Enrico Giaccherini

ANTHROPONOMASTIC ISSUES IN THE MIDDLE-ENGLISH
PLAY OF THE SACRAMENT

Abstract: The study investigates the character names of the Middle-English miracle play *The Conversyon of Ser Jonathas þe Jewe*, aka *The Play of the Sacrament*. While the name of the Christian *mercator* Aristory/*Aristorius*, in spite of its apparent simplicity, surprises for its uniqueness (not limited to literary texts), the major problems are posed by those of the protagonist's Jewish servants Jason, Jasdon, Masphat, and Malchus. An enquiry into these anthroponyms reveals the playwright's subtle use of biblical echoes and allusions, only available to a 'professional', an erudite cleric.

Keywords: *Play of the Sacrament* (*Conversion of Sir Jonathas the Jew*); Character Names – Jewish; Medieval English Theatre; Miracle plays

In the 2012 issue of this journal I presented a brief investigation into a problematic place-name[1] that occurs in one of the most remarkable texts of the late-medieval dramaturgy in Middle English, *The Conversion of Ser Jonathas þe Jewe*, a miracle play of the second half of the fifteenth century most frequently, although debatably, referred to as the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*.[2] I will keep to this practice in this article, albeit no less reluctantly than I did in my earlier one.[3] In returning to the same text, I now dwell on anthroponomastic questions, complementary in my view to the toponomastic ones I have already examined. Literary onomastics is doubtless an interesting topic *per se*; however, the object of the present enquiry into these two closely related components of the linguistic and stylistic texture of the *Play of the Sacrament* is also to show how the combined hypotheses I am suggesting may contribute to throwing further light upon the cultural scene to which this miracle play belonged, as well as to making the artistic and intellectual profile of its unknown author stand out in somewhat sharper relief.

The plot of *The Play of the Sacrament* having been briefly outlined in the companion article, here I limit myself to recalling that the play's subject is

---

[1] Giaccherini 2012.

[2] Quotations from this miracle play are from my recent critical edition (with Italian translation and extensive commentary: Giaccherini [ed.] 2013), cited by line number; page numbering refers to the introduction and commentary sections.

[3] Cf. Giaccherini (ed.) 2013, pp. 9-12.

the charge of profanation of the consecrated host traditionally levelled at the Jews, and that its conclusion, exceptionally, sees the protagonist's and his accomplices' repentance and enthusiastic conversion to the Christian faith, instead of the more customary burning at the stake. Except for its finale, the legend here adapted for the stage thus finds a close enough pictorial analogue in Paolo Uccello's predella of the Corpus Domini altarpiece, painted in Urbino in 1467-1468.[4]

Not taking into account the farcical interlude that, halfway through the central episode of the play, momentarily but effectively slackens the emotional strain that has been rapidly mounting to a peak of almost unbearable intensity,[5] and not counting mere dramatic functions either (e.g. «the Bishop»), or «Jesus» himself, there appear onstage eight characters who are given personal names. Three of these belong to the Christian «side»: the merchant *Aristory/Aristorius*, his secretary/assistant, the «*clericus*» *Petre Powle*, and the «*presbiter*» *Ser Isoder.* Five, instead, belong to the Jewish «side»: the wealthy merchant *Jonathas*, who has arrived from the Orient («Surrey», Syria, l. 19) in the company of four fellow-Jews, *Jason*, *Jasdon*, *Masphat*, and *Malchus*, his attendants and future co-desecrators of the host.[6]

Although in the present analysis I concentrate primarily on the names belonging to the latter group, those of the former are not without interest in their own right, most notably *Aristorius* (with *Aristory* as its linguistically unexceptionable Middle-English adaption). In spite of the unproblematic nature of its formation, based on Greek *áristos* – like an array of well-attested names of classical derivation such as, to cite but a few, Aristaios/Aristaeus, Aristides, Aristodemus, and, not least, Aristoteles – *Aristory/Aristorius*, entirely plausible morphologically, phonetically and semantically, remains nevertheless, to the best of my knowledge, a *hápax* within the entire corpus of our literary tradition – virtually: not taking into account, that is, hypertext pages. Indeed, odd as it may appear, no further testimonies, either ancient or modern, have been preserved of precisely such a name in literary texts, with the only exception of that of a Greek-god-like character in a fantasy story

in recent circulation on the web.[7] Its morphology, however, has an unmistakably Latin/Romance resonance. *Petre Powle* too is discernibly «foreign». Although on two occasions (ll. 339, 356) Aristory addresses its bearer by shortening his name to the first element only, this is a «naturally double» given name: *Powle*, that is, should not be viewed as a «second first» name, much less as the equivalent of a modern «middle name» – a virtually unknown name-giving practice in medieval Britain, and of relatively recent introduction. My suggestion is that the area the name points to in particular is Italy. Between the late Middle Ages and the Early Modern period, it was within this cultural-linguistic environment that the anthroponimic pattern formed by the name *Pietro*[8] (most frequently in its popular variant *Piero*) in combination with another name to form a unit began to meet a certain, albeit limited, favour: statistically, *Francesco* prevails as the second element, although *Paolo* too appears with relatively high frequency, as the persistent Italian use of the compound name *PierPaolo* especially confirms.[9] This seems to provide evidence in support of the play's claim for the existence of an Italian analogue «marycle» performed in Rome in 1461 (l. 57). The formation of this double name was favoured in all likelihood by the widespread popularity of legends concerning the simultaneous sojourn in Rome, and joint martyrdom under the Emperor Nero, of the two major apostles of the Christian faith, in combination with the legend of Simon Magus, as narrated in the late New-Testament apocryphal *Acts of Peter and Paul* and *Passion of Saints Peter and Paul*[10] – a popularity which later underwent a *de facto* canonization when the two martyrs began to be chosen as joint titulars of a number of churches across Christendom. And, as I have on various occasions pointed out, the close familiarity of *The Play of the Sacrament*'s unknown author

---

[7] <http://allpoetry.com/story/7952521-Its-All-Greek-to-Me----Chapter-Two-by-octoberstormxx>, accessed October 2013. In Chapter One, puzzlingly, the character's name is «Aristorias». Outside «literature» in the common acception, *Aristorius* seems to have had a surprisingly limited circulation in the classical and post-classical worlds. As classicist friend and departmental colleague Professor Rolando Ferri kindly informs me, the only verified witness extant to date is epigraphic: a third/fourth century inscription from *Albulae* (the modern Algerian municipality of Aïn Témouchent) in the ancient province of *Mauretania Caesariensis*, where one *C(aius) Iul(ius) Aristorius* is mentioned. Also the *Aristory-Aristorius* pair deserves further, separate onomastic investigation.

[8] On Italian *Pietro* see ARCAMONE 2001.

[9] See the «Medieval Names Archive» page at <http://www.s-gabriel.org/names>, last accessed October 2013, for a reliably useful first source of anthroponymic materials, at least for the historical period concerned. For Jewish names in particular, first consult SINGERMAN, GOLD 2001. The Israeli Bar-Ilan University hosts a specialized research centre for the study of Jewish onomastics.

[10] The early tradition concerned with the two major saints of the Christian faith, their cult, the basilicas first dedicated to their names, is collected in CARNANDET (ed.) 1867, pp. 362-435. The standard English version of the New Testament apocrypha is now SCHNEEMELCHER (ed.) 1991-1992.

with both the canonical and the extra-canonical writings of the Christian tradition is unquestionable.[11] Finally, considering that the play's action is set, however implausibly, in the Iberian peninsula,[12] the choice of *Isoder* as the name of the priest may reveal itself as an apposite one.[13] In the decades that saw the transition from Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages, Isidorus Hispalensis, the Bishop-Saint of Seville (*c*. 560-636) was in fact the foremost cultural exponent of Christian Visigoth Spain. Best remembered as an erudite polymath and the indefatigable compiler of the *Etymologiae*, Isidore of Seville was furthermore a zealous and vastly influential anti-Jewish polemicist as the author, in particular, of *De fide catholica contra Iudaeos*.[14]

Coming now to the Jewish characters' names, the least problematic of the five appears to be that of the protagonist himself, the merchant *Jonathas*. The form of his name mirrors the Latin Vulgate's nominative-case rendering of Heb. יְהוֹנָתָן, *Jǝhonatan*, in its contracted form יוֹנָתָן, *Jonatan*, 'God has given' – Jonathan, in the English of both the Catholic Douay-Rheims and the King James versions, and of general English usage. The name belongs to several Old-Testament characters, but the two most famous ones are undoubtedly, first, Jonathan the son of King Saul and friend of David, amongst the protagonists of the First Book of Samuel, and, second, Jonathan (surnamed Apphus), youngest of the five sons of Mattathias the priest and a prominent figure of the deuterocanonical First Book of the Maccabees. This Jonathan succeeded his brother Judah as leader of the Jews in the Maccabean wars of the central decades of the second century BCE and became High Priest in Jerusalem. Yet, *Jonathas* is not just one amongst many other equally characteristic names immediately suggesting their owners' religious and ethnic affiliation, as will also be the case with those of the protagonist's four acolytes. The name *Jonathas* is itself an integral feature of the legendary tradition dramatized in the *Play of the Sacrament*. In a study of 1992 Miri Rubin, the British historian who has most thoroughly investigated this tradition, asserted – but without producing any documentary evidence to support her statement – that Jonathan was the name of the protagonist of the events recorded in Parisian chronicles of 1290, the earliest extant testimony of the myth of the Jewish profanation of the host later dramatized in the *Play of the Sacrament*.[15] In fact, the very earliest documentary sources are reticent as to

---

[11] See esp. the commentary notes to GIACCHERINI (ed.) 2013, *passim*.

[12] GIACCHERINI 2012, *passim.*

[13] And, possibly, mildly ironic too, in light of Ser Isoder's partly unorthodox characterization: see GIACCHERINI (ed.) 2013, esp. ll. 120, 125-132, 344-353.

[14] See COHEN 1999, esp. pp. 95-122.

[15] RUBIN 1992 (2005), p. 335.

the central character's name,[16] but many later chronicles and histories that recorded the same, or analogous events – beginning with an episode set in 1370 Flanders – agree in assigning him precisely that name. In that year, in Brussels, the charge of having desecrated the host was brought against the foremost representative of the Jews of Brabant, Jonathan (or Jonathas) of Enghien, who was murdered a few days later. The affair, fraught with social, political, and economic implications whose consequences were to last for decades to come, led to the apprehension and public execution of the city's Jews, and to the expulsion of the entire Jewish population of the region, accompanied by the confiscation of all their possessions.[17] The name chosen for the central character of the Middle-English miracle play, therefore, suggests that the unknown playwright may have been consciously working within an established oral and written tradition, possibly embodied in the alleged «marycle at Rome [...] presented» in 1461[18] mentioned in the play's banns (l. 57), or inherited from other sources no trace of which has survived.

Unlike Jonathas's, the names of his servants and collaborators in the profanation of the host apparently carry no particular connotation except that they heavily underline their bearers' religious affiliation and ethnic origin. A preliminary observation is that the choice is determined, albeit to a minimal extent, by the exigency of alliteration, since they are often juxtaposed within «natural» pairs – Jason-Jasdon and Masphat-Malchus – in accordance with that rhetorical device.[19] Far more significant is that all four names have ultimately in common, as we will soon see, a direct or, in a single case, mediated biblical provenance, naturally rich in exotic, oriental reverberations. Yet, each of them raises its own problems. At a first scrutiny, these names do not appear in the customary documentary sources available, not only in relation to late-medieval England, but also to the other, continental areas seemingly pertinent to *The Play of the Sacrament*, namely Iberia, and Aragon in particular. Neither in these, nor in fact in any other European region are these anthroponyms common within the Jewish families and communities of that historical period.

Potentially at least, the fourth and last name of the set, *Malchus*, is the most familiar one to a Christian audience, since it is to be found in the context of a highly dramatic passage of the New Testament. Amidst the four canonic Gospels, the name – ever afterwards laden, for obvious reasons,

---

[16] «Quidam Iudeus» is the standard formula. Cf. GIACCHERINI (ed.) 2013, pp. 26-29.

[17] See RUBIN 1999, pp. 181-188.

[18] Or maybe a dozen years later, as argued in my companion article: see GIACCHERINI 2012, pp. 216-217.

[19] GIACCHERINI (ed.) 2013, ll. 190, 191 197, 385, 386.

with derogatory/negative associations – appears exclusively in that of John, even if the picturesque episode within which it occurs is also found in the Synoptics. In John's text, the disciple Simon Peter, in an attempt to prevent Jesus's arrest in Gethsemane, struck with his sword the servant of the High Priest Caiaphas «et abscidit auriculam eius dexteram. Erat autem nomen servo Malchus»[20] (Io 18. 10). Peter, however, was harshly scolded by Jesus, who then, according to the Evangelist Luke's version, worked his last miracle while on earth by healing the servant's ear (Lc 22. 51).

In the *Acts of the Apostles*, *Jason* – a Greek name in origin, but commonly associated with Hebrew «Yehoshua», hence with «Joshua» – is the name of the man who gives hospitality to the apostle Paul in Thessalonica, and whose house is besieged by «[z]elantes [...] Iudaei» (Act 17. 5) who later accuse him before the civic authorities of spreading false beliefs and fomenting disorders «contra decreta Caesaris [...] regem alium dicentes esse, Iesum» (Act 17. 7). Here, the pattern of the accusation clearly replicates that brought against Jesus himself in the Gospel narratives. Of all the servants' names, *Jason* is the only one which is unequivocally testified in the Old Testament, albeit in a deuterocanonical book originally written in Greek, the Second Book of the Maccabees, rejected from the Masoretic canon of the *Tanakh*, the Hebrew Bible. In addition to belonging to Jason of Cyrene – the supposed, unknown author of the original five-book narrative of which II Maccabees claims itself to be the abridgment[21] – this significantly Hellenizing name belongs to the man who around 175 BCE, under the reign of the Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes, gained for himself, through corruption, the High Priesthood in Jerusalem, then legitimately held by his own brother Onias III. Once he obtained the office, Jason «statim ad gentilem ritum contribules suos transferre coepit» (II Mach 4. 10), that is, he imposed an impiously Hellenizing lifestyle. He was subsequently deposed in his turn by Menelaus, led an unsuccessful assault on Jerusalem in the hope of regaining control of the city, and eventually died in exile in Sparta, hated by all (II Mach 5. 5-10). In this name too are thus implicit, in both cases, pejorative connotations and/or associations, although hardly recognizable to anyone with a less than thorough knowledge of the Bible: directly, in the latter case, indirectly in the former, insofar as the episode of the *Acts of the Apostles* of which Jason is co-protagonist heavily stresses the vicious nature of the Jews and their arrant enmity towards all those who preach the gospel of Christ and their followers, including, or especially, those of their own kin.

---

[20] Biblical quotations are from the Clementine Vulgate (COLUNGA, TURRADO [eds] 1977).

[21] «Itemque ab Iasone Cyrenaeo quinque libris comprehensa tentavimus nos uno volumine breviare» (II Mach 2. 24).

Almost identical at first sight with *Jason*, the most problematically obscure name of the series is *Jasdon*. To all appearances a coinage of this miracle play's dramatist, it is unknown among Jewish anthroponyms in use in diverse ages and geographical areas. Above all, it is not recorded anywhere in the Old or New Testament or in the Apocrypha either: there is no known biblical personage of that name that might guarantee its plausibility *talis qualis*. The Old Testament, however, records – as yet another *hápax* – a close enough name, *Jadon*, bestowed on a person of the lowliest importance, Jadon of Meronoth, one of the crowd of volunteers engaged in the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem in the fifth century BCE, narrated in the Book of Nehemias. Besides the evident phonetic and morphological closeness to *Jasdon*, what makes the name especially noticeable is that, in the relevant passage from Nehemias, it appears right before other workmen are mentioned who are identified not by their names but by their provenance: «Et iuxta eos aedificaverunt Meltias Gabaonites, et *Iadon* Meronathites, viri de Gabaon, et *Maspha*» (Neh 3. 7; my italics). The latter toponym, originally designating a military outpost, since the literal meaning of the word is «watchtower, lookout»,[22] takes us to the third of the names given to Jonathas's henchmen, *Masphat* (alternatively spelled *Masfat* in the manuscript). As anthroponym, this name, too, finds no correspondence in the Bible, neither exact nor close enough to let one conjecture a simple transcription error which might have occurred at some stage of the textual transmission. «Maspha», of which I have counted nineteen occurrences, represents the Vulgate's transliteration of the original Hebrew toponym «מעפה». Yet, most subsequent translations variously rendered the place name as «Mizpah», «Mitspà», «Mispa» or other equivalent spelling variants; the different vocalisation, in these cases, conformed to the Masoretic vocalisation of the word as «מִצְפָּה» – in accordance with a system, that is, that was elaborated at a considerably later age than both the Septuagint and the Vulgate versions of the *Tanakh*. In the Hebrew Bible can be found forty occurrences of this toponym, from Gen 31. 49 down to Os 5. 1, although it is impossible – and irrelevant – to determine which ones referred to one and the same locality, which ones, instead, to different localities identically denominated. But in many instances, with particular frequency in the Books of Samuel and of Jeremiah, this toponym occurs in the locative form «(ה)מִצְפָּתָה», *(ha)mitzpātāh* («to Mitzpâ, towards Mitzpâ»), deriving from the transformation of the ה- (-*h*) feminine noun ending into the voiceless dental stop ה- (-*t*), to which is next added the locative ה- (-*h*) suffix: מִצְפָּה > מִצְפָּתָה (*mitzpâ > mitzpātāh*). The latter is in effect

---

[22] Cf. mod. Heb. *mitzpe*, especially as first element in compound place-names of modern Israel, such as *Mitzpe Ramon*, *Mitzpe Yericho* etc.

the form underlying the Vulgate's «Masphath»: a form which that version very often uses as an alternative to «Maspha» (in most cases, in fact: twenty-one out of forty, if my reckoning is correct), even when the source name seems not to justify its adoption, that is, when the corresponding toponym in the Hebrew text is not in the locative form at all (e.g. I Sam 7 *passim*, Ier 40-41 *passim*).

In conclusion, my contention is that in the *Play of the Sacrament*, *Jasdon* is an anthroponymic coinage born of the imaginative fusion of two biblical names, *Jason* and *Jadon*, with the former of which, as noted above, *Jasdon* repeatedly forms in this play a stock pair, «Jason and Jasdon»[23] – consistently in that order. That *Jadon* must have been indeed the name at the back of the playwright's mind is confirmed by his choice of *Masphat* – by defective memory, or intentionally, made to coincide with *Maspha* – as next in the series of four, considering that in Neh 3. 7, as has been seen, the two names are virtually contiguous: only that, owing either to a misunderstanding of his biblical source or to a *lapsus memoriae*, what was in origin a place name has been taken for a personal name. An alternative, and perhaps even more convincing explanation, is that in this circumstance too the dramatist presumed – with good reasons – that for the average spectator of this miracle play, unaware of, and in any case indifferent to, these onomastic nuances, what mattered most in the last analysis was the exotically evocative sonority of the name *Masphat*.

The personality of the author of this miracle play, as it emerges from the anthroponomastic and toponomastic evidence examined here and in the earlier companion article, together with many other elements deducible from different *loci* of the *Play of the Sacrament*, is that of a dramatist possessed of an in-depth familiarity with the texts of both the Old and the New Testaments to a degree and of a kind nothing short of professional: a man of religion, in all probability, living and working within a favourably congenial milieu such as, for instance, Babwell Friary might well have provided. As argued elsewhere,[24] various elements converge on the Suffolk area of eastern England that includes Babwell, just outside Bury St Edmunds, where this now ruined Franciscan house, dissolved in 1538, had been founded in 1263,[25] as that of probable provenance of the *Play of the Sacrament*.

---

[23] GIACCHERINI (ed.) 2013, ll. 190, 197, 385. See above n. 19.
[24] GIACCHERINI (ed.) 2013, pp. 58-61.
[25] See KNOWLES, HADCOCK 1971, p. 224.

References

ARCAMONE, MARIA GIOVANNA 2001. *La diffusione del nome* Petrus *nel Medioevo*, in *La figura di San Pietro nelle fonti del Medioevo. Atti del Convegno tenutosi in occasione dello* Studiorum universitatum docentium congressus *(Viterbo e Roma, 5-8 settembre 2000)*, a c. di L. Lazzari e A.M. Valente Bacci, Louvain-La-Neuve, Fédération Internationale des Instituts d'Études Médiévales, pp. 53-69 (Textes et Études du Moyen Age 17).

CARNANDET, JEAN BAPTISTE (ed.) 1867. *Acta Sanctorum Ivnii* [...] *Tomvs VII* [...] *editio novissima*, Parisiis et Romæ, apvd Victorem Palmé.

COHEN, JEREMY (1999). *Living Letters of the Law. Ideas of the Jew in Medieval Christianity*, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London, University of California Press.

COLUNGA, ALBERTO, O.P., LORENZO TURRADO (eds.) 1977. *Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatam Clementinam nova editio*, Madrid, Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 5th edn.

GIACCHERINI, ENRICO 2012. «Eraclea, that famous cité» *in the Middle-English* Play of the Sacrament, «il Nome nel testo», 14, pp. 213-219.

GIACCHERINI, ENRICO (ed.) 2013. *La conversione di Ser Jonathas Giudeo.* Miracle play *del secolo XV*, Roma, Carocci.

KATZ, DANA E. 2003. *The Contours of Tolerance: Jews and the Corpus Domini Altarpiece in Urbino*, «The Art Bulletin», 85, pp. 646-661.

KNOWLES, DAVID, RICHARD N. HADCOCK. 1971. *Medieval Religious Houses. England and Wales*, London, Longman.

LAVIN, MARILYN ARONBERG 1967. *The Altar of Corpus Domini in Urbino: Paolo Uccello, Joos van Ghent, Piero della Francesca*, «The Art Bulletin», 49, pp. 1-24.

RUBIN, MIRI 1992 (2005). *Desecration of the Host. The Birth of an Accusation*, «Christianity and Judaism. Studies in Church History», 29, pp. 169-185 (rptd. in *Medieval Religion. New Approaches*, ed. by C. Hoffman Berman, New York and London, Routledge, pp. 334-346).

RUBIN, MIRI 1999. *Gentile Tales. The Narrative Assault on Late Medieval Jews*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press.

SCHNEEMELCHER, WILHELM (ed.) 1991-1992. *New Testament Apocrypha*, Revised Edn., English translation ed. by R.McL. Wilson, 2 vols., Cambridge, James Clark, and Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press.

SINGERMAN, ROBERT, DAVID L. GOLD 2001. *Jewish Given Names and Family Names. A New Bibliography*, Brill, Leiden.

Biodata: Enrico Giaccherini è ordinario nell'Università di Pisa. Sulla letteratura in volgare del medioevo inglese, cui ha dedicato tutti i suoi studi, ha pubblicato volumi, saggi, edizioni di testi, traduzioni. Fra i contributi più recenti, l'edizione critica di *The Conversyon of Ser Jonathas þe Jewe* (Roma 2013).

e.giaccherini@angl.unipi.it