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# The N-Town Plays and the Politics of Metatheater

by William Fitzhenry

THE N-Town plays are a scribal *compilatio*, written down and compiled in East Anglia during the second half of the fifteenth century, that self-reflexively meditates on the range and effects of vernacular drama.<sup>1</sup> The preoccupation of these plays with the limits and potential of vernacular dramatic activity implicates them in the contemporary political debates about the appropriate role of the vernacular in late medieval English culture.<sup>2</sup> In his efforts to define the parameters of vernacular drama, the N-Town scribe-compiler enacts a sort of theatrical self-analysis through his depiction of the complex interaction between two contrasting theatrical models: the monologic and the dialogic.<sup>3</sup> The first or monologic model conceives of theater as a resolutely

<sup>1</sup> Alan Fletcher provides a fine assessment of the N-Town plays as a scribal compilation in his "The N-Town Plays," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. Richard Beadle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 163–88.

<sup>2</sup> For an incisive account of these debates, see Nicholas Watson, "Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate, and Arundel's Constitution of 1409," *Speculum* 70 (1995): 837. While Watson argues that Arundel's *Constitutions* virtually extinguished a "nascent vernacular religious culture" (859) in fifteenth-century England, I am not arguing about the specific cultural effects of this legislation, but rather outlining the vexed and contentious nature of writing in the vernacular at this time. Also see Ralph Hanna III, "The Difficulty of Ricardian Prose Translation: The Case of the Lollards," *Modern Language Quarterly* 51 (1990): 319–40.

<sup>3</sup> I am borrowing these terms from M. M. Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981). My idea of stage/audience relations partially derives from Anthony Gash's critique of "the dramatic process as a one-way transmission of doctrine from authors to audience via the medium of actors" in his article "Carnival against Lent: The Ambivalence of Medieval Drama," in *Medieval Literature: Criticism, Ideology and History*, ed. David Aers (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 75. I am also indebted to Sarah Beckwith's suggestive description of the dialogic nature of medieval drama in "Ritual, Church and Theatre: Medieval Dramas of the Sacramental Body," *Culture and History, 1350–1600: Essays on English Communities, Identities and Writing*, ed. David Aers (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992), 65–89.

didactic medium in which there is a one-way transference of knowledge from stage to audience. According to this model, the intent of the playwright, the actor's performance, and the understanding of the audience converge to affirm a single, authoritative message. The second model posits a more dynamic and interactive form of drama that initiates an open-ended dialogue between stage and audience. In this model, the boundaries between playwright, actor, and audience do not collapse to underwrite a single, overarching idea, but rather remain in tension with one another, multiplying interpretive possibilities rather than reducing them. Within the context of the N-Town plays, neither of these models taken alone seems sufficient, as the distinctively self-referential drama of these plays appears to proceed from the oscillation between the monologic and dialogic. This variety of vernacular drama insists upon the necessity of controlling the interpretation of the plays and respecting the didactic intent of the playwright; but it also creates a space for an intellectually active audience that is capable of constructing divergent and even heterodox interpretations of the plays.<sup>4</sup>

The oscillation between the monologic and dialogic models of drama that informs the N-Town plays engenders the self-reflexive theatrical events through which the scribe-compiler evaluates the nature of vernacular drama. In her thorough study of East Anglian religion, politics, and drama, Gail Gibson meticulously delineates the "incarnational aesthetic" that underwrites that region's devotional and dramatic activity.<sup>5</sup> Gibson defines this aesthetic as the "ever-growing tendency to transform the abstract and theological to the personal and concrete,"<sup>6</sup> as evidenced by the "greater sensory concreteness with which the central mystery of Incarnation was experienced in late medieval devotion."<sup>7</sup> While I respect Gibson's efforts to rigorously define a central aesthetic for the N-Town drama, I think that her incarnational ideal only partially accounts for the rich dramatic activity these plays embody and scrutinize. Instead of moving towards a drama that focuses on the personal and concrete, I think that the N-Town plays employ their self-reflexive characters and situations to stage the tension between the abstract and the concrete, and to suggest how the personal becomes a vehicle for

<sup>4</sup> For the possibility of divergent responses to medieval performances, see Claire Sponsler, "The Culture of the Spectator: Conformity and Resistance to Medieval Performances," *Theater Journal* 44 (1992): 15-29.

<sup>5</sup> Gail McMurray Gibson, *The Theater of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

a much more intellectualized version of drama. For instance, characters like *Contemplacio*, *Demon*, the *Virgin Mary*, and *Herod the Great* are concretely realized characters that simultaneously raise important philosophical questions about theater, religion, and politics. In this way, the N-Town plays invoke an idealized audience that is able to identify with the characters on stage while at the same time maintaining enough emotional distance to thoughtfully evaluate the political and religious implications of their speech and actions. Thus, an analysis of the tension between N-Town's differing dramatic models as well as an assessment of the self-reflexive nature of its characters will help to uncover the more abstract, intellectual underpinnings of the N-Town plays.

R. W. Hanning, in his study of the "Fall of Lucifer" plays, first describes the self-reflexive aspects of medieval English playwrights: "the cycle dramatists indicate that they know the limits of their art, and thus differentiate the intent of their mimesis, which is to glorify God by showing his dealings with men, especially through his Son, from the subversive and delusory intent of Lucifer's imitation of his Maker."<sup>8</sup> Hanning's formulation raises the important notion of medieval vernacular drama as a sort of metatheater, embodying a sophisticated dramatic practice that acknowledges and meditates upon the significance of its own theatricality.<sup>9</sup> However, Hanning attributes a certainty and confidence to the cycle dramatists regarding their ability to distinguish between the delusory and the genuinely devotional aspects of their dramatic art that does not seem to be consistently present. The N-Town scribe-compiler is not always certain about the boundaries of his art, and constantly tries to separate the more subversive qualities of the drama from its more orthodox and trustworthy ones. This artistic anxiety regarding the value and purpose of vernacular drama mirrors and invokes the intense cultural concerns regarding the moral and social effects of this drama. Indeed, the consistently self-reflexive nature of the N-Town plays, and the number of scenes that consider the proper uses of drama, are intended to address the objections about the validity of vernacular drama raised by clerics and other cultural leaders. In effect, the N-Town scribe-compiler at once cautions his audience

<sup>8</sup> R. W. Hanning, "'You Have Begun a Parlous Pleye': The Nature and Limits of Dramatic Mimesis as a Theme in Four Middle English 'Fall of Lucifer' Cycle Plays," in *The Drama in the Middle Ages: Comparative and Critical Essays*, ed. Clifford Davidson, C. J. Gianakaris, and John H. Stroupe, (New York: AMS, 1982), 140-68.

<sup>9</sup> For the basis of my understanding of this term see Lionel Abel's *Metatheatre: A New Form of Dramatic Form* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1963), 60.

about the possible abuses of vernacular drama, while also affirming the essential role this drama plays in late medieval culture.

Archbishop Arundel's *Constitutions*, issued in 1409, manifest the contested status of the vernacular in fifteenth-century England. This legislation crystallizes clerical anxiety about the uncontrolled proliferation of vernacular preaching and writing. Arundel suggests the threatening qualities of the vernacular when he demands the licensing of vernacular preachers in the first article and forbids the translation of Scripture into the vernacular in the seventh article.<sup>10</sup> These articles speak directly to the perceived threat of Lollard Christianity, whose commitment to vernacular preaching and translation exhibits the potentially heretical and disruptive uses of the vernacular. Arundel's *Constitutions* attempt to contain the unauthorized spread of vernacular preaching and translation, since these activities might pose a substantial threat to the orthodox clergy's control of the sacred, especially in terms of its traditional monopoly over scriptural interpretation.<sup>11</sup> These *Constitutions* represent what Anne Hudson calls orthodoxy's "instinct of suppression," whereby "the establishment's answer to heresy among the laity was not to be a reasoned argument for its rejection, but a suppression of all discussion of theological or ecclesiastical issues, tending to heresy or not."<sup>12</sup> This statement powerfully suggests the high degree of clerical nervousness around the vernacular either as a medium for theological ideas or as a method of response to Lollard vernacular treatises.

<sup>10</sup> The *Constitutions* are printed in David Wilkins, ed., *1737 Concilia Magnae Britanniae et Hibernia*, 4 vols. (London: Brussels, 1964), 3:314–19. The relevant portion of the first article reads: "Quod nullus secularis (aut regularis) ad praedicandum verbum Dei a jure scripto minime auctorizatus, privilegio speciali munitus, officium sive exercitum praedicationis eiusdem verbi Dei in se assumat, populo aut clero quovismodo praedicet, in Latino sermone, seu vulgari, in ecclesia, aut extra, nisi primo dioecetano illius loci, in quo sic praedicare nititur, se praesentet, et examinationem subeat . . ." (3:315). The seventh article states: ". . . statuimus igitur ordinamus, ut nemo deinceps aliquem textum sacrae scripturae auctoritate sua in linguam Anglicanam, vel aliam transferat, per viam libri, libelli, aut tractatus . . ." (3:317).

<sup>11</sup> An excellent discussion of the contested nature of the sacred in late medieval England occurs in David Aers and Lynn Staley, *The Powers of the Holy: Religion, Politics and Gender in Late Medieval English Culture* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996). Aers suggests the importance of the Lollards in raising questions about definitions of the sacred in terms of "what constituted appropriate forms of Christian discipleship, over access to the Scriptures, over hermeneutic authority, over many aspects of ecclesiastical organization, including its economic and political power, over the legitimate sources of religious authority, and over such fundamental symbols of Christian unity and salvation as the body of Christ" (44).

<sup>12</sup> Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 431.

But Arundel does not fully adhere to the repressive impulse of his articles, since he does encourage the implementation of orthodox vernacular writing to underwrite clerical prerogatives. Margaret Aston cites the contemporary recognition of a need for an “educational initiative of a positive kind”<sup>13</sup> and speculates that Arundel “probably saw that it was necessary not merely to root out dangerous English writings but also implant alternative reading.”<sup>14</sup> An example of this alternative vernacular reading is Nicholas Love’s popular devotional work, *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, approved by Arundel in 1410. This text functions largely as an anti-Lollard treatise concerned with defending the efficacy of the sacraments and the clergy’s right to administer them. Arundel’s ambivalent attitude towards the vernacular, as simultaneously threatening and useful, also informs the N-Town plays’ preoccupation with their own status as a dramatic form of the vernacular. Thus, while the N-Town plays self-consciously stage the cultural tensions swirling around the debate over the vernacular, they also transform that discussion into a meditation on the value of vernacular dramatic performance. What is interesting about this meditation is that while the N-Town plays are politically engaged, they avoid political commitments, preferring to weave the orthodox and the heterodox together in an effort to encourage their audience to contemplate larger questions concerning the origins and nature of authority, both dramatic and cultural.

The N-Town scribe-compiler’s use of the device of *compilatio* also indicates that he was very much aware of the difficulties that he faced working in the vernacular. This device permits the scribe-compiler to explore complex theological issues and offer oblique political commentary regarding the nature of the sacred at a time when other forms of vernacular activity were coming under increasing suspicion. Alan Fletcher states that the N-Town scribe-compiler arranges his material according to a principle of inclusiveness which encourages its audience to move selectively among the different portions of compiled material.<sup>15</sup> This demand for intellectual choice on the part of the spectators forces them to think about the political dimension of theater and the responsibility that they as an audience have for helping to construct the significance of the theatrical experience. In addition, as A. J. Minnis says, the

<sup>13</sup> Margaret Aston, *Faith and Fire: Popular and Unpopular Religion, 1350–1600* (London: Hambledon Press 1993), 92.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>15</sup> Fletcher, “The N-Town Plays,” 163.

practice of compilation was employed as a method disclaiming responsibility for one's more controversial utterances. According to Minnis, the compiler's disavowal of responsibility operates on two levels, as the compiler claims that he is merely repeating the opinions of previous authors, and consequently is not responsible for his statements or the possible misinterpretation of those statements by an audience.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the N-Town scribe-compiler's use of *compilatio* enables him to stress the relationship between politics and theater, and at the same time deflect responsibility for the politics of his plays onto his sources and audience. The device of *compilatio* functions as a protective mechanism, as it generates a degree of intellectual freedom for the scribe-compiler and suggests the self-conscious nature of the playwriting process.

The series of dramatic narrators that permeate the N-Town plays is another means by which the scribe-compiler engages with the possible dangers inherent in vernacular drama. Since the vernacular allows sacred texts and images to circulate in various forms outside of direct ecclesiastical control, narrators such as Contemplacio and Demon preemptively interpret the sacred stories on stage in order to safely insulate the plays against audience misapprehension. Initially it is Contemplacio who manifests the anxiety of the N-Town plays about the expression of religious ideas and values through the vernacular. As a virtuous expositor figure (Gail Gibson calls him "the most extraordinary expositor figure in medieval drama"<sup>17</sup>), Contemplacio occupies an ambiguous position as he functions to protect the vernacular drama of the "Mary plays" against the perils of misinterpretation by virtue of his verbal and visual presence on stage. However, at the same time, Contemplacio seems to complicate his role as the stalwart defender of the hermeneutically unstable medium of vernacular drama since he also indirectly enables the staging of these plays through his expositor-like part and thereby tacitly affirms the efficacy of this drama as a method of religious instruction. Due to this double attitude of caution and confidence the speeches of Contemplacio become a place where the N-Town drama enacts its own ambivalence toward itself as a genre: cognizant of its ability to instruct in religious matters but anxious about the illicit and ungovernable qualities of theater in the vernacular. Gibson sees Contemplacio as embodying the monastic contemplative ideal, "so fiercely does he exemplify not only devotion to heaven but the mysterious me-

<sup>16</sup> A. J. Minnis, *The Medieval Theory of Authorship* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), 191–210.

<sup>17</sup> Gibson, *Theatre of Devotion*, 130.

diation of the monk's own prayer and sacred learning on behalf of the Christian community."<sup>18</sup> I agree with Gibson's statement, but would extend her notion of mediation to include the intricate ways in which *Contemplacio* communicates the N-Town scribe-compiler's idea of the powerfully ambivalent effects of vernacular drama to his audience.

In his Prologue to the "Mary plays," *Contemplacio* stages this self-reflexive ambivalence as his character gestures towards the two different models of stage/audience relations (the monologic and dialogic) which are held in tension with one another over the course of the N-Town plays. In his opening lines, *Contemplacio* assumes his mediatory role in the service of the monologic dramatic model, since his presence is intended to ensure the uncomplicated transference of orthodox religious instruction from stage to audience:

Cryst conserve þis congregacyon  
 Fro perellys past, present, and future,  
 And þe personys her pleand, þat we pronunsiacyon  
 Of here sentens to be seyde mote be sad and sure;  
 And þat non oblocucyon make þis matere obscure,  
     But it may profite and plese eche persone present  
 From the gynnyng to þe endyng so to endure,  
 þat Cryst and every creature with þe conceyte be content.<sup>19</sup>

On the surface, this passage appears to be a conventional blessing that invokes God's sustaining protection for players and audience. However, it also hints at the potentially divergent responses elicited by dramatic performance and the difficulty of effectively controlling and communicating the didactic import of that performance. *Contemplacio* anxiously admits that the mispronunciation of words, bad delivery of lines ("oblocucyon"), or other sorts of interruptions on stage or perhaps emanating from the audience might mar the "processe" and prevent a clear and coherent message from being sent to the listening audience. While these lines refer to some of the practical problems of staging, they also suggest that these problems may be overcome and a monologic version of theater be preserved. This is accomplished by imagining an audience that is dependent upon the mediations of a dramatic narrator, such as *Contemplacio*, to explain away any obscurities and misunderstandings that might inhere in a particular performance.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>19</sup> Stephen Spector, ed., *The N-Town Play*, 2 vols., EETS s.s. 11 and 12 (London: Oxford University Press, 1991), 8/1–8. All quotations are taken from this edition and cited by play and line number.

As Contemplacio's speeches are interspersed among the "Mary plays," offering summaries and foreshadowings of past and future plays, he becomes a character that stands apart and monitors the orthodox progress of the drama. For instance, prior to the play of "The Presentation of Mary in the Temple," Contemplacio refers to what has transpired in the previous "Joachim and Anna," as he mentions that Mary's conception and birth will be passed over "breffness of tyme consydyrynge" (9/4), and states that Mary's presentation to the temple "xal appere / to alle pepyl wat ben here present" (9/9-10). Additionally, Contemplacio's epilogue to the play of "The Visit to Elizabeth" that ends the Mary group reprises the blessing of the audience of his opening prologue and provides a reassuring sense of order and symmetry to the dramatic proceedings. By interjecting Contemplacio's prologues in between individual plays and framing the entire sequence with his verbal and visual presence, the N-Town scribe-compiler provides a potent emblem of interpretive control over the sacred images and events that have been depicted on stage. In a sense, Contemplacio becomes a representative of the orthodox intellectual culture of fifteenth-century England and its desire to limit the range and value of vernacular writing.

However, the N-Town plays complicate this depiction of Contemplacio as the authoritative interpreter of vernacular drama as they also enact the second or dialogic model through his character. While Contemplacio seeks to control the polysemousness of the dramatic sign and to reduce the potential for misinterpretation, the fact that the N-Town plays need an expositor to ensure the production of orthodox meaning suggests that intended meanings may be displaced by unintended and possibly heterodox ones during the process of interpretation. In her book on vernacular translation, Rita Copeland contrasts the role of the *fidus interpres* "who respects the primary authority of the text by preserving even its obscurities" with that of the expositor who "asserts an independent productive authority over the text by achieving difference with it."<sup>20</sup> Contemplacio embodies aspects of both the *fidus interpres* and the *expositor* as defined by Copeland, since he does attempt to reinforce the authority of the N-Town drama, while at the same time his very presence on stage raises the specter of the possible misappropriation of sacred stories and images by an audience capable of choice and interpretive activity. I think that the N-Town plays use the figure of Con-

<sup>20</sup> Rita Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 90.

templacio to represent the tension between the monologic and dialogic models of dramatic activity. His character embodies the complexity of a vernacular drama that values a dynamic stage/audience interaction, while also acknowledging the importance of authorial intent and the necessity of controlling the meaning of polysemous dramatic signs.

The N-Town scribe-compiler's awareness of the appropriable nature of dramatic performance, and the range of responses it could provoke, is also indicated by the metatheatrical character of Demon, who appears in the section that precedes and introduces the Passion sequence, "Satan's Prologue." In his "Prologue," Demon struts on stage, revelling in his ostentatious garb, and appropriates the salvific language of Christ (26/1-164).<sup>21</sup> He uses this language in a sermon parody as the basis for a self-representation that enables him to assume the role of parodic Christ. In counterfeiting the language of Christ, Demon fashions himself as a "bounteous" lord who offers his faithful servants mock rewards in eternity: "To reward so sinners, as my kend is; / Whoso wole folwe my lore and serve me dayly, / Of sorwe and peyne anow he xal nevyr mys" (26/11-12). Demon then proclaims his sovereignty over human souls, as he inverts Christ's promise of salvation into one of damnation:

Takyth hed to 3our prince, þan, my peple everychon  
 And seyth what maystryes in hefne I gan þer do play.  
 To gete a thowsand sowlys in an houre, methynkyth it but skorn  
 Syth I wan Adam and Eve on þe first day.

(26/21-24)

Demon, continuing in his role of parodic Christ, once again, appropriates Christ's words in the final lines of the Prologue, echoing the assurance Christ gives to his disciples at the Last Supper in John 14.18, "I am with 3ow at all tymes whan 3e to councel me call; / But for a short tyme myself I devoyde" (26/123-24).<sup>22</sup> In this scene of self-fashioning, Demon enacts an illicit exchange between sacred and profane to forge a theatrical identity that reveals the powers and limits of dramatic representation. On the one hand, by usurping Christ's life and words, Demon demonstrates how modeling one's identity on Christ's life is a potentially empowering representational strategy. However, Demon's method of

<sup>21</sup> In his commentary, Stephen Spector states how much of Satan's speech "parodies pleas and assurances traditionally attributed to Jesus" (2:493). I am supplementing this insight by describing how Demon deliberately usurps the role of Christ in order to draw attention to the danger and power of vernacular dramatic activity.

<sup>22</sup> See Spector's commentary in *N-Town Play*, 2:493.

devising a dramatic self also suggests the limits of dramatic representation, since his attempt to make himself into a figure with Christ-like powers fails due to the fact that the signs of holiness which Demon appropriates from Christ's life contradict his evil intentions and deeds to such a degree that his efforts at imitation are rendered ridiculous.

Demon's attempt and failure at imitating Christ highlights his meta-theatrical status in the N-Town drama, as the figure of Demon becomes a way for the N-Town dramatist to scrutinize the potential excesses and abuses of vernacular dramatic activity. In many ways, Demon's character functions as an anti-model for theatrical practice, as his perverse imitation of Christ foregrounds how theatrical activity dangerously divides signs from deeds, which according to *A Treatise of Miraclis Pleyinge* perverts our belief and hope in God:

So sithen miracles pleyinge ben only 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 devyel to cacchen 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.<sup>23</sup>

Although Demon embodies some of the anxieties the *Treatise* expresses regarding the relations between dramatic representation and spiritual corruption, the N-Town dramatist brackets his performance in the "Prologue" and marks him as unmistakably evil, thereby defusing the most threatening aspects of Demon, since the audience recognizes him for who he is and knows not to trust his language. This enables Demon to become a cautionary dramatic exemplum, both to the audience and to the playwright, as he reminds them of the dangerous possibilities inherent in vernacular theatrical practice. In this capacity, Demon reveals the manipulable nature of linguistic signs and spiritual categories as he prophesies a new era of spiritual confusion and rampant vice:

For synne is so plesaunt to ech mannys intent.  
ze xal kalle pride 'onesté,' and 'naterall kend' lechory,  
And covetyse 'wysdam' there tresure is present;  
Wrreth, 'manhod,' and envy callyd 'chastement' . . .  
(26/110-13)

However, even as the N-Town scribe-compiler tries to neutralize (by marking as evil) Demon's destabilization of linguistic and spiritual

<sup>23</sup> Clifford Davidson, ed., *A Middle English Treatise on the Playing of Miracles* (Washington: University Press of America, 1981), 99.

codes, he also marks the vulnerability of vernacular drama to heterodox misappropriation.

It is Demon's retelling of the Temptation of Christ in his "Prologue" that demonstrates his multivalent status in the N-Town Passion sequence. His revision of this story casts him simultaneously in the roles of representer and represented, author and audience, perhaps ironically foreshadowing Christ's role in the N-Town "Last Supper" where Christ is at once signifier and signified, sacrificer and sacrificed. In Demon's hands, the Temptation of Christ warns the audience to avoid the temptation of viewing dramatic narrative as entirely monologic and static; indeed Demon's retelling underscores the instability of N-Town's composite manuscript and the dialogic nature of dramatic performance. In his role of arch-dramatist and arch-reviser, Demon's version of Christ's temptation contradicts earlier and later plays in the cycle<sup>24</sup> and through these discrepancies indicates the gap between the divine narrative of the gospels and his appropriation of this narrative for his own infernal purposes. Demon uses the story of Christ's temptation to construct himself as the confident authorizer of his own signifying practices. However, Demon's pretensions to narrative control are undercut by the fact that while he devised the temptations to determine whether Christ was human or divine, even after Christ has been subjected to these identity tests Demon is still unable to determine the contours of Christ's nature:

What þat he is I cannot se;  
Whethyr God or man, what þat he be  
I cannot telle in no degree.  
For sorwe I lete a crakke.

(23/192-95)

These lines (and the lines in the "Prologue" stating, "His answerys were marvelous, I knew not his intencyon; / And at last to veynglory, but nevyr I had myn intent," 26/31-32) reveal Demon's status as a failed dramatic author whose intent has been frustrated, as well as an unperceptive spectator who cannot read the signs that have been presented to him. Christ, by keeping his identity secret, successfully resists the intention of Demon's narrative, superseding Demon's infernal narrative

<sup>24</sup> See Spector's commentary in *N-Town Play*, 2:489. Spector explains how Demon's claim that the third temptation of Christ was vainglory contradicts Play 23's assertion that it was covetousness; Satan also states that Christ granted remission for Mary Magdalene's sins when in fact her exorcism does not occur until Play 27, "The Last Supper."

of temptation with a divine narrative of redemption, a resistance that transforms Demon from a masterful manipulator of signs to a clownish breaker of wind.

The N-Town plays also use the figure of the Virgin Mary to examine the legitimacy of vernacular drama, this time in terms of traditional gender roles. According to Theresa Coletti, the play "Joseph's Doubt" juxtaposes Mary's virginal status and the undeniable physicality of her pregnant body in a way that challenges "traditional ideologies of gender" and reveals the "contradictions sustained within the sex and gender system."<sup>25</sup> This disruption in the sex and gender system also signals a break in the relationship between sign and referent, as the ambiguity surrounding Mary's virginal yet pregnant body calls into being an intense interpretive anxiety that cannot be easily dispersed or smoothed over. In a scene of meaningful misreading, ripe with metatheatrical implications, Joseph returns home after working in a distant country to find Mary pregnant and himself apparently a cuckold:

That semyth evyl, I am afrayd.  
 þi wombe to hyze doth stonde!  
 I drede me sore I am betrayd,  
 Sum other man we had in honde  
 Hens sythe þat I went!  
 (12/26-30)

Mary and Sephor, one of her handmaids, try to explain the doctrine of the Virgin Birth to Joseph by saying that an angel told her that she will give birth to "swete Jesus" in order to redeem humankind. The uncomprehending Joseph does not listen and merely blames Mary for giving an angel of God a bad name and not owning up to her sexual indiscretion:

An aungel! Allas, alas! Fy, for schame!  
 ze syn now in þat ze to say,  
 To putten an aungel in so grete blame!  
 Alas, alas! Let be! Do way!  
 It was sum boy began þis game  
 þat clothyd was clene and gay.  
 And ze zeve hym now an aungel name.  
 (12/71-77)

<sup>25</sup> Theresa Coletti, "Purity and Danger: The Paradox of Mary's Body and the Engendering of the Infancy Narrative in the English Mystery Cycles," in *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature*, ed. Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 83.

On the level of gender, Joseph's vehement accusations and too literal reading of Mary's body recall how medieval misogynist literature constructed women as being morally and physically inferior, possessing a dangerously seductive carnality and an unstable ethical nature. However, the inadequacy of Joseph's interpretation of Mary's physical condition not only points up his perceptual shortcomings, but also reverses traditional gender hierarchies by representing Mary as a much more capable reader and interpreter of divine narrative than is Joseph.

On a metatheatrical level, "Joseph's Doubt" associates the ambiguity of Mary's body with the dangerously uncertain nature of theatrical signs. Gail Gibson suggests how Joseph's pounding on Mary's locked door in the play parodically enacts the mystery of the Incarnation by invoking the image of the *porta clausa* in Ezekiel, often viewed as an Old Testament prefiguration of the Virgin Birth.<sup>26</sup> In this context, I think that Joseph's relation to the locked door functions as another cautionary dramatic exemplum which foregrounds how theatrical activity may disruptively divide signs from deeds. Joseph's literal interpretation of Mary's pregnant body, his inability to interpret Mary's pregnancy on a spiritual plane, depicts how an audience may be led into error when letter and spirit, sign and deed are detached from one another. This detachment of sign from deed demonstrates how human perception may mistakenly separate the earthly from the spiritual and in so doing exalt the temporal over the divine. The consequent diminishment of divinity and the self-sufficiency of the earthbound sign lead to an intepretive distortion that results in Joseph mistaking Mary's visible pregnancy for a sign of adultery rather than divine grace. Thus "Joseph's Doubt" enacts the potentially idolatrous nature of the theatrical sign, but simultaneously refutes this idea; the audience does not necessarily identify with Joseph because they are already aware of the virgin birth, and by extension the necessary link between sign and deed.

"The Trial of Mary and Joseph" reconsiders the qualities of the vernacular drama within the context of the ecclesiastical court system. At the beginning of the play, two detractors, Backbiter and Raise Slander, maliciously gossip about Mary's swollen womb, as well as making fun of Joseph's age, the lessening of his sexual powers, and his supposed cuckolded status.<sup>27</sup> Backbiter even goes so far as to construct a licen-

<sup>26</sup> Gail Gibson, "'Porta Haec Clausa Erit': Comedy, Conception, and Ezekiel's Closed Door in the *Ludus Coventriae* Play of 'Joseph's Return,'" *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 8 (1978): 152-54.

<sup>27</sup> Douglas Hayes offers an intriguing assessment of the role of these two detractors in

tious Virgin Mary, a woman who prefers young lovers—"Sum fresch zonge galaunt she lovyth wel more / þat his leggyts to here hath leyd!" (14/87-88)—and possesses an enticing body—"And of schap so comely also, / Of hir tayle ofte-tyme be light / And rygh tekyl vndyr þe too" (14/95-97). Following these defamatory accusations, which are enough for the bishop to summon Mary and Joseph to court, Den the Summoner rudely escorts the holy couple to court, all the while accusing Mary of lewd behavior and adulterous conduct. Obviously, the fact that the bishop stands willing to accuse the Virgin Mary of adultery on the basis of slanderous testimony of three explicitly evil characters undercuts the authority of the ecclesiastical court system.<sup>28</sup> But it also witnesses to the male anxiety circulating around the issue of female sexuality, as Mary's virginal status becomes a pretext for male speakers to attempt to define and control a female body whose threatening and ungovernable nature they construct with their language. The illicit and anarchic aspects of the female body are translated to the domain of theater, as the virginity test becomes not only a method of testing Mary's virginity, but also a way to raise questions about the polysemous qualities of drama, whether the vernacular can be successfully monitored and controlled so that it will dovetail with orthodox precepts.

"The Trial of Mary and Joseph" concludes with Mary and Joseph being forced to drink a potion called "the botel of Goddys vengeauns" which marks a party as guilty if "sum maculacion" appears on his or her face while walking around the altar seven times. After Joseph successfully passes this test, proving that Mary's pregnancy is not due to any sexual advances on his part, Mary prepares to prove her "trew virginittee." At this moment, the First and Second Doctors of Law read Mary's pregnant body on an entirely literal level and wonder how Mary can deny the adulterous implications of her swollen womb. Then the First and Second Detractors mock Mary's claims of innocence by telling the story of how a snowflake crept into the mouth of a sleeping woman and

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his "Backbiter and the Rhetoric of Detraction," *Comparative Drama* 34 (2000): 53-78. Hayes argues that the language of the detractors creates an interpretive crisis for an audience that is brought into "a living contemporaneity with Christian history and doctrine so that the weight of decision, of interpretation falls on the shoulders of each individual who must separate truth from 'ydele wordes'" (72). See also Alison Hunt, "Maculating Mary: The Detractors of the N-Town Cycle's 'Trial of Joseph and Mary,'" *Philological Quarterly* 73 (1994): 11-29.

<sup>28</sup> Coletti, "Purity and Danger," 82. Coletti explains how acts of defamation in "The Trial of Mary and Joseph" function as part of a critique of both ecclesiastical justice and "the patterns of informal regulation of private behavior that were driven by gossip and surveillance" (82).

impregnated her. They warn of the insubstantial nature of that snow-child, since “snow unto watyr doth evyrmore reclyne” (14/313), and imply that Mary’s protestations of purity, and by extension the idea of the virgin birth, are equally tenuous and untrustworthy. Both sets of accusers attest to a theory of dramatic language in which sign and deed (Mary’s pregnant body and her adulterous affair) inevitably coincide on a literal level. Even as their limited perspectives exclude a spiritual interpretation of signs, these characters undercut their own insistence on one-to-one linguistic correspondences through their own false manipulations of the vernacular. Their ostensible faith in a literalist model of language disguises a profound distrust of the vernacular, as something that is manipulable, ever shifting, and insubstantial as snow ever on the verge of turning to water.

In this way, “The Trial of Mary and Joseph” becomes a trial about whether or not vernacular dramatic activity can be effectively regulated and protected against a sort of interpretive anarchy occasioned by its misappropriation. This simultaneous faith in and distrust of the vernacular is imaged in Raise Slander’s refusal to recognize Mary’s virginal status or even the validity of the virginity test she has just passed “withouten fowle spotte or maculation” (14/349). But after taking the test himself, which he fails, Raise Slander is coerced into admitting his own “cursyd and fals langage” (14/367), and the bishop himself falls on his knees and asks Mary to forgive “all cursyd langage and schame onsownd” (14/372). With this final recognition of Mary as a “clene mayde, bothe modyr and wyff” (14/354) the N-Town drama suggests that the vernacular may successfully instruct its audiences in spiritual matters, and that the polysemousness of theatrical language may be effectively mediated and controlled. However, the fact that Mary’s bodily signs were misread, deliberately or otherwise, by so many characters emphasizes the dangers associated with vernacular dramatic performance and forcefully illustrates the necessity of guarding against its potential abuse and manipulation.

N-Town’s Herod the Great is another figure who speaks to the ambivalences of vernacular drama, as his performance simultaneously depicts idealized and corrupt relations between king and subject, stage and audience.<sup>29</sup> As “The Play of the Magi” opens, Herod bombastically proclaims the boundless nature of his sovereignty:

<sup>29</sup> For a useful account of the figure of Herod in medieval drama see Rebecca Bushnell, *Tragedies of Tyrants: Political Thought and Theater in the English Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell



occur on the *platea*.<sup>31</sup> After the three Magi arrive at Herod's scaffold, emblematic of that king's puffed-up pride and ambition, they inform him of the birth of Christ and their intent to pay homage to this greatest of kings. Herod, in a show of false largesse, asks the three kings to find this new young king and return to him so that "with reverens I xal seke hym sone / And honour hym on kne" (18/189-90). However, an angel exposes the falsity of Herod's performance as he warns the three kings to avoid Herod after they have visited the Christ child and to head straight home:

3e kynggys on this hill,  
Werk 3e not aftyr Herodys wyll.  
For yf 3e do he wyll yow kyll  
þis day or nyght.

(18/291-94)

Thus this encounter between angel and kings enacts the triumph of dramatic truth-telling over dramatic obfuscation. Perhaps the angel descends from a nearby scaffold to the kings who are sleeping on an imaginary hill in the *platea*, a movement between scaffold and *platea* that suggests mobility and power that Herod does not possess. In addition, the quiet hymns of praise and thanks offered by the kings following the angel's visitation mark a movement towards a dramatic rhetoric of truth and simplicity purged of the excesses of Herod's boastful, self-inflating language.

The next play, "The Purification," continues to displace and invalidate Herod's violent and prideful language with a purified rhetoric of salvation. "The Purification" interrupts what Stephen Spector calls "the otherwise continuous action of the Magi and Herod plays" in order to recount the stories of Simeon and the Virgin Mary's presentation of Jesus in the temple.<sup>32</sup> Both of the tales dramatize how the figure of the Christ child simultaneously marks the chasm that stretches between the heavenly and the temporal while also functioning as an emblem of their future unification. An aging Simeon prays that before he dies he

<sup>31</sup> See Jerome Bush, "The Resources of *Locus* and *Platea* Staging: The Digby *Mary Magdalene*," *Studies in Philology* (1989): 139-65. Bush notes how the *loca* in the Digby *Mary Magdalene* represent the limitations and ultimate powerlessness of the tyrants that inhabit them. I think that this same dynamic is at work in the *locus* and *platea* staging of the N-Town plays. For accounts of the staging of the N-Town plays see Anne C. Gay, "The Stage and Staging of the N-Town Plays," *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama* 10 (1967): 135-40; and Martial Rose, "The Staging of the Hegge Plays," in *Medieval Drama*, ed. Neville Denny, Stratford-upon-Avon Studies 16 (London: Edward Arnold, 1973).

<sup>32</sup> Spector, *N-Town Play*, 2:476.

"might fynde / My Savyour with myn ey to se" (19/7-8), and an angel responds "Symeon, leff þi careful stevene, / For þi prayer is herd in hevene" (19/41-42). Simeon's plaintive prayer to see the Christ child suggests the distance between the human longing for redemption and the divine fulfillment of that desire. However, the angel's rhyming response indicates poetically how the Christ child will produce a new linguistic harmony that reconciles human signifier (Symeon's prayer) and divine signified (the promise of salvation). With the bringing of Jesus to the temple, Simeon says that he is ready to die now that he has seen his savior

Which þu hast ordeyned befor þe face  
Of al mankynde þis tyme of grace  
Opynly to appere.  
þi lyth is shynand clere  
To all mankyndys savacyon.  
(19/150-54)

The notion of divine clarity dispelling temporal confusion foreshadows the impending salvation of humankind, but it only offers a provisional harmony in the play's present time since the subsequent "Slaughter of the Innocents" reiterates, through the violence of Herod, the gap between human deeds and divine will. Mary's offering of her "lytyl childe" to God on the altar at the end of the play further affirms the salvific sentiments expressed by Simeon and provides a visual embodiment of that redemptive promise. Thus, "The Purification" optimistically gestures toward but does not accomplish the work of salvation, and in so doing suggests how its audience needs to continue the dialogue between the temporal and heavenly after they depart from the performance.

In "The Slaughter of the Innocents," the reassertion of Herod's violent rhetoric and actions, even after the powerful staging of the spectacle of divine grace in the preceding play, raises the question of whether the vernacular drama is able to properly instruct in religious matters. If the spiritual blindness of Herod can persist in the face of Christ's redemptive promise, what hope do the N-Town plays have of initiating meaningful spiritual change in their audience? Herod's response to the divine intervention in "The Play of the Magi" (when the angel reroutes the three kings) is to order the killing of the male children of Israel:

Shewyth on 3oure shulderys scheldys and schaftys,  
Shapyht amonge schelchownys a shyrling shray!

Doth rowncys rennyng with rakyng raftys  
 Tyl rybbys be to-rent with a reed ray!  
 (20/30–34)

This elaborate rhetoric of violence, focusing as it does on the literal breaking of children's bodies, contrasts with the previous play's language of spiritual wholeness that is associated with the physically intact body of the Christ child. Ironically, the fracturing of bodies on stage that is intended to consolidate Herod's sovereignty actually disperses his authority since the excessive violence associated with this scene of slaughter serves to indict his use of temporal power. In metatheatrical terms, Herod's attempts to suppress other dramatic voices fails because the slaughter of the children on stage creates a new space for dissent as the mutilated bodies strewn the stage offer a visual reproach to Herod's actions, while the laments of the children's mothers incarnate a verbal reproof:

Alas, Qwhy was my baron born?  
 With swappyng swerde now is he shorn,  
 þe heed ryght fro þe nekke!  
 Shanke and shulderyn is al to-torn!  
 (20/90–93)

This scene emphasizes the violence inherent in a monologic theater that insists on a single, authoritative dramatic perspective and whose absolutist nature results in the senseless multiplication of carnage and grief. In a way, Herod becomes an instructive emblem of a dramatic tyranny that in its attempts to control meaning absolutely ends up self-destructing and unleashing an array of interpretive possibilities.<sup>33</sup>

After "The Slaughter of the Innocents," Herod and his minions sit down to a feast that is intended to confirm the incontrovertible nature of Herod's regal potency. The motif of earthly feasting represents Herod's worldliness and pride, his aspirations to absolute authority, both social and hermeneutic.<sup>34</sup> But this affirmation of Herod's authority is chal-

<sup>33</sup> For a different interpretation of violence in "Slaughter of the Innocents" plays emphasizing a critique of masculine power in relation to ideas of work and labor in urban milieus, see Claire Sponsler, *Drama and Resistance: Bodies, Goods, and Theatricality in Late Medieval England*, *Medieval Cultures* 10 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 136–60.

<sup>34</sup> Theresa Coletti, "The Design of the Digby Play of *Mary Magdalene*," *Studies in Philology* 76 (1979): 313–33. I am indebted to Coletti's insight that in the Digby *Mary Magdalene* "images of eating, banqueting, and nourishment serve the important function of defining the characters' relationship to the world and to God" (316).

lenged by the appearance of Death who, as David Staines recognizes, uses Herod's own exaggerated rhetoric to condemn Herod's pride and ambition before he slays him with "dredful dentys:"<sup>35</sup>

I am sent fro God: Deth is my name.  
 Allthyng þat is on grownd I welde at my wylle:  
 Both man, and beste, and byrdys wylde and tame,  
 Whan þat I come them to, with deth I do them kylle.  
 Erbe, gres, and tres stronge, take hem all in-same;  
 ʒa, þe grete myghty okys with my dent I spylle.  
 (20/181-86)

The effect of Death's ironic mimicking of Herod's inflated authoritarian rhetoric not only mocks Herod's pretensions to absolute authority, but also demonstrates how Herod's own self-presentation has escaped his control. This loss of control on the part of Herod functions on two levels: the political and the dramatic. On the level of politics, the death of Herod suggests the demise of an absolutist political community in which the tyrannical will of a monarch takes precedence over and ignores the needs of his subjects. In terms of dramatic implications, the fact that a devil takes Herod down to hell, along with his perversions of theatricality for political advantage, pointedly underlines the ability of this vernacular drama to police itself, to make visible and the punish abuses of the stage's dramatic power. However, the fact that Herod's dramatic idiom is so easily usurped and imitated by Death once again suggests the limits of the N-Town scribe-compiler's ability to control the interpretations of his dramatic material.

The figure of Death reiterates the metatheatrical qualities of Demon and Contemplacio in that he too possesses a certain doubleness or ambivalence in regards to the status of vernacular drama. Death's two-sided character is evidenced by the fact that he is at once the destroyer of dramatic identity and the creator of new dramatic meanings. On the one hand, Death's consignment of Herod's soul to "hell pytt" to be torn to pieces by devils and his designation of Herod's body as "wormys mete" displays his destructive power. However, Death's destruction of Herod also suggests the tenuous and impermanent quality of dramatic endeavor, as what seems indestructible and potent on the surface turns out to be powerless and evanescent. But this apparent questioning of the vernacular drama's capacity to transmit a single, lasting message is countered in the figure of Death himself. Death, being a character on

<sup>35</sup> Staines, "To Out-Herod Herod," 218.

stage (a living, breathing embodiment of the cessation of life) and wearing a costume in which "wurms knawe me al aboute," functions not only as a sign of the limits of dramatic activity, but also as a figure of the stage triumphant. While Death initiates Herod's downfall, he also institutes the restoration of a dramatic moral order that insists on the value and efficacy of theatrical activity. Death's restorative powers are imaged in his purging of the stage of Herod's political and dramatic abuses of power, and his reopening of the stage to new voices and ideas. It almost seems as if the figure of Death signals the death of one dramatic order and the beginning of another. Instead of the authoritarian imposition of meaning on the audience, this new, more fully dialogic drama tries to intellectually engage its audience through the consideration of what constitutes proper kingship and appropriate dramatic practice. Thus, Death as a complex emblem of theatrical efficacy is able to move between and use the monologic and dialogic aspects of drama in order to fashion a vividly memorable theatrical message. It is a message that respects the interpretive boundaries constructed in accordance with the playwright's intent, but one that at the same time allows a space where interpretive plays between author, actor, and audience is not only possible but desirable.

In the end, the N-Town plays attempt to encourage all members of the audience to think about the relation between drama and politics in new and deeper ways. This drama focuses on the legitimacy of the vernacular because this issue so effectively raises other contested cultural issues such as the nature of political authority, the parameters of religious freedom, and the possibility of lay education. The theory of vernacular drama that the N-Town plays enact to answer these important inquiries is one that asserts a dramatic ideal in which playwright, actor, and audience exist in a dynamic interrelation with one another. Actor and audience honor the intent of the playwright, but at the same time they have the license to creatively interpret and add new meaning to that original intent. The N-Town plays depict how this dialogic process sometimes succeeds and fails, as a series of characters adopts different voices and stances toward vernacular drama as a means of testing its capacities. The abuse of dramatic powers enacted on stage not only demonstrates the perversion of the vernacular drama, but also suggests the dangers of unbridled political authority and the destructive consequences of unconsidered political rule. The proper use of dramatic idiom bodies forth a sense of shared political community, as the harmonious yet dynamically varied interaction of playwright, stage, and

audience gestures toward the proper relation between king and subject, or the church and its faithful. Thus, the N-Town plays see themselves as defining and stabilizing social relationships at a time when those relationships were coming under increasing strain. N-Town's defense of vernacular dramatic activity becomes a way of defining drama's important role in late medieval society, while also defending that society against the erosion of values, either through political tyranny on the one hand or the careless challenging of authority on the other.

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