authors draw on apocrypha to create much fuller narratives. The elements that can be included in augmented versions of the episode are: the angel’s message to Joseph; Joseph’s reactions; the geography of their destination; the practicalities of travel; events on the journey. The boundary between the last category and the Infancy narratives is blurred in those texts that include fuller accounts of Christ's childhood; this has precedent in chapters 18-24 of *Pseudo-Matthew*.

Message to Joseph

The Flight is told in the Gospel primarily through Joseph’s encounter with the Angel. This dream is seen in visual media, often paired with an image of of Joseph leading Mary and Jesus on a donkey. The speech of the angel is represented in iconography through scrolls. On f.148v of the Queen Mary Psalter, Mary is suckling the baby while, at the foot of the elaborate bed, an alert, attentive Joseph reads a scroll held by a hovering angel. For writers, the frame of the dream offers potential to create a dramatic encounter but occasionally the potential is left untapped. The *South English Nativity* does not explicitly state that Joseph is asleep when 'An aungel per cam' to him 'and hette him vp arise' (653). All of the instructions are relayed to the reader indirectly. This approach is seen also in the *Stanzatic*

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348 BL Add Mss 18850 (Bedford Hours), f.83 (plate 29). The Flight itself is also in a small roundel.


350 Middle English *Three Kings*: And| aftre that, as pe gospell seith, Angelus domini apparuit in somnis Joseph dicens, 'S urge, accipe puerum et matrem eius, et fugite in Egiptum, et esto ibi usque dum dicam tibi: futurum est enim vt Herodes quaerat puerum ad perditionem eum.' Qui consurgens accepto puerum et matrem eius nocte, et cesssit in Egiptum, et erat ibi usque ad obitum Herodis. (TKC, p.79)

A Wycliffite preacher also stays close to Matthew 2: 'The Lordus aungel aperynede in sleep to Joseph and seyde: 'Ryse and tak pe chylde and his modur, and fle into Egypte, and beow peere tyll pat I seye to pe; for it is to comen pat Eroude seeke pe chylde for to lese hym and his felowyw wiþ hym' ([EWS, p.221](#)).

351 BL Royal BVI, f.148v (plate 30).
Life, wherein the dream is narrated without direct speech: the angel ‘bad him make him sone boun /in-to Egipt to be hyng’ (3307-8).

Cursor Mundi explicitly states that the angel comes when ‘ioseph on his sleping lai’ (11583) and the poet allows the angel ten lines fully to describe what Joseph must do and why: “Rise vp, iosep, and busk and ga [...]” (11585-94). The NHC-angel ‘fra God’ comes to Joseph ‘in his slepe’ (3884-5), telling him to ‘take þe child þat þou hast þare’ with Mary and go ‘sune out of þis land [...] /Into þe land of Israel’ (3888-91). They must ‘bide and dwell’ there until ‘Ded, for sertain, er all þa /þat soȝt þe childe so for to sla’ (3893-4). Joseph’s dream becomes, in these texts, emblematic of God’s ordaining hand; the angel is sent specifically ‘fra God’. After explaining the danger Herod poses, the Phillipps poem explains that ‘gret god of his grace alsone /þat wote all thynge or yt be done /Herof sett remedy’ (1381-83). The remedy is the angel’s message: ‘He sent to Iosepe an angell bryght /Als he lay slepand þe same nyght’ (1384-5), who

Bad hym ryse hastely  
& take þe childe & modyr hende,  
Bad hym faste into Egyp wende  
& dwell þer prevely  
Unto I wyt þe for to say;  
For herodes sekes þi child alway  
To sla hym sikyrly. (1388-92)

The repetition of ‘bad hym’, with the parallel polysyndeton, creates a sense of urgency; Joseph has much to accomplish in order safely to effect his family’s escape. The idea that the angel’s message shows the role of God in the unfolding of events is used to didactic purpose in Love’s Mirror: Love explains that, through it, his reader can envisage God’s special comfort: ‘we mowe lerne in þis forseid processe [...] þe benefices & þe speciale confortes of god, þat he þat felep hem specialy be not þerfore eleuate in his owne siȝt, as haldyng him more worþ þen anoþer þat hap hem noȝt, & also he þat felep þat sech speciale ȝiftes or confortes’ (lune, x, p.52). The lesson having been explained, Love directly commands that we should not envy Joseph (‘be not þerfore kast done by sorow or enuy to him þat hap hem’) because he receives the message even though ‘was he miche lasse in merite & more vnworþ þan she’ (lune, x, p.52). The other lesson to be learned is that those who have these ‘special ȝiftes of god [...] haue hem not aȝlate as he wold & aftur his desire, þat þerþor hir grucche not, nor be heuy by vnkyndnes aȝeyns god’ (lune, x, p.52). We know this because, despite Joseph’s acceptability to God, ‘þe apperynges of þe angele & þe reuelaciones were not done to him opynly & in wakyng, bot in maner of dremes, & in his slepyng’ (lune, x, p.52).
Joseph is chosen, in Love’s text, to receive the message from God even though he, like the reader, is ‘miche lasse in merite’ than Mary. This fits with Joseph’s role throughout the Nativity sequence as a representative of humankind. We might expect comic misunderstanding to unfold when angel speaks to Joseph in the drama, as in the Joseph’s Trouble plays; however the urgency of the message tends to outweigh the impetus for humour. Comedy comes later when a harried Joseph attempts to hurry his wife to depart. The angel’s message is a chance for the dramatist to remind his audience of the forthcoming Slaughter of the Innocents. This is, of course, more important in those cycles with separate Slaughter and Flight plays. Yet even when the two events are interwoven, as in N-Town Play 20, the message provides an opportunity for the story to be made clear as action shifts from one scene (Herod and his advisors) to another. The angel commands Joseph to wake ‘and take þi wyff, /Thy chylde also, ryd belyff’ (20.73-4):

\begin{verbatim}
For kynge Herowde with sharpe knyff
His knyghtys he doth sende.  
The Fadyr of Heyvn hath to þe sent
Into Egypte þat þu be bent,
For cruel knyghtys þi chylde haue ment
With sword to sle and shende. (20.75-80)
\end{verbatim}

Herod may not carry out the Slaughter, but is here reported to give his orders ‘with sharpe knyff’, thus implicating him further in the deaths of the children. As with other details in N-Town, this has parallels in visual media; Herod is frequently depicted wielding a sword in images of the Slaughter such as f.132r of the Queen Mary Psalter, in which Herod’s sword is much longer than the swords of the two soldiers in the act of killing.\textsuperscript{352}

The York play, which takes the Flight as its primary subject matter, allows a greater number of lines for the angel to delineate Herod’s plans to Joseph (18.37-62). While Towneley is fairly similar to York, an interesting difference lies in the instruction to ‘ryse and slepe no mare; / If thou wyll saue thyself’ (15.2-3). The angel appeals to Joseph’s desire to save himself; this reminds us that the Flight into Egypt is necessary for each individual’s salvation:

\begin{verbatim}
Awake, Joseph, and take intent
Thou ryse and slepe no mare;
If thou wyll saue thyself vnshent,
Fownde the fast to fare.
I am an angell to the sent,
For thou shall no harmes hent,
To cach the outt of care.
If thou here longer lent,
For rewth thou mon repent,
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{352} BL Royal MS BVII, f.132r.
Although the angel’s message is unremarkable in the Chester play, Joseph asks him if they will have ‘companye of thee’ as they travel. The angel responds that ‘companye we shall you beare /tyll that you be commen there’ (X.270). Such protection is necessary because ‘Herode buskes him you to deare /as fast as ever hee maye’ (X.271-72).

Joseph’s reaction to the angel’s message can be conveyed through his actions: ‘Iosep aros anon by nihte and toward Egipte wende /Wip þe child and wip þe moder, as þe aungel hem sende’ (SEN, 657-8). However, the brevity of these lines in the South English Nativity prevents the poet from hinting at Joseph’s emotional response. A similar treatment is chosen by the Chester dramatist. His Joseph simply conveys what he has learnt to his wife:

Marye, suster, now we must flytt;  
upon my asse shall thou sytt,  
into Egipte that wee hitt.  
The angell will us leade. (X.273-6)

For a Wycliffite preacher, the Flight is not an opportunity to portray the relationship of Mary and Joseph; it occurs to fulfill the prophecy: ‘And Ioseph roos vp and tok in þe nyȝt þe chylld and his modyr, and flede into Egypte. And Ioseph was þere to þe dep of Crowde. And þis was don of Ioseph for to fulfulle þat þat was seyd by þe prophete, þat seyde: ‘Owt of Egypte I clepude my sone,’ seip God of Crist’ (EWS, p.221).

The episode can be used didactically in other ways. For example, the NHC-author uses it to portray Joseph as an example of obedience: ‘to þis tale gude tent he toke; /To do Goddes biding was he bayne, /He redied him with al his mayne’ (3900-02). Like the homilist’s picture of a man eager to ‘do Goddes biding’, the York Joseph’s response shows his devotion to the baby as he bemoans the events that force them to flee. This Joseph prays to God for safety (‘I praye þe lorde, kepe us fro skathe’, 18.77; cf. 18.63-83), shows a marked metamorphosis from the doubting Joseph of play 13 (Joseph’s Trouble About Mary).

Elsewhere, this episode provides further opportunity for writers to use him as a type of fallible humanity. In the Phillipps poem, Joseph articulates distress and confusion:

Iosep rase up ban sone I wys  
& sayd: lorde god, what lyf ys þis?  
In what place may I dwell?  
I am ald & my banys er sare;  
Now bus me wende I wol neuer qwhare  
Bot als I hard þe angell tell.  
Here wend I haf lyfted with my frenedes,  
& now herode all togider shendes;  
Curst be he with brek & bell,  
Ffor may I myself neuer so yll welde  
Yt bus me trauell now in my elede  
Ffull fare ouer many a fell. (1393-1404)
His age once again disadvantages him; travel will be difficult because his 'banys er sare' and he does not wish to live far from his 'frendes'. While Herod is the object of his anger, Joseph's complaining in this version distances him from the ideal of an obedient Christian.

The Chester dramatist shows Mary's exemplary character in her reaction to the unexpected news that she must flee with her child. During four lines of dialogue, she manages to state her intention to do her husband's will thrice:

Syr, evermore lowd and still
your talent I shall fulfill.
I wott yt is my lordes will;
I doe as you me read. (X.277-80)

A similar Marian emphasis characterises the meditation on the Flight in Love's Mirror, which concentrates on Mary's diligent reaction to Joseph when he calls her and tells 'hir þees harde tydynges': 'she in alle haste toke yp hir dere son & began to go, for she was ful sore agast of þis worde, & she wolde not as she miȝt not be seene negligent in þe kepyng of him, wherefore anone in þat miȝt þei token þe wey towarde Egipte' (lune, x, p.51). 'þe kepyng of him' is a burden rather than a privilege at this point.

The potential humour in the Flight plays is clear in the N-Town Joseph, who is proactively full of instructions to Mary:

Awake, good wyff, out of 3oure slepe,
And of 3oure childe takyght good kepe
Whyl I 3oure clothis ley on hepe
And trus hem on þe asse.
Kynge Herowde þe chylde wyl scloo,
þeory to Egipte muste we goo –
And aungel of God seyd me soo.
And þeory lete us passe. (20.81-8)

An audience may find it amusing that he prioritizes telling her that he will pack her clothes onto the donkey over imparting the news that Herod wishes to 'scloo' her child. Likewise, there could be laughter during the York play, when Mary and Joseph amusingly articulate confusion over where Egypt is. Told where they are going, Mary asks 'Whare stanith itt? /Fayne wolde I wit’ (18.177-78). Her thirst for knowledge is not fruitful; Joseph rather tetchily replies: 'What wate I? /I wote not where it stande' (18.179-80). This is one of the moments, perhaps, where the humour in the plays resonates as fully today as it would have done in medieval York. In most texts, though, the destination remains an unremarkable part of the narrative, as when we learn in the South English Nativity that 'Forþ wente Iosep and is wif, and þis suete child forþ ladde /Toward þe londe of Egipte, as þe aungel hem radde' (677-78).
Practicalities of travel

It was noted earlier how the Journey to Bethlehem raised a lot of practical questions for Middle English authors (for example how Mary and Joseph made provision for board and lodging while away), and we have seen the N-Town Joseph fussing over his packing. Yet for the most part, these concerns seem less pressing in accounts of the Flight than in the Journey to Bethlehem. Many narratives do mention the harsh physical conditions; the SEN-poet reminds his readers that it was ‘a cold tyme as hij wenten, a-cale and weri þei were’ (683). Love uses a full description of these conditions to evoke compassion from his readers: ‘Lord how dide þei þere of hire lyuelode, or where rested þei & were herbored in þe ny3tes, for in þat wey fonde þei ful seldomy any house. Here ouht we to haue inwardly compassion of hem, & no3t be lope or þenk trauailous to do penance for our self. sipen oper token so gret & so oft trauail for vs, namely þei þat weren so noble & so worþi’ (lune, x, p.51).

The Phillipps poem is particularly attentive to the practicalities of getting ready for travel and thus undergoes a genre shift with a passage explaining the stages of preparation that is akin to such description prior to a knight’s departure on quest in a romance:

He cald þan on hys childer two
And hys 30hng damsell, bad þam go
To trusse & all playn.
Mo þan two oxen had þai no3t;
Hys other hernays full sne was broght
& layd all in a wayn.
Mary with her child on an asse satt
& Iosep another for hymself he gatt
To go, for he was no3t bayn.
When þai had on þis wysse trussed,
þai wente ne nyght, for þai ne dursted
Be day for dred be slayn. (1405-16)

The events that take place on the journey are found in only four detailed accounts in Middle English: The Three Kings of Cologne, South English Nativity; the Phillipps poem; and Kindheit Jesu. These texts are also the only Middle English versions of Christ’s Infancy. This interrelation is made clear in the Three Kings, which explains how that our Lady with her child Ihesum went ynto Egypte and come ayens then pleynly is founde in the book of the childhede of Crist’ (TKC, p.80). So the source for description of the journey corresponds with the source of narration about Christ’s childhood. The apocryphal events on the journey include: the worshipping of Jesus by the dangerous animals (lions, dragon, etc, usually said to fulfill a prophecy); Jesus getting a tree to bow down so that his parents have fruit then producing a stream of water to sate their thirst; an encounter with Barabus and his son

355 Infancy here refers to the period of Christ’s life between the Flight into Egypt and the next event included in the canonical gospels, Christ’s meeting with the doctors at the Temple in Jerusalem.
Dysmas which demonstrates Jesus’s foreknowledge; meeting an old man who tells them they are thirty or thirty-seven days from Egypt whereupon Jesus magically makes them there already.

Christ’s power over beasts is demonstrated on the journey by an encounter with wild animals in which the fear of his parents is overcome when the beasts bow to him. The legend is not fully developed in the Three Kings, where an explicit meeting with danger is absent even though we learn that ‘by meny perilouses places and wildirnessis of men and bestis they went’ (TKC, p.81). The Phillipps poem also fails to comment on the danger of the animals focussing instead on the way that they follow the Holy Family:

When Iosep had rest hym þer a whyle
He sayd, Egyg ys hythen many a myle;
I wald fayne we wer thore.
Mary on hyr asse agayn he drest;
þe lyons & liberds wald þer noþi rest
Bot folowed þam euer more. (1483-8)

In contrast, the SEN-poet creates dramatic tension by first describing the physical hardship that the family experience as they travel: ‘In a cold tyme as hij wenten, a-cale and weri þei were; / By a grene olde dich hij come; for colde hij resteden hem þere’ (683-84). As they rest, they are met with a terrifying array of creatures: ‘þo come þer addren and foule wormes ad dragounes wip grysly chere’ (685). The poet comments especially that ‘þonge children þat siweden hem crieden and wepen for fere’ (686), thus enabling Christ’s behaviour to stand in opposition to the usual pattern: ‘þis swete child þat was vr lord Crist a3e þe wormes stod faste /As þei he wolde a3en hom fihte – þese wormes weren agaste, /And louteden to him echone’ (687-89). This fulfils a prophecy ‘þat Seynt Daут in is Sauter of him sede / þat dragounes scholden our lord herie and is heste do’ (690-1). Joseph, typically, does not comprehend that Christ’s powers make him safe from the animals: ‘Sore was Iosep adrad þat he ne myhte hym fram wormes wite; /Fette he wolde oure lord, a he ne dorste lest he were abyte’ (693-4). While this inability to understand underlines Joseph’s human imperfections, here he demonstrates a willingness to sacrifice himself for the baby and thus becomes a Christ-type. Despite his intense fear, he says “beter it is þat hij quellen me þan þe childe; /Go ichulle fet it to me, ne be þe wormes neuir so wylde” (695-6). Jesus himself intervenes and tells Joseph not to worry ‘for of me it is ywrite /þat ich scholde wilde þing make tame, and here 3e mowen it ywite’ (697-8).

A repetition of this pattern of events immediately follows in the South English Nativity, with Mary’s fear replacing Joseph’s when ‘Lyouns and liberdes and oper ſele to sewy þat swete childe’ (700). Like her husband, Mary is ‘sore adrad’, so Christ precociously...
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He sayd, Egyp ys hythen many a myle;
I wald fayn we wer thore.
Mary on hyr asse agayn he dreyst;
þe lyons & liberds wald þer no3t rest
Bot folowed pam euer more. (1483-8)

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164
explains that ‘pese bestes come[p] for to honoury vs – ne haue of hem no drede’ (701-2). The poet explores how being near Jesus causes the animals to act against nature: ‘Nolde þe wilde bestes hem harmy nout, þei hit here kynde were, /Ac eche 3ede by ðep and honoureden þat child þat hij ladden þere’ (705-6). Once again, the prophetic significance is delineated: ‘þo was fulfilld þe prophecie of Ysaies lessoun, /þat þe lomb scholde wip wolues ete and þe oxe wip þe lyoun’ (707-8). The poet then gives ‘þese bestes’ power to help the Holy Family; they ‘sewedhen him wip ioye and wip pleye, And 3edem him bifo[re] as it were to teche him þe rihte weye’ (715-6). This version of the encounter with the animals is also seen in Kindheit Jesu. Being pursued by the Jews leads Mary to travel ‘Be vnkout weysis þat she ne knewe’ (30), whereupon ‘She sey lyonys, lebbardes, many on, /& þan began here sorwyn newe’ (31-2). Her distressed cries that ‘þis bestes xullyn vs slon’ (33) prompts her son to action: ‘þhesu blyssyd þo bestes Ichon: /More & lesse he loutyd to hym. [...] Thys Mary’s kar was al gon’ (35-6; 40).

The Phillipps poem compresses the dragons and lions into a single incident. The journey is portrayed through Joseph’s eyes; he has responsibility for his household, including ‘hys thre childre’ (1459), as they travel: ‘Iosep with all hys fayre men3he / Wendes furth thurgh þat wyld cowntre’. The poet suggests to his readers that the heat en route to Egypt impedes the Holy Family’s ability to think (‘for hete wyster þat no3t what was best’, 1444) and they rest by a cave.354 Jesus is, by this time, capable of walking; he ‘went furth on hys fette’ (1448).355 When ‘wylde dragons’ emerge from the cave, Mary’s fear is for her son, which allows the poet to foreshadow the Passion: ‘Allas, sayd mary, my child bes slone; /Grett god help hym þis tyde’ (1451-2). However, the dragons recognise him as their lord: ‘to hys fett fast gon þai ffal /& worshypt hym on þer wyse’ (1454-56), and they are joined by ‘Lyons & lebardes’ (1456). Precociously alert to the feelings of others, Christ tells Mary ‘dred 3ow noght’ and assures Joseph that the animals ‘com for oure seruyse’ (1462-4). Thus, Joseph’s ‘men3he’ are brought to a new realisation of the importance of the child who travels with them: ‘Iosep sayd þan, lorde, blyssed be yow /þat swylke a child haues sent us now /Samwyse us fra all whaht’ (1474-6). As in the other poems, the episode’s prophetic resonance is emphasised: ‘þan was fulfyld þe prophecy /þat danyell sayde and jeremy /Of ihesus full lange beforne’ (1477-9).

354 This specificity of setting is unusual among Middle English texts, which often appear to take place in medieval England despite their Biblical setting.
355 Since this text is the only Middle English account that specifically states that two years elapse between the Nativity and the visit of the Magi, Jesus’s ability to walk is not particularly remarkable.
As the journey progresses, Jesus demonstrates his precocity further. The practicality of finding food is suitable opportunity for the child to perform miracles. The Phillipps Mary notices ‘many a full fayr date’ in the tree when she seeks rest (1492-1500), provided by ‘grett god [...] For us & oure men3he’ (1502-4). Joseph is unable to see beyond the physical limitations (‘Here es no man may perto wyn /pat hys so hegh a tre’, 1505-6), which allows Christ opportunity to intervene. He is amused at his parents’ conversation: ‘Ihesus went up & don and playd, /& how mary & Josep sayde /He herd & at þam logh’ (1513-15). When he speaks to the tree, ‘sone downe yt 3hode’ (1522) and they are able to pick the fruit. Yet this reminds Joseph of their thirst (‘how þat we sall do of drynke /þerof no red I can’ (1526-7) and therefore Jesus ‘bade oute of þe rote spryng /A well with water most plesyng’ (1531-2):

When, in Kindheit Jesu, ‘[h]ete of þe sunne’ (1513-15), Mary asks for some fruit from the blossoming tree under which she is seated. Rather than the intended response from her husband, Mary’s words reach Jesus: ‘Hyre sone wynst al here wyl’ (78) and he provides her with the tree’s fruit by miraculously getting it to bow down:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Jhesu spak to þe tre þanne:} \\
\text{þou loute adoun my moder tyl,} \\
\text{Tyl she & Josep boþe han þanne} \\
\text{Of þe frut ryth al here wyl,} \\
\text{Onto here fot þe tre gan folde} \\
\text{Tyl he hadde takyn þat hem ryth,} \\
\text{Qwan he takyn hadde þat he wolde,} \\
\text{As it was it stoc vp ryth. (81-88)}
\end{align*}
\]

Mary does not seem especially grateful for the food but instead immediately concentrates on another physical need: ‘pan seyd our suete lady: /Certes, me thrystyt wonder sore’ (89-90). Joseph joins in: ‘so do I, /And our asse 3et mekyl more’ (91-92). Obligingly, Jesus again speaks to the tree ‘And bad it wyssyn water þare’ (96). In a pre-echo of the later miracle of the wedding at Cana, ‘Of þe tre þer gan spryng /Wellys fele & water at wyl, /Wyn & water it gan fort bryng’ (97-9). While Mary, conventionally, blesses her son and thanks him, Joseph, rather more unusually, tells the tree that it will end up ‘In paradys’ (104). This fate awaits the tree also in the Phillipps poem when Jesus thanks it for taking care of his family:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{For yow has comfort my moder here} \\
\text{With other trees þat me ere dere} \\
\text{þi place hys now preuad} \\
\text{To be in pradysse for euer mare.} \\
\text{With an angell sone was þare} \\
\text{& a braunche of gon brayd} \\
\text{& bare it & sett yt in paradys,} \\
\text{For fruet þat es of gret prys} \\
\text{þerof sall be displayd. (1540-8)}
\end{align*}
\]

In the South English Nativity, the poet describes a tree whose special powers enable it to prove Christ’s innate goodness: it is a tree ‘þat hoso þerof anyþing aboute his nekke bere
\(\text{Fruit oper rynde oper lef or oper ping what it were), /3if he in any yuel were, hol he scholde be' (719-21). When the Holy Family pass it on their way to Egypt, it does not divine any evil in them but 'bowede his crop adoun to grounde and þe middel narwwe bende, /And to oure lord aloutede, and honourede him bope crop and more, /And susþe aros vp a3en þo vr lord was forþ ibore' (724-6).\)

The next event on the journey connects the early childhood to the Crucifixion through the name Barabas.\(^{356}\) In *Kindheit Jesu*, a thief stops the Holy Family and despite his son’s plea that he ‘ben mylke’, Barabas tells Mary ‘3e xul be robbyd alle III’ and transgressively touches her: ‘He held here stylle be þe lappe’. The son, Dysmas, becomes a Christ-type in his assertion that ‘Me were leuer for to dey /pan here mystyd euyl happes’. However Jesus foresees not only that Dysmas will follow his father into a life of crime and will be crucified with Him at Calvary but that his intervention in Christ’s early life will be matched by an understanding on the cross of His significance and will therefore be saved:

‘Moder, wt me he xal dey /And kome wt me in to my blys’ (51-64).

The final miracle that Christ performs on the Flight is to transport his family straight to their destination when they learn that they are still a month from Egypt. In *Kindheit Jesu*, an old man’s words that ‘3e ha 3ete /XXX days jurne to þe toun’ (111-2) is enough to make Mary cry: ‘pan gan Mary to wepe, /For werynesse she sat doun’ (113-4). To ease his mother’s distress, Jesus curtails their journey:

‘Moder’, qwap Jhese, ‘wyll þou lete?
Lo here þe wallys of þe toun!’
It is so fayir a rych cete.
Lo how short he made here way.
’Sone’, she seyd, ‘blysyd þou be,
As lord þat al mytheþe may!’ (115-20)

The Flight is concluded similarly in the Phillipps poem, but the poet allows two stanzas to describe Joseph asking Jesus for advice:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{He sayd: leue son ihesus,} \\
\text{þer mountans er so hegh & grett} \\
\text{& þe some scildes us nere for hete} \\
\text{þat shynes so hate on us;} \\
\text{May we noght sauely leve þes douns} \\
\text{& walke here by 3e se gude touns?}
\end{align*}
\]

\(^{356}\) Barabbas is freed by Pilate in place of Christ in Matthew 27.15-26, Mark 15.6-15, Luke 23.13-25 and John 18.38-19.16. However, despite the use of this name for the father that Mary and Jesus encounter en route to Egypt, it is the son who will be crucified. Elsewhere in the Infancy stories, Jesus frequently has dealings either with people he will meet again (for example in NIMEV 208, when his ointment is sold to a ‘woman leyte in lechery’ and brings her to grace: her ‘name was mary magdalene’, 2011-76. Mary Magdalene was traditionally (but wrongly) assumed to be the woman who anoints Christ with oill in John 12.3 so this episode provides a pleasing circularity) or names of familiar characters are used to identify the people whom he meets (e.g. a teacher called Caiaphas). The topic of the good thief has recently been discussed by Mary C. Dixon (‘Tales of the Good Thief’s Benevolence from Late Medieval England’, forthcoming in the proceedings of *Mapping Lives*).
For owmbre lat us do þus;
Ffor and we ouer þe montanys merke
Seuen & thrytty lang dayes werke
To Egiþ get we or mare;
He sayd, 3e shorot (?)þam all ways. (1554-64)

Foreshadowing the time interval between Crucifixion and Resurrection, Christ tells him

'within thre days, /Iosep, 3e sall be þar' (1565-6) then enacts the miracle allowing Joseph

the chance once again to recognise his importance:

He bad Iosep before hym loke,
& Egiþ hylês als says þe boke
Als son before þam ware.
Iosep hurkyld up þan & smylde
& sayd, þis es a blyssé chylde,
Mary, þat þu us bare. (1567-72)

The poet writes that they find lodging in a city near to Egypt and describes the events that

occur while lodging at a widow’s house there. Thus the Flight leads seamlessly in the

Phillipps poem into the stories of Christ’s Infancy.
Tring tiles, early 14th century.

Plate 31: BM 1922, 0412.1.

Plate 32: BM 1922, 0412.3.

Plate 33: BM 1922, 0412.4.
Epilogue: the Infancy

This dissertation thus far has explored the ways in which Middle English authors and artists narrated the events depicted in Luke 2.1-38 and Matthew 2.1-23 and later augmented by apocryphal sources. A detailed picture has emerged of a vernacular Christianity that is at ease with multiple versions of the same story. This is a devotional tradition that employs the resources of narrative art, with its opportunities for characters to undergo trajectories from doubt to faith and for memorable amplifications of the gospels such as the star that speaks to the Magi, to convey complex aspects of theology, Christology and soteriology on many levels to many audiences. This epilogue will conclude the exploration by examining whether and how Middle English authors covered the lacuna that exists in Luke’s two-verse account of the decade following Christ’s Birth: following the Presentation, et ut perfeecerunt omnia secundum legem Domini reversi sunt in Galilaeam in civitatem suam Nazareth. puer autem crescebat et confortabatur plenus sapientia et gratia Dei erat in illo (Luke 2.39-40). By verse 42, Luke has skipped over a decade to narrate Christ’s meeting with the doctors in Jerusalem when he was twelve.

The Tring tiles, the only surviving examples of the sgraffiato technique from England,357 show various episodes from the apocryphal stories of Christ’s Infancy.358 Such stories derive from Pseudo-Matthew and the Infancy Gospel of Thomas and, while they are absent from the majority of accounts of Christ’s life in Middle English, a significant few authors choose to provide their readers with lengthy descriptions of the events that were believed to have taken place in the dozen years between the Flight to Egypt and Christ’s conversation with the doctors in Jerusalem.359 This epilogue will consider the function of these stories in three representative episodes from the Tring tiles,360 and the narrated versions of these stories in Cursor Mundi, Kindheit Jesu and the Phillipps poem.361

The difficulty of portraying the child Jesus derives from the fact that it is hard to align divinity and its concomitant precocious wisdom and potency with the obedience and docility expected from a child. However, the canonical gospels include many incidents which depict

357 See Eames (1980) vol 1, pp.56-60.
358 The images on the tiles have been connected with those in MS Selden Supra 38, which contains an Anglo-Norman version of the Infancy.
359 The connection with Anglo-Norman poetry has been documented. Most notably, the tiles have been linked to the illustrations of Les Enfants de Jesu Crist (c.1325) in Oxford, Bodleian MS Selden Supra 38 (see for example Mary F. Casey (2006), pp.4-5).
360 Plate 31.
361 Mary C. Dzon’s forthcoming study on imagining the Christ Child in the later Middle Ages and her forthcoming edited volume (Alpha et O: Studies on the Medieval Christ Child, ed. Mary Dzon and Theresa Kenney) from the University of Toronto Press will make a valuable contribution to this field.
Christ rebelling against the accepted authority structures of the society in which he lived; his omniscience affords him a perspective that is not bound by temporal laws. The main difference between Christ’s canonical rejections of the law (for example when he overturns the tables in the Temple or heals someone on the Sabbath) and the stories shown on the Tring tiles is the manner in which his anger is manifested: as a child, he lacks the maturity to temper his instinct for vengeance and therefore punishes his opponents with death. Such punishments, though, serve a useful narrative purpose since they give space for the child Jesus to enact miracles as he restores people and possessions to their previous state.

Jesus’s bad behaviour tends to be reactive. In the first story from the Tring tiles that I will examine, he kills someone who deliberately damages the pools that he has made.\textsuperscript{362} By making miniature lakes, the Christ-child had reenacted Creation, and as the sins of ‘envie and wreth’ lead a boy to destroy the thing created, the boy and his actions symbolize sinful humanity’s lack of care for God’s Creation. The demarcation of the tile into two halves recalls the pairing of typologically-related incidents in iconography, and this may point to a way that we can read the potentially problematic accounts of Jesus in his ‘wanton’ childhood. Firstly, Jesus enacts justice, punishing the miscreant with death. This echoes the pattern of retribution followed by the God of the Old Testament. Eventually, persuaded by the chastisement of his parents, he shows mercy and restores the boy to life.

In the version of this story in \textit{Cursor Mundi}, like his adult self in John 5.18, Jesus angers Jews by disregarding the Sabbath as he makes pools, leading them to upbraid Joseph for failing to keep him in check: “Iosep, ne seis þou, be þi fa? /Hu iesus brickes vr halidai?” (11991-2). An angry priest’s son, ‘Thor envie and wreth and tene /Brack þe lackes al bidene’. The tile depicts the consequences of this action; the upside-down child is now dead. In the Phillipps poem, the episode follows on from Jesus casting down the false gods in the Egyptian temple. Seemingly as an act of revenge, a ‘prest son’ of the temple ‘Whar ihesus cast doun þe goddes befor /To hys podell fast gon wende, /And spitously he brake ihesus game’ (1735-8). The child’s friends recognize ‘pat he dyd syn’ (1740), and Jesus turns on him with a stream of abuse:

\begin{verbatim}
þe deuel son, seed of wykkednes,
Withouten grace and all gudness,
þi braunches er baran & bare;
þe rowtes of þe er old, cold, & dry. (1744-7)
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{362} CM 12015-38, tile BM 1922, 0421.1
These words are potent and the child himself becomes ‘old, cold, & dry’; he falls down, ‘Benomen ryght als he ware’ (1749). The choice of the word ‘benomen’ to describe his lifeless body recalls the description of the midwife’s hand after her transgressive examination of Mary’s vagina. The Cursor-Jesus launches into very similar verbal assault, which unambiguously leads to the death of the child ‘Wit þis he dried awai o-nan, /And þan he fel dun ded als ston’.

Following this episode in Cursor Mundi, Jesus goes on to strike down another child who crosses him as he travels home, and restitution for both events is postponed until pressure from townspeople prompts Mary and Joseph to intervene. They are afraid that they will be blamed for ‘pe tresun’. Nonetheless, their intervention prompts the immature Christ to enact mercy, thus creating a narrative arc from retributive justice to mercy, which is akin to the movement from Old Testament justice to the mercy brought about by the Incarnation.

The Phillipps poet allows the child to remain ‘benomen’ on the ground while, continuing to break the Sabbath, Jesus is given another opportunity to demonstrate his powers of creation: he ‘toke clay, with water yt weted, /Sythen byrdes þer of he countyrifted /Ffull propurly to þer paye’ (1753-55). He is told off by a passing ‘yew’ (‘child þu suld no3t wyrke now; /Yt ys our sabot day’, 1757-8), who reports back to Joseph, prompting him to punish Jesus: ‘Iosep on hys heued þan ihesus smate’ (1765). Jesus miraculously makes his clay sparrows ‘toke þer fleyght’, leading the Jew to tell others of the ‘gret mervayle’ that the child has performed. This ‘mervayle’ ensures that Jesus is portrayed as the giver of life immediately after the episode wherein his words have dried the life out of a child.

Later in the Phillipps poem, the father of Jesus’s victim comes, with his friends, to tell Joseph that he must teach Jesus ‘better maner’ (1787): ‘He cursedoure child apon þe sande /& þer lefte hym dede lyggaunde; /þis was a wykyd dede.’ As in other similar childhood stories, Joseph demonstrates his limited perception of Jesus’s role and powers. He ‘blamed ihesus þar oppynly’ and passes the burden of discipline over to Mary (he ‘Bad hir scho suld take hede’, 1800). His evident desire to dissociate himself from Jesus implicitly reminds the reader that Jesus’s true father is God.

Joseph is acutely aware of the social difficulties that ensue from Jesus’s behaviour (‘wyll he gar us all be shent /& into pryson be tane’, 1802-3); once again, Joseph is grounded in his humanity, contrasting with the precocious divinity of Jesus and the deeper perspective

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363 See chapter 3, above.
enjoyed by Mary, whose question to her son (‘what trespast yhone childe / On þe sand þat he ligis slane?’ 1812) indicates that she understands that there must be some reasoning behind his actions. Jesus’s response indicates a clearcut morality of consequences; the child’s death occurred because he ‘brake spitousely / þe handwarke þat I wroght’ (1814-5).

Here, he is the God of justice, and Mary takes on the role of intercessor, appealing to her son on behalf of the sinful boy: ‘Ma son, scho sayd, I wald full fayne / þat pe child war on lyfe agayne’ (1816-7). Her intercession is motivated by fear of the negative consequences for her own family rather than pure compassion for the boy: Jesus should resurrect him because

To ded elles be we broght;
þat gettes us ennemys & we er demed
Out of þis land ilkane be flemede,
Ffor shame þat wold I noght. (1818-21)

This intervention is successful (‘Ihesus wald no3t hys modyr wreght’, 1822): the Christ-child returns to the boy’s body and, just as he withdrew its life with words, enacts resurrection by speaking:

Ryse up, þu worde wyght,
Ffor yow ær æght worthy I wys
At come unto my faydyr blysse
Whar yoi and ryste ys dyght.
þe child rase up þan verrament
& hayne with hys frenýs þus he went;
þai war glad of þat syght. (1830-6)

This is particularly clear in the images on the Tring tile where the right side shows the bodily resurrection of the ‘maledight’, reminding the viewer that the purpose of the Incarnation is to redeem mankind so that everyone will enjoy the Resurrection of the body. While this significance can be understood by later Christians, in the temporal and geographical location of Christ’s childhood (and the literal sense of the narrative), the restitution is necessary so that the Holy Family can continue to live peacefully with their neighbours.

The left side of tile BM 1922, 0412.3 shows a boy locked in a turret by his father; on the right side, he is pulled to freedom by Jesus. This story illustrates redemptive theology: the child is imprisoned for associating with Jesus, and Jesus rewards his love with freedom. In the Phillipps poem, the man is displeased because his son ‘luyfed ihesus best’ (2456), and he is afraid of the consequences: ‘þai dred so sare hys company / In pryson þai put þar child forþi / & set hym in a stranghalde’ (2458-60). The same situation arises in Kindheit Jesu because the man (‘Josep fader, Braudyn hyth he’) ‘to Ìhesu had envye’. The boy represents a persecuted Christian in his imprisonment. Braudyn explains that ‘For hys louve þou xalt be kept / I n a tour of lym & ston. (Kf 539-40).
Joseph's father, whose Jewishness is made explicit when he swears 'be god Adonay' that his son shall have no light or help however hard he cries (547-50), fails to have the additional saving perspective that the medieval reader would have, and therefore the reader is joined with the poet in recognizing the irony of his words:

\[ \text{Jhesu, } \text{pat hath be bus shent,} \\
\text{Out of presoun xal } \text{pe not bryng} \\
\text{Be no maner of sharment} \\
\text{pat he kan of rede & syng'}. \text{ (Kf} 551-4) \]

His son becomes a model for these future Christians in his faithfulness: 'Fader, pou myth done } \text{pi wyl. } \text{Jhesu is ful of mekyl myth, } \text{He wyl not suffre me to spyl}' (556-8). The poet prepares for the miracle about to be enacted by emphasising the security of 'pat prisoun' in which 'pe dorys weryn lokyn faste' (558-9).

The image on the tile (and in the illustrations of Selden Supra 38) creates the opportunity for a miraculous release by depicting the sheer impenetrability of the tower, which resembles a medieval castle more than an accurate representation of buildings in biblical Egypt. In narrative and in image, once the child has been locked away, the scene is set for Jesus's intervention. The Phillipps-poet describes him happening upon his imprisoned friend when popping round 'be child & be hus to se' (2463). In answer to Jesus's enquiry, 'child, what dos } \text{pi } \text{par?}’ (2464), the boy explains his situation, with the parallels with persecuted Christians clearly evident: he is imprisoned 'for I lufyde ihesus company mar /pan childer of pis cete'. Jesus enacts the release through a tiny hole in the tower wall, just large enough for a finger: 'per was bot a hole als says } \text{pe boke } \& \text{by } \text{pe fynger out } \text{pe child he toke (2470-1).}

The release not only represents Christ's power to keep his childhood friends safe in this world but also symbolises the full and complete bodily resurrection that he is believed to facilitate for believers after death. Similarly, in Kindheit Jesu, Jesus immediately comes to the aid of his friend 'ryth in haste' and as he is about to release Joseph, his words make clear that the redemption is a natural result of the boy's willingness to suffer for Jesus's sake: 'Josep, felaw', qwab Jhesu./ 'For my loue pou lytse here'. Jesus draws his friend to safety through 'a lytyl bore', miraculously enabling the full-sized child to escape: 'Heyl & sond as he was core. /He kam out wtoutyn wrake'. The miracle reinforces Joseph's faith and devotion to the Christ child and his father's desire to separate the two boys is proven to be futile: 'Euer wt Jhesu he wold be, /Nothyng myth hym lette' (571-74). The Phillipps poem suggests greater consequences for this act of liberation; the man's 'frendes hard } \text{pat yt was so' and therefore 'pai sayd & were agaste: } \text{Bot we our child ys lyfe refe } \text{ihesus company will he not3 lefe'}
because of the depth of their love for him: ‘Swylke lufe þai to hym cast’. Their realisation gives Jesus the playmates that he desires.

Expectations of decorum are further overturned in the left panel of Tring tile 1922, 0412.4, in which a man slaps the Christ-child’s face. This image illustrates an episode that explores the thorny question of whether Jesus needs to be educated. In the childhood narratives, Mary and Joseph repeatedly take their son to school and his (well founded) belief that he knows best causes him to fall foul of his teachers. The Phillipps-poet describes a typical scene of pedagogy: ‘Hys maister come þat suld hym lere /And a. b. c. for hym he wrate /& toke it to ihesus & bad hym say a’ (2090-2).

However, Jesus will not take on the role of student and answers the instruction with a question of his own: ‘tell maister or þu ga /Fyrst what es b. algate, /And I sall tell what a. es þan’ (2093-5). This reversal of roles is sufficient provocation for the teacher, who is described as ‘a dispitous man’ (2096), to lose his temper: ‘Ihesus fortene he smate’ (2097).

The punishment brings about swift retribution: ‘& ded smate hym & slow hym sone’ (2098). The poet’s wording allows for ambiguity to remain over Jesus’s involvement with the man’s death; it could perhaps be a spontaneous result of a transgressive action just as Salome’s hand withered merely at the touch of Mary’s body.

In contrast to the (obnoxious) vocality of the Phillipps Jesus, the Cursor-poet frames the provocation for the ‘dint’ as a clear pre-echo of Christ’s trial before Pilate:

Maister leui, þat ald man,
Teched him a letter þan,
And badd him þar-to respond,
And iesu heild him stil a stund;
Leui was wrath, a yeird vp-hint,
And gaf him in þe heued a dint. (12179-84)

A figure of temporal authority is angered by Jesus’s silent passivity. Only after he has been struck does Jesus pose a question ‘to maister leui’ (“Quar-for smites þou me and qui?”) 12185). By reversing the expected catechistical framework of a lesson, just as Christ’s questions to Pilate overturn our expectations of a trial, the poet preserves the parallel with the events of Christ’s Passion. Jesus directly contrasts his knowledge with the teacher’s: ‘þou smites him can mor þan þu. /For þat þou teches til ðop men, /þin aun word i can þe ken’ (12187-9), and the metaphors that he uses to illustrate his point directly recall, for the reader, Matthew 13.13-14:564

Bot þai ar blind þat spakes and hers,

564 Ideo in parabolis iocur eis: quia videntes non vident, et audientes non audunt neque intelligunt. Et adimpletur eis prophetia Esaie divens: audiit audiitis et non intellegitis: et videntes videbitis et non videbitis.
And what night quatt thing pert to feris,
Als a chin or brasin bell,
bat no per can understand ne tell
Wat taken pair aun sune,
patt witt bath wantis and resume.” (CM, 12191-96)365

While the Cursor-poet allows his Christ-child to respond to the violence with words rather than vengeance (perhaps staying truer to canonical Christology), the teacher remains dead for some two hundred lines of the Phillipps poem while Joseph expresses his anger to Mary (‘pi child I will ga fra hym. /He dos so many a wykkit dede’, 2103-4), Mary assures her husband that there is no danger because ‘He bat hym heder sent and broght /On na wyse wyll forga hym’ (2108-9) and they send Jesus to another teacher who also fails in his attempts to teach the omniscient child. Eventually, a third teacher recognizes the futility of these efforts, telling Mary and Joseph that ‘He ys þe wyset of all place, /Ffor he ys full of gods grace [...] & of God has he all þis wytyf’ 2212-5). This acknowledgement of his role and gifts prompts Jesus to remember his first teacher and to be moved to mercy:

& for þi gude worde & þi dede [...]  
My fyrst maister þat me so smate  
Sall ryse fro ded to lyfe algate;  
þis do I for þi sake. (2216-26)

Once the first teacher has regained his life, he articulates his devotion to the child: ‘Of his lyfe was he glade & blyth /& thankyd ihesus full fele syth, /Gret louyng of hym gon make’ (2230-2). Thus, like so many other characters in the Birth and Infancy sequence of stories, the teacher Levi undergoes a transformation from doubt to faith and, in this way, gains proof of Christ’s miraculous nature on behalf of the medieval reader.

Whereas the events in the other sections of Christ’s Birth and Infancy that I discuss in this study (with the exception of the Midwives legend) have been rooted in a canonical source, the childhood stories derive entirely from apocrypha. Yet Levi’s role, captured on the Tring tile and narrated in full in the texts, exemplifies the ways in which stories can function as entertaining narrative while simultaneously being the vehicle for moral instruction.

Vernacular Infancy stories create a vibrant sense of the child Jesus in ways consonant with the Christology espoused by the Church but which may jar with the ‘mild, obedient, good’ version of Jesus, ‘our childhood’s pattern’, that we have inherited from Victorian Christians including Cecil Frances Alexander.366 However, the survival of the few Middle English texts that narrate them in vivid detail indicates that apocrypha played a crucial narrative role.

365 The passage that continues is full of pre-echoes; he even goes on to say that ‘A commament nu mak i here /that yee it all mai see and here’, and to describe miracles that he will enact in adulthood.
366 ‘Once in Royal David’s City’, Hymns and Psalms 114.
prior to the Council of Trent. The Tring tiles, understood alongside other visual and literary sources covered by this study, give us an insight into the narrative vitality of pre-Reformation Christianity in England. This fits with the picture, that has emerged over the course of this dissertation, of a Christianity at ease with narrative plurality and apocryphal augmentation. Some episodes, such as the Midwives and Jesus’s childhood acts of destruction, creation and resurrection, are so divorced from the canonical gospels that they became lost to the popular imagination during the religious upheaval of the 1500s. Other episodes and additions, including most obviously the ox and ass that annually feature in Nativity plays and on Christmas cards, are still integral to the ways in which Christians understand the mystery of Incarnation.

Conclusion

Christ’s life is by definition both historical yet also mythic and heroic in dimension. The dissertation has shown how knowledge of that life in medieval England presumed familiarity with various non-canonical apocryphal variables, and how that devotional truth and authority could be accrued through fuller and more elaborated accounts. Not unlike the corpus of variants to the text of an edition, this dissertation has built up a corpus of varying witnesses to the ‘chapters’ of Christ’s early life, and the implications of such a corpus are greater than the sum of its parts in witnessing to the nature of familiarity with Christ’s biography in later medieval England.

Across the chapters of the dissertation, evidence has been accumulated from literary texts in Middle English, which may often be seen as popular and popularizing of more learned traditions, perhaps even verging on Christological pulp fiction, in order to situate them as part of a wider tradition in medieval English biblical treatments. Much recent modern criticism of medieval English religious and literary history has, for too long, focused on the question of a binary divide between fifteenth-century religious orthodoxy and heterodoxy and assumes a far narrower awareness of versions of biblical texts than that described here. Yet, when seen as a corpus and systematically compared and analysed, the texts furnish scant evidence for much coordinating, directive or censoring ecclesiastical influence in late medieval England. For example, the dissertation is able to revise the notion that Nicholas Love’s Mirror on the Blessed Life of Christ represents simply a desire to
counteract a perceived Lollard threat to the orthodoxy of the Church by situating the Mirror alongside other vernacular versions in prose, verse and drama.\(^{367}\)

Discussion of the cycle plays, whose manuscripts date from the fifteenth- and sixteenth- centuries, has been situated at the end of most sections since it represents the latest expression, chronologically of each aspect of the story. Yet their concluding function is especially appropriate: vernacular religious drama is performed from the thirteenth- to sixteenth- centuries and therefore the metamorphosis of the play texts from earlier versions to the extant manuscripts, as dramatists and guilds respond to changing modes of devotion and the articulation of heretical ideas, is emblematic of the movement and continuities in vernacular religious culture that the dissertation has explored. Furthermore, the cumulative weight of visual and textual evidence presented here highlights the spectacular, as well as performative and textual, impact of religious drama on medieval English understanding of Christ’s Birth and Infancy and illustrates the way in which the drama must be understood as part of a vibrant contemporary vernacular religious culture. In sum, the dissertation demonstrates, through analysis of Middle English texts from a variety of literary genres and of medieval English visual and material culture, that a myriad of different Christocentric stories were able happily to co-exist in pre-Reformation England. It therefore provides evidence to challenge the notion that competing orthodox and heterodox vernacular attitudes to biblical and theological material created a state of religious conflict in late medieval England. The cumulative method of building up a picture of the episodes from a variety of sources embodies in itself a positive methodological approach. This reflects the nature of evidence, which does not necessarily develop linearly or organically towards greater intrinsic complexity. Instead, there emerge lateral and coinciding ramifications in the form of coexistent or even contradictory versions.

This dissertation has sought to present a ‘metabiography’ of Christ, which aims to recreate the familiarity with Christ’s early life in the many permutations of its telling and therefore represents the awareness of an age rather than the mindset of any one medieval individual. Modern lifewriting tends to be predicated on a desire to retrieve the ‘truth’ of the life narrative, where the truth is implicitly singular: only one set of events or scenarios can have occurred, even though biographers remain interested in myths that may have grown up

\(^{367}\) As indicated in the introduction, above, the insight into medieval English biblical treatments provided by this dissertation will be augmented by reference to the Latin, insular French and Anglo-Norman traditions; this will enable the thesis more clearly to articulate the continuities across and distinctions between the culture in England, contemporary works in continental Europe and the common ideas inherited from the Church.
around some particularly heroic, virtuous, or even despicable, real lives. In contrast, the dissertation has shown that the circumstances of medieval textuality and circulation worked more towards the coexistence of versions than prioritizing between them, with a tolerance of a plurality of competing accounts. Scholars of medieval literature have long discussed the way in which texts were able simultaneously to exist in different scribal variations, rewritten or reinterpreted and glossed.\footnote{See, for example, Paul Zumthor's \textit{Essai de poétique médiévale} (1972).} Through the inclusiveness of the popular narrative 'chapters' of Christ's life described in this dissertation, the metabiography of Christ was known in medieval England in ways that both embodied yet transcended any particular textual realization.
Bibliography

Annotated bibliography of primary sources

Additional abbreviations used in annotated bibliography
LALME: Linguistic Atlas of Late Medieval England
Manual: Manual of the Writings in Middle English
SC: short catalogue
SJC: St John’s College, Cambridge

Sources of material in Middle English texts

Pseudevangelium of James (Greek)
earliest MS is dated to 4th century but most surviving MSS are later than 10th century

Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew
PM dates from the 8th or 9th century. Its main body is made up of a Latin translation of PJ with significant expansions and alterations, especially in the Infancy sections.

Robert de Gretham, Miroir
c.1250-1260. Anglo-Norman
translated into Middle English 14th/15th century; 6 MSS

Jacobus de Voragine, Legenda Aurea (1263) and Jean de Vignay, Legende Doree (c.1333-40), translated into Middle English as Gilte Legende (1438). Extant in 8 MSS, edited from BL Egerton 876 by Richard Hamer, EETS os 327 (2006); vol 2 with Vida Russell os 328 (2007).

Higden, Polychronicon.
trans. John Trevisa, 1398, enlarged by Caxton ca. 1482 IPMEP 605, Wells 3.9
SJC H.1 (204) a1387; BL Addit 24194 c1410; Cotton Tiberius D.7 LALME 1.107; LP 7051
Gloucs; Harley 1900 a1425; Oxford Trinity 29 a1500.
anonymous 15th century translation, continued to 1401: IPMEP 35, Manual 8.xxi,22
BL Harley 2261 a?1475 (a?1425)

Narrative Poetry

South English Nativity of Mary and Christ
This is the earliest Nativity poem of the South English Legendary and is part of the temporale material described by O.S. Pickering (1973) and edited by him in 1975 from Stowe 949. The poem exists in three versions: a) Stowe 949; b) Cambridge SJC B.6; c) Lambeth 223.
a) conception, birth of Mary, presentation, life in temple, betrothal, sojourn with maidens, Annunciation, Joseph’s trouble, trial of Mary and Joseph, Journey to Bethlehem, birth of Christ, signs, magi, purification, Herod, massacre and Flight, miracles on Journey, return from Egypt, Christ and Doctors.
b) as a + prologue, 244-5 Annunciation to Zacharias, visitation, birth of John, 626-3, Annunciation to shepherds and circumcision. Pickering says that the additions are 'not part of original poem'.

c) based on b; departs at 620.

The SEN is 'a largely original Middle English composition'. However, it has not historically been seen as an independent poem from the South English Legendary, and is described in NIMEV in its various parts:

NIMEV 3997 'Whanne men heren telle of þing þat hij louen, ioye þai habben and blisse'
f.88v (Stowe), prologue to Long Life; NIMEV 213 'Al þat þe prophetes tolden whyle in heore prophecie'; NIMEV 862 'fourety dayes after crist was borne was candelmasse day' Purificacio beate marie, in a MS of the SEL. Cf. NIMEV 586 'Candelmasse ys a feste heye & holy þorþe alle þyng' in another MS of SEL; NIMEV 3354 'þe xl day þat þe child was born as on Candelmasse day (cf. NIMEV 2717); NIMEV 1801 'Josef was born in Bethlehem in þe londe of Iudee': Pater domini, a section of the narrative of the Birth of Christ incorporated into the SEL; 120 lines; couplets. indexed as narrative of Nativity in NIMEV 2743 (couplet only in Stowe and Lambeth); NIMEV 3452 'The prophethys tolden sumtyne in here prophessye' The Long Life of Christ; NIMEV 3559 'þes þre kinges anoper wey toward here lond nome'

Innocents in Stowe-Lambeth (cf. Horstmann's Geburt Jesu)

9 MSS: c.1330 Auchinleck 19.2.1; LALME i.88 LP 6510 (ed. Turnbull 1840)
a1450 Bodley 779 (Bod. SC2567) LALME 1.146 LP 5470
1425 Bodl Add. C.220 (Bod SC25430); LALME 1.145 LP 6960, Gloucester
Bodl Rawl Poetry 225 (Bod SC14716); LALME 1.152 LP 73
c.1400 Lambeth 223 LALME 1.118 LP 140 Derbyshire
a1450 Cambridge SJC B.6 LALME 1.64 LP 4646 Norfolk
a1425 London BL Add 10626
a1425 Cambridge Trinity R.3.25 LALME 1.65 LP 5320
London BL Stowe 949 LALME 1.116 LP 6950 Gloucester

Also preserved in 4 derivative temporale poems (Conception of Mary; Expanded Nativity “Geburt Jesu”; Abridged Life of Christ; Feast of Christmas).

Geburt Jesu

NIMEV 2632. Prologue to Concepio Marie (38) in SEL 'A god mon þat het isacar was bi olde dawe'.
c1375 (c1280?) BL Egerton 1993, f.27r-v LALME 1.109, LP 7130 Gloucester; (a1450) Bodley 779 LALME 1.146, LP 5470 Hants; a1350 (?c1280) Ashmole 43 (SC 6924), f.208v; LALME 1.145, LP 7170 Gloucester; Bodl. Laud Misc 622 (SC1414), f.71 (prol only); Cambridge, Pepys 2344, pp.353-58. Also in Auchinleck MS.
ed. Horstmann (1875)

Egerton 1993 is vellum 14th century small folio. Item 2 in BL catalogue entry: 'The birth and childhood of Christ, preceded by the history of Joachim and Anna, etc.; beginning, "Of ioie

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aud blisse is now mi pouzt. care to bi leue," f. 27. Printed by Horstmann, p. 64, from the present copy and Ashmole MS. 43."

Middle English La Estorie del Evangeli
NIMEV 3194; Manual 2.IV.28; ‘Sum while ich was wiþ sunne i-bounde /And sunne me etc’, pre-1300.

Dulwich MS 22, ff. 81-85v; Bodl. Eng. poet. a.1 (SC 3938), f.105 f-v, 1410-20 Bodl Add c.38 (SC 30236) (part of South English Legendary), ff.71v-82; London UL 1459/C16 ff, 97v-111v
MED dates it as c.1425.

Dulwich is not the original so even though the other 2 MSS are later, poem is dated to 13th century. Gertrude C. Campbell, first editor of the poem, supposes East Midland original in latter half of 13th century. Source is possibly gospel harmony rather than Vulgate directly. Apocryphal additions include Herod’s trip to Rome and the boat burning (753-61); downfall of idols (774-83); devil at Crucifixion.

Kindheit Jesu
NIMEV 1550 (“Apocryphal History of Christ’s infancy”); Manual 2.v.1; ‘In þe honurance of swete Ihesu /pat is louerd ful of vertu’. Late 13th century.
Bodl. Laud 108 ff.11-22, West Oxfordshire dialect LALME 1.149; main hand ff.1-200 LP 6920
1854 lines in octosyllabic couplets.

Maureen Boulton suggests, in the introduction to Les Enfaunces de Jesu Crist, ed. Boulton (London: Birkbeck for ANTS, 1986), that this poem like the French Enfaunces, stems from an earlier Anglo-Norman poem or possibly a Latin source. All stories are included in the Latin Infantia salvatoris (printed by Caxton in 1477).

Cursor Mundi
NIMEV 2153, Manual 7.xx.31; ‘Men 3erned iestes for to here /& romance rede etc’. History of the world in couplets (over 23000 lines). c.1300; late 13th-early 14th century.
Narrative poem; chronicle; comprehensive account/synthesis of Biblical material, in Northern dialect.
ed. Morris, EETS 57 (1874), 59 (1875), 62 (1876), 66 (1877), 68 (1878). Southern version (i.e. Cambridge Trinity MS) ed. Horrell et al, Ottawa, 1978-.
Preferred MS Cotton Vespasian A.III, ff.2-163; LALME 1.108: hand A LP18; hand B LP 100 Bodl. Laud misc 416 (SC 1479), ff.66-181v; Bodl Fairfax 14 (SC 3894), ff.4-123v; TCC R.3.8 (588), ff.1-142v; BL Add. 31042, ff.3-32 (extracts); BL Add 36983, ff.1-117v, 127v-158v; London, College of Arms, Arundel LVII, ff. 1-132v (begins imperfectly); Edinburgh, Royal

3 Dzon, p.105
4 Dzon, pp.124-25

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College of Physicians *NHC* and *Cursor Mundi*, ff. 37-50v, 1-10; Göttingen UL Theol. 107, ff.2-169v.

[i.e. related entries in NIMEV 694 (book of penance), 780 (prayer to Trinity in some MSS), 788 (pater noster), 959 (exposition of creed in some MSS), 1775 (hours of cross inserted into CM), 1786 (dialogue between Christ and Man in two MSS), 1885 (Founding of the Feast of the Conception), 2685 (story of Resurrection), 3208 (lyric on Sorrows of Mary), 3976 (Assumption of Mary)].

*Meditation on the Life and Passions of Christ*

NIMEV 1034, Wells 13.1746 (2nd suppl); ‘Hey! be þou, sone of þe fader aboue’ f.7a.
BL Additional 11307, ff.7-87v LALME 1.100 LP 7890, Warwickshire, a1450 (a1400) (poss pre. 1400).
ed. Charlotte d'Evelyn (EETS 158, 1921)

South Midland poem with no guiding theme or chronology. Some topics are treated more than once. Between the Birth and the Last Supper, ‘only one event, the raising of Lazarus (vv209-52) is noted at any length.\(^5\)

*Stanzaic Life of Christ*

NIMEV 1755 ‘Ihesu þat borne was of a may /In amendement of mankynde’; Life of Christ and the Feasts of the Church; 10840 lines, quatrains.
ed. Foster, EETS 126 (1926). 14\(^{th}\) century.\(^7\) Compilation of *Polychronicon* (Book I and IV) and *Legenda Aurea* (Life of Christ). Octosyllabic, 4-line stanzas (abab), often combined into octave stanzas of ababab, ababac, ababbc. The episodes selected for inclusion in the poem ‘are those which the Church ordinarily chose for lay instruction, and bear a close resemblance to the subjects in church sculpture and glass’.\(^8\) Extant in 3 MSS, each of which is the source for different parts of Foster’s edition: lines 1-66: BL Additional 38666, ff.5-173v c.1450 (?a1400) LALME 1.102 LP223; lines 67-9624 Harley 3909, ff.1-151v, LALME 1.112; 4 hands, Cheshire. a1500 (?a1400); lines 9625-10840: Harley 2250, f.44, LALME 1.111 LP17 Cheshire a1500 (a?1400) omits half of Nativity.

Nativity portion of *The Metrical Life of Christ* [cf. NIMEV 123, 130, 311, 315, 2365]
NIMEV 3845.3 Vpon þe hilles coppe wakinge /A3eyn þe tyne þe sterre schold springe.

According to Walter Sauer, it is ‘a homogenous religious poem, and indeed the work of a single author’.\(^9\) The poet’s ‘originality’, which appears to stem more from the poet’s inaccurate recollection and confusion than from deliberate imaginative individuality.\(^10\) This

\(^5\) d'Evelyn, p.xv.
\(^6\) d'Evelyn, p.xvi.
\(^7\) SLC, p.ix.
\(^8\) SLC, p.xvii.
\(^9\) MLC, p.16.
\(^10\) MLC, p.21.
poem ‘has no traceable connection with other Middle English or Old French *temporale* poems or dramatic cycles. The text frequently evades precise source analysis due to the liberty the author takes with his otherwise conventionalized material’.11

*The Romance of the childhode of Jhesu... pat clerkes callys Ipokrephum*
NIMEV 250; Manual 3.p.684 ‘Allemygthy god in Trynytee’
BL Additional 31042 (Thornton ms), ff.163va-168vb; Northern dialect LALME 1.101; c.1450.
925 lines in 12-line stanzas
Other MSS: MS Harley 3954, ff 70-74, c.1420 (Morey); a1475 MED; North Midland dialect; LALME 1.112; 1 hand Norfolk; includes disputation poem ed. Conlee in *Middle English Debate Poetry* (1991), pp.167-77. 694 lines; MS Harley 2399, ff.47v-61; LALME 1.112, copied in Cornwall, corresponds stanza by stanza with Thornton MS 843 lines; 15th century c.1500 MED.

NIMEV 208 ‘Alle pat haues lykyng for to here’ (described in the dissertation as ‘the Phillipps poem’).
Manual 2.V.117(a) Minnesota University MS Z822 N81, ff.185v-215r
3456 lines in 12 line stanzas
Mid-15th century, c1450 in MED
Northern text; midland scribe. LALME 1.139
ed. Parker as one of the Middle English Stanzaic Lives of St Anne, EETS os 174 (1928), 1-89.
Based on *Pseudo-Matthew*.12

John Lydgate, *Life of Our Lady*
IMEV 2574; Manual 6.xvi.108
c.1421-22. Extant in 42 MSS.
ed. from Durham University MS Cosin V. ii.16 by Joseph A. Lauritis, Ralph A. Klinefelter, Vernon F. Gallagher (Dusquene, 1961).
Source for Books I and II is *Pseudo-Matthew*, it is ‘identical in numerous details’.13 Books III (Nativity) and IV (Circumcision) are based on *Pseudo-Matthew, Legenda Aurea, Vulgate and Pseudo-bonaventuran Meditationes*.14 Books V (Magi) and VI (Purification) seem to use *Legenda* and its sources for the material.15

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11 MLC, p.27.
12 Dzon, p.120; Parker, pp.xxvii-xxix
13 Lydgate, p.57.
14 Lydgate, p.97.
15 Lydgate, p.147.
Lyrics cited in the text

NIMEV 352 (CB14.56) ‘Als i lay vp-on a nith/ Alone in my longging’; from MS Advocates Library 18.7.21, ff.3v-4v; CUL Add.5943, f.169 (fragment); Cambridge SJC 259 (S.54), f.4r-v; BL Harley 2330, f.120 (fragment). Lullaby carol; 37 quatrains and 2-line burden.


NIMEV 1472 (CB14.57) ‘In bedlem is a child i-born /sal comen amongus vs’; MS Advocates Library 18.7.21, f.4v-5v.


NIMEV 1748 (CB15.92) ‘Ihu, that alle this worlde hast wroghte,’ BL Harley 1706, ff.210-11v; Longleat 30, ff.52-53; Huntington MS HM 142 f.48-49v.

NIMEV 1748 (CB15.92) ‘Ihu, that alle this worlde hast wroghte,’ BL Harley 1706, ff.210-11v; Longleat 30, ff.52-53; Huntington MS HM 142 f.48-49v.

CB14.75: ‘Ler to louen as i loue pe’; from MS Advocates Library 18.7.21.

CB13.24: ‘On leome is in þis world illist’; from Trinity College Cam 323

NIMEV 2800 (CB15.28) ‘Regina celi and Lady, letare’; Pepys 1236, f.98ve-100. Macaronic hymn the virgin; seven 12-line stanzas.

RLG 77.47 Balliol MS 354 f.227 r ‘Syng we with myrth, joye, and solas /In honowr of this Cristemas. /[1] Glorius God had gret pyte’. XVI century.

NIMEV 3236 (CB14.7) ‘Sute ihesu, king of blysse’; Bodl. Digby 86 (SC 1687), f.134v (st. 1-3 only); Harley 2253 f.75; Fitzwilliam 355 (st. 14 only). Other MSS are missing.


[version of NIMEV 3596] CB15.4: ‘pis endres nyght A-bout mydnyght’; Harley 2380, f.70v

NIMEV 3628 (CB15.5) ‘Thys mayden hy3th mary, she was full mylke’; Bodl. Ashmole 189 (SC 6777), ff.106v-107. Dialogue between Virgin and Jesus; 36 lines in varying stanzas.

NIMEV 3643 (RLG77.28) ‘This tyme is born a chyld ful good’ MS Sloane 2593 f.28r. Nativity carol; 5 quatrains and 2-line burden.

RLG77.119 ‘To encrease our joye and blysse /Christus natus est nobis. /[1] Make we mery in hall and boure,’ Huntington Library, Christmas carolles newely Inprynted (Richard Kele), c.1550, p.23.

‘Wolle ye iheren of twelte day’: Trin 323 ‘Wou þe present was ibroust /In-to betlem þer iesus lay’.

Homilies
Expanded Northern Homily Cycle

MSS: 1. BL Cotton Tiberius E 7; 2. Harley 4196 LALME 1.113 c.1375

Manual cp 2.V.304, Wells 5.18. Each homily is identified separately in NIMEV:

NIMEV 128: Efter þe birth of Crist God-sun, /And after þe childer occision; Sabbato quatuor temporum in Adventu, in ‘expanded’ NHC. MS 1. f.120; 2.ff.8v-9. No connection with U or V.

NIMEV 876: Fra God was sent ane angel bright, /Gabriel, for soth, he hight; stéría iii in quatuor temporum, in ‘expanded’ NHC. MS 1. f.102-103v; 2.ff.6-7 (also ed. Heuser, Anglia, XXVII (1904), 290-93). Revised from the Annunciation in H, f.146.ff; based on U; different from V.

NIMEV 1547: In þe emparure dais Octouiane (2535) /When five thousand thowsand 3eres war gane; Gospel, In gallicantu natalis domini, in ‘expanded’ NHC. MS 1. f.107v-108; 2. ff.12-14. Diff from U and V.

NIMEV 1792: John Baptist als gastly leche /Was in desert þe folk to preche.; Gospel for Friday of the 2nd week in Advent, in ‘expanded’ NHC. MS 1. f.121r-v; 2. f.5.

NIMEV 1800: Joseph and Mari maiden gude /Had mekill meruial in paire mode (3610); Gospel, Dominica infra octabu nativitatis Christi, in ‘expanded’ NHC. MS 1. f.115r-v; 2.ff.26v-27 [cf. NIMEV 3393; 3556]. Different from U and V.


NIMEV 3941: When aght daies war al fulfilde (3765) /Of Jesu birth right als he wilde, Gospel, In virgilia Epiphanie, in ‘expanded’ NHC [cf. 2977]. MS 1. ff.110v-111; 2. f.27r-v. Not in U; diff from V.

NIMEV 3953: When þis had made endyng /And Archilaw was corond king, (3880); Gospel, In vigilia Epiphanie, in ‘expanded’ NHC. MS 1. f.118r-v; 2. f.28. Not in U; different from V.

NIMEV 4002: When oure Lord Jesu so fre /Was born in Bedleem of Jude; Gospel, In die Epiphanie, in ‘expanded’ NHC. MS 1. ff.111-113; 2. ff.28-30 (ed. Heuser, 1904, 293-97). Diff from U and V.

NIMEV 4048: When þis God angel þat was sent (1605) /To blys of heuyn ogayn was went; Gospel for feria vi quatuor temporum, in ‘expanded’ NHC. MS 1. ff.103v-104v; 2. ff.7v-8v. Version diff from V and from MSS of U.

NIMEV 4049: When þis mayden milde and trew, /þe moder of oure Lord Jesu, Gospel, In virgilia natalis domini, in ‘expanded’ NHC. MS 1. ff.106v-107v; 2. ff.10-11. Not in U; diff from V.

ed. Saara Nevalinna (Helsinki, 1972)
‘extant in three different versions [...] composed by different poets. p.1

Unexpanded version (known as U) written by a friar or monk using Miroir as a model. Late 13th/early 14th century. There are two expanded versions. The first, described as V, is translated into a Midland dialect by a poet who seems to have known Sarum Missal. It is

16 Nevalinna, p.2.
17 Nevalinna, p.3.
extant in 2 closely connected MSS from same scriptorium: Vernon MS (c.1390) and BL Addit. 22283 (Simeon MS) and remains unedited.18 The other, which is in a Northern dialect, is extant in 2 MSS: Harley 4196 and Cotton Tib. Evii.19 It has been edited by Nevalinna. Harley MS follows the arrangement of York Missal, which leads to different ordering from U and V.20 Tiberius’s scribe rearranges the order to fit the chronology of Christ’s life.21 Mary’s Purification is therefore included in Tiberius after Matthew 2.1-2 and before Luke 2.33-39, whereas H does not have a dedicated homily for the Purification (although there is a version on f.141a).22 The 2 MSS derive from a common model.23 This version of the Northern Homily Cycle is not homogenous in date and composition.24 The homilies concerned with Christ’s birth and his childhood, and with the life of John the Baptist, have their models in older historical Bibles, such as Petrus Comestor’s Historia Scholastica.25

Mirk, Festial
IPMEP 734, Manual 9.xxiv.21
Written in 1380s by an Augustinian priest in Shropshire (Ford, 2006 page ref??), derived from Legenda Aurea (IPMEP, 248) ed. Theodore Erbe from Bodl. MS Gough Ecclesiastical. Top.4 (a1500), EETS es 96 (1905). 26 extant MSS including Cambridge Caius 168/89 – LALME 1.63, NE Notts; BL Cotton Claudius A.2 (pref MS) (a1450) (a1415).

Sermons
Lollard sermons, ed. Gloria Cigman.
BL Additional 41321 – end of xvi century (?) (a1400) source for sermons 1-12; John Rylands Eng 412 (a1425); Bodl Rawlinson C.751 sermons 8-16.
The dialect is South Central Midlands with South-West Midland ‘colouring’.26 The three hands of Additional and Rawlinson are written in the Central Midlands Standard that is ‘a form of written English found in many religious texts from the middle of the fourteenth century to the middle of the fifteenth’.27 The sermons are ‘talking about and not to

18 Nevalinna, p.4.
20 Nevalinna, p.23.
21 Nevalinna, p.27.
22 Nevalinna, p.28.
23 Nevalinna, p.30.
24 Nevalinna, p.124.
25 Nevalinna, p.125. Also includes Legenda Aurea as a source and notes parallels with the York plays.
26 Cigman, xxxviii-ix.
27 Cigman, xli.
audience’ therefore implies not indicated for oral delivery but partly for guidance of the preacher.28

Orthodox sermons in BL Royal 18 Bxiii, ff.51-72, 74-148,149v-157. c.1450 (c.1415) IPMEP 26, Wells.5.16.i.(s8) ‘Adest nomen tuum et munera tua accepta erunt ... Good men and wymmen that Lord pat made all thynge’.

LALME ‘six hands all in similar language’ LP 6751 Berks ed. Woodburn O. Ross, EETS os 209 (1940).

Ross believes that the sermons are designed to be preached and not read, and intended for a lay audience.29 The nativity and epiphany sermons is part of Ross’s group V which he believes were ‘preached by an unusually educated preacher to audiences of unusually high social status’.30

The collection seems to have been written at some point during the Schism of 1378-1417.

Wycliffite sermons in MS Cambridge Pepys 2616
‘pis gospel tellip mouche wisdom pat is hid to many men and speciali for pis cause pat it is not al red in pe Chirche’; part of the cycle is described as IPMEP 738: Of Mynystris in pe Chirche, Wycliffite exposition of Matthew 24, s.xiv ex. Manual 2, pp.360-61, 522-33

Eamon Duffy comments that ‘The Wycliffite Sermon Cycle is the largest and most systematic body of Lollard teaching, a stupendous and learned labour providing 294 sermons for the whole year, produced in Oxford or in some aristocratic Lollard household in the last years of the fourteenth century. It is a chilling and depressing body of material, all too obviously infected by the spiritual dyspepsia of the movement’s founder, monotonous in its moralism and its relentless polemic against the religious orders and the “folly of prelates”, entirely lacking in the affective warmth and devotion to the suffering humanity of Christ which is the distinctive mark of late medieval popular Christianity.’31

Prose

Pepysian Gospel Harmony; ‘Ovre suete lord Jhesu Crist his godhede he was tofore all creatures’
IPMEP 530, Manual 2.iv.31; Gospels an Hundrej Sex, a harmony of the gospels narrating the life of Christ, translated from the French, s.xv.
Pepys 2498, pp.1-43. LALME 1.64 (same hand as Laud misc 622 and Harley 874 – part of LP 6260, Essex a1400)
ed. Theodore Erbe, EETS os 157 (1922)

Nicholas Love, Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ; ‘Quecunbque scripta sunt ad nostram doctrinam scripta sunt ... These ben the wordes of the grete doctour and holy apostel saynte Poule’

28 Cigman, xlv.
29 Ross, xviii-xix
30 Ross, xxii.
31 Duffy, 2005 preface, xxvii.
IPMEP 553; translation of Pseudo-Bonaventure's *Meditationes Vite Christi*, s. xv in.

*Book to a Mother*: To knowe þe bettere my purpos in þis boke wite 3e wel þat I desire euerych man and woman and child to be my moder.

IPMEP 767: devotional treatise, s.xiv (2), Manual 7.xx.16


also in: BL Add 30897 a1500; BL Egerton 826 (fragment) a1400: LALME 1.109, hand A LP 4682 Warwickshire; Jolliffe B.5

*The Book of Margery Kempe*

IPMEP 288; Manual 7.xix.7; 9.xxiii.40

BL Additional 61823, LALME 1.103 Norfolk

Book 1 rewritten 1436; Book 2 written 1438.


*Liber celestis* of Bridget of Sweden (1303-1376)

BL Cotton Claudius B.i.


[a partial translation is found in BL Julius F II, ed. as *Revelations of St Birgitta*, EETS os 178, 1929)]

Middle English *Three Kings of Cologne*, London: Lambeth 491.

John of Hildesheim (d.1375), *Historia Trium Regum*. John renowned 'as a theologian, scholar, philosopher, poet, and preacher' but his authorship of *Three Kings* is not certain; work composed between 1351-1389.\(^\text{32}\) As one would expect, the *Three Kings* focuses on the story of the Magi. However, it includes some nativity material and a brief description of the Flight to Egypt.

*Three Kings* extant in 3 Middle English translations. The best known (c.1400) is the abridged version edited by Horstmann, which exists in 21 copies.\(^\text{33}\) There is a stanzaic version (IMEV 31; ed. MacCracken 1912), divided into three passus.\(^\text{34}\) The Lambeth version, dated to c.1425, is independent of the other two. An extract is also found in Huntington 114 by the same scribe.\(^\text{35}\) Ralph Hanna describes a scribe employed in London, originating from South

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\(^\text{32}\) Schaer, p.17.


\(^\text{34}\) Schaer, p.27; single MS BL Addit 31042 (Thornton).

East Essex. Schaer comments that ‘in the light of his overall oeuvre, Lambeth 3KCol, or at least the L copy, may be classed as one of his more conservative efforts.’

**Drama**

*The York Play*
IMEV 1273; Manual 5.xii.10.
BL Additional 35290; dated 1463-77; LALME: vol. 1. 102 (three entries, q.v.). "Hand A. language 1 ... probably of York area or a little west." York. "Hand A. language 2 ... possibly from far N Lancs." "Hand B (main hand) ... . Language apparently from considerably S of York.

*The N-Town Play*
IMEV 2321; Manual 5.xii.12.
1468 MS BL Cotton Vespasian D.8, LALME 1.108, Norfolk

*Towneley Plays* (Wakefield)
IMEV 715; Manual 5.xii.11.
San Marino, Huntington HM1; LALME 1.92, LP 211. WRY.
1475-1500

Chester cycle
IMEV 716; Manual 5.xii.9.
BL Additional 10305; BL Harley 2013 *(Pref.MS for part of text)*; BL Harley 2124; Oxford, Bodl. 175; San Marino, Huntington HM 2 *(Pref.MS for part of text)*, LALME: vol. 1. 92. Cheshire. Three other manuscripts contain a fragment (Manchester 822.11C2, ‘The Resurrection’), Play XXIII ‘Antichrist’ (Peniarth 399) and Play XVI ‘The Trial and Flagellation’ (Chester, Coopers’ Guild)

**Images**

*Holkham Bible Picture Book*
1325-50 (1327-40 according to Brown)
BL Additional 47682 (olim Holkham 666)
Anglo-Norman illustrated Bible
Apocrypha.
231 images accompanied by captions giving summary, i.e. not full Biblical text or exegesis.

See details of further sources in reference section of bibliography.

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36 Schaer, pp.30-31; 4-10 emendations per page for this text as opposed to 8-21 for his *Fiers Plowman* (but only 0-8 for *Troilus*).
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