The Chester mystery play is a familiar entity to twenty-first-century theatre historians. Much scholarly labor has been invested in the excavation of archival evidence pertaining to the original performances of the cycle play and, as a result, we know a lot about the material, social, economic, and theological components of the play’s pageants within the context of late medieval devotional practices and urban oligarchical systems.¹ My goal here, however, is to unmoor our understanding of this play as a medieval thing. I want to do this by placing the Middle English text in proximity to archival material that is distant from anything that could be called either medieval or original.

In 1917 Roy Mitchell, in collaboration with Frank M. Conroy, revived the Chester Nativity pageants at the Greenwich Village Theatre in New York City. Designed as a Christmas entertainment, the adaptation, *The Chester Mysteries*, combined pageant seven, the painters’ pageant (*Incipit Pagina Septima de Pastoribus*), and pageant nine, the mercers’ pageant (*Pagina Nona: De Oblatione Trium Regum*), both from the late-fifteenth-century text of the Chester cycle. Mitchell would remount this production at Hart House Theatre in Toronto in 1919 as a part of that theatre’s inaugural season. These productions were among the first postmedieval revivals of the play and likely the first North American performances.² As such, they are manifestations of late nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century medievalism, consistent with the ecumenical spiritualism of theosophy and the anti-industrial aesthetic of the Arts and Crafts movement. These productions were
also made possible by the relatively recent availability of antiquarian and scholarly editions of the medieval play. The archive of the Mitchell revival is remarkably rich; it includes annotated play scripts, photographs, programs, reviews, manifestos and articles, journal entries, and personal correspondence that solicit strong affective engagement as they unfold Mitchell’s near-fanatical obsession with the medieval play’s vitality. I use this material to address two of the initial questions posed to contributors by the editors of this collection: how might we think critically about the contemporary and past historiographical methodologies used to write theatrical and performance histories; and how might we resituate theorizations of the archive, periodization, and the past within our research? I want to suggest that considering historical drama outside of its native performance context makes familiar things strange in productive ways. I am not trying to provide a new reading of the medieval text exactly, but I do want to suggest that the Chester Nativities’ remediated form, in all its enchanting complexity, poses the interplay between motion and stillness (and by extension light and darkness) as a possible modality for understanding the dramaturgical design of theatrical wonder that underpins the painters’ and the mercers’ pageants. Likewise, the medieval text provides experimental material for an emergent modernist theatre seeking to explore alternative spiritualities by releasing the iconic and corporeal materialities of religious plays from the bookish restraints of late-nineteenth-century antiquarianism. It is the conversation taking place between the medieval and the modern that I want to hear. It isn’t a conversation that is out of time or of all time. It is neither an original nor a universal conversation, rather, it is multitemporal and variously located—dynamic in a manner that is madly cumulative rather than neatly specific.

In order to enable this project I want to appeal to a theoretical scaffold that supports a different kind of historiography, thus permitting a discussion of the modern production that doesn’t lose sight of the medieval text, as studies of modern revivals often do. My work appeals to Jonathan Gil Harris’s interrogation of the “time of material culture.” Harris would call the remains of medieval cycle drama—the play manuscripts, the accounts, the matter meticulously collected by the REED project—“ethnographic curio[s]” valued because they “materialize [...] moment[s] unfamiliar to us.” Harris also claims, however, that historical artifacts can challenge conventional models of temporality and historicity, according to which any object or phenomenon has “citizenship” in a singular historical moment. Drawing