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Presenters in N-Town: ‘We asygne it to 3oure good deliberacion’¹

The N-Town cycle is a compilation and, as such, presents us with not just one expositor character in one play but with various and subtly different expositor figures in four distinct plays: Contemplacio in the so-called *Mary Play*, Primus Doctor and Secundus Doctor at the close of *Passion Play I* (or rather, in an interpolation after the end of *Passion Play I*), Contemplacio at the beginning of *Passion Play II*, and Doctor in the *Assumption Play*. These plays are all interpolations into a Creation to Last Judgment cycle which is contained in the same manuscript. In this paper, I should like to challenge the widely held opinion that these figures personify ecclesiastical authority and that they are expressions of the monologic model of drama, which sees drama as a one-way didactic medium; these figures are both more mundane and more challenging than has often been appreciated.

There is a general belief that expositors in medieval drama are figures of authority, and they are usually taken to represent the institution Church in some way. This is a perfectly reasonable assumption, and there is quite a lot of contemporary evidence to support it. The opening monologue of Michel’s *Le Mystère de la Passion* (1486) is in effect a thematic sermon; the character opening Jean Bodel’s *Jeu de Saint Nicholas* (1200) is called *li preechieres* (the preacher). As such, these figures are often taken to present the authoritative reading of the play, thereby reinforcing orthodoxy and limiting the active involvement of the audience in the hermeneutic process. Similarly, presenter figures in medieval English plays are generally assumed to represent authority, traditionally ecclesiastical authority. In some cases, this seems to be the correct reading of those characters. In Chester, for example, the presenter, variously called Expositor and Doctor, claims a position of authority and has the obvious task of highlighting typological links (particularly in relation to the sacraments) of the episodes just shown, as in:

Lordinges, what may this signifye
 I will expound yt appertly –
 the unlearned standing herebye
 maye knowe what this may bee.

¹ This research was supported by the European Union through the Research Executive Agency's Seventh Framework Programme.

This present, I saye veramente,

signifieth the newe testamente

[...]

In the old law, without leasinge,

when these too good men [i.e. Melchizedek and Abraham] were livinge,

of beastes were there offeringe

and eke there sacramente.

But synce Christe dyed one roode-tree,

in bred and wyne his death remeber wee (Chester IV, ll. 113-126)²

But in other cases, the almost automatic equation of expositors with ecclesiastical authority appears to be misguided. The various N-Town presenter figures, for example, appear to challenge this point of view. This is perhaps especially interesting as the N-Town plays are all East Anglian, an area where heterodox activity seems to have been particularly strong, and stem from a period when, if Lollardy was no longer prevalent at least anti-Lollard propaganda was still in full swing; we would therefore expect presenters who assert the orthodoxy of the dramatic enterprise and pre-empt heterodox interpretations.³

The expositor figure *Contemplacio* in the *Mary Play* is often said to represent ecclesiastical authority in order to limit the potential subversiveness of the plays. Gibson connects *Contemplacio* with ‘the old ideal of monastic contemplation, so fiercely does he exemplify not only devotion to heaven but the mysterious mediation of the monk's own prayer and sacred learning on behalf of the Christian community.’⁴

² R.M. Lumiansky and David Mills, eds, *The Chester Mystery Cycle*, 2 vols (EETS S.S. 74; London: Oxford University Press, 1974).

³ Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 447-453, and Gail McMurray Gibson, *The Theater of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 30-31. The handwriting, watermarks, and language date the manuscript which contains the N-Town plays to roughly the 1460s although there were later alterations; the *Assumption Play*, which is contained in an independent quire and which was written by a different scribe, seems to have been copied slightly earlier than the remainder of Cotton MS Vespasian D. 8. The plays may of course have been substantially older than the manuscript although linguistic evidence would tentatively suggest the second quarter of the fifteenth century; see Stephen Spector, ed, *The N-Town Play: Cotton MS Vespasian D. 8*, 2 vols (EETS S.S. 11; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. xxvii-xli; this is also the edition used.

⁴ Gibson, *Theater of Devotion*, p. 127.

Given this link, she presumes that Contemplacio 'would not have been garbed as learned 'doctor' but as religious contemplative, as a monk.'⁵ Meredith likewise assumes clerical standing for this figure, and describes him as 'a slightly fussy, benevolent clergyman.'⁶ Fitzhenry has argued strongly that Contemplacio is defined by a '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'⁷ and

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.⁸

But to what extent does Contemplacio really represent ecclesiastical authority and/or circumscribe the potential range of interpretations of the *Mary Play*? We have no costume information. The name Contemplacio evidently refers to devotional practices and may consequently indicate that a religious is represented; however, the name is never mentioned in the text and therefore seems not to be of importance for the spectators. Moreover, if his name points towards a clerical colouring of Contemplacio, his speeches indicate a more pragmatic function. By far and away most speeches of this presenter figure are not didactic in any obvious way but are used to ask for silence, to recapitulate preceding matter, to introduce material to come, and to summarise episodes of the story which have been left out. The following stanzas are a representative example:

Sovereynes, 3e han sen shewyd 3ow before

⁵ Gibson, *Theater of Devotion*, p. 130.

⁶ Peter Meredith, 'Establishing an Expositor's Role: Contemplacio and the N-town Manuscript', in *The Narrator, the Expositor, and the Prompter in European Medieval Theatre*, ed. by Philip Butterworth (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), pp. 289-306 (304).

⁷ William Fitzhenry, 'The N-Town Plays and the Politics of Metatheater', *Studies in Philology*, 100 (2003), 22-43 (28).

⁸ Fitzhenry, p. 29.

Of Joachym and Anne here botherys holy metyng.
 How oure Lady was consevyd and how she was bore,
 We passe ovyr Þat, breffness of tyme consyderynge;
 And how oure Lady in here tendyr age and 3yng
 Into Þe temple was offryd, and so forth proced.
 Þis sentens sayd xal be hire begynnyng.
 Now Þe Modyr of Mercy in Þis be oure sped.

And as a childe of iij 3ere age here she xal appere
 To alle pepyl Þat ben here present.
 And of here grett grace now xal 3e here,
 How she levyd evyr to Goddys entent
 With grace.
 That holy matere we wole declare
 Tyl fortene 3ere how sche dyd fare.
 Now of 3oure speche I pray 3ow spare,
 All Þat ben in Þis place. (N-Town 9, ll. 1-17)

This is hardly the voice of clerical authority, nor does it denote a monologic view of drama. Of course, *Contemplacio* is not unaware of the didactic intent of the play overall and he touches upon this aspect in his opening and closing speeches. In his very first stanza, *Contemplacio* worries lest the play be made incomprehensible by various mishaps on the stage:

Cryst conserve Þis congregacyon
 ...
 And Þe personys here pleand, Þat Þe pronunciacyon
 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 (N-Town 8, ll. 1-6)

To see this as an expression of anxiety about the open-endedness of vernacular drama seems to me to be far-fetched; this is a relatively standard humility topos. Moreover, *Contemplacio* seems to fret nearly as much about how such a defective delivery may

mar the spectators' enjoyment of the play as it might obscure the lesson of the play. This same concern for the audience's enjoyment is to be found in *Contemplacio*'s fear that the play may become too long-winded or tedious: 'In fewe wurdys talkyd, Þat it xulde nat be tedyous | To lernyd nyn to lewd, nyn to no man of reson.' (N-Town 8, ll. 14-15). When *Contemplacio* touches upon material which has been left out, he even begs the audience to forgive this necessity:

And we beseche 3ow of 3oure pacyens
 Þat we pace Þese materys so lythly away;
 If Þei xulde be do with good prevydens,
 Eche on wolde suffyce for an hool day.
 Now xal we procede to here dissponsacyon,
 Which aftere Þis was xiiij 3ere.
 Tyme sufficyth not to make pawsacyon;
 Hath pacyens with vs we besech 3ow her. (N-Town 9, ll. 298-305)

In this passage at least, *Contemplacio* does not claim a position of authority but instead courts the audience's approval and goodwill. Rather than a clergyman presenting a monologic view of drama, we appear to be dealing with the representative of a slightly harassed producer or author whose principal worry is to keep the spectators happy. This stance of humility vis-à-vis the audience is especially marked in *Contemplacio*'s closing stanza where he 'most mekely' (N-Town 13, l. 178A) thanks the audience for their patience and beseeches their 'good supportacyon' (forbearance; N-Town 13, l. 179A).⁹ In this same stanza he again touches upon the didactic (and enjoyment) aspect of the performance: 'If here hath be seyde ore don any inconuenyens [impropriety, fault, sin, inconsistency], | We asygne it to 3oure good deliberacion [deliberation, consideration, judgment]' (N-Town 13, ll. 180A-181A). Here *Contemplacio* exemplifies a dialogic model of drama, encouraging the audience to participate actively (if kindly) in the interpretative process.

⁹ 'Supportacyon' could perhaps refer to a financial contribution, one of the meanings cited in the *MED*; the phrase 'of your god supportacioun', however, is not linked with the pecuniary meaning. This play has several possible conclusions and may consequently have been performed without *Contemplacio*'s closing speech.

Indeed, this presenter figure barely ever teaches, despite having quite a few speeches. He does present the audience with information, but this is normally basic factual background information which enables the spectators better to follow the play (as in the passage from N-Town 9, ll. 1-17 quoted above or in the quatrains about Mary and Joseph's stay with Elizabeth and Zacharias in the closing speech). Only in his final speech is there an overt element of didacticism:

Lystenyth, sovereynys, here is conclusyon.
 How Þe Aue was mad here is lernyd vs:
 Þe aungel seyð, 'Ave, gratia plena. Dominus tecum,
 Benedicta tu in mulieribus'.
 Elyzabeth seyð, 'Et benedictus
 Fructus uentris tui.' Thus Þe Chirch addyd 'Maria' and 'Jhesus' her.
 Who seyth oure Ladyes Sawtere dayly for a 3er Þus,
 He hath pardon ten thowsand and eyte hundryd 3er. (N-Town 13, ll. 150A-157A)

However, even here that element is muted – despite the Latin, it is more a summary of the preceding 'Salutation and Conception' and 'Visit to Elizabeth' plays than a lesson; the latter play is, incidentally, much more didactic with its inclusion of the Magnificat in Latin and English. Although the mention of a pardon perhaps implies a clerical standing, this is neatly counterbalanced by the use of the first person plural pronoun in 'here is lernyd vs' (l. 151): Contemplacio is not teaching the audience what the play means so much as including himself in the group of people who have learned something from the play.

It is also interesting to note that the compiler of the N-Town manuscript seemingly intended to leave the Contemplacio figure out altogether. In the end, the background information provided by Contemplacio appears to have proved too important to be left out, and so the compiler went back to the beginning of the *Mary Play* to insert the first speech. This desire to eliminate Contemplacio was probably due to an entirely prosaic reason: by linking the various episodes of the *Mary Play* together, this presenter goes against the compiler's evident desire to present them as individual pageants. Still, the fact that such a superficial reason almost certainly led the compiler to try to discard this character shows that presenters such as Contemplacio were not automatically seen as a necessary safeguard of the orthodoxy

of the plays. Similarly, the two octaves of Contemplacio's closing speech at the end of the *Mary Play* are perhaps original (though the quatrains appear to be a later addition) but the closing speech was possibly discarded in favour of a later, Contemplacio-less alternate ending. It would therefore appear that the reasons to include (or to try to exclude) Contemplacio in the *Mary Play* and the N-Town cycle were entirely pragmatic and unrelated to a desire to instruct the audience in orthodoxy or, for that matter, to an attempt to give the play an aura of ecclesiastical approval and authority.

It therefore seems mistaken to over-emphasise the clerical standing of this character. That Contemplacio was dressed as some kind of cleric must remain a possibility but it is equally possible, perhaps even more likely given his pragmatic role in the play, that he was a secular figure. It certainly seems wrong to view this character as a channel of orthodox religious authority limiting the potential subversiveness of the play. If anything, Contemplacio diminishes the authority of the performance by highlighting the potential for errors and flaws in his opening stanza and by repeatedly pointing out the selective nature of the story shown on stage; he ends the play, moreover, by stressing the importance of the audience's 'deliberacion'.

The *Mary Play*'s Contemplacio's namesake in *Passion Play II* is described as 'an exposytour in doctorys wede' in the opening stage direction of that play, arguing for a more overt clerical presence in this play. His address of the audience 'sofreynes and frendys' (N-Town 29, l. 1) is also slightly more sermon-like than the mere use of 'sovereynes' (N-Town 9, l. 1, N-Town 13, l. 23; 'sofreynes', N-Town 9, l. 294; 'sovereynys', N-Town 13, l. 150A) by the *Mary Play* Contemplacio. 'Sovereigns', which evidently entails a certain humility on the part of the speaker with regards to his audience, is not a form of audience address used in Middle English sermons whereas 'friends' is frequently used to address the congregation. However, the *Passion Play II* presenter figure still treats the audience with deference ('we beseche 3ow', N-Town 29, l. 7, and 'Besekyng 3ou', N-Town 29, l. 20). Contemplacio is also repeatedly aligned with the actors ('We intendyn to procede Þe matere Þat we lefte Þe last 3ere', N-Town 29, l. 6, 'The last 3ere we shewyd here', N-Town 29, l. 9, 'Now wold we procede', N-Town 29, l. 17). To see this character as an objective, independent voice of authority mediating between players and spectators would be misleading. The most important point of similarity between the two Contemplacio figures resides not in their didacticism but in their practical usefulness. At least once

in its performance history, the two *Passion Plays* were intended to be performed in consecutive years and Contemplacio's opening speech in *Passion Play II* is primarily used to recapitulate what had been played the previous year and to introduce the matter to follow.

On the other hand, this Contemplacio is marginally more didactic as he reminds the audience 'to kepe þe Passyon in 3oure mende' (N-Town 29, l. 8). But he does so in such a tentative manner that, again, it would be mistaken to see Contemplacio as representing ecclesiastical authority: 'Wherefore we beseche 3ow þat 3oure wyllys be good | To kepe þe Passyon in 3oure mende, þat xal be shewyd here.' (N-Town 29, ll. 7-8). Interestingly, these lines almost seem to emphasise the desired effect of the play rather than present the spectators with a simple didactic lesson, for according to the *Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge* one of the arguments in favour of religious drama was that it had a positive mnemonic effect ('To kepe þe Passyon in 3oure mende, þat xal be shewyd here.'). In any case, the bland message 'kepe þe Passyon in 3oure mende' is hardly sufficient to label this presenter a didactic figure. Nor does Contemplacio reappear later on in *Passion Play II* (as it has survived) to direct the audience's interpretation of the events depicted on stage. It seems therefore safe to conclude that we are, again, dealing with a pragmatic character, unrelated to (ecclesiastical) authority or anxiety to circumscribe heterodox interpretations.

The Doctor of the *Assumption Play* seems, at first sight, to be much more authoritative. True, he commences his speech by addressing the audience in a highly respectful manner ('Ryht worchepful souereynes' N-Town 41, l. 1) but in the next few lines he asserts his authority: 'as I lere' (N-Town 41, l. 3), 'wythoutyn dyswary [doubt]' (N-Town 41, l. 4), and 'this avowe dar I' (N-Town 41, l. 6). Nor does this Doctor align himself with the actors ('here men schul be pleyand', N-Town 41, l. 25). He also provides sources for his claims: 'That Seynt Jhon the Euangelist wrot and tauht [...] | In a book clepid apocriphum' (N-Town 41, ll. 3-4), 'as scripture dothe specyfye' (N-Town 41, l. 12), and 'Legenda Sanctorum autorysyth this trewely' (N-Town 41, l. 13). This is unlike anything we have encountered with the Contemplacio figures of the *Mary Play* and *Passion Play II*, and the *Assumption Play* Doctor is a much more likely candidate for a monologic voice of ecclesiastical authority. But in fact here, too, the didacticism of the speech is minimal. For example, the promising

use of *auctoritates* such as Scripture and the *Legenda Aurea* is used to calculate the age of the Virgin Mary at the time of her death – hardly controversial material! There are some interesting snippets of information in the Doctor's speech concerning the life of the Virgin, especially after the Passion, but the educational element is not very pronounced. Moreover, the one practical – if extremely basic – religious instruction in this entire speech is phrased in a much politer way and addressed to the audience in a much more indirect fashion ('Now blissid mot sche be, we owe to be seyand.' N-Town 41, l. 24), than the concluding request for silence ('now ses and tak hede.' N-Town 41, l. 26). The presenter does not reappear in the play to provide an interpretation or to advise the audience how the play may aid their devotion.

In fact, even Doctor's apparent stance of authority is misleading on closer inspection. Claims of authority, such as 'as I lere', are in two out of three occasions used in conjunction with a reference to an *auctoritas*, with the effect that the responsibility for the accuracy of the information is shifted from the speaker to the relevant source: 'That Seynt Jhon the Evangelist wrot and tauht, as I lere, | In a book clepid apocriphum, wythoutyn dyswary.' (N-Town 41, ll. 3-4). Rather than asserting the infallible authority of the speaker, these lines imply that Doctor is reliant on other sources for his authority. Similarly, the line 'Thus was sche occupyed, I rede' (N-Town 41, l. 22), the reference to Scripture, and the claim that 'Legenda Sanctorum autorysyth this trewely' (N-Town 41, l. 13), while they might all support a claim to learnedness, also serve to diminish the responsibility of the speaker. Moreover, the odd reference to St John the Evangelist writing about the Assumption in 'Apocriphum', perhaps a reference to 'Apocalypse', the alternative name of Revelation, does not augur well for the learnedness of the Doctor. **THIS IS BASED ON LEGENDA AUREA!!!!** Furthermore, Doctor relies not simply on the authority of his sources, but even on the audience's abilities in mental arithmetic:

Now acounte me thise yeris wysely,
 And I sey the age was of this maide Marye
 When sche assumpte above the ierearchye
 Thre score yer, as scripture dothe specyfye:
 Legenda Sanctorum autorysyth this trewely. (N-Town 41, ll. 9-13)

Encouraging the audience to verify the accuracy of the information presented by Doctor and his sources is not at all monologic, nor does it indicate an especially authoritative stance for Doctor.

However, to some extent it is possible that this Doctor is reinforcing orthodoxy. The Assumption was celebrated as an important Church feast in late medieval England, but it was only declared infallible dogma in the twentieth century; given that there is but slender biblical support for it (even in Revelation), it may be that there was some opposition to the feast and the idea behind it. If there was such controversy, it cannot be aligned with mainstream Lollardy. For example, the Wycliffite sermon cycle contains sermons for the vigil and the feast of the Assumption and, although neither mentions the Assumption as such, this surely indicates that opposition to the Feast or the event it commemorated was not typical of the most influential heterodox movement in late medieval England.¹⁰ Moreover, concern about the authenticity of the Assumption is not a theme in less authoritative Lollard texts either. Thus, whereas a whole series of Lollard opinions are expressed in the confession Hawisia Moone of Loddon made in Norwich in 1430, there is nothing concerning the Virgin Mary's Assumption.¹¹ Nonetheless, there may have been some controversy surrounding the feast and the event it celebrates, and the presenter's emphatic, if misleading, assertion that there is biblical evidence of the Assumption might serve to undermine criticism of the theology underlying the play. Using the *Legenda Aurea* and John the Evangelist's mysterious 'Apocriphum' as source material to support the thesis would presumably not have convinced any doubters, but it might well have convinced less learned and less critical spectators of the authenticity of the events to be enacted. But given that belief in the Assumption appears to have been as characteristic of Lollards as of orthodox believers, this play and its Doctor cannot be seen as actively countering Lollardy.

In the *Assumption Play* Doctor we have, then, a more complex presenter figure. He claims authority in the same breath as he disclaims responsibility for the information he conveys. While he might impress the spectators by referring to learned sources, most of the information he provides is extremely basic and appears to have

¹⁰ Sermo 58 (In Vigilia Assumpcionis) and Sermo 59 (In Assumpcione Beate Marie) in Pamela Gradon, ed., *English Wycliffine Sermons*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

¹¹ Anne Hudson, ed., *Selections from English Wycliffite Writings* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), pp. 34-37.

been included to enable to spectators better to follow the play. That is, the Doctor has a predominantly practical function for all his erudition; he is not a theological instructor. His one, bland, piece of overt religious instruction to the audience is phrased in a circumspect and tentative way, wholly unlike what one would expect from a representative of ecclesiastical authority. Nor can the Doctor be said to assert a monologic view of drama because he does not offer an interpretation of the play – he even encourages the audience to check that the source material is correct and that Mary’s age at her death was indeed sixty. On the other hand, the explicit reference to biblical sources for the Assumption of the Virgin may point towards contemporary debate concerning the authenticity of this event. This is not a monologic speech aimed at refuting doubt on this matter and the orthodoxy of the spectators on this point does not seem to be of particular importance: they are advised to think highly of the Virgin but they are not told explicitly to believe in the Assumption. We can perhaps say that the addition of the presenter, while mainly a practical device to introduce the play, was stimulated by a desire to assert the authenticity of the Assumption. The learned material and the Doctor’s fleeting authoritative stance all serve to underline the accuracy of the subject material but they are not used to force a particular interpretation on the audience. Nor does the Doctor, however orthodox he may be, represent the authority of the Church: his relationship to the spectators and his role as instructor are much too tentative to see the Doctor as a preacher or priest teaching a congregation.

A teacher and a preacher is exactly what Primus Doctor in the so-called ‘Procession of Saints’ at the end of *Passion Play I* claims to be:

To þe pepyl not lernyd I stonde as a techer,
 Of þis processyon to ȝeve informacyon;
 And to them þat be lernyd as a gostly precher,
 That in my rehersayl they may haue delectacyon. (N-Town 28, 'Procession of Saints', ll. 9-12)

This is a much more emphatic assumption of authority than anything else we encountered in the N-Town plays. In fact, the idea that the learned may also profit from the Doctors’ speeches makes these figures more authoritative than even the

Chester Expositor / Doctor, who limits his lessons to the unlearned in the audience ('I will expound yt appertly – | the unlearned standing herebye | maye knowe what this may bee.', Chester IV, ll. 114-116). But, as we shall see, this assertion of authority is again somewhat misleading.

There are several indications that the 'Procession of Saints' is an interpolation and not an inherent part of the *Passion Plays*.¹² Perhaps the fact that, despite being such prominent characters, so few of the apostles were individualised in the *Passion Plays* (only Peter is named in the spoken text, for instance) led the compiler to insert this pseudo-dramatic fragment containing their names, just like he inserted genealogical information for Mary on the pages leading up to the *Mary Play* (ff. 37v and 38r). Although it is doubtful that the 'Procession of Saints' was originally part of the *Passion Plays* and even, I would argue, that it was ever meant to be performed with them, it is nonetheless a very interesting text. It is an example of a procession and as such of interest for our appreciation of East Anglian dramatic traditions as well as for our understanding of expositor figures in N-Town and East Anglian drama more generally.

Despite the overt claim to authority, the actual speeches of Primus Doctor and Secundus Doctor are not particularly didactic. They identify various apostles, as well as Paul and John the Baptist, and provide some background information, but there does not seem to be a clear mnemonic structure (for example, the apostle Thomas comes between Paul and John the Baptist), theological slant, or devotional message, e.g.:

Heyl, Poul, grett doctour of ðe feyth,
 And vessel chosyn be trewe eleccyon.
 Heyl, Thomas, of whom ðe gospel seyth

¹² The 'Betrayal' pageant ends about three quarters of the page down on folio 162r, 162v is blank, and the 'Procession of Saints' commences on 163r. It is followed by a blank folio, and *Passion Play II* starts on 165r. The 'Procession of Saints' is not an independent pageant (it does not have a play number and it does not really fit into the Creation to Doom cycle which the N-Town compiler created), but the manuscript also indicates that it is a part of neither *Passion Play I* nor *Passion Play II*. Its connection to the surrounding plays is also problematic in terms of content as Paul does not feature in either of the *Passion Plays* but is identified in the 'Procession of Saints'. Spector's edition, which restarts numbering lines with the 'Procession of Saints', is more accurate in this regards than Sugano's with continued numbering; Douglas Sugano, *The N-Town Plays* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute, 2007).

In Crystys wounde was 3oure refeccyon. (N-Town 28, 'Procession of Saints', ll. 33-36)

The Doctors appear to be a talking *Who's Who*, identifying individuals by name and providing a tiny bit of extra information so that the audience can remember why that person is famous. This identification might be useful in a procession of images or *tableaux vivants*, although if local images were used presumably many people in the audience would have known and recognised those images, making it doubtful that even many unlearned spectators would have required the identification provided by the Doctors. There is nothing in the speeches of Primus Doctor and Secundus Doctor about the benefits of knowing the apostles by name, about how devotion to them might aid you, or some such message. The devotional value of the Doctors' speeches therefore seems to be minimal and it is certainly questionable that they would have provided learned spectators with 'delectacyon'. It is, moreover, probable that the Doctors remained fixed in one place and delivered their speeches as the procession moved along, which has as a result that presumably only a (small) section of the audience received their information. This information, while asserting the identity of the individuals portrayed, is factual and sparse, and lacks the kind of lessons a preacher might draw from these figures. In fact, the Doctors' speeches are much less informative and theologically insightful than those of the various prophets in the N-Town's cycle's *Jesse Root* pageant, as in

I am þe prophete Jeremye
 And fullich acorde in all sentence
 With Kyng Daud and with Ysaie,
 Affermynge pleyndly beforþ þis audyens
 That God, of his high benyvolens,
 Of prest and kynge wyll take lynage,
 And bye us all from oure offens,
 In hevyn to haue his herytage. (N-Town 7, 32-40)

The 'Procession of Saints' expositors are indeed self-proclaimed figures of authority, and they do not rely on other sources for their information, mention the possible short-comings of the procession, or encourage the audience to participate in the

process of identification. Presumably, the 'Procession of Saints' was originally part of a religious procession and, consequently, probably under clerical aegis, which may account for the more authoritative and monologic stance of Primus Doctor and Secundus Doctor. On the other hand, the information provided is extremely bare and not at all related to the audience; as a result, it is difficult to see these Doctors as religious instructors. It appears that the producers of this East Anglian procession, however clerical they may have been, were not very interested in stimulating the spectators' devotion to these saints through overt religious instruction. The interpolation of the 'Procession of Saints' in the N-Town manuscript demonstrates the compiler's interest in the biblical narrative but the minimal amount of information contained in it and its position in the manuscript ensure that Primus Doctor and Secundus Doctor in no way restrict the open-endedness of the *Passion Plays*.

We therefore have to be wary of assuming that presenters in medieval English drama are figures of authority and that, as such, they serve to limit heterodox interpretations. Of all the presenter figures in the N-Town manuscript, only Primus Doctor and Secundus Doctor in the 'Procession of Saints' come close to representing the authority of the Church and a monologic view of drama, but even here there is little sense of limiting potentially subversive, heterodox interpretations of the event or of reinforcing orthodox theology and devotion. The inclusion of the 'Procession of Saints' indicates the N-Town manuscript compiler's devotional interest in the subject material of the plays but it does not constitute an attempt to provide the *Passion Plays* with a mantle of ecclesiastical authority or to pre-empt heterodox readings of the play. The other presenter figures in the N-Town manuscript (*Mary Play* Contemplacio, *Passion Play II* Contemplacio, and *Assumption Play* Doctor) do not in any obvious way represent the authority of the Church, nor do they offer an interpretative frame in order to limit the open-endedness of their plays. In fact, only in the *Assumption Play* is there a hint of religious controversy – not concerning the play or drama in general, but about the authenticity of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary. While the Doctor's opening lines align the *Assumption Play* with orthodoxy, this seems to be a side-effect of the emphasis on the authenticity of the event depicted; these lines do not express concern about the audience or about how they might (wrongly) interpret the play.

Rather than worrying about potential mistaken or subversive understandings of their plays, medieval East Anglian playwrights seem to have been more likely to

encourage a critical audience and to restrict overt didacticism by presenters to a bare minimum. Further study of other such characters in Middle English drama might well provide more evidence of this phenomenon. There is, for instance, only one play with an expositor figure in the entire York Corpus Christi Play. At least one speech by Poeta in *The Conversion of St Paul* (c. 1500-1525) is optional as it is marked 'si placet'.¹³ It has been argued that Poeta's prologue to *The Killing of the Children* (c. 1512) was written for a specific occasion – that is, that it was not an integral, unchangeable part of the play.¹⁴ The name of these two presenters also does not point to clerical figures. Ritch has argued that English presenter figures 'were actually added or further developed to bolster intellectual apologies as the Reformation proceeded', an idea which could be explored fruitfully with regard to one of the very few overtly didactic presenters in medieval English drama, namely the Doctor or Expositor in Chester.¹⁵ Perhaps a reassessment of the role and importance of such figures in medieval drama overall is in order. Mazouer, for example, has postulated that the thematic sermon prologue to Michel's *Mystère de la Passion* did not form part of the performance but was aimed at a reading audience.¹⁶ And Ramey has demonstrated that the unreliable opening summary of Jean Bodel's *Jeu de Saint Nicholas* by a presenter figure who obviously represented ecclesiastical authority – he is labelled *li preechieres* ('the preacher') – was used to encourage the spectators to engage critically not just with the play but also with real sermons.¹⁷

Given the anxiety surrounding the use of the vernacular in religious instruction in late medieval East Anglia and England more generally, the liberal approach to the interpretative process which characterises most of the N-Town plays is doubly remarkable. While the function of most of the N-Town presenter figures may be rather more mundane than some scholars have thought, the absence of a clear

¹³ Donald C. Baker, John L. Murphy, and Louis B. Hall Jr, eds, *The Late Medieval Religious Plays of Bodleian MSS Digby 133 and E Museo 160* (EETS 283; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), sd after l. 154.

¹⁴ Baker, Murphy, Hall, p. lx.

¹⁵ K. Janet Ritch, 'The Role of the Presenter in Medieval Drama', in *'Bring furth the pagants': Essays in Early English Drama Presented to Alexandra F. Johnston*, ed. by David N. Klausner and Karen Sawyer Marsalek (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), pp. 230-268 (243).

¹⁶ Charles Mazouer, 'Sermons in the *Passions* of Mercadé, Gréban and Jehan Michel', pp. 247-269, in *Les Mystères: Studies in Genre, Text and Theatricality*, ed. by Peter Happé and Wim Hüsken (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012), p. 256.

¹⁷ Lynn T. Ramey, 'Unauthorized Preaching: The Sermon in Jean Bodel's *Jeu de Saint Nicholas*', pp. 221-233 (esp. 228).

monologic and ecclesiastical presence in the majority of the N-Town plays makes the plays overall a more subtle and more complex expression of religious instruction and devotion. Even Doctor in the orthodox *Assumption Play* does not appear to be overly concerned with ensuring that his audience believes in the Assumption. The absence of an authoritative, mediating ecclesiastical voice indicates that these plays are likely to have been a predominately, perhaps even exclusively, lay enterprise.¹⁸ Furthermore, the apparent lack of anxiety about divergent interpretations of the plays indicates not simply faith in the spectators' abilities in that regard, it also seems to point to a relatively open-minded and lax attitude to certain religious differences in fifteenth-century East Anglia.

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¹⁸ This goes against Gibson's claim for a connection with the great monastery at Bury St Edmunds and Sugano's suggested link with the Cluniac Priory of St Mary at Thetford; see Gail McMurray Gibson, 'Bury St. Edmunds, Lydgate, and the N-Town Cycle', *Speculum* 56 (1981), 56-90 (esp. 75), and Douglas Sugano, 'This game wel played in good a-ray': The N-Town playbooks and East Anglian games', *Comparative Drama* 28 (1994) <<http://lion.chadwyck.com>> [accessed 30 April 2013]. The overt preacher and teacher stance of the Doctors in 'Procession of the Saints' may perhaps be due to ecclesiastical auspices of the event with which it was originally associated.