
Original Article

Staging encounters: The touch of the medieval Other

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Abstract Shuttling back and forth from medieval to modern texts, this essay proposes an alternative vision of temporality and, in doing so, offers a glimpse into a queer (or non-normative) temporality. The purpose of this temporal travel is to reveal the systems deployed in constructing an outcast, a thing of hate and derision. This essay discusses a select number of medieval texts as the starting point for reflecting on the process involved in inventing a temporal outcast. The conversation about normative temporality mostly builds from *The Passion of the Christ*, which in this essay represents the end point in meditating on the making of a fantastical Other who materializes from fantasy as a thing outside time and humanity.

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‘Why have you come to my country to lay waste and plunder?’ It was the intruder who said this to the person whose land it was, and the owner of the land bowed his head and said nothing.

Salih (1970), *Season of Migration to the North*

It is tradition to which the anti-Semites turn in order to ground the validity of their ‘point of view.’ It is tradition, it is that long historical past ... that is invoked when the Jew is told, ‘There is no possibility of your finding a place in society.’

Fanon (1967), *Black Skin, White Masks*

Why have we kept our own names? Out of habit, purely out of habit ... To render imperceptible, not ourselves, but what makes us act, feel, and think.

Also because it's nice to talk like everybody else ... To reach, not the point where one no longer says I, but the point where it is no longer of any importance whether one says I. We are no longer ourselves ... We have been aided, inspired, multiplied.

Deleuze and Guattari (1987), *A Thousand Plateaus*

Charting time as *anno domini* means I don't really exist. I have learned this much over the years. I have been 'aided, inspired, multiplied,' to quote Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 3)¹. If we consider my ontological presence in and through *anno domini*, my multi-dimensionality is a freak accident because in normative time (I am assuming that *anno domini* represents normative time) my number is up: as a Jew, I am a member of a group that signifies as a continuously vanishing number, according to Ambrose at any rate: 'when one number is added to another, something new arises. The original number disappears' (Ambrose, 1961, 359–362). Ambrose's formula hinges on his argument that Abel's birth replaces Cain's necessary presence just as the emergence of Christianity allegedly transforms Judaism into irrelevance.

I find the implications of Ambrose's calculations quite troubling, and I am concerned about present-day brushes with religious and ethnic hate. Circling around the arguments in this essay are the cultural Others who are subject to outcasting from the temporal monopoly of *anno domini* time. The following speculative piece introduces my reading of normative temporality as at once infused with medieval realities and modern urgencies. (Inter)locked in a fixed time scheme, these mediievally modern and modernly mediieval moments (the moments when the urgencies of *anno domini* are most apparent) speak of their own miscalculations because, after all, Cain did not disappear (he is remembered over and over again in literature) and alternative time schemes continue to be inspired by their own queer heterogeneity (the Jewish and Islamic calendars march forward).² 'Staging Encounters' both maps and participates in the rhizomatic literary and cultural constructs that surface when the film *The Passion of the Christ* is placed in dialogue with medieval texts, especially the 'Prioress's Tale' and the 'Parson's Tale' from the *Canterbury Tales* and 'The Conspiracy' from the York mystery cycle. Because of this modern to mediieval reach, Mel Gibson's antique world falls apart.

Inspired by Dinshaw, I wonder: What does it mean 'to get mediieval'? (Dinshaw, 1999).³ And what happens when I get mediieval on *The Passion*? Stanbury remarks that she feels dragged in as a 'witness' to Christ's scourging (Stanbury, 2009, 518). Griffiths begins with a confession that she 'will eschew the protocols of scholarly writing for a moment,' which she does because, as she explains, 'there is much I vehemently oppose in Gibson's hagiography' (Griffiths, 2007, 3). Enders remembers a story her mother told her about being called a 'Christ Killer!' (Enders, 2006, 190).⁴ Along with Torjesen, I consider the film remarkably similar to mediieval Passion plays (Torjesen, 2004, 94). I join in this dialogue about the intersection between the personal and *The Passion* – a

1 This essay, born as a conference talk, 'The Touch of Happenstance or a Staged Encounter? The Medieval in Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*' (New Chaucer Society, Siena, 2010), was met – during the question and answer period – with fantastic questions asked by Jeffrey Cohen, Aranye Fradenburg, Patricia Ingham, Eileen Joy and Karl Steel. The four anonymous *postmedieval* readers offered astute revision suggestions. A brief interlude with Hannah Johnson at the meeting of the New Chaucer Society, Portland (2012), brought me to think about temporality. Matt Ponesse's and Tim Davis's lively responses at the Ohio Mediieval Colloquium (April 2013)



dialogue evident in Stanbury's, Griffiths's and Enders's words – as I share my own experience with *The Passion*. I write to enact the gestures of social 'advocacy' to investigate unjustified and fantastical attributions to the Jew (Barkan, 2009, 902).⁵ I bring a selection of medieval texts to touch each other as a way of revealing an intricate process of Othering, which in turn invokes the construction of a temporal outcast, a thing out-of-time. Unmade as a human, this temporal outcast – at once medieval and modern or modernly medieval – transforms into the embodiment of violence, a thing nourished by acts of hatred and abuse. The texts from the period marked as '*medium ævum*' (in the middle of things, an era, time) figure as this essay's starting point for my study of the outcasting of temporal rejects.⁶ Gibson's allegedly modern text points us toward not only a continuous present that is *medium ævum* but also, and perhaps unsettlingly so, our ultimate inescapability from medieval temporality and *anno domini* time. We are all 'aided, inspired, multiplied' as we live in someone else's temporal construction. We have no choice in the matter. As Davis's insights make clear, even using the culturally sensitive 'C.E. ("common era") for the nomenclature A.D. ... does little to diminish the effect of a globalized Christian calendar, and in fact privileges its order under a rubric that appears both secular and universal' (Davis, 2008, 3). The words 'common era' effectively duplicate what Bede introduced in the eighth century with his various ecclesiastical histories. An escape from normative temporality is effectively impossible.

Something Old, Something New

The desire to isolate a marginalized group from the larger community appears when a text works hard – or even just makes the attempt – to write a revised history. Nothing in Christ's Passion, whether we are talking about the film or scripture, can occur without the Jew(s). Such gestures of temporal containment serve as dangerous acts of translation. Largely resonating as supersessionism, the typological figurations speak from the mouth of normative temporality in the act of colonizing competing and non-dominant temporalities.⁷ Here, supersessionism performs as a postcolonial desire to translate bodies that move in their own multidimensional sphere into automata built for an unchanging temporality.⁸ When the Prioress transforms the 'litel clergeon's' mother into a 'newe Rachel' (VII, 627), for instance, the Prioress aims to erase memories and replace old Jewish bodies with new Christian ones. Historical Jewish content disappears, and in the very newness of the Rachel-widow, the threads that unite the old Jewish content with the new Christian incarnation untie. Reconstructing a displaced past becomes artifice. The widow is now made to be a suffering Jewish-Christian mother just as Yeshu Nazarete (Gibson's name for his Jesus) becomes the suffering servant of Isaiah who occupies space in pre-Incarnational time.

pushed me to continue the revision process. I claim all mistakes as my own.

- 2 Throughout this essay I am thinking of claims made by Dinshaw about touching the past and her 'queer historical impulse ... toward making connections across time between ... lives, texts, and other cultural phenomena' (Dinshaw, 1999, 1). Dinshaw considers queer a 'sexual category'; I invoke queer to encompass ethnic and temporal difference. Mills discusses the intersections between medieval perceptions of the Jew and the queer as types of abject Others (Mills, 2012).
- 3 Among scholars, there is no secret that Gibson's *Passion* features things medieval. To name just a few of those scholarly voices, see Stanbury (2009), Griffiths (2007) and Torjesen (2004).
- 4 Enders's mother had a friend who responded,

She wasn't even there! (italics hers) (Enders, 2006, 191). These words, of course, imply her belief that Jews *did* kill Christ.

5 Dinshaw too hopes to enact a form of social advocacy in her writing (Dinshaw, 1999, 37).

6 I think of the medieval texts and modern film as 'limit cases' along a continuum rather than as moments that represent a lachrymose history. I owe a debt to Johnson for this point (Johnson, 2012).

7 On this subject of supersessionism in the Middle Ages, see Cox (2005, 3–15). Brooks and Collins describe supersession as the 'appropriation of the Hebrew Scriptures' and note that this act 'has undeniably led to the denigration of Judaism, ancient, medieval, and modern, and cannot be held innocent of the outrage of anti-Semitism' (Brooks and Collins, 1990, 1).

8 On the insidious nature of

Yeshu is made to seem completely unlike the people with whom he shares a language and presumably a genomic imprinting.⁹ Because Yeshu is entirely alien to and genetically unlike his fellow Jews, the clannish Jews reject Yeshu and, except for a few, refuse to grasp the thesis of Yeshu's narrative.¹⁰ Because of this unbridgeable difference, Yeshu and the Jews share nothing more than the Hebrew and Aramaic languages. Even more, Yeshu's Midas touch translates everything Jewish into a Christian temporality. Yeshu's seder serves as a case in point. When the film depicts Yeshu's doing 'Jewish' things, Yeshu is actually already engaging in Christian practices as his living worship rewrites Jewishness as a disposable prequel whose efficacy has ended. Yeshu's seder, which appears in the film as a flashback during Yeshu's arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, produces Eucharistic overtones that mimic – and reduce through this mimicry – Jewish tradition, announcing to his disciples that the bread is his body and that the wine is his blood (*Passion of the Christ*, Chapter 28).¹¹ Yeshu's seder effects a clean break from and dismantles the old tradition that would not speak about the wine and the matzo as incarnational.¹²

The voices of the Marys also mimic Jewish content, reducing the Jewish seder to absurdity as their speech acts affirm Yeshu's work to silence Jewish participation when viewers witness a Jewish tradition performing as an embodied, present, real Christian practice.¹³ The Marys reinforce the pastness of Judaism by channeling Yeshu's seder from their temporally distant bedroom. The night of Yeshu's arrest, one Mary awakens in her bed with a jolt and intones – in Aramaic and Hebrew – the seder's first question, customarily asked by the oldest child: 'Why is this night different from every other night?' To which the other Mary, also roused from her slumber, responds with words customarily spoken by the leader of the seder: 'Because we were once slaves in Egypt ... and we are slaves no longer' (Chapter 4). These visions of a colonizing temporality deftly manage to render multiple Jewish moments into one Christian time.

The seder in *The Passion of the Christ* is not simply new: it's also a dangerous postcolonial translation and a complicated grafting of Paul's 1 Corinthians onto Yeshu's last seder/supper.¹⁴ The Hebrew and Aramaic words spoken by Yeshu and the Marys while celebrating their barely-Jewish seder but really-Christian (last) supper provides evidence of the Jews' becoming Christian even though they might still think they are Jewish.¹⁵ This is a sobering moment, and in this flashback, Yeshu's disciples certainly seem sobered as they participate in this event that changes their very identities and creates a new way of knowing and marking time.

In addition to this sort-of-Jewish seder but really-Christian Last Supper, viewers never see Yeshu trying to worship at the Temple. Gibson's Yeshu fears the appearance of the Temple guards (Chapter 1). In fact, from the beginning of the film, Yeshu exists in opposition to the Temple's practices, but in this resistance to things Jewish, Gibson brings trouble on his project because the Gospel accounts and Pauline material, Klawans asserts, provide readers with a Yeshu who is not 'antitemple' (Klawans, 2006, 218, 217–222).¹⁶ Gibson means



to create a Yeshu whose only link with Jewishness is made by the Roman soldiers who repeatedly mock him with the moniker *Rex Judaeorum* as Yeshu hauls his bedraggled and bloody body to Calvary (Chapters 20–26). In this desire to establish a clear separation between Yeshu and the Temple, Gibson violently and ahistorically dismembers his Yeshu from the very narrative Gibson tries to create (that is, an authentic Yeshu Nazarete). Instead, the Yeshu of *The Passion* points toward Gibson's own desires to fashion a new Gospel account that earnestly and energetically disavows Jewish contact.

Where Have All the Jews Gone?

Gibson's twenty-first century film *The Passion of the Christ* believes it can take the Jewish out of a story that begins and ends with Jewishness, especially medieval representations of Jewishness, but the result is unpredictability, something careening out of Gibson's control.¹⁷ Through his 'visual theater' (Stanbury, 2009, 519), Gibson reintroduces many traditions to the secular world, and one of those traditions narrates a story of insiders and outsiders at Christ's Passion. Mary and Yeshu, at once the insiders in and protagonists of this story, feature 'good' Jewish identities as always already Christian. Linguistically Jewish, they follow Jewish law with a newfangled twist. 'Bad' Jewish identities, the outsiders, lack an ethical compass and have the uncanny ability to morph into demons. Children transform into ghouls, temple priests plan an innocent man's death and friends betray a comrade.¹⁸ In this maneuvering the shape of the protean Jew imperceptibly shifts from a cathected 'object-choice' to a practitioner of an immoral religion (Freud, 1961; Despres, 2002, 28–39).¹⁹ Yeshu's Jewishness is incarnational; the Others are evil incarnate with their elastic evil that appears as 'Satanist Temple priests and demonic shrieks from the Jewish street' (Garber, 2006, 3).

Playing with Jesus's Jewishness also surfaces in the York mystery cycle, especially the play, 'The Conspiracy,' when Judas outs Jesus's Jewishness.²⁰ One line brings trouble upon York's 'The Conspiracy,' and that one line is Judas's, spoken when he betrays his friend Jesus:

'*Ingenti pro inuria*' – him Jesus, that Jew,
Unjust unto me, Judas, I judge to be loath.
For at our supper as we sat, the sooth to pursue,
With Simon Leprous, full soon my skift came to scathe

(Beadle and King, 1999, ll. 127–130)

[On account of great injury – there is Jesus, that Jew who was unjust to me,
Judas. I judge him to be hateful. As we sat at supper with Simon the Leper,
I hatched my plan].

'[H]im Jesus, that Jew.' Much happens in these four words and the York play's ownership of Jesus's Jewishness. Judas's Jewishness must be unmade so that

postcolonial translation, see Lefevere (1999, 77).

- 9 Heschel reflects on the need among some sects of Christianity to separate Jewishness from Christianity (Heschel, 2004, 177–192).
- 10 Jewish blindness is particularly evident in the kangaroo court at the Temple (Chapter 6).
- 11 References to *Passion of the Christ* are made by DVD chapter, here and elsewhere. I think of Bhabha, who theorizes how mimicry threatens the validity of what is being mimicked by producing a reformed Other with an 'authentic' (revised, fixed, flawless) history (Bhabha, 1994, 85–89). To Webb, Gibson's flashbacks serve as breaks from the 'graphic gore-fest' and prompts readings of 'deeper significance' (Webb, 2004, 48).
- 12 See: 'a Passover meal [exists] in remembrance of the exodus' whereas the Last

Supper figures as 'a sacramental meal to recall Jesus' death and to partake of those things promising salvation.' *The Passion of the Christ* conflates the two and has one (the Christian one) overlay the other (the Jewish one).

- 13 Enders talks about the role of sight in religious belief (Enders, 2006, 191–193).
- 14 On Paul's 1 Corinthians, see Klawans (2006, 221–222).
- 15 In this new 'community of believers ... the faithful [get] a piece of his flesh' (Stanbury, 2009, 522). Sacrificing a paschal lamb for the seder dinner is a practice that discontinues after 70 C.E. (Bokser, 1984, 25).
- 16 The Temple figures as the site where viewers encounter Yeshu's cowardly friends or Peter's and Judas's too-perfectly self-interested, spineless behavior: Peter denies any knowledge of or relationship with Yeshu (Chapter 9); Judas kisses

Jesus's Jewishness is not the same as Judas's.²¹ In this deft rhetorical gesture, 'The Conspiracy' assails Jewish identities and writes (what it imagines will produce) a careful separation from pre-Incarnational Jews. Judas's speech act homogenizes Jewish difference and privileges Christianized Jews by making Jesus a new Jew in an ahistorical move that resembles the Prioress's verbal game of forcing a rupture between productive Christian and obsolesced Jewish time.

Sorting out the good from the bad in this way resonates as an attempt to retranslate Yeshu's/Jesus's Jewishness as always already Christian (when Christianness performs as kind, generous and empathic) and Caiaphas's, Annas's and Judas's Jewishness as not-Christian but putatively – or stereotypically, in a Bhabhaean sense (Bhabha, 1994) – Jewish (when the Jewish signifies as murderous, mean, cruel and disloyal). In this new temporality Jewishness must be scripted as distant from the touch of evil, evident in Caiaphas's or Judas's antisocial behavior. Caiaphas, Annas and Judas plot, deceive and betray, whereas Yeshu/Jesus protects, loves, cherishes and stays committed to his father's mission even while enduring incredible physical and psychological abuse. Both *The Passion* and 'The Conspiracy' willingly counter Jewish temporality by constructing a Jewishness that is a comforting sign, an identity that only projects good. Such a sign for Jewishness would seem impossible and in many ways is difficult for these texts to navigate. Characters who behave badly can never be denoted as 'Jewish.'²² The absence of the word 'Jew,' however – when it should be applied to characters with Jewish identities (and here I speak not of good characters, such as Yeshu/Jesus, but of bad characters, such as Caiaphas) – instantiates the larger project both of the *The Passion* and of the York plays. These texts repress some Jewish identities, rediscover other Jewish identities and separate all negative signs from the idea of Jewishness.

Faced with an enormous problem – how can Jesus be made Jewish while Caiaphas, Annas and Judas are made not-Jewish – the York Plays write a new fantasy to rescue the Jewish heirs to the Christian experiment (such as Jesus and Mary) from touching Jewishly behaving figures (such as Judas and Caiaphas) who trouble the purity of Christianity.²³ Revising the known and commonly accepted story of 'Christ killers' in this way involves an injection of 'modernity' into the York Plays.²⁴ The modernizing impulse of the York Plays involves, as does Gibson's medieval film, resisting history by writing a Corpus Christi cycle that reimagines the old as the new in order to create origins that are always already purely Christian and that never previously touched the Jewish. The time before Christ's birth is marked by pagan antiquity; after Christ's birth time is divided between what is good (everything that is and will become Christian) and what is evil (everything that Christianity discards or displaces). This script in the film necessitates committed and continuous containment, constant reassurance that the antisemitism belongs in the narrative since the film doubles as a documentary text 'based on sacred texts' (Shepherd, 2005, 331).²⁵



700 Years Before Christ

The Passion of the Christ, in designing a perpetually present Christianity, disregards other possible temporalities in translating Yeshu's story as if it were always in the midst of its unfolding, already happening, a sort of filmic *in medias res* of Yeshu Nazarete's – already underway – march toward his eventual crucifixion. For *The Passion of the Christ* to work, Gibson's audience must passively and unreflectively succumb to the familiar performance of supersessionism. Such viewers depart from *The Passion of the Christ* 'speechless and with tears running down their cheeks' (Griffiths, 2007, 3). Supersessionism registers, for them, as known time, a familiar Christian temporality. But *The Passion* deploys insidious methods to collapse the distance between present and past, scripting a new incarnation of time.

Beginning without opening credits, Gibson's *The Passion* starts at that moment when lightning collides with the eye of Icon Productions. A peal of thunder and a lightning strike foretell a violent rupture from competing temporalities. A temporal miracle occurs: the Christian period in history begins and, in its very beginning, signifies the end of the Jewish period. Christianity's present(ness) overlays, announces and makes invisible Judaism's past(ness). This cataclysm springs from an after-effect of the film's opening screen: the words, 'Isaiah 53,' and its neighbor, the date '700 BC,' sitting to Isaiah 53's left. Visibly larger than the rest of the symbols that appear on the screen, the letters 'BC' effectively erase any doubt that this film aims to introduce a temporality that is not *anno domini*. Filmic time unfolds as a time before Christ – near the moment when *anno domini* begins and Judaism ends. *The Passion*, thus beginning its enactment of a postcolonial translation, simultaneously invents a largely lost biblical past and ignores an acknowledged multi-temporal part of human history. The film remembers backwards through Bede's eighth-century introduction of *anno domini* to 'political time,' through Dionysius Exiguus's miscalculated sixth-century paschal calendar, and creates a 'BC' date before *anno domini* and 'BC' even existed.²⁶ One new temporal dispensation replaces/erases multiple temporalities at that moment when a uniform calendar assumes precedence over a complexly kaleidoscopic one when 'farmers could keep up with the seasons, Jews could keep up with the lunar months and seven weekdays, Romans could have their solar years with alternating thirty and thirty-one day months, Egyptians could have their leap years, and Christians ... could celebrate the Passion of the Christ and his Resurrection after the vernal equinox' (Stevens, 2003, 17).

Another postcolonial translation unfolds on this screen in this 'BC' moment when the translated English words of the Aramaic Isaiah 53:5 appear.²⁷ The English text means to erase the Aramaic text that lurks behind it, but absolutes are never really absolute. Things are much closer to 'lithic narratives' (Cohen, 2010, 60) – vastly more heterogeneous than homogeneous. The Isaiah passage provides evidence of this point. The absent-Aramaic-present-English moment

Yeshu as a way of fingering and, thus, betraying his friend (Chapter 4).

- 17 I echo Yates (2002, 50–51).
- 18 The ghoulish children refers to the Jewish boys who shape-shift between demons and humans (Chapter 10). Another demoniac-looking figure appears in the Temple laughing hysterically as Caiaphas mocks Yeshu's claim that he is the son of god (Chapter 8).
- 19 Mary is performed by Maia Morgenstern, a Jewish actor. Mary's and Maia's Jewishness is also significant to the 'holy family romance' (Stanbury, 2009, 520). According to William Fulco, his indispensable assistant, Evelina Meghnagi, 'was Jewish' and all aspects of the film that she 'occasionally' considered 'offensive' were 'changed' (Shepherd, 2005, 330). On Jewishness in the historical Mary, see Boyarin (2010, 40–41).

- 20 A more detailed discussion of the York Plays appears in Krummel (2013).
- 21 In lines 127–130 – and throughout both ‘The Conspiracy’ and ‘Moses and Pharaoh,’ as well as the interplay between Noah and Wife in ‘The Flood’ – the Jewish inheres in Christian identity as a character flaw that needs to be expunged. See Lampert [Lampert-Weissig] (2004, 1121–1157).
- 22 Tomasch observes a similar gesture of segregation between what signifies as the Jewish and the Christian in her discussion of the ‘Pardoner’s Tale’ (Tomasch, 2000, 249).
- 23 Bhabha addresses how the colonizer refashions an authentic human into inauthentic postcolonial through the process of mimicry – mimicking very real cultural practices and, thus, diminishing the postcolonials’ very authentic (and different) self, identity

speaks of how multiple temporal histories can be encased in a thing that looks like one object.²⁸ *The Passion* hopes to foreclose the end of a competing temporality by erasing Jewish presence with Isaiah’s English biblical authority, but instead, *The Passion* introduces a text translated from a language that was only meant to perform as Oriental exotica in the film. *The Passion of the Christ* tries to silence its heterogeneity by offering audiences an English Isaiah 53:5. But haunting this English Isaiah is the Aramaic Isaiah 53:5 whose words are echoed in the language spoken by Yeshu and the Marys as well as the Sanhedrin in the Temple and the Jews on the street. The temporal cataclysm returns Jews and Jewishness to centrality at that moment when Jewish time – or even common era time – is elided. The BC/AD divide separates barbaric and lawless times (when Jews run wild and murder someone else’s god) from civilized and law-ful times (when Christ put Jews in their proper place as outmoded, replaced objects). In Gibson’s Christian time, Jews become bloodthirsty, betraying villains, the antagonists of both the future Christians and the present Romans; Jews represent a temporal deformity in a putatively stable system. The Old Testament translation of Isaiah, when joined with the before-Christ date (700 BC), expresses – in totality – a filmic gesture of imperialism and dominant normativity that together want to evade the long(er) arm of a multitemporal Jewish history (in Jewish time, the date falls somewhere around 3060). This lonely quotation from Isaiah (literally marked by the binary of black and white with the white text on a black screen) is a deterritorialized Jewish Isaiah as the Jewish *Nevi’im* (or Prophets) are deployed as Christian proof of Yeshu’s always alreadiness. Reterritorializing a quotation from Isaiah, *The Passion* deploys a standard trope, a refrain commonly used in the typological gestures – the hijacking of the Jewish time, taking the *Tanakh* (*Torah*, *Nevi’im*, *Kethuvi’im*) and rendering it as the Old Testament by having Jewish time foretell Yeshu’s arrival as the suffering servant mentioned in this Isaiah passage.

Dominant temporality cannot completely contain subversive slippage. The voice of the temporally colonized speaks and resists silence.²⁹ In this attempt to suppress the Jewish touch by omitting the Aramaic words, *The Passion* touches the ‘Prioress’s Tale’ and the ‘Parson’s Tale.’ Like *The Passion*, both the ‘Prioress’s Tale’ and the ‘Parson’s Tale’ attempt to evade the touch of Jewish history, but an alternative history reaches out to touch her miracles and his sermon when the Prioress brings the Hugh of Lincoln history (VII.684) into her tale to provide yet another example of Jewish villainy and the Parson invokes *Jhesus Nazarenus rex Judaeorum* (X.284; italics original) to attest to the value of the ethics of generosity and goodness. The Hugh of Lincoln story, introduces the blood libel that erupted because of Belaset of Lincoln’s wedding celebration, and the Parson’s invocation brings trouble upon his larger project when he neglects to discuss the *Judaeorum* part of Jesus’s name (see Krummel, 2011).³⁰

The unavoidable need to (mis)represent Jewishness may very well be that which undermines these texts’ (failed) attempts to construct one, uniform history



without the memories of multiple histories. In an attempt to suppress and rearrange time, the labor of *The Passion*, the Prioress and the Parson display more indebtedness to a history of hate than of Christian sacrifice and spirituality. The Sanhedrin of *The Passion* are too perfectly malicious in their mockery of Yeshu's belief that he is *Rex Judaeorum*, king of the Jews. The ghettoized Jews of the 'Prioress's Tale' are too hateful in their worries over Christian song to be believable. The Parson is too eager to dismiss Jews at all costs – even at the cost of the consistency of his sermon. *The Passion*, the Prioress and the Parson construct Jews who are the stereotype of themselves – and I deploy Bhabha here: their Jews uniformly figure as 'an arrested, fixated form of representation that, in denying the play of difference ... constitutes a problem for the *representation* of the subject' (Bhabha, 1992, 321; italics his). These three texts undermine their historicizing projects because of their desire to promote a static Jewish identity that shows no signs of difference, of growth, of having contact with a time that changes things. Instead, the Jews of *The Passion*, the 'Prioress's Tale' and the 'Parson's Tale' are 'frozen, fixed' (Chakrabarty, 2002, 140), like normative time. The limit of 'BC' and 'AD,' born in a state of erasure and denial, is reached when non-normative history with its variegated time gets medieval on their projects. Undermining their own projects, *The Passion of the Christ*, the 'Prioress's Tale' and the 'Parson's Tale' educate viewers/listeners about the methods deployed when 'humans create absolute others out of other humans' (Chakrabarty, 2002, 141) rather than bringing their audience to a sacralized site.

Jews in *Anno Domini*

Antisemitism is a refrain of normative temporality. Jews are reminded time and time again that they don't fit, that they should go home, go away, travel to an alternative dimension where their temporality fits. I think of a recent incident in the community where I live when 'Anti-Semitic graffiti was written in red letters on the home, cars parked on the property were damaged and one count of arson was recorded when a lit "Molotov cocktail" was thrown through the glass window of the home causing a small fire' (Winkler, 2013). Chaucer's and Gibson's creative energy tell us why antisemitic incidents, like this one that happened in Oakwood, Ohio, in the twenty-first century, continue.

Both the Prioress and *The Passion* present themselves as engaging in noble – even epic – work. Chaucer's sanctimonious nun, Madame Eglentyne, decides that she will sing to her lord ('*oure* Lord,' VII.453; italics mine) rather than tell a story to the other pilgrims.³¹ Madame Eglentyne takes the opportunity in her position on center stage to right the wrong direction of the pilgrimage. Mel Gibson shares this grasp for something eternal, something extra-ordinary, a 'Gospel according to Mel,' as William Fulco, Gibson's consultant 'on

(Bhabha, 1994, 85–92).

- 24 Reading 'modern' as a category open to interpretation, I speak of 'modernity' as a hegemonic principle whose long reach has the ability to control all interpretations of putative reality. My reading is informed by Chakrabarty (2002, xix–xx, 51–64).
- 25 Barty shares my thoughts as he remarks, 'from the very first frame [Gibson] encourages his viewers to think that this will be the most historically accurate film ever made about Jesus, a perception emphasized by his use of Aramaic and Latin' (Barty, 2006, 77). See also Torjesen, who points out that Gibson's faint 'gesture toward historical accuracy' is fraught because 'Greek rather than Latin was the *lingua franca* of the day.' (Torjesen, 2004, 93)
- 26 These moments of translation – the suffering servant

passage in Isaiah and the mismatching of common-era time – underscore the film’s mission to rewrite time as a way of inventing a homogeneous (and Christian) past. Webb finds that the Isaiah passage introduces ‘conservative Catholic views’ to Gibson’s audience (Webb, 2004, 49). Bartchy understands Gibson’s gesture as ‘thumb[ing] his nose at historical analysis before any human being appears on the screen’ (Bartchy, 2006, 81). Davis points to Bede’s act of bringing the *anno domini* dating system into his history of England (Davis, 2008, 4). McCarthy discusses Dionysius Exiguus (McCarthy, 2003, 31–38).

27 Gibson’s passage is taken from ‘Isaiah 53:5,’ but Gibson provides only the documentation ‘Isaiah 53’ on the screen.

28 The work of Dinshaw and Cohen introduce

theological and historical aspects of the script’ reports (Shepherd, 2005, 325, 321). The Prioress wishes to re-invest the pilgrims with religious ardor through the story of a miracle that aims ‘to declare’ the ‘grete worthynesse’ (VII, 482) of Mary whom the Prioress hopes will ‘Gyde [her] song’ (VII, 487). Gibson ‘was very intent on having a macho Jesus ... He wanted to make sure that the Passion was something Jesus did, not something for which he was a victim’ (Shepherd, 2005, 328). Reaching back to the innocence of childhood is integral to this reach into a religious moment. The Prioress summons the voice of ‘a child of twelf month oold, or lesse / That kan unnethes any word expresse’ (VII.484–485); Benedict Fitzgerald, Gibson’s screen writer, ‘simply opened up to the sort of faith that children have and let that influence me ... I was remembering of how I thought of [the Crucifixion] when I was a child’ (Shepherd, 2005, 323).

In the Prioress’s and Fitzgerald’s claims for childish views of the world, audiences are hoodwinked, for the tellers are adults who knowingly missionize through adult stories. Madame Eglentyne ‘Gladly’ (VII.452) accepts the Host’s charge to tell the next tale. Fitzgerald, too, comes to this film already committed to sharing Christ’s story in detail: ‘I gave him something that was, I think, 280 pages long’ (Shepherd, 2005, 322). Neither Chaucer’s Prioress nor Gibson’s screenwriter is innocent: both know full well that their stories are part of a temporal history that rides on isolation and violence. The Prioress tells us a story of child abuse – ‘This cursed Jew hym hente, and heeld hym faste, / And kitte his throte, and in a pit hym caste’ (VII.570–571); Gibson shows us a world of pain all wrapped up in continuous scourging of the penetrable body of Jim Caviezel. In the words of Fitzgerald, ‘it was based on a sacred text and there was no reason in the world to change it. There was nothing in it that was offensive that isn’t in the Gospels’ (Shepherd, 2005, 331). The Prioress’s ‘Prologue’ and ‘Tale’ and *The Passion of the Christ* wittingly introduce strokes of brutality – ‘horror’ – to produce their Marian lyric or ‘visual theater’ by ‘quickening our emotional responses’ (Cohen, 2007, 249; Stanbury, 2009, 519).

A Wrinkle in Normative Time

At first glance *The Passion of the Christ* occupies a space hitherto unclaimed by any film on this topic, unfolding in both the Latin (for the Romans) and Aramaic and Hebrew languages (for the Jews). *The Passion* attempts to capture an episode in history that joins biblical and antique times, but Satan’s presence, her-his deeply queer body (her-his very evident sexual *bricolage*), transforms Gibson’s *The Passion* into something else: a story of non-normative slippage that acknowledges its rupture with traditional history and participates in filmic myth-making.³² As the little-boy-to-demon-to-boy metamorphoses suggest (Judas calls the boy and his friend ‘little satans’ [Chapter 10]), contact with Satan (and evil)



involves shape shifting, deploying the human body as a costume to disguise one's demonic nature and ultimate turn away from the normative. Satan attempts to perform normativity, wearing a wig as a way of blending into the human sphere until the wig flies off Satan's head and god's tear disrupts earthly sanguinity (Chapter 30).

Satan, also noticeable as a broken thing whose unclear sexuality and visible androgyny (both a masculinized woman and a feminized man), demands that we (re)see Gibson's portrayal of the endless violence Yeshu undergoes. Satan's queerness compels us to wonder over Gibson's desires to craft a hypermasculine and hyper-Christian Yeshu. On the one hand, 'Mel was very intent,' William Fulco explains, 'on having a macho Jesus in charge' (Shepherd, 2005, 328).³³ On the other hand, Gibson resists his past identity and his own heightened passion for things Jewish when, as a young man in Israel, 'he started attending Sabbath services, eating only kosher food, and dressing in traditional black garb' (Griffiths, 2007, 11).

At the close of a 'postscript' that opened her *Empire of Magic*, Heng rightly notes that 'in order for the present to pick its way, less than blindly, to the future – in order, perhaps, to have a future worth possessing – it is time, I think, to return to the past anew' (Heng, 2003, 15). I move Heng's introductory remark to my end because, yes, by all means, in order to stumble through the future, we need to reread the medieval 'past,' duly noting the intersections of the medieval and modern horror of othering the bodies of people who do not fit into normative temporality.

The touch of the texts in 'Staging Encounters' brings us to see a staging ground of what later becomes refined, refinished and applicable to all humans rendered nonhuman.³⁴ I return to the subaltern in closing as I leave us with Chakrabarty's impossible 'ideal' and the question that penetrates his text: can voiceless fragments speak and be heard? (Chakrabarty, 2002, 36) Often. Voiceless specters of medieval hate haunt our allegedly advanced and modernized present as the appearance of the bodies of 16 medieval Jews languishing in a well remind us (Chism, 2002, 1–9; *Jewish Bodies*, 2011). Our pasts do not go away. The past returns with a vengeance to haunt the present – and probably the future too – in the most unexpected moments and unanticipated places.

About the Author

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the possibility that we cannot assume that we remain untouched by other stories, other histories (Dinshaw, 1999, 38–40; Cohen, 2010, 60–62).

- 29 In mobilizing Jewish history I mean to enact the silent resistance that Chakrabarty speaks of when a temporal 'fragment' (Chakrabarty, 2002, 34–35), like myself, 'challenge [s] ... conceptions of totalities' (Chakrabarty, 2002, 36). As a fragment, my Jewish view takes us away from the frame of homogenous time and drags us into reterritorialized Jewish time.
- 30 For the 'Prioress's Tale', see lines 98–100; for the 'Parson's Tale,' see lines 110–111. Lavezzo proposes that the *litel clergeon's* perpetual singing infects rather than nourishes the Christian community (Lavezzo, 2011, 377–379). Like the Parson, the Church attempted to disown its Jewish 'origins' (Hobbs, 1999, 182).

- 31 Quotations from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* are made by Fragment and line number(s), here and elsewhere. Readers are introduced to the Prioress's moniker, Madame Eglentyne, in the General Prologue (I, 121). Power imagines a young woman who, later advancing from novice to prioress, is initially committed to a nunnery by her father (Power, 1946, 59–84). Rex traces the evidence that the Prioress's 'sobriquet' (Rex, 1995, 79) is a willfull *double entendre*, linking the Prioress to Bankside brothels and the rose, Mary's flower (Rex, 1995, 79–84). Most recently, Price offers a psychological analysis of the Prioress (Price, 2008, 197–208).
- 32 Satan's undefined sexuality is largely the effect of the actor, Rosalina Celentano, who performs the role of Satan; Celentano's femaleness undercuts Satan's maleness. Torjesen notes that 'the

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- devil in the garden and her appearances throughout are not part of the Gospels' (Torjesen, 2004, 93).
- 33 *The Passion of the Christ* creates a cowering Judas, whose eventual suicide further prompts visions of Yeshu's triumphant masculinity. Through an early camera trick of slowing filmic time, Judas's betrayal of Yeshu is etched into audiences' memories as Caiaphas tosses a satchel of money to Judas, who fails to catch the satchel as 30 silver coins scatter over the floor (Chapter 2). Proper time returns as the Sanhedrin stand over Judas while he pathetically scrambles to collect the blood money.
- 34 I arrive at these thoughts independent of Heschel who also senses present horrors echoing in Gibson's film: 'will we watch the film as an expression of our own suffering, as innocent American victims of our allegedly implacable Muslim



enemies?'
(Heschel, 2004,
189). I leave this
essay with one
final reflection on
the act of Othering
humans in our
current conflicts
abroad. I refer to a
New York Times
Magazine
(Mogelson, 2011)
article that talks
about how four of
our US soldiers
used innocent
human bodies as
chess pieces in
their games of war,
when the military
men transformed
innocent
noncombatants
into expendable
Others.

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