



Drama and Sermon in Late Medieval England

Performance, Authority, Devotion

Charlotte Steenbrugge



EARLY DRAMA, ART, AND MUSIC

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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 Savoranola, 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 pantomines 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.⁷ 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.⁸ 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.⁹ In these instances, then, the church's sponsorship and authorship of drama was at some remove from the laity.¹⁰

At times, the clergy did sponsor lay performances. For instance, from 1272–73 onward Christ Church Canterbury repeatedly paid *histrionibus* (“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.¹¹ 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.¹² In September 1424 local players performed a play of *Amys and Amylon* for the prior at Bicester Priory.¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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.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:

it was a king bi olde dawene
 þat wel leuede on godes lawe
 ...
 yf ye wollet stille ben
 in þis pleye ye mowen isen. (33–40)¹⁶

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 1388–89.¹⁷ 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:

freris han tauȝt in englund. þe pater noster in engliȝsch tunge as
 men seyen in the pley of ȝork & in many oþere cuntreys/ siþen þe
 pater noster is part of matheus gospel as clerkis knowen: why may
 not al be turnyd to engliȝsch¹⁸

It is, however, possible that they merely sponsored or endorsed its performance.¹⁹ Certainly, the Dominican Thomas Bynham was paid in 1423–24 for writing the banns of the Beverley’s Corpus Christi plays,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 commendavit 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 feasting, 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 vrbano 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”).²³ In the same vein, Pauper in *Dives and Pauper* approves of “Steraclis, pleys & 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”) instead²⁵—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 “cuidem 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.²⁸ 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").²⁹ The York Corpus Christi Play was brought forth "ob comodum ciuium eiusdem ciuitatis & omnium extraneorum illuc veniencium 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 magnam deuocionis causam & viciorum extirpacionem morumque reformacionem" ("for the important cause of devotion and for the extirpation of vice and the reformation of customs").³⁰ 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."³¹ 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 "errour medelyd in swyche steraclis & pleys azenys þe feyth of holy chirche ne azenys þe statys of holy chirche."³² 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" (717–19; "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").³³ 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.³⁴ 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*.³⁵ 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 festivitibus, quae continue natalem Christi sequuntur, diaconi, presbyteri ac subdiaconi vicissim insaniae suae ludibria exercere praesumunt, per gesticulationum suarum debacationes obscoenas in conspectu populi decus faciunt clericale vilescere, quem potius illo tempore verbi Dei deberent praedicatione 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.]³⁶

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.³⁷ Innocent III prohibited such attendance at the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215: “Clerici ... commercia saecularia non exercent, maxime inhonesta. Mimis, jocularibus et histrionibus 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”).³⁸ Similar concerns and prohibitions were voiced in England by, among others, Bishop Grosseteste.³⁹

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 saecularia a locis sacris omnino arceantur” (“all pastimes and secular pleadings should be entirely kept away from sacred places”).⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹ 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.”⁴² 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 legislation prescribed corporal punishment or exile for actors who put on clerical dress.⁴³ This leads one to assume that these actors did not present a flattering portrayal of their subjects; an impression confirmed by a letter of King Edgar, roughly two centuries later, in which he laments that monastic 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 forgotten.”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 spiritual effects of religious plays on its spectators, especially converting men “to gode livinge,” “to the bileve,” and moving them “to compassion and devocion.”⁴⁹ Moreover, such plays are said to have a superior mnemonic function, which means their audiences will remember their content particularly 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 consequently its utility:

and sithen as ther ben men that only by earnestful doinge wilen be convertid to God, so ther been othere men that wilen not be convertid to God but by gamen and pley. And now on dayes men ben not convertid by thee earnestful 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.⁵¹

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 blasphemie 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 miraculis 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 miraculis pleyeris and maintainours, leevinge plesingly to do that God biddith hem, scornen God” just as “diden the Jewis that bobbiden Crist.”⁵³ The plays are also labeled “gynys 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 earnestful doyinge of God and by noon vein pleying, for that that the word of God worchith not ne his sacramentis, how shulde pleyinge wochen that is of no vertue but ful of defaute?⁵⁷

In fact, such performances merely succeed at making people praise and worship “onely the lickensse of the miraculis of God” instead of “the word of God in the prechours mowth by the whiche alle miraculis 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.⁶⁰ 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.⁶¹ 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.⁶² 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.”⁶³ 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*).⁶⁴ 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*.⁶⁵ The influence of the *artes prae-dicandi* 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.”⁶⁶ 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.⁶⁷ Marianne G. Briscoe has likewise suggested that the morality plays function more or less as dramatized *exempla*.⁶⁸

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 rhetoricae* and *artes poeticae* too; they were not the preserve of the *artes praedicandi*.⁶⁹ Moreover, as W. A. Davenport hints, the didacticism of the plays and that of sermons does not operate in quite the same way.⁷⁰ 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.⁷¹ 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.⁷² 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 Notre 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.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 *Wisdom*.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 *Everyman* and *Elckerlijc* can be found in Middle English sermons, as well as the *Legenda Aurea* and *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.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.⁷⁶ Although another preacher refers to the scholarly origin of his *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 enterludie, as doctors

ymagynne, I wote neuer who shall pley þee seynte in oure enterludie.” and “Where-fore I may sey as me semeþ after þe old maner þat þer is no man able to pley on oure seynt.”⁷⁷ There is, then, limited evidence to suggest that drama had an impact on Middle English sermons.⁷⁸

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;⁷⁹ 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.⁸⁰ 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.⁸¹ 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*.⁸² *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.⁸³ 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.

³ Taylor, "French Sermons," pp. 731–32.

⁴ Kienzle, p. 111.

⁵ Ritch, pp. 252–53.

⁶ Gillespie, "Chichele's Church," pp. 7–8 (7).

⁷ Shull, pp. 947–48, 966.

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.

¹¹ For example, "Roberto ffol & gerardo" in 1358–59, "hobbe ffol & socio suo" in 1363–64, "Roberto ffool" in 1364–65, "Hobbe fool" in 1366–67, and "Thome Skynnere Stulto domini regi" in 1372–73 (Gibson, *REED: Kent*, pp. 48, 50, 52, 53, 57).

¹² Gibson, *REED: Kent*, pp. 65, 66, 1038, 1039.

¹³ Johnston, "Amys and Amylon," pp. 16–17.

¹⁴ Clopper, "Lay and Clerical Impact," pp. 112, 117.

¹⁵ Davidson, *A Tretise*, p. 103.

¹⁶ Brown, p. 62.

¹⁷ Johnston, "The Plays of the Religious Guilds," p. 71.

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, p. 102, 773.

²⁸ Thompson, "From Texts to Preaching," p. 33.

²⁹ Johnston and Rogerson, pp. 80, 757.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 28, 37, 713, 722.

³¹ Barnum, p. 293.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 293.

³³ 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).

³⁴ Axton, p. 164.

³⁵ Young, 1:548.

³⁶ Briscoe, "Some Clerical Notions," pp. 210, 220.

³⁷ Axton, p. 19.

³⁸ Schroeder, pp. 257, 568.

³⁹ 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 (Pilkinton, p. 5).

⁴⁰ Stoke, pp. 8, 617.

⁴¹ Johnston and Rogerson, p. 2.

⁴² Pike, pp. 48–49.

⁴³ Axton, p. 19.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁴⁵ Ramey, "Unauthorized Preaching," p. 228.

⁴⁶ Berlioz and Polo de Beaulieu, p. 27.

⁴⁷ Erler, p. 207.

⁴⁸ 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).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 97, 97, 98.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 112.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 99, 100, 101, 103.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁶⁰ 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).

⁶¹ Mazouer, p. 247.

⁶² Hindley, "Preaching and Plays," p. 76.

⁶³ Knight, p. 76.

⁶⁴ Ventrone, p. 343.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 341–42.

⁶⁶ Fletcher, "*Everyman*," p. 269.

⁶⁷ Davenport, pp. 53–54.

⁶⁸ Briscoe, “The Relation,” p. 99.

⁶⁹ Kemmler, pp. 71, 192.

⁷⁰ Davenport, p. 53.

⁷¹ Briscoe, “The Relation,” pp. 105, 137.

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.

⁸⁰ Spencer, *English Preaching*, pp. 214–15.

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.”