



Drama and Sermon in Late Medieval England

Performance, Authority, Devotion

Charlotte Steenbrugge



EARLY DRAMA, ART, AND MUSIC

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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.¹ 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."² 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.³ Presenters also feature in the Durham Prologue and the Reynes Epilogue which have survived without any accompanying play text.⁴ 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*.⁵ 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 *passé-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.⁶ 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 preechieres* ("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.⁷ In Florentine *sacra rappresentazione* the *annunzio* ("prologue") and *licenza* ("epilogue") were delivered by actors in angel costume, automatically asserting their spiritual authority.⁸ 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.⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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.”¹¹ 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.¹² And Lynn T. Ramey has demonstrated that the unreliable opening summary of the *Jeu de Saint Nicholas* by *li preechieres* (“the preacher”) was used to encourage the spectators to engage critically not just with the play but also with real sermons.¹³ 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.¹⁴ Peter Meredith likewise assumes clerical standing for this figure, and describes him as “a slightly fussy, benevolent clergyman.”¹⁵ William Fitzhenry has emphasized this same Contemplacio’s function to ensure “the uncomplicated transference of orthodox religious instruction from stage to audience,” making

him akin to a preacher.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.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.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.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ In some cases the names and even the very creation of presenters 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 signifye
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.²¹ 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.²² 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.²³ 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.²⁴ 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.²⁵ 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),²⁶ 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 azens owre Lord God, | In welthe or woo, wether that he 3ow 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 3e, sorys, and God sent an angell
And commawndyd 3ow 3owre chyld to slayn,
Be 3owre trowthe ys ther ony of 3ow
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.²⁷ 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.²⁸ 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 3e 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 “3e may plece God both euyne and morne” (463).²⁹ 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 “3e 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 3e 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 brougth owte of helle lawhyng þat 3ode þidur ful sore wepyng.³⁰

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 *Candlemas Day*, "Besechyng you to geve vs peseable audiens!" (52), and at times seemingly moving them about, as when Poeta in *The Conversion of St. Paul* entreats "Besechyng thys audyens to folow and succede | Wyth all your delygens þis generall procession" (156–57).³¹ Sometimes they conclude the performance, as in the Reynes Epilogue's call to have a drink before leaving: "We pray 3ou alle in Goddys name | To drynke ar 3e pas" (25–26).³² 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 Kyll yng of þe Children of Israelle* (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).³³ It is to be noted that some of the names of expositor figures, such as Poeta in *Candlemes Day and þe Kyll yng of þe Children of Israelle* 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.³⁴ 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:

And we beseche 3ow of 3oure pacyens
 Þat 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 disponsacyon,
 Which after þis was xiiij 3ere,
 Tyme sufficyth not to make pawsacyon;
 Hath pacyens with vs, we besech 3ow her. (N-Town 9.298–305)

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.”³⁵

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 nowondays are haldyn tediys and yrkesom, leuyng to another
tyme þe secunde principall of owre sermown, a schorth worde of þe
thyrde, and sone make an ende.³⁶

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).³⁷ Rather than forcing a particular interpretation of the play on the spectators, Contemplacio urges the audience to amend any flaws: “If here hath be seyð ore don any inconuenyens, | We asygne it to 3oure 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 besече hem al comunliche þat it reden oþer here, þat 3eue þer be ani defaute in, þat hii amende it.”³⁸ 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.³⁹ 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 Kylling of þe Children of Israelle* prays the audience to overlook the defects of the play (“Wherfor of benevolens we pray euery man | To haue vs excused that we no better doo,” 21–22) and promises amelioration in the future “if oure

cunningy be thertoo" (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 conclud we
 As we can, lackyng lytturall scyens,
 Besechyng 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:

Wherfor we beseche 3ou of 3oure 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 3our soferyng sylens that 3e han kept þis day
 ...
 Derely we thank 3ow with myght as we may,
 And for 3our 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 poynt in oure pleyng,
 Or moved ony materys in oure seyng
 That schuld be to 3oure personys displesyng,
 We beseche 3ou 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 ierarchye
 Thre score yer, as scripture dothe specyfy:
 Legenda Sanctorum autorysyth 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 3owre oune eyin be iuge whether Y sey soth or Y do now3t. And trullyche, Y dowt yt naw3t, 3eue 3e be wel sette, 3e wyl acorde withe me."⁴⁰

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 my3te falle in errour azens the beleue of holy chirche."⁴¹ 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 anopur, me þenkeþ þou þat arte a lewde man, þou shudest not fardere entermett þe þan holychurche techēþ 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 holychurche techēþ þe pleynly," "And þer-fore þou þat art a lewd man, it suffice to þe to beleue as holychurche techēþ þe"⁴² and

þe argymentes and þe skill þat may be of þe Sacramente, and þat longēþ not to þe, shewynge well Crist, þat he wold lat no man geþur

þe releue but is disciples, shewynge to þe þat arte a lewd man þat it is inowȝþ to þe to beleven as holychurche techeþ þe and lat þe clerkes alone with þe argumentes. For þe more þat þou disputes þer-of, þe farþur þou shall be þer-fro.⁴³

Another preacher anxiously stipulates the proper interpretation of a quotation: “Þe comen glose declarip þis text o þis wyse & i pray 3e takis good hede, vor it is a perlus text but a man take þe glose þer-with.”⁴⁴ Hugh Legat reminds his audience that they should listen with devotion even to sinful priests and follow their advice uncritically.⁴⁵

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 confessiun. 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 counsell. But tis peple þat tis prechith, þow þey vound 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.⁴⁶

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.⁴⁷ In a mixed-audience sermon on the theme *Verbum caro factum est*, lessons and warnings are delivered to “clerkes, knyȝthes, and commynalte.”⁴⁸ Its stern criticism of the clergy evidently contained some members of the audience in its remit, as in “Lo, sir, ziff 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.”⁴⁹ 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.⁵⁰

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).

² Butterworth, p. 125.

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-Incarnation (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-operations" were normally removable and connected to specific performances (see also Stern, chapter 4).

⁷ Ritch, pp. 252–53.

⁸ Ventrone, p. 339.

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

¹⁰ Lenke Kovács, "Forms and Function of the Prologues in the Majorcan Llabrés Manuscript (Ms. 1139 Bibliotheca de Catalunya)," 14th Triennial Colloquium of the Société Internationale pour l'étude du Théâtre Médiéval, Poznań (22–27 July 2013).

¹¹ Twycross, "Books," p. 88.

¹² Mazour, p. 256.

¹³ Ramey, "Unauthorized Preaching," p. 228.

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).

²⁴ Ritch, p. 243, and Diller, p. 116.

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*.

²⁷ Woolf, *The English Mystery Play*, p. 153.

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.

³⁷ “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.

³⁸ Duncan and Connolly, p. 21.

³⁹ 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.

⁴⁰ Fletcher, *Late Medieval*, p. 94.

⁴¹ Morrison, p. 184.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 127.

⁴³ Ross, p. 128.

⁴⁴ Grisdale, p. 33.

⁴⁵ Fletcher, *Late Medieval*, p. 87.

⁴⁶ Grisdale, pp. 7–8.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁴⁸ Ross, p. 237.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

⁵⁰ 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.