

***Piers Plowman* and whiteness in Passion plays**

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An actor hangs in crucifixion, stretched taut against a wooden cross. He wears a garment that conceals his nudity: an off-white, flesh-toned, leather bodysuit. A small crowd of actors playing his prosecutors, including Pilate and Longinus, gather round and speculate about the man's claims of divinity. Longinus is often figured as both blind and Jewish in the medieval imaginary. Here, he pulls out a spear and pierces the flesh of Jesus. The blood springs out from the wound, slides down the weapon, and pools into Longinus' eyes, curing his blindness. Having received the gift of Christ's miracle, he immediately repents and converts to Christianity.

This scene was well known in medieval Europe. The Passion was performed as a drama throughout the Middle Ages, and its audiences developed a familiarity with its bifurcated tropes: devils and demons played by actors in blackface or black masks, and Christ played by an actor in a white leather skin suit. The use of black and white colors to depict the blessed and the damned is common in medieval Christian visual vocabulary. In these ways and more, medieval passion dramas participated in the development of a cultural, literary, and historical matrix of symbols that influenced common beliefs about identity and racial difference.

One of the most interesting reenactments of medieval passion dramas is William Langland's *Piers Plowman*, especially Passus XX. It is important to read Langland's poem

as one node in a network of theatrical and literary works engaging with the Passion in this period. I'm not suggesting that Langland willfully wrote these episodes in Passus XX as a dramatic text.

Readers of *Piers Plowman* were likely entrenched in widespread visual and performance traditions that informed their understanding of the poem. So, I come back to the image of an actor playing Christ, clad in a *whitlether* suit, hung from the cross. What was the *whitlether* suit? What did it look like? And how did it fit into that network of racial and identity meaning-making?

The Christ costume likely resembled common Death costumes in the period, but it would have been more tight-fitting to better simulate human flesh. It wouldn't have been *white*—white like a piece of printer paper. The way leather was treated then would have made it cream, off-white, or sometimes yellow in appearance. People in the late Middle Ages called the leather suit *whit*, which shows us that pre-modern whiteness was never something singular, and that the significance of whiteness was not in the literal color of skin, living or flayed.

In the performance of Christ in a Passion, the actor wears a *whitlether*, literally wrapping himself in a leather suit that signifies the skin of Christ, scarred by the traumas of the Passion. He is wearing a symbolic garment of pain.

So, we're back at the performance. Ostensibly, the actor in his *whitlether* suit performs the precarity of Christ's crucifixion. But the actor himself, even if an impoverished laborer, is not the most precarious in the broader culture. While he's performing suffering, he is not literally suffering. In the Passion narrative, Christ is the most vulnerable, but in the medieval world in which these passion plays were performed, and in which *Piers Plowman* was read, the truly precarious are not the medieval Christians, but the Jews.

Christianity in medieval Europe depended on Jewish precarity. The performance of passion dramas facilitated the sharing of a distorted view of Jews as a common threat. Precarity politics is readily adaptable as a mode of governance that reinscribes the uneven and false persecution of some, but not others. By gesturing to the Jews as Christ killers, the *whitlether* suit's symbolism weaponizes precarity to enforce a dominant mode of Christian governmentality.

We see the same distorted logic at play in modern culture, including the false rhetoric of the "great replacement theory," the fearmongering over gender and restrooms, and the travel bans for people from predominantly African and Arab Muslim-majority countries into the US.

The irony of the *whitlether* suit is that the skin representing Christian salvation is ultimately a Jewish one. Despite Christian efforts at de-Judaicizing the body of Christ, Christ remains a Jew. To don the *whitlether* skin of Christ, in effect, is to wear the "Jewskin." It is doubly ironic because in medieval Europe, Jewish regulations for the production of writable skins for ritual use delegated the handling of skins to non-Jews whenever possible.

On the preparation of qelaf, the parchment made from the skin of kosher animals, historical instructions read:

After [the skins] were taken out of the second lime solution, if a non-Jew is the one who does the work, should from now on assist a Jew stretching the skin that will be qelaf... And when the skin is stretched... let the non-Jew do everything necessary.

But within the premodern Christian imaginary, the precaritized Jew is a stretched Jew. In Chaucer's *The Prioress's Tale* the Jews who murder the young Christian Clergeon, a boy, are punished by being drawn, or stretched, and then hanged. The medieval practice of the

"Jewish execution" stipulated the hanging of Jewish criminals upside down with dogs beneath. By the early modern period, the middle English word *strecchen* had gained the contextual meaning that included penal hanging. This is a historical trajectory—the drawing, hanging, and hoisting of the guilty Jew emerges from the medieval period and is made concrete in the early modern disciplinary machine.

It is in this network of symbolic reference that the cultural understanding of whiteness inches toward difference, be it in color, salvation, or precarity. So, when we read Passus XX of *Piers Plowman* with the context of its historical, material, and theatrical cultures, we can see the tendrils of racial difference reaching and grasping.

A study of whiteness in the pre-modern shows that racial difference is not merely a sorting of markers into restrictive bins of white-versus-black. Instead, we are able to track and examine the crafting of whiteness into an alluring fantasy that divides us even now.