

## The Fourteenth Century Tree of Jesse in the Nave of York Minster

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Window sXXXIII situated in the nave of York Minster is a heavily repaired example of a fourteenth century Tree of Jesse design. The subject is familiar to observers of medieval religious art and perhaps best known in stained glass. The Tree of Jesse as a devotional theme in artwork can be traced back as far as the eleventh century, yet it is frequently seen as originating in its most familiar form in the stained glass of St Denis cathedral in 1145 in a window commissioned by Abbot Suger.<sup>1</sup> (fig.1) In this window the fundamental elements of the depiction of the Tree were established and were to disseminate, in a relatively restricted form, through the cathedrals and churches of France and England in the twelfth century. By the thirteenth century a discernible iconography had been established. The Jesse Tree of the Minster nave, however, which has been dated to c.1310-1320<sup>2</sup>, represents a departure from this tradition and the design emphasises different aspects of the Jesse Tree's iconography than those of its predecessors. All of the representations of the Jesse Tree do share a universal origin in their

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<sup>1</sup> Both Arthur Watson and Emile Male place the emergence of a developed imagery of the Tree of Jesse no earlier than the eleventh century. A. Watson, *The Early Iconography of the Tree of Jesse* (Oxford, 1934), pp.1-2; E. Male, *The Gothic Image: Religious Art in France of the Thirteenth Century*, trans. D. Nussey (New York, 1972), p.165n. The unpublished dissertation of Emanda Johnson catalogues the development of the iconography of the Jesse Tree during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, locating in the St Denis window of c.1145 the tradition's model and demonstrating the stasis of the design in this period. E.R. Johnson, 'The Tree of Jesse in England and Northern France in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries' (MA diss., Southern Methodist University, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Friends of York Minster, 'The Jesse Window in the Nave', *JBSMGP* 11 (1951-52): 26-34. The window is dated by the conviction that the glass of the window was made for that specific setting and therefore could not pre-date the building work of the nave. No trace of silver stain was found in the window, which presumably makes it earlier than the earliest use of the stain in the windows of the nave.

literal interpretation of the prophecy of Isaiah, where Christ is shown as a descendent of the royal house of David.

And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots. (Isaiah 11:1)

The rod, ‘*virga*’ in Latin, represents the Virgin Mary and is depicted as a stem that emanates from the loins of a typically recumbent Jesse. In early manuscript and sculptural representation of the subject the Virgin was often the focus of the Tree. (figs 2 and 3) Her significance as the ‘*virga*’ is echoed in Isaiah’s prediction of the virgin birth of the Messiah. “Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel”.<sup>3</sup> In an inversion of standard modern day ‘family trees’, the focus, Christ, is shown in the top branches and His ancestors appear beneath. This composition means that the vine’s source at Jesse is emphasized and is particularly effective in the medium of stained glass where the ‘reading’ of the window begins at the lower panels and the eye is drawn upwards towards Christ at the apex. In the windows of the twelfth century and later, the Tree, after leaving its root at Jesse, becomes a vine, which is a common metaphor in both the Old and New Testaments and correspondingly in both early and medieval religious art.<sup>4</sup> The vine reaches upwards and outwards to embrace a succession of kings who represent the

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<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 7:14. All scriptural quotations are taken from the Authorized Version.

<sup>4</sup> Psalms 80 and Isaiah 5:7. Christ describes Himself as the vine in an address to the Apostles (John 15:1-6), “I am the true vine, and my father is the vinegrower...” The symbol was popular from the days of early Christian art and can be seen in the catacombs. By the middle ages the image came to be associated more with eucharistic devotion and the humanity of Christ, relating well to the Tree of Jesse which delineates Christ’s earthly heritage. P. and L. Murray (eds.), *The Oxford Companion to Christian Art and Architecture* (Oxford, 1996), p. 560.

generations of the House of Judah. The Virgin and Christ are depicted in the central stem. An important component of the imagery of the Tree of Jesse is the inclusion of prophets who, in the stained glass depictions of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, commonly assume a more subsidiary or marginal place in the branches. In both manuscript and glass form it is common that, whilst the figures of the genealogy are presented face-on, the prophets are dedicated considerably less space and are usually shown in profile and facing inwards, either gesturing to Christ as the focus of the Tree or else seemingly speaking to each other across the stem as though participating in a dialogue.(fig. 4)

As yet, little has been done to map the progress and development of the Tree of Jesse design beyond the thirteenth century.<sup>5</sup> England is home to a number of extant (if for the most part badly damaged) Jesse Tree windows in her churches and cathedrals and has produced a host of Psalters in which the imagery is repeated, predominantly featuring on the ‘beatus’ page illumination.<sup>6</sup> The tree of Jesse that is situated in the nave of York Minster was extensively restored in 1950 (figs. 5 and 6) and little is known of the window’s history prior to Torre’s description in the 1670s.<sup>7</sup> Before the restoration it is evident that the window had been significantly damaged by both time and through ruinous ‘repair’ work: the hand of William

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<sup>5</sup> Notable exceptions are H.T. Kirby, ‘The Jesse Tree Motif in Stained Glass. A Comparative Study of Some English Examples’, *Journal of the British Society of Master Glass-Painters* 13 (1960-61):313-320; 434-424; C. Woodforde, ‘A Group of Fourteenth Century Windows Showing the Tree of Jesse’, *JBSMGP* 6 (1935-7): 184-190.

<sup>6</sup> The Jesse Tree became a common subject of the illumination of the Beatus page of Psalters in the fourteenth century, replacing the image of David and Goliath. H. Helsinger, ‘Images on the Beatus Page of some Medieval Psalters’, *Art Bulletin* 53 (1971): 168.

<sup>7</sup> Torre, *York Minster*, f23v.

Peckett, an eighteenth century glass-painter, is commemorated in the glass itself. Although our knowledge of the original state of the window is limited, sufficient evidence remains to allow us to comment on its position in the history of the Jesse Tree arrangement.

The window, which accords to the uniform layout of the nave, consists of three lights each of seven panels. It is surmounted by a tracery made up of three quatrefoils, which have been filled with modern glass since Peckett's work of 1789 and now have no bearing on the theme of the window. Unlike the rest of the windows of the nave, however, the Jesse window does not incorporate a format of alternating white and coloured horizontal 'bands', though the design is set upon a background of square quarries with a black and white hatched vine leaf pattern. This colour scheme represents a departure from the Jesse Tree windows of twelfth and thirteenth century France surveyed by Johnson, which were all predominantly blue or red in colour and had a white stem. The traditional colour scheme is upheld in some way, however, by the placement of ruby glass in the backgrounds of the vine whorls in the central light and by Christ's blue nimbus.<sup>8</sup> The vine itself represents a greater departure from tradition. The density of the stem and the deepness of the colour have no precedent in English and French glass of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. There is a new emphasis on a more naturalistic depiction of the Tree and its foliage, the overall effect of which is to draw greater attention to the stem itself, highlighting the genealogical aspect. The prophets too are fully enclosed by the vine whorls and this draws them into the subject. One interesting feature is that although the central stem that encloses the key figures of the ancestry is undoubtedly a vine, the stem of the two outer lights bears oak leaves. The oak came to represent Christ in the Middle Ages due to its association as one of the species of tree from which the cross may have been made. It is in this variance in the

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<sup>8</sup> I have been able to locate only black and white illustrations of the window.

tree's fruit that the distinction between the two groups and their function in the tree is drawn.

When the restoration of 1950 brought the window to its current state the restorers, again consulting Torre's description could identify that, not only had the window suffered damage and careless restoration, but the panels themselves had been rearranged since the seventeenth century. An entirely new 'Jesse' panel had to be made for the base of the central light and amongst the 'prophet' panels of the left light a grisaille featuring the armorial of the Minster had been intruded into the top section.<sup>9</sup> A further intrusion was that of a 'king' panel into the right light that housed the prophets. In 1950 this panel was removed to the central light and main stem of the Tree where it now resides between Solomon and the Virgin, conveniently filling a space left there and necessitating the construction of a new prophet figure for the empty panel in the right light. Two fragments of scrolls with the characters 'I' and 'O', found elsewhere in the jumbled body of the window, led the restoration team to name the king Josiah.<sup>10</sup> I would suggest, however, that although the gap in the window must have originally contained a king, 'Josiah', is not that king. The principal reason for this reservation is that the 'Josiah' figure is standing and can be seen clearly in this aspect in both pre-and post-restoration photographs. (Figs. 7 and 8) He is also depicted not face-on but inclining slightly to his right – or towards the centre of the Tree if he was placed in the right light. A standing king breaks with the tradition of the representation of kings in Jesse Trees and, more crucially, it interrupts the continuity of the Minster Jesse where the surrounding figures of David, Solomon, the Virgin and Christ are all enthroned. In addition, in his description of the window in the 1670s, Torre clearly describes

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<sup>9</sup> FYM, 'Jesse Window', pp.31-33.

<sup>10</sup> The figures of the Minster Jesse were identified originally by name scrolls.

the figures of the central light as enthroned.<sup>11</sup>

The identification of the Josiah figure as that of a king rests on his possessing a crowned head, which has actually been confirmed as a later, fifteenth century head, and holding a sceptre, which I cannot locate in the photographs of the panel in pre-restoration state (fig. 7).<sup>12</sup> There are no obvious differences between the style of dress of the prophets and the kings, nor would the colour scheme be affected if the green-clad figure of 'Josiah' did in fact belong to a side light. I would suggest, therefore, that the 'king' figure currently residing above Solomon has been wrongly identified and is in fact a prophet, that he did originally inhabit a panel of the right light and that his bodily inclination to his right suggests that he too once took part in the 'dialogue' across the Tree's stem. The original king panel from the central light has, I believe, been lost.

The prophets in the side lights of the Jesse Tree in the Minster nave are worthy of note in several respects. Not all Jesse Trees contained the same prophets or even the same number of figures. In some depictions of the motif the prophets included are not intended to be seen by individual characteristics or impart any personal significance but are rather there merely to represent the notion of their collective prophecy of the Messiah.<sup>13</sup> In the Jesse Tree of the

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<sup>11</sup> Torre, *York Minster*, f23v.

<sup>12</sup> FYM, 'Jesse Window', p.32.

<sup>13</sup> There is a huge variety in the amount of prophets included in the Tree of Jesse design. J.T. Kirby suggested a possible pool of sixteen prophets and, with the addition of kings and patriarch figures, a possible sixty-four characters that could have been included in the design. In the glazed Trees of the St Denis model the prophets do not seem to have any personal significance at all and instead blend into the design. Arthur Watson proposed that space alone dictated the number of prophets depicted in the design in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Kirby, 'Jesse Tree Motif', p.313; Watson, *Tree of Jesse*, p.19.

Minster nave, however, the prophets depicted were not chosen randomly nor indeed for their prophecies alone but for the prefiguring of events of the life and works of Christ that appear in their Books or their narratives. In this role as Old Testament ‘types’ there is significance in the inclusion of twelve prophets in the window, which pre-empts the number of apostles. The prophets’ elevated status in this scheme would explain the greater physical prominence given the figures here.

At the top of the Minster Jesse Tree the enthroned Christ is flanked by figures identified by original scrolls as Moses and Elijah who have, since the 1950 restoration, been set back in the positions described by Torre.<sup>14</sup> The arrangement is significant, symbolizing the Transfiguration, described in Matthew 17:1-8, and Christ’s conversation with the two Old Testament figures. The lives of both Moses (not actually a prophet but a patriarch) and Elijah provide many examples of symbolic prefigurations of the life of Christ. The inclusion of this New Testament event epitomizes the acceptance of Christ by the Old Testament figures as the heir to their Law and more importantly represents the dual natures of the human and divine as united in Christ. The Transfiguration and its characters are therefore pivotal in uniting the two books of the Bible and are a perfect example of the typology that follows in the rest of Minster Jesse Tree.

The other eight known prophets shown in the Minster Jesse Tree each have aspects in their stories that in some way pre-empt the works of Christ rather than just foretell of His coming. The Tetramorph, the symbol of the four Evangelists, and the Resurrection are signified through the inclusion of Ezekiel.<sup>15</sup> It is not improbable that one of the unnamed figures that the

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<sup>14</sup> FYM, ‘Jesse Window’, pp.30-31.

<sup>15</sup> Ezekiel 3:18-21;Ezekiel 7:1-5.

1950 restorers named Elisha is in fact he, as the life of Elisha paralleled Christ's work in a number of miracles, including the curing of leprosy and the multiplying of loaves to feed a gathering of one hundred.<sup>16</sup> It is apparent that the prophets depicted in the Minster Jesse were not randomly selected but were chosen because they represent specific parallels to the life of Christ.

One of the most striking features of the Minster Jesse is the large Virgin Mary panel. This is even more remarkable when compared with the glazed Trees of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries where, as described earlier, the Virgin was relegated to a more minor role and the Marian theme of the earliest examples gave way to an emphasis on genealogy. This figure, crowned, enthroned and robed in sapphire is certainly an arresting component of the Minster Tree and represents something of a return to the pre-St Denis (and pre-stained glass) depiction of the subject. Although heavily restored it is clear from Torre's description that the panel was always meant to represent a single figure and not, for example, a Virgin and Child, which was a common scene in the earlier Jesse Trees. Mary, portrayed as the 'Queen of Heaven', provides the link between her son's divine office as judge and His human ancestry below. It is possible that the prominence of the Virgin in the window could locate the window in a Marian context or could be related to the position of the window in the Minster. Although there is nothing extant to suggest a fully realised Marian cycle in the glazing of the south aisle it is plausible that beneath the window stood either an altar or a dedication to the Virgin. The window directly opposite the Jesse Tree is the 'Penitentiary' window of the north aisle (nXXVII) which does feature scenes from the Coronation of the Virgin and has been dated to

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<sup>16</sup> Kings 1 and 2.



the early fourteenth century.<sup>17</sup> However, from study of the rest of the windows and from the dating of the glass it appears that the windows of the south aisle windows were glazed first, rendering a projected ‘mirroring’ effect unlikely.<sup>18</sup>

An interesting and atypical aspect of the window is the ‘missing’ iconography belonging to Christ. It is standard in Jesse Trees to in some way include a depiction of the descent of the Holy Spirit, either as a single dove or as an aureole composed of seven doves or rays intended to represent the Spirit’s seven gifts.<sup>19</sup> In the Minster Tree of Jesse there is no representation of the Holy Spirit at the apex or in the body of the glass. Christ is nimbed in blue and in the medallion above His head is a cross, which replaces the armorial of the Minster found by the restoration team in 1950. The article produced from the finds of the restoration documents that the Christ panel was in “shapeless confusion” in 1950 and gave “no clue as to how the vine ended”.<sup>20</sup> It is likely that the medallion above Christ’s head originally contained the dove of the Holy Spirit, an image so fundamental to the representation of this theme, but a detail that escaped the attention of the restorers. A further possibility is that the three quatrefoils of the tracery contained this imagery. Unfortunately, the contents of these panels can only ever be speculated upon, being now filled with eighteenth century glass and even at the time of Torre’s visit filled with broken pieces of imagery, none of which appear to have been related directly

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<sup>17</sup> J. Toy, *A Guide and Index to the Windows of York Minster* (York, 1985), p.18.

<sup>18</sup> F. Harrison, *The Painted Glass of York* (Oxford, 1927), pp.22-47; D. O’Connor and J. Haselock, ‘The Stained and Painted Glass’ in G.E. Aylmer and R. Cant (eds.) *A History of York Minster* (York, 1077), pp.313-393.

<sup>19</sup> Isaiah 11:2.

<sup>20</sup> FYM, ‘Jesse Window’, p.32.

to the theme of the window.<sup>21</sup>

It is clear from a detailed analysis of the Minster Jesse that a departure in both content and style had occurred since a standardised depiction of the subject had spread across France and England in the two preceding centuries. In order to establish the significance of this deviation it is necessary to establish whether this is an isolated example or if we can locate a more general shift in the design. To this purpose I will refer to two very different contemporary examples. The first, a Jesse Tree dating to the early fourteenth century, is found in the east window of Dorchester Cathedral, Oxfordshire. (fig.9) The design is highly unusual, incorporating characters from the genealogy in both the glass and carved into the mullions of the window. The central vertical jamb forms the main stem of the Tree and springs from the loins of Jesse who is carved into the windowsill. The window is not only unique in its presentation of its subject, the content is different too in that it is the only known surviving example where quotations from the genealogy given by Matthew are used in the glass itself, where they appear in the scrolls held by the prophets and kings. A further divergence in the style and content of the Jesse Tree is represented well in the great east window of Selby Abbey, Yorkshire, where it forms the basis of a doom scene. The window was constructed in a campaign of the 1320s-1330s and represents a new direction for the subject in glass that would become popular.<sup>22</sup> In these two examples very different focuses and uses of the subject are apparent, as is their divergence from the York Minster Jesse. Although the Jesse Tree had, by

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<sup>21</sup> Torre, *York Minster*, f.23v.

<sup>22</sup> The Jesse Tree as part of an apocalypse was familiar in some areas of art in the earlier period, for example in the porticos of Santiago de Compostella and Chartres. However, the uniting of the schemes in windows on such a large scale seems to have occurred in the fourteenth century.

the early fourteenth century, long been a popular subject in glass due in part perhaps to the flexibility of the spatial element of the design, such an adaptation in the overriding theme of the work was new and indicates a set of influences drawn from sources other than the St Denis model.

A number of factors may have influenced the commission and the design of a Jesse tree window, one of which could simply have been fashion, the familiarity of the subject and the appeal of an eye-catching design which differed markedly from the depiction of saints' lives found in acres of church glass. Other stimuli may have been of a more local or immediate nature. Royal patrons or those eager to insert a regal theme into the glazing scheme could potentially have exploited the royal context of the Jesse Tree design. The English royal court was based at York in the period in which the nave and the Jesse window were being constructed and it is possible to see in the king's presence and amid the prominent royal heraldry of the nave a spur for a design that focuses upon kingship. The royal emphasis in the Minster Jesse, however, is simply not prominent enough to draw this conclusion from the window, had it been the intended focus the number of kings and their eminence in the window would surely have been augmented.

A more visible influence for the window comes, I feel, from contemporary manuscript illumination. As described earlier, the colour scheme and the naturalistic appearance of the Tree is comparable to contemporary 'beatus' illustrations such as that of the Tickhill Psalter and the Queen Mary Psalter.<sup>23</sup> (figs. 10 and 11) The Tickhill Psalter in particular bears remarkable resemblance to the Minster Jesse window. Although six architectural canopies containing

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<sup>23</sup> 'Tickhill Psalter', New York Public Lib., Spencer 26, f.5v dated c. 1303-1313; 'Queen Mary Psalter', London B.L., Royal 2.B. VII, f.67v dated c. 1310-1320.

prophets surround the Psalter page, the main element of the design takes place in the ‘vegetal’ space at the centre. This image is composed of three figure-bearing stems, the central one featuring David with harp, the Virgin and Child and Christ in Majesty at the apex. To each side, entirely enclosed in the whorls of the vine, are five prophets bearing scrolls who gesture to each other across the principal stem. The thick stem bears both grapes and oak leaves and is green in colour, providing an obvious comparison to the Minster window. The Tickhill Psalter has been dated to c1303–1314 and located as the work of John Tickhill, prior of Worksop Priory, Nottinghamshire, which was part of York diocese at that time. As such, the Priory was subject to visitation from the Archbishop of York who in the period 1306-15 was William Greenfield. Visits to the priory and dealings with John Tickhill are recorded in Greenfield’s register.<sup>24</sup> It is interesting to speculate whether the illustration of the beatus page would have been in place by the time of Greenfield’s visit and if he saw and was influenced by the monumental Jesse Tree.<sup>25</sup> The Archbishop’s interest and participation in the glazing of the Minster nave is attested to by his donor window (sXXVIII), which is also dated to the early fourteenth century.<sup>26</sup>

The Tree of Jesse window of York Minster demonstrates a significant shift from the St Denis model which predominated the theme in France and England in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The nave window shows far more originality in its use of space, in the emphasis placed on the groups of figures contained in the design and in the iconography and the colour

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<sup>24</sup> W. Brown and A.H. Thompson (eds.), *The Register of William Greenfield, Lord Archbishop of York, 1306-1315*, IV Surtees Society (Durham, 1936-40), p. 119. The register notes a number of meetings between the Archbishop and Tickhill. The Archbishop in fact demoted the Prior in March 1313.

<sup>25</sup> Donald Drew Egbert, *The Tickhill Psalter and Related Manuscripts* (New York, 1940), p.4.

<sup>26</sup> J. Toy, *Guide and Index*, p.11.

scheme that is so central to the reading of stained glass windows. The window stands alone as an individual and coherent representation of its theme, but when seen alongside some of its contemporaries in glass it exemplifies the increasing flexibility granted the subject in the fourteenth century. This flexibility is apparent not only in the style of the Tree but also in the overlying theme projected by the window. The Minster Jesse's intent is not to flatter royalty, to form part of a doom scheme nor even to provide a focus for Marian devotion but instead represents the cross-pollination of ideas across media which had been stifled by the propagation of the St Denis model. If there is one prominent theme of the window it is the focus on the duality of the nature of Christ and the unity of the divine and human in His person. In this context Mary, once again enjoying an elevated status, serves to form the link between Christ's earthly ancestors and His divinity. Of the genealogy itself, a minimum number of kings are needed in order to convey its point, a fact owing possibly to an already established familiarity of the Jesse Tree motif and the role of the kings within it. Alternatively, a discernible shift is seen towards the increased prominence of Old Testament figures who provide 'justification' of Christ in their function as types and in their 'dialogue' enacted across the Tree's stem mirror the acceptance of Christ as seen in the Transfiguration. The greater emphasis placed on the role of the prophets and the focus on the divinity and humanity of Christ could have been the preference expressed by the window's donor, of whom we know nothing, or an extension of themes and distribution of design already surfacing in contemporary artwork. A particularly clear example of this can be seen in a manuscript of local production, the Tickhill Psalter. The designers of the Minster window translated the themes emerging in such illustration to glass and in doing so aided the injection of new ideas into what was already a familiar, desirable and instantly recognisable subject.

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## Illustrations

### Figure

1. Saint Denis Abbey: Tree of Jesse Window (Photo: E. Johnson).
2. Dijon Bibliotheque MS. 129, St Jerome, Explanatio in Isaiam, f.4v. Dated c.1125.
3. Florence S. Leonardo in Arcetri, Pulpit Panel. Dated late twelfth century.
4. Chartres Cathedral: Tree of Jesse Window, Upper Portion (Photo: E. Johnson).
5. York Minster: Tree of Jesse Window, pre-restoration. (Photo: Dean and Chapter of York Minster).
6. York Minster: Tree of Jesse Window, post-restoration. (Photo: Dean and Chapter of York Minster).
7. York Minster. 'Josiah' panel, pre-restoration. (Photo: Dean and Chapter of York Minster).
8. York Minster. 'Josiah' panel, post-restoration. (Photo: Dean and Chapter of York Minster).
9. Dorchester Cathedral: Tree of Jesse Window.
10. 'Tickhill Psalter'. New York Public Lib., Spencer 26, f.5v.
11. 'Queen Mary Psalter'. London B.L., Royal 2.B. VII, f.67v.