

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

Artikel: Staging concerns of inquisitorial procedures in The N-Town Plays
Autor: Karáth, Tamás
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-583889>

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: 13.01.2026

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

Staging Concerns of Inquisitorial Procedures in *The N-Town Plays*

Tamás Karáth

The Norwich heresy trials (1428-31) preserved the unique documentation of the hearings of sixty persons accused with heretical charges. The records evince the notary's involvement in the idiosyncrasies of the accused. John of Exeter's personal interest in the spontaneous vernacular expressions of the suspects reflects on the deeper psychology of the hearings. Fifteenth-century East Anglian culture provides both legal and non-legal testimonies of similar interests in the inquisitorial potentials of obtaining truth. *The N-Town Plays* post-dates the burgeoning production of new inquisitorial materials of the 1420s, yet its unique focus on public fame, accusation, and trial situates the plays in this pedagogical interest. The legal discourse of the plays is not overtly polemical with heterodoxy; its inquisitorial concerns rather explore the limitations and inefficiencies of an inquisitorial situation. This essay argues that *N-Town's* engagement with the psychology and pedagogy of inquisitorial procedures is similar to John of Exeter's involvement in the conflicting biases during a staged process of questioning. *N-Town* ultimately challenges the dialogic mode of acquiring truth by representing the distortions of personal integrity and of truth in different situations of questioning.

A recent collection of studies, *The Culture of Inquisition in Medieval England*, co-edited by Mary C. Flannery and Katie L. Walter, discusses medieval inquisition as social and cultural discourses that “penetrated the late-medieval consciousness in a broader sense, shaping public *fama* and private selves, as well as affecting the construction of deviancy, sexuality and gender, rhetoric, narrative form and literary invention” (2). The edi-

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. 89-110.

tors of the volume indicate new possibilities of research that intersects epistemology, law, pedagogy, literature and religion (1-7). This essay explores the discourses of heresy and law in the fifteenth-century East-Anglian *N-Town Plays* in the context of a series of close contemporary large-scale heresy trials in the same region. The extant records of the Norwich trials of 1428-31 have preserved not only the legal protocols and the occasional abuses of the inquisition of the day, but also the notary's attempts to reconstruct a Lollard idiom.

The two central sources of this paper, an episcopal inquiry into heresy and a dramatic text, are intricately related to pedagogy. The practices of the church to detect heresy became immediately pedagogical propaganda to instruct the laity. The legal procedures of the church courts, such as public trials, excommunications, penitential processions and performances, abjurations, purgations, let alone public executions, were performed in ways that imitated and used the potentials of civic drama (Forrest 137). Forrest labels this important aspect of the ecclesiastical pedagogy of communicating knowledge of the new procedures against heresy to the lay as judicial drama (Forrest 113). He concludes that the church's channels of communication and modes of instruction were inherently indebted to civic drama:

The form of ecclesiastical propaganda most closely associated with civic drama was the procession, which demanded extensive participation, and thus attention from the laity. Because of the popularity and frequency of civic, liturgical, guild and parochial processions, the episcopacy was able to manage and manipulate familiar forms of communal activity in support of current and pressing problems. Indeed in some cases it is difficult to differentiate the scheduled procession from the exceptional, but in these cases its effectiveness as propaganda may be increased rather than diminished. Processions could be used to draw attention to new legislation against heresy or to heresy investigations, and to realize the dramatic potential of abjurations and penances. (137)

Yet the practices that were sought to be transmitted through various semi-dramatic and performative channels were themselves under constant pedagogical revision. John A. F. Thomson and Anne Hudson have pursued the development of inquisition strategies. They have observed that the similar sets of condemned heretical views in the extant episcopal enquiries can also be ascribed to the use of formulaic lists of questions, the first extant examples of which were "devised, one by a jurist, another by theologians, for the discernment of heretics, apparently about 1428 under the zealous direction of archbishop Chichele" (Hud-

son 21; Thomson 224). The circulation of such schematic lists of questions in later trials also attests to a constant endeavour of canon lawyers and notaries to adapt legal situations to local conditions, on the one hand, and to develop the ways of efficiently identifying heresy in the suspects on the other (Forrest 109). Thus the pedagogical role of such documents is at least twofold: as “confidential” records of the inquiring authorities, they can reveal some of their anxieties over the limits of the inquisitorial methods, while as documents prepared with the aim of restoring social order, they also prepared the way for the public and propagandistic use of the recorded event.

The juxtaposition of the extant records of the Norwich heresy trials and the *N-Town* compilation will illustrate two related strategies contradicting the overall mechanisms of the fifteenth-century pedagogical propaganda of the church in England. The personal engagement of John of Exeter, notary of the Norwich trials, displays a unique interest in the ways in which language constructs collective identities and expresses power relations, social status and the self. While John’s endeavour may also serve to more precisely identify the clues of heterodoxy in the language of the suspects, the very deep involvement in the idiosyncrasies of the Lollards necessarily develops empathy that precludes the demonization of the heretics for the sake of propaganda. *N-Town* deconstructs the stereotypes of the depravity of Lollard language, whose manifestations were widespread in contemporary sources:

The lollard was being constructed as an example of the false speaker, or “ill-tongued” man, who, according to the Aristotelian physiognomic work *Secretum secretorum*, could be recognized because his “lower lippe lolle outward.” The pride of heretics created in them an imbalance that led to anger and inconstancy in their speech and actions. Thomas Netter advised his readers to let their Wycliffite opponents “rage and ridicule.” They would not prevail because “truth was not in their mouths.” In the same vein *Friar Daw* says to his Wycliffite interlocutor: “in thi frensy thou fonnest more and more!” The image of the raging heretic was popular with polemicists, and was often expressed in extrapolations from the wolf in sheep’s clothing metaphor. (Forrest 160-61)

N-Town’s focus on the nature of public fame and inquisition situates the plays in the pedagogical interest of John of Exeter without becoming overtly polemical. The compilation indeed reverses the conventional value judgment of orthodox authority and heterodox depravity, and represents heresy as the exclusive attribute of Christ. At the same time, it ascribes corruption to the institutions of jurisprudence and empowers

anti-Christian authorities to hunt heretics. An obvious, but not exclusive, interpretation of this perversion may be that justice and heresy are elusive, which enabled the scribe-compiler (to use Alan Fletcher's term [164]) to reflect on the corrupt practices of contemporary courts.

A telling sign of one of the revisers' keen eye on the theme of heresy is a revised and partly illegible passage in the first great monologue of Herod in the pageant of the Magi (Play 18). This very first reference to heresy in the plays has been reconstructed by Douglas Sugano as follows:

HERODES REX I shall marryn tho herytykys that belevyn a mysse,
 And therin sette there sacramentys. Fallse they are I say!
 Ther is no lorde in this werde that lokygh me lyke, iwyssse;
 For to lame herytykkys of the lesse lay,
 I am jolyere than the jay! (*N-Town* 18.73-7)¹

Sugano's reconstruction of the textual gaps of the above passage on the basis of the revisions by a later hand associates Herod's speech with other references to heretical depravity in *N-Town*. This reading is entirely in line with the characteristics of the pompous and intimidating monologues of other abusive authorities of the plays, such as Caiaphas, Annas and their legal assistance. Inquisition and heresy hunt become the prerogatives of the persecutors of Christ.

The instigators of the Conspiracy in *Passion Play I* coalesce in their unison of menacing heretics. Annas vindicates the exclusive jurisdiction over heretics and claims an ironically exaggerated *omnitudo potestatis* for himself: "Yf any eretyk here reyn, to me ye compleyn. / For in me lyth the powere, all trewthis to trye, / And pryncypal, oure lawys, tho must I susteyn" (*N-Town* 26.170-2). A variation of this claim appears in Caiaphas's speech:

¹ The four-line passage contains several illegible words, and is also revised by a later hand. Sugano reconstructs the revised text; Stephen Spector edits the text that is recoverable from the original layer: "I xall marryn þo men þat r . . . yn on myche, / And þerinne sette here sacramentys sottys . . . say! / Þer is no lorde in þis werde þat lokygh me lyche. / For to lame l . . . of þe lesse lay . . ." (*The N-Town Plays*, notes to lines 18.73-7). Katherine S. Block also edits this version of the main text and gives the revised readings by the second hand in her notes: "[Note to line 73:] The latter part of this line has been altered in the second hand to (*þo*) *heretykys* (*þat*) *beleuen a-mysse*." She further notes that the obscure word in line 76, "altered by the reviser to *heretykkys*, may be *lo[ve]rys* or *le[ve]rys*" (*Ludus Coventriæ* 153-54).

CAYPHAS I, Cayphas, am jewge with powerys possible
 To distroye all errouris that in oure lawys make varyawns.
 All thyngys I convey be reson and temperawnce,
 And all materis possyble, to me ben palpable. (26.211-4)

Although the arch enemy of his power is identified with “errouris” that make “varyawns” in laws, the canonical distinction between heterodoxy by ignorance (error) and by the obstinate denial and rejection of orthodox faith was not consistently maintained in contemporary legal sources and speculations either (Leff 1-2; Forrest 15). Reginald Pecock, Bishop of Chichester, tried for heretical charges and forced to publically recant, defines error and heresy as synonyms: “an errour or heresye is not þe ynke writen, neipir þe voice spokun, but it is þe meenynge or þe vndirstondyng of þe writer or speker signified bi þilk ynke writen or bi þilk voice spokun” (qtd. in Forrest 16). The preambles of the abjurations of the Norwich heresy trials often introduce the views in which the suspects were found contrary to the Church with the formula “doctrinas erroneas et hereticas admisisse” [to have embraced erroneous and heretical doctrines] and its English counterpart “afermed opin errours and heresies” (cf. e.g. Tanner 52 and 56).

The menaces of Annas and Caiaphas find a specific target only in the speeches of the legal entourage of the two bishops. Lynn Squires observes that the stage directions describe the two doctors of Annas and the two lawyers of Caiaphas in terms of the conventional array of fifteenth-century ecclesiastical and lay judges (208). The furred hoods and caps of the two doctors and the striped robes of the lawyers, Rewfyn and Leyon, permit Squires to identify them as judges and sergeants-at-law: “The council scene as a whole is carefully constructed so as to impress the audience with a show of contemporary power: the costumes and characters represent the range of authority in a late medieval town” (208). The conspirators and the actual executors of the bishops’ plot readily translate Annas and Caiaphas’s universal and general raids on heretics into a concrete target by hereticising Christ: “REWFYN He [Jesus] is an eretyk and a tretour bolde / To Sesare and to oure lawe, ser-tayn!” (*N-Town* 26.309-10). The first doctor of Annas proposes Christ’s dual punishment by hanging and burning, which echoes the terms of the statute *De haeretico comburendo* of 1401, declaring that heretics perpetrate treason, and consequently sanctions their crime with hanging and burning at the stake: “Let hym [Jesus] fyrst ben hangyn and drawe / And thanne his body in fyre be brent” (*N-Town Plays* 26.319-20). Finally, Gamaliel, one of the soldiers arresting Christ in the episode of the Betrayal (Play 28), anticipates the judicial verdict before the ensuing trial

scenes by the announcement of Christ's guilt, again in terms of *De haeretico comburendo*: “Lo, Jhesus, thu mayst not the cace refuse! / Bothe treson and eresye in thee is fownde” (*N-Town Plays* 28.113-4).

The sequence of the two *Passion Plays* – a later addition to the plays – constructs the Passion narrative as a monumental preparation of an inquisition against heresy in *Passion Play I*, whose court trial takes place in *Passion Play II*. Jesus and his disciples are constantly identified as perpetrators of orthodoxy, and consequently, Jesus is condemned as a heretic. In the pageant of the Announcement to the Marys, Mary Magdalene's lament evokes the absent Christ with the phrase “bowndyn in brere” [bound in briar] (*N-Town Plays* 36.40), which ambiguously signifies Christ's crown of thorns, as well as the common humiliation of fifteenth-century heretics before their execution: they were “surrounded by briars as they were being burned at the stake” (*N-Town Plays*, note to line 36.40). The post-resurrection part of the plays represents a symbolic purging of Christ, in which the heretical charges are dropped and turned against those who made ill use of public defamation. The pageant of Cleophas and Luke and the Appearance to Thomas (Play 38) is the only instance of the heretical discourse of *N-Town*, which detaches the notion of heresy from Christ: “THOMAS For be my grett dowte, oure feyth may we preve / Agens all the eretykys that speke of Cryst shame” (*N-Town Plays* 38.387-8).

The “legal plot” of the plays is embedded in this heretical discourse, but it does not stage a dramatic clash between forces of orthodoxy and of heterodoxy. As a matter of fact, the legal design of the plays consists of several subplots with different dominant themes. Christ's life and Passion are conceived as a series of legal challenges. The unique Parliament of Heaven pageant, concluding with the victory of “the case” of Mercy and Peace, contextualizes the heavenly debate in a court of conscience scene with appropriate legal terminology:

PAX Therefore, mesemyth best ye thus acorde;
 Than hefne and erthe, ye shul qweme:
Putt bothe youre sentens in oure Lorde.
 And in his hygh wysdam, *lete hym deme.*
 This is most syttinge, me shulde seme.
 And lete se how we fowre may all abyde.
 That mannys sowle, it shulde perysche, it wore sweme,
 Or that ony of us fro othere shulde dyvyde.

VERITAS In trowthe hereto I consente;
 I wole prey oure Lorde it may so be.
 JUSTICIA I, Ryghtwysnes, am wele contente,
For in hym is very equyté. (N-Town Plays 11,121-32; emphasis added)
 [...]
 FILIUS I thynke the thoughtys of Pes and nowth of wykkydnes.
This I deme, to ses youre contraversy. (11.137-38; emphasis added)

The earthly life of Christ pursues the motif of legal challenge. The first subplot consists of plays where the defamed or accused party is not Christ. Following the spectacular divine arbitrations of the *Mary Play* (especially in Play 8: Joachim and Anne, Play 10: Marriage of Mary and Joseph and Play 11: The Parliament of Heaven), the scribe-compiler inserted the unique pageant of The Trial of Mary and Joseph. In this pageant the Bishop overhears the conversation of detractors and summons both Mary and Joseph to purge themselves. While the process from defamation to summoning and inquisitorial questioning stages contemporary practices, the pageant ends with a miraculous (and rather anachronistic) divine arbitration: an ordeal by a magic potion, which reveals truth that cannot be elicited by the legal methods of inquisition.

Similarly, the pageant of The Woman Taken in Adultery is conceived in terms of public defamation and false accusation. Following Jesus' opening monologue, the scribe [Scriba] is determined to reveal Jesus' hypocritical disguise by appropriating Annas and Caiaphas's concerns with the destruction of laws, as well as by slandering him in a rather debased and condescending manner:

SCRIBA Alas, alas! Oure lawe is lorn!
 A fals ypcryte, Jhesu, be name –
 That of a sheppherdis dowtyr was born –
 Wyl breke oure lawe and make it lame!
 He wyl us werke ryghtmekyl shame!
 His fals purpos – if he upholde –
 All oure lawys he doth defame!
 That stynkyng beggere is woundyr bolde! (N-Town Plays 24.41-48)

The Pharisee [Phariseus] joins the scribe and proposes a framework for countering Christ's teaching to put shame on him. But ultimately, the accuser [Accusator] presents the precise scheme of confronting Jesus with a prostitute caught *in flagranti*. The low language of the accuser denigrating the woman cannot conceal his indulgence in the erotic fantasies which still show both the prostitute and her sexual services attractive:

ACCUSATOR Herke, Sere Pharysew and Sere Scrybe:
 A ryght good sporte I kan yow telle!
 I undyrtake that ryght a good brybe
 We all shul have to kepe councell:
 A fayre yonge qwene hereby doth dwelle,
 Both fresch and gay upon to loke,
 And a tall man with her doth melle.
 The wey into hyr chawmere ryght evyn he toke.

Lett us thre now go streyte thedyr,
 The wey ful evyn I shall yow lede,
 And we shul take them both togedyr
 Whyll that thei do that synful dede. (24.65-76)

The display of verbal violence and obscene slander of the conspirators represents the harshest registers of low language, which evokes at the same time the more moderate, though equally insulting, language of the accusers of Joseph and Mary in the pageant of The Trial of Mary and Joseph:

SCRIBA Come forth, thu stotte! Com forth, thu scowte!
 Com forth, thu bysmare and brothel bolde!
 Com forth, thu hore and stynkyng bych clowte!
 How longe hast thu such harlotry holde?
 PHARISEUS Com forth, thu quene! Come forth, thu scolde!
 Com forth, thu sloveyn! Com forth, thu slutte!
 We shal thee tecche with carys colde,
 A lytyl bettyr to kepe thi kutte! (24.145-52)

DETRACTOR 2 Ya, that old shrewe Joseph – my trowth I plyght –
 Was so anameryd upon that mayd
 That of hyr bewté whan he had syght,
 He sesyd nat tyll he had her asayd!
 DETRACTOR 1 A, nay, nay, wel wers she hath hym payd!
 Sum fresch yonge galaunt she loveth wel more
 That his leggys to her hath leyd.
 And that doth greve the old man sore!

DETRACTOR 2 Be my trewth, al may wel be,
 For fresch and fayr she is to syght,
 And such a mursel – as semyth me –
 Wolde cause a yonge man to have delyght!
 [. . .]

DETRACTOR 2 That olde cokolde was evyl beglyyd
 To that fresche wench whan he was wedde!
 Now muste he faderyn anothyr manrys chylde
 And with his swynke, he shal be fedde.
 DETRACTOR 1 A yonge man may do more chere in bedde
 To a yonge wench than may an olde.
 That is the cawse such a lawe is ledde,
 That many a man is a kokewolde. (14.82-89 and 98-105)

Just as the *N-Town* playwright operates with linguistic codes to identify the depravity of the detractors and plotters, the notary of the Norwich heresy trials, John of Exeter, seems to have been engaged in the reconstruction of a linguistic identity of the accused and, ultimately, in the exploration of the potentials of language use in the heresy trials. In the period of 1428-31, John Alnwick, Bishop of Norwich, orchestrated the hearings of a large group of Lollard suspects of Norfolk and Suffolk. The extant documentation of the legal procedure contains fifty-four cases of at least sixty persons, recorded by the episcopal notary John of Exeter (Tanner 8). John Foxe, who undoubtedly had access to more materials, reports double this number in Book 6 of his *Acts and Monuments* (Tanner 8). Shannon McSheffrey's and Maureen Jurkowski's calculations of the persons involved in the investigations consider also "individuals directly implicated by the testimony of others," but reach different conclusions: they put the number of suspects at 83 and 127 respectively (Jurkowski 122). The dimensions of the Norwich heresy investigations can only be compared to those attested by the courtbook of the investigation of Bishop John Longland in the Lincoln diocese almost a century later in 1518-21 (Hudson 38-40, 129).

The Norwich heresy trials were instigated by the activity of the "recidivist" William White and his followers in Kent, who established a network in Suffolk and Norfolk (Aston, "William White" 469-97; Aston, "Bishops and Heresy" 77; Hudson 33). After the initial activity of William Alnwick, who presided over the majority of the hearings, the bishop's absence becomes conspicuous in the second phase of the trials, in which many hearings were conducted by his vicar general William Bernham. By the later phase of the trial series (1430-1), Alnwick must have been detained by his participation in the trial of Joan of Arc in Rouen.

The documentation of the Norwich trials survives in a unique manuscript, which is not a courtbook. London, Westminster Diocesan Archives, MS B.2 contains copies of original notes, depositions and recantations in an arrangement without any apparent scheme (Tanner 2). My

investigation of the manuscript concluded that the dynamism of the exigencies of the inquisitorial process determined when and where the material of a suspect could be filed.² The unfinished documentation preserved the enfolding narrative of an unprecedented heresy trial series, in which John of Exeter occasionally also acted on behalf of his superiors and took the lead in a few (legally dubious) hearings. But even when his task was restricted to playing the second violin in the quest for heretics, he relentlessly observed the language and behaviour of the suspects.

Steven Justice's study of the interrelations of inquisition, speech and writing in the case of the Norwich heresy trials concludes:

I have not tried to claim that John of Exeter was sympathetic to the heretics. My argument is stranger: that he did not particularly pay attention to them as heretics, and that the boredom of scribal work drove him to record their words; that this sort of detached curiosity could produce a record historiographically more usable than either a hostile or a friendly account, because so little under ideological pressure, or indeed any pressure less vagrant than the need to occupy the mind; *that a chink in the armature of institutional power is the banality of so much of its work.* (Justice 318)

While Justice believes that John's motivation to record the spontaneous vernacular expressions of the accused was sheer boredom and a fundamental need to occupy one's mind, the notary's personal involvement in a few private conversations with the Lollards contradicts the assumption that he acted out of a sense of blind duty. Some of the hearings were also conducted by the notary privately, either in circumstances of face-to-face conversations with the suspect (John Burrell, 5 and 10 July 1429) or with a few witnesses in John's home (William Colyn, 23 Oct 1429). But besides these exceptional episodes whose scenarios were obviously arranged by the notary, his apparent interventions in the testimonies of the suspects also seem to derive naturally from the notary's personal zeal. The few passages that permit us to reconstruct his methods of keeping record of the hearings uncover the deeper psychology of the hearings and the notary's personal interest in the manifestations of different perceptions and expressions of truth. John's sensitivity to the idiosyncrasies of the Lollards appears in both explicit and implicit ways. The more obvious case is illustrated by the macaronic testimonies of Margery Baxter and John Burrell.

² I am grateful to the European Society of the Study of English (ESSE), whose postdoctoral bursary allowed me to carry out research on the manuscript in the collections of the Westminster Diocesan Archives.

Margery's is one of the most complex cases of the trials; she was summoned to the episcopal court on two occasions; her husband, William Baxter of Martham, also figures among the major suspects (Tanner 41-51). The records make it clear that the *publica fama* of the couple was compromised by their alleged connections with William White, who had been burnt for heresy in 1428 in Norwich (Aston, "William White" 71-100; Hudson 33-4). The first hearing of Margery on 7 October 1428 was concluded with the ordering of her public flogging in front of Martham parish church and at the market of Acles, as well as her performance of public penitence in Norwich Cathedral on Ash Wednesday and Maundy Thursday of the following year (Tanner 43). Her case was, however, reopened on 1 April 1429, and was retried with the involvement of three witnesses whose depositions against Margery also survive in the manuscript. The records do not contain her punishment. Her state as a relapsed heretic should have incurred dual execution by hanging and burning according to the statute *De haeretico comburendo* (1401) in vigour at the time of the heresy trials. There is, however, no extant record proving her second conviction and eventual execution (Tanner 22; Thomson 123).

In the second hearing of Margery, John of Exeter inserts several English passages in the deposition of Johanna Clifland, quoting sentences from her private conversations with Margery. These macaronic passages thus occur as a reported speech within a reported speech, doubly distanced from John's authority, but in a crucial moment of the trials when a suspect's relapse into heresy had to be proved. The macaronic passages of Johanna Clifland's deposition evoke vivid episodes of Margery's hostility to oaths and the veneration of images:

[I]psa Johanna Clifland dixit quod die Veneris proximo ante festum Purificationis Beate Marie ultimum Margeria Baxter, uxor Willelmi Baxter, wright, nuper commorantis in Martham Norwiciensis diocesis, sedens et suens cum ista iurata in camera eiusdem iuxta camenum in presencia istius iurare ac Iohanne Grymell et Agnetis Bethom, servencium istius iurare, dixit et informavit istam iuratam et servientes suas predictas quod nullo modo iurarent, dicens in lingua materna: "*dame, bewar of the bee, for every bee wil stynge, and therfor loke that 3e swer nother be Godd ne be Our Ladi ne be non other seynt, and if 3e do the contrarie the be will stynge your tunge and veneme your sowle.*" (Tanner 44; emphasis added)

[The same Johanna Clifland said that on the following Friday before the latest Feast of the Purification of the Virgin Mary, Margery Baxter, wife of William Baxter, carpenter, recently living in Martham of the Diocese of Norwich, was sitting and sowing in her chamber at the fireplace with this

witness, and in the company of this witness, as well as of her servants Iohanna Grymell and Agnes Bethom told her and her servants before mentioned not to swear under any circumstances, saying in her mother tongue: “Dame, beware of the bee, for every bee stings, and therefore, look that you swear neither by God nor by our Lady or by any other saint; and if you do the contrary, the bee will sting your tongue and poison your soul.”³

Immediately following Margery’s cautions against the bee, Joan relates another episode, quoting again Margery’s vernacular:

Et tunc dicta Margeria [. . .] dicens in lingua materna, ‘lewed wrightes of stokes hewe and fourme suche crosses and ymages, and after that lewed peyntors glorye thaym with colours, et si vos affectatis videre veram crucem Christi ego volo monstrare eam tibi hic in domo tua propria.’ (Tanner 44)

[And then the said Margery . . . said in her mother tongue: ‘ignorant carvers hew and shape such crosses and images, and afterwards ignorant painters glorify them with colours. But if you wish to see the true cross of Christ, I will show it to you here, in your own house. (translation mine)’]

At this point, the records insert a small narrative of the witness’s consent to seeing the true cross and Margery’s performing the embodiment of the Cross by reaching out her arms. This vivid episode is an anecdotic gem with suspense, surprise, and a dramatic exchange of words between Margery and Joan. Although incursions against the veneration of images are the most frequently quoted heretical views in the trials (Tanner 11), Margery’s very personal revolt against images makes her opposition a memorable episode of the hearings.

The uncommon and unusual expressions of personal discontent and zeal also suspend John’s routine work of recording the standard grievances of the suspects in John Burrell’s case. Like Margery, he was summoned to court also on two occasions (18 April 1428 and 5 July 1428), and his case was concluded with his public recantation on 9 December 1430, extant in the records. The English insertions into the Latin text of his trial are more restricted in length than those in Margery’s case. Moreover, unlike in Margery’s records, the notary rather signposts John Burrell’s unorthodoxy with recording the untranslatable puns disgracing certain devotional practices. The pun on the name of the shrine and the Virgin of Walsingham, Norfolk, also appears in Margery’s and John

³ Translation mine. Anne Hudson considers “wright” as an alternative surname of William Baxter/Wright (138, 182). I interpret it as an occupational indicator.

Skyllan's cases (Tanner 47 and 148), which suggests that they had a wider currency among the Lollards: "Item peregrinaciones nullo modo sunt faciende ad Mariam de Falsyngham nec ad Thomam Cantuar' nec ad aliqua alia loca nisi tantum ad vicinos indigentes." (Tanner 74) [Also, pilgrimages should in no way be done to the Mary of Falsyngham, to Thomas of Canterbury or to any other sites, unless they are in the close vicinity. (translation mine)].⁴

The frequent marginal notes on the pages of John Burrell's case further indicate the interests of the investigators to use all evidence of content as well as expression and style against other suspects (Tanner 73-76, notes). A marginal sign [:-] can be found next to another pun in Burrell's case, which comments on the Lollard rejection of fasting: "nul-lus homo tenetur iejunare [...] quia talia ieunia nunquam erant instituta ex precepto divino sed tantum ex ordinacione presbiterorum, for every Fryday is fre day." (Tanner 74) [noone is bound to fast. . . , because fasts were never established by divine commandment, but only by the ordinances of priests, and because Friday is free day (translation mine)]. Finally, John of Exeter also records a vernacular passage in John Burrell's examination, probably not for the curiosity of the suspect's expression but for the fact that it quotes the Bible:

Item dicit quod idem frater suus docuit istum iuratum precepta Dei in lin-gua Anglicana, et quod in primo mandato continetur quod nullus honor est exhibendus aliquibus ymaginibus sculptis in ecclesiis per manus hominum, ne likened after hem in hevene above ne after hem that be in water benethe erthe, to lowte thaym ne worshipe thaym. (Tanner 73)

[Also, he said that the same brother taught this same suspect God's Commandments in the English language, and also that the first Commandment says that no carved images made by men's hands should be worshipped in the churches, *nor the likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, nor of those things that are in the waters under the earth* should be praised or worshipped. (translation mine)]⁵

⁴ In the case of Margery Baxter, the witness Johanna Clifland relates that Margery imparted to her her aversion to pilgrimages, quoting the same pun: "ipsa [Margery] nunquam iret peregre ad Mariam de Falsyngham" (Tanner 47) [Margery would never go on pilgrimage to the Mary of Falsyngham]. John of Exeter recorded a whole list of abusive puns in the case of John Skyllan: "Also that no pilgrimage shuld be do to the Lefdy of Falsyngham, the Lefdy of Foulpette and to Thomme of Cankerbury, ne to noon other seyntes ne ymages" (Tanner 148).

⁵ The translated biblical verse (Ex 20:4) comes from the Douay-Rheims 1899 American edition. The verse is only partially blended into the Latin with some syntactic confusion.

Besides the macaronic excerpts of the records, many other instances of the trials suggest that John of Exeter was constantly revising both the Latin documents and the English recantations, containing reminiscences of the suspects' utterances. The more idiomatic phrasing of a handful of the English recantations illustrates the efforts the notary took to register some collective characteristics of the suspects' use of the vernacular.⁶ Nonetheless, John also found that a meticulous interest in the linguistic decoding of Lollard reasoning may also frustrate the goals of the hearings. The paradox of John's records is his simultaneous involvement in, and distancing from, what he identifies as a Lollard idiom. As soon as he grasps the linguistic identity of his opponents, he obfuscates their language (and his own translation from one idiom into the other) probably in order not to sound like them. An example of this is John's reluctance to translate literally "every trewe man and woman being in charite" (Tanner 57; Justice 302). In John Skelly's case, the Latin says: "quilibet homo existens in vera caritate" [whichever man being in true faith] (Tanner 52). But in the Godeselle couple's later hearings, the notary renders the same phrase as "quilibet fidelis homo et quelibet fidelis mulier" [whichever true man and whichever true woman] (Tanner 61 and 67). In John Kynget's English denunciation, the notary's oscillations between the positions of biased distance and objective involvement found a way to record the authentic expression of the suspect without appropriating the speech marker of the Lollards: "[John Kynget believed that] the sacrament of Baptem, *whyche the heretikes calle the shakelment of Baptem*, doon in water in the fourme custimed in the Churche is of none availe ne to be pondred" (Tanner 81, emphasis added).

What is common in the Norwich heresy trial records and the *N-Town* staging of hereticizing procedures is the suggestion that morality and immorality determine language use, and the ability of making good decisions in legal scenarios is ultimately bound to awareness of language and recognition of language codes, which can be taught and practiced with pedagogical insistence. The various trial scenes preceding the legal plot of *Passion Play II* stage different situations of victimization and institu-

The Middle English fragment literally says that images should not be likened to anything that is above in heaven or in the waters beneath the earth. The original verse reads: "Thou shalt not make to thyself a graven thing, nor the likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, nor of those things that are in the waters under the earth."

⁶ These are the cases of John Skelly, John Kynget, Richard Flecher, John Reeve, Hawisia Moone, John Skyllan, William Hardy, William Bate and Thomas Moone, corresponding to case numbers 5, 13, 14, 22, 28, 29, 30, 31 and 35 in Tanner.

tional abuses, all of which exploit the dramatic potentials of language. The overall theme that unites the several threads of the legal discourse and trial scenes is language. *The N-Town Plays* has also provided a rich store for the study of the reflections on language and the identity of its users in late medieval drama. Plummer concluded that the very drama of *N-Town* originates from the competing claims to control language:

[S]everal critics have taken note of the importance of language as a theme in the religious drama of late medieval England: the work of Paula Neuss and Kathleen Ashley on *Mankind* and that of Martin Stevens of the Wakefield plays has helped to make us more keenly aware of these dramatists' self-consciousness about language. [. . .] The author of the N-Town Passion Play I shares with some of his colleagues a marked interest in language as a theme, though he differs from the author of *Mankind* and the Wakefield author in the use he makes of it. For the N-Town author, language is not so much an indicator of a character's spiritual state – though that is no doubt also true – as an arena of conflict. [. . .] Christ and Satan struggle over the power to name, and thus to structure, the world. The conflict is thus not primarily between good words and evil words, though there are examples of both, but between Christ and Satan themselves over control of language, not merely what is said but how it means. (313 and 315)

My suggestion beyond Plummer's interpretation is, however, that language not only constitutes an arena for conflict and a power struggle for control, but that the corrupted authorities of inquisition, persecution and judgment are united in their desperate endeavour to find out the linguistic identity of their opponents. Language is construed not only as a theme which helps the playwright to translate legal opposition into a clash between wicked/immoral language and a pure and taintless expression of the defamed, but it becomes also a tool that could provide a safer code and strategy for the identification of heretics than their vague pronouncements of intentions. Although *The N-Town Plays* stages a perverted inquisition whose orthodoxy falls short of the doctrines of the Church, the desire of the persecutors to obtain a key to the language of the "sect of Christ" serves to identify the fictitious stage characters of Annas, Caiaphas and other representatives of the institutional jurisdiction as soul mates of John of Exeter, the notary of the Norwich heresy trials.

The N-Town Plays subtly surveys the struggles of the inquisitorial authorities to prevent the appearance of unfounded or hasty judgments, as well as to create the conditions of a legally self-explanatory situation in which the utterances of the suspect would automatically incur the sanc-

tions for heresy. Ian Forrest's statements about the general dilemmas of medieval inquisition can very relevantly be applied to the *N-Town* heresy hunters:

Historians of heresy, like their inquisitorial forerunners, set themselves a difficult task if they wish to discover intention. More knowable are the methods used by inquisitors to narrow down the potential margin of error, remaining aware that pronouncements of heresy could never be definitive judgements. Judgement of final guilt or innocence belonged solely to God. On earth it was mankind's responsibility to protect the peace of the church by punishing the most dangerous examples of heresy, and tolerating those who could not be punished without causing scandal equal to the damage done by the crime itself. The requirement for justice, to balance punishment with equity, meant that the whole canonical system was predicated upon indeterminacy and careful interpretation. (16)

The corollary of this pervasive uncertainty, in the overall design of *The N-Town Plays*, is the view that instead of interpreting heresy as a momentary and situational expression of intention, it should be defined as an essential part of the person's identity that must find an individual and idiomatic expression.

The *N-Town* playwright uses the theme of language to dramatize the double frustration of inquisition. On the one hand, their pedagogical attempts at eliciting truth from Christ fail in crucial moments, as the dialogic model of dramatic discourse prevalent in the trial scenes is inherently alien from the monologic discourses of the revelation of truth (cf. Fitzhenry 22-3). Very conspicuously, the sufferers of legal abuses – Mary, the adulterous woman and Christ – are shown mostly silent or low-key in front of their accusers. The revelations of truth are rather bound to monologic modes of expression that take the form of quasi-sermons or recitations of liturgical texts, which ultimately proves the failure of inquisitorial process in obtaining truth. On the other hand, the inquisitorial authorities are frustrated by their own assumption that there must be a sectarian and collective characteristic of the heretics' use of language, which could be grasped as a code to their identities. The plays construct a frame of interpretation which shows inquisition as a quest for the collective linguistic identity of the "heretics." The playwright does not experiment with creating a fictitious idiom for Christ and his disciples (and in this respect he is not at all comparable to John of Exeter, who actually recorded the markers of Lollardy in the suspects' language). Nevertheless, he attributes such claims to inquisition and sug-

gests that their pedagogical tools are insufficient to find out whether a collective idiom of the heretics exists, let alone to elicit it.

This frame of interpretation is established already in the pageant of Moses, which interprets the fifth Commandment (the prohibition of killing) with the fatal consequences of wicked speech:

The fyfft comaundement byddyth all us:
 Scle no man, no whight that thu kyll.
 Undyrstonde this precept thus:
 Scle no wyght with wurd nor wyll.
Wykkyd worde werkyht oftyntyme grett ill,
Bewar therfore of wykkyd langage.
Wyckyd spech many on doth spyll.
Therfore of spech beth not owtrage. (*N-Town Plays* 6.131-8)

The counterpart of this caution is Demon's Prologue in *Passion Play I*, which not only instigates wicked speech, but also explicitly sets the Commandments at naught and evokes the triumph of perjury at assize courts:

DEMON Loke thu sett not be precept nor be comawndement,
 Both sevyle and canoun, sett thu at nowth;
 Lette no membre of God, but with othys be rent. (*N-Town Plays* 26.93-5)
 [...]
 Seyse nere sessyon, lete perjery be chef. (26.114)

The playwright constructs the linguistic identity of detractors and abusers of law in various ways. The detractors of the pageant of The Trial of Mary and Joseph deploy the style of popular contemporary erotic and vulgar poems mocking the trials and joys of marriage:

DETRACTOR 1 Such a yonge damesel of bewté bryght
 And of schap so comely also
 Of hir tayle ofte tyme be light
 And rygh tekyl undyr thee, too! (*N-Town Plays* 14.94-7)
 [...]

DETRACTOR 1 A yonge man may do more chere in bedde
 To a yonge wench than may an olde.
 That is the cawse such a lawe is ledde,
 That many a man is a kokewolde. (14.102-5)

The “Accusator” of the pageant of The Woman Taken in Adultery uses harshly abusive language for the woman (cf. *N-Town Plays* 24.145-52 qtd.

above). Demon in his harangue introducing *Passion Play I* boasts with aureate language, Latinate vocabulary and Latin refrains:

Whan the soule fro the body shal make separacyon,
 And as for hem that be undre my grett domynacyon,
 He shal fayle of hese intent and purpose, also.
 Be this tyxt of holde remembryd to myn intencyon:
 “*Quia in inferno nulla est redempcio.*” (26.44-8)

[. . .]

Byholde the dyvercyté of my dysgysyd varyauns,
 Eche thyng sett of dewe naterall dysposycyon,
 And eche parte accordynge to his resemblauns,
 Fro the sool of the foot to the hyest asencyon. (26.65-8)

The tyrants and plotting leaders of the plays are identified with menaces. In spite of the diversity of stylistic registers and gestures of the abusers of law, they are united in their common and sincere wish to find out the “language code” of their opponents.

The quest for heresy is transfigured into a quest for the expression of the identity of the group who are collectively labelled as heretics. The pageant of the Conspiracy with Judas (Play 27) in *Passion Play I*, takes an ironic turn when after agreeing on the details of the conspiracy with Judas, one of the plotters realizes that they cannot seize Christ as they cannot distinguish him from his disciples:

LEYON Ya, beware of that, for ony thyng!
For o dyscipil is lyche thi mayster in al parayl,
 And ye go lyche in all clothyng,
 So myth we of oure purpose fayl. (N-Town Plays 27.321-4; emphasis added)

Leyon’s anxiety recasts the opponents into a sectarian group whose “parayl” means more than the dresses and habits of Jesus and his disciples. In his farewell speech to the disciples, Jesus extends the meaning of dresses to words, virtues and behaviour as part of the expression of their collective identity:

JHESUS *The gyrdyl* that was comawndyd, here reynes to sprede,
 Shal be the gyrdyl of clennes and chastyté:
That is to sayn, to be contynent in word, thought, and dede,
 And all leccherous levyng, cast yow for to fle.

And the schon that shal be youre feet upon
 Is not ellys but exawnpyl of vertuis levyng

Of youre form-faderys, you beforne.
With these schon, my steppys ye shal be sewyng.

*And the staf that in youre handys ye shal holde
Is not ellys but the exawmpyls to other men teche.*

(*N-Town Plays* 27.417-26; emphasis added)

The girdles, the shoes and the staff that are supposed to be worn and carried by all the disciples as signs of their newly avowed way of life in the imitation of Christ become symbols of their commonly shared words, language, deeds, virtues and teaching. But this collective identity to be manifested in speech is only in its making. It does not yield to Caiaphas's impatient questioning: "And *what is thi dottryne* that thu dost preche? / Telle me now somewhath, and bryng us out of doute / That we may to othere men thi prechyg forth teche" (*N-Town* 29.131-3, emphasis added); nor does it seem to be shared by Christ and the disciples in the *qui-pro-quo* on the way to Emmaus. But finally, in this pageant, the playwright restores not only the correct interpretation of heresy (*N-Town Plays* 38.387-8 quoted above), but transforms multi-vocal language into a unison of Christ, which is the language (meaning language, message and conversation in the context) the inquisitors were desperately looking for:

JHESUS *Qwat is youre langage to me ye say*
That ye have togedyr, ye to?
Sory and evysum ye been alway –
Youre myrthe is gon. Why is it so? (*N-Town Plays* 38.45-8; emphasis added)

[. . .]

LUCAS For dowte of Pylat, that hygh justyce,
He was slain at the gret asyse
Be councell of lordys, many on.
Of suche langage – take bettyr avise
In every company ther thu dost gon. (38.108-12; emphasis added)

[. . .]

CLEOPHAS Trewly from us ye shal not go.
Ye shal abyde with us here styll!
Youre goodly dalyaunce plesyth us so,
We may nevyr have of yow oure fylle!
We pray yow, sere, with herty wylle:
All nyght with us abyde and dwelle,
More goodly langage to talkyn us tylle
And of youre good dalyaunce more for to telle. (38.169-76)

N-Town's engagement with the language of inquisitorial procedures and the linguistic characteristics of detractors is similar to John of Exeter's involvement in the conflicting biases and truths during a staged process of questioning that must obey strict rules of choreography. The concerns of the scribe-compiler of *N-Town* ultimately challenge institutional inquisitions and the dialogic mode of acquiring truth by exploring the distortions of personal integrity and truth in different situations of questioning.

References

Manuscript

London, Westminster Diocesan Archives, B.2/8 (The Norwich Heresy Trials)

Published Sources

Aston, Margaret. "William White's Lollard Followers." *Catholic Historical Review* 68 (1982): 469-97.

—. "Bishops and Heresy: The Defence of the Faith." *Faith and Fire: Popular and Unpopular Religion, 1350-1600*. Ed. Margaret Aston. London: The Hambledon Press, 1993. 73-93.

De haeretico comburendo (1401). Text: Statutes of the Realm, 2:12S-28: 2 Henry IV. <http://www.ric.edu/faculty/rpotter/heretico.html> (9 October 2014)

Fitzhenry, William. "The N-Town Plays and the Politics of Metatheater." *Studies in Philology* 100 (2003): 22-43.

Flannery, Mary C. and Katie L. Walter, eds. *The Culture of Inquisition in Medieval England*. Westfield Medieval Studies 4. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2013.

Fletcher, Alan J. "The N-Town Plays." *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*. Ed. Richard Beadle. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. 163-88.

Forrest, Ian. *The Detection of Heresy in Late Medieval England*. Oxford Historical Monographs. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Hudson, Anne. *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988.

Jurkowski, Maureen. "Lollardy and Social Status in East Anglia." *Speculum* 82 (2007): 120-52.

Justice, Steven. "Inquisition, Speech, and Writing: A Case from Late Medieval Norwich." *Criticism and Dissent in the Middle Ages*. Ed. Rita Copeland. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. 289-322.

Leff, Gordon. *Heresy in the Later Middle Ages: The Relation of Heterodoxy to Dissent c. 1250-c. 1450*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1967.

Ludus Coventriæ, or The Plaie Called Corpus Christi. Cotton MS. Vespasian D. VIII. Ed. Katherine S. Block. Early English Text Society, E.S. 120. London: Oxford University Press, 1922.

The N-Town Plays. Ed. Douglas Sugano. Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007.

Plummer, John F. "The Logomachy of the N-Town Passion Play I." *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 88 (1989): 311-31.

Squires, Lynn. "Law and Disorder in 'Ludus Coventriæ'." *Comparative Drama* 12 (1978): 200-13.

Tanner, Norman P., ed. *Heresy Trials in the Diocese of Norwich, 1428-31, Edited for the Royal Historical Society from Westminster Diocesan Archives MS. B.2.* Camden Fourth Series 20. London: Offices of the Royal Historical Society, 1977.

Thomson, John A. F. *The Later Lollards, 1414-1520.* London: Oxford University Press, 1965.