



Drama and Sermon in Late Medieval England

Performance, Authority, Devotion

Charlotte Steenbrugge



EARLY DRAMA, ART, AND MUSIC

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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.¹ Rob Lutton, for example, has shown that “the increasing heterogeneity of Tenterden’s orthodox piety”² 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 1409.³ 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.⁴

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 haþ done azeyns 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 fadur 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 myzthe no noþur veys don. ... The iij is penaunce. And þat is fastyng, wakyng, bedyng, and almesdede doyinge, and all oþur þinges þat is goostely fadur will enioyne hym in þe stede of penaunce. Pese iij þinges, penaunce, shrift, and repentaunce 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, confescion of mowthe and satisfaccion in dede, for the sekene 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: *Sollicitudo* 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 schame and custome keypyng þen att steryng of compunccion or contricion.”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, contricion, and wepyng that þou oweþ 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 Praedicatorum*: 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 Praedicatorum*, 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 growth 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 mythtyly wythstandys vnclennesse and synne, for an þai trowyd stedfastly, all þis þai schuld fulfyllen yt in dede²⁶

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).²⁷ In another sermon, those who despair are likened to heretics—a serious accusation at this point in time:

þe second þinge þat letteþ a man to be sory for is synnes, hit is dyspeire. 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 error and heresy.²⁸

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

Sermons also stress the importance and meaning of satisfaction. Satisfaction, they explain, functions as a way of evening out the punishment 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:

Peunte þe ymage of þi soule aftur þi confession with þe white colour of prayere, aftur with þe blake colour of fastyng and abstynens, and aftur þat with þe red colour of almes dede, þe wiche goyþ forth of brennyng charite. For by þin devoute prayere þou makeþ amendis to God, by þin fastyng to þi-selfe, and by þin almes dede þou satisfieþ þi neyȝbors.²⁹

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 performance of satisfaction will involve a fearful struggle with one's flesh:

þan wyl hys fesse ben aferde of þe penaunce and doth it nocht aftur, as he is bydon, for drede þerof. But þan he motte also wrastelwyn wyth hys fesse and, magreyth it, done hys penaunce fully os he is bedon³⁰

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 penaunce to be liztter or shorter or so that they mowe bere it.”³¹ On the other hand, that understanding is not boundless, and sermons often enjoin their congregations to perform the penance assigned: “And letteþ no3t for youre synnes to make satisfaccion to God with penaunce and fastynge.”³² 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.³³

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.³⁴

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.³⁵ The protagonist is also shown to pray, another standard act of satisfaction. Similarly, various French *moralités* 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)³⁶ and one stage direction reads “Adonc bien advise se gette contre terre faisant oraison” (“Then Well Advised throws himself on the ground, praying”).³⁷ In *L’Omme pecheur*, the protagonist gives all his clothes to Satisfaction, who tells Aulmosne

to sell them and give the proceeds “aux crediturs 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 satisfaction. 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 relative disinterest. This view is somewhat supported by Satisfaction’s complaint 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 “convenientissima 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, in quantum 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 faciunt 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 significantly 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 Theologica*, 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,” “screyfh of mowth to a prest is nescessary to owre saluacion,” “þis sacrament of schryft of mowth,”⁴¹ and

þis clensyng most nedys stande in þe vertuus sacrament of confession, thorow þe qwylk þe tempyll and þe tabernakyll of owre sawle is dewly porgyd and clensyd, and gloriously hallowyd and disposyd and repareld to owre lorde God⁴²

Another preacher claims “See how sone þat he shall haue forzeuenes þat mekely shryveþ hym and knolages is trespase.”⁴³ Hugh Legat urges his listeners:

Here þe maist se þat confessiun is a gret preparative to for-ziuenes of þi synnes. 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.⁴⁴

Mirk closes one of his sermons for the First Sunday in Lent with a call to confess: “Wherefore I amonest 3ow þat 3e tak not his grace in vayne, but schryue 3ow clene of 3oure synnus and put 3ow fully into hys mercy and into hys grace.”⁴⁵ The importance of the priest in this process is also frequently stressed and explained, as in some of the examples above, and

Pou seist me, sir, parauntur, why shuld þis confession be shewed to a prest? Sir, for þe prest haþ powere in ys hond to forzeue þe, to blisse þe, and to curse; and shortely, he is ordeynt to be þi iuge and þin helper in all þi spirituall goueraunce.⁴⁶

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.⁴⁷

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:

Perfore it is certeyn, clerer þanne li3t, þat synnes ben forzeuen be contricioun of hert. Hec ibi. Perfore very contricioun is þe essencial

parte of penance, and confecioun of mouþe is þe accidental parte.
 But naþeles confessioun of hert done to þe hiȝe prest Crist is as
 nedeful as contricioun.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 beyng wele disposed, as vnto the prieste beyng his curate, specialli if the saide curate be in dedely synne.”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.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.⁵¹

In many continental morality plays, that link between salvation and the sacrament of penance is indeed emphatically present. In *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):⁵²

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

...

Dolant en suy et corochie,
 S'en demande absolucion.
Chi est absoulce. (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 Contrition, 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 dampnement⁵³

[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 chappellain ou le prestre | qui a de ton ame la cure” (“the chaplain or priest, who has the cure of your soul”).⁵⁴

Likewise, the sinner passes through Contrition, Confession, and Satisfaction before making a good end in *L'Homme pecheur*. This play repeatedly highlights the importance of the clergy in this process, as when Contrition recommends the penitent to go to church and confess in order to receive “absolucion du prestre” (“absolution from the priest”).⁵⁵ 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 Contrition, Confession, and Satisfaction on the saved protagonist's road to heaven. These aspects of penance are also staged to some degree. Following Contrition's advice “Lhomme iuste en plorant” (“The Just

Man while weeping”) expresses his desire to confess his sins.⁵⁶ He then proceeds to Confession, and a stage direction reads “Icy lhomme iuste se met 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”).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”).⁵⁸ This play also shows the encounter between the damned protagonist and Contrition, 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.⁵⁹

Elckerlijc, the source of *Everyman*, explicitly associates the protagonist’s salvation with the sacrament of penance as well. *Elckerlijc* is sent “Tot Biechten” (486; “To Confessyon,” 536⁶⁰), 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 “penaunce” (725) are named as sacraments.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.”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 *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),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 wndyrstondyng haue very contrycyon,
Wyth mynde of your synne confessyon make,
Wyth wyll yeldyng 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 sakyrmnt 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 Might's 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 Might's to a (presumably) full realization of their sinfulness. 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:

“Prey 3ee wifou3ten cesyng wif þe voyce of trew confession.” But þes han not þey þat comen to the prest and seyn “Syre, I kan seye not; I preye 3ow appose [question] me.” 3if he kan not whereof schulde he be sori, and 3if he be not sori, febul is his confessioun.⁶⁴

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;⁶⁵ 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.⁶⁶ 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 dyvyneté” 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
Whan I thynke thereon. (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 iij Quadragesime*.⁶⁷ Mirk claims that shame is often sent by the devil in order to prevent sinners from making a proper confession.⁶⁸ In the

Speculum Sacerdotale priests are warned against those who come to confess “for schame”⁶⁹—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.⁷⁰ 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 leuyng of synne be sufficient be himself wiþ þe grace of God.”⁷¹

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?⁷²

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,⁷³ 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 Contrycyon.
 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 Praedicatorum*, 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:

Pan schul 3e know wel þat, rythe os þe Iewes pursueden 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 dyden hym to deth in erthe. Pan 3if 3e wil know wyche þeise bene ... Criste hymself scheweth whyche þat bene þat pursueth hym in heven. Þais ... bene grownded in foule leuing and wil notte amende hem for no preching ne for no teching, but euer defendeth here gulte be ensaumpul of suche other os þei bene⁷⁴

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).⁷⁵ 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 contricion that I had.
For I thow3t and if I my3te have lyvid, in certen I wolde have ben as
iwell 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 therefore byd all thi childern beware be me, and every
man in his degre, for the well of þer owne sowlys.⁷⁶

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 brekyng 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).⁷⁷

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.⁷⁸ 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 Moraud* (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.⁷⁹ 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
confessioun of mouþe; that is to wite, in tyme of nede and in poynt
of dep, 3if ther may no3t be hadde no preste redy, or 3if the sike haue
no space or power for to make his confession.⁸⁰

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

day and nythe and neurer sesed of seven dayes þat he leuet.”⁸¹ As we have seen, it is very doubtful, however, that *Humanum Genus* is at all contrite. *Iusticia* 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 Confescion;
 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.⁸² 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.⁸³ *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.⁸⁴ 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.⁸⁵ 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"⁸⁶ 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, 3e, 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.⁸⁷

That is exactly what the protagonist in this play does:

A, yt swemyth my hert to thynk how onwysely I hawe wrought.
Tytiullus, þat goth invisibele, hyng hys nett before my eye
And by hys fantastical visionys sediciusly sowght,
To New Gyse, Nowadayis, 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.⁸⁸ In fact, at the point where we might expect some kind of priestly absolution, Mercy instead asserts Mankind's responsibility over his own fate: "3e may both saue and spyll 3owr 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.⁸⁹

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 3ow 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:

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 power⁹⁰

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

While *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 *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 *Occupation and Idleness* the sinful protagonist’s conversion starts through physical violence, in *Nature* through the advent of Age, and even in *Wisdom* it requires divine intervention. Heartfelt contrition was presented as a first step to salvation, but in *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.⁹¹ 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-Anglian 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.
 ...
 Penitenciam nunc agite [do penance now]
 Appropinquabit regnum celorum [for the kingdom of heaven is at hand]:
 For your trespas penaunce do 3e
 And 3e 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 3e 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 3ow 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 3e 3ow shryve" (22.147), "Schryfte of mowth loke þat 3e 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 penawns 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 3ow be dome. Why? For 3e wole not redresse
Be mowthe 3oure Dedys Mortal, but þeris don perdure.
Of þe wych but 3e haue contrycyon and 3ow confesse,
3e may not inheryte hevyn, þis I 3ow 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 Aristorius 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 coutyts:

...

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 thys 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 temptacyon 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 Aristorius with the promise “But I wyll labor for yowr absolucyon.” (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 aske mercy, I sey nevyr nay.” (24.16).

Some plays, such as the Digby *Mary Magdalene*, 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 hur synnes and so recoured aʒeyne grace, be doing of penaunce and repentyng, þat scheo hadde loste be luste of þe fesse and so[re] synnyng, þe wyche is made a myrroure to alle synful to schewon how alle þat wolden leuon hur synne and done penaunce for hur trespace þei schul recoure grace aʒeyn þat þei haue loste and ofte myche more.⁹⁵

In *The Northern Homily Cycle* the saint is used as an example against “wanhop” (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 terrys 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*

as sone as Marye herde telle of hym, sche thought in hire-self by dyuyne aspiracion and grace þat it were then couenable tyme for to conuerte and make sorowe and penaunce of hure lyf that sche hadde ladde afore.⁹⁷

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 archetypal 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 sufficient ... ad peccati remissionem dolor cordis cum lachrymis, sed requiritur necessario verbalis confessio: peccati expressio facta coram illo qui potest solvere 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 absoluit sciret omnia peccata eius nude et aperte et omnes circunstancias peccatorum ... Possibile

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].⁹⁹

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

Noli, Domine, indignari ancillae tuae quod importuna me ingero ... quod inter epulas lacrymas fundo ... moles peccatorum me permit ... culpa me torquet, conscientia me mordet. ... Cofiteor ... 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]¹⁰⁰

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).¹⁰¹ 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 onoly consydryst sorwe & labour.” (5436–57)¹⁰²

The Digby playwright does not stage a confession. Mary Madgalene 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 contryssyon þou art expert,
 ...
 Thy feyth hath savyt þe, and made þe bryth!
 Werfor 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."¹⁰³ For instance, in the *Legenda Aurea* (an important source for the play text), in the *Legendys of Hooly Wummen*, 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.¹⁰⁴ 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 Wummen*. 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."¹⁰⁵ 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."¹⁰⁶

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.¹⁰⁷ 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.¹⁰⁸ *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 & pleysys azens þe feyth of holy chirche ne azenys þe statys of holy chirche."¹⁰⁹ 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,”¹⁰ 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”¹¹ 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.

¹¹ Thomson, pp. 154–59.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 156.

¹³ Ross, p. 141.

¹⁴ Morrison, p. 102.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

¹⁶ Fletcher, "Performing," p. 103.

¹⁷ See also Arnold, p. 219.

¹⁸ Weatherly, p. 68.

¹⁹ For the developments in the doctrine of penance, see Tentler, chapter 1.

²⁰ Weatherly, p. 67.

²¹ Morrison, p. 102.

²² Ross, p. 274.

²³ Bromyard, p. 117. Abbreviations have been silently expanded.

²⁴ Furnivall, p. 394.

²⁵ Bromyard, p. 115.

²⁶ O'Mara, *Four*, p. 113.

²⁷ Langland, *Piers Plowman*.

²⁸ Ross, p. 275.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 283.

³⁰ Powell, p. 83.

³¹ Weatherly, p. 75.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 58.

³³ 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.

³⁴ 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.

³⁵ "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&id=42213&lemma=penitencie> [accessed 19 November 2015]. The edition used is van Elslander.

³⁶ 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.

⁴⁰ The translations are from www.summatheologica.info/summa/questions/?q=506&a=2627 [accessed 11 July 2014].

⁴¹ O'Mara, *Four*, pp. 91, 92, 92.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 90.

⁴³ Ross, p. 144.

⁴⁴ Gridale, p. 19.

⁴⁵ Powell, p. 136.

⁴⁶ Ross, p. 280.

⁴⁷ Morrison, p. 188, cited on p. 38.

⁴⁸ Hudson, *Selections*, p. 21.

⁴⁹ Hudson, *Premature Reformation*, p. 298.

⁵⁰ For the label "morality play" in late medieval England, see also pp. 11, 138.

⁵¹ Potter, p. 16.

⁵² In Bouhaïk-Gironès, Doudet, and Hindley, *Recueil général de moralités*.

⁵³ Helmich, *Moralités*, p. 36.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 307.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 777.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 778.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 794.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 756.

⁶⁰ Quotations from *Everyman* are from the edition by Cooper and Wortham.

⁶¹ 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.

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

⁶³ Wilkins, p. 316.

⁶⁴ Hudson, *Premature Reformation*, p. 295.

⁶⁵ Jansen, p. 213.

⁶⁶ Doctrine does present Idleness with a new costume to confirm his new status as "Clennes" (813).

⁶⁷ Morrison, p. 134.

⁶⁸ Powell, p. 83.

⁶⁹ Weatherly, p. 68.

⁷⁰ Tentler, pp. 26–27.

⁷¹ Hudson, *Premature Reformation*, p. 294.

⁷² Ross, p. 149.

⁷³ 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: “Pus mowthys confession | And hys hertys contricion | Schal saue Man fro dampnacion | 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 begyn to 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.

⁹⁰ Hudson, *Premature Reformation*, p. 294.

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.

¹⁰⁶ Spencer, *English Preaching*, p. 102.

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.