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Does Reading Historical Drama Increase

Historical Knowledge and Empathy?

The Case of Dorothy Sayers's *The Man Born to be King*

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Abstract

Literary theorists have argued that literary reading fosters empathy, a claim that has substantial empirical support. In this study, I consider the more specific case of reading historical drama and its potential to foster historical empathy among secondary school students. Although several educational interventions for fostering historical empathy have been proposed, none have yet considered the potential of reading historical drama. I evaluate an intervention where students engaged with selected plays from Dorothy Sayers's *The Man Born to be King* that depict the Nativity and Easter narratives. After the intervention, I find that these students, compared to students who did not engage with the plays, exhibited higher levels of various dimensions of historical empathy including cognitive empathy towards historical figures in those narratives, feeling more immersed in the historical narrative, and confidence in properly contextualizing the historical events in the narrative. The students who engaged with the play also gained more knowledge about the historical accounts depicted in the plays but did not exhibit more affective empathy with historical figures. Implications for history education are considered.

Keywords: Historical empathy; historical fiction; history education; Dorothy Sayers

Does Reading Historical Drama Increase Historical Knowledge and Empathy?

The Case of Dorothy Sayers's *The Man Born to be King*

Contemporary educational paradigms of English language arts and history instruction, at least in the United States, typically eschew literary texts such as novels, plays and poems in favor of informational, scientific and other non-fiction texts (Bauerlein, 2005; Robbins, 2013). Some scholars argue that knowledge acquisition—insofar as knowledge is understood as justified true belief about the “actual world”—is most efficiently accomplished by reading non-fiction (Jones, 2019, p. 3).

However, in *An Experiment in Criticism*, Lewis (1961) points out that there is another kind of knowledge that is primarily relational rather than merely cognitive. He clarifies the distinction by offering two French verbs *connaitre* and *savior*, which both can be translated into English as *to know*. *Connaitre* is used to refer to knowledge of a person and to convey an intimate familiarity. This conception of knowing is akin to Taylor's (1988) notion of poetic knowledge. *Savior*, in contrast, is used to refer to knowledge of a fact.

Lewis goes on to argue that the knowledge acquired in literary reading is best conveyed with the verb *connaitre*. Literary reading, he writes, enables “an enlargement of our being...to see with other eyes, to imagine with other imaginations, to feel with other hearts, as well as with our own” (p. 137). English novelist George Eliot (1856) similarly remarked: “The greatest benefit we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies....Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot” (p. 54). Understood this way, literary reading plays a significant role in knowledge acquisition that spans above factual

knowledge of the material world and its mechanics. The effect of such knowledge, moreover, is empathy.

If Lewis and Eliot are correct, then such knowledge about characters in works of literature can also be applied to knowledge about historical figures. In particular, reading historical fiction may have an analogous effect of fostering historical empathy, defined as “cognitive and affective engagement with historical figures to better understand and contextualize their lived experiences, decisions, or actions” (Endacott and Brooks, 2013, p. 41). Scholars have posited many pedagogical approaches for history educators to foster historical empathy, but reading historical fiction or any other literary reading in the context of history instruction is not one that has been given much attention. This study, addresses this gap. In this study, I evaluate an intervention in which students engaged with historical fiction by assessing its potential effects on fostering historical empathy.

In a Christian school located in the U.S. state of Arkansas, seventh-grade students were taught selected plays from Dorothy Sayers’s *The Man Born to be King* during the Advent and Lenten seasons of the liturgical calendar. The selected plays portrayed the narratives about the historical events surrounding Christmas and Easter as recorded in the New Testament gospel writings. Compared to the other students in the sixth and eighth through eleventh grades who only engaged with Advent and Lent through the school’s usual curriculum, such as chapels about Advent and Lent or other instruction at home or at church, students who additionally engaged with *The Man Born to be King* exhibited greater knowledge of the Christmas and Easter narratives as recorded in the Bible, felt more able to contextualize the historical circumstances in which the narratives took place, and were better able to understand as well as connect with the lived experiences of historical characters in those narratives. In short, reading historical drama

appeared to increase students' historical empathy, consistent with Lewis's (1961) and Eliot's (1856) proposition about literary reading.

The remainder of the article is divided into four sections. In the next section, I motivate the present study and pose corresponding hypotheses to test by discussing the concept of historical empathy and its connection to Lewis's central argument about the effects of literary reading. I then describe the sample, the study design, the intervention, study procedures, and the analytical methods used to test the hypotheses. Results are presented in the third section, followed by a concluding section that discusses the findings.

Literature Review: Reading Historical Drama and Fostering Historical Empathy

The Three Components of Historical Empathy

Endacott and Brooks (2013) define historical empathy as “cognitive and affective engagement with historical figures to better understand and contextualize their lived experiences, decisions, or actions” (p. 41). The three key components of historical empathy—cognitive engagement, affective engagement, and contextualization—resemble Lewis's observation that literary reading enables the reader to transcend the self and to know intimately the experience of another. Such knowledge is not merely cognitive in which an individual is able to observe others' behavior and deduce their mental states, that is, their thoughts, desires, beliefs, intentions, and knowledge. There is also an affective component in which the individual not only responds to the emotional displays of others but also shares their same emotions. Cognitive and affective engagement with the historical figures maps onto the psychological constructs of cognitive and affective empathy more generally (Blair, 2005; Maibom, 2017).

Aside from cognitive and affective engagement, historical empathy also requires proper contextualization of the historical circumstances that surround the historical figures and events.

Historical contextualization refers to the ability to understand the social, political, and cultural norms of a particular time period. Proper contextualization of a historical event requires familiarity with other events that precipitated and were contemporaneous with it (Endacott and Brooks, 2013; Gehlbach, 2004). Importantly, judgments about historical figures must be informed by those particular historical circumstances. Otherwise, one might assume that the way people view things today is the same as the way people viewed things in the past and subsequently impose the former to make sense of the latter, resulting in a presentist bias (Hartmann and Hasselhorn, 2008; Huijen et al., 2014; Wilschut and Schiphorst, 2019).

The Effects of Reading Fiction on Historical Empathy

Theoretical Considerations.

Since Lewis (1961) articulated the argument that literary reading enables readers to transcend themselves and experience the perspective of another, many other literary theorists have posited several reasons for the phenomenon. Many of these theorists have focused on the potency of emotional experiences to enable readers to understand literary characters and, by extension, their own selves and others. For example, Miall and Kuiken (2002) explain that in reading a literary text, readers often react emotionally to events and characters in the narrative and even come to share the same emotions as the characters. These feelings, in turn, help the reader more intensely immerse themselves in the narrative's events or identify with its characters.

Feelings sometimes assist readers with identifying with the characters or being immersed in the events of the narrative because they reawaken the readers' own emotional memories and cause them to relive those memories. Scheff (1979), for instance, suggests that readers feel sadness at Romeo and Juliet's fate because they are reliving a personal experience of loss.

However, Oatley (1994) observes that readers can also identify with a character in a literary text even if they have never shared the same experience. Instead, he proposes that reading literary texts is akin to running a simulation in which readers adopt a character's goals, engage in planning actions to attain those goals, and then subject those plans to the world and events of the literary text. As readers then vicariously watch and emotionally react to the unfolding of these plans through the literary narrative, they come to a clearer understanding of other people and themselves.

Viewing literary reading as this kind of simulation, Oatley (1995) reasons that literary reading increases empathic abilities because it gives readers the opportunity to make inferences about story characters, which presumably enables them to make inferences about real people. Especially when literary texts present unique characters and circumstances that readers may not otherwise encounter, the effort and activation of empathic processes to understand characters in a literary text is practice for doing the same towards people in the actual world. Identification with literary characters and events is strengthened when the reader emotionally reacts to how the so-called simulation unfolds and feels more deeply immersed in the literary world (Bal and Veltkamp, 2013; Johnson, 2012; Mar et al., 2006; Mar et al., 2008; Stansfield and Bunce, 2014).

More generally, as Oatley (2002) explains, literary narratives conjure and transform the readers' emotions, enabling them to understand their own emotions and, by extension, themselves more clearly. Readers may even extend those emotions to others for whom they may not have felt anything previously. The experience is nothing short of the reading undergoing a "metamorphosis" (p. 3). Lewis (1961) similarly observes that literary reading enables readers "to go out of the self, to correct its provincialism and heal its loneliness" (p. 138). It is "an enormous extension of [the reader's] being" (Lewis, 1961, p. 140).

Theories about the ways reading fiction engages readers and fosters empathy likely apply to reading historical drama. In fact, history itself can be viewed as a coherent story where characters are historical figures who once lived, plots are events that happened in the past, and settings are real places in the world (Andrea, 1991). Historical drama, then, comprises taking the substance of a particular kind of story, namely, history and then making a work of art. Indeed, in her introduction to *The Man Born to be King*, Sayers (1943) referred to the recorded history about the life of Jesus in the New Testament gospel writings as “a story—a true story, the turning-point of history” (p. 28). Sayers’s goal in writing the plays was “to tell that story to the best of [her] ability, within the medium at [her] disposal – in short to make as good a work of art as [she] could” (p. 12). To do so, she had to appropriately “display the words and actions of actual people engaged in living through a piece of recorded history” (p. 13).

Like many other works of fiction, historical drama has both what Lewis (1961) called a realism of presentation and a realism of content. A realism of presentation refers to “the art of bringing something close to us, making it palpable and vivid, by sharply observed or sharply imagined detail” (p. 57). It refers to the level of richness of details and descriptions that the author provides in the story, regardless of whether the events in the story can plausibly happen in the real world. Realism of content, on the other hand, marks a work of fiction when it is “true to life,” where “there is no disbelief to be suspended” (p.59). In other words, there is a probability that the events depicted in the story could have happened to someone in the real world. Realism of presentation and realism of content are the key ingredients for a reader of historical drama, specifically, and much of fiction, more generally, to engage in the simulation described by Oatley (1995). Reading historical drama, then, hypothetically, conjures the emotional reactions, empathic responses, and self-knowledge needed for fostering historical empathy.

Empirical Findings of the Effects of Reading Fiction.

The potential for literary reading to foster historical empathy has some empirical support. Several studies of fiction reading demonstrate its capacity to increase empathy and improve social cognition (Dodell-Feder, and Tamir, 2018). Observational studies document a positive correlation between the amount of fiction an individual reads and empathy as measured by scales designed to measure empathy, such as the Interpersonal Reactivity Index or the Mind of the Eyes test, which is a measure of theory of mind (Mar et al., 2006; Mar et al., 2008; Stansfield and Bunce, 2014). Furthermore, researchers who have conducted experimental studies that randomly assign subjects to read either fiction texts, nonfiction texts, or nothing at all find that those assigned to read fiction score highest on measures of empathy, theory of mind, and social understanding (Black and Barnes, 2015; Kidd and Castano, 2013). Some experiments additionally demonstrate that the effects of reading fiction on empathy are mediated by how much readers feel emotionally transported into the story (Bal and Veltkamp, 2013).

Despite the evidence of the connection between reading fiction and empathy, the particular case of whether or not there is a connection between reading historical drama and historical empathy has not been empirically studied. Most interventions intended to increase historical empathy among schoolchildren ask students to engage with primary source documents and offer guided questions designed to help students understand historical figures and their particular circumstances (Endacott, 2014; Wilschut and Schiphorst, 2019). Other interventions ask students to complete writing assignments that ask them to use evidence to describe and to analyze historical figures and their historical contexts (Kohlmeier, 2006). Studies of writing assignments have yielded mixed results. Brooks (2008) found that asking students to write in the first person from the perspective of a historical figure can help students historically contextualize

the actions of historical figures but can also lead to presentism. De Leur et al. (2017) found similar results but additionally found that asking students to write in the first-and third-person helped them incorporate more narrative elaboration and emotional elements than students who were only asked to recount the facts of a historical event.

On the other hand, some interventions have relied on role-playing and drama. In a case study of secondary classrooms in Greece that implemented these methods, Kosti et al. (2015) found evidence of gains in students' ability to understand historical contexts and viewpoints. Other interventions avail themselves of films, sometimes even mediated through immersive virtual reality, to help students contextualize historical figures and circumstances. Research of these interventions suggests some promise to this approach, though concerns that films are emotionally provocative or that filmmakers have personal agendas have been raised (Metzger, 2012; Patterson et al., 2022; Stoddard, 2009). Finally, a few studies of museum visits suggest that they may be effective for enhancing historical empathy (Savenije and de Bruijn, 2017; Uppin and Timoštšuk, 2019).

Research Questions and Hypotheses

This study adds to the research about educational interventions for fostering historical empathy by evaluating an intervention in which students engaged with historical drama. In the intervention, students read several plays from Dorothy Sayers's *The Man Born to be King*, which is based upon the New Testament gospel accounts of the life of Jesus. Students interacted with three of the plays that depicted the Christmas and Easter narratives. I test whether reading *The Man Born to be King* has effects on (1) historical knowledge about the events surrounding the Christmas and Easter narratives; (2) experiences of being transported or immersed into the story;

(3) cognitive empathy towards the figures in the story; (4) affective empathy towards the figures in the story; and (5) the ability to properly contextualize the historical circumstances in the story.

Strictly speaking, the research design explained in the next section precludes me from making causal inferences between engaging with *The Man Born to be King* and the outcomes of interest, though I do undertake various approaches to rule out potential confounding factors. Nonetheless, I hypothesize that there will be a positive association between engaging with *The Man Born to be King* and each of the specified outcomes. The existing research about the impacts of reading fiction discussed earlier make such a hypothesis plausible (Black and Barnes, 2015; Dodell-Feder, and Tamir, 2018; Kidd and Castano, 2013; Mar et al., 2006; Mar et al., 2008; Oatley, 2002; Stansfield and Bunce, 2014).

Methods

Study Sample

Participants for this study all attended a classical Christian private school in the U.S. state of Arkansas for the 2022-2023 school year. The sample comprises 41 students from this school ranging from the sixth through the eleventh grades. Table 1 presents some descriptive statistics of the sample. One third of students in the sample were in the seventh grade and just over half of the students were male. The remaining rows of Table 1 also display summary statistics for baseline and post-intervention measures of the outcomes of interest for both the Advent and Lenten phases of the study.

Table 1: Sample Statistics

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Male	0.55	0.55	0.00	1.00
Grade Level				
Sixth	0.28	0.28	0.00	1.00
Seventh	0.33	0.33	0.00	1.00
Eighth	0.15	0.15	0.00	1.00

Ninth	0.15	0.15	0.00	1.00
Tenth	0.05	0.05	0.00	1.00
Eleventh	0.05	0.05	0.00	1.00
Outcomes for Advent Phase				
Pre-Intervention Measures				
Historical Knowledge	0.52	0.17	0.16	0.67
Story-Induced Transportation	4.07	0.64	2.63	5.13
Affective Empathy	4.45	0.91	2.17	6.00
Cognitive Empathy	3.83	0.78	1.53	5.16
Historical Contextualization	3.01	0.66	1.60	4.40
Post-Intervention Measures				
Historical Knowledge	0.51	0.21	0.09	0.91
Story-Induced Transportation	4.07	0.72	2.63	5.26
Affective Empathy	4.36	1.28	1.00	6.67
Cognitive Empathy	4.02	0.71	2.00	5.37
Historical Contextualization	3.29	0.69	1.50	4.50
Outcomes for Lent Phase				
Pre-Intervention Measures				
Historical Knowledge	0.52	0.21	0.09	0.91
Story-Induced Transportation	3.96	0.73	2.00	5.05
Affective Empathy	4.06	1.15	1.25	6.67
Cognitive Empathy	3.95	0.81	2.25	5.38
Historical Contextualization	3.36	1.03	1.00	5.50
Post-Intervention Measures				
Historical Knowledge	0.53	0.23	0.09	1.00
Story-Induced Transportation	4.16	0.66	2.95	5.25
Affective Empathy	4.43	0.91	2.08	6.42
Cognitive Empathy	4.42	0.84	2.56	6.67
Historical Contextualization	3.51	1.08	1.10	5.10

Note: Sample sizes range from 38 to 41 due to missing data.

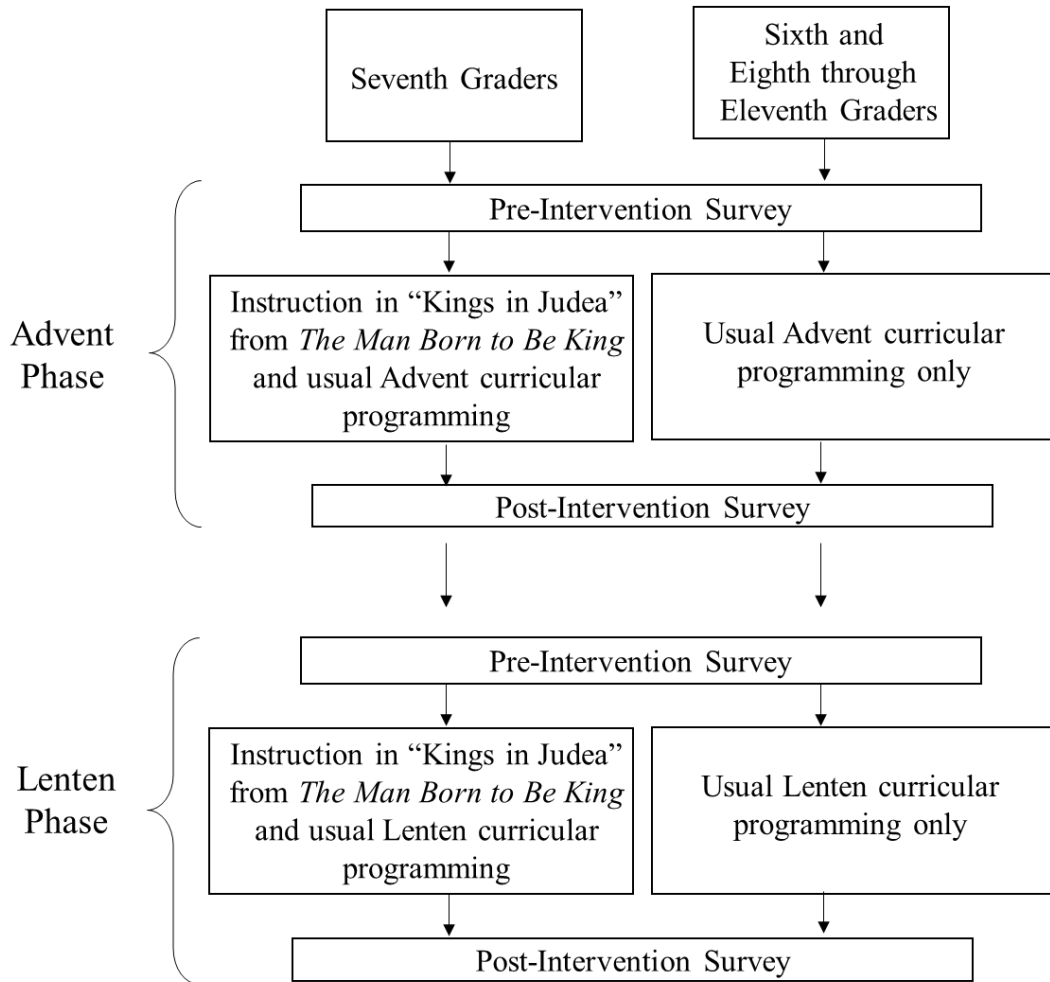
Study Design

The school involved with this study divided their sixth through eleventh grade students into four separate classes. Sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students are grouped into three respective classes, whilst ninth through eleventh graders are grouped into a single class.

Practically speaking, the intervention is most feasibly implemented to a single class rather than mixing classrooms. This fact together with considerations related to study power, I selected students in the seventh grade class to be the treatment group and students in the other classes to

be the control group. The seventh grade class is the largest of the classes, maximizing the balance in the size of the treatment and control groups while also making delivery of the intervention feasible. This study design as well as the study procedures, described next, are depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Study Design



Study Procedures

A few days prior to the beginning of Advent, which began on 27 November 2022, and a few days prior to the beginning of Lent, which began on 22 February 2023, I administered surveys to the study participants to collect pre-intervention measures of the outcomes of interest.

The outcomes of interest, discussed below, include measures of historical knowledge, story-induced transportation, affective empathy, cognitive empathy, and historical contextualization. Together, these measures capture the central components of historical empathy.

In the weeks after administering the surveys, students in the treatment group were then taught the planned plays from *The Man Born to be King* in addition to any regular instruction about Advent or Lent, whilst students in the control group only received the regular instruction about the two liturgical seasons. Then, just before Advent ended but also before school closed for the Christmas holiday, I administered surveys to collect post-intervention measures of the outcomes of interest for the Advent phase of the study. Likewise, post-intervention measures of the outcomes of interest for the Lenten phase of the study were collected a few days before school closed for the Easter holiday.

The Intervention

At the start of the intervention during the Advent season, seventh-grade students were given a copy of *The Man Born to be King* by Dorothy Sayers. Over the course of the next two weeks, students listened to the radio performance of the play “Kings in Judea” and then were assigned parts and read the play aloud in class. During and after the reading of the play, they participated in teacher-led discussions and completed writing assignments about the play. For the Lenten phase of the intervention, the students engaged with two plays, which depicted the Easter narrative: “King of Sorrows” and “The King Comes to His Own.” Again, the class listened to radio performances of them, read them aloud in class, participated in teacher-led discussions of the plays, and completed writing assignments about them.

Outcome Measures

To evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention, students were assessed on five outcome measures: historical knowledge, story-induced transportation, affective empathy, cognitive empathy, and historical contextualization. Summary statistics for these measures both at baseline and after the intervention for both the Advent and Lent phases are shown in Table 1. These concepts are defined in the subsequent paragraphs.

Historical knowledge.

Historical knowledge refers to the students' familiarity with the factual details associated with a historical event. In this study's case, it refers to the extent to which students know details about the Christmas and Easter accounts. Following prior research that measured knowledge of a play (Greene et al., 2018), I measured historical knowledge by asking students to answer free-response and multiple choice questions about the Christmas and Easter accounts. For instance, students were asked where Mary, Joseph, and Jesus fled to from Bethlehem, or who owned the tomb in which Jesus was laid. Students' historical knowledge was operationalized as the percentage of questions they correctly answered.

Story-induced transportation.

Readers often remark about feeling lost in or absorbed by a story (Nell, 1988). Gerrig (1993) likens the experience to being "transported" from one's "world of origin" to the narrative world (p. 11). In being transported, readers' attention towards their world of origin is lost and redirected towards the narrative world. Readers often also strongly feel emotions and motivations associated with the events and characters of the narrative world, ultimately returning to their world of origin themselves feeling personally changed. Importantly, the experience of being transported can occur not only with fiction but also with nonfiction (Green and Brock, 2000; Lewis, 1961). To measure story-induced transportation, I adopted the Transportation Scale

developed by Green and Brock (2000), taking the general items listed on that scale and modifying the story-specific items to fit *The Man Born to be King*. Higher values on this scale indicate stronger feelings of being transported by the Christmas and Easter stories.

Affective empathy.

Affective empathy is the ability to emotionally respond to and share the feelings of another person. It is a key component of historical empathy (Blair, 2005; Endacott and Brooks, 2013; Maibom, 2017). To measure affective empathy, I followed the approach implemented by Baston et al. (1997) and Stansfield and Bunce (2014), which are based on the Emotional Response Questionnaire developed by Coke et al. (1978). Specifically, for the Advent phase of the study, students were presented with a list of six emotional states: sympathetic, softhearted, warm, compassionate, tender, and moved. For each adjective, they were asked to indicate how frequently they felt those emotional states when they thought about the Christmas story. The measure of affective empathy was modified during the Lenten phase of the study. Instead of merely asking students how often they experienced those emotional states while they thought about the Easter story, I asked them to indicate how often they experienced those emotional states when they thought about specific characters in the story, namely, Mary and Peter. Higher values on this scale indicate greater levels of affective empathy.

Cognitive empathy.

Unlike affective empathy which is the ability to vicariously experience others' emotions, cognitive empathy refers to the ability to understand others' experience and perspectives as well as to make inferences about their thoughts, desires, beliefs, intentions, and knowledge (Blair, 2005; Reniers et al., 2011; Stansfield and Bunce, 2014). Cognitive empathy, in other words, is Theory of Mind (Premack and Woodruff, 1978) and is an essential component of historical

empathy (Endacott and Brooks, 2013; Gehlbach, 2004). To measure cognitive empathy, I posed several statements about various figures in the Christmas and Easter narratives, and asked students to make inferences about the validity of those statements. One of the items, for example, stated “King Herod does not trust people.” Students then rated the statement “Don’t know,” “Not true at all,” “A tiny bit true,” “Somewhat true,” “Mostly true,” or “Very much true.” Students with greater levels of cognitive empathy will more likely be able to make appropriate inferences about the characters based on the details of the historical narratives. Though not an exact replication, this measurement approach emulates one taken by prior research in which study participants are first presented with vignettes of a choice made by a historical figures and then asked to evaluate how well the choice fits the historical figure’s situation (Hartmann and Hasselhorn, 2008; Huijen et al., 2014; Wilschut and Schiphorst, 2019). Higher values represent higher levels of cognitive empathy.

Historical contextualization.

To measure historical contextualization, I adopted Gehlbach’s (2004) measure of students’ confidence of social perspective taking in historical situations. On the survey, I asked students to rate how capable they felt about explaining various social and political aspects related to Palestine during Jesus time, such as people’s attitudes towards the Roman Empire or beliefs about the Jewish Messiah. Higher scores indicate a greater aptitude for historical contextualization.

Empirical Strategy

To test my hypotheses, I compare the five post-intervention outcome measures for students who were taught the plays from *The Man Born to be King* with the same measures for students who were not taught those plays, while controlling for pre-intervention measures of the

respective outcome. This comparison provides an approximation of the magnitude of the amount of growth that students experienced with respect to each of the outcome measures. By controlling for pre-intervention measures of each outcome, I also rule out the possibility that the treatment and control groups already differed on these measures prior to the intervention, which would have confounded the results. This strengthens the case that differences in outcomes are caused by the intervention and not a different factor.

Econometrically, I estimate pooled Ordinary Least Squares models that express post-intervention outcome measures as a function of treatment status and pre-intervention outcome measures. Practically, these models estimate the amount of growth in each outcome measure that students experienced during the Advent phase and separately for the Easter phase. The growth across the two phases experienced by students in the treatment is then compared to the growth across the two phases experienced by the control group.

The regression equation can formally be expressed as follows.

$$Y_{postip} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Treat_{ip} + \beta_2 Y_{preip} + \gamma_p + \epsilon_{ip}, \quad (1)$$

where Y_{postip} and Y_{preip} are pre- and post-intervention measures of one of the outcome variables of interest for student i in phase p (either Advent or Lent) of the study. Both Y_{postip} and Y_{preip} are expressed in standard deviation units so that all five of the outcome variables are expressed in terms of the same units. Specifically, all outcome variables are rescaled to have mean equal to 0 and standard deviation equal to 1. Thus, the magnitudes of the effect sizes of each outcome variable are comparable. $Treat_{ip}$ is the independent variable of interest, a binary variable indicating if student i was taught the plays from *The Man Born to be King*. Therefore, β_1 provides an estimate of the difference, expressed in standard deviations and averaged over the Advent and Lenten phases of the intervention, in the amount of growth students in the treatment

group experienced for a particular outcome relative to students in the control group. Finally, γ_p is an indicator for whether the observation pertained to the Advent or Lent phase of the study, and ϵ_{ip} is the usual stochastic error term.

I also cluster the standard errors at the student level. Because each student shows up twice in the data—once for the Advent phase of the study and another time for the Lenten phase of the study—not all observations are independent. Without statistically correcting for this feature in the data by clustering the standard errors at the student level, the standard errors would be underestimated, potentially leading to false positives.

Results

Table 2 displays the estimates of the pooled Ordinary Least Squares models depicted in Equation 1. The estimates for the outcome of historical knowledge are shown in column 1. Students in the treatment group grew in their knowledge about the Nativity and Easter narratives by 82 percent of a standard deviation more than the amount that students in the control group grew in their knowledge of the Nativity and Easter narratives. This difference is substantively sizeable and statistically significant at the 0.01 level. The result in next row of column 1 suggests that historical knowledge about the Nativity and Easter narratives prior to each phase of the intervention is predictive of historical knowledge after the respective phase of the intervention. All else equal, a student who is one standard deviation higher on historical knowledge at baseline is 96 percent of standard deviation higher on historical knowledge after the intervention. The differences in growth in historical knowledge between the Advent and Lenten phases of the intervention are shown in the penultimate row. Specifically, it appears that all students gained more knowledge about the Easter story than knowledge about the Nativity story. The difference

Table 2. Regression Results

	(1) Historical Knowledge	(2) Story-Induced Transportation	(3) Cognitive Empathy	(4) Historical Contextualization	(5) Affective Empathy
Treatment Group	0.82*** (0.20)	0.40*** (0.13)	0.43** (0.20)	0.37** (0.17)	-0.12 (0.12)
Baseline Scores					
Historical Knowledge	0.96*** (0.21)				
Story-Induced Transportation		0.82*** (0.07)			
Cognitive Empathy			0.59*** (0.10)		
Historical Contextualization				0.83*** (0.10)	
Affective Empathy					0.78*** (0.10)
Lent Phase	1.72*** (0.37)	0.41*** (0.15)	0.48** (0.19)	-0.01 (0.14)	0.38* (0.19)
R ²	0.36	0.67	0.45	0.66	0.57

Notes. Sample size equals 75. Standard errors clustered at the student-level are in parenthesis. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

in gains of historical knowledge across the two phases for all students is about 1.72 standard deviations higher in the Lenten phase than in the Advent phase.

The remaining columns indicate differences between students in the treatment and control groups with respect to the other outcomes. As shown in column 2, the difference in growth in the measure of story-induced transportation between students in the treatment and students in the control group is 40 percent of a standard deviation, a result that is substantively large and statistically significant at the 0.01 level. The difference in amount of growth experienced by students in the treatment group and students in the control group for the outcomes of cognitive empathy and ability to contextualize historical events (columns 3 and 4) are similar at 43 and 37 percent of a standard deviation. Both of these results are statistically significant at the 0.05 level. Finally, in column 5, one can observe lower amounts of growth in affective empathy for students in the treatment group relative to students in the control group. The magnitude of the difference is about 12 percent of a standard deviation. However, this difference is not substantive large and statistically insignificant. In other words, I cannot conclude whether the intervention altered students' affective empathy.

Discussion and Conclusion

Summary of Findings and Connections to Prior Literature

In this study, I evaluated an intervention in which students engaged with historical drama. I hypothesized that students who engaged with historical drama would increase in historical knowledge and historical empathy relative to students who did not engage with historical drama. These hypotheses are informed by theoretical arguments from literary theorists about the effects of literary reading. That is to say, literary reading enables readers to visit other times and places and to experience them through different characters. It transports them outside their own selves,

ultimately allowing them to understand others and their own selves better (Lewis, 1961; Mar et al., 2006; Mar et al., 2008; Miall and Kiuken, 2002; Oatley, 1994; 1995; Scheff, 1979; Stansfield and Bunce, 2014).

The results of the analysis provide supporting evidence for the proposed hypotheses. In other words, students who engaged with several plays written by Dorothy Sayers depicting the biblical accounts of the Christmas and Easter narratives not only demonstrated larger gains in historical knowledge about those accounts but also larger gains in aspects of historical empathy such as story-induced transportation, cognitive empathy, and the ability to contextualize the historical events.

Quite possibly, the realism of presentation, to use Lewis's (1961) terminology, that Sayers included in each play about the main and side characters, the setting, and the objects in each scene helped students feel transported. Sayers also incorporated dialog that conveyed each character's disposition and otherwise tacit motivations, which may have helped students cognitively empathize with the characters. Sayers also presented details of the historical context through elements of the dialog and descriptions of the scenery, perhaps helping students make sense of the social, political, economic, and cultural context of the historical events. These unique aspects of the historical drama may be the reason behind why students in the treatment group differed from students in the control group on measures of historical knowledge, story-induced transportation, cognitive empathy, and the ability to contextualize the historical events.

On the other hand, I found no conclusive evidence engaging with the plays had any effect on affective empathy, which is consistent with other research demonstrating no direct effect of reading fiction on affective empathy (Baland Veltkamp, 2013; Johnson, 2012; Stansfield and Bunce, 2014). That research, however, also suggests that increases in affective empathy are

mediated by feelings of story-induced transportation. Although I found that students who engaged in historical drama also experienced greater increases of story-induced transportation, those gains, in a departure from the findings of prior research, did not translate into greater increases of affective empathy. Sayers's plays have moments that conjure emotional reactions (e.g., Mary grieving over the death of Jesus), but it does not appear that engaging with the plays induced any affectively empathic response above and beyond the ways students normally engaged with the Nativity or Easter narratives.

Limitations, Subsequent Research, and Implications for History Education

Whether or not other historical dramas depicting the same events will have a material effect on affective empathy as well as the other outcome variables could be the subject of subsequent research. It is possible that the effects on each dimensions of historical empathy will vary across different historical dramas. Likewise, how the historical dramas are presented to students in the context of an educational intervention as well as the duration of the engagement may also moderate the effects on historical empathy. For instance, would reading a different drama from Sayers's *The Man Born to Be King* yield similar results? Would presenting historical drama to students in ways other than merely reading, listening to, discussing, or writing about it be more effective at fostering historical empathy? Empirical tests of these propositions would be valuable for extending the knowledge about the effectiveness of engaging in historical drama on historical empathy and assist with the development of educational interventions aimed at fostering historical empathy.

Finally, experimental evaluations ought to be conducted to produce stronger evidence for a causal relationship between engaging with historical drama and historical empathy. Though the research design in this study was not experimental, I did collect and control for baseline

measures of the outcome variables to strengthen the argument that engaging with historical drama might play a causal role in fostering historical empathy. Indeed, this causal relationship has long been advanced by literary theorists.

Experimental evaluations might also consider varying the counterfactual conditions. The treatment contrast in this study was between engagement in historical drama about the Nativity and Easter narratives and the typical instruction students receive about the Nativity and Easter narratives in school chapels, at home, or at church. Might watching films depicting the events have a different level of effectiveness (Metzger, 2012; Patterson et al., 2022; Stoddard, 2009)? Would varying the duration of the intervention or selecting a range of other texts yield different results?

Despite these limitations, the results of this study provides history educators with supporting evidence to consider how they might use historical drama to foster historical empathy among their students. Prior research has suggested a variety of writing exercises (Brooks 2008; De Leur et al., 2017; Endacott, 2014; Kohlmeier, 2006; Wilschut and Schiphorst, 2019) and other interventions such as role-play (Kosti et al., 2015), watching films (Metzger, 2012; Patterson et al., 2022; Stoddard, 2009), and museum visits (Savenije and de Bruijn, 2017; Uppin and Timoštšuk, 2019) as means for developing historical empathy. Engagement with historical drama can be added to this list.

Historical empathy is an important trait to cultivate among students in order for them to fully understand history and properly practice historical inquiry (Endacott and Brooks, 2013). Implementing pedagogical strategies such as incorporating historical drama into the teaching of history may serve that end. History educators and scholars of history education are encouraged to

pilot, develop, experiment with, and evaluate those and other pedagogical strategies for cultivating historical empathy.

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