

Imaging Salvation in the Medieval Drama Classroom

Professor Alan Baragona

"The integration of text, image, and performance makes the study of medieval plays more dynamic and more enriching for our students. As much as anything, it is this "intelligent design" of Images of Salvation, integrating so many features into a single tool, that makes it indispensable in the medieval drama classroom".

Introduction

Dee Dyas and her team of editors and computer designers set out first and foremost to address a modern problem, students' almost total lack of knowledge of the Bible, even as a cultural document. They have created an extremely elaborate picture book introduction, one might say the Mercedes of picture book introductions, using illustrations from a period of Western culture when art was suffused with piety, even inextricable from it. The notes always include an aesthetic analysis along with the doctrinal one, and many of the commentaries connect the illustrations to medieval literature. All of these features allow the teacher to use the CD to teach students about medieval culture and literature through biblical traditions. Any literature teacher who looks at the CD will quickly see its usefulness for teaching any medieval texts. But I, at least, did not, really could not, foresee the variety of ways one could adapt this resource until I began to use it in the medieval drama classroom.

An electronic picture book like this is particularly useful to teach medieval drama, because drama is itself partly a visual art. Students of drama must learn to treat the texts as scripts to be performed rather than literature just to be read. To appreciate the artistry, the deeper themes, and sometimes even the literal meaning of medieval plays, students must be able to see them in their heads as they read. Modern productions have multiplied over the last few decades, and most courses include some performance by the students themselves. But student or even professional productions are not always the best ways to get an authentic picture of medieval theatrical practices, even as scholars strive to reconstruct exactly what those would be. They can never really entirely capture the look of a medieval performance. They always have some touch of the modern about them. With medieval illuminations, however, we have an authentic medieval look to help students form a mental picture. The trick is to connect the static and stylized medieval images to living performance. *Images of Salvation* provides the tools, sometimes in surprising ways, to do just that. Having used it in my course twice now, I have found it to be a remarkably effective way to teach six important elements of medieval drama: **compression of time**, especially through simultaneous staging; **typology; iconography; conventions and anachronisms; deviations from the Bible text**, whether traditional or original; and, most fundamentally, **the visual imagination of the medieval playwrights**.

The visual imagination of the medieval playwrights

Luckily, the perfect illustration to begin a semester-long discussion of that final point corresponds to some of the earliest medieval plays. I try to take a comprehensive approach to the drama in the

course, using David Bevington's massive textbook, *Medieval Drama*, so that I can lead off with liturgical plays and church drama, before getting to the mysteries, moralities, and saints plays. This means that very early in the course we come to the Fleury *Service for Representing the Scene at the Lord's Sepulchre*. On the *Images of Salvation* CD, the Visitation to the Sepulchre is under the theme of "Resurrection," and there we find the 10th-century **Benedictional of St. Æthelwold**, along with commentary which is, one might say, a godsend for my approach to the drama. The description explicitly connects the illustration to the dramatizations of the Bible story. "In his *Regularis Concordia*, Æthelwold describes how, during the celebration of Mass on Easter Sunday, there was a dramatic re-enactment of the Resurrection before the altar. . . . [T]he shroud hanging in the doorway of the sepulchre illustrates both the biblical narrative and the liturgical rituals that were performed during Easter Sunday when the Resurrection was celebrated. Reference to these rituals may also be found in the way the women at the sepulchre are not differentiated in terms of their identity. In Christian art generally, one of the women was often portrayed as the Virgin Mary The more anonymous presentation in the manuscript . . . is more in keeping with the comparatively unspecific accounts of the Gospels, but it may also refer to the manner in which the visit to the sepulchre was re-enacted during the service on Easter Sunday, where the role of the women was played by clerics. Certainly the manner in which the sepulchre has been depicted as a church building was intended to call to mind these liturgical celebrations." So not only is the depiction highly artificial and "medievalized," but it implants in the mind's eye of the student the visual image of the church setting of these plays, rather than the cinematic image of a primitive tomb outside a desert city that they are likely to bring with them. It is, in other words, a "stagy" picture, which is perfect for a study of drama.

The illumination of the Sacrifice of Isaac in the 14th-century **Litlyngton Missal** helps reinforce this point later in the course. The commentary here emphasizes the typological connections of Isaac with Christ, the sacrificial altar with the Mass, and Abraham with the priest, but one could make the case that this has an even stronger connection than Æthelwold's Benedictional to a church performance. Not only is the altar shaped and draped like a church altar, but it has stone steps leading up to it, and the decorative gold leaf background on either side is rectangular and surrounded by almost architectural ornamentation. It looks for all the world as if the angel is coming out from behind a curtain rather than from clouds. It certainly looks as if it is taking place indoors, rather than on a mountain top. If the Æthelwold Benedictional suggests a dramatic staging, the Litlyngton Missal almost seems to be a record of one.



Litlyngton Missal: The sacrifice of Isaac
(© Dean & Chapter of Westminster Abbey)

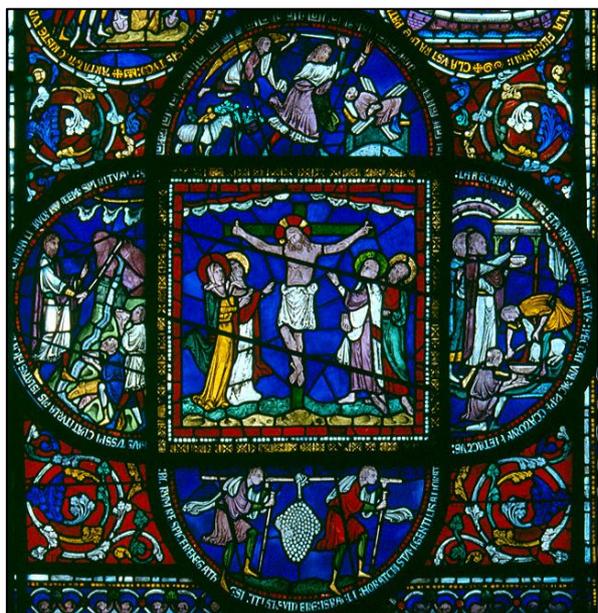
The compression of narrative time

Another aspect of the medieval imagination that the plays and pictures have in common is the compression of narrative time through simultaneous depiction of action. This technique, of course, is everywhere in medieval art, and in *Images of Salvation* it very helpfully shows up in illustrations of stories that are also dramatized. The stories of Cain and Abel in **Bodleian MS Junius 11** and Abraham

and Isaac in the **Old English Hexateuch** are both depicted in a kind of zigzag filmstrip, with the events jammed into a single frame, but the action is still linear as you follow each moment in the story. The 14th-century **Holkham Bible Picture Book** and 15th-century Bedford Hours, by contrast, depict the episodes of the Noah story in a truly simultaneous fashion. In Holkham, the eye can follow the crow leaving Noah's left hand and alighting on a floating horse to pick out its eyes, but then you must go back up to Noah's right hand, which is at once releasing the dove and about to catch the dove as it returns with the olive branch, which you can see it picking out of the receding waters below, all at the same time.

There are three theatrical equivalents to this technique. One is simply the use of dialogue to indicate quickly a slow passage of time. We see this in the Towneley *Play of Noah*, where forty days and forty nights pass like lightning in the speeches of Noah and his wife. Another is just to skip narrative details. Again, in the Towneley *Noah*, the raven and dove are released immediately one after the other within the span of eight lines. Both these techniques are much like the zigzag filmstrip of the Anglo-Saxon manuscripts. The third method is the simultaneous staging that David Bevington several times points out in his textbook, beginning with his discussion of the *Fleury Service for Representing Herod* (and sure enough, it is used in the York Minster South Aisle Window of the Slaughter of the Innocents). The Fleury text makes clear that the two acting locations contrast the pride of Herod's court with the humility of Christ's stable. Once students have this kind of image firmly planted in their minds with the help of the CD, they can consider the effect when it is not explicitly indicated in the text, like having God visible on his scaffold during the whole of *The Castle of Perseverance* or having the Holy Family visible at all times during the antics of Mak and Gill in *The Second Shepherds' Play*. Such staging choices raise questions about symbolic and thematic parallels between characters and events, questions that can run throughout class discussion for the entire semester.

Such parallels bring us to the use of typology in medieval art forms. Typology is important for teaching any medieval literature, but especially medieval theater. Early in the course, for example, I teach the Anglo-Norman *Service for Representing Adam*. Its three parts, the Fall, Cain and Abel, and the Procession of the Prophets, require readers to understand the typological connections among Adam, Abel, and Christ. This prepares students to look for such patterns in the later plays, even when they don't hit you over the head. You don't have to be turning your students into mini-Robertsonians to recognize the prevalence of typology throughout all the different genres of medieval drama, and *Images of Salvation* makes it particularly easy to explain. It lists "**Typology**" as a separate "Theme," significantly placed as a transition between Old and New Testament Themes. The explanation is clear, concise, and, of course, illustrated, in this case with the **Redemption window of Canterbury Cathedral**. Commentaries on other works of art reinforce the typological interpretation. A Topic search for "typology" returns eleven hits in



Canterbury Cathedral Redemption window
(© Dean & Chapter of Canterbury)

addition to the general "Theme," including another illumination of Abraham and Isaac, this time the Old English Hexateuch. A search for "exegesis" yields seven more, repeating only the Hexateuch; for "prefiguration," fourteen items. Once the students understand the principle, you can use pictures to highlight the use of typology in the plays, including the question of whether or not it is there. A key example is the story of Noah. Robertsonians point out that medieval exegetes tended to interpret the Ark as Holy Church. In the **Bedford Hours**, students can see the Ark depicted as a building rather than a boat, and the commentary says, "The ark itself is presented rather like a church, with finial decorations which emphasize the parallel. This serves to remind viewers of the understanding that the ark is a type of the Church in which souls can be saved just as the ark kept Noah, his family and the animals from the flood." By contrast, the illumination of Noah in the **Old English Hexateuch** depicts the Ark as a Viking ship, and the notes point out there is "very little investigation of biblical exegesis." This 7 allows the class to discuss whether, for example, the Towneley *Play of Noah* invites the audience to see Noah and the Ark as figures of Christ and the Church and whether a staging might include some visual hints at the connection.

Iconography

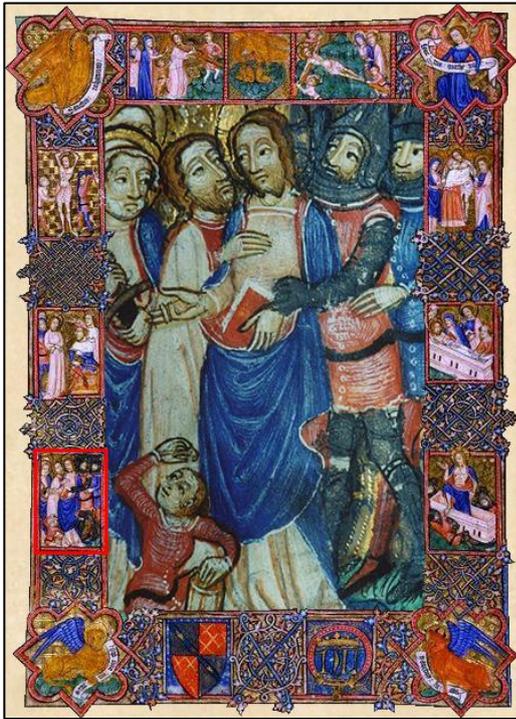
Depictions of the Noah story also open up the conversation to the related issue of iconography. The CD commentaries point out that, in contrast to the Bedford Hours illustration, the **Holkham Bible Picture Book** depicts the dead floating in the water as naked, a man and a woman with genitals prominently exposed, likely indicating that the artist wants to stress sexual sins as a cause for the Flood. In class, you can discuss how this is analogous to the most prominent feature of the Towneley *Play of Noah*, the comic fight between Noah and his wife. The text of the play makes no mention of sexual sins; God says several times that he will destroy humankind for "setting no store by Him," but He doesn't give any specifics. In the action, however, we see sin at work in Noah's wife and his uxoriousness. As a hen-pecked husband, Noah, of course, is a type of Adam, as well as a type of Christ, the New Adam, and in the Uxor's stubbornness and Noah's difficulty controlling her, audiences see the sin of Adam and Eve almost bringing down all humankind yet again.

The **Bedford Hours** Noah provides a somewhat different, but equally useful analogue to the comic moral satire in the Towneley play. The lower half of the painting depicts the story of Noah's drunkenness and exposure of his own genitals, once again linking human failings to our sexuality and self-indulgence. Although this episode is not depicted in the drama, it is in some ways an even better parallel to the play's treatment of Noah as a comically flawed prophet, because these flaws are attributed to Noah himself, rather than to those killed in the Flood. Students are generally surprised to find a holy figure treated with apparent disrespect, and this illumination helps them understand and accept the medieval concept, which is more complex than they are used to. By the way, this is also a moment in my course when the CD fulfills its primary purpose of educating students about the Bible itself. Not a single one of my students has ever heard the story of Noah's drunkenness and shame. This year, one of my students remarked to his roommate how surprised he was to learn about it. The roommate, who was something of a Bible-thumping Christian all too common in America today and who was sure he knew his Scripture back to front, denied that any such story existed. My student took great delight in pointing to the text for proof (and I'm pleased to say he used the Douay-Rheims translation, too).

Using these visual works to help modern students understand medieval icons also trains them to think about whether medieval play sets might have given similar visual clues to iconography. The

Sforza Hours and **French Book of Hours**, both contemporary with the English mystery plays, depict Nativity scenes with a ramshackle stable, and the Sforza Hours picture includes a crumbling classical temple. The notes point out that these are icons of the passing of the Old Law and of classical paganism, respectively. Once again, students can use these paintings to form a picture in their mind of what a play performance might have looked like and how a production can contribute to the meaning of the text.

Conventions and anachronisms



Litlyngton Missal: The Betrayal
(© Dean & Chapter of Westminster Abbey)

This sort of iconography is part of a more general approach to the Bible stories that we find in both the artwork and the plays. The depictions in both are usually anachronistic and often rely on medieval tradition rather than the literal text. Students will be able to imagine the sets, props, and costumes of a medieval play production when they have been exposed to the conventions of medieval painting. In every illumination, they see Joseph and Mary in medieval dress. The **York Minster South Aisle Window** shows Herod's soldiers as 14th-century knights in plate armor, armed with pikes, leading us to believe that the *milites* in the plays would be similarly portrayed. At the same time, the picture of the Betrayal in the **Litlyngton Missal** shows how costuming might be mixed, with the soldiers and Malchus in contemporary garb, while Jesus and the disciples wear robes that suggest biblical times, a feature that the commentary mentions.

The non-biblical traditions, mostly medieval, are just as important as the anachronisms. For example, Genesis does not say explicitly why Cain's sacrifice is unacceptable or even what he sacrificed. However, the Bodleian Junius 11 manuscript and the **York Minster Great East Window** emphasize the difference between offerings of grain and of sheep, which becomes an essential part of the dramatic tradition. *The DaVinci Code* notwithstanding, the Mary Magdalene of art and literature, both medieval and modern, is a traditional composite of four biblical figures, who may or may not be the same woman. Two illuminations of the Nativity include one or more apocryphal midwife, and since one is the 10th-century Benedictional of St. Æthelwold, and the other is the 15th-century **British Library Book of Hours**, students learn how persistent such legends can be. It is in teaching how non-biblical traditions find their way into medieval drama that the apparatus in *Images of Salvation* becomes particularly valuable. Since each Theme and most individual commentaries come with links to the relevant Bible passages themselves, you can quickly show students in class what is not in Scripture, as well as what is there. Here, the commentary for the Book of Hours not only traces the apocryphal sources of the midwives, with links to the Glossary for each, but provides the text of the main one, the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*. This is also another instance where the CD directly connects the images to the plays and their freewheeling way with the Bible, since the commentary mentions that they appear in the N-Town Nativity pageant.

The pictures of the Scourging or Flagellation highlight a popular attitude that puts the mystery plays in a larger context. The Introduction allows one to point out the connection between the plays and the prominence of "affective devotion" in the late Middle Ages, especially since the Gospels give no details at all about the scourging. The **Bolton Hours** illumination is significant because the book is contemporary with the mystery plays and was produced in York. It is also particularly bloody, making a nice complement to the depiction of the Passion by the York Realist. Moreover, the scene is unusually set in a field of flowers, which *Images of Salvation* says is incongruous, but one can't help but speculate whether it is influenced by the outdoor setting of the York play productions. Did the playwrights see these pictures? Did the illuminators take time off from their meticulous labor to refresh themselves by seeing a midsummer play?

Most useful of all, the single example of a picture of the Nativity Shepherds, from the **Canterbury Cathedral Library Book of Hours**, brings both elements together. It is anachronistic in the clothing, the bagpipe, and the cityscape in the background. It also follows the non-biblical tradition of depicting three shepherds, where Scripture is silent about the number, and portraying them as young, middle-aged, and old, exactly matching the characters in both Towneley Shepherds plays. The commentary calls attention to iconography in the possible contrast between heavenly music of the angel and the earthly music of the bagpipes, which, a drama teacher can add, corresponds exactly to the singing competition in the York *Shepherds' Play* and Towneley *Second Shepherds' Play*. Note that in the York play, as in the illumination, one shepherd doesn't see the angels at first until the others point it out.

Deviations from the Bible text

The pictures and the plays not only elaborate on the Bible stories; they share an occasional disregard for Scripture, choosing tradition over text, which most students find surprising. The most obvious example is the treatment of the Visitation. The Gospel of Mark is the only one that says there are three women, and in no Gospel are all named "Mary." Matthew has only two women, and Luke has three named women and unnumbered anonymous ones. John has only Mary Magdalene. All the illuminations and plays depict three women, and the 12th-century *Fleury Playbook* and 15th-century Towneley *Resurrection* name all of them "Mary." The depiction of Mary Magdalene and the Risen Christ in the **Lambeth Apocalypse** raises an interesting question for the drama. John says Christ is disguised as a gardener, but here Jesus is depicted as a triumphant savior (though this seems to be the moment after the recognition, when he is saying "nole me tangere," so perhaps we are supposed to assume that a transformation has taken place). This question generates some good discussion when my students watch the video of Fletcher Collins's *Fleury Visitatio*, in which the risen Christ is dressed as a cleric rather than a gardener.

Finally, the York Minster Massacre of the Innocents window, seen earlier, provides a different way to use the CD-ROM to discuss the plays' deviation from the Bible. The commentary focuses on the brutality of the violence and ugliness of the scene, especially how the evil of the soldiers highlights the poignancy of the victims, both of which are true to Scripture. But this melodramatic depiction has a bearing on one of the chief features and chief problems of the Towneley *Slaughter of the Innocents*, the use of what David Bevington calls "the comedy of evil" and the way in which the pathos has to be balanced with that comedy. The stained glass window allows one to bring up other dramatic versions, the Chester play, for example, that do not employ satire and take the same

melodramatic approach to the story. The Towneley play presents a greater challenge, which can be resolved only in performance.

This kind of integration of text, image, and performance makes the study of medieval plays more dynamic and more enriching for our students. As much as anything, it is this “intelligent design” of *Images of Salvation*, integrating so many features into a single tool, that makes it indispensable in the medieval drama classroom.

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