

Play time. Gender, anti-semitism and temporality in medieval biblical drama. By Daisy Black. (Manchester Medieval Literature and Culture.) Pp. xii + 234 incl. 5 figs. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020. £80. 978 1 5261 4686 1 JEH (73) 2022; doi:10.1017/S0022046922000537

Play time is not a work of ecclesiastical history, but it will be of interest to readers of this JOURNAL for its new insights into the religious culture of late medieval England. It offers a series of studies based on vernacular biblical plays that were enacted in English cities, performed by lay actors to lay audiences. Its analysis is based on extensive reading in gendered literary criticism, and in the more recent literature that reflects on ideas and practice about time and temporality. *Play time* enriches our understanding of religious experience outside the parish and beyond the sacraments, to civic spaces where religious drama interacted on stages with the raw social and personal lives of their audiences.

Daisy Black opens *Play time* with a quote from Augustine, where the Church Father imagines a conversation with Moses about the secrets of Creation: 'I would clasp him and ask him ... I would concentrate my bodily ears to the sounds breaking forth from his mouth. If he spoke Hebrew, he would in vain make an impact on my sense of hearing ... If he spoke Latin, I would know what he meant' (*Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick, Oxford 1991, xi. xiii, p. 223).

The chasm of time can be bridged through shared narratives and rituals, but it is never an easy conversation. That difficulty is at the heart of *Play time* where Black argues that 'questions concerning divine and human experiences of time were not only the preserve of eminent early and medieval theologians and religious scholars' (p. 3). *Play time* shows that reflection on competing time frames occupied those – probably friars – who composed the plays, but also those who staged them, played in them and watched them in medieval towns and cities.

Conceptions of time were so central to the Christian order and civic life that they recur as points of contention in the plays examined here. Chapter i deals with the N-Town Plays (p. 39), a sequence of scenes from Mary's life, where Joseph still dwells in pre-Christian time, and Mary in time Christian. Joseph is doubtful that Mary's pregnancy is without sin, while Mary (and her kinswoman Elisabeth) are constant in their understanding of her virtue, present and future. Joseph shares his suspicions with the audience, and so engages a third time frame, that of fifteenth-century East Anglia (p. 47), as he blames his wife: 'I drede me sore I am betrayd!' (p. 52). Yet ultimately, all is resolved and Joseph converts, 'For sche is ful of grace / I know wel I have miswrought. / I walk to my pore place / and aske forgyfnes. I haue misthought' (p. 57). Christian time has triumphed in the person of Joseph.

Chapter ii considers the York and Chester Flood plays, usually the most extensive and challenging to stage. While Noah is a man with a divine mission, chosen to perform God's plan, to break with mankind in order to save it, Noah's wife challenges this acceptance. She worries about those 'left behind': 'My commodrys and my cosynes bathe, / them wolde I wente with us in feere' (p. 82). The Wife's perspective is familial and communal; hers is a life in place and time, from which she is loath to be parted. She is like the 'Jew' who cannot see the divine plan and embrace it. In the Chester Noah play, where the Wife helps in the building of the Ark, the moment of boarding tests her sorely, as she misses

her gossips; she puts her foot down: 'But I have my gossips everyechone, one foot further I will not gone' (p. 100). But she is forced onto the ark, by the fretful Noah: 'Our tarrying here mee highly greeves. Over the lande the water spreades' (p. 103). The Wife cannot forget, and in her new life still asks her husband: 'But Noye, whee are nowe all oure kyne, / And comanye we knwe before?' (p. 91).

Chapter iii introduces the concept of 'queering' time in the Towneley *Second shepherds' play*, that shows time to be unstable as it 'repeats, doubles, pauses, lingers, remembers and deviates' (p. 116). The shepherds have been informed of Christ's birth, yet one can only complain about the weather. As the virgin birth of Christ is about to be celebrated, Mak disrupts Christian time and decorum in references to his household as one of sloth, eating and drinking. His wife Gyll, in turn, sees her domestic time as busy worktime: 'Why, who wanders, who wakys, who commys, who gose? / who brewys? Who bakys? / what makys me thus hose?' (p. 130). When they plan to steal a sheep and disguise it as a baby, she takes control: 'I shall swedyll hym ryght / In my credyll' (p. 134). The child is ugly, because his parents are, and because their intercourse was 'ill spon' (p. 138). Ultimately it is revealed to be a sheep, and the child becomes food. Gospel time only arrives at the very end of the play, whose core is to disrupt by introducing a 'kink' into biblical time, a kink savoured no doubt by its audiences.

The final chapter, iv, is a study of the Towneley *Herod the Great*, where Herod makes a futile attempt to stop Christian time by ordering the massacre of all newborn boys. Black introduces Michel Serres's metaphor of time as a crumpled handkerchief: its edges, distant when the handkerchief is ironed flat, meet in unexpected ways when it is crumpled. Herod was presented as a Jewish king, and yet in order to arrest the unfolding of time as prophesied in the Hebrew Bible according to the Christian reading, he decreed the destruction of 'youre bookys! Go kast thaym in the brookys!' (p. 167). The grieving mothers of Herod's victims are active, accusing and resistant, shouting at Herod's men: 'Outt! Morder! Man I say / strang tratoure and thefe!' (p. 173). They call for vengeance, and Herod is ultimately defeated, for being out of time.

Play time ends with an epilogue inspired by Black's attendance at the 2016 performance of the York cycle in the city's minster. This experience reinforced her sense of the contingency of time in drama, as every director presents it – and spectator experiences it – somewhat differently. Black reminds us of the many possible pasts and times we bring to the experience of drama, and 'However the authorities of the time spin their "official" historical and theological narratives, biblical drama defends the right of each individual to experience, resist, complicate and challenge time in their own fashion' (p. 201). There is a great deal to ponder here thanks to *Play time's* lively intellectual style and accessible rendering even of complex concepts regarding religious literary creativity, and the experiences it engenders.

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