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Witness to a Mystery

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Patronat Del Misteri d'Elx

The festival of the Misteri d'Elx in the Basilica de Santa María, Elche, Spain, 2015

A few years ago I received an honorary degree from the University of Alicante, in Spain's Valencia region. At the end of my visit, my host, presenting me with a lavishly illustrated book in Catalan entitled *La Festa o Misteri d'Elx*, urged me to return someday in mid-August to the nearby town of Elche (or Elx, in the Catalan spelling) to witness the elaborate religious drama of the book's title, which has been performed annually since the fifteenth century and may have roots even earlier.[1] This event—recognized by UNESCO as "a masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity"—is, like the Oberammergau passion play in Bavaria, one of the few living relics of collective celebrations that were once widespread in medieval Europe.

These celebrations, known as mystery or miracle plays, did not have a single set form, but they shared a focus on sacred themes drawn from the Bible and from the legends that had gradually accumulated around biblical stories. They have left very few living traces: mystery plays were actively suppressed in the sixteenth century, both by Protestant authorities who felt they were indelibly stained with Catholicism and by Counter-Reformation Catholic authorities who were anxious, after the Reformation, to exercise more doctrinal control over popular religious enthusiasm. The survival of the *Misteri d'Elx*, more or less intact, is something of a miracle

(more prosaically, its continuance required a papal dispensation, granted in the seventeenth century by Pope Urban VIII).

Ireturned to Spain last summer to see it for myself. With a population of more than a quarter of a million, Elche is not notably quaint. The surrounding highways are lined with shoe factories. The brutalist architecture of the 1950s and 1960s has left its telltale footprint up to the edge of the historic center. Some remarkable finds from the nearby ruins of ancient Iberian settlements are displayed in the fine archaeological museum housed in an old fortress, but the greatest of these finds, a haunting fourth-century BCE stone bust known as the Lady of Elche, was taken away to the National Archaeological Museum in Madrid. Elche's most beautiful physical feature is an enormous grove of date palms, a legacy of the Moorish inhabitants who were driven out in 1238 by Jaume I of Aragon.

It is the annual performance of the mystery play that makes Elche unique. Performed over the course of two days, the *Misteri d'Elx* is a celebration of the Dormition and Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary—the belief that the immaculate mother of God passed from earthly life without suffering, her corpse miraculously spared the decay that befalls all other mortals, and that her body as well as her soul ascended to heaven to be reunited with her son Jesus.

On the first day of the festival, accompanied by musicians and civic officials, the Virgin, played by a young boy arrayed in a white tunic and blue hooded cape surmounted by a gilded diadem, walks in a procession through the streets of the town. With an entourage, including several blond-wigged angels, she then solemnly approaches Elche's baroque Basilica de Santa María. The basilica, which stands on the site of an ancient mosque, was gutted in 1936 during the Spanish Civil War, but, lovingly restored, it is packed with spectators who have been waiting for hours for this moment. The Virgin sings plaintively as she proceeds up a specially built walkway (known as the *andador*) to a raised platform (the *cadafal*) erected at the crossing of the nave and the transept. There, informed by an angel that her end is near, she expresses the wish to see the apostles once more before she departs from this life of sorrow.

After an exquisitely sung choral reunion with Saint John, Saint Peter, and the others, she lies down upon a bier. While the apostles surround her and lament her passing, a cleverly constructed trapdoor in the *cadafal* opens, allowing the boy playing the Virgin to disappear below. In his place appears a life-sized wooden statue of the Virgin of the Assumption, richly dressed and crowned, the eyes in her masklike face closed and her bejeweled fingers pressed together in a gesture of calm piety.

The substitution of the statue for the boy does not break the theatrical illusion: there is no illusion to break. The performers have all along behaved less like characters in a play than like figures in a medieval or Renaissance altarpiece. The first part of the *Misteri* ends with an angel clad in white descending from the ceiling surrounded by four more angels, one playing a harp, the others strumming guitars, and all singing sweetly. On the *cadafal*, the central angel receives a small doll—a miniature version of the recumbent statue lying on the bier—and carries it back up to the heavens. Mary's soul—an icon of an icon of a boy doing his best to resemble an icon—is thus glorified.

The next morning there is a second solemn procession: the recumbent statue of the Virgin, accompanied by costumed penitents, is carried through the streets of Elche, which are lined with the faithful holding candles, and then back to the platform in the church. When in the late afternoon the large crowd has once again gathered in the basilica, the mystery play's most dramatic event occurs: led by a gaunt, elderly man with long braided hair and beard, a crowd of Jews, wearing prayer shawls and skullcaps and singing *Oh Déu Adonai*, rushes into the church and up the walkway in an attempt to reach the Virgin's corpse. The apostles valiantly try to repel the onslaught, but the ferocity of the malevolent Jews, stirred up by their chief rabbi, is overwhelming. Suddenly, just as the attackers are about to reach the body—presumably for some nefarious purpose—there is a miracle: the rabbi's hands are paralyzed. The Jews fall to their knees, convert, and are baptized.

The remainder of the sacred event then proceeds without further impediment. The painted ceiling opens once again to lower sweetly singing angels who have come to transport Mary to her son. The holy statue is slowly lifted toward heaven, and a mystical apparition of the Holy Trinity descends, amid a shower of golden confetti, and gently lowers a golden crown onto the Virgin's head. The apostles and the converted Jews together sing their beautiful polyphonic choral refrains, the massive organ sounds its triumphant chords, fireworks explode outside, and the crowd filling the nave, balconies, and tribunes weeps and applauds and shouts the praises of Mary, Mother of God and protectress of Elche.

The *Misteri d'Elx* is unusual not only because it has survived the vast political, aesthetic, and ideological mood swings of many centuries—including the Council of Trent's restrictions on popular religious drama, the Enlightenment, the scientific revolution, radical anticlericalism, civil war, the attempted suppression of Catalan nationalism, globalization, and the rise of digital media—but also because it is set entirely to music. It has managed to retain this setting, along with two remarkable aerial stage devices, dating in their current form from as early as the sixteenth century, that transport singing angels (and ultimately the statue of the Virgin herself) between the marble floor of the basilica and the ceiling of the dome high above.

The more spectacular of these devices is known popularly as the pomegranate (in Catalan, *magrana*). A flap cut into the frescoed ceiling of the basilica's dome opens and a glittering red machine slowly emerges and unfolds to reveal the angel who bears the message to Mary that she will soon rejoin her son. The second device, known as the *recèlica* or *araceli*, is lowered to reveal the group of guitar-strumming, harp-playing angels. The devices are charmingly archaic—men operating a winch in the attic space behind the painted canvas flap are clearly visible—but their enduring effectiveness was apparent in the ecstatic cries of excitement and the rapt, tear-stained faces of the crowd. When the ceiling opened, the spectators' frenzy of fanning—this was Spain in August, after all, and the church was like an oven—gave way to bursts of passionate applause. In an enclosed gallery high above the *cadafal*, even the nuns, who must have been roasting in their wimples and heavy black tunics, clapped their hands in wonder and delight.

Though the available online videos are substantial, they can only gesture toward the actual experience of the mystery play in its entirety. That experience includes not only the two-day liturgical drama itself but also tryouts, first to select the best singers and then to determine if any of those who might sing the part of the angels are afraid of heights; neighborhood feasts; the

making of elaborate costumes; multiple rehearsals; a succession of parades, mock battles, and unbelievably noisy daylight pyrotechnic events (*mascletás*) to celebrate the reconquest of Valencia from the Moors; solemn candlelit processions in honor of the Virgin; masses starting at 4 AM; and spectacular fireworks filling the night sky with shimmering light and the acrid smell of gunpowder.

My kind host in Alicante was perfectly right in thinking that I would find Elche's mystery play fascinating. But my fascination was interwoven with perplexity. What exactly are we meant to do with these artistic traces of a past in which a dark history of religious hostility is twisted together with popular faith, and in which we can glimpse the sources of some of our most intractable contemporary problems? The strictly formalist literary training that I received, at Yale in the 1960s, dismissed almost all historical and cultural considerations, past and present, as irrelevant. I was taught to analyze the internal structure of a work of art, rather the way an engineer might analyze the machine that raises and lowers the angels from the ceiling: How exactly do the cog wheels and pulleys function, and what are the weight limits of those slender ropes? But though it is a powerful tool for understanding how certain aesthetic effects are produced, such formalism deliberately keeps its distance from the ethical questions raised by works like the *Misteri d'Elx.* It has little to say about the intense, potentially dangerous energies that make those ethical questions pressing.

In a printed text, works like mystery cycles and miracle plays can be treated as if they were abstract puzzles, narrative problems solved either cleverly or imperfectly. But the power of medieval art lies in its insistence on larger frames of reference, which extend to the community of the living and the dead, to the hidden powers of nature, and, above all, to the numinous beings who reside in heaven and hell and preside over our salvation or damnation. This is an art that makes explicit what is often hidden in the works of later periods: the inculcation of the shared values and collective beliefs that define the *corpus Christianorum*, the entire body of Christendom. Hence the vivid effect of what I witnessed on those summer days in Valencia: "This is who we are and what we believe," the whole city seems to declare in unison. "This performance marks the boundary between those who belong and those who must be excluded; it manifests our faith and makes clear who are our brothers and who are the others."

The enormous civic involvement in the array of events in Elche is one of the central features of medieval drama: on their own, the surviving texts—the fifteenth-century Wakefield mystery plays from England, for example, or *Les Actes des Apôtres* from France—provide only a small clue to a cultural form whose vitality depends upon communal participation. Understanding the nature and meaning of that participation lies at the center of much recent scholarship, whose primary inspiration was a brilliant book written almost twenty years ago by Sarah Beckwith, *Signifying God: Social Relation and Symbolic Act in the York Corpus Christi Plays.*

Beckwith's insights were based in part on attempts in the contemporary theater to recover something of the spirit of the original performances. In Tony Harrison's celebrated adaptation of *The Mysteries*, which I saw in London in the early 1980s and which is based on the Wakefield cycle, the director, Bill Bryden, had the audience move around the huge open acting space and lend a hand to actors dressed as workmen from different trades. At one moment we were all milling about as if among the angels witnessing the creation of the world; at another we were

part of the crowd watching the Crucifixion with mingled curiosity and horror. What I remember most vividly was holding onto a large piece of blue plastic and shaking it up and down to create the vast, seething ocean on which Noah's ark was bobbing. It was all homely and more than a bit absurd, but I distinctly felt I had ceased to be a mere spectator and was actively participating in something important.

Affirming their collective faith, the performers in medieval mystery plays generally came, as they do in Elche, from the lay populace. The sense of civic solidarity was heightened in many performances by the role of craft guilds, each of which assumed responsibility for a particular segment of the narrative. (The term "mystery" has its origin not in enigma but, more mundanely, in the Latin *ministerium*, that is, métier or trade.) In the mystery cycle performed in Chester, in northwest England, for example, the tanners were responsible for the Fall of Lucifer, the drapers for the Creation of the World, the "waterleaders and drawers" (water carriers) for the Flood, and so on, all the way through to the ironmongers for the Passion, the cooks and innkeepers for the Descent into Hell, and the skinners for the Resurrection.

Sometimes, as in Elche, most of the event took place in the sacred precincts of the church, but often much of it unfolded outside, on wagons in the streets, and in squares and marketplaces. We are now accustomed to situating performances in specially demarcated spaces: theaters, opera houses, concert halls, arenas. (The dominant model in the English-speaking world was laid out in 1576 when an entrepreneurial builder, James Burbage, constructed the first free-standing public theater in England since the fall of the Roman Empire.) But for much medieval drama, there was no sharp distinction between theatrical spaces and the spaces of ordinary life, while the boundary between the sacred and the profane was remarkably porous. All the world was a stage.

If in the Middle Ages the performance of a mystery moved as it does in Elche from the streets into the basilica, the sense of the sacred would have been heightened, but the principal performers continued to be lay, rather than clergy, and the events depicted remained at some distance from the liturgical rituals and hieratic solemnity of the church. Reverence was often seasoned by a certain playful raucousness or a lingering tang of theatricality. The most delightful of the surviving English mysteries, the Wakefield *Second Shepherds' Play*, features a comedy about a stolen sheep that the thief's wife attempts to conceal by swaddling it as a newborn baby and hiding it in a cradle. Only after the shepherds discover the ruse and punish the thief does the play turn its attention to the real newborn, the Christ child, in the manger. The thief, a boisterous rogue, is one of many figures in the mysteries who leaven the liturgical sobriety with histrionics and, like the Jews in the *Misteri d'Elx*, inject an anarchic energy that flourishes briefly before it is contained.

Such figures take many forms. There are lively allegorical sinners like Mischief, Avarice, and Lust alongside an array of scolds, skeptical neighbors, peddlers, and soldiers. Herod and Pilate both throw their weight around, as do various noisy devils and demons. Judas, of course, plays his sinister role, and on occasion, as in the *Misteri d'Elx*, there are other, less infamous troublemakers identified as Jews. Take, for example, the fifteenth-century *Play of the Sacrament* from the village of Croxton, in Cambridgeshire. This miracle play depicts an immensely rich Jew, Jonathas, who pays the corruptible Christian merchant Aristorius to steal a Eucharist wafer and then, in the company of four fellow Jews, subjects the consecrated host to a

series of attacks. Their ostensible motive is to demonstrate, as Jonathas puts it, that "the belief of these Christian men is false…for they believe in a cake." Of course, if the Jews thought the wafer was only a cake, they would hardly have paid a fortune for it and set about stabbing it with their daggers and driving nails into it. As so often in the long history of violent iconoclasm, the ostensible skeptics are the ones who are most in the grip of magical conviction.

"Now, by Muhammad"—as Jews in this and other medieval plays repeatedly swear, conflating Christianity's two great enemies—"with our strokes we shall fray [assault] him as he was on the rood [the cross]." They are unwittingly reenacting the Crucifixion, depicted here as the work of the Jews, without the distraction of the pagan Romans. But the perfidious Jews are in for an unpleasant surprise, for when Jonathas strikes the host, it begins to bleed, and when in dismay he tries to cast the bleeding wafer into a cauldron of boiling oil, it clings to his hand. His fellow Jews try desperately to pull it away, but they manage only to pull his hand off as well.

In horror-movie style, the shocks keep coming. Plucking out the nails that they had driven into the consecrated host, they wrap the hand and wafer in a cloth and, hoping they have seen the last of them, throw the hideous packet into the cauldron. The oil, however, bubbles up into a mass of seething blood. To staunch it, they fire up an oven with straw and thorns, and then, gingerly lifting the "cake" and what remains of the hand out of the oil, they cast them both into the flames. But the Jews cannot contain the mysterious power they have inadvertently released. A stage direction in the original manuscript calls for a spectacular *coup de théâtre*: "Here the oven must rive asunder and bleed out at the crannies, and an image appear out with wounds bleeding." The "image" is none other than the suffering Jesus, who addresses his tormentors directly: "Oh ye marvelous Jews,/Why are ye to your king unkind?" The Jews precipitously fall to their knees, repent, and convert.

There were no Jews in England in the fifteenth century when *The Croxton Play of the Sacrament* originated. As with all the other depictions of Jews, from the medieval mystery plays through Elizabethan masterpieces like *The Jew of Malta* and *The Merchant of Venice*, this play was performed in a conspicuously Jew-free environment. The entire Jewish community had been expelled in 1290, the first such ethnic cleansing in Europe. By the late sixteenth century, as James Shapiro has persuasively argued in *Shakespeare and the Jews* (1992), there were probably in London a handful of *marranos*, that is, nominal Christians of Spanish and Portuguese origin who in secret observed certain Jewish rituals. But Jews—that is, people who openly professed and practiced Judaism—were not admitted back into the country until the late seventeenth century.

Christian society, however, has never had to rely altogether on the presence of "real Jews"; it has always been able, in Marx's wry formulation, to "produce Judaism from its own entrails."[2] As the historian David Nirenberg amply shows in his magisterial *Anti-Judaism*, Jews, at least imaginary Jews, pervade Western habits of thought.[3] Their presence is necessary, and not only because they cannot be erased from the historical origins of Christianity. In medieval drama, Jews, along with a variety of devils and pagans, emperors and sultans, repeatedly act out the doubts that even pious Christians occasionally experience. Hence in *Croxton*, at the end everyone files into the church, where not only do all the Jewish characters become Christian but also the penitent Christian merchant Aristorius confesses that he has acted like Judas: "I sold our

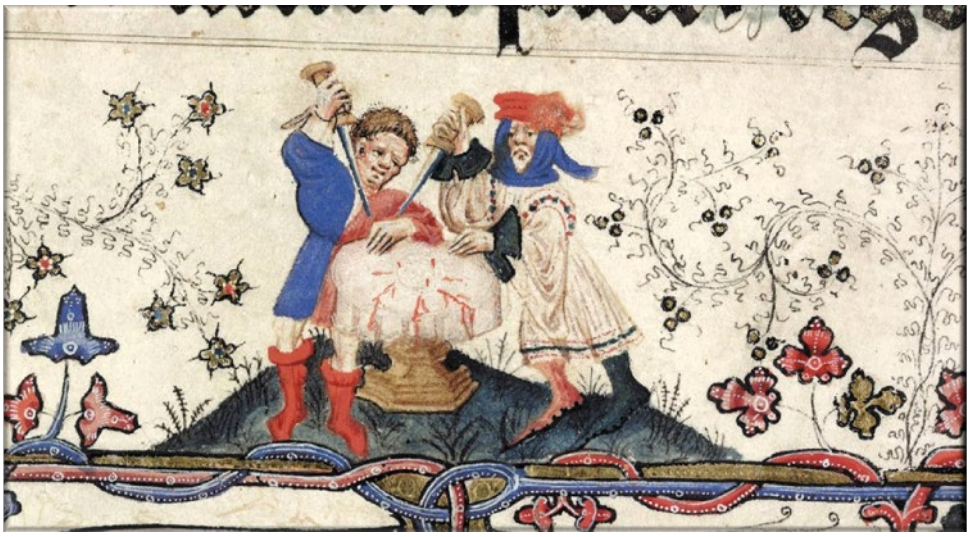
Lord's body for lucre." The plaintive figure of Jesus having resumed the form of bread, the entire community, cleansed of its Jews, can now take communion.

Moving the whole performance into the church has the virtue of highlighting the authority of the institution and its ordained representatives, but it also runs the risk of labeling those representatives as actors and exposing the high altar as a theatrical stage on which fraudulent illusions are produced. Indeed, in place of the altar the *Misteri d'Elx* requires the construction of an actual stage, complete with trapdoor, from which Mary ascends into a painted heaven by means of an altogether visible rope and pulley. To be sure, the Jews' skepticism—their conviction that Mary is simply mortal or that the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation is hocus pocus—is soundly defeated. This defeat presumably signifies the hoped-for vanquishing of the quiet skepticism that evidently lurked in the rational minds of ordinary Christians and found dangerous expression in those whom the church called heretics and tried to silence. The problem is that the triumphant demonstration of the Assumption of the Virgin or the miracle of the Eucharist is ineradicably tinged with theatricality. "The host, the little biscuit," as Beckwith observes of the *Croxton Play*, "is a mere stage prop."[4] If this is proof, what would disproof look like?

The best that mystery plays can do is to deflect the skepticism they unleash—the little, nagging voice that says that the wafer is only bread or that Mary must die and putrefy like everyone else—onto public enemies and to make these enemies conspicuously theatrical, as if they belonged to a different medium from that of the virtuous Christians in their icon-like stillness.[5] As in *Croxton*, at the end of the *Misteri d'Elx* the Jews are compelled to quiet their skepticism and their noisy histrionics and to enter the world of Christian mystery. One by one, as they are touched by Saint John's palm frond, they bend down to adore the statue that they would in their former Jewish lives have regarded with contempt. Then they rise and solemnly follow one of the apostles, who is holding up a crucifix. Their conversion is complete, or rather as complete as it can be, since the Jews remain separate as a group and distinct in dress. Set apart from Mary and the apostles, who seem never to have had anything at all to do with Judaism, these figures, still in tallises and yarmulkes, are in effect marked as *conversos*, New Christians, who have not yet fully merged with the true faithful.

In Spain, such a spectacle of conversion inevitably brings to mind 1492, when the entire Jewish population of the kingdom, newly united under Ferdinand and Isabella, was forced to choose between baptism and exile. But the *Misteri d'Elx* is not a depiction of that event or of the lamentable history of inquisitorial suspicion and persecution that both preceded and followed the forced conversions. In the early fifteenth century, when the performance originated, the Jews were already largely gone from Elche and its region. The substantial Jewish population of late-medieval Valencia had been the special obsession of Saint Vincent Ferrer, a charismatic Dominican preacher. Ferrer, born in 1350 and tirelessly active until his death in 1419, believed that the continued existence of the Jews was a scandal and an impediment to the Second Coming of Christ. Accompanied by a retinue of some three hundred flagellants, the peripatetic Ferrer launched a succession of spectacular anti-Jewish campaigns whose combination of economic sanctions, political pressure, rhetorical fervor, and sheer menace led a significant number of Jews, including some highly influential rabbis, to embrace Christianity.

One outcome of the public zeal Ferrer's preaching tapped into was a large-scale massacre in 1391 of Jews in Valencia and elsewhere. Though the royal authorities, taken by surprise, punished a few of the ringleaders of the violence—the Jews were technically royal property and therefore under protection—the event marked the beginning of the end of Spanish *Convivencia*, the time-honored mutual toleration of the three monotheistic faiths. The Jewish survivors of the slaughter got the message: some fled; others begged to be baptized. So many would-be converts lined up outside churches that the priests worried that their supply of holy chrism, the mixture of oil and balsam used in baptisms, would be exhausted.[6]



British Library

Men desecrating the host; from the Lovell Lectionary, illustrated by John Siferwas, circa 1400

Almost immediately after the massacre in Valencia, stories began to circulate about wondrous occurrences that seemed to validate or justify what had happened. According to reports sent to the king, chrism was suddenly filling the empty vessels of the churches. Such events, the local witnesses averred, could not have occurred through human ingenuity but must have been the work of divine intervention.[7] It is a relatively modest distance from such stories to the fantasies that seem to be motivating the *Misteri d'Elx*. Instead of guilt and shame, there is vindication. Instead of a murderous attack on the Jews, there is a providentially averted attack by the Jews upon the Holy Mother of God. Instead of robbery, bloodshed, and compulsion, there is the spectacle of penitent Jews, down on their knees before the image of Mary, gratefully acknowledging the revealed truth: "*Nosaltres tots creen*," they sing, "*que és la Mare del Fill de Déu. Batejau-nos tots en breu*, *que en tal fe viure volem*"—"We all believe that the mother of the son of God will soon baptize us all in that faith in which we want to live." Vincent Ferrer—canonized in 1455—could not have hoped for more.

Today there are almost no Jews in Elche, and very few in all of Valencia. As a Spanish colleague wrote to me when I delicately asked if there had ever been any discussion of the interfaith issues in the *Misteri d'Elx*, "I must tell you that Elche is a town free from religious conflict or racist hatred and violence. Those prejudices against Jews are only in the play which is just a popular celebration to honor the death and assumption of Mary." If Elche is indeed free from religious conflict—and free from the presence of Jews—why should Jews figure at all in its fervent celebration of Mary? The answer is that virtually from its inception the cult of Mary was closely bound up with a current of vehement anti-Judaism.[8] The vehemence may have intensified in

angry responses to skeptical denials of Mary's virginity, denials most notoriously summed up and circulated in a Jewish alternative biography of Jesus known as the *Toledot Yeshu.* But the anti-Jewish strain long outlasted any direct polemical contact between the two faiths and seems to have become focused, somewhat surprisingly, not only on Mary's miraculous pregnancy but also on representations of her bodily ascent to heaven.

In the *Misteri d'Elx*, as the Jews enter the basilica and rush up the *andador*, they do not say why they want to seize Mary's body or what they would do with it if they got their hands on it. But legends, many dating back to the year 500, supply the missing explanation: the earliest texts tell a tale in which the Jews, fearing that Mary's bodily relics will work wonders and will therefore win converts to the Christian faith, conspire to burn her corpse. All but one of the conspirators are struck blind, but that one, named Jephonias, runs in a rage toward the apostles who are carrying Mary's body and attempts to overturn her bier.[9] In defense of the Mother of God, an angel with a flaming sword cuts off Jephonias's hands, which remain clinging to the bier. When the mutilated Jew begs the apostles to heal him, they reply that he must pray to the Virgin. In doing so, he is miraculously healed and immediately converts. With a palm branch from the Tree of Life, he then touches those of his fellow Jews who are willing to be cured of their blindness and join him in embracing the true faith.

"Well, what did you think of it?" my Spanish host asked, as the crowd, their cries of exaltation still ringing in my ears, filed out of the basilica. I replied that I found it compelling and beautiful; the music was splendid, the spectacle unforgettable, and the collective energy almost overwhelming. I was very glad to have seen it. But, I added after a pause, it also made me extremely uncomfortable. He looked baffled, so I asked him as a thought experiment to imagine himself in Baghdad watching a powerful, moving, ancient performance of a ritual drama that celebrated the miraculous awakening of a pack of angry Christians to the luminous truth of Islam. Would that make him uncomfortable? He hesitated for a moment and said that, yes, it would.

Why go out of one's way to engage with an experience like the *Misteri d'Elx*? One needn't, after all. But refusing to look will not make the annual spectacle go away. It is, as UNESCO assures us, part of the heritage of humanity, one with considerable antiquity, beauty, and allure. Moreover, it is a living link to innumerable other texts and performances that over many generations fashioned the consciousness of the Christian West, and helped to shape its history. If we want to understand that history—if we want, for that matter, to understand the passions of the present—we must not simply turn our eyes away from unnerving, alienating, or offensive works of art in the hope of constructing a sanitized, reassuring canon. Such a canon does not exist, or if it did, it would have to exclude for one reason or another many of the most precious works of the human imagination, from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, from *The Tale of Genji* to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.* Where would we stop—and how could we ever understand how we got here?

But even as I write these words, I glance nervously at the newspaper to see if there has been yet another violent outburst of Jew-hatred somewhere in the world. The August celebration in Elche is certainly not responsible for these attacks, but it is not entirely innocent either, any more than Chaucer's "Prioress's Tale," Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, or Pound's *Pisan Cantos* are

entirely innocent. Should artistic beauty confer a special privilege for the spreading of lies? Isn't cultural prestige precisely one of the ways in which vicious stereotypes are freely reproduced and passed from generation to generation? Surely it is important to speak out, to object, and to articulate one's own ethical principles. Some years ago, as the editor of the *Norton Shakespeare*, I was pilloried for my alleged political correctness—Harold Bloom dubbed me "the chief of the School of Resentment"—for calling attention to an antiblack slur in Shakespeare's comedy *Much Ado About Nothing.* Would it actually have been better to let the slur pass unglossed? I think, on the contrary, that registering the presence of the racist stereotype illuminates the character who speaks the words, supplies contextual information about the period's dominant assumptions, and gives needed expression to our own values.

Exploring the ethical dilemmas found in the "intangible heritage of humanity" is hardly the only available option, either in the public sphere (there was no trace of that exploration at all, of course, in Elche) or in the academy (where it is sometimes thought to be pervasive). Often the aspects of this heritage that one might expect to be most vehemently challenged are quietly ignored, winked at, or even actively championed. "What's wrong, exactly, with euro-centrism?" asks Milo Yiannopoulos, a former editor at *Breitbart News*, reflecting on the Crusades. "And aren't we *glad* the Christians won?" After all, he cheerfully says of fanatics who slaughtered innumerable Jews and Muslims, "the Christians were the good guys."[10]

One need not go to this extreme to defend and appreciate an event like the one performed in Elche. The annual festival, it is possible to argue, is a time-honored civic ritual that has nothing to do with old histories of persecution and hatred. Those histories belong to a past as distant as the pagan rites that were no doubt once practiced on the site that gave way to a Christian church and then to a mosque and then to the current basilica. Moreover, what is depicted in the miracle of conversion is in effect the conferral of a form of citizenship—not quite our form, since we no longer insist upon a single faith as a condition of full membership in our civic community, but, for its time, the late Middle Ages, a reasonably decent one.

It is also possible with a work like the *Misteri d'Elx* to treat the disagreeable aspects as irrelevant and to focus more or less entirely on those elements that give aesthetic pleasure. It may help if you are a connoisseur whose interest is almost entirely formal. Hence the old joke about the German Jewish art historian on his deathbed visited by a priest who holds a crucifix before his fading eyes and urges him to look up. The dying man whispers, "Netherlandish, late seventeenth century, around 1670." Alternatively, it may help if the performance is in a language you do not understand or if you know virtually nothing about the history of its reception.

But such responses risk underestimating the vitality that characterizes the greatest cultural achievements. Living works of art are never fixed and closed. They are subject to revising and reimagining in the light of shifting values, historical scholarship, and newly awakened sensitivities. With a work still performed in public—as the *Misteri d'Elx* decidedly is—it is possible to encourage frank discussion and to hope for transformation. There have been such transformations in the past. In the late eighteenth century a bishop, finding the whole business of the *Judiada* inappropriate, ordered it cut from the performance. The bishop was not concerned with religious tolerance. He simply thought the spectacle of the eruption of the Jews into the basilica and the melee with the apostles was unseemly and dangerous. (Evidently the actors playing both the Jews and the apostles bore swords, and on occasion there had been bloodshed.)

For more than a century Elche observed its communal celebration of the Assumption without Jews, and it turned out that the town managed perfectly successfully to express its identity, reinforce its solidarity, and celebrate its faith. The Jews only returned to the *Misteri d'Elx* in the 1920s.[11]

Even as the play is currently performed, its director has innumerable choices to make in dress, gesture, facial features, and vocal expression that shape the experience and subtly alter it from year to year. The coming iteration of the *Misteri d'Elx*, which would ordinarily take place in mid-August, has been postponed because of Covid-19 and provisionally planned instead for autumn. So here is a modest proposal for whenever the next performance occurs: change the costumes. If there are to be tallises and yarmulkes, have all the men wear them. A director who decided through costuming to acknowledge the simple historical fact that the apostles (along, of course, with Mary) were themselves Jews would, without altering a word, change the meaning of the whole. The strict boundary between Christians and Jews, insiders and outsiders, natives and others, would be blurred. The spectacle would no longer conjure up the distinction, responsible for centuries of suspicion and persecution in Spain, between Old and New Christians. It might even lead some of the people of Elche to reflect on their own mixed ethnic origins. The sublime music and the startling scenic effects would remain the same, but they would arise from less poisoned ground.

It is through such reinvention—awakening implications that are only latent—that artistic masterpieces stay truly alive. Transformations of this kind rarely resolve in any completely satisfying way the issues raised by ethically problematical works that are deeply rooted in tradition. (The costume changes I have just proposed would hardly eliminate the struggle over Mary's body or the miraculous conversion of the attackers.) The experience of such works, for some of us at least, will always remain uncomfortable, even on the page and still more so in live performance. This queasiness is the price of a voyage to another time and place, the voyage that is the core experience of the humanities.

The *Misteri d'Elx* is probably as close as it is possible to come to a living encounter with medieval drama. Buried in its origins is an ancient faith, along with an ancient hatred, to which the poets and composers gave a powerful expression that has miraculously endured into the present. To witness it now is to shuttle back and forth for several days between proximity and distance, engagement and detachment, attraction and revulsion. Its music, its stage magic, and its collective ardor provoke wonder, but if my days in Elche are any indication, the wonder is not unmixed with pain, pain that is a measure of the distance between the world conjured up in the celebrated work of art and the world in which we live, or at least hope to live.

In an earlier version of this article, the location of the town of Elche should have been given as Spain's Valencia region, not province. The text above has been amended.

1
In a history of the city written in the early seventeenth century, Cristobal Sanz claimed that the play originated in the thirteenth century, perhaps to commemorate the conquest of the city from the Moors in 1265. Another account, from the early eighteenth century, added a miraculous event: the arrival on the beaches of Elche of a mysterious ark in May 1266, containing the script and perhaps the music of the play. Most modern scholars date the *Misteri d'Elx* to the first half of the fifteenth century. The text, for

the most part in octosyllabic couplets, is in a dialect of Occitan with a strong influence from Catalan. I am indebted to José Manuel González Fernández de Sevilla for making my visit to Elche possible. ↩

2

Karl Marx, "Zur Judenfrage," quoted in David Nirenberg, "Shakespeare's Jewish Questions," *Renaissance Drama*, Vol. 38 (2010), p. 78. ↩

3

David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (Norton, 2013). ↩

4

Sarah Beckwith, "Ritual, Church, and Theatre: Medieval Dramas of the Sacramental Body," in *Culture and History, 1350–1600: Essays on English Communities, Identities and Writing*, edited by David Aers (Wayne State University Press, 1992), p. 68. ↩

5

This logic continues well beyond the Middle Ages. Shakespeare's Shylock also voices subversive, skeptical thoughts, before being forced to his knees and compelled to convert. But *The Merchant of Venice*, written for a secular theater in a Protestant country, does not end in a religious ritual. Shylock simply disappears from the play, and the last act depicts a set of decidedly worldly couples squabbling and reconciling. ↩

6

See Henry Charles Lea, "Ferrand Martinez and the Massacres of 1391," *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1895), pp. 217–18. ↩

7

See Philippe Wolff, "The 1391 Pogrom in Spain: Social Crisis or Not?," *Past and Present*, No. 50 (1971), pp. 9–10. ↩

8

See Miri Rubin, "The Passion of Mary: The Virgin and the Jews in Medieval Culture," in *The Passion Story: From Visual Representation to Social Drama*, edited by Marcia Ann Kupfer (Penn State University Press, 2008); Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (Yale University Press, 2009); and Stephen J. Shoemaker, *The Dormition and Assumption Apocrypha* (Leuven: Peeters, 2018), pp. 83–136. ↩

9

See, for example, the earliest Greek Dormition narrative, in Stephen J. Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition and Assumption* (Oxford University Press, 2003). ↩

10

Milo Yiannopoulos, *Middle Rages: Why the Battle for Medieval Studies Matters to America* (Dangerous Books, 2019). ↩

11

The revival of the *Judiada* seems to have been largely the work of the gifted composer Óscar Esplá, whose long, complicated, and politically ambiguous career took him from Spain to anti-Franco exile in Brussels, to writing for the Nazi-sympathizing newspaper *Le Soir* during World War II, and finally back to Spain. See Eva Moreda Rodriguez, *Music and Exile in Francoist Spain* (Routledge, 2015). ↩