

# ‘LONG LULLYNGE HAUE I LORN!’: The Massacre of the Innocents in Word and Image

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The impact of the story of the Massacre of the Innocents on people in the Middle Ages can be gauged not only from its numerous depictions in all areas of medieval art, but also from its treatment in the literature and drama of the period.<sup>1</sup> The story was so well known that, when relating the story of the murdered ‘littel clergeoun’, the Prioress in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* chooses to describe the little boy’s mother as ‘this newe Rachel’, thus linking her with the archetypal bereft mother of Bethlehem.<sup>2</sup> To Chaucer’s medieval audiences, the biblical link would have been obvious. Rachel was the proverbial distraught mother mourning the death of her children, who is specifically referred to in Matthew’s account of the Massacre.

The mourning figure of Rachel would have been familiar to Chaucer’s contemporaries through Massacre scenes painted onto church walls and depicted in stained-glass windows or — for a more select class of viewers — in illuminated manuscripts. In addition, there was the veneration of the Holy Innocents with masses, homilies and reliquaries. More important still for the purpose of this paper, the Massacre was furthermore enacted in both liturgical drama and the vernacular mystery plays, with Rachel and the Bethlehem mothers playing rather different roles. It is crucial to look at the wider context of the Innocents in medieval culture when discussing the presentation of the Massacre in Medieval drama. The visualisations in art, when read in conjunction with texts relating to the Massacre, may communicate much more than mere variations in medieval iconography. Indeed, they may offer further insights into the development and staging of medieval drama and ultimately, on a different level, tell us more about medieval feelings towards children that popular belief still wrongly considers to have been close to indifference.

## **The Biblical and Liturgical Context**

None of the other gospel books mention the Massacre at Bethlehem, so all interpretations of the event are based on the following brief account in Matthew 2: 16–18:

16. Then Herod perceiving that he was deluded by the wise men, was exceeding angry; and sending killed all the men children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the borders thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently inquired of the wise men.

17. Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremias the prophet, saying:

18. A voice in Rama was heard, lamentation and great mourning; Rachel bewailing her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not.<sup>3</sup>

The words in Matthew about the voice in Ramah are a typological echo of Jeremiah 31: 15: 'Thus saith the Lord: A voice was heard on high of lamentation, of mourning, and weeping, of Rachel weeping for her children, and refusing to be comforted for them, because they are not'. The context in Jeremiah is one of consolation to the Israelites in their exile, and not about actual bereavement. The biblical Rachel had no dead children to mourn, although she lamented her long childlessness (Genesis 31:1); she finally died giving birth to her second son, Benjamin. However, the French scholastic Durandus offered as an explanation for Rachel's lamentation the story in Judges 19–21 of how the Benjamites were destroyed in battle by the tribes of Israel because of the rape of a Levite's concubine.<sup>4</sup> Yet a further link with the Massacre story in Matthew may be the words in Genesis 35: 19–20 that Rachel was buried 'in the highway that leadeth to Ephrata, that is Bethlehem'; from the fourth century her grave was (wrongly) believed to be near Bethlehem.<sup>5</sup>

Although they were clearly Jewish children, the Innocents came to be regarded quite early as Christian protomartyrs baptized in their own blood or 'signed', which is what we find in the homily *De Innocentibus et Eorum Festiuitate* by John Mirk (or Myrc), canon of Lilleshall in Shropshire around 1400: 'Thay wer not folowet [*baptised*] yn no font, but yn schedyn[g] of hor blod'.<sup>6</sup> Both the eastern and the western church traditionally believed the Innocents to number 144,000, based on Revelation 7: 3–4 which mentions the number of the servants of God signed 'in their foreheads' as 144,000. The medieval Mass of the Holy Innocents juxtaposed the Gospel text in Matthew 2: 1–18 with the Lesson of Revelation 14: 1–5, which describes the 144,000 elect not only as having the name of the Father 'written on their foreheads', but also as virgins 'not defiled with women' in whose mouth 'there was found no lie'.<sup>7</sup> Infants are

inevitably virgins and unable to speak or lie: in Isidore of Seville's etymology the very word *infant* meant that the child cannot yet *fari*, or speak.<sup>8</sup> Their innocence was crucial: one late-medieval preacher, John Felton, even claimed in his *Sermo de Innocentibus* that the Holy Innocents had been cleansed of original sin by circumcision, which is what one also finds in Durandus.<sup>9</sup> The Mass of the Holy Innocents appositely opens with the Office from Psalm 8, containing the line 'Out of the mouth of infants and of sucklings thou hast perfected praise, because of thy enemies, that thou mayst destroy the enemy and the avenger', whereas the verse about Rachel in Matthew 2: 18 was repeated at Communion. However, it is also important to note that at baptism medieval children were marked on their foreheads with a cross in chrism oil in a way that would bring to mind the 'sign' mentioned in Revelation. The figure of 144,000 would also have been familiar through the Breviary for the versicle beginning with *Centum quadraginta* ... was chanted as the responsorium at the Vigil of the Feast of the Innocents, as well as in every office of the feast day itself and upon the octave.<sup>10</sup> The number of Innocents is specifically mentioned in the Middle English poem *Cursor Mundi*, dating from the early fourteenth century: 'It was a mikel sume o quain / O þaa childer that war slain, / An hundret fourti-four thusand. / Thoru iesu com to lijf lastand'.<sup>11</sup> It is also confirmed by one of the soldiers in the French *Mystère de la Passion de Semur* of the first half of the fifteenth century,<sup>12</sup> and in a convoluted fashion by Herod himself in the Massacre play from the Towneley Plays: 'A hundreth thowsand, I watt, / and fourty ar slayn, / and four thowsand'.<sup>13</sup>

### **The iconography of the Massacre in medieval art**

Just as the Innocents acquired the status of protomartyrs, the Bethlehem Massacre soon became a familiar theme in Christian art: one of the earliest known examples has been identified on the so-called Lot sarcophagus in Rome, which has been dated before the middle of the fourth century.<sup>14</sup> The Massacre also features on a fifth-century sarcophagus at St Maximin in Trier and in the mosaic of c. 432–440 on the chancel arch in the basilica of Sta Maria Maggiore in Rome, where the little cross on the forehead of one child in a striped tunic held in his mother's arms may refer to the 'signing' on the forehead mentioned in the Book of Revelation.<sup>15</sup>

As part of the Infancy of Christ, the Massacre was to become an ever more popular theme during the Middle Ages. It is often found in three components: Herod giving the order to his soldiers, the actual slaughter or the presentation of the bodies to Herod, and the mothers either protecting

or mourning their children.<sup>16</sup> In early medieval art it is frequently found decorating smaller objects such as ivory reliefs, caskets and diptychs, such as a panel from an early fifth-century ivory diptych now in Berlin (PLATE 1).<sup>17</sup> In this relief, a single soldier is shown in the brutal act of swinging an infant by the leg in order to dash its naked body to the ground, while the corpse of another victim is already lying at the feet of the enthroned Herod. The violence of the Massacre, targeted at the weak bodies of naked infants, is further emphasized by the reaction of the mother on the left, her arms raised in desperate grief and horror. Scenes of the Massacre were also used to decorate less obvious items, such as an English Romanesque ivory comb, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and dating possibly from the third decade of the twelfth century, which features the Massacre amongst other scenes from the Infancy of Christ.<sup>18</sup> As the theme increased in popularity, it also appeared ever more frequently in church architecture, e.g. as carved or painted scenes on portals and roof-bosses,<sup>19</sup> or in wall-paintings and windows, thus available for viewing by the congregation at large.

Although Matthew's account contains no details about the way in which the Innocents were supposed to have been killed, two distinct types of infanticide emerged in visual representations of the Massacre.<sup>20</sup> Early depictions in which the soldiers grab the infants by the legs in order to dash their bodies to the ground (e.g. PLATE 1) increasingly gave way to an alternative type, in which Herod's soldiers use swords and spears for their butchery, even though they may still be seen holding their victims by the limbs. Admittedly, there was yet a third type showing the Innocents instead being drowned in a well, an example of which can be found on a Frankish bone coffer carved around 1100; this variant may have been based on one of Prudentius' hymns but it remained very unusual.<sup>21</sup>

Many artists across Europe found highly effective ways of making the Massacre look as horrific as possible. Thus, the Winchester Psalter, believed to have been produced at the Cathedral Priory of St Swithun in Winchester around 1150, depicts Herod's main executioner in the centre of the scene as an ogre who is not merely content with skewering a helpless Innocent but actually sinks his teeth into the naked body (PLATE 2).<sup>22</sup> Another armed soldier is shown dangling a second infant by the arm and plunging his sword into its body. The dismembered remains of at least four more Innocents lie strewn around the scene while the mothers look on in horror, apparently dumbstruck. A caption above the actual Massacre briefly explains the scene: *ICI FAIT HERODE OCIRRE LES INNOCENS* ('Here

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PLATE 1: Massacre of the Holy Innocents, detail from the right wing of an ivory diptych, early fifth century, Berlin, Staatliche Museen zur Berlin-Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Museum für Spätantike und Byzantinische Kunst, Inv.Nr. I. 2719.

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Herod has the Innocents killed'). Equally terrifying is another Massacre illumination, formerly in the Hirsch collection in Frankfurt am Main and originally from a Bible illuminated by a German or Bohemian master around 1200 (PLATE 3).<sup>23</sup> Here we see one soldier holding three infants by their legs in order to run them through all together with his sword; at the same time, a second soldier needs both hands to wield his sword on which the bodies of five infants have been skewered, while more dead children are shown floating around the scene.

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PLATE 2: Massacre of the Holy Innocents, illumination in the Winchester Psalter (c. 1150), London, British Library MS Cotton Nero C IV, fol. 14.

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Artists frequently showed the Innocents' corpses cruelly mutilated, with severed heads and limbs strewn across the scene, an image that is quite graphically echoed in a song from Priester Wernher's *Maria, Diu drie liet von der maget*, written probably in Augsburg in 1172:<sup>24</sup>

owi welh wvfen, welh chlagen,  
da div kint waren in der not  
da si lagen allen ende,  
hie die fuzze, dort die hende!

'O what crying, what lamenting,  
as the children were in distress,

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PLATE 3: Massacre of the Holy Innocents, illuminated Bible leaf produced around 1200, probably by a German or Bohemian master (formerly Hirsch collection, Frankfurt am Main; auctioned at Sotheby's in 1978: present whereabouts unknown).

as they lay around in all directions,  
here the feet, there the hands!

Of course, the traditional number of 144,000 murdered Innocents was even more horrific than medieval artists could ever hope to depict, but they clearly tried hard to produce the most vivid images of the event. It seems likely that playwrights would somehow have tried to emulate that horror on the medieval stage.

### **The Massacre in liturgical drama**

Despite the gruesome depiction of the killing of the Innocents in PLATE 3, the text above this illumination of c. 1200 actually draws the reader's attention to the mothers' plight: *Heu matres misere que cogimur ista uidere* ('Woe, pity us mothers who are compelled to see these things'). This emphasis on the Bethlehem mothers may reflect attitudes in Latin liturgical drama, which was reaching its peak around this time, although it continued to be performed throughout the medieval period long after the

rise of vernacular drama.<sup>25</sup> Several versions survive of the liturgical Massacre play or *Ordo Rachelis*: the Laon version formed the latter part of the *Officium Stellae*, but the Massacre was treated as a play in its own right at Limoges, Fleury and Freising.<sup>26</sup> The *Ordo Rachelis* was usually presented either on Epiphany or on 28 December, the latter being the Feast of the Holy Innocents known in England as ‘Childermas’, and also the feast of choirboys when a Boy Bishop was elected to rule for a day.<sup>27</sup> Liturgical drama of the period relied very much on dialogue and gesture, rather than on lively action or props, and the formality of its language might seem to contrast with the much more vivid depiction of the Massacre in contemporary art shown in PLATES 2 and 3. However, the texts by themselves cannot quite convey the nature of the actual performance. It must have been very moving to see the Innocents represented by young boys, as appears to have been the case in these liturgical plays: the role of choirboys in the *Ordo Rachelis* would have thus been both symbolic and befitting this particular feast.<sup>28</sup> If the liturgical plays were associated with processions, it might help explain why they appear to have been much more formal.

Instead of the bloody spectacle of the Massacre itself, the focus in the liturgical plays appears to be very much on the grief and despair of the mothers or, more specifically, of their symbolic representative Rachel, according to Matthew and Jeremiah. After the enactment of the Massacre in all four versions, the figure of the Consolatrix — or, in the Limoges play, that of an angel — attempts to console Rachel with a reminder that the Innocents have, in fact, suffered a *blessed* death, through which they have been elevated to the status of saintly protomartyrs in Heaven. Yet, in accordance with Matthew’s words, Rachel refuses to be comforted at the sight of her murdered children, as her words in the Laon play make clear: *Heu! Heu! / Quomodo gaudebo dum mortua membra uidebo? ... Nolo consolari quia non sunt* (‘Woe, woe! How shall I rejoice while I must see these dead bodies? I will not be comforted for they are not’).<sup>29</sup> Rachel is described as *plorans super pueros* (‘weeping over her children’) in the Freising text and in the Fleury version as *cadens super pueros* (‘throwing herself on the children’):<sup>30</sup> especially the latter is a visually important stage direction, reminiscent of similarly prostrate Bethlehem mothers in medieval art.

The notion that young children who die in a state of innocence should be congratulated rather than mourned is one that can be found in other medieval texts, although it has earlier parallels in classical stoicism. It is interesting to compare Rachel’s insistent grief and refusal to be



comforted — despair was, after all, considered a great sin — with warnings by medieval authors to grieving parents, as expressed by the Doctor at the end of the Middle English Brome mystery play of *Abraham and Isaac*:

And thys women that wepe so sorowfully  
 Whan that hyr chyldryn dey them froo,  
 As nater woll, and kynd;  
 Yt ys but folly, I may wyll awooe,  
 To groche azens God or to greve 3ow ...<sup>31</sup>

Yet such warnings merely serve to confirm the fact that medieval women did mourn their dead children, and we shall see that medieval Massacre plays were designed to tug at the heartstrings of viewers in displaying the emotions of the Bethlehem mothers.

Even though the Massacre was presented as an extraordinarily horrific event, many medieval authors expressed a belief that it ultimately constituted a heavenly martyrdom for these infants, who thereby came to be baptized in their own blood for Christ's sake. The Anglo-Saxon author Ælfric in the tenth century referred to the Innocents as *Hælendes gewitan* ('witnesses of the Saviour') while he described their Massacre as follows: *Hi wurdon gegripene fram moderlicum breostum, ac hi wurdon betæhte þærrihthe engellicum bosmum* ('They were snatched from their mothers' breasts, but they were straightaway entrusted to the bosoms of angels').<sup>32</sup> In the liturgical Fleury play, Rachel's lament is actually followed by the resurrection of the Innocents and their entry into Heaven, symbolically represented by the *pueri* entering the choir while singing *O Christe*.<sup>33</sup> At the same time, it was claimed that the Massacre constituted a glorious sacrifice for the Bethlehem mothers. According to Ælfric, the Bethlehem mothers should share equally in their children's salvation for *witodlice ða moddru on heora cildra martyrdome þrowodon; þæt swurd ðe þæra cildra lima þurharn becom to ðæra moddra heortan* ('Truly, the mothers suffered martyrdom in their children; that sword which pierced their children's limbs reached those mothers' hearts').

### The image of the mothers of Bethlehem

Despite the idea of a glorious martyrdom, many medieval artists chose to emphasise the inconsolable Bethlehem mother in depictions of the Massacre. It is sometimes one single or central mother reminiscent of the biblical Rachel,<sup>34</sup> yet often there are several women: some kneeling as if in supplication for the lives of their children, pleading either with Herod or

with his soldiers, but always in vain. The sorrowing mothers may express their emotions in various ways, such as by tearing their hair and clothes, raising their arms in grief, or cradling the remains of their children.

The latter type of the woman almost prostrated in her grief is found in a Massacre scene of c. 1145–50 on the capital frieze on the left jamb of the north doorway on the west portal of Chartres Cathedral (PLATE 4): kneeling down, she tenderly cradles the naked body of her dead child, while another mother behind her still tries to cling to her child. Another sorrowing mother can be observed on the left in a quatrefoil relief of c. 1225–30, situated on the socle of the left jamb flanking the south doorway on the west front of Amiens Cathedral (PLATE 6): she is shown kneeling down while holding in her hands the head of her dead child.<sup>35</sup> This type of mourning mother appears to have been particularly popular in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and is reminiscent of the figure of Rachel *cadens super pueros* in the Fleury *Ordo Rachelis*; of course, it has long been argued that liturgical drama did influence the iconography in art of this period.<sup>36</sup> Maternal devotion is also often expressed in the type of woman clinging protectively to her child as an armed soldier tries to pluck him from her arms, which occurs on the Chartres capital frieze (PLATE 4) and on the south wall of the nave at All Saints' church in Croughton, Northamptonshire (PLATE 5).<sup>37</sup> In this early fourteenth-century wall painting, a seated mother tries to hold on to a child dressed in a long tunic, who is being torn from her arms by a soldier wielding a long sword. Despite the mural's present faded state, the visual impact of the armed soldier towering over this small family group is still strong. It is also worth noting the dismembered remains of Innocents across the floor and the soldier on the right holding a naked Innocent by his left leg.

However, some artists preferred to lend the Bethlehem mothers a more defiant attitude — one that can, perhaps, already be detected in the standing woman in the centre of the Amiens quatrefoil who tries to hide her swaddled child from the soldier on her right (PLATE 6). In 1997 Johann-Christian Klamt published an essay on three late-medieval paintings depicting the Massacre of the Innocents and featuring what he assumed to be a new and unusual type of Bethlehem mother: the defiant woman fighting back. Klamt's earliest example is an enigmatic panel of c. 1480 by an anonymous Bavarian master from Freising, which is now in the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg (PLATE 7).<sup>38</sup> This painting shows a single distraught mother frantically attacking a soldier in armour

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PLATE 4: Massacre scene, c. 1145–50, on the capital frieze on the north door of the west portal of Chartres Cathedral. Photo ©author.

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PLATE 5: Massacre of the Holy Innocents, early fourteenth-century wall-painting on the south wall of the nave, All Saints' church, Croughton, Northamptonshire. Tracing © author.

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PLATE 6: Massacre of the Holy Innocents, c. 1225–30,  
quatrefoil relief on the socle of the left jamb flanking the south portal  
on the west front of Amiens Cathedral. Photo © author.

from behind; her open mouth and rolling eyes express great pain, and one may wonder whether this is due to mental anguish or, instead, to the very physical effect of having her fingers bitten by the soldier, as has been suggested.<sup>39</sup> With the three examples discussed in his essay, Klamt believed to have discovered a new type of iconography for the Massacre on the threshold of the Renaissance, and thereby a contrast to the more usual depictions of sorrowing mothers in medieval art. Although his essay contains a range of fascinating visual comparisons, Klamt appears to have been unaware not only of the many earlier examples of the defiant mother in depictions of the Massacre in medieval art, but also of a much wider context: the occurrence of this type in vernacular drama of the period.

It must be admitted that gestures and poses in medieval art can sometimes be open to different interpretations. One example is that of the Massacre scene in the St Albans Psalter, produced c. 1120–30 for Christina of Markyate, which is in the collection of the Basilica of St Godehard at

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PLATE 7: Massacre of the Holy Innocents, c. 1480, panel by an anonymous Bavarian master from Freising, Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg.

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PLATE 8: Massacre of the Holy Innocents, c. 1120–30, illumination in the St Albans Psalter, Hs. St. God. 1, p. 30, Dombibliothek, Hildesheim.

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Hildesheim (PLATE 8). In this English miniature, one woman appears to beseech a soldier who is already thrusting his sword into her baby's naked body, while another woman is seen clutching the leg of this same soldier and apparently biting him in the leg.<sup>40</sup> Instead, a more probable interpretation of her open mouth is that she, too, is screaming or pleading desperately while kneeling in a traditional pose of supplication. It is, however, another woman in the St Albans miniature whose gesture may be more relevant in the context of the defiant mother: this is the woman above on the right, who appears to grab the arm of the soldier opposite her in an attempt to stop him from killing her son with his raised sword. Her gesture may be one of feeble resistance, but it could be an early example of similarly desperate maternal behaviour that can be found at Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris more than a century later. Here, a Massacre scene of c. 1250 on the sculpted tympanum of the north transept portal depicts a mother actually grasping a soldier's raised sword with her bare left hand in a futile attempt to prevent the murder of her child (PLATE 9). Trying to ward off a sword attack with bare hands may be a natural reaction on the part of a desperate (and unarmed) mother, but the motif appears elsewhere: a similar gesture can be found in a Massacre illumination in the late thirteenth-century French prayerbook of Madame Marie (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France MS nouv. acq. fr. 16252, fol. 24<sup>v</sup>) which shows the Innocents being beheaded, with the caption *Ensi col[omme] decole les ynnocens*.<sup>41</sup> Andreas Bräm suggested that the motif originally derived from scenes of the angel halting Abraham's sword in the Sacrifice of Isaac, although his example on fol. 3 of the famous Parisian Maciejowski Bible (New York, Pierpont Morgan Library MS M.638) of c. 1250 is actually rather late.<sup>42</sup> Instead, one could compare two adjoining column-statues of c. 1204–10 on the left jamb of the central doorway of the north transept portal of Chartres Cathedral: the figure of the angel zooming down over the head of Melchisedek or Aaron is still holding out his left hand to grab the now broken sword of Abraham on the right (PLATE 10a–b).

Somehow, this particular type of desperate maternal resistance among the Bethlehem mothers that slowly emerged in Massacre scenes of the twelfth and especially thirteenth centuries must have developed into that of women actively engaging Herod's soldiers in a fight, as observed by Klamt in his selection of paintings produced towards the end of the Middle Ages. In fact, an early prototype for the woman in the Freising panel may be seen in an otherwise unreferenced manuscript illumination, simply labelled 'Provence, c. 1265', a photo of which was found in the photographic

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PLATE 9: Massacre scene, c. 1250, detail of the sculpted tympanum of the north transept portal at Notre-Dame, Paris.  
(Photo © author.)



collection of the Warburg Institute in London (PLATE 11). In this miniature, the woman on the far left appears to be grabbing from behind the raised sword arm of a soldier who is about to slay a naked child. A caption underneath the image confirms the traditional number of Innocents killed as 144,000. Another Bethlehem mother on the late-thirteenth-century sculpted retable of the Infancy of Christ in the Chapel of the Virgin at the royal abbey of Saint-Denis takes hold of a soldier's mail coif with her right hand in an attempt to prevent him from killing the naked child being pulled from her left arm. It seems that this was no uncommon motif: one quickly starts to find more examples as soon as one becomes aware of it.

The much more aggressive type of defiant mother can also be discovered fairly frequently in English art from the early fourteenth century on, e.g. in the Massacre scene in the top left-hand corner on fol. 124<sup>v</sup> of the Psalter of Robert de Lisle, painted by the Madonna Master around 1308 (PLATE 12).<sup>43</sup> This miniature shows a standing woman, her face contorted by emotions, taking a very determined hold of the face of the soldier next to her who is about to plunge his sword into the helpless naked body of her child; two other women on either side of her are kneeling, the mother in front clearly pleading in vain with Herod. The mother's attack on the soldier's face in the De Lisle Psalter is paralleled in a wall-painting of c. 1325–30 on the north chancel wall of St Mary's Church at Chalgrove, Oxfordshire (PLATE 13a–b).<sup>44</sup> Although parts of the mural are now barely visible, it is still possible to discern one mother trying to hit or even pinch the face of the soldier poised to finish off the naked and clearly male child in her care. A Massacre scene on fol. 132 of the Queen Mary Psalter, produced in the London area around 1310–20, provides another example of a Bethlehem mother aiming her outstretched right hand at a soldier's face (PLATE 14).<sup>45</sup>

The aggressive type of the defiant mother was also developed further by medieval artists on the Continent. A similar attack by a mother grabbing the head of one of Herod's soldiers can be found in a grisaille Massacre scene in a French missal of the mid fourteenth century, now in the Bodleian Library at Oxford (PLATE 15). Even though the woman is shown kneeling, her gesture clearly expresses aggression rather than supplication. An earlier example is a mural of c. 1300 on the choir wall of the church at Marchésieux, Manche, which depicts a mother grabbing the neck of one of the soldiers while raising her right hand to hit him with her washing beetle, a typical female implement used in laundry work.<sup>46</sup> Her striking

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PLATE 10 (a): The angel reaching out to grab Abraham's now broken sword, c. 1204–10, column-figures on the left jamb of the central doorway of the north transept portal of Chartres Cathedral. Photo © author.

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PLATE 10 (b): Detail. Photo © author.

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PLATE 11: Massacre of the Holy Innocents, manuscript illumination, Provence, c. 1265, present location unknown.

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PLATE 12: Massacre scene, illumination by the Madonna Master c. 1308, Psalter of Robert de Lisle, London, British Library, MS Arundel 83 II, fol. 124<sup>v</sup>.

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PLATE 13 (a): Massacre of the Holy Innocents, wall-painting of c. 1325–30, north chancel wall of St Mary's church at Chalgrove, Oxfordshire.

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PLATE 13 (b): The same. Tracing © author.

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PLATE 14: Massacre of the Holy Innocents in the Queen Mary Psalter, produced in the London area around 1310–20, London, British Library, MS Royal 2 B VII, fol. 132.

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PLATE 15: Massacre scene, mid fourteenth century, grisaille illumination in a French missal, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 313, fol. xx a.

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aggression dominates the scene, thereby almost eclipsing the murder of the naked Innocent by her side.

The use of implements, rather than hands, is an interesting iconographical variation found more in continental than in English art. Two later French examples show defiant mothers actually using as their weapons that most traditional of female attributes, the distaff. The earlier of these is a smaller Massacre scene underneath the main miniature of the Flight into Egypt on fol. 102 of the Hours of Marguerite d'Orléans in the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris, produced around 1430, which features an oriental-looking soldier with a scimitar fighting over a naked infant against a woman armed with a distaff.<sup>47</sup> The second example on fol. 36 in the Hours of Louis d'Orléans, dated c. 1490, which is

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PLATE 16: Massacre illumination, French, c. 1490, Hours of Louis d'Orléans, St Petersburg, Saltykov-Shchedrin Library, MS. Lat. O.v.I.N.126, fol. 36.

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now in the Saltykov-Shchedrin Library in St Petersburg, shows a combination of different types of mothers (PLATE 16).<sup>48</sup> Framed by a renaissance-style border featuring putti with huge wings, the main scene graphically depicts a Massacre in which several women attempt to escape with their infants, while one woman in the foreground grapples from behind with one of the murdering soldiers — a type already observed some two centuries earlier. In addition, there are two smaller contrasting scenes below: one showing a protective mother trying to save her swaddled infant, and the other a fierce attack by a mother pointing her distaff like a spear at the soldier who has grabbed her child.



### The defiant mother in vernacular drama

As we know, the aggressive Bethlehem mother is not merely found in medieval art but also features prominently in the vernacular mystery plays, in strong contrast to the Latin liturgical plays which focus more on the grieving Rachel, in accordance with Matthew's account.<sup>49</sup> It is unclear whether there could have been a connection between the development of this new iconography of the defiant Bethlehem mother and the vernacularisation of medieval drama in Europe.

Unfortunately, most of the surviving mystery plays both in England and on the Continent have come down to us in relatively late manuscript copies of the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, with evidence of later updating of some plays. For example, at Coventry Robert Croo is known to have made changes to the cycle as late as 1535, and there must have been a further effort to protestantise the pageants as they continued to be performed at Coventry until 1579.<sup>50</sup> The Digby manuscript of 'candelmes day & the kyllinge of the children of Israel', which appears to have been a single pageant, is dated 1512.<sup>51</sup> The tradition that the Chester plays were the oldest in England has given way to a sixteenth-century date for the cycle in its present form. Similarly, the Towneley manuscript is now believed to be as late as 1550, and the assumption that all mystery plays surviving within the same manuscript necessarily formed part of an original coherent cycle has also been questioned and — in the case of the N. Town and Towneley 'cycles' — dismissed.<sup>52</sup> Where some of these plays were actually written or performed is another matter for debate. However, the Coventry, Chester, and York cycles are far better documented, with the latter possibly first recorded as early as 1376.<sup>53</sup> Whatever the dates and origins of the extant texts, none of the English vernacular mystery plays as we now know them are likely to have been around in Chaucer's time. Nonetheless, the influence of art on the staging of medieval drama, and *vice versa*, cannot be ruled out.

There is no denying that many of the vernacular Massacre plays combine intense maternal grief with expressions of violent anger, just as we find in medieval art. Compared to liturgical drama, the mystery plays were clearly intended to have a strong popular appeal, and some recent authors have emphasised that aspect by discussing Herod as a Carnival King or Lord of Misrule.<sup>54</sup> Yet these plays were at least as much about maternal feelings. Some contained songs and even lullabies, as does the Coventry Pageant of the Shearmen and Taylors where the anxious Bethlehem mothers make their first appearance singing a specially adapted version of

the familiar type of medieval lullaby.<sup>55</sup> In the N. Town play, the tragedy of the slaughter of innocent children is made more intense by the transformation of a mother's lullaby into a lament for her dead child: 'Long lullynge haue I lorn! / Alas, Qwhy was my baron born?'<sup>56</sup> At the same time, the second mother's recollection of her 'fourty wekys gronyng' (line 101) would have touched women in the medieval audience, many of whom must have shared the experience of both bearing and losing children. However, it is worth pointing out that all actors would have been male, including those playing the roles of the Bethlehem mothers; we can only guess how that may have affected viewers' reactions to the staging of the Massacre. There is a strong element of subversiveness in the aggressive behaviour of the Bethlehem mothers, which has resulted in these scenes being discussed as a gender struggle or battle of the sexes.<sup>57</sup>

As the image of the defiant mother occurs both in English and Continental art, the motif should ideally be studied throughout the surviving corpus of European mystery plays in order to offer a wider context to the occurrence of the theme in both medieval art and the English plays; this paper can only be a first step in that direction. Some of the Middle French Passion plays appear to contain textual parallels to the visual examples of violent interaction between the Bethlehem mothers and Herod's soldiers that one finds in medieval art.<sup>58</sup> In the fifteenth-century *Mystère de la Passion* from Troyes, for example, the soldier Agrippart — clearly no hero — is thus described by his colleague Achopart:

Voicy Agrippart qui ressongne  
et dit qu'i ne luy chault des peres,  
mais il redoubte bien les meres  
qui souvant sont de grant courage.<sup>59</sup>

'Behold Agrippart who is afraid  
and says that he does not care about the fathers  
but that he does fear the mothers  
who often have great courage.'

This view is confirmed by Agrippart himself: *Il ne me demorra visage / qui de griffes ne soit deffait* (lines 7387–8, 'There is no part left of my face that has not been disfigured by claws'). This remark is very reminiscent of some scenes in art where the defiant mother targets the face of a soldier in her assault (compare PLATES 12, 13, 14, 15). Throughout the ensuing scene leading up to the Massacre, the mothers in the Troyes play react with both grief and anger while exchanging rough words with the soldiers,

and it seems only too likely that these would have been accompanied by blows and other forms of physical violence in the actual stage production. Also typical is the grim humour with which the soldiers carry out their butchery, e.g. when Achopart explains how he has dealt with one Innocent: *Je luy ai donné medecine / dont jamais ne sera malade* (lines 7436–7, ‘I have given him medicine from which he will never again be ill’). Very similar to the Troyes version is the Massacre scene in the *Mystère de la Passion* performed in 1501 at Mons (Hainault), in which the soldiers proudly boast about the many thousands of infants they have killed; incidentally, this play is important in retaining its *Livre de conduite du régisseur* and accounts.<sup>60</sup> Humour also plays an important role in the fifteenth-century Passion play from Semur, in which the Massacre is preceded by a farcical exchange of rude words between the soldiers, the recurring comic figure of the *Rusticus* and his wife (lines 3338–85). However, maternal grief is the focus in the subsequent enactment of the Massacre when two mothers lament their dead infants; one of the mothers is even called Rachael.

Humour may occur at different levels in the mystery plays. When comparing texts and images, the words of one of the soldiers to the first mother in the Troyes play — *Dame, baillez moy ce poupart* (line 7395, ‘Lady, hand me that moppet’) — makes one wonder whether the props used to represent the Innocents consisted of dummies resembling naked infants or rather swaddled bundles, similar to that in the much earlier Provence miniature of c. 1265 (PLATE 11). The ambiguity of the word *poupart*, as well as the soldier’s reassurance to the mother that he only wants her son to play with, *pour esbattre* (line 7400), may even contain a deliberate irony about the use of dummies in the play.<sup>61</sup> The stage directions in the Massacre scene in the Mons play actually mention an *effant futif*, i.e. a wooden doll representing a dead Innocent, but this type of dummy might not have sufficed for a dramatic enactment of the Massacre itself.<sup>62</sup> Although it was common for medieval artists to depict infants as swaddled cocoons, in Massacre scenes the children are almost always shown naked and thus all the more vulnerable. Soldiers transfixing an Innocent on top of their sword or spear can frequently be found in medieval art (e.g. PLATES 12, 13, 17).<sup>63</sup> This was clearly also a favourite device in medieval drama, as stage directions in the Massacre play from Chester confirm: *Tunc Miles trasfodiet primum puerum et super lancea accipiet* (‘Then the soldier transfixes the first child and takes it on top of his spear’).<sup>64</sup> This matches the first N. Town soldier’s boast ‘Upon my spere / A gerle [male child] I

bere' (lines 109–10) when returning to Herod in triumph with an infant still impaled on his spear. The children's bodies are thus turned into hunting trophies, 'boys sprawlyd at my sperys hende' (line 220). The additional use of blood would have made the martyrdom of the Innocents all the more realistic.<sup>65</sup> In a naked state, the Innocents would also clearly prove to be male, as is blatantly evident not only in the Chalgrove mural (PLATE 13) but also in the words of one of the soldiers in the Chester play when he morbidly jokes about his intentions:

Dame, thy sonne, in good faye,  
 hee must of me learne a playe:  
 hee must hopp, or I goe awaye,  
 upon my speare ende ... 321–24

Dame, shewe thou me thy child there;  
 hee must hopp uppon my speare.  
 And hit any pintell [*penis*] beare,  
 I must teach him a playe. 361–64

The image of infants skewered on top of the soldiers' spears is here confirmed by the grim word-play, which in its turn is reminiscent of Death's words to the infant in some textual versions of the medieval *danse macabre* discussed elsewhere.<sup>66</sup>

The brief discussion of some of the French plays already highlights a number of the similarities between the presentation of the Massacre in art and drama but the comparison of the Bethlehem mothers must here concentrate on the English mystery plays. Amongst these, the texts of the N. Town pageant and the Massacre play from York appear to focus specifically on the tragic aspects of the story, although this does not rule out the possibility of a lively fight between the women and soldiers on stage. In the N. Town pageant, which was probably written somewhere in East Anglia,<sup>67</sup> there is merely a brief stage direction *Tunc ibunt milites ad pueros occidendos* ('Then shall the soldiers go to kill the children') to indicate the slaughter, followed by a heartfelt lament by two mothers. Only the words of the first mother may convey some idea of how the Massacre may have been enacted on stage: 'With swappyng swerde now is he shorn, / Þe heed ryght fro þe nekke! / Shanke and shulderyn is al to-torn!' (lines 91–3). Against the tragic character of the N. Town play stands the very vivid depiction of the Massacre in one of the stained-glass panels of c. 1430 in St Peter Mancroft church in Norwich, which not only shows Herod himself taking part in the Massacre and even a cradle — almost as a

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PLATE 17: Massacre scene, c. 1430,  
stained-glass panel, East Window, St Peter Mancroft Church, Norwich.  
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PLATE 18: Massacre scene, fifteenth century, decorated border in a Dutch book of hours, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 93, fol. 34<sup>v</sup>.

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stage prop — but also a mother grappling with a soldier from behind (PLATE 17); the motif of the defiant mother was obviously known in the region by the time that the N. Town play came to be written and performed. The York play does offer more scope for violent interchange between the mothers and soldiers, as suggested by one soldier's exhortation: 'Asarmes, for nowe is nede; / But yf we do yone dede / Ther quenys will quelle vs here.'<sup>68</sup> There is also an indication of maternal desperation in the words of the second mother: 'To saue my son schall I, / Aye-whils my liff may last' (lines 200–1) — a sentiment shared by the first mother (lines 204–6). However, the emphasis is still on the tragedy of the slaughter, movingly expressed by the second mother:

Allas, this lothly striffe,  
 No blisse may be my bette,  
 Þe knyght vppon his knyffe  
 Hath slayne my sone so swette,  
 And I hade but hym allone. 210–14

The York playwright obviously knew how to convey maternal grief; the last line in particular still has the power to wring the hearts of readers and audiences.

In contrast, despite the tragic nature of the Massacre story, the rather late Chester 'Gouldsmythes Playe' contains unmistakable comic elements and often crude language. Thus, Herod and the Primus Miles contemptuously refer to the Innocents as 'dyrtie-arses' and 'shitten-arsed shrowe' (lines 143 and 157), thereby recalling that less attractive baby aspect of the soon-to-be martyrs. The problem for Herod's soldiers of finding out whether their intended victims are indeed male (lines 305–6) results in an explicit description by the Secunda Mulier: 'Hit hath two hooles under the tayle' (line 367).<sup>69</sup>

Yet it is the exchange of blows and foul language that provides the strongest contrast with the liturgical plays. As in so many medieval mystery plays, Herod's knights are foolishly boastful about their 'heroic' role in the planned Massacre, only to find that the mothers are a force to be reckoned with; the two women that the soldiers must face in the Chester play respond with both insults and violence. The distaff, which could be observed as a female assault weapon in Continental depictions of the Massacre (PLATES 15, 16), was here obviously used as a theatrical prop for the Secunda Mulier warns that 'this distaffe and thy head shall meete' (line 303).

The same weapon is wielded by the mothers in the Digby play, which has been described as the most black-humoured as well as the most violent in its beating of the would-be hero Watkyn.<sup>70</sup> The fourth woman declares that ‘we women shall make a-geyns you resistens, after our power’ (lines 303–4), and the play contains several references to the use of the distaff, such as when one of the women threatens the boorish Watkyn that she ‘will not faile / to dubbe the knyght with my rokke rounde!’<sup>71</sup> The distaff was, of course, traditionally the female attribute *par excellence* and as such the archetypal weapon used by women against men in depictions of the Battle of the Sexes; in this context, its use almost transforms the Bethlehem mothers from tragic figures into stereotypical battleaxes. However, the mothers in the Digby play nonetheless show valour as they ignore the soldiers’ warnings that resistance will result in their own deaths, too: ‘Our sharpe swerdes thurgh your bodies shall goon’ (line 292). Their pleading also emphasises the innocence of the intended victims ‘that can no socour but crie’ and ‘pat in þer cradell slumber’ (lines 299, 302).

A slight variation on the mothers’ choice of weapons is found in the Coventry Pageant where the third mother threatens to apply as her ‘womanly geyre’ a ‘pott ladull’ to the soldiers’ heads.<sup>72</sup> Instead, the women in the Towneley play do not mention specific weapons and appear to be targeting the soldiers’ heads with their fists and nails, much like their counterparts in examples of medieval English art discussed earlier, as the second woman makes clear: ‘Then thi skalp shall I clefe! / Lyst thou be clawd?’ (lines 510–11). The third mother also comes across as a veritable Amazon:

Haue at the, say I,  
 Take the ther a foyn!  
 Out on the, I cry,  
 Haue at thi groyn  
 Another!

551–5

However, the outcome is just as tragic, as she finally comes to mourn her son whose ‘body is all to-rent!’ (line 564). The second Towneley mother, too, is left crying a pitiable lament for her dead child: ‘Out, alas and waloway, / My chyld that was me lefe! / My luf, my blood, my play’ (lines 523–5).

At least, there is a sting in the tail for Herod in some mystery plays, when one of the Innocents killed turns out to be his own son. This is an older tradition originally derived from Macrobius’ *Saturnalia*, but better



known to medieval writers through Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda Aurea* and, in the case of the Chester play, the Middle English *Stanzaic Life of Christ*.<sup>73</sup> The motif also occurs in the Mons play, where we find a graphic description of how Herod's own infant son is mistakenly killed by being *trenchié tout d'un coþ / En deux pars* ('sliced in one go into two parts'). At Chester, the *Secunda Mulier* who warned the soldiers that 'my child shall thou not assayle' (line 366) turns out to be not the infant's mother but his nurse: 'This child was taken to me / to looke to' (lines 381–2). An important detail for staging of the Massacre is the nurse's claim that the soldiers should have recognised the baby as Herod's own son because of his special clothes: 'For in gould harnesse hee was dight, / paynted wonders gaye' (lines 403–4). This is confirmed by Herod in lines 409–10: 'Hee was right sycker in silke araye, / in gould and pyrrie that was so gaye'. However, such a distinctly dressed infant son of Herod remains to be identified in medieval art.<sup>74</sup> Other plays omit this episode altogether: the York and Coventry plays instead end with Herod's realisation of Christ's escape and his pursuit, whereas the Towneley play concludes with the king giving thanks to 'Mahowne' for what he still believes to have been a successful action. Yet other plays finish with a scene of divine retribution: in the Digby play, Herod dies rather abruptly from terror after hearing about the mothers' cries for vengeance, whereas the Chester and N. Town plays emphasise the horror of the king's death as devils come to claim him. Herod's death and damnation would have been a further way of appeasing, as best as possible, the minds of medieval audiences upset by the gruesome spectacle of the Massacre; in fact, the blows aimed by the mothers at Herod's soldiers may have served a similar purpose in a play where the outcome for the Innocents was known to be a tragic one.

Humour and pathos are also juxtaposed in the Coventry pageant, which introduces the mothers singing lullabies in order to silence their infants and keep them hidden from Herod's soldiers; the fact that these mothers have prior knowledge of the king's intentions lends further tension to the scene. Despite the sharp and even ferocious words of the three women, however, the slaughter itself is not explicitly dealt with in the text; of course, this lack of textual evidence does not mean that the Coventry actors did not act out the scene with any degree of violence on the stage.<sup>75</sup> In the Digby play, the boorish Watkyn is deliberately introduced as a cowardly counterpart to the virago-like mothers of Bethlehem; a royal messenger longing to be knighted, Watkyn is ordered by the king first to prove his valour by taking part in the Massacre, yet

instead he finds himself pitched against women who threaten to dub him with their distaffs. In fact, this is the very thing that Watkyn had feared from the first, as he confesses to Herod in a lengthy farcical dialogue: 'I drede no thyng more than a woman with a Rokke ... the most I fere is to come amonge women, / for thei fight like deuelles with Rokkes whan þei spynne' (lines 159, 223–4). His worry is even shared by the second soldier who agrees that women 'be as fers as a lyon in a cage / whan thei are broken ought' (lines 231–2). Their exaggerated fear may seem simply a farcical dramatic motif, similar to that of the cowardly Agrippart in the play from Troyes. However, the marginal decoration of a fifteenth-century Dutch book of hours now in the Bodleian Library at Oxford shows rather the same type of virago that the Digby knights dread so much (PLATE 18): of the four mothers depicted, three are actively engaged in attacking the soldiers, with one of them assaulting a soldier from behind and two others wielding club-like weapons in a most unfeminine fashion. The resulting almost burlesque impression that these illuminated viragos create is very much that of the defiant mothers in the mystery plays, but without the added mourning.<sup>76</sup>

### The cult of the Holy Innocents

Chaucer's reference to the bereft mother of the 'litel clergeoun' as 'this newe Rachel' in *The Prioress's Tale* may predate the vernacular mystery plays, but it is clear that the Massacre of the Holy Innocents had long been well-known episode within the Infancy of Christ, with the defiant mother already a wide-spread motif in French and English art of this period. In addition, there was a growing cult of the Holy Innocents with numerous relics of the Holy Innocents to be revered in different shapes, forms, and numbers. An altar at Sta Maria Maggiore in Rome is still said to contain the remains of five Holy Innocents while the cathedral of Padua apparently acquired another three in the eleventh century.<sup>77</sup> In the fifteenth century, the church of the Franciscan cemetery of the Holy Innocents in Paris boasted 'a whole Innocent', which was encased in a crystal shrine and presented to the church by the French king Louis XI (1423–83).<sup>78</sup> Yet another such 'whole' Innocent at Cologne, encased in gold and silver, was recorded by a pilgrim at Cologne in 1433: *Te guldinen domme te Coeln ... Item een gheheel Innocent in goude ende selver besleghen* ('At the golden cathedral in Cologne ... item, a whole Innocent covered in gold and silver').<sup>79</sup> More telling still is the relic of the leg of one Innocent in a fourteenth-century reliquary from the diocese of Aachen, the shape of the

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PLATE 19: Reliquary containing the leg of a Holy Innocent, fourteenth century,  
Katholische Pfarrgemeinde St. Johann-Baptist, Aachen-Burtscheid.  
(Illustration from Ernst Günther Grimme *Kirchenschätze der ehemaligen Abteikirche  
St. Johann und der Pfarrkirche St. Michael in Aachen-Burtscheid* (Aachen, Leipzig,  
Paris: Thouet-Verlag, 1996).

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reliquary providing a visual reminder of how some Innocents are shown in art as being held by the leg before being dashed to the ground or pierced by weapons (PLATE 19).<sup>80</sup> It is interesting in this respect that Jacobus de Voragine professed himself puzzled by the size of some Innocents' relics, which he felt were so much larger than the bones of any normal child below the age of two; his explanation was that perhaps people in those days were taller than their medieval counterparts.<sup>81</sup>

Surviving texts testify to a growing popular cult commemorating their martyrdom, from homilies written by Ælfric in the tenth century and by John Mirk around 1400, to the poet John Audelay who, some time after 1426, began his poem *In die sanctorum Innocencium* thus: 'With al þe reuer[en]s þat we may, / Worchip we Childermasday'.<sup>82</sup> Like John Mirk before him, Audelay reminded his audience how, despite the fact that these Bethlehem infants were technically unbaptized and their souls thus stood in peril of eternal damnation,

Crist ham cristynd al in-fere,  
In [h]or blod, and were martere,  
Al clene vergyns hit is no nay. 12-14

Yet did Audelay advocate worship of the Holy Innocents themselves, or rather the observance of Childermas? While religious literature about the Innocents is one aspect of their importance, the true extent of medieval feeling about the horror of the Massacre may be better gauged from superstitions surrounding it. In the fifteenth century, when their cult was probably at its peak, not just the feast itself was considered an impropitious day, but also every subsequent day of the week on which Childermas fell, the whole year through; on this weekly black-letter day, which was itself also referred to as Childermas or Innocents' Day, people would avoid starting on a new task or on a journey, or even refuse to engage in battle. Louis XI, donor of the relic of 'a whole Innocent' to the church of the Innocents in Paris, was particularly scrupulous in observing this custom, while René of Lorraine is recorded as having had to forego battle on 17 October 1476 because his lansquenets refused to fight the enemy 'on Innocents' Day' — not Childermas itself but merely the same weekday.<sup>83</sup> This same tradition was also very much alive in England for on 21 June 1461 James Gresham wrote to John Paston that the coronation of Edward IV was to be postponed from Sunday 28 to Monday 29 June 'for cause Childermesse day fal on the Sunday, the Coronacion shall on the Moneday, &c'.<sup>84</sup> Apparently, the coronation did in fact take place on

Sunday after all, but the processions and pageantry were deferred until Monday. This observation of Childermas throughout the year apparently continued long after the medieval period. As late as 1745, the writer Jonathan Swift stated that 'Friday and Childermas are two cross days in the week, and it is impossible to have good luck on either of them'.<sup>85</sup>

Against this background, it may seem understandable that medieval artists and playwrights developed the motif of the defiant mother punishing Herod's soldiers for their brutal deeds. Yet it may be too simplistic to explain its spread all over Europe as just an iconographical variation in art, and quite separate from its occurrence in vernacular drama. After all, the figure of the defiant mother can be found not just in English, French, Netherlandish, and German art, but even further afield.<sup>86</sup> A mural of 1410 by Cenni di Francesco di Cenni in the Capella della Croce at the church of San Francesco in Volterra, Italy, is one such example.<sup>87</sup> It shows not only women grabbing the arms and heads of the attacking soldiers but, more importantly, the old motif of mothers trying to halt the soldiers' swords with their bare hands: one woman's hand is being pierced, and another has actually taken hold of a sword with her bare hand while blood is shown spurting from her wounds. The type of the defiant mother was also known in Denmark, where it survives in a number of wall-paintings from the fifteenth century on; for example, a Massacre scene of c. 1450 in the church at Mørkøv includes a woman armed with a distaff.<sup>88</sup> It would be fascinating to know whether the same theme could also once be found in medieval drama in these countries. The idea that the motif of maternal resistance developed out of the gesture of the angel halting Abraham's sword in the Sacrifice of Isaac may seem visually convincing, but could this really be the origins of the defiant mother in art and drama? Further research may yet reveal an underlying source for this motif amongst the patristic writings. Such a textual origin for the defiant mother in both art and drama might ultimately offer a more convincing explanation for the spread of this motif across Europe, even though it is still likely that Massacre depictions in art also had an impact on the staging of the medieval mystery plays and *vice versa*.

## Conclusion

It is obvious that the story of the Massacre of so many innocent children exercised a powerful appeal, even at a time when high infant mortality rates are popularly believed to have left adults relatively indifferent to such seemingly transient creatures. Although the Massacre with its many

thousands of Innocents suffering violent deaths would have been infinitely worse than the everyday reality of infant mortality, there is clear evidence that the latter caused deeply felt anguish and despair amongst medieval parents. The reiterated reminders by medieval authors that it is sinful to mourn the death of children who must surely have gone to Heaven, in fact provides a strong indication that parents *did* grieve, and the Massacre plays were clearly aimed to appeal to such feelings among the audiences.

Inevitably, the portrayal of the Massacre in art and drama provided an image of horror and grief that all Christians would have recognised, as is evident much later when Shakespeare's *Henry V* exhorts the citizens of Harfleur to surrender by conjuring up the spectre of the Massacre to great dramatic effect in *Henry V*, Act 3 Scene 4 lines 38–41:<sup>89</sup>

Your naked infants spitted upon pikes,  
Whiles the mad mothers with their howls confus'd  
Do break the clouds, as did the wives of Jewry  
At Herod's bloody-hunting slaughtermen.

Chaucer also referred to Rachel to illustrate maternal grief, yet in one other instance in his *Canterbury Tales* he actually used an echo of the Massacre to an ironic effect that almost certainly relies on his contemporaries' familiarity with the dramatic enactment of the Massacre. When old January in Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale* beholds his young wife's shocking antics in the pear-tree,

... up he yaf a roryng and a cry,  
As dooth the mooder whan the child shal dye:  
'Out! help; allas! harrow!' he gan to crye.<sup>90</sup> 2364–6

These words suggest that the mothers' distraught reactions as presented in both medieval art and drama had become a byword, just as Herod's rage was later to be.<sup>91</sup> If they read like an echo of the second Towneley mother's lament, it must be remembered that there is no record of the Towneley play until much later. Not just maternal rage but even anguish might thus lend itself to comic comparisons, in Chaucer's case in a highly farcical situation far removed from the Massacre story itself.

While it cannot be denied that broad humour was an important part of medieval literature and drama, scholars of the Middle English mystery plays have often appeared uncomfortable about the fury unleashed by the Bethlehem mothers on Herod's soldiers, which to some has seemed like a crude departure from the more formal, tragic focus of the liturgical plays.<sup>92</sup>

Consequently, these pageants have been subjected to Bakhtinian as well as feminist scrutiny, which has resulted in fascinating new ideas, but perhaps too much so at the loss of the wider medieval picture. One cannot make sense of this near-farcical element in the vernacular drama without taking into account the wider context of iconographic development of the Massacre in contemporary art and of parallels in continental drama. Just as one should not study iconographical motifs in art without being aware of the occurrence of the same theme in medieval drama (or in earlier art, for that matter), so one should not focus on English drama texts in isolation. In this instance, the theme of the defiant mother is far more widespread than most authors appear to have realised up to now, and mutual influence seems very likely.

Admittedly, nothing in Matthew's short description of the Massacre prepares us for these vivid presentations of maternal violence, and perhaps further study of the exegetical traditions may yet reveal a underlying written source that could help explain these parallels between art and drama across Europe.<sup>93</sup> What cannot be denied was the popularity of this motif. The visual development of the defiant mother in Massacre depictions, together with the vernacularisation of medieval drama, allowed the Bethlehem women to run the full gamut of maternal emotions when they see their children threatened and killed by Herod's soldiers: from protective love to despair, horror, grief, and outright fury. As such, a combined study of texts and images does not just help us understand this episode in the mystery plays better, but may also testify to the powerful appeal of maternal feelings towards infants in medieval society.

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#### NOTES

1. This article is based on chapter 4 of the author's PhD thesis (University of Leicester, 1999), due to be published as *'Litel enfaunt that were but late borne'*:

*The Image of the Infant in Medieval Culture in North-Western Europe* (Turnhout: Brepols, forthcoming). It was presented as a paper at the Third Utrecht Symposium on Medieval Literacy, 'Reading Images and Texts', held in Utrecht 7–9 December 2000.

2. *The Prioress's Tale*, line 627; *The Riverside Chaucer* edited Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 3rd edition 1988). Further quotations from Chaucer's work are based on this edition.
3. All biblical quotations used in this article are from the Douay-Rheims translation of the Vulgate as available on <www.intratext.com>.
4. *Guillelmi Dvranti Rationale Divinorum Officiorum*, edited A. Davril, T.M. Thibodeau, and B.-G. Guyot, 3 vols (Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaevalis, 140, 140A, 140B; Turnhout: Brepols, 2000), 3 111; VII, xlii: 11. Durandus also compares Rachel to Ecclesia weeping over her children.
5. Gertrud Schiller *Iconography of Christian Art* translated Janet Seligman, 2 vols (London: Lund Humphries, 1971) 1 114. 1 Samuel 10: 2 refers to 'Rachel's sepulchre in the border of Benjamin at Zelzah', whereas Durandus referred to Jerome for his assertion that the three patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were buried with their wives in a double cave *ab Esron*; see Durandus *Rationale*, 1 60; I, v: 11.
6. John Mirk *Mirk's Festial: A Collection of Homilies Part 1* edited Theodor Erbe *EETS ES* 96 (1900) 36. Compare also Durandus *Rationale* 3 112; VII, xlii, 14.
7. *The Sarum Missal in English* edited and translated A.H. Pearson (London: Church Press, 1868) 27–9. I am very grateful to Professor Meg Twycross for drawing my attention to this. See also Louis Réau *Iconographie de l'art chrétien* 3 vols (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1956) 2: 2 267.
8. J. A. Burrow *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986, reprinted 1988) Appendix 200.
9. H. Leith Spencer *English Preaching in the Late Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) 342. I am grateful to Dr Miriam Gill for drawing my attention to this sermon.
10. Ian Bishop *Pearl in its Setting: A Critical Study of the Structure and Meaning of the Middle English Poem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1968) 105–6.
11. *Cursor Mundi (The Cursor of the World): A Northumbrian Poem of the XIVth Century in Four Versions, Two of them Midland, Part 2* edited Richard Morris *EETS OS* 59 (1875), lines 11577–80. The lines quoted are from version BL MS Cotton Vespasian A III.
12. See P.T. Durbin and Lynette Muir *The Passion de Semur* (Leeds Medieval Studies 3; Leeds: University of Leeds Centre for Medieval Studies, 1981), where a soldier reports the slaughter *d'anffans cent xl iiiii mille* (line 3410), although



- here Herod commands the killing of all *enffans de trois ans en dessoulx* (line 3304). Further references to this play in the text are based on this edition.
13. *The Towneley Plays* edited Martin Stevens and A.C. Cawley, 2 vols, *EETS SS 13* and *SS 14* (1994) lines 703–5. Further references to this play in the text are to this edition. See also the discussion of the Middle English plays and their dates in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre* edited Richard Beadle (Cambridge University Press, 1994).
  14. See Lieselotte Kötzsche-Breitenbruch ‘Zur Ikonographie des bethlehemitischen Kindermordes in der frühchristlichen Kunst’ *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum 11–12* (1968–69) 104–15.
  15. Schiller *Iconography of Christian Art 1* 115; *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie* edited Engelbert Kirschbaum, 8 vols (Rome: Herder 1968–1976, reprinted Freiburg: Herder, 1994) 2 509–13. See also Kötzsche-Breitenbruch ‘Zur Ikonographie’, and examples discussed in Ilene H. Forsyth ‘Children in Early Medieval Art: Ninth through Twelfth Centuries’ *Journal of Psychohistory 4* (1976) 34–5 and note 11.
  16. Schiller *Iconography of Christian Art 1* 115.
  17. See *Kunst und Kultur der Karolingerzeit. Karl der Große und Papst Leo III. in Paderborn*, exhibition catalogue edited Christoph Stiegemann and Matthias Wenhoff (Mainz: Von Zabern, 1999) 2, no. X, 4, 693–4.
  18. Anat Tcherikover ‘Two Romanesque Ivory Combs’ *Journal of the British Archaeological Association 132* (1979) 7–21.
  19. The Massacre must have featured, for example, on a *voussoir* from St Mary’s Abbey, York, although now only the scene of Herod issuing his command to the soldiers survives; see George Zarnecki and others *English Romanesque Art 1066–1200* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1984) no. 174c–d. A surviving twelfth-century portal at the former Benedictine abbey of Saint-Aubin in Angers shows painted scenes of the Three Magi and the Massacre; see Christian Davy *La peinture murale romane dans les Pays de la Loire: L’indicible et le ruban plissé* (La Mayenne: Archéologie, Histoire, Supplément no. 10; Laval: Société d’Archéologie et d’Histoire de la Mayenne, 1999) 156–61.
  20. See the discussion of these two types in Kötzsche-Breitenbruch ‘Zur Ikonographie’, especially note 45 in which she lists examples in the Old Testament of children being killed in similar fashion, e.g. Isaiah 13: 16: ‘Their infants shall be dashed in pieces before their eyes’.
  21. See *Glanz der Ewigkeit. Meisterwerke aus Elfenbein der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin*, exhibition catalogue edited Regine Marth (Brunswick: Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, 1999) no. 27 and page 55, plate 4.
  22. The Winchester Psalter was produced in England for Henry of Blois; the Massacre scene can be found below the Flight into Egypt on fol. 14 of British

- Library MS Cotton Nero C IV. See Francis Wormald *The Winchester Psalter* (London: Harvey Miller and Medcalf, 1973) plate 17; Kristine Edmondson Haney *The Winchester Psalter: An Iconographic Study* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1986) 23 and plates 13, 97, 100.
23. Loose leaf MS 32 B31 C.H9 2, B, verso, combined with a scene of Christ's entry into Jerusalem; see *Die illuminierten Handschriften und Einzelminiaturen des Mittelalters und der Renaissance in Frankfurter Besitz* edited Georg Swarzenski and Rosy Schilling (Frankfurt am Main: Frankfurter Bibliophilen Gesellschaft, 1929) 16 and plate XI; Sandra Hindman *Medieval & Renaissance Miniature Painting* (Akron: Bruce Ferrini Rare Books, and London: Sam Fogg Rare Books & Manuscripts, 1988) no. 1. The miniature was earlier described as 'Flanders or Rhineland' in *The Robert von Hirsch Collection, 1: Old Master Drawings, Paintings and Medieval Miniatures* (London: Sotheby Park Bernet, 1978) auction catalogue, item 3.
  24. Quoted thus in Ursula Gray *Das Bild des Kindes im Spiegel der altdeutschen Dichtung und Literatur* (Europäische Hochschulschriften, series I, Deutsche Literature und Germanik 91; Bern: Herbert Lang; Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1974) 21–2. I am very grateful to Tobias A. Kemper, University of Bonn, for additional information on this song and its author, and to Maria Theising-Otte for her help with the translation.
  25. Rosemary Woolf *The English Mystery Plays* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972) chapter 1; Charles Mazouer *Le théâtre français du Moyen Âge* (Paris: SEDES, 1998) chapter 1.
  26. See *Ordo Rachelis* edited Karl Young (University of Wisconsin Studies in Language and Literature 4; Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1919) 3. See also by the same author *The Drama of the Medieval Church* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933) 2, chapter 20.
  27. Durandus *Rationale* 3 112–13; VII, xlii: 15. See also Bishop *Pearl in its Setting*, chapter 7, especially at 105, where he quotes the rubric from the Sarum Breviary for the Vespers on the feast of St John the Evangelist (27 December): *Tunc eat processio puerorum ad altare Innocentium, vel Sanctae Trinitatis, cum capis sericis et cereis illuminatis in manibus suis, cantando, R. Centum Quadraginta ... etc.*
  28. For example, the *Pueri* played an active role at Laon, as the stage directions indicate: *Interim Pueri, agnum portantes, intrant cantantes: 'Ecce Agnus Dei, ecce qui tollit peccata mundi, alleluia'* ('Meanwhile the boys, carrying the lamb, enter singing: "Behold the Lamb of God, behold Him who has taken away the sins of the world, alleluia"'). See Young *Ordo Rachelis* 17. It is in this play that the Innocents are given their only dramatic line as the Massacre takes place: *Quare non defendis sanguinem nostrum?* ('Why do you not defend our blood?'). As Young, 10–12, pointed out, the Innocents were also clearly presented in the

- procession at the end of the Freising *Officium Stellae*, but it is uncertain whether this play ever included the actual Massacre.
29. Young *Ordo Rachelis* 16–17.
  30. Young *Ordo Rachelis* 44 and 31.
  31. Brome *Abraham and Isaac*, in *Non-Cycle Plays and Fragments* edited Norman Davis *EETS SS 1* (1970) lines 449–53. A similar condemnation of such grief can be found in the 1420s in John Audelay's long poem *De visitacione infirmorum et consolacione miserorum*. See *The Poems of John Audelay* edited Ella Keats Whiting *EETS OS 184* (1931) no. 11, especially lines 365–7: '3e that wepe for childer and frynd / When thai schul dey, haue þis in mynd, / Hyle [*Highly*] 3e ofend swet Ihesus'. You should instead rejoice: '... ioyful and glad schal 3e be / When 3our Fader wold after 3oue send' (lines 370–1).
  32. Ælfric's *Homily on the Nativity of the Innocents*, written in Old English while he was a monk at Cerne Abbas in Dorset, is the fifth in his first volume of forty homilies issued in 991 and survives in a number of manuscripts including the oldest version, BL Royal MS 7 C. xii (A), of the late tenth century. See *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The First Series* edited Peter Clemoes *EETS SS 17* (1997).
  33. Young *Ordo Rachelis* 31. This unusual scene of the Innocents entering Heaven appears to be depicted on one of the roof-bosses in the fourth bay of the north transept of Norwich Cathedral, installed after a fire in 1509; see Martial Rose and Julia Hedgecoe *Stories in Stone: The Medieval Roof Carvings of Norwich Cathedral* (London: Herbert Press, 1997) 115, 125–26. One may also find Massacre scenes with angels carrying the Innocents' souls to Heaven, e.g. on a painted bronze baptismal font of the early fourteenth century in the St. Martinikirche, Halberstadt.
  34. A good example of this is the seated mother cradling her child in the centre of the Massacre panel on the sculpted wooden doors of the church of St Maria im Kapitol in Cologne, dated c. 1049; see Klaus Gereon Beuckers *Rex iubet — Christus imperat. Studien zu den Holztüren von St. Maria im Kapitol und zu Herodesdarstellungen vor dem Investiturstreit*, (Veröffentlichungen des Kölnischen Geschichtsvereins e.V., 42; Cologne: SH-Verlag, 1999) especially plate 81.
  35. This specific type of mother, kneeling down while clutching the remains of her dead child, is discussed by Rudolph Binion in 'Three Mourning Mothers: The Making and Unmaking of a Christian Figural Complex' *Journal of Psychohistory* 26:1 (Summer 1998) 449–77, and shown in a number of illustrations, including the stained glass of the central west window of Chartres Cathedral from the mid twelfth century; fol. 18<sup>v</sup> of the Ingeborg Psalter of c. 1200 (Musée Condé, Chantilly, MS 1695) and fol. 86<sup>f</sup> of the early thirteenth-century *Bible moralisée* in Paris BN, MS lat. 11560. Binion discusses this type of mother in relation to

that of the Virgin embracing the body of her dead son and to the later Pietà, although the psychohistorical slant of the article is questionable.

36. See Emile Mâle *L'Art religieux du XIIIe siècle. Étude sur les origines de l'iconographie du Moyen Age* (Paris: Colin, 1922), edited Harry Bober and translated Marthiel Mathews as *Religious Art in France: The Twelfth Century: A Study of the Origins of Medieval Iconography* (Bollingen Series 90: 1; Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978) chapter 4 for a discussion of liturgy and iconography.
37. E.W. Tristram and M.R. James 'Wall-Paintings in Croughton Church, Northamptonshire' *Archaeologia* 76 (1927) 179–204; also E.W. Tristram *English Wall Painting of the Fourteenth Century* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1955) 73–5, 162–5, and plate 21. It should be noted that the versions of the mural published by Tristram differ from the original mural in some important details.
38. Johann-Christian Klamt 'Emotie en actie: Over kordate moeders in laatmiddeleeuwse voorstellingen van "De Kindermoord van Bethlehem"' in *Emoties in de Middeleeuwen* edited R.E.V. Stuip and C. Vellekoop (Hilversum: Uitgeverij Verloren, 1998) 199–216. Klamt's two other examples are a predella painted c. 1530 by an anonymous Stiermarken master (now in the Steiermärkisches Landesmuseum Joanneum, Graz) and a panel of c. 1515 by an anonymous Antwerp master (now in the Landesgalerie, Hannover).
39. The interpretation by Klamt 'Emotie en actie' 209, that the agonised expression on the mother's face is due simply to the fact that the soldier is biting her fingers, would seem to lend this panel a farcical rather than tragic character, especially when there is no other sorrowing mother to adjust the balance; the soldier under attack shows little evidence of pain himself even when having his hair pulled. The real anguish must surely be caused by the vicious slaughter of the five naked infants in this scene.
40. For the St Albans Psalter, see Otto Pächt, C.R. Dodwell and Francis Wormald, *The St Albans Psalter (Albani Psalter)* (Studies of the Warburg Institute 25; London/Leiden: Warburg Institute, University of London, 1960); also Zarnecki and others *English Romanesque Art*, cat. 17; Jane Geddes 'The St Albans Psalter: the Abbot and the anchoress' in *Christina of Markyate, a Twelfth-Century Holy Woman* edited Samuel Fanous and Henrietta Leyser (London, 2004) 197–216, especially 204; Geddes' own book *The St Albans Psalter: a Book for Christina of Markyate* is in progress. This interpretation by Pächt 85, of the mother in the St Albans Psalter biting the soldier's leg, was adopted by Kathleen Nolan, "Ploratus et ululatus": The Mothers in the Massacre of the Innocents at Chartres Cathedral' *Studies in Iconography* 17 (1996) 103 and plate 5. The St Albans Psalter is now available as a full-colour facsimile with commentary online at <[www.abdn.ac.uk/stalbanspsalter](http://www.abdn.ac.uk/stalbanspsalter)>.

41. *Das Andachtsbuch der Marie de Gavre* (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, Ms. nouv. acq. fr. 16251: *Buchmalerei in der Diözese Cambrai im letzten viertel des 13. Jahrhunderts* edited Andreas Bräm (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1997) 68–9 and plate 7. Alison Stones *Le livre d'images de madame Marie. Reproduction intégrale du manuscrit Nouvelles acquisitions françaises 16251 de la Bibliothèque nationale de France* (Paris: Editions du Cerf/Bibliothèque nationale de France, 1997), identifies this 'Madame Marie' as Marie de Réthel; I am grateful to Dr Martine Meuwese for pointing out this identification problem to me.
42. Bräm *Das Andachtsbuch der Marie de Gavre* 68. Bräm does not support this idea further with specific references.
43. London: British Library, MS Arundel 83 II, fol. 124<sup>v</sup>; see Lucy Freeman Sandler *The Psalter of Robert de Lisle in the British Library* (London: Harvey Miller, 1983) 56 and plate 12.
44. For Chalgrove, see Tristram *English Wall Painting of the Fourteenth Century* 84–6, 153–5, and plate 30; also *Age of Chivalry: Art in Plantagenet England 1200–1400*, exhibition catalogue Royal Academy, edited Jonathan Alexander and Paul Binski (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987) no. 93. The painting of the Massacre is now in a much worse state than that suggested by Tristram's illustration, although it is still possible to recognize some crucial details omitted in his plate.
45. London: British Library MS Royal 2 B VII; see *Queen Mary's Psalter* edited George Warner (London: British Museum, 1912) plate 138.
46. Paul Deschamps and Marc Thibaut *La peinture murale en France au début de l'époque gothique de Philippe-Auguste à la fin du règne de Charles V (1180–1380)* (Paris: CNRS, 1963) 129–30 and plate LXV.1.
47. See the facsimile edition by Eberhard König *Les Heures de Marguerite d'Orléans* translated from the German by François Boespflug (Paris: Éditions du Cerf/Bibliothèque nationale, 1991).
48. For a discussion of this manuscript, see Tamara Voronova and Andrei Sterligov *Western European Illuminated Manuscripts of the 8th to the 16th Centuries in the National Library of Russia, St Petersburg* translated Mirielle Faure (Bournemouth: Parkstone Press and St Petersburg: Aurora, 1996) 180–4, and also the facsimile edition by Andrei Sterligov *Das Stundenbuch Ludwigs von Orléans* translated from the Russian by Eberhard Fleischmann, 2 vols ([Leipzig]: Edition Leipzig, [1980]). The shelfmark is given as Lat. Q. v. I. 126 in the former publication.
49. Rachel does appear as a character in some of the vernacular plays, e.g. in the Middle Dutch Maastricht Easter Play, written probably before c. 1350, and in at least two versions of the German *Weihnachtsspiel*, i.e. the play from St Gallen, surviving in a fifteenth-century copy although probably much earlier in

- date, and the *Ludus trium magorum* from Erlau, said to have been written in the first half of the fifteenth century. See Julius Zacher 'Ein mittelniederländisches Osterspiel' *Zeitschrift für deutsches Alterthum* 2 (1842) 302–50; *Das St. Galler Weihnachtsspiel* edited Emilia Bättschmann (Altdeutsche Übungstexte 21; Bern: Francke, 1977); Karl Ferdinand Kummer *Erlauer Spiele: Sechs altdeutsche Spiele nach einer Handschrift des XV. Jahrhunderts* (Vienna: A. Hölder, 1882, reprinted Hildesheim and New York: Olms, 1977).
50. *The Coventry Corpus Christi Plays* edited Pamela M. King and Clifford Davidson (EDAM Monograph Series 27; Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 2000) 4–5, 52–3. See also *Records of Early English Drama: Coventry* edited R.W. Ingram (Toronto University Press, 1981).
  51. John C. Coldewey 'The Non-Cycle Plays and the East Anglian Tradition' in *Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre* 194; also Barbara D. Palmer 'Recycling "The Wakefield Cycle": The Records' *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama* 41 (2002) 88–130, at 96 and 107.
  52. Palmer 'Recycling "The Wakefield Cycle"' 88–130; Alexandra F. Johnston 'The Emerging Pattern of the Easter Play in England' *METH* 20 (1998) 3–23, also refers to the N. Town and Towneley plays as 'composite texts with episodes drawn from demonstrably different sources' (3). See also Garret P.J. Epp, "Corrected & not played": An Unproductive History of the Towneley Plays' *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama* 43 (2004) 38–53.
  53. Richard Beadle 'The York Cycle' in *Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre* 85–108, at 85, 95.
  54. See, for example, Martin Stevens 'Herod as Carnival King in the Medieval Biblical Drama' *Mediaevalia* 18 (1995) 43–66; Gary Harrington 'The Dialogism of the Digby Mystery Play' *Mediaevalia* 18 (1995) 67–80 especially 76.
  55. King and Davidson *Coventry Corpus Christi Plays*, 'Shearmen and Taylors' Play' stage direction after line 775: 'Here the wemen cum in wythe there chyldur syngyng them', and Appendix 3 (166–9).
  56. *The N-Town Play: Cotton MS Vespasian D.8* edited Stephen Spector, 2 vols, *EETS SS 11 and 12* (1991) lines 89–90. All further quotations in the text are from this edition. The idea that the N. Town plays constitute a single cycle has long been dismissed. See also Alan J. Fletcher 'The N-Town Plays' in *Cambridge Companion to English Medieval Theatre* 163–88.
  57. For such a more feminist approach, see Theresa Coletti "'Ther be but women": Gender Conflict and Gender Identity in the Middle English Innocents Plays' *Mediaevalia* 18 (1995) 245–61; Denise Ryan 'Womanly Weaponry: Language and Power in the Chester *Slaughter of the Innocents*' *Studies in Philology* 98 (2001) 76–92.

58. See also the discussions of French Massacre plays in Jean-Pierre Bordier *Le Jeu de la Passion: le message chrétien et le théâtre français (XIIIe–XVIe s.)* (Paris: Champion and Geneva: Slatkine, 1998) 494–506
59. *Le 'Mystère de la Passion' de Troyes* edited Jean-Claude Bibolet (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1987) 1, lines 7383–6; further references in the text will be from this edition.
60. Gustave Cohen *Le livre de conduite du régisseur et le comte des dépenses pour le mystère de la passion joué à Mons en 1501* (Publications de la Faculté des Lettres de l'Université de Strasbourg 23; Strasbourg: Les Belles Lettres, 1925).
61. The French word *poupard* can signify both a chubby child and a large doll; Compare the similar word-play with the Middle English word *moppe*; see Sophie Oosterwijk 'Of Mops and Puppets: The Ambiguous Use of the Word *Mop* in the Towneley Shepherds' Plays' *Notes and Queries* 242 (June 1997) 169–71. The verb *bailler* means 'to give', but it can at the same time contain a pun on 'dancing'.
62. After Herod's own son has been mistakenly killed by the king's soldiers, a stage direction for the maid of the ominously named royal nurse Medusa states: *Lors elle prend le cariot et met l'enfant futif dedens*. See Cohen *Livre de conduite* 103 and cvii, j; also Oosterwijk 'Of Mops and Puppets'.
63. Three fourteenth-century stained-glass examples of Innocents impaled on spears in York Minster are given in Clifford Davidson and David E. O'Connor *York Art: A Subject List of Extant and Lost Art Including Items Relevant to Early Drama*, (EDAM Reference Series 1; Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1978) 58–60 and fig. 16.
64. *The Chester Mystery Cycle* edited R.M. Lumiansky and David Mills, 2 vols, *EETS* SS 3 (1974), and SS 9 (1986) Play 10, line 344, repeated slightly differently after line 376. Further quotations from the Chester play are based on this edition. Chester is known to have had a Corpus Christi procession by 1398 and a Corpus Christi play as early as 1422, but the extant cycle texts were extensively revised in the first half of the sixteenth century. See David Mills 'The Chester Cycle' in *Cambridge Companion to English Medieval Theatre* 109–33; and Sophie Oosterwijk 'Lessons in "Hopping": The Dance of Death and the Chester Mystery Cycle' *Comparative Drama* 36: 3–4 (2002–3) 249–87, especially 260 and note 40–41.
65. Artificial or animal blood is known on occasions to have been used in medieval drama; see Oosterwijk, 'Of Mops and Puppets'. Some of the drama texts contain hints about the probably brutal, or even bloody way in which the Massacre must have been enacted, e.g. when one of the soldiers in the Digby play of 'The Killing of the Children' promises that 'we shalle make a flood / To renne in the stretis, by ther blood shedyng'; see in *The Digby Plays* edited Donald C. Baker, J.L. Murphy and L.B. Hall *EETS* 283 (1982) lines 287–8.

This remark may even contain a hint at the way these Middle English mystery plays were performed as pageants in the streets of the city. Blood also appears to have been used in the 1547 Passion Play at Valenciennes: *Item a loccision des inocens on voyoit le sang sortir de leurs corps*. See Elie Konigson *La représentation d'un mystère de la Passion à Valenciennes en 1547* (Paris: Édition du Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1969) 80.

66. The theme of the newborn infant who cannot walk and yet has to learn to dance was particularly popular in the German *Totentanz* tradition: see Sophie Oosterwijk 'Lessons in "Hopping"', and by the same author "'Muss ich tanzen und kann nit gan?" Das Kind im mittelalterlichen Totentanz' in *L'art macabre: Jahrbuch der Europäischen Totentanz-Vereinigung 3* edited Uli Wunderlich (Düsseldorf: Europäische Totentanz-Vereinigung, 2002) 162–80. An updated English version of the last paper has been accepted for publication in *Word and Image* (2005).
67. Both Norwich and Bury St Edmund have been suggested as the place of origin for these plays, but the true location remains a matter for debate. See Fletcher 'The N. Town Plays' in *Cambridge Companion to English Medieval Theatre* 163–88; also Gail McMurray Gibson *The Theater of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1989).
68. *The York Plays* edited Richard Beadle (London: Arnold, 1982) Play 19, lines 207–9. The term *quenys* is also used by the soldiers in other plays as a term of abuse.
69. This is explained by the editors of the Chester plays as 'the orifices of anus and penis only, lacking the third "hole", the female pudendum'.
70. Coldewey 'The Non-Cycle Plays' 207.
71. *Digby Plays* edited Baker, Murphy and Hall, lines 309–10; see also lines 334, 337 and especially the threat of a duel in lines 329–30: 'If ye abide, Watkyn, you and I shalle game / With my distaff that is so rounde'. *Rokke* is a now archaic word for 'distaff'; compare the Dutch word *spinrokken*.
72. King and Davidson *Coventry Corpus Christi Plays*, 'Shearmen and Taylors' Play' lines 810, 813.
73. See the comments on lines 381–92 in Lumiansky and Mills *Chester Mystery Cycle*, *EETS* SS 9 156.
74. The suggestion in Davidson and O'Connor *York Art* 59–60, that the dead child in the richly decorated cradle in the bottom corner of clerestory window SC3.2 of c. 1350 may be Herod's own son is interesting, but hard to prove; a cradle also occurs in the stained-glass panel in St Peter Mancroft church in Norwich (PLATE 17), but this was a common emblem of infancy and all of the Innocents are naked here.



75. As King and Davidson, *Coventry Corpus Christi Plays*, point out in their commentary on lines 827–8 (248), ‘some kind of contrivance must have been used to convey the slain children to the presence of Herod, since the first soldier announces that the tyrant may see the thousands that have been killed’.
76. I would seriously question a fairly recent interpretation of these same marginal scenes as mere ‘game variants’ with one woman ‘blindfolding’ a soldier; see Sandra Billington ‘The *Cheval fol* of Lyon and Other Asses’ in *Fools and Folly* edited Clifford Davidson (EDAM Monograph Series 22; Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 1996) 24–5 and plate 5.
77. The relics in Rome were transferred to Sta Maria Maggiore by Pope Sixtus V from an Early Christian sarcophagus originally located in the basilica of San Paolo fuori le Mura. The Paduan relics are mentioned in David Foote ‘How the Past Becomes a Rumor: The Notarialization of Historical Consciousness in Medieval Orvieto’ *Speculum* 75: 4 (2000) 804.
78. Johan Huizinga *Herfsttij der middeleeuwen* (1919) abridged and translated by F. Hopman as *The Waning of the Middle Ages: A Study of the Forms of Life, Thought, and Art in France and the Netherlands in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1924, reprinted 1982) 143. Michael Camille *Master of Death: The Lifeless Art of Pierre Remiet, Illuminator* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1996) 196, described the relic as encased in gold and silver.
79. B. van den Eerenbeemt *Het kind in onze middeleeuwse literatuur* (Amsterdam: N.V. van Munster’s Uitgevers-Maatschappij, 1935) 289.
80. Reliquary belonging to the Katholische Pfarrgemeinde St. Johann-Baptist, Aachen-Burtscheid, as displayed in the exhibition ‘The Way to Heaven: Relic Veneration in the Middle Ages’ (Utrecht, Museum Catharijneconvent, 16 December 2000 — 22 April 2001) no. 17; see also Ernst Günther Grimme, *Kirchenschaetze der ehemaligen Abteikirche St. Johann und der Pfarrkirche St. Michael in Aachen-Burtscheid* (Aachen/Leipzig/Paris: Thouet-Verlag, 1996) 67–9. Another silver foot reliquary containing an Innocent’s foot, dated 1450 and originally from the Treasury at Basel Cathedral, can now be found in the Schweizerisches Landesmuseum in Zurich; I am grateful to Professor Meg Twycross for alerting me to this example recently exhibited in the Metropolitan Museum, New York. For an earlier example of a reliquary showing the actual Massacre, see the Limoges *chasse* of c. 1190–1210 from the Louvre in the exhibition catalogue *Enamels of Limoges 1100–1350* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1996), no. 41. The Massacre is also depicted amongst scenes of the Infancy of Christ on a *chasse* of the first quarter of the thirteenth century in the Musée national du Moyen Age in Paris (Cl. 1896).
81. *Jacobi a Voragine Legenda aurea* edited Th. Graesse (Dresden and Leipzig: Arnold, 1846, reprinted Osnabrück: Zeller, 1965) 65.

82. Whiting *The Poems of John Audelay* no. 36.
83. Réau *Iconographie de l'art chrétien* 269; Huizinga *Waning of the Middle Ages* 149–50.
84. *The Paston Letters, A.D. 1422–1509* edited James Gairdner, 6 vols (London: Chatto & Windus, 1904) 3 280, no. 460 and note 4.
85. Quoted in the *OED* as an example of the second meaning of *Childermas*.
86. Besides Klamt's panel paintings from Freising and Stiermarken, there is a German stained-glass panel of the first half of the sixteenth century, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, which shows two women desperately attacking Herod's soldiers; Mr Nigel Wilkins of the National Monuments Record kindly drew my attention to this window. Further examples continue to be discovered.
87. I am very grateful to Dr Barbara Baert from the Faculty of Arts at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven for informing me about this fresco.
88. Niels M. Saxtorph *Danmarks Kalkmalerier* ([n.p.]: Politikens Forlag, 1986, reprinted 1997) 99. Further examples may be viewed on the *kalkmalerier* website of Danish medieval wall-paintings set up by Mr James Mills: <<http://ica.princeton.edu/mills/index.php>>.
89. Also quoted by Woolf *English Mystery Plays* 208, and in the Commentary in King and Davidson *Coventry Corpus Christi Plays* 247–8.
90. See also Woolf *English Mystery Plays* 208 and note 76.
91. Herod's anger is vividly depicted in one of the bosses in the stone vault of the nave at Norwich Cathedral; see Alan H. Nelson 'On Recovering the Lost Corpus Christi Cycle' *Comparative Drama* 4 (1970–71) 241–52, whose discussion of one of the Paston letters written on the eve of Corpus Christi Thursday, 20 May 1478, which compares the Lord of Suffolk to 'Herrod in Corpus Christy play', is very illuminating. Of course, there is also Hamlet's famous warning to the players *Hamlet* 3 2: 14 not to out-Herod Herod.
92. Woolf merely calls the treatment of the mothers in these plays 'surprising' (*English Mystery Plays* 207), while King and Davidson refer to a 'tonal shift into the burlesque' (*Coventry Corpus Christi Plays* 19). Lumiansky and Mills comment: 'The laments of the women are suggested by Matthew 2: 17–18, and were a feature of the liturgical drama. Here, however, the sense of sorrow is subsumed under the vindictiveness and comic belligerence of the women' (*Chester Mystery Cycle EETS* SS 9 154). David Mills similarly emphasises comedy over tragedy in A.C. Cawley, Marion Jones, Peter F. McDonald and David Mills *The Revels History of Drama in English 1: Medieval Drama* (London: Methuen, 1983) 194:

What sometimes appears a retreat into comedy proves rather to be an attempt to avoid the difficulties raised by a concentration upon verisimilar emotional response. Nowhere is this more pronounced than

in the Massacre of the Innocents, where cycle-dramatists share with the author of the Digby 'Killing' the avoidance of tragic potential by employing the stock comic figures of the ranting Herod and *miles gloriosus*, and by reducing the Massacre to a comic belabouring of soldiers by mothers in the manner of Coventry's Hocktide play.

Some editors have preferred not to discuss this aspect of the Massacre plays at all, whereas other authors have adopted a Bakhtinian or feminist approach, as we have seen.

93. The categorical statement in Coletti "Ther be but women" 247-8, that 'Nothing in the account of the Slaughter of the Innocents in Matthew's gospel, nor in the exegetical and liturgical traditions deriving from it, prepares for the ritualized violence between men and women exhibited by the English Innocents plays' may be correct, but it illustrates at the same time a lack of awareness of the same theme in art and in continental drama.