

THE CHRIST CHILD IN MEDIEVAL CULTURE:
ALPHA ES ET O!

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EDITED BY MARY DZON AND
THERESA M. KENNEY

The Christ Child in Medieval Culture: Alpha es et O!

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Abbreviations

AASS	<i>Acta Sanctorum</i> , 69 vols (Paris, 1863–1940)
BnF	Bibliothèque nationale de France
CCCM	Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaevalis
CCEL	Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum
CCSA	Corpus Christianorum, Series Apocryphorum
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina
CF	Cistercian Fathers
DACL	<i>Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie</i> , ed. F. Cabrol and H. Leclercq, 15 vols (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1920–53)
EETS	Early English Text Society
o.s.	Original Series
e.s.	Extra Series
s.s.	Supplementary Series
ELH	English Literary History
MED	<i>Middle English Dictionary</i> , ed. Hans Kurath et al. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1952–2001)
MGH	Monumenta Germaniae Historica
NCE	<i>New Catholic Encyclopedia</i> , ed. B.L. Marthaler et al., 15 vols (New York: Thomson/Gale, 2003)
NPNF	Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church
PG	<i>Patrologia Graeca</i> , ed. J.-P. Migne, 161 vols (Paris, 1857–66)
PL	<i>Patrologia Latina</i> , ed. J.-P. Migne, 221 vols (Paris, 1844–64)
PMLA	Publications of the Modern Language Association
RS	Rolls Series
SC	Sources Chrétiennes
SFSS	Samlingar utgivna av Svenska Fornskriftsällskapet (Swedish Medieval Texts' Society Series)

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M.D.

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T.M.K.

Introduction: The Infancy of Scholarship on the Medieval Christ Child

MARY DZON AND THERESA KENNEY

Focus on the Divinity and Humanity of the Christ Child

To medieval Christians, the Christ Child was the beginning and end of all things, the Alpha and the Omega (Revelation 1:8, 21:6, and 22:13). In him, heaven and earth, eternity and time met. Believing that this child was in fact the Lord of the universe, medieval poets and artists strove to understand his unique place in their cosmos, and to praise him rightly. And yet, they also recognized that the same being was both God and man. Theologians and mystics pondered the union of humanity and divinity in the same person and its implications. Artists sought to represent the perspective of the boy who held the orb of the world in his hand and at the same time played with a child's ball.

No book has ever been written on the countless medieval representations of the Christ Child and few shorter works dealing with this subject are to be found. To begin to remedy this gap in medieval studies, the editors present the current volume: an interdisciplinary collection of essays on the ways in which the Christ Child was represented in the arts, or imagined in scholarly and popular thought throughout the Middle Ages, broadly conceived as the period extending from the end of Late Antiquity up until the Reformation.

We set out upon this path with the simple question: how did medieval persons understand the omnipresent figure of the Christ Child? What we found was that these understandings were not homogeneous, although images and ideas of the Child are not so fragmented from each other that one cannot speak of a 'medieval Christ Child.' To the contrary, an examination of the sources reveals general trends (such as the traditional emphasis upon his paradoxical nature) and a rich

culture of practices, texts, images, and even music concerned with his birth and childhood.

More than twenty years ago, the social historian David Herlihy remarked that 'a cult of childhood' seems to stand behind the cult of the child Jesus, which 'enjoys great popularity, at least from the twelfth century.'¹ But was there a cult of childhood and did it predate the intense medieval interest in the Christ Child? The latter does not seem to be true, yet it is evident that medieval attitudes toward childhood and medieval views of Christ's infancy and boyhood are interrelated. When medieval Christians experienced representations of the boy Jesus, they did not just see a pretty child, but a person who was the most important being in the universe – God, in fact, an uncreated spirit of unimaginable power who deigned to undergo the indignities of infancy and childhood, but who by doing so became as approachable as any newborn baby. Even when medieval authors, artists or devotees focus on the boy's divinity, as opposed to his humanity, they often reveal their assumptions about childhood. Conversely, when they explore his humanity, they very often reveal a great deal about their theological presuppositions and their sense of his uniqueness. The treasury of medieval sources dealing with the Christ Child thus affords rich material for learning more about childhood and about this central figure within medieval Christianity.²

One factor unites these essays that deal with such diverse topics as Christ's baby teeth, his taming of dragons, his miraculous clothing, and images of death in artworks representing his birth, even though we did not set out to discover an overriding thesis or unifying point when we began. While the present volume deals with the diversity of images of the child Jesus and different aspects of his medieval cult, it emphasizes consistently the paradoxical duality of his nature that we find in the views of medieval Christians. Medieval people were fascinated with the Christ Child's possession of divine power and knowledge, and his simultaneous subjection of himself to the conditions of human childhood. What kind of child was he if he knew and could do all things? Did he think about his future suffering as he was doing his chores? Was he troubled, even as an infant, by the thought of a painful and ignominious death upon a cross? Did this child, filled with wisdom and potency, let others know that he was no ordinary boy? Questions about the Christ Child's normalcy arose with regard to his physical development as well. Did he indeed undergo all the indignities of infancy (such as toothlessness and a lack of speech and literacy), and if so, why?

All the authors whose work is gathered herein have in their own ways dealt with the Christ Child's duality. It is the main point about the Christ Child that concerns medieval Christians, from the most rigorous theologians to the writers of popular legends, from sculptors to visionary nuns, from monks squabbling over relics to Arthurian *romanciers*.

The Origin and Title of This Collection

Each of the contributors to this collection to some degree owes a debt to the first essay it presents: it was Leah [Sinanoglou] Marcus's 1973 essay on the motif of the 'child in the host' in the late-medieval English drama that in a way began this project.³ Marcus's essay has been repeatedly cited by scholars over the course of almost forty years, appearing in footnotes usually without reference to other scholarship. Though interest in the topic of the medieval Christ Child has grown, the dearth of available studies convinced the editors of the present volume that a scholarly need was not being met. They thus conceived of an interdisciplinary collection of essays that would serve as a good sourcebook for those wishing to study the subject of the Christ Child further.

Theresa Kenney's research on the Middle English religious lyric had led her to Marcus's article as one of the only sources available in the early 1990s for someone interested in the subject of the temporal collapse between the time of Christ's birth and his Passion in late-medieval and Renaissance Nativity lyrics.⁴ Rather than posit the affective piety promoted by the Franciscans as the main explanation of late-medieval images of a suffering Christ Child, Marcus chose to delve a little deeper into patristic lore, and she opened wide the door for the exploration of patristic and early homiletic traditions as sources for the later images of the Christ Child that Kenney focused on in her dissertation.

Mary Dzon was struck by a different type of image: that of the wonder-working Christ Child found in medieval literature and art based upon centuries-old apocryphal infancy legends.⁵ Having focused on this image in her doctoral thesis, Dzon continued to ponder it within its wider context. At the International Congress on Medieval Studies at Kalamazoo, Michigan, in 2005, she served as a respondent to two sessions on the medieval Christ Child organized by David Areford for the International Center of Medieval Art: 'The Childhood of Christ Revisited: Images, Texts, and Devotions I & II.' These were followed by a session entitled 'The Passion of the Christ (Child)' at the annual meeting of the Medieval Academy of America held in Boston in 2006, which

formed the nucleus of this book. At that session, Dzon and Kenney were joined by David Areford, who was unfortunately unable to participate in the project of the current book. He presented a paper on fifteenth-century German woodcuts featuring the Proleptic Passion, that is, the future Passion represented as already occurring or accomplished in the Christ Child.⁶ Jeffrey Hamburger graciously presided over the session and offered insightful critiques and comments. It was he who first drew the attention of the editors to a 1973 essay by Dora Jane Janson entitled 'Omega in Alpha: The Christ Child's Knowledge of His Fate.'

In a nod to Janson's titular phrase 'Omega in Alpha,' the editors have borrowed the line 'Alpha es et O' from the carol 'In Dulci Jubilo,' attributed to the Dominican mystic Heinrich Suso (d. 1365), which praises the Christ Child exuberantly as the beginning and end of all things.⁷ The exclamation refers to Christ's divinity, his not being bound by the endpoints of human time. Patristic and medieval writers considered the phrase 'Alpha and Omega' a denomination of the Word in particular, rather than of God in general. In one of his hymns, the fourth-century poet Prudentius says that Christ, '[b]orn of the Father's love before the world's beginning, [is] called Alpha and Omega. He is both source and end of all things that are or have been or hereafter shall be.'⁸ The symbolic use of these letters to signify Christ was, in fact, a standard feature of early Christian art; these letters were often placed on either side of the monogrammatic Chi-Rho chrismon, a shorthand form of Christ's name.⁹

So, by the time the phrase 'Alpha ... et O' appears in the carol attributed to Suso, it had been applied to Christ for centuries. The essays in this volume, which all explore the Child who is Alpha and Omega, reveal that medieval discourses and representations of the boy Jesus have deep roots in the past and have more intellectual content than we might at first assume. The phrase also sums up our sense that this Child was omnipresent in medieval Europe, and was of interest to those beyond its borders.

The Contents of This Collection

The reader will find different approaches represented by the critics herein that for the most part are due to the diverse tools and vocabularies used by the disciplines of art history, social and intellectual history, and literary interpretation. The choice to study the Christ Child himself as a child clearly derives from the growth in interest in medieval child-

hood over the past few decades and is related to new historicist trends, as formalist methods of interpretation, including structuralism and deconstruction, have yielded to thick description, contextualization, intertextuality, and other methods. Readers will find some speculation about the history of the cult of childhood, the history of emotions, the role of gender, and the role of the marginalized (particularly the Jews) in the medieval imagination. Our book follows from these trends, but there is a great deal of old-fashioned source study in these pages and, on the editors' part, a conscious desire to offer to other scholars material that would be both approachable and useful.

Though the reader will find that much remains to be said about early-medieval images of the Christ Child – we barely touch on the Anglo-Saxons, for instance – the following essays do treat the early sources of the image as well as a wide range of medieval approaches toward him, with a focus on fourteenth- and fifteenth-century literature and art. One might expect that the preponderance of the essays in this book would deal with affective devotion to the Babe of Bethlehem, yet our authors have found ample use of the figure of the Christ Child as a means of conveying theological information, to allow the presentation of essential mysteries of the Christian faith, such as the Incarnation, the Passion (represented proleptically in images of Christ's infancy), and the Eucharist. The role of affective piety is treated herein as well, but our experience with the diverse materials has taught us that promoting or expressing that devotion is only one of many aims the medieval authors and artists seem to have had. If the Christ Child was everywhere, it seems it was because a great many interesting questions or issues could eventually come to be seen in the light of his unique experience and the unique challenge he posed to the intellect as well as the heart.

The essays in this collection are organized by their themes. Part 1, 'The Christ Child as Sacrifice,' contains the only piece that was previously published elsewhere, 'The Christ Child as Sacrifice: A Medieval Tradition and the English Cycle Plays,' by Leah S. Marcus, who draws our attention to the strange image of the slain Christ Child in the host, the idea of the Christ Child as sacrifice, in medieval art and drama. The essay is reprinted here with slight modifications and annotations. Following Marcus within this part are three essays focusing on the image of the sacrificial Christ Child: Theresa Kenney's 'The Manger as Calvary and Altar in the Middle English Nativity Lyric,' Elina Gertsman's 'Signs of Death: The Sacrificial Christ Child in Late-Medieval Art,' and Nicole Fallon's 'The Christ Child in the Tree: The Motif in

the Thirteenth-Century Wood-of-the-Cross Legends and Arthurian Romances.' Kenney's essay explicates the theoretical basis for images of sacrifice that are highlighted in this part. Medieval Christians, she asserts, believed that the act of Incarnation, Christ's taking flesh within the womb of Mary, was accessible to them through Christ's presence in the Eucharist, and that the Eucharist provided the nexus between humanity dwelling in time and God dwelling in eternity. Christ's foreknowledge and his experience of timelessness as God, as well as his presence in the sacrament, provided the rationale for images of the Proleptic Passion, which sometimes depicted him already suffering wounds or with the *arma Christi* (the weapons used at the Passion). These images are the focus of Gertsman's investigation of pictorial art, which reveals the intimate way in which the doctrine of the Eucharist interrelates with the powerful pathos of the image of the *Schmerzenskind* (Child of Sorrows), which emphasizes the vulnerability of his body. Fallon's essay traces episodes having to do with a child in a tree in Arthurian romances back to stories of Adam and Eve's son Seth and the 'oil of mercy' that is to come from a seed of the tree of knowledge or the tree of life in Eden. Because Christ himself is the promised 'oil of mercy' from the tree, the paradisaical tree prefigures the rood-tree on which he will die.

Part 2, 'The Christ Child and Feminine Spirituality,' offers three essays on the role of the Christ Child in women's spiritual lives: Mary Dzon's 'Birgitta of Sweden and Christ's Clothing,' Holly Flora's 'Women Wielding Knives: The Circumcision of Christ by His Mother in an Illustrated Manuscript of the *Meditationes vitae Christi*,' and Richard Kieckhefer's '*Thesus ist Unser!*: The Christ Child in the German Sister Books.' Dzon's essay provides a link with the previous part by underscoring the centrality of the Proleptic Passion in the visionary writings of Birgitta. She argues that the Swedish saint gendered the trope by repeatedly associating it with the Virgin's use of textiles. In her study of a Franciscan text written for nuns, Flora shows how the knife of the circumcision was, in a sense, one of the *arma Christi*. Mary's use of this instrument to shed Christ's blood for the first time casts her in the role of both priest and new mother of Moses. Taken together, the studies of Dzon and Flora reveal that medieval women both encouraged others to feel compassion for the sufferings of Christ and Mary and constituted an audience urged to feel such sorrow through the assumption of Mary's feminine perspective. Kieckhefer's essay demonstrates that while German nuns frequently related to the Christ Child in maternal

ways – in imitation of Mary – they did not regard him, individually, as their exclusive possession, but rather as a divine being whose presence permeated their community.

Part 3, 'The Question of the Christ Child's Development,' consists of three essays that at least touch upon the question of the Child's maturation: William MacLehose's 'The Holy Tooth: Dentition, Childhood Development, and the Cult of the Christ Child,' Mary McDevitt's "'The Ink of Our Mortality': The Late-Medieval Image of the Writing Christ Child,' and Pamela Sheingorn's 'Reshapings of the Childhood Miracles of Jesus.' MacLehose posits a connection between high-medieval writings about the process of dentition and the roughly contemporary cult of the relic of Christ's baby tooth at the monastery Saint-Médard at Soissons. The tooth provided an entry-point for reflection on the reality of Christ's humanity, with regard not only to his passage through the human life cycle, but also to the pain he felt at the Passion. Like the swaddling bands in the writings of Birgitta and the portrayal of the infant Jesus with wounds, the Child's tooth encoded the mystery of Christ's destiny to suffer at the height of his adulthood. Yet MacLehose's discussion, in contrast to the other essays in this collection, foregrounds Christ's passage through time and his normal human development. McDevitt, too, is interested in the ways in which the medieval image of the Christ Child writing or reading reflects normal human life, specifically, the interaction between medieval mothers and children engaged in the process of education. But she also understands the motif in numerous symbolic ways, reflecting on medieval interpretive habits and perspectives (one of which views the New Testament as supersessionary). Sheingorn focuses on the Christ Child in the apocrypha, legends that give inconsistent answers to the question whether Jesus developed like an ordinary human child. On the one hand, they portray him as already possessing and displaying divine power and wisdom, yet, on the other, they attribute to him the ordinary behaviour of a child. To make things more complicated, medieval texts that appropriated the apocrypha did so in different ways, as Sheingorn amply demonstrates. The pervasive trope of the Proleptic Passion dominates the first part of our collection, yet Sheingorn's essay, in particular, shows that the medieval Christ Child was not always passive; he was sometimes potent and seemingly invincible. The images of both a suffering and a wonder-working Christ Child reveal that Jesus' childhood was hardly a time of carefree gaiety. While the apocryphal Child fosters a feeling of awe in those around him (and in the medieval audience), his miraculous deeds

also cause tension within his community, since many of the people who deal with him experience anger and frustration.

Rubin provides in her epilogue to this collection a consideration of the role of the Christ Child's image in the Middle Ages, which readers will find a thought-provoking capstone to what has gone before. Combined, the contributions to this volume illuminate the many facets of the Christ Child within medieval Europe. The Child evoked a range of responses, among which we find speculation, wonder, compassion, and tenderness. His presence in the child-as-host miracle also affected the Jews – often accused of host desecrations and imaginatively presented as witnesses to the reality of transubstantiation.¹⁰ But while the strong association of the infant Jesus with bloodshed had ramifications in the real social interactions of medieval people, we also see repeatedly in mystical visions, paintings, and poems that this association provoked maternal protectiveness and grief within a contemplative mode. The medieval Christ Child with his destiny to suffer and rise from the dead had a role to play in fiction, art, poetry, theology, and history. Medieval Christians were constantly being invited to interact with him in some way.

The Present Collection and Future Studies

Our collection represents the infancy of scholarship on the Christ Child, a beginning, only because it had to have an end. Although striking such a rich vein of material has presented many temptations to extend what became a larger project than we had at first envisioned, we realize that more work is necessary to do full justice to the sources we have unearthed thus far. Though no similar book exists at present, we are sure that other scholars will build upon the work presented here.

Examples of topics that could have been explored in this volume, but for which we had neither space nor time, include images of the Holy Kinship and St Anne; literary, visual, and theological treatments of the Christ Child's relationship to the Father; the Christ Child in Byzantine, Slavic, or Celtic sources; and paraliturgical practices centred on the baby Jesus.¹¹ There is much to be done on the cult of the Christ Child in the earlier Middle Ages. Scholars like David Herlihy, who have called attention to the frequent appearance of the Christ Child in Cistercian and Franciscan sources, may unintentionally have led people to believe that the cult is primarily a phenomenon of the twelfth

and thirteenth centuries.¹² Yet, as the essays in this volume by Marcus, Kenney, and MacLehose demonstrate, the roots of this devotion lay in the patristic period, and its presence can be perceived as early as the eleventh century.

The editors, in looking forward to such further studies, also wish to call for a reconsideration of tacit assumptions about the great divide between the Early and Late Middle Ages in regard to interior devotion and affective piety. In a recent essay on the presentation of the Christ Child in an Anglo-Saxon and an Old-Saxon poem, Thomas D. Hill calls his readers' attention to the flowering of devotion to the Christ Child in the High Middle Ages, as well as to its earlier stages.¹³ Hill's argument that a dark Germanic view of the universe determines the emphasis on the Christ Child's suffering in *Christ III* is in great part persuasive, but it should not prevent us from seeing that the theme also dominates Nativity poetry of the later Middle Ages. Hill's essay nonetheless supports our contention that we should examine presumptions about mendicant spirituality as promoting a 'new' affectivity in European Christianity. More work on earlier medieval materials along the lines of the studies of Hill and MacLehose will surely help us gain a greater perspective on the cult of the Christ Child throughout the period.

Other recent scholarship will be of use to those readers who have an interest in the issues raised in this volume. Rachel Fulton's book on devotion to Jesus in the early to High Middle Ages and Sarah McNamer's study of the relationship between gender and medieval compassion are major contributions to the recent field of 'the history of emotions.'¹⁴ Miri Rubin's recent book on the history of the Virgin Mary in the medieval West and in other contexts will surely also stimulate further interest in the figure of the Christ Child.¹⁵

The present book cannot hope to cover all of the ways in which many peoples in the many centuries between the fall of Rome and the Reformation imagined Christ's childhood. However, what it can hope to do is to provide a way to begin talking about the relation between medieval conceptualizations of childhood and the worship of the Christ Child. It can give literary and art historical scholars, social historians, theologians, and others a springboard for their studies of Christ and Mary in the Middle Ages, and encourage further engagement with the problem of representation – representation of the inexpressible, whether it is the inexpressibility of the thing the adult is not – the child – or the inexpressibility of God himself.

NOTES

- 1 'The Family and Religious Ideologies,' 170. Herlihy also raises the issue of the connection between medieval children and the Christ Child in 'Medieval Children.'
- 2 In her survey of the study of medieval childhood, Hanawalt mentions the Christ Child only once. See 'Medievalists and the Study of Childhood,' 445. In their lavishly illustrated *L'Enfance au Moyen Age*, Alexandre-Bidon and Riché make frequent use of sources involving the Christ Child.
- 3 'The Christ Child as Sacrifice: A Medieval Tradition and the Corpus Christi Plays.' The subtitle for this essay as it appears in this volume is 'A Medieval Tradition and the English Cycle Plays.'
- 4 Kenney, "'Aeternity Shutt in a Span.'"
- 5 Dzon, 'The Image of the Wanton Christ-Child.'
- 6 See entry no. 82, 'The Virgin Nursing the Christ Child,' by Areford in Parshall and Schoch, eds., *Origins of European Printmaking*, 266–8.
- 7 *The New Oxford Book of Carols*, ed. Keyte and Parrott, no. 59, 193–5. Though it is possible the song was composed as early as the thirteenth century, the carol as presented in the text derives from a mystical experience of Suso, which occurred on the Feast of the Angels, rather than on Christmas. See his *Vita* in *Henry Suso: The Exemplar*, trans. Tobin, 73–4. For the German text, see *Heinrich Seuse*, ed. Bihlmeyer, 21–2.
- 8 *Cathemerinon*, 9.10–12, in *Prudentius*, trans. Thomson, 1.76–7.
- 9 Cabrol, 'ΑΩ.'
- 10 Rubin, *Gentile Tales*.
- 11 For studies of St Anne in medieval culture, see Nixon, *Mary's Mother*; and *Interpreting Cultural Symbols*, ed. Ashley and Sheingorn. For an Old Irish poem attributed to the sixth-century St Íte, in which the speaker recounts her experience of nursing the Christ Child, see Quin, 'The Early Irish Poem *Ísucan*.' On the uses of Christ Child effigies, see, e.g., Hale, 'Rocking the Cradle.'
- 12 'Medieval Children.'
- 13 'The Baby on the Stone.'
- 14 Fulton, *From Judgment to Passion*; McNamer, *Affective Meditation*.
- 15 Rubin, *Mother of God*.

PART ONE

The Christ Child as Sacrifice

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1 The Christ Child as Sacrifice: A Medieval Tradition and the English Cycle Plays*

LEAH S. MARCUS

In one of the most bizarre, yet very common, miracles of the Middle Ages, the bread of the Eucharist is transformed between the very hands of the priest at Mass into a small living child, then slain and dismembered before the eyes of the congregation. Commentators identified the child as the infant Jesus and often cited such miracles as proof that the Mass is an actual re-sacrifice of the body and blood of Christ. But why should he appear as a child rather than the adult who died on Calvary? This question is more than a minor doctrinal quibble, for it widens out immediately into a much larger issue – that of just what impact the myriad pictorial and verbal images of the Christ Child had, or were expected to have, on a medieval popular audience. Works like the widely read *Meditationes vitae Christi*, attributed to Johannes de Caulibus, emphasize the Child's humanity. They seek to kindle a joyous form of devotion by bringing him to life as a winsome infant and inviting the reader to a sentimental response. But the miracle of the host become child is based on a harsher parallel tradition. Medieval writings, from early Latin tracts to late English popularizations, persist in conflating the Incarnation and the Passion, in fusing the Babe of Bethlehem and the sacramental victim of the Mass.

Materials from this tradition regularly appear in the English cycle plays, but have been just as regularly ignored by critics.¹ It would be easy to overemphasize the sacramental motifs in English medieval drama, thus freezing a living art form into the rigidity of a theological treatise. But to bypass these themes entirely, however fleetingly they appear, is to miss subtle overtones likely to reach a fifteenth-century viewer who was at all familiar with vernacular sermons and devotional manuals. The 'Second Shepherds' Play' makes particularly skilled use

of the child-host motif. By approaching the play through this tradition, we can more clearly recognize the artistry of the Wakefield Master and more fully appreciate the thematic unity that critics such as Eleanor Prosser have denied his work.²

The *Vitae patrum* tells of an aged and saintly Egyptian monk who found himself unable to believe that the bread of the sacrament is indeed the body of Christ. Two of his fellow monks expostulated with him in vain, then prayed for divine revelation and accompanied him to Mass. When the loaves were placed on the altar, it seemed to the three monks that a little boy lay there. As the priest stretched out his hand to break the bread, an angel of God came down from heaven and stabbed the child with a knife, catching his blood in a chalice. When the priest broke the bread into small pieces, the angel cut up the boy's limbs. The doubting monk went forward to partake of the sacrament, and was given bleeding flesh, whereupon he cried out, 'Lord, I believe that the bread laid on the altar is thy body and the chalice thy blood.' Upon these words, the flesh mercifully reassumed the semblance of bread, he communed, and the three returned to their cells praising God for so effectively curing the old monk's unbelief.³

Such miracles served not only to convince doubting Thomases but also to reward the trust of the faithful. The author of the celebrated *Vision of the Monk of Eynsham* attended a Mass celebrated by St Hugh of Lincoln in 1196:

[When the bishop] had reached the place where it is customary to consecrate the host, which has already been raised, to be turned by the words of consecration into the body of Christ, God in His mercy deigned to open the eyes of a certain clerk and showed him Christ in the likeness of a small child in the chaste hands of the venerable and holy bishop. Although very tiny, the child was very lovely and of a supernatural brilliance and whiteness beyond man's imagination. The clerk who saw this not unnaturally felt great devotion and compassion, and wept continuously from the time of the elevation until he saw it elevated once more to be broken into three portions and partaken of. In the second elevation he saw the Son of the Most High, born of a virgin, in the same form as before, offer himself for the redemption of mankind.⁴

St Edward, king and confessor, was blessed by a child revealed in the host during a Mass at Westminster,⁵ and the vision was often granted to children, presumably on account of their innocence and simplicity.

In 1231, as Peter of Malines elevated the host, a child appeared to the children present, whose wonder aroused their mothers to behold the vision.⁶ Of Peter of Tewkesbury it is recorded:

He was very intimate with the family of Galfrid Le Despensyr. On one occasion when he visited the house, the lord's son John, a little boy, ran as usual to him with the greatest familiarity. But when the boy had been to the chapel with his mother, where Father Peter had celebrated Mass, on returning home the child ran from the aforesaid Father and could not be compelled by his mother to approach him. When she asked why he fled, he replied that he had seen Father Peter devour a little child on the chapel altar and feared a like fate for himself.⁷

Peter of Brabant earned a similar reputation. After he had celebrated Mass, a child announced that Brother Peter ate little boys since he had just consumed one on the altar.⁸

Beginning with the case of St William of Norwich in the early twelfth century, medieval Jews were all too frequently accused of crucifying children in grisly parody of the Passion of Christ.⁹ But if Christians charged Jews with child sacrifice, the Jews could return the accusation, for they too witnessed the child-host miracle. In the earliest recorded example from the *Vitae patrum*, a Jew seeking to test Christian claims of the Real Presence attended Mass, saw 'an infant torn limb from limb in the hands of St Basil,' and was Christianized with all his family.¹⁰ An English verse homily of about 1400 describes a somewhat less willing conversion. A Christian travelling with a Jew urges him to wait while he attends Mass. The Jew grows impatient, enters the church just in time for the elevation, and sees, instead of the host, a fair child whom priest and congregation proceed to devour. He leaves the church in horror, but the Christian soon joins him and claims that the Jew has been subjected to the sight because his forebears killed Christ. The Jew, rather than risk witnessing such an abomination again, immediately resolves to convert.¹¹ Not always did the sight arouse such repulsion. John Bromyard tells of yet another Jew who, once baptized, complained that he had lost the vision, formerly his delight, of a most beautiful child between the priest's hands. The priest replied that Christian merit lies not in seeing but in believing.¹²

The child-host miracle was well known to theologians. St Thomas Aquinas examined the question 'Whether Christ's Body Is Truly There When Flesh or a Child Appears in This Sacrament' (ST, 3, q. 76, a. 8).

The manuals of Bromyard and John de Burgh treat the miracle as a commonplace,¹³ and it was a favourite target of early Protestant reformers. In 'The Displayeng of the Popysh Masse,' Thomas Becon attacked the transformation with his customary scurrilous wit:

A wonderfull God it is, that ye set forth to the people to be worshipped. Not many dayes paste it was corne in the plowe mannes barne, afterwarde the myller gronde it to meale, then the Baker, myngling a litle water with it, made dough of it, and wyth a payer of whote prynting yrons baked it. Now at the laste come you [the priest], blusteryng and blowing, and with a fewe wordes spoken ouer it, ye charme the bread on such sorte, that eyther it trudgeth streygt-wayes awaye beyonde the moone, and a fayre yong childe, aboue .xv. hundred yeares olde, come in the place of the bread, or els, as the most part of you papists teach of the litle thynne cake ye make the very same body of Christ that was born of Mary the virgin and dyed for vs vpon the altare of the Crosse, the bread being turned into the naturall fleshe of Christ, and the accidentes of the bread only remaynyng, accordyng to the doctrine of Pope Nicholas and Pope Innocent. O wonderful creators and makers. O maruelous fathers, which beget a childe older than the father. And after ye haue made him, ye tear him on peces, ye eate hym, ye digest hym, and send hym downe by a very homely place. O cruell and unmercyfull fathers, so to handle your poore yong olde chylde.¹⁴

The association between bread and the infant Jesus that Becon found so offensive was, for its defenders, grounded in the words of Christ himself. 'I am the living bread which came down from heaven,' he preached to the Jews; 'If any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever' (John 6:51). At least as early as Pope Gregory the Great, and probably much earlier, these words were read as establishing the identity of the bread of the Eucharist and the body of Christ as he appeared at his birth, when he had just 'come down from heaven.' A Christmas homily of St Gregory interprets the Nativity scene in strongly Eucharistic terms: 'And he is born in Bethlehem for good reason, since Bethlehem means House of Bread. For he it is who said "I am the living bread which came down from heaven." Therefore the place where the Lord is born was called beforehand the House of Bread, since it would come to pass that he would appear there in the flesh, who refreshes the minds of the elect with inner satiety.' The newborn Christ lay in a manger – that is, in a bin where animals feed on hay. St Gregory interprets the ox and

ass which traditionally flank the manger as Christian believers nourished not with hay, but with the bread of the infant Jesus: 'The newborn Child lies in the manger to refresh all the faithful, namely the holy animals, with the grain of his flesh.'¹⁵ St Gregory's symbolic reading of the Nativity story became a medieval commonplace, repeated in England as early as the homilies of Ælfric, and reflected in the frequency with which art and literature paired wheat and the Christ Child.¹⁶

Just as he was born once in Bethlehem, he is reborn daily in the ceremony of the Mass. By the words of consecration, God is again made flesh and blood – the Incarnation is re-enacted at the altar. Numerous medieval sermons equate altar and manger, calling upon the faithful to come forth to the sacrament as the shepherds and Magi journeyed to Bethlehem. Peter of Blois, an Archdeacon of London who died around 1200, wrote: 'Brothers, although you are not shepherds, that little Child whom many kings and prophets desired to see, you shall see today placed in the manger of the altar, not in a form of glory, but wrapped in swaddling clothes. Just as in the time of his Nativity his strength was truly present, but hidden by these coverings, so now his majesty is hidden in the Sacrament.'¹⁷ A twelfth-century Christmas sermon by St Aelred, Abbot of Rievaulx, draws a more detailed set of correspondences:

Bethlehem, the House of Bread, is the Holy Church, in which is offered the body of Christ, that is, true bread. The manger in Bethlehem is the altar of the church. There feed the animals of Christ ... In this manger is Jesus wrapped in swaddling clothes. The wrapping with swaddling clothes is the veiling of the sacrament. In this manger, under the species of bread and wine, are the true body and blood of Christ. There, we believe, is Christ, but wrapped in swaddling clothes, that is, invisible in the sacrament. We have no greater and more evident sign of the birth of Christ than when we daily consume his body and blood at the holy altar; and when we daily see sacrificed him who once was born for us of a virgin. Therefore, brothers, let us hasten to the manger of God; but as much as we can, let us prepare ourselves beforehand through his grace, so that united with the angels, *from a pure heart, and a good conscience, and an unfeigned faith* (1 Timothy 1:5) we may sing unto the Lord in all our life and conduct: *Glory to God in the highest; and on earth peace to men of good will'* (Luke 2:14).¹⁸

Clearly, for St Aelred, every Mass is a Christmas, where the rebirth of Christ is hailed with thanksgiving. Less evident, perhaps, is his inter-

pretation of the manger scene as a mysterious figure of the Real Presence: as the body of the Christ Child was hidden beneath swaddling clothes, so his flesh and blood on the altar are disguised under the appearance of bread and wine.

Lest we find such notions hopelessly recondite, we must recognize their prominence in the art of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In reaction against Berengar of Tours's denial of transubstantiation, the doctrine was reaffirmed by the Church and finally proclaimed as dogma in the Lateran Council of 1215. Just as sermons from these centuries emphasize the sacramental significance of the Nativity, so in visual representations the manger scene becomes a hieroglyph of the divine victim of the Mass. In church windows, manuscript illustrations, and sculpture the Christ Child often appears not protectively enclosed in his mother's lap, but remote from her, lying bound in swaddling clothes on what is clearly the altar of a church.¹⁹ Through such images, as through the sermons, believers were invited to contemplate the mystery of the Real Presence and worship the infant Jesus veiled in the consecrated host.

The Eucharistic interpretation of the manger scene was not only evoked through words and pictures, it was enacted through the liturgy. In the seventh century, boards claimed as relics of the true manger were brought to Rome and joined in the form of an actual crib. During the eighth century, this crib was the very altar upon which the Pope laid the consecrated host when he celebrated his yearly Mass in Santa Maria Maggiore on Christmas Eve.²⁰ The practice was either continued or reintroduced (lacking records, we cannot know which) by St Francis of Assisi. Three years before his death, he obtained permission from authorities of Greccio to celebrate Christmas by recreating the scene at Bethlehem for the townspeople. A manger with hay, an ox, and an ass were provided for the occasion. In the torchlit night, Mass was celebrated over the manger and St Francis preached to the folk standing round of the birth of the Christ Child:

when he would name Christ Jesus, aglow with exceeding love he would call Him the Child of Bethlehem, and, uttering the word 'Bethlehem' in the manner of a sheep bleating, he filled his mouth with the sound, but even more his whole self with the sweet affection. Moreover, in naming 'the Child of Bethlehem' or 'Jesus' he would, as it were, lick his lips relishing with happy palate, and swallowing the sweetness of that word. There the gifts of the Almighty were multiplied, and a vision of wondrous efficacy

was seen by a certain man; for in the manger he saw a little Child lying lifeless, to whom the saint of God seemed to draw near and (as it were) to rouse the Child from the lethargy of sleep.

Nor did the miracles cease there, for the hay from that manger was found to be a panacea for man and beast, restoring many sufferers to health. Finally, 'the place of the manger was hallowed as a temple to the Lord; and in honour of the most blessed father Francis, over the manger an altar was reared and a church dedicated, to the end that where beasts had once eaten fodder of hay, men might thenceforth for the healing of soul and body eat the flesh of the spotless and undefiled Lamb, our Lord Jesus Christ.'²¹ In this restaging of the Nativity, a devotional aid that was to gain wide popularity among Franciscans, the Eucharistic motifs are subtly but distinctly set forth. The stable made church, the manger become altar, the beasts compared to Christian communicants, their fodder miraculously transformed into the body of the infant Jesus, and St Francis's delighted 'tasting' of the child – all of these demonstrate clearly that the manger scene at Greccio was enacted squarely within the rich and ancient tradition of the Christ Child as sacrifice.

Not the least important aspect of the Greccio Christmas Mass was its purpose – it was celebrated to kindle devotion in a congregation of ordinary townspeople. During the twelfth century, the theological ideas we have discussed remained largely the province of monks and clerics. But starting with the thirteenth century, which saw the first flowering of a broad movement toward the laicization of religious dogma, we can begin to talk in terms of a popular audience. Laicization of the tradition of the Christ Child as sacrifice may have come to England along with the Franciscans: by the fourteenth century if not earlier, the essence of the sacramental interpretation of the Nativity had been echoed in the vernacular. According to a poem celebrating festivals of the Church:

His fleish fedip̄ more and lesse,
 And fendip̄ vs from feendis fere;
 Þe kinnell sprang at Cristenmasse
 þat now is crist in a cake clere,
 þe preest drynkeþ blessed bere,
 Goddis blood in sacrament.
 Almyȝty god omnipotent,
 Hys blessyd body haþ sent
 To fede hys freendys here.²²

Nicholas Love's popular tract on the Eucharist explains the theological conflation of the consecration of the host and the Incarnation of the Christ Child: 'Loo, hou expresse mynde therof [how clear a memorial of it] is this mete [food] that he zeueth to vs in the sacremente of the awtere; for thereynne is he verreily, and in that self body that was so merueylosly conceyuede by the holy goost aboue kynde [supernaturally], and also merueylosely born of his blisshed moder Marye with oute sorwe or weme [spot] of synne.'²³ Mass books designed to aid lay devotion urge their readers to visualize the Christ Child in the sacrament. Worshippers are to approach the altar with their offerings as the Wise Men journeyed to the manger, and to pray that the Child will accept their gifts as he did those of the Magi. At the moment of the host's consecration, they are to welcome Christ 'in form of bred,' and at the end of Mass, to thank God for granting them sight of his Son.²⁴ Nor was the actual immolation of the Child neglected in popularizations. Child-host miracles were a favourite with homiletic writers, as was the grisly tale from the *Gesta Romanorum* of a blasphemous judge who was treated to a vision of the infant Jesus gouged, bloodied, and dismembered by his oaths.²⁵ But the greatest and most consistent emphasis on the Christ Child as sacrifice is to be found in the literature surrounding the Feast of Corpus Christi.

This festival was new to the fourteenth century. Promulgated by Pope Urban IV, officially adopted at the Council of Vienne in 1311, and celebrated throughout England by mid-century, its avowed purpose was to honour the Real Presence. On the day of Corpus Christi, the consecrated host was carried in solemn procession through the streets, followed by municipal authorities and guild members marching in testimony of their faith in transubstantiation. During the octave of Corpus Christi the host was displayed in churches for devout believers to venerate. The festival's main emphasis lay not on partaking of the sacrament, but on beholding it – on contemplating the concrete physical presence of Christ.

In the Early Middle Ages, the sacrament of the altar had been administered to the laity relatively often; but with the passage of time, the frequency of lay communion dwindled to once – at Easter – or at most three times a year. As taking the sacrament declined, viewing it assumed greater and greater importance. From the twelfth century on, seeing the host became an ever more prominent feature of the Mass. The ceremony of elevation was introduced and elaborated to give worshippers ample opportunity to worship the sacrament. The drama of

the moment of consecration was heightened by the ringing of 'sakering bells,' the lighting of torches, and, in some cases, the draping of black cloth behind the host to outline the body of Christ more clearly. In convent churches, the choir doors separating congregation from monks were thrown open during the elevation. At Eton, and no doubt much more generally, a bell rang to announce the consecration and summon students to the chapel door to adore the Corpus Christi.²⁶

By the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, veneration of the host was a cult of fanatical proportions. According to Becon, the people

[b]eleue that bread, which the priest heaueth aboue hys head to be Christ perfect God and perfect man. Therefore knele they down vnto it, knocke their breastes, lift vp their handes, worship and honour it. When the Bell once ryngs (if they can not conueniently see) they forsake their seates and runne from altare to altare, from Sakering to Sakering, peeping here and touting ther, and gasing at that thing, which the pilde-pate Priest holdeth vp in hys handes. And if the Priest be weake in the armes, and heaue not vp hys ynough, the rude people of the country in diuers partes of England wyll crye out to the Priest, 'holde vp, Sir John, holde vp. Heaue it a littel hyer.' And one wil say to another: 'Stoupe downe, thou fellowe afore, that I may see my maker. For I can not be mery, except I see my Lorde God once in a day.'²⁷

And Becon, despite his pious Protestant outrage, was not exaggerating. Church officials regularly deplored such devotional excesses. Even in paintings of less rowdy elevations, the congregation stare at the host as though awestruck, and a contemporary ballad records, 'All came this lady to beholde / and all still vppon her gazing / as people that behold the sacring.'²⁸ How is such popular awe to be explained? Theologians held that the sight of the sacrament was beneficial to faith, and mystics taught that contemplation of the body of Christ assured the believer of great merit and eternal joys.²⁹ But popular devotional writers were willing to go much further. Alleging the authority of St Augustine, John Mirk, John Lydgate, and many others preached that the day a believer sees Christ's body, he is guaranteed abundant food and drink, the forgiveness of venial sins, and insurance against blindness. If he dies suddenly on that day, the sight of the host will serve him as extreme unction. More than one writer ventured even to assert that adoring the body of Christ is equivalent to partaking of the sacrament.³⁰ For attending liturgies of the octave of Corpus Christi, the devout were granted

generous indulgences in addition – up to forty-one years and sixscore days of pardon according to one sermon.³¹ And yet, such guaranteed rewards do not sufficiently account for the exaggerated wonder with which the host was beheld. Rather, we must recognize that for the medieval faithful, to see the consecration was to witness a miracle of infinite and undefinable solace – the rebirth of Christ in their very midst.

The collective message of sermons for Corpus Christi is ‘Behold and believe!’ For the confounding of Lollard heretics, the conversion of doubting Thomases, and the edification of true Christians, homilists frequently cited miracles of the host become child. Robert of Brunne’s ‘Septem miracula de corpore Cristi’ retells the story of the Egyptian monk from the *Vitae patrum* to illustrate the merit of believing without visual proof. Lydgate’s ‘Procession of Corpus Christi’ relates how as St John the Evangelist celebrated Mass, a ‘chylde yong of age’ appeared on the paten in proof that ‘þis brede is he þat dyed for oure outrage.’ Nicholas Love recounts the miracles of St Edward and St Hugh of Lincoln.³² A more elaborate tale for ‘lewede men’ is told in a verse homily, ‘De festo corporis Cristi,’ from the Vernon Manuscript. A Jew in search of his Christian companion enters a church just in time for the sacring and sees the priest hold over his head a ‘ffeir child, I-woundet sore / In ffoot, in hond.’ As the congregation kneel and raise their hands in adoration of the host, the Jew sees replicas of the child ‘com fle’ out of the host and ‘lihte bi-twene vche monnes honde.’ When the priest eats his child, the others all follow suit.³³ This miracle illustrates the common belief that seeing the sacrament is equivalent to tasting it. The Christians are clearly not taking communion since they remain kneeling in their places; and when the Jew’s companion returns, he expresses his satisfaction at having *viewed* the host: ‘siþen ichaue my god seye, / Þe lihtore ich holde al my weye.’³⁴ The Jew, scandalized, retorts to the effect that the Christian should in fact feel heavy, not light, since he has just devoured a child large enough for three days’ food. When the Christian explains the miracle, the Jew is converted with ‘oþur mo’ – witnesses all to the truth of the Real Presence.

G.R. Owst has called attention to the intimate ties between medieval sermons and plays – they were often performed in the same places, using similar techniques and content.³⁵ The *Croxton Play of the Sacrament* dramatizes a child-host story that was a pulpit favourite long after the Jews had been expelled from England. In this play, two Jews bent on testing the doctrine of the Real Presence buy a consecrated host, stab it with five wounds, and submit it to other gruesome tortures. Horrified

by the host's incessant bleeding, they throw it into an oven. The oven, too, bleeds, and an image with bloody wounds rises up to rebuke them for their persecutions. The Jews are converted and recount their experience to the bishop:

The holy Sacrament, þe whych we haue done tormentry,
 And ther we haue putt hym to a newe passyon,
 A chyld apperyng with wondys bloody:
 A swemfull syght yt ys to looke vpon.³⁶ [piteous]

The *Croxton Play* was apparently not performed in connection with the Feast of Corpus Christi, but other dramatizations of child-host miracles may well have been produced alongside the cycle plays.³⁷ Yet even if they were not, the theme so prominent in Corpus Christi sermons was anything but absent from drama that was often associated with that festival. For it is in the cycle plays themselves, though in an altered form, that we find the broadest and most sustained literary use of the motif of the Christ Child as sacrifice.

Though later detached from it, some of the cycles were closely tied to the Feast of Corpus Christi during much of their history. Not only were some of them performed on the holiday itself or a day very close to it, but their content and orientation clearly reflect its liturgy. The feast celebrates a theological doctrine, not a historical event, and the service for the day surveys all Christian history as a manifestation of that doctrine. The cycles, too, span time from the Creation to Doomsday, giving dramatic form to episodes that illuminate the significance of the Eucharist. It was not by caprice that Pope Clement and the Bishop of Chester were willing to grant liberal pardons for those who resorted peaceably to see the Chester Cycle, for the drama was meant to have a strongly didactic impact.³⁸ Like sermons for the feast, the cycle plays' central message is 'Behold and believe!' One of their aims was to strengthen faith and eradicate doubting Thomasism – to demonstrate the truth of Christian teaching by re-enacting it in vivid detail before the very eyes of the community. That the cycles are merely random agglomerations piled together over time is a view that has long since died a natural death. But Hardin Craig has argued that in many plays – the Sacrifice of Isaac in particular – the choice of subject was 'merely formal, or accidental.'³⁹ I would like to suggest, on the contrary, that this episode and others were shaped to fulfil a specific didactic function – to offer visual 'proof' of the doctrine of the Real Presence by evoking the tradition linking

explains that Melchizedek represents a priest and his gifts, the sacrament instituted by Christ at the Last Supper (69). The stage directions call for his bread to be carried on a paten and his wine in a chalice. Only after this heavily symbolic episode are the birth and sacrifice of the child Isaac enacted. The Chester Isaac Play thus presents a double prefiguration of the Eucharist: first as the bread and wine it seems in the priest's hands, and second as the living Child it really is for all who believe in the doctrine of transubstantiation.

But Isaac is only a prefiguration. Just as Abraham is about to strike the fatal blow, an angel intervenes, the child is spared, and a sheep dies on the altar in his place. The Abraham and Isaac Plays reverse the pattern of the York Purification Play, in which Joseph announces that the Christ Child will substitute for the lamb usually offered in the Temple. Isaac is replaced by a sheep and the infant Jesus replaces one – an inversion by no means fortuitous but based on the doctrine that the animal sacrifice of the Old Testament is transcended in the New Testament sacrifice of Christ, and that his flesh and blood shared by Christians supersede the Passover lamb eaten by Jews. This is a major theme of the cycle plays. In the *N-Town*, Abel offers a lamb and prays for grace to God who 'in a lombys lyknes' will be 'offeryd in peynfulnes / and deyn ful dolfoly' (31). At the *N-Town* Last Supper Christ himself explains that though his disciples have just eaten the lamb of Passover according to the old law, under the new, his own flesh and blood will replace the lamb of old. Holding up not simple bread and wine, but a wafer and a chalice, he transforms them into his true body and blood. In the Chester Plays, the Expositor, explaining the significance of Melchizedek's gifts, points out that under the old law, beasts were offered, but now, bread and wine. The Chester Last Supper also features Christ's institution of the new sacrament of his body. From the Christian point of view, as enunciated by Jesus himself, the Jewish sacrifice is a mere foreshadowing of the Eucharist. He urges the disciples to eat the Passover lamb quickly that they may move on to the new:

ffor know you now, the tyme is come
 that signes and shadows be all done;
 therefore make hast, that we may soone
 all figurs cleane reiect.⁴⁸

[completely]

And so the Old Testament immolation of the lamb takes its place alongside the sacrifice of the child Isaac and Melchizedek's offering as an