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## Morality Plays and the Aftermath of Arundel's Constitutions<sup>1</sup>

There have been huge advances in medieval drama scholarship in the last few decades. Gone are the days when Mankind could be described as 'a play of the utmost ignorance and crudity' (Craig 350) as we have come to appreciate medieval drama's theatrical sophistication. Thanks to exhaustive research by the Records of Early English Drama project, we have also developed a much better understanding of the diverse nature of medieval English drama. Research in these fields continues to advance our knowledge of theatrical activity in medieval England. This article, however, will approach medieval drama from yet another angle, in line with current work that reveals an increasingly complex picture of religion and devotion in late medieval England. While 'orthodoxy' and 'heterodoxy' remain useful and convenient shorthands, and while there undoubtedly was considerable tension between two different strands of Christianity in England from the late fourteenth century onwards, recent scholarship demonstrates again and again the fluid boundaries and overlaps between orthodoxy and Lollardy, and the internal diversity of these two camps (for instance, Kelly and Perry 2). Lutton, for example, has shown that 'the increasing heterogeneity of Tenterden's orthodox piety in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries' (4), which to some degree helped pave the way for the Reformation, cannot simply be ascribed to the influence of Lollardy. This appreciation of the complexities of contemporary devotion opens up new ways of addressing medieval English drama, as this essay hopes to show.

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In particular, the impact of anti-Lollard legislation and sentiment on vernacular religious literature has come under strong scrutiny of late. Watson argued that the perceived dullness of fifteenth-century English religious literature was the result of censorship and self-censorship due to the climate of suspicion following the condemnation of John Wyclif's opinions at the Blackfriars council of 1382, *De Heretico Comburendo* of 1401 and specifically Arundel's Constitutions of 1409 (822-864). This legislation limited preaching to specially licensed preachers, circumscribed the content of preaching and teaching of religious matters, and proscribed (written) Biblical translations into the vernacular. There is some evidence to suggest that these Constitutions did have an effect on the main ecclesiastical channel of religious instruction. Spencer, for instance, has remarked that there was a marked lull in the production of Middle English sermons following Arundel's Constitutions (116, 182-183). Authors with both heterodox and orthodox leanings commented on, and complained about, the restricting influence of the legislation on preaching (Swinburn 101; Hudson and Spencer 232). On the other hand, both this perceived poverty of vernacular religious writing in late medieval England and the impact of Arundel's Constitutions are increasingly being questioned.<sup>2</sup> Certainly, medieval religious drama flourished in the fifteenth century, seemingly undeterred by ecclesiastical restrictions on teaching and preaching. Crassons has claimed that 'the resiliency of the Corpus Christi cycles alone attests to the fifteenth century's lively and enduring interest in a distinctive mode of vernacular theology apparently unscathed by Arundel's legislation' (98).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the various essays in Gillespie and Ghosh.

<sup>3</sup> Note that the neither the N-Town nor the Towneley manuscripts contain dramatic cycles as such, and that the correlation between Chester and Corpus Christi was temporary.

While this is an attractive thesis, King has shed doubt on the extent to which these texts can be seen to ‘originate as acts of defiance directed at Arundel ... immediately following the promulgation of the Constitutions’ (552), because the surviving scripts nearly all date from the later fifteenth to early sixteenth centuries – in what form the plays existed previous to the surviving manuscript copies we simply do not know (539-549). Nevertheless, the authorities were still wary of the use of the vernacular, unauthorised preaching and the threat of heterodoxy in the mid to late fifteenth century and play texts from this period may still have been an expression of lay defiance in the face of ecclesiastical restrictions. This article will use the so-called morality plays as a test case to determine how they fit into these politics of contemporary vernacular theology, focusing especially on the use of English for religious instruction and the sacrament of penance because these were two of the most hotly contested issues between orthodox authorities and suspected heretics.<sup>4</sup>

First, however, it is necessary to show how deeply engrained religious controversy was in the society from which these plays emerged. The plays from the Macro manuscript, namely *The Castle of Perseverance* (c.1400-1425), *Mankind* (c.1465-1471) and *Wisdom* (c.1465-1470), can safely be located in East Anglia, an area with a strong history of Lollardy and anti-Lollard persecution from at least the late 1420s until the 1510s (Thomson, Chapter V; Hudson *Premature Reformation* 447-453; Gibson *The Theater of Devotion* 30-31). For example, surviving documents show that

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<sup>4</sup> Given the few surviving examples and the notable differences between these surviving examples, it is perhaps best to treat the category ‘morality play’ with caution in the context of medieval English drama. Nevertheless, their perceived didactic nature and interest in penance make them an ideal test case for the purposes of this article.

around the time of Mankind and Wisdom heretics were forced to undertake penance on the markets of Cambridge and Ely (1457) and a relapsed heretic was publicly executed (1467) (Thomson 133). As such, it is very likely that these plays would have been influenced in one way or another by current religious debate and conflict. There are two further plays that will be taken into account: *Occupation and Idleness* (c.1450) and *Nature* (c.1490-1495).<sup>5</sup> *Occupation and Idleness* may be connected with Winchester College although there is no hard evidence to support such a connection (Beadle 7). There is likely to have been some awareness of religious controversy wherever it originated. If the play does indeed come from Winchester, we know of heresy prosecutions at Winchester in 1440, in which the suspects were indicted, amongst other things, for the belief that sinners need not confess to a priest, and a Lollard had to abjure to the prior in Winchester in 1454 (Thomson 63-64, 67). Evidence suggests an active Lollard community in London in the 1490s, that is, at the time when Henry Medwall's *Nature* was almost certainly performed for Cardinal Morton's household at Lambeth (Nelson 1-3). Historical documents also indicate that authorities were actively investigating suspected cases of heresy (Thomson 154-159). In 1494, for instance, the octogenarian Joan Boughton, 'an old cankyrd heretyke' (Thomson 156), was burnt at Smithfield for maintaining Wycliffite opinions. We would consequently expect all the plays under discussion to have been affected to some extent by this atmosphere of religious debate, propaganda, and persecution.

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<sup>5</sup> Neither *The Pride of Life* (c.1350-1400), which is almost certainly Irish and predates Arundel's Constitutions, nor *Everyman*, a sixteenth-century translation from a Dutch original, will be considered.

In order to assess these plays' position in their contemporary religious climate, I shall concentrate first on whether their use of English and Latin betrays any concern about religious instruction in the vernacular, especially when the plays were intended for an audience which included members of the less educated, lower social classes.<sup>6</sup> The existence of fifteenth-century English religious plays which seem to flout various ordinances of Arundel's Constitutions – as they are in the vernacular, deal with religious topics, were on the whole a lay enterprise, and were possibly open to the “general public” – is an odd phenomenon. Such plays could be linked with religious dissent as early as the late fourteenth century. John Wyclif's use of the York Pater Noster Play to defend translations of the Bible in *De Officio Pastoralis* at first sight endorses the reading of at least some vernacular religious plays as subversive:

freris han tauzt in englund. þe pater noster in engliʒsch tunge as men seyen in the pley of ʒork & in many oþere cuntreys/ siþen þe pater noster is part of matheus gospel as clerkis knowen: why may not al be turnyd to engliʒsch  
(Lindberg 52)

But what this episode demonstrates above all is how easily religious English drama could be adopted as a mascot by either side of the controversy. The York Pater Noster Play was, after all, produced under the auspices of friars at this point in time, and though it devolved into lay patronage, it continued to be performed, apparently without creating any debate about its orthodoxy, until well into the sixteenth century (Johnston 'The Plays of the Religious Guilds of York' 72). Despite Wyclif's seeming

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<sup>6</sup> As Watson (831) has noted, the Church's legislation was especially used to target lower class owners and readers of potentially seditious texts.

approval of the York Pater Noster Play, certain strands of Lollardy were fiercely critical of religious drama, as *A Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge* makes clear. Gillespie has argued that the English delegation's sponsorship of religious plays at the Council of Konstanz in 1417 served as a rebuttal of such Lollard criticism (7-8). Given the intended international and clerical audience for these performances at Konstanz, they were almost certainly in Latin – if, indeed, there was any spoken text at all (the surviving account may well describe short tableaux without any text).<sup>7</sup> The sponsorship of performances at Konstanz does not therefore unequivocally confirm that the English Church supported religious drama in the vernacular, or religious drama which was produced by and for the laity. This problematic status of vernacular religious (lay) drama is likely to have left its mark on the surviving plays; indeed, in some of these plays unease about religious instruction in the vernacular to the laity is discernable.

This anxiety is most easily observed in the use of Latin in order to limit the non-Latinate spectators' understanding of the play in *Mankind* and *Occupation and Idleness*. It has been argued that fully to appreciate the humor and understand the theological message of *Mankind*, as well as its political comments, knowledge of Latin is indispensable (for example, Clopper 350). This does not happen in all instances, thus the command 'Vade et jam amplius noli peccare.' (850) is translated twice (852, 853); no knowledge of Latin is demanded here in order to understand the message. But in many cases the religious lesson is conveyed through Latin only and

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<sup>7</sup> 'There were shows and pantomines by players in rich and costly raiment. They played Our Lady holding her Son God Our Lord and Joseph standing beside her and three holy kings bringing their tribute. ... They also played King Herod sending after the three kings and slaying the children', as quoted by Gillespie (7).

excluding the unlearned does seem to have been one of the intended effects of the use of Latin in this play. Intriguingly, the theology that requires a Latinate audience does not appear to be in any way controversial, e.g. ‘The justyce of God wyll as I wyll, as hymselfe doth precyse: | Nolo mortem peccatoris, inquit, yff he wyll be redusyble.’ (833-834). Of course, barring potential non-Latinate spectators from fully understanding the play is not the sole reason for, and effect of, Mercy’s use of Latin. It clothes him in an aura of authority. In some instances it also recalls the liturgy, which would, in turn, have validated his discourse and have added gravitas and in certain cases very possibly an emotional impact to his text. Thus the Latin phrase in ‘Be repentant here, trust not þe owr of deth; thynke on þis lessun: | “Ecce nunc tempus acceptabile, ecce nunc dies salutis.”’ (865-66) was used in the liturgy on Ash Wednesday and on the first Sunday of Lent, and would consequently not merely have carried penitential overtones, it would also have called the Passion of Christ to mind (Eccles 227). The parodic use of Latin by Mischief and his ilk has led scholars to believe that the playwright was critical of contemporary religious discourse and was to some extent in favour of the Lollards’ call to employ the vernacular (for instance, Dillon 57-59). However, Mercy, the voice of religious instruction in this play, firmly re-appropriates Latin and even macaronic Latin-English discourse towards the end of the play and it is consequently unlikely that the playwright objected to the use of Latin and Latinate language for religious purposes (Steenbrugge 28-56). Given that the religious authorities were concerned about unlicensed preaching and teaching on religious matters to the laity in the vernacular, Mercy’s obfuscating use of Latin in *Mankind* points to a certain level of anxiety about the use of English for religious instruction in a dramatic performance open to a lay audience.<sup>8</sup> Various scholars have

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<sup>8</sup> There is no hard evidence regarding the audience of *Mankind* but if the individuals named in

also remarked on the aureate English used by Mercy and Mankind. Gillespie has argued that aureation was a conscious attempt ‘to reclaim the vernacular for orthodoxy, and to make it fit for precise and nuanced theological thought’ (36) in response to the Lollards’ call for the plain use of the vernacular. This appreciation of aureate language would then indicate more orthodox leanings for the play, in line with the exclusive use of Latin and the general predisposition towards Latinate language and Latin observed above (as well as some anti-Lollard sentiments expressed in the play).<sup>9</sup> Although Mankind is evidently a play in Middle English, it would consequently be wrong to see its use of the vernacular (and Latin) as challenging contemporary restrictions on religious instruction in English.

An elitist aspect of the use of Latin is also to be observed in *Occupation and Idleness*. Although *Occupation* explicitly requests such information as may benefit the laity, *Doctrine* delivers it with a heavy use of Latin, which makes it incomprehensible for all but the Latinate spectators:

*Occupation*: Tel us some of Goddis werkis,

That the comoun peple may knowe

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the play did indeed attend a performance, it would point to at least some members of the laity amongst the spectators. For more information regarding these individuals see Meredith (10) and Geck (33-56). The reference to ‘ze souerens þat sytt and ze brothern þat stonde ryght wppe’ (29) may also indicate a social divide in the audience.

<sup>9</sup> Dillon (54-60) has seen the use of aureate English as a critique of contemporary sermons, more or less in line with Lollard insistence on the need of translations and the use of the vernacular. But surviving Middle English sermons are much less aureate than the play, so that it is difficult to link the use of such language to contemporary preaching.

As don thes worthi clerkis.

Doctrine: Summe Trinitati Y wyl begynne,

That with his myght wrought al thyng;

Novem ordines without synne

Angelorum to hym obeyng

Ad Dei iudicia for to abide

Misteria complenda ful of lyght. (549-557)

Again, Latin is not solely used in this instance to exclude non-Latinate members of the audience, but it would be hard to deny that this outcome was also envisaged by the playwright. A particularly interesting example from this play occurs when Doctrine touches upon St. John the Baptist's preaching on penance:

John the Baptist seide in his steven

To all that veram pentitenciam wold chesen,

'Penitenciam agite that ye nat lesen,

Quia aporpinquabit the kyngdom of heven' (576-579)

Since Arundel's Constitutions of 1409, even parish priests were not encouraged to discuss the nature of the sacraments in depth and translation of the Bible was proscribed; the playwright here seems to be adhering rather strictly to ecclesiastical legislation. It is likely that *Occupation and Idleness* was intended for a mixed audience: the reference to 'thes worthi clerkis' in line 551 implies that the audience did include such learned clerks as well as the 'comoun peple' referred to in line 550. In an era when religious instruction in English was potentially a dangerous

undertaking, such a mixed audience helps to explain the exclusive use of Latin in religious didactic passages.

There is no parallel usage of Latin in *The Castle of Perseverance*, *Wisdom* or *Nature*. The performance setting of *Nature* would have ensured an elitist audience, making religious instruction in the vernacular much less problematic.<sup>10</sup> The large cast, elaborate costumes and need for dancers and musicians for *Wisdom* indicates an exclusive setting of some kind (both the Benedictine monastery of Bury St. Edmunds (Gibson ‘*The Play of Wisdom*’ 39-66) and a magnate’s hall have been suggested (Johnson ‘*Wisdom and the Records*’ 96)). This elitist character of the play may help to account for the more intricate discussion on the properties of the soul, as well as its untroubled use of English. However, even in such an exclusive setting, the sense of freedom from censorship is limited. Whereas in the English *Orologium Sapientiae*, one of the sources for the play, only worldly learning is rejected, in the play all searches for intellectual knowledge are to be abandoned.<sup>11</sup> *Wisdom* warns

Dyser not to sauour in cunnyng to excellent  
 But drede and conforme yowr wyll to me.  
 For yt ys þe heelfull dyscyplyne þat in Wysdam may be,  
 The drede of God, þat ys begynnyng.  
 The wedys of synne yt makyt to flee,

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<sup>10</sup> Although some Lollards were members of the elite, such as Sir John Oldcastle and Lady Yonge, widow of a former mayor of London (and daughter of Joan Boughton), on the whole the known cases of Lollardy can be situated in the ranks of the artisans (Thomson 156). See also note 6 above.

<sup>11</sup> See also Paulson (247).

And swete wertuus herbys in þe sowl sprynge. (87-92)

This is subtly different from the source passage in *The Seven Poyntes of Trewe Wisdom* where, next to ‘drede of God’, learning is emphasised:

þe mayster, euerlastynge wisdam, answered þus: ‘Mye dere sone, wille þou noth sauere in kunynge to hye, but drede! here me nowe and I schalle teche þe þinges þat beþ profitable to þe; I schalle 3ive þe a chosen 3ifte, for myne doctryne schalle be þi lyfe. Where-fore, takynge owre biginnyng of helefulle discipline at þe drede of godde, þe wheche is þe beginnyng of wisdam, I schalle teche þe be ordre VII poyntes of mye loue, whereinne stant souerene wisdam and þe perfeccion of alle gode and rihtwislyuynge in þis worlde. Þe first poynt is þe maner and properte of me...’ (Horstmann 328)

The direct didacticism of *The Seven Poyntes of Trewe Wisdom* would not translate into attractive theatre, and one can only applaud the playwright’s decision not to go through the seven points one by one as the treatise does. Nevertheless, the elision of all references to learning and teaching from this speech, combined with the retention of the opening warning ‘Dysyer not to sauour in cunnyng to excellent’ (87, ‘wille þou noth sauere in kunynge to hye’), ensures that the play actively discourages intellectual pursuit in favour of fearful obedience. The (presumably at least partly lay) audience of *Wisdom* is then not encouraged to delve deeply into matters of theology.

*The Castle of Perseverance*, on the other hand, seems to have been intended for an outdoor performance, open to a “general public”; if there was an admission charge, that would have excluded the poorest from attending, but presumably the

social range at a performance such as this was nonetheless considerable. The Banns envisage an audience that consists predominantly of ‘goode comowns’ (9). The play cannot be dated precisely, but based on references to contemporary fashion the outermost limits seem to be c.1382 and 1425; most scholars assume that it was composed at some point in the first quarter of the fifteenth century (Eccles x-xi). The play could therefore predate Arundel’s ordinances of 1409 (which presumably took a few years to take full effect), which could account for the play’s apparently unselfconscious use of English.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, evidence suggests that persecution of the Lollards in East Anglia gained in strength especially in the late 1420s.<sup>13</sup> The play’s basic and uncontroversial theological content certainly helped to make the use of the vernacular unexceptionable in this instance, but its relatively early composition (before Alnwick’s trials and possibly before the promulgation of Arundel’s Constitutions) probably contributed to the lack of “vernacular anxiety” as well.

There does not then seem to be a single surviving morality play which used English to defy Church legislation that aimed to restrict religious instruction in the vernacular. *Mankind* and *Occupation and Idleness* even evince concern about the use of the vernacular for religious instruction (at least in a play), almost certainly an effect of Arundel’s Constitutions and similar legislation. *Wisdom*, which was presumably intended for an elite audience and which does not betray an uneasiness about its use

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<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, the manuscript of the play is certainly post Arundel’s Constitutions as it is dated c.1440 (Eccles ix).

<sup>13</sup> Although there were some earlier cases: William Sawtry had been examined by Bishop le Despenser of Norwich and had publicly recanted his opinions in 1399 (he subsequently moved to London, relapsed, and was burned in London in 1401) and in 1424 Bishop Wakering also investigated suspected Lollards (Thomson 118-120).

of English, nonetheless aims to curtail desire for theological knowledge. It is then doubly remarkable that the playwrights chose to write these religious plays in the vernacular, despite their apprehensions concerning the use of English and the spectators' desire for theological knowledge. These plays do, on the whole, reveal an impact of contemporary stigma surrounding the use of the vernacular for religious instruction. Only *The Castle of Perseverance*, which almost certainly had by and large a lay audience of mixed social standing but which may predate the full effect of Arundel's Constitutions and East Anglian anti-Lollard persecution, appears to have been free of anxiety about its use of the vernacular or its function as religious instruction. But while these plays' use of English cannot be read as a challenge to religious authority and while they do demonstrate anxiety about their role as vernacular religious instruction to the laity, the fact that they were written at all indicates that the level of (self-)censorship in these plays should not be exaggerated either.

One reason why the use of English must have been thought acceptable for these plays is the fact that their religious instruction is relatively basic and uncontroversial. They are not a viable resource if one had to learn more or less from scratch about the basic religious tenets, such as those outlined in *Ignorantia Sacerdotum*, namely the fourteen articles of the faith, the Ten Commandments, the two precepts of the Gospel (charity towards God and charity towards one's neighbours), the Seven Corporal Works of Mercy, the Seven Deadly Sins with their branches, the Seven Principal Virtues, and the seven sacraments (Spencer 203). Though these playwrights adopted allegory as their fundamental mode of expression, only *The Castle of Perseverance* and *Nature* use all of the Seven Deadly Sins and their opposing Virtues. Not one of the plays

under discussion deals with the fourteen articles of faith, the Ten Commandments, the Seven Corporal Works of Mercy, or the seven sacraments in a determined or coherent manner. Neither do these plays focus on promoting the religious doctrines Arundel's legislation outlined for encouragement:

But let all henceforth preach up the veneration of the cross, and of the image of the crucifix, and other images of saints ... and relics, with processions, genuflexions, bowings, incensings, kissings, oblations, pilgrimages, illuminations, and all other modes and forms whatsoever used in the times of us and our predecessors; and the making of oaths in a lawful manner, by touching God's holy gospels. (Arundel's Constitutions 9)

The most common topic in these plays is, in fact, penance. Interestingly, although the plays all support an orthodox interpretation of the sacrament, only *Wisdom* presents a straightforward endorsement of the sacrament of penance. It could be argued that to some extent this lapse to offer whole-hearted support for the sacrament of penance may be explained by the orthodoxy of the plays. But while Arundel's Constitutions forbade reiterating non-orthodox theories regarding the sacraments (Constitution 4), it nowhere discouraged an orthodox account of the sacraments, so that an orthodox play should have been able to include a detailed, orthodox presentation of penance.

The sacrament of penance was a particularly contentious issue at the time. The canon *Omnis utriusque sexus*, issued at the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, had made annual confession an official requirement for all Christians. Evidence suggests that in fifteenth-century England clerics were active in promoting confession. One sermon explains that three things make a man acceptable to the mercy of God:

Þe first is for-þenkyng in herte, þat a man shuld repente hym for is synnes þat he haþ done aʒeyns God and is soule. The ij is shrifte of mouthe; for as sone as a man repenteþ hym in is herte for is foule synnes, þan he shall com to holychurche to is goostely fadur and mekely knele afore hym, and tell is synne and crye God mercy. And tell how and on what maner of vise þat þou hast synned, and excuse not þi-selfe to sey þat þou myʒthe no noþur veys don. ...

The iij is penaunce. And þat is fastyng, wakyng, bedyng, and almesdede doyinge, and all oþur þinges þat is goostely fadur will enioyne hym in þe stede of penaunce. Þese iij þinges, penaunce, shrift, and repentaunce ben nedefull to all þo þat will amende hem to God. (Ross 141)

Part of the reason for this emphasis on confession is that not all lay people were keen to confess: *Sollicitudo in the Castle of Perseverance* blames ‘Slugge and Slawthe’ (2340) for preventing men from doing penance or shriving themselves.<sup>14</sup> A more important reason was that disagreement about the precise content and validity of the sacrament of penance made it (together with various of the other sacraments) a point of contention in late medieval England. Theologians had long debated the exact roles of contrition and priestly absolution, but by the later Middle Ages the notion that priestly absolution was indispensable for forgiveness of sins was firmly established; hence, of course, the absolute necessity of auricular confession.<sup>15</sup> This stress on the importance of confession and absolution did not invalidate the need for contrition and satisfaction, but emphasis was fixed on the role of the priest in orthodox doctrine.

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<sup>14</sup> See also Arnold 219.

<sup>15</sup> For the developments in the doctrine of penance, see Tentler, chapter 1.

Thomas Aquinas underlined the fundamental effect of the words of the priest for the sacrament:

Now this sacrament, namely the sacrament of Penance, consists ... in the removal of a certain matter, viz. sin ... This removal is expressed by the priest saying: "I absolve thee" ... God alone absolves from sin and forgives sins authoritatively; yet priests do both ministerially, because the words of the priest in this sacrament work as instruments of the Divine power ... It is true in a sense that the words, "I absolve thee" mean "I declare thee absolved," but this explanation is incomplete. Because the sacraments of the New Law not only signify, but effect what they signify. Wherefore, just as the priest in baptizing anyone, declares by deed and word that the person is washed inwardly, and this not only significatively but also effectively, so also when he says: "I absolve thee," he declares the man to be absolved not only significatively but also effectively<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> 'Hoc autem sacramentum, scilicet poenitentiae, ... consistit ... in remotione cuiusdam materiae, scilicet peccati ... Unde patet quod haec est convenientissima forma huius sacramenti, ego te absolvo.' (Summa Theologica III q. 84. a. 3 co.), 'Ad tertium dicendum quod solus Deus per auctoritatem et a peccato absolvit et peccata remittit. Sacerdotes autem utrumque faciunt per ministerium, inquantum scilicet verba sacerdotis in hoc sacramento instrumentaliter operantur' (Summa Theologica III q. 84 a. 3 ad 3), 'Ad quintum dicendum quod ista expositio, ego te absolvo, idest, absolutum ostendo, quantum ad aliquid quidem vera est, non tamen est perfecta. Sacramenta enim novae legis non solum significant, sed etiam faciunt quod significant. Unde sicut sacerdos, baptizando aliquem, ostendit hominem interius ablutum per verba et facta, non solum significative, sed etiam effective; ita etiam cum dicit, ego te absolvo, ostendit hominem absolutum non solum significative, sed etiam effective.'

The vital role of the priest's words is such that Aquinas even speaks of 'the sacrament of absolution'.<sup>17</sup> The Lollards, on the other hand, were opposed to this view of penance, as there is no biblical basis for private confession to a priest and priestly absolution, and they encouraged a rather more direct relationship between the penitent and God:

Perfore it is certeyn, clerer þanne liȝt, þat synnes ben forȝeuen be contricioun of hert. Hec ibi. Perfore very contricioun is þe essencial parte of penance, and confecioun of mouþe is þe accidental parte. But napeles confessioun of hert done to þe hiȝe prest Crist is as nedeful as contricioun. (Hudson Selections 21)

Lollard criticism of priestly power also led to the suggestion that 'a man or woman may as wele be confessed vnto a layman beyng wele disposed, as vnto the prieste beyng his curate, specialli if the saide curate be in dedely synne', as one suspected heretic pronounced in 1476 (Hudson Premature Reformation 298). It is therefore of special interest to see how these plays depict penance and in particular what importance they attribute to the role of the priest, auricular confession and priestly absolution.

Wisdom presents a very traditional picture of the sacrament of penance: 'By wndyrstondyng haue very contrycyon, | Wyth mynde of your synne confessyon make, | Wyth wyll yeldyng du satysfaccyon.' (973-975). Wisdom repeatedly stresses

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(Summa Theologica III q. 84 a. 3 ad 5). The translations are from <[www.summatheologica.info/summa/questions/?q=506&a=2627](http://www.summatheologica.info/summa/questions/?q=506&a=2627)> [accessed 11/07/2014].

<sup>17</sup> 'Sacramentum absolutionis' (Summa Theologica III q. 84 a. 3 ad 5).

the importance of contrition (961-964, 967-969), explaining that penance without contrition ‘relesyt nought’ (967). Once Anima weeps with contrition, the devils (representing the Seven Deadly Sins) abandon her (977-980). Nevertheless, the play does not neglect to emphasise the need for formal, oral confession to a priest. Contrition alone in the world of this play evidently does not suffice and Wisdom sends Anima to ‘Holy Chyrche so mylde’ (982) to confess, be reconciled and receive forgiveness (981-988). Anima promises to confess to a priest (‘To owr modyr, Holy Chyrche, I wyll resort, | My lyff pleyn schewenge to here syght.’ 991-992) and to perform any satisfaction assigned (‘To þe domys of þe Chyrche we xall vs dyght’ 995). It is only when Anima returns to the stage after her confession and absolution that she is cleansed – indicated by a return to her opening costume – and in a state of grace (1071-1072). A little later in the play, Wisdom again highlights the importance of the Church sacrament: ‘And now ye be reformyde by þe sakyrment of penance | Ande clensyde from þe synnys actuall.’ (1111-1112). The playwright’s decision not to stage the actual confession is in line with this scrupulously orthodox portrayal of penance. Staging the actual confession runs the risk of presenting confession and priestly absolution as a theatrical show, which would have come dangerously close to the Lollard notion that such confession and absolution were empty gestures. The Wisdom playwright was then careful to give due importance to all the aspects of the sacrament of penance, not to stage a confession and absolution as this might have been controversial, to highlight the importance of the Church’s mediation in the process and to emphasise the need and importance of the sacrament for salvation. This is by far the most explicit, coherent and overtly orthodox representation of penance in the surviving morality plays.

Although the other morality plays do not openly challenge the sacrament of penance, their support for and treatment of it tends to be fleeting and superficial. We have already seen how *Occupation and Idleness* carefully switches to Latin in order not to have to deal with penance in plain English when John the Baptist's preaching is mentioned. The play is perhaps less interested in penance than it is in the concept of mercy, which is discussed at some length (634-665). Although there is some obfuscating use of Latin in this passage too, the general sense is easy to follow in the English text: Christ's blood is what enables the salvation of repentant sinful men, e.g. 'his blode of mercy every man gete may | If thei repente hire evel levying.' (660-661). This is relatively abstract theology (though by no means an original thought), even when the information that 'This is the licoure of mercy that every day, ywys, | In holy chirche thou may it fette.' (664-665) is added. After all the laity was not supposed to have communion every day and took it in one kind only, the bread; eucharistic wine was the preserve of the clergy (Bynum 688). So how exactly can repentant sinful men get this 'licoure of mercy'? The link between salvation and Holy Church is stated but is nonetheless rather obscure. Possibly the availability of confession and priestly absolution is implied here, but it is certainly not expressed in a straightforward way.

The conversion of *Idleness*, though it entails some kind of confession, is likewise not a good example of the sacrament of penance. To begin with, *Idleness* is not repentant but is beaten into submission by *Doctrine* (755-772), though he later expresses contrition for his sins. He is told to behave virtuously henceforward, but he is not assigned any satisfaction, nor is *Doctrine* shown to absolve him, strictly speaking:

*Doctrine*: The ten comaundementis thou brake ever more,

Thi fyve wyttis thou kepte hem ille.

Ydelnes: Treuly that I repente sore.

Y wil amende with al my wylle.

...

Doctrine: Now thou forsakest thyn ydelnes,

And hereafter wilt drede shame,

Here Y caste on the a clothe of clenness,

And Clennes shal be thi name. (802-813)

The various elements of the sacrament of penance are clearly hinted at in this scene, and given the importance of Doctrine ('that worthi clerk' 295, 'A maister of dyvyneté' 297) this passage does not undermine the orthodox emphasis on the vital role of the priest in administering the sacrament. Yet overall this scene and the play in general do not present a coherent representation of the orthodox understanding of the sacrament. Unlike contemporary sermons, and unlike *Wisdom*, this play does not explicitly advocate auricular confession for the penitent, nor does it state that priestly absolution is necessary to salvation. Instead *Occupation and Idleness* presents a more amorphous concept of penitence, which pays greater attention to the necessity of Christ's Passion for individual salvation than it does to the acknowledged ecclesiastical route to salvation through confession and absolution.

Such a lack of explicit endorsement of the sacrament of penance can also be observed in *Nature*. Man's first impulse to pull away from sin seems to be genuine (if short-lived) but does not lead to a clear presentation or discussion of penance. *Shamefastnes* appears once Man abandons the Seven Deadly Sins, but *Shamefastnes* is not quite the same as contrition, and Man's admission to Reason that 'I have

commytted myche foly – | I am ashamed certaynly | Whan I thynke theron.’ (I.1398-1400) is a far cry from Anima’s tears of contrition in *Wisdom*. According to Duns Scotus, if the penitent felt only imperfect sorrow for his sins, the power of the priest and the formal rite of the sacrament of penance were especially needful to compensate for such imperfect contrition, or attrition (Tentler 26-27). As Man is only attrite at best, we would reasonably expect a marked emphasis in this scene on the other elements of the sacrament of penance and especially on the absolution of the priest, but there is no such emphasis. On the one hand, Shamefastnes’s function appears to be the equivalent of contrition in the sacrament of penance: ‘Whan ye have done offence or syn, | Yf ye wyll mercy and grace wyn | Wyth Shamefastnes ye must bygyn’ (I.1379-1381). On the other hand, his role in the play is extremely limited, he does not advise Man, does not recommend either confession or satisfaction, but leaves in order to let Reason counsel Man. Rather than encouraging Man to confess, Reason cuts short any desire Man may have to pour forth his sins: ‘And of your offencys wyll I make no rehersall’ (I.1407). He depicts a direct relationship between Man and God, bypassing the clergy and the Church’s formal sacrament of penance: ‘God ys mercyable yf ye lust to crave. | Call for grace and sone he wyll yt send’ (I.1414-1415). Finally, Reason does recommend Man to live a virtuous life henceforth, but that does not equal satisfaction, which should in any case be assigned by a priest, not by one’s own conscience or reason. If Reason were represented as a member of the clergy, all of this could perhaps still look more or less orthodox, but as the representation of an internal faculty of Man, this passage argues for a very different understanding of repentance and mercy than the orthodox doctrine entails. In fact, all this is remarkably similar to the Lollard opinion that oral confession to a priest and priestly absolution

are entirely superfluous ‘For contricioun of hert and leuyng of synne be sufficient be himself wip þe grace of God’ (Hudson *Premature Reformation* 294).

Conversely, Man’s second and final conversion, which does last, explicitly mentions the sacrament of penance. But even in this instance, the reference to the importance of penance seems to be something of an afterthought. Man’s final conversion is not caused by contrition, but by the advent of Age which makes him unable to continue with his sinful life: ‘I can not continue though I wold, | For Age hath wayned me clene therfro’ (II.1010-1011). Whereas theologians were aware that true and perfect contrition might be hard to attain and that attrition, an imperfect sorrow for one’s sins, should suffice for the less saintly penitent, we can not even credit Man with attrition in this instance (Tentler 26). In fact, not all the Deadly Sins have abandoned Man as Covetyse now for the first time joins forces with Man ‘for a yere or two’ (II.979). So his conversion commences when Man is neither contrite (or attrite) nor free of sin. Man then meets the Virtues, who encourage satisfaction (‘penaunce or other good dede’ II.1249) and restitution (‘And therof to thy power make due restytucion, | For erst shalt thou have of thy syn no remyssyon.’ II.1270-1271). Both satisfaction and especially restitution had to be assigned by the priest after confession, so in a sense the Virtues are here usurping the role of the priest (Tentler 340, 343). It is only after Man has accepted to be ruled by the Virtues that there is reference to the sacrament of penance, when Man leaves to ‘speke wyth Repentaunce’ (II.1365):

I have ben wyth Repentaunce also,  
 Whyche fro my hart shall never go,  
 For he brought me unto Confessyon,

And anon I was acquainted with Hartys Contrycyon.

They advysed and charged me to do satisfaccyon (II.1395-1398)

As already mentioned, staging an actual confession could potentially have been perceived as subversive, so this is in itself as expected. It is clear that only Man's second conversion is effective and the role of the sacrament in this regard is not neglected. Reason exclaims 'Than art thou fully the chyld of salvacyon!' (II.1401) when the confessed Man returns to the stage, and no further lapse into sin is staged. The first attempt at converting to virtue, which did not feature a confession and relied on a more direct interaction between the penitent and God, did not have the same power or longevity. At first glance, we could conclude that Nature expressly favours the orthodox sacrament of penance and that by placing this reference at the very close of the play the importance of formal penance is enhanced. Nonetheless, there is a strong sense that Man's penance and adherence to a virtuous life are only effective because of his inability to sin more and because of his imminent death – and that the strictures of the Virtues are of utmost importance for his salvation. The few lines regarding 'repentaunce', when compared to the extensive staging of the Virtues and their lessons, seem to be paying lip service to orthodox doctrine rather than a genuine endorsement of the sacrament of penance.

A somewhat similar picture emerges from *The Castle of Perseverance*. Confession is linked with Bonus Angelus early on in the play (312-313) and is also a force of good in the course of the play: Bonus Angelus relies on the aid of Confessio to help save Humanum Genus, and the former promises 'Whoso schryue hym of hys synnys alle | I behete hym heuene halle.' (1333-1334). The importance of contrition is

also repeatedly mentioned in this scene (1379-1383, 1386-1389). *Humanum Genus*' contrition leads to an on-stage confession (1468-1486) and absolution:

I þe asuoyle wyth goode entent  
 Of alle þe synnys þat þou hast wrowth  
 In brekyng of Goddys commaundement  
 In worde, werke, wyl, and þowth.  
 I restore to þe sacrament  
 Of penauns weche þou neuere rowt (1507-1512)

As *Confessio* was presumably dressed in appropriate clerical attire, this reflects the orthodox insistence on the need for confession to a priest and priestly absolution and, as such, this whole scene presents the audience with an emphatic portrayal of penance. (Although there is no mention of satisfaction.) This seems to be in line with the importance attributed to penance in the Banns ('Þus mowthys confession | And hys hertys contricion | Schal saue Man fro dampnacion | Be Goddys mercy and grace.' 127-130) Interestingly, this staging of a confession, and especially of priestly absolution, seems to be unselfconscious – there is no implication that either could be perceived as empty, theatrical gestures. As with the use of the vernacular, it seems that *The Castle of Perseverance* has somehow managed to escape the contemporary stigma of controversy and censorship which does leave its mark on *Mankind*, *Occupation and Idleness*, *Wisdom*, and *Nature*. *The Castle of Perseverance*'s presentation of penance so far is straightforwardly orthodox, but this affirmation of the importance of the sacrament of penance is undermined by the actual development of the story. This penance has a clear but temporary effect, as *Humanum Genus*

eventually lapses back to a life of sin. More importantly, he dies unshriven (though with the word ‘mercy’ (3007) on his lips). *Justicia* cites the protagonist’s failure to confess his sins before his death as an adequate reason for his damnation:

Ouyrlate he callyd Confescion;

Ouyrlate was hys contricioun;

He made neuere satisfaccioun.

Dampne hym to helle belyve! (3427-3430).

Yet, despite the fact that *Humanum Genus* did not confess before death, he is ultimately saved. God’s mercy trumps the failure to repent (and, indeed, to lead a virtuous life) when it comes to salvation. This may be a very comforting message for the audience, but it is hardly in line with orthodox theology which strongly stressed the necessity of penance in this life in order to attain salvation in the next.

In *Mankind*, likewise, the necessity of (formal) penance for salvation is called into question. Again, as with *Occupation and Idleness* and *The Castle of Perseverance*, the focus lies more on mercy (also the name of the virtuous character in this play) than on penance as such. *Mankind* is repeatedly told to ask for mercy (816, 819-820, 827, 830) but there is no overt reference to the sacrament of penance in the whole play. Although *Mercy* does encourage the protagonist ‘Be repentant here’ (865), this is more a *memento mori* than a reference to the sacrament, as the line continues ‘trust not þe ovr of deth; thynke on this lessun: | ‘Ecce nunc tempus acceptabile, ecce nunc dies salutis.’ (865-866).<sup>18</sup> The protagonist is evidently

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<sup>18</sup> The Latin phrase is, however, associated with Lent, the traditional season of penance in the Christian calendar year, through its liturgical uses.

extremely sorry about his sinful behaviour, but his contrition is shown to be problematic rather than salutary as it leads him to despair. Both Mankind and Mercy touch upon Mankind's fall (876-890) but there is no confession, no absolution, and no mention of satisfaction. In fact, at the point where we might expect some kind of priestly absolution, Mercy instead asserts man's responsibility over his fate: 'Ȝe may both saue and spyll ȝowr sowle þat ys so precyus.' (893). Despite this absence of the formal elements of confession and absolution (and satisfaction), Mercy appears to be able to ensure the spiritual cleansing of Mankind ('Mankynd ys deliuryd by my fauerall patrocynye.' 904), a cleansing that Wisdom and Nature linked with confession and priestly absolution. Divine mercy is again given a greater role to play than the sacrament. If Mercy were dressed as a religious – which his line 'I, Mercy, hys father gostly' (765) and his use of liturgical phrases makes probable – then at least his delivery of Mankind is more or less in line with the orthodox insistence on the Church's role in attaining salvation. If, however, Mercy was not dressed as a cleric – which is also possible –, this play presents a much less emphatically orthodox vision of the workings of divine mercy.<sup>19</sup> In fact, even if Mercy was in clerical dress, the priest's ability to absolve a penitent is called into question, as Mercy warns Mankind: 'God wyll not make ȝow preuy onto hys last jugement.' (839). In orthodox doctrine, priestly absolution is always effective, though the penitent may obstruct its workings.<sup>20</sup> But one of the Lollards' objections to the Church's focus on priestly absolution was that only God can absolve sin and that priestly absolution therefore

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<sup>19</sup> Beckwith (120) calls the identification of Mercy as a priest 'premature'.

<sup>20</sup> 'Quia sicut alia sacramenta novae legis habent de se certum effectum ex virtute passionis Christi, licet possit impediri ex parte recipientis, ita etiam est et in hoc sacramento.' (Summa Theologica III q. 84 a. 3 ad 5).

can only ever be ‘purely declarative at best; at worst, when the priest’s decision was at odds with the knowledge of God, it was [...] was a misleading and blasphemous arrogation of divine power’ (Hudson *Premature Reformation* 294). Though not a wholehearted rejection of priestly absolution, the play leans more toward the heterodox position in this instance. While *Mankind* does not set out to undermine the sacrament of penance, its insistence on mercy and its workings, the lack of overt references to the formal aspects of penance, and especially Mercy’s acknowledgement of our inability to know God’s judgment all add up to give the impression that the sacrament of penance is not necessary or indispensable in order to attain salvation, and that priestly absolution certainly is no guarantee of salvation. As such, this play does come perilously close to presenting the sacrament of penance as an empty form, to be disregarded in favour of a direct relationship between the penitent and God’s mercy – very much in line with Lollard theology. This would have been especially the case if Mercy was not represented as a cleric on stage.

The late medieval English morality plays, then, are much concerned with man’s journey from sin to salvation, yet all but *Wisdom* present this journey as more difficult and personal than the orthodox doctrine of penance allows. Contrition can be difficult to feel spontaneously – in *Occupation and Idleness* the sinful protagonist’s conversion starts through physical violence, in *Nature* through the advent of Age, and even in *Wisdom* it requires divine intervention. Heartfelt contrition was presented as a first step to salvation, but in *Mankind* it is nearly a road to damnation. Doubt is also cast on the importance of the sacrament of penance in several of these plays: *Mankind* appears to be saved without any reference to it, *Humanum Genus* is saved without a final confession, and *Man* seems to be saved before he goes to confess. In these plays, it is the availability of divine mercy – without being tied down to the specifics of the

sacrament of penance – and the direct relationship between the believer and God which is of utmost importance. Even in *Wisdom* Anima is encouraged to confess by Wisdom, who is Christ: that is, even in the most emphatically orthodox of the plays under discussion, the first and most important step on the road to salvation consists of direct interaction between God and the individual. Apart from *Wisdom*, the morality plays do not set out to teach their audiences the sacrament of penance and focus more on less doctrinal aspects of repentance. By doing so, they come close to presenting the sacrament of penance as unnecessary and superfluous. On the other hand, none of these plays overtly challenge orthodox doctrine, and *Wisdom*, *The Castle of Perseverance*, and *Nature* – perhaps even *Mankind* with Mercy's passing line 'Be repentant here' (865) and *Occupation and Idleness* with the role of Doctrine and the vague references to confession and absolution in the conversion scene – all present support for the sacrament. These plays are then neither bastions for orthodox doctrine (apart from *Wisdom*), nor would it be reasonable to claim they subvert orthodox doctrine.

It is difficult to see the morality plays as an act of defiance against Arundel's Constitutions. Their theology is much too basic and conservative to challenge orthodox discourse, even if they constitute religious instruction in the vernacular by and for the laity. Moreover, *Mankind*, *Wisdom*, and *Occupation and Idleness* show some signs of self-censorship regarding the use of English and religious instruction, almost certainly an effect of the stigma created by Arundel's Constitutions and similar legislation. Of the plays that do not show such self-censorship, one, namely *Nature*, was intended for an elitist audience; it is also possible that *The Castle of Perseverance* preceded the full impact of Arundel's Constitutions. Most of the plays under

discussion that can be safely dated after Arundel's Constitutions do, therefore, demonstrate their prohibitive effect in one way or another.

And yet, despite the overwhelming focus in these plays on man's recovery from sin and attempts to gain salvation, their interest in the orthodox sacrament of penance is much less pervasive than one might expect. Only *Wisdom* coherently explains the nature of the sacrament and emphatically affirms its necessity; the other plays treat it more superficially, and at times come close to suggesting that it is of no particular importance. This relative disinterest in the sacrament of penance was by no means a given; the French *moralités*, for instance, are much more emphatically aligned with religious orthodoxy and 'frequently express the conflict of good and evil in the context of religious observance, in particular the importance for the Christian of the sacraments of contrition, repentance and confession' (Hindley 76). Although orthodox, the plays under discussion give a more independent, and presumably lay, point of view, which is rather more interested in the relationship between God and the individual, as well as in the psychological realities of sin and trying to attain salvation, than it is in Church doctrine. The English so-called morality plays do, then, present us with, as Crassons put it, 'a distinctive mode of vernacular theology' (98), although they are certainly no expression of lay dissent in the face of Church legislation. By contextualizing these plays, their use of the vernacular and presentation of penance, against the backdrop of contemporary religious controversies, we better come to understand that these plays need to be discussed not so much in relation to the traditional stark dichotomy between 'orthodox' and 'heterodox' but instead bearing in mind the 'heterogeneity and vitality of orthodox religious culture' (Kelly and Perry 5) and indeed the realities of lived devotion.

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