Form and Reform

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Forms of Reading in the Book of Brome

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The late-fifteenth-century Book of Brome—so-called because it was found at Brome Hall, in Suffolk—is best known for the Abraham and Isaac play it contains.\(^1\) Located early in the book (New Haven, CT, Yale University, Beinecke Library MS 365, ff. 15r–22r), this stand-alone pageant gives memorable weight and shape to the deep emotions of a story told many times, in many ways, throughout the Middle Ages.\(^2\) In its 465 lines, the Brome play dramatizes the unthinkable sacrifice demanded of Abraham with particular expressive force, concentrating on such details as the initial love and trust between father and son, the father’s extended agony at the necessity of obeying God’s cruel command, and the boy’s continual thoughts of his mother, which move from a wish that she could intervene (“Now I wold to God my moder were her on þis hyll! / Sche woola knele for me on both hyre kneys / To save my lyffe,” 175–77) to a wish that she be protected entirely from any knowledge of the event (“But, good fader, tell ʒe my moder nothyng, / Sey þat I am in another cuntré dwellyng,” 205–06).\(^3\) Even after God’s angel appears to provide an alternative animal for sacrifice, Isaac quite reasonably continues to suspect his father’s intentions towards him:

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\(^1\) For their helpful reactions to these ideas in early versions, I wish to thank audiences at the New Chaucer Society, the Michigan Medieval Seminar, and the University of Virginia Medieval Colloquium. Special thanks to James Simpson, Peggy McCracken, Catherine Sanok, and Gabriel Haley.

\(^2\) All of the extant cycles include plays on the subject, and there exists another free-standing version: the Northampton Abraham and Isaac (Dublin, Trinity College MS 432). Unlike the Norwich Grocers’ Play and the Newcastle Noah’s Ark, neither the Brome nor the Northampton play can be plausibly connected to a lost cycle.

\(^3\) All quotation of the Brome play, unless otherwise indicated, is drawn from *Early English Drama: An Anthology*, ed. John C. Coldewey (New York and London: Garland, 1993).
he offers to “stowppe down lowe” to blow on the sacrificial fire, but first has to ask, “ʒe wyll not kyll me with ʒowre sword, I trowe?” (378). The play concludes with a speech from a “Doctor,” who summarizes the “good lernyng” to be drawn from “thys solom story” (436).

Questions of form have dominated discussion of the Brome play. Although it is an independent dramatic piece, it shares especially close verbal patterns with the version of the Abraham and Isaac story found in the Chester cycle. But critics have been unable to determine conclusively whether both plays descend from a common source, Brome precedes Chester, or Chester precedes Brome. The argument about priority proceeds according to formalist criteria for assessing relative literary value. The fundamental question is whether one assumes that those constructing a second text from an original are more likely to improve or debase it: one might argue either that the better play must be the earliest version (that is, any imitation could only be derivative) or that it must be the final word (any initial draft must be incompletely realized). In either case, the judgment turns upon whether one deems Brome or Chester to be the better play, a decision that has come down to determining whether metrical skill (as demonstrated by Chester) is more or less important to a dramatic poem than characterization (the strength of Brome). Ultimately, then, these questions about priority and comparative literary value rest on weighing the importance of form—both quantifiable features such as metrical structures, and also the kinds of literary effects that a formalist criticism such as close reading is so well suited to reveal.

Although the relationship with Chester has thus far been the main question in critical discussion of the Brome play, it is not a question—barring unanticipated discoveries in the archive—that is likely to be very productive in the future. The connections that can be traced (or imagined) through literary forms too often ignore salient differences in material form that promise greater insight. Whereas the Chester play exists in a handful of manuscripts, some of which preserve a fully imagined dramatic cycle, the Brome version is found only within one household book, where it is the singular play. Instead of pursuing the relationship between analogous texts through patterns of repetition and rhyme, I am interested in thinking about the formal properties of the Brome play through the appearance

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5. For the manuscripts of Chester, see R. M. Lumiansky and David Mills, eds., The Chester Mystery Cycle, 2 vols., EETS s.s. 3 and 9 (London: Oxford University Press, 1974, 1986).
Brantley, “Forms of Reading in the Book of Brome”

of its words on the page: the text’s physical relationship to its own manuscript context. For the play’s connections to other playtexts prove less revealing than its place within the strange miscellany. The physical form of the Brome Abraham and Isaac can provide perspective on what the text means, and especially on the ways in which its literary forms were read. As Christopher Cannon has observed, “‘Form’ (as both concept and term) always allows analysis to build a bridge between the immaterial and the material: ‘form’ is necessarily the ‘werk’ seen in terms of the ‘thoughte’ behind it, the brute physicality of some thing as it is rooted in the realm of ideas conceived in the mind.”6 In particular, I will argue that the mysterious patterns of rubrication that appear in the Brome play join “brute physicality” to “the realm of ideas,” for they can be understood along with other scribal decoration in the miscellany to reveal a practice of reading, rather than (as has sometimes been suggested) a practice of performance. Illuminating methods of literary interpretation rather than practices of histrionic declamation, the highlighted words constitute a “reading” of the text that shows the importance of reading itself to our understanding of it.7

The dramatic text sorts uncomfortably with the book’s other miscellaneous contents, which include both nondramatic poems and practical writings such as model legal documents, recipes, tax lists, and accounts.8 The manuscript was written, probably in a gentry household, by at least two hands over a period of years in the late fifteenth century.9 Many of the more businesslike items were entered between 1499 and 1508 by the second of these hands, which can be identified as that of Robert Melton of Stuston. Perhaps, then, the miscellaneity of the book arises in part from its different scribes and registers their changing


7. Susan Wolfson and Marshall Brown have observed that in the wake of a purely formalist literary criticism, attention to form has lately implied attention to practices of reading (“Introduction,” Reading for Form, 14).


9. The manuscript is usually dated to the last quarter of the fifteenth century on the basis of handwriting and paper, whose watermarks suggest that it was manufactured on the Continent around 1465–75. Although some leaves have been cut out, the omissions do not seem to affect any of the text.
intentions for how it should be used. However, the anonymous first scribe himself included a range of matter in the book. Although he was the one who copied the literary items of greatest interest—including the play—he also copied model legal documents showing the proper forms of private charters and bonds, such as “a grant of a pigeon-cote, with reversions to second and third grantees, if the first and second grantees respectively die without heirs” or “a bond for the payment of £10 on demand.” He also copied ciphers and antifeminist puzzles. The more literary pieces include: a poem on fortune-telling by dice (“Have your desire”); The Fifteen Signs of Doomsday; the catechetical dialogue Adrian and Epotys; the purgatorial journey Owein Miles; a Life of St. Margaret; a carol of the Annunciation; part of Lydgate’s Pageant of Knowledge; verses adapted from Chaucer’s Lak of Stedfastnesse; and a number of shorter lyrics including “Man in merthe hath meser in mynd,” “The hart lovyt þe wood,” “Fyrst arysse erly,” “I stond as styll as ony ston,” and “Lux ys leyd a downe.”

Even leaving aside Melton’s sixteenth-century accounts, the variety of these pieces is puzzling: they represent traditions both devotional and secular; poetic and prosaic; anonymous and authorized; dramatic, lyric, and hagiographic. A certain practicality is common to most of the selections, in the sense that the book includes a number of how-to texts: how to tell your fortune by dice, how to know if doomsday is approaching, how to give away your pigeon-cote. Even the anonymous dialogue Adrian and Epotys and Lydgate’s Pageant of Knowledge share a basic concern with imparting essential moral information; these texts do not offer complicated theologies, but practical instruction in the faith: how to be a Christian. The book thus concentrates on “the objective things of religion” and generally reveals “the strongly utilitarian reading practices of many gentry households.”

10. The documents are so characterized in A Commonplace Book of the Fifteenth Century, Containing a Religious Play and Poetry, Legal Forms, and Local Accounts, Lucy Toulmin Smith, ed. (London: Trübner and Co., 1886), 132. For a discussion of the scribal evidence, see Non-Cycle Plays, Davis ed.: “The documents are surely later than the poems, but the hand is not appreciably different and the interval cannot have been very long” (lxii). Moreover, poems copied by the first scribe appear both before and after the documents, so it would seem that the main reason to distinguish them is their genre.

formalist concern: texts offering the proper templates for legal documents, or ways to interpret patterns thrown in dice, derive their interest directly from the reproduction or analysis of structures of meaning—structures that, I will argue, are equally important to the Brome Abraham and Isaac. The contents of this book matter for our understanding of the play, not for their thematic or topical resonances with it, but for their complicated generic and formal ones.

The inclusion of the Abraham and Isaac play with so many nondramatic texts in the Book of Brome suggests that—whatever its performance history extrinsic to this volume—at some point someone thought it worth reading. It is the only dramatic text in a manuscript otherwise unconcerned with the theater, and for this reason it is hard to imagine that it was copied primarily for the purpose of reenactment. And in its appearance, as well as in the company it keeps, the Brome Abraham and Isaac presents itself as a medieval play for reading. The basic ordinatio of the play suggests readers rather than spectators, for it differs in some significant ways from the standard visual conventions of fifteenth-century drama. Most often in plays of this period, speakers’ names are found in the right margin, set off by lines that separate each part from the others (e.g., BL MS Add. 35290 [York Register]). Stage directions, as well, are usually separated from the text to be read, distinguished by some combination of linguistic difference (they are often in Latin) and visual difference (they are often in larger display scripts, and even rubricated). In the Brome play, by contrast, the characters’ names are placed to the left of their speeches, replicating the layout of a dialogue, rather than a staged play (f. 19v; Fig. 1.1).

The stage directions are written within the playtext, seemingly a part of the characters’ speeches: on this folio, the words “Here Abraham layd a cloth over Ysaacys face, thus seyying” form the beginning of the patriarch’s second speech. This placement of the words would perhaps confuse an actor trying to make sense of his spoken part, but would pose no particular problem to a reader who needs visual descriptions of the characters’ actions as well as their words, to provide a sense of the drama.

13. The performance history of the play is not definitively known. For records of dramatic activity near Stuston, see Kahrl, “Brome Hall Commonplace Book,” 161. Lucy Toulmin-Smith, A Commonplace Book of the Fifteenth Century, 47, notes that religious plays were performed in East Anglia at Wymondham, Manningtree, and Cambridge.
14. The Book of Brome has what Boffey and Thompson call a “sectional structure,” making it possible to imagine that parts of it once traveled independently. The contents of the book were “finally and irrevocably fixed” early in its life, however, by Robert Melton, the second of the main scribes. See Boffey and Thompson, “Anthologies and Miscellanies,” 293–94.
FIGURE 1.1. New Haven, Yale University, Beinecke Library MS 365 [Book of Brome], f. 19v. Atypical layout with stage directions integrated into speech.
The line between reading and performance in late medieval culture is, of course, complicated and ultimately fine. As Joyce Coleman has shown, reading aloud to an audience from a book—praelection—was a very common practice even in the late Middle Ages, making such a reader very nearly an actor, and his audience very nearly spectators. It is possible—even probable—that the Brome Abraham and Isaac play, along with other texts in the miscellaneous manuscript, were read aloud in this way. But in a study of the miscellany’s antifeminist ciphers, Ian Johnson notes a wide variety of ways in which they might have been used:

The Brome Ciphers have varied potential for exhibition/concealment in their reception and circulation; they can be enjoyed homosocially away from women (perhaps with the added fuel of communal drinking), or shown to them to annoy them. Easy to find quite near the beginning of the miscellany, they could be read as private graffiti eminently reusable for sniggering consolacioun, meditacioun, or recreacioun.16

None of these imagined contexts for reading the ciphers has to do with histrionic reenactment, or even praelection—these are not texts that lend themselves particularly to aural reception. (This is even more obviously true of the accounts and legal documents.)17 But the balance Johnson describes between exhibition and concealment, between recreation and meditation, is pertinent to the play as well.18 Given its codicological context, this copy of the play is more likely to have been read—either in private or aloud—than to have served as an instrumental, throwaway script.19 And so, though it undoubtedly relies on the memory or prospective fantasy of actors embodying roles and speaking lines aloud—that is to say, on a performance that has nothing to do with a book—this play also has a life on the page.

17. The dramatic or undramatic appearance of a piece is no certain proof of its uses, of course. Cf. the Macro MS (Washington DC, Folger Shakespeare Library MS V.a.354), a collection of texts clearly marked as plays that were also probably privately read.
18. Nicola MacDonald identifies the antifeminist verses as part of a “fully-fledged ludic programme” in the Brome manuscript (“Fragments,” 242). She does not include the Brome play among the manuscript’s ludic texts, but I would argue that some modes of reading encouraged by the games are relevant, also, to the ludus of Abraham and Isaac.
19. According to Kahr, “In this context it becomes immediately apparent that these texts, all of a decidedly devotional cast, were collected for purposes of meditation. It is thus extremely unlikely that the text of the play of Abraham and Isaac as we have it in the Brome manuscript was copied out for someone intending to stage the play” (Kahr, “Brome Hall Commonplace Book,” 159). See also Rosemary Woolf: “Furthermore, whilst there is nothing in the text to suggest that they were not composed for performance on the stage, it is possible that they were copied for private reading, since they seem to be preserved on equal terms with other kinds of poetry, some religious, some secular” (The English Mystery Plays [Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972], 153).
FIGURE 1.2. New Haven, Yale University, Beinecke Library MS 365 [Book of Brome], f. 2v. Poem on fortune-telling with dice.
FIGURE 1.3. New Haven, Yale University, Beinecke Library MS 365 [Book of Brome], f. 14v. Final page of Adrian and Epotys with devotional emblem.
The point is confirmed by the fact that some of the items in the manuscript are illustrated with diagrams that mandate individual visual reading. The ciphers and puzzles studied by Johnson, for example, include some layouts that could only be significant to someone looking at the page, such as brackets showing rhymes, and large, rubricated titles: “Take iii claterars ...” (f. 1v). The poem on fortune-telling with dice includes marginal images to organize and reinforce its message (f.2v; Fig. 1.2).

Moreover, at the end of the dialogue of Adrian and Epotys, there is an elaborate devotional emblem in the form of the Holy Monogram (ihc) with a bleeding heart (f. 14v; Fig 1.3). The poem concludes:

He [St. John] bad and commanded all man kynd
The payssoyyn of cryste þei schuld haue yn mynd
Thus ʒendeth the talkyng
God ʒeffe vs all hys blyssyng.

With the end of the dialogue—of “the talkyng”—the reader is led into a silent visual space where he can be helped to fulfill the familiar injunction: the spear wounding the bleeding heart, which is crucified on the crossed ascender of the letter “h,” compels him to have the passion of Christ in mind as he looks at the page.

I have argued in another context for a pervasive practice of performative devotional reading in the fifteenth century—that is, private reading animated by textual and visual allusions to the conditions of performance. The Brome commonplace book provides a good example of how these cross-generic affiliations work in the period, for it combines drama and meditational devotion, plays and lyrics, diagrams and emblems, pageants and snippets of Chaucer, coming as close as any other book in the English tradition to the profusion of performative imagetexts found in the Carthusian miscellany that was the basis for my argument. If the genres of the other texts in the Book of Brome affect our understanding of this play’s meaning—they were privately read, and it, too, must be considered to have an unperformed, “literary” existence—its clear affiliations with dramatic performance also affect the reading of them. One could note the miscellany’s inclusion of dialogue in the case of Adrian and Epotys: dialogue as a genre, though never intended for performance, is closely allied with drama through the differential voicing of its words. Or one could mention the excerpts from Lydgate’s Pageant

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of Knowledge, a text that takes advantage of the visual and dramatic resonances of that word (pageant) to offer an imagined spectacle of allegorical characters speaking their moral mottos. Traces of performance lurk in these nondramatic texts, just as marks of reading suffuse the more obviously performative ones.

But continuing to think through this codicological context to the play itself: How do the interactions we can see here between reading and performance influence our understanding of this text’s meaning and the ways in which it was understood by its first readers to mean? If it was privately read in this performative vein, how was it privately read?

Some answers to these questions are suggested by the physical layout of the page, for, like the other texts in the Book of Brome, the play has been presented in some ways that would signify only to a reader who was looking at the manuscript (f. 15r; Fig. 1.4).

The most striking feature to notice is the variety of rubrication: the display script and flourishes in the first line, the red touches in the initial letters of each line, as well as the brackets that indicate patterns of rhyme (although the brackets appear only on this first page). There are less decorative elements (such as correction marked in red; e.g., ll. 19, 21) as well as more decorative elements (such as line-fillers; e.g., f. 18v). Most intriguingly, various words in the Brome play have been underlined in red in an inexplicable pattern. As Norman Davis explains in his edition of the text:

> The principle on which these are chosen is not apparent. Some of them are obviously important, especially names and designations of relationship such as wyffe 7, chyld 12, Fader 14, son 15, all of which are underlined almost every time they occur; but also marked are lyvelod 4, erth 6, creatury 8, sacryfye 39, 42, offryng 49, best 52, hyll 56, lyffe 81, blood 97, fagot 116, handys 120, harte 121, backe 130, and many others equally miscellaneous. Some of them are perhaps important enough to merit special emphasis, but it is not clear that they are more so than other words that are not underlined.

Although the rubrication seems to be part of the manuscript’s original design, it is probably scribal rather than authorial. Some readers have offered up the idea of performance as an explanation for these underlined words: John Coldewey, for example, has suggested that perhaps “the underlining acted as cues or as mnemonic devices for actors, for an overseer of the play, or for an early reader.”

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22. For similar decoration in a dramatic manuscript, see the ornate capitals in the Towneley Plays (San Marino, Huntington Library MS HM 1).


FIGURE 1.4. New Haven, Yale University, Beinecke Library MS 365 [Book of Brome], f. 15r. First page of *Abraham and Isaac.*
Given the layout and the miscellaneous context of this particular copy of the text, it seems most pertinent to explore the last of Coldewey’s suggestions and to ask about the relevance of the rubrication to practices of reading.

The most striking piece of evidence against a simple performance context for these emphasized words is the fact that they are not unique to the Abraham and Isaac play. The scribe includes such rubrication in many of the texts he transcribes—both those with performative elements and those without. But lest we conclude that the scribe routinely picks out formal divisions in every text, there are a few texts not treated in this way: The short carol that begins “Nowell! Nowell! Nowell!” contains no rubrication at all (f. 79v), and The Fifteen Signs of Doomsday contains no underlining (f. 23r). As in the Abraham and Isaac play, some rubrication serves merely to emphasize the formal structure of these poems: to highlight the first words of each stanza, for example, or the first letter of each line. But in this poem in praise of moderation (Fig. 1.5; f. 1r), you can see that some words—many important, but some less so—are underlined in an inconclusive pattern that seems to have to do with interpretation: reasonably significant words such as meser, suffer, sufferance, vertuys, and grace, join with hast and much and thynges—for which the rationale in context is much less obvious.

As a principle, names are quite commonly emphasized; in the fragmentary Life of St. Margaret, the only three words underlined are names: Olybryus twice, and Margaret once.25 And although it appears that the scribe has more completely rubricated the poems in the beginning of the manuscript—the barest ones are towards the end—this rule is not absolute: the Life of St. Margaret (with underlined names) comes after The Fifteen Signs of Doomsday (with no rubrication at all other than the first line). While the choice to rubricate appears to be a significant one, it is not reserved uniquely for clearly performative pieces. In general the rubrication found outside of the Abraham and Isaac play is as mysterious as the rubrication within it.

Outside of the Book of Brome, rubrication for emphasis appears in other non-dramatic texts: the B-version of Piers Plowman, for example, is often treated in this way. Linguistic difference in this macaronic poem is often signaled by some kind of visual emphasis on its Latin quotations, either underlining or writing in red ink. Less routinely, but still quite frequently, scribes of Piers Plowman B call attention to other words or brief phrases: some emphasis of this kind can be found in twelve of the B-version manuscripts, and it is prominent in four.26 The styles

25. For Olybryus, see f. 40v, and for Margaret, f. 41r. Margaret is underlined at the moment when the king asks the saint her name and she replies, so the emphasis here perhaps indicates that the name is pronounced as direct speech within the narrative, as well as marking the significance of the revelation.

26. For a detailed discussion of the emphasized words, see C. David Benson and Lynne S. Blanchfield, The Manuscripts of Piers Plowman: The B-Version (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997), 17–20. The four most heavily rubricated manuscripts are Cambridge, University Library, MS Dd.i.17 (C); Cambridge, University Library, MS Ll.iv.14 (C2); Oxford, Corpus Christi College, MS 201 (F); and
FIGURE 1.5. New Haven, Yale University, Beinecke Library MS 365 [Book of Brome], f. 1r. “Man in merthe hath meser in mynd.”
of emphasis include “underlining, boxing, highlighting, or actually writing the words in red,” and it is possible in some cases that different methods signify varying levels of importance.\(^{27}\) These words or phrases show some general similarities to the ones marked in Brome, for they include proper names (\textit{Piers, Meed}), titles (\textit{vitaillers, erchedekenes}), place names (\textit{Gallilee}), and technical terms (\textit{contra, ergo}) that would all seem to call for some differentiation from the regular course of the text. Some of the words and phrases marked in \textit{Piers Plowman}, however, seem to C. David Benson “unimportant, and thus questionable”: \textit{sche is assoilled, residue, south, namliche, bakbyte, skoorne, skoolde, sklawndres, places, in, awhte}.\(^{28}\)

How might the rubrication in \textit{Piers Plowman} help to explain the practices of the Brome scribe? Some of the marks call attention to the largest structures of the poem—new speakers or textual divisions—thus helping readers to find their way more easily around a famously complicated text. Others emphasize formal features of the poetry: the rubricator of Oxford, Corpus Christi College, MS 201 is interested in alliteration, for example, marking alliterating nouns, but also—more surprisingly—verbs. This scribe also routinely underscores \textit{quod}, sometimes even adding that word to the text, as well as the names of speakers. He emphasizes, then, the plurality of voices in the poem, and implicitly identifies its genre as “dialogue”—a word used to describe \textit{Piers Plowman} in some manuscripts, though not in this one. The primary generic analogue, however, is not dialogic but historical. Although this sort of emphasis also appears in some Lydgate manuscripts and in a few copies of the \textit{Canterbury Tales}, it appears most commonly in historical prose: the prose \textit{Brut}, chronicles of London, Mandeville’s \textit{Travels}, and even the Winchester Malory. Cambridge University Library MS Dd.i.17 binds together a marked copy of \textit{Piers} with Latin historical works marked for reading in a similar way, suggesting that perhaps the socially conscious alliterative verse of \textit{Piers Plowman} was occasionally mistaken for historical prose. In spite of their general “opacity,” Benson finds interpretative interest in the highlighted words, which suggest one reader’s perspective on important characters and lively, dialogic passages.\(^{29}\) Whatever the explanation of any particular scribe’s interests, the alternative patterns of emphasis in \textit{Piers Plowman} suggest that such marking is not authorial but interpretative. Even within a single manuscript the marking is rarely consistent, seeming to reflect the varying intensities of the process of reading, rather than a carefully planned and formal layout, conscientiously executed.

In the Brome \textit{Abraham and Isaac}, the scribe’s meaningful rubrication includes words that are important, either structurally (they are the first in the line), or categor-

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\(^{27}\) Benson and Blanchfield, \textit{Manuscripts of Piers Plowman}, 17.

\(^{28}\) Benson and Blanchfield, \textit{Manuscripts of Piers Plowman}, 19.

\(^{29}\) Benson and Blanchfield, \textit{Manuscripts of Piers Plowman}, 18.
ically (they are proper names), or dramatically (and there is some overlap—names, for example, could be emphasized when declaimed). But there remain words that do not seem to fit into any of these categories, the sort of words that Davis finds self-evidently unimportant, and that Benson finds questionable. It would be hard to imagine a performance, or even a prælection, that would pause over or emphasize them all. I cannot conclusively explain the meaning of all of these marks wherever they appear in the Book of Brome, but I want to suggest that the underlined words in the play point in part towards an interpretation of it, an interpretation that could of course be communicated by any performance, but one that is equally relevant to, and that I think arises from, the practice of reading in solitude.

In the case of this play, nearly all of the underlined words can be interpreted typologically. Words such as sacrifice, hill, beste, blood, and faggot, for example, may not seem important of themselves, but they point towards the elements of the Abraham and Isaac story that have the most memorable correspondences with the familiar interpretation of the story as a type of Christ’s passion. Critics including Rosemary Woolf and V. A. Kolve have shown in detail that the Abraham and Isaac story is the “locus classicus of typological interpretation in the cycles”: easily dramatized for its obvious human pathos, but also for its figural relevance to the story of Christ’s redemptive sacrifice. As the Expositor points out at the end of the Chester Abraham and Isaac play (and remember the strong connection between Chester and Brome):

This deed ye see done here in this place,
in example of Jesus done it was,
that for to win Mankind grace
was sacrificed on the rood.

By Abraham I may understand
The Father of Heaven that can fond
with his Son’s blood to break that bond
the Devil had brought us to.
By Isaac understand I may
Jesus that was obedient ay,
his Father’s will to work always,
and death to underfo.

30. I thank Christopher Grobe for first suggesting this idea to me, and for sparking my interest in the Book of Brome.
Thus the play posits both Abraham as a figure for God and Isaac as a figure for Christ. That the Brome play does not make the typological associations of its narrative as explicit does not mean that they were not operative for its audience; the “typological imaginary,” as Kathleen Biddick describes the medieval Christian fantasy of the New Law superseding the Old, was so powerful in this context that it is difficult to imagine what contemporary reader would not have understood the Abraham and Isaac story in this way. In fact, the rubricated words could themselves serve as a visual version of the kind of interpretative gesture that Chester provides verbally.

Though it does not itself form part of a dramatic cycle, the play is nevertheless aware of its place in the figural patterns of biblical history; its cyclical aesthetic emerges through the repetitive structure of the marked words. The most commonly emphasized words are all essential to the idea of the typological correspondence between the two narratives: Abraham, father, child, son, Lord, heaven. Moreover, the rubricator underlines sacrifice and offering nearly every time they appear. The Brome play’s insistence on Isaac’s carrying the wood on his back for the sacrificial fire (i.e., the wood of the cross) or its choice to dwell so long on the sheep who turns up “among the brerys” (i.e., wearing a crown of thorns) just in time to provide a sacrificial animal, echo Tertullian’s influential readings of the story as figure. The rubricator’s repeated emphasis on the hill on which the offering is to be made, the cloth with which Abraham wipes Isaac’s face, the sword in the father’s hand that so frightens the son, the unlucky scheepe or best that happens along, even the fruit of Abraham’s loins that is multiplied like stars in the sky, create mental images that encourage a typological reading. The hill is only important insofar as it prefigures Calvary; the quick beast only insofar as it prefigures Christ; the stars remind us of this story’s implications for the future of Abraham’s descendants. The Brome rubricator did not capitalize on every occasion for a typological interpretation—but if his readings were not consistently skilled, they are nonetheless readings. It seems clear that he sought to emphasize, for himself or for others, this particular meaning of the play. Thus his presentation of the text offers, to quote Kolve, “further evidence that ‘figuration’ as a concept was a part of the medieval dramatist’s [or at least the medieval reader’s] understanding of his material.”


34. For a modern reading of the Brome play that emphasizes the repetition of the word “heart,” see C. F. Burgess, “Art and Artistry in the Brome Miracle Play of Abraham and Isaac,” Cithara 1 (1962): 37–42. But although “heart” is underlined twice (ll. 35, 121), it is not one of the words most often chosen for emphasis by the contemporary rubricator.

35. Kolve, Play Called Corpus Christi, 73–74.

Edgar Schell argues that the Brome Abraham and Isaac is more thoroughly typological than any other dramatic treatment of the story. He notes verbal echoes of the Passion narrative, such as Isaac’s proud promise that “aʒens my Lordys wyll / I wyll neuer groche, lowd nor styll” (190–91). Such precise echoes reinforce more general Christological themes, such as Isaac’s concern in death for the benefit of others. And visual tableaux, such as Isaac carrying the wood on his back for the sacrifice, or submitting calmly to his binding on the altar, superimpose one narrative upon the other imagistically. As Schell explains, “[t]he figure on the altar is Isaac, of course, but with a concentrated power of assertion unique among the biblical plays, Brome has made the image of Christ approaching his own sacrifice almost equally vivid.”

Many readers of medieval drama have seen that typology often works its analogies through visual means: dramatic tableaux and memorial images that make clear that Isaac’s carrying of the wood mirrors (and the visual metaphor here is not quite dead) Christ’s carrying of the cross.

But this is not the only way in which typological meanings can be envisioned, as the Brome miscellany shows. The devotional emblem we saw at the end of Adrian and Epotys helps the reader of Abraham and Isaac to a typological interpretation, for it directly precedes the start of the play (ff. 14v–15r). With a linguistic emblem—the holy monogram—rather than a crucifixion-tableau, the visual form of the manuscript opening thus puts the reader in “mind of Christ’s Passion” just before embarking on the story that prefigures it. The bloody spear wounding the heart helps that reader to imagine the death prefigured by Abraham’s terrifying sword, and the extremity of Christ’s—or Isaac’s—sacrifice.

If the narrative of the play, its rubricator’s emphases, and its codicological context offer a spur to the “typological imaginary,” the final words of the text perhaps offer a corrective. The play concludes with an epilogue spoken by a “Doctor,” a direct address to the audience that asks them to reflect upon the kinds of moral lessons the narrative enjoins. The Brome Doctor calls on parents who have lost children not to grieve overmuch, reminded by Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son that the most important thing is obedience to God. Woolf links this epilogue to Pearl, calling both “occasional.” As the product of a historically specific occasion, the Brome epilogue might be antitypological: instead of mak-

39. Woolf, English Mystery Plays, 153: “Unlike a typological exposition, this moral is disconcertingly constrictive, and from the purely literary point of view even more infelicitous than the fairly common moral that the play demonstrates how children should be obedient to their parents. The Brome moralitas turns the play into a complement to The Pearl, and it is possible that these parallel studies in rebelliousness and obedient acquiescence in loss may have been occasional works, the occasion being some bereavement, which of necessity can no longer be identified.”
ing the story of Abraham and Isaac resonate with sacred time, the Brome Doctor brings the biblical narrative firmly into the contemporary human present of its audience. As David Mills has thoroughly demonstrated, however, the moral to parents to show patience in the face of adversity was a traditional one. Neither can the story be understood simply as exemplary, for the Doctor acknowledges that a sacrifice comparable to Abraham’s could never be expected of the members of his audience:

Trowe ye, sorys, and God sent an angell
And commaundyd yow yowre chyld to slayn,
Be youre trouthe ys ther ony of yow
That eyther wold [groche] or stryve therageyn?
How thynk ye now, sorys, therby?
I trow there be thre ore a four or moo . . . (443–48)

The very distance between Abraham’s experience and the Brome reader’s experience, however, reinforces the likelihood of a typological reading. If Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac is both inspiring and incomprehensible, so is God the Father’s sacrifice of Christ. By just so much as Abraham’s sacrifice exceeds any normally patient human parent, so does Christ’s sacrifice exceed Abraham’s.

The typological understanding of medieval drama long ago rescued the plays from critical oblivion, both elevating the texts as literary objects and recovering the possibilities of these plays for visual stagecraft. In so doing, typological critics argued that figural interpretations—often thought a kind of allegory—should enrich readings based on the drama of individual characterization or the pathos of human situations. Christ should be just as visible as Isaac, when the boy rests on the sacrificial altar. As Auerbach so clearly saw, the historicity of the figure is crucially important, for neither Isaac nor Christ loses the particularity of his own story as an effect of the figural relation between them. It is the balance between individual history and sacred image, the way each dimension informs the other, that creates the power of the figural in the plays. Typological meaning and narrative pathos (what we could call contemporary resonance, or even history) are the same thing, in this view, for the realism of the play’s characterization of both the child and the father serves to show how deeply felt Christ’s passion should be. While acknowledging the affecting human story, the play uses typological means to show that Abraham’s compassion for Isaac is the same as his obedience to God—that in both cases the law is fulfilled through love.

41. Erich Auerbach, “Figura,” in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 11–76.
Recent critical voices have found more complications to inhere in these connections of figure and history. Biddick’s understanding of the typological imaginary, for example, takes Auerbach’s insistence on history to its logical conclusion, to ask what historical effects such a mode of thinking necessarily had. The status of each figure firmly within history reveals the inherent reversibility of typological thinking (“the shattering threat of typological reversibility”) against which the teleological narrative must establish itself: as she writes, “[w]ithout the fantasy of supersession the figure of the Christian is always possibly the truth of the Jew.”

Or, in the case of Abraham and Isaac, without the fantasy of supersession the figure of the resurrected Christ is possibly the truth of the frightened human child. Allen J. Frantzen identifies similar problems with sacrificial logic, arguing that the Brome play in particular questions the reassuring Christian fantasy. In his view, the ultimately “antisacrificial” play undermines the consolations of typology by hinting at “the futility and social cost of sacrifice.”

Intriguingly, Biddick positions the inscription of this historical problem in the layout of medieval books, rather than in the theatrical performance of plays. She finds the typological imaginary incised, for example, into the mise-en-page of the Glossa Ordinaria, a familiar schoolbook that in turn inscribes it in the hearts and the minds of those who learn habits of thought from their experience of such material texts. The static layout of the page and gloss manifests the rewriting of the Old Law by the New, and makes the supersession of one narrative by the other, rather than the biblical text itself, the center of its meaning. “Typology and graphic technology are thus closely bound,” Biddick argues, and are “historically constitutive of each other.” Typological reading in the Book of Brome, too, is such a matter of seeing an interpretation laid out in the physical form of the page, a layering of Christ’s story on top of Isaac’s—or a picking of Christ’s story out of Isaac’s—that no medieval Christian reader could do without. Here the vision of the concrete page itself rather than of the figures it superimposes in the abstract leads a reader to a figural interpretation. Interestingly, Benson notes that the annotations in Piers Plowman manuscripts frequently highlight Old and New Testament names, suggesting that typological thinking is similarly inscribed upon that poem.

42. Biddick, Typological Imaginary, 6.
44. Biddick, Typological Imaginary, 12–20, and Fig. 1.
45. Biddick, Typological Imaginary, 12.
46. Benson and Blanchfield, Manuscripts of Piers Plowman, 19, write that both Old and New Testament names are frequently rubricated in Cambridge University Library MS Dd.i.17 and Cambridge University Library MS Ll.iv.14.
speeches declaimed or the interpretation of stage-pictures, but the visual effects of words on a manuscript page.

The intersections here between typological interpretation and histories of reading return us to questions about the Brome play that have surrounded its criticism: namely, the Chester problem. J. B. Severs, arguing strongly for Chester as a corrupt version of Brome, uses the question of textual inheritance to think through various possibilities for textual transmission. He imagines the actual creation of the text as partaking of the circumstances of performance: “To be sure, there are signs of imperfection caused by written transmission, and errors of this kind are undoubtedly present; but much more numerous are the errors suggesting inaccurate memory.” But further he supposes: “The sort of corruptness in which Chester abounds suggests an author-compiler, well-acquainted with the play [i.e., Brome] from having frequently heard or read it, attempting to reconstruct it from memory.” He here opens up the possibility that the Chester author was not only hearing but frequently reading the play. An alternative mode of transmission, then, would be the memory of seeing a written page, rather than memory of seeing a performance. And the memory of seeing these particular pages—though of course it could never be certain that the author of Chester saw the Book of Brome—inscribe the memory of typological interpretation, as well as the memory of the narrative itself.

I began with a pun based on bringing reading as interpretation together with reading as decoding (“a reading of the Brome play that shows the importance of reading itself”). What I have hoped to explore here is both aspects of the word: the ways in which the rubricator’s marks reveal a practice of private reading that performs a typological interpretation of the text. Instead of seeing the performance of medieval drama as typological, we might think of typological reading as itself performative. Of course, any performance is also always an interpretation, and so every performance is therefore also a kind of reading—in so many ways, the two practices are deeply and densely connected. But the Brome rubrication is more about reading itself—about the performance of interpretation—than simply about the ways in which ideas can be put forth in theatrical or extrinsic spectacle. The typological reading of the story of Abraham and Isaac is attested in multiple ways throughout medieval culture, both embodied by actors and inscribed on books. But this fifteenth-century instance of it is a reminder that the forms of medieval plays were read (both decoded and interpreted) as well as performed, and that late-medieval dramatic texts have a material existence we

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47. Both quotations are from Severs, “Brome and Chester Plays,” 151.
48. For this insight I am grateful to Helen Solterer.