

**Zeitschrift:** SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature  
**Herausgeber:** Swiss Association of University Teachers of English  
**Band:** 31 (2015)

**Artikel:** Doubting the middleman : mediated instruction and divine authority in the Towneley mystery plays  
**Autor:** Marshall, Camille  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-583885>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 04.02.2026

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# Doubting the Middleman: Mediated Instruction and Divine Authority in the Towneley Mystery Plays<sup>1</sup>

Camille Marshall

As narratives in which God gives instructions, orders and blessings, the Old Testament mystery plays offer the ideal platform for dramatists to explore late medieval concerns on unorthodox transmission. These issues appear most vividly in the Towneley plays of *The Murder of Abel* and *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, in which characters doubt divine intermediaries, the (supposed) transmitters of the Word of God. The aim of this essay is to demonstrate how the Towneley dramatist(s) portrayed the doubt of the characters and manipulated that of the audience in order to draw their attention towards the need to question religious instructors' authority. I will thus consider the suspicious or dissenting Towneley characters through the lens of late medieval anti-heresy mandates and anti-theatrical polemics to uncover how the plays strived to maintain the hierarchy of religious instruction, but also show that the reception of the play itself, with its actors and props serving as intermediaries to devotion, also requires a careful reading. These two issues instigated by doubtful characters will not only be shown to bear a strong relevance to the plays' initial production context but also that of the sixteenth-century manuscript's reception, an unavoidable consideration for any study of the Towneley plays.

---

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Professor Denis Renevey, my colleague Diana Denissen, the anonymous reviewer, as well as the editors of this volume who have all kindly accepted to read this essay and have provided detailed and insightful comments that have helped improve and refine its argument. All shortcomings remain my own.

*Drama and Pedagogy in Medieval and Early Modern England*. SPELL: Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature 31. Ed. Elisabeth Dutton and James McBain. Tübingen: Narr, 2015. 53-70.

The widespread concern and discussion of who was entitled to speak, teach, or interpret the Word of God emerges in late medieval English scriptural drama, and perhaps most vividly in the Old Testament plays of the Towneley collection. The biblical episodes on which these performances base themselves are replete with divine orders, tests, instructions and warnings that might be delivered by God Himself, or by an appointed messenger. Naturally then, it is in the treatment of the interactions of these middlemen – intermediaries between Man and God – with their addressees that we may uncover the reflection of coeval issues of authorized transmission. Indeed, mediated divine instruction is often questioned and its reception problematized because of an uncertainty towards its provenance and coincidentally of the lingering possibility that dissenting or unorthodox voices are at its origin. The Towneley plays of *The Murder of Abel* (Play 2) and *The Sacrifice of Isaac* (Play 4) offer particularly striking illustrations of this process and demonstrate that any polarized and direct equation of faith with blind obedience should be moderated within their reception context, strongly pregnant with the strives to limit the spread of heresy. Yet, through the portrayal and manipulation of doubt within the play-texts and their performance, they also show the need to keep one's scepticism in check and not reject the intermediary completely, which might apply to the way in which the audience is to receive religious drama itself. While it is indeed possible and often positive to distinguish the actor from represented divinity, doubt should not override the reception and obliterate the play's devotional agenda as a whole. This point was also a crucial issue in the sixteenth-century context in which the Towneley manuscript was produced, and I will show how the exploration of doubt gains a renewed instructional potency years after the plays' inception. I would thus argue that the instructional agenda of the plays studied here is purposefully aimed towards the redefinition of the authority that various means of religious instruction hold, as well as towards the detection, avoidance and perhaps reporting of religious dissenters. These of course include unlicensed preachers and other categories of religious nonconformists condemned in Archbishop Arundel's 1409 Constitutions, but might be viewed to extend to the reformed Christians when reading the plays from the perspective of their later compilation context.

The differential responses to direct or mediated divine instruction are most manifestly portrayed in the Towneley play of *The Sacrifice of Isaac*. As is traditional of this particular episode, Abraham receives two instructions from God, which are to offer his only begotten son Isaac in a ritual offering, as well as the merciful retraction and counter-

instruction to put an end to the projected sacrifice and kill a ram in his son's stead. Whereas one would undoubtedly assume that the latter of the two orders is the easiest for the patriarch to accept and execute, this is in fact far from true in the Towneley version of the episode. Indeed, Abraham is quick to confirm that his Lord's "bidyng shall be done" (l. 76), and confirms his intentions in the subsequent stanza, even as the emotional toll of the act dawns on him. Conversely, when an angel appears to interrupt the sacrifice nearer the end of the play, there is a long process of mental, and even physical, struggle, of doubt and questioning, before Abraham accepts to lower his sword. From lines 257 to 270, Abraham uses each of his four speech turns to assure himself of the legitimacy of the divine message:

<i>Angelus.</i>	Abraham! Abraham!	
<i>Abraham.</i>		Who is ther now?
	War! let me go!	
<i>Angelus.</i>		Stand vp now, stand!
	Thi good will com I to alow;	
	Therfor I byd the hold thi hand.	
<i>Abraham.</i>	Say, who bad so? Any bot thou?	
<i>Angelus.</i>	Yei, God; and sendys this beest to thyn offerand	
<i>Abraham.</i>	I speke with God latter, I trow,	
	And do [and] he me commaund.	
<i>Angelus.</i>	He has persauyd thy mekenes	
	And thi good will also, iwis.	
	He will thou do thi son no distres,	
	For he has graunt to the his blys.	
<i>Abraham.</i>	Bot wote thou well that it is	
	As thou has sayd?	
<i>Angelus.</i>		I say the 'yis.'
<i>Abraham.</i>	I thank the, Lord, well of goodnes,	
	That all thus has relest me this. (ll. 257–272)	

With the back-to-back enquiries on the divine messenger's identity and on the source of the instruction, Abraham demonstrates that he will not submit to just anybody. Furthermore, he expresses his scepticism with this second-hand order that stands in contraction with the direct order he had recently received from God and requires one last statement from the messenger that expresses his personal confidence in his understanding of the order for all doubts to finally be relieved. As the patriarch had already demonstrated his willingness to go through with the sacrifice and had thus succeeded in his test, the passage above does not question his blind faith and obedience in divine instruction, but more clearly



questions his blind faith in mediated instruction. This authorial intention appears more clearly still in the addition of the scene in which God instructs the angel to descend and revoke the order (ll. 233-48) by which the audience, but not Abraham, witnesses the chain of command.

With the unequivocal knowledge of the divine instruction's legitimacy, the audience may be tempted to consider Abraham's tenacious doubts in a critical or mocking light. However, another passage in the pageant shows the negative outcome of a lack of transparency in the source of divine instruction. The play is indeed particular in yet another respect in that it is the only extant English mystery play in which Isaac never accepts his death and can thus be considered to fail in his part of the divine test. Right up until the angelic intervention, Isaac repeatedly begs his father for mercy, expresses his terror and incomprehension and tries to change his fate. Where the other English mystery plays on the same episode also insist on Isaac's fear in the face of death (much more than the biblical narrative, in which neither Abraham's nor Isaac's feelings receive a mention), they nevertheless all portray his acceptance as soon as he understands that it is God's will. He may even express gratitude to have been honoured in this way as in the N-Town pageant (ll. 145-6), or keep his father's resolve from wavering as in the Chester version (ll. 315-16). These pivotal moments of acceptance can however only take place after the revelation that the sacrifice is required by God.

In the Towneley pageant, the reason for Abraham's actions remain hidden to the child and the divine order is not only implicitly omitted but also directly misrepresented. Indeed, Abraham never names God as the instructor and the dramatist goes so far as to have the father insistently present the sacrifice as his own will saying that "[s]ich will is into myne hart went" (l. 170), "it may be as I haue ment" (l. 174), and insisting on his paternal prerogative ("That I say may not be denyde; / Take thi dede therfor mekely" ll. 180-1). However obedient Isaac has been earlier in the play, he cannot accept the order to sacrifice himself because this in fact does overextend his earthly father's entitlement, at least in the late medieval context of the episode's reception.<sup>2</sup> While Rosemary Woolf holds the Towneley version as "dramatically inferior" because the omission obscures Isaac's typological relationship to Christ, and "[t]he moral strength of the story, which is also its dramatic backbone, is sacrificed to a slightly sentimental naturalism" (806 n. 4), I can

---

<sup>2</sup> While classical Roman law conferred the power of life and death to the head of the household, this changed even before the rise of Christianity and late medieval fathers were in no way sanctioned to kill their offspring. See Reid (70-74) for further considerations on the limits of paternal power.

only disagree in considering how the dramatist's choice poignantly serves to emphasize what Isaac is unaware of. The audience feels more uncomfortable throughout the play because of his refusal and Abraham is clearly at fault here for not presenting himself as what he truly is: a mere mouthpiece of God's will. This is his only actual shortcoming. Indeed, the audience knows from having seen God speak that Abraham is true in what he orders. However, it is clear from the other collections' versions of the episode that the only proof of legitimacy needed in this instance was the stating of divine provenance. In failing to produce this, he is the sole obstacle in Isaac's proving of his faith and demonstrates the consequences of obscuring the chain of citation.

This "chain of citation" and the issues of its required unambiguity can but remind us of the issues linked to medieval preaching, as best explored by Claire Waters.<sup>3</sup> While the jump from these dramatic episodes of sacrifice to the domain of preaching may seem quite a drastic leap, one can only but admit that Abraham's unrelenting questioning of the angel finds particular resonance in the words of Robert of Basevorn in his *Forma prædicandi* (c. 1320): "It is not sufficient for someone to say that he is sent by God, unless he manifestly demonstrates it, for heretics often make this claim" (qtd. in Waters 13). Furthermore, Abraham's failure to make explicit the hierarchy of his own chain of command to his son is in contradiction with the words of Christ himself ("My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me" John 7:16) and the basis for the practice of preaching. As Waters reminds us, medieval preachers, like the divine messengers of the Old Testament, were "a bridge between divine and human" (1) and thus:

The insistence that a teacher's words are valid only insofar as they mark his connection to God requires the speaker's displacement of himself. . . . [H]is disowned speech marks the preacher's personal authority and righteousness and also his claim to be "him whom God has sent," his official and lineal authorization by the church. (26)

This equation of the authorization by God and the Church was utilized most forcefully from the late fourteenth century onwards in the ecclesiastical struggle against unorthodox preaching.

Concerns of inadequate preaching appear more explicitly in the Towneley play of *The Murder of Abel*, which may, to a certain extent, then serve as a key for the reading of the play of *The Sacrifice of Isaac*. Although

---

<sup>3</sup> While Waters focuses on female preachers, her discussion illuminates issues of wider concern.

the sacrifice episode that leads to the infamous fratricide is not originally one of instruction or preaching (Genesis 4 does not mention any order to make the offerings), all extant English versions add the intermission of either an angel, Adam or Abel who ask for the sacrifice to be performed and instruct on the process of and reasons for its execution. In the Towneley episode, Abel reminds his brother of the requirement to tithe (ll. 74-5), which gives the character of Cain the space to respond to this second-hand instruction. His reaction is famously vehement as he bursts out: "How! let furth youre geyse; the fox will preche. / How long wilt thou me appech / With thi sermonyng?" (ll. 86-8). In comparing Abel to the preaching fox, Cain is using a well-known proverb that suggests that his brother is a false preacher, either unauthorized to preach, or preaching with ill intent, one whose aim is to harm his audience.<sup>4</sup> The tradition of Reynard the Fox, although sparse in written texts prior to Caxton in England, abounds in visual culture.<sup>5</sup> More specifically, images of fox-preachers are numerous in wood carvings or painted glass in churches throughout the country so that the audience of the play would undoubtedly be familiar with representations of a fox in clerical garb, often speaking from a pulpit to a congregation of birds, as well as with the associated scenes of the fox making off with one unsuspecting audience member in his mouth. Varty and his impressive body of evidence have shown that this theme is very seldom represented in "secular surroundings" (78) and can thus be considered to have served as a clerical tool for the edification of potentially gullible parishioners. Indeed, these scenes are a warning against the cunning of ill-intentioned and false clerics, who could either be members of the regular clergy fallen into sin, or known heretics who were not authorized to teach and preach their unorthodox views, lest they should infect their audience with their beliefs.

The fox imagery was but one of the many implements of spiritual safeguard. Particularly from the late fourteenth century onwards, which coincides with the first decades of English mystery play performance

---

<sup>4</sup> I would also argue that the likening to the preaching fox is possibly furthered by calling out Abel's "disguise." Although the MED does not list "geyse" as a variant of the noun "gīse", it is included in its verbal form (s. v. gīsen, 2). In their notes to the play, Stevens and Cawley translate the line as "Let out your geese; the fox wants to preach," albeit noting how the Towneley line departs from the more common proverb "whanne þe fox prechyth, kepe wel ȝore gees" (vol. II, 443).

<sup>5</sup> The only two texts preceding Caxton are Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale* and *The Fox and the Wolf*. Of course, Reynard flourished in Flanders circa 1150, as well as in twelfth-century Old French and Middle High German texts, some of which undoubtedly travelled to the British Isles (Varty 23-7).

history, important measures were taken in an attempt to limit, detect and punish heretics, as it was believed, not without reason, that heretical views were partly spread through public sermons.<sup>6</sup> One of the orthodox clergy's actions was to prevent the unlicensed from preaching. Thomas Arundel's Constitutions of 1409 are probably the most famous document created to this effect, in which it is repeatedly stated that no-one preach the word of God unless authorized to do so and able to provide assurance of this, but this text is merely one of the many statutes on the matter issued since the 1380s throughout most English dioceses.<sup>7</sup> One of Arundel's earlier anti-heresy mandates from a time in which he was still bishop of Ely (1382) in fact better expresses how laypeople played as big a role as religious authorities in checking preachers' authorizations:

. . . mandamus quatinus omnibus et singulis subditis nostris ecclesiasticis et secularibus vtriusque sexus ex parte nostra interdicatis et inhibeatis, interdicti et inhiberi efficaciter faciatis quibus nos etiam tenore presencium interdicimus et inhibemus ne aliquos ad predicandum in eorum ecclesiis capellis oratoriis cimiteriis ciuitatibus villis seu plateis aut locis aliis sacris seu profanis admittant . . . aut eos predicare permittant nisi tales sunt de quorum admissione littera seu licencia nostra speciali legitime constiterit.

. . . each and every one of our subjects, ecclesiastical and secular of both sexes should on our behalf prevent, just as we ourselves in the present document prohibit you to admit or permit, anyone to preach in their churches, chapels, oratories, cemeteries, cities, villages, or other places whether sacred or profane, unless they are constituted by a letter of admission or our special license. (Qtd. and transl. Forrest 65)

In relation to this passage, Ian Forrest, who has produced an invaluable historical study on lay involvement in the fight against heresy, notes that although we might not expect just anybody to check licenses and take prohibitive actions, "the range of places listed [above] would extend the category of 'persons in authority' [and responsible for the documentary

---

<sup>6</sup> Clearly the scope of this chapter does not permit a full account of religious heterodoxy across the period and so I have limited the consideration to those elements that are pertinent to my discussion of the plays.

<sup>7</sup> Nicholas Watson's 1995 study was of course a pioneering piece of scholarship that brought a better understanding of this legislation's impact, especially on matters of fifteenth-century vernacular theology. Since then, the numerous essays in the *After Arundel* volume edited by Vincent Gillespie and Kantik Ghosh have however contributed to nuance Watson's argument.



check] from abbots, abbesses, rectors, and patrons to, possibly, village elders, manorial officials, churchwardens, and so on" (66). It is partly because the detection relied on the laity that the "signs of heresy had to be simplified. This was achieved through licensing, which made suspicion subject to a simple documentary check" (Forrest 60). The parishioners who did not possess such authority nevertheless needed to be sensitized to the issue since an unlicensed preacher excluded from one locus could simply move to another. Moreover, fault did not only lie with the heretical preacher: those who listened to him/her also risked major punishments.<sup>8</sup> It is clear from these examples that laymen were considered to be crucially instrumental in the detection and reporting of suspected heretics. It would then make perfect sense that the mystery plays were put to contribution to help encourage suspicion on the part of the lay audience of the plays who were also the potential audience of authorized or unauthorized sermons.

Studying the Towneley *Murder of Abel* in this light will reveal just how much it is devoted to fighting dissenting religious views and might well be an additional pawn in the anti-heretical game. While Abel is in no way practising what Claire Waters labelled "explicit preaching, that is preaching in the strictest definition (from a pulpit, wearing the clerical garb, and speaking in a codified manner at a specific point in Mass) (17), Cain nevertheless accuses his brother's "preaching" of being ill-intended and thus rejects his words and his authority. Importantly, Abel does not instruct his brother to offer just any generic sacrifice, but rather tithes (l. 75). With this transformation to the biblical source, the brothers dispute a matter that was much more relevant to the audience's everyday obligations as well a major point of religious contention. The audience should have been able to recognize that Cain is presenting heretical views in his rant about tithing: Wyclif famously advocated against giving tithes or paying any other dues to members of the clergy if one judged that they were undeserving of them. Lollards of course denounced the wealth of clergymen and some are known to have withheld their tithes in order to

---

<sup>8</sup> As the following extract from Archbishop William Courtenay's statute of 30 May 1382 demonstrates: ". . . ne . . . aliquem predicantem audiat vel ascultet seu ei faueat vel adhereat publice vel occulte sed statim tanquam serpentem venenum pestiferum emittentem fugiat et euitet sub penan excommunicationis maioris" (qtd. in Forrest 64); ". . . one should not listen, attend, nor support such preaching, be it public or private, but immediately flee and avoid the snake's poison as it is emitted, on pain of major excommunication" (translation mine).

I should also make clear that there is no direct correlation between a lack of license and condemnation as heretic, however suspicion would be raised and the inquisitional process might arise from this.

rather give them to the poor.<sup>9</sup> In the Towneley play, to avoid an act of charity from redeeming his character, Cain presents himself as the needy man who cannot spare his goods in order to give them to God.

By including God in the reciprocal economics of tithing and asserting that He has not performed any act that would justify an offering (ll. 97-131), Cain however goes one step further in the debate on priests being deserving or not of tithes. The ploughman seems incapable of envisaging a hierarchy in which God is beyond such considerations and indeed conflates Him with the body of priests as he says that his “farthyng is in the preest hand / Syn last tyme [he] offyrd” (ll. 106-7). This accusation of keeping his past offering for themselves occurs in the middle of his arguments against God, and without any distinction; all are the same kind of culprits to Cain. Again, part of the criticism of Lollard practices such as the translation of Holy texts was based on the reduced lay need for the clergy that it entailed, which also led to a reduced hierarchy in the access to salvation. For Cain, whom the audience has already seen as being unable of having any control over his servant Garccio, this is but one instance in which he is clearly himself confused with hierarchy, although in this case religious.

Thus, as Cain develops his argument throughout the play, the audience finds confirmation of the negative preconceptions they would have of the character from their prior religious and cultural knowledge, and from the obvious vulgarity he manifests from his very first lines. However, when he attacks Abel’s “preaching” and therewith posits his brother as the dissenter, the audience may be destabilized and brought to question their pre-established judgments in the subsequent disputative to and fro, in which Cain is given more space to systematically debunk Abel. In fact, both the shepherd (Abel) and the ploughman (Cain) are biblical symbols of members of the Godhead, preachers or, more simply, good Christians.<sup>10</sup> But which preacher, which Christian, is the audience member to follow when each of them is being discredited in turn? For instance, both invalidate the other’s words in significantly and identically dismissing them as “vayn carpyng” (ll. 92, 99), which is also the phrase used to warn Lucifer in the Towneley play of *Creation* (2 *Bonus Angelus*: “I reyde ye sese of that ye sayn, / For well I wote ye carpe in

---

<sup>9</sup> For instance, see Hudson for the account of Lollard Thomas Ploman of Sizewell’s reallocation of tithes to the poor (152).

<sup>10</sup> See Luke 9:60-2, John 10:1, 15:1, Ecclesiasticus 18:11-13, or Isaiah 40:11.



vayne" ll. 114-15).<sup>11</sup> Cain further uses "jangyls waste" (l. 136) and questions Abel's sanity in order to discredit his discourse by holding him "mad" and "woode" (ll. 150, 161). And thus Cain's repudiations of Abel's authority are in fact the more overriding of the two.

When prompted by Cain's objections, one might be lead to wonder what grounds Abel actually has indeed to sermon his older brother on tithing, especially in the light of the late medieval licensing debate. For instance, the York play on the same episode opens with an angel instructing the two brothers on the matter whereas the Chester version has Adam explain this to his sons. There is always some hierarchical removal in these other texts, thus highlighting that, once again, the Towneley collection is quite peculiar in having Abel assume this position of instructor on his own authority. If Cain's rejection could be in part justifiable then, the audience could not however deny the ploughman's fault when he fails to recognize God and His authority when He appears after the performance of their offerings. It is crucial to note how, with the very first lines He speaks, the character of God confers his authorization to Abel. Where the biblical source ("Why art thou angry? and why is thy countenance fallen?" [Gen. 4: 6]) does not even point to Abel as the target of Cain's anger, the Towneley God's question "Cam, whi art thou so rebell / Agans thi brother Abell?" (ll. 293-4) is more specific. One traditionally "rebels" against an established authority, which, in this instance, God is attributing to Abel. With this intervention, one could then say that God brings Abel the required authorization for his "preaching" to be lawful. And just as it was the case for God and Abraham, the audience is given visual proof through His appearance to be sure of this.

Unlike Isaac who would comply as soon as the Lord is even mentioned, Cain does not recognize the divine authority however, nor does he in fact recognize God, both figuratively and literally. After the divine character has spoken, Cain comically questions His identity:

---

<sup>11</sup> Although the group of Towneley pageants is now recognized as a composite cycle, with plays gathered from York, Wakefield and other towns in their vicinity, this verbal echo between the two plays can still be considered to be significant, especially when looking at other occurrences of the phrase in the collection. Indeed, the collocation "vayn carping" is only otherwise used by Noah's wife about her family's talk of the upcoming Flood (Play 3, l. 520) and by a *tortor* to Jesus (Play 22, l. 482). Peter also tells Mary Magdalene that she "carpys waste" (Play 28, l. 7) when she gives first news of the Resurrection. These are all instances in which the interlocutor is accused for spreading, what is considered to be, aberrant beliefs. See below for further discussion of the composite nature of the collection and the implications thereof.

Whi, who is that hob ouer the wall?  
 We! who was that that piped so small?  
 Com, go we hens, for parels all—  
 God is out of hys wit! (ll. 299-302).

While he does not actually fail to recognize God altogether, as demonstrated by the fourth line of this passage, the first line playfully points at how God was to be recognized and perceived in the context of the mystery plays. This Hob over the wall or, in other words, a commoner (“Bob”) standing on a bit of scaffolding, was indeed what was before the audience’s eyes. In this case where God neither directly (naming) nor indirectly (mentioning elements of his curriculum vitae) states His identity, the audience can only count on the presence of a gilded mask and perhaps some particular dress to infer that this character stood for God Almighty.<sup>12</sup> As new characters came into play, audience members would have surely often felt some doubt in identifying them, an uncertainty that Cain voices in this instance. However, this doubt would only be temporary, as the costume, context, and speech should lead the audience to quickly be assured of the character’s identity. It is Cain who actually demonstrates yet another failing in this instance: that of not being able to read the signs before him, and thus, in a way, of being a bad audience member.

Thus, just as he is incapable of understanding the hierarchy between priest and God in the context of the economics of tithing, Cain seems confused by the relationship between actor and character and what is owed to each. This is indeed a delicate distinction to be made, especially for the mystery plays that were, for the most part, performed by members of the community, in the streets, and with a flourish of anachronisms that brought the texts closer to the audience’s everyday lives. Whereas these elements have precisely been recognized as aspects that allowed for an *increased* form of identification and affective religious devotion, there was some fear that they might encourage idolatry and direct the audience’s love and prayers towards false, empty, signs; this is one of the reproaches made by the *Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge*. Although its stance probably does not reflect popular views, this anti-dramatic treatise written between 1380 and 1425 is an extremely precious testimony of the arguments brought forth by both the supporters and detractors

---

<sup>12</sup> Many records of dramatic activity in England prove that it was customary for God, but also Christ, as well as the angels, to wear a gilded mask. See Meg Twycross’s and Sarah Carpenter’s very thorough study of masks in medieval and early Tudor England, especially the chapter on mystery plays, 191-232.

of medieval devotional drama.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the author first lists the uses that the plays' advocates traditionally invoked before systematically debunking them. The first point of contention is with the use of the plays for devotion, which the *Tretise* writes off as it could only lead to fake devotion.

In the course of the text, the author compares the performances to the episode of the golden calf of *Exodus* (e. g. ll. 637-43), and thereby clearly brings forth the accusation of idolatry:

Therefore as the wickidnesse of the misbileve of hethene men lyith to themself, whanne they seyn that the worshiping of their maumetrie [*idols*] is to the worships of God, so mennus lecherye now on days to han ther owne lustus lieth to hemself whanne they seyn that suche miracles playing is to the worschip of God. For Crist seith that folc of avoutrie [*heretics*] sechen si- che singnys as a lecchour sechith signes of verrey love but no dedis of verrey love. So sithen thise miraclis pleyinge ben onely singnis, love withoute dedis, they ben not onely contrarious to the worschipe of God—that is, bothe in signe and in dede—but also they ben ginnys of the devvel to cac- chen men to byleve of Anticrist, as wordis of love withoute verrey dede ben ginnys of the lecchour to cacchen felawchipe to fulfillinge of his leccherie. (ll. 192-206)

The author of this treatise exposes criticism on several levels: beyond the fact that the performance is done for pleasure alone, s/he also states that the performance is only capable of bringing *signs* to the stage. In Saussurean terms, one would rather say that only the signifier is performed and by extension worshipped, and never the signified. Thus s/he considers that the audience is continually at risk of directing their devotion to false signs and incapable of holding both signifier and signified in their mind in order to extend their devotion beyond the immediacy of the performance.

These considerations unjustly discredit the playgoer's natural abilities to contemplate several levels of signification and reality simultaneously. Meg Twycross discusses this very phenomenon from the first-hand experience of staging the York Carpenters' *Resurrection of Christ*. Not only does she explain how the audience and actors may share the play-space without completely breaking the dramatic illusion (275), but she also

---

<sup>13</sup> The *Tretise* is contained in a single manuscript (British Library MS. Add. 24202, fols 14<sup>r</sup>-21<sup>r</sup>), alongside other Wycliffite texts. Its dialect has been located to the East Central Midlands but any other information is conjectural. Even the nature of the "miraclis" that it opposes is highly debated and probably refers to a broad range of performance types, including the mystery plays. See Davidson's edition for further discussion.

explains that mystery plays often openly recognize the limitations of their mimesis, without signalling to the audience that they are empty signs:

The effect it seems to have in our present context is that the audience are invited into a kind of complicity with the players, in which they behave as if they were taking the illusion for reality, while at the same time reserving the right to remember that it is only illusion. But there would be no point in this game if it were not also accepted that the illusion represents a historical and spiritual reality which is vitally important to both actors and audience. (276-7)

The instances in which the more non-naturalistic, physical aspects of the performance are brought to light can thus be considered as reminders for the audience of the multivalence of the experience. Whereas Cain is clearly represented as a bad team player in “this game” of semiotics, other Towneley plays show us characters who are fully capable of managing the multilayered theatrical signs with propriety. A well-known example of this occurs in the *Second Shepherds’ Play*, in which the Christ child is adored by the shepherds in His double nature of “derling dere, full of Godhede” (l. 728). At once the “sufferan Savioure” that “all thing has wrought” (ll. 719, 720) and the “yong child” (710), the shepherds do not fail to make reference to His third identity in the context of the performance by addressing Him as a “mop” (l. 1046). In addition to being a term of endearment, this also means a doll, which was no doubt what was used in the performance rather than a live baby.<sup>14</sup> While the reference is similar to God as a “hob over the wall,” this play shows the audience how to correctly respond to the theatrical sign.

In a way, these processes posit the actor as an explicit intermediary, the signifier to what is ultimately being portrayed, and is thus not dissimilar to the intermediaries of divine instruction studied above. Both defy any straightforward acceptance or recognition in order to signal the necessity of caution to the spectator. While it is generally accepted that both *Shepherds’* plays as well as the *Murder of Abel* are the work of the Wakefield Master, the similar idiosyncratic use of doubt for this purpose in the Towneley *Sacrifice of Isaac* pageant might be used to support the claim made by Gardner as early as 1971 that this piece was also, as it is now accepted for the *Murder of Abel*, revised by the Wakefield Master (227-8). Whether this can ever be confirmed or not, I would actually

---

<sup>14</sup> The same reference is made in the *First Shepherds’ Play* (l. 673); the *double entendre* of “mop” was first noted by Sophie Oosterwijk.



suggest that the interest in these themes does not belong to this dramatist alone, but can be traced to the Towneley collection as a whole. Doubt in intermediaries, in signs, or in the direct apparition of the divine presence is indeed emphasized more than in any other cycle.<sup>15</sup>

As it is now widely recognized however, the Towneley plays are not a “cycle.” Rather, they constitute a composite compilation of plays from different dates and origins, and it is precisely through the consideration of their possible compilation context that we might uncover why doubt in intermediaries finds such pride of place. Although scholarship on this collection still has long ways to go, the leading scholars in the field agree that the plays originated from various locations in West Lancashire and East Yorkshire, and that they in no way constitute the cycle of Wakefield in any comparable manner to what the York plays were to the city of York for example. In terms of dating, it would seem that some of the earliest pageants, including the six that were in fact borrowed and adapted from the York cycle, were created in the early fifteenth century, while the plays by the Wakefield Master are most often dated to the latter half of that same century. The copying of the single manuscript, Huntington Library MS HM1, was dated around 1553-8 by Malcolm Parkes (reported by Palmer 96). The selection of plays itself, the compilation process, could have taken place at any time in the interval, but there is a very strong chance that it was during the English Reformation, for the use of a recusant patron. If contemporary to the manuscript production, then this was during the brief return of Catholicism that occurred with the reign of Queen Mary.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> There is no place to make such a wide demonstration in the context of this essay, but I may briefly give a few more illustrations of the singular importance of doubt to the Towneley narratives beyond the four plays already mentioned here: the *Noah* play (play 3) is the only version in which Uxor’s resistance is explicitly linked to her disbelief of the coming of the Flood; the *Adoration of the Magi* play (14) has Herod uniquely question the kings’ sanity for basing their belief on a star and needs the confirmation of books for proof of what they prophesize; whereas the *Doubting Thomas* play (28) is developed like no other version.

<sup>16</sup> Theresa Coletti and Gail McMurray Gibson make a strong case for the collection being created on the occasion of the 1556 wedding of John and Mary Towneley, members of one of the most prominent recusant families of the area, that have owned the manuscript at least from Christopher Towneley’s lifetime (1607-74).

For the most recent scholarship on the Towneley manuscript, see the chapter by Peter Meredith in the *Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Literature*, as well the article by Barbara Palmer. A collection of essays on the Towneley manuscript commissioned and edited by Meg Twycross is forthcoming and will undoubtedly shed new light on the circumstances of the collection’s production.

The concerns of those for whom the Towneley plays were collected were thus those that pertained to the Reformation, rather than the Lollards and their “premature Reformation” as Anne Hudson has famously put it. However, some of the similarities in both movements would undoubtedly explain why plays that expressed concerns specific to the earlier, would be attractive for inclusion in a recusant collection.<sup>17</sup> Religious intermediaries were obviously at the centre of both reformative movements, and a Catholic mid-sixteenth century audience/readership would definitely have been sensitive to attacks such as those formulated by the Towneley Cain. They would have witnessed the struggles to demonstrate that Catholicism was the “true” religion first of all, and secondly that the clergy and its hierarchy were legitimate and necessary to their access to salvation. Moreover, Cain’s deconstruction of the theatrical sign of God almighty might also have had the interest that Catholicism and the Mass was criticized during the Reformation for its over-reliance on signs, images, and theatricality. Many studies have shown how liturgy and drama are indeed indissociable,<sup>18</sup> and similar to the actor who can only be taken as the signifier of the religious truth s/he seeks to portray, “[s]acraments were conventionally described as signs of sacred things, the visible signs of an invisible grace” (Beckwith 60). As when faced with the theatrical sign, the church-goer is meant to play along, to believe that the bread that may seem unchanged has indeed become something else through the miracle of transubstantiation. Scepticism has led the Lollards and then the Reformers to challenge this: just as the Almighty cannot be seen in Bob on his scaffolding, there is little reason to believe that He actually descends in a baked good; a sceptical move that effected major religious turmoil.

Doubt then had a double instructional purpose, which took effect in two different periods of the plays’ reception: that of initial composition and of compilation. I hope to have demonstrated how, in the two episodes of sacrifice, this idiosyncratic exploration of doubt was instrumental in teaching the mystery play audience that they could and should question the authority of those who claimed to instruct matters of faith. Doubt was not only performed by actors and witnessed in the charac-

---

<sup>17</sup> The degree to which Lollardy has actually paved the way for Protestantism has variously been defended and contested through the years. Richard Rex offers a useful summary of this scholarly debate in his study of the Lollards (see esp. 115-42).

<sup>18</sup> For the relations and interplay of liturgy and drama in the specific context of English scriptural drama, see for example Penny Granger (esp. 4-35) in relation to the N-Town plays, and Sarah Beckwith or Pamela King (*Worship of the City*), who focus on the York cycle.



ters, but was caused to be felt by the audience members themselves. Thus, momentary uncertainty as to which character is presenting the accepted religious viewpoint or more simply which character an actor is meant to embody can be considered part of the didactic scheme at play: it respectively taught to try and discern orthodox from unorthodox claims as well as to bear in mind that the performance at hand is a cumulation of signs that need to be correctly deciphered in order for the performance to be effective. Whether both *The Sacrifice of Isaac* and *The Murder of Abel* are the work of the Wakefield Master or not, it would seem that such vivid attention paid to these concerns might well be the reason for their inclusion in the Towneley collection. The plays in this manuscript, read or performed in a changed religious climate, will then not only have instructed their audience, but strengthened them in the "Old Faith" by reasserting the legitimacy of religious hierarchy and imagery, so long as they were properly deciphered. In the transition of a set of medieval plays into the early modern period, it would then seem that doubt insured part of their continued relevance.

## References

- Beckwith, Sarah. *Signifying God: Social Relation and Symbolic Act in the York Corpus Christi Plays*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.
- Coletti, Theresa, and Gail McMurray Gibson. "The Tudor Origins of Medieval Drama." In: *A Companion to Tudor Literature*. Ed. Kent Cartwright. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010. 228-45.
- Davidson, Clifford, ed. *A Treatise of Miracles Pleyinge*. Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University Press, 1993.
- Forrest, Ian. *The Detection of Heresy in Late Medieval England*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005.
- Gardner, John. "Idea and Emotion in the Towneley *Abraham*." *Papers on Language and Literature* 7:3 (1971): 227-41.
- Gillespie, Vincent, and Kantik Ghosh, eds. *After Arundel: Religious Writing in Fifteenth-Century England*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2011.
- Granger, Penny. *The N-Town Play: Drama and Liturgy in Medieval East Anglia*. Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2009.
- Hudson, Anne. *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- King, Pamela. "Spatial Semantics and the Medieval Theatre." *Themes in Drama 9: The Theatrical Space*. Ed. James Redmond. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987. 45-58.
- . *The York Mystery Cycle and the Worship of the City*. Rochester: D. S. Brewer, 2006.
- Meredith, Peter. "The Towneley Pageants." In: *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*. 2nd ed. Ed. Richard Beadle and Alan J. Fletcher. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 152-82.
- Oosterwijk, Sophie. "Of Mops and Puppets: The Ambiguous Use of the Word 'Mop' in the Towneley Shepherds' Plays." *Notes and Queries* 44:2 (1997), 169-71.
- Palmer, Barbara. "Recycling 'the Wakefield Cycle': The Records." *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama* 41 (2002), 88-130.
- Reid, Charles J. (Jr). *Power over the Body, Equality in the Family: Rights and Domestic Relations in Medieval Canon Law*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2004.
- Rex, Richard. *The Lollards*. New York: Palgrave, 2002.
- Stevens, Martin and A. C. Cawley, eds. *The Towneley Plays*, Vol. I: Text, Vol. II: Commentary and Glossary. Early English Text Society, S.S. 13 and 14. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Twycross, Meg. "Playing 'The Resurrection.'" *Medieval Studies for J. A. W. Bennett*. Ed. P. L. Heyworth. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981. 273-96.

- , and Sarah Carpenter. *Masks and Masking in Medieval and Early Tudor England*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002.
- Varty, Kenneth. *Reynard, Renart, Reinaert: And Other Foxes in Medieval England: The Iconographic Evidence*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1999.
- Waters, Claire. *Angels and Earthly Creatures*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.
- Watson, Nicholas. "Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate, and Arundel's Constitutions of 1409." *Speculum* 70:4 (1995): 822–64.
- Woolf, Rosemary. "The Effect of Typology on the English Mediaeval Plays of Abraham and Isaac." *Speculum* 32:4 (1957): 805–25.