

# Introduction

*Chanita Goodblatt and Eva von Contzen*

This collection brings together international scholars working on the enactment of biblical themes and narratives in European drama from the twelfth to the seventeenth centuries. Scholarly attention paid to the connection between drama and the Bible has revealed their interpretive relationship.<sup>1</sup> Presented on stage, biblical themes and narratives can exert an influence quite different from that of written forms of intellectual and theological debate, and can comment on these debates from a perspective that literally gives voice to a range of positions and opinions. Within this context, the present volume offers a sustained focus on biblical drama, as it developed from the medieval to the early modern periods.

Over the last decade or so, the study of the Bible in relation to drama has gained a central position in scholarship. A number of noteworthy publications highlight the impact of biblical material on drama. These studies pay particular attention to the question of how the changing parameters – not only religious, but also social, cultural, and political – within the late medieval and the early modern period were negotiated in and through drama.<sup>2</sup> Our collection is firmly set in this trajectory and seeks to broaden the horizon of the existing scholarship. The structure of this collection is chronological: we move from the medieval mystery and cycle plays, to early modern drama and baroque influences. This arrangement, though somewhat conventional, is but the framework within which we distinguish three primary dimensions: the first two involve the spatio-temporal, manifested in specific multitemporal and transnational aspects; the third is conceptual, pertaining to aspects of performance and form. The historical dates of plays and events thereby provide but the benchmark for our scrutiny of very complex intertwined processes that have as their focal point the Bible – or in a wider sense, biblical material – and its uses and functions in drama.

## Multitemporality

Whenever the Bible is used in plays, several temporalities are simultaneously present. There is the time-frame of the biblical events, which may be anchored in a historical context to a greater or lesser extent (David's Kingship or the Nativity, for instance, can evoke a specific historical context, whereas extracts from the Psalms or Paul's Epistles may not). There is also the contemporaneous context in which plays are set – the actual context of the performance, the present moment of acting, and audience involvement. These references to and uses of the Bible generate a multitemporality of events, which is often further enriched by intertextual links and references to various political or historical events, both past and present. In discussing these connections and layers in their chapters, our contributors collectively make a case for a flexible, continuous framework of the pre-modern that extends from the late medieval to the early modern period. The development of biblical drama is not perceived as constituting a single coherent and consistent process; rather, dramatic traditions from the medieval and early modern periods are seen as existing side by side during the Reformation. We therefore situate this volume in the ongoing debates of what constitutes 'the pre-modern', and to what extent it may be liberating to go beyond the established boundaries of periodisation that inhibit rather than foster our understanding of cultural processes.<sup>3</sup>

## Transnationality

The flexible temporal dimension is complemented by a broad spatial one, as this volume attends to what Robert Henke and Eric Nicholson have recently termed 'transnational' perspectives.<sup>4</sup> We cross religious and cultural boundaries – from the revitalisation of Catholic liturgical practices for the medieval lay audience outside Church venues, to the Protestant effort to translate and interpret the Bible, and then to the mutually enjoyed popular performances in the Christian and Jewish communities. The different chapters thus cover a wide range of linguistic and cultural dimensions: languages (Latin, English, German, Czech, Yiddish); dramatic traditions (cycle plays, popular drama, marionettes); and religious cultures (Catholic, Protestant, Jewish). This opens up the opportunity for a highly international approach – fostered by the international character of the scholars themselves – that raises larger questions about religious and cultural relations among the Christian countries of northern Europe, as well as between Christian and Jewish communities. In

doing so, the volume as a whole thus calls into question binaries (e.g. Catholic–Protestant, Christian–Jewish, popular–professional theatre), which may seem to exist; in reality, the categories are very often overlapping and integrative. What is more, this volume is characterised by an ongoing effort to highlight the complex interaction of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English plays within their religious contexts.

### Performance and form

The third focus of this volume resides in its emphasis on performance and form. The various enactments of biblical themes and narratives are discussed from different theoretical perspectives, which illuminate the parameters of the performance itself (or the possibility of performance, as far as it can be reconstructed or assumed). Our contributors use both established approaches (new historicist; source study) as well as more experimental ones (narratological; cognitive) in order to scrutinise the performativity of the plays in relation to their biblical material.<sup>5</sup> Closely related to the question of performance is that of form: which functions can be ascertained for the various forms and formal arrangements employed in the plays in order to convey their message? As Caroline Levine argues, dramatic form inherently affords the negotiation of political and ethical issues because it is by definition built on presentation, argumentation, and description.<sup>6</sup> Discussions of performance and form are linked with more general questions of the enactment of religious concepts. Are there discernible differences between Catholic and Protestant plays and their approaches to the biblical material in terms of speech, perspective, or scene?<sup>7</sup> To what extent does the Bible function as a means of negotiating (criticising, debating, supporting) a particular religious concept and its contemporary relevance? Ultimately, these chapters argue that biblical plays are much more than either straightforward religious instruction, or the reprising of salvation history, or the subversion of religious hegemony.

In conclusion, this volume opens up new horizons for the study of biblical drama by putting special emphasis on a framework that capitalises on the dimensions of *multitemporality* and *transnationalism*, as well as that of *performance* and *form* in relation to the uses of the Bible in medieval and early modern drama. These three dimensions are not to be treated as separate or distinct phenomena, but rather as intertwined: we discuss biblical material in a wider European context of genres, audiences, and religious debates; particular modalities of

performance evolve, adapt, and are re-created as they intersect with different historical times and circumstances. Our three dimensions relate to aspects such as dramatic traditions, confessional and religious rites, dogmas and debates, conceptualisations of performance, and audience response – whenever the Bible is evoked for performative purposes. In doing so, we offer a perspective that decentralises the focus on the English tradition (in particular Shakespeare and a few other playwrights), and is also conceptually innovative by drawing on a range of approaches and methods. Read side by side, our contributions demonstrate the breadth and depth of the Bible and its dramatic realisations in Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish cultures across Europe.

### The chapters

The thirteen chapters in the present volume are divided into three parts. In the first part, titled ‘Medieval drama’, the focus is on English mystery plays preserved in the Towneley, Chester, York, and N-Town Cycles. Lawrence Besserman discusses the role of Noah’s wife – a voiceless cipher in the biblical account – as a radical, impious questioning of both patriarchal and divine authority. He argues that in the performative foregrounding of this character, her refusal to board the Ark can be seen as coinciding with the emergence of outspoken female critics (e.g. Margery Kempe, Joan White, anonymous female Lollard ‘preachers’) of a male-dominated Church hierarchy. For his part, Jonathan Stavsky analyses the representation of Jewish–Christian relations in the N-Town ‘Trial of Mary and Joseph’. He situates this play within a wide intertextual context, including the Apocryphal source and its Middle English retellings. Considered in this way, Stavsky proposes that the play offers a nuanced vision of Christianity’s roots, as it translates salvation history to fifteenth-century East Anglia in order to forge a just community capable of resisting scandalmongers. In the final chapter of this part, Eva von Contzen discusses the enactment of the Creation, the Fall, and the Nativity. She focuses on the concept of ‘joint attention’ through which characters not only act out – literally embody – the events from the Bible, but also invite the audience to imagine the actions in an active, experiential way. By means of this strategy, the plays interpret the shared humanity of Christ in a very literal, experiential sense for the audience and believer. In these three chapters, English medieval drama is presented as enactments of central contemporaneous Christian issues, with the plays

both redefining and intensifying biblical situations, characters, and beliefs.

The five chapters in the volume's second part illuminate the transition between medieval and early modern biblical drama. The first three chapters focus on illustrating the shared characteristics of plays from these two periods. Silvia Bigliuzzi traces the development of lamentation scenes through different patterns of chorality. She first devotes special attention to the laments of the three Marys in the York and Towneley Cycles. Bigliuzzi then discusses George Peele's early modern play, *The Love of King David and Fair Bethsabe*, in which the two formal Choruses comprise a religious device subservient to a political design of male power. Thus this play ultimately demonstrates how female pathos is no longer part of the tragic ritual. M. A. Katritzky studies the evolving changes to the 'merchant scene' in European (French, Catalan, Romansh, Latin, and German) plays. This scene specifically relates to the Holy Women's *Visitatio Sepulchri*, developed from Gospel accounts of the Marys' visit to the tomb of Christ. Katritzky considers this scene in juxtaposition with significant manuscript and stone images, thereby underlining how it intersects with evolving traditions of the biblical stage as it absorbs and reflects varied historical, political, religious, and transnational influences. Cathy Shrank's chapter also bridges the two periods by considering the impact of citing scripture in fifteenth-century English morality drama. She studies its evolution from a genre that focuses on the *psychomachia* of the individual human soul to one that maps a struggle for the soul of the nation. Furthermore, Shrank explores what happens to biblical quotations – and the language in which they are cited – and how they are used to establish the ethos of characters in performance after the Reformation. The subsequent two chapters discuss biblical drama in Reformation England. Greg Walker discusses John Heywood's *The Pardoner and the Friar*, focusing on a confrontation between a seemingly evangelical friar and a corrupt pardoner. He argues that Heywood's innovative dramatisation of a specific incident from the early English Reformation is a means of powerfully embodying the jarring nature of contemporary religious controversy. Walker also argues that beyond the linguistic and physical disorientation, the interlude pursues a deliberate affective strategy, cueing audience responses to shift several times through the evolving drama to powerful creative effect. In the final chapter of this part, Paul Whitfield White challenges the accepted consensus concerning the decline of biblical drama in early modern England. He argues that during the latter

half of Elizabeth's reign, and continuing into the seventeenth century, *all* of the major patronised companies operating both within London and beyond, including those travelling to the Continent, staged biblical plays. Furthermore, White proposes that these plays were characterised by diversity in dramaturgy, ideological purpose, and reception.

This transition from the medieval to early modern drama – both generic and thematic – is firmly established in the third and final part of the volume, titled *Early modern drama*. Elisabeth Dutton focuses on how Reformation Protestant writers asserted the historicity of scriptural events. She asks a crucial question: How do the Protestant playwrights manage to create any form of 'scene' by which their audiences might be able to situate themselves in these events? Dutton argues that to encourage these audiences, these playwrights – specifically John Bale, John Foxe, and Nicholas Grimald – used the accessible, physical reality of props, to thereby overcome the challenges of presenting a Protestant history. Hannibal Hamlin focuses on one significant play, *A Looking Glasse for London*, by Thomas Lodge and Robert Greene. Called the most popular biblical play of the Elizabethan stage, it is rich in spectacle and scandal – designed to succeed in the popular theatre. Yet Hamlin proposes that in both moralising and stagecraft it looks back to the mystery plays of the earlier fifteenth century. It thus offers a unique Elizabethan example of staging God himself, though done in such a peculiar way as to avoid censure. Monika Fludernik also focuses on one play, William Rowley's *A Shoemaker, A Gentleman*, comprising one of the few existing treatments of martyrdom in early modern dramatic literature. She studies this play within the context of earlier Elizabethan depictions of martyrdom, as well as with reference to the medieval tradition of saints' legends. Fludernik also brings this play into dialogue with other contemporaneous plays about issues of martyrdom and religious identity: *The Virgin Martyr*, written collaboratively by Thomas Dekker and Philip Massinger, and Thomas Middleton's *A Game at Chess*. The final two chapters in this part turn from English drama to a consideration of transnational contexts. Pavel Drábek analyses three plays from the early seventeenth century: the Czech plays *Ruth* and *Samson* as well as a German comedy of Queen Esther. Despite their different backgrounds, the plays bear remarkable similarities. According to Drábek, this is due to a transnational theatrical culture that foreshadows elements of baroque aesthetics. In her chapter, Chanita Goodblatt

discusses English, German, and Yiddish dramatisations of the Book of Esther. She focuses specifically on the performative dimensions of the Fool, enacted through two different dramaturgical strategies: in comic interludes or inserted directly into the narrative. Goodblatt discusses the Fool as an exemplar of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, enacted through parodic language and embodying (in the material and corporeal aspects of its performance) his ultimate authority as incisive commentator on monarchy, family, and religious tradition.

This volume thus presents a collection of chapters which together illuminate the co-presence of biblical and contemporary concerns in medieval and early modern drama – conceiving of such drama as a central participant in the dynamic struggle to both interpret and translate the Bible.

The editors thank the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung for a grant that supported the international conference, *The Bible in Medieval and Early Modern Drama*, which convened at Albert Ludwigs University of Freiburg (16–18 February 2017) and provided the original stimulus for this collection. The publication of this collection was also supported by the Israel Science Foundation (Grant No. 338/16). We dedicate this volume to the memory of Lawrence Besserman, who sadly passed away in July 2017. He was an inspired scholar and teacher, and his presence at the Conference was deeply appreciated. May his memory be blessed, *yehi zikhro barukh*.

## Notes

- 1 See Lawrence Clopper, *Drama, Play, and Game: English Festive Culture in the Medieval and Early Modern Period* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Peter Happé and Wim Hüsken (eds), *Staging Scripture: Biblical Drama, 1350–1600* (Leiden: Brill, 2016); Murray Roston, *Biblical Drama in England from the Middle Ages to the Present Day* (London: Faber, 1968); Adrian Streete (ed.), *Early Modern Drama and the Bible: Contexts and Readings, 1570–1625* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Paul Whitfield White, *Drama and Religion in English Provincial Society, 1485–1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
- 2 See e.g. Chester N. Scoville, *Saints and the Audience in Middle English Biblical Drama* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004); Beatrice Groves, *Texts and Traditions: Religion in Shakespeare, 1592–1604* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Beatrice Batson, *Word and Rite: The Bible and Ceremony in Selected Shakespearean Works* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2010); Hannibal Hamlin, *The Bible in Shakespeare*

- (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). For an earlier precursor, see also David C. Fowler, *The Bible in Middle English Literature* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1984); Thomas Fulton and Kristen Poole (eds), *The Bible on the Shakespearean Stage: Cultures of Interpretation in Reformation England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). Studies have not been restricted to the English context; see e.g. Thierry Revol, *Représentations du sacré dans les textes dramatiques des XIe–XIIIe siècles en France* (Paris: Champion, 1999); Wolfram Washof, *Die Bibel auf der Bühne: Exempelfiguren und protestantische Theologie im lateinischen und deutschen Bibeldrama der Reformationszeit* (Münster: Rhema, 2007).
- 3 See Holly Crocker, ‘The Problem of the Premodern’, *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, 16.1 (2016), pp. 146–52, as well as the groundbreaking study by James Simpson, *Reform and Cultural Revolution, The Oxford English Literary History*, Vol. 2: 1350–1547 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). The debate has also received important impulses by Gordon McMullan and David Matthews (eds), *Reading the Medieval in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance* (New York: Zone Books, 2010), as well as Jonathan Gil Harris, *Untimely Matter in the Time of Shakespeare* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008). For recent studies that focus on continuity, see Holly Crocker, ‘“As false as Cressid”: Virtue Trouble from Chaucer to Shakespeare’, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 43.2 (2013), pp. 303–34; Lisa Lampert, *Gender and Jewish Difference from Paul to Shakespeare* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).
  - 4 Robert Henke and Eric Nicholson (eds), *Transnational Exchange in Early Modern Theater* (Aldershot: Ashgate 2008); Robert Henke and Eric Nicholson (eds), *Transnational Mobilities in Early Modern Theater* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014); Eli Rozik, *Jewish Drama and Theatre: From Rabbinical Intolerance to Secular Liberalism* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2013).
  - 5 See Manfred Jahn, ‘Narrative Voice and Agency in Drama: Aspects of a Narratology of Drama’, *New Literary History* 32.3 (2001), pp. 659–79; Bruce McConachie, *Engaging Audiences: A Cognitive Approach to Spectating in the Theatre* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Bruce McConachie and F. Elizabeth Hart (eds), *Performance and Cognition: Theatre Studies and the Cognitive Turn* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006); June Schlueter, *Dramatic Closure: Reading the End* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1995); Jill Stevenson, *Performance, Cognitive Theory, and Devotional Culture: Sensual Piety in Late Medieval York* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
  - 6 Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 93. For an application of these and similar ideas to Shakespeare, see Evelyn Tribble, *Early*



*Modern Actors and Shakespeare's Theatre: Thinking with the Body* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017); Julia Reinhard Lupton, 'The Affordances of Hospitality: Shakespearean Drama between Historicism and Phenomenology', *Poetics Today* 35.4 (2014), pp. 615–33.

- 7 See also Philip Butterworth, *Staging Conventions in Medieval English Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Janette Dillon, *Language and Stage in Medieval and Renaissance England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

