



Medieval Feminist Forum

A Journal of Gender and Sexuality

VOLUME 58 • NUMBER 1 • SUMMER 2022

Gender, Science, and the Natural World:
Essays on Medieval Literature
from the 2020 Gender and
Medieval Studies Conference



University Press | Kalamazoo
MIEVEAL INSTITUTE PUBLICATIONS
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Medieval Feminist Forum, e-issn 2151-6073
<https://doi.org/10.32773/LBCI8319>

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Being the Bigger Ram: Arable vs Pastoral Masculinities in the Towneley *Mactacio Abel*

Daisy E. Black

Abstract: This article addresses the construction of rural masculine identities through a study of the Towneley manuscript play *Mactacio Abel* (*The Killing of Abel*) and the relationships the play stages between human, animal, and land. It argues that the *Mactacio Abel* places pastoral and arable agricultural labor in competition through the play's two brothers, and that this competition takes the form of a gendered attack on the masculinity of each. The article begins with Cain's arable farming and how the character's antagonistic relationship with the earth hints at his failures as laborer and as a man. It examines Cain's interactions with Abel and the way the brothers' different experiences of farming inform their relationships with God, before turning attention to Cain's vicious attack on his brother's masculinity and occupation through scatological language and hints that Abel is committing bestiality with his sheep. Finally, the article examines the play's blurring of distinctions between food and kin, and human and animal meat. Broadening the current critical focus on the intersection of urban drama and identity, this study shows that the *Mactacio Abel* stresses contemporary anxieties about rural performances of masculinity and labor.

Keywords: Abel, agriculture, Cain, drama, farming, gender, Mactacio, masculinity, medieval, Towneley

In early drama, the production labor involved in creating the symbolic items central to Christian devotion—the wheat required to make the bread of the Eucharist, the wood hammered and bored to make a cross, and the fine wool used for Christ's shroud—often becomes

visible through the activities of sinful characters. Moreover, the more difficult these characters seem to find their work, the more likely they are to be shown to be morally wavering or deficient. In the York cycle, the clumsy, inept work of York's carpenters, nailers, and pinners becomes the focus of the *Crucifixion* pageant, and the labor of the Chester and Towneley Noah's wives as they turn raw wool into valuable spun yarn jeopardizes their salvation as they nearly miss the boat.¹ The deterioration of the relationship between dramatic personae and their labor can also be used to stage a gradual moral failing or fall. In *Mankind*, for example, the central character's increasing struggle with his spade against a hostile, stony earth is followed by his fall into sin.²

The dramatic potential of labor was not only realized in the staging of struggle between laborers and their work, but also in conflicts or contests established between kinds of occupation. The urban labor underpinning late medieval civic drama, and the good-natured (and less good-natured) competition it produced between guilds has recently been the focus of several important works, particularly Christina Fitzgerald's work on masculinity and guild culture and Nicole R. Rice and Margaret Aziza Pappano's study of artisan identities in large civic centers such as York.³ This article turns its attention to how forms of

1 See Richard Beadle, ed., "The Crucifixion," in *The York Plays* (London: Edward Arnold Publishers, 1982), 315–23; R. M. Lumiansky and David Mills, eds., "The Thirde Pageante of Noyes Fludd," in *The Chester Mystery Cycle*, EETS, s.s., 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 42–56; and George England and Alfred W. Pollard, eds., "Noah and the Ark," in *The Towneley Plays*, EETS, e.s., LXXI (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1897; repr. 1966), 23–40.

2 See Kathleen M. Ashley and Gerald NeCastro, eds., *Mankind* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2010), ll. 529–54. The difficulty of Mankind's labor is due to diabolical influence: Titivillus places a board under Mankind's spade to make his digging impossible, mixes his seed with weeds, and ends by stealing his spade and corn. These methods prove more effective at prompting Mankind's fall into sin than the temptations initially offered by the vices. No doubt anyone who has spent the past year teaching via the Titivillan medium of Zoom will appreciate the spiritual vulnerability a worker feels when finding their usual labor suddenly harder than usual.

3 See C. M. Fitzgerald, *The Drama of Masculinity and Medieval English Guild Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) and Nicole R. Rice and Margaret Aziza Pappano, *The Civic Cycles: Artisan Drama and Identity in Premod-*

professional competition were also used to construct rural masculine identities through a study of the Towneley *Mactacio Abel* (*The Killing of Abel*) and the relationships the play stages between human, animal, and land. Building on my previous work for this journal on the trade masculinities at play in urban drama, this article argues that the *Mactacio Abel* places pastoral and arable agricultural labor in competition through the play's two brothers.⁴ This competition takes the form of a gendered attack on the masculinity of each. The article begins with Cain's arable farming and how the character's antagonistic relationship with the earth hints at his failures as laborer and as a man. It examines Cain's interactions with Abel and the way the brothers' different experiences of farming inform their relationships with God, before turning attention to Cain's vicious attack on his brother's masculinity and occupation through scatological language and his hints that Abel is committing bestiality with his sheep. Finally, the article examines the play's blurring of distinctions between food and kin, and human and animal meat. In doing so, it draws on recent works by Tison Pugh and Eric Wade about the fluidity and fragility of performances of gender and race in these plays.⁵ It claims the Towneley *Mactacio Abel* stresses contemporary anxieties about how closely the performance of a job was related to performances of masculinity.

ern England (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015). Several articles have also made specific trade identities their focus, most recently Leanne Groeneveld, "The York Bakers and Their Play of the Last Supper," *Early Theatre* 22, no. 1 (2019): 37–70.

⁴ Daisy Black, "'Nayles Large and Lang': Masculine Identity and the Anachronic Object in the York Crucifixion Play," *Medieval Feminist Forum* 50, no. 2 (2015): 85–104.

⁵ See Tison Pugh, *On the Queerness of Early English Drama: Sex in the Subjunctive* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021), 39 on "the arbitrariness of the human body as a theatrical signifier," and Erik Wade on the fragility of racial signifiers in East Anglian performance in "Ower Felaws Blake: Blackface, Race, and Muslim Conversion in the Digby *Mary Magdalene*," *Exemplaria* 31, no. 1 (2019): 22–45.

THE "GOOD" YEOMAN

All medieval dramatic villains are somewhat incompetent, but very few of them own it. While Lucifer, Herod, Pilate, Annas, and Caiaphas are all terrible at their jobs, their boastful speeches lay claim to acts and powers well beyond their real capabilities.⁶ The Cain of the Towneley *Mactacio Abel* is therefore unusual among his villainous counterparts in that he makes no secret of the fact he finds his labor difficult. The play begins conventionally enough, with a lackey exhorting the audience to be quiet and threatening them. The servant boy then gives somewhat lukewarm praise of his master, whom he introduces as a "good yeoman."⁷ Margaret Rogerson has argued that this introduction of Cain as a yeoman, a free agricultural laborer, "means [in this context] simply an ordinary man, a small landholder, who cultivates his own fields."⁸ The boy also aligns Cain's occupation with that of certain men in the audience. He associates Cain within those watching (and reading) this play, claiming "Full well ye all hym ken" (you all know him full well), before suggesting members of the audience share Cain's occupation, "som of you ar his men" (some of you are his men).⁹ While this declaration

6 On the tyrant's boast and the sin of pride, see David Staines, "To Out-Herod Herod: The Development of a Dramatic Character," *Comparative Drama* 10 (1976): 29–53; Rosalie M. O'Connell, "Sovereignty through Speech in the Corpus Christi Mystery Plays," *Renascence* 33, no. 2 (1981): 117–28; Clare Wright, "Acoustic Tyranny: Metre, Alliteration and Voice in *Christ before Herod*," *Medieval English Theatre* 34 (2012): 3–29; and Daisy Black, "Commanding Un-Empty Space: Silence, Stillness and Scopic Authority in the York *Christ before Herod*," in *Gender: Places, Spaces and Thresholds*, ed. Victoria Blud, Diane Heath, and Einat Klafter (London: Institute of Historical Research, 2019), 237–50.

7 Garrett P. J. Epp, ed., "The Killing of Abel," in *The Towneley Plays* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2018), l. 15, <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/epp-the-killing-of-abel>.

8 Margaret Rogerson, "The Medieval Plough Team on Stage: Wordplay and Reality in the Towneley *Mactatio Abel*," *Comparative Drama* 28, no. 2 (1994): 182–200, at 186. On Cain as a fifteenth-century agricultural laborer, see also Dorrel T. Hanks, "The *Mactatio Abel* and the Wakefield Cycle: A Study in Context," *Southern Quarterly* 16, no. 1 (1977): 47–57.

9 Epp, ed., "The Killing of Abel," ll. 16 and 20. The modern translation is my own, aided by Epp's edition.

hints at least some of the play's early audience members were involved in arable farming, the boy is also insulting these audience members. In situating them as Cain's employees, or "men," the boy is also suggesting they are of his disposition. This second reading is supported when he goes on to address the audience members as "harlottys" (harlots), thereby casting them as being, like Cain, part of a ribald company and, by extension, suggesting the occupation of an arable yeoman is equally disreputable.¹⁰ While this was not always the case in a literary tradition in which the Ploughman was also used as an idealized spiritual exemplar, it is consistent with other plays compiled in the Towneley manuscript, most notably the *Second Shepherds' Play*, in which a poorly disguised Mak adopts the role of yeoman, "Ich be a yoman, I tell you, of the kyng" (I am a yeoman, I tell you, of the king), and uses this false status to try to bully the shepherds.¹¹ In the case of the *Mactacio Abel*, the boy's description of this yeoman as "good" compounds the idea of yeomen as ruffians. When Cain enters, it rapidly becomes clear that he is neither morally "good" nor good at his work. Moreover, Cain's portrayal of imperfect arable labor is set against the foil of his more virtuous brother's pastoral labor. The brother's rivalry is therefore extended to a rivalry of rural occupations.

Despite the fact they are compiled from a number of sources, several of the plays collected in the Towneley manuscript demonstrate an interest in agricultural economy, labor, and poverty that is less prominent in the city-based pageants.¹² Robert S. Sturges recently

10 Epp, ed., "The Killing of Abel," l. 22. See also the definition of "harlot" in the *Middle English Dictionary*, which defines the word as "(a) Of persons: knavish, villainous, base; (b) of language: ribald, obscene." Given the language and behavior of Cain in this play, this insult seems to embrace both possible definitions. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED20004>.

11 See Garrett P. J. Epp, ed., "The Shepherds (2)," in *The Towneley Plays* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2018), l. 291, <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/epp-the-killing-of-abel>. On the Ploughman as a spiritual exemplar, see James H. Morey, "Plows, Laws, and Sanctuary in Medieval England and in the Wakefield *Mactacio Abel*," *Studies in Philology* 95, no. 1 (1998): 41–55, at 41.

12 Gareth Epp gives an excellent summary of the most recent debates concerning the origins, compilation, and purposes of the plays contained in what

identified a preoccupation in this collection with issues of class, poverty, and starvation in rural communities, whose major sources of sustenance and wealth came from farming. He notes that the *Mactacio Abel* is the first play in which these themes come to the fore: “the sympathetic and class-conscious portrayal of peasant poverty begins with the first play in the cycle usually attributed to the Wakefield Master, the *Mactacio Abel*, or *Killing of Abel*, in which Cain plays a leading role.”¹³ It is interesting that Sturges picks up on Cain as a leading role in this play’s focus on rural poverty, although the play itself seems to conservatively place at least some of the responsibility for Cain’s poverty onto the farmer, suggesting Cain struggles to make a living because he is not skilled at his job. Cain makes a spectacular, noisy entrance, driving what appears to be a mixed plough team of horses and cattle—all while cursing at the animals’ slowness:

Io forth, Greynhorne, and war oute, Gryme!
 Drawes on, God gif you ill to tyme.
 Ye stand as ye were fallen in swyme!
 What, will ye no forther, mare?¹⁴

(Go forth, Greyhorn, and look out, Gryme! / Pull on, God give you ill faring / Youstandasifyouwerefalleninaswoon! / What, will you [go] no further, mare?)

is now known as the Towneley manuscript in Garrett P. J. Epp, ed., “The Towneley Plays: Introduction,” in *The Towneley Plays* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2018), <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/epp-the-towneley-plays-introduction>. See also Peter Happé, *The Towneley Cycle: Unity and Diversity* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007), 2–4; Barbara Palmer, “Recycling ‘The Wakefield Cycle’: The Records,” *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama* 4, no. 1 (2002): 88–130; Peter Meredith, “The Towneley Cycle,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. Richard Beadle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 134–62; and Murray McGillivray, “The Towneley Manuscript and Performance: Tudor Recycling?,” in *Editing, Performance, Texts: New Practices in Medieval and Early Modern English Drama*, ed. Jacqueline Jenkins and Julie Sanders (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 64.

13 Robert S. Sturges, *The Circulation of Power in Medieval Biblical Drama: Theaters of Authority* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 85.

14 Epp, ed., “The Killing of Abel,” ll. 25–28.

There has been much debate over whether Cain's team of eight mixed oxen and horses were physically present in this scene, though the common consensus seems to be that they were imaginary.¹⁵ This speech figures Cain's labor as a battle between him and his animals as he seeks to prepare the earth for planting. Moreover, it suggests that these animals have the upper hand; a performance which would have been even more comic if these were animals of imagination and air. The multiple references to and physical interactions with the plough suggests that it, at least, was physically realized as a stage property. At the end of the play, for example, Cain commands his boy "take yond plough" (l. 454) (take yonder plough) and drive it off stage. This suggests the plough remains present throughout Cain's murder of Abel: acting as witness to Cain's sin and as a reminder of his ongoing failure to productively perform as an arable farmer.

The reason for the animals' slowness is soon revealed. Cain's boy claims he has been putting the animal's food "behind their ars" (behind their arse) in the stables and tied their heads next to a hay-rack full of stones.¹⁶ The animals are hungry. When offered food, the team start to work more quickly. The boy's taunting reversal of the creatures' arses and mouths here exposes another area of Cain's incompetence as a yeoman; not only does he not do good work himself, he also fails to extract good work from his subordinate. From the play's beginning, the character is therefore shown to have an antagonistic relationship with everything and everyone: with his servant boy, his animals, and the land itself. This, if a ploughing pun is permitted, prepares the ground for Cain's conflict with Abel.

Cain's lack of authority and competence also tells us something about his social and financial success as a working man. James H. Morey has argued that plough ownership conferred both status and a measure of security on its owner, noting that "for the Wakefield Master, one's social and legal status depends on the control one has over a plow."¹⁷ Morey makes a convincing case for God's marking of Cain merging divine sanctuary with the political sanctuary afforded to medieval

15 See Rogerson, "The Medieval Plough Team on Stage," 182–84 and Sturges, *The Circulation of Power*, 109.

16 Epp, ed., "The Killing of Abel," l. 47.

17 James H. Morey, "Plows, Laws, and Sanctuary in Medieval England and in the Wakefield *Mactacio Abel*," *Studies in Philology* 95, no. 1 (1998): 41–55, at 42, 50.

plough-bearers. Yet Cain's chaotic entrance seems to suggest that, while he may be a plough owner, he still has very little control, and is barely managing to perform his role as a yeoman. This lack of control may have a practical and theological underpinning. If Adam's symbol (and indeed, Mankind's symbol) is the spade, then it raises the question about whether the plough represents a technological advancement since Eden, or whether it represents a form of "cheating." Perhaps Cain is bad at ploughing because the technology is still very new and his animals untrained. However, when read in a medieval context, there is also a metatheatrical point being made out of Cain's noisy and abusive entrance. Cain's cursing of the plough and its animals inverts the performance traditions surrounding Plough Monday, which involved the blessing and decoration of the plough, and were often accompanied by processions, dances, and other performances.¹⁸ In blaspheming, rather than blessing the plough, Cain's later complaints about his land's unproductivity are partially explained: he has failed in his job as a plough performer and his plough is unblessed.

Incompetent ploughing may also wryly suggest Cain's failure in other areas. The use of the action of "ploughing" or "tilling" as a metaphor for sexual activity was well-established by this period. For example, the protagonist of the thirteenth-century fabliau *Dame Sirith* instructs a clerk in making thorough use of the women she has procured for him through trickery: "And loke that thou hire tille, / And strek out hir thes" (and look that you till her, / and stretch out her thighs).¹⁹ In *Dame Sirith*, this agricultural metaphor fits the tone of the story. The narrative concerns a woman coerced into sex, at least in part because of her pretensions to the upper-class registers of courtly love and benevolence.²⁰ However, Dame Sirith's use of "tille," as opposed to

18 See Morey, "Plows, Laws and Sanctuary," 52–53 and Tom Pettitt and Peter Meredith, "The Later Bassingham Plough Play: Con-Textualizing a New Text," *Folk Music Journal* 11, no. 4 (2019): 44–75. Thank you to Pamela King for bringing this point to my attention.

19 Eve Salisbury, ed., "Dame Sirith," in *The Trials and Joys of Marriage* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2002), ll. 440–41, <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/salisbury-trials-and-joys-of-marriage>.

20 On the class satire of *Dame Sirith*, see Gabriel Ford, "'Wose is onwise': *Dame Sirith* in Context," *Studies in Philology* 114, no. 2 (2017): 223–44, at 233: "Her effusive welcomes are steeped in class-based fictional postures that distinguish her social reality from her performed persona."

the “pricking” (riding) favored by Chaucer for this same activity adds a further sting to this parody of courtly love, setting the sexual act in an agricultural register rather than in the chivalric, horse-riding register of higher-class characters. Returning to the *Mactacio Abel*, Cain’s struggle to “till” therefore hints that he fails to perform sexually, too. As we later hear, his attempts at sowing seed have been similarly ineffective, suggesting the earth is a kind of womb that Cain is unable to cultivate. This is not the first time in the Towneley manuscript that a dramatic character’s failure at their occupation is linked to a failure to perform sexually or to bear children. As I have argued concerning the *Second Shepherds’ Play*, Mak’s claims to many children prove as fictional as his claims about being a “yeoman.”²¹ In the case of *Mactacio Abel*, Cain’s failure to cultivate also carries a hint of cuckoldry: he may till, but as we see later in his complaint to Abel, the ground springs up weeds he did not sow himself. According to Thomas Tusser’s 1570s editions of *Fiue Hundred Points of Good Husbandrie*, weeds are the consequence of the original seed being sown too thinly:

Sée corne sowen in,
too thick nor too thin.
For want of séede,
land yéeldeth wéede.”

(See corn sown in / neither too thick nor too thin / for lack of
seed, / the land yields weeds.)²²

Weeds make a further appearance in Cain’s debate with Abel about tithing. Claiming he does not owe God a tithe because God has given him “nought bot soro and wo” (nothing but sorrow and woe),²³ Cain argues:

21 Daisy Black, *Play Time: Gender, Anti-Semitism and Temporality in Medieval Biblical Drama* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 131–32.

22 See Thomas Tusser, *Fiue Hundred Points of Good Husbandrie*, ed. W. Payne and Sidney J. Herrtage (Project Gutenberg, 2016), 31, ll. 29–33, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/51764/51764-h/51764-h.htm#September>.

23 Epp, ed., “The Killing of Abel,” l. 98.

At yere tyme, I sew fayre corn,
 Yit was it sich when it was shorne.
 Thystyls and brerys, yei, grete plenté,
 And all kyn wedys that might be.²⁴

(In the proper season, I sowed fair corn, / yet was it such when it was harvested. / Thistles and briars, yes, in great plenty, / And all sorts of weeds that might be.)

Cain claims he sowed good corn, but by the harvest found it spread with thistles, briars, and weeds. There is a sense here that the poorness of Cain's crop is linked to a failure of masculinity. He compares his crop to that of other farmers: "When all mens corn was fayre in feld / Then was myne not worth a neld" (when all [other] men's corn was fair in [the] field, / then was mine not worth a needle).²⁵ Given Cain's stinginess in tithing, it seems sensible to assume that he is being characterized as a miserly farmer who has spread his seed too thinly. The thinness of Cain's "seed" has therefore left the soil open to plants of other kinds.

Part of Cain's struggle to do his job is of course due to the original curse of his father, Adam, in Genesis 3: "Cursed is the earth in thy work; with labor and toil shalt thou eat thereof all the days of thy life. Thorns and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herbs of the earth. In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread till thou return to the earth, out of which thou wast taken: for dust thou art, and into dust thou shalt return."²⁶ This passage forms the central theme of Cain's excuses to his brother about why he does not want to pay his tithe. God's curse, referenced in the Towneley Cain's complaint about the thistles and briars, figures postlapsarian man's relationship with the earth as antagonistic. Yet Cain's complaint that other men do not seem to suffer as badly from this curse as he does suggests he has an unusually unproductive relationship with the land. In a currently unpublished paper, Gillian Redfern draws attention to Cain's poverty and its relation to poor soil in the line which tells us Cain "sup-pys no coyle bot cold" (eats only cold cabbage).²⁷ Redfern identifies a

²⁴ Epp, ed., "The Killing of Abel," ll. 202–5.

²⁵ Epp, ed., "The Killing of Abel," ll. 124–25.

²⁶ Genesis 3:17–19. All Bible quotations are taken from the Douay-Rheims Catholic Bible. www.drbo.org.

²⁷ Epp, ed., "The Killing of Abel," l. 426.

potential double meaning in this line, with the word “coyle” meaning both kale (cabbage), and coal: “This would give the sense that, because of his spiritual or financial poverty—or a combination of both—Cain ingests only cold coal.”²⁸ Both of these possible meanings look back to Adam’s curse. Cain’s eating of kale identifies him with the bitter “herbs of the earth.” However, “coal,” a dusty substance taken from the earth, recalls the second part of the curse: “dust thou art.” It suggests barrenness, with Cain’s dusty earth producing, not life-nourishing “herbs,” but the destruction of the topsoil from mining. This might explain why the land yields poorly, and why Cain does not produce enough to eat. Product and process of his agriculture are therefore associated with hard work for poor reward, and figure this as a God-ordained state.

Cain’s failures of masculinity and agriculture are compounded by the odd timing of his ploughing. As Abel’s entrance makes clear, it is the time of year they should be offering their tithes, which, in rural areas, tended to be collected during or soon after harvest.²⁹ Cain, however, has already progressed to ploughing, which would usually have been completed in September after the summer harvest was gathered, and again in the early spring.³⁰ In ploughing before tithing, Cain, like his boy, is completing his tasks “behind the ars”—that is, backwards. The untimeliness of Cain’s labor underlines the fact that he has no intention of presenting his tithe to God, and audiences used to the rhythms of the agricultural and spiritual year would have recognized this. The premature ploughing also produces a sinister foreshadowing of what is to come: at the end of the play, the newly ploughed earth is ready to receive, not seed, but Abel’s body. Producing and receiving dust, the generative, womb-like earth therefore becomes a grave. If the weeds Cain complains of carry associations of cuckoldry, this replacement

28 Gillian Redfern, “The Yorkshire Moors: They Are What They Eat,” paper presented at the Medieval English Theatre Meeting, The University of Fribourg, Fribourg, 12–13 April 2019, 4. Thank you to Gillian Redfern for allowing me to cite her work here.

29 Ben Dodds, “Managing Tithes in the Late Middle Ages,” *The Agricultural History Review* 53, no. 2 (2005): 125–40.

30 Ploughing appears under the tasks for “September” in Tusser, *Fiue Hundred Points of Good Husbandrie*, 223: “Threshe sede and goe fanne, for the plough may not lye, September doth bid, to be sowing of rye.”

of plant life—whether “fayre corn” or weeds—with a human’s grave reverses the fertility of the ground.³¹

Meanwhile, the timing of the ploughing acts as an arable joke at Cain’s expense. The farmer is preparing the soil for next year’s crop, unaware that the events that follow will result in him becoming an exile. He will never return to plant and harvest. While the nomadic lifestyle is suited to pastoral agriculture, constant movement precludes the intimate relationship with and knowledge of a specific piece of land involved in crop farming. When he turns the soil into a grave, Cain loses all his labor. In a chapter on the Towneley shepherds’ plays, Pamela King identifies the social tensions provoked by fifteenth-century dispossessions from land due to enclosures and evictions: “[E]nclosure involving the conversion of arable land to permanent grazings for sheep was identified as a major social evil, depopulating and pauperizing the countryside.”³² As King shows in relation to the shepherds’ plays, this conversion of the land for grazing was bad for both family-scale pastoral and arable farmers. However, the large-scale turn-over of crop-growing land to sheep farming perhaps provides another possible reason why the Towneley *The Killing of Abel* stages the brothers’ conflict as a conflict of occupations. This is consistent with arguments made by Martin Stevens, Lisa Kiser, and Andrew Galloway regarding evidence of social unrest and resentment caused by “the wool economy’s disruption of agrarian labor” in the farming-centered plays of the Towneley manuscript.³³ God’s apparent preference for Abel’s sheep farming over Cain’s crops therefore shadows the actions of earthly landowners, with their systemic privileging of the lucrative wool trade

31 Epp, ed., “The Killing of Abel,” l. 202.

32 Thanks to Pamela King for bringing these sources to my attention and for sharing an early version of this chapter before its publication. See Pamela King, “The ‘Wakefield Master’ Revisited,” in *Performance, Ceremony, and Display in Late Medieval England: Proceedings of the 2018 Harlaxton Symposium*, ed. Julia Boffey (Donington: Shaun Tyas, 2020), 110–28, at 121.

33 See Andrew Galloway, “Wool-Gathering: Magical Economies in the *Second Shepherds’ Play*,” *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 32 (2019): 49–68, at 50; Martin Stevens, *Four Middle English Mystery Cycles: Textual, Contextual, and Critical Interpretations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 129–30; Lisa J. Kiser, “Mak’s Heirs: Sheep and Humans in the Pastoral Ecology of the Towneley First and Second Shepherds’ Plays,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 108 (2009): 336–59.

at the expense of growing food. If the Towneley Cain is read both within the context of God's edict in Genesis and in a sixteenth-century context, he is therefore triply exiled: by God from Eden's productive soil; from the enclosed medieval land; and, by the end of the play, from his own farm. If the possession of a plough marks status, Cain's plough becomes essentially useless—a false signifier—at the moment of his exile.

COMPETITIVE JOBS

Although Cain is wrong about many things, he is not wrong about the hardships of agricultural labor. While the two Towneley shepherds' plays give voice to contemporary concerns about the harshness and exploitation of pastoral labor, the *Mactacio Abel* performs an equivalent catalogue of the suffering involved in arable farming. Cain complains of poverty, starvation, and his fear of becoming a beggar. The fact crop farming is not easy is emphasized across several plays. The difficulty of planting and growing frames Mankind's fall, when Titivillus makes the ground hard by placing a board under it, and steals Mankind's seed, "To yrke hym of hys labour" (to make him annoyed with his work).³⁴ The Towneley Cain, however, places particular emphasis on the physical cost of this labor, telling Abel "Or it [his corn] was shorne and broght in stak / Had I many a wery bak" (before it was harvested and brought into a stack / I had many a weary back).³⁵ This bodily damage and exhaustion is mirrored in the physical damage done to Cain's clothes. He complains, "What ende had I my travel to lose, / to were my shoyn and ryfe my hose?" (what purpose had I to waste my work / to wear out my shoes and tear my hose?).³⁶ The brothers' relationship should be collaborative and co-dependent, with Cain's grain feeding his brother's animals through the winter, and Abel's animals providing the raw materials needed to repair Cain's leather shoes and woolen trousers. However, Cain figures this wear and tear as something he alone suffers while his brother thrives.

While *Mactacio Abel* suggests Cain finds farming difficult because he is not very good at it, the play also places the brothers' work in competition. Cain repeatedly implies that crop farming is far more labor intensive than the (more lucrative) work of sheep-rearing. As the

34 Ashley and NeCastro, eds., *Mankind*, l. 532.

35 Epp, ed., "The Killing of Abel," ll. 243–44.

36 Epp, ed., "The Killing of Abel," ll. 154–55.

two Towneley shepherds' plays demonstrate, sheep-rearing requires constant, lower-level daily care, with certain periods of intense work. Crop farming, however, demands large amounts of whole-community work at the start and end of the process, as well as the constant maintenance of weeding. In setting its action at the end of harvest and in the middle of ploughing season (rather than, for example, during the lambing or shearing seasons, which produce the heaviest workload in sheep farming), the *Mactacio Abel* stages the brothers' conflict at a time Cain would have been more physically exhausted than Abel. As with the fight with his plough animals, Cain figures his own attempt to control the natural world as a futile but necessary task, which must be constantly repeated to avoid starvation. He casts God's tithe as yet another chore that makes his job even more difficult.

The brothers' farming roles underpin their relationships with God. Abel, whose farming relies on the miraculous multiplication of life, is better placed to appreciate divine gifts than Cain, who sees only the thistles and briars among his "fair corn." This conflict extends to the symbolic characteristics of the goods they produce. Intriguingly, both the brothers' crops hold Eucharistic associations. Abel's lamb may be read in the context of medieval Christian typological referencing of Christ as the Lamb of God, and its reproduction and appropriation of the Jewish Passover.³⁷ Through this typology, Abel's role as sheep farmer held the potential of hope, looking forward to the coming, and sacrifice, of Christ. Cain's crop of corn, however, is rather more problematic. Certainly, the growth of grain is also a key part of Eucharistic devotion, needed to make the wafers and bread which, like the Lamb, host Christ's body. A recent article by Leanne Groeneveld recently detailed how close this association was between "everyday" grain and bread and the Eucharist in her examination of the pageant of the York

37 On typological alignments between the Lamb of Christ and the various sheep of the Hebrew Testament (Abel's sacrifice, the Passover lamb and Abraham and Isaac) in late medieval drama, see Leah Sinanoglou, "The Christ Child as Sacrifice: A Medieval Tradition and the Corpus Christi Plays," *Speculum* 48, no. 3 (1973): 491–509; Thomas Rendall, "Visual Typology in the Abraham and Isaac Plays," *Modern Philology* 81 (1984): 221–32; and Pamela Sheingorn, "Typology and the Teaching of Medieval Drama," in *Approaches to Teaching Medieval English Drama*, ed. Richard K. Emmerson (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1990), 90–100.

Bakers.³⁸ As with the cloth and the animal feed, the brothers' roles should be cooperative, between them producing the key figures of the Eucharist. However, while Abel adopts a proto-Christian stance to his tithe, Cain conceives of his role as arable farmer as looking backwards towards Adam's fall, and figuring labor as a punishment. As the brother battling the weeds, Cain's work bears the curse of Adam more heavily.

Although Abel is presented as the virtuous character in this pageant, he does not answer any of Cain's objections satisfactorily. Abel's answers refuse to engage with the potentially dangerous social and theological problems raised by his brother. Rather comically, he merely replies again, and again, and again, with variations on the theme that they make sacrifice "Ffor God gifys thee all thi lifyng" (for God gives you all your living).³⁹ Although the Towneley Abel acts as the voice of devout orthodoxy, there has developed a consensus among the play's critics that the character's repetitive exhortations make Abel irritating. However, what is striking is that the language used by several of these critics implies that Abel's language is also unmanly. Edith Harnett, for example, calls Abel "a relentless nag": a term more commonly employed to devalue the speech and arguments of women.⁴⁰ Yet this form of conflict is not uncommon in the staging of moral or theological conflict in medieval drama, where a character who is "wrong" is given a full and creative range of arguments and objections. They are then placed in argument with a character who is "right," but whose pious register and simpler, repetitive arguments become comic the more frequently they are repeated. For example, this dynamic appears in the N-Town *Joseph's Doubt*, in which Joseph's long, emotional (and logical) protestations that he cannot have made his wife pregnant are punctuated by Mary's repeated assertions that she is pregnant with both God's child and also Joseph's.⁴¹ Here, as in the *Mactacio Abel*, the conflict escalates as the doubter becomes increasingly irate while the believer remains calm. Both Abel and Mary are right, but unable to persuade their

38 Groeneveld, "The York Bakers."

39 Epp, ed., "The Killing of Abel," l. 100.

40 Edith Harnett, "Cain in the Medieval Towneley Play," *Annuaire Mediaevale* 12 (1971): 21–20, 24. Sturges also gives a helpful summary of this critical sympathy towards Cain and against Abel in *The Circulation of Power*, 98.

41 Stephen Spector, ed., "Joseph's Doubt," in *The N-Town Play: Cotton MS Vespasian D8*, EETS, s.s., 11–12, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 123–52.

questioners. As a dramatic device, this use of repetitive dialogue and Abel's refusal to directly engage with or acknowledge any validity in his brother's complaints also performs a build-up of tension which, at least temporarily, seems to exacerbate Cain's increasingly explosive responses. The comic potential of this is realized in Abel's baffled responses to his brother's furious speeches, "Broder, ther is none here aboute / That wold thee any grefe" and "Brother, whi art thi u so to me in ire?" (Brother, there is nobody around here / that would give you any grief ... and, Brother, why are you so angry with me?).⁴² However, while I disagree with the misogynist undertones of linking Abel's repetitive and bewildered speech with effeminacy, Cain certainly attacks Abel's masculinity in attempting to devalue his argument that they should commit their tithes.

Cain's attack begins from the brothers' first interaction. When Abel enters with a polite greeting, Cain responds:

Com kis myne ars! Me list not ban
as welcome standys ther oute.
Thou should have bide til thou were cald.
Com nar, and other drife or hald,
and kys the dwillis toute.
Go grese thi shepe under the toute
For that is thee most lefe.⁴³

(Come, kiss my arse! I don't want to curse / So you are [more] welcome elsewhere. / You should have waited until you were called. / Come near, and either drive or hold [the plough team], / And kiss the devil's arse. / Go, grease your sheep under the arse / for that is most pleasing to you.)

Cain's "you should have waited till you were called" forms a metatheatrical joke, suggesting Abel is early for his cue and has interrupted Cain's labor. In suggesting Abel has entered too early, Cain figures his brother's pious greeting as a kind of premature ejaculation that deserves sexual humiliation. This is seen in his invitation, "com kis mine ars." This kind of joke is common among the Towneley plays attributed to the "Wakefield Master." Accusations of mis-timed entrances appear in both shepherds' plays and may have formed something

⁴² Epp, ed., "The Killing of Abel," ll. 68–69 and 318.

⁴³ Epp, ed., "The Killing of Abel," ll. 61–67.

of a running joke used to put subordinate characters in their place.⁴⁴ What is unusual here, however, is the inventive violence of the punishments Cain considers appropriate for this particular theatrical transgression. This is consistent with the astonishing range of scatological and arse-centered language used by Cain and his boy throughout the play. These include several references to arse-kissing, arse-wiping, and kissing the devil's arse. This small sample gives an idea of the inventive variety of arse-centric insults used in the play:

“Even ther the good wife strokid the hay.”
 (Even where the good wife [wiped her ass on] the hay.)
 “he [God] might wipe his ars withall.”
 (he might wipe his arse with [my tithe].)
 “Yei, kys the dwillis ars behynde!”
 (Yes, kiss the devil's arse behind!)
 “Com kys the dwill right in the ars!”
 (Come, kiss the devil right in the arse!)⁴⁵

This kind of scatological, obscene language is a common part of vice character traditions across England and the Low Countries.⁴⁶ Tison Pugh notes “the carnivalesque humor of analingus” performs as “an inversion of normative sexuality—to remind their audiences of sexual possibilities that were unlikely to be staged but could nonetheless be adumbrated for comic potential.”⁴⁷ The queer possibilities of this are clear from the opening of this play, where Cain's boy makes a visceral opening threat to the audience, which seems to combine arse-kissing and oral sex:

“bot who janglis any more,
 He must blaw my black hoill bore

44 In both shepherds' plays, the third shepherd is mocked for slowness and for coming in too late, suggesting this may have formed a running joke. See Epp, ed., “The Shepherds (1),” ll. 181–82 and “The Shepherds (2),” 219–20, both in *The Towneley Plays* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2018). As it is likely the plays of the Towneley manuscript were performed separately, this joke about entrances may have been added to add a dramatic feel to the reading experience.

45 Epp, ed., “The Killing of Abel,” ll. 90, 240, 268, 289.

46 See Charlotte Steenbrugge, *Staging Vice: A Study of Dramatic Traditions in Medieval and Sixteenth-Century England and the Low Countries* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014).

47 Pugh, *On the Queerness of Early English Drama*, 60.

Both behind and before
 Till his tethe blede.”
 (But whoever chatters any more / He must blow my black borehole
 [arse] / Both behind and in front / Until his teeth bleed.)⁴⁸

However, where the boy references his own “black hole,” what is curious about Cain’s use of obscenity at Abel’s entrance is that he explicitly links interactions with arses to Abel’s trade as a sheep farmer: “Go grese thi shepe under the toute / For that is thee most lefe” (Go, grease your sheep under the arse / for that is most pleasing to you).⁴⁹ While Cain’s repeated invitations to “kis myn ars” attack Abel’s masculinity, this accusation also attacks his occupation, claiming that the most enjoyable thing for Abel is to “grease your sheep under the arse.” This accusation of bestial desire is unusual even within medieval obscene registers. Nicole Nolan Sidhu has noted the heteronormative conservatism of medieval obscenity, which tends to uphold established powers: “While sexual body parts and normative heterosexual sex are ... more publicly acceptable in the Middle Ages than in the modern West, other forms of sexuality are subjected to a censorship so profound they are rarely, if ever, visible. Cunnilingus, fellatio, homosexuality, bestiality, masturbation, and heterosexual acts that violate the gender conventions of male superiority and female inferiority are never (or very rarely) depicted in medieval texts and art.”⁵⁰ Sex in medieval obscene literature is, as a consequence, often rather vanilla. It is not of course surprising that Cain, set to break the taboos of homicide and fratricide, has no qualms breaking others. Yet his insult also makes a careful reference to the practices of Abel’s job. The mention of sheep-greasing may be a reference to treating sheep against rot. Sheep fed on poor land (often due to the disappearance of common grazing rights) were more likely to succumb to disease, so Cain’s reference to “greasing” may reference the medical treatment Abel performs for his flock.⁵¹ If this is the case, it is perhaps a reminder that Abel, too, is a dispossessed farmer, though unlike Cain, he does not complain about it. The sickness of Abel’s sheep is hinted at again later, when Cain tells

48 Epp, ed., “The Killing of Abel,” ll. 6–9. Pugh also notes that a similar insult of arse-blowing appears in John Heywood’s *Play of the Wether*. See Pugh, *On the Queerness of Early English Drama*, 60.

49 Epp, ed., “The Killing of Abel,” ll. 66–67.

50 Nicole Nolan Sidhu, *Indecent Exposure: Gender, Politics, and Obscene Comedy in Middle English Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 25.

51 See Kiser, “Mak’s Heirs,” 340–51.

his brother “tend thi scabbid shepe wele,” suggesting Abel is not doing a good job of looking after his flock.⁵² However, even read within this context, the sheep-greasing incident still retains elements of bestiality.⁵³ Cain is clearly suggesting here that this is part of the job that Abel takes rather too much pleasure in, “For that is thee most lefe.” The use of “lefe,” with its additional meanings of “love,” suggests that the sheep is Abel’s lover, as well as his desire. The fact that Cain’s insult makes use of a sheep, coupled with his suggestions of sickness, also taps into other medieval associations of sheep and rams with sexual voraciousness and uncleanness. Unlike lambs, which were used as figures of the Lamb of God, sheep and rams were associated with sexual looseness, able to become pregnant by a gust of wind, and rams were particularly associated with sexually active men.⁵⁴ Drawing both on images of bestial love and male desire, Cain’s insult re-figures his brother’s pious sacrifice of one of his flock by suggesting he is exploiting them in other ways, too. This accusation taints Abel’s sacrifice, troubling its status as a pious prefiguring of the Christian priest sacrificing the Lamb of God.

The figuring of Abel’s pastoral labor as sexual exploitation adds weight to Cain’s figuring of tithes as the exploitation of a church’s flock. This argument is developed in Cain’s subsequent speech, which draws on another common animal motif used as a criticism of the Church’s

52 Epp, ed., “The Killing of Abel,” l. 250.

53 It is likely that Cain’s other uses of scatology in this play also hold links to medieval anti-Semitic imagery. Susan Signe Morrison and others have noted that excremental and sexual language was used to characterize or undermine minorities, particularly Jews, peasants, and women. See Susan Signe Morrison, *Excrement in the Late Middle Ages: Sacred Filth and Chaucer’s Fecopolitics* (New York: Palgrave, 2008), 33; Birgit Wiedl, “Laughing at the Beast: The Judensau: Anti-Jewish Propaganda and Humor from the Middle Ages to the Early Modern Period,” in *Laughter in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times: Epistemology of a Fundamental Human Behavior, Its Meaning, and Consequences*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 325–57; and Jan Nicolaas Sevenster, *The Roots of Pagan Anti-Semitism in the Ancient World* (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 142. Other readings of the Cain and Abel episode in medieval culture have tended to identify processes of typological reading through which Abel is figured as a kind of proto-Christ and Cain is associated with Judaism. See Sturges, *The Circulation of Power*, 97.

54 N. C. W. Spence, “The Human Bestiary,” *The Modern Language Review* 69, no. 4 (2001): 913–30, at 918 and 928.

manipulation of poor congregation members through tithing. After a long speech from Abel about the tradition, duty, and custom of tithing, Cain responds, “How! let furth youre geyse, the fox will preche” (How! Let forth your geese, the fox will preach).⁵⁵ This refers to a tradition within beast fable, anti-clerical satire, and art in which a fox poses as a monk or preacher to the birds that would normally be its prey.⁵⁶ This tradition figures Christian preachers as corrupt, consuming the very flocks they are supposed to lead and protect. If we read this reference against Cain’s previous statement about sheep-greasing, Cain is deliberately upsetting the motif of Abel as a preacher, as a shepherd, and as a proto-Christ figure, suggesting he is sexually and materially abusing those who follow him.

EARTH, HUMAN, ANIMAL

For all its blasphemous theological work, Cain’s obsession with excrement, arses, and animals also holds a practical concern. The repeated references to excrement remind us again that Cain and Abel’s work is complementary. Cain grows the feed that will enable his brothers’ sheep to outlast the winter, while Abel’s sheep provide the dung needed to fertilize Cain’s fields. Food’s opposite brother is excrement. In short, shit is the key thing bringing the brothers’ work together. Abel’s bafflement at Cain’s anger suggests that he, at least, sees their professions as equivalent, and it is only Cain who insists on suggesting his labor demands more work, even as he figures Abel’s as easier and less masculine. Moreover, even though Abel does everything he should do, his own labor, both in animal husbandry and in tithing, furnishes Cain with the means to un-make him.

The brothers’ conflict comes to a head when, in my favorite pun in early drama, Cain tells his brother “we have a craw to pull” (we have

55 Epp, ed., “The Killing of Abel,” l. 86.

56 See Warren Edminster, *The Preaching Fox: Festive Subversion in the Plays of the Wakefield Master* (New York: Routledge, 2005) and Kenneth Varty, *Reynard the Fox: A Study of the Fox in Medieval English Art* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1999). See also the beast fable *The Fox and the Wolf*, in which the fox acts as a preacher to convince a foolish wolf that heaven is at the bottom of a well and that he can get there by confessing his sins. In Elaine Treharne, ed., *Old and Middle English: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 332–37.

a bone to pull).⁵⁷ Since the ninth century, Cain's murder weapon had been figured as the jawbone of an ass, though the Towneley Cain uses the "cheke bon" (cheekbone) of an unspecified animal.⁵⁸ The handy proximity of bone with the altar hints that this creature may have been one of Abel's own, earlier, pious tithes: a fragment representing the product of his labor now turned against him. Cain's act blurs the relationships the play has established between human, animal, and earth. Rebekah L. Pratt's study of medieval hunting manuals argues that descriptions of fragmented animal bodies were used to illustrate human dominance, but that "the death of a living creature emphasizes the inherent fragility of all flesh, including human skin which could also be rendered or ruptured unto the point of the death."⁵⁹ Abel's devout desire to un-make the body of his sheep is therefore paralleled in the un-making of his own body. This transformation of body into meat is grimly repeated when Cain's boy comes in to help dispose of the body. The boy quips to the audience "cold rost is at my masteres hame" (cold roast [meat] is at my master's home).⁶⁰ The occupations Cain has been so careful to delineate and set in opposition merge together in the closing part of the play and images of animal and crop farming mix to grim effect. Murder changes Cain's role: the crop laborer has turned butcher. The most significant change comes in the iconography of the plough. In his closing speech, Cain tells his boy "take yon plough and travel faster than before," else:

For bi Codys sydys, if thou do
I shall hang thee apon this plo
With this rope, lo lad! Lo,
By hym that me dere boght.

57 Epp, ed., "The Killing of Abel," l. 313.

58 See Epp, ed., "The Killing of Abel," l. 326 and Meyer Schapiro, "Cain's Jaw-Bone that Did the First Murder," *The Art Bulletin* 24, no. 3 (1942): 205–12, at 211: "English artists who represented Cain with the jaw-bone sensed the bestiality implied in the use of this weapon."

59 Rebekah L. Pratt, "From Animal to Meat: Illuminating the Medieval Ritual of Unmaking," *EHumanista* 20 (2013): 20.

60 Epp, ed., "The Killing of Abel," l. 424.

(For by God's loins, unless you do / I shall hang you upon this
plough / With this rope, lo lad! Lo, / By him that bought me
dearly.)⁶¹

The threat is of course consistent with Cain's murderous nature: having committed the first murder his words suggest he is already well on his way to committing a second. It also intriguingly brings together the themes of this paper. Although Cain's oath finishes with an anachronistic reference to Christ's sacrifice, the divine is again reduced to the bodily and excremental, with Cain swearing "by God's sides (loins)," rather than by his wounds. Moreover, by threatening to hang the boy upon the plough "with this rope," Cain collapses the item that signifies his status and his labor both with the gallows and with Christ's cross. There is also a potential reference here to Judas, who, like Cain, was figured as a betrayer of kin and who ended his own life by hanging. Given the emphasis Cain consistently places on the physical effort and suffering his labor costs, this momentarily aligns the pain of farm labor and the pain of Adam's curse with the suffering of Christ and his betrayer. This collapse of plough, gallows, and cross perhaps opens new ways to read the relationship between land, labor, and spirituality. As one of the closing images of the play, this use of the plough as symbol of the laborer's suffering and agricultural struggle is never redeemed. While Christ's cross undoes the part of Adam's curse that turns human flesh into dust, medieval audiences knew that the curse of labor, weeds, and work remained. Despite their moral attitudes, both brothers end the play stuck in the mud.

61 Epp, ed., "The Killing of Abel," ll. 461–64.