



This is a repository copy of *Preaching Penance on the Stage: The Case of John the Baptist*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:  
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/97041/>

Version: Accepted Version

---

**Book Section:**

Steenbrugge, C. [orcid.org/0000-0002-4130-7565](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4130-7565) (2016) *Preaching Penance on the Stage: The Case of John the Baptist*. In: Happe, P. and Husken, W., (eds.) *Staging Scripture: Biblical Drama, 1350-1600*. *Ludus* (14). Brill . ISBN 9789004313941

---

**Reuse**

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

**Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



[eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk)  
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

# **Preaching Penance on the Stage in Late Medieval England: The Case of John the Baptist**

**Charlotte Steenbrugge**

## **Abstract**

This essay situates Middle English biblical plays in the context of contemporary ecclesiastical legislation and religious controversy, using the pageants on the Baptism of Christ from the York Corpus Christi Play, the N-Town manuscript, and the Towneley manuscript as a case study and the same episode from various French *mystères* for comparative purposes. The French dramatists included preaching on penance as standard practice for this episode, and were prone to identify these sermons as such; English dramatists, on the other hand, appear to have tried to avoid staging a sermon or mentioning penance. In particular, I argue that the unwillingness by the playwrights of the York and Towneley plays to stage a sermon is due to an atmosphere of anxiety and self-censorship following Arundel's Constitutions of 1409, which restricted preaching to specially licensed members of the clergy. The N-Town play does feature a preaching protagonist, unlike the pageants from York and Towneley. However, the truly remarkable insistence on confession in the N-Town pageant, a point of contention between the orthodox authorities and Lollards, serves to make explicit the orthodox affiliation of the play. These references thereby also make the on-stage sermon less controversial for Church authorities. Both the lack of sermons in York and Towneley, and the insistence on confession in N-Town indicate the extent to which medieval English biblical plays were affected by current controversies about who had the right to preach to the laity.

## **Keywords**

John the Baptist, N-Town, Towneley, York, Lollards, penance

## **1. Introduction**

Although John the Baptist was a popular saint in late medieval England, there is reason to assume that plays dealing with this character's preaching of penance and his baptism of Jesus were relatively controversial. Despite the solid biblical background for these episodes (especially Matthew 3:1-12, Mark 1:3-8, Luke 3:2-18), this should not be surprising. The Lollards challenged various sacraments, including at times baptism; the denial of the need of infant baptism by a priest is attested from the late fourteenth century onwards in Lollard trials.<sup>1</sup> A bigger point of contention was the sacrament of penance, Lollards generally being of the opinion that only contrition was necessary for the remission of sins, rather than confession to a priest and priestly absolution: "Perfore it is certeyn, clerer þanne list, þat synnes ben forzeuen 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 hize prest Crist is as nedeful as contricioun."<sup>2</sup> Moreover, in order to contain the Lollard threat, preaching was increasingly controlled and circumscribed, particularly in terms of personnel. The connection between Lollards and vernacular preaching was made early on in the history of the movement, with Leicester Lollards in 1389 maintaining that "any layman can preach and teach the gospel anywhere."<sup>3</sup> The most well-known measures which aimed to

---

<sup>1</sup> Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 292.

<sup>2</sup> Hudson, *Premature Reformation*, 295-99, and "Sixteen Points on which the Bishops accuse Lollards," in *Selections of English Wycliffite Writings*, ed. Anne Hudson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 21.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Aston, "Lollardy and Sedition, 1381-1431," *Past and Present* 17 (1960): 12.

restrict preaching are Arundel's Constitutions of 1409, but already in 1400 action was taken throughout England to limit preaching to those with a license from their diocesan and parochial chaplains in their own churches.<sup>4</sup> It is hard to know how strictly these rules were enforced, but people were certainly wary of unauthorized preaching. For instance, in 1417 some chaplains were charged with preaching in contravention of Arundel's Constitutions and Margery Kempe had to defend herself to the archbishop of York against accusations of preaching.<sup>5</sup> In fact some Lollards complained that nowadays even as holy a man as John the Baptist would be charged as a Lollard for preaching: "and if ony preche þe troupe, þe multitude schal azenseie him ... þou3 he were as hooli as euere was seint Ion Baptist, he schulde not faile to be sclaudrid for a cursid Lollard & pursued as an heretik."<sup>6</sup> Any play dealing with this saint's preaching of penance and baptism of Jesus therefore touched upon controversial material and there is sufficient evidence from the surviving John the Baptist plays from York, N-Town, and Towneley (there is no such play from Chester) to indicate that they were affected by these controversies, most importantly in their depiction of John the Baptist as a preacher.

## 2. John the Baptist in the French *mystères*

Before analysing the English plays' presentation of John the Baptist's sermon on penance, I would like to take a brief look at some French *mystères*, which are roughly comparable in date to the composition and/or performance history of the surviving English pageants. This is because France was untroubled by Lollardy and its concomitant legislation, which would argue for greater freedom in presenting a vernacular sermon on penance on the stage.<sup>7</sup> And this is borne out by the texts: all the French *mystères* I have looked at (*Passion de Semur* [Burgundy, probably fourteenth century], *Passion d'Arras* [Arras, probably early fifteenth century], Gréban's *Mystère de la Passion* [Paris, c. 1450], *Passion d'Auvergne* [Montferrand/Clermont-Ferrand, 1477], and Michel's *Mystère de la Passion* [Angers, 1486]) have a John the Baptist episode, and in all of these he preaches on penance to a greater or lesser degree.<sup>8</sup> For example, the theme of John's first sermon on the second day of Gréban's play is *penitenciam agite* (do penance) and it counsels, amongst other things,

ung chascun mette diligence  
de faire en soy les dignes fruiz  
de penitance, car je truis  
et vous adnonce pour certain

---

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>5</sup> John A. F. Thomson, *The Later Lollards, 1414-1520* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 117, and *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Lynn Staley (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute, 1996), Book I, Chapter 52.

<sup>6</sup> *The Lanterne of Lizt*, edited from MS. Harl. 2324, ed. Lilian M. Swinburn (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & co., 1917; rpt. New York: Kraus Reprint, 1971), EETS o.s. 151, 101.

<sup>7</sup> There were issues with heterodoxy in France as well but the plays do not stem from a place or time much affected by this issue. Catharism had been all but eradicated by the Albigensian Crusade of the early thirteenth century and the last Cathar was burned in 1326; the Waldensians were more long-lived but had retreated mainly to isolated Alpine valleys of south-eastern France by the fourteenth century. See Chas S. Clifton, *Encyclopedia of Heresies and Heretics* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 1992), 30 and 133, and Gordon Leff, *Heresy in the later Middle Ages: the relation of heterodoxy to dissent, c. 1250-c. 1450*, 2 vols. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1967), 2: 450 and 482.

<sup>8</sup> For the French playwrights' propensity to include sermons in their *mystères*, see also Charles Mazouer, "Sermons in the Passions of Mercadé, Gréban and Jehan Michel," in *Les Mystères: Studies in Genre, Text and Theatricality*, ed. Peter Happé and Wim Hüsken, Ludus: Medieval and Early Renaissance Theatre and Drama (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012), 247-69.

que la regne Dieu est prochain.

(ll. 10017-21)<sup>9</sup>

[Let each be diligent to bring forth the noble fruit of penitence because I affirm and tell you for certain, that the reign of God is nigh.]

It also urges

Et, pout tant, selon l'Esripture,  
vous ay dit et admonnesté:  
penitenciam agite.  
Peuple de povre remembrance,  
fais penitence, penitence,  
fais penitence austere et dure  
tant que ta povre vie dure.

(ll. 10115-22)

[And, therefore, according to Scripture, I have said and admonished you: penitenciam agite (do penance). People of poor remembrance, do penance, penance, do austere and harsh penance, while your poor life lasts!]

The French playwrights are not just willing to insert sermons on penance, they are keen to identify their sermons as such. The speech just cited is announced in the prologue with “Jehan, venez vous avancer || de vostre sermon commancer” (John, come forth and begin your sermon; ll. 10008-09). Perhaps most exciting in this regard are those sermons which have, or claim to have, an overt modern or university sermon structure. In the *Passion d'Arras*, John the Baptist asserts that he is going to preach on the theme *Penitenciam agite*, *appropinquabit enim regnum celorum* (Do penance, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand; l. 6424):

Je vous feray cy ung sermon  
En bien briefve collation,  
Mon premier theume exposeray  
Auquel j'ay dit se l'en sievray.  
Penitenciam agite, etc.

(ll. 6434-39)<sup>10</sup>

[I will make you here a sermon in a nice short collation. I shall expound my first theme, concerning which I have said: *Penitenciam agite* (do penance), etc.]

This is a little confused, as a sermon has only one theme, which is then divided: strictly speaking, one cannot have a “premier theume.” Still, the intention to have a sermon, and one that would moreover have been familiar and recognisable for a medieval audience in terms of structure, is evident. The first speech by John the Baptist in Michel's play is on the theme *Parate viam Domini, rectas facite in solitudine semitas Dei nostri*. Ysaie XL (Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight the paths of our God in solitude; l. 888), which is given at the start of the sermon; the theme is identified as such and developed with two divisions:

Et pour tant, au commencement

---

<sup>9</sup> *Le Mystère de la Passion d'Arnoul Gréban*, ed. Omer Jodogne (Brussels: Académie Royale de Belgique, 1965).

<sup>10</sup> *Le Mystère de la Passion: texte du manuscrit 697 de la bibliothèque d'Arras*, ed. Jules-Marie Richard (Arras: Société du Pas-de-Calais, 1891).

de ceste predicacion,  
j'ay prins pour introduction  
le mot d'Isaïe que je dy:  
Parate viam Domini.  
En ce theme icy, je puis prendre  
deux pions bien ayséz a comprendre  
a tout homme de bon vouloir.  
Le premier sera de sçavoir  
comme on doit preparer son cueur  
a la venue de sauveur;  
et cecy nous est denote  
par ce mot icy Parate.  
Le second sera par quell œuvre  
la grace de Dieu on requeuvre;  
et est ce noté quant je dy:  
Rectas facite semitas Dei nostri.

(ll. 902-18)<sup>11</sup>

[At the beginning of this preaching, I have taken as introduction the words of Isaiah, which I pronounce: Parate viam Domini (prepare the way of the Lord). In this theme here, I can take two points, very easy to understand for all men of good will. The first will be to know how one must prepare one's heart for the coming of the Saviour. And this is demonstrated to us by the word Parate (prepare) here. The second point will be by which work one might receive the grace of God, and this is meant when I say: Rectas facite semitas Dei nostri (make straight the paths of our God).]

These two divisions are then duly developed.

There are two points of interest concerning John the Baptist's sermons on the French stage in relation to the relative dearth of such sermons in the English biblical plays. Firstly, during the saint's sermons there are extra characters on stage who represent Jews from the New Testament in the French *mystères* but seemingly not in the English plays. This possibly has the effect that – as in the York opening speech to an extent (see below) – the spectators of the play are often not the expressed target of the sermon. In Michel's play, for example, the sermon's audience is living at the time of Christ: "Cestui sauveur est ja venu || et est ja sur terre regnant" (The Saviour is already come and is already reigning on earth, ll. 1072-73). But the contemporary spectators of the play are by no means excluded from the lessons of the sermons in the French *mystères*. After Michel's John repeatedly seems to address a New Testament audience, he includes various categories of sinners that map onto medieval society rather well and for which there is no biblical precedent. These fifteenth-century categories are closely interwoven with Luke's account of John's preaching: the bourgeois and merchants are told to give their second cloak and meat to the poor, for example. Evidently, the real audience of the sermons consisted, at least partly, of the spectators watching the play – but it is certainly possible that the actors representing John predominantly addressed other actors on the stage. This has implications for the status of these sermons: the claim to authority of a 'genuine' sermon addressed to a contemporary audience is very different to that of a 'historical' sermon to a historical audience. Secondly, clerics seem to have participated quite actively in French *mystères*, but there is no evidence for clerics acting in the English biblical plays which have survived (although that does not mean that they certainly did not). The

---

<sup>11</sup> Jean Michel, *Le Mystère de la Passion* (Angers 1486), ed. Omer Jodogne (Gembloux: Duculot, 1959).

delivery of sermons by clerical actors would presumably have made the sermons both more authoritative for the audience and less troublesome for local Church authorities, than if they were delivered by lay actors.

It is in any case clear that the French playwrights included preaching on penance for this episode as standard practice, and were prone to identify these sermons as such. References to a theme and divisions and the consistent use of a Latin opening tag demonstrate how strong was the urge to clothe these speeches in the dress of contemporary sermons. As we shall see, this is very dissimilar from the English situation, where only *N-Town* contains a preaching John the Baptist and even this John does not employ a thematic sermon.

### 3. The English John the Baptist Plays

The orthodoxy of the three English plays is evident from their desire to teach their audiences not simply about the baptism of Jesus, but also about the sacrament of baptism. In the York pageant, John explains that “baptyme is tane || To wasshe and clense man of synne” (21.77-78), while Jesus stresses the necessity of baptism for salvation (21.90-91).<sup>12</sup> In *N-Town*, Jesus announces that he has come to take baptism in order to “conferme þat sacrament þat nowe xal be” (22.64).<sup>13</sup> When the angels restrain the protagonist from going to meet Jesus in the *Towneley* play, John takes this to mean that infant baptism should happen in church: “By this I may well vnderstand || That childer shuld be broght to kyrk || For to be baptyssyd in euery land” (19.85-87).<sup>14</sup> *Towneley* is the most insistent on the sacramental nature of the event, as Jesus is also anointed “With oyle and creme, in this intent || That men may wit, whereso thay go, || This is a worthy sacrament.” (19.194-96). Baptism is also linked to the other sacraments in this play (19.197-200).<sup>15</sup> These pageants present self-conscious, orthodox support for the sacrament of baptism. We do not know how a late medieval audience would have reacted to these assertions, but their controversial nature is indicated by the fact that the whole stanza about the anointment and the seven sacraments in *Towneley* was cancelled at some point in the manuscript’s career.<sup>16</sup> Although this was probably due to Reformist objections to the sacramental system, it is reasonable to assume that these kinds of comments would have been objectionable to many a Lollard as well, and were included to reinforce the audience’s orthodoxy.

We might therefore expect that these plays would be equally forceful in their representation of penance as a sacrament, but this is not the case. In fact, only in the *N-Town* Baptism is penance mentioned at all. As there is a fair amount of information about what John

---

<sup>12</sup> The York Plays: A Critical Edition of the York Corpus Christi Play as Recorded in British Library Additional MS 35290, 2 vols., ed. Richard Beadle, EETS s.s. 23-24 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009-13).

<sup>13</sup> The *N-Town* Play: Cotton MS Vespasian D. 8, 2 vols., ed. Stephen Spector, EETS s.s. 11-12 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

<sup>14</sup> The *Towneley* Plays, 2 vols., ed. Martin Stevens and A. C. Cawley, EETS s.s. 13-14 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>15</sup> Garrett P.J. Epp, ‘Re-editing *Towneley*’, *The Yearbook of English Studies* 43 (2013): 103-04, has argued that the badly formed ‘v’ of the manuscript may originally have read ‘i’, which would date the play to the period after the Ten Articles of 1536 and before anointment at baptism disappeared from church ritual in 1552. This would locate the play in a Reformist rather than Catholic setting, but it would still emphatically assert its orthodoxy. The cancellation of the stanza would then relate to Catholic anxieties rather than Reformist objections to the sacramental system.

<sup>16</sup> For a discussion on the authenticity of the cancellation see Alexandra F. Johnston, ‘The *Towneley* Manuscript: Huntington Library MS HM1’ (forthcoming). Garrett P. J. Epp, ‘The *Towneley* Plays and the Hazards of Cycling,’ *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama* 32 (1993): 129, points out that “there is a notable lack of similar marginalia and cancelling in the case of other sacramental references in the manuscript.”

preached in the biblical narratives and agreement on the importance of penance for his preaching, this is extremely odd. The York saint does, he says, preach to the people to avoid sin, “Therefore be clene, bothe wiffe and man, || Þis is my reed” (21.39-40), but that is not quite the same thing as penance. Similarly, the Towneley closing speech warns its audience to forsake sin and beware of death, but there is not a single mention of penance.

The reasons for the omission of penance from the pageants in York and Towneley are not evident, and I can only tentatively suggest factors that may have contributed. One possible explanation is that the York and Towneley playwrights preferred to focus on one sacrament, namely baptism, in such a relatively short play. Towneley’s mention of the other sacraments (though not by name) makes this perhaps unlikely. Another reason could be that penance was simply too controversial a topic to be dealt with. Admittedly, the sacrament of penance was more strongly contested than that of baptism, and the biblical John’s preaching does not really support orthodox stress on private confession and priestly absolution. What exactly the saint meant by penance is not entirely clear, but it does seem to involve baptism and the performance of charitable deeds, neither of which were particularly important in the debates surrounding penance by the time these plays were written and conceived.<sup>17</sup> The fact that Love glosses over John’s preaching of penance might support the notion this was truly a dangerous topic; “John baptizing sinfulmen, & miche peple þat was come þider to here his predicacion, for þei helden him at þat tyme as criste,” and “For John prechede to sinful men to do penance & baptized hem” is all the information one receives in the eminently orthodox *Mirroure of the blessed lyf of Jesu Christi*.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, the writer of the *N-Town Baptism* seems to have felt no qualms about dealing with this topic and to have been successful in emphasizing the orthodox aspects of penance. *Wisdom* (c. 1465-70), a so-called morality play, likewise deals with the sacrament of penance in some detail (ll. 957-96).

It is perhaps possible that the playwrights were concerned by the audience’s reactions to a sermon on penance on their holiday. Given the didactic nature of the biblical plays this may at first sight seem improbable. These plays are fundamentally serious in intent and an important aim, if not the principal one, of the writers and producers must have been to educate the spectators in moral and religious matters and to stir them to devotion. That much is clear from the content of the plays and from various other records; as mentioned above, these very pageants’ insistence on baptism as a sacrament bears this out as well. But messages are not always received as they are intended. To give but two examples from medieval York: the play of Fergus gave rise to more noise and laughter than devotion (“magis risum & clamorem causabat quam deuocionem”) which upset its producers.<sup>19</sup> William Melton preached in 1426 about the York Corpus Christi Play. He commended the Play affirming that it was good in itself and most laudable (“affirmando quod bonus erat in se & laudabilis valde”). However, he despaired of the audience because they are given greatly to feasting, drunkenness, clamours, gossiping, and other wantonness (“comessacionibus ebrietatibus clamoribus cantilenis & alijs

---

<sup>17</sup> For the orthodox discussions see Thomas N. Tentler, *Sin and Confession of the Eve of the Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), passim but especially 24, 27, 30, 52, 68, 318-19; for the heterodox angle, see Hudson, *Premature Reformation*, 299.

<sup>18</sup> Nicholas Love, *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ: A Full Critical Edition*, based on Cambridge University Library Additional MSS 6578 and 6686 with Introduction, Notes and Glossary, ed. Michael G. Sargent (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2005), 66 and 68.

<sup>19</sup> The complaint is noted in 1431-32. Interestingly, one of the Masons’ objections to the play appears to have been that the subject of this pageant is not contained in the sacred scripture (“materia pagine illius in sacra non continetur scriptura”), which may indicate certain Lollard tendencies in York. See *Records of Early English Drama: York*, 2 vols., ed. Alexandra F. Johnston and Margaret Rogerson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), 1: 47-48, 2: 732.

insolencijs multum”).<sup>20</sup> Presumably this refers to only (a small) part of the audience, although one can imagine a vocal one. Here are then two sources which demonstrate that the spectators of the York Corpus Christi Play did not always behave appropriately. Furthermore, we know that sermon audiences were not always well-behaved either, especially if the lesson of the sermon was too specifically targeted at them.<sup>21</sup> If even real preachers during proper sermons encountered all sorts of upsets and antagonism, it is very possible that at least some of the playgoers would object to being subjected to a sermon on the need to repent on their holiday. The fear of an unfavourable reception of such a sermon by the spectators cannot be entirely dismissed. On the other hand, there is a strong didactic element to both the York and Towneley pageants, and evidence from France shows that sermons exhorting penance could be incorporated successfully in plays. And the audience of the N-Town Baptism pageant (of which more below) are told to repent. Consequently, consideration for the audience cannot solely explain the lack of preaching on penance in the York and Towneley plays, although it might have been a contributing factor.

Another possibility is that the link between penance and preaching in relation to John the Baptist was too strong. If penance is mentioned in the spoken text, then the John actor must be preaching, and that in itself would have been controversial. This may seem far-fetched, but given late medieval anxiety about unlicensed preaching, it may well have been an issue. It is probably no coincidence that the one John who mentions penance in the English corpus is the only one to preach.

As mentioned above, preaching without a licence was prohibited by Arundel's Constitutions of 1409 and earlier measures intended to circumscribe preaching. It is therefore conceivable that playwrights and producers felt uneasy at the idea of having actors preach to the audiences – and I would like to argue that the plays do indeed display considerable anxiety in their attempts, or lack thereof, to represent John as a preacher.

#### **4. The York Baptism**

Most intriguing in this regard is the York Baptism where the protagonist takes such care not to preach to the audience. It should have been relatively straightforward to write a little sermon for the protagonist, and this is indeed what happens normally in the French *mystères*, as we have seen above. However, in the York Corpus Christi Play John's whole speech is ostensibly addressed to God and the more sermon-like part of it is introduced as a recapitulation of the actual preaching event: “Loke þou make þe redy, ay saide I” (21.29). The audience of the play is, of course, at the receiving end of the lesson, despite this device, so the question that needs to be addressed is why the playwright chose to adopt this format of indirect preaching instead of a sermon directly addressed to an (on-stage or off-stage) audience. At the close of this play there is a renewed interest in preaching when John promises, “I schall gar preche” (21.171) but, again, there is no preaching on-stage. It is interesting to see that John Clerke made notes to the effect that John's opening speech had been amended at line 2 (“De nouo facto”), that “a pece newly made for saynt John Baptiste” was missing at the close of John's opening speech (l. 49), and that John's closing speech was also changed and/or augmented (“This matter is newly mayde and devysed || wherof we haue no cobby regystred,” after l. 175).<sup>22</sup> It is therefore very possible that by the time John Clerke had access to the manuscript in the sixteenth century the protagonist's intriguing failure to preach penance to the audience had

---

<sup>20</sup> Johnston and Rogerson, REED: York, 1: 43, 2: 728.

<sup>21</sup> For examples of problematic audience reactions to sermons, see John H. Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief in Medieval Europe* (London: Hodder, 2005), 48-49, and Jacques Berlioz and Marie Anne Polo de Beaulieu, “The Preacher Facing a Reluctant Audience According to the Testimony of *Exempla*,” *Medieval Sermon Studies* 57 (2013): 16-28.

<sup>22</sup> Beadle, *York Plays*, 1: 166, 167, 171.



been amended; in any case, it seems clear that the saint's speeches, as they have survived, were at some point felt to be dramatically, and perhaps also theologically, inadequate. Indeed, there does not seem to be any good aesthetic reason for the writer's choice regarding John's opening speech. A speech which directly engages with the audience would surely have greater dramatic potency than the recollection of a sermon. Nor are there so many sermons or sermon-like speeches in the York Corpus Christi Play overall that it would have been too much of a good thing. It is therefore likely that the reasons behind the York playwright's decision not to stage preaching are external to the drama, and the most obvious explanation is that sermons were, in theory at least, strictly policed.

The date of composition of this York pageant is not known. The first record to the Corpus Christi Play dates from 1376 but presumably the cycle grew and evolved over time. Richard Beadle suggests that the text from the mid-1470s is closely related to the performance recorded in the *Ordo Paginarum* of 1415.<sup>23</sup> Meg Twycross has called into question to what extent the *Ordo Paginarum* refers to scripted plays but notes that spoken text is involved in the York Corpus Christi Play by at least 1421-22.<sup>24</sup> There is then some evidence tentatively to suggest that the text evolved after the promulgation of Arundel's Constitutions (1409), which forbade unlicensed preaching, and during the archbishopric of Henry Bowet (1407-23), who was so eager to evict the unlicensed teacher (and preacher) Margery Kempe from his diocese.<sup>25</sup> Even if the York Baptism text is not to be pinned down so precisely, it is likely that the concern for unlicensed preachers and other Lollard threats would have been an influence. Although the diocese of York appears to have been little troubled by actual cases of Lollardy, most of its archbishops were actively involved in promoting anti-Lollard measures and eradicating Lollardy: for instance, Arundel (1388-96) was one of the foremost anti-Lollard agitators; Scrope (1398-1405) had worked under Arundel; Bowet (1407-23) interviewed Margery Kempe on suspicion of heresy; and Kempe (1426-52) called a convocation to address the danger of Lollardy shortly after his translation to the archdiocese.<sup>26</sup> It is possible that the presence of archbishops with such strong anti-Lollard sentiments created an atmosphere of self-censorship in which the playwright felt that sermons on the stage, in breach of Arundel's Constitutions and other measures, were best avoided. The influence of such bishops over religious life in York may well explain the playwright's choice of indirect preaching for his John the Baptist.

## 5. The Towneley John the Baptist

The York situation is not entirely unique in the English corpus: the long opening speech of the protagonist in the Towneley John the Baptist pageant is nothing like a sermon. In fact, this speech is not even particularly concerned with sin or baptism, and focuses more on John the Baptist's identity, the Crucifixion to come, and John's relationship with Jesus. The inclusion of this kind of material is not noteworthy in itself, but the lack of stress on penance is, again, intriguing, as is the saint's failure to preach. At the close of the play, as in York, John departs to preach but before he does so, this John does turn to the audience to give them sage counsel:

---

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 2: 169-70.

<sup>24</sup> Meg Twycross, "The *Ordo paginarum* Revisited, with a Digital Camera," in *'Bring furth the pagants': Essays in Early English Drama Presented to Alexandra F. Johnston*, ed. David N. Klausner and Karen Sawyer Marsalek (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 111.

<sup>25</sup> As far as I am aware, there is no evidence for clerical actors who were also licensed to preach participating in the surviving biblical plays, although we know that a religious institution, namely St Leonard's Hospital, originally brought forth *The Purification of the Virgin at York* (Beadle, *York Plays*, 2: 136).

<sup>26</sup> Thomson, *Later Lollards*, 194-97.

Syrs, forsake youre wykydnes,  
Pryde, envy, slowth, wrath, and lechery.  
Here Gods seruice, more and lesse;  
Please God with prayng, thus red I;  
Bewar when deth comys with dystres,  
So that ye dy not sodanly.

(19.275-80)

Though strongly didactic, this speech of fourteen lines does not constitute a sermon: there is no opening prayer, no Latin, no use of authorities, or any other features one would expect in a Middle English sermon, and neither does this speech rely on the biblical accounts of the saint's preaching. Again, there does not seem to be a sound dramatic or literary reason for this decision not to have the protagonist preach (penance) to the audience. The Towneley and York pageants therefore both seem to go against the biblical account in order to avoid preaching on the stage.

The date and location of the composition and performance(s) of the Towneley John the Baptist play are unknown, although it is likely that the Towneley manuscript consists of a collection of disparate plays from the West Riding and perhaps Lancashire, plays which may have been performed variously at places such as Wakefield, Pontefract, and Doncaster.<sup>27</sup> It is consequently impossible to ascertain whether the Towneley lack of overt preaching might similarly be due to close clerical supervision over religious matters, as I have suggested for York, although that is certainly not impossible. There are one or two lines which would suggest some uneasiness about the 'sermonising' – however little it bears resemblance to genuine sermons – of the protagonist at the end of the play. In this speech we encounter the unexpected advice to "Here Gods seruice, more and lesse" (19.277); Peter Meredith has suggested that the second half of the line originally ended in "mes" (mass), which would have enhanced the orthodox message of the speech even more.<sup>28</sup> The playwright appears to be taking some pains to confirm that he is in no way opposing the Church, even though the other advice he gives consists of such bland and utterly uncontroversial statements as "forsake youre wykydnes" (19.275) and "Bewar when deth comys" (19.279). Similarly, when John recommends "Beseche youre God, both euen and morne, || You for to saue from syn that day" (19.283-84) it is interesting to note that you should not pray to God to save you – bypassing the priest and the Church – but merely to prevent you from sinning. These are suggestive indications that even a mildly exhortative speech might potentially be seen as heterodox and that the playwright was well aware of this danger. If such a short and innocuous speech caused this much anxiety, one can readily understand why the playwright avoided staging a sermon.

## 6. The N-Town Baptism

That this presentation of a non-preaching John the Baptist is unusual in medieval drama is demonstrated not just by the French *mystères* but also by the N-Town Baptism pageant. The latter play opens with John the Baptist preaching penance to the audience:

Ecce vox clamantes in deserto. [Here a voice of one crying in the desert]  
I am þe voys of wyldirnese  
Pat her spekyth and prechyth yow to.

<sup>27</sup> Barbara D. Palmer, "Recycling 'The Wakefield Cycle': The Records," *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama* 41 (2002): 88, 95, 108.

<sup>28</sup> This whole line seems to be an addition on top of an erasure and is framed with black lines, which again indicates that at some point in the play's or manuscript's history this may have been considered to be controversial. For the "mes" to "lesse" change, see Epp, "Towneley Plays," 147 n. 27.

...  
 Pentitenciam nunc agite [Do penance now]  
 Appropinquabit regnum celorum: [For the kingdom of heaven is at hand]  
 For your trespass penance do 3e  
 And 3e xall wyn hevyn Dei Deorum. [of the God of Gods]  
 ...  
 Baptyme I councell yow for to take  
 And do penance for your synnys sake.  
 And for your offens amendys 3e make,  
 Your synnys for to hyde. (ll. 1-26)

This is not much like most surviving Middle English sermons, being too short, in verse (with some macaronic lines, which are highly unusual in surviving Middle English sermons), and there is no a theme.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, there are clear references to the biblical account of John's preaching, such as lines 14-15 which cite Matthew 3:2 ("paenitentiam agite adpropinquavit enim regnum caelorum" [do penance for the kingdom of heaven is at hand]), and this speech can be taken to constitute a dramatic rendition of a preaching event. And, unlike in York and Towneley, penance is emphatically mentioned. The saint's whole opening speech is in the hand of scribe C (probably late fifteenth or early sixteenth century), and although it may simply be a newer copy of the original text, it may equally be a later reworking.<sup>30</sup> But at the close of the play, John the Baptist has another, longer, sermon-like speech on penance in the hand of the main scribe, which addresses the audience, and which commences "Of penawne do I preche" (22.14) and concludes "Now haue I tawght 3ow penauns" (22.180). Again, this sermon is to some extent based on the biblical accounts of John's preaching: the reference to the felling of the fruitless tree and the disregard for chaff recall Matthew 3:10 and Luke 3:9, and Matthew 3:12 and Luke 3:17 respectively. Although these speeches do not resemble surviving Middle English sermons in many respects, there can be no doubt that they were supposed to be a dramatic rendition of John's biblical preaching on penance.

At first sight, it would therefore seem that the playwright and producers of this pageant felt no particular anxiety about a sermon on penance preached on the stage. Perhaps if we knew more about the locale and date of this play, we could to some degree account for this very different treatment of the biblical sermon on penance by the protagonist in this pageant vis-à-vis the York and Towneley pageants. Nonetheless, the East-Anglian N-Town play would seem to have been created and copied at a time when there was substantial anti-Lollard propaganda.<sup>31</sup> We might consequently expect to find signs that there was some uneasiness about staging preachers, and indeed N-Town's conspicuous emphasis on confession in John's closing sermon in fact shows just that. This unusual and unexpected stress on confession – which the Lollards rejected, of course – shows the playwright's efforts explicitly to endorse orthodoxy and the Church: "I rede þat 3e 3ow shryve" (22.147), "Shryfte of mowth loke þat 3e make" (22.155), "God wyl be vengyd on man þat is both dum and mute, || Þat wyl nevyr be shrevyn" (22.162-63), "Schryfte of mowthe may best þe saue" (22.167), and "Whan man in good penauns and schryfte of mowth be sene, || Of God he is wel-belovyd" (22.177-78). Confession is, of course, necessary for the sacrament of penance according to orthodox theology but this playwright almost seems to claim that confession only can save you. This emphasis on confession is indeed remarkable, as can be seen when this sermon is compared to

<sup>29</sup> Although the Latin opening line certainly recalls the sermon theme.

<sup>30</sup> Spector, N-Town Play, 1: xxiii.

<sup>31</sup> Although no further prosecution was undertaken after Alnwick's Lollard trials of 1428-1431 in Norwich until 1472, there were cases in neighbouring dioceses in the mid and later fifteenth century; Thomson, *Later Lollards*, 120-22, 132-34.

the sermons on penance in the French *mystères* where there is no such insistence on confession; sometimes it is not even mentioned at all, as in Michel's John the Baptist sequence, for instance. The saint's closing speech in the N-Town pageant is then perhaps not so much a sermon on penance but rather a promotion for aural confession and, consequently, the ecclesiastical institution. Again it would seem that there was some anxiety concerning on-stage sermons, and that this playwright, again, went out of his way to affirm his and the play's orthodoxy.

## 7. Conclusion

Woolf points out that the N-Town Baptism play is "exceptional ... in giving emphasis to John the Baptist as preacher."<sup>32</sup> In fact, the N-Town representation of John the Baptist is what one would expect, given the biblical accounts of this event. It is the lack of sermons on penance in York and Towneley which needs to be accounted for, not the inclusion of such speeches in N-Town. The fact that the inclusion of recognisable sermons for John the Baptist is standard practice in the French *mystères* also indicates that the cause for not doing so in York and Towneley is likely to be a peculiarly English issue. The various measures that were enforced in late medieval England to limit preaching to licensed preachers may well have made playwrights and producers wary of staging preaching figures overtly preaching. The unexpected material with a decidedly institutional-Church-supporting slant in both instances of vaguely sermon-like speeches by the N-Town Baptism and the Towneley John the Baptist, as well as the fact that York's John the Baptist emphatically does not preach on stage, demonstrates that there was uneasiness in late medieval England about usurping the role of a preacher on the stage – even if the person represented was a popular saint like John the Baptist.

## Bibliography

- Arnold, John H. *Belief and Unbelief in Medieval Europe*. London: Hodder, 2005.
- Aston, Margaret. "Lollardy and Sedition, 1381-1431." *Past and Present* 17 (1960): 1-44.
- Beadle, Richard, ed. *The York Plays: A Critical Edition of the York Corpus Christi Play as Recorded in British Library Additional MS 35290*, 2 vols. EETS s.s. 23-24. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009-13.
- Berlioz, Jacques, and Marie Anne Polo de Beaulieu. "The Preacher Facing a Reluctant Audience According to the Testimony of Exempla." *Medieval Sermon Studies* 57 (2013): 16-28.
- Clifton, Chas S. *Encyclopedia of Heresies and Heretics*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 1992.
- Epp, Garrett P. J. "The Towneley Plays and the Hazards of Cycling." *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama* 32 (1993): 121-50.
- , "Re-editing Towneley," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 43 (2013): 87-104.
- Hudson, Anne. *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988.
- , ed. "Sixteen Points on which the Bishops accuse Lollards." In *Selections of English Wycliffite Writings*, 19-24. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978.
- Jodogne, Omer, ed. *Le Mystère de la Passion d'Arnoul Gréban*. Brussels: Académie Royale de Belgique, 1965.
- Johnston, Alexandra F. "The Towneley Manuscript: Huntington Library MS HM1" (forthcoming).
- , and Margaret Rogerson, eds. *Records of Early English Drama: York*, 2 vols. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979.

---

<sup>32</sup> Rosemary Woolf, *The English Mystery Plays* (London: Routledge & Paul, 1972), 217.

- Leff, Gordon. *Heresy in the later Middle Ages: the relation of heterodoxy to dissent, c. 1250-c. 1450*, 2 vols. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1967.
- Love, Nicholas. *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ: A Full Critical Edition*, based on Cambridge University Library Additional MSS 6578 and 6686 with Introduction, Notes and Glossary, edited by Michael G. Sargent. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2005.
- Mazouer, Charles. "Sermons in the Passions of Mercadé, Gréban and Jehan Michel." In *Les Mystères: Studies in Genre, Text and Theatricality*, edited by Peter Happé and Wim Hüskén, 247-69. *Ludus: Medieval and Early Renaissance Theatre and Drama*, 12. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012.
- Michel, Jean. *Le Mystère de la Passion (Angers 1486)*, edited by Omer Jodogne. Gembloux: Duculot, 1959.
- Palmer, Barbara D. "Recycling 'The Wakefield Cycle': The Records." *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama* 41 (2002): 88-130.
- Richard, Jules-Marie, ed. *Le Mystère de la Passion: texte du manuscrit 697 de la bibliothèque d'Arras*. Arras: Société du Pas-de-Calais, 1891.
- Spector, Stephen, ed. *The N-Town Play: Cotton MS Vespasian D. 8*, 2 vols. EETS s.s. 11-12. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- Staley, Lynn, ed. *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996.
- Stevens, Martin, and A. C. Cawley, eds. *The Towneley Plays*, 2 vols. EETS s.s. 13-14. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Swinburn, Lilian M., ed. *The Lanterne of Ligt*, edited from MS. Harl. 2324. EETS o.s. 151. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & co., 1917; rpt. New York: Kraus Reprint, 1971.
- Tentler, Thomas N. *Sin and Confession of the Eve of the Reformation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977.
- Thomson, John A. F. *The Later Lollards, 1414-1520*. London: Oxford University Press, 1965.
- Twycross, Meg. "The Ordo paginarum Revisited, with a Digital Camera." In *'Bring furth the pagants': Essays in Early English Drama Presented to Alexandra F. Johnston*, edited by David N. Klausner and Karen Sawyer Marsalek, 105-31. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007.