Drama and Sermon in Late Medieval England: Performance, Authority, Devotion

Charlotte Steenbrugge

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Drama and Sermon in Late Medieval England
Performance, Authority, Devotion
Charlotte Steenbrugge
Drama and Sermon
in Late Medieval England
EARLY DRAMA, ART, AND MUSIC

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Drama and Sermon
in Late Medieval England
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by
Charlotte Steenbrugge

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List of Abbreviations

EETS Early English Text Society
MED Middle English Dictionary
<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>
MNW Middle Dutch Dictionary in De Geïntegreerde Taalbank
<http://gtb.inl.nl>
REED Records of Early English Drama
sd. stage direction

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Introduction

IN 1933 G. R. Owst published his magisterial *Literature and the Pulpit in Medieval England: A Neglected Chapter in the History of English Letters and of the English People*, in which he claimed that medieval drama was heavily influenced by sermons.¹ There are, however, issues with his findings because his “excess of zeal” to identify sermon themes and content in vernacular literary texts led him to exaggerate the influence of preaching and to underestimate the importance of a shared cultural background as a more likely explanation for similarities.² Despite this awareness of the shortcomings of Owst’s claims, little research on the links between preaching and drama in late medieval England has been undertaken, and scholars have widely accepted his claim that Middle English drama was markedly influenced by contemporary preaching.³

Such an assumption has significant consequences for our understanding and appreciation of late medieval English plays in particular. Moralizing or didactic speeches by virtuous or divine characters are routinely labeled “sermons” and expositors are frequently linked with preachers, as we shall see in chapters 3 and 4. Both claims imply that medieval drama was explicitly, and straightforwardly, aligned with ecclesiastical authority and that by staging preacherly characters the plays reinforce the importance of the preacher as the ultimate authority on all things moral and spiritual. As such, the role of vernacular religious plays in the laity’s devotional life becomes little more than that of a handmaiden to preaching. In extreme cases, the supposed influence of preaching is judged to undermine the literary value of the plays, with the plays being merely “works of persuasion cloaked in drama.”⁴ The overpowering effect of sermon influence should even lead us to question “the accuracy of the label ‘drama.’”⁵

There are two further important problems with the research on the connections between preaching and plays in late medieval England. Firstly, some of this work seems to apply ideas of nineteenth-century and
twentieth-century realist drama to medieval drama. For instance, the claim that “the interruption of the dramatic business of the play with didactic addresses to the audience must be regarded as a manifestation of sermonic voice” strongly suggests that audience address is atypical of drama, which presumably needs to preserve the fourth wall, and belongs in the preacher’s toolbox. But in fact medieval English drama has no fourth wall and regularly thrives on audience interaction, as we shall see further in chapter 5. Secondly, references to preacherly passages and characters in drama are almost always pejorative—the exception would be those to Mischief’s sermon-parody in *Mankind*—and there is then a marked sense that didactic, moralizing passages and characters, and indeed sermons, are necessarily boring and inherently untheatrical. Although Marianne G. Briscoe points out that “recognizable sermon elements would not conflict with and might in some cases actually enhance the recreational or festive motives, as well as the didactic goals, of late medieval dramatic entertainment,” she goes on to say that “Many examples of sermon influence in the plays ... actually interrupt the flow of the dramatic action.” As we shall see in chapter 3, however, the few examples of sermons on the late medieval English stage have great theatrical potency. (If I argue against older scholars, G. R. Owst and Marianne G. Briscoe in particular, that is not to undermine the importance of their work, rather it is a token of esteem, proof of the important and challenging nature of their research.)

These problems are compounded by the fact that knowledge of medieval sermons, their conventions, compositional influences, and performance has become more substantial and sophisticated in the last few decades, a fact which drastically affects our understanding of the potential effects of the influence of sermons on drama and vice versa. Our appreciation of the literary and dramatic originality of medieval religious plays has similarly developed considerably in recent years.

The relationship between late medieval English plays and sermons is not just of interest because they were the two main performative genres at the time, and arguably had similar didactic and religious aims, but also because they seem to garner popularity at roughly the same time. Of course, the scarcity of sources—particularly of surviving sermon and play texts—may distort this image. There definitely were plays well before the late fourteenth century, many on religious matters and in the vernacular too, such as *La Seinte Resurrection* (ca. 1175), the saints’ plays mentioned in FitzStephen’s description of London (ca. 1170–82), and a representa-
tion of the Lord’s Resurrection which was performed outdoors at Beverley in the summer of 1220 “ut assolet” (“as usual”).

But religious plays in English appear to have become especially prominent from the late fourteenth century onward. The first references to the York Corpus Christi pageants as well as those from Beverley date from 1377, to Coventry from 1392, to Chester from 1421–22, and to Newcastle from 1427. The N-Town manuscript, which contains a collection of East Anglian biblical drama, was compiled in the middle or second half of the fifteenth century; the exact dates of the individual texts are not known but presumably they stem from the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century. The Brome Abraham and Isaac survives in a late fifteenth-century manuscript, but linguistic evidence points toward a composition in the early fifteenth century. The Towneley manuscript, conversely, is post-Reformation; the dates of the plays contained in the manuscript are unknown, but some of these texts could well be sixteenth-century and even postdate the Reformation.

Texts of non-biblical religious plays in English also start to survive from around the late fourteenth century onward, although most exemplars are from the later fifteenth century. The Pride of Life is the earliest example and probably dates to the mid to late fourteenth century; it is, however, presumably Irish in origin. The composition of The Castle of Perseverance and the manuscript of Dux Moraud are usually dated ca. 1400–25. Occupation and Idleness is mid fifteenth-century. Wisdom, the Croxton Play of the Sacrament, and Mankind are probably all from the 1460s–70s. Henry Medwall’s Nature was in all likelihood performed in London in the early 1490s. The Digby Mary Magdalene and The Conversion of St. Paul are generally thought to date to the very late fifteenth or very early sixteenth century.

Sermons in English also seem to have experienced a revival in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. Naturally, there was a fair amount of preaching from early on, nor were the earliest sermons always intended for fellow clergymen. Several Old English sermons have survived and at least some of these texts were aimed at the laity; Wulfstan and Ælfric also encouraged preaching to the laity in the vernacular. The Anglo-Saxon period seems to have been followed by a dip in original preaching in English, although Old English sermons continued to be copied into the twelfth century. The earliest reference to a pulpit in an English church is connected with Abbot Samson of Bury St. Edmunds (elected 1182), so evidently there was at least some interest in preaching. There
must have been crusade preaching as well from 1095 onward; some traces remain of Gerald of Wales’s crusade-preaching campaign in Wales in 1188.

The early thirteenth century introduced a marked shift toward more regular preaching to the laity in the vernacular throughout Western Europe. Important factors conducive to this change include the emergence of the mendicant orders and the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215. The latter encouraged bishops to organize preaching of pastoral material to the laity throughout their diocese:

Inter cetera quae ad salute spectant populi Christiani, pabulum verbi Dei premaxime noscitur sibi esse necessarium ... ut episcopi viros idoneos ad sanctae presicationis officium salubriter exequendum assumant, potentes in opere et sermone, qui plebes sibi commissas vice ipsorum, cum per se idem nequiverint, solicite visitants, eas verbo aedificent et exemplo

[Among other things that pertain to the salvation of the Christian people, the food of the word of God is above all necessary ... Wherefore we decree that bishops provide suitable men, powerful in work and word, to exercise with fruitful result the office of preaching; who in place of the bishops, since these cannot do it, diligently visiting the people committed to them, may instruct them by word and by example.]14

Whether this canon led to more preaching in England is impossible to ascertain, but it certainly led to more Church legislation which encouraged preaching to the laity on the so-called *pastoralia*.15 The most important of these was canon 9 of Pecham’s Lambeth Constitutions of 1281—often referred by its opening words *Ignorantia sacerdotum*—which required:

quilibet sacerdos plebe presidens, quarter in anno, hoc est, semel in qualibet quarta anni, dia una sollemni vel pluribus, per se vel per alium exponat popula vulgariter, absque cuiuslibet subtilitatis textura fantastica, quatuordecim fidei articulos, decem mandata decalogi, duo percepta evangelii, scilicet, gemine caritatis, septem etiam opera misericordia, septem peccata capitalia, cum sua progenie, septem virtutes principals, ac septem gratie sacramenta.16

[that every priest bearing rule over the people [should expound] plainly in their vulgar tongue without any fantastical imagination or invention of any manner subtlety or curiosity either by himself or some other, four times a year, that is to wit every quarter of the year once, and that in one solemn feast or more the Fourteen Articles
of the Faith, the Ten Commandments, the Two Precepts of the Gospel, that is to say both Charities [one towards God, the other towards our neighbor], the Seven works of mercy, the Seven Deadly Sins with their branches, the Seven principal Virtues and the Seven Sacraments of Grace.\textsuperscript{17}

Despite these repeated thirteenth-century calls for more preaching, it seems that their impact was only felt much later. There is too little evidence to determine the quantity of preaching activity before the late fourteenth century, but it is reasonable to suppose that there was a revival at that time. That parish preaching increasingly became the norm from the mid to late fourteenth century is supported by the number of permanent pulpits which appear in English churches at this time.\textsuperscript{18} Helen Leith Spencer, working on Middle English sermons, notes that contemporaries show an awareness of change in preaching practices in the late fourteenth century.\textsuperscript{19} Alan J. Fletcher notes that the written production of vernacular sermons picks up in the 1380s.\textsuperscript{20} And Siegfried Wenzel, working on Latin sermons, remarks that the history of preaching in medieval England commences again ca. 1380.\textsuperscript{21}

That the revival of preaching and the flourishing of vernacular religious drama appear to coincide in time is indicative of the importance of both genres in late medieval English devotion. There need not be any causal relationship linking the two phenomena. It is more likely that both in their own way responded to various aspects of the contemporary religious and historical background, such as rising levels of lay literacy and the consolidation of urban centers, than that an increase in preaching resulted in more plays being performed or vice versa. On the other hand, Pamela M. King has shown the strong correlation between the liturgy and the selection of topics in the York Corpus Christi Play; she has also argued that most lay people knew biblical stories primarily through vernacular preaching as part of the liturgy.\textsuperscript{22} Increased parish preaching may have resulted in closer acquaintance with the Bible and that, in turn, might have led to a greater desire on the part of the laity to enact these stories. Clearly, vernacular drama did not exist in a vacuum and the co-existence of sermons and plays probably exerted some influence in either direction. But, as will hopefully become clear in the remainder of this book, there is no evidence to suggest a particularly strong link between the flourishing of the two genres. That both genres came into their own at roughly the same time also implies that they served different purposes and responded to different needs in late medieval life.
The questions concerning the relationship between the two genres are consequently due a fresh appraisal in order to offer more accurate insight into the problem of possible cross-fertilization, as well as into the importance of drama in late medieval devotion. Were sermons and plays staged in conjunction with each other by figures of religious or civic authority, or were their performances predominantly independent? If the latter, does that indicate a lay struggle for a greater role in moral and even religious instruction? Are there indications of clerical unease at the effectiveness of plays as a means of instructing the lay population? These aspects will be explored in chapter 1. In chapter 2, the question is whether Middle English sermons exploit theatrical features to improve their effectiveness and, if so, whether that demonstrates an attempt to emulate plays, or, if not, whether it points to a desire to preserve a marked distinction between the two genres. Conversely, in chapters 3 and 4, I investigate whether plays use sermon-like strategies to convey their moral messages; that is, do they adopt an established, ecclesiastical medium to gain a position of authority? Or do plays present their moral messages in ways divergent from sermons in order to lay claim to an independent status of authority? In chapter 5, I assess the similarities and divergences in the relationship between a preacher and his congregation, on the one hand, and an actor and his audience, on the other hand. Finally, how plays and sermons treat one particular aspect of late medieval religion, namely the sacrament of penance, which was an important element of individual devotion as well as a major topic of contention at the time, will be analyzed in chapter 6. This chapter tries to sketch the position of various plays within the context of contemporary religious politics, in line with current research that seeks to refine our understanding of late medieval English devotional life and to present a careful analysis of the impact of the Church’s attempts at containing alternative theologies. Questions such as these need to be asked in order to ascertain the importance of both sermons and drama on the late medieval literary and devotional scenes.

But before we can commence the discussion a serious caveat is in order: it is necessary to stress how fragmentary and skewed our perception and knowledge of late medieval English drama and preaching are, despite all the advances in modern scholarship. Most scripts of dramatic events were presumably never recorded and many more that were recorded have not survived; the same is undoubtedly true for preaching. Dramatic texts that have survived were in most instances written down with ulterior (non-performance) goals in mind, making the correlation between the surviving
texts and performance even more difficult; again, as will become clearer in chapter 2, the same is to a large extent true for sermons. As a result, the late medieval English texts which have come down to us very likely do not offer an accurate representation of dramatic or preaching activity in late medieval England. Indeed, perusing the volumes of the REED project gives us a glimpse—but only a glimpse—of how varied dramatic activity was throughout medieval England. Moreover, the survival of sources is not just haphazard. For example, it seems likely that sermons that were aligned with mainstream doctrine had a better chance of being recorded and circulated than those which were less theologically sound—and that would probably have been the case for both orthodox and Lollard sermons. But just because most surviving sermons have sound theological underpinnings it should not be presumed that most sermons that were preached at the time did so too (though that is, of course, possible as well). Any analysis of medieval drama and preaching based on the surviving sources will necessarily be incomplete and is likely to reflect certain facets disproportionately. This is an unavoidable flaw of this kind of research, but it is important to keep in mind that our perception of late medieval English drama and sermons is strongly biased in favor of the tastes and ideologies of the few clerics, bureaucrats, and other individuals who, for personal or professional reasons, wrote down texts. Texts, then, constitute an unbalanced source of evidence for late medieval English dramatic and sermonic practices.

The other important issue to remember is the several crucial uncertainties that surround the surviving texts. Importantly, the performance and textual histories of most of the play and sermon texts used in this book are extremely difficult to pin down. The suggested settings of Mankind have ranged from an inn yard performance in front of a crowd of country bumpkins, performance under patronage of a religious guild, the Shrovetide revels of a noble household or Cambridge college, to a fundraising event for ecclesiastical matters under the auspices of the great Benedictine monastery of Bury St. Edmunds. Actually, we have absolutely no evidence that it was ever performed at all. The so-called N-Town Cycle is, in fact, not a cycle at all but rather some kind of anthology of East Anglian biblical plays. The purpose of this compilation is unclear, but it may well have been primarily or exclusively aimed at a reading audience and have been composed for devotional rather than dramatic reasons; if, when, where, for whom, and by whom the plays were performed is not known. And, of course, it is again unclear how representative the taste of the scribe-compiler of this manuscript is of East Anglian biblical drama.
The York Corpus Christi Play was certainly performed and we have a reasonable—indeed, an unusual—amount of information about its performance. Even so, the relationship between the text and the cycle’s performance history is complicated: did these pageants have a text as early as the 1370s or was the text a later addition? That is, was the York Corpus Christi Play originally a dramatic, but mainly non-textual, procession? And if spoken text was a later development, when did this aspect emerge: by the time of the *Ordo Paginarum* (1415) or shortly thereafter? Or did the actual surviving texts take form closer to their recording in the Register (ca. 1463–77), about a century after the earliest surviving mention of the Corpus Christi Play? Moreover, we know from John Clerke’s marginalia that the text was altered in several mid sixteenth-century performances. How representative are the York Corpus Christi Play texts of the York Corpus Christi Play as it was experienced in performance at any given point in its performance history? How do the late texts of the Chester Cycle—the manuscripts all considerably postdate the last known performance of this dramatic event—relate to what was performed? Like for York, we cannot assume that a late sixteenth-century copy accurately reflects what people in Chester saw and heard in the mid fifteenth century. Indeed, the Puritan Christopher Goodman’s list of “absurdities” which he claimed to have witnessed suggests that what was performed in the early 1570s does not map directly onto any of the surviving versions of the Chester play texts. On the hand, there is one example from the Low Countries that shows that a long history without essential changes is possible, too. *Lanseloet van Denemerken* survives in an early fifteenth-century manuscript (ca. 1410) as well as in a late fifteenth-century print version (between 1486 and 1492) with only a few very minor alterations. The fact that John Clerke only makes annotations here and there suggests that the bulk of the texts of the York Corpus Christi Play had not changed beyond recognition between the time of their recording in the Register and the mid sixteenth century (if we assume he was an objective and conscientious observer). But even if that is the case, it tells us nothing more about earlier iterations of the York Corpus Christi Play. Texts may, therefore, reflect earlier and later performances reasonably accurately, but there is certainly no guarantee that they do so.

The situation for late medieval English preaching is somewhat similar to that of late medieval drama. It is again impossible to be certain how representative surviving sermons are of late medieval English preaching because of the selective and haphazard nature of the survival of our sources. For instance, given the popularity of saints in late medieval
England, sermons on saints must have been widespread, yet they survive but sparsely. (In fact, the same can be said for saints’ plays.) One of the most copious sources for such sermons is the *Speculum Sacerdotale*, which survives in a London copy of ca. 1425. The fact that it survives in a single copy suggests that it was not a popular compilation; although it is possible that other copies were so much used they did not stand the test of time. The chapters in this compilation are evidently intended to serve as an encyclopedia for preachers and could have been used as building blocks in many a sermon. In any case, the *Speculum Sacerdotale* helps us excavate what such sermons on saints’ lives may have been like and constitutes an important source given how few sanctorale sermons have survived.

Linking sermons to specific places and dates is also fraught with difficulty. The sermons used in this study mainly date from the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century. (There seems to have been a lull in the production of vernacular sermons in mid fifteenth-century England; the only late fifteenth-century sermon collection to be included is a *De tempore* cycle, which survives, in various forms of completion, in seven manuscripts.) But many of the earlier sermons had a long textual, and perhaps even performance, history: many of them are known to have been popular and influential, and many were clearly intended to be used as model sermons for other preachers. For example, *The Northern Homily Cycle* is the oldest sermon source to be included in my corpus, but while its earliest manuscripts date from the early fourteenth century, it continued to be copied until the mid fifteenth century. Whether and how it continued to be preached is less easy to ascertain.

The three English sermons preserved in Worcester Chapter Manuscript D. 10, probably composed in the late fourteenth to early fifteenth century and copied more or less contemporaneously, were perhaps less influential. However, the author of the first sermon, Hugh Legat, was a famous preacher, who was especially chosen to preach to the Benedictine General Chapter held at Northampton in 1420. Clearly, his sermon style—while more authoritative and long-winded than that of many other preachers—was held in high esteem at the time. In fact, Alan J. Fletcher has suggested that this conservative social and religious tendency in Legat’s sermons was not so much caused by the preacher’s personality but is primarily due to the Benedictine background of his sermons. As such, Legat’s sermons may point to a particularly Benedictine style of preaching in late medieval England and Benedictine preaching seems to have been of some importance in late medieval England. The other two Worcester
sermons appear to have been preached at a religious institution to a mixed audience and have been included in the corpus as representatives of such preaching practices.

The sermons in British Library Royal 18 B. xxiii are from various authors, some known and some anonymous, and those that can be dated, however roughly, date from 1388 to 1414. The manuscript dates to the middle of the fifteenth century, and some of the sermons seem to have run through various editions before they were included in this manuscript. Combined with differences in style and length of the sermons included in this volume, this suggests that these sermons give us a reasonably good sense of the diverse nature of English vernacular preaching from about 1388 to 1450 and possibly beyond.

Probably the most influential of all medieval English sermon collections, John Mirk’s Festial, was composed in the late 1380s, but copied in numerous manuscripts throughout the fifteenth century and printed by Caxton in 1483. Its popularity in late medieval England is beyond doubt, though it is again much more difficult to pin down when and how this material was used for preaching.

Like the plays, then, sermons are usually difficult to date and localize. This makes the matter of comparing plays and sermons fraught because in very few instances can a sermon and a play be closely related in time and place. In fact, the closest possible link is that Benedictine preaching may have had a direct impact on the conceivers and/or recipients of the York Corpus Christi Play: four English sermons from British Library MS Harley 2268 can tentatively be linked to St. Mary’s in York and may have been composed by its abbot Thomas Spofford to be preached at various locations in York from 1414 to 1421—a time when the York Corpus Christi Play was certainly being performed in some form, and was perhaps even developing its textual aspect, as noted above.

Nevertheless, given the popularity of some of the sermons in the corpus and the long textual history of others, it seems probable that the sermons included in the corpus, or sermons very like them, would have been known to playwrights, patrons, actors, and play audiences, and would have shaped their understanding of the sermon. Similarly, we hope that enough late medieval English religious plays have survived to give us a reasonable sense of how contemporary audiences and preachers perceived vernacular religious drama. Despite the caveats, then, we can try to determine important influences, parallels, and differences between these two performative genres and assess how and why they used their literariness for devotional purposes.
NOTES

1 See Owst’s chapter “Sermon and Drama.”
2 Fletcher, Late Medieval, pp. 273–74. Marianne G. Briscoe highlights the importance and fallibility of Owst’s research in “Preaching.”
5 Ibid., p. 214.
6 Ibid., p. 196.
8 Young, 2:542, 539. For the date of the Beverley play, see Axton, p. 162.
9 This impression is also gained from various REED volumes, but again this may simply be because fewer early records survive. For a quick overview, see the chronological table in Beadle and Fletcher, pp. xix–xxi.
10 Oldest surviving references and manuscript dates do not give a reliable date for the creation of a text or event, of course, and certainly for the so-called mystery plays most of the earliest references indicate a cycle which was already established to a degree.
11 For preaching to the laity in the earlier Middle Ages, see also Amos.
12 See Cross for an overview of Old English sermons and the fostering of preaching by Wulfstan and Ælfric (pp. 567–68). For the question of audience, see also Wright, esp. pp. 204–8.
13 Cross, p. 462, and Carruthers, p. 11.
14 Schroeder, pp. 251–52, 566. The translations are by the scholars cited, unless otherwise indicated.
16 Powicke and Cheney, pp. 900–901.
17 The translation, with very minor changes, is taken from Spencer, English Preaching, p. 203.
18 Ibid., p. 64.
19 Ibid., p. 156.
20 Fletcher, Late Medieval, p. 163.
21 Wenzel, Latin, p. 396.
22 King, York, pp. 31–32.
23 See also Gillespie and Ghosh, and Kelly and Perry, in particular.
24 Symes, pp. 37–41.
27 Meg Twycross notes that spoken texts are referred to in the records by 1421–22 and that speaking verbs occur in the Ordo Paginarum (“The Ordo Paginarum,” p. 111).
28 For the latter view, see King, “Medieval English,” pp. 539–52.
29 King, “Manuscripts,” 281.
30 Weatherly, pp. xx–xxi.
31 Morrison, pp. xxi, xli.
32 Grisdale, p. xxiii. Grisdale dates the sermons more precisely to 1389–1404, but Fletcher notes that Legat’s sermon in this volume seems to reflect knowledge of Arundel’s Constitutions and was therefore probably written after 1409 (Grisdale, p. xxiii, and Fletcher, Late Medieval, p. 71).
33 Grisdale, p. xii.
34 Fletcher, Late Medieval, pp. 79–80.
35 Ross, pp. xxxiv–xxxviii.
36 Indeed, O’Mara notes the remarkable case of a lay reader in Nottinghamshire delivering a sermon from the Festial in the 1580s (“A Middle English Sermon,” p. 184).
37 O’Mara, Four, pp. 9–10.
Chapter 1

Historical Connections between Sermons and Plays

It is very difficult accurately to gauge clerical involvement, and even more difficult to gauge preacherly involvement, in the production of late medieval drama. We have evidence from continental Europe that sermons and religious drama were, at least at times, very closely connected. Castellano Castellani, a clergyman and associate of the notorious preacher Savonarola, was a prolific writer of *sacre rappresentazioni* in late medieval Florence.\(^1\) The Italian preacher Alessandro de Ritiis would fall silent at climactic moments during his sermons to allow actors to continue the narrative dramatically.\(^2\) Such a conjunction of preaching and dramatic performance seems to have been used in France as well. In 1469 the town of Poitiers prevented a Dominican friar from “using people to act out the Passion.” While this attempt was unsuccessful, another friar was allowed to have several people stage the Passion while he provided a simultaneous commentary in Bourg-en-Bresse in 1480. Likewise, in 1507 forty *tableaux vivants* of the Passion were staged while Guillaume Le Doyen gave further explanations of the event.\(^3\) Another friar, Michel le Flamenc, composed a play for Pentecost in 1483.\(^4\) In 1501 Mons (in present-day Belgium) the prologues to a Passion play were delivered by priests, God was acted by a priest, and the role of Mary Magdalene was given to a canon.\(^5\)

The evidence for such close connections between preaching and playacting in late medieval England is rather sparser. Clerical involvement in drama is documented here as well, but in many instances those plays seem to have been confined to church settings, clerical actors, and at times even clerical audiences. The English delegation at the Council of Constance in 1417 sponsored “shows and pantomimes by players in rich and costly raiment” centering on the Nativity and Adoration of the Magi; given the international and clerical status of the intended audience and possibly of the performers as well, these performances were almost certainly in Latin, if spoken text was involved.\(^6\)
Closer to home, Lincoln cathedral was the venue of some kind of dramatic activity from at least 1318 until 1561, and such church plays may have been reasonably standard throughout the country. The nave formed the location for the Assumption of the Virgin and St. Thomas plays, which suggests that they were open to a sizable public, including lay citizens. It is then also likely that these plays were in the vernacular, if they were indeed scripted. The records indicate that these plays were undertaken without any input from the laity: all payments are to members of the cathedral. Moreover, despite the apparent decision in 1483 to link the Assumption play more closely to civic celebrations on St. Anne’s Day, the play’s performance firmly remained located in the cathedral’s nave. In these instances, then, the church’s sponsorship and authorship of drama was at some remove from the laity.

At times, the clergy did sponsor lay performances. For instance, from 1272–73 onward Christ Church Canterbury repeatedly paid *histrioniibus* (“entertainers”), a vague term which here possibly refers primarily to musicians as it alternates with other terms such as *trupatoribus* (“trumpeters”), *citharedibus* (“harpers”), and *menestrallis* (“minstrels”). However, it is not impossible that some of these entertainers were (also) actors. The payments to fools point to a more dramatic form of entertainment, if not what we would label “plays” as such. In 1444–45 the accounts mention payments to the parishioners of St. Mildred for the “coexibicionem ludi” (“joint production of a play”) and in the following year Henry Pykot was paid “pro interludijs erga Natale domini in presencia domini Cardinalis” (“for interludes for Christmas in the lord cardinal’s presence”); that these latter two references point to dramatic entertainment is beyond doubt. In September 1424 local players performed a play of *Amys and Amylon* for the prior at Bicester Priory. There are other records of members of the clergy patronizing plays, though we usually do not know much about these events, such as the language of the play (when non-clerical players were involved we can safely assume that plays were in the vernacular), its content, and whether the performance was open to the general public or performed in a more private setting.

But certainly for the civic biblical plays, there is nothing to suggest (great) clerical involvement. Lawrence Clopper has even argued that the clergy had a prohibitive effect on cycle plays as these appear to have evolved only in cities with a strong secular government. It is perhaps of some interest to note that the author of *A Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge* (ca. 1380–1425), while fulminating against the hypocrisy of priests that
“bysien hem aboute siche pleyis,” seems to be especially concerned about clerics attending plays, but does not associate “the fautours [makers] of siche pleyis” with members of the clergy.\(^\text{15}\)

We have some limited evidence of connections between preaching, in particular, and playacting in England. One St. Nicholas Day sermon, preserved in a Dominican manuscript of around the middle of the thirteenth century, seems to have preceded a play that depicted some aspect of the saint’s life. Among a great many condemnations of uncharitable rich people, the preacher references a particular instance in Nicholas’s life that will apparently be shown to the listeners:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{it was a king bi olde dawene} \\
\text{þat wel leuede on godes lawe} \\
\text{...} \\
\text{yf ye wollet stille ben} \\
\text{in þis pleye ye mowen isen. (33–40)}^{16}
\end{align*}
\]

The reference is too vague to enable us to ascertain what story was to be staged, but it does strongly suggest that friars were involved with dramatic activity in the vernacular in England, as they were on the Continent.

The York Pater Noster Play was likewise in some capacity or other associated with the friars, although it became the responsibility of the Pater Noster Guild by at least 1388–89.\(^\text{17}\) The exact level of involvement of the friars is not clear from the records although a reference in *De Officio Pastoralis* (ca. 1378) intimates that they may have written and staged it, as John Wyclif claims that they use the play to teach the Pater Noster:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{freris han tauȝt in englond. þe pater noster in engliȝsch tunge as} \\
\text{men seyen in the pley of ȝork & in many oþere cuntreys/ siþen þe} \\
\text{pater noster is part of matheus gospel as clerkis knowen: why may} \\
\text{not al be turnyd to engliȝsch}^{18}
\end{align*}
\]

It is, however, possible that they merely sponsored or endorsed its performance.\(^\text{19}\) Certainly, the Dominican Thomas Bynham was paid in 1423–24 for writing the banns of the Beverley’s Corpus Christi plays,\(^\text{20}\) which constitutes an endorsement of this dramatic event but argues for a very different level of association than authorship of the actual plays or acting in them would entail.

A similar kind of engagement with lay dramatic activity is encountered in friar William Melton’s comments regarding the York Corpus Christi Play. According to city records, he “In suis sermonibus diuersis
ludum predictum populo commendauit affirmando quod bonus erat in se & laudibus” (“commended the said play to the people in several of his sermons, by affirming that it was good in itself and most laudable”).21 This approval of the Play itself was, however, followed by disapproval of the audience, given greatly “comessacionibus ebrietatibus clamoribus cantilenis & alijs insolencijs” (“to feastings, drunkenness, clamours, gossipings, and other wantonness”).22 He also faulted the timing of the Play, which prevented people from attending mass and “quod dolendum est ea de causa amittunt indulgencias in ea parte per felicis recordacionis vrbanum papam quartum graciose concessas illis” (“alas, for that cause, they lose the indulgences granted to them in that matter by Pope Urban IV of happy memory”). In the same vein, Pauper in Dives and Pauper approves of “Steraclis, pleyys & dauncis þat arn don principaly for deuocioun” on the condition that “þe peple be nout lettyd þerby fro Godys seruyce ne fro Godis word herynge.”24 For William Melton, then, the York Corpus Christi Play did not seem to be wholly a force of good, and he certainly deemed it to be much inferior to the official Church festivities. This qualified approval of the Play in a sermon is a far cry from the close interaction between plays and preachers occasionally observed on the Continent. This friar was in fact so concerned by the popularity of the York Corpus Christi Play that he urged the city in 1426 to change the day of the Play “sic quod populus conuenire possit ad ecclesias in festo predicto & interessa seruicio ecclesiastico” (“so that the people could come together in the churches on the aforesaid feast and attend divine service”) instead—a request the city ignored. The York civic government did routinely sponsor sermons as part of the festivities, though not on the day of the Corpus Christi Play but on the following day.26 The fact that they did pay for a sermon indicates that preaching formed part of the festivities, though probably not a very important one: after the splendor of the pageants and the expense of the mayor’s sumptuous banquet, the solitary sermon seems an anti-climax. In 1468, for instance, a gratuity of 3s 4d was given to “cuidemn fratri Augustino” (“a certain Augustian friar”) for his sermon, which was considerably less than the rent of the chamber where the banquet was held and from where the city fathers watched the performance (6s 8d). The total cost of all the other expenses of the mayor and aldermen for the feast of Corpus Christi that year was 53s 6d.27 This lack of prestige surrounding the sermon and the preacher—who is not named in the records—seems to be different to the situation on the Continent: in France and Italy, at least, star preachers were hired by cities, sometimes years beforehand, in order to promote
these cities’ reputation. For the York authorities, then, plays and sermons were by no means incompatible but the former were strikingly more prestigious than the latter.

Medieval records usually do not give much insight into why secular institutions or individuals sponsored or put on plays, but the educational value of religious plays in the vernacular was noted. For instance, the York Creed Play was put on “Per Ciuitatem Ebor’ palam & publice ... erudicionem populi specialis ... immo ut crede porteratur ad ignorantium modicum commodum Ciuitatis” (“openly and publicly through the city of York ... to the educating of the people ... so that the Creed may be brought a little to the good of the ignorant of the city”). The York Corpus Christi Play was brought forth “ob comodum ciuim eiusdem ciuitatis & omnium extraneorum illic venientium in festo predicto” (“for the benefit of the citizens of the same city and of all strangers coming there on the aforesaid feast”) and “ob magnum deuocionis causam & viciorum extirpacionem morumque reformacionem” (“for the important cause of devotion and for the extirpation of vice and the reformation of customs”). Indeed, it is important to note that the city of York decided not to follow Melton’s advice to reschedule the Corpus Christi Play in order to let the laity attend mass, demonstrating both a belief in the devotional power of the Play and an independent stance with regard to clerical authority.

The repeated assertions of drama’s role in instructing the laity in religious matters and virtuous living support the idea that these plays were seen to have a devotional function similar to sermons. In Dives and Pauper, Pauper only approves of plays that “arn don principaly for deuocion & honest merthe to teche men to loue God þe more.” But this devotional and didactic side of medieval drama gave rise to concerns that the content of the plays might be less than orthodox or critical of the Church. Pauper, for instance, is anxious lest “error medelyd in swyche steraclis & pleyys aþens þe feth of holy chirche ne æþenys þe statys of holy chirche.” This awareness of the plays’ importance in devotion also implies that sermons alone were not quite successful in teaching and converting the laity. In the Middle Dutch Mariken van Nieumeghen the protagonist insists on seeing a pageant play about the devil Masscheroene because “Ic heb mijnen oom horen seggen op ander saisoenen | Dat dit spel beter is dan sommige sermoenen. | Daer zijn goede exempelen somtijts in selcke spelen” (“I have often heard my uncle [a priest] say that this play is better than some sermons. Sometimes there are good examples in such plays”). It is indeed seeing this play, and not hearing a sermon or attending mass, which causes
the heroine Mariken to repent her sinful life, leading to her ultimate salvation. That the friars in York were involved with the Pater Noster Play at all—which presumably entailed more practical and/or financial burdens than simply preaching a sermon on the Pater Noster would have done—inevitably gives the impression that a play was at least as, if not more, successful in teaching the laity than a mere sermon. As such, one could argue that many of these plays were encroaching on the sermon, and that the laity responsible for these plays were invading the territory of the clergy.

The record of Melton’s preaching about the York Corpus Christi Play and the York friars’ educational use of the Pater Noster Play both indicate that there could be an element of competition and rivalry to the clergy’s view of vernacular religious plays in late medieval England. In fact, throughout the medieval era, the relationship between sermons and religious drama at times went beyond being competitive and became somewhat acrimonious. From the earliest records onward, members of the clergy were repeatedly prohibited from participating in drama, although liturgical plays were sometimes permitted. Around 1300 William of Waddington, for example, makes allowances for the clergy to perform in liturgical plays, but condemns all other dramatic activities and members of the clergy who act in them. Various attacks on drama explicitly include theatrical performance of the liturgy and liturgical drama, however. Already in the twelfth century, Ælred of Rievaulx condemned theatrical gestures and expressions in an attempt at mimicry during the liturgy in the *Speculum Charitatis*. In some such condemnations, (religious) plays are unfavorably compared to preaching. A papal decree from 1207 bans plays in church and recommends replacing them with sermons:

> Interdum ludi fiunt in eisdem ecclesiis theatrales, et non solum ad ludibriorum spectacula introducuntur in eis monstra larvarum, verum etiam in aliquibus anni festivitatibus, quae continue natalem Christi sequuntur, diaconi, presbyteri ac subdiaconi vicissim insaniae suae ludibria exercere praesumunt, per gesticulationum suarum debaccationes obscenas in conspectu populi deus faciunt clericale vilescere, quem potius illo tempore verbi Dei deberent praedicatone mulcere.

[From time to time theatrical games are produced in certain churches. Not only are imitations of devils introduced in parody; in truth, in certain festivals of the year that immediately follow Christ’s birth, deacons, presbyters, and subdeacons in turn present
mad parodies with obscene gestures in the sight of the people. They thus tarnish the honor of the clergy who ought better, at that time, to be delighting people by preaching the word of God.]

Clerical attendance at a dramatic performance was frowned upon too. As early as 969 King Edgar expressed concern over secular entertainments and dramatic performances in monasteries. Innocent III prohibited such attendance at the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215: “Clerici ... commercia saecularia non exerceant, maxime inhonesta. Mimis, jocatoribus et his-trionibus non intendant” (“Clerics shall not ... engage in secular, and above all, dishonest pursuits. They shall not attend the performances of mimics and buffoons, or theatrical representations”). Similar concerns and prohibitions were voiced in England by, among others, Bishop Grosseteste. Sometimes the Church made a push to free certain days or places from dramatic activities, whether performed by the clergy or the laity. Bishop Grosseteste warned that “omnes quoque ludi & placita securaria a locis sacris omnino arceantur” (“all pastimes and secular pleadings should be entirely kept away from sacred places”). Just as William Melton later wanted to rid the liturgical feast day of the York Corpus Christi Play, so Archbishop de Zouche from York commanded in 1343 that no one participate in “ludis” and “spectaculis” on Good Friday. These rules and prohibitions all show that drama was regarded with strong suspicion by clerical authorities throughout the Middle Ages and that it was not generally regarded as an acceptable complement to preaching, much less that the two could be seen on an equal footing—unlike the impression created by some secular accounts.

From Church Fathers such as Chrysostom and Jerome onward, there was a noticeable tendency to judge professional drama and actors harshly as well. The clerical view of professional actors was guarded at best. Thomas Aquinas conceded that, as long as one uses moderate words and deeds, keeps away from unsuitable topics, and refrains from playing at inappropriate times, acting is not sinful in itself; he also affirmed that promoting plays which did not adhere to all these restrictions was a sinful act (*Summa Theologica*, Pars II q. 168 a. 3). Outright disapproval of secular entertainers was more common. John of Salisbury’s *Polycraticus* devotes a whole chapter to the condemnation of actors and claims that “by the authority of the Christian Fathers the sacrament of holy communion is forbidden actors and mimics as long as they persist in their evil career.” Evidently, in the opinion of the Church, professional actors could not possibly aspire to a position as teachers of religion and virtue—a position
akin to that of preachers—and were much more likely to cause harm than
do good with their plays. It comes as no surprise, then, that various *artes praedicandi* warn preachers against a performance style which may liken them to actors, as we shall see in the next chapter.

If the Church had none too high an opinion of drama, there is some
evidence to show that playwrights and actors did not always treat the
clergy and their sermons with deference either. In 789 episcopal legisla-
tion prescribed corporal punishment or exile for actors who put on cleri-
cal dress.43 This leads one to assume that these actors did not present a flat-
tering portrayal of their subjects; an impression confirmed by a letter of
King Edgar, roughly two centuries later, in which he laments that monas-
tic scandals are enacted in market places.44 The Preacher (*li preechieres*) in
Jean Bodel’s *Jeu de Saint Nicholas* is an unreliable character, possibly an
attack on crusade preaching in particular.45 In the *Moralité du Jour Saint
Antoine* sermons are presented as “boring, inefficient and quickly forgot-
ten.”46 Although much later than the material at hand, and in a different
cultural and religious context, members of the clergy complained in early
seventeenth-century London that a player had maintained “that a man
might learne more good at one of their playes or interludes then at twenty
of our Roagish Sermons.”47

The only detailed discussion of the connections and rivalry between
preaching and drama in late medieval England occurs in *A Tretise of
Miraclis Pleyinge*, which presents and refutes a list of arguments in favor
of religious dramatic performances.48 This list mentions the positive spir-
itual effects of religious plays on its spectators, especially converting men
“to gode livinge,” “to the bileve,” and moving them “to compassion and
devocio.”49 Moreover, such plays are said to have a superior mnemonic
function, which means their audiences will remember their content par-
ticularly well and often call it to mind.50 Some people clearly felt that these
“miraclis” were more effective at converting (some members of) the laity
than sermons, and an important argument for religious drama is conse-
quently its utility:

> and sithen as ther ben men that only by ernestful doinge wilen be
> convertid to God, so ther been othere men that wilen not be conver-
> tid to God but by gamen and pley. And now on dayes men ben not
> convertid by thee ernestful doing of God ne of men, thanne now
> it is time and skilful to assayen to convertyn the puple by pley and
gamen as by miraclis pleyinge and other maner myrthis.
The horror of the author of the second part of the treatise at the notion that religious plays are more effective than sermons is evident:

and therefore blasfemely they seyen that siche pleyinge doith more good than the word of God whanne it is prechid to the puple. A, Lord, what more blaspheme is agenis thee than to seyen to don thy bidding as is to prechen the word of God, doth fer lasse good than to don that that is bodyn onely by man and not by God, as is mira-clis pleyinge?52

The approbatory assessment of the effects of religious drama that the authors of this treatise attribute to its supporters aligns well with the reasons for supporting plays which we occasionally find in other records. These arguments in favor of drama are, of course, mercilessly attacked in A Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge. Its authors are unequivocal in their condemnation of religious drama: “these miraclis pleyeris and main-tenours, leevinge plesingly to do that God biddith hem, scornen God” just as “diden the Jewis that bobbiden Crist.”53 The plays are also labeled “gin-nys of the devel,” and priests, “that shulde been the ginne of God,”54 are repeatedly warned by the author of the first part of the treatise not even to attend, let alone participate in, a performance.55 Both authors are especially worried because such plays pervert not just “oon singuler persone” but “an hool comynte.”56 In particular, plays are unfavorably compared to sermons. The supposed superior efficacy of religious drama at converting people to virtue, compared to sermons, is rejected for

no man may be convertid to God but onely by the ernestful doyinge of God and by noon vein pleying, for that that the word of God worchith not ne his sacramentis, how shulde pleyinge worchen that is of no vertue but ful of defaute?57

In fact, such performances merely succeed at making people praise and worship “onlye the lickenesse of the miraclis of God” instead of “the word of God in the prechours mowth by the whiche alle miraclis be don.”58 Plays are then not simply not a force of good, they are positively a force of evil for these authors.

The second part of this treatise appears to be attributable to a Lollard, the first part being seemingly the work of a priest “who was not demonstrably heterodox.”59 Interestingly, the arguments against religious drama in both sections of the treatise are more or less identical, and some of the arguments for or against the value of religious drama occur in other
sources as well. The association of *A Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge* overall with Lollardy does not mean that its objections to drama did not circulate in more mainstream discourse as well. This anti-theatrical tract also provides us with important insight into contemporary justification of religious drama. The rationale for religious drama centers on the plays’ ability to convert people to a true Christian life and proper religious sentiment. And it was exactly these perceived similarities of the didactic aims and objectives of preaching and religious drama that caused no little unease for the established Church (as we have seen in previous examples) and Lollards (as evidenced by the second part of *A Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge* especially).

It is difficult to form a coherent picture of the relationship between sermons and plays in late medieval England. It is clear that some clerics and preachers engaged with vernacular drama, but the nature of the surviving evidence suggests that, generally speaking, the connections between sermons and plays were less strong in late medieval England than they were on the Continent. We have very little material that indicates that they were staged in conjunction and clerical and lay drama frequently seem to have been kept distinct. Although friars in England were actively involved with vernacular drama, their role often appears to have been temporary and to have consisted mainly of promoting, advertising, and endorsing plays, rather than writing them, producing them, or acting in them.

Theoretically, for the Church, the two genres ought to have had very few connections, as plays and actors were generally held to be much inferior to sermons (or the liturgy) and the clergy, and not infrequently plays were regarded as forces of evil. On the other hand, some members of the clergy appear to have defended drama and thought it could be used to teach religious knowledge and virtuous behavior to the laity, granting plays more or less the same function and standing as sermons. At times there is even a sense that the clergy conceded that plays were rather more successful at stirring their audiences to devotion than preaching. This more positive evaluation of drama is also encountered in several secular records. In practice, the situation was variable and complicated, and reflected both points of view, sometimes at the same time. William Melton both appreciated the educational and moral qualities of the York Corpus Christi Play and lamented the event as an opportunity for all kinds of evil behavior on the part of the spectators. He both admitted the (potential) value of the plays and confirmed how inferior their value was compared to that of the offices of the Church. Taken altogether, then, the sources argue for widespread awareness that sermons and religious plays had similar didac-
tic aims and even that, possibly, the plays may have been the more effective genre. Not unnaturally this awareness of the latent similarities and correspondences between preaching and religious drama caused a certain amount of unease and friction at times.

It is safe to assume that the closer the connections between sermons and plays, the greater the possibility of influence and cross-fertilization. On the Continent, the tight links between the two genres had a clear impact on many of the surviving plays. Charles Mazouer has noted the proclivity of the writers of the great French mystères to incorporate sermons in their plays. Alan Hindley has demonstrated the various ways in which sermons influenced several French moralités. La Moralité de Charité, for instance, commences with a thematic sermon, with the ensuing play of the parable of the rich man functioning as dramatized exemplum. Yet another thematic sermon is contained within the play. Alan E. Knight has argued that the “constant repetitions and verbal prolixity” in the moralités is due to the influence of preaching rhetoric and that “we may understand them, not as impeding the flow of the action, but as enhancing the moral states at the heart of the action.”

The influence of sermons can also be detected in some Italian plays. Florentine sacre rappresentazioni sometimes invoke famous preachers at their beginning in order to draw on that preacher’s authority and to present the play as something analogous to a sermon. One play calls upon Bernardino da Siena to give “tanta virtù” (“such virtue”) to the actors that they might successfully show “un esemplo” (an exemplum). Indeed, some of these Florentine plays are built along the lines of a thematic sermon with the theme stated in the annunzio (“prologue”) and repeated at key points in the play. The meaning and importance of the theme is then further illustrated through the staged narrative, which acts as the equivalent of a sermon exemplum. The influence of the artes predicandi and preaching on these plays in France and Italy is unquestionable.

The genre for which sermon influence has been most strongly argued in relation to late medieval English drama is undoubtedly the so-called morality play. (Given the few surviving examples, the fact that three of those examples all stem from East Anglia, and the notable differences between the surviving examples, it is perhaps best to treat the category “morality play” with caution in the context of medieval English drama. Nevertheless, their perceived didactic nature and interest in penance make them a prime candidate for sermon influence.) Alan J. Fletcher, one of the scholars who has remarked on its sermon-like quality, argues that “To a degree, the morality play genre may be seen as a dramatic counterpart of
the medieval sermon.” W. A. Davenport introduces the term “exemplum-play,” a play with a homiletic beginning, followed by “an anecdote of sin,” and concluding with a judgment or moral message, which he would apply to Mankind, among others. Marianne G. Briscoe has likewise suggested that the morality plays function more or less as dramatized exempla.

This connection is valid to an extent but one must also bear in mind the important differences between sermons and sermon exempla, on the one hand, and the morality plays, on the other. One aspect of the plays that has given rise to this claim of sermon influence is the undeniably moral and didactic nature of the so-called morality plays. But the same can be said for many other genres of medieval English religious and devotional literature. Indeed, the usefulness of exempla and their illustrative and persuasive power were acknowledged in the artes rhétoricae and artes poeticae too; they were not the preserve of the artes praedicae. Moreover, as W. A. Davenport hints, the didacticism of the plays and that of sermons does not operate in quite the same way. Marianne G. Briscoe similarly remarks that it is significant that quotation of authorities does not enjoy the same vogue in morality plays as it does in sermons. As we shall see especially in chapter 5, the didacticism of medieval English religious plays is indeed of a much more experiential nature than the assertive didacticism of the sermon. Furthermore, the analysis of the portrayal of penance in plays and sermons in chapter 6 will show that the didactic message of plays is not always perfectly aligned with the orthodox doctrine espoused by sermons.

Above all, the narrative content of the so-called morality plays is distinctly different to that of the majority of sermon exempla. Allegorical sermon exempla are rare. Such allegorical exempla were moreover always treated as fictional stories that do not have the same weight and truth value as traditional exempla, which were always treated as fact. By far and away most exempla are about a rich widow in Rome or a hermit in Yorkshire—specific (if anonymous) individuals, not allegorical characters. Biblical stories could also be used as illustrative material, but again, the English morality plays do not contain such material. Staging a traditional exemplum would have been easy to conceive and we do have continental examples of such “exemplum-plays.” Some of the sacre rappresentazioni and moralités, as mentioned earlier, function as a kind of thematic sermon with the bulk of the material presenting a dramatized exemplum of the Prodigal Son or a proud king and the like. The Miracles de Nostre Dame par personnages could also be said to consist of dramatized exempla. The medieval English morality plays, conversely, have “a radically different concept of
dramatic function,” which generalizes rather than particularizes the concept of human nature.\textsuperscript{73} It is therefore difficult to see the English so-called morality plays as dramatized exempla, despite resemblances in their moral and didactic content.

Many plays and sermons do share common themes and concerns, but that need not indicate either borrowing from sermons into drama or a strong case of direct influence. Instead it is likely that the perceived connections between these two genres are due to their similar cultural background, which encouraged dealing with certain issues in certain ways. Jesus’s address from the Cross which we find in both Middle English plays and sermons were themselves influenced by lyrics and the reproaches in the Good Friday liturgy, and do not necessarily exhibit direct borrowing from sermons to plays or vice versa. The tripartite appearance of Mind, Will, and Understanding was widespread in clerical and intellectual texts and emerges in sermons as well as in \textit{Wisdom}.\textsuperscript{74} That said, the common rhetorical, religious, and literary background was certainly affected more by sermons than by plays. For instance, the faithful-friend motif of \textit{Everyman} and \textit{Elckerlijc} can be found in Middle English sermons, as well as the \textit{Legenda Aurea} and \textit{Gesta Romanorum}, and it is far more likely that this international sermon tradition eventually, directly or indirectly, influenced the Dutch dramatist than that some unknown older, presumably Latin, version of the play on the subject matter existed and influenced these various sermons and exempla collections and, in due course, the Dutch playwright as well.

It is, nonetheless, possible that medieval English sermons were influenced by the dramatic tradition to a degree. Erick Kelemen has suggested that the confession of the Prodigal Son, which consists of a rhymed first-person narrative that refers to the visibility of its actions, was incorporated from another oral source, very possibly a play, into a prose sermon.\textsuperscript{75} The sermon exemplum of the actor refusing to repeat his role as Christ in a “somer-game”—electing instead to be one of the tormentors or demons next time because those actors had more fun—suggests that this preacher was familiar with dramatic enactments of the Passion and expected his audience to be so as well.\textsuperscript{76} Although another preacher refers to the scholarly origin of his \textit{theatrum mundi} metaphor, one can perhaps postulate that he would not have used it twice in one sermon if he did not think his audience would easily understand the concept, particularly as the metaphor’s application to the listeners’ moral status is of some importance: “I shall afferme þat ȝiff þis world be an enterlude, as doctors
There are very few instances where plays were directly influenced by sermons, as far as I am aware. Mary Philippa Coogan suggested a close connection between Mankind and the Jacob's Well tradition; there are very few instances where plays were directly influenced by sermons, as far as I am aware. Mary Philippa Coogan suggested a close connection between Mankind and the Jacob's Well tradition; the similarities are too general to form evidence for strong influence from the latter on the former in my opinion. Moreover, some scholars would argue that Jacob's Well does not constitute a sermon collection as such, but was conceived as material for private devotional reading. In any case, by far and away most known sources of medieval drama present us with a diverse range of devotional treatises rather than sermons. The York Corpus Christi Play, for instance, drew on the Middle English Metrical Paraphrase of the Old Testament, the Cursor Mundi, the Northern Passion, the Stanzaic Life of Christ, the Gospel of Nicodemus, and the Revelations of St. Bridget of Sweden, among others. The Mary Play in the N-Town manuscript contains echoes of at least two meditative treatises, Nicholas Love's Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ and the Charter of the Abbey of the Holy Ghost. Wisdom commences by replicating the The Seuene Poyntes of Trewe Loue and Euerlastynge Wisdome, a text intended primarily for private devotion. It also used, among other sources, Walter Hilton's Epistle on the Mixed Life and Scale of Perfection and the Latin poem Novem Virtutes. The status and importance of sermons among the sources of the dramatists should therefore not be exaggerated.

In sum, it would be hard to deny that there are strong points of connection between preaching and religious drama on the Continent in the later Middle Ages, in terms of authorship, joint performances, and literary influence. It is impossible to state with any certainty the exact correlation between late medieval sermons and religious plays in England because of the fragmentary, and at times contradictory, nature of the evidence. However, historical sources from late medieval England and the texts themselves suggest that the relationship between sermons and drama was not so significant as G. R. Owst claimed, and less prominent than on the Continent. Likewise, there are very few instances in which late medieval English plays and sermons can be shown to have exerted a direct influence on each other. We should think more in terms of cross-fertilization across various literary genres rather than posit an especially marked relation between late medieval English religious drama and sermons. Indeed,
in the remainder of this book some fundamental differences will emerge in the performance styles, didactic aims, and even, to some extent, the religious content of plays and sermons.

NOTES

1 Ventrone, p. 345.
2 Delcorno, p. 476.
4 Kienzle, p. 111.
5 Ritch, pp. 252–53.
8 Ibid., pp. 950–60.
9 Ibid., pp. 958–59.
10 For the differentiation between clerical and secular dramatic enterprise in Lincoln, see also Clopper, “Lay and Clerical Impact,” p. 114.
12 Gibson, REED: Kent, pp. 65, 66, 1038, 1039.
15 Davidson, A Tretise, p. 103.
16 Brown, p. 62.
18 Lindberg, p. 52.
19 As he was arguing for the availability of the Bible in the vernacular, it would have been in John Wyclif’s interest to exaggerate the connection between the orthodox friars and the vernacular Pater Noster Play.
20 Rastall, p. 348.
21 Johnston and Rogerson, pp. 43, 728.
22 Ibid., pp. 43, 728.
23 Ibid., pp. 43, 728.
24 Barnum, 1:293.
25 Johnston and Rogerson, pp. 43, 729.
26 See, for example, the City Chamberlains’ Rolls for 1468, 1475, and 1506.
27 Johnston and Rogerson, pp. 102, 773.
28 Thompson, “From Texts to Preaching,” p. 33.
29 Johnston and Rogerson, pp. 80, 757.
30 Ibid., pp. 28, 37, 713, 722.
Barnum, p. 293.

Ibid., p. 293.

The original quotation is from Dirk Coigneau’s edition; the translation is mine. The English version, Mary of Nemmegen, has “for I haue harde my vnkyll say often tymes that a play were better than a sermant to some folke” (Raftery, p. 33).

Axton, p. 164.

Young, 1:548.


Axton, p. 19.

Schroeder, pp. 257, 568.

See, for instance, Grosseteste’s Letters and Diocesan Statutes of ca. 1239 (Stoke, pp. 3, 7) and Lord Berkeley’s grant for the foundation of a chantry (Pilkington, p. 5).

Stoke, pp. 8, 617.

Johnston and Rogerson, p. 2.

Pike, pp. 48–49.

Axton, p. 19.

Ibid., p. 19.


Berlioz and Polo de Beaulieu, p. 27.

Erler, p. 207.

The meaning of “miraclis” seems to accommodate a wide range of (semi-) dramatic events, including performances of the Passion (Davidson, A Tretise, pp. 1–2).

Ibid., pp. 97, 97, 98.

Ibid., p. 98.

Ibid., p. 98.

Ibid., p. 112.

Ibid., p. 97.

Ibid., p. 99.

Ibid., pp. 99, 100, 101, 103.

Ibid., p. 100.

Ibid., p. 102.

Ibid., p. 112.

Ibid., p. 4.

Its approbation of severe asceticism, rejecting even the idea that humans need some recreation to maintain physical and spiritual health, is rather extreme (Davidson, A Tretise, p. 20).

Mazouer, p. 247.

Hindley, “Preaching and Plays,” p. 76.

Knight, p. 76.

Ventrone, p. 343.

Ibid., pp. 341–42.

Fletcher, “Everyman,” p. 269.
Davenport, pp. 53–54.
69 Kemmler, pp. 71, 192.
70 Davenport, p. 53.
72 Kahrl, p. 109.
73 Potter, p. 40.
74 Fletcher, “Performing,” p. 104.
75 Kelemen, pp. 5–6. The sermon is numbered 36 in Ross’s edition of British Library MS. Royal 18 B. xxiii.
76 Wenzel, “Somer Game,” pp. 279–80. Wenzel remarks on the oddity of the appearance of the crucified Peter and Andrew alongside Christ but reminds us that very little medieval English drama has survived and that we cannot tell how well what has survived reflects dramatic practices in medieval England.
77 Ross, pp. 252, 254.
78 The theatricality of the performance of late medieval English preaching will be assessed in greater detail in the next chapter.
79 Coogan, pp. 38–45.
81 See also the introduction in Davidson, The York Corpus Christi Plays.
82 King, “Medieval,” p. 534.
83 Owst, Literature and the Pulpit, “Sermon and Drama.”
Chapter 2

Performing Sermons

Two areas of influence repeatedly come to the fore in scholarly discussions of the connections and similarities between the medieval sermon and drama. One is the use of theatrical traits in sermons, the other is the preacherly tone and style of didactic passages in plays. This chapter will assess the former; chapters 3 and 4 will look more closely at the latter.

Medieval sermon scholars, like scholars of medieval drama, constantly have to face the difficulty of reconstructing an ephemeral performance from written source material. There are extremely few secondary witnesses to sermons preached in late medieval England that could help build a better picture of such performances, and the reliability of such eyewitness accounts in general is doubtful. Chroniclers, for example, often approach the preaching event from a specific angle that benefits their own narrative, and in any case these writers tend to focus on the exceptional rather than the ordinary. It is no coincidence that we have much more information about famous and extraordinary preachers such as the Italian Franciscan Bernardino da Siena than we do about the average Sunday sermon. The main source of information used in this chapter when trying to reconstruct what late medieval English preaching would have been like will consequently consist of the surviving sermon texts themselves, although evidence from the artes praedicandi will also be used.

The sermon texts are, however, a problematic source of information about preaching. Some medieval English sermons may have been intended for reading rather than oral delivery. It has been argued, for example, that it is more likely that the “sermons” from Jacob’s Well were experienced through private reading than public preaching. Another important complication when trying to reconstruct a performance from a written sermon is that in many cases the written sermon was probably not trying to replicate an oral performance, and consciously adopted different generic pointers, or at least actively omitted oral features. Thom Mertens has argued
that these texts are better treated as belonging to their own literary genre than seen as “watered-down” versions of preached sermons.⁵

As noted in the introduction, only a small sample of sermons has presumably survived and it is not clear how representative that sample is. Veronica O’Mara has argued that sanctorale preaching was more popular than the textual evidence suggests, but that the stories narrated in such sermons were so memorable and so well known that they did not need to be written down.⁶ Helen Leith Spencer has similarly claimed that the sermons on offer would have been more diverse than the large collections of de tempore and de sanctis sermons allows us to reconstruct.⁷

Another issue is the diversity of the sample of surviving sermons. Some sermons are extremely short. A sermon on Luke 6: 36 is a mere 66 lines long and seems to be (near) complete as it ends with the intimation of the final prayer (“Amen. Qui cum Patre ...”).⁸ Some are very long. A sermon that was probably written for the feast of the Annunciation and Passion Sunday in 1414 takes up nearly 26 pages in its modern edition.⁹ Some employ the modern, or thematic, structure; the sermon of Hugh Legat from Worcester Ms F 10 is a good example, as both the sermon text and the marginalia accentuate its structure, as in “I seyde firste & principalich” and “primum membrum primi principalis” respectively.¹⁰ But many sermons, such as those in John Mirk’s Festial, do not use such a well-defined structure. Some, such as a Palm Sunday sermon on the theme “Quid vultis mihi dare et ego vobis eum tradam,” regularly use Latin.¹¹ Some use little to no Latin. Apart from the rubrics with the first words of the Gospel lesson of the day, the sermons in The Northern Homily Cycle tend not to use any Latin. Some sermons repeatedly address the audience. Others use audience address more sparingly; Mirk, for instance, tends not to address the audience much in the course of his sermons and when he does so, he deliberately uses such address to draw attention to particularly pertinent points or to aid the flow of the argument.¹² It is, then, important to bear in mind these differences in style and even in content between the sermons.

Furthermore, many of the surviving Middle English sermons are presumably model sermons, primarily intended as building blocks for other preachers rather than to be preached verbatim. For instance, the “sermons” in the Speculum Sacerdotale contain several instances of duplication and cannot have been performed as they stand. Its editor points to “the encyclopedic nature” of this work and sagely remarks that “in a work of that purpose such duplication might even be a virtue.”¹³ The chap-
ter on satisfaction in this compilation is undoubtedly aimed at helping a priest assign appropriate satisfaction to confessants; it is not intended for preaching.

How preachers used model sermons is difficult to ascertain; presumably the usage varied greatly. Monica Hedlund remarks that a sermon preached at Vadstena, while based on a model sermon by Nicola de Aquaevilla, “is really a new sermon, with a new focus, much more colourful than the original one.” The “serene impersonality” of most Middle English sermons is then probably due to their status as model sermons and is unlikely to reflect the reality of preached sermons in late medieval England. Jussi Hanska, conversely, has noted that, where both the written model sermon and a reportatio of the preached sermon survive, the differences between the two tend to be minimal. Consequently, he argues that “it is safe to assume that model sermons also reflect quite well the style and content of actual Sunday sermons.” It is in any case reasonable to suppose that the influence of model sermons on preaching events was substantial, as model sermons were the most important aid to preachers.

For a later, Protestant preaching tradition Arnold Hunt notes that printed sermons influenced preaching both directly, as model sermons were used in the pulpit, and indirectly “in conditioning clerical expectations of what a sermon should be.” It is probable that the influence of model sermons in the medieval period was similarly direct and indirect, although the availability of model sermons in written form must have been more limited than in the later period, and their influence, as a result, somewhat reduced.

In several instances, the surviving sermon was evidently not intended to be preached as it was recorded. While many of John Mirk’s sermons could be preached without much ado, several others end very abruptly. The Festial is explicitly said to be intended for the use of fellow preachers and presumably Mirk considered these men to be able to supply the remainder of well-known stories and some concluding lessons without further assistance. This is the case for the text on the feast of St. Nicholas, which ends “he was in þe chapel of hys faderes yfound et cetera,” for example. Thomas Cyrcetur’s sermon for Good Friday ends with a sudden note to look elsewhere (“Nota alibi.”) for information about the Last Supper. The sample text for Epiphany in the Speculum Sacerdotale seems to contain a suggestion for expansion by potential preachers in “And therfore cometh to churche, et cetera.” The sermon for the Second Sunday in Advent in The Northern Homily Cycle, conversely, states that the extensive Latin passage on the Fifteen Last Signs is to be omitted if delivered to a lay
English-speaking audience: “Isti versus omittantur a lectore quando legit Anglicum coram laycis.”

Other sermons, on the other hand, contain information that strongly suggests that they were preached without significant changes and alterations, as in:

Her ich hade cast to ha told ȝow how ȝe schuld ha desired charite, how ȝe schuld ha gotin it, & how ȝe schuld ha kept it, but, for because þat vr ȝungiste brother declarid it to ȝow so wel & so openli-che þis dei seueniþ, þervorni i pas ouer & drawe to an hende-ward.

Taken together with other references in this sermon, we can assume that it was intended to be preached “e þis holi tyme o lente,” in a specific town (“þis toun”), at a religious institution of some description (“an hows of religiun swich on as tis is”), by a member of that house of religion (hence the reference to “vr ȝungiste brother”), and to a mixed congregation (“ȝif þe be a man of þis dei seueniþ, þervorni i pas ouer & drawe to an hende-ward.”

Another sermon was apparently preached by a junior member of a religious institution by way of replacement: “Sirs, my lord shuld haue preched here hym-selfe þat is here pre-sente now, but he is a litill dezed; and þer-fore he ordeynt me to preche in is stede.”

Most sermons are less forthcoming with information about the circumstances of their delivery, but many of them still contain markers that indicate that they were (at least in part) intended for an oral preaching event, even if they might never have been preached. Mirk’s sermon for the Eve of Pentecost, for instance, encourages the audience to kneel at the end of the sermon with “ȝe schul now knele down.” The preacher also urges sinful members of the congregation to come to confess to him before the next Sunday in the same sermon:

Wherefore I charge ȝow, if þer be any man or womman þat is fallyn in any grevous synne, þat ȝe comyn to me and clanse ȝow þerof or Sonday comme, and I wil be redy to help in alle þat lythe in me wyth gode wylle.

While Mirk’s Festial is a model sermon collection, the author evidently envisaged preachers using his sermons in oral preaching contexts.

Although the use of such phrases as “I shall tell you” are relatively rare in Mirk’s Festial, they can be found here too, as in “And ȝitte, for to ster ȝow more in conciens, I schal telle ȝow þis ensampul,” “þan to styr ȝow
The characterization of the audience as a listening one is regularly encountered in other sermons too. For example, in the sermon for the First Sunday in Advent in *The Northern Homily Cycle*, we find “Of hir wil ik aperteli telle, | Yef ye will list and lithe mi spel” (157–58) and “Nou haf ye herd twifald tocom” (273). The preacher, on the other hand, is typically said to speak, as in the examples above; further examples of such practices are easily found in other sermons.

Despite the fact that we have very little evidence to link surviving sermons to actual preaching events, despite the fact that many sermons may have been conceived as model sermons rather than as material to be preached directly to a congregation, and despite the fact that some sermons may have been primarily intended (and appreciated) as texts for reading, the surviving sermons pay considerable attention to the orality of the preaching event. When treated with due caution, these texts can therefore be used to gain further insight into the performative nature of a preached medieval English sermon.

The fact that the performative angle of sermons is the most difficult to recreate is especially frustrating because the quality of delivery can have a significant impact on the quality of the sermon. In early modern England, audiences were acutely aware of the fundamental importance of performance for preaching. Elizabeth I reportedly judged one sermon as “one of the best Sermons She ever heard, and the worst she ever read.”

Dedicatory epistles in printed sermon collections from the Renaissance frequently lament the unavoidable losses experienced when turning the spoken word into writing.

That awareness is also well attested for the medieval period. One sermon theorist, the fourteenth-century Dominican Thomas Waleys, claims that “modus ipse dicendi non minus proderit audotiribus quam res dicta” (“the way of speaking itself will carry to the hearers no less than the thing said”). Chaucer’s Pardoner starts by proudly highlighting his performative skill, to which he subjugates the importance of content:

“Lordynges,” quod he, “in chirches whan I preche,  
I peyne me to han an hauteyn speche,  
And rynge it out as round as gooth a belle,  
For I kan al by rote that I telle.  
My theme is alwey oon, and evere was—  
*Radix malorum est Cupiditas.*” (*Pardoner’s Prologue*, 329–34)
A little later he describes some of his bodily movements as well:

Thanne peye I me to streche forth the nekke,
And est and west upon the peple I bekke [nod],
As dooth a dowve sittyng on a berne [barn].
Myne hande and my tonge goon so yerne
That it is joye to se my bisynessee. (Pardoner’s Prologue, 395–97)

Both his volume and movements suggest transgressions of the acceptable norms laid out in the *artes praedicandi*, as we shall see, and evidently this character does not present us with the portrait of an ideal preacher. But notwithstanding the Pardoner’s dubious morality, his limited range of subjects, and the questionable appropriateness of his performance style, he is depicted as a reasonably successful and impressive orator. The importance of the performance aspect is also foregrounded in the *exemplum* of an eager preacher botching a good sermon due to lack of performative competence. The famous preacher Jacques de Vitry admitted that bad delivery ruined his sermons when he first started to preach, and Humbert of Romans, a Master General of the Order of Preachers, conceded that some preachers simply cannot cope with narrating *exempla* and should therefore refrain from doing so.

The preachers in these instances see the performative angle as a handmaiden to an effective delivery of the content, but at times medieval audiences were apparently more interested in the performance than in the content of a sermon. A Cologne audience listened patiently to a sermon in Latin by the great preacher Bernard of Clairvaux, but could not be bothered to stay for the translation of that same sermon into German. Evidently, in this instance people were more excited by the performance aspect, and by the celebrity factor, than by any prospect of spiritual edification. This perceived danger that too impressive or too pleasing a delivery might draw audiences away from the moral and religious lessons of the sermon seems to have been omnipresent for preaching theorists.

Generally speaking, the *artes praedicandi* betray little interest in the performative aspects of preaching. The *Tractatus Eximii Doctoris Henrici de Hassia de Arte Praedicandi* is a good case in point. Its discussion of theme, divisions, the proper use of authorities, and various other aspects of sermon composition is prolific but its comments regarding performance are limited to three remarks. Firstly, “Elocutio debet habere vocem acutam in proferendo, austeram in corrigendo, benivolam in
exhortando” (“The oral delivery should be characterized: in exposition, by a sharp voice; in correction, by an austere voice; in exhortation, by a kindly voice”). As secondly, it assigns different exclamations to exhortation and correcting: “Exclamatio debet fieri per O in hortando, per V in corrigendo” (“Exclamation should be made by Oh in exhorting, and Alas in correcting”). Finally, common flaws of preaching are listed, and some of these relate to delivery: “Vitia moralia, artificialia: ignorantia praedican—intollerabile vitium; infacundia—naturale; digitorum demonstratio nimia; capitis iactatio; oculorum clausura; applicatio defectuosa” (“Faults of character and skill: the preacher’s ignorance—an intolerable vice; lack of fluency—a natural vice; excessive pointing of the fingers; tossing of the head; closing of the eyes—defective application”). The overall sense generated by the artes praedicandi is that, while an intelligible delivery is clearly indispensable for a successful sermon, most discussion on delivery is aimed at containing performative aspects.

That is not to say that these manuals recommend a flat delivery. The necessity of linking content and tone of voice is often highlighted in sermon manuals. The Tractatus Solemnis de Arte et Vero Modo Predicandi has quite an extensive section on the different “modes of locution” to be used in preaching. It recommends using all of the following when appropriate: vigor, wonder, grief and lamentation, horror and agitation, irony and derision, elation, impatience and indignation, joy, and hate. However, sermon theorists counsel restraint here as well. Alan of Lille warns that, should the audience be too moved by the sermon and start to weep, the preacher “debet aliquantulum immorari” (“should hold back a little”). Certainly, shouting and whispering are deemed to be unacceptable by Thomas Waleys:

Qui vero nunc in altum vocem elevat, nunc vero ad imma deprivit, omnes auditores offendit, non solum quia tales subitas mutations ... odit natura, sed etiam quia quando clamorem extollit ad sidera, offendit eos qui sibi vicini et propinquii sedent vel assistunt; quando vero nimium vocem deprivit, offendit distantes, quia videtque quaedam secreta mysteria his qui sibi propinqui sunt velle communicare, et in eorum auribus susurrare quae vellet a magis distantibus occultare.

[Those who raise their voice and then suddenly speak with a low voice offend all the listeners not only because human nature ... dislikes these sudden changes but also because when the cry reaches the stars it hurts those who are sitting or listening near the preacher; when the preacher lowers his voice, he offends those who are sitting]
far from him because it seems he wants to say something secret only to those who are next to him whispering to them something he wants to keep from the others.] 43

When using a particular mode of locution, accompanying gestures may be necessary too, as stipulated in the Tractatus Solemnis de Arte et Vero Modo Predicandi, where hatred is associated with the preacher turning away his face and joy with the preacher lifting up his hands. 44 This treatise also names “sleepy delivery” as a flaw in a sermon. 45 Thomas Waleys, likewise, reminds the preacher to ensure “ne videlicet sit velut statua immobilis” (“that he does not look like a motionless statue”), although he also warns against “motibus inordinatis” (“immoderate movements”). 46

While flatness is evidently not advocated in sermon manuals, many references to performance aspects of sermons in the artes praedicandi consist of prohibitions of their use. The author of the Tractatus Solemnis de Arte et Vero Modo Predicandi lists excessive noisiness, pointing with the finger, and head tossing as faults in a sermon, as we have seen. 47 Humbert of Romans disapproves of “inordinatum motum corporis, ut videlicet faciem non deformet, caput non agitet, manibus non percutiat, pedibus non calcet, et similia” (“immoderate movement of the body, that is do not deform the face, do not shake the head, do not clap the hands, do not kick with the feet or other similar things”). 48 Chaucer’s satirical portrayal of the Pardoner, whose preaching involves impressive volume, bird-like head movements, and roving eyes, also suggests that exuberant performance styles did not necessarily find favor in the laity’s eyes.

Indeed, condemnation of styles of delivery that are deemed to be too “theatrical” is something of a Leitmotif in sermon manuals. In his Summa de Arte Praedicatoria, Alan of Lille discommends using

Rythmorum melodies et consonantias metrorum, quae potius fiunt ad aures demulcendas, quam ad animum instruendum, quae praedicatio teatralis est et mimica, et ideo omnifarie contemptanda

[rhythmic melodies and musicality, such words are made to attract the ears rather than to instruct the soul. This kind of preaching is a theatrical one and similar to mime; hence it has to be condemned in every way.] 49

Thomas of Chobham tells the preacher that he

uidelicet ut non habeat oculos inflammatos et manus vagabundas admodum pungantium uel gesticulantium. ... Unde manifeste patet
These condemnations of “theatrical” elements show that many sermon theorists’ understanding of the theater should not be taken to relate solely to what we would now consider to be drama. While some medieval plays do use music or stage fighting, neither “rhythmic melodies and musicality” nor “fighters” are archetypal characteristics of medieval (English) drama per se. Instead, this negative contrast is a cliché that goes back to early Christian times, when authors such as Augustine and Gregory compared the “moral performance” of the preacher unfavorably with the deceitful performance of the theatrical actor, as we saw in the previous chapter. This rejection of specifically “theatrical” elements in preaching by sermon theorists should consequently not be used as straightforward evidence of a possible influence of contemporary drama on sermons.

It is difficult to deduce an accurate image of preaching in performance from the evidence of these artes praedicandi. The repeated prohibitions and condemnations of lively gestures suggest that at least some preachers used them. In fact, Thomas Waleys claims to have observed preachers that moved so forcefully that they nearly fell from the pulpit. About a century later, the Council of Nantes of 1431 decreed that “preachers should avoid making terrible outcries, waving their hands about wildly, posturing excessively, and gesticulating outrageously,” which may indicate that some French preachers did employ such a style of delivery. The correspondence between sermon theory and preaching practices was by no means perfect. Sometimes the theorists did not even follow their very own guidelines when composing actual sermons. In Alexander of Ashby’s De Artificioso modo predicandi only one of the sample sermons follows the rules laid out in the first part of the treatise. It is then possible that preachers routinely disregarded the prescriptions of the artes praedicandi; that they did so occasionally is beyond doubt. Some continental preachers clearly went beyond what was deemed to be appropriate in the manuals. Vincent Ferrer is reported to have wept and gesticulated during his sermons and to have inserted long silences into his discourse. One German audience member described Giovanni da Capestrano as preaching “with his hands and feet” in 1452.

quod qui in predicatione tales gestus faciunt, stulti reputantur, et magis uidentur esse histriones quam predicatores.

[may not have fiery eyes and waving hands as fighters ... Hence it is obvious that those who make these gestures while preaching are considered to be like fools; they are more similar to actors than to preachers.]
On the other hand, most of the preaching treatises are conventional and may include such prohibitions merely because their predecessors did; that is, these prohibitions do not prove that such “excesses” did actually happen, and they certainly do not indicate that they happened often. Preachers such as Vincent Ferrer and Giovanni da Capestrano were far from ordinary and these preachers probably became famous because of their adoption of marked performative features that made their preaching style extraordinary. We should beware of treating the practices of such famous preachers as if they were the mainstream. It seems more probable that the average preacher aimed for a delivery that was lively enough to attract the audience’s attention and goodwill but modest enough to advertise his moral standing and to underline the serious, spiritual content of the event. Such a style would have had much in common with the moderate modes of delivery advocated by the artes praedicandi.

In the discussion so far I have carefully avoided using the adjectives “theatrical” or “dramatic” to describe preaching practices. I have also pointed out that the manual writers’ references to “theater” should be understood in a loose sense that need not refer to late medieval plays. In doing so I do not mean to imply that there was no overlap between the performance aspect of sermons and drama; on the contrary, I believe that the performance styles of sermons and drama must to some degree have been similar. I am, nonetheless, unconvinced by many scholars’ attempts to find theatrical aspects in sermons because they often seem to ignore the fact that much medieval literature would have been performed orally in a great many instances. As a result, scholars tend to highlight the use of performative features rather than typical theatrical features in their discussions of the theatricality of sermons. Thus Karen Bjelland’s notion that the use of quoted speech and prosopopoeia in the South English Legendary is such that the text becomes essentially dramatic appears to disregard the common use of these features in many other kinds of medieval literature.

Even dialogue, favored by Alan J. Fletcher and Valentina Berardini as a hallmark of theatricality, is hardly the preserve of the theater. That does not mean that a dialogue embedded in a sermon could not become dramatic in performance, but presumably no more so than a dialogue in a romance or debate poem or dream vision. There are some interesting examples of performance markers in both devotional and secular texts that are neither sermons nor plays, including “Alle herkneth to me nou” and “Gilote e Johane” in Harley 2253, for instance. Indeed, a dialogue in a sermon would probably have been more akin to one in these several
other literary genres, as these would likely all have been impersonated by one speaker only, whereas a dialogue in a play it would as a matter of course have been uttered by two or more actors, making the performance of dialogue in sermons and drama distinctly dissimilar.

In fact, neither Alexander of Ashby nor Thomas Chobham refers to the theater as a rhetorical parallel to preaching, although poetry and philosophy are mentioned in that capacity. It therefore seems to me more realistic to think of elements such as the use of dialogue, gestures, and exclamations as sharing a common performance style that was adopted in various literary genres, rather than postulating a special relationship between drama and sermons.

That is perhaps especially pertinent for Middle English preaching, which seems, on the whole, to have been less exuberant than some continental examples. It is interesting to note in this regard that, although some late medieval English preachers were evidently popular and able to attract sizable crowds, none of them acquired the fame of a Bernardino da Siena or other star preachers. The general impression generated by the texts is that, although Middle English sermons would have been lively and engaging in performance, their writers consciously eschewed a more impressive performative style.

This does not mean that the sermon writers overall were not careful to employ the performative, oral aspect of the sermon to great effect. One common strategy to ensure that the audience remains attentive to the preaching event is the use of (rhetorical) questions. This method is very useful for presenting a particular snippet of information with special emphasis. For example, “But what is þe ende of all þis myschief? Trewly, euerlastyng dethe” is much more emphatic than the declarative alternative would have been. Such questions break up the flow of the discourse and provide a welcome change of intonation in delivery. At times, rhetorical questions are used to engage and to teach the audience indirectly. When a preacher wonders “Is not he dombe and vers þan dombe þat may shewe is synnes to þe preest and amende hym þer-of, and will not, but leseþ hym-selfe þorow is awn wilfulnes?” the audience is clearly supposed to answer resoundingly, if silently, with a yes and to act in an opposite way to this “vers þan dombe” man. Likewise, in the following example, the audience is evidently supposed to reorient their love to God:

3if þe kans loue a man for þin owne profitt & tin owne avauntage, whi kans nat loue him þat wil 3e þe for þi loue þe riche reem of heuene? 3e, 3if þu kans forþurmore loue a bodi for is vertues & is
goodnes, whi kanst nat loue him þat is, as Davyd seith, \textit{deus virtut-}
\textit{tum}, “lord of all vertues’ & god of alle goodnes?”

Another good example of preachers exploiting the performative, oral
nature of the event occurs in the use of dialogue, such as the debate
between the devil, St. James, and St. Peter about a soul, followed by Mary’s
judgment, in \textit{The Northern Homily Cycle}’s sermon for the Fourth Sunday in
Advent. As this is one of the more “dramatic” passages I have encountered
in late medieval English written sermons, it is worth quoting in full:

\begin{verbatim}
And Sain Jam said to the fend:
"Quider wil to wit mi pilgrim wend?"
And he ansuerd and said, “Til helle,
Thar he sal for his sinnis duel,
For he was his awen ban,
Forthi in him part haf ye nan,
Wit riht and resoun he es mine,
To wend wit me til helle pine."
Than ansuerd Sain Jam for his man,
And said, “Thou lies, traytour Satan,
Thou wat wel, thef, thou havis the who [blame],
For in my nam himself he sloh,
He wend wel that thou havid ben I,
Quen thou gert him do his folye;
In deed was he til me bowxom,
And forthi sal he wit me com.”
The fend said, “That mai noht be,
Wit riht and law mai thou se
That he es min thoru jogement,
For quen he on his voyege went,
He filed his sawel dedelye
Wit the filth of licherye;
And sithen wit his awen knife
He set him selvin of his life.
Wy, sai me, Jam, on quatkin wisse
Moht he mar dey in mi servise?
Loc quether I wit riht and lawe,
May him wit me til helle drawe?"
Sain Jam ansuerd and said him to:
“Wrang no wille I nan thee do,
Bot yef we wil the sothe treye,
Gon we til dom of our Leuedye,
And als scho demes sal it be,
\end{verbatim}
For that es riht als think me.”
And Sain Peter, his felawe
Said, “This think me right and lawe;
Mari,” he said, “es god justise,
Scho wil do wrang on nane wyse.”
Quen thai com bifor ur Leuedye,
Scho demid son wit hir mercye:
At that sawel til the bodie
Suld turn, and penance do worthi;
And said, “This sawel, als it nou isse,
Mai nangat [in no way] cum til hevin blis,
Ar it be clensed in bodye
Of sin, wit penanze worthi.
Forthi for jugement gif I,
That it turn til the bodye,
And clens it wit penanze,
And yem [protect] it sitthen fra meschanze.”
The fend for this dom was sarie,
And ille payed that our Leuedye
Havid reft him wit riht jugement
That man that he wit gil [guile] had schent. (207–60)

The sedate tone and proper vocabulary of the devil is perhaps a little underwhelming; it would certainly have been entertaining to hear him express his frustration at the Virgin’s decision. We could also have had a greater moment of tension before her judgment. Despite a strong desire to present a lively narrative, the writer of this sermon does not allow these opportunities for exuberant performance, transgressive language, and tension to distract him from his interest in the rights and wrongs of the soul’s situation. Of course, such more exuberant performance elements may have been added in various deliveries of the passage, but on the whole both this text and others suggest that medieval English preachers carefully and consciously circumscribed the performative elements of their sermons and, concomitantly, maintained a clear focus on the didactic content.

This passage compares starkly with the surprisingly non-dramatic presentation of the Temptation of Christ in a Lenten sermon. The first temptation is presented with direct speech for both the devil and Jesus, but even so a section reminding us of Jesus’s ability to perform the feat and explaining His reasons for refusing to turn the stone into bread intervenes between the two speeches. Its leisurely pace and stress on the didactic lesson arguably robs this passage from developing into a dramatic dialogue,
although the use of direct speech did no doubt provide a change of tone in performance. But this minor dramatic element in the first temptation is discarded in the remainder of the scene, as the other two temptations are dismissed with:

In þis manner and oþur mo tempted þe feend oure Lord for to witt wheþur þat he was Goddes sonne or noon. But oure Lorde answered hym so wisely þat þe feende wist not what he was.67

This preacher was not interested in the dramatic potential of the narrative but in its didactic import. At times, then, the use of dialogue in sermons was used to enhance their performance aspect, but English preachers were generally careful not to divert attention from their moral and religious lessons.

Audience address is another method preachers employed to ensure a successful delivery. At the same time, interaction with the audience regularly serves the preacher’s didactic ends in Middle English sermons. Whereas many sermons use direct speech in the portrayal of the Last Judgment to some performative effect, a few insert direct audience address in this narrative foremost as a means to underscore the lessons of the passage. The *Speculum Sacerdotale* provides us with a good example of the former method:

And then that kynge schal say to hem þat schall be on his riȝt honde: “Venite, benedicti, et cetera. Comeþ to me, ȝe blissid children of my fadur ... for I hungred, and ye ȝaue me mete” ... And then schall tho riȝtwisemen seyen: “Lord, when sawe we the hungry and fedde the?”68

The damned are addressed and dismissed in a similar manner. One can easily imagine that the preacher may have used various modes of locution, such as wonder and anger, and appropriate gestures, such as turning away his face, as recommended in the *artes praedicandi*, to make this dialogue more impressive in performance.

But some preachers improve on this method by casting their congregation in the role of the damned souls:

The thryd dethe, þat ys dethe of body and sawle togedyr, and þat ys most to be drede, for in þat ys no redempcyon ne turnyng agayne qwen almyghty God schall say to þe, “Ite, maledicti, in ignem eternum, qui preparatus est diabolo et angelis eius”. “Gose, ȝe cur-set, into þe fyre of hell qwech ys ordente to þe deuell and all hys
angellys'. Fyrst þis Lorde says, “Ite”, “Go ȝe” ȝette þu may aske grace of þi Lorde and say, “Lorde, and we schall go fro þe and noȝte abyde with þe, we besche þe, gyf vus þi blesyng.” Then comus þe secunde worde and forbarrus hom qwen he says, “Maledicti”, “curset” or “warede”. ȝette may þu aske anoþer grace and say ...

And so it continues, with the damned repeatedly and unavailingly asking for grace until the final dismissal with “‘Et angelis eius, þat is, ‘to þe deuell and all hys angellus’. Arguably, the use of Latin and translations into English in this passage undermines its dramatic potency by arresting the flow of the narrative. Likewise, while the five requests and six rejections clarify the structure of the passage and hammer home the suppliants’ lack of success, the repetition of the almost identical requests and rejections vary too little to develop either the narrative or the characters. There is no sense, for instance, that the damned become increasingly distressed or that they finally realize the justice of their damnation or that they come to understand the full implication of God’s dismissal: their second request is to be spared pain, and so is their final request. The liveliness of the exchange is held in check by its structure and content. As a result what we have here is not a dramatic exchange, as such, but rather a stylized, formal dialogue, more reminiscent of the liturgy than of surviving Middle English drama, that lends the passage an aura of awesome grandeur and highlights the finality of God’s decision, while engaging with the audience directly. I imagine it would have been striking in performance and that it would have brought home the didactic message very effectively.

Generally speaking, the surviving vernacular sermons from late medieval England suggest that the writers were fully aware of the oral, performative angle to preaching, but that they chose to exploit this aspect in moderation, never losing sight of the didactic aim of the event. In fact, Holly Johnson has argued that, unlike many other devotional treatises on the Passion, English Passion sermons carefully control and contain the emotional responses of the congregation in order to emphasize the doctrinal importance of the Passion. While Mirk’s Good Friday sermon is perhaps not the best example of a sermon which prioritizes theology, it certainly does not build up to an emotive climax either. The rather short passage on the Passion is almost upstaged by the vivid account of Pilate’s life which precedes it. And it is followed by yet another captivating narracio, demonstrating the value of forgiving one’s enemies, that also concludes the sermon. Nor is Jesus given an extended speech to rouse the emotions
of the listeners; instead, Mirk chose to focus on identifying Jesus’s sayings and on explaining the religious usefulness of these utterances for the medieval laity:

And so whan he shulde dyen, he began, as Ion Bellette telleth, and saythe: “Deus meus, Deus meus, respicie”, and so forth alle þe ix psalms sewing forþe til he come to: In te, domine, sperau, and so at þe vers: In manus tuas, domine, wyth þat he ȝaf vp þe goste, ȝefvyng a hegh ensampull to vche criston man and womman for to haue þat verse in mynde when he scal ȝoldon vp þe goste. Wherefore vche man þat can rede schulde say þaise psalmus þis day, and he þat sayse hem vche Fryday he sal newre dyon none evel deþe.72

It is clear that Mirk’s main aim was not to generate an emotive response to the Passion for this sermon, but that, above all, he sought to teach his listeners about useful prayers and proper Christian forgiveness. This focus on the didactic side of the passage also entailed curtailing its performative element to some extent.

Similarly, a sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Trinity incorporates direct speech, thereby providing an opportunity for appropriate voice modulation, which would undoubtedly have been entertaining in a good delivery. But the responses are too short and fragmented genuinely to engage the listeners with a “play-world” within the sermon:

If case be þat a man wolde sey to a grete slogard and to a grete slepar, ‘Whi whilt not þu aryse up on the Sondayes and on other festival dayes and come to the chyrche and ȝe a duw attendaunce to the devyne servyce of God and to all his seyntis?’ Anon he wyll make hus excuse and sey, "I am olde", or “sekely”, or “the weder is colde and I am febyll”, or he wyll excuse hym and sey, “I have a gret howsolde”, or ells he haþe sum odur ocupacion to do.73

The various excuses of the sluggard could have been incorporated into one speech to allow for an extended impersonation. There are several other examples where the potential for “dramatic” impact is not exploited to the full in the surviving material, and often the reason for that choice appears to have been didactic.

Another thing Middle English sermons tend to have in common is their monologic and authoritative stance, which must have had a significant impact on their performance style as well as their reception by listeners. This authoritative stance does not mean that preachers never admit their own fallible human nature; they mention their sinful human-
ity in references such as “to deluyere vs owt of al maner þraldum ðe deuel, Crist come in-to þis world ... & deliuerd vs from al maner subiectiun” and “Of usself haf we noht bot sin” (Northern Homily Cycle 1.145). There are numerous examples where the preacher includes himself in the lessons to be learned and implemented, as in “And kepe we trewly þe Commandementes,” and in

Allas for schame to owre pride, God his in þe rythe, and ȝitte he tre-tuth wyth vs þat bene in þe vronge. He profurreth mercy or we hit askon, he mekuth hym to vs þat displesuth hym, and scheweth luf

The humanity, and concomitant sinfulness, of the preacher is not ignored in sermons.

But examples where preachers assume a position of authority with regard to the congregation are legion. The preacher is often presented as more knowledgeable than his auditors. A discussion on the meaning of the theme is introduced with “And I schulde openliche declare ȝow to what entente Seynt Poul seyde þis word, i most tel ȝow sumwhat þe effecte oþ þe pistol oþ þis same day.” The preacher of a Palm Sunday sermon promises to use the Bible as proof in order to enhance his listeners’ understanding of his argument: “Frendes, ȝe shall vndirstond, as I may prove be holy scripture.” Mirk announces that he will tell an exemplum “for to ster ȝow more in conciens.” Another preacher highlights how he will amend the moral state of his addressee: “To þe, sir, I sey somewhat at þis tyme, so to enforce þe þat I may brynge þe fro vnkeendnesse to keendnes aȝeyn” and “And now I shall tell þe how þou shuldeste contynue and make ende in þi keendnes.” The teaching role of the preacher and the audience’s duty to listen and learn are then frequently and carefully stressed. The didactic nature of the preaching event itself is also often underlined, as in “And þu wil schortelich bere a-way þe mater of þis sermon, take hede!” One exemplum is introduced with “Wilte her how orrible þis synne is ... bi a litel tale? & i pray þe, take hede, vor it is rith a notable tale.” Mirk advises the listeners “Holduth þis in ȝoure mynde and I hope it schal put away pride.” Some of these sermons were intended for a mixed audience, so that members of the clergy in the audience are included in that position of relative inferiority.

The audience’s position of intellectual inferiority also comes to the fore when the preacher carefully circumscribes the listeners’ knowledge and understanding. One preacher firmly steers the congregation away from certain difficult topics with “þe argymentes and þe skill þat may be of
Hugh Legat admonishes the congregation to attend sermons, even if they cannot fathom the content of the discourse, for such a lack of comprehension does not hinder the sermon’s beneficial impact:

The ij [second kind of] pepul ther ys also qui dicunt [that say] the prechwure spekyth so hye diuinite, so depe clerge, no man may con-seyue what he talkyt. Wherefor hem semyþe bot a spendyng and wasyng of tyme to þeue hym any audyens. Truly, god men, talia verba [such words] be lewed and vnwytty, for as Origin seyt, super iudicium, ȝeue hyt be so that wrettys and charmys that diuerse pepil berun abowt here neckys, of the wyche they con ful lytyl scille or ryȝt noȝt, be of suche vertu to saue men fro bodylyche sykenes, myche more þe worde of God ys to the lowe here of swche vertu that hþt wol kepe hym fro gostelych sykenes, of al hit be nȝt fullyche conseyt. ... Thus, than, seth ȝe se wyle [well] that ȝe may nowȝt be excused be lackynge of conyng noþer dulnes of whyt, sekyt no suche ocacionse to be myche absent fro Holy Churche prechynge, bote buþe as gode childrun oȝute to be, as Y seyde at the bygynnynge.

This all adds up to foster a suitably passive and uncritical reception of sermons as a genre by the congregation. The sermon audience, even if it consists of clergy, is then generally taken to be in a position of spiritual inferiority, in need of the preacher’s sage council and advice.

Indeed, the audience is regularly told how to live their lives by preachers, as in “Firste I sey ȝe schall be devowte and holy in prayer.”

One preacher warns his listeners to have “no lust or no likynge e smell-yng’ of hote spiceri, hote erbis or ani oþer þat mithte stir þe to vlesli-che lustis.” Another admonishes his listeners not to confess to “ron-ners ouer cuntreys” who “for a peny or tweyn” confess and absolve children who have murdered one of their parents! Somewhat similar advice is given in another sermon, where the audience is explicitly told to confess only to “þi nawne parson or parysh prest as þin auwe curatte and, wythowtyn hys leue, þu awe noght to schryue þe to nan oþer.”

This sermon also encourages an anti-Lollard attitude: “And þerfore, for Goddys loue, bese ware of slyke wykkys pepyll ... and kepe ȝow sted-fastly in þis fayth.” A clerical audience is reminded to pray, and blamed for not doing so in:

But perauntur, þe seith to me “sir, me tunge is for þe most part so drie & so weri what i sei ani þyng, þat i mai nat bidde me bedis, i-make no praours, no i mai nat dur ani while e seyng of my sawter.”
... Whan þe schalt serue God, a-non rith þe tunge is drie, but it is nat weri vor to stonde al day ... iuggyng þi neȝebours, demyng þi breþerin & ti soucreyne þat is a-bowte þe.\textsuperscript{92}

Mirk gives specific advice about how to fast during Lent: one must not eat before noon or remain too long at the table, one must not eat “to freschelych” or any kind of “flesse-mete and whyt-mete,” and one must fast both night and day.\textsuperscript{93} In another sermon, he admonishes the congregation to leave their oaths and swearing and to do reverence to Christ’s Passion and wounds instead.\textsuperscript{94}

Even the preacher’s \textit{captatio benevolentia} can assert the audience’s need to listen to the preacher. The opening prayer for a St. Nicholas Day sermon aims to ensure “þat it so be þat I may haue grace so to preche and teche you to vake, þat I may haue þanke of God, and þat þe may haue þe sone grace to ryse owte of þe slepe of synne.”\textsuperscript{95} The “positional rhetoric” of the preacher is then normally one of authority and sermons do not engage in a debate with their listeners.\textsuperscript{96} A great many more examples of such an authoritative and monologic stance by preachers could be adduced, and indeed many more will be encountered in the remainder of this book.

Conversely, Katherine Ludwig Jansen has argued that this view of the sermon is mistaken:

Sermons were not always, as is commonly assumed, some sort of monolithic institutional discourse imposed from on high on the passive lay subject. They could be, in Bakhtin’s terms, dialogical in that it is not just the institutional voice, or the preacher’s voice, that is contained in them; frequently, if we listen carefully, the voice of the audience can also be discerned.\textsuperscript{97}

I would propose instead that, when preachers incorporate such other voices, it is normally to silence them and to reject their notions outright. In a sermon for the Feast of Mary Magdalene, the audience’s curiosity is acknowledged but condemned, and they are told to believe unquestioningly in all the Church teaches:

þu þan to aske knawlegyn of God or hys pryuitese be kindly reson qwath for þi febylnesse and hys excellens þu art not worthy to con-sayue yt ... Sen þi wyttys þan bodyly are so febyll þat þai may not bryng þe in to þe knawlegyn of lele trowth, I cowynsele þe after þe ensamplll of þis haly woman ... so most þe trowe in techynge of haly kyrke and seke be na resun to proue 3owre trowth\textsuperscript{98}
Some resistance to the idea that hell and damnation await those who do not distribute their wealth charitably comes to the fore in another sermon, but the preacher is quick to stress the truth of such people’s postmortem fate:

But trowe þou well, þoo þat God suffure þe to haue þi will here in þis world, þat he will not punysche þe þer-fore in a-noþur world, for þi grett rychese? I sey be þou neuer so grett in þis werld, and þou loue not þi God more þan þi good, leve well þat þou shalte haue sorowe þer-of.\(^9^9\)

In a late fifteenth-century sermon, the preacher utterly rejects the idea that the pope and priests are not able to forgive sins, an idea that some members of the congregation apparently maintain:

Here thiself that art vnlerned and lackest a perfit moder wit, then þu seyste that the pope and þese prelatis of the chyrche of God may not forȝefe synne. And hereto I answere and sey þis: for vnto the ordur of presthode is committed potestam Petri ligandi atque soluendi in celo et in terra: “He hath þe power of Peter to bynde and to vnbynde in heven and in erthe.”\(^10^0\)

In these examples, the (projected) congregation can indeed be heard, but the relationship between it and the preacher is hardly dialogical.

In other instances, the information supposedly sought by members of the congregation is entirely devout and clearly aligned with orthodoxy. In one case, the lay listeners are credited with a pious desire of knowing more about the Last Judgment. This projected quest of knowledge is evidently approved by the preacher, who answers it to the best of his abilities:

But peraventure þou þat art a lewde man, þou wold witt ... when þe Day of Dome shall be, and also where it shall be, in erthe or in heven or else beneþ þe erthe. For-sothe, frendes, where it shall be, I shall tell þe ... But trewly what tyme and when it shall be and wheþur nyght or day, þer is no clerke in erthe ne aungell ne postell ne seynt in heven þat can tell þat day.\(^10^1\)

In these sermons, the projected voice of the congregation is adopted either to affirm their orthodox piety or else to reprove, correct, and silence them.

The Middle English sermons are then, generally speaking, prescriptive, authoritative, and monologic. Such labels almost necessarily raise “the spectre of the constricting, over-protective Church,” as Meg Twycross has so picturesquely described it.\(^10^2\) In the case of the sermons, this is probably correct—but we should be charitable enough to add that, if one
believes as the Church did, much was at stake. Consequently, this prescriptive didacticism and authoritative stance was likely due primarily to a real sense of concern for the spiritual welfare of the listeners. Not teaching the laity properly would have put their souls in danger of damnation and that would, in turn, have endangered the soul of the preacher whose duty it was to teach his flock. This vital importance of the sermon presumably added a sense of urgency, which is easy to overlook, to the delivery of the sermon for many a preacher and audience member.

Despite the many difficulties and uncertainties that are inevitably encountered when trying to recapture something of the preached Middle English sermon, three main aspects come to the fore so regularly that we can assume they must have been reasonably standard. Firstly, medieval English preachers were fully aware that the success of their sermon relied to a great extent on the quality of the delivery and consequently utilized various means to enhance that aspect. Nonetheless, the delivery of Middle English sermons, generally, seems to have been relatively subdued and the performance elements carefully subjugated to the religious content and didactic aims of the sermon. As a result, it seems that late medieval English sermon writers did not attempt to emulate performance aspects that are typical of contemporary drama. This restrained performativity and concomitant focus on their didactic content is the second trait these texts tend to have in common. Thirdly, most sermons consistently adopt a tone of authority and spiritual superiority over their audiences that does not encourage participation in, or even an active reception of, the discourse. As we shall see in the following chapters, the didacticism and authority of medieval English drama operated in fundamentally different ways. Despite the undeniable performative quality of these sermons, it is therefore safe to say that their style of delivery, didactic stance, and relation to the audience are distinct from late medieval English religious drama, and that the performativity of both genres developed and operated independently.
NOTES

1 Thompson, “From Texts to Preaching,” p. 25.
3 Ibid., pp. 214–15.
4 Mertens, p. 299.
5 Ibid., p. 293.
8 Ross, p. 140.
10 Grisdale, p. 5.
11 Ross, pp. 30–35.
12 Volk-Birke, p. 117.
13 Weatherly, p. xxxvi.
14 Hedlund, p. 140.
16 Although the reliability of *reportationes* must also be treated cautiously. For example, some of them are in Latin, whereas the sermon was preached in the vernacular (Thompson, “From Texts to Preaching,” p. 17).
17 Hanska, p. 299.
18 D’Avray, p. 78.
19 Hunt, p. 182.
20 Powell, p. 17.
21 Fletcher, *Late Medieval*, p. 159.
22 Weatherly, p. 19.
23 Thompson, after l. 180.
24 Grisdale, p. 49.
25 Ibid., pp. 27, 25, 39, 49, 38.
26 Ross, p. 59.
27 Powell, p. 146.
28 Ibid., p. 144.
29 Ibid., pp. 116, 146, 159.
30 Bulwer, pp. 6–7.
32 Although he seems to be more concerned with a clear rather than impressive delivery: “Studet igitur praedicator, inter coetera, praecipue habere modum dicendi intelligibilem et allectivum, quia modus ipse dicendi non minus proderit audotiribus quam res dicta.” (“Let the preacher therefore take care, most importantly among these factors, to have a way of speaking that is intelligible and comprehensible, because the way of speaking itself will carry to the hearers no less than the thing said.” *De modo componenti sermones cum documentis*, Cap. I as quoted in Murphy, *Rhetoric*, p. 334).
Benson.

34 Berlioz and Polo de Beaulieu, p. 20.

35 Ibid., pp. 18–19. Humbert’s comment implies that narrating exempla requires a very different performative skill to delivering the remainder of sermon staples, such as quoting authorities.

36 Kienzle, p. 110.

37 Caplan, p. 155.

38 Ibid., p. 156


41 Caplan, pp. 56–57.

42 Kienzle, p. 99.

43 Berardini, p. 78.

44 Caplan, p. 57.


46 Berardini, p. 80.

47 Caplan, p. 58.

48 Berardini, p. 80.

49 Ibid., p. 79.

50 Ibid., p. 80.

51 Kienzle, pp. 96–97.

52 Berardini, p. 80.


54 Donavin, p. 281.

55 Sanchéz, p. 808.

56 Kienzle, p. 108.

57 Bjelland, p. 231.

58 Fletcher, “Performing,” pp. 89–90, and Berardini, pp. 81, 83.

59 Fein, Raybin, and Ziolkowski.

60 Murphy, Rhetoric, pp. 312, 322.

61 Occasionally, preachers used props. Roberto da Lecce, for example, employed a crucifix and crown of thorns during his preaching (Kienzle, “Medieval Sermons,” p. 106). In such instances, the link between preaching and drama seems much more direct. However, there are relatively few known instances of prop use in sermons, and none of those that I am aware of relate to late medieval England.

62 Although Valentina Berardini states that performance indicators are to be found in various English sermons as well as those of Bernardino da Siena, she describes the English material as being “more understated” and “more subdued” (p. 81).

63 Ross, p. 239.

64 Ibid., p. 147.

65 Grisdale, p. 11.

66 This passage is still less “dramatic” than the Harrowing of Hell episode in an Old English homily, which consists almost entirely of dialogue and direct speech
by a number of characters—Symeon even embeds quoted speech in his utterance (Hulme, p. 23)—and which stipulates modes of locution, as in “Seo helle þa swa swyðe grislice þuss cwæð” (“hell then said thus so very horribly,” ibid., p. 25).

67 Ross, p. 142.
68 Weatherly, p. 113.
69 Fletcher, *Late Medieval*, pp. 220–21.
70 Ibid., p. 221.
71 Johnson, pp. 333–34.
72 Powell, p. 108.
73 Fletcher, “Performing,” p. 99.
74 Grisdale, p. 27.
75 Ross, p. 106.
76 Powell, p. 98.
77 Grisdale, p. 25.
78 Ross, p. 171.
79 Powell, p. 116.
80 Ross, pp. 31, 34.
81 Grisdale, p. 21.
82 Ibid., p. 39.
83 Powell, p. 80.
84 Ross, p. 128.
85 Fletcher, *Late Medieval*, pp. 88–89.
86 Morrison, p. 220.
87 Grisdale, p. 44.
88 Ibid., p. 60.
89 Ibid., p. 61.
90 O’Mara, *Four*, p. 90.
91 Ibid., pp. 89–90.
92 Grisdale, p. 38.
93 Powell, p. 79.
94 Ibid., p. 100.
95 Ross, p. 47.
96 The term “positional rhetoric” is borrowed from Swan, p. 179.
97 Jansen, p. 7.
98 O’Mara, *Four*, pp. 111–12.
99 Ross, p. 174.
100 Morrison, p. 188.
101 Ross, p. 173.
Chapter 3

Preaching on Stage

IT IS OFTEN TAKEN for granted without further comment that didactic, moralizing speeches by virtuous, saintly, or divine characters in late medieval English drama are sermons or, at the very least, sermon-like. The sermon was, of course, closely associated with the authority of the Church, and the silent assumption is, therefore, that playwrights who resorted to sermon-like strategies to convey their moral messages aligned themselves with an established, ecclesiastical medium to gain a position of authority. However, the adoption of sermons into English drama would not have been a straightforward matter because “Imitations of sermons was no mere literary facility; it raised questions about the would-be ‘preacher’s’ moral and legal authority to preach.”¹ That issue would have been especially problematic if the actor playing the preaching character was a member of the laity (which seems to have been the case for most plays under discussion), because preaching was a carefully guarded privilege of specific members of the clergy in late medieval England. In fact, I would argue that there are surprisingly few uses of the sermon as a textual genre on the fifteenth-century English stage, presumably partly because of contemporary ecclesiastical legislation that aimed to restrict preaching to specially licensed preachers.

Whatever the exact influence of Church legislation may have been, the plays under discussion tend to present their moral messages in ways divergent from preaching. Late medieval English dramatists demonstrably pursued different modes of instruction and, as a result, shaped an autonomous authority for their artifacts. This development is apparently perverse. In France, for instance, where the Church was rather less concerned about unauthorized preaching, playwrights overtly ally their religious instruction with that of the Church whenever they present a sermon on the stage, which they regularly do for such characters as Jesus Christ, saints, and expositor figures.² Likewise, as we saw in chapter 1, the Florentine sacra rappresentazione is often emphatically aligned with contemporary preach-
ing practices. Arguably, in England, the dramatists usurp the role of the preacher whenever they do not stage a sermon for virtuous, didactic characters because they do not rely on the acknowledged ecclesiastical mode to teach matters of religion.

It appears to be predominantly the moral content of certain speeches, rather than formal features that can be clearly associated with contemporary sermons, that results in scholars deeming these speeches to be sermon-like. For instance, Mark Eccles states that *Wisdom* “begins ... with a sermon” and David N. Klausner agrees that the opening scene is “in a format clearly derived from the late medieval sermon.” But we know, and indeed both scholars recognize, that these speeches are closely based on a meditative treatise, namely *The Seuene Poyntes of Trewe Loue and Euerlastynge Wisdome*, a translation of the *Orologium Sapientiae*. To my knowledge, no one has ever claimed sermon status for this treatise. Unless Wisdom’s use of that text is suffused with features typical of Middle English sermons—and it is not—it is probably safer to claim that, however didactic and religious this speech may be, it is not a sermon.

The medieval sermon is not simply any didactic, exhortative, moralizing discourse; it is a specific genre with its own actors and setting and its own generic features, including the use of a theme, an opening prayer, a prayer for the success of the sermon, the use of Latin, the quotation of *auctoritates*, the inclusion of practical lessons aimed directly at its audience, the use of *exempla*, and a well-defined structure. Burlesques of sermons rely on exactly these features, which were clearly acknowledged to be typical of sermons. Chaucer’s Pardoner is quick to mention his theme and his use of Latin “To saffron with my predicacioun” (*Pardoner’s Prologue*, 345). He also includes “ensamples many oon | ... | For lewed peple loven tales olde” (*Pardoner’s Prologue*, 435–37) and retain them better; his *exemplum* of the Flemish rioters (*Pardoner’s Tale*, 661–888) is indeed especially memorable. Similarly in the *Parson’s Tale*, the Parson’s sermon commences with a Latin theme and its translation, and he quotes a great many authorities, including “Seint Ambrose” (83), “Seint Ysidre” (88), “Seint Gregorie” (91), and “Seint Augustyun” (96, 100). This sermon is loosely structured with divisions and subdivisions, like many Middle English sermons, and this is reflected in both Latin marginalia and the English text. The subdivisions are especially plenteous: there are three “acciouns of Penitence” (94), three “spes of Penitence” (101), three necessary aspects to Penitence (106), four things are to be understood by contrition (127), six causes move a man to contrition (132), and so forth. Sermons with
such typical features were associated with lay audiences in particular, and not just by Chaucer’s Pardoner: both Alexander of Ashby and the scribe of the marginalia in Cambridge University Library Ms Ii.1.24 strongly imply that a recognizable and predictable sermon structure would most benefit a mixed or lay audience.7

While it is extremely difficult to define what exactly constituted preaching, medieval sermon theorists do seem to have been rather insistent on circumscribing its application:

Though preaching almost never verbally declares itself as such (“I preach to you”), a properly authorized man standing in a pulpit, at the appropriate point in a Mass, dressed in clerical garb and speaking on the right sort of topic in the right manner could hardly be regarded as doing anything other than preaching. It might be fair to say that preaching theorists would have wished to exclude from consideration as preaching any speech-act that could not properly have taken place in those circumstances (at Mass, from the pulpit)—a criterion that would obviously, and from their point of view desirably, exclude female and lay preaching altogether.8

It is again the authority of the speaker, the appropriateness of the setting, and the topic of discourse, which is used by Helen Leith Spencer to define preaching as “utter[ing] a religious and hortatory address, customarily based upon a passage of scripture, provided one were an authorized person in an authorized place at an authorized time.”9

Indeed, there was considerable awareness in late medieval England that teaching and preaching are not one and the same thing. The latter required a specific frame, particularly in terms of setting and the authority of the speaker, as the early fifteenth-century Speculum Christiani explained:

Magna differencia est inter predicacionem et doctrinam. Predicacio est, ubi est convocacio sive populi invitacio in diebus festivis in ecclesias seu in alis certis locis et temporibus ad hoc deputatis, et pertinet ad eos qui ordinati sunt ad hoc iurisdictionem et auctoritatem habent, et non ad alios. Informare autem et docere potest unusquisque fratre suum in omni loco et tempore oportuno, si videatur sibi expedite, quia hoc est Elemosina, ad quam quilibet teneatur.10

[A grete differens es between prechynge and techynge. Prechynge es in a place were es clepynge togedyr or foluynge of pepyl in hily
When Margery Kempe was accused of preaching, she seized on exactly this frame of the sermon to deny the charge: “I preche not, ser, I come in no pulpytt” (Book I, Chapter 52). The fact that Margery was accused of preaching without being in a pulpit, and without suffusing her discourse with typical sermon features, such as a theme, the use of Latin, and the use of *exempla*, shows how fragile a narrow definition of preaching is. As Simon Forde has pointed out, this orthodox, clerical definition of preaching excludes a range of important activities (including Margery’s) which “form part of the transmission of the faith” in the medieval period.

Nevertheless, it was precisely the strict contemporary definition of “explicit preaching” in sermon manuals and Church discourse that enabled Margery to teach without preaching; she did, after all, win her case. Claire M. Waters notes how it was the “very insistence on its own boundaries, as Margery Kempe realized, [which] enabled women to give themselves an *alibi*, in Latin, literally an ‘elsewhere’, from which to speak.” Similarly, I would argue, it was this narrow clerical definition that allowed the playwrights to instruct the laity in the vernacular in religious matters without running the risk of contravening Church legislation, as long as their didactic monologues did not contain too many generic sermon features.

In any case, given the medieval differentiation between preaching, which is only acceptable in duly authorized members of the clergy and at certain times and places, and teaching, which can be done anywhere by anyone at anytime, we should beware of identifying any didactic speech by a virtuous character in a play automatically as a sermon. Unless the speech is characterized by some explicit sermon feature or clearly uttered by a preacher, it is more likely that contemporaries regarded it as an instance of teaching rather than preaching. Moreover, “explicit preaching” was presumably most closely associated with the Church’s authority. And, as the sermon is a monologic and overtly didactic genre, as we saw in the previous chapter, dramatic passages that resemble the sermon to a marked degree would probably have generated a suitably docile attitude in the
spectators as well. A recognizable sermon on the stage would give rise to a very different set of audience expectations and attitudes than other kinds of discourse, even if the topic of that discourse is religious and the mode didactic. This chapter will therefore assume that for a passage in a play to have the authority and weight of a sermon, it must be instantly recognizable as such.

If one accepts that a sermon should be a monologue of some length with at least a few of the recurrent Middle English sermon traits, or else a speech that is evidently based on a biblical sermon, the list of potential sermons in the plays becomes rather more limited. In fact, there are remarkably few instances of preaching in late medieval English drama: there are no sound examples of sermons in the whole of York, Towneley, Chester, the Northampton Abraham and Isaac, The Castle of Perseverance, Occupation and Idleness, Wisdom, and Henry Medwall’s Nature.\textsuperscript{17} Even prototypical preacher characters, such as John the Baptist, rarely preach on the Middle English stage: he preaches only in N-Town, but not in York and Towneley (the episode is not represented in Chester), whereas in the French mystères a sermon for this saint is standard practice.

It could, however, be argued that to apply these criteria to defining a sermon on the stage is too stringent and makes no allowances for dramatic license. But, using these criteria, there remain a few clear instances of sermons in dramatic texts from England and many more from France, showing that medieval playwrights could successfully incorporate an explicit sermon if they wanted to do so. A nice example is John the Baptist’s first speech in Michel’s \textit{Le Mystère de la Passion}, which commences:

\begin{verbatim}
Et pour tant, au commencement 
de ceste predicacion, 
j’ ay prins pour introduction 
le mot d’Isaïe que je dy: 
Parate viam Domini. 
En ce theme icy, je puis prendre 
deux poins bien ayséz a comprendre 
a tout homme de bon vouloir. 
Le premier sera de sçavoir 
comme on doit preparer son cueur 
a la venue de saulveur; 
et cecy nous est denote 
par ce mot icy Parate. 
Le second sera par quell œuvre 
la grace de Dieu on requeuvre;
\end{verbatim}
et est ce noté quant je dy:

Rectas facite semitas Dei nostri. (902–18)\(^{18}\)

[At the beginning of this preaching, I have taken as introduction the words of Isaiah, which I pronounce: “Parate viam Domini” [prepare the way of the Lord]. In this theme here, I can take two points, very easy to understand for all men of good will. The first will be to know how one must prepare one’s heart for the coming of the Saviour. And this is demonstrated to us by the word Parate [prepare] here. The second point will be by which work one might receive the grace of God, and this is meant when I say: “Rectas facite semitas Dei nostri” [make straight the paths of our God].]\(^{19}\)

The divisions are duly developed in the remainder of this sermon.

We find staged sermons in England, too, particularly in texts that are associated with East Anglia. (If more plays had survived, that connection might not be so pronounced, but as things stand it is further evidence for the unique character of East Anglian drama so admirably outlined by Gail McMurray Gibson.) The most obvious example is the protagonist’s speech toward the end of *The Conversion of St. Paul.*\(^{20}\) This long speech of nearly 70 lines (after which Paul is interrupted by the priest’s servant) includes a great many of the traditional, recurrent sermon features. It commences with an opening prayer followed by a prayer for the success of the sermon:

Graunte me, good Lorde, þi pleasure to fulfyll,
And send me soch speech þat I the truth say,
My ententyons profytable to meve yf I may (506–8)

It contains several Latin phrases and repeatedly refers to Scripture as a source of authority, as in

As Holy Scrypture baryth playn wytnes:
“Allium omnum peccatorum superbia est” —
That often dystroyth both man and best! (513–15)

St. Paul is not afraid to claim authority for himself, either, as when he insists “And I therfor assent and fully certyf | In text, as I tell the trw entencyon” (525–26), and “Thys ys my consell: bere the not to hye!” (529). The sermon incorporates a number of practical lessons with direct address of the audience, such as “Kepe clene your body from synne vncuth; | Stabyll your syghtys, and look ye not stunt [cease]” (567–68). There are also a few references to the preacher’s own preaching practices, as when he
says “Whoso in pryde beryth hym to hye, | Wyth mysheff shalbe mekyd as I mak mensyon.” (523–24) and “Wherfor I reherse thys wyth myn owyn mowthe” (565). That this is a sermon cannot be doubted.

In another late fifteenth- or early sixteenth-century East Anglian play, the Digby Mary Magdalene, Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount is evidently referenced although there does seem to have been some uneasiness about staging the female saint preaching. The Lollard suggestion that even women could preach caused orthodox authorities considerable uneasiness in late medieval England. Female preaching was problematic outside the Lollard context as well, and several medieval artists, writers, and scholars struggled to reconcile the reputed preaching of Mary Magdalene with biblical and ecclesiastical prohibitions against women preaching. The famous preacher Jacques de Vitry, for instance, drew on the distinction between praedicatio and exhortatio; according to him Mary Magdalane had merely done the latter, not the former. Whether this female saint does or does not preach was then likely to be a matter of some interest throughout the Middle Ages, but especially so in late medieval East Anglia where the debate about spiritual authority and women’s ability and right to preach had rekindled with deadly intensity. Perhaps that is why the female saint in the East Anglian Digby Mary Magdalene is never told to preach; instead she is to convert, to teach, and to express God’s law:

Kyng and quene converte xall ȝe,  
And byn amyttyd as an holy apostylesse.  
Alle þe lond xall be techyd alonly be the,  
Goddys lawys onto hem ȝe xall expresse. (1379–83)

The male disciples, on the other hand, are said to have gone “To dyvers contreys her and ȝondyr, | To prech and teche of hys hye damage” (1346–47). In the Legenda Aurea, one of the most important sources of the play, the saint is repeatedly described as preaching. In several other versions of the saint’s life, such as the Legendys of Hooly Wummen and the relevant sermon in John Mirk’s Festial, she is similarly said to preach. The play therefore seems to deviate from the widely accepted notion that St. Mary Magdalene preached, and to partake of the anxiety about female preaching that characterizes some medieval material concerning Mary’s ministry in Marseille.

Our play does not seem to be especially interested in Mary Magdalene’s preaching, although two potential sermons are spoken on stage by the protagonist. Karen A. Winstead has argued that a new
trend in hagiography, which involved a greater interest in the preaching activities of saints and especially of female saints, emerged after Arundel’s Constitutions. Our female saint, however, seems to be rather more conservative. She has an instructive but not sermon-like speech on the relatively safe topic of the seven days of Creation. Even so, the orthodoxy of the speech is emphasized, as it recommends church attendance:

And on þe Sunday, he gan rest take,
As skryptur declarytt pleyn,
Pat al shold reverens make
To hyr Makar þat hem doth susteyn
Vpon þe Sunday to leuen in hys servyse,
And hym alonly to serve, I tell yow pleyn. (1520–25)

This is the most sermon-like extract of the speech with a reference to the Bible, an assertion of personal authority, and a practical lesson for its audience; it is no coincidence that it is also the most obviously Church-supporting passage. This speech’s adherence to the biblical account of Creation is not often found in surviving medieval English sermons, and may have instead called to mind artistic representations and even plays on the Creation, such as that found in the N-Town compilation. But while this distance between contemporary preaching and Mary Magdalene’s instruction on Creation may serve as a safety feature, ensuring that the play does not stage a woman preaching, it also strongly links this singular, and female, source of spiritual authority directly to the Bible. As a result, the authority and value of the clergy and of contemporary preaching practices are diminished.

The saint’s speech to the returned King and Queen in Marseille is more clearly a sermon, as it contains some recognizable sermon features, such as audience address (e.g. 1923), a closing prayer (1937–38), and Latin (1930). It is, however, extremely short, which may serve to reduce its sermon-like feel (it is a mere sixteen lines long, compare St. Paul’s sermon which takes up nearly seventy lines before the preacher is interrupted), which may again indicate some unease about women preaching. This passage immediately brings to mind not a contemporary sermon, but Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5: 3–8 in particular), connecting Mary Magdalene directly to God and the Bible. Again, then, the playwright bypasses the authority of the clergy and of contemporary preaching, unlike in The Conversion of St. Paul, which links its biblical protagonist to contemporary preaching, thereby validating the latter.
The Digby *Mary Magdalene*, conversely, is a play that expresses caution about the ability of clerical “covnnyng” (806) to comprehend and communicate divine mysteries. The play throughout emphasizes Mary’s authority as contemplative and visionary, presents her as an exceptional teacher of religious matters, and downplays the importance of the clergy. Mary Magdalene’s lack of “explicit preaching” may then not so much be due to the playwright’s orthodoxy in relation to female preaching, but rather reflect the playwright’s understanding of the importance of other, less institutional, forms of religious discourse and teaching in late medieval English devotion.

Another relatively clear instance of a dramatic sermon is Episcopus’s speech in the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* (also from East Anglia) which commences with a Latin theme and contains practical lessons addressed to its auditors:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Estote fortos in bello, et pugnate cum antico serpente,} \\
\text{Et accipite regnum eternum, et cetera.}
\end{align*}
\]

My chyldern, ye be strong in batayll gostly
For to fyght agayn the fell serpent,
That nyght and day ys ever besy (866–70)

The sermon status of this speech is not only enhanced by the clerical position of the speaker, but also by the location of the speech. The stage directions directly before this mini-sermon indicate that it takes place in a church, or at least in a church-like structure: “the bysshop shall entre the chyrche and lay the ost on the auter, sayng thus” (after l. 865). The speech is not a fully-fledged sermon but it seems clear that it represents a preaching event.

There are other instances of sermons on the late medieval English stage. In the East Anglian N-Town compilation, we find the only preaching biblical John the Baptist (play 22; he has a further preacher-like appearance in play 26), we also encounter Moses (play 6) preaching the Ten Commandments, Jesus preaching repentance at the start of *The Woman Taken in Adultery* (play 24), and John the Baptist as well as the apostles Peter and John the Evangelist preaching in *Passion Play I* (play 26). In this last play, Peter’s and John the Evangelist’s discourse is described as “prechynge” in the stage directions, which may be indicative that their communication was staged in a particular, sermon-like way. These saints include many lessons for the audience, offer interpretations, and assert their own authority and the listeners’ inferior spiritual status. The same
can be said for John the Baptist’s speech in this play, as in “Wherefore I councele þe ȝe reforme all wronge” (129), “As ȝe xal here when I have tolde” (140), and

Of þis wey for to make moralysacyon,
Be þe ryth syde ȝe xal vndyrstonde “mercy”;
And on þe lefte syde lykkenyd “dysperacyon” (141–43)

In the N-Town Moses pageant, God explicitly commands Moses to “preche all abowte” (41) before Moses’s speech on the Ten Commandments, highlighting that that speech is supposed to function as a sermon. We find various features commonly used in medieval English sermons in this speech as well. These include the use of Latin authorities followed by a translation, as in the opening lines “Custodi precepta Domini Dei tui: Deutronomini vjto. | The comaundment of þi Lord God, man, loke þu kepe” (48–49), lessons for the listeners, as in “Frendys, þese be þe lawys þat ȝe must kepe” (187), and a position of authority for the speaker, as in “But swere not oftyn, by rede of me” (95), “ȝow to teche God hath me sent” (55), “And to my techynge take good intent” (52). Such speeches could not be lifted out of the plays as independent sermons, but their status as a preaching event within their dramatic context is evident. These examples clearly demonstrate that, when they wanted to, playwrights could stage a sermon; if other didactic, religious speeches are not very sermon-like it is presumably because the dramatists in question were not interested in staging a sermon.

There are many instances where the sermon would seem an entirely, if not the most, appropriate genre for a particular utterance or character, and yet it is not used. Thus, for instance, Bonus Angelus, the Virtues, and the Daughters of God in The Castle of Perseverance are all didactic, but none of them sounds like a preacher. The speeches are too presenter-like and emotional (Bonus Angelus), too short (Virtues), or serve a different purpose to the sermon (the debate of the Daughters of God). In Towneley 7, the prophets use some features that typically occur in Middle English sermons but they are evidently prophesying, not preaching. The Doctor opening the York The Annunciation and the Visitation pageant is likewise a “composite Prophet figure” rather than a preacher. Reason in Henry Medwall’s Nature is a thoroughly didactic character but he has not one sermon-like speech. In Chester 14, Jesus teaches Simon by way of a parable, but the whole conversation is too short and too dialogue-based to stand out as a sermon.
The didactic and authoritative role of the Expositor/Doctor in the Chester cycle is indubitable. Authenticating devices are common throughout his speeches—one of his favorite expressions is “believe you me” (e.g. Chester IV.131, Chester XII.195, 301, Chester XXII.249, 305). Again and again, this presenter limits the range of interpretations of the events staged, as in “By Isaac understande I maye | Jesus that was obedient aye” (Chester IV.472–73) and “These redde horses call I maye | all maner of marters, in good faye” (Chester XXII.105–6). The value of this insight for the audience is repeatedly highlighted, for example:

Nowe that you shall expresselye knowe  
these prophettes wordes upon a rowe,  
what the doe signifie I will shewe  
that mych may doe you good. (Chester XXII.25–28)

Yet, although this presenter is evidently designed specifically to be didactic, his speeches do not resemble sermons in any overt manner. Several sermon characteristics, such as the use of Latin or the inclusion of practical lessons for the audience are lacking—the focus of the Expositor/Doctor is belief rather than practice. Moreover, he repeatedly addresses the audiences with “lordynges,” which is atypical of preachers, and is instead associated with romances. The function of his relatively short speeches, which tend to be spread out throughout the plays, is evidently to elucidate those plays, so these speeches are very different in intent, and even in content, from the sermon. It is also worth remembering that the Chester Expositor/Doctor is unique in the English corpus and probably a late addition to the cycle, possibly postdating the Reformation.

This sparse use of sermons despite evident opportunities on the late medieval English stage is intriguing. It is unlikely that the infrequent use of the genre is due to a dislike of sermons per se. Admittedly, there are some indications that the medieval public was by no means always positively inclined toward preaching. The congregation’s critical attitude is implied in the complaint of the author of the postils in Longleat 4 that people will not sit down during sermons “but þei welyn stondyn þat þey moun redely gon awey ȝif þe prechour plese hem nout. … Summe comyn for malice and enuye to pynchyn at þe prechouris wordis.” Other sources suggest that attendance at sermons was not necessarily dictated by piety: the Wife of Bath lists sermons as one of the events she attended “for to se, and eek for to be seye | Of lusty folk” (Wife of Bath’s Prologue, 552–53). Many of these kinds of comments come, however, from the sermons them-
selves and serve an ideological purpose, namely to encourage a suitably devout attitude in its listeners; their reliability as historical witnesses is therefore to be treated with due caution. Preachers were at times interrupted by their auditors, sometimes aggressively, but sometimes merely with demands for further explanations or examples, requests which show considerable interest in the sermon.36

There is also evidence to attest the popularity of sermons in late medieval England. For example, Margery Kempe repeatedly describes the great crowds attending sermons: “Ther was a monke schulde prechyn in Yorke ... ther was meche multitude of pepil to heryn hym” (Book I, Chapter 52), “the frer seyd the sermown, a famows man, and a gret audi- ens had at hys sermown” (Book II, Chapter 2), and

Than cam ther a frer to Lenne whech was holdyn an holy man and a good prechowr. ... he seyd a sermown in a chapel of Seynt Jamys in Lenne, wher was meche pepyl gadyrd to heryn the sermown. ...

In schort tyme aftyr he prechyd ageyn in the same place. ... how fast the pepyl cam rennyng to heryn the sermown (Book I, Chapter 61)

Waldeby, an Austin friar at York, was said to be a very popular preacher and to draw huge crowds.37 Public outdoor sermons at Paul’s Cross in London are recorded from 1330 and became an institution which lasted into the seventeenth century.38 There is therefore no sound reason to assume that English playwrights avoided incorporating sermons because they were fundamentally unpopular—a point worth stressing as a modern predilection for anti-authoritarian discourse makes us prone to assume that sermons are boring and without literary value.

In fact, plays from France as well as The Conversion of St. Paul, the Digby Mary Magdalen, the Croxton Play of the Sacrament, and various N-Town pageants demonstrate that sermons on stage could contribute to dramatic success. The first sermon of Episcopus in the Croxton Play of the Sacrament, for example, is a fitting climax to the miraculous conversion of the Jews. There is, moreover, a strong sense of dramatic irony at play as the audience knows that Aristorius, and to some degree Presbyter, are about to confess their failure to adhere to the bishop’s advice to “be strong in batayll gostly” (867), which serves to reinforce the message of the sermon. The timing of this speech moreover supplies potential for action on stage in order to indicate the effect of this sermon on the sinner(s). The Digby Mary Magdalene also demonstrates that playwrights could and did engage with the genre creatively. Rather than aligning the saint with cleri-
cal authority, her biblically inspired preaching and teaching asserts both her independence as a religious authority and the value of forms of religious instruction that did not fit the confines of clerical definitions and understanding of preaching.

To take another example, it is probable that the scribe’s (and the Pharisee’s) reaction to Jesus’s opening sermon on the abundance of His mercy in the N-Town Woman Taken in Adultery contained a certain amount of comedy. But this speech also serves to tie the spectators more closely to the moral of the story by highlighting the distance between virtue in theory and in practice. The opening sermon contains relatively self-evident material, such as the call to repent your sins, to love God, and to forgive your neighbor if they trespass against you. Presumably any vaguely devout spectator would have made some kind of mental promise to adhere to Jesus’s commands—especially in view of the scribe’s and Pharisee’s reactions. When the plot develops, and the question of how to deal with the adulteress emerges, however, it is also plausible that these same spectators would not have found it so easy to forgive this sinner in the theatrical world and even harder to forgive an adulterer in the ordinary world. Adultery was taken very seriously in the Middle Ages and is frequently mentioned in records of episcopal visitations, as in “Harry Daundevyl, a tiler, refuses to live with his wife, fails to love her as a husband ought, and has an adulterous relationship with Mathilda, who he keeps in his house at Pyon.”

While the audience’s sympathy is clearly not supposed to lie with the accusers, it is likely that they would not have had too much sympathy for the accused either. When Jesus refuses to condemn her, then, the message of the opening sermon—to forgive one’s neighbor—is brought home again to the spectators in a rather more personal way: many of the spectators may well have fallen short of this requirement for salvation in the little time that has elapsed since the opening sermon. All the pageants on this episode play with the difference between ideal Christian forgiveness and everyday affairs to some degree, but only in N-Town does the playwright bring home this tension to the audience specifically, and he (or she) uses Jesus’s opening sermon to do so.

The sermon was then not only the most appropriate genre for playwrights to exploit in certain episodes, they clearly could incorporate sermons to great dramatic effect in their plays when they chose to do so.

Yet medieval English playwrights employed the genre extremely sparingly. Both the causes and the effects of this disinclination to stage sermons warrant further attention. Two obvious reasons for not staging
sermons come to mind. Firstly, it could be that dramatists preferred carving out an independent authority for themselves and their plays. Secondly, it could be that they felt it was safer to avoid staging a sermon, given contemporary legislation that restricted preaching to duly licensed members of the clergy. In fact, these two possible reasons are not mutually exclusive and it is likely that they fed into each other: that is, that the repressive influence of English ecclesiastical legislation induced playwrights further to explore independent modes of instruction.

It is well known that there was considerable anxiety, especially after the rise of Lollardy, about who was allowed to preach, and that various measures were put in place to limit sermons to licensed preachers. The connection between Lollards and vernacular preaching was made early on in the history of the movement, with Leicester Lollards in 1388 maintaining that “quilibet laicus potest sancta evangelia ubicumque predicare et docere” (“any layman can preach and teach the holy gospel anywhere”). Already in 1382 the Blackfriars Council had decided that the notion that all priests and deacons were entitled to preach by virtue of being in holy orders was erroneous. In 1400 action was taken throughout England to limit preaching to those with a license from their diocesan and to parochial chaplains in their own churches. Finally, Arundel’s Constitutions were promulgated in 1409 and remained in force until 1529. As a result of this latter legislation, both secular and regular clerics had to undergo an examination into their learning and manners in order to gain a license of the diocesan, which allowed them to preach in places appointed by the diocesan in that diocese. Parish priests and temporary vicars, unless they had obtained a license to preach, had to restrict their sermons to the basics of the faith covered in John Pecham’s *Ignorantia sacerdotum*, such as the Ten Commandments and the Seven Deadly Sins. Anyone who contravened these decrees was to be excommunicated; if they persisted in their unlawful preaching, they were to be declared heretics and punished as such (Constitutio 1). It was the responsibility of both the clergy and the laity, upon pain of an ecclesiastical interdict, to ensure that members of the clergy were properly licensed before they were permitted to preach (Constitutio 2).

It is difficult to know how strictly these rules were enforced, but people were certainly wary of unauthorized preaching. For instance, in 1417 some chaplains were charged with preaching in contravention of Arundel’s Constitutions and Margery Kempe had to defend herself to the Archbishop of York against accusations of preaching in the same year.
(Book I, Chapter 52). In fact, some Lollards complained that nowadays even as holy a man as John the Baptist would be charged as a Lollard for preaching:

> if ony preche þe trouþe, þe multitude schal aȝenseie him ... þouȝ he were as hooli as euere was seint Ion Baptist, he schulde not faile to be sclaundrid for a cursid Lollard & pursued as an heretik.\(^{47}\)

The otherwise orthodox friar responsible for the postils in Longleat 4 fulminates against the restrictions on preaching following Arundel’s Constitutions and even likens them to the persecution of early Christians: “þe persecucion of Deoclician and Maximian be now newly begonnyn to letting techinge and preching of Goddys word and Goddis lawe.”\(^{48}\) Who was and who was not allowed to preach could indeed be a matter of life and death. William White was condemned for various beliefs deemed to be heretical, including that “each faithful person, even if not sent or licensed by diocesans or ordinaries ... may freely preach the word of God,” and was burned in Norwich as a relapsed heretic in 1428.\(^{49}\) Helen Leith Spencer has argued that there was a marked lull in the production of Middle English sermons following Arundel’s Constitutions.\(^{50}\) Later manuscripts of the early fourteenth-century *Northern Homily Cycle* contain less of the biblical material and some excise the gospel narratives altogether, which betrays great unease about what material might be safely incorpo-

rated in vernacular sermons addressed predominantly to the laity.\(^{51}\) There are then sufficient indications that preaching in the vernacular to the laity was affected by specific legislation and by the more general anxiety concerning the use of English in lay religious instruction.

While it is impossible accurately to date and locate most of the plays under discussion, the majority of them seem to postdate Arundel’s Constitutions and the rise of Lollardy, both of which problematized preaching in the vernacular (by and) to the laity. It is therefore likely that writers and producers of late medieval English drama were concerned about how a sermon on the stage, presumably uttered by a lay actor in the majority of instances, would be perceived. This anxiety can perhaps explain why we encounter indirect preaching in the York Corpus Christi Play. Despite the biblical accounts of his preaching, the York John the Baptist merely recapitulates his sermons: “Loke þou make þe redy, ay saide I” (21.29). Although the audience is the ultimate recipient of the moral message, ostensibly this character does not preach on the stage. This indirect preaching goes against the biblical account of the event. There
also does not seem to be a good aesthetic or dramatic reason to prefer the saint’s indirect preaching to a speech which engages directly with the audience (or with extras on stage), making the repressive influence of legislation aimed at circumscribing preaching the more likely trigger for the dramatist’s choices.

This anxiety would account not only for the relative dearth of sermons in the English dramatic corpus but also for the careful orthodoxy of most sermons or sermon-like speeches in medieval English drama. Not all the on-stage sermons offer emphatic support for the Church or touch on controversial topics, however. Jesus’s preaching on penance in *The Woman Taken in Adultery* in N-Town does not explicitly align itself with orthodox doctrine regarding the sacrament of penance. In *The Conversion of St. Paul* the protagonist preaches on the Seven Deadly Sins, an uncontroversial topic. But nearly every other instance of preaching within a play can be seen as an insistent assertion of orthodoxy. For example, several of the sermons in the East Anglian N-Town manuscript have a distinct anti-Lollard flavoring. Moses preaches on the Ten Commandments but does not mention idolatry, probably because of Lollard debate surrounding images and idolatry. The importance of auricular confession, a point of contention between the orthodox Church and Lollards, is repeatedly emphasized in various N-Town pageants. I shall discuss these instances in greater detail in chapter 6, which looks at the portrayal of the sacrament of penance in late medieval English plays and sermons. For now, I shall only point out that the stress on confession in John the Baptist’s closing speech in the *Baptism* play (22.147, 155, 162–63, 167, 177–78) is indeed remarkable, as can be seen when this sermon is compared to the saint’s sermons on penance in the French *mystères* where there is no such insistence on confession; sometimes it is not even mentioned at all, as in Michel’s John the Baptist sequence, for instance. A similar assertion of this orthodox idea that confession is integral to salvation is also to be found in both the saint’s Prologue and Peter’s preaching in *Passion Play I* in the N-Town compilation (26.155–56, 410–13). Episcopus’s sermon in the East Anglian Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* occurs in a distinctly orthodox play and likewise recommends confession to a priest: “Of synnys forgotyn take good avysement, | And knowleage them to yowr confessor full evyn” (874–75). The overt assertion of orthodoxy which is to be found in these speeches supports the understanding that there was apprehension about whether a sermon on the stage might be perceived as potentially heterodox and dangerous; the writers of these passages took care to fend off any such suspicion.
The treatment of the sermon genre in *Mankind* is of special interest as this play is deeply concerned with the proper mode of religious didactic discourse. Scholars have generally accepted the idea that Mercy’s opening speech is a sermon. However, when looked at side-by-side with surviving Middle English sermons the dissimilarities are more numerous than the similarities. There are certainly some clear sermon features in this speech, such as the lessons aimed at the audience, for instance “In goode werkyes, I awyse yow, souerence, to be perseuerante | To puryfye youw sowlys, þat þei be not corupte” (25–26), and the references to the audience as a listening and learning congregation with the speaker in a position of spiritual authority, as in “Who ys þe hede forsoth I xall yow certyfye: | I mene Owr Sauyowr” (33–34). But the language of this speech is much more aureate than any surviving sermon I have come across, and at least in so far as regards its aureate tone, this speech resembles other literary genres more than it does sermons. The repeated address of the auditors as “sovereigns” is wholly unlike the sermon; this is a form of address typically found in plays but never in sermons. We encounter a variety of addresses in sermons, from the bare “sirs” to the more elaborate “worschypful and feithfull frendys,” but never “sovereigns.” It is presumably no coincidence that all three instances of lessons with direct address in Mercy’s speech also employ this term which undermines the (social) superiority of the speaker (13–16, 25–26, 29–31).

Some typical sermon features are also missing from this soliloquy, such as a theme, the quotation of *auctoritates*, and the use of Latin. As not every single surviving Middle English sermon has all the recurrent sermon features, this absence could be dismissed. Mischief’s interruption, however, focuses attention on exactly these features with a spoof authority and the use of doggerel Latin:

> For a winter corynthrescher, ser, I haue hyryde  
> ...  
> Ande he prowyth nay, as yt schewth be þis wers:  
> “Corn seruit bredibus, chaffe horsibus, straw fyrybusque.” (54–57)

The last line is evidently the theme of this sermon-parody, as it is translated (58–59), repeated (60), and explained (61–62). Moreover, Mischief’s phrase introducing the translation of the theme, “Thys ys as moche to say, to youw leude wnderstondynge” (58), most definitely recalls the sermon. The translation of the theme of a sermon is standardly introduced with this phrase, with only minor variations, throughout the fifteenth
century: “& tus miche te seie on engliss tunge to ȝour vndirstondyng,”56 “thus myche to say in englice tong to your vndirstondyng,”57 “þe wordes of my teme beþ þus much to sey to youre vndyrstondynge,”58 “These wordys been þus moche to sey,”59 “These wordys that I haue spoken in Laten be thus moche to sey in Ynglyssche to ȝowre vnderstondyng.”60 Mischief may be ever so slightly ruder, but he captures the phrasing, and the patronizing tone, of these preachers to perfection; it is undeniable that the phrase would have put auditors in mind of preaching. That Mercy does not use any such phrase to translate Latin—which, of course, he does not use in his opening speech either—is equally undeniable.

Another sermon feature which Mischief parodies, although Mercy has not used it, is that of ending Latin quotations with *et cetera*, as in “'Quid uultis mihi dare?' et cetera,”61 “Y sa primo, Cum multiplicaveritis oraciones, et cetera”;62 occasionally, we even encounter it embedded in a vernacular phrase, as in “þe virste i sey, clennes, makis etc.”63 and “þan wyl he haue mercy on vs and bryngon vs into þe londe of lyf et cetera”64 If it were not for Mischief’s “'Chaff horsybus et reliqua' | ... | And so forth, et cetera.” (60–63) we would interpret the *et cetera* of the sermon as a note to the preacher to expand the quotation or phrase as appropriate. Mischief’s parody, however, makes clear that the *et cetera* were in fact at times uttered in preaching—if perhaps only by inept and ignorant preachers.

Although it is patent that Mischief’s interruption is meant to unsettle Mercy’s discourse, it is also evident he mocks all the typical sermon features that Mercy does not employ in his opening speech. The playwright clearly had a sound knowledge of the Middle English sermon, yet chose not to imbue Mercy’s opening soliloquy with those features that would most characterize it as a sermon.65 The lack of some of these sermonic features, such as the use of Latin, in Mercy’s opening monologue is quite atypical for the speech patterns of a virtuous character in contemporary religious plays; for instance, Mercy’s later speeches are repeatedly interspersed with Latin. But when, later on in the play, Mercy uses various sermon features, such as quotations of authorities and Latin, it is in dialogues or in emotional outbursts but never in monologues that could be perceived as sermons. Overall, then, despite Mischief’s parody, the playwright does uphold such typical sermon features as rightly belonging in religious, didactic discourse; this play does not appear to be an argument to alter the style of contemporary preaching. The playwright seems to have consciously held check on the sermon-feel of Mercy’s opening monologue, but not because he (or she) disapproved of the contemporary sermon style
as such. Rather, although the writer of *Mankind* experienced no anxiety about having a vicious character parody the sermon on the stage, he (or she) does seem to have avoided staging an actual sermon.

A similar tongue-in-cheek reference to the sermon is to be found in Newguise’s “Now gostly to owr purpos, worschypfull souerence, | We intende to gather mony, yf yt plesse yowr neclygence” (459–60). While the phrase “gostly to owr purpos” is normally used in sermons to introduce a piece of exegesis for the spiritual benefit of its auditors, here it is used incongruously to gather material profit for the actors, or sponsors, of the play. Furthermore, Helen Leith Spencer has suggested a controversial referent for this phrase and its context, namely the debate about whether friars might collect money for their sermons. In any case, the phrase is further evidence that the playwright of *Mankind* was intimately acquainted with the contemporary vernacular sermon, but chose to abstain strategically from staging such a sermon. Again, the influence of anti-Lollard legislation comes to mind as a reason for his doing so, for the play takes an orthodox stance on some other issues related to Lollardy, such as Mankind’s failure to attend church.

These plays and their careful (non-)use of the sermon genre support the notion that sermons on the stage were perceived as dangerous. Playwrights at times went against their sources to avoid incorporating sermons. When they did include a sermon, they usually inserted some material in that very speech to prove their orthodoxy, even though the remainder of the content is normally entirely uncontroversial. Very few plays seem to have been able to use the sermon in an unselfconscious way. It is probably no coincidence that the best example of a staged sermon occurs in a sixteenth-century play, *The Conversion of St. Paul*, because although there still was Lollard activity, and anti-Lollard measures continued to be taken in the sixteenth century, the focus seems to have shifted away from preaching to some extent. This is borne out by evidence from sermon studies, in that there was a marked lull in Middle English sermons being copied after about 1410 and throughout the mid fifteenth century, but later in the century the activity picked up again. The evidence therefore seems to point fairly conclusively to a prohibitive influence on the plays of contemporary restrictions on preaching.

By not incorporating sermons for many of the didactic moments of their virtue characters, the playwrights also avoided relying on a recognized ecclesiastical medium of religious instruction, and thus to an extent created their own autonomous authority. Despite the orthodoxy of the
plays under discussion, then, it could be argued that playwrights usurp the role of preachers rather more than if they had employed the sermon and thereby derived their authority from that clerical genre. Ironically, it seems that the Church’s desire to exclude the laity (and indeed many members of the clergy too) from preaching indirectly encouraged the laity further to develop their own mode of religious instruction and vernacular theology.

Whatever the causes of the sparse use of sermons in fifteenth-century English drama, the end result is that the plays on the whole tend to present their moralizing and didactic messages in a more independent, and frequently lay, fashion. Thus Lazarus’s final speech on death in Towneley 31 is greatly inspired by death lyrics, through the use of a wide array of standard images and themes, by replicating lines and phrases from the poems, and through its emotional tone. Wisdom lectures the audience and Anima through a religious treatise that was associated predominantly with private devotion. Occupation commences Occupation and Idleness with an “abuses of the age” speech, a genre also employed by the bishop in The Pride of Life. Likewise, although contemporary sermon techniques seem to be endorsed by the author of Mankind, Mercy employs a more literary style to teach the audience at the beginning of the play. By not making their virtue characters and the personages historically linked with sermons preach on stage, the dramatists endow these other forms of discourse with their own unique religious and spiritual authority.

As we observed in the previous chapter, the sermon is a monologic genre, making next to no allowances for audience participation; the congregation’s (ideal) response was very straightforward: to listen and learn. A play audience faced with a staged sermon may not have been in quite the same devout and docile mood as when faced with a genuine sermon, but presumably the audience’s response to a dramatic sermon and a real sermon would have been somewhat similar. By not exploiting this monologic textual genre the playwrights also failed to—or, rather, chose not to—claim the kind of spiritual and intellectual authority over their spectators which the sermon would have provided to some degree. Instead, as shall see in the following chapter, they often encourage the audience’s contribution in creating meaning and ascribing value to the performance. An important effect of this relative dearth of sermons on the medieval English stage is therefore that plays generally involve their audiences more in the hermeneutic process.
NOTES


2 For the use of sermons in medieval French drama, see especially Knight, Hindley, “Preaching and Plays,” Hindley, “Le prédication,” and Mazouer. One of the reasons why French *mystères* contain more sermons than the English biblical plays may be that the clergy appears to have participated more actively in performances in France.

3 Eccles, p. xxxv.

4 Klausner, p. 5. By extension, any virtuous and didactic character is often assumed to be a preacher simply by virtue of being virtuous and didactic; see for instance Briscoe, “The Relation,” p. 120.

5 This does not apply to Lollard sermons but I have detected no instances where a Lollard sermon might be presented on the stage.

6 Spencer, “Middle English Sermons,” p. 603.

7 Donavin, pp. 295–96.

8 Waters, p. 17.


10 Gillespie, “Chichele’s Church,” p. 23.

11 Windeatt, p. 253. For the date of the *Speculum Christiani*, see Gillespie, “Chichele’s Church,” p. 22. The exact same sentiment is expressed as early as the thirteenth century in John of Wales’s *Communiloquium* (Spencer, *English Preaching*, p. 39).

12 Staley, *The Book of Margery Kempe*.


14 The term derives from Waters, p. 17.

15 Waters, p. 122.

16 Despite the many similarities between sermons and religious plays and despite the general medieval ambiguity of terminology, it is noteworthy that the terms used to describe the vernacular religious plays, such as *play* and *game* and *ludus*, are not those used to refer to sermons and vice versa—although there is some overlap with *treatise*, which was used to label either genre. The distinction between sermon and play consequently appears to have been reasonably thorough and obvious.

17 There is one potential sermon in Towneley (Lazarus’s speech on death in play 31) and one in York (Prisbeter’s opening of *The Purification of the Virgin*). The former is more akin to lyrics (see p. 62). The latter is more difficult to determine as it has some, though not many, sermon features. However, given the inappropriateness of Prisbeter’s advice for a contemporary audience and the complete lack of sermons in the rest of the Corpus Christi Play, it is perhaps better not to label this speech a sermon. On the other hand, this version of the *Purification* pageant is substantially later than most of the other York texts: it was only copied by John Clerke in 1567 and probably dates from 1477 or later (Beadle, *The York
Plays, 2:136, 143; this is also the edition used). Perhaps concerns about sermons which appear to have been felt by other York playwrights might no longer have been so strongly present by the late fifteenth and in the sixteenth century (see also pp. 56–57, 61).


19 The translations from French are mine; abbreviations have been silently expanded.

20 In Baker, Murphy, and Hall, *Late Medieval Religious Plays*. For an analysis of the structure of this sermon, see also Hubert, appendix 1.

21 Coletti, pp. 139–40.

22 In Baker, Murphy, and Hall, *Late Medieval Religious Plays*.


24 The situation is rather different in the *Pride of Life*, which possibly predates the rise of Lollardy and is in any case probably Irish in origin (Fletcher, *Drama*, pp. 84–86). (Davis concurs with the Irish provenance and suggests a mid fourteenth-century date (pp. xcix, c). Klausner suggests a date towards the end of the fourteenth century but does not comment on the provenance of the play in his introduction.) Although the Queen’s speech to the King is relatively short, it has many more sermon features than the Bishop’s homily. She teaches her audience directly, for example, when she tells the King “In feith loke þou be stabil” (Davis, 238). She bolsters the authoritative tone of her discourse by referring to *auctoritates*, as in “Holy writ and prophecye | Þerof I take to borowe [as evidence]” (225–26), but also assumes a position of personal authority with utterances such as “I rede ȝe serue God Almiȝte” (229) and “For, God wot þe soþe, | I ne sey hit for no fabil” (235–36). The King dismisses her with “Qwhat prechistou” (239). In the early and possibly Irish *Pride of Life* there is no sense that a preaching woman is especially troublesome (except to her obtuse husband). But the surviving text of *The Pride of Life* is incomplete and corrupted, so details of its content can never be wholly relied on.


26 Ibid., pp. 114–21, 124–27, 130–34, see also pp. 144–46.

27 Davis, *Non-Cycle Plays*. If the extra-metrical Latin was not included in the spoken speech, which is possible, this monologue would be rather less sermon-like.

28 Spector, after l. 385.

29 The extra-metrical Latin lines may not have been included in the spoken text.

30 The Corpus Christi Play lacks an independent prophet play. See also Twycross, “Books,” p. 82.

31 References here are to Lumiansky and Mills.


33 These expository speeches following the dramatic action instead recall methods of exegesis (Twycross, “Books,” pp. 86–87).

34 Ritch, p. 243.

35 Hudson and Spencer, p. 223. For the idea that these “sermons” were pri-
marily intended for private reading, see also ibid., pp. 226–27.
36 Arnold, p. 49.
38 Maclure, pp. 5, 18.
39 As recorded at Burghill in 1397; in Shinners and Dohar, p. 292.
40 The dialogue between Jesus and the two apostles at the end of the episode in the York pageant stresses the need for the spectators to act with mercy and forgiveness, but it does not have the same effect as the engagement with the audience in the N-Town version.
41 Forde, p. 114.
43 Aston, p. 33.
44 Wilkins pp. 315–16.
46 Thomson, p. 117.
48 Hudson and Spencer, p. 232.
49 Forde, p. 115.
51 For the later tradition, see also the introduction in Thompson, *The Northern Homily Cycle*.
53 References in Eccles, *The Macro Plays*.
54 Helen Leith Spencer makes a similar observation about the divergent level of aureate diction in Mercy’s speech and sermons (*English Preaching*, p. 120).
56 Grisdale, p. 51.
57 Ibid., p. 22.
58 Ross, p. 33.
59 Morrison, p. 186.
60 Ibid., p. 217.
61 Ross, p. 33.
62 O’Mara, *Four*, p. 129.
63 Grisdale, p. 43.
64 Powell, *Festial*, p. 140.
65 Further in-depth knowledge of sermons is perhaps argued by the verses “Lex et natura, Cristus et omnia jura | Damnant ingratum, lugent eum fore natum.” (“Law and nature, Christ and all justice | damn the ungrateful, lament that he was born,” 754–55), which occur in a slightly different version in the preaching handbook of Friar John of Grimestone (ca. 1376), as “Lex et natura, Christus, simul omnia iura | Dampnant ingratum, plangunt illum fore natum” (“Law and Nature, Christ, together with all justice | Damn the ungrateful, lament
that he was born," Wenzel, *Preachers*, p. 128). It is also possible that these verses were fairly commonplace at the time *Mankind* was composed.

66 Fletcher, “The Meaning.”
Chapter 4

Performing Authority:
Expositors and Preachers

Presenter figures are ideally placed to guide and circumscribe the audience’s response to the dramatic performance because they occupy a liminal position, mediating between the audience and the fictional world presented on stage, firmly being part of the performance yet not belonging to the play-world. As such, presenter figures have often been seen as being fundamentally linked to the didacticism of medieval drama, having “didactic theatrical functions” and a “powerful effect upon the didactic nature of the play.” The similarity with the figure of the preacher, mediating between God and the laity and providing the laity with circumscribed access to clerical knowledge, is pronounced. However, while the presenter is often used to try to ensure that the spectators have an optimal experience of the dramatic event, authors of late medieval English presenters rarely employ their creations to enforce a monologic mode for the performance.

By my count, English plays with presenters are a small minority in the corpus of plays that have survived: 18 plays (or 11.7 percent) have a specially designated presenter, 136 (or 88.3 percent) do not. Presenters also feature in the Durham Prologue and the Reynes Epilogue which have survived without any accompanying play text. The paucity of presenters in late medieval English drama indicates that these figures were not seen as a necessary authenticating device. It is of course possible that some of the plays which have survived without a presenter did originally have one. The N-Town scribe-compiler, for instance, almost certainly intended not to include Contemplacio in the so-called Mary Play; if he had succeeded in deleting this figure, then perhaps he would also have erased the opening speech of Contemplacio in Passion Play II. On the other hand, there are a number of independent plays, such as the Digby Mary Magdalene, without a presenter and there are presenter figures in some of the cycle plays at York and Chester, so we must not assume that all stand-alone plays originally had a presenter and that these were edited out when incorporated into a larger whole.
But the texts of presenters were liable to various alterations and even omission. The two octaves of Contemplacio’s closing speech at the end of the N-Town Mary Play are perhaps original (though the quatrains appear to be a later addition) but this speech was possibly discarded in favor of a later, Contemplacio-less alternate ending. The Norwich Grocers’ Play B has two different prologues: the First Prologue was to be used when the play was performed independently, the Alternative Prologue was to be recited if the play was preceded by other pageants. At least one of Poeta’s speeches in The Conversion of St. Paul is optional (“si placet,” sd. before l. 155). Conversely, the Reynes Epilogue can be described as a passe-partout closing speech, and could have concluded any dramatic performance at a church ale; its generally utility was presumably the reason why Robert Reynes, a churchwarden in Acle, preserved the text. Presenter figures, and especially those that delivered only prologues or epilogues, do seem to have been deleted and added with great freedom, and it is likely that a greater percentage of performances had presenters than the mere eighteen surviving plays with presenters suggest. The detachability of these speeches and their speakers gives them a special status, separate from the remainder of the play and very possibly actuated by specific performance contexts. These figures and their speeches then were not regarded as particularly important or authoritative, but rather as a practical device to be used when and how the occasion required.

In the previous chapter, I tentatively suggested that Middle English plays prefer a more dialogic relationship with their audiences than the frequent adoption of the sermon would have allowed. This view is supported by a close study of presenters on the late medieval English stage. Presenters in medieval English drama are often assumed to personify ecclesiastical authority, no doubt at least partly because this seems to be the case on the Continent. In many continental plays prologues and epilogues are delivered by preachers, or at least by actors who assume the role of a preacher. The presenter opening Jean Bodel’s Jeu de Saint Nicholas is called li prechei-eres (“the preacher”) and the opening monologue of Michel’s Le Mystère de la Passion is in effect a thematic sermon. In the Passion play performed at Mons in 1501 the prologues were delivered by a priest. In Florentine sacra rappresentazione the annunzio (“prologue”) and licenza (“epilogue”) were delivered by actors in angel costume, automatically asserting their spiritual authority. In Feo Belcari’s sacra rappresentazione of the Abraham and Isaac story, the angel promises the audience “una storia Santa e giusta” (“a holy and true story” 1.6) and asks for a devout audience (1.8) at the
start of the play. He reappears to conclude the play by recommending the audience to carry away the moral (62.5), which strongly recommends “santa ubidienza” (“holy obedience” 62.7). In several medieval Majorcan plays prologues and epilogues are used to promise spiritual reward to the audience, to highlight the theological message of the play, and to assert the accuracy and authenticity of the play. It seems clear that these prologuists and epiloguists represent ecclesiastical authority, often through the character of the preacher, and present the authoritative reading of the play, thereby reinforcing orthodoxy and limiting the active involvement of the audience in the hermeneutic process. As Meg Twycross notes, this emphatically didactic tone and its link with the clergy first and foremost indicates the Church’s “desire to share the riches of its accumulated wisdom.” Nonetheless, a guiding voice interpreting the play or play episodes does circumscribe the audience’s role in constructing meaning and value.

But in some instances, the situation is rather more complicated than may at first appear. Charles Mazouer, for example, has postulated that the thematic sermon prologue to Michel’s play did not form part of the performance but was aimed at a reading audience. And Lynn T. Ramey has demonstrated that the unreliable opening summary of the Jeu de Saint Nicholas by li prechieres (“the preacher”) was used to encourage the spectators to engage critically not just with the play but also with real sermons. Presenter figures could indeed represent the Church’s authority and enforce a monologic model of drama, and often did so, but sometimes they could be used to undermine that model of ecclesiastical, monologic authority.

Given the ecclesiastical politics in late medieval England, with its anxiety surrounding the use of the vernacular and the participation of the laity in religious instruction, one would expect presenter figures who are ostensibly related to the Church and assert the orthodoxy of the dramatic enterprise and pre-empt heterodox interpretations. The names of many of these characters (Contemplacio, Doctor, Expositor) would seem to support this hypothesis. Many scholars accept these characters’ link with the established Church. Gail McMurray Gibson connects Contemplacio in the N-Town Mary Play with “the old ideal of monastic contemplation” and argues that he would have been dressed as a monk. Peter Meredith likewise assumes clerical standing for this figure, and describes him as “a slightly fussy, benevolent clergyman.” William Fitzhenry has emphasized this same Contemplacio’s function to ensure “the uncomplicated transfer of orthodox religious instruction from stage to audience,” making
him akin to a preacher.\textsuperscript{16} Contemplacio’s role is specifically situated in the fifteenth century’s troubled religious climate by Fitzhenry:

By interjecting Contemplacio’s prologues in between individual plays and framing the entire sequence with his verbal and visual presence, the N-Town scribe-compiler provides a potent emblem of interpretive control over the sacred images and events that have been depicted on stage. In a sense, Contemplacio becomes a representative of the orthodox intellectual culture of fifteenth-century England and its desire to limit the range and value of vernacular writing.\textsuperscript{17}

However, on closer inspection it appears that many of the English presenters have a structural function and were probably included for practical reasons rather than didactic or religious ones. As a result, although some presenters in the English tradition have the function of asserting the correct interpretation of the play they accompany, many of these figures do not represent the voice of the Church in any way. Also, next to none of the surviving presenter speeches are especially sermon-like. Again, we notice that most late medieval English dramatists do not aim to adopt the spiritual authority or monologic voice associated with preaching, but instead opt for a more dialogic relationship with their audiences.

There are, however, some presenter figures who claim to speak, or simply do speak, in a spiritually authoritative manner, limiting the potential range of interpretations. Generally, presenters who do not align themselves with the actors and producers, or do so rarely, are prone to instruct and teach the audience more often: this is the case for the Doctor in the Brome Abraham and Isaac, the Doctor of the N-Town Assumption Play, the Doctor in the York Annunciation and Visitation pageant, Primus and Secundus Doctors in the “Procession of Saints” inserted in between the N-Town Passion Plays, and the Expositor/Doctor in Chester IV, Chester VI, Chester XII, and Chester XXII. The play that has the most explicit frame with a clear didactic purpose is Everyman, a text which was undoubtedly translated from a Dutch original and thus tells us little about the English dramatic tradition; the English translation is also possibly post-Reformation.\textsuperscript{18}

Although these characters are all monologic and didactic to some degree, their association with ecclesiastical authority is not always certain. They may, of course, have been dressed as clerics to support their claim to authority and given their names, this is rather likely. On the other hand, it is worth remembering that the authoritative sounding names of these
characters are never part of the spoken text. In fact, the designation of the prophet-like speaker at the beginning of the York *Annunciation and Visitation* pageant as “Doctour” is not simply never used in the spoken text, it also stems from the sixteenth century. The proliferation of Contemplacios in the N-Town manuscript similarly shows how the names of these kinds of characters could be added or altered, as the attribution of both the opening prologue of *The Parliament of Heaven; The Salutation and Conception* pageant and of the opening speech of *Passion Play II* to Contemplacio figures are presumably due to the appearance of Contemplacio in the *Mary Play* earlier in the manuscript. The former case is especially interesting for the speech originally seems to have been attributed to two separate dramatic characters, possibly angels or prophets, and it is probably the vague ascription in the copy text which finally caused the scribe-compiler of the N-Town manuscript to give all stanzas to Contemplacio. In some cases the names and even the very creation of presenter figures therefore appear to be scribal decisions. In most cases the exact name of the presenter figure would only have mattered to the reader of the text, not the spectator of a performance. The connection between the name of these characters and the content of their speech consequently appears to have been of minimal importance.

Apart from in the so-called “Procession of Saints,” the source of authority of presenter figures is never explicitly mentioned. For example, the Chester Expositor/Doctor starts his first speech by stressing his role as teacher and by asserting his personal authority but he never reveals a source for that authority:

Lordinges, what may this signifie
I will expound yt appertly –
the unlearned standinge herebye
maye knowe what this may bee.
This present, I saye veramente,
signifieth the newe testamente (Chester IV.113–18)

In Chester IV the Expositor is described as riding a horse (“equitando,” sd. before l. 113), which, as David Mills points out, puts him physically between the actors and the audience, thus highlighting his role as mediator between the play and the spectators. It is difficult to see to what extent the horse-riding Expositor/Doctor in Chester IV would have appeared clerical to the spectators. Clerics did not normally teach their congregations on horseback. This particular mode of delivery may well
have recalled more secular authoritative discourses, such as proclamations. Perhaps it called to mind the crier of the Banns, who also rode on horseback. If this were so, then maybe, despite his name and the religious content of his speeches, the Chester IV Expositor/Doctor is best regarded not as a representative of the Church but rather as the representative of a civic impulse to limit religious controversy surrounding the plays; he would then have had a more straightforward civic and dramatic source of authority. It is also likely that the role of the Chester Expositor/Doctor was developed later on in the history of the cycle in order to “bolster intellectual apologies as the Reformation proceeded,” so that this element of overt didacticism need not go back very far in the history of the cycle. In any case, while their costumes may have made visible a link with the Church, it is also possible that these didactic presenter characters were not explicitly associated with clerical standing and that they derived their authority from other sources.

Only in one semi-dramatic text, the “Procession of Saints” in the N-Town manuscript, is the connection between the expositors and the Church made evident, namely when Primus Doctor claims to be a preacher: “To þe pepyl not lernyd I stonde as a techer, | ... | And to them þat be lernyd as a gostly precher” (9–11). This text was probably originally part of a religious procession and under clerical aegis, so the actors of Primus Doctor and Secundus Doctor may well have been clerics. Nevertheless, despite the overt claim to clerical authority, their speeches are not especially didactic. They identify various saints and provide a minimal amount of background information for each one, but there is no clear mnemonic structure, particular theological slant, or strong devotional message. It therefore appears that the producers of this East Anglian procession were not especially interested in stimulating the spectators’ devotion to these saints through overt religious instruction.

The majority of didactic presenters are relatively straightforward with regard to the content of their speeches. The York Doctor bridges the divide between the Old and New Testaments by reciting prophecies, the N-Town Assumption Play Doctor provides useful background information on Mary’s life since the Passion, the Chester Expositor/Doctor generally highlights established typological links, and Primus and Secundus Doctor are a talking Who’s Who.

The didacticism of the Doctor who speaks the epilogue in the Brome Abraham and Isaac, on the other hand, is rather more complicated. This is the only didactic presenter in the surviving corpus of Middle English plays
who approximates a preacher’s style. His name is never mentioned in the spoken text and his clerical standing is by no means certain: he identifies himself as one of the actors and/or producers in his very first line (“now haue we schewyd,” 435), which, unless at least some of the actors or producers were clerics, would rather undermine his position as preacher. But his speech does employ some sermon features. He aims his practical lessons directly at the audience, as when he says “And groche not aȝens owre Lord God, | In welthe or woo, wether that he ȝow send” (456–57). He asserts his personal authority, with “Yt ys but folly, I may wyll awooe” (452) for instance, and engages the audience through rhetorical questions, as in

Trowe ȝe, sorys, and God sent an angell
And commawndyd ȝowre chyld to slayn,
Be ȝowre trowthe ys ther ony of ȝow
That eyther wold groche or stryve therageyn? (443–46)

None of these features is exclusively found in sermons and several other traits that are typical of sermons, such as the theme, the use of Latin, and references to authorities, are lacking in this speech. Moreover, as mentioned in the previous chapter in relation to *Mankind*, Middle English sermons never address their congregation with “sovereigns,” which evidently entails a certain humility on the part of the speaker with regard to his audience, but the Brome Doctor does exactly that (435). Nevertheless, although the Brome Doctor’s epilogue is not a fully developed sermon, it relies on certain sermon features in order to enhance its didactic impact. It is likely that at least some members of the audience experienced it as a sermon, especially if the presenter were dressed as a cleric, and almost certainly so if the part of Doctor were acted by a cleric.

But how straightforward is the Doctor’s interpretation of the play and its moral message? The metrical scheme of this epilogue is different to the rest of the play, which may indicate that it is a later (though still fifteenth-century) addition. David Mills has argued that the content of the speech presents us with a standard interpretation of the Abraham and Isaac story and a well-fitting, unproblematic ending to the play. It may well be a traditional interpretation that suits the narrative, but the play places some emphasis on the cruelty of God’s test, the unnecessary suffering it entails for both Abraham and Isaac, and the fact that Abraham was on the verge of committing filicide, and none of these aspects is resolved in the Doctor’s speech. On the contrary, the Brome Doctor focuses on
the cruel, arbitrary, and pathetic aspects of the episode. He also repeatedly encourages the audience to situate the story in their own lives: he taunts the fathers in the audience that they would fail to obey God when commanded to kill their child, as we have seen in the quotation above, and dismisses as foolish mothers who “wepe so sorrowfully” (449) at the death of their child. Given the high infant mortality rate at the time, several people in the audience must have experienced such a tragic loss at close quarters, and their response to this speech would presumably have been intensely personal and emotional.

In the play, Abraham and Isaac are promised some reward for their sufferings, but the audience must seemingly not look for too much. The closing stanza starts promisingly with “Hys comawmentys trevly yf ȝe kepe” (460), which looks as if some reward for such behavior is to be outlined, but no such reward is described and the sentence peters out on “ȝe may plece God both euyn and more” (463). There seems to be a shift in Abraham’s sentiments toward God in the play. He states his love for God in the opening lines (13–15) but when he is about to kill Isaac, he is not acting out of love of God but out of fear: “I wyll no lenger let for the, | For that my God agrevyd wold be” (313–14). The epilogue likewise does not tell the spectators to obey God for love, or some other reason like gratitude for the Passion, but simply because “ȝe schall neuer se hym [i.e. God] myschevyd” (454). This is a very bleak vision of the relationship between the deity and humankind, which replicates that of the Abraham and Isaac episode.

Consequently, the Doctor’s epilogue does not undermine the play—it is a fitting epilogue to a play that does not shy away from the cruelty inherent in the story. It is much more unsettling than the Angel’s epilogue to Feo Belcari’s play on the same topic, which uncomplicatedly advocates faithful obedience and promises that such obedience will bear “magno frutto” (“great benefits” 62.1) because God “ha sempre cure de’ suo’ servi eletti” (“always cares for his chosen servants” 62.4). The English epilogue is also significantly different from John Mirk’s explanation of the story in his Dominica in Quinquagesima sermo that outlines a typological interpretation and focuses on the salvific effect of the Passion:

Pan by Habraham ȝe schul vndurstande þe Fadur of heuen, and by Ysaac, hys Sone Ihesu Criste … Þus may Cryste we be called Ysaac, þat is to vndurstande, laghtur, for many a soule he browght owte of helle lawhyng þat ȝode þidur ful sore wepyng.
This preacher’s analysis is straightforwardly didactic and does not invite the congregation to approach either the Old Testament or its explanation in a critical manner, and this is what we would expect from a sermon. The Brome epilogue, on the other hand, surely left many spectators with a bitter aftertaste, inducing them to ponder further, not on the greater, typological meaning of the story, but rather on the paradox of why an omnipotent God would not simply allow but actually cause so much suffering. The didactic, authoritative tone of the preacher-like Brome Doctor is therefore misleading because his epilogue is not used to inhibit potentially problematic responses to the story enacted on stage, but rather to draw them out.

The majority of presenters in Middle English drama are fundamentally pragmatic characters who aid a fluent performance. They have what can be described as “dramatic authority,” that is an authority based on their close association with and knowledge of the play. Presenter figures often manage the spectators, aiming to quieten them, as in *Candlemes Day*, “Beschyng you to geve vs peseable audiens!” (52), and at times seemingly moving them about, as when Poeta in *The Conversion of St. Paul* entreats “Beschyng thys audyens to folow and succede | Wyth all your delygens þis generall procession” (156–57). Sometimes they conclude the performance, as in the Reynes Epilogue’s call to have a drink before leaving: “We pray ȝou alle in Goddys name | T o drynke ar ȝe pas” (25–26). Pragmatic presenters can also contextualize the performance. At the beginning of the N-Town *Passion Play II*, for instance, Contemplacio reminds the audience of where the players had left off in the previous year (6–19). Presenters commonly introduce the setting and plot of the play: for example, “How sche was assumpte, here men schuld be pleyand” (N-Town 41.25). Finally, they sometimes summarize episodes that have been omitted, with “and how she was bore, | We passe ovyr þat, breffnes of tyme consyderynge” (N-Town 9.3–4).

The information which pragmatic presenters supply can then aid the audience’s understanding of the play. For instance, when they sum up an episode which chronologically intervened between two staged actions but which was not itself staged, presenters not only notify the audience of the lapse of time, but also often convey important background information better to contextualize the action which about to be shown. Nonetheless, such didacticism is relatively circumscribed in content and pragmatic in function: it enhances the spectators’ appreciation of the play but hardly teaches them important spiritual or moral messages.
Presenters who consistently put themselves on a par with their fellow actors usually have this more pragmatic and less didactic role to play, as in *Candlemes Day and þe Kyllynge of þe Children of Israill* (Poeta), Chester IV (Preco and Messenger), Chester V (Doctor), *The Conversion of St. Paul* (Poeta), the N-Town *Mary Play* (Contemplacio), the N-Town *Passion Play II* (Contemplacio), *The Pride of Life* (no name), the Durham Prologue (no name), the Norwich Grocers’ Play B (Prolocutor), and the Reynes Epilogue (no name). It is to be noted that some of the names of expositor figures, such as Poeta in *Candlemes Day and þe Kyllynge of þe Children of Israill* or Prolocutor in the Norwich Grocers’ Play B, carry no religious or ecclesiastical overtones, and that several others have no name at all. There is no good reason to see these characters as an objective voice of authority, still less reason to view them as monologic representatives of the Church. This is even the case for presenters who are traditionally seen as representing ecclesiastical authority, such as Contemplacio in the N-Town *Mary Play*. In fact, such presenters may have diminished the link between the Church and the plays, if the latter were written by clerics. Tiffany Stern notes in relation to early modern drama that “The Prologue is, however, visually the ‘author’ and takes on himself theatrical ownership of the text,” and the same seems to be the case for many of the late medieval presenters. These presenters’ assumption of ownership would then have put the (possibly clerical) authority of the dramatists at further remove from the actual text, especially in performance.

Given their dramatic authority, it is no surprise that the relationship of many of these presenters to their audience is not one of spiritual superiority, unlike what one usually finds in sermons. In fact, one of the most common features of such presenters’ speeches is the humility topos, often linked with *captatio benevolentia*. In the *Mary Play* Contemplacio begs the audience to forgive the necessity of omitting material:

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And we besche ȝow of ȝoure pacyens
Pat we pace þese materys so lythly away;
If þei xulde be do with good prevydens,
Eche on wolde suffyce for an hool day.
Now xal we procede to her dissponsacyon,
Which aftere þis was xiiij ȝere,
Tyme sufficyth not to make pawsacyon;
Hath pacyens with vs, we besech ȝow her. (N-Town 9.298–305)
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We find similar examples in the Chester Cycle and *The Conversion of St. Paul* and, as Philip Butterworth remarks, “Concern for brevity of the audience is clearly used as theatrical bait.”

A similar concern for maintaining the audience’s attention is probably at the root of comparable comments notifying the congregation of an excision in sermons, although the difference in tone between plays and sermons is significant. When material is excluded in sermons, the preacher usually implies this was done because the audience does not have sufficient mental stamina:

> Bot for als mekyll als þe tyme passys fast away and lang sermow-nys nowondayis are haldyn tedius and yrkesom, leuyng to another tyme þe secunde principall of owre sermown, a schorth worde of þe thyrde, and sone make an ende. 

Contemplacio, conversely, implies that the audience has the necessary interest and abilities to have dealt with a fuller depiction of the story than is practically feasible. This argues for a very different relationship between this preacher and his congregation, on the one hand, and between this presenter and his spectators, on the other.

In his closing stanza, Contemplacio “most mekely” (N-Town 13.178A) thanks the audience for their patience and beseeches their “good supportacyon” or forbearance (N-Town 13.179A). Rather than forcing a particular interpretation of the play on the spectators, Contemplacio urges the audience to amend any flaws: “If here hath be seyd ore don any inconuenyens, | We asygne it to ȝoure good deliberacion” (N-Town 13.180A–81A). Occasionally one finds similar requests in sermon collections, as in the Prologue of the Middle English *Mirror*’s “Y besche hem al comunliche þat it reden oþer here, þat ȝeue þer be ani defaute in, þat hii amende it.” However, such comments typically appear in the preface or prologue to the collection, not in the actual sermons themselves; these requests for a favorable reception and emendation are therefore aimed predominantly at fellow clerics. Such requests in drama, conversely, seem to be primarily directed at the laity which presumably made up the large majority of the audience.

This humble stance of the presenter figure is not limited to the N-Town compilation. Poeta in *Candlemes Day* and *þe Kyllyng of þe Children of Israelle* prays the audience to overlook the defects of the play (“Wherfor of benevolens we pray every man | To haue vs excused that we no better doo,” 21–22) and promises amelioration in the future “if oure
cunnyng be therto” (24). His namesake commences *The Conversion of St. Paul* “vnder your correccyon” (8) and ends the play by begging even unlearned members of the audience to forgive any shortcomings:

> Thys lytyll pagent thus conclu we  
> As we can, lackyng lytturall scyens,  
> Bescychyn yow all, of hye and low degre,  
> Owur sympylnes to hold excusyd and lycens,  
> That of retoryk haue non intellygens (656–60)

Courting the goodwill of spectators of “low degree” strongly suggests that the writers’ stance of humility and use of *captatio benevolentia* was not (solely) due to the potential presence of clerics in the audience, and that they nominally treated all spectators with deference.

The Reynes Epilogue seems to be mainly concerned with avoiding bad press, as in:

> Wherfore we beseche ȝou of ȝoure gret gentry  
> The best to reporte of vs in oure absens  
> In euery ilke a place. (20–22)

This text is the most sychophantic of all the surviving examples. The audience is thanked elaborately for their attention, with lines such as:

> And for ȝour soferyng sylens that ȝe han kept þis day  
> ...  
> Derely we thank ȝow with myght as we may,  
> And for ȝour laudably lystenyng in good audiens (5–8)

The spectators are also asked to overlook anything which they may have found offensive:

> And if we haue passyd ony poynyt in oure pleyng,  
> Or moved ony materys in oure seyng  
> That schuld be to ȝoure personys displiesyng,  
> We beseche ȝou to reporte it not away. (10–13)

After all, the epiloguist reminds us, “For trewly oure entent was wel to do” (14). None of the presenters whose speeches have such a degree of deference with regard to the audience’s ability to spot and improve flaws in the play speaks with special spiritual authority. For none of these characters need we assume clerical standing and, not surprisingly, their speeches are never particularly sermon-like.
At times, English dramatic presenters do not merely assume a knowledgeable and intelligent audience, they encourage it. In *The Conversion of St. Paul*, for example, Poeta refers the spectators to read up on the subject in the Bible instead of offering an explanation of the events staged (158–60). Even the more authoritative and didactic Doctor of the N-Town *Assumption* displays some faith in the spectators’ abilities, and calls on them to verify that the information provided is correct with a rapid exercise in mental arithmetic:

Now acounte me thise yeris wysely,
And I sey the age was of this maide Marye
When sche assumpte above the ierearchye
Thre score yer, as scripture dothe specyfye:
Legenda Sanctorum autorsyth this trewely. (N-Town 41.9–13)

The sum does add up to the expected total.

This positive evaluation of the audience’s thirst for knowledge and ability to process it is wholly unlike what we encounter in sermons. Sermon congregations are almost never asked to confirm authorities or to agree with the preacher, as in the N-Town *Assumption Play*. And, on the rare occasion this does happen, it is clear that to disagree is to label oneself a heretic or similar. Thus, after condemning some Lollard opinions, one preacher urges his listeners to “late ȝowre oune eyin be iuge whether Y sey soth or Y do nowȝt. And trulyche, Y dowt yt nawȝt, ȝeue ȝe be wel sette, ȝe wyl acorde withe me.”

Sermon congregations are also repeatedly warned against critical thought or a search for knowledge, particularly but not exclusively in relation to Lollardy. An Easter sermon seeks to prevent its congregation from pondering the eucharist: “Also we forydden on holy chirche behalfe þat no man, lernyd ne vnlernyd, dispute of þe sacrament wherethorow lewyd men myȝte falle in errour aȝens the beleue of holy chirche.” Another Easter sermon insists four times in quick succession that the laity accept Holy Church’s teaching and not ask for further insight or understanding: “And anoþur, me þenkeþ þou þat arte a lewde man, þou shudest not fardere entermett þe þan holychurche techeþ þe,” “þe pleyn side is to þe at arte a lewd man, in token þat þou shalt not melle þe no farþur but to beleue as holychurchte techeþ þe þe pleynly,” “And þer-fore þou þat art a lewd man, it suffice to þe to beleue as holychurchte techeþ þe” and

þe argymentes and þe skill þat may be of þe Sacramente, and þat longeþ not to þe, shewynge well Crist, þat he wold lat no man gehþur
Another preacher anxiously stipulates the proper interpretation of a quotation: “De comen glose declarip þis text o þis wyse & i pray ȝe takis good hede, vor it is a perlus text but a man take þe glose þer-with.”

Admittedly, sermons focus on discouraging critical enterprises of the laity especially; the plays, on the whole performed by lay men, might have had to be more deferential with regard to their audiences because members of the clergy might have attended a performance. But sermons do not always treat the clergy with particular respect. In a sermon seemingly aimed at a mixed audience, Hugh Legat criticizes preachers that demonstrate no discrimination in the selection of topics for their discourse:

Summe for leudnes & for vnkuningnes preche þe preuitise þat schuld not be rehersed in no congregaciun, but onlich in confessediun. For God is for-bed þat i schulde crie ate cros al þat euer i schulde finde writen e mi book. ... And ter-for a clerke schulde haue it of kinde for to kepe cowsnells. But tis peple þat tis prechith, þow þey vownd a bole-fot [bull’s foot or coltsfoot] writen in hir book, trust it wel þer-to, þei wolde tel it forth, & tat is for no-thing ellus but wantyng of wit & of discreciun. And ter-fore thei schulde not preche to hure pareschon, but onlich swiche thing as tei knowe skel vpon, as te 5 wittis, the 7 dedly synnes, þe 10 comaundementis & swich oþur þat longen to here estat for to preche of.

Legat’s concern may ultimately be for the spiritual well-being of these incompetent preachers’ congregations, but his criticism is clearly directed at certain members of the clergy. In another sermon, also for a mixed audience, clerics are reprimanded for not fulfilling their religious duties and for their penchant for gossip.

In a mixed-audience sermon on the theme *Verbum caro factum est*, lessons and warnings are delivered to “clerkes, knyȝthes, and commynalte.” Its stern criticism of the clergy evidently contained some members of the audience in its remit, as in “Lo, sir, ȝiff þou shame to speke þi Goddes cause for plezaunce of þe worlde, Crist will make þe shamed and reiecte when þat þou woldest be of is household in þe blis of heven.” In such cases, we are of course dealing with a cleric—and
evidently not a member of the laity—accusing fellow clerics, if in front of the laity, so the situation is not exactly the same as for plays. Nonetheless, these instances may indicate that the deferential treatment of play audiences is not (solely) due to the potential presence of clergy. Moreover, requests for all spectators of a play, even those that are unlearned, to overlook shortcomings show that playwrights ostensibly treated the whole audience, and not merely potential clerical spectators or social superiors in the audience, as intellectually capable human beings. The relationship between preacher and congregation, and presenter and audience is then substantially different.

This analysis of presenters in medieval English drama demonstrates that we should not assume that they are always, or even usually, representatives of Church authority. Authoritative presenters that focus on religious instruction are clearly a minority, although if more plays with presenters had survived perhaps that picture might be somewhat different. However, in the case of the Chester cycle, the didactic presenter may be a post-Reformation development, and the monologic and authoritative stance of the N-Town Primus Doctor and Secundus Doctor is probably due to the ecclesiastical origin of the “Procession of Saints.” Moreover, the content of the “sermon” of the only didactic presenter who comes close to preaching, namely the Brome Abraham and Isaac Doctor, is problematized and encourages a critical attitude in the audience, unlike genuine sermons. It would appear that most late medieval English dramatists simply did not want to endow their creations with such ecclesiastical authority.

Another important fact to bear in mind is the paucity of examples of plays with presenters, which indicates that, even if some presenters were deleted when play texts were preserved in writing, such framing devices were not deemed to be necessary for maintaining the orthodoxy of a play. Speeches by presenters seem to have been especially prone to alterations, and appear to have been added to and deleted from plays with great freedom, which intimates again that such speeches were not considered to provide the ultimate key to the message of their play. The predominance of pragmatic presenter figures, furthermore, indicates that playwrights and producers were at least as concerned, if not more so, with ensuring the spectators’ enjoyment of the play as a performance as they were anxious to instruct their audience in religious and devotional matters.

It is therefore clear that an examination of the great majority of presenters in the surviving corpus of medieval English drama fails to support the received understanding that presenters were used to assert the ortho-
dox reading of the play or to pre-empt potential heterodox interpretations. The authors of most late medieval English religious plays were more likely to applaud a critical audience and to restrict overt didacticism by presenters to a bare minimum. Moreover, most presenters encourage a dialogic mode of discourse, asking the audience to approve the play, to forgive shortcomings, and to interpret the play for themselves. Indeed, the Reynes Epilogue, which is extremely humble, indicates that even Church-sponsored plays—the epilogue is evidently intended for a dramatic performance at a church ale—did not necessarily seek to adopt an authoritative tone.

Given the anxiety surrounding the use of vernacular religious instruction in late medieval England, the liberal approach to the interpretative process that characterizes most of the Middle English religious plays is doubly remarkable. Many plays were created and put on at a time when heterodoxy was flourishing yet do not have dogmatic presenters. The apparent lack of anxiety about divergent interpretations of these plays indicates not simply faith in the spectators’ abilities in that regard, it also seems to point to a relatively open-minded and lax attitude toward certain religious differences. The absence of a clear monologic and ecclesiastical presence in the majority of plays also makes the plays overall a more complex expression of religious instruction and devotion. Rather than opting for overt didacticism that limits the audience’s contribution, as sermons and indeed several continental plays do, these plays tend to encourage the audience to participate in the hermeneutic process. By doing so, the spectators become active, even responsible, participants in the play’s religious import as well as their own piety.

As most presenters ask the spectators to judge the play benignly, there is also a strong sense that the play is effective only in so far as the audience is willing to ascribe it value. That is, the individual spectator’s interpretation of and contribution to the play’s devotional message is what makes the play meaningful: the onus for religious edification lies with the individual believer/spectator. There is next to no emphasis on the fact that the content is meritorious per se, unlike in Legat’s sermon which states that sermon content is always beneficial, even if the individual listener cannot comprehend it (as quoted on p. 36). Late medieval English religious drama is consequently very focused on the active, personal role of the (presumably in the majority of instances, lay) individual both in the performance and in devotion, which is completely the opposite from sermons, which aim to foster an uncritical, passive reception of the discourse and docile engagement with religion.
NOTES

1. This understanding differs slightly from Dan McIntyre’s phrasing: “The dramatic figure who recites a prologue is already part of the fictional world, whether he or she is at that point representing a character or not” (McIntyre, Point of View, p. 65).


3. These figures do not treat the N-Town Mary Play as an individual play, although it was originally such a play; conversely the so-called “Procession of Saints” in between the two N-Town Passion Plays appears to be a remnant of a religious semi-dramatic procession, and has been included as an independent play. Sometimes, as in the English version of the Cambridge Prologue or Reason’s speech at the end of Nature Part I, a character seems to step outside his role for a few lines to assume a practical role, akin to that of a presenter—unless these plays have specific presenter figures they have not been included in the list with presenters. I would argue that Isaiah at the beginning of the Coventry Shearmen and Taylors’ pageant speaks ex officio as a prophet rather than a presenter, as he clearly identifies himself (17) and speaks at a point in time that is explicitly pre-Incar-nation (Craig, Two Coventry Corpus Christi Plays, 4–12, 24–36). Likewise for the three prophets that open the Weavers’ pageant, for example “We haue desirid many a yere | Of thatt star to haue a syght | And spesschalli of that kyng of myght | Of whose cumyng we haue playne warning” (10–13). The two prophets who appear later in the Shearmen and Taylors’ play (332–474) are also too embedded in the dramatic action to act as clear presenter figures, even though they do not interact with other dramatis personae (on stage; one prophet claims to have learned of the birth of Christ from the shepherds).

4. The Cambridge Prologue is not spoken by a presenter, although the first few lines have a pragmatic function. In addition, the banns of N-Town, Chester (Pre-Reformation and Post-Reformation), The Castle of Perseverance, and the Croxton Play of the Sacrament have survived; presumably many more plays had banns.

5. Meredith, p. 292.

6. Although these prologues and epilogues are not the exact equivalent of their counterparts in professional early modern drama, there, too, such “stage- orations” were normally removable and connected to specific performances (see also Stern, chapter 4).


9. The references are to stanza and line; the translations are by O’Connell.


14 Gibson, Theater, pp. 127, 130.
15 Meredith, p. 304.
16 Fitzhenry, p. 28.
17 Ibid., p. 29.
18 The initial appearance of the Doctor is not attested in the surviving Dutch versions, but a different copy text may have been used by the English translator. The moral lessons in the English epilogue are less emphatic than in the Dutch one.
19 The Doctor’s speech itself is probably original (Beadle, The York Plays, 2:80–81).
20 Meredith, pp. 295, 305.
21 Mills, “Brought,” p. 314. Later in the play, the same character kneels down (sd. before l. 476) to pray to God, which means he is no longer on horseback.
22 For more information regarding the Banns, see also Clopper, REED: Chester, pp. 34, 238–39, and Mills, Chester, p. 3.
23 Likewise, in sixteenth-century York John Clerke monitored the plays “but he represented the civic authorities, not a theological institution” (Ritch, p. 257).
25 The “Procession of Saints” is not an independent pageant (it does not have a play number nor does it fit into the Creation to Doom cycle which the N-Town compiler created), but it is a stand-alone interpolation. The manuscript indicates that it is a part of neither Passion Play I nor Passion Play II: the “Betrayal” pageant ends about three-quarters down on f. 162r, f. 162v is blank, the “Procession of Saints” commences on f. 163r, is followed by a blank folio, and Passion Play II starts on f. 165r. Its connection to the surrounding plays is also tenuous in terms of content as Paul does not feature in either of the Passion Plays but is identified in the “Procession of Saints.”
26 In Davis, Non-Cycle Plays.
28 Mills, “The Doctor’s Epilogue.”
29 The final two lines, a prayer for salvation, do hint at where true reward may lie, but salvation is not promised those who faithfully serve and obey God.
30 Powell, p. 74.
31 In Baker, Murphy, and Hall, Late Medieval Religious Plays. It is possible that Poeta is merely entreating their attention, but it is certainly not impossible that this play was staged at different stations. For a detailed discussion of this latter possibility, see also Butterworth, pp. 128–31.
32 Davis, Non-Cycle Plays.
33 Preco and Messenger in Chester IV may or may not be the same character. The label Prolocutor in The Pride of Life is modern.
34 Stern, p. 113.
35 Butterworth, p. 127.
36 O’Mara, Four, p. 114.
“Supportacyon” could refer to a financial contribution, one of the meanings cited in the *MED*; the phrase “of your god supportacioun,” however, is not linked with the pecuniary meaning. This play has several possible conclusions and may consequently have been performed without Contempacio’s closing speech.

Duncan and Connolly, p. 21.

Some manuscripts of the Middle English *Mirror*, and indeed manuscripts of other sermons, may have been intended for the educated laity (Duncan and Connolly, pp. lvii–lx). Such an educated lay audience is still more exclusive than many play audiences, which were presumably often mixed in social terms.

Fletcher, *Late Medieval*, p. 94.

Morrison, p. 184.

Ibid., p. 127.

Ross, p. 128.

Grisdale, p. 33.

Fletcher, *Late Medieval*, p. 87.

Grisdale, pp. 7–8.

Ibid., p. 38.

Ross, p. 237.

Ibid., p. 238.

Many sermons aim to generate an active response in their congregation, such as going to confession or abstaining from sin, but nonetheless, the congregation’s participation in religious life, as well as in the sermon itself, is carefully limited.
Chapter 5

Audience Interaction in Sermons and Plays

In the previous chapters it has become increasingly clear that many medieval English dramatists purposefully opted for a dialogic relationship with their spectators that acknowledged and even solicited the audience's participation in the hermeneutic process and in ascribing value, unlike the sermon which tends to assume a monologic stance with regard to its listeners. While the didactic aims of medieval sermons and religious plays were often deemed to be similar by contemporaries, as we saw in chapter 1, this difference in tone would seem to point to subtle differences in these genres' specific role in religious instruction as well as their didactic aims. In this chapter I therefore want to explore further what these plays' and sermons' use of engagement with the audience can tell us about their precise literary and educational aims and objectives.

It is often assumed that, because the sermons and plays under discussion both have a strong didactic aspect and are fundamentally performative genres, their relationship with their audiences is construed along similar lines. Scholars go even further and claims about sermon influence on medieval English drama are frequently encountered in connection to audience address in particular. Edgar T. Schell and J. D. Shuchter, for instance, argue that "the close relationship between morality drama and sermon literature practically guarantees that it [i.e. morality drama] will be drama of direct address."\(^1\) Marianne G. Briscoe, one of the few scholars to have paid close attention to the connections between sermons and plays, repeatedly attributes the use of audience address in the latter to the influence of preaching, as in "The most straightforward example of such sermonizing occurs when characters, in imitation of a preacher, address the audience and make a moral or interpretative point."\(^2\)

However, as we shall see, plays and sermons employ audience address for divergent reasons and with different effects, and there is no good reason to assume that cross-fertilization between these two genres was of particular importance. While both preaching and drama were
undoubtedly influenced by a common rhetorical tradition and hence display certain similarities, it is more productive to assess what their unique relationship with their audience can tell us about the role of sermons and plays in the devotional culture of late medieval England, as well as about the audiences’ generic expectations and how these, in turn, shape the texts.

Unfortunately, detecting instances of audience address is not as straightforward as one would wish, largely because both genres have survived in written forms that are hard to relate to actual performances. It is probable that there were extra instances of direct address in performance which are not reflected in the existing texts. As noted in chapter 2, those elements of a sermon which needed to be customized to the individual situation of the performance, which doubtlessly included engagement with the audience, were those least likely to be recorded in detail. The same is undoubtedly true for medieval drama.

Instances of audience address are at times difficult to pin down as well. When Bonus Angelus in *The Castle of Perseverance* tells Humanum Genus “Man, þynke on þyn endynge day” (407), is he addressing the protagonist only or is the audience included in this directive? The distinction between the audience as “overhearers” (where the listeners’ presence is ignored), “ratified listeners” (where the listeners’ presence is in some way acknowledged without there being direct address), or “addressees” (where discourse is specifically aimed at the listeners) in theater is especially fluid. The point is not that in these instances there is one right reading, that is there is audience address or not, that the audience was engaged indirectly or not, but that all interpretations are potentially valid. (In performance, the inclusion of the audience may have been pointed enough to avoid ambiguity or it may not; different performances could have staged it differently.) An audience can always react and respond to the performance, but implicit and especially explicit audience address actively creates an opportunity for the actors (or characters), or preacher, on the one hand, and the audience, on the other, to engage with each other and with the performance. As a result, they present moments of special dramaturgical interest.

It is of course important to bear in mind that individual members of the audience are likely to have experienced the same utterance diversely, affected by factors such as disposition, gender, social status, religious inclination, and physical location vis-à-vis the performance space. Any analysis of the use and effects of audience address in late medieval English plays and sermons is of necessity tentative and subjective, and is likely to miss...
much of the variation in delivery and reception. On the other hand, “One of the hallmarks of live theatre is that we experience it collectively” and that this collectivity affects individual responses; the same surely applies to preaching. The “generalized experience” of the audience of both plays and sermons is therefore of considerable importance.

I shall begin by looking at opening sequences, mainly because the start of a text is a moment when that text tends to reveal its genre and, by doing so, engender a set of audience expectations. Moreover, many of the claims that sermons had great impact on medieval English drama are made with references to direct address at the beginning of plays. For example, Marianne G. Briscoe states the following concerning the opening monologue in *Mankind*:

Mercy’s speech in *Mankind* is filled with similar preaching devices.
First there is the clear establishment of rapport with the audience:
line 1 uses the [first] person plural pronoun “owr” and it is repeated often throughout the passage.

A similar link is implied in Mark Eccles’s description of the beginning of *Wisdom*: “The play begins ... as a sermon. Wisdom ... speaks first to the audience.” I have already argued in chapter 3 that neither Mercy’s nor Wisdom’s opening speeches are sermon-like. Their use of audience address does not alter this. In fact, the most common purpose of audience address in sermon openings, namely to establish the superiority of the preacher, is utterly unlike the use of audience address at the beginning of plays.

A standard sermon opening using direct address—and one parodied by Mischief in *Mankind*—is to quote and explain the Latin theme to the listener, as in:

> “*Qui manducat mean carnem et bibit meum sanguinem, in me manet et ego in eo.*” *Et ideo “reuertar vnde exiui.”* Worshippull sirs, þese wordes þat I haue taken to sey at þis tyme to you ben þe wordes of Criste hymselfe, written in þe gospell of þis daye, and ben þus meche to sey vn-to youre vndirstondynge ... 

Many sermons combine the theme and a prayer, as here:

> *Christus semetipsum optulit Deo, Christus etc.* ad Heb. 9no. The help & te grace of Almiþty God, þorwþ þe besechyng of His blisside modir, Marie, be with vs at owr bygynnyng, help vs & spede vs in yr forth-leuyng and bryng vs al to a good endyng, amen. Cristen peple, þes wordes þat ich ha take to prech of at tis tyme, þei be þe wordes of
Seint Poul, writen e þe pistel o þis day & tus miche to seie on engliss tunge to ȝoure vndirstondyng, “Crist hath offred Him-silf to God, Crist etc.”

A typical sermon opening in John Mirk’s *Festial* is “Such a day ȝe schal haue þe fest of” and variations thereof. The sermons in *The Northern Homily Cycle* as a norm commence with a Latin rubric (at least in the manuscript), followed by a Gospel paraphrase which is emphatically directed at the congregation, as in the following:

*Dominica in Septuagesima. Evangelium secundum Matheum.*
*Simile est regnum celorum homini patrifamilias. Et cetera.*
Lythis [listen] all I sall yow tell
What Mathewe sais in this Gospell. (14.1–2)

The range of the uses of audience address and their effects at the beginning of surviving sermons is then relatively unified. Audience address was regularly used in this position to create a sense of fellowship and even conviviality with the audience (“frendis,” the use of the first person plural pronoun) yet it is also used—frequently in the same breath—to reinforce the spiritual and intellectual inferiority of the congregation (“þus meche to sey vn-to youre vndirstondyng,” “I sall yow tell”).

On the other hand, interaction with the audience was not deemed necessary for many sermon openings, possibly because the setting of many of these texts (predominantly during mass), the authority of the preacher, and the acknowledged meritorious content of the discourse anticipated an attentive and deferential audience to some extent. Emphatic overt engagement with their congregation at the beginning of a sermon is then not a ubiquitous feature of medieval English sermons. Of course, the sermon audience always consists of at least ratified listeners, as there is no other possible recipient for the discourse, but quite a number of sermons do not specifically engage with the listeners at their beginning (at least as they have survived), as in Mirk’s sermon on St. Thomas of Canterbury (“Thys day ys Sent Thomas Day, a marter þat was slayn for þe law of Holy Chyrch and for þe ryght of þys reeme. …”¹³), a sermon for the eleventh Sunday after Trinity (“After the discription of the gospel of this day, Criste seythe þat þer were two men …”¹⁴). Some thematic sermons also do not explicitly address the audience at the start, as in

“AllExibite membra vestra,” et cetera. vbi prius. These been the wordes of Seynt Paule the appostell and are thus myche to saye, “Gyf ȝe
youre membres to serue vnto ryghtwysnes." Every member that
man hase, God made it for this cause ...

Audience address was then by no means a sine qua non.

The great majority of preaching manuals also pay no special attention to establishing a relationship with the audience, the implication being that the audience is assumed to be automatically quiet and attentive from the very start of the sermon. Humbert of Romans, for example, lists various necessities for ensuring a successful preaching performance, such as clear diction and a delivery that is neither too fast nor too slow, but there is no mention of the need to employ devices to attract the audience's attention at the beginning of the sermon. Robert of Basevorn's Forma praedicandi contains a section on “Winning Over of Audience,” but this merely lists the kinds of content that would intrigue the audience, such as a dreadful narrative or a reminder that the preacher’s aim is to convert the listeners and not to beg from them—clearly, the assumption is, again, that the audience is already paying attention. In fact, this section does not come at the start of the actual sermon, but follows the statement of the theme. Scant attention is paid to the listeners in the discussion on the “Invention of the Theme,” although Robert recommends the selection of “such a theme that immediately excites the audience to devotion.”

These preaching treatises then presuppose that the congregation will be listening from the very opening words of the sermon, although various ways to enhance the audience’s engagement with the discourse or simply stop their minds from wandering can be used by preachers. As seen in the examples above, actual sermons normally commence straightaway with important content.

All the evidence suggests that, on the whole, plays had greater difficulty attracting and quietening their audiences. Many plays commence by asking the audience to be quiet, whether it is a presenter figure requiring silence, as in The Pride of Life with “Pees, and herkynt hal ifer” (1), a heavenly creature (probably preceded or accompanied by music and special stage effects in at least some instances) enjoining the audience to pay heed, as in “Alle creatures to me take tent” (1) in the York Expulsion, or a tyrant demanding attention, as in the Towneley Offering of the Magi:

Peasse, I byd, both far and nere!
I warne you leyf youre sawes sere;
Who that makys noyse whyls I am here,
I say shall dy. (Towneley 14.1–4)
Other means are also used to ensure that the audience is quiet and pays attention. In the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*, Aristorius prays for the salvation of only the quiet members of the audience: “Vnto hys endelesse joye myghtly he restore vs, | All tho þat in hys name in peas well them hold” (83–84). The exclusive nature of this prayer, which does not encompass badly behaved spectators in its remit, presents a small but crucial difference compared with the prayers at the beginning of sermons, which include all members of the congregation, whether silent or not. Several plays have some stage action to signal the beginning of the play. In Henry Medwall’s *Nature*, for example, the play stages an entry procession of various characters before any text is spoken. Similarly, the entrance and above all the regal appearance of Wisdom functioned as a kind of audience quietener at the start of the eponymous play, so that the character could start by introducing himself in the very first lines. Here the setting of the play may also have played a part. The raging tyrants, for instance, all occur in plays that appear to have been intended for outdoor performances, whereas *Wisdom*, in which the opening character starts the play by calmly introducing himself, was seemingly written for indoor performance.

Plays not only frequently commence by a request for quiet, many of them, unlike most Middle English sermons, also have a relatively unimportant preamble before imparting information vital for the comprehension of the story. For example, although the interest in labor and virtuous behavior evinced in the opening lines of *Occupation and Idleness* is certainly relevant to the message of the play, the first piece of genuine information is the revelation of the speaker’s name at line 31. The lengthy prologue to *The Pride of Life* (it is over a hundred lines long) contains a summary of the plot but if one missed most or even all of this speech, one could still follow the play. This, again, suggests that playwrights could not take for granted that the audience would be silent from the very beginning of the performance—perhaps this was especially the case for outdoor plays like *The Pride of Life*—unlike writers of sermons, who usually expect an attentive congregation. These differences that emerge between the opening strategies of sermons and plays point to a different level of authority for each genre and its performers, and attest an essential, as well as practical, distinction in the reception of these two performative genres.

Moreover, audience address is used for a range of theatrical purposes at the beginning of plays, including setting the tone of the play and introducing the kind of character who is speaking. As a result, the tone of the interaction with the audience can differ significantly, as becomes clear
in the examples referred to above. *The Pride of Life* prologue is courteous toward its audience (e.g. “Lordinges and ladiis þat beth hende, | Herkenith al with mylde mode” 5–6), while the opening rant of the tyrant treats the audience as negligible underlings. There are no exemplars in the surviving sermons for these different colorings of audience address that are to be observed in the drama. Furthermore, these opening addresses serve to set up the dramatic world, or purposefully to blur the boundary between the real and play worlds, and consequently have a specific theatrical purpose for which there is no equivalent in the sermons. Of necessity, in sermons the audience is always addressed as an audience by the preacher as preacher; there is evidently no scope for play with any boundary between worlds in the sermon, as there is in the plays. It is then clear that, although many Middle English sermons do address their congregation in their opening lines, direct audience address at the beginning of the plays serves specifically theatrical purposes for which there is no sermonic equivalent and that there is too much variety in its tone and usage to ascribe all, or indeed any, instances to the influence of sermons, even if that address is of a more sedate and didactic kind, as in the openings of *Mankind* and *Wisdom*.

Of all the opening strategies in plays, that of the raging tyrant seems to be the most compelling. In the plays overall, the apparent strategies for creating interaction between the audience and the less virtuous characters appear to modern readers and spectators especially effective and memorable. Not only is this kind of audience engagement clearly not based on the sermon, again demonstrating that audience address and sermons were not associated in the playwrights’ minds, it serves a uniquely theatrical and didactic purpose. As Meg Twycross has cogently argued:

> moralities are a struggle between good and evil principles for the attention and loyalty of the audience as well as soul of the protagonist; since he represents them, the audience have to feel as well as observe the attraction of vice.\(^{18}\)

What better way to capture the audience’s attention than to interact with them? This also has as a result that the audience address of the virtuous characters is nearly always a foil for that of the negative ones: the former, if there is any, has to be less engrossing than the latter (a point to which I shall return). This is evidently what happens in *Mankind*. In *Occupation and Idleness*, similarly, both the “virtuous agrarian labourer-cum-husbandman”\(^{19}\) *Occupation and Doctrine*, the virtue character in this play, estab-
lish rapport with the audience, as when Doctrine instructs the men in the audience with regards to their children’s education: “Sette youre children unto scole, | Ye that ben good men of fame” (412–13). But these forms of address are apparently completely eclipsed by that of the sinful protagonist Idlenes, who, among other things, uses an unfortunate spectator as witness to his assumed name, “Besynesse” (109), and seems to push the audience out of his way when entering “verry kuppe-shote” (236).

There are, of course, exceptions to the “rule” that negative characters engage with the audience most effectively. In the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* the (perhaps additional) interlude with Colle and the quack Brundyche is memorable for its audience engagement. However, the audience seems to be required by Episcopus to form a barefoot procession (812–13, 837) and to chant (840–41), with the result that the spectators are explicitly under pressure to become active participants in witnessing the miracle enacted in the play. The bishop’s sermon (866–87) also appears to include the spectators in its target audience. While it is possible that this speech is directed to on-stage characters, references to “all ye peple that here are” (810) and “all and summe, | And all tho that bene here, both more and lesse” (838–39) makes the inclusion of the audience at this point more than plausible. His closing speech with instructions on how to live a virtuous life is possibly exclusively aimed at the spectators as all the other characters may have left the acting area by this point. In this play audience engagement is therefore predominantly associated with a preacher figure; it is presumably no coincidence that there are no truly evil or vice characters in this play.

In *Wisdom*, audience address, strictly speaking, is mainly associated with Wisdom’s soliloquy on the “nyne poyntrys” (998), when he teaches the audience the nine actions and ways of life that best please God (997–1064). On the other hand, the most unexpected and memorable instance of actual physical interaction with the audience occurs when Lucifer snatches a boy from among the spectators: “Wyth þis fals boy, God gyff hym euell grace!” (550), followed by the stage direction “Her he takyt a schrewde boy wyth hym and goth hys wey cryenge.” Furthermore, the theatrical effect of the soliloquy (325–80) in which Lucifer reveals his evil plan and disguise to the audience, though without overt audience address, is arguably especially potent, in that it casts the spectators more or less in the role of co-conspirators. When Lucifer reappears disguised as “goodly galont” (sd. after l. 380) and sets out to deceive Mind, Will, and Understanding exactly as he had outlined previously, the audience’s
inability to stop the action on stage strongly suggests they are complicit in Lucifer’s deception. Such an assumption of willing cooperation on the audience’s behalf by vicious characters hints at an uncommitted moral status for that audience.

Comparable indirect didacticism is also evident in those instances where immoral characters claim to be well acquainted with the spectators, as when, in Occupation and Idleness, Idleness says:

Be God, ther ben many of yow  
That Y knowe wel and fynge.  
This worthy man, though Y it say,  
He hath know me many a day,  
For he and Y spente, in fay,  
Oure bothis thyst at wyne. (51–56)

As many of the plays under discussion were put on in front of audiences that were intimately acquainted, and very possibly knew the actors as well, these kinds of interactions in medieval performances had presumably an even bigger impact than they do in modern productions where most audience members are not known to each other. The effect of Idleness’s speech would be very different depending on whether the actor was known to the addressee and on whether the “worthy man” Idleness claims to have as drinking partner was the parish priest, a virtuous layman known for his abstemious habits, or the local drunk. The effect of these lines would have been especially marked if the actor and spectator were known to drink together. As different people were assuredly addressed in different performances—assuming the play was put on more than once—the effect of this speech would have been unique to each performance. At the same time, the close association between the immoral character Idleness and the audience suggests a shared world, a shared way of life, and a similar moral outlook.

These comic yet didactic interactions between negative characters and spectators are very illuminating for our understanding of how these playwrights, and presumably their audiences, generally conceived the didacticism of plays. Clearly didacticism and entertainment are not polar opposites; on the contrary, these two elements frequently reinforce one another. Moreover, the dramatists preferred an indirect mode of teaching and stimulated an experiential mode of learning on the part of the audience through their vice characters’ interactions with them. This suggests that didacticism was an important function of these plays, but that the dramatists were not aiming for an authoritative tone.31
Such an indirect, experiential mode of didacticism is also evident in audience engagement by fallible human characters. These are the characters to whom the spectators ought to relate most, and this connection is established partly through the use of direct address. Often in the so-called morality plays, references to the audience occur at moments when the fall into sin, or the return to virtue, happens. When Man dismisses his nurse Innocencye in Nature, he suggests that the spectators would do exactly the same thing in his place:

I suppose there ys no man here
What soever he be
That could in hys mynde be content
Allwayes to be called an innocent. (I.644–47)

In The Castle of Perseverance, the protagonist’s oscillation between sin and virtue is consistently linked with the audience and their real-life experiences. Humanum Genus dismisses Confessio with the hint that he is no more sinful than the audience members: “We haue etyn garlek euery-chone.” (1369). A little later he admits to and amends his sinful life, again with interaction with the audience: “Lordynges, ȝe se wel alle þys, | Mankynde hathe ben in gret bobance.” (1420–21). In this case, the audience is indirectly linked with sin through the vers ambiguus of the protagonist’s name as well. When the Castle is attacked by the Seven Deadly Sins, Humanum Genus again turns to the spectators and explicitly likens his own experience of virtuous living to theirs:

Whanne Mankynd drawyth to goode
Beholde what enmys he schal haue!
Pe Werld, þe Deuyl, þe Flesche arn wode;
To men þei casten a careful kaue;
Byttyr balys þei brewyn on brode
Mankynd in wo to welyr and waue,
Lordynges, sothe to sey.
Perfore iche man be war of þis,
For whyl Mankynd clene is
Hys enmys schul temptyn hym to don amys
If þei mown be any wey. (1997–2007)

When he abandons the Castle, he calls upon the audience to support this decision with:

Certys þis ȝe wel knowe,
It is good, whouso þe wynde blowe,
A man to haue sumwhat of hys owe,  
What happe so-euere betyde. (2540–43)

In such instances, direct address of the spectators is used to implicate them in the protagonist’s fall (and redemption) without, however, directly inferring the audience’s sinful status. At the same time the play works didactically by reminding the audience that their action is delegated to the protagonist within the logic of the allegory.

This picture of the tenuous authority and commensurate preference for indirect, experiential didacticism of these plays remains surprisingly intact when we consider the use of audience address by virtuous characters. It is here that one would expect the greatest influence of preaching, but instead an analysis of direct address by the most preacher-like characters demonstrates how little the playwrights were affected by sermons.

In sermons, the use of audience engagement is normally straightforward, linked to the assertion of authority and the provision of information. In a sermon for the feast of St. Mary Magdalene, the preacher highlights the auditors’ duty to listen and learn when he stipulates “Bot I wold ilke man and woman wald note and bere away an ensampyll ... and for Goddys loue, take hede.” In Mirk’s sermon for *Domenica iiija Quadragesima*, audience address is solely used to teach the audience: “As ȝe knowen wel, þis is þe furþe Sunday of Lenton,” “Hereby ȝe may knowon how grete vertu is wyth almys dede,” and “Also for we spekon of þe synne of avoutry ... þerfore I telle ȝow þis ensaumpul,”

In a sermon on the theme *Estate sicut filii*, Hugh Legat repeatedly calls for an unquestioning, docile sermon audience, even when the preacher is not known for his personal virtue, and compares suitable audience members to good children, as in

Bot ȝit, gode men, nawȝtwhytstondyng scuch [i.e. sinful priests] su [follow] nawȝt the stepys of Crist in that þey corforme naȝt here dedys to here thechyng, ȝyt do ȝe as he betawȝthe and buthe [be] as gode chydrun owȝt to be, as Y seyde at þe bygynnyng. ... Qwerefor, ȝe that desyrþe to be edyfyt be worde of God, herit withe deuoyt and meke spyryt that hys spoken for ȝowre profyt and honeste. “Et estote sicut filii,” and but [be] as gode chydrun owȝt to be.
There are innumerable examples of similar kinds of overtly authoritative and didactic audience address in surviving sermons (some more instances can be found particularly in chapter 2). In many of these instances there is a strong sense of the preacher’s desire to aid the listeners by sharing his greater knowledge: while relatively patronizing and uniform in form and intent such interaction with the congregation is not dry. This engagement with the listeners must have enlivened the performance of many a sermon; successful didacticism need not be unpalatable.

Of course, some virtuous characters in plays on religious topics do speak directly to the audience in order to teach them. We have already seen that the preacher-like bishop in the Croxton Play of the Sacrament repeatedly offers instruction to the audience (868–87, 988–1005). Jesus’s sermon at the beginning of the N-Town Woman Taken in Adultery directly tells the spectators to repent their sin, to love God, and to forgive their neighbors (1–40). Likewise, St. Paul gives the audience all kinds of sage counsel in relation to the Seven Deadly Sins toward the end of The Conversion of St. Paul (502–71), as we have seen in chapter 3. There are then undeniably instances in which good characters on the stage engage with the audience in ways that enhance both the theatricality and the didactic impact of the plays.

On the other hand, playwrights often do not take advantage of the potential for audience address by such characters. In many plays instructional material directed at the audience is framed as dialogue between characters on stage, casting the audience as eavesdroppers. This preference for dialogue over direct instruction was probably partly due to the importance of disputation and debate in contemporary pedagogy. But the playwrights’ use of dialogue on stage to teach the audience indirectly often also allows for subtle theatrical effects that direct interaction with the audience would have made more difficult to achieve.

For example, the bishop’s direct teaching and the Jews’ debate on the eucharist in the Croxton Play of the Sacrament have very different effects. Episcopus’s instruction, which is probably directly addressed to the audience, is more pragmatic and less theologically intricate or controversial than the Jews’ conversation on the sacrament (especially 197–220 and 393–441). Thus the audience is urged to keep the Ten Commandments, but they are not even told what those Commandments are: “Crystys commandementys ten there bee: | Kepe well them; doo as I yow tell” (996–97). The Ten Commandments were an uncontroversial topic with which the audience was supposed to be familiar, and nobody
would presumably have taken exception to the bishop's mention of them. The eucharist, on the other hand, was very controversial at this time and sermons frequently tell audiences not to think about the eucharist, but simply to accept the Church's teaching on the matter (for some examples, see pp. 35–36, 37, 79–80). The playwright carefully avoids teaching the audience directly about the eucharist by opting for the format of a dialogue between on-stage characters. The play does not explicitly address contemporary debate surrounding the sacrament either, but presumably the Jews' incredulous tone is meant to reinforce the audience's belief in the miraculous nature of the eucharist and transubstantiation:

The unbelieving Jews' dialogue about the nature of the eucharist encourages a more affective response from the audience than direct didacticism might have done. The bishop's brief mention of a well-known fundamental religious tenet is unlikely to have had a great emotional impact on the audience. Although each spectator's reaction to the discussion between Jonathas, Jason, Masphat, and Malchus about the eucharist would have been unique, this scene encourages the audience to view the Jews' denial of the eucharist with anything from amused disdain to angry dismissal and, simultaneously, to confirm (silently) their own belief in the eucharist.

A similarly affective response is envisaged by the use of dialogue at the beginning of *Wisdom*. Wisdom explains, among other things, his own and the soul's properties, as well as the ideal relation between Wisdom and the soul, in a “question and answer” session with Anima. This section of the play is undeniably instructive and Anima's speeches have the pragmatic function of dividing this discourse into more manageable chunks and of highlighting the content of the various passages, all of which aids the transfer of knowledge. But the function of Anima is not limited to merely easing transfer of knowledge in an objectively didactic way. Instead, these speeches are scripted to stir an affective response in the audience, through the use of the first person plural pronoun, exclamations, and Latin, among other features, as in:

> Þe beleve of thes Cristen men ys false, as I wene;
> For þe beleue on a cake—me thinke yt ys onkynd.
> And all they seye how þe prest dothe yt bynd,
> And be þe myght of hys word make yt flesh and blode—
> And thus be a conceyte þe wolde make vs blynd—
> And how þat yt shuld be he þat deyed upon þe rode. (199–204)
O worthy spowse and soueren fayer,
O swet amyke, owr joy, owr blys!
To yowr loue wodoth the repeyer,
All felycyte yn þat creature ys.
Wat may I yeue yow ageyn for þis,
O Creator, louer of yowr creature?
Though be owr freelte we do amys,
Yowr grett mercy euer sparyth reddure.
A, soueren Wysdom, sanctus sanctorum,
Wat may I yeue to yowr most plesaunce? (69–78)

It is Anima’s emotional tone that is of foremost theatrical importance, because (ideally) it inspires a correspondingly loving and grateful disposition in the hearts of the spectators.

In the same vein, in The Castle of Perseverance, the Four Daughters of God do not teach the audience directly how to attain salvation. Instead, they debate the relative importance of the Passion, a virtuous life, and heartfelt repentance for salvation, first among themselves and then before God (3129–560). This passage conveys some religious instruction, such as the notions that baptism washes away Original Sin (3392–95) and that the Passion enabled salvation (3363–65). Given that the outcome of this debate will decide the fate of Humanum Genus’s soul, it is infused with tension which incites the audience to support Misericordia and Pax, rather than simply listen objectively to the discussion. As the audience has just witnessed Humanum Genus’s far from virtuous life, it is difficult to take issue with Justicia’s and Veritas’s calls for damnation. The fact that God eventually decides to save the soul was presumably welcomed with some relief and gratitude for God’s boundless mercy. Again, the playwright does not seem primarily interested in conveying basic theological information—although the play does that as well—but rather seems to want the spectators to experience, almost first-hand, the precariousness of their salvation and thereby come genuinely to appreciate how much grateful love they owe God. The use of dialogic, indirect instruction can, therefore, be very theatrically potent and this is undoubtedly the major reason for its use. The theatrical potency of such exchanges would presumably have made them especially memorable, which would, in turn, have increased their didactic efficacy. Again, theatricality and didacticism work together in these plays.

But there also seems to have been a disinclination to teach the audience directly, which may have contributed to the frequent use of dialogue-
based teaching on stage. Virtuous characters are often presented as adopting an impersonal tone for their strictures. The Bishop in *The Pride of Life*, for instance, uses audience address only in a four-line prayer:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Yif ou gras or lif to led} \\
\text{Pat be your soulis to bot;} \\
\text{God of Heuin for his godhed} \\
\text{Leu hat hit so mot. Amen. (386–90)}
\end{align*}
\]

His long lament on the state of the world (327–82) contains no marked acknowledgment of the audience and neither does he include the audience in his lecture to the King (391–406), nor in his leave-taking (435–48).

Pater in *The Castle of Perseverance* seems to include the audience to some extent in his address to the soul of Humanum Genus, so that whereas “My mercy, Mankynd, yeve I þe. | Cum syt at my ryth honde” (3598–99) is clearly directed to the character, the conditional “If þou me loue and drede | Hevene schal be þi mede” (3607–8) is more appropriate if spoken explicitly to the audience. Nevertheless, the main part of this closing speech is not in any overt way directed to the audience and uses the third person pronoun throughout, as can be seen in, for example, “All þe statys of þe werld is at myn renoun; | To me schal þei ȝeue acompt at my dygne des.” (3615–16), “And þei þat evyl do, þei schul to helle lake” (3639), and even “All men example here-at may take | To mayntein þe goode and mendyn here mys.” (3643–44). The spectators are then, on the whole, ratified listeners at most for Pater’s religious instruction and not the acknowledged addressees of the didactic messages. Targeting these warnings directly at the audience would arguably have been more theatrically compelling, although the objective finality and generality of this impersonal summary of man’s fate is awe-inspiring.

To give another example, in the York *Temptation* pageant, the devil repeatedly addresses the spectators. Upon his first appearance he apparently forces them to make way for him with lines such as “Make rome believe” (1) and “High you hense, high myght ȝou hang” (3); it is entirely possible that these lines were accompanied by physical horseplay between the actor and some people in the audience. Later on, he explains his plans to tempt Jesus with reference to at least one spectator: “To dere hym nowe haue I no doute, | Betwyxte vs two” (35–36). As I have mentioned before, the audience’s inability to intervene in the dramatic action ensures that the addressee of the latter remark is put in the uncomfortable position of somehow enabling and endorsing the devil’s actions. This playwright was,
then, willing and able to exploit direct interaction with the audience for theatrical and didactic purposes; it is therefore especially noteworthy that he (or she) chose not to employ this method for the virtuous, didactic character in this play. Instead, this Jesus never overtly engages with the audience and delivers His teaching consistently using the third person plural, as in “Þare myrroure may þei make of me” (195). Even His final leave-taking is not explicitly addressed to the audience:

> My blissing haue þei with my hande,
> Þat with silke greffe is noȝt grucchand,
> And also þat will stiffely stande
> Agaynste þe fende.
> I knawe my tyme is faste command,
> Now will I wende. (205–10)

In such instances, the audience is ostensibly cast in the role of overhearers—when the speeches are addressed to other characters—or ratified listeners—when the actor faces the audience directly—although there can be little doubt that the messages and information are included for the spectators’ benefit. It is difficult to measure the exact difference in the audience’s experience, depending on whether they are addressed directly, in a more indirect manner, or not at all. A cognitive stylistic approach would argue that overt direct address explicitly “reminds the audience of their own deictic field,” thus binding the utterance to their own experiences. Likewise, in both theatrical and linguistic theory it is generally agreed that “only the speaker and the addressee are actually participating in the drama,” whereas the use of the third person suggests a non-participant who functions as a passive object. Michelle M. Butler argues that medieval drama uses “unmarked direct address” most commonly, “reserving marked direct address to create intensity and emphasis.” We can then perhaps argue that in cases of overt direct address it is harder for the spectators to ignore the intended personal application of the on-stage speech compared with instances when they are not addressed directly or when their presence is not explicitly acknowledged.

The reasons for this limited use of direct audience address by many virtuous characters are not entirely clear. To some degree, the playwrights exploited the theatrical means of indirect instruction through on-stage dialogue which the genre offered them. But it is possible that playwrights also feared to lecture their audiences too directly. However serious and didactic the majority of surviving English plays may be, we have some con-
temporary evidence to suggest that spectators did not always behave appropriately. As mentioned in chapter 1, whereas the friar William Melton praised the didactic York Corpus Christi Play, he also lamented that the audience was unruly and, as a consequence, did not derive spiritual benefit from the performance. In 1432 the York Masons petitioned to be allowed to discontinue staging the *Funeral of the Virgin* pageant because it generated not devotion but laughter and uproar, and even resulted in fights. In the Low Countries, seven audience members of a romance play, *Spel van Strasengijs*, were involved in a fight during the performance. While such records highlight the exception rather than the rule, and always refer to a (small) section of the audience only in all probability, it was presumably quite a vocal minority and the threat of such unruliness must have lain always just under the surface at holiday events.

In fact, sermon audiences did not always behave with proper restraint and decorum either, which makes my hypothesis about the prohibitive effect of the playwrights’ anxiety about disruptive audience responses more likely. Even famous preachers like Bernard of Clairvaux and Bernardino da Siena were interrupted or expelled when their topic was not to the audience’s liking. In fact, Bernardino da Siena was subjected to a number of assaults, including being slapped in the face and having the pulpit tampered with so that it collapsed under him. And there is evidence from medieval England that audiences did at times criticize and disturb sermons. An East Anglian sermon promoting a crusade was interrupted by a listener who urged his fellow audience members not to heed the call to go to the Holy Land, and Stephen Langton was called a liar during a sermon at Paul’s Cross. Although most preachers betray no anxiety about teaching their congregations, some sermons reveal uneasiness about potential reactions from the listeners should they feel the lesson was aimed too directly at them. One preacher is careful to pass on the responsibility for his pointed criticism:

merueyle ȝe nawth, sere, þat i speke so miche to ȝow as i do vor truliche i se nat tis o myn owne heued, vor ich was in a certeyn place with-in þis six wokkis wher þis mater was somynd boþe e general & e special a-mong grete men þat y schild preche to ȝe þis same mater when i prechid next her.

In another example, the preacher takes pains to assure the audience that he is not attacking them individually: “I speke noyber of Richarde, nor of
Robert, nor of William, nor of Dan Ion, & tervorin no man ha me suspect þat i speke of hym." It is consequently by no means improbable that playwrights opted for instruction in dialogue format and through impersonal references partly to ensure that audience members did not react badly to being directly criticized or lectured.

There is a closely related issue: namely that it is more important for virtuous, authoritative characters to receive an appropriately submissive response from their addressees than it is for vice figures. Audiences “are always a potentially disruptive force.” Perhaps an awareness of the audience’s latent unruliness helps further to explain from a theatrical point of view the playwrights’ general disinclination to have virtue figures teach the audience directly. There simply does not seem to be the same scope for improvisation or physical interaction with the audience to accommodate their unpredictable responses for virtue characters compared with devils and other vice characters. If the boy whom Lucifer wanted to drag off to hell in *Wisdom* fought back and managed to escape his clutches, it would not be a serious issue because we can see various ways for the actor playing Lucifer to react to such an unexpected turn of events. He could snatch someone else from the audience, he could leave the acting space chasing after the boy, he could roar with frustration and retreat defeated, for instance. None of these alternatives would affect the meaning of the play. But an uncooperative response to Episcopus’s request to the audience to form a barefoot procession at the close of the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* would be much more difficult for the actor to mask or gloss over, and would significantly undermine the authority of the character and his whole speech. In effect, it would ruin the end of the play, if not the whole play. Reducing direct interaction between virtue characters and the audience lessens the chances that uncooperative audiences might undermine the didactic import and theatrical success of the performance.

But above all, the limited amount of interaction with the audience of virtuous characters may have served to make that of the less positive characters all the more noticeable and appealing. This effect enhances the overall message of many of these plays, namely that it is harder to do good than it is to be distracted by less moral inclinations or people. This it is not simply a matter of making the negative characters most appealing: because virtuous characters often do not engage directly and emphatically with the spectators, audience members have to make a more conscious decision to pay them attention and to take on board the lessons they are providing.
While the vices, devils, sinful humans, and other such characters tend to engross the spectators willy-nilly, the playwrights construct the virtues in such a way that the audience members have to choose to give them their attention and goodwill. To say that these characters are boring is simplistic and mistaken, but it is probable that the playwrights consciously opted to make such characters less obviously palatable to the audience—just as virtuous behavior appeared to be less easy to adhere to in real life in many instances. As Nowadays puts it in *Mankind*, “Men haue lytyll deynte of yowr [i.e. Mercy’s] pley | Because ȝe make no sporte” (267–68). Again, the use of, and absence of, audience address is an important aspect of this characterization of virtue characters, as it was for the construction of the negative characters’ appeal. The relatively restrained, and to some degree perhaps even untheatrical, audience interaction of good personages is therefore used in a theatrically effective manner to bring home the message of the plays. But whatever the reasons for the rather limited interaction between virtuous characters and the audience, it is clear that the playwrights generally preferred not to adopt the authoritative, expressly didactic stance of the preacher and instead sought to teach their spectators in a more indirect fashion.

Indeed, the relationship between a preacher and his congregation, and a virtuous character and his audience is construed rather differently. Again, as with the opening strategies of plays and sermons, this points toward a very different level of authority for the two genres. Preachers seem to have been able to rely on their spiritual authority, and they rarely make allowances for a superior social or educational status of their auditors. On the contrary, they often demand respect: one preacher urges his congregation to be obedient to “haly kyrke, and specialy to þam þat hauys cure of ȝowre sawlys.” Another preacher reminds the listener that “presthode … ys more of dyuynte, more of worschep than regally, kynhode, or eny other astat of temporal power.” In a similar vein, *The Northern Homily Cycle* mentions the “gret derworthines [preciousness]” (1.61) of preachers. Actors, on the other hand, had no special spiritual license and this is noticeable in how they interact with the spectators. Thus the audience is treated politely, as social superiors and, axiomatically, this convention is honored in the breach by the insulting behavior toward the audience on the part of immoral characters. In fact, the generally polite stance of plays may also have been partly due to the fact that many actors, producers, and playwrights were financially dependent on their audiences and thus courted their goodwill.
Sermons, of course, also rely on the goodwill of their listeners (and in the case of friars at least, possibly on their financial support as well) and we regularly encounter polite forms of address in preaching, such as “Cristen peple,” and “worshippull bretheren and susteren,” and “Gode men and wymmen.” But we also find a few rather less flattering descriptions in sermons, as “þu vnkinde wrech,” “þu synful creature,” and “þu synfull man and women.” One of the main purposes of these sermons was to teach their congregations to live better lives and, that being so, preachers were not afraid to castigate their audiences and often took for granted their sinfulness. One preacher, for instance, closes his sermon by directly asking his listeners why they are so sinful: “qwerto, þen, lufȝe so mekull þe vanytez of thys worde [world], and lusteȝ to ocubye þe lyfe aftur þe lust and þe lykyng of þi flessche?”

Prayers for the success of the sermon at the beginning of the discourse display a similarly negative opinion of the congregation’s moral state when they highlight the listeners’ dire need for the preacher’s aid in attaining salvation. One preacher asks the audience to pray for grace that is nedful boþe to ȝow & to me, to ȝow, ȝat ȝe may dewothliche her þe word o God, & to me, þat i may tell sum crafte wher þorw ȝe may deliuere ȝoure sowles owt oþ þe seruise o dedli sinne.

In a sermon for the feast of St. Mary Magdalene we find:

Bygynne we þan owre sermon wyth haly bedys byddyng, besekand allmyghty God for þis grace and þis moystour þat hys worde may swa be sawyn emang ȝow, and so wattyryd be ys grace þat yt may be to hys plesyng and so profete to ȝowre lyuyng þat ȝe may aftyr come to þe ioye þat neuyr schall haue ending.

This sermon also openly casts doubt on the virtue of the congregation: “and þis loue schuld nowondayis be weele assayed, I drede me, we schuld fynde many febyll frendys and louers” or “and for als mekyll yt is vncertayn to me qwedyr 3e haue þis trowth.” Preachers derive their authority from their spiritual superiority; by emphasizing the concomitant inferiority of the listeners, these preachers are consequently asserting both their authority and the congregation’s need to listen and to accept unquestioningly the lessons presented.

Dramatists and actors had no such position of acknowledged superiority, spiritual or social. The social, or relational, deixis of virtuous char-
acters reflects this precarious standing and, as a result, virtuous characters in the plays, generally speaking, treat their audiences with more circum-
section than do preachers. A traditional form of address for the plays is “sovereigns” (e.g. Brome Abraham and Isaac, 435, Mankind, 13, 25, 29), which acknowledges the social superiority of the public; it is a term which is not found in surviving Middle English sermons. Whereas several preachers assume a sinful audience, virtuous characters, on the whole, do not. As ever, the picture is not entirely uniform. The Brome Doctor takes for granted that the spectators would not willingly sacrifice their children should God command them to do so, but he does not otherwise stress their sinful nature, and even allows for the fact that to mourn the loss of a child, however silly, is “As nater wolle, and kind” (Brome Abraham and Isaac, 451). His condemnation of the spectators is therefore circumscribed. Mercy carefully balances his assumption of the audience’s sinful nature with an acknowledgment of their social superiority in the opening speech of Mankind: “O souerence, I beseche yow your condycyons to rectyfye” (13)—Mercy’s supplicating tone also draws attention away from the presumption of the audience’s sinful status. Most of this speech, and indeed his closing speech, merely implies, rather than claims, that the audience might well be sinful, as in “In goode werkys I awysye yow, souerence, to be perseuerante | To puryfye yowr sowlys, þat þei be not corupte” (25–26).

In the same vein, Pater in The Castle of Perseverance is very careful not to label his audience as sinful in his closing speech, through the use of the conditional and the lack of direct audience address. At the end of the Crotston Play of the Sacrament, Episcopus, one of the more preacher-
like figures in the surviving corpus, seems to tell the audience directly how salvation is to be attained, but he never states that the audience is sinful (988–1003), and the same can be said for Wisdom’s speech on the novem virtutes in Wisdom (997–1064). Similarly, the Bishop in The Pride of Life does not blame his audience explicitly during his “Abuses of the Age” speech (327–82) or his strictures to the King (391–406). In The Conversion of St. Paul, the protagonist is also circumspect in his sermon. Thus, in the following stanza, there is a shift in syntactical subject from the listener to the sins (highlighted by the use of Latin), followed by the use of the more impersonal third person, all of which lessens the impression that the listener is indeed sinful:

But drede alway synne and follye
Wrath, enuy, couytyes, and slugyshnes;
Exeunt ownt of thy syȝt glotony and lechery
This is very different from claims which stress the active sinfulness of the listener, which we find in sermons, such as “couetyse, where-in þe worlde temptes þe in at all tyme, for þou canste not hold þe a-payed with þoȝ goodes þat God haþ sende þe,” “slouthe, glotenye, and lechery; in þe wiche þi flessh temptes þe euermore,” and “þou muste prey God of forȝeuenes also for brekyng of þi v wittys,” all of which can be found in a single sermon for Palm Sunday. In any case, there seems to be an on-stage congregation for St. Paul’s sermon, so these lessons on how to attain virtue and salvation might be primarily or exclusively aimed at them; there may also be an on-stage audience for Episcopus’s speech in the Croxton play.

The plays do not merely address their audiences as social superiors on a regular basis and avoid labeling them sinners, they also tend to treat their audiences as intellectually capable human beings. In *Mankind*, Mercy flatters the audience’s understanding: “I prey haue me excusyde, | I nede not to speke of yt, yowr reson wyll tell it yow” (183–84). In *Nature*, the protagonist encourages the spectators to read Aristotle “yf ye covet now to know theffecte | Of thyngys natural by trew conclusyon” (I.57–58). Such an apparent high regard for the audience’s intellectual and spiritual powers is often lacking in medieval English sermons, and at times the audience is dealt with in a downright patronizing manner. Hugh Legat refuses an explanation on the grounds that

To telle ʒow how þis mith, it were to long ata{:t}, for þei i stode here al þis twelue monthe i chain secur, i schulde nauth make summe of ʒow clirlich to conseyuen it. 61

This dismissive attitude is completely the opposite of Mercy’s appreciation of the spectators’ intelligence. In chapter 4, we observed a similar divergence in the appraisal of the audience by expositor figures on the one hand, and preachers on the other hand.

To a degree, the different positional rhetoric and the limited use of direct address by virtuous characters in plays may be due to historical circumstances of sponsorship and funding. However, different expectations on the part of the audience also seem to be at play. One attends a sermon anticipating instruction on how to behave well, and to have one’s bad habits criticized and corrected by a spiritually superior speaker; one seemingly
did not go to a play with the same expectations. Although play audiences were apparently expected to tolerate some didacticism aimed directly at them, on the whole, playwrights were careful not to overdo it. Here some variation can be detected between plays, presumably dependent on the content of the play, its cast, its occasion, its intended audience, and the inclination of the playwright and/or patron. For instance, *Wisdom* is more willing to teach its audience directly than *Mankind*. Some sermons are likewise more willing to depict a sinful or mentally inferior audience than others; again, we can assume an influence of the intended setting and audience of the sermon and of the prestige and personality of the preacher. But, overall, the different stance with regard to the audience in plays and sermons indicates a very different level of authority for each genre, and presumably also disparate assumptions about the audience as well as distinct expectations for each genre on the part of the audience.

To conclude, despite the fact that both plays and sermons were ultimately performative genres and depended on their rapport with their audiences for their success, and despite the fact that both genres do have a didactic content to a greater or lesser degree, they use audience address in disparate ways and for apparently different reasons. There are too many examples of audience address in the surviving Middle English plays and sermons to pin them down to a complete and coherent list of purposes and effects, but we can make some generalized statements that highlight the divergent application and appreciation of this aspect of performativity in each genre. True, the use of audience address in sermons and plays ordinarily helps to bring home the moral message of the text performed. To that extent, both genres use audience engagement to similar ends.

But some important differences emerge that demonstrate how these genres stimulated piety in unique ways. Though sermons depend on the goodwill of the congregation, their use of audience address reflects very little apprehension about their authority and right to correct and teach their listeners (collectively rather than as individuals). Conversely, the relatively polite and limited rapport between especially virtuous play characters and their public indicates the fragility of the plays’ claims to didactic authority as well as an awareness of their need to entertain and to maintain the audience’s favor and support.

The didacticism of the plays is also usually much less direct and focuses more on encouraging emotional reactions in the spectators (and presumably the actors) than that of sermons. In sermons, audience address is predominantly used to reinforce the sense of a spiritually superior
speaker delivering a useful and necessary message that is directly relevant to the morally inferior listeners. The surviving Middle English sermons are normally prescriptive and concentrate on promoting specific virtuous behavior and religious actions, such as going to confession, and on sharing useful information, rather than on stimulating internal religious experiences. In plays, conversely, audience address is carefully used to create audience involvement in the actions on stage, by tricking their audiences into being more absorbed by less virtuous characters, by encouraging identification with fallible humans on stage, and by making it ever so slightly harder to engage with morally good characters. It is widely accepted that the spectators of plays are supposed to experience the attraction of sin while watching the play, and that they are seen as a plaything “with the potential to be recruited, manipulated, and used in a festive, combative game.” What has been less widely acknowledged is the extent to which the portrayal of the virtuous characters, including their limited use of direct audience address, contributes to this experiential didacticism. Plays tend to present religious tenets not so much as objective material to be accepted unquestioningly and remembered by the spectators; instead, playwrights incorporate such material in ways that promote an active, emotional, and even personal reception by the listeners. The playwrights’ desire for the audience to feel and to experience, to become to some degree active participants both in the drama and in its didacticism, differs from the preachers’ construction of the audience as docile, unquestioning, passive recipients of well-defined, objective religious instruction.

The use of audience address in the surviving Middle English religious plays strongly suggests that these plays complemented sermons by responding to lay desire to take ownership, to a degree, of their own devotion in a way that preachers were not able or willing to accommodate. At the same time, by often presenting their audiences as intelligent agents, these plays also encouraged lay people to engage critically with their faith. Through encouraging and enabling such a personal, active engagement with religious matters, these plays perhaps not simply complemented preaching, but were deemed to exceed the sermon as a spiritual exercise by some people, a possibility that was much feared by some churchmen, as we saw in chapter 1. While sermons also aimed to increase their listeners’ piety, they focused mainly on communal, ritual, and external actions. There was an understanding, of course, that without internal spirituality such outward actions are worse than useless, but nevertheless the point remains that sermons often emphasized aspects of faith that could be
regulated by the Church. The plays, conversely, stimulated inward piety in a way that makes them more akin to mystical treatises, and especially those that encourage an imitative and performative approach to devotion (despite the rather basic theological content that is referenced in the plays), than sermons. While the focus on fostering personal affective piety is perhaps especially effective in performance, some of the same effect would have been achieved by reading play texts, and it is indeed possible that many of the plays were preserved in writing in order to be used in devotional exercises as scripts to cultivate proper religious sentiments. Certainly, the N-Town manuscript has additional material that suggests that the scribe-compiler did have a pious interest in the material.

The plays’ focus on the personal and interior, aspects which could not be regulated by the Church, has the potential to challenge the Church’s autonomy. In fact, writers of late medieval English devotional texts tend to be concerned about interiority’s capacity to draw people away from communal and approved forms of worship, and, as a result, are somewhat ambivalent about private, individual spirituality. The public nature of many performances arguably further enhanced this potentially subversive aspect of the plays. One of the concerns expressed in A Tretise of Miracles Pleyinge is precisely that these plays corrupt “an hool comynte” rather than simply “oon singuler persone.”66 And given that not all plays are emphatically aligned with Church doctrine, as we shall see in the next chapter, such plays could indeed have guided the devotion of audience members in unusual directions that might have been perceived as problematic by orthodox authorities.

NOTES

1 Schell and Schuter, p. x.
3 Eccles, The Macro Plays.
4 For the characterization of the audience as either overhearers or ratified listeners, see Bubel, “Film Audiences as Overhearers,” and Dynel, “’You talking to me?’” The definitions above are my own, based on Bubel’s. In sermons, the listeners are always ratified, never simply overhearers.
5 The importance of the acknowledgement of a heterogeneous public is discussed in Livingstone, “Audience Research at the Crossroads,” among others. See also McGavin and Walker for examples of how such heterogeneity might have affected medieval and early modern performances.
6 Warner, p. 177.
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7 Ibid., p. 178.
8 Briscoe, “Preaching,” p. 159. Briscoe has “second person plural pronoun.”
9 Eccles, p. xxxv.
10 Ross, p. 61.
11 Grisdale, pp. 50–51.
12 Powell, p. 51.
13 Ibid., p. 38.
14 Morrison, p. 305.
15 Ross, p. 301.
16 Murphy,  Three, pp. 133–34.
17 In Stevens and Cawley,  The Towneley Plays.
18 Twycross, “The Theatricality,” p. 73.
19 Beadle,  Occupation and Idleness,” p. 11.
20 Eccles,  The Macro Plays.
21 Of course, the importance of the didacticism can vary from text to text, and from performance to performance. As Alexandra Johnston remarks: “We must rid ourselves of the idea that all plays using biblical narratives must be pious, didactic and performed by the people for the people as an act of devotion” (Johnston, “English Biblical Drama,” 199).
22 For the label “morality play” in late medieval England, see also pp. 11, 138.
24 For vers ambiguus, see Helmich,  Die Allegorie, p. 45.
25 O’Mara,  Four, p. 120.
26 Powell, p. 88.
27 Ibid., p. 92.
28 Ibid., p. 92.
29 Ibid., p. 92.
30 Fletcher,  Late Medieval, p. 87.
31 This need not mean that the Jews represent Lollards, although some such connection is, in my opinion, hard to avoid altogether. For the debate about the anti-Lollard nature of this play, see also Cutts, “The Croxton Play,” Lampert, “The Once and Future Jew,” and Chemers, “Anti-Semitism.”
32 God’s decision would not come as an entire surprise to people who had previously heard the Banns, but awareness of the plot does not prevent an audience from experiencing tension during a performance.
33 Of course, the visual elements of the performance would have enhanced the emotional and mnemonic impact considerably; it is not simply a matter of spoken text. Indeed, in the later Middle Ages, “vision was considered an active endeavour (unlike hearing that was thought to be passive), and as such was considered to have greater emotional impact, thus allowing it to impart a more effective and lasting impression on the memory” (Plesch, p. 112). Despite the preacher’s ability to gesticulate and even use the occasional prop, the visual element of a sermon is likely to have been bare compared to that of plays. The difficulty of concentrat-
ing on an orally delivered monologue of considerable length and of absorbing its complex content troubled later preachers, and various treatises were published in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries that outlined methods the congregation could employ in order “to heare well” (Hunt, p. 65).

34 McIntyre, p. 120.
35 Lyons, Semantics, 2:638, as quoted in Elam, p. 143.
36 Lyons also argues that the use of “a name or some other term of address ... in the vocative function” is used to distinguish the addressee from other possible receivers and to invite the addressee to pay attention or respond to the utterance (Lyons, Semantics, 1:34). Stylistics sees third person pronouns being used for people who are “neither sanctioned speakers nor addressees at the time of the speaker’s utterance” (McIntyre, p. 97).

37 Butler, p. 104.
38 “Magis risum & clamorem causabat quam deuocionem,” “contensiones et pugne” (Beadle, York, 2:429).

39 Mantingh, p. 38.
40 Kienzle, p. 122.
41 Arnold, p. 49.
42 Grisdale, p. 79.
43 Ibid., p. 38.
44 Escolme, p. 113.
45 O’Mara, Four, p. 113.
46 Fletcher, Late Medieval, pp. 91–92.
47 This would perhaps apply especially to (semi-)professional actors, whose spiritual status was often judged to be poor by clerical authorities, as noted in chapter 1. Many of the plays under discussion would have been performed largely by local players who were known to some spectators at least, and whose social standing was probably on a par with that of many audience members.

48 Grisdale, p. 51.
49 Ross, p. 46.
50 Powell, Festial, p. 105.
51 Grisdale, p. 12.
52 Morrison, p. 229.
53 O’Mara, Four, p. 136.
54 Fletcher, Late Medieval, p. 221. The ending of this sermon does seem abrupt, which may imply that additional material was to be added in delivery (ibid., p. 179).
55 Grisdale, p. 25.
56 O’Mara, Four, pp. 107–8.
57 Ibid., pp. 121, 115.

58 There was, of course, debate about the efficacy of immoral preachers, and not all preachers can have been morally exemplary. Nevertheless, the idea of the preacher’s spiritual superiority, due to his office as representative of the Church
and of God as well as, ideally, to the individual’s virtue, was prevalent. See also Waters, esp. chapter 2.

59 For social deixis, or relational deixis, see McIntyre, pp. 97–98.
60 Ross, pp. 31–32.
61 Grisdale, p. 16.

62 While some preachers did criticize individual’s traits, such as Margery Kempe’s excessive weeping (Book I, Chapter 61), on the whole preachers avoided specifically correcting individuals in the audience and dealt with such sins as would apply to many or most members of the congregation. Chaucer’s Pardoner boasts of attacking individuals in the congregation in such a way that everyone will know to whom he is referring even though he does not name the individual in question (Pardoner’s Prologue, 413–22), another sign that this was not regarded as acceptable practice.

64 Bryan, p. 54.

65 Jennifer Bryan notes that the connection between “the material practices of silent, solitary reading” and “expectations of privacy, inwardness, and self-reflection” explored in late medieval English devotional texts is not as transparent as the texts suggest, and that it was primarily “the idea of solitude and bodily containment that was important to the reader’s experience” (pp. 12–13). The plays never participate in this construction of solitude (and indeed never explicitly address “expectations of privacy, inwardness, and self-reflection” either), although they may have been experienced privately in reading.

66 Davidson, A Tretise, p. 100.
Chapter 6

The Sacrament of Penance in Sermons and Plays

Middle English plays appear to have aimed for a mode of didacticism that was much less direct and authoritative than that of contemporary sermons. In this chapter I shall investigate in more detail the subject matter of that didacticism, using the sacrament of penance, one of the most hotly contested issues between orthodox authorities and suspected heretics and a recurrent theme in Middle English drama, as a test case to determine how the plays fit into the politics of contemporary vernacular theology, in line with current work that reveals an increasingly complex picture of religion and devotion in late medieval England.

While “orthodoxy” and “heterodoxy” remain useful and convenient shorthand, and while there undoubtedly was considerable tension between two different strands of Christianity in England from the late fourteenth century onward, recent scholarship demonstrates again and again the fluid boundaries and overlaps between orthodoxy and Lollardy, and the internal diversity of these two camps. Rob Lutton, for example, has shown that “the increasing heterogeneity of Tenterden’s orthodox piety” from the late fifteenth century onward, which to some degree helped pave the way for the Reformation, cannot simply be ascribed to the influence of Lollardy. The impact of anti-Lollard legislation and sentiment on vernacular religious literature has also come under strong scrutiny of late. Nicholas Watson argued that the perceived dullness of fifteenth-century English religious literature was the result of censorship and self-censorship due to the climate of suspicion following the condemnation of John Wyclif’s opinions at the Blackfriars Council of 1382, De Heretico Comburendo of 1401, which encouraged persecution of heretics and prescribed burning for heretics who persisted in their heresy, and specifically Arundel’s Constitutions of 1409. This latter legislation limited preaching to specially licensed preachers, circumscribed the content of preaching and teaching of religious matters, and proscribed (written) Biblical translations into the vernacular.
Both this perceived poverty of vernacular religious writing in late medieval England and the impact of Arundel’s Constitutions are increasingly being questioned.\(^5\) Certainly, medieval religious drama flourished in the fifteenth century, seemingly undeterred by ecclesiastical restrictions on teaching and preaching. Kate Crassons has claimed that:

> the resiliency of the Corpus Christi cycles alone attests to the fifteenth century’s lively and enduring interest in a distinctive mode of vernacular theology apparently unscathed by Arundel’s legislation.\(^6\)

While this is an attractive thesis, Pamela M. King has shed doubt on the extent to which these texts can be seen to “originate as acts of defiance directed at Arundel ... immediately following the promulgation of the Constitutions,”\(^7\) because the surviving scripts nearly all date from the later fifteenth to early sixteenth centuries—in what form the plays existed previous to the surviving manuscript copies we simply do not know.\(^8\) Nevertheless, the authorities were still wary of the use of the vernacular, unauthorized preaching, and the threat of heterodoxy in the mid to late fifteenth century and play texts from this period may consequently have been an expression of lay defiance in the face of ecclesiastical restrictions.

We have some historical evidence of persecution of suspected heretics that corresponds closely with dates and locales of plays. For instance, around the time of the East Anglian plays *Mankind* (ca. 1465–71) and *Wisdom* (ca. 1465–70) heretics were forced to undertake penance on the markets of Cambridge and Ely (1457) and a relapsed heretic from Walden was publicly executed (1467).\(^9\) Likewise, evidence suggests an active Lollard community in London in the 1490s, that is, at the time when Henry Medwall’s *Nature* (probably early 1490s) was almost certainly performed before Cardinal Morton’s household at Lambeth.\(^10\) The authorities were investigating suspected cases of heresy, too.\(^11\) In 1494, for example, the octogenarian Joan Boughton, “an old cankyrd heretyke,” was burned at Smithfield for maintaining Wycliffite opinions.\(^12\) But we would expect all the plays written after the rise of Lollardy and the ensuing legislation to have been affected to some extent by this atmosphere of religious debate, propaganda, and persecution.

The sacrament of penance was a particularly controversial topic at the time, and it would have been easy, and very possibly expedient, for the playwright to incorporate an explicitly orthodox understanding whenever the context of the play allowed it. Penance is certainly one of the most common topic in these plays yet, interestingly, only a very few plays, most
notably *Wisdom*, the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*, and the N-Town *Baptism*, present a straightforward endorsement of the sacrament of penance. The fact that many playwrights did not adopt the Church’s stance and presented instead divergent understandings of what penance might entail, shows that they were not afraid to stray from explicit Church doctrine to convey a slightly different and presumably more lay perception of this aspect of Christian devotion.

The sacrament of penance was not merely a contentious issue at the time, it was also an extremely important ritual for orthodox Christians. The canon *Omnis utriusque sexus*, issued at the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, had made annual confession an official requirement for all Christians. Evidence suggests that in late medieval England clerics were actively promoting and explicating the sacrament of penance, with its traditional tripartite division of contrition, confession, and satisfaction. One sermon explains that three things make a man acceptable to the mercy of God:

> Þe first is for-þenkyng in herte, þat a man shuld repente hym for is synnes þat he hæp done aȝeyns God and is soule. The ij is shrifte of mouthe; for as sone as a man repenteþ hym in is herte for is foule synnes, þan he shall com to holychurche to is goostely fadir and mekely knele afore hym, and tell is synne and crye God mercy. And tell how and on what maner of vise þat þou hast synned, and excuse not þi-selfe to sey þat þou myȝte no noþur veys don. ... The iij is penaunce. And þat is fastynge, wakyng, bedynge, and almesdede doyinge, and all oþur þinges þat is goostely fadir will enioyne hym in þe stede of penaunce. Þese iij þings, penaunce, shrift, and repen-
taunce ben nedefull to all þo þat will amende hem to God.¹³

Another sermon from a late fifteenth-century *de tempore* collection, mentions the “iij erbis of helthe for þi sowle,” namely contrition, confession of mouth, and satisfaction in deed.¹⁴ This sermon also advises the congregation to confess to “a discrete confessore, that is to sey, go to þine owne proper curate.”¹⁵ Yet another sermon closes with the command to its listeners to perform penance: “þu muste forsake thi synnes with contriscion of hert, confession of mouthe and satisfaccion in dede, for the sekenes of þi sowle.”¹⁶ Evidently, the sacrament of penance was deemed to be of considerable importance for salvation by the orthodox authorities.

Part of the reason for this emphasis on penance is that not all lay people were keen to confess: Solicitudo in *The Castle of Perseverance* blames “Slugge and Slawthe” (2340) for preventing men from doing penance or shriving themselves.¹⁷ While there were pious people who
confessed regularly, even outside the penitential season, evidently some members of the laity had little interest in the sacrament of penance and the *Speculum Sacerdotale* warns preachers that some people even confess “more for shame and custom kepynge þen att sterynge of compunccion or contriciion.”18 A more important reason for the regular insistence on proper penance in sermons was that disagreement about the precise content and validity of the sacrament of penance made it (together with various other sacraments) a point of contention in England from at least the late fourteenth century onward.

Theologians had long debated the exact roles of contrition and priestly absolution, but by the later Middle Ages the notion that priestly absolution was indispensable for forgiveness of sins was firmly established; hence, of course, the absolute necessity of auricular confession.19 This stress on the importance of confession and absolution did not invalidate the need for contrition and satisfaction. Middle English devotional texts are very emphatic about the necessity and importance of contrition for a true confession and hence forgiveness of sins: “þou mayste wel perceyue with what manere compunccioun, contricioun, and wepynge þat þou owþe for to make confession for thi synnes.”20 They also regularly stress the importance of external signs, particularly the need for and effect of tears, as in “contriscion ... thereof þu muste make a drynke, þat is to sey, thu muste wepe for þi synnes”21 and “In þis freshe water of þin eyes washe þin foule soule.”22 The impact of tears and weeping are also mentioned in Bromyard’s discussion of contrition in the *Summa Praedicantium*: the thief is saved at the Crucifixion “sic ergo lachrymè contritionis lauant delictum” (“because the tears of contrition wash away the transgression”) and “aqua lachrymarum, & contritionis est tantæ uirtutis, quod facit abundanter metere in cęlo” (“the water of tears and of contrition is of such virtue that it makes abundantly to reap in heaven,” Pars I, Cap. 5).23

Conversely, those that do not repent are castigated and even demonized. Robert Brunne, for instance, has an *exemplum* of a devil who confesses without any contrition, and it is that very lack of contrition that allows his confessor correctly to identify the sinner (12577–78).24 In the *Summa Praedicantium*, Bromyard advises that those who struggle to repent should be encouraged to contemplate how they have offended God and how they are heading straight to Hell; but if that does not help they are damned (“cœlum perdunt ... & non dolent,” Pars I, Cap. V).25 In a sermon for the Feast of Mary Magdalene people who fail to repent are charged with being “vnkynd” to God and faithless:
And trewly þe maner of folk are vncertayn and vntrewe in þere
trowth to þere God, and vnkynd ... þai trowe not, als yt is tawght
þame, how synne schuld be fled and clensyd by penaunce ... how
lastyng and endeles paynis is ordaynid to all þese þat wyll not leue
þere synne, and blysse and ioy aylastyng to all þase þat mythytyly
wythstandys vnclennesse and synne, for an þai trowyd stedfastly, all
þis þai schuld fulfyll þe in dede

In *Piers Plowman*, too, lack of true contrition is closely associated
with lack of belief in the confession of Sloth (Passus V, esp. 395–405). In
another sermon, those who despair are likened to heretics—a serious ac-
cusation at this point in time:

Þe second þinge þat letteþ a man to be sory for is synnes, hit is dys-
peire. And to dispeire som men beþ meved for þe huge offence of
þer synne. Som semeþ þer offence is so gret þat God woll not forȝeue
hem. þese men ben in a foule errour and heresy.

The sermons are then emphatic on the need for contrition and carefully
define its content. As we shall see, this picture of the importance, expres-
sion, and intensity of contrition is distinctly different in most plays.

Sermons also stress the importance and meaning of satisfaction. Satis-
faction, they explain, functions as a way of evening out the punish-
ment for the sin that would otherwise take place postmortem in purgatory
and also serves to re-establish the penitent in the community. One sermon
clarifies that satisfaction has three elements to it:

Peynte þe ymage of þi soule aftur þi confession with þe white colour
of prayere, aftur with þe blake colour of fastynge and abstynens, and
aftur þat with þe red colour of almes dede, þe wiche goyþ forth of
brennynge charite. For by þin devoute prayere þou makeþ amendis
to God, by þin fastynge to þi-selfe, and by þin almes dede þou satis-
fiþ þi neȝzbors.

There was clearly a sense that people did not always find it easy to fulfill
their imposed satisfaction. John Mirk in his *Festial* warns that the perform-
ance of satisfaction will involve a fearful struggle with one’s flesh:

þan wyl hys flesse ben aferde of þe penance and doth it noght aftur,
as he is bydon, for drede þerof. But þan he motte also wrastelyn
wyth hys flesse and, magreyth it, done hys penance fully os he is
bedon
The clergy, on the whole, seems to have been reasonably sympathetic to this plight. The *Speculum Sacerdotale* advises confessors to bear in mind “mannes febilyns” these days and therefore “to temper here peneunce to be liȝtter or shorter or so that they mowe bere it.” On the other hand, that understanding is not boundless, and sermons often enjoin their congregations to perform the penance assigned: “And letteþ noȝt for youre synnes to make satisfaccion to God with peneunce and fastaynge.”

Despite the importance of satisfaction for the success of the sacrament of penance and despite the importance of penance in several late medieval English plays, satisfaction is barely mentioned in these plays and never staged.

The reason for this absence is far from clear. To a large extent, it may have been caused by a dramatic rationale, with playwrights choosing to end their plays on the moment of climax that is the conversion from sin to virtue; some plays, like *Mankind* and *Wisdom*, do indeed end at this point. But in *The Castle of Perseverance* and *Nature*, the life of the converted sinner is shown, and we would reasonably expect their reformed way of life immediately after their conversion to include the performance of satisfaction; that is, indeed, what happens in various continental morality plays, as we will see in a moment. Yet neither *The Castle of Perseverance* or *Nature* stages satisfaction; in the former it is not even mentioned.

Another explanation for the lack of representation of satisfaction in these English plays could be that it would be difficult to stage a realistic late medieval satisfaction, which usually consisted of repetitive prayer, fasting, and/or deeds of charity over an extended period of time. This problem does not seem entirely unsurmountable, however. The Dutch *Elckerlijc* opts for an archetypal act of satisfaction, namely self-flagellation, which would have been instantly recognizable as such, and which is in any case repeatedly referred to as satisfaction. The protagonist is also shown to pray, another standard act of satisfaction. Similarly, various French *morali-tés* feature characters named Satisfaction, Aumosne (Almsdeeds), Jeusne (Fasting), and Oraison (Prayer)—the latter three typical aspects of late medieval satisfaction—who explain their import for the expiation of the punishment of sin. Sometimes, there is even some limited stage action to represent satisfaction. In *Bien Advisé, Mal Advisé*, for instance, Aumosne gives some alms to Le poure (The Poor) and one stage direction reads “Adonc bien advise se gette contre terre faisant oraison” (“Then Well Advised throws himself on the ground, praying”). In *L’Omm pecheur*, the protagonist gives all his clothes to Satisfaction, who tells Aulmosne...
to sell them and give the proceeds “aux crediteurs du penitent ... et aux
poures” (“to the penitent’s creditors ... and to the poor”).38 It was clearly
possible to stage a convincing representation of a late medieval satisfac-
tion. Continental playwrights regularly incorporate satisfaction in their
presentation of penance, which makes the absence of satisfaction in the
English plays even more intriguing.

It is possible that the medieval English laity, on the whole, were
simply not especially interested in satisfaction and that the plays’ lack of
representation of this aspect of the sacrament of penance reflects that rela-
tive disinterest. This view is somewhat supported by Satisfaction’s com-
plaint in Bien Advisé, Mal Advisé that no one wants to touch or approach
her, which strongly suggests that satisfaction was often not performed by
penitents.39 Such a lay disinterest would in turn account for the sermons’
frequent call to perform satisfaction. But whatever the underlying causes,
English plays are remarkably reticent when it comes to the third aspect of
the sacrament of penance.

Notwithstanding the interest in contrition and satisfaction in
orthodox doctrine, emphasis was undoubtedly fixed on the role of the
priest. Thomas Aquinas underlined the fundamental effect of the words
of the priest for the sacrament, arguing that the removal of sin is “con-
venientissima forma huius sacramenti, ego te absolvo” (“expressed by the
priest saying: ‘I absolve thee,’” Summa Theologica, Pars III q. 84. a. 3 co.).40
He continues to argue that the priest absolves from sin and forgives sin
“per ministerium, inquantum scilicet verba sacerdotis in hoc sacramento
instrumentaliter operantur” (“ministerially, because the words of the
priest in this sacrament work as instruments of the Divine power,” Summa
Theologica, Pars III q. 84 a. 3 ad 3):

Sacramenta enim novae legis non solum significant, sed etiam faci-
unt quod significant. Unde ... ita etiam cum dicit, ego te absolvo,
ostendit hominem absolutum non solum significative, sed etiam
effective. (Summa Theologica, Pars III q. 84 a. 3 ad 5)

[Because the sacraments of the New Law not only signify, but effect
what they signify. Wherefore ... when he says: “I absolve thee,” he
declares the man to be absolved not only significatively but also
effectively.]

The vital role of the priest’s words is such that Aquinas even speaks of
“sacramentum absolutionis” (“the sacrament of absolution,” Summa Theo-
logica, Pars III q. 84 a. 3 ad 5).
The late medieval English Church subscribed to this view of the importance of confession and actively encouraged its congregations to confess at least once a year. One Middle English sermon repeatedly stresses the importance of confession for salvation, and even relabels the sacrament of penance, the sacrament of confession: “þys blyssyd sacrament of confession,” “scryfth of mowth to a presst is nescessary to owre saluacion,” “þis sacrament of schryft of mowth,” and

þis clensyng most nedys stande in þe vertuus sacrament of confessiun, thorow þe qwylk þe tempyll and þe tabernakyll of owre sawle is dewly porgyd and clensyd, and gloriously hallowyd and dispoysyd and repareld to owre lorde God

Another preacher claims “See how sone þat he shall haue forȝeuenes þat mekely shryveþ hym and knolages is trespace.” Hugh Legat urges his listeners:

Here þe maist se þat confessiun is a gret preparative to for-ȝiuenes of þi sinnes. And ter-for as sone as þu art defowlid with ani maner filþe of sinne, go to a priest & with þe trewe schrift of mouth wasch it clene a-way.

Mirk closes one of his sermons for the First Sunday in Lent with a call to confess: “Wherefore I amonest ȝow þat ye tak not his grace in vayne, but schryue 30w clene of ȝoure synnus and put ȝow fully into hys mercy and into hys grace.” The importance of the priest in this process is also frequently stressed and explained, as in some of the examples above, and

Þou seist me, sir, parauntur, why shuld þis confession be shewed to a prest? Sir, for þe prest haþ powere in ys hond to forȝeue þe, to blisse þe, and to curse; and shortly, he is ordeynt to be þi iuge and þin helper in all þi spirituall goueraunce.

Another preacher in a late fifteenth-century sermon collection similarly reminds the audience of the priesthood’s power to bind and loose in an attack on the Lollard notion that the pope and priests cannot forgive sin.

The Lollards were indeed strenuously opposed to the late medieval orthodox view of penance, as there is no biblical basis for private confession to a priest and priestly absolution, and they encouraged a rather more direct relationship between the penitent and God:

Þerfore it is certeyn, clerer þanne liȝt, þat synnes ben forȝeuen be contricioun of hert. Hec ibi. Þerfore very contricioun is þe essencial
parte of penance, and confessioun of mouþe is þe accidental parte. But naþeles confessioun of hert done to þe hiȝe prest Crist is as nedeful as contricioun.\textsuperscript{48}

Lollard criticism of priestly power also led to the suggestion that, as one suspected heretic pronounced in 1476, “a man or woman may as wele be confessed vnto a layman beynge wele disposed, as vnto the prieste beynge his curate, specialli if the saide curate be in dedely synne.”\textsuperscript{49}

Given the importance of the sacrament of penance for salvation in orthodox doctrine and given the contemporary debate surrounding the sacrament, it is of special interest to see how late medieval English religious plays depict penance and in particular what importance they attribute to contrition, auricular confession, and priestly absolution. If plays lean toward a Lollard position we would expect a disregard for confession and priests, and a concomitant emphasis on true contrition. Conversely, if the plays are orthodox, we would expect them to highlight the unique, salvific effect of confession and priestly absolution whenever penance and redemption are featured in the story.

Penance is an especially prominent theme in the so-called morality plays, which typically stage a narrative in which humankind falls into sin and is subsequently redeemed.\textsuperscript{50} The importance of penance for such a story line is self-evident, and these plays have been treated as propaganda for the sacrament of penance:

The morality plays have frequently been mistaken for naïve treatises on virtue. They are in fact the call to a specific religious act. If we are to understand these plays, we must clearly understand the action which they promulgate and ultimately represent. It is the acknowledgment, confession, and forgiveness of sin, institutionalized in medieval Christianity as the sacrament of penance.\textsuperscript{51}

In many continental morality plays, that link between salvation and the sacrament of penance is indeed emphatically present. In \textit{Le Jeu des sept pechiés et des sept vertus} all the vices confess on stage to a hermit, who is evidently a priest (1858–63):\textsuperscript{52}

\textit{Chi se confesse Envie}  
Sire proidome, Dieu vos benie!  
Je me confesse, en nom de Dieu,  
De mes mal, de ceur ententieu.  
...

\textit{Chi se confesse Envy}
Dolant en suy et corochie,
S’en demande absolucion.
Chi est absoulee. (1412–19)

[Here Envy confesses. “Sage sir, may God bless you! I confess, in the name of God, my evils, with a troubled heart. ... I am sorrowful for it, and troubled, and I ask for absolution.” Here she is absolved.]

In this play all the vices are verbally absolved by the priest, as in “Je vous absouls, ou nom de Dieu” (“I absolve you, in the name of God” 1555). The effect of the confessions is such that Le Maistre Dyable (The Master Devil) laments “Bien saie qui toutes sont delivre, | Car elles se sont confessee.” (“I know well that they [i.e. the former vices] are all saved, because they confessed.” 2404–5).

In Bien Advisé, Mal Advisé the path to heaven goes through Contricion, Confession, and Satisfaction. The play sets out explicitly to teach the importance of the sacrament of penance and the importance of the Church as well. Confession warns that confession has to be whole otherwise

Ta confession riens ne vault
...
Se ainsi prens ton sacrament
Tu le prens a ton dampnement

[Your confession is worthless ... If you accept the sacrament [eucharist] like that, you accept it to your damnation]

She also stresses that confession needs to be made to “le chapplain ou le prestre | qui a de ton ame la cure” (“the chaplain or priest, who has the cure of your soul”).

Likewise, the sinner passes through Contricion, Confession, and Satisfaction before making a good end in L’Omme pecheur. This play repeatedly highlights the importance of the clergy in this process, as when Contriction recommends the penitent to go to church and confess in order to receive “absolucion du prestre” (“absolution from the priest”). In fact, the play stages a priest who accompanies the penitent sinner through the process and who acts as confessor.

L’Homme juste et l’Homme mondain similarly features the characters Contriction, Confession, and Satisfaction on the saved protagonist’s road to heaven. These aspects of penance are also staged to some degree. Following Contriction’s advice “Lhomme iuste en plorant” (“The Just
Man while weeping”) expresses his desire to confess his sins.\textsuperscript{56} He then proceeds to Confession, and a stage direction reads “Icy lhomme iuste se mut a genoulx devant confession ... Et fera lhomme tout en la maniere comme sil se confessoit” (“Here the Just Man kneels before Confession ... and the [Just] Man shall behave entirely in the manner as if he were confessing”).\textsuperscript{57} Finally, l’Homme juste tells Satisfaction to share all his goods among his creditors and “Icy satisfaction prendra tous les biens de lhomme iuste et sen yra” (“Here Satisfaction shall take all the goods of the Just Man and leave”).\textsuperscript{58} This play also shows the encounter between the damned protagonist and Contriction, Confession, and Satisfaction. They explain his need of them for salvation and urgently appeal to the sinner to amend his ways. L’Homme mondain [The Worldly Man], however, utterly rejects penance and is subsequently damned.\textsuperscript{59}

\textit{Elckerlijc}, the source of \textit{Everyman}, explicitly associates the protagonist’s salvation with the sacrament of penance as well. Elckerlijc is sent “Tot Biechten” (486; “To Confessyon,” 536\textsuperscript{60}), in what appears to be a church, the “Huys der Salicheden” (489; “hous of Saluacyon,” 540). The penitent kneels before the confessor figure (497 and 543 respectively) and expresses his awareness of his sinfulness and his contrition (500 and 549 respectively). Biechte/Confession then assigns the penitent satisfaction (515 and 562 respectively), which consists predominantly of self-flagellation. It is only once Elckerlijc/Everyman undertakes the satisfaction that Duecht/Good Deeds is restored. Later on in the play, “Biechte” (678) and “penance” (725) are named as sacraments.\textsuperscript{61}

These continental European plays are then emphatically aligned with religious orthodoxy and “express the conflict of good and evil in the context of religious observance, in particular the importance for the Christian of the sacraments of contrition, repentance and confession.”\textsuperscript{62} However, when we turn to the English morality plays, that connection between redemption and Church doctrine is perhaps not so explicit as people have assumed.

Of all the surviving medieval English so-called morality plays, only \textit{Wisdom} presents a straightforward endorsement of the sacrament of penance. It could be argued that to some extent this lapse to offer wholehearted support for the sacrament of penance may be explained by the orthodoxy of the plays. But while Arundel’s Constitutions forbade reiterating non-orthodox theories regarding the sacraments (Constitution 4),\textsuperscript{63} it nowhere discouraged an orthodox account of the sacraments. An orthodox play should have been able to include a detailed, orthodox presentation of pen-
ance. It would, moreover, have been easy to depict the protagonist becoming contrite, going to confess, and performing satisfaction—as in the continental plays. Instead, we find a much more amorphous understanding of penance and redemption in the other so-called morality plays; an understanding that acknowledges how difficult it can be to repent something pleasurable and focuses on the availability of God’s mercy without tying it down to the specifics of Church doctrine.

*Wisdom* does present the traditional, tripartite picture of the sacrament of penance:

> By wndyrstondynge haue very contrycyon,
> Wyth mynde of your synne confessyon make,
> Wyth wyll yeldynge du satysfaccyon. (973–75)

Wisdom repeatedly stresses the importance of contrition (961–64, 967–69), explaining that penance without contrition “relesyt nought” (967). Once Anima weeps with contrition, the seven devils, representing the Seven Deadly Sins, abandon her (977–80). Nevertheless, the play does not neglect to emphasize the need for formal, oral confession to a priest. Contrition alone in the world of this play evidently does not suffice and Wisdom sends Anima to “Holy Chyrche so mylde” (982) to confess, be reconciled, and receive forgiveness (981–88). Anima promises to confess to a priest (991–92) and to perform any satisfaction assigned (995). It is only when Anima returns to the stage after her confession and absolution that she is cleansed—indicated by a return to her opening costume—and in a state of grace (1071–72). A little later in the play, Wisdom again highlights the importance of the Church sacrament: “And now ye be reformyde by þe sakyrment of penance | Ande clensyde from þe synnys actuall” (1111–12).

The playwright’s decision not to stage the actual confession is in line with this scrupulously orthodox portrayal of penance. Staging the actual confession runs the risk of presenting confession and priestly absolution as a theatrical show, which would have come dangerously close to the Lollard notion that such confession and absolution were empty gestures. The *Wisdom* playwright was then careful to give due importance to all the aspects of the sacrament of penance, not to stage a confession and absolution as this might have been controversial, to highlight the importance of the Church’s mediation in the process, and to emphasize the need and importance of the sacrament for salvation. This is by far the most explicit, coherent, and overtly orthodox representation of penance in the surviving morality plays.
But even here an issue arises, namely about the nature of contrition. As mentioned earlier, most Middle English devotional texts tend to present that as the natural Christian response to the knowledge that one has sinned. But while Anima’s contrition presents the traditional image of intense, heartfelt sorrow and its external expression through tears, contrition is not the automatic response to the realization of one’s sins. Divine intervention is required, and even so Wisdom’s first attempt to convert Mind, Will, and Understanding is unsuccessful and the three Mights merely decide to postpone their turn to virtue to old age (873–92). It is only the revelation of Anima “in þe most horrybull wyse, fowlere þan a fende” (sd. after l. 903) that brings the three Mights to a (presumably) full realization of their sinfulfulness. However, that knowledge does not automatically bring on contrition either. Wisdom first has to explain the necessity of contrition for Anima to feel contrite and start the process of salvation (949–79). While this delay to feel contrition allows the playwright to discuss this particular aspect of the sacrament of penance in greater detail—which is why the delay is there, of course—it also reflects the difficulty which ordinary human beings face when dealing with such a complex, moral set of emotions.

Although the other morality plays do not openly challenge the sacrament of penance, their support for and treatment of it tends to be fleeting and superficial. Occupation and Idleness is perhaps less interested in penance than it is in the concept of mercy, which is discussed at some length (634–65). The conversion of Idleness, though it entails some kind of confession, is not a good example of the sacrament of penance. To begin with, Idleness is not repentant but is beaten into submission by Doctrine, a representative of the Church (755–72). When Idleness professes contrition for his sins a little later, we may be tempted to suspect his honesty and assume that he merely says whatever he thinks Doctrine wants to hear in order to avoid further beating. I doubt that is how a medieval audience would have read this scene; after all, chastising one’s children was considered to be a good thing—as Doctrine rather smugly boasts “Lo, how litel maistry it is | To brynge in a childe in yowthe” (790–91). Nevertheless, the play does present contrition as anything but a simple process: it requires physical violence, an authoritative presence of the Church, and enlightenment on the nature of one’s sins. And although probably sincere, one could still wonder how efficacious such “artificially induced” contrition might be. One writer with Lollard sympathies casts strong doubt on the usefulness of such contrition:
There is no proper confession in the play either, although Doctrine outlines Idleness’s sins (802–13). As Katherine Ludwig Jansen remarks, “confession was a highly regulated ritual in terms of verbal and physical comportement” and sermons and penitential manuals are very specific about what constitutes a true confession; the priest summarizing your sins does not qualify. Idleness is told to behave virtuously henceforward, but he is not assigned any satisfaction, nor is Doctrine shown to absolve him. Doctrine’s enumeration of Idleness’s past sins and Idleness’s new designation as “Clennes” (813) in this scene clearly hint at confession and absolution, and given the importance of Doctrine (“that worthi clerk” 295, “A maister of dyvynete” 297) this passage does not undermine the orthodox emphasis on the vital role of the priest in administering the sacrament.

Yet, overall, this scene and the play do not present a coherent representation of the orthodox understanding of the sacrament. Unlike contemporary sermons, and unlike Wisdom, this play does not explicitly advocate auricular confession for the penitent, nor does it state that priestly absolution is necessary to salvation. Instead Occupation and Idleness presents a more inchoate concept of penitence, which pays greater attention to the necessity of Christ’s Passion for individual salvation (e.g. 640–65) than it does to the acknowledged ecclesiastical route to salvation through confession and absolution.

Such a lack of explicit endorsement of the sacrament of penance can also be observed in Nature. Man’s first conversion, while sincere and (temporarily) effective, falls short of official guidelines on various grounds. Most importantly, the protagonist does not appear to be contrite but merely ashamed:

I have commytted myche foly—
I am ashamed certainly
When I thynke theron. (I.1398–400)

Sermons frequently mention shame as a negative emotion which prevents true contrition and confession, as in the late fifteenth-century sermon for Dominica iiij Quadragesime. Mirk claims that shame is often sent by the devil in order to prevent sinners from making a proper confession. In the
Speculum Sacerdotale priests are warned against those who come to confess “for schame”—evidently such confessions are invalid.

According to Duns Scotus, if the penitent felt only imperfect sorrow for his sins, the power of the priest and the formal rite of the sacrament of penance were especially needful to compensate for such imperfect contrition, or attrition. As Man is only attrite at best, we would reasonably expect a marked emphasis in this scene on the other elements of the sacrament of penance and especially on the absolution of the priest, but there is no such emphasis. Rather than encourage Man to confess, Reason cuts short any desire Man may have to pour forth his sins (I.1407). He depicts a direct relationship between Man and God, bypassing the clergy and the Church’s formal sacrament of penance: “God ys mercyable yf ye lust to crave. | Call for grace and sone he wyll yt send” (I.1414–15). Finally, Reason does recommend Man to live a virtuous life henceforth, but that does not equal satisfaction, which should in any case be assigned by a priest, not by one’s own conscience or reason.

As Reason is the representation of an internal faculty of Man, this passage argues for a very different conceptualization of repentance and mercy than orthodox doctrine entails. In fact, all this is remarkably similar to Lollard opinion that oral confession to a priest and priestly absolution are entirely superfluous “For contricioun of hert and leuynge of synne be sufficient be himself wiþ þe grace of God.”

Conversely, Man’s second and final conversion, which does last, explicitly mentions the sacrament of penance. But even in this instance, the reference to the importance of the sacrament seems to be something of an afterthought. Man’s final conversion is not caused by contrition but by the advent of Age which makes him unable to continue with his sinful life. The fact that Man would continue with his sinful life if he could is repeatedly mentioned (e.g. II.1005–16): it is the Deadly Sins that abandon Man, not the other way around. Preachers warned sternly that such a conversion from sin is absolutely worthless:

For euery man shuld amend hym in ys good hele when þat he is myghty to do penaunce for is synnes, for he þat abideþ vn-to is last ende, is synne letteþ hym. And what mede is he worthy to haue to do penaunce, þat is vnmyghty to do good oþur evell?

In the play, however, such a reason for converting does not cause problems, and Man goes on to discuss with Reason how he will attain salvation. There is very little sense of intense, heartfelt contrition:
But not wythstandyng thys myne abusyon,
I trust that by the help of your good advyse
I may be made the chyld of salvacyon. (II.1078–80)

This insistence on the importance of one’s reason and self-knowledge in attaining salvation is a trait not to be found in the other plays to the same extent but, like in the other plays, the start of the conversion process is not a clear-cut instance of contrition.

It is also evident that Man is saved first through Reason’s advice and then through the more detailed guidance of the Virtues, who encourage satisfaction (II.1249) and restitution (II.1270–71). Satisfaction and especially restitution had to be assigned by the priest after confession, so in a sense the Virtues, which are explicitly stated to be internal to Man (II.1131–32), are here usurping the role of the priest. It is only after Man has accepted to be ruled by the Virtues that there is a reference to the sacrament of penance, when Man leaves to “speke wyth Repentaunce” (II.1365). When he returns to the stage he says:

I have ben wyth Repentaunce also,
Whyche fro my hart shall never go,
For he brought me unto Confessyon,
And anon I was acquaynted with Hartys Contracyyon.
They advysed and charged me to do satysfaccyon (II.1395–98)

As already mentioned, staging an actual confession could potentially have been perceived as subversive, so this is in itself as expected. It is clear that only Man’s second conversion is ultimately effective and the role of the sacrament in this regard is not neglected. Reason exclaims “Than art thou fully the chyld of salvacyon!” (II.1401) when the confessed Man returns to the stage, and no further lapse into sin is staged.

At first glance, we could conclude that Nature expressly favors the orthodox sacrament of penance and that by placing this reference at the very close of the play the importance of formal penance is enhanced. Nonetheless, there is a strong sense that Man’s penance and adherence to a virtuous life are only effective because of his inability to sin more and because of his imminent death. The guidance of Reason and the strictures of the Virtues, all faculties internal to Man, also seem to be of utmost importance for his salvation. The few lines regarding “repentaunce,” when compared with the extensive staging of Reason and the Virtues and their lessons, seem to be paying lip service to orthodox doctrine rather than a genuine endorsement of the sacrament of penance.
A somewhat similar picture emerges in *The Castle of Perseverance*. Contrition is consistently problematized in this play. It is the encounter between Bonus Angelus and Confessio that commences Humanum Genus’s conversion. Not that he is immediately overcome by a need to confess; instead, he turns down that invitation with the rejoinder that Confessio should come again on Good Friday. (This reflects contemporary anxiety that the obligation to confess annually would not necessarily encourage true contrition, as in Bromyard’s *Summa Praedicantium*, Pars I, Cap. V, p. 115b.) Confessio then reminds man that he may well be dead by Good Friday, but this call to repent is again unsuccessful and Humanum Genus merely counters that we have all sinned. These kinds of reasons and excuses not to confess are standardly decried in sermons. In Mirk’s sermon for Passion Sunday, for instance, people who act like Humanum Genus are said to be worse than the Jews that persecuted Jesus:

\[
\text{Pan schul ȝe know wel ȝat, rythe os þe Iewes pursuuden Criste to þe deth whyl he was in erthe, rythe so be þere now many false men christened þat pursuen hym reynyng in heven. And Seynt Austyn sayth þat he syngeth more greuowsly þat pursueth hym reynyng in heven þat þe Iewes þat pursen hym reynyng in heven. Pan ȝif ȝe wil know wyche þeise bene ... Criste hymself scheweth whyche þat bene þat pursueth hym in heven. Þais ... bene grounded in foule leuing and wil notte amende hem for no preching ne for no teching, but euer defendeth here guite be ensaumpul of suche other os þei bene.}\]

Humanum Genus’s lack of contrition, however humorously expressed, is therefore problematic.

It is only once Penitencia appears and pierces the protagonist’s heart that he becomes immediately and completely contrite (1403–4). The importance of contrition, and its external expression with tears, is stressed in this scene (e.g. 1381–89). Contrition is here presented as a crucial first step to a good and effective confession. At the same time, the playwright acknowledges the difficulty of feeling contrite: even though Humanum Genus is fully aware of his sins, it requires no fewer than three supernatural agents to make him feel contrite.

Humanum Genus’s deathbed conversion toward the end of the play apparently does not involve contrition; he merely seems to be seriously annoyed that “I Wot Neuere Who” inherits his wealth (e.g. 2969–81 and 2988–94). While he acknowledges that he needs God’s mercy to avoid hell (3001–2), there is no sense in this passage that he repents his sins as such. Bromyard gives stern warning that last-minute repentance out of fear of
death and hellish punishment is insufficient for salvation “quia talis timor non est in charitate” (“for such fear is not in love,” Pars I, Cap. V). Such last-minute contrition could thus have been somewhat problematic in its own right. But what we seem to have in this particular instance is merely a regret that his worldly treasure is lost to him or, perhaps, foremost a regret that his treasure is lost to his wife and children (which is a much more sympathetic portrayal of the death of an avaricious man than one usually encounters in medieval art and literature). In any case, there seems to be no question of contrition. Such a concern with worldly goods and lack of proper contrition at the point of death is sternly condemned in at least one medieval exemplum. In this narrative, although “the seke ever wept,” the soul appears postmortem to his curate to explain why he is in hell:

I am dampned to hell for evermore for all my contriscion that I had.  
For I thowȝt and if I myȝte have lyvid, in certen I wolde have ben as ivell as ever I was before. And as for my wepyng that I wept, was for incheson þat I scholde dye, and not for my synnes that I dyd here in erthe. And therfore byd all thi childern beware be me, and every man in his degre, for the well of þer owne sowlys.

Humanum Genus’s lack of proper, heartfelt, intense contrition at the point of death is then actually rather surprising.

The play also complicates the other elements of the sacrament of penance. The first conversion leads to an on-stage confession (1468–86) and even an absolution:

I þe asuoyle wyth goode entent  
Of alle þe synnys þat þou hast wrowth  
In brekynge of Goddys commaundement  
In worde, werke, wyl, and þowth.  
I restore to þe sacrament  
Of penauns weche þou neuere rowt [took heed] (1507–12)

As Confessio was presumably dressed in appropriate clerical attire, this reflects the orthodox insistence on the need for confession to a priest and priestly absolution and, as such, this whole scene presents the audience with an emphatic portrayal of penance (although there is no mention of satisfaction).

Interestingly, this staging of a confession, and especially of priestly absolution, seems to be unselfconscious for there is no implication that either could be perceived as empty, theatrical gestures. This can probably to some degree be accounted for by the relatively early date of the
play, which is usually dated to the first quarter of the fifteenth century, and could thus predate the full effect of Arundel’s Constitution of 1409. In fact, other allusions to “crakows” were probably written between 1382 and 1425, and at least one scholar has dated the play to the late fourteenth century. Even if the play is later than the Constitutions, it precedes the extensive anti-Lollard persecution in East Anglia by Bishop Alnwick, which started in 1428. In fact, another play that is more or less contemporaneous with _The Castle of Perseverance_, namely _Dux Morau_ (manuscript dated ca. 1400–25), seems similarly unselfconscious about staging a confession and probably a priestly absolution, although the latter is impossible to verify due to the nature of the evidence. It would therefore seem that playwrights from the early fifteenth, or perhaps even from the late fourteenth, century were able to stage a confession and absolution where later playwrights carefully avoided doing so. (A similar avoidance of staging priestly absolution can be observed in the Croxton _Play of the Sacrament_, as we shall see.) This shift does seem to be linked with a climate of (self-)censorship due to Lollard challenges to the sacramental system and anti-Lollard persecutions.

_The Castle of Perseverance_’s presentation of penance so far is straightforwardly orthodox, but this affirmation of the importance of the sacrament of penance for salvation is undermined by the actual development of the story. This penance has a clear but temporary effect, as Humanum Genus eventually lapses back to a life of sin. More importantly, he dies unshriven though with the word “mercy” (3007) on his lips. Technically, salvation without confession at the point of death is possible, if confession is for whatever reason impossible:

and penaunce of herte may turne to saluacion of a man withoute confessedioun of mouþe; that is to wite, in tyme of nede and in poynyt of deþ, ȝif ther may noȝt be hadde no preste redy, or ȝif the sike haue no space or power for to make his confession.

This is evidently not the case here, as Humanum Genus has some time between the first onset of death (at l. 2842) and his actual death (at l. 3007)—enough time to visit Mundus and to bicker with “I Wot Neuere Who”—and there does not appear to be a good reason why he does not go to confess. He could and should have done so.

Moreover, _exempla_ of deathbed conversions always stress the intense and heartfelt contrition of the dying that are eventually saved. One dying sinner is described as having “suche a contricion in hys herte þat he wepte
As we have seen, it is very doubtful, however, that Humanum Genus is at all contrite. Justicia also cites the protagonist’s failure to confess his sins, and indeed to repent them, as an adequate reason for his damnation:

Ouyrlate he callyd Confescioun;
Ouyrlate was hys contricioun;
He made neuere satisfaccioun.
Dampne hym to helle belyve! (3427–30)

Yet, despite the fact that Humanum Genus did not confess before death, and did apparently not feel contrite either, he is ultimately saved. The play seems to suggest, then, that true, heartfelt contrition is next to impossible for humankind to feel spontaneously, but that an acknowledgment of one’s unworthy, sinful nature, combined with a firm reliance on God’s mercy, is sufficient to attain salvation. God’s mercy trumps the failure to repent, confess, and perform satisfaction. This may be a very comforting message for the audience, but it is hardly in line with orthodox theology which strongly stressed the necessity of penance in this life in order to attain salvation in the next.

In Mankind, likewise, the necessity of formal penance for salvation is called into question. Mankind is repeatedly told to ask for mercy (816, 819–20, 827, 830) but there is no overt reference to the sacrament of penance in the whole play. Neither does it stage a straightforward representation of any of the aspects of the sacrament of penance. To begin with the first aspect, namely contrition. The protagonist in this play is evidently extremely sorry about his sinful behavior, but his contrition is shown to be problematic rather than salutary as it leads him to despair. Despair was routinely linked with the devil, Judas, Cain, and heretics in late medieval English sermons. Some plays take an unforgiving stance on this issue too. Mankind, not dealing with such archetypal villains, is rather more lenient in dealing with the protagonist’s desperation. While it is certainly not presented as a positive emotion, Mercy never condemns Mankind for feeling desperate and merely reiterates the availability of God’s mercy. Despite Mercy’s benevolent approach and reassurances, the protagonist is rather persistent in his despondent attitude: he declares his unworthiness to receive salvation (814, 822) and remarks on the injustice such a restoration would entail (831–32). This humane portrayal of the kinds of fears people experience when they feel unworthy of divine mercy is very much at odds with the categorical condemnation of despair by preachers; the playwright
seems to be much more aware of, and understanding of, the complex emotions that the heartfelt knowledge of one’s sinfulness might entail.

Mankind’s despair is gradually alleviated by Mercy, but interestingly Mankind is never shown to experience the proper kind of contrition. At the very moment when he comes closest to expressing contrition, he also tries to excuse himself. Sermons warn the laity again and again not to deflect blame for their sins, as in “þi confession most be pure, or clene, with-owten anny dowbulnes, with-owten anny excuse” and

Vor many men, whan þei cum to schrifte wher’ þei schulde a-cuse hem-silf? þei ex-cuse hem-silf & a-cuse oþer volk: vor þei sei, “Sir, ich ha synnid e pride, ich ha synnid e glotenie, ȝe, ich ha synnid e lecheri, but truliche it was noþynge defawte but al þe defawte was o þe wummanis sied.” And a lieþ falsliche, it is noþynge so, but it is his owne wretchidnes & his owne vnþrift.

That is exactly what the protagonist in this play does:

A, yt swemyth my hert to thynk how onwysely I hawe wroght.
Tytiuillus, þat goth invisibele, hyng hys nett before my eye
And by hys fantastical visionys sediciusly sowght,
To New Gyse, Nowadays, Nowght causyd me to obey. (875–78)

Given that Mankind attempts suicide due to his great sense of unworthiness, there is no reason to question the sincerity of his repentance and, ultimately, its efficacy. But Mankind’s various emotions in this exchange are a far cry from the standard tears of contrition of Anima or the sermons’ sense that contrition is a straightforward and straightforwardly positive process. And the role of Mercy in this play again suggests that nothing short of divine intervention, as in The Castle of Perseverance and Wisdom, is required to enable humankind to feel contrite.

Both Mankind and Mercy touch upon Mankind’s fall (876–90) but there is no confession, no absolution, and no mention of satisfaction. In fact, at the point where we might expect some kind of priestly absolution, Mercy instead asserts Mankind’s responsibility over his own fate: “ȝe may both saue and spyll ȝowr sowle þat ys so precyus” (893). This statement is actually a little odd because, while the idea that one can damn oneself is common enough, the notion that one can save oneself is, strictly speaking, unorthodox, as only God’s grace can enable salvation. In any case, despite this absence of the formal elements of confession and absolution (and satisfaction), Mercy appears to be able to ensure the spiritual cleansing of
Mankind. Divine mercy is again given a greater role to play than the sacrament. If Mercy were dressed as a religious—which his line “I, Mercy, hys father gostly” (765) and his use of liturgical phrases makes probable—then at least his delivery of Mankind is more or less in line with the orthodox insistence on the Church’s role in attaining salvation. If, however, Mercy was not dressed as a cleric—which is also possible—this play presents a much less emphatically orthodox vision of the workings of divine mercy.\textsuperscript{59}

Even if Mercy was in clerical dress, the priest’s ability to absolve a penitent appears to be called into question when Mercy warns Mankind that “God wyll not make ȝow preuy onto hys last jugement” (839). One of the Lollards’ objections to the Church’s focus on priestly absolution was that only God can absolve sin and that priestly absolution therefore can only ever be:

\begin{quote}
purely declarative at best; at worst, when the priest’s decision was at odds with the knowledge of God, it was ... a misleading and blasphemous arrogation of divine power.\textsuperscript{90}
\end{quote}

Though not a wholehearted rejection of priestly absolution, the play leans more toward the heterodox position in this instance.

While \textit{Mankind} does not set out to undermine the sacrament of penance, its insistence on mercy and its workings, the lack of overt references to the formal aspects of penance, and Mercy’s acknowledgment of our inability to know God’s judgment all add up to give the impression that the sacrament of penance is not necessary or indispensable in order to attain salvation, and that priestly absolution certainly is no guarantee of salvation. As such, this play does come perilously close to depicting the sacrament of penance as an empty form, to be disregarded in favor of a direct relationship between the penitent and God’s mercy—very much in line with Lollard theology. This would have been especially the case if Mercy was not represented as a cleric on stage.

The late medieval English so-called morality plays are much concerned with man’s journey from sin to salvation, yet all but \textit{Wisdom} present this journey as more difficult and personal than the orthodox doctrine of penance allows. Contrition, the first element of penance, is systematically complicated. It is difficult to feel spontaneously: in \textit{Occupation and Idleness} the sinful protagonist’s conversion starts through physical violence, in \textit{Nature} through the advent of Age, and even in \textit{Wisdom} it requires divine intervention. Heartfelt contrition was presented as a first step to salvation, but in \textit{Mankind} it is nearly a road to damnation.
The content of contrition is also much more varied in these plays than the sermons allow for, and contrition is but rarely accompanied by the external behavior devotional treatises stress as signs of true contrition. These shortcomings are not demonized: in all five plays the protagonist is evidently saved. Where many sermons would have offered little advice or comfort for those members of the congregation that struggled to repent their sins and even have vilified such people, the plays take a much more lenient view of such failings and suggest that they are neither uncommon nor the sign of sure and certain damnation. While these plays do not encourage sinful behavior or a refusal to repent, they do acknowledge that contrition is a peculiarly difficult process and that those who struggle with it are just ordinary human beings for whom divine mercy is still very much attainable.

Doubt is also cast on the importance of the sacrament of penance and particularly of confession to a priest in several of these plays: Mankind appears to be saved without any reference to it, Humanum Genus is saved without a final confession, and Man seems to be saved before he goes to confess. In these plays, it is the availability of divine mercy—without being confined to the specifics of the sacrament of penance—and the direct relationship between the believer and God which is of utmost importance. Even in Wisdom Anima is encouraged to confess by Wisdom, who is Christ: that is, even in the most emphatically orthodox of the plays under discussion, the first and most important step on the road to salvation consists of direct interaction between God and the individual.

Apart from Wisdom, the morality plays do not set out to teach their audiences the sacrament of penance and focus more on less doctrinal aspects of repentance. By doing so, they come close to presenting the sacrament of penance as unnecessary and superfluous. On the other hand, none of these plays overtly challenges orthodox doctrine, and Wisdom, The Castle of Perseverance, and Nature—perhaps even Mankind with Mercy’s two mentions of repentance (23, 865) and Occupation and Idleness with the role of Doctrine and the vague references to confession and absolution in the conversion scene—all present some support for the sacrament. These plays are, then, neither bastions for orthodox doctrine (apart from Wisdom), nor would it be reasonable to claim that they subvert orthodox doctrine. Indeed, the very lack of emphasis on true and heartfelt contrition and its essential role for salvation indicates that these plays are not at all aligned with a Lollard theology of penance. Instead they seem to reflect a more lay appreciation of how penance may be experienced.
It is of course difficult to generalize based on such a small corpus, and one in which two examples (Mankind and Wisdom) are both closely related in place and time and survive because of a specific individual, namely a Benedictine monk at Bury St. Edmunds; a third play, The Castle of Perseverance, is also from East Anglia. Nevertheless, there are significant differences between these texts in intended setting and audience, form, and content. There are also, as the discussion above has shown, important differences in how these plays present penance, and while Wisdom’s emphatic orthodoxy could be attributed to the Benedictine leanings of its early owner, Mankind’s less emphatic orthodoxy is more difficult to relate to the Benedictine leanings of that same early owner, for instance. In fact, the so-called morality plays are fairly representative of the corpus of surviving Middle English plays overall. Several late medieval English religious plays endorse an emphatically orthodox understanding of penance, whereas others pay little to no attention to ecclesiastical doctrine on the matter; none appears to support a Lollard attack on the sacrament.

There are some points that suggest that an explicit portrait of the orthodox sacrament in Middle English plays was influenced by contemporary religious controversies. It is presumably no coincidence that many of the emphatically orthodox plays are from East Anglia, an area of strong Lollard activity and anti-Lollard propaganda. For instance, the only John the Baptist in the corpus to mention penance is also the only one to preach confession to the audience, and he features in the East-Angian N-Town compilation. The N-Town Baptism pageant opens with the saint preaching penance to the audience:

Ecce vox clamantes in deserto [here a voice of one crying in the desert].
I am þe voys of wyldirnese
Þat her spekyth and prechyth yow to.
...
Pentitenciam nunc agite [do penance now]
Appropinquabit regnum celorum [for the kingdom of heaven is at hand]:
For your trespas penaunce do ȝe
And ȝe xall wyn hevyn Dei Deorum [of the God of Gods].
...
Baptyme I cowncell yow for to take
And do penaunce for your synnys sake.
And for your offens amendys ȝe make,
Your synnys for to hyde. (N-Town 22.1–26)
The saint’s whole opening speech is in the hand of scribe C (probably late fifteenth- or early sixteenth-century), and although it may simply be a newer copy of the original text, it may equally be a later reworking.92

But at the close of the play, John the Baptist has another speech on penance, in the hand of the main scribe, which commences “Of penawne do I preche” (22.140) and concludes “Now haue I tawght ȝow penauns” (22.180). While contrition and satisfaction are clearly of some importance, the main focus of this speech lies firmly on confession. The emphasis on confession in John’s closing sermon is conspicuous: “I rede þat ȝe shryve” (22.147), “Shryfte of mowth loke þat ȝe make” (22.155), “God wyl be vengyd on man þat is both dum and mute, | Þat wyl nevyr be shrevyn” (22.162–63), “Schryfte of mowthe may best þe saue” (22.167), and “Whan man in good penauns and schryfte of mowth be sene, | Of God he is wel-belovyd” (22.177–78). Confession is, of course, necessary for the sacrament of penance according to orthodox theology but, despite the references to contrition and satisfaction, this playwright almost seems to claim that confession alone can save you. The saint’s closing speech in the N-Town pageant is then perhaps not so much a sermon on penance but rather a promotion for auricular confession and, consequently, the ecclesiastical institution. As we noted in chapter 3, it appears that there was some anxiety concerning on-stage sermons, and perhaps this can partly account for the fact this playwright clearly took particular pains to affirm both his (or her) own orthodoxy and that of the play.

There are various other play texts in the N-Town manuscript that display a similarly orthodox outlook with regard to penance, and these references all occur in on-stage sermons. John the Baptist’s Prologue to Passion Play I, another dramatic sermon, is also concerned with penance, though it only mentions confession once: “But þerfore do penauns and confesse þe clene, | And of hevyn þu mayst trost to ben eyre” (26.155–56). This is much less emphatic than John’s call to confession in the Baptism pageant, but there is the same sense that confession is all important for salvation, a point of view contested by the Lollards. In Peter’s preaching in Passion Play I there is again an assertion of this orthodox idea that confession is integral to salvation:

Many of ȝow be dome. Why? For ȝe wole not redresse
Be mowthe ȝoure Dedys Mortal, but þeris don perdure.
Of þe wych but ȝe haue contrycyon and ȝow confesse,
þe may not inheryte hevyn, þis I ȝow ensure. (26.410–13)
Another play to offer emphatic support for the Church’s understanding of penance is the East Anglian Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*, which also reinforces belief in the eucharist—it seems to be an eminently orthodox, perhaps even anti-Lollard, play. Jonathas, Presbyter, and Aristorus all confess their sins to the bishop. There are also references to kneeling, the position repeatedly recommended for confession by preachers, and to satisfaction:

**ARISTORIUS:** Holy father, I knele to yow under *benedycite*.  
I haue offendyd in the syn of couytys:  
...  
But, gracyous lord, I can no more,  
But put me to Goddys mercy and to yowr grace:  
My cursyd werkys for to restore.  
I aske penaunce now in thysh place.  

**EPISCOPUS:** Now for thys offence that þou hast donne  
Aȝens the Kyng of Hevyn and Emperowr of Hell,  
Euer whyll þou lyuest good dedys for to done  
And neuermore for to bye nor sell:  
Chastys thy body as I shall the tell,  
With fastyng and prayng and other good wyrk,  
To withstond the temtacyon of fendys of Hell;  
And to call to God for grace looke þou neuer be irke. (900–919)

Absolution is mentioned as the main reason to go and confess when Presbyter comforts Aristorus with the promise “But I wyll labor for yowr absoluucyon.” (861), although no penitent receives a formal absolution.93 The fact that absolution is not explicitly staged is undoubtedly due to the same desire to avoid any implication of the Lollard notion that priestly absolution is an empty, theatrical gesture that we observed in the case of *Wisdom* and *Nature*. In the same vein, although the Church formula for baptism is patently paralleled in the *Play of the Sacrament*, it is subtly altered to avoid the imputation that an actual baptism was staged.94

Other plays display less interest in the sacrament of penance per se; some of these are also from East Anglia. For instance, Jesus’s preaching at the beginning of *The Woman Taken in Adultery* in N-Town is evidently concerned with redemption after sin, yet it does not mention the sacrament or confession to a priest. The focus here, as in *The Castle of Perseverance, Occupation and Idleness*, and *Mankind*, is on the abundance of God’s mercy; the word “mercy” occurs twelve times, and “merciable” once, in forty lines. Contrition and weeping are stated to be necessary pre-
requisites for salvation after sin (24.9–12). Satisfaction may be referred to with “If þu amende þat is amys” (24.3). Confession is not mentioned. At the close of the play, the requirements for salvation are again explicitly said to be God’s mercy and man’s contrition (285–92). Here, then, we are dealing with a play that is much less invested in the specifics of the sacrament of penance, and instead suggests a direct relationship between God and the contrite penitent: “Iff þu问我 mercy, I sey neyr nay.” (24.16).

Some plays, such as the Digby Mary Madgalene, even depart somewhat from their sources to lessen the importance of the sacrament and the Church for salvation. The story of Mary Magdalene depicts an archetypal, if supposedly historical, story of a fall into sin and redemption. Mary Magdalene was often used as an example of the abundance of divine mercy in sermons. As John Mirk puts it:

For scheo was þe furste in tyme of grace þat dud penaunce for hyr synnes and so recoured aȝeyne grace, be doing of penaunce and repentynig, þat scheo hadde loste be luste of þe flesse and so[re] synnyng, þe wyche is made a myrroure to alle synful to schewon how alle þat wolden levon hur synne and done penaunce for hur trespass þei schul recoure grace aȝeyn þat þei haue loste and ofte myche more.95

In The Northern Homily Cycle the saint is used as an example against “wan-hop” (l.174).

Despite the common link between Mary Magdalene and contrition in the later Middle Ages, contrition is not a self-evident response to sins in the Digby play. The saint’s contrition is beyond doubt: as well as a stage direction indicating that Mary Magdalene washes Jesus’s feet with “þe ter-rys of hur yys” (after l. 640), the protagonist expresses her sorrow at her past sinful life verbally (e.g. 604–7). But its origin is undeniably external to the saint. As Joanne Findon has amply demonstrated, the conversion scene is heavily indebted to romance narratives.96 The sinful Mary Magdalene lies down to sleep in an orchard—a standard trope for an encounter with the supernatural in Middle English romances—and is then visited by an angel, or “þe gost of goodnesse” (601), who reminds her of the fate of her sinful soul after death. When she awakens her conversion is complete. This element of divine inspiration for her conversion is common to the story, but the somnolent encounter with the angel is unique. In the Legenda Aurea, for instance, she is merely inspired by the Holy Ghost during one of Jesus’s sermons and in the Speculum Sacerdotale
The play’s encounter with the angel, with its romance-like aura, is much more emphatic on this point, though, arguably, the most obvious way to show the operation of such divine grace on the stage. However, as in the so-called morality plays, the Digby Mary Magdalene might again give its spectators the impression that true contrition is not a natural and spontaneous reaction to the knowledge of one’s sins but, instead, requires divine machinations.

There is also no proper confession and absolution in this play. We would not necessarily expect a clear instance of the sacrament of penance as such in this story, because the biblical versions of the story do not mention an oral acknowledgment of the woman’s sins and only Luke mentions Jesus’s absolution (Matthew 26: 6–13, Mark 14: 3–9, and Luke 7: 37–48). This biblical lack of reference to a confession evidently constituted a stumbling block for preachers promoting auricular confession. Katherine Ludwig Jansen has outlined the various solutions preachers employed to accommodate this archetypical penitent in penitential discourse after the Fourth Lateran Council. Some explained that Mary Magdalene’s conversion took place before the Church and the sacraments were established and that perfect contrition was sufficient at that time. Now, however,

non sufficiunt ... ad peccati remissionem dolor cordis cum lachrymis, sed requiritur necessario verbalis confessio: peccati expressio facta coram illo qui potest solver et ligare.

[heartfelt sorrow with tears does not suffice, but a verbal confession is necessarily required: an utterance made before him who has the power to bind and loose.]\(^98\)

Others highlighted the exceptional nature of the father confessor figure, which obviated any need for further verbal confession. Nonetheless, despite these possible explanations for the lack of mention of a confession in the biblical sources, some preachers suggested that there might have been one after all. Thus Aldobrandino Cavalcanti:

Ista patent in evangelio ubi de confessione non agitur quia non fuit ei necessaria cum sacerdos qui eam absolvit sciret omnia peccata eius nude et aperte et omnes circumstantias peccatorum ... Possible
est etiam ea aliqua verba dixisse in quibus fatebatur se esse peccatricem etsi non legatur in evangelio.

[These things are plain in the gospel where confession is not discussed, because it was not necessary for her. Because the priest who absolved her knew simply and clearly all her sins and all the circumstances ... It is even possible that she said some words in which she confessed herself a sinner, though one does not read it in the gospels].

Pope Innocent III even went so far as to articulate what she might have confessed:

Noli, Domine, indignari ancillae tuae quod importuna me ingerō ... quod inter epulas lacrymas fundo ... moles peccatorum me permit ... culpa me torquet, conscientia me mordet. ... Confiteor ... Domine, miserere

[Lord, do be angry with your servant because I rush in so indecorously ... because I am pouring out tears in the midst of the banquet dishes ... the weight of sin is pressing upon me, ... guilt is tormenting me, my conscience gnaws at me. ... I confess ... Lord, have mercy on me]

English sermons normally present the penitent Mary Magdalene as silent, but her conversion is sometimes narrated with references to the sacrament of penance here too. In the *Early South English Legendary*, for instance, Jesus dismisses the saint with “Op aris, thou wumman; thine sunnes thee beoth forgyve! | Also ich nouthe [now] can and may, of me thou art ischrive” (135–36). It would presumably have been difficult for a medieval writer completely to distinguish the saint’s penance from contemporary understanding of what penance should entail. To some extent we are dealing with an established vocabulary and practice surrounding the issue of penance which would have been hard to avoid altogether when dealing with an instance of penance; thus in the *Early South English Legendary* Mary Magdalene does not actually confess her sins to Jesus, despite Jesus’s “of me thou art ischrive” (136). At the same time, such references do align the narrative more closely with ecclesiastical doctrine than the biblical sources warrant.

Moreover, the urge to vocalize the saint’s internal contrition, to ensure that the audience is fully appreciative of its intensity, is apparent in some treatments. In the *Legendys of Hooly Wummen*, for example, while the saint does not speak, her weeping is emphatically said to be eloquent:
And þow wyth hir mouth outwardly
To hym no wurde she dede expresse
...
Yet, of hyr wepyng by þe grethnesse,
Of hyr herte she shewyd þe corage,
As þow she had vsyd þis language:
...
“Thou knowyst wele, lord, as I do wene,
What my wepyng, my syhyng & my sorwe doth mene.
Y am a synnere, & of euery cryme
Wyth spottys defoulyd ful horrybylly,
And so haue I contunyd ful long tyme
Syth wyt & dyscrecyoun fyrst had I;
Reforme me now, lord, for þi mercy,
And in þis greth nede be my socour,
Wych oonly consydryst sorwe & labour.” (5436–57)

The Digby playwright does not stage a confession. Mary Magdalene acknowledges her sins verbally to the audience, but the change from third to second person when referring to Jesus indicates that this acknowledgment takes place before her encounter with Jesus. Once in the presence of Jesus, she merely requests His mercy. Moreover, unlike many sermons, which tend to move directly or extremely quickly on to Jesus’s absolution of the penitent Mary Magdalene, as in Mirk’s *Festial*, the *Speculum Sacerdotale*, and the *Legenda Aurea*, the play stages a relatively long discussion between Jesus and Simon (641–74), with the parable of the two debtors, before the absolution (675–76). Presumably the actor playing Mary Magdalene continued to wash and wipe Jesus’s feet throughout His exchange with Simon, highlighting the extent of her contrition. In staging this discussion before the absolution, the playwright is merely following Luke’s account of the events. At the same time, it is hard to avoid the implication that Jesus’s absolution is granted solely because of her contrition (and her request for mercy), and that confessing one’s sins orally to a figure of religious authority is a negligible element in the process of redemption.

The importance of priestly absolution is also undermined in this play because Jesus’s absolution is not immediately accompanied by the dramatic stage action of the retreating devils. The “seuyn dyllys xall dewoyde from þe woman, and the Bad Angyll entyr into hell wyth thondyr” (sd. after l. 691) only after Mary Magdalene promises to practice humility, patience, and charity (681–84) and Jesus dismisses her with:
Woman, in contrysyon þou art expert,
...
Thy feyth hath savyt þe, and made þe bryth!
Wherfor I sey to þe, “Vade in pace.” (686–91)

He goes on to say explicitly that she has saved her soul with contrition (701–2). Although Jesus’s absolution a few lines earlier is an unquestionably important moment, the delayed stage action and the explicit mention in Jesus’s speech directly before the devils run away of Mary Magdalene’s contrition and faith all suggest that for the playwright contrition and faith in God’s mercy are more important for securing salvation than the formal elements of the sacrament of penance.

Unlike her initial conversion, the end of the saint’s life is more clearly amalgamated with the Church as an institution, both in this play and in other medieval accounts of her life. The communion of Mary Magdalene before her death was a popular subject of medieval paintings and the saint was frequently depicted on eucharistic tabernacles: “preachers, hagiographers, and artists collaborated in making the symbol of the communicating Magdalen of legend a figurehead for Eucharistic devotion in the later Middle Ages.” For instance, in the *Legenda Aurea* (an important source for the play text), in the *Legendys of Hooly Wommen*, and in Mirk’s *Festial* she is said to go to church and receive communion from the bishop before her death. In the *Early South English Legendary* she explicitly asks the bishop for “shrift and hosel” (626) as death approaches. In the Digby play, Jesus bestows “My body in forme of bred” (2079) to a priest who then duly carries it to the saint, who receives it and dies. Considering that she has been shown to receive heavenly bread directly from angels before (sd. after l. 2018), this indirect route through the priest presents a clear endorsement in this play, as in these other narratives, of the role of the Church as mediators between humankind and God, particularly in relation to the sacrament of the eucharist.

At the same time, the play shifts focus somewhat compared to other versions, where a male cleric of some authority becomes central to the narrative, to the point of displacing the female saint—literally, for she ends her life in a religious building rather than her hermitage. In the *Golden Legend*, St. Maximin almost usurps Mary Magdalene’s role as protagonist. This is also true for the *Legendys of Hooly Wommen*. In the play, on the other hand, there is no St. Maximin or bishop figure, and Mary Magdalene does not leave her shelter in the wilderness. This shift in focus might have been partly caused by practical concerns as the play’s version reduces the
number of speaking roles and the number of locations needed. The miraculous teleportation of Mary Magdalene from her desert cell to the oratory would perhaps have tested the ingenuity of potential producers as well. Given the sprawling and adventurous nature of this play in terms of cast, set requirements, and special effects, however, this explanation seems unconvincing.

Instead, I think we should commend the playwright’s decision to retain a clear focus on the saint and her intimate relationship with God, even if it reduced the sources’ stress on the importance of the Church and its clergy in ensuring a good death. Theresa Coletti has similarly remarked that “Magdalene exhibits a piety based on visionary revelation and angelic communing with the deity that counters the play’s representations of sacramental authority and privilege of the priesthood.” The play, then, does not undermine the role of the Church, but it certainly does not go out of its way to promote it either. The matter of the Digby Mary Magdalene is undeniably orthodox but we find that the playwright was rather more interested in the saint’s intimacy with the divinity than in Church doctrine.

What emerges from this analysis of the representation of the sacrament of penance in Middle English plays and sermons is perhaps most of all how far from unified the drama is. While some plays are explicitly didactic and closely aligned with ecclesiastical doctrine, other play texts evince little interest in teaching their audiences about the religious act that is the sacrament of penance. Some sermons are more invested in promoting confession than others as well, but overall orthodox sermons are alike in presenting this sacrament as a necessity for the salvation of sinners and in promoting confession in particular. It was obviously in the preacher’s interest to support and recommend such a cornerstone of the ecclesiastical view of how salvation was to be attained; in fact, “Preaching and confession were causally connected.”

Some of the plays are evidently conservative, didactic, and emphatically orthodox. Plays like Wisdom, the Croxton Play of the Sacrament, and the N-Town Baptism pageant can almost be seen as Church propaganda for the sacrament of penance and especially auricular confession. Ann Eljenholm Nichols has pointed out that, in East Anglian seven-sacrament art, penance is always represented by confession or by absolution by the confessor, and that this iconographic consistency is unusual in contemporary art. She has accounted for this phenomenon by linking it to the Lollard threat to the sacramental system. It is very likely that the emphasis on confession in these East Anglian plays is equally due to contem-
porary debate surrounding penance. We can also detect the influence of an atmosphere of (self-)censorship in the choice whether or not to stage a confession and absolution as the only two plays to do so, The Castle of Perseverance and Dux Moraud, very possibly predate the full impact of Arundel’s Constitutions. The Castle of Perseverance and Dux Moraud, very possibly predate the full impact of Arundel’s Constitutions. 

Wisdom, the Croxton Play of the Sacrament, and Nature, conversely, carefully avoid staging the moment of absolution, probably to deflect any suspicion that the playwrights perceived absolution as an empty, theatrical gesture as the Lollards did. Contemporary legislation does, then, seem to have had some impact on the artistic choices made by these playwrights.

Nonetheless, it is surprising how few plays present heartfelt contrition, the performance of satisfaction, and confession to a priest as necessary for salvation and how many texts explore different ways in which the sinful human might attain God’s mercy instead. The majority of plays presumably did not form part of the ecclesiastical institution and seemingly many playwrights and patrons had no personal or professional reasons to promote the sacrament of penance or teach its specific content. The lack of references to confession and the sacrament of penance in many plays, including those from East Anglia, where there was a long history of Lollard and anti-Lollard activity, is striking. This is partly because, in late medieval mentality, the Church’s version of what effective penance entails appears to have been widely accepted and deeply engrained: hence Jesus’s technically erroneous reference to Mary Magdalene’s shrift in the Early South English Legendary and the recurrent use of the sacrament to save penitent sinners in the French moralités, for instance. It is then likely that the lack of references to true contrition and confession, in particular, constitutes a conscious decision on the part of the dramatists. Contemporary controversy in late medieval England about the precise content, validity, and sacramental nature of penance increases the probability that this lack of mention in the plays is far from neutral. It might have gained the disapproval of Pauper as having “errour medelyd in swyche steraclis & pleyys ažens þe feyth of holy chirche ne aženys þe statsys of holy chirche.” At the same time, it has to be underlined that none of the plays under discussion attack or explicitly deny the orthodox concept of penance. While they might offer only fleeting or even no support for the importance of the sacrament for the salvation of sinners, they do not argue against it either.

Although broadly orthodox, many of the plays under discussion reflect a more independent, and presumably lay, view of penance, which is rather more interested in the relationship between God and the individ-
ual, as well as in the psychological realities of sin and trying to attain salvation, than it is in teaching Church doctrine. Many of the English plays do, then, present us with, as Crassons put it, “a distinctive mode of vernacular theology,” although they are certainly no expression of lay dissent in the face of ecclesiastical legislation. But, as noted in the previous chapter, the plays’ repeated interest in creating personal, affective responses to the religious matter at hand does have the potential to complement and even challenge the Church’s discourse. We have, moreover, noticed that these plays repeatedly encourage a critical stance in their audiences (especially in chapters 3 and 4). All this, combined with the fact that their content is sometimes not explicitly aligned with Church teaching, suggests that some of these plays were quietly subversive in that they presented and upheld a more lay understanding of devotion and religion which was at odds with ecclesiastical doctrine.

By contextualizing these plays’ presentation of penance against the backdrop of contemporary religious controversies, we better come to understand that these plays need to be discussed not so much in relation to the traditional stark dichotomy between orthodox and heterodox but instead bearing in mind the “heterogeneity and vitality of orthodox religious culture” and indeed the realities of lived devotion. These plays not only reflect, but also sustained and validated the heterogeneity of lived devotion in late medieval England.

NOTES

1 See also Kelly and Perry, p. 2.
2 Lutton, p. 4.
3 Watson, pp. 822–64.
4 For more details about Arundel’s Constitutions and their impact, see pp. 56–58.
5 See, for example, the various essays in Gillespie and Ghosh.
6 Crassons, p. 98. Note that neither the N-Town nor the Towneley manuscripts contains dramatic cycles as such, and that the correlation between Chester and Corpus Christi was temporary.
7 King, “Medieval,” p. 552.
8 Ibid., pp. 539–49.
9 Thomson, p. 133.
10 Nelson, pp. 1–3.
12 Ibid., p. 156.
The exception is Everyman, in which the protagonist flagellates himself; Everyman is, however, a translation from the Dutch Elckerlijc. The play is not part of my corpus given its non-English origin. Mary Philippa Coogan suggests that Mankind’s agricultural work consists of satisfaction, but while its spiritual overtones are undeniable and its connection to Adam tilling the earth and its function as a remedy for idleness give it somewhat of a penitential feel as well, I cannot agree that it represents the performance of an imposed satisfaction (Coogan, pp. 47–52). It is possible that some kind of penance was staged in Dux Moraud, but the surviving fragmentary text suggests that the penitent is killed before he can undertake his penance.

In Nature satisfaction is mentioned, though not staged, after the second conversion at the point of death. Interestingly, satisfaction is first mentioned by the virtues, that is, before Man goes to confess.

“Penitencie” (515, 526, 528, 565). Although “penitencie” originally referred to remorse, its actual meaning came to be the satisfaction aspect of penance; MNW penitencie at http://gtb.inl.nl/iWDB/search?actie=article&wdb=MNW&cid=42213&lemma=penitencie [accessed 19 November 2015]. The edition used is van Elslander.

Helmich, Moralités, p. 50.
37 Ibid., p. 57.
38 Ibid., pp. 396–97.
39 Or at least that the playwright worried that this might be so. The French plays are often more emphatically didactic and aligned with orthodox doctrine, as well as more closely associated with preaching, which might account for the emphatic presentation of satisfaction in these plays compared to the English ones.
The translations are from www.summatheologica.info/summa/questions/?q=506&ca=2627 [accessed 11 July 2014].

O’Mara, *Four*, pp. 91, 92, 92.

Ibid., p. 90.

Ross, p. 144.

Grisdale, p. 19.

Powell, p. 136.

Ross, p. 280.

Morrison, p. 188, cited on p. 38.


For the label “morality play” in late medieval England, see also pp. 11, 138.

Potter, p. 16.

In Bouhaïk-Gironès, Doudet, and Hindley, *Receuil général de moralités*.

Helmich, *Moralités*, p. 36.

Ibid., p. 37.

Ibid., p. 307.

Ibid., p. 777.

Ibid., p. 778.

Ibid., p. 794.

Ibid., p. 756.

Quotations from *Everyman* are from the edition by Cooper and Wortham.

Interestingly, the English play is somewhat more emphatic on the question of sacraments. The female Biechte, for instance, becomes “that holy man Confessyon” (539). Scholars have linked this alteration to a change in the religious climate following the Reformation (see, Wortham, “Everyman,” for instance). However, this emphatic assertion of orthodox, Catholic doctrine could also have been influenced by pre-Reformation Lollard criticism of the sacrament of penance. Until we know more about the translation, particularly its date, it is impossible to be certain on this point.

Hindley, “Preaching and Plays,” p. 76.

Wilkins, p. 316.


Jansen, p. 213.

Doctrine does present Idleness with a new costume to confirm his new status as “Clennes” (813).

Morrison, p. 134.

Powell, p. 83.

Weatherly, p. 68.

Tentler, pp. 26–27.


Ross, p. 149.

Tentler, pp. 340, 343.
74 Powell, pp. 97–98.
75 Bromyard, p. 116.
76 Fletcher, “Performing,” pp. 102–3.
77 This seems to be in line with the importance attributed to penance in the Banns to the play: “Þus mowthys confession | And hys hertys contricion | Schal saue Man fro dampanacion | Be Goddys mercy and grace” (127–30).
78 Eccles, pp. x–xi.
79 In Dux Moraud, the remorseful sinner prays Jesus for a priest to hear his confession (Davis, 195–205). The next passage is evidently a confession to such a priest (206–29), which is followed by a promise to perform the penance assigned (230–32), so we can assume that the priest absolved the penitent and assigned satisfaction in the intervening text.
80 Weatherly, p. 63.
81 Powell, p. 71.
82 Although Mercy does encourage the protagonist “Be repentant here” (865), this is more a memento mori than a reference to the sacrament, as the line continues “trust not þe owr of deth; thynke on this lessun: | ‘Ecce nunc tempus acceptabile, ecce nunc dies salutis’” (865–66). Mercy also reminds the audience that God’s mercy is available “To þe synfull creature þat wyll repent hys neglygence” (23) in his opening speech.
83 For instance, the York Corpus Christ Play shows Cain to despair of mercy (“My synne it passis al mercie, “ 7.119) and has a play on the remorse of Judas where his failure to trust in mercy is directly linked with his suicide (“Me thare aske no mercy, for none mon Y gete. | Therfore in haste myselffe schall fordo me,” 32.303–4).
84 This is unlike the French moralités, where despair is closely linked with damnation, as in l’Homme juste et l’Homme mondain, where l’Homme mondain ends up with Desesperance and Malle Fin (Bad End), and in Bien Advisé, Mal Advisé, where the ill-advised human associates with Desesperance and Honte (Shame) before making a bad end.
85 While his despair and self-loathing could be extremely powerful in performance, it is Mercy who is associated with the more standard expression of contrition when he weeps for Mankind: “The dolorus terys of my hert, how þei amownt!” (824).
86 Ross, pp. 278–79.
87 Grisdale, p. 45.
88 I find Mercy’s blessing “Dominus custodiat te ab omni malo | In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti. Amen!” (901–2) and the standard formula for absolution (“Ego te absolve a peccatis tuis, in nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti. Amen.”) to be sufficiently different to question Mary Philippa Coogan’s suggestion that Mercy’s blessing functions as absolution in the play (pp. 15–16).
89 Beckwith calls the identification of Mercy as a priest “premature” (p. 120). Given the implied criticism of friars’ preaching practices in lines 459–61, it is
perhaps unlikely that Mercy was represented as a Dominican friar, as originally argued by Cushman, p. 85.


91 It is impossible to be certain how the actors expressed contrition in performance, but there are very few indications in the plays that they weep: only in *Wisdom* (977) and for the first conversion in *The Castle of Perseverance* (1407) are there references to the protagonist’s tears.

92 Spector, p. xxiii.

93 The Jews are not absolved either, although their sins are cleansed through baptism (952–59). In *The Conversion of St. Paul*, likewise the penitent Jew is cleansed through baptism (“Yt purgyth synne,” 322) rather than the sacrament of penance (318–31), as is appropriate in the context.

94 Sebastian, note at l. 957.

95 Powell, p. 184.

96 Findon, pp. 35–55.

97 Weatherly, p. 170.

98 Jansen, p. 216.

99 Ibid., p. 215.

100 Ibid., pp. 216–17.

101 Reames, *Middle English Legends*.

102 Serjeantson, *Legendys of Hooly Wummen*.

103 Jansen, pp. 222–24.

104 There is no mention of confession and absolution, but given her virtuous existence for the last thirty years of her life, this should not be too surprising. After all, as Aquinas points out, the sacrament of penance is only necessary for those who commit sins, not for the righteous (*Summa Theologica*, Pars III q. 84 a. 5 co).

105 Coletti, p. 23.


107 Nichols, pp. 105, 161, 183.

108 It has, of course, to be remembered that the surviving corpus of medieval English drama is extremely fragmentary and not necessarily representative of contemporary dramatic activity. If more plays had survived, this picture would possibly have to be adjusted.

109 Barnum, p. 293.

110 Crassons, p. 98.

111 Kelly and Perry, p. 5.
Conclusion

The stage plan for *The Castle of Perseverance* (reproduced on the following page) in many ways epitomizes both the similarities and the differences between surviving late medieval English drama and sermons.

The moral compass that is imprinted in this stage plan clearly highlights the devotional and didactic aspect of the play, which makes it akin to preaching. At the same time, the reference to “gunnepowdryr brennynge In pypys” in the hands, ears, and arse of the actor playing the devil when he goes to battle gives us a glimpse of the impressive visual and aural theatrical spectacle that must have been the siege of the castle. The note that nobody should sit in the castle “for lettynge of syt, for þer schal be þe best of all.” demonstrates a concern for the dramatic success of the play that does not seem especially focused on a successful transfer of its didacticism. It is not entirely clear what “þe best of all” refers to, but one possibility is certainly that the person responsible for this drawing thought of the siege as the most spectacular, entertaining, and thus “þe best” bit of the play—not the salvation of Humanum Genus’s soul.

Several motifs used in *The Castle of Perseverance*, such as the conflict between the Seven Deadly Sins and the Virtues, the allegorical castle, and the death of the avaricious man, have parallels in vernacular sermons. But the playwright has used, fused, and staged these motifs in such a way that the similarities with those sermons become of little significance. For example, the deathbed scene of the covetous man in sermon *exempla* may feature a chest or cupboard, akin to the “copbord” near Humanum Genus’s bed, but these *exempla* never seem to be situated in a castle setting.¹ Humanum Genus is arguably presented in a more favorable manner than those far from exemplary sermon characters. The former seems particularly concerned with the financial welfare of his widow and family (2942–46, 2969–81), the latter kind only seems to be desirous never to be parted from their worldly treasure.² And unlike the dying covetous men in
Figure 1: The Stage Plan for The Castle of Perseverance.  
(Photograph provided by The Folger Shakespeare Library.)
these exempla, Humanum Genus is saved. The allegorical castle also features in various sermons, such as Lincoln Cathedral Library, MS 133, fols 98r–101r, Bodleian Library, MS e Museo 180, fols 177v–185v, Bodleian Library MS Hatton 96, fols 193r–197r, Trinity College (Dublin), MS 75, fols 2v–3r. However, in these four sermons, the castle is Holcot’s Castrum Sapiencie or the Castle of Prudence, where the hopeful philosopher must solve the riddles of the three shields in order to gain entry. In Mirk’s sermon for the Assumption of the Virgin he reaches back to Grosseteste’s Château d’amour and presents Mary as a castle, with a “deche of mekeness,” a “drawe-bruge” of “dyscrete obedyens,” and walls betokening patience and virginity, which Jesus entered into. These stories are entirely different to the use of the allegorical castle in the play.

Of course, late medieval English drama and sermons share themes, tropes, and rhetorical features, but these are generally due to their common background, not to strong influence in either direction, as I hope to have shown in the course of this book. There is no historical or textual evidence to argue that Middle English religious plays were profoundly influenced by contemporary preaching. And, indeed, neither was preaching particularly affected by drama: late medieval English preaching is, on the whole, less theatrical than some of its continental relations.

This minimal cross-fertilization between plays and sermons comes to the fore especially in their didacticism and assumption of authority. The late medieval English sermons that have survived tend to adopt a straightforward authoritative tone and present clear, objective lessons and instructions to their congregation that promote docile, passive audience responses, during and after the preaching event: confess, accept this gloss, fast during Lent, on the one hand, but, on the other hand, do not discuss the sacrament, do not seek to have knowledge of matters beyond your comprehension. The Middle English plays that have come down to us, conversely, set out to encourage active, critical, emotional, personal engagement of the spectators with the play and its lessons. The Jews’ discussion on the eucharist in the Croxton Play of the Sacrament reinforces belief in this sacrament, as the references to the eucharist in sermons aim to do, too. But this play does not shy away from dealing with eucharistic unbelief, unlike most contemporary English sermons. Moreover, the Jews’ philosophical and physical prodding of the eucharist inspires a more emotionally vigorous assertion of belief, and perhaps even vocal rejection of doubts and doubters, than eucharistic passages in sermons. (It is not difficult to imagine a medieval audience booing the Jews at specific
moments of the performance.) Late medieval English sermons’ main aim is to reinforce orthodox behavior, whereas contemporary vernacular religious drama seeks to stimulate active, critical, and affective participation of the (lay) individual in devotion. The didactic aims of these two genres and their role in devotion are then different. The plays often also betray a slightly divergent conception of contemporary lay piety from the orthodox doctrine espoused in surviving sermons. Of course, some English plays, such as *Wisdom*, are emphatically orthodox and some endorse ecclesiastical authority by staging a preacher character as spiritual guide, as in the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*. But many plays, while broadly orthodox, present a more independent, and presumably lay, view of religion, one that reflects the vitality of lived devotion rather than Church doctrine.

In this book, I consequently hope to have shown not just the artistic and literary independence of late medieval English religious drama, but also to have sketched a more nuanced picture of the didactic aims and devotional effects of the plays than the frequent claims of sermon influence allow for.

NOTES

2 Ibid., pp. 308–9.
3 Fletcher, *Late Medieval*, p. 166.
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