

Article

“But Now I Consydre Thy Necessite”: Augustine’s Doctrine of Jewish Witness and the Restoration of Racial Hierarchies in the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*

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Abstract: This paper examines the depiction of Jewish and Christian merchants in the medieval English Host miracle play, the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*. This play is a critical illustration of religious racialization, effectively demonstrating the perpetuation of anti-Jewish stereotypes and legitimizing violence. Positioned within a broader scholarly debate, particularly in relation to Augustine’s doctrine of Jewish witness, the play portrays Jews as allegorical figures that validate Christian theological constructs. This paper delves into the representation and linguistic depiction of Jewish characters in the play, emphasizing their systematic dehumanization and instrumentalization in Christian narratives. A significant focus is placed on the coerced conversion of Jewish characters, which forces them into the archetype of the “Wandering Jew”, thereby highlighting motifs of symbolic aggression and unending diaspora. This paper also confronts contemporary scholarly perspectives that view the play as challenging religious boundaries, positing that such interpretations overlook the ingrained racialization and marginalization of Jewish identity during the European Middle Ages. It argues that the play’s transient disruption of power dynamics ultimately reinforces prevailing social hierarchies, thereby solidifying deep-seated anti-Jewish sentiments.

Keywords: race; boundaries; religion; Augustine of Hippo; hierarchies



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1. Introduction

The Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*, the sole surviving medieval English Host miracle play, exhibits complexities that reach beyond its narrative to illuminate broader dynamics of religious racialization.¹ My article seeks to elucidate these complexities by examining the characterizations of both Aristorius and Jonathas, a Christian and a Jewish merchant, respectively. Both characters are depicted as deeply entwined with the trappings of material wealth and social prestige. Through their shared occupation as merchants² as well as their vocal emphasis on commercial success and social standing, the boundaries typically constructed between Christians and Jews during the Middle Ages are intriguingly blurred.³ Aristorius⁴ emerges in the narrative with a decidedly secular grandeur. His self-presentation is imbued with proclamations of his vast wealth and far-reaching fame. In the lines, “Syr Arystory ys my name,/A merchaunte myghty of a royall araye,/Ful wyde in this worlde spryngyth my fame, [. . .]/And as a lordys pere thus lyve I in worthynesse”⁵, he situates himself firmly within the realm of secular ambition (*Play*, 89–91, 119). The audacity of his claims is further accentuated when he asserts that even his religious guide, the curate, is subservient to his whims: “My curat wayteth upon me to knowe myn entent,/And men at my weldyng, and all ys me lent/My well for to worke in thys world so wyde” (120–122). By underscoring his dominion over religious figures, Aristorius reconfigures the traditional hierarchy, placing secular success at the apex, seemingly above spiritual piety.

Jonathas’s introduction paints a parallel portrait. His declaration—“Jew Jonathas ys my name [. . .]/For I am chefe merchaunte of Jewes, I tell yow, be ryght”—while echoing the same themes of secular achievement and authority as Aristorius, carries with it additional layers of complexity given his positioning within the Jewish community (189,

196). In a society where religious figures often epitomize moral and ethical leadership, the foregrounding of Jonathas, a merchant, as a pivotal figure in the Jewish community—as opposed to a rabbi or another religious leader—is striking as it subtly intertwines the essence of the Jewish faith with commerce, suggesting a conflation of religious and commercial identities. Furthermore, by placing a merchant at the helm rather than a religious figure, the *Croxton Play* implies a certain erosion or compromise of religious and moral values within the Jewish community, which has allowed the trappings of material wealth to dictate or overshadow their spiritual and moral compass.

This nuanced representation becomes even more pronounced when juxtaposed against Augustine of Hippo's doctrine of Jewish witness, which envisages Jews as living symbols whose social positioning serves as cautionary tales from which Christians should derive both religious truths and a sense of superiority. Upon first glance, the parallels in the characterizations of Aristorius and Jonathas challenge this doctrine. By mirroring each other in their worldly ambitions and achievements, they destabilize the notion that Jews are distinctively separate or inferior, and, by extension, they problematize the simplistic reading of Jews merely as testimonial objects for Christian doctrinal learning. It is as if the play inadvertently raises the question: if a Christian merchant is so akin to his Jewish counterpart, then how can one be a witness to the other's purported spiritual deficiency or superiority?

However, I argue that this disruption is ultimately restored by the play's ending. As the Jewish characters undergo a forced⁶ mass conversion, they are cast into the role of the "Wandering Jew", an allegorical embodiment of their perennial marginalization. This coerced transformation is not merely a resolution to the narrative but a deliberate realignment of Augustine's doctrine of Jewish witness, striving to rectify the preceding ambiguity. The *Croxton Play*, rather than maintaining a critique of hierarchies, re-emphasizes them by positioning Jewish identity within the traditional, marginal narrative it has been historically allocated by Christian doctrine. Thus, even as Aristorius's and Jonathas's similar introductions challenge established religious boundaries, the play's conclusion firmly and resolutely reinforces racialized hierarchies and perceptions, reminding its audience of the preordained narrative accorded to Jewish identity within medieval Christian cosmology.

This article delves into the intricate interplay between the role of religious doctrine in promoting the objectification and racialization of Jews during the European Middle Ages and how such racialization is specifically depicted in the sole surviving English Host miracle play, the *Croxton Play of the Sacrament*. Notably, the *Croxton Play* portrays many of the complexities—such as socioeconomic dynamics, religious racial disparities, and power dynamics—that marked the relationship between Jewish and Christian communities during this period; however, this portrayal is particularly notable, as—I argue—it appears to be a dramatized inversion of Augustine's doctrine of Jewish witness. This, in turn, sparks a wider exploration into the Christian construction of racialized Jewish identity and its historical implications.

By focusing on the analogous characterizations of Aristorius and Jonathas, this article presents a new understanding of the *Croxton Play of the Sacrament* by utilizing Augustine's doctrine of Jewish witness to analyze the intricate nexus between theological discourse and dramatic representation as mechanisms of perpetuating religious racialization and objectification—a critical inquiry markedly absent in previous studies of the play. While the initial parallels between these two characters might challenge the socioreligious boundaries often entrenched in medieval Christian thought, by the play's conclusion, there is once again a deliberate realignment of religious racial hierarchies: the forced conversion of the Jewish characters pushes them into the allegory of the "Wandering Jew", thereby emphasizing their perpetual marginalization. While the early acts of the play might gesture towards a dismantling of established hierarchies, I contend that, by its conclusion, age-old paradigms are reasserted with renewed vigor, thus emphasizing that the place of Jewish identity, as determined by medieval Christian doctrine, remains not only unaltered but also, and most importantly, subordinate.

2. Augustine's Doctrine of Jewish Witness and the Hermeneutical Jew: The Theological Underpinnings of Medieval Christian–Jewish Relations

The Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* intricately portrays the relationship between Jewish and Christian communities, a dynamic deeply rooted in historical and theological doctrines. At the core of this interplay is Augustine of Hippo's doctrine of Jewish witness, which simultaneously acknowledges and complicates the role of Jews in a Christian-dominated context. Jeremy Cohen's scholarship is indispensable to understanding this relationship, particularly his *Living Letters of the Law: Ideas of the Jew in Medieval Christianity*, in which he examines the hermeneutical and doctrinal construction of Jewish identities through a Christian interpretive lens during the Middle Ages.⁷

Cohen illuminates how medieval Christians perceived Jews through the doctrine of Jewish witness, as established by Augustine of Hippo. According to Augustine, Jews—thought to have misunderstood their scriptures—were paradoxically vital in affirming Christian doctrine. From this belief, Cohen conceptualizes the “hermeneutical Jew” which, he asserts, encapsulates the variegated roles attributed to Jews by medieval Christians with each role developing from their perceived “failure to embrace Christianity when Jesus, [their] own kinsman, came to redeem [them] [...] before all others” (Cohen 1999, p. 33). According to Cohen, these ascribed roles not only made the “hermeneutical Jew” central to Christian doctrinal narratives but also embedded them within a precarious social existence.

Central to understanding the doctrinal impact that shaped medieval Christian–Jewish relations is Augustine's “doctrine of toleration for the Jews of Christendom” (Cohen 1999, p. 13). Cohen posits that this doctrine underscored the Jews' pivotal role in the Christian narrative of salvation history, thereby influencing the tenor of their interactions with Christians during the Middle Ages. As Cohen argues, Augustine's doctrine paradoxically recognized the Jews' theological utility while concurrently endorsing their marginalization, attributing this to their “grave theological errors” (Augustine 2007, p. 133). Cohen's analysis discerns the profound influence of Augustine's doctrine on later ecclesiastical thinking. He exemplifies this through Bernard of Clairvaux, who advocated against harm towards Jews and positioned them as living symbols of a scriptural interpretation that bolstered Christian doctrine. Further, Cohen contends that Augustine, despite acknowledging the Jews' theological deviations and marginal status, attributed to them a paradoxical blessedness. Their mere existence and persistence, he argues, inadvertently confer blessings upon Christ.

Cohen interprets Augustine's writings as casting “the Jews in somewhat praiseworthy terms, despite their grave theological error” (Cohen 1999, p. 39). This perspective is echoed in Augustine's own words, wherein he asserts that “[t]he impious people of the fleshly Jews shall not perish by bodily death. For whoever destroys them in that way shall suffer seven punishments” (Augustine 2007, p. 133). However, while Augustine's prohibition against physically harming Jews may imply a form of protection, it does not infer an unconditional acceptance or integration of Jews within Christian society. On the contrary, I argue that Augustine's doctrine of Jewish witness acts as a preservation tool rooted in punishment rather than in a spirit of inclusion, as echoed in his admonition that Jews must endure “subjection [...] [because] they killed the Lord” (Ibid).

Challenging Cohen's reading, I assert that Augustine's seeming advocacy for Jewish survival was inextricably tied to the theological utility that Jews provided to Christian narratives. Augustine's assertion that Jews remain “cursed [...] and still [carry] out the works of earthly circumcision, the earthly Sabbath, the earthly unleavened bread, and the earthly Pasch” underscores their utility as a living testament to Christian truth, rather than as a community with intrinsic value or divine favor (Augustine 2007, p. 132). In this way, Augustine delineates a stark dichotomy between Jewish and Christian relationships to the divine: Christians do not “rest upon the promise of temporal things” since the “patriarchs and prophets” of the Old Testament “understood [...] things to come [...] and foretold through all those things that were said and done” (Augustine 2007, p. 83). The Christian appropriation of the Old Testament is thus not mimetic but transformative: it is

a reimagining that affirms Christian freedom in contrast to what Augustine portrays as Jewish servitude to the literal and temporal.

Augustine's positioning of Jews as the perpetual carriers of their scriptural condemnation—the “desks [. . .] bearing the law and the prophets as testimony to the tenets of the church”—emerges as one of the more disconcerting aspects of his doctrine (Augustine 2007, p. 140). This perception raises profound questions about the nature and precariousness of Jewish survival under Christian hegemony. Augustine's conceptualization suggests that Jewish continuity is warranted not by their historical agency or divine benevolence but by a passive submission to a role scripted by an overarching Christian theological narrative. Such a view endangers the possibility of Jewish self-definition by relegating their existence to a function within Christian teleology. The ideological framework established by Augustine's doctrine of Jewish witness has historically facilitated the marginalization and objectification of Jewish communities within both ecclesiastical and secular realms. Employing this theological underpinning, I intend to explore the mechanisms of marginalization present in the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*. My analysis will suggest that the play's Jewish characters are not only subjected to objectification but are also employed as narrative instruments to validate the truth of the Christian Sacrament, mirroring the utilization envisioned by Augustine's doctrine.

3. A Crucible of Otherness: Racialized Hierarchies and Its Material Consequences in Christian–Jewish Relations during the European Middle Ages

During the European Middle Ages, the representation of Jews in both secular and religious literature frequently functioned as didactic tools for Christians to construct their own religious and social identities. Here, it is crucial to distinguish between the representation of Jews in texts and the lived experiences of actual Jewish individuals. While my focus is on the former, this discursive practice nevertheless had material consequences as it contributed to the dehumanization and objectification of Jews by reducing them to object lessons in Christian morality and social teachings. At this juncture, the scholarship of Ora Limor provides a pertinent framework that argues that Jews were regulated to the status of an “internal, imagined ‘other’” within Christian society (Limor 2009, p. 135). Such conceptualization adeptly bridges the gap between textual representations and lived material conditions by recognizing Jews both as ideological constructs and as real, physical communities. Her insights help illuminate how these textual portrayals were not merely reflective, but also operative in fortifying the systemic marginalization of Jews. Despite their physical presence in Christian societies, Limor asserts that this physical reality did not amount to a concomitant social or political integration. Rather, she states that Jews found themselves subjected to a spectrum of inhumane conditions—segregation, expulsion, and ostracization—all aimed at positioning them at, or entirely beyond, the periphery of the Christian sociopolitical landscape.

According to Limor, the twelfth-century heightened the Christian “need to delineate clear boundaries” between Christians and Jews as a result of the social, political, and religious transformations in Europe which, in turn, intensified the Christian quest for religious homogeneity (Limor 2009, p. 137). Such demarcation, while sociopolitical, had profound undercurrents of religious doctrine intricately woven into it as it was largely defined by a form of Christian anxiety rooted in the collective memory of the crucifixion.⁸ This enduring psychological trauma played an instrumental role in perpetuating, even accentuating, Christian prejudices against Jews, thereby solidifying existing stereotypes and what came to be recognized as an almost insurmountable religious divide. Within this context, the *Croxton Play of the Sacrament* stands as an edifice of religious doctrine colliding and coalescing with dramatic representation. The culmination of this collision, as I posit, can be located in the juxtaposition of the characters of Aristorius and Jonathas with Augustine's doctrine of Jewish witness. In challenging the prevailing scholarly perspective, notably Cohen's assertion that Augustine's doctrine fostered a protective and privileged status for medieval Jews, my analysis reveals the presence of a nuanced, occasionally

contradictory portrayal embedded within the Croxton *Play*. This complexity suggests that Augustine's influence was more multifaceted than previously acknowledged, opening new avenues for interpreting a racialized and objectified Jewish portrayal in medieval literature.

As Jewish communities found themselves increasingly marginalized and relegated to roles that were oftentimes vilified, a palpable undercurrent of religious, racial, and socioeconomic discrimination intensified. In the context of late twelfth- and early thirteenth-century Europe, rapid urbanization and the emergence of a mercantile class further emphasized the division between Christians and Jews. Excluded from most forms of commercial trade, Jews were often left with money-lending as their occupation, which was both socially and theologically scorned by Christians. Limor contends that such occupational marginalization served to deepen the social chasm between the two groups: "Money-lending strengthened the association between Jews and the sovereigns who needed financial credit, levied high taxes on the earnings of the Jews, and in return provided them with protection. This dependence on the authorities further weakened the status of the Jews" (Limor 2009, p. 146). Beyond the confines of their limited economic roles, Jews were also ensnared in the tenacious web of Christian narratives that propagated pernicious stereotypes, including vile accusations of ritual murder and the nefarious blood libels. These narratives, Limor posits, not only ignited the flames of distrust and antipathy towards Jews but also underpinned the thematic foundation of numerous literary compositions, among which the Croxton *Play* stands out. Limor observes that these libels saw Jews as "maliciously evil, with a deeply rooted demonical, perverted and traitorous character" (Ibid). Such indictments solidified the chasm between communities, casting the Jews perennially as the "Other" and cementing their image in the collective Christian psyche as the embodiment of malevolence and deceit. In this way, the social cleavage was not merely maintained but petrified, framing the Jewish people within an immutable archetype of alterity and marginalization.

In examining the intricate tapestry of Christian–Jewish relations during the European Middle Ages, it becomes imperative to scrutinize the religious and racial frameworks that governed these interactions. One could argue that the scholarly terrain is replete with explorations into the theological divisions between Christianity and Judaism; however, there is otherwise a lack of rigorous inquiry concerning the racial underpinnings of these divisions, particularly in pre-modern settings.⁹ M. Lindsay Kaplan's seminal work in *Figuring Racism in Medieval Christianity* serves as an exception, as she analyzes the Christian concept of *servitus Judaeorum*, or the "enslavement of the Jews",¹⁰ in effort to address what she believes other studies on pre-modern and early modern Jewish and Christian relations have often overlooked: "Against the older critical commonplace that race does not exist prior to the development of the modern discourses of nationalism and biology, [...] [the] concept of cursed inferiority, developed within medieval Christian theology, produces a racial status that functions like and anticipates modern racism" (Kaplan 2019, p. 1). Through her scholarship, Kaplan unveils that medieval ecclesiastical discourses not only propagated but actually initiated a conceptualization of race predicated on the hereditary inferiority derived from allegorical readings of biblical personages—Cain, Ham, and Ishmael—who symbolize the subjugation of Jews under Christian hegemony. In the medieval epoch, Jews found themselves legally consigned "to a position of inferiority" by both sacred decree and profane ordinance, a strategic imposition designed to crystallize and uphold the divide between Christian and Jewish communities (Kaplan 2019, p. 20). Kaplan's incisive analysis not only challenges the entrenched academic notion that race is a distinctly modern construct, but also compellingly argues that the genesis and proliferation of racialization in the medieval period were fundamentally shaped by theological doctrine. This perspective brings to light the intricate ways in which theological hierarchies and teachings contributed to the early formations of racial categorizations, thereby extending the historical roots of racial concepts well beyond the modern era.

In her critical engagement with Augustine's doctrine of Jewish witness, Kaplan presents a compelling counterargument to the established interpretations—such as Cohen's interpretation in his *Living Letters*—which posit that Augustine offered Jews "a privileged

place of protection [which was] beneficial to Christian society” (Kaplan 2019, p. 32). Kaplan posits that these interpretations tend to minimize the gravity of Augustine’s theology, which, in reality, consigned Jews to an intrinsically inferior station. That is, Augustine’s insistence that “Jews’ continued observance of their Law” must perform “a beneficial service to Christian society” also “creates a new inferior status for the Jews as [figurative] slaves to the Church” (Ibid). Kaplan contends that Augustine’s notions of Jewish servitude and transgenerational guilt played a significant role in shaping an enduringly pejorative narrative in which Jews were portrayed as eternally subjugated and spiritually wanting. In turn, this portrayal perpetuated anti-Jewish sentiment that underscored their depiction as a people condemned to a perpetual servility.

The perspectives brought forth by Limor and Kaplan, despite their distinct approaches, collectively contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the religious and racial dynamics of the European Middle Ages. Through their research, they shed light on the systemic degradation of Jews, which extended beyond mere religious differences and fostered a race-making¹¹ process that predates modern forms of discrimination. It is crucial to acknowledge that late medieval perceptions of Jews were not limited to religious othering. Rather, they were intricately intertwined with a process of racialization that reified a superior Christian identity and fortified Christian dominance. By integrating their analyses, I aim to argue that the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* emerges as emblematic of the socioreligious zeitgeist of the Middle Ages. In utilizing both Limor and Kaplan’s analyses, I cast a spotlight on the interplay of religious racialization, objectification, and the central role of the Croxton *Play* in molding this discourse. This play, I argue, becomes not just a mere literary artifact but a lens through which the socioreligious ethos of the European Middle Ages can be discerned and dissected.

4. Converting Bodies, Preserving Boundaries: The Paradox of Inclusion in the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*

In this segment, I explore the intricate dynamics of Jewish–Christian relations in the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*, bringing to light critical but often neglected facets within scholarly discussions, most notably the establishment and perpetuation of racialized hierarchies and the invocation of the allegorical “Wandering Jew”. In existing literature, Greg Walker offers an interpretation that suggests that the Croxton *Play* allows for a reincorporation of Judaism within the purview of Christian doctrine while also preserving the integrity of Jewish identity; however, I believe that this assessment warrants further scrutiny as it may not sufficiently account for the intricate layers of racial and religious dynamics present within the text. Upon closer examination, it is evident that the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* does not simply depict the conversion of Jewish characters as a benign act of spiritual redemption but rather utilizes this narrative mechanism to reinforce and justify prevailing racial hierarchies. I contend that such conversions represent a symbolic aggression that subjects the Jewish characters to profound dehumanization and objectification, thereby reinforcing their subservience to the overarching Christological narrative.

The figure of the “Wandering Jew” as explored by Lisa Lampert-Weissig offers a lens through which the portrayal and conversion of Jewish characters in the play can be analyzed. According to Lampert-Weissig, the “Wandering Jew” is not merely an individual but rather a symbolic representation of the Jewish people as perpetual outsiders, doomed to wander as punishment for their purported role in the crucifixion. This figure is frequently employed within medieval Christian literature to exemplify the endurance of Judaism solely to bear witness to Christian truth, hence affirming Augustine’s doctrine of Jewish witness; however, I argue that in the Croxton *Play*, the utilization of this symbol—and the violence enacted upon it—underscores the ways in which the Jewish characters are not only marginalized but are effectively stripped of their humanity, reduced to mere objects whose suffering and eventual conversion validate the supremacy of Christian doctrine.

The objectification of the Jewish characters in the Croxton *Play* is, I assert, emblematic of the prevalent attitudes toward Jews in medieval Christian literature. By the play’s end,

any semblance of shared humanity or blurred lines between the Jewish and Christian characters is decisively eradicated, and the Jewish characters are subsumed into a narrative device in which their conversions serve as a dramatic spectacle that confirms the power and righteousness of a Christian worldview. In this process, I contend that the Christian audience is taught a dual lesson: they not only witness the ultimate triumph of Christian doctrine, but they are also cautioned against the moral and spiritual dangers represented by the Jewish characters, dangers that Aristorius and, by proxy, other Christian merchants flirt with through their occupation.

Shifting focus from the thematic to the instrumental elements of the narrative, it is important to analyze the banns—a distinctive feature of medieval drama that carries profound narrative and thematic weight.¹² These proclamations perform a dual role: they not only herald the commencement of the play but also serve as a distinctive narrative apparatus. Thus, the banns stand as an indispensable overture, not merely prefacing the drama but actively shaping the moral and theological scaffolding of the narrative, equipping the audience with a framework through which to decipher the unfolding events. Within the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*, the banns occupy a vital role, sculpting the spectators' anticipations and solidifying the narrative's intended message:

1 VEXILLATOR Of this Cristen merchaunte he freyned sore,
Wane he wolde have had hys entente.
Twenti pownd and merchaundyse mor
He proferyd for the Holy Sacrament.

2 VEXILLATOR But the Cristen marchaunte therof sed nay,
Because hys profer was of so lityll valewe:
An hundder pownd but he wolde pay
No lenger theron he shuld pursewe. (*Play*, 21–28)

The above dialogue, pivotal in its brevity, encapsulates the fraught negotiation over the sacrament's value, adroitly setting the stage for the central thematic conflict of the play, and propels the audience directly into the core of the Croxton *Play's* moral dilemma. It is here, in this bargaining over the price of the sacrament, that the audience confronts the immediate and disquieting commodification of that which is sacred. The sacrament, within the confines of this dialogue, is transformed from a holy relic into a deeply contested symbol, ensnared at the intersection of divine reverence and monetary worth. This pronouncement by the Vexillator stretches far beyond the realm of simple storytelling. Rather, it provides a discerning glimpse into the complex dynamics of religious veneration entangled with the forces of material exchange.

The Vexillator's exposition casts characters, specifically Aristorius, against the canvas of social norms, magnifying his individual actions in order to interrogate more foundational questions about the ethical constitution of a society that integrates sacred belief systems with economic realities. At his core, Aristorius, a Christian merchant, embodies the moral ambiguities confronting Christian merchants during the Middle Ages. His choices, while they can be viewed as individual moral lapses, are situated within a wider social framework by the play's design. In turn, this positions the audience to contemplate the social systems that might not only tolerate but also promote such behaviors.

This approach broadens the scope of moral inquiry from individual accountability to the larger systemic forces that shape and are manifested in personal actions. It also uncovers the ethical quandaries specifically encountered by a particular stratum of Christian society: merchants. Positioned at the crossroads of spirituality and commerce, these individuals faced the challenge of reconciling their business endeavors with their religious principles, especially when such endeavors seemed to violate religious norms. The Vexillator's exposition, while highlighting this immediate critique, also extends the analysis to broader social dimensions. The transformation of revered elements like the sacrament into negotiable commodities reveals deeper moral conundrums. The play confronts its audience with these

unsettling inquiries: What mechanisms within a Christian society allow its most sacred symbols to be subject to trade and barter? What implications does this have for the broader moral orientation of such a society? By juxtaposing individual behaviors with systemic norms, the play critiques both personal decisions and the overarching social structures that give rise to such decisions.

Arising from the moral complexities embodied by Aristorius and the subsequent socioeconomic implications delineated in the drama, the Vexillator's declarations precipitate a pivotal shift. They redirect the gaze of the audience from the ethical transgressions afflicting Christian commercial practices to the ideological frictions that arise in the interactions between Jewish characters and Christian sacramental practices. The Vexillator's vivid account of the Jewish characters' treatment of the holy bread serves as a narrative fulcrum:

And sythe thay toke that blysed brede so sownde
 And in a cawdron they ded Hym boyle.
 In a clothe full just they yt wounde,
 And so they ded Hym sethe in oyle.
 And than thay putt Hym to a new turmentry,
 In an hoote ovyn speryd Hym fast.
 There He appyred with woundys bloody;
 The ovyn rofe asondre and all to-brast. (41–48)

This passage, while distinctly irreverent from a Christian doctrinal standpoint, is also depicted as a crucial catalyst for divine manifestation within the play. It is the dramatic actions described by the Vexillator that incite the miraculous intervention, which becomes central to the narrative's unfolding. This portrayal not only underscores the sacrilege from a Christian perspective but also foreshadows the impending divine vindication, which is instrumental to the thematic progression of the play.

In this light, the depiction of Jewish characters in the banns reveals a nuanced interpretation of agency, framed in two dimensions: the initiative of action and its ensuing consequences. While Augustine's doctrine of Jewish witness characterizes Jews as passive exemplars from whom Christians derive doctrinal truths, thus relegating them to a subordinate status, the Croxton *Play* appears to take a slight interpretative departure. Far from passive, the Jewish characters are cast as active adversaries—recurrent desecrators—to Christian faith: "They grevid our Lord gretly on grownd/ And put Hym to a new passyoun,/ With daggers goven Hym many a grevyos wound,/ Nayled Hym to a pyller, with pynsons plukked Hym doune" (37–40). Such charged diction, evoking the crucifixion through terms like "daggers" and "nayled", carries potent symbolic weight, stirring anti-semitic notions of unending duplicity.¹³ However, the agency they possess in performing these actions is arguably circumscribed. Their deeds do not spring from an autonomous intent but are rather confined to the role outlined for them in Christian narratives.

While it is tempting to dismiss this portrayal as part of a larger network of religious allegories, I argue that a closer examination reveals a more insidious undertone since such portrayals buttress the antisemitic belief that Jews are both spiritual and moral deviants and, therefore, amplify their racialized and subordinate positioning within Christian society. The Croxton *Play* constructs a theological narrative that ostensibly bestows a degree of autonomy upon the Jewish characters, yet this autonomy is merely illusory. The narrative, while momentarily endowing Jewish characters with agency, ultimately entangles them within the prevailing Christian worldview. The results of their actions—though initially suggesting self-determined agency—ultimately underscore their scripted roles, portraying them as mere conduits for the affirmation of Christian "truth". This apparent autonomy is thus unmasked as a narrative device. Within this framework, the Croxton *Play* does not subvert but rather reinforces Augustine's doctrine of Jewish witness, thereby perpetuating, rather than critiquing, the deep-seated religious and racial schisms it ostensibly opposes. This reassertion of traditional doctrinal views not only underscores the play's concurrence

with contemporary ecclesiastical perspectives but also reinforces the social and theological status quo of the Middle Ages.

The careful dissection of the language employed in the Vexillator's description of the Croxton *Play's* pivotal scene reveals much about the interplay between autonomy and subjugation. The Vexillator describes the conversion of Jewish characters with significant lexical choices: "Thus in our lawe they wer made stedfast: /The Holy Sacrement sheuyd them grette favour. /In contrycyon thyr hertys wer cast/And went and shewyd ther lyves to a confesour" (49–52). The term "stedfast" here, as explicated by the *Middle English Dictionary*, conveys notions of unwavering fidelity, typically associated with a believer deeply rooted in the tenets of their faith.¹⁴ This steadfastness implies a resistance to external forces, a constancy in religious practice and belief that endures beyond the temporal.

Yet, when the Vexillator proclaims, "Thus in *our* lawe they wer made stedfast", a starkly different connotation is unveiled (49, emphasis mine). The coupling of "stedfast" with "our" sharply divides religious identities, segregating the Christian in-group from the Jewish out-group. Moreover, the Jewish characters are "made stedfast", which suggests a process that is enacted upon them rather than one that emanates from a personal, intrinsic evolution of faith. This phrasing nuances steadfastness with an element of coercion, as the subjects are brought into the fold of "our lawe" not through personal revelation but through a transformative imposition that essentially functions as a conquest of Christian "truth" over Jewish "error".

The performative dimension of the Jewish characters' conversion, particularly as it is mediated through the mechanics of contrition and confession, is equally important in unearthing the play's conceptual investment in depicting the Jewish characters as vessels for the propagation of Christian ideology. The Vexillator's phrasing—"In contrycyon thyr hertys wer cast"—employs a grammatical passivity that implies the Jewish characters are not the agents of their contrition, but rather, their hearts have been acted upon, cast into contrition by an external force (51). This syntactical choice effectively strips the Jewish characters of their own volition, rendering their spiritual transformation as something that is affected by them. The process of their conversion, therefore, is orchestrated for the edification and reassurance of a Christian audience.

The term "favour" as used in the line "The Holy Sacrement sheuyd them grette favour" further elucidates this performative conversion (50). To a modern audience, the term might evoke notions of equitable and undeserved divine kindness; however, in the dramatic context of the play, set against the backdrop of medieval Christendom, this "favour" assumes a more complex, multifaceted significance. Rather than an intimate encounter with the divine or an insular act of salvation, this "favour" is rendered as a public testament, a kind of divine accolade that functions to affirm the Christian doctrine publicly. It is emblematic of sacramental power, not merely to redeem but to demonstrate visibly and irrefutably the "truth" of Christianity.

The conversion narrative within the Croxton *Play* is artfully rendered on two intricately connected levels: the personal transformation of the Jewish characters and the public spectacle of their conversion. Individually, the Jewish characters undergo a metamorphosis that brings them into conformity with Christian teachings, an arc that signifies a personal, albeit orchestrated, alignment with the prevailing religious ideology. This individual transformation, however, is overshadowed by the broader communal context; it is within this public domain that the conversion is dramatized, embodying a powerful depiction of Christian doctrinal victory over Jewish belief. On this communal stage, the conversion is imbued with a performative quality that transcends the internal experiences of the characters. It is manifested as a theatrical display, not only reinforcing the narrative's religious stratification but also mirroring the actual social dynamics of medieval Christendom.

In transitioning to a broader analytical context, it is crucial to incorporate the critical discussions present in contemporary scholarship to shed light on the delicate interplay of Jewish and Christian narratives within the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*. In this regard, Greg Walker's stance, as delineated in his work "And Here's Your Host...: Jews and

Others in the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*”, confronts the conventional assertion that the play serves as a vehicle for “violently ultra-orthodox [. . .] theology and politics” (Walker 2009, p. 42). Walker posits that the play’s resolution, far from perpetuating a divisive and destructive religious schism, tends toward a harmonious “reincorporation and integrity (in all senses of that word)” and, thus, “alienates its audience, unsettles familiar conventions, and blurs the very distinctions between the domestic and the foreign, the familiar and the alien, virtue and vice” (Walker 2009, p. 45).

Walker argues against the reduction of the play to antisemitic propaganda, maintaining that “for it to be propaganda, the play would surely have to be simpler and more direct in its didacticism, and less willing to subvert the stereotypes upon which such narratives rely” (Walker 2009, p. 44). He advances the notion that the play’s conclusion, characterized by the conversion and ceremonial integration of Jewish characters into the Christian faith, defies easy categorization into the trope of erasure and replacement, typically associated with antisemitic literature. Rather than witnessing the annihilation of Jewish spaces and identity, the play presents a conciliatory procession that amalgamates both Jews and Christians in a communal celebration, as Walker describes:

[The Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*] ends not with an act of destruction and erasure, the demolition of the Jewish spaces of home and synagogue and their replacement with a Christian chapel or site of commemoration, but with a procession, in which the actors—representing both Jews and Christians—join the audience to walk behind the Bishop and the newly restored host to the local church, singing *Te Deum Laudamus*. (Walker 2009, p. 45)

Nevertheless, Walker’s portrayal may inadvertently underplay the latent symbolic violence inherent in the narrative. While physical aggression towards the Jewish characters is eschewed in the concluding scenes, I argue that the Croxton *Play* engages in a different, perhaps more insidious, form of violence, which is encoded in the narrative arc of forced conversion. This thematic element in the play not only compels the Jewish characters into a semblance of religious assimilation but also perpetuates the enduring and problematic trope of the “Wandering Jew”. The veneer of unity and reconciliation achieved through the conversion masks the underlying coercive act that strips the characters of their autonomy, ultimately reinforcing a narrative of displacement and rootlessness that has historically been ascribed to Jewish identity. This act of symbolic violence, although devoid of physical harm, is a powerful reinforcement of the stereotypes it ostensibly aims to dismantle, insidiously sustaining the very essence of the “Wandering Jew” mythos within the fabric of the play’s resolution.

It is within this framework that we must interpret the final monologue of Jonathas, who, despite articulating a seemingly sincere conversion, embodies this very paradox. The route prescribed to Jonathas and the other Jewish characters diverges sharply from that of Aristorius, underscoring a dichotomy grounded in religious and racial identity that the play’s conclusion seeks to delineate. Jonathas’s proclamation to “[. . .] walke by contré and cost,/Owr wyckyd lyvyng for to restore,/ And trust in God of myghtys most,/ Never to offend as we have don befor” ostensibly echoes a traditional Christian pilgrimage (*Play*, 964–967). However, the explicit absence of a sacred destination in Jonathas’s narrative casts their journey as a form of indefinite wandering rather than a targeted pilgrimage. While the Middle English Dictionary defines “pilgrimage” as a journey to a specific sacred place or to a specific saintly relic, Jonathas’s path is bereft of a holy end.¹⁵ Their endless wandering becomes a symbolic exile, a punitive measure that has no closure or sanctuary, mirroring the anti-Semitic trope of the “Wandering Jew”—a figure condemned to wander the earth until the Second Coming.

In stark contrast, Aristorius’s penitent trajectory remains within the confines of his “contré” where he is to live an amended life and impart the lesson of his experience to others: “Into my contré now wyll I fare, For to amende myn wyckyd lyfe,/ And to kep the people owt of care/I wyll teache thys lesson to man and wife” (972–975). His penance is localized and constructive. He is tasked with educating his community, thereby reinforcing his role

within society. Here, his penance does not disconnect him from his cultural and religious roots but serves to further entrench him within the Christian social fabric. This bifurcation of destiny according to religious identity—a pilgrimage for the Christian and perpetual exile for the Jew—encapsulates a critical thematic concern of the Croxton *Play*. The outward structure of the narrative espouses a seemingly egalitarian resolution of conversion and inclusion. Yet, the conclusion reveals a continuance of division and marginalization. The play thus uses the act of conversion not as a harmonizing force but as a sophisticated mechanism to perpetuate a social othering of the Jewish faith and people.

The narrative structure of the play, although ostensibly advocating for an egalitarian approach through the conversion of its Jewish characters, in actuality underscores continued social division and marginalization, using the act of conversion not as a unifying gesture but rather as a sophisticated means to sustain the exclusion of the Jewish faith and people. This subtle but profound othering within the context of the play can be related to the broader cultural myth of the “Wandering Jew” and its implications as explored by Lisa Lampert-Weissig. According to Lampert-Weissig, the figure of the “Wandering Jew” embodies a kind of symbolic violence, encapsulating a paradoxical existence as both a relic and a slave within Christian narratives—a man cursed for his mockery of Jesus to live until the end of days, belonging to neither the world of the living nor the peace of the dead. Lampert-Weissig explicates this condition, stating that the “Wandering Jew” exists in a liminal state that could be “profitably compared to the social death of slavery”, wherein the individual is deprived of their social identity and transformed into an object devoid of agency (Lampert-Weissig 2015, p. 96). Furthermore, she elucidates the duality of the character: “As a man in thrall to his curse, the Wandering Jew is both relic and slave. He is not quite living, not quite dead; he is human, but also an object” (Ibid).

The relic-like state of the “Wandering Jew” can be understood as emblematic of a deeper social mechanism within Christian hegemony. According to Lampert-Weissig, this mechanism enshrines a form of symbolic violence that relegates the figure to an existence that is neither fully alive nor dead, a human being reduced to an object by the curse. This dual nature is intrinsic to the paradox of the “Wandering Jew”, who Lampert-Weissig posits as “a living eyewitness, indeed the living eyewitness, to the events of the Passion. He is the relic who can actually respond to questions” (Lampert-Weissig 2015, p. 95). This suggests that while the “Wandering Jew” is reduced to a state akin to objecthood, he is simultaneously endowed with the agency of testimony, though it is an agency circumscribed by the Christian narrative that demands his eternal punishment. The comparison drawn between the “Wandering Jew” and the Jewish characters of the play, particularly in their post-conversion state, is underscored by narratives of exile and wandering without end. Lampert-Weissig’s articulation of the “Wandering Jew” as both a witness and an object—a relic who can respond—mirrors the converted Jewish characters in the Croxton *Play* who become living testimonials of the power of the Eucharist yet are subjected to the symbolic violence of perpetual exile and forced wandering.

Walker’s assessment that the Croxton *Play* moves from “the chaos of doubt and false belief into the harmony of faith” seems at first to propose a narrative arc that ends in spiritual and communal coherence (Walker 2009, p. 46). Yet, this reading fails to acknowledge the inherent violence in relegating the Jewish characters to an existence of dehumanized objects, subjected to forced conversion and eternal wandering, which only perpetuates their otherness and subordination. In this context, the Croxton *Play* becomes an exemplar of how such narratives sustain Christian dominance by portraying Jewish beliefs and practices as not merely incorrect but as so fundamentally flawed that conversion itself does not fully redeem the Jewish characters. Instead, it subjects them to a new form of bondage—one that is spiritual and unending.¹⁶

5. Negotiating the Sacred and the Profane: The Croxton *Play of the Sacrament's* Dramatic Assertion of Christian Hegemony

The Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* intricately delineates Jewish and Christian identities, creating a rich allegorical tableau that serves as a medium for expounding medieval Christian doctrine and morality. This historical backdrop sets the stage for understanding the theological interpretations of this era, particularly as articulated by influential Christian figures such as Augustine. At the heart of this analysis lie the figures of Jonathas, the Jewish merchant, and Aristorius, his Christian counterpart, with their characterizations transcending mere narrative constructs and, instead, being deeply imbued with profound theological significance. Within medieval Christian cosmology, the interplay between materialism and spirituality is pivotal to understanding the often intricate and fraught interactions between Christians and Jews. I posit that, by casting Jews as embodiments of materiality and juxtaposing them against the spiritual “truth” of Christianity, the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* delves into the perceived threats that Jews are purported to pose to Christians.

The theological underpinnings of the juxtaposition between Aristorius and Jonathas are rooted in the teachings of early Church Fathers, particularly Augustine of Hippo. His doctrine of Jewish witness provides a crucial lens for interpreting these interactions within the play. Augustine articulates a fundamental dichotomy between the “earthly” practices of Jews and the “spiritual” truths of Christianity:

[T]he Church recognizes that the Jewish people is cursed and reveals that, after Christ was killed, that people still carries out the works of earthly circumcision, the earthly Sabbath, the earthly unleavened bread, and the earthly Pasch. All these earthly works keep hidden the strength derived from understanding the grace of Christ, which is not given to the Jews who continue in their impiety and unbelief. (Augustine 2007, p. 132)

Augustine posits that the continuation of traditional Jewish rituals—circumcision, the Sabbath, unleavened bread, and Pasch—following the death of Christ, is indicative of a spiritual curse. These “earthly” works, as labeled by Augustine and other medieval Church leaders, are interpreted as veiling the profound insights available through the grace of Christ—a grace that, according to this perspective, is inaccessible to the Jews who persist in their “impiety and unbelief”. Augustine’s doctrine of Jewish witness implies a profound disconnect between the corporeal adherence to ancient rites and the spiritual liberation offered through Christ’s teachings, suggesting that the former impedes the recognition of the latter. This doctrinal viewpoint positions Jewish practices not merely as antiquated but as active barriers to divine comprehension, thereby justifying the marginalization of Jewish belief within a Christian hegemony. Yet, as much as Augustine’s doctrine positions Jews as morally inferior to Christians, it also posits the necessity of Jewish presence within Christian societies in order to serve as both a testament to and a validation of Christian scripture. Jews, therefore, occupy a paradoxical position—marginalized, yet essential; witnesses to the Christian revelation, yet marked by their disbelief.

Augustine’s doctrine of Jewish witness, I argue, is complicated in the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* through the character of Aristorius, whose occupation as a wealthy, worldly merchant—a profession commonly associated with Jews in medieval Europe due to restrictions that limited their engagement in various economic activities—symbolically aligns him with the Jewish characters. By engaging in morally ambiguous or outright inappropriate behavior for a Christian, Aristorius serves as a cautionary figure, exemplifying the pitfalls medieval Christians are expected to avoid. Aristorius’s complex persona not only reflects individual moral dilemmas but also broader social dynamics. Thus, Aristorius emerges as a didactic mirror reflecting the potential moral failings of its contemporary Christian audience by portraying a Christian who has not only strayed from the ideal but who also resembles the “Other”—in this case, the Jewish merchant. Aristorius’s speech detailing his extensive travels and mercantile success—as delineated in the lines “In Jerusalem and in Jherico among the Jewes jentle,/ Among the Caldeys and Cattlyngys, kend is my

komyng/In Raynes and in Rome to Seynt Petyers temple”—ostensibly boasts of his commercial enterprise and worldly ventures (*Play*, 105–107). However, a deeper analysis of this speech reveals a complex interweaving of cultural and religious symbolism, underscoring the intertwined nature of commerce, religion, and culture in the medieval epoch.

Aristorius’s travels span the breadth of the known medieval world, from the holiest cities in the Christian and Jewish narratives to important centers of trade and culture. The cities of Jerusalem and Jericho hold deep biblical resonance, the former being the site of the Crucifixion and the latter associated with miraculous conquest.¹⁷ These locations are more than simple geographic markers: they symbolize the heart of the Christian narrative and serve as points of pilgrimage, embodying the sacred journey toward spiritual redemption. Conversely, the mention of the “Caldeys” and “Cattlyngys” people may represent both the exotic and the secular, places to medieval Christians that resonate with mercantile activity and cultural exchange. This amalgamation of religious and commercial geography in Aristorius’s declaration transcends his accomplishments, signaling a broader conflation within the cultural psyche of the medieval era. The spaces he enumerates merge their spiritual and commercial identities, reflecting a union of the sacred and the profane. Aristorius, via his commercial engagements, becomes a junction where these divergent identities and moral landscapes intersect, mirroring the social anxieties and the complex socioreligious milieu of the time.

Transitioning from Aristorius’s extensive travels, Derrick Higginbotham’s insights in his article “Impersonators in the Market: Merchants and the Premodern Nation in the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*” offer a profound lens to understand the play’s preoccupation with the instability in spiritual and commercial identities. Higginbotham astutely observes that the play’s initial setting in the city of “Eraclea”, within the realm of “Aragon”, not only situates the narrative geographically but also “asks its audience to engage in a form of [...] misrepresentation that mingles the native and foreign” to explore both identity and nationhood (Higginbotham 2007, p. 164). He draws parallels between this theatrical misrepresentation and the medieval practice of “coloring goods”, which involved English merchants collaborating with foreigners to “pretend that the foreigner’s goods were [their] own at the custom-house” to evade taxes (Ibid). Coloring goods, thus, engendered “a fear of indeterminacy of identity” and a loss of the merchants’ “orientation toward their ‘Englishness’” (Higginbotham 2007, p. 165). According to Higginbotham, this fear of indeterminacy is epitomized in the characters of Aristorius and Jonathas, whose interactions in the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* reflect the unsettling “unfixing [of] [...] geographic affiliation, social rank, and religious identity” in the face of their commercial exchanges (Ibid).

While Higginbotham’s analysis is incisive, my argument extends his interpretation by proposing that the Croxton *Play* not only critiques the instability of identities engendered by mercantile interactions but also examines how such mercantile occupations encourage Christian characters like Aristorius to misinterpret established religious and racial hierarchies, as delineated in Augustine’s doctrine of Jewish witness. This critique is notably articulated through Aristorius’s speech, wherein he boasts of being accepted among both Christians and “Jewes jentle” (*Play*, 105). The word “jentle”, if read as a homophone for “gentile”, obscures the distinction between the Jewish characters and their Christian counterparts, suggesting a common humanity that the play’s narrative structure seemingly refutes in its conclusion.¹⁸ Alternatively, if “jentle” is interpreted as “genteel”, it subtly undermines the prevailing narrative by attributing civility and status to the Jewish characters, challenging their portrayal as the quintessential “Other” in Christendom. This interpretation destabilizes the prevailing Christian narrative which endeavors to uphold its supremacy by denying Jews any semblance of dignity.

Nevertheless, the subversive potential of Aristorius’s speech is ultimately re-contained within a conventional religious framework. The play’s conclusion, culminating in the forced conversion of the Jewish characters, reaffirms the unyielding boundary between Christian and Jew, underscoring the limitations of any subversive elements within the

narrative. In the end, the allegorical figure of the “Wandering Jew” emerges, symbolizing perpetual marginalization and acting as a narrative tool that reinforces Jewish exclusion from Christian teleological history. Consequently, I argue that the Croxton *Play* oscillates between challenging and reaffirming religious divisions, mirroring the broader social dynamics of the medieval period which was characterized by the paradox of a burgeoning global market that was both inclusive in its reach and exclusive in its spiritual economies.

Higginbotham also explores how changing international trade dynamics reanimated discourses of premodern nationhood and emphasized a “competitive contact between a distinct ‘us’ and ‘them’” (Higginbotham 2007, p. 165). As Higginbotham argues, both the Christian merchant, Aristorius, and the Jewish merchant, Jonathas, represent this dissolution of identity and allegiance to “to any geographic place, social rank, or religion”, which allows Aristorius to “ingratiate himself with the ‘foreign’ [. . .] by acting as an Other” (Higginbotham 2007, p. 174, 176). I argue, however, that the play’s focus is not merely on the instability of identity for both merchants, but rather on the specific instability of Aristorius’s identity, which is precipitated by his mercantile occupation. Indeed, while the Croxton *Play* does thematically engage with the instability of identity as an important thematic element, Jonathas remains a consistent figure throughout, firmly anchored in his role as the non-Christian, foreign merchant, embodying the ‘Other’ within the social and religious landscape of the play.¹⁹ This persistent portrayal of Jonathas is instrumental in highlighting the contrast with Aristorius’s instability in identity which is precipitated by his occupation as a merchant. Contrary to Higginbotham’s argument that Aristorius’s impersonation of the ‘Other’ transforms him into a foreign, Jewish merchant and allows him to “occupy the place of the Other”, I argue that it is his occupation as a merchant which corrupts him and encourages him to misread the subordinated positioning of Jews within Christian society, as delineated by Augustine’s doctrine of Jewish witness (Higginbotham 2007, p. 177).

The interaction between Aristorius and Jonathas further illuminates not just the breakdown but also the nuanced misinterpretation of social and hierarchical boundaries. Aristorius, by inviting Jonathas to sit with him, disrupts late medieval social norms, materializing the play’s themes of identity confusion: “Sir Jonathas, ye be wellcum unto myn hall!/I pray yow come up and sit bi me,/ And tell me wat good ye have to sell,/ And yf ony bargeny mad [made] may be” (*Play*, 270–273). This act of misplaced familiarity embodies the broader social tensions arising from the destabilizing forces of commerce and materialism, challenging the rigid religious and racial hierarchies of the time. Significantly, Aristorius’s use of the honorific “Sir” to address Jonathas linguistically elevates the Jewish merchant within the Christian social order, a subtle yet profound inversion of established norms. In the late medieval period, such a title usually denoted a person’s rank within the feudal system and was typically associated with knighthood or nobility. By conferring this title upon Jonathas, Aristorius temporarily disrupts the traditional subjugation of Jews within the Christian social hierarchy, offering a fleeting glimpse of social parity between the social ‘Other’ and the Christian self.

This inversion, however, is not devoid of its own complexities. Aristorius’s motivations are not purely egalitarian but are interwoven with the mercantile ethos that permeates the play. His greeting is as much a reflection of his commercial interests as it is a subversion of social norms. By welcoming Jonathas into his hall and inviting him to sit alongside him, Aristorius indicates that the pursuit of profit can, at times, transcend entrenched religious divides. Yet this gesture is laden with ambivalence. Aristorius’s breach of social protocol is not depicted as an act of moral or social progressiveness. Instead, it is framed within the narrative as a transgression of the proper order, a deviation from the religious and social norms that dictate Christian supremacy and Jewish subordination.

This ambivalence extends to Aristorius’s commercial endeavors, as evidenced when he probes Jonathas about potential trades: “And tell me wat good ye have to sell,/ And yf ony bargeny mad may be” (272–273). The commercial exchanges between Aristorius and Jonathas not only reflect personal motives but also symbolize wider social tensions

wherein commercial interests have the potential to disrupt the social order by bringing a Christian and a Jew to a level of temporal equality. The play ultimately resolves this tension by reinforcing the prevailing social and religious order. The forced conversion of the Jewish characters acts as a narrative device that reaffirms Christian hegemony and restores the status quo.

Amid the social and religious complexities of the medieval period, Aristorius's internal struggles in the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* become particularly revealing. His decision to sell the Host—a profound act symbolizing the body of Christ and a revered element in Christian liturgy—to Jonathas, a Jewish merchant, marks a pivotal moment of tension in the narrative. Aristorius's fear as expressed in the lines "I fere me that I shuld stond in drede,/ [. . .] And preste or clerke myght me aspye,/ To the bysshope thei wolde go tell that dede/ And apeche me of eresye!" (295, 297–299) reflects not only personal trepidation but also the overarching fear of social disgrace and the severe repercussions for heresy prevalent during the Middle Ages.²⁰ Intriguingly, while this act could be seen as a betrayal of Christian doctrine, it is Aristorius's lack of spiritual remorse that is most telling. His contemplation lacks genuine spiritual introspection; he is more concerned with the immediate temporal consequences rather than the potential eternal ramifications of his actions. This absence of theological guilt in Aristorius's considerations poignantly underscores a shift in his morality wherein social reputation and fear of punitive action overshadow deeper spiritual convictions. His trepidation, rooted more in fear of social judgment than in fear of divine retribution, reveals the complex interplay between personal gain, social expectations, and religious orthodoxy in the late medieval period.

6. Conclusions

The Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* stands as a pivotal work in medieval English drama, intricately reflecting the delicate socioreligious milieu of its era. At first glance, the play seems to advocate for religious reconciliation, yet a more discerning analysis reveals a reinforcement of enduring divisions. The symbolic violence meted out to the Jewish characters through forced conversion and dehumanization not only perpetuates their marginalization but also cements their "othered" status within the narrative framework. This dichotomy underscores the play's role as a mirror to the social and religious intricacies of medieval England.

Deepening this analysis, the play intricately problematizes yet ultimately upholds the concept of the "hermeneutical Jew" within the framework of Augustinian doctrine. The character of Jonathas embodies this idea, initially blurring religious lines through his shared merchant identity with Aristorius; however, the narrative trajectory diverges dramatically towards the end, recasting Jonathas as the archetypal exiled "Wandering Jew", in stark contrast to Aristorius, who finds redemption through localized penance. This bifurcation along religious lines not only highlights the systemic segregation of Jews in medieval society but also underlines the superficiality of the narrative's initial semblance of unity. In his article, "And Here's Your Host. . . : Jews and Others in the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*", Greg Walker notes the play's progression "from chaos of doubt and false belief into the harmony of faith" (Walker 2009, p. 46). Contrary to Walker's observation, I have argued that the forced conversion of Jewish characters, far from being a conciliatory gesture, is laden with inherent violence and reasserts their marginalized status within the Christian narrative.

Furthermore, the play skillfully dramatizes the social tensions between burgeoning commerce and spirituality. Aristorius, a character torn between his faith and commercial interests, desecrates the Eucharist, which reflects broader social concerns about the erosion of sacred values amid economic expansion. His connection with the Jewish merchant Jonathas, marked by their shared commercial interests, temporarily disrupts established social hierarchies, suggesting a potential bridging of faith boundaries; however, this is swiftly undercut by the forced conversion of Jewish characters, which reasserts religious divisions and negates any subversive potential that the narrative might have suggested.

Aristorius's engagement in trade with both sacred sites and commercial centers, spanning diverse geographical and cultural realms, epitomizes the medieval psyche's struggle to reconcile the spiritual with the profane. His business dealings, described as spanning "Jerusalem and in Jherico among the Jewes gentle/Among the Caldeys and Cattlyngys" (*Play*, 105–106), highlight the paradoxical coexistence of the sacred and the secular in the medieval world. The initial portrayal of Jews as "gentle" offers a fleeting glimpse of shared humanity between the two characters, which is quickly negated by the narrative's conclusion. As a liminal figure, Aristorius embodies the profound contradictions and tensions of his society.

The play's exploration of the complexity between Jews and Christians, however, ultimately gives way to conventional narratives that reinforce Christian dominance. The moral ambiguity surrounding Aristorius and his occupation as a merchant serves as a cautionary tale against the corrupting influence of materialism on faith, while the problematic portrayal of Jewish stereotypes within the play through that same occupation underpins the assertion of Christian supremacy and casts Judaism in the light of spiritual illegitimacy. Therefore, the forced conversion of the Jewish characters is depicted not merely as a path to salvation but as a theatrical affirmation of Christianity's power, serving to contain the socioreligious tensions that the play itself raises.

Incorporating sociohistorical insights from scholars like Kaplan, Limor, and Lampert-Weissig, I shed light on the play's multidimensional portrayal of interfaith relations. Recent interpretations tend to highlight the play's inclusivity, but this examination underscores its inherent violence, particularly in the way Jewish characters are manipulated as objects within a Christian-centric narrative. Lampert-Weissig, in her insightful analysis, articulates how the forced conversion and the imposed allegorical role of the "Wandering Jew" enact a form of symbolic violence through dehumanization, akin to a social death. This outward reconciliation masks an undercurrent of continued marginalization and subjugation within the narrative structure.

Central to this discussion is the complex interplay of doctrine, racialization, and economics. Augustine's formulation of Jews as essential witnesses yet spiritually deficient reifies a form of religious racialization enacted through the play's narrative. The Jewish characters paradoxically fulfill Augustine's role: their forced conversion not only confirms their perceived spiritual deficiency but also serves to underscore the dominance of Christianity. The element of merchantry introduces additional layers of complexity wherein Aristorius and Jonathas, through their shared trade interests, momentarily exhibit an unexpected equity; however, this brief moment of religious coexistence is quickly overshadowed by the enduring religious identities that re-segregate them, encapsulating the era's worries about economic exchange facilitating cross-cultural contact and ingrained segregation.

The moral quandary faced by Aristorius as a Christian merchant illuminates the broader social anxieties concerning the preservation of sacred values in the face of self-interest and pragmatic concerns. His preoccupation with reputation over piety is emblematic of deeper social concerns regarding the potential corruption of faith by materialism and ambition. As noted by Limor, the urbanization and growth of mercantile practices during this period heightened social divisions, further exacerbated by increased interaction between diverse religious and cultural groups. Although Aristorius's business dealings momentarily disrupt the established social stratification, the Croxton *Play* ultimately negates this, realigning religious divisions along entrenched lines.

The shared merchant identity of Aristorius and Jonathas initially presents an intriguing dynamic, evoking both the threat of unstable religious boundaries and the perceived necessity of clear demarcation. The narrative resolution dispels this tension by reasserting the racialized differentiation and the subservience of Jews to Christian doctrine. Thus, despite its gestures of inclusion and moments of subversive potential, the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* ultimately reaffirms Augustine's doctrine of Jewish witness, wherein Jews act as both the desk that upholds Christian doctrine and a perpetual outsider within Christendom. While the narrative arc may suggest an advocacy for integration, its symbolic violence and

the mechanisms of conversion, subjugation, and inferiority articulate a vision of toleration that is firmly rooted within circumscribed paradigms. The play thus mobilizes the act of forced conversion not only as a narrative device but also as a means to reassert the dominance of Christianity and the marginality of Judaism in the socioreligious landscape of medieval society.

The Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* is more than a mere literary artifact. The play encapsulates the cultural zeitgeist of medieval England in all its complexity, offering a window into the contradictory forces of change and tradition that defined the era. By dramatizing the multifaceted socioreligious tensions related to doctrine, race, and economics, the play serves as a microcosm of medieval society. Its subversions of narrative and thematic conventions gesture toward a semblance of inclusivity, yet these are ultimately constrained by enduring prejudices and normative structures. Thus, the play not only illuminates the delicate balance in medieval Christianity between progression and enduring exclusionary norms but also provides invaluable insight into the rich and complex religious heritage of the period.

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Notes

- ¹ (Sebastian 2012). All subsequent references to the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* are from this edition.
- ² See (Beller 2015). In *Antisemitism: A Very Short Introduction*, Steven Beller examines the socioeconomic roles of medieval Jews, highlighting how ecclesiastical and social limitations often confined them to certain professions like merchants or money lenders. He discusses the emergence of stereotypes that inaccurately portrayed Judaism as synonymous with mercantile activities, painting Jews as economically and morally parasitic. Beller emphasizes that these stereotypes rarely reflected the actual experiences of medieval Jews, who were often impoverished and marginalized due to the same restrictions. He argues that such stereotypes were less about accurate representation and more about reinforcing the outsider status of Jews in Christian societies, thus depicting them as religious, social, and economic threats.
- ³ During the medieval period, occupations were not merely professions but were intimately linked with one's social and religious standing. By delving into the occupational roles of Aristorius and Jonathas, I aim to illuminate how these roles both reflect and reinforce social norms and hierarchies.
- ⁴ Aristorius's introduction in the play provides a vivid illustration of the sociocultural intricacies of the medieval era. While his name denotes an association with aristocracy, his royalty is merely an "araye", or an artificial construction that blurs established class hierarchies.
- ⁵ Within this context, Aristorius's bold proclamation that he exists "as a lordys pere" assumes added significance. It is not merely a display of his affluence or stature. Instead, it signifies his audacious self-placement on par with the aristocratic elite. Such a declaration not only pushes the boundaries of social norms of the period but can also be construed as verging on the blasphemous.
- ⁶ The concept of "forced" in the context of this conversion is multifaceted, presenting a stark dichotomy between spiritual demise—manifested as the renunciation of Jewish faith in favor of Christianity—and physical annihilation—exemplified by the horrific prospect of being burned alive.
- ⁷ See (Cohen 2013). In "Alterity and Self-Legitimation: The Jew as Other in Classical and Medieval Christianity," Cohen provides a re-examination and re-elaboration of the Augustinian doctrine of Jewish witness. Central to his discussion is Augustine's innovative contributions to the classical Christian *Adversus Iudaeos* doctrine, most notably the enunciation of the "slay them not" principle. The metaphoric descriptors of Jews as "librarians" and "book-bearers", as outlined by Augustine, serve as significant pillars of this doctrine. These metaphors, as Cohen illuminates, encapsulate the idea that Jews, despite their perceived theological errors, played a crucial role in preserving the scriptures, thereby inadvertently affirming Christian truth. In the latter part of his chapter, Cohen addresses the subsequent scholarly discourse surrounding his analysis of Augustine's enduring influence. He concedes to some criticisms of his earlier work, *Living Letters*, but firmly stands by his central thesis that the conceptualization of the "hermeneutical Jew" by Augustine had a deep and lasting impact on shaping more positive Christian perceptions of and interactions with Jews.

- ⁸ The Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* intriguingly showcases a distinct temporal juxtaposition that emphasizes an enduring, almost cyclical, reenactment of the Crucifixion. The *Play* collapses temporal boundaries, creating an illusion that the past atrocities committed against Christ are not merely historical events but recur in the present narrative of the play. The Jewish characters serve dual roles: they question the sanctity of the Host and, more pivotally, become emblematic actors in the reiterated Crucifixion. This conceptual alignment is not left to mere subtext but is overtly signaled at the play's outset by the Vexillators, or banns, who proclaim: "They gravid our Lord gretly on grownd/ And put Hym to a new passyoun,/ With daggers goven Hym many a grevous wound,/ Nayled Hym to a pyller, with pynsons plucked Hym doune" (*Play*, 37–40). The evocation of a "new passyoun" is telling, insinuating an unending cycle in which Jews perpetually threaten and assault the Christian faith. However, the narrative takes an even darker turn, suggesting that the Jewish characters, in their malignancy, are not merely satisfied with re-enacting the historic Crucifixion. They display a troubling inventiveness in devising "new turmentry" against Christ and, by extension, the Christian community (45). This narrative choice underscores a deeply entrenched motif—Jews are not only adversaries but are constantly evolving in their methods of persecution, amplifying the gravity of their threat in the Christian psyche as represented in the play.
- ⁹ See (Heng 2019). Geraldine Heng's *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* is instrumental for my argument, particularly in how she defines the concept of race in the context of the European Middle Ages. Heng challenges conventional historiographical boundaries by asserting that race is a salient and identifiable construct in medieval society and not confined to modern understandings. According to Heng, race in the medieval period was a process of assigning and essentializing differences among human beings to establish a hierarchy of groups for differential treatment. This process was often supported by religious, cultural, and pseudo-scientific narratives, leading to systemic discrimination and marginalization. Heng emphasizes that race-making in the Middle Ages was not just about skin color or physical features; it also included religious, cultural, and social markers. Her analysis of how Jews and other groups were racialized through these multifaceted lenses provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the intricate interplay between religious identity and racialization during this period. By adopting Heng's broader and more inclusive definition of race, my analysis of the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the historical roots and manifestations of racial categorization, particularly in the context of medieval Christendom's treatment of Jews.
- ¹⁰ While the laws governing this inferiority were not equivalent to chattel slavery, they nonetheless subjected Jews to a multitude of constraints aimed at maintaining Christian hegemony.
- ¹¹ See (Heng 2019). As I utilize Heng's definition of race in my analysis, I also draw upon her specific definition of "race-making" as outlined in *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*. Geraldine Heng defines "race-making" as a process that occurs in particular historical instances, wherein strategic essentialisms are established and imposed through various practices and pressures. This process aims to construct a hierarchy of peoples, thereby facilitating differential treatment based on these constructed racial identities. Heng's articulation of "race-making" is pivotal to understanding the racial dynamics within the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*, as it provides a framework for analyzing how racial hierarchies are established and maintained in medieval literature.
- ¹² See (Bevington 1975). In *Medieval Drama*, David Bevington highlights the "riding of the banns" as an important custom used to publicize upcoming performances of the Corpus Christi cycle. These events, he suggests, were a combination of promotional showmanship and serious ceremony. Audiences would gather to witness a procession, enjoy musical renditions by minstrels, and receive a preview of the forthcoming pageant within the cycle. See also (Moore 1993). Bruce Moore provides additional depth in his article "The Banns in Medieval English Drama", noting the dramatic activities linked to the proclamation of the banns. Moore contends, based on the available evidence, that the banns might have presented condensed versions of the larger narrative, accompanied by mime.
- ¹³ See (Felsenstein 1990). Frank Felsenstein's research into antisemitic stereotypes present within medieval and early modern English literature in his article "Jews and Devils: Antisemitic Stereotypes of Late Medieval and Renaissance England" offers a broader contextual understanding to the imagery presented in the Croxton *Play*. Through his meticulous analysis of sources ranging from visual caricatures to miracle plays, he sheds light on the pervasive and malevolent portrayals of Jews as diabolical entities. These characterizations span from associations of treachery akin to Judas, to insinuations of usury, blood libel accusations, well poisoning insinuations, and alleged sinister rituals. Felsenstein underscores that these stereotypes, rather than emerging from an informed understanding of Jewish customs or beliefs, were anchored in deliberate distortions of scripture and a general unfamiliarity with Jewish religious tenets. Importantly, his findings reveal that the English cultural psyche had deeply embedded within it a distorted and negative construct of "the Jew". This imagined portrayal, deeply rooted in suspicion and fear, endured even after the 1290 expulsion in England and loomed large during discussions surrounding the potential readmission of Jews in 1655.
- ¹⁴ *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. "sted-fast adj". https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED42721/track?counter=3&search_id=51658714 (accessed on 31 October 2023).
- ¹⁵ *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. "pilgrimage n". https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED33370/track?counter=1&search_id=51658714 (accessed on 31 October 2023).
- ¹⁶ See (Kaplan 2019, p. 23). In her seminal work, Kaplan also delves into the thematic undercurrents of subordination within Christian narratives, positing that the depiction of Jews not only reinforces Christian supremacy but also presages a deeper, insidious racial stratification. Kaplan argues that such narratives laid the groundwork for a social construct that extends beyond

religious differences to racial ones, essentially delineating Jews as second-class citizens within a racially coded hierarchy. In the context of the Croxton *Play*, the forced conversion and subsequent exile of Jewish characters do not merely represent a renunciation of faith but are emblematic of a broader systemic relegation and dehumanization—a dramatic enactment of the process by which Jewish individuals are stripped of their autonomy and relegated to an inferior racial status.

- ¹⁷ See (Limor and Stroumsa 2006). Ora Limor and Guy Stroumsa provide a thorough exploration of the historical and religious significance of Jerusalem and Jericho in Christian tradition. Their work *Christians and Christianity in the Holy Land: From the Origins to the Latin Kingdoms* delves into Jerusalem's central role in the life of Christ and early Christianity, highlighting its importance as a primary pilgrimage destination. The authors also shed light on other key Christian holy sites such as Bethlehem, Nazareth, and the Jordan River, and discuss how these locations were integrated into the Latin Christian tradition during the medieval period.
- ¹⁸ *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. "gentil adj". https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED18403/track?counter=2&search_id=52574484 (accessed on 31 October 2023).
- ¹⁹ Higginbotham's argument centers on the instability in Jonathas's religious identity, particularly through his and the Jewish characters' invocation of "Machomet", which he suggests aligns them with Muslims. However, I argue that this representation does not necessarily indicate an unstable Jewish identity; rather, it underscores a conflation of Jewish and Muslim identities as unified in their divergence from Christianity and, thus, collectively "non-Christian" in the medieval Christian consciousness. For a broader understanding of the conflation of Jewish and Muslim identities in medieval Christian thought, see (Conklin Akbari 2009). Suzanne Conklin Akbari's comprehensive study *Idols in the East: European Representations of Islam and the Orient, 1100–1450* delineates how medieval Western perceptions of Islam and the Orient were crafted and mutually reinforced over time. She emphasizes the use of spatial and orientational categories in establishing religious and ethnic differences, highlighting how medieval Christian thought often merged Jewish and Muslim identities. According to Akbari, both groups were seen as spiritually blind to the salvation offered through the Incarnation and Crucifixion, thereby categorizing both as adherents of the "law of Moses". This conflation was deeply embedded in the premodern Christian psyche, shaping their perception of the 'Other' and reinforcing a binary opposition between Christianity and other Abrahamic faiths.
- ²⁰ See (Lerner 2018). Robert Lerner and his colleagues offer an in-depth exploration of the complex nature of heresy in the medieval period, underscoring the extreme social and religious consequences for those accused of such charges. The essays within *Late Medieval Heresy: New Perspectives: Studies in Honor of Robert E. Lerner* provide a nuanced understanding of the fear and tension experienced by individuals like Aristorius in the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*, set against the backdrop of a period marked by severe punitive measures for heresy. This context is crucial in understanding the gravity of Aristorius's actions and the implications of his fear.

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