

Theresa Tinkle, *Imagining Jesus Christ in Middle English Literature, 1275–1475: Royal Traitor, Heroic Lamb* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2024).

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*Review*

In this monograph, Theresa Tinkle argues that Christ is characteristically portrayed as both a powerful heroic figure and a suffering man in Middle English texts, two images which broadly correspond to Christ's two natures: divine and human. Tinkle examines, through close reading, many literary and dramatic works, including some which have received little scholarly attention in this field. This book contributes to a growing shift by scholars such as Mary Dzon towards recognizing the multiple, sometimes contradictory, aspects of Christ present simultaneously in medieval literature, something which has been identified in medieval art by art historians like Sixten Ringbom, Bernhard Ridderbos, and David S. Areford. This book stands in contrast to existing literary scholarship which generally overemphasizes the human suffering of Christ in works from this period. It is intended for specialists in the field already familiar with late medieval religious literature.

Tinkle's first chapter lays out her argument: images of Christ are multivalent. This results from changes in the theology of redemption over time, where older theories are not replaced by newer ones, but linger on in the vernacular literature. Tinkle briefly describes the theories of redemption of Augustine, Anselm of

Canterbury, and Peter Lombard, which provide the images of a heroic Christ, a militant Christ, and a suffering Christ respectively. Peter Lombard's work is multivalent itself, combining many theories, some representing an objectivist view of redemption (which stresses Christ's actions) and some a subjectivist one (where a change occurs in human sinners). Tinkle associates the images stemming from these views with Christ's two natures. Added to this is a 'sheer diversity of figurative representation generated from Scripture' (p. 15). Late medieval authors are left with a variety of tropes that they utilize concurrently. Throughout the book, Tinkle also discusses affective piety, where Christ's suffering inspires compassion in the sinner, which leads to redemption. Tinkle argues that affective piety elicits a broader range of emotions from readers than only compassion. Different images of Christ induce different responses — including anti-Judaism. Almost every text that Tinkle examines blames Jews for Christ's death, and she highlights that anti-Judaism forms an 'integral part of English devotional practice and pastoral instruction' (p. 17). Tinkle describes an ambivalence towards Jews, stemming from a tension between being 'at once past and present, repudiated and depended upon, superseded and the source of Christian identity' (p. 19). Discussion of each text's anti-Judaism is a through-line in each following chapter.

In the second chapter, Tinkle studies the way Christ is portrayed in texts covering the Annunciation, Incarnation, and Nativity, specifically in *Cursor Mundi*, *Stanzaic Life of Christ*, and *Pepysian Gospel Harmony*. She particularly examines the

emphasis that these texts place on portraying Jesus as divine king. Despite their focus on the infant Jesus, they describe him as powerful and heroic, serving as a counterpoint to the narrative that Christ's human suffering is foregrounded in post-twelfth-century literature. Mary, often associated with affective piety, is treated as 'an indispensable witness to Jesus's two natures' (p. 21) and a wider range of emotional responses are elicited by the texts: 'awe, wonder, and reverent worship rather than pity or loving care' (p. 35).

The third chapter concerns Jesus's Passion, again in *Cursor Mundi* and *Stanzaic Life of Christ*, but also in *Northern Passion* and *Southern Passion*. Here the militant Christ trope, appears alongside the trope of Jesus dying out of love for sinners. Christ is also imagined as traitor, accused of treason against Caesar and arrested by Jews. These texts exhibit the ambivalence that Tinkle mentions earlier. These texts are more outright hostile than not, and 'they portray Jews who converted in the past, and Jews who will never convert in the present' (p. 89). They speak volumes as to contemporary attitudes of antisemitism, especially *Southern Passion*, given that the text was compiled not long before the 1290 expulsion of Jews from England. Anti-Judaism in these texts is connected most with the heroic Christ who triumphs over both Satan and Jews.

In chapter four, Tinkle moves to examining the varied images of Christ in a single text; Nicholas Love's *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ* (c. 1400). Tinkle explores the many images of Christ that are present in this work, which stress

Christ's two natures. The king and warrior tropes are present in *Mirror*, alongside Christ as lover, traitor, bait to trick the devil, and meek sacrifice. Tinkle also discusses the ways that the literary image of Jesus as king in *Mirror* displays the virtues an English king was meant to display, with potential contemporary political significance for Henry IV's reign.

Tinkle has been working with the ideas she puts forth in this monograph for at least a decade. Chapters five and six concern texts that feature in Tinkle's previous publications. Chapter five is about the York Corpus Christi *Play*, and an earlier version of this chapter appeared in *Speculum* in 2019 under the title 'York's Jesus: Crowned King and Traitor Attainted.' Most of the chapter is devoted to how the play's shifting portrayals of Jesus, especially the king and traitor tropes, comment on the relationship between different kings and the city of York across the period of the cycle's development.

Chapter six concerns Sir John Mandeville's *Book*. Like the *Play*, Tinkle has worked with this text before, handling similar subject matter in 'God's Chosen Peoples: Christians and Jews in *The Book of John Mandeville*' (2014), in which she develops her concept of Christian ambivalence towards Jews, and 'Sir John Mandeville's God(s)' (2015), which shares a title with this chapter. The chapter considers the different depictions of Jesus and God in Mandeville's text, which come from a larger variety of sources and traditions than the texts previous examined. Tinkle also examines these depictions of God in relation to conceptions of

Judaism, Islam, and paganism in the text.

As an afterword, Tinkle examines Julian of Norwich's *Revelation of Love* as a sort of test of her theory that Christ is normally depicted with differing images that stress the two natures. She selects this specific text because the image of Jesus of mother in the text is dissimilar to the tropes already discussed, as well as the fact that the author is a woman. Her arguments are persuasive.

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