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ECONOMIES OF SALVATION:
COMMERCE AND THE EUCHARIST IN
THE PROFANATION OF THE HOST AND
THE CROXTON *PLAY OF THE SACRAMENT*

Alexandra Reid-Schwartz

A Eucharist miracle tale known as the *Miracle de la Sainte Hostie*, which was popular in thirteenth-century France and received papal recognition in a Bull issued in 1295 by Pope Boniface VIII, resurfaced throughout Europe in various artistic forms in the late fifteenth century.¹ In this paper I will consider why this particular Eucharist tale appears so prevalently in the late Middle Ages, even in a country like England which had hitherto shown minimal interest in Eucharist miracles.² I will look in particular at *The Profanation of the Host*, a predella which Paolo Uccello painted for the high altar of the Urbino

¹A basic outline of the 1290 tale is as follows: A Parisian Jew buys a consecrated Host for ten pounds from his Christian serving girl. He places the Host on a table, declaring that Christians are fools to believe in it, and joined by other Jews, he attempts to destroy the Host with large knives. The Host divides into three parts and bleeds continuously, at which sight many of the Jews convert. The remaining Jews place the Host in a cauldron of boiling water to destroy it, but the Host turns into flesh and blood, and the Jews convert. See Margaret Aronberg Lavin, "The Altar of the Corpus Domini in Urbino: Paolo Uccello, Joos Van Ghent, Piero della Francesca," *The Art Bulletin* 49 (1967): 3. The thirteenth- and fourteenth-century versions in France are *Chronicles of Saint-Denis* (1285-1328) and an anonymous version in 1325; in Italy, in *La Cronaca Figurata* of Giovanni Villani, compiled before 1348 (Lavin 2-3). The known fifteenth-century versions are, in France, a drama called *Le jeu et mystere de la Sainte Hostie*, and in Italy a drama called *Un miracolo del Corpo di Cristo* (publ. 1498). In 1473, a version of the play was part of a festival held in Rome and in 1500, a Dutch version of the play was published. See Norman Davis, ed. *Non-Cycle Plays and Fragments* (Early English Text Society, 1984) lxxiii ff. All references to the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* will be from this edition and will appear parenthetically by line number in the text.

²Rosemary Woolf, *The English Mystery Plays* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1972), 68-70; Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991), 287.

church in 1467-8, and an English religious drama, the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*, which appears in a manuscript dated circa 1461. The original source of the predella and the play invites comparison between the two, as does the fact that drama and the visual arts were often seen as homologous in the fifteenth century.³ Specifically, I propose to examine the ways in which Uccello's predella (shown on pages 4 and 5) and the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* use the miracle tale as an artistic site in which to explore the competing and clashing economies of the Host and of profit-driven commerce. Each work of art expresses a generalized anxiety about mercantilism and about mercantilism's absorption of the Host into its commercial economy. The threat to the integrity of the Host by its debasement into money ostensibly gets resolved by the narratives' exposure of the problematic nature of commercial economy, and by the (re)elevation of the Host as an economy of salvation controlled and directed by the Church. Thus, to the extent that the play and the predella reveal and attempt to contain threats to the Host, they seem to function like the 1290 Eucharist tale. However, the efforts of the play and the predella to reaffirm the Eucharist continue to subject the Host to systems of ever-expanding signification and to call into question the Host's symbolic value. While both narratives are preoccupied with the transgression and permeability of boundaries—whether artistic, religious, or economic—neither is ultimately able or willing to reestablish the commercial and the religious economy each within its own hermetically-sealed, closed system; instead, the narratives manifest the continuous erosion of boundaries between the two.

Like the *Miracle de la Saint Hostie*, the play and the predella depict the treatment of the Host as a commodity whose value can be determined by money, outside the bounds of the Church. In the first scene of the predella, a Christian woman stands in a shop, which is denoted as Jewish by the scorpion blazon on the back wall.⁴ She

³Cycle dramas, which Woolf calls "narrative wall-paintings," were justified in the fifteenth century with the argument that since it was acceptable to represent the Passion and Redemption in the visual arts, it must also be acceptable to do so in drama (Woolf 55, 84-6, 94-5). Several critics have drawn parallels between the Croxton play and affective iconography of the Eucharistic Man of Sorrows and the *Arma Christi* to account for the play's graphic violence and to read it as a work of affective piety. See Richard L. Homan, "Devotional Themes in Violence and Humor of the the *Play of the Sacrament*," *Comparative Drama* 20 (1986): 327-340, and Ann Eljenholm Nichols, "The Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*: A Re-reading," *Comparative Drama* 22 (1989): 117-37.

⁴Lavin, 6.

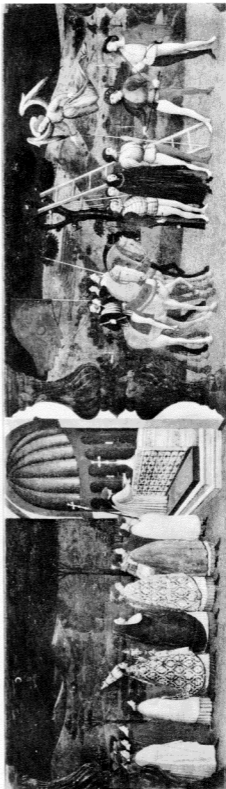
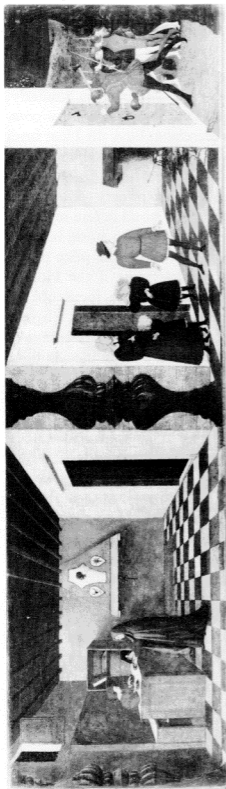
holds up a Host in her right hand, about to exchange it for what appears to be a pile or a bowl of coins.⁵ While we do not know who the woman is, or the price for which she exchanges the Host, we do know that the transaction has been completed, for in scene two the Jew has the Host and is heating it over a cooking brazier. Similarly, in the *Play of the Sacrament*, the Host is again subjected to a commercial transaction. Jonathas, a Jewish merchant, buys the Host from Aristorius, a Christian merchant, whose only reluctance about selling the Host is that the price quoted to him is too low. Aristorius responds to Jonathas's business proposition of twenty pounds by saying, "I wollnot for an hundder pownd / To stond in fere my Lord to tene, / And for so lytell a walew in consyence to stond bownd" (288-90). The merchants barter and negotiate about the price of the Host in an extended dialogue, trying to determine if the Host is worth twenty, forty, or one hundred pounds. The focus on the transaction process underscores the Host's removal from its religious context and its subjection to a "different economy of representation" in which value is determined and redetermined by a monetary price that itself constantly fluctuates.⁶

It is not gratuitous that these manifestations of the Eucharist miracle tale would explore the results of bringing the Host into the world of commerce. To begin with, there is an inherent analogy between the function of religious symbols and of money. Mary Douglas writes that "money can only perform its role in intensifying economic interaction if the public has faith in it. If faith is shaken, the currency is useless. So too with ritual; its symbols can only have effect so long as they command confidence."⁷ Moreover, the doctrine of the Eucharist, as first propounded by the Church fathers in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, has significant parallels to early medieval monetary theory. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the Church began to construct the Host as a symbol whose function in communion and eventually in rituals like the elevation of the Host and Corpus Christi processions, was to unite the religious commu-

⁵"The Jew touches two indecipherable objects (a bowl of coins and coins?). The woman takes a pile of coins (?) in her left hand, and proffers a Host with her right" (Lavin, 7). I am indebted to Lavin's article for my reading of the predella.

⁶Sarah Beckwith, "Ritual, Church and Theatre: Medieval Dramas of the Sacramental Body," in *Culture and History 1350-1600: Essays on English Communities, Identities and Writing*, ed. David Aers (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1992), 68-9.

⁷Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Culture and Taboo* (Boston: Ark Paperbacks, 1984), 69.





Paolo Uccello, *The Profanation of the Host*. Galleria Nazionale delle Marche, Palazzo Ducale, Urbino, Italy. (Photo: Alinari/Art Resource, New York)

nity.⁸ Through the doctrine of concomitance developed at the end of the twelfth century, the Church further attempted to insure that the meaning of its central symbol would remain independent of any fluctuation in form; this doctrine declared that the body and blood of Christ was not physically broken in the fraction or division of the Host, but was always present in each element of the Eucharist. In effect, the early Eucharist miracle tales, like the *Miracle de la Sainte Hostie*, worked in conjunction with the theory of concomitance; they proved that the Host, despite its fragmentation, enfleshment, or sanguineousness, was always Christ, and that its signification remained constant despite any fluidity or violation of its form. Indeed, Eucharist miracle tales were specifically intended by the Church to show how regular and reliable Host miracles were, and thus to bolster the Church's efforts in establishing the Host as its controlling religious symbol.⁹

The Church constructed the Host to be a stable and unifying symbol in much the same way early medieval monetary theory posited money to be. According to theories prior to the twelfth century, money was believed to hold together the economic community. Augustine, for example, compared "the unifying effects of coinage to the social fabric itself." And, continues Howard Bloch in his analysis of medieval grammar and money: "Like the verbal terms that are considered to constitute the unity—the common speech or *koine*—of the community, monetary signs embody the principle of oneness."¹⁰ Money was thought to function independently of market forces, to have instead "a concept of value that has independent and universal existence."¹¹ The value of a coin corresponded to the weight of metal it contained, a value which remained intact even when the coin was recast into a usable object.¹² Thus, like the Host, early medieval money in theory had a fluidity of form while its value remained impervious to change.¹³

⁸Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 12-15.

⁹*Ibid.*, 108, 113-4.

¹⁰R. Howard Bloch, "The Economics of Romance," in *Etymologies and Genealogies: A Literary Anthropology of the French Middle Ages* (Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press, 1983), 166.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 167; Eugene Vance, "Love's Concordance: The Poetics of Desire and the Joy of the Text," *Diacritics* 5 (1975): 43-4.

¹²Bloch, 168-9.

¹³In fact, the word "specie," which has the now obsolete meaning of coin, coined money, minted pieces of metal, or more generally, a commodity serving as a means of

There is no need to assume that the Church consciously sought to model its eucharistic doctrine on medieval economic theory. In fact, the analogy quickly became problematic, for by the twelfth century, money began to circulate freely and its value began to fluctuate according to market forces. Indeed, simply inscribing a new name on an existing currency could change its value.¹⁴ I would argue that the 1290 miracle tale first emerges partly in response to the disturbing connections between the Eucharist and money, for as medieval monetary theory began to diverge from the Church's construction of the Host's meaning, some interpretive dissonance between the two would seem inevitable.¹⁵ The tale's depiction of the commercial transaction of the Eucharist addresses this dissonance by, in essence, exaggerating the analogy between the Host and money in order to undermine it. The Host, the tale recognizes, can no longer play a role in the religious community similar to money's role in the economy; indeed, it runs the risk of becoming subject to money's own economy of representation by having a price fixed to it. By conflating the implicit parallels between the Host and money in its depiction of the Host's commercial transaction, the tale sets out to demonstrate the dangers of understanding the Host in terms of a commodity to be bought or sold for spiritual or material profit.

By the fifteenth century, money and commerce had evolved to another stage of economic development which anthropologist Marcel Mauss describes as "the purely individual contract of the market where money circulates, of sale proper."¹⁶ This century saw an increased premium on trade and profit, as well as the ultimate monetary deregulation, the "issuance of the first paper money—a purely symbolic promise, in the absence of any metal content, to pay what the printed face says."¹⁷ With the appearance of paper money, the value of currency became separate from its form, and money became

exchange in trade, has an etymological similarity to "species," one of whose many meanings is the visible form of either or both of the elements of bread and wine used in the eucharistic sacrament (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

¹⁴Bloch, 165, 169; Vance, 44.

¹⁵Vance compares the "homology between changing functions of money and of texts in twelfth-century Champagne" and sees in the erotic lyrics of Gace Brule the "poetics of money" as it changes to an open, profit-based system (40-52).

¹⁶Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W. D. Halig (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990), 46. Originally published as "Essai sur le don" in *Sociologie et anthropologie* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1950).

¹⁷Bloch, 169.

a floating sign. Such a monetary system, with its possibilities for endless fluctuation and destabilization, threatened to displace entirely the Church's efforts to construct a "hegemonic sacramental worldview" through the Host by constituting an alternative signifying system so antithetical to the Church's own.¹⁸ The Eucharist miracle tale, with its inherent questioning of commodity and exchange, thus becomes an ideal site in which to investigate the expression of fifteenth-century anxieties not only about an expanding and potentially destabilized economy, but also about the meaning of the Host itself.

Both the play and predella respond to the change in the monetary system with an increased focus on the Eucharist as a commodity and an emphasis on the insidious spread of commercialism into all aspects of medieval life. In the predella, for example, the Host does not simply behave like money; it looks like it too. Fourteenth-century illustrations of the miracle tale (see the cover of this volume for an example) invariably portray the Host as large, almost fist-sized, with a stamp of a cross on it to define it uncatégorically as a consecrated Host. In Uccello's rendition, however, the Host is small and coin-sized. It lightly balances on the woman's fingertips, and it displays no cross. Stripped of its usual eucharistic markers, the Host in this scene re-presents a coin, about to be exchanged for other coins. Uccello's deletion of any explanatory framework for the woman's presence in the Jew's shop further emphasizes the one-to-one relationship between the Host and currency. In *Un Miracolo del Corpo di Cristo*, an Italian sacred drama from which Uccello drew, the Christian woman's husband pawns her gown in order to gamble. The woman needs the gown to wear to Easter services, and the Jew suggests that she give him a Host, allaying her fears by telling her falsely that his sick son needs it; he also assures her that he and his family will soon be baptized.¹⁹ The woman is thus exonerated for her actions since she gave the Host in good faith to retrieve a gown which she herself did not pawn. However, the predella offers no such exoneration, deleting both the garment and any scene explaining why the woman is in the Jew's shop. Without the garment as a visual or commercial intermediary, the Host is directly linked to money; the Host buys money just as money buys the Host. In addition, the

¹⁸Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 51.

¹⁹Lavin, 5.

scene leaves only the money on the table as the sole visible motive for the exchange.²⁰

The *Play of the Sacrament* also rereads *The Miracle de la Sainte Hostie* through the lens of fifteenth-century commerce, and like the predella, its emendations underscore the pervasiveness of fifteenth-century mercantilism.²¹ Two merchants, who exist only within the realm of commerce, replace the Jewish usurer and the Christian woman of the tale's original version. They have no families and live surrounded instead by business associates, thus emphasizing both their independent agency and their myopic focus on commerce. The play further highlights the pervasiveness of fifteenth-century commerce by showing that Aristorius and Jonathas's mercantilism is not confined to a single transaction of a Host but spreads out across the world. Aristorius recites an alphabetical inventory of places in which he does business, from "Antyoche and Alamyn," to "Hamborowhe and Holand," to "Taryfe and Turkey" (96-115), to show the extent of his commercial reach. Jonathas's catalogue of spices and stones from "amatystic" to "gynger grene" (161-188) similarly indicates his trade's global expanse. Fifteenth-century mercantilism, the play suggests by these lists of exotic places and objects, knows no geographic bounds.

While one critic has described the *Play of the Sacrament* as portraying in microcosm late medieval civic life in its myriad functions,²² I would argue rather that the play portrays a mercantile system that reshapes every aspect of medieval life in its own image and replaces all other modes of thinking with economic ones. Most evidently, commerce has contaminated religion. Aristorius trades all over the world, and he also trades on the Church's very doorstep. He boasts that "in Rome to Seynt Petyrs temple / I am knowen certainly for bying and sellyng" (107-8). He has Isodyr the presbyter on his payroll and, as noted, he looks at the Host as a means of making a profit

²⁰The predella itself emerges out of an exchange—a contract between Uccello and Urbino's confraternity of Corpus Domini for a new painting for the high altar of the Church (Lavin 1-2). The commercial exchange which motivates the painting's very existence provides a suggestive framework for Uccello's exploration of exchange within the painting itself.

²¹East Anglia was one of the wealthiest areas in England, and Victor Scherb persuasively argues that the play reflects the disarray caused by this wealth. Victor I. Scherb, "Violence and the Social Body in the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*" in *Violence in Drama*, ed. James Redmond (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991), 73-4.

²²William Tydeman, "Scenic Structures: The Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*," in *English Medieval Theatre 1400-1500* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), 55.

rather than as a religious symbol. The play thus depicts commerce replacing religious modes of thought with economic ones. Indeed, despite the fact that Jonathas is Jewish and Aristorius is Christian, the distinctions between the two are negligible. Jonathas is not portrayed in a stereotypically anti-Semitic way, as in earlier Continental versions of the tale, but rather as a quintessential merchant, just like Aristorius.²³ The two characters are almost identical in language and in action. For example, Aristorius describes himself as “a merchant most myght thereof my tale ys told, / In Eraclea ys non suche” (85-6). Jonathas describes himself in the play’s following scene with the same language, saying “In Eraclea ys noon so moche of myght” (194). Their alphabetical, alliterative advertisements of their commercial success underscore their similarity. The play thus suggests that the category of merchant subsumes all religious distinctions and modes of thought within its own economy of representation.

In fact, no systems of thought or social categories are impervious to commerce, the play insists. Like religious boundaries, class boundaries fall in the face of commerce. Aristorius thinks of himself on par with nobility, declaring that he is a merchant of “royall araye” (90) and a “lordis pere” (165). In addition, the scene with Brundyche and Colle suggests another dimension of medieval life which commerce subsumes. These two characters, while representing the “medical” aspect of civic life are, in fact, simply another type of merchant, albeit unsuccessful.²⁴ Their language revolves around money. Colle has only contempt for Brundyche’s lack of financial (and intellectual) resources; he lets the audience know that his master is a “man off all syence, / But off thryfte—I may with yow dyspence!” (529-30) and that “In euery tauerne he ys detter” (543). Colle also

²³There were very few Jews in England in the late fifteenth century as most of them had been expelled centuries before. Scherb argues that the Jew as a type thus made a conveniently distant figure with which to explore various social anxieties. Victor I. Scherb, “The Earthly and Divine Physicians: *Christus Medicus* in the Croxton Play of the Sacrament,” in *The Body and the Text: Comparative Essays in Literature and Medicine*, eds. Bruce Clarke and Wendell Aycock (Lubbock: Texas Tech. Univ. Press, 1990), 163-4. Cecilia Cutts interprets Jonathas as a Lollard, and the play as an expression of anti-Lollard sentiment. Cecilia Cutts, “The Croxton Play: An Anti-Lollard Piece,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 5 (1944): 45-60.

²⁴Critics have an uncomfortable time with this scene because its tonal register seems to differ from the rest of the play. Sister Nicholas Maltman (“Meaning and Art in the Croxton Play of the Sacrament,” *English Literary History* 41 [1974]: 154) and Scherb read the scene as a juxtaposition of the false physician to *Christus Medicus*. Nichols ignores the scene entirely, and Cutts views it as an interpolation.

berates Brundyche that "On wydowes, maydese and wy[v]se / Yowr connyng yow haue nyhe spent" (595-6). Like the merchants, Colle and Brundyche's language is saturated with commercial terms, and moreover, both characters are looking for a way to make a profit. Colle lists his own advertisement and inventory of diseases and sicknesses the doctor can cure, and he tries to "sell" the doctor's reputation to the Jews, declaring that "men that be masters of scyens be profytable" (647). By incorporating these two characters into the plot, the play once again depicts the insidious power of commerce to infect whatever it touches and turn all life into a repeating expression of its own economy.²⁵

We begin to see, therefore, how the play and the predella amend the 1290 tale in ways that demonstrate a pervasive unease about late medieval economic structures. The two narratives also emerge from a climate of concern about changes in the Eucharist's own meaning, however. In the fifteenth century, popular perceptions of the Eucharist increasingly diverged from Church doctrine, as secular and religious groups invested the Host with a variety of meanings. For example, town patricians used the Host, and more particularly the Host processions, to demarcate spheres of influence or to trace village boundaries.²⁶ Male and female mystics used the Host as a way to access a personal, affective religious experience, often focusing on their identification with Christ's suffering body.²⁷ While many of these popular beliefs about the Host originated before the fifteenth century, the variety of Eucharist interpretations became so extensive and so threatening to the Church's project of promoting a hegemonic view of the Eucharist that in the mid-fifteenth century the "tendency to withdraw, reclaim, shield and reappropriate the eucharist is everywhere in evidence, as the Church sensed that its perfect symbol of meditation became too charged and overdetermined with conflicting meanings."²⁸ The Church's concern about losing control of the Eucharist's meaning thus forms a general backdrop for the play and predella, along with the unease about late medieval commercialism.

²⁵Colle and Brundyche belong to the folk play tradition of the rural quack and his savvy sidekick. Scherb, "Earthly and Divine Physicians," 162-3.

²⁶Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 267.

²⁷Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1987), esp. 150-88; Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 316-9.

²⁸Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 59.

Yet these concurrent anxieties about commercial and eucharistic meanings themselves merge in the play and the predella and interact with each other in complex ways. For the two narratives explore a particular popular conception of the Host and of religion which itself relies on an economic model of exchange. In the *Play of the Sacrament*, as I have noted, Aristorius perceives the Host as a profit-making commodity. But the play dramatizes more generally the slippage between religious and economic signifying systems, for Aristorius conceives of religion as a whole as a profit-based system, in which God himself acts as an agent of exchange. Aristorius declares: "No man in thys world may weld more rychesse; / All I thank God of hys grace, for he yt me sent" (117-8). Jonathas similarly thanks his God for his wealth: "For I thanke the hayly that hast sent / Gold, syluer & presyous stonys, / & abunddance of spycis thou has me lent" (157-9). Aristorius and Jonathas, in effect, conflate commerce and religion, not simply by buying or selling religious icons, but by interpreting religion itself as a kind of commercial economy.

Indeed, an economic language and a model of exchange underlie not only these two art works but much late medieval popular discussion of the workings of the Host and of the religious system. In *Revelations of Divine Love*, Julian of Norwich describes religion as a type of gift economy. She writes, "Prayer onyth the soule to God...and therfore he steryth us to prayen that that likyth hym to don; for which prayors and gode will that he wil have of his gyft he wil reward us and gevyn us endless mede."²⁹ While Julian conceives of the eternal "mede" as a "gyft," to receive this gift, people must pray and show good will.³⁰ Episcopus, the bishop in the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*, echoes Julian in the play's last speech when he declares to the converted merchants and to the audience, "God Omnyptent, euermore looke ye serue / With deuocion and prayre whyll that ye may; / Dowt yt not he wyll yow perserue / For eche good prayer that ye sey to hys pay" (988-91). Again we see the idea that if one gives prayers and devotion to God, one will receive eternal preservation in return.

²⁹Julian of Norwich, *A Revelation of Love*, ed. Marion Glascoe (Exeter: Exeter Univ. Press, 1976), 45.

³⁰Mauss discusses the fallacy that gifts are free. He argues that any gift engages the recipient in an obligatory return of another gift which, in turn, requires its own recognition. See esp. 3-6.

Similarly, the Host was popularly perceived to give salvation in return for a sincere belief in it as the body of Christ. Miri Rubin writes of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries:

Since so much that was tangible could be gained from the mass and especially at the moment of elevation, that moment of gazing was marked with the stamp of an exchange. Petitions and requests were made at the elevation in a pandemonium of vernacular prayers and salutations, exchanging faith and acceptance of the host of God, for a variety of benefits.³¹

Economic terminology pervades the perception of the Host, as Nicholas of Clamanges (c. 1360–1432), a curial official and reformer, disdainfully remarks: “Those who have looked at the body of Christ during the elevation, judge him for that reason to be in their debt and boast it like a great sacrifice.”³² Even more disturbing to the Church’s efforts to control the Host was the popular belief that the Host had magical, generative power even when removed from its sacramental context. Popular belief held that the Eucharist, if planted, could fertilize fields, and if fed to bees, could increase their production of honey; the Host was even thought to make a potent love charm.³³

What underlies these disparate conceptions of the Host, whether sacred or profane, is the understanding of the Host as a pseudo-currency; as long as people believed in it, the Host would give material or spiritual benefits in exchange. By depicting the Host and religion as commerce, the *Play of the Sacrament* thus only pushes to a literal extreme what is already implicit in this popular conception of the Host. By so baldly stating the implicit reliance of religious thinking on economic models, however, the play seeks to expose its inherent danger. For to perceive the Host as part of a literal or even metaphorical profit-making system, and the Host itself as a currency that can lead to material or spiritual profit, automatically allies the Host and religion to an economic signifying system that is open ended and can thus only threaten the Church’s desire to construct a hegemonic meaning for the Eucharist.

By literalizing the parallels between Host and money, religion and commerce, the play and the predella suggest that an economic metaphor of the Host can subsume the Host in a commercial econ-

³¹Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 155.

³²Quoted in Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 155.

³³Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (reprint, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973), 38.

omy. Acknowledging and emphasizing the threat commerce poses to the symbolic construct of the Host, as well as to social boundaries of all kinds, both narratives then strive to separate commerce from religion and to reaffirm the Host solely as a religious symbol. To begin with, both narratives alter the tale's 1290 version, which ends with the Jews' conversion, to emphasize instead the reinstatement of the Host in its religious setting. For example, in the *Play of the Sacrament*, the Host is reinstated on the church altar by a Corpus Christi-like procession of ecclesiasts and repentant Jews; the play thus depicts the Host's rescue from the greedy hands of commerce and its symbolic and literal reentry into the religious system. Similarly, scene three of the predella depicts an elaborate procession of ecclesiasts who are about to replace the Host on the church altar in front of them; in the center of the procession and carrying the *ostensorium* which contains the Host is Pope Boniface VIII himself.³⁴ This scene illustrates the Host's reintegration into the Church's domain, as well as its reauthentication as a religious symbol through the presence of the very Pope who had officially recognized the miracle two hundred years before. Furthermore, in the final scene, Uccello portrays the Host working in its true economy. In front of the altar of scene three, angels drop a consecrated Host into the Christian woman's open mouth to save her soul from the devils who tug at her feet.³⁵ Thus, in the final scene, the Host seems to function as a religious sacrament within the context of its own purified symbolic economy.

The play and predella do not simply seek to reaffirm the Host in its religious economy, however. As if to separate the Host once and for all from any link to a commercial economy, they also aim to suppress commerce itself. In the predella, the Jew who buys the Host is burned, along with his entire family. This scene is the only documented version in which the Jew's wife and children are executed, and it reflects increased anti-Semitism in much of late fifteenth-century Europe.³⁶ But the execution of the Jew and his entire genealogical line also gestures to the metaphoric execution of commerce, present and future, which had so endangered the Host. The threatening mercantilism of the play's opening is similarly removed by the play's end, although not by execution but by conversion and renunciation.

³⁴Lavin, 7.

³⁵Lavin explains this scene as a "visualization of the particular service offered by the Confraternity of Corpus Domini to the community of Urbino" (8).

³⁶Ibid., 8-9.

Aristorius must forswear commerce to redeem himself; Episcopus tells him, "Euer whyll thou lyuest good dedys for to done / And neuermore for to bye nor sell" (834-5). Jonathas and his companions also give up their business and become pilgrims: "Now wyll we walke by contre & cost / Our wyckydy lyuyng for to restore" (964-5).

Yet the efforts that the play and predella make to separate the Host from commerce do not ultimately succeed. In both its miraculous behavior and its function as a sacrament, the Host in the final scenes of the play and the predella continues to behave disturbingly like currency, and the boundaries between commerce and religion continue to bleed into each other. The narratives thus suggest that the Eucharist's signifying system, while it perpetually gestures towards an abandonment of mercantile models, is, by its ontology and its valuation in popular thought, destined to retain its analogy to those models. Indeed, the thematic concentration on the open-endedness and inflationary nature of religious and economic systems that is apparent in the final scenes of the play and the predella is paralleled by further thematic and structural explorations of transgressed boundaries in both pieces of art.

The predella questions the spiritual efficacy and symbolism of the Host even as it seems to reaffirm them. To begin with, we never actually see the Host replaced on the altar in scene three; rather, it is always about to be replaced, and the eternally unfulfilled objective of the procession thus problematizes the Host's reintegration into its religious system. The breakdown of boundaries between inside and outside in this scene further destabilizes the procession's attempt to reaffirm the Host's symbolic integrity. The scene conflates the procession's route from the Jew's house to the church with its objective to place the Host on the altar.³⁷ Thus we see in the background a landscape of trees, hills, scattered houses, and a crescent moon, and in the foreground the procession itself before the altar, which metonymically stands for the Church. Yet Uccello's visual conflation of the two scenes problematizes the Host's relevation as the Church's central symbol. Without any walls to enclose and protect it, the Host is vulnerable to the landscape, and vulnerable to being once again removed from the altar and subjected to a commercial exchange. The altar similarly stands exposed without church walls to protect it. In effect, the visual breakdown of the Church's formal boundaries sug-

³⁷Ibid., 7.

gests the permeability of the Church's own theoretically closed signifying system.

Scene two of the predella also explores the disintegration of formal boundaries. In this scene the Jew cooks the Host in a pan in order to destroy it, thus transgressing the Church's eucharistic doctrine and the Host's own body. Defying immolation, blood from the Host pours out of the pan, across the floor, through the wall, and onto the street. The miracle depicted thus displays the Host's power to penetrate seemingly impermeable boundaries, for the blood runs through the wall, not under the nearby door.³⁸ Yet the scene as a whole underscores the disturbing permeability of all borders. In the street, Christian soldiers, alerted by the Host's blood, stand at the door about to break it down. Uccello also explores the idea of broken boundaries by not painting a fourth wall to the Jew's house. Instead, we see directly into the room, as though we ourselves displace the wall. Moreover, the room itself seems about to spill over the edge of the canvas without a fourth wall to enclose it. Uccello further plays with containment and borders by sandwiching the soldiers between the wall and the column he uses to separate each scene. Yet, defying his own enclosure of them, he also paints soldiers emerging from behind the column, as if they are coming from the predella's adjacent scene. Both scenes two and three thus depict a variety of permeable and potentially permeable boundaries—from walls to doors, to narrative and artistic frames, to the Host itself—which, moreover, implicate the Jew, the soldiers, the audience, the Host, and Uccello as transgressors. The scenes thus suggest that no boundaries, whether structural or metaphoric, are stable and impermeable, but are instead always subject to penetration.

The final scene of the predella throws open to myriad meanings the signifying system of the Host by depicting an unresolved and endlessly circulating relation between the Host, commerce, and the body. Ostensibly this scene, as I have argued, reestablishes the Host's symbolic integrity by depicting it in its sacramental role. However, this integrity quickly unravels, for the last scene visually reintroduces the troubling connection between Host and money by its composi-

³⁸Kathleen Biddick reads this miraculous flow of blood as "a fantasy of excess that echoes the Scholastic fear of excess in usury." Kathleen Biddick, "Genders, Bodies, Borders: Technologies of the Visible," *Speculum* 68 (1993): 405. This paper first saw light before the publication of Biddick's essay, and I am encouraged and intrigued by how Biddick also focuses on the crossing of borders in the predella.

tional similarity to the predella's first scene. In the first scene, a Jew and Christian stand on opposite sides of a table, linked together in an economic transaction of the Host which the woman elevates in her hand over the table. In scene six, angels and devils stand on opposite sides of the table-like catafalque.³⁹ Like the Jew and the Christian in the first scene, they are trying to determine the value of the body (of the Christian woman) which lies between them. The Host in the final scene is elevated over the woman's open mouth as the determinant of spiritual value, for once it drops into the woman's mouth, it will presumably save her soul from eternal damnation. Yet because the Host acts as a determinant of value, albeit spiritual, and because it is elevated over the table, as in the first scene, we are predetermined by the painting itself to read the last scene metaphorically as an economic transaction of the body between bodies with the Host mediating as spiritual currency. Such a metaphor was common, but because the predella has already exposed the danger of taking the Host for a material commodity, to see it in the final scene so carefully depicted as a spiritual commodity puts the problematic link between the economic and the religious back into circulation. Thus, far from being stabilized as a religious symbol in the last scene, the Host slips restlessly between being a symbol of currency and commodity, of the body, and of salvation, and this slippage is, moreover, eternal. The Host's spiritual redemption of the woman is never shown, but is left forever suspended, just as the woman herself is suspended between life and death and the body of the Host is suspended over the woman's open mouth.⁴⁰

The *Play of the Sacrament*, like the predella, also questions the possibility of containing the Host in a hegemonic system of meaning as a "stable object of perception."⁴¹ The play's Host-miracles explore ideas about inflation and deflation that undermine the Host's reinsertion into its religious economy. In the 1290 tale, the first Host-miracle produces the instant conversion of several Jews, and the second miracle converts the remaining doubters. The Eucharist in the

³⁹Lavin, 7.

⁴⁰Biddick argues that "the debate between the angels and the devils for the soul of the repentant Christian woman...opens up the anxious possibility that the process of pollution could still be set in motion again" (405).

⁴¹Beckwith argues that the play's efforts to incorporate all characters into the body of Christ are compromised precisely because they are theatrical. Beckwith concludes her essay by writing that the play thus "demands us to see the body of Christ as a dramatic process of relation and not a static object of perception" (81).

Play of the Sacrament, however, goes through a seemingly endless succession of miracles before it effects any spiritual change in the Jews. The Host bleeds, Jonathas's hand sticks to the Host and then detaches from his arm, the cauldron water turns bloody, blood runs out of the oven's crevices, and the oven bursts. It is only with the appearance of Christ that the Jews finally convert. The ultimate success of the Christ child's appearance and sorrowful reproaches in converting the Jews indicates the play's emphasis on the efficacy of affective miracles as opposed to the preceding spectacular ones.⁴² More disturbingly, though, the prolonged succession of the miracles and the fact that none works until Christ appears point to the devaluation of the miracles themselves, for in this play it takes multiple miracles to effect a conversion which hitherto had taken only one or two. Thus, the play's very representation of the Host-miracles suggests a displacement of anxiety onto the Host about the workings of money, and indicates as well how foundational an analogy between religious and monetary systems was in understanding and depicting the sacrament of the Eucharist.

The Host miracles also bring into question the Host's transgression of boundaries. The Host bleeds profusely, turning the cauldron water bloody and spilling onto the floor, and its blood is uncontainable. Jason says he will "stoppe" the Host in the oven and Jason says a few lines later, "I stoppe thys ovyn, wythowtyn dowte, / With clay I clome yt uppe ryght fast" (709-10). Yet blood immediately pours out of the oven's corners and the oven bursts apart. The Host transgresses bodily boundaries as well as structural ones, most graphically when it separates Jonathas's hand from his arm. Furthermore, it sends a contagious madness circulating among the Jews when it is stabbed, thus penetrating even mental boundaries.⁴³ Jonathas declares when he stabs the Host, "Yt bledyth as yt were woode, I wys" (493). He quickly feels he is going mad himself, declaring a few lines later, "I may not awoyd yt owt of my hond. / I wylle goo drenche me in a lake. / And in woodnesse I gynne to wake!" (500-2). This madness then penetrates Malchas, who comments when the Host is being boiled, "I am so aferd I am nere woode" (676). The Host's contagious madness, its union with Jonathas's hand—which parodies the sacramental union of Host and communicant⁴⁴—and its unstaunchable

⁴²Nichols, 129.

⁴³Scherb, "Violence," 75.

⁴⁴Beckwith, 75.

bleeding all manifest the Host's miraculous response to the provocation and mistreatment of its own religious and corporeal boundaries.⁴⁵ Yet, in a play that depicts the threat of the commercial system to be its penetration and subsumption of all other systems of thought and meaning, including the Host, the Host's own power of transgression becomes problematic and another source of anxiety. The play thus leaves us with the uncomfortable suggestion that no bounded system is safe; all are subject to penetration by commerce, by the Eucharist, by the playwright himself, or, implicitly, by any other bounded system, and, moreover, all are themselves potentially transgressive.

In effect, the inability or unwillingness of the play and the predella to enclose the Host in a hegemonic construct shows the power of the Eucharist to defy single categories and meanings.⁴⁶ What is so interesting, though, is how their attention to bodies and bodily boundaries highlights the Host's floating signification. The Host is Christ's body, the abundance of blood in the play and the predella reminds us, yet constructed as a body, the Host incorporates within itself the body's endless potential for meaning. As Mary Douglas writes: "The body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened and precarious."⁴⁷ In fact, the body had in the late Middle Ages become overdetermined with conflicted meanings, like the Eucharist itself.⁴⁸ The play and the predella, then, while they seek to recoup the Host's "lost symbolic innocence"⁴⁹ and to redraw its boundaries through containing commerce's threatening signifying system, thus keep returning willy-nilly to the Host's interaction with the body

⁴⁵It is interesting how closely the Eucharist resembles the gift in Mauss's "archaic" societies. Mauss writes that the gift in these societies is thought to "possess a soul" and have an independent will; when not reciprocated or mistreated, it has the power to harm the miscreant recipient. See esp. 3-6.

⁴⁶Miri Rubin, "The Eucharist and the Construction of Medieval Identities" in *Culture and History 1350-1600: Essays on English Communities, Identities and Writing*, ed. David Aers (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1992), 43-6.

⁴⁷Douglas, 155.

⁴⁸The body defined various systems, including politics, cathedrals, and cities—an analogy which, interestingly, also incorporates commerce, for the city was regarded as a body whose walls were its boundaries, whose inner arteries included churches, and whose gates were apertures which allowed for exchange. Peter Travis, "The Social Body of the Dramatic Christ in Medieval England," *Acta: Early Drama to 1600* 13 (1987): 17-23.

⁴⁹Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 349.

and bodily boundaries. Or, rather, the body insists on penetrating any exploration of the Host's signifying system and, in so doing, opens up any such exploration to an ever-expanding corpus of meaning.

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