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A BIBLICAL STORY FOR TWO STAGES: ABRAHAM AND ISAAC IN FIFTEENTH-CENTURY FLORENCE AND YORK

Abstract
In the late middle ages, the Biblical story of Abraham and Isaac formed an ideal platform to develop a discourse on absolute faith in God as well as on the hierarchical relationships within family and society. By considering how Feo Belcari's Florentine *sacra rappresentazione* and the York Abraham and Isaac participated in – and contributed to – a broader and diversified 'public theology', this article argues that through the performance of dramas, lay people not only gained access to the Bible but also had agency in processes of appropriation and adaptation of its text and message. At the same time, it shows how these plays, as lay enterprises, were deeply embedded in the distinct fabrics of the societies that produced them.

Key words: Religious drama, Medieval exegesis, York, Florence, Manuscripts, Obedience, Abraham and Isaac

Abraham's sacrifice of his beloved son Isaac (Genesis 22.1-19) is one of the most memorable and dramatic stories of the Bible and one of its most challenging representations of God. The narrative – already central to the Hebrew Bible and culture – acquired a further relevance in the Christian tradition.[1] In the New Testament, Abraham's sacrifice is portrayed as an example of faith, adding that he acted believing in the resurrection of his son – something that happened 'for a parable', *ἐn paraboλή* / *in parabolam* (Hebrews 11.19). This authoritative reference provided the patristic exegesis with the ideal background to develop a sophisticated interpretation of the episode as a perfect typology of the sacrifice of Christ.

Elaborating on the rich patristic interpretation, the refiguration of the key event in the story of Abraham and Isaac acquired a crucial value in the medieval Latin world. In his book, *Le sein du pare: Abraham et la paternité dans l'occident médiéval*, Jèrôme Baschet describes how, in a fascinating way, during the high Middle Ages the 'filicide' father Abraham became the supreme model of fatherhood.[2] As Baschet points out, 'la mise en scène de cette figure emblématique [Abraham] peut être l'occasion d'un discours sur l'ordre nécessaire de la parenté', where the filial submission to the father was connected to the father's obedience to a superior authority and, ultimately, to God.[3] This was true not only for the visual representations, which form the core of the French scholar's work, but also when the Abraham and Isaac story was staged as a religious play.

This biblical story was indeed an ideal place to develop a discourse on faith in God and on his absolute authority as well as on the hierarchical relationships within family and society. Such a discourse was used either to confirm the necessary hierarchy within a society based on the respect of distinct functions and roles (a 'società posizionale'[4]) or to challenge it in subtle ways.[5] Or it could be used to somehow do both: to show a momentary dramatic rebellion to that order and the positive and salvific return to established relations of power. In this regard, it is not surprising that the story of Abraham's sacrifice gained an important role in late medieval religious theatre. While its basic content largely remained fixed by Scripture, the way to dramatize this story, its socio-religious function, and its 'theatrical exegesis'[6] presented significant differences.

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[1] For an overview on the interpretation and reception history of this episode (also known with its Hebrew name as *Aquedah*, i.e. the 'binding' of Isaac) see in *Encyclopedia of the Bible and its Reception* the entries *Abraham* (1, coll. 149-204) and, in particular, *Aquedah*, 2, coll. 526-565. See also *Isaaks Opferung (Gen 22) in den Konfessionen und Medien der Frühen Neuzeit*, which includes several contributions on early modern plays on this biblical tale.
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[2] Baschet, *Le sein du pare*, in part. ch. 2: 'Abraham patriarche parricide' (pp. 63-98). See also Baschet, 'Medieval Abraham'.

[3] Baschet, *Le sein du pare*, pp. 97-98.

[4] On the use of this concept for late medieval society, see Muzzarelli, 'Noscere ordinem et finem sui status'.

[5] For an updated overview on the potential of this story on the medieval stage, see Steenbrugge, 'Playing for Emotion'.

[6] On this concept, see Delcorno, *In the Mirror of the Prodigal Son*, pp. 283-284.

Indeed, as we will see, the stage represented a flexible and dynamic space to engage with the Bible.

This article explores the different options that playwrights (and performers) had in staging this biblical narrative, thus reflecting the specific socio-religious function that this story, mediated by specific plays, assumed in distinct social contexts. We will do so by comparing two fifteenth-century plays. Instead of considering all the medieval dramas that elaborated on this Biblical story – as scholars have done for other Biblical narratives[7] – we will limit our comparison to two plays, since this gives us the possibility to develop a more in-depth analysis of both of them as well as of the information available about the context in which they were produced and staged.[8] In a way, we propose this as a test case for a close comparative analysis of medieval drama and as an exercise in collaboration and cross-fertilization between scholars working on different theatrical traditions. The article will focus on the *sacra rappresentazione* written by Feo Belcari and first staged in Florence in 1449, and the York *Abraham and Isaac*, probably played more or less annually from the late fourteenth to the mid sixteenth century and transmitted to us by a text written around 1476-1477. These two plays stem from quite distinct cultural environments – late medieval Italy and England – and yet their near-contemporary urban setting allows for a close comparison of their performance contexts, which is further enriched by the relative wealth of information that we possess about them.

By tracing similarities and differences in staging the Abraham and Isaac story in York and Florence, the chosen comparative approach has two goals: to shed more light on otherwise relatively well-known plays, but above all, to underline how fifteenth-century religious theatre participated in – and contributed to – a dynamic socio-religious culture characterized by the coexistence of 'multiple options'.[9] In fact, performing drama was a privileged medium by which lay people not only gained access to the Bible but also had agency in processes of appropriation and adaptation of its text and message.[10] At the same time, as lay enterprises, these plays were also deeply embedded in the social structures of the societies which produced them.

The article will first present the historical contexts in which the two plays were produced, next it will focus on three key issues, namely: how the topic of obedience unfolds within the dramas; the way in which Isaac's character is developed and its possible social relevance; and the information available about multiple uses of the plays.

Abraham and Isaac in York

The York *Abraham and Isaac* play forms one small segment in an overview of Christian history which was performed more or less annually on the Feast of Corpus Christi in York

[7] As reference point, see Muir, *The Biblical Drama of Medieval Europe*. As example of an attentive Europe-wide consideration of the staging of a specific biblical narrative, see Kovács, 'The Dramatisation of the Parable of the Prodigal Son'.

[8] For instance, if we aimed to consider all six medieval English dramas on Abraham´s sacrifice, this level of analysis would have not been possible.

[9] On this key characteristic of fifteenth-century religious culture, see Van Engen, 'Multiple Options'.

[10] See Delcorno, *In the Mirror of the Prodigal Son*, pp. 251-309. On the engagement of laity with the Bible, see also Corbellini, 'Instructing the Soul, Feeding the Spirit and Awakening the Passion: Holy Writ and Lay Readers in Late Medieval Europe'.

from about 1377 to 1568.[11] The York Corpus Christi Play covers episodes from the Old Testament and New Testament (as well as apocrypha) with the majority of plays portraying events after the Incarnation. The individual short plays were produced by different trade guilds on pageant wagons that were wheeled through the town and stopped at predesignated playing places, or stations, for a performance. The *Abraham and Isaac* play (number 10 in the sequence) follows *The Flood* and precedes *Moses and Pharaoh*, and was performed by the guild of parchment makers and bookbinders.[12]

The plays are preserved in the so-called 'Register', a civic document compiled by the Common Clerk of the city, probably around 1476-1477.[13] The exact reasons for this manuscript to be commissioned are unknown, but Richard Beadle has noted that its creation coincides with a renewed civic interest in the cycle. The Register not only corresponds closely with the year (1476) when the plays ousted the liturgical Corpus Christi procession from the feast day – the liturgical procession was postponed to the day after Corpus Christi – but also with what seems to be the first impulse of the City to monitor the quality of the performances. In 1476, the City demanded 'iiij of þe most connyng, descrete and able players within þis Citie to serche, here and examen all þe plaiers and plaies and pagentes' ('4 of the most skilful, discrete, and able players within this city to search, hear and examine all the players and plays and pageants').[14] As Beadle notes, if these four skilled players were to inspect not only the acting and wagons, but also the plays, they would have required easy access to a reliable, official copy of the text. It is then possible that the Register was drawn up to facilitate this civic requirement to examine the plays and their performances.[15] We also know that at least from 1527 onwards the Register was at times used to some extent as 'quality assurance', as the Common Clerk or his deputy watched the plays and noted changes in the text in the margins.[16]

There is then solid evidence that texts in later performances were changed and augmented; indeed, plays were merged or removed from the cycle as well. It is important to bear in mind that the correlation between the surviving text and earlier and later, and perhaps even contemporary, performances need not be strict. On the other hand, the fact that the Common Clerk or deputy seemed to have thought that in most instances marginal annotations such as 'hic caret' were sufficient to indicate change also suggests that while the performance texts were altered – sometimes to a significant extent – these changes did not make the texts overall unrecognisable. For instance, we find at least four instances of 'hic caret' or the like in the course of roughly forty lines (between l. 266 and l. 300) in

[11] The collection of plays, starting with *The Fall of Angels* and ending with *Doomsday*, is perhaps most appropriately referred to as the York Corpus Christi Play, although other labels such as the York Plays or York Mystery Plays are found as well. The edition used is *The York Plays*, ed. by Beadle.

[12] In most cases, the connection between a play and guild remained constant throughout the cycle's history, as is the case here. For some plays, there is a clear connection between the topic of the play and the craft to which it was allotted; it is no coincidence that the Shipwrights staged the *Building of Noah's Ark* and the Pinners were involved in the Crucifixion pageant. This is not the case always, and there does not seem to be a topical link between parchment makers and bookbinders and the Abraham and Isaac story. Other determining factors might have been the guild's size and finances, with more expensive pageants being the responsibility of wealthier guilds. For instance, the *Doomsday* pageant, the last play in the sequence as well as (probably) the most lavish one, was staged by the Mercers, the wealthiest and most important guild in York.

[13] *The York Plays*, ed. by Beadle, p. xii.

[14] Beadle, 'The York Corpus Christi Play', p. 105.

[15] Beadle, 'Nicholas Lancaster, Richard of Gloucester and the York Corpus Christi Play', p. 40.

[16] *The York Plays*, ed. by Beadle, p. xxi.

Abraham and Isaac, which indicates that the lead-up to the intended sacrifice was significantly expanded in at least some sixteenth-century performances. At the same time, however, the surviving text still seems to have formed part of the performed spectacle. Moreover, there is only one other possible suggestion of an addition or change in the remainder of the play.[17] And in two instances, the correct speech heading has been added or repeated (l. 145 and l. 369), which again strongly suggests that the written words were still used on stage.

We have even less information about the form of the play before the texts were copied. It is at least possible that the very existence of the Register somehow crystallized a more fluid textual and performance tradition. Indeed, it is not clear at which point in the cycle's history text came to be used: while it is possible that text was used in performance from the very inception, it is also possible that the pageants were originally *tableaux vivants* which were wheeled through town as part of the Corpus Christi procession.[18] There is some tentative evidence which may indicate that the *Abraham and Isaac* play was part of a reworking of sections of the cycle around 1422. This reworking seems to have affected the text of *Abraham and Isaac* (10), *Moses and Pharaoh* (11), *The Shepherds* (15), *Herod / Magi* (16), *Christ and the Doctors* (20), *The Transfiguration* (23), *The Woman Taken in Adultery and the Raising of Lazarus* (24), *The Last Supper* (27), *Crucifixio Christi* (35), *The Harrowing of Hell* (37), and *Pentecost* (43). These plays are linked by their use of a twelve-line stanza and there is historical evidence that points to changes in some of them around 1422; the two Old Testament plays are further associated by their reliance on the *Middle English Metrical Paraphrase of the Old Testament*.[19] Perhaps our play text had been in use – with (minimal) changes – since about 1422. A list of pageants from 1415 (known as the *Ordo Paginarum*) already allots the Abraham and Isaac story to the parchment makers and bookbinders, though how that pageant relates to the text that has survived will likely remain uncertain, unless new evidence comes to light.

While the city of York may have monitored the plays more stringently from about 1476 onwards, as the historical documents as well as the creation of the Register suggest, the civic authorities were closely involved with the cycle much earlier on in its history as well. Very little is known of the scope and nature of the York Corpus Christi Play in its earliest years, but already in 1415 the Common Clerk drew up the so-called *Ordo Paginarum* for the city. And even earlier than that, in 1399, the city's register of documents, the Memorandum Book, contains a complaint that not all pageants were able to be staged in one day despite 'graundes espences & costages' ('great expense and cost').[20] This entry is indicative of both the scale of the cycle and the level of civic involvement in its organisation at this point in time.

The official reason why the York civic authorities sponsored these plays centred on devotion: the York Corpus Christi Play was brought forth 'ob magnam devocionis causam et viciorum extirpacionem morumque reformacionem' ('for the important cause

[17] That is 'hic' in the margin of ll. 235-238; the deleted addition at ll. 164-165 seems to be the result of a mishap in performance with an Isaac-actor having spoken prematurely.

[18] Though arguably the reference to the 'grete pestilence' (11, l. 345) of 1348-1349 is more likely to have been included in a text written in the fourteenth century (when the Play came into existence) than in the fifteenth, which would suggest that spoken text was part of the performance from very earlier on, if not the very beginning.

[19] Beadle, 'York Corpus Christi', pp. 118-119.

[20] Johnston and Rogerson, eds., *Records of Early English Drama*, p. 11 (henceforth: *REED*).

of devotion and for the extirpation of vice and the reformation of customs').[21] While we do not have details about the reaction to the York *Abraham and Isaac* per se, we are fortunate to have a glimpse of how the whole cycle may have been received in a summary of sermons that touched on the York Corpus Christi Play. The summary of these sermons, which were preached in York around the year 1426, is found in York City Records. The summary suggests that the Play may not have been a hundred percent successful in its aims of increasing devotion and decreasing vice, mainly due to the apparently mundane celebrations accompanying it. The preacher of these sermons, the Franciscan William Melton, generally seems to have been in favour of the use of drama for religious purposes, as he praised the plays of the York cycle as 'good in themselves and very laudable' ('bonus erat in se et laudabilis valde').[22] However, he urged the City to distinguish the day of the Play from the day of the Corpus Christi 'sic quod populus convenire possit ad ecclesias in festo predicto et interesse servicio ecclesiastico' ('so that the people could come together in the churches on the aforesaid feast and attend divine service').[23] Clearly, in Melton's opinion, religious plays may aid devotion but were not as beneficial to the soul as the liturgy and its connected indulgences.[24] Beside the implicit competition between the two initiatives, part of the reason for that cautious optimism regarding the benefits of religious drama may have been the audience's response. According to Melton, the York audience – or at least some audience members – simply were not in the right frame of mind for liturgical devotion on the day of the Play, since beside the *ludus* they were given greatly 'comessacionibus ebrietatibus clamoribus cantilenis et aliis insolenciis' ('to feastings, drunkenness, clamours, gossipings, and other wantonness').[25] This judgment of the audience may well be accurate, of course, and indeed the idea of a party atmosphere on a holiday seems rather credible. On the other hand, William Melton had a clear goal in preaching these sermons, namely to move the York Corpus Christi Play to another day, and this may have influenced his views on the matter. Nevertheless, even if Melton's desire to change the date of the play coloured his presentation of the audience, it is likely that his description was somewhat recognisable. It had to be, if it was to be persuasive. On the other hand, the possibility that Melton's assessment of the behaviour of the audience might not have been uniformly recognized is indicated by *A Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge* (c.1380-1425), which strongly suggests that a much more devotional, or at least attentive and emotional, reception of religious plays was also possible. The *Tretise* does not mention the York Play; it presents instead a general overview of reasons pro and

[21] Johnston and Rogerson, *REED*, pp. 37, 722.

[22] Johnston and Rogerson, *REED*, pp. 43, 728. On this preacher, see Homan, 'Old and New Evidence of the Career of William Melton, OFM', which underlines that in his preaching in York this friar was particularly interested in the observance of holy days, advocating also for the closure of shops and trade activities on Sundays.

[23] 'Super hoc quidam vir maxime religiosus, frater Willelmus Melton ordinis Fratrum Minorum, sacre pagine professor, verbi Dei famosissimus predicator, ad istam veniens civitatem in suis sermonibus diversis ludum predictum populo commendavit, affirmando quod bonus erat in se et laudabilis valde. Dicebat tamen quod cives predicte civitatis et alii forinseci in dicto festo confluentes ad eandem, non solum ipsi ludo in eodem festo, verum eciam comessacionibus, ebrietatibus, clamoribus, cantilenis, et aliis insolenciis multum intendunt, servicio divino officii ipsius diei minime intendentes. […] Et ideo ipsi fratri Willelmo salubre videbatur, et ad hoc populum civitatis inducebat, ut ludus ille fiat in una die et processio in die altera, sic quod populus convenire possit ad ecclesias in festo predicto et interesse servicio ecclesiastico pro indulgenciis consequendis'; Johnston and Rogerson, *REED*, pp 43, 729 (with minimal adaptation in punctuation).

[24] A similar caveat on the timing of plays can be found in *Dives and Pauper*.

[25] Johnston and Rogerson, *REED*, pp. 43, 728.

contra religious drama.[26] Although the authors of this treatise definitely favour the arguments against such drama, they do not mention unruly audiences as a reason for opposing religious drama; on the contrary, the *Tretise* mentions spectators of (seemingly) Passion plays and plays on the martyrdom of saints weeping as they watch the performance.[27] And we will encounter this latter type of reaction also in a preacher's evaluation of the Florentine *Abraham and Isaac*. Again, the views of the authors of the *Tretise* may have coloured their assessment of audience responses: the text is anxious about spectators' devotion being misdirected through watching plays, but for that to happen, they have to watch and respond to the plays, of course. Most likely, responses were not uniform: some spectators paid close attention and were spiritually and emotionally engaged while others came to see and be seen, to chat, to flirt, to drink, and have a good time – and some perhaps even moved between these two states over the course of a day of watching the York Corpus Christi Play. But what these accounts have in common is the argument that the crux of religious drama generally – and of the York Play in particular in the case of Melton's sermons and the York records – resides in its attempt to stir devotion.

And in Florence

Feo Belcari's *Abraham and Isaac* is one of the earliest Florentine *sacre rappresentazioni*, a peculiar genre of confraternal play developed in Florence during the fifteenth century as an innovative form of religious instruction.[28] By skilfully intertwining doctrinal discourses and theatrical strategies these spectacles were a memorable and powerful form of education, particularly aimed at young people. Within this dramatic genre, the lion's share were biblical and hagiographical stories. Through dramatic scenes, lively dialogues, and material objects, the spectacles provided the audience with exemplary models as well as an insight on key religious and social issues.[29]

From the late fourteenth century onwards, in some of the main churches of Florence some lay brotherhoods regularly organized spectacles for particular liturgical days (the oldest and most famous are the plays for Annunciation, Ascension, and Pentecost). These spectacles sought to celebrate the main mysteries of the Christian faith in a visible form. They also made ingenious uses of theatrical machinery that enabled stunning special effects, such as the flight of the archangel Gabriel in the Annunciation play or the pyrotechnic descent of the Holy Spirit on the apostles in the Pentecost play.[30]

Besides these spectacles, a new, complementary form of religious drama was developed around the mid fifteenth century: the Florentine *sacra rappresentazione*. This type of play usually involved a less complex setting and focused more on moral issues than the previous Florentine religious spectacles. Moreover, by gradually freeing this type of theatre from the liturgical context, these dramas focused mainly on education. The *sacre rappresentazioni* were in fact conceived in the 1440s as a pioneering catechetical

[26] The *Tretise* refers to Passion plays and plays on the martyrdom of saints but the exact meaning of *miraclis* is undefined.
[27] The *Tretise* then goes on to dismiss these tears as misguided; see *A Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge*, p. 102.
[28] The most updated and complete study on the subject is Ventrone, *Teatro Civile e Sacra Rappresentazione a Firenze*.
[29] See Ventrone, 'Politica e attualità nella sacra rappresentazione fiorentina', and Delcorno, ''E i miei denari che prestai a usura?''.
[30] See Newbigin, *Feste D'Oltrarno*.

activity in brotherhoods for boys (young men from twelve to twenty-four years old), a new type of confraternity that expressed the increasing attention to education of youth – a theme that became central for both humanists and religious reformers.[31] The key pedagogical idea was that by staging this type of spectacle, the young, non-professional actors learned in a ludic and entertaining way the moral concepts and the behavioral guidelines by which they should live – now and in their adult lives. Hence, the educational aim of this theatre was twofold: on one hand it was directed at the spectators, who were guided to ponder theological as well as social issues, and on the other hand aimed at the performers, who memorized the texts and so internalized their content. Within the context of civic religion that characterized fifteenth-century Italian cities, this type of confraternal theatre aimed to form a new generation of virtuous citizens committed to the common good, as Ventrone has pointed out.[32]

Belcari's *Abraham and Isaac* is not only one of the oldest Florentine *sacre rappresentazioni*, but has also an 'archetypic value'[33] in relation to the morphology of this type of drama, as it already presents its most characteristic features, and the didactic contents, which – as we will see – depict an itinerary of growth that emphasizes obedience as key virtue. This message about obedience proved to be particularly apt to a type of confraternity that aimed at religious and social control over potentially turbulent 'adolescents'.[34] Indeed, the poet and layman Feo Belcari – 'theologian-layman' with a marked sensibility for the biblical texts – has to be counted among the intellectuals who 'invented' this new type of religious play, which was elaborated in the cultural milieu surrounding Archbishop Antonino Pierozzi.[35] Within that context, the bidirectional influence between humanistic ideals and projects of religious reform were favoured. This process took place in the shadow of the patronage of the Medici, the *de facto* ruling family in Florence, as Belcari's dedication of the *Abraham and Isaac* to Giovanni di Cosimo de' Medici confirms.[36]

While we know the author of the play and the socio-cultural context in which it originated, there is no exact information about either the confraternity that first staged Belcari's *Abraham and Isaac* or any other performance of this play, which – as we will see – had considerable dissemination. Manuscripts record that the play was performed for the first time in 1449, in the Florentine church of Santa Maria Maddalena in Cestelli. Yet, from the state of current scholarship it is not possible to deduce who was involved in its initial preparation, although from its typology and contents, we can safely assume that Belcari composed it for one of the earliest youth confraternities.

In this regard, it is extremely important to note that an early spectator's testimony of this play survives, although it has so far escaped the attention of scholars working on

[31] Ventrone, *Teatro civile*, pp. 109-167. On the age and social status of the boys in these confraternities, see Taddei, *Fanciulli e giovani*.
[32] Ventrone, 'Politica e attualità', p. 320
[33] Ventrone, '*La Rappresentazione di Abraam e Isaac* di Feo Belcari', p. 178. The first *stanza* of the play has a sort of programmatic value, since it highlights the interplay between seeing and hearing and their effectiveness to both entertain and educate the audience; see Newbigin, ''L'occhio si dice ch'è la prima porta''.
[34] Gazzini, 'Confraternite e giovani a Milano nel Quattrocento'.
[35] Ventrone, *Teatro civile*, p. 118. On Belcari, beside the pages dedicated to him by Ventrone, see Martelli, *Letteratura fiorentina del Quattrocento*, pp. 20-47 and Cremonini, 'Il linguaggio biblico nelle laude di Feo Belcari'. For an updated overview on the production of vernacular religious texts in late medieval Italy see Delcorno, 'Medioevo religioso e dimensione letteraria'.
[36] See Polizzotto, *Children of the Promise*, pp. 53-106.

this play – and on Florentine spectacles in general. Speaking to his audience in Padua during the 1451 Carnival, Roberto Caracciolo – a Franciscan preacher and one of the undisputed stars of the pulpit in the second half of the Quattrocento – referred to Belcari's *Abraham and Isaac* as an example of a legitimate and praiseworthy spiritual *ludus*.[37] The sermon was preached in the vernacular and registered by a *reportator* in macaronic Latin. Its aim was to restrain the listeners from taking part in the celebrations of Carnival, which were seen by Caracciolo (and other preachers) as extremely dangerous for the soul. The sermon begins with a discussion of legitimate spiritual and temporal recreations, since the preacher claimed that he did not want to be too austere.[38] Dealing with the *ludi spirituales*, he first mentions well-established justifications for the legitimacy of devotional representations of the main Christian mysteries. He adapts for spectacles – with a significant shift of meaning – a famous quotation from Bonaventura about images, in which the Franciscan theologian stressed that *representationes* had more power than words to move the people.[39] Caracciolo did not stop at the theoretical level but added his own experience:

> Florentie similia valde bene fiunt, vidi Assentionem Ihesu Christi fieri taliter quod non reputatum fuisset cor humanum quin se tenerime commovisset, profecto fuit stupenda devotio. Recordor quod inter quosdam devotos facta fuit representatio obedientie Abrae, ubi valde ploratum fuit.[40]
>
> (In Florence similar spectacles are performed very well. I watched the Ascension of Jesus Christ, which was performed in a way that surely it would not be considered possible for a human heart not to be tenderly moved by it. Undoubtedly, it was a wonderful devotion! I remember that among some devout men the play of Abraham's obedience was performed, and there was much weeping).

These few words give us valuable information. The indication of the performers as *devoti* fits the members of a lay confraternity very well, although it does not provide any information about the actors' age, while the term *representatio* seems to be a Latin rendition of one of the vernacular terms used in Florence for this type of play, *rappresentazione*. Caracciolo's choice to summarize the content of the play by focusing on obedience is quite telling, as we will see analysing the drama. Furthermore, as a spectator of one of the earliest stagings of this play, he provided us with a glimpse of the audience's reception of it. Since this part of the sermon repeatedly emphasizes the ability of spectacles to move their audience, I suggest interpreting 'much weeping' as a reference to the effect of the play on the spectators, although – as we will see – it may also refer to the weeping of the main characters on the stage. The two possibilities, of course, are not mutually exclusive, since the emotions presented on the stage could be mirrored (and

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[37] Caracciolo, *Quaresimale padovano*, pp. 97-105 (*Sermo tripudii et quando licet tripudiare*). On the reason to date this sermon cycle with certainty to 1451, see Visani, 'Roberto Caracciolo e i sermonari del secondo Quattrocento', pp. 278-91.

[38] 'totaliter austerus esse nolo'; Caracciolo, *Quaresimale padovano*, p. 98.

[39] 'Ludi spirituales sunt quando fit aliqua representatio alicuius devotionis: aut Passionis, vel Assensionis, aut Anuntiationis, que secundum Innocentium et Hostiensem fieri in ecclesia possunt [...]. Et Bonaventura in ... 9 dist., in tractatu de imaginibus: *Quia tales representationes, si cum devotione fiant, magis animos movent quam verba*'; Caracciolo, *Quaresimale padovano*, p. 98. The original quotation is in Bonaventure, *Commentaria*, dist. IX, art. 1, q. 2. Already the famous preacher Bernardino da Siena (d. 1444) used this reference of Bonaventura applying it to a peculiar religious spectacle, namely the so-called bonfire of vanities; see Delcorno, ''Quomodo discet sine docente?'', pp. 167-68.

[40] Caracciolo, *Quaresimale padovano*, p. 98. In her critical edition, Oriana Visani indicates that Caracciolo referred here to Belcari´s play. However, this reference seems to have escaped scholars who worked on *sacre rappresentazioni*.

indeed, were expected to be so) by the observers. As we noted in relation to Melton's sermons, the descriptions given by preachers were often coloured by their own aims. Given his line of argument in this part of the sermon, Caracciolo may have exaggerated the effect of the play, yet he clearly judged it very favourably. This becomes even more significant when one considers that as a preacher he was renowned for his theatricality. In fact, we have a description of his preaching in Perugia on Good Friday in 1448 when his sermon involved actors who performed a *sacra rappresentazione* of the Passion.[41] Hence, here we have the expert – albeit tendentious – point of view of a professional of religious communication. Finally, it is highly plausible that in 1449 the friar did in fact attend the two plays he referred to in Padua. This would support the dating of Belcari's *Abraham and Isaac* provided by manuscripts. In 1449, Caracciolo resided in Florence for an extended period of time: he preached there during Lent and attended the General Chapter of his Order, held that year in Florence, as usual around Pentecost.[42] Pentecost is also very close to the feast of the Ascension, when the first spectacle Caracciolo mentioned in his sermon would have been performed in the Florentine church of Santa Maria del Carmine.[43] The fact that he recalled these spectacles while preaching about Carnival might imply an additional meaning. Later sources show that youth confraternities in Florence often played *sacre rappresentazioni* during that time of the year, as a safe and virtuous activity meant to substitute immoral and dangerous entertainments – as *ludi laudabiles* opposed to *ludi vituperabiles*, to use Caracciolo's terminology.[44] It might be that in 1449 Caracciolo witnessed one of the first occurrences of this practice, which prompted him to recall it while he addressed a different urban audience two years later during Carnival.

Obedience to God (and to the father)

Undoubtedly, the paramount element of the biblical story is Abraham's obedience to God, as an expression of steady faith and as the acknowledgment of God's supreme (and unquestionable) authority. Yet, while the Bible is clear on this point, it is less so on Isaac's attitude in the face of his possible death, opening the way to different representations of his resistance and/or obedience. In any typological reading of the story, Isaac's willingness to accept his own death becomes a key element, since he is a prefiguration of Christ.[45] This was true also when exegesis in the form of theatre wanted to make this interpretation explicit.[46]

This typological approach is definitely important in the York play's presentation of Isaac, while it plays a less evident role in the Florentine drama.[47] Feo Belcari was

[41] See Ventrone, ´The Influence of the *Ars praedicandi* on the *Sacra rappresentazione* in Fifteenth Century Florence' and Jansen, 'Preaching as Playwriting'.
[42] Caracciolo later on recalled to have remained in Florence for five months without interruption: 'Demum Florentiam acessi et ibidem quinque continuis mensibus predicavi', cit. in Mariani, *Roberto Caracciolo da Lecce's Sermons*, p. 42. Mariani's work is the most updated account of Caracciolo's life, see in part. pp. 41-54 on the years 1448-1452 (on p. 43, Mariani recalls Caracciolo's passage of 1451 sermon, yet without discussing it).
[43] On this play, see Newbigin, *Feste d´Oltrarno*, and Ventrone, *Teatro civico*, pp. 39-100.
[44] See for instance Polizzotto, *Children of the Promise*, pp. 79-80.
[45] For some consideration on the medieval exegetical debate, see Nerida Newbigin, 'Il testo e il contesto dell'*Abramo e Isac* di Feo Belcari', *Studi e problemi di critica testuale*, 23 (1981), pp. 13-37: 15-18.
[46] See Woolf, 'The Effect of Typology on the English Mediaeval Plays of Abraham and Isaac' and Rendall, 'Visual Typology in the Abraham and Isaac Plays'.
[47] For the York play, see also Steenbrugge, 'Playing for Emotion' (with previous bibliography).

clearly aware of the typological reading of the tale. In his dedicatory sonnet to Giovanni de' Medici, he stated that he had consulted (directly or indirectly) the Jewish expanded Biblical account provided by Flavius Josephus (d. c.100) as well as the Christian interpretations elaborated by Origen (d. 253) and Nicholas of Lyra (d. 1349) while composing his play – a claim that Nerida Newbigin has proved to be true.[48] Nevertheless, Belcari did not foreground the typological interpretation developed by Origen and adopted by many medieval interpreters; or, at least, he did not do so for the spectators. Hints to the typological meaning of the story are instead present in the very rich *didascalie* (stage directions) that characterize the manuscript tradition of the play, and that scholars generally agree to attribute to Belcari himself.[49] They not only give detailed indications about movements, gestures, and objects but also provide a further exegetical analysis of the story.[50]

For instance, when Abraham tells the servants to wait at the foot of the mountain, since 'quando arem sacrificato, noi | tornerem presto in questo loco a voi' ('when we've made our sacrifice, we will | swiftly return to you here in this place'; ll. 119-120) the stage direction indicates not only the actors' actions but also that Abraham said this by the will of the Holy Spirit that made him prophesize the actual outcome of the story, without knowing it ('*E per volontà dello Spirito Santo gli venne profetato. Non intendendo la profezia, Abramo dice così a' servi...*').[51] Similarly, a stage direction states that Abraham rightly prophesies that God will provide a victim for the sacrifice, when he replied to Isaac's question about it ('*Abram sospirando risponde e similmente nella risposta gli venne profetato*'; before l. 136). Spectators had no access to the 'prophetic' value of what Abraham said purely on the basis of the protagonists' speeches. Instead, they could interpret Abraham's first claim as an expression of his faith in the resurrection of Isaac. This theme, indeed, is developed at large in the play, as it constitutes a justification of what Abraham is ready to do and is a key argument used by Abraham to persuade Isaac to accept God's will. In this regard, it is again the *didascalie* that clarifies that Abraham did not know the time of Isaac's resurrection, although he believed that his son would rise from the dead (see stage direction, before l. 233). Even more significant is that only a *didascalia* states that Isaac too understood that he would rise from dead (before l. 241) – a conviction that is not expressed in Isaac's discourse.

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[48] Newbigin, 'Il testo e il contesto'. Newbigin shows how Belcari made use in particular of Josephus, *Antiquities* 1, 225-236, which already presented some of the arguments of Abraham's speech to persuade Isaac. Yet, while Josephus stated that Isaac is immediately ready and willing to die, Belcari adopted a different approach.

[49] The key reason to support the idea that Belcari wrote the *didascalie* himself is that they are fully consistent with the sources Belcari indicated in his dedicatory sonnet; see Newbigin, 'Il testo e il contesto', pp. 17 and 33 and Ventrone, 'La *Rappresentazione di Abraam e Isaac*'. Still, the possibility that he added them at a second stage (perhaps, together with the dedicatory sonnet) as a way to enhance the appeal of his text for readers cannot be ruled out. On the issues concerning using the terms *didascalia* or stage direction for these elements of the *sacre rappresentazioni*, see Newbigin, 'Rubrics and *didascalie* in Fifteenth-Century Dramatic Texts `.

[50] Newbigin, 'Il testo e il contesto', p. 25.

[51] We follow here – with minimal adaptation in the translation – the critical text and translation published online in 2011 by Nerida Newbigin; see Belcari, *La rappresentazione di Abramo*. The edition is based on Florence, BNCF, MS. Magliab. VII.690, fols. 105v-119r. As Newbigin notes, the previous editions depend on 'the *testo vulgato* published by D'Ancona [that] is based on the earliest printed edition to which he had access. This differs in many places from the manuscripts that circulated in Belcari's lifetime'. The text published by D'Ancona is available, with an English translation, in *Three Florentine Sacre Rappresentazioni*, pp. 1-35.

The presence of these pieces of information in the *didascalie* is a striking feature, since elements that support the typological interpretation of the story remained hidden to the spectators, while they were available to the people involved in the preparation of the play, as the organizers and, probably, also performers – as well as to the readers, which makes it clearer as to why Belcari ended his dedication to Giovanni de' Medici by saying that, using previous exegetical sources, he gave the story a mystic sense ('ho fatto un senso mistico').[52] We will discuss the multiple levels of use of the play in the last section of this contribution. Still, assuming that the *didascalie* were conceived by Belcari, his use of a sort of double coding emerges clearly. He considered it essential that the actors/organizers of the play were fully aware of the deeper allegorical meaning of the story, and yet he foregrounded only the moral interpretation as key for the spectators. Perhaps, Belcari thought that while the members of the confraternity who prepared the play – as well as the readers – had time to engage with and ponder on the typological/allegorical meaning, it was more effective for the spectators to keep the play focused on its moral message, namely the connection between the obedience due to God and that to the paternal authority.

The cornerstone of Belcari's play is the overlap between obedience to the father and obedience to God. As observed by scholars, Abraham is quick to obey God blindly, arguing that: 'Non debbe il servo dal suo buon signore | cercar ragion del suo comandamento' ('The servant must not ask his worthy lord | the reason for an order he has given'; ll. 73-74).[53] The dramatic engine of the play resides in the process through which Abraham leads his son to follow his own extreme act of submission to God. Obedience to God and to the father merge together, so that Isaac obeys God through his obedience to Abraham, as the play repeatedly states. Isaac's following words are perhaps the clearest passage (ll. 241-252):

O fedel padre mio, quantunque el senso	O faithful father, even though my senses
pel tuo parlar riceva angoscia e doglia,	feel pain and sorrow for these words of you,
pur sed e' piace al nostro Dio immenso,	yet if it pleases our almighty God
ch'i' versi il sangue ed arsa sia la spoglia	that I should shed my blood and then be burnt
in questo loco sopra 'l foco accenso,	in this place, here upon the burning fire,
vo' star contento all'una e l'altra voglia,	I want to submit happily to both your wills,
dico di Dio e di te, dolce padre,	that is, to God's and to yours, sweetest father,
perdendo tante cose alte e leggiadre.	although I forfeit great and lovely things,
Giusto non era che mai fussi nato,	It was not right that I should have been born
se i' volessi a Dio mai contradire,	if I were ever to defy God's will,
e s'i' non fussi sempre apparecchiato	and were I not to stand ever prepared
a te, buon padre, volere obedire.[54]	to be obedient to you, dear father.

In fifteenth-century Florentine religious culture, the mirroring between complete obedience to God and the sons' respectful obedience to their father was a familiar theme. For instance, in 1425 the most famous preacher of the time, Bernardino da Siena, presented two sermons on the ideal relationship between fathers and sons to his

[52] The issue changes when we consider the printed editions instead of the manuscript tradition, since the exegetical notations tend to disappear in the incunabula; see Newbigin, 'Il testo e il contesto', pp. 24-25. Newbigin notes that the typological interpretation is present in the *didascalie* and assumes that it would become evident in the performance (ivi, p. 17) – something about which we are less sure.

[53] See Newbigin 'Il testo e il contesto', p. 28 and Eisenbichler, 'Per un nuovo approccio all'Abramo e Isac di Feo Belcari', p. 297.

[54] The last four verses depend directly from Josephus, *Judean Antiquities*, 1,232.

Florentine listeners. On the first day, he announced: 'Oggi udirai di che amore si debbano amare i figliuoli, e domane che reverenzia debbono avere i figliuoli a' padri' ('Today, I tell you how sons must be loved, while tomorrow I will tell you about the reverence that sons must have towards their fathers').[55] While the second sermon dramatizes the prodigal son's story as a journey of rebellion and return under the authority of God and the father, the first sermon built on the story of Abraham's sacrifice to show the interplay between the obedience a father gives to God and the obedience he receives from his sons. Bernardino's essential teaching to the fathers in his audience was: 'Ubbidisci a Dio, e i tuoi figliouli obbediranno a te' ('Obey God and your sons will obey you').[56] Hence, the sermon is entirely devoted to depicting Abraham as the perfect father, who transmits the most important teaching to his son: complete obedience to God.[57] According to the preacher, the true love that a father should have for his sons lies in a perfect and blind submission to God. This attitude results in and guarantees the perfect obedience of the sons to the father. This notion is summarized in the final dramatic dialogue between Abraham and Isaac; a dialogue not found in the Bible but one introduced by Bernardino. When Abraham explains to the son that God asked for his life, Isaac replies: 'Padre mio, io sono molto contento, fa' di me ciò che tu vuoi. Io sono apparecchiato. Iddio si vuole ubbidire e io voglio ubbidire a te. Io sono preparato' ('My dear father, I am very glad, do to me what you want. I am disposed. God has to be obeyed and I want to obey you. I am ready').[58] For a virtuous son, obedience to God entails obedience to the father.[59]

As we can see, this message is identical to the key message of the play by Belcari, who could have been familiar with this sermon, which circulated in Florence as a *reportatio*. It is possible that the playwright might have found interesting suggestions for his drama in it.[60] Yet, the two texts followed a different path to come at the same idealized conclusion. While Bernardino dramatized Abraham's internal turmoil and presented Isaac as immediately ready to obey, Belcari portrayed a process that gradually lead Isaac to overcome his natural resistance to a sudden and unjustified death, while Abraham is firm in his faith in God.

The theme of obedience can also be found in the Middle English *Abraham and Isaac* plays, and indeed in other medieval English versions of the story, such as in the *Cursor Mundi* where the angel praises Abraham for his 'buxsumnes' ('humility, meekness, obedience' 3197).[61] In the York play, both the typological interpretation and the theme of obedience to God are central. A focus on the typological aspect of the story is not

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[55] Bernardino da Siena, *Le prediche volgari*, II, p. 238. On this sermon, see also Delcorno, *In the Mirror of the Prodigal Son*, pp. 209-10.

[56] Bernardino da Siena, *Le prediche volgari*, II, p. 239.

[57] On this theme, see also Baschet, *Le sein du père*, pp. 63-98.

[58] Bernardino da Siena, *Le prediche volgari*, II, p. 250. It remains to be investigated the possibility that Bernardino took this idea from Josephus.

[59] See on this theme, Robert J. Bast, *Honour Your Fathers. Catechisms and the Emergence of a Patriarchal Ideology in Germany, 1400-1600* (Leiden: Brill, 1997).

[60] For instance, Bernardino's observation that Isaac's questions regarding the victim of the sacrifice were as a knife in the heart of Abraham ('Pensate che coltello di dolore dovevano essere quelle dolci parole del figliuolo semplice e puro inverso il padre [...] gli furono coltella dentro al cuore che gli dividevano l'anima, ma il grande amore di Dio e la grande sua obbedienza...'; Bernardino, *Le prediche volgari*, II, p. 249) is very close to Belcari verses: 'Questo parlare di Isac er'un coltello | che 'l cor del santo Abram feriva forte' (ll. 49-50). A close comparison between these two texts remains to be done. On the dissemination of the 1425 *reportatio*, which survives (in different forms) in eight manuscripts, see Delcorno, *In the Mirror of the Prodigal Son*, p. 223.

[61] See *Cursor Mundi*, ed. Morris.

surprising in the context of the overall York Corpus Christi Play, which depicts the whole of Christian history from the Creation to the Last Judgment. What is perhaps a little less expected, is the marked emphasis on obedience. The play starts with a reasonably long preamble by Abraham (64 lines) which strongly stresses that God's promises come to pass and that therefore complete, unquestioning obedience is the only proper response. This is reiterated throughout the remainder of the play. Isaac's first two speeches, for instance, both mention obedience to God (ll. 101-104, 111-112); in the first of these he states that obeying God is the only acceptable way for a human being to behave: 'Goddis comaundement to fulfille | Awe all folke for to be fayne.' ('All people ought to be keen to fulfil God's command', ll. 103-104). These speeches occur before Isaac becomes aware of the specific nature of what his father has been asked to do. This complete and unquestioning submission is put into action in the play. Isaac, for instance, accepts his fate without any hint of complaint or disobedience (ll. 191-196):

And I sall noght grouche þeragayne,	And I shall not grumble against it,
To wirke his wille I am wele payed;	I am well pleased to do His bidding;
Sen it is his desire,	since it is His desire,
I sall be bayne to be	I shall be obedient to be
Brittynd and brent in fyre,	hacked to pieces and burnt in the fire,
And þerfore morne noght for me.	and therefore don't mourn for me.

There is, unlike in the Italian play, no questioning of why God might have asked for this sacrifice. Interestingly, this passage in the English text does not try to gloss over the cruelty of the action commanded by God ('brittynd and brent'), or its emotional aftermath (given that Isaac assumes Abraham's natural impulse will be to 'morne […] for me'). Indeed, the play text makes it clear that neither Abraham nor Isaac are blind to the physical and emotional hardship involved in the sacrifice. But while their bodily instincts may revolt – Isaac asks his father to bind him because 'My flessche for dede will be dredande' ('My flesh will dread death', l. 210) – and their emotions may nearly overpower them – Abraham describes being in 'perles pyne' ('incomparable pain', l. 239) and cries (l. 275) – their will to obey remains constant. Their blind obedience despite the physical and emotional hardships they experience is therefore all the more noteworthy and, in the eyes of the playwright at least, praiseworthy.

Their obedience to God is complete and unquestioning not because Abraham and Isaac fail to see the apparent cruelty of God's command, but rather because they have complete faith in God's beneficence. As a result, even though they cannot identify or map the specifics of God's larger plan, they believe that beyond the apparent cruelty, there is goodness. Abraham's response to God's command is indeed one of complete trust in the ultimate goodness of that order: 'And vnto dede hym buse be dight. | God has saide me so for my seele' ('And to death he must be brought. God has told me so for my well-being', ll. 83-84). Later on, when Isaac agrees to carry to wood up the hill (still unaware that he is the designated victim), he also expresses complete faith in the goodness of God's larger plan (ll. 153-156):

Fadir, þat may do no dere,	Father, that may do no harm,
Goddis comaundement to fullfyll,	to fulfil God's command,
For fra all wathes he will vs were,	because He will keep us from all danger,
Wharso we wende to wirke his wille.	wherever we go to work His will.

Unlike in the Italian play, the obedience that is portrayed in this play is obedience to God, much more than obedience to the father. Isaac is, of course, obedient to his father

too but the speeches all focus on God. However, inter-human obedience is given a role as well through the two servants. These servants, while they have a biblical origin (Gen 22:3), are present only in the Northampton and York versions (there are four more surviving Middle English Abraham and Isaac plays in which they do not feature), and only in York are they given a speaking part. Their presence in the York play is therefore unusually developed.[62] Their label is of some interest. Speech headings would only have been seen by actors and/or producers (as well as the city officials using the Register), but it may give us a clue as to how these two servants were staged. Their labels are 'I Famulus' and 'II Famulus'. *Famulus* 'servant, manservant, slave, house servant' has classical origins and was used in late medieval England to refer to servants, attendants, and labourers.[63] It is then likely that these two servants were portrayed as typical young ('Childir' l. 109) servants. These two servants are, again, uncomplainingly and unquestioningly obedient to God (they seem to have overheard that Abraham is acting on God's command judging by lines 117-120), but also to Abraham and Isaac.

As we have seen, Abraham's and Isaac's obedience is at least partly helped by their complete trust in the ultimately beneficent nature of God's plan. While they do not know its specifics, their lack of knowledge is never highlighted. Because of God's promise to multiply Abraham's seed, which is mentioned very early on in the play (l. 15), there is even a sense that Abraham at least may have some vague understanding of the existence of a larger, divine plan. Conversely, the servants' lack of understanding of what is happening is prominent. It is, moreover, made very clear that this lack of understanding ought in no way to impact on their obedience (ll. 121-126):

I FAMULUS:	Bott what þei mene, certayne, Haue I na knowlage clere.	But of what they intend, certainly, I have no clear knowledge.
II FAMULUS:	It may noght gretely gayne To move of swilke matere.	It would not be profitable to speak of such matters.
ABRAHAM:	No, noye you noght in no degré So for to deme here of oure dede	No, don't you vex yourself in any way so as to judge our deed here.

Given the socio-political setting of the York Corpus Christi Play, it is plausible to see the promotion of unquestioning obedience to God and masters in the play as an attempt to generate similar obedience to God, guild governance, masters, and/or civic authorities in its audiences and, very probably, actors.

Of course, it would be too simplistic to map out a specific correspondence between the actors in the play and the power hierarchies of late medieval York, with God/angel = civic governance, Abraham = guild governance, Isaac = guild member/master, and the servants = servants/apprentices.[64] But the play does reinforce hierarchical power structures. We have already seen that the servants are not worthy of judging their 'betters'. Towards the end of the play, another reinforcement of established hierarchies occurs. After the angel has stopped the sacrifice and reiterated God's promise to multiply

[62] In Belcari's play, the servants are present, yet their role seems not particularly significant.
[63] The *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources* coincidentally lists entries from Durham – which is close to York – from c.1375, 1439, and 1499 which may roughly cover the period of the genesis, possible reworking, and copying of the play.
[64] God is not actually staged in this play, but is nevertheless clearly a powerful player in the story.

Abraham's seed, Abraham and Isaac rather unexpectedly become nonplussed as to how best fulfil God's desires (ll. 351-356):

ABRAHAM:	Full wele it wer vs and we it wiste Howe we shulde wirke his will alwaye.	It were well for us if we knew how we should do His bidding always.
ISAAC:	Fadir, þat sall we frayne At wiser men þan wee, And fulfille it ful fayne, Indede eftir oure degree.	Father, that we shall ask wiser men than us, and fulfil it gladly, indeed [in deed?] according to our degree.

Given that Abraham has not had any concerns or doubts about how to fulfil God's command in the course of the play, this sudden expression of lack of knowledge of how to do God's will is somewhat surprising. However, unlike with the sacrifice where Abraham has been given rather strict instructions, the angel's second appearance does not include any advice on how to do God's bidding in the future. Where Abraham has been used to direct communication from God (in person or through an angel), now seemingly this channel of communication has stopped and guidance needs to be found elsewhere ('at wiser men'). The inclusion of these few lines is remarkable. Instead of representing some relief at the staying of Isaac's sacrifice, as we find abundantly in the Florentine play, the English playwright yet again brings the theme of obedience, and its concomitant desire for guidance, to the fore. These lines seem to promote, once again, unquestioning, uncomplaining obedience to the powers that be (secular and religious), and through them to God – even if you do not understand the larger picture.[65]

Focus on Isaac: stable or evolving character

While the two plays largely agree on the way they depict Abraham's obedience, there is a major difference for what concerns Isaac. Ultimately, in both dramas he expresses a full submission to the will of God (and of his father too, in Belcari's), yet the playwrights chose different ways to arrive at this outcome: the stability of ordered relationships prevails in York, while an educational process is depicted in Florence. The difference, we argue, is connected in a significant way with the socio-political function that the plays had in their original context.

As we have seen, the York Isaac is characterized by his obedience to God from start to finish; there is no sense that he learns something or changes in any way in the course of the drama. One of the reasons for that may be that Isaac is an adult in the York play. It is made very clear that Isaac is of a similar age as Christ at the Crucifixion: 'He is of eelde to reken right | Thyrty 3ere and more sumdele' ('He is, to count correctly, just over thirty years old', ll. 81-82), which recalls Christ's age as mentioned in Luke 3:23. The adult Isaac is part of a less common but nevertheless widespread exegetical tradition.[66] The

[65] If the *Herod / Magi* pageant was indeed reworked by the same hand as *Abraham and Isaac*, this would present an interesting contrast. In this play, the soldiers are also unquestioningly obedient to Herod but the moral and/or religious value of that obedience is of course highly questionable. The servants in the *Abraham and Isaac* play are obedient in the knowledge that Abraham is fulfilling God's wish, of course.

[66] This interpretation dates back to Josephus, *Judean Antiquities*, 1,227 (with commentary), and so to the Hebrew exegetical tradition. On the reception of this idea in Christian exegesis, see Newbigin, 'Il testo e il

appearance of this motif in this play may partly be due to the sources used, as the *Middle English Metrical Paraphrase of the Old Testament* also refers to Isaac as a grown man. Other reasons for preferring an adult Isaac may have been practical. Arguably, within the York tradition of spectacles, such a large and important role would have been too taxing for a child.[67] After all, the play would usually have been performed twelve times in the course of a single day. Acoustically, the voice of an adult male would almost certainly carry better than that of a child in the streets. Given that the play was staged by two guilds, there probably were more good adult actors available than there were good child actors, although guilds would have had a goodly number of apprentices as well. However, it is not certain that actors were always or even usually drawn from the craft guilds, as we have no names at all of actors for the entire performance history of the York Corpus Christi Play. Moreover, as Richard Beadle, points out, York had a high number of educational establishments from which boys with a talent for the stage might have been drawn[68] – in a way not too different from the Florentine tradition. In fact, the York cycle also features *Christ and the Doctors*, in which a child does have a significant part, and all the parts of women (including the Virgin Mary) would have been acted by prepubescent boys, so these practical considerations are unlikely to have been the determining factor. Hence, what probably was the most significant factor is that an adult Isaac works especially well in a play cycle that has the Passion at its centre by projecting forward to the plays to come. This similarity with the Passion is highlighted through iconography as well. The staging of Abraham as an elderly, bearded man very likely recalled traditional representations of God the Father in contemporary art.[69] This play also stages Isaac carrying the wood up the hill, which again would have made visible the meaningful connection with Christ carrying the cross. Like Christ in Gethsemane, Isaac's human nature is shown to dread death, but his desire to be obedient to God is unswerving. There are several verbal echoes as well, for instance, 'My flessche for dede will be dredande' ('My flesh will dread death', l. 210) is repeated by Jesus in the *Agony in the Garden* ('My flesh is full dredand for [dede]', l. 48).[70] This marked emphasis on Isaac as an antitype of Christ surely helps explain the representation of Isaac as a stable and mature character in the York *Abraham and Isaac*.

The stability of Isaac's character further underlines the play's overall interest in obedience as well. Even if the decision to stage Isaac as an adult was predominantly influenced by theological and perhaps even practical considerations, nevertheless it does have socio-political reverberations. The Italian play comes out of a youth confraternity, and its interest in and lessons concerning Isaac's religious and emotional journey would

contesto', pp. 16 and 18. Yet, for instance Bernardino in his 1425 sermon states that Isaac was 12, Bernardino da Siena, *Le prediche volgari*, II, p. 243.

[67] Modern and medieval notions of what constitutes a 'child' do not overlap entirely. As noted in Beadle, 'The Children of the York Plays', pp. 92-93, puberty usually commenced later than it does nowadays and a 'boy' might be in his late teens before his voice broke. In Elizabethan acting companies, female roles were typically acted by 'boys' between the ages of fourteen and nineteen, with some acting these roles into their early twenties. We would like to thank Professor Beadle for sharing this article with us in advance of its publication.

[68] Beadle, 'The Children of the York Plays', p. 93.

[69] Woolf, 'The Effect of Typology', pp. 818-19 and Rendall, 'Visual Typology in the Abraham and Isaac Plays', p. 225. But note that God would almost certainly have worn a gold mask in the York Corpus Christi Play, so that the similarity with God the Father in the other pageants would not have been as marked.

[70] The latter text has, probably mistakenly, *drede* 'dread' rather than *dede*. Also in Belcari's play there are similar verbal echoes of Jesus' agony in the garden; see note 76.

have spoken directly to its audience. The York play was conceived in a very different context, namely that of trade guilds and civic governance. There is on-going debate about the genesis of the York Corpus Christi Play but there may well have been civic power struggle at play, as Richard Beadle clearly explains:

> the first appearance in the 1380s to 1390s of abundant documentary evidence of formal organisations amongst the craft organisations (and indeed for the existence of some of them) coincides with the earliest extended references to the Corpus Christi Play. There would appear to be at least some grounds for [Barrie Dobson's] speculations to the effect that the firm control of the Play from above by a 'mercantile oligarchy' (who some believe dominated the corporation) was an important dimension to their imposition of new schemes of internal regulation upon the crafts, including provision for extracting revenue from them, and increased their scope for exercising political power over these bodies […] The origins of the Play may indeed lie, to some extent, in the realm of late fourteenth century civic politics, and the manipulation of power by one group of citizens over another by economic means.[71]

The *Abraham and Isaac*'s promotion of unquestioning obedience fits particularly well in such a socio-political context. As we have seen, the play encourages this behaviour in the face of lack of understanding on the premise that the decisions made higher-up are for your own good, even if it may not look like it. A mercantile oligarchy would almost certainly have been keen to endorse a public image of civic governance as benevolently looking after its subjects and regulating matters in an orderly manner (even if the goodness and rationale may sometimes be obscure to onlookers). This view of an orderly society with all members fulfilling their allotted role without complaint may be far from the historical reality of late medieval York, but it closely recalls the idealized medieval view of society as a perfectly ordered body, strongly influenced by the metaphor adopted by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:14-27 and Romans 12:4-8.

As Beadle goes on to point out, however, such a power struggle by the 'mercantile oligarchy' can only ever be one facet in the story, and the play is as much an articulation of piety, expressing at once 'commitment to the duties of being both a citizen of York and a soul in Christ'.[72] Isaac's portrayal in the York play is influenced by, and in turn influences, this twofold commitment. It is both the outcome of a civic attempt at creating harmony through grateful acceptance of power hierarchies (religious and secular) and encourages its viewers and actors gratefully to accept power hierarchies (religious and secular).

While the York play does not present an evolution of Isaac's character, the Florentine play unfolds as a sort of coming-of-age story. By exploiting the fact that his actions are less defined in the Bible then those of Abraham, Belcari portrayed Isaac as a character who undergoes a transformation. His journey can be can summarized in four stages: 1) ingenuous trust in his father; 2) momentary resistance/rebellion; 3) conscious submission to the superior authority; 4) acknowledgment of the positive outcome of an obedient life.

At first, Isaac does not question the reason of their sudden and secret departure in the middle of the night when Abraham announces their journey. Only after they have

[71] Beadle, 'York Corpus Christi', p. 100.
[72] Beadle, 'York Corpus Christi', p. 100.

set out on the journey does Isaac's childish trust in his father leave room for questions about the absence of a sacrificial victim, in that he asks his father to be reassured about it ('prego mi facci di tal dubbio certo'; l. 136). It would be too much to call his questions a lack of trust, still they suggest that Isaac begins to problematize the situation and – as in the Bible – the dialogue enhances the dramatic tension of the story. To further increase the latter aspect, Belcari interrupts the sequence on the mountain (with a sort of cliffhanger effect) to introduce a side scene, which takes place at home, where Sara, speaking with the servants, expresses her anxiety concerning the mysterious departure and prolonged absence of her husband and son (ll. 145-176). Sara's tears introduce the moment of crisis of the play. When the focus of the action moves back to the mountain, a weeping Abrahams finally reveals to Isaac that God has asked for his death. Albeit his father argues that 'the eternal God, who never errs, | has greater glory all prepared for you' and that death in a 'holy sacrifice' would be far better than the common human death in war or from sickness[73], Isaac does not accept this reasoning and contests it. Isaac replies in tears and thus all the three main characters of the story weep in this sequence.[74]

Here the dramatist stages a momentary rebellion of Isaac, who complains about his father's obedience to God, asking how he could accept such an order and questioning why he – an innocent – has to die.[75] Moreover, opposing one parent against the other, Isaac claims that his mother would not allow this outcome and would be able instead to convince God to retract his command. He also holds the previous announcements of a numerous progeny against his father. Isaac's reply occupies three stanzas and is worth presenting in full (ll. 209-232):

Isac, combattendo la sensualità con la ragione, piangendo risponde:	*As his flesh struggles with his reason, Isaac weeps and replies:*
Com'ha' tu consentito, padre santo,	O holy father, how have you agreed
di dar per sacrifizio sì gran dono?	to give such a great gift in sacrifice?
Per qual peccato debbo patir tanto	For what transgression must I suffer such
crudo tormento senza alcun perdono?	cruel torment with no possible forgiveness?
Abbi pietà dell'innocente pianto	Have mercy on my tears of innocence
e della bella età nella qual sono.	and on my tender years.
Se del camparmi non mi fai contento,	If you don't hear my plea that you should spare me,
i' farò una morte e tu poi cento.	then I'll die once, and you on hundred times.
O santa Sarra, madre di pietade,	O holy Sarah, mother of compassion,
se fussi in questo loco i' non morrei.	if you were in this place I wouldn't die.
Con tanti pianti e voti e umilitate	With weeping, with humility, with vows
pregherresti il Signor ch'i' camperei.	you'd pray to our Lord God I should be spared.
Se tu m'uccidi, o padre di bontate,	If you go on and kill me, dearest father,
come potra' tu ritornare a lei?	how will you ever go back home to her?
Tapino a me, dove sono arrivato?	Alas, what will become of me, oh woe!
Debb'esser morto e non per mio peccato.	I am to die, and for no sin of mine.
Tutt'è l'anima mia trista e dolente	My soul is sorrowful and full of woe,

[73] The argument of the noble death dates back to Flavius Josephus, as noted in Newbigin, 'Il testo e il contesto'.

[74] The play mentions the transition from tears to joy three times, echoing Psalm 30.6 and 12 (see ll. 162, 229, 400), which serves as 'counterpoint' in the text, somehow summarizing one of the key moral lessons of the play.

[75] On the crucial value of this passage, see Eisenbichler, 'Per un nuovo approccio', p. 298.

per tal precetto e sono in agonia.	for what you've said, and even unto death.
Tu mi dicesti già che tanta gente	You told me once that a great multitude
nascer doveva della carne mia.	would yet be born, flesh of my very flesh.
El gaudio volgi in dolor sì cocente	You're turning my joy into burning pain,
che di star ritto non ho più balia.	and I no longer have the strength to stand.
S'egli è possibil far contento Dio,	If it is possible and what God wills,
fa' ch'io non mora, o dolce padre mio.	let me not die, I beg you, sweetest father.

It is only a momentary rebellion, which already by the final stanza moves towards a reluctant and fatalistic obedience.[76] Yet, it is a real moment of struggle[77], which requires further reasoning from Abraham in order to lead his son to a full acceptance of the will of God – and of his father, as we have seen in the previous section.

There is a marked contrast between Belcari's description of Isaac and the instantaneous and complete submission of Isaac expressed in Bernardino's sermon (to remain within the Italian cultural context) and in the York play. Belcari portrays Isaac's progressive acceptance of blind obedience to the father as well as to God – or better, to God through his obedience to his father. In this way, the Florentine play depicts an itinerary of growth and education through which Isaac becomes a perfect and obedient believer, just like Abraham. Furthermore, a *didascalia* provides actors and readers (but not spectators) with a key element to interpret this passage by saying that Isaac's words express the inner fight between sense and reason (*sensualità* and *ragione*).

Once Isaac agrees to Abraham's request, the play depicts at length how father and son, together, dispose themselves to fulfil God's will. It is a moving and highly idealized scene, which prepares for the expected moment of the angel's intervention and the sudden liberation of Isaac from his destiny of death. The salvation is celebrated with great joy, expressed by singing while descending from the mountain, and emphasized didactically by underlining the marvellous fruits that come from serving God obediently (ll. 361-376).[78] Isaac demonstrates that he has fully internalized the religious/moral message of the story, and this is further highlighted by the fact that, when they arrive back home, it is he (and not Abraham) who narrates to Sara what happened during their journey.

In evaluating Belcari's presentation of Isaac, one has to take into consideration the 'socio-political function' of the play, as Konrad Eisenbichler rightly points out.[79] He underlines that the play ought to be interpreted in light of its educational function for the adolescents of the confraternities, i.e. by adopting 'the point of view of the young members who memorized and staged it'.[80] This means that the drama could not show Abraham's turmoil, since it would mean presenting a quivering and uncertain adult leadership, undermining the actual patriarchal authorities in society, thereby going against one of the key value of the Florentine confraternal educational project. Instead, the young actors and spectators of the play were most likely to identify with Isaac. The members of the confraternities were thus presented with a positive model of the difficult

[76] The stanza clearly echoes also the prayer of Jesus in the Gethsemane (in particular, ll. 225-226 and 231), suggesting to the most attentive spectators also a typological interpretation of the episode.
[77] 'Il conflitto drammatico, benché di breve durata, scaturisce dal giovane Isac che non capisce e quindi reagisce istintivamente, in maniera del tutto umana, ribellandosi all'irrazionale volontà di un Dio tremendo e inscrutabile'; Eisenbichler, 'Per un nuovo approccio', p. 298.
[78] The traumatic experience evaporates in a reflection on the benefit of serving God.
[79] See Eisenbichler, 'Per un nuovo approccio', pp. 293-300.
[80] Ibidem, p. 295.

process that leads a young person (Isaac) from 'rebellion/resistance' to understanding and accepting the necessity of submission to paternal authority.[81] In this regard, intertwined with its religious value, the play highlighted and conveyed crucial social values about obedience and the control of the passions (the fight against *sensualità*). We can say that the stage served as a safe space to represent, control, and overcome the adolescents' desire for autonomy[82] and to reassert established authority in the family and in society at large.[83] We might even think whether the (implicit) political value of the play was one of the elements that led Belcari not only to dedicate the play to Giovanni di Cosimo de' Medici but also to affirm that his patron treasured this story.[84]

While the political meaning of the dedication to Giovanni de' Medici remains difficult to assess, the play seems to be more vocal in affirming the social value of the confraternities for boys (although in less explicit terms than another play composed by Belcari in the same years, the *Rappresentazione del dì del Giudizio*).[85] When Abraham and his son descend from the mountain, Isaac rejoices and sings, praising the Lord and blaming as fool, blind, and ignorant those 'brutish boy[s] of the world and the devil' who look for mundane delight and not for God's friendship – a stanza that condenses the ideal program of the confraternity in opposition to other (dangerous and competing) groups of adolescents.[86]

The multiple lives of a play

A final issue that is worth noting is that the two dramas that we analysed 'played' different roles during their lives. The possibility to assess the multiplicity of uses of these two plays largely depends on the primary sources available for each of them (manuscripts, early printed editions, information on their performance in city chronicles or other archival sources) – and the discrepancies between sources are a powerful reminder of the limits that this poses to our research.

Belcari's play offers precious information on the multifaceted life of a religious play within the Italian cultural context. It is an exceptional case, since it is one of the most widespread plays in fifteenth-century Italy, attested by no fewer than 25 manuscripts and by at least 9 incunabula (first imprint, 1485), followed by at least a further 20 sixteenth-

[81] Ibidem, p. 298.
[82] See Eisenbichler, 'Adolescence and Damnation' and Delcorno, *In the Mirror of the Prodigal Son*, pp. 251-99.
[83] See Bast, *Honour Your Fathers*. Its main coordinates about the way religious education strengthened the patriarchal hierarchy simultaneously in the family, the Church and the state are largely applicable also to fifteenth-century Italy. Emphasising obedience as a distinct key (political) value in the earliest Florentine *sacre rappresentazioni*, Ventrone speaks of a 'capolavoro ideologico'; Ventrone, *Teatro civile*, p. 166.
[84] 'D'Abram la storia mando a te che memini | tu concupir, da me composta...' (dedicatory sonnet, ll. 5-6). Yet, the sonnet also praises Giovanni for having matched the glory of his father Cosimo (ll. 1-4). This laudatory affirmation suggests that the biblical exemplar story of a father and a son might be considered by Belcari as apt to honour both his patrons and the Medici family in general. The dedicatory poem is absent in the manuscripts that mention the earliest performance of the play in 1449, suggesting that it was added at a later stage; see Newbigin, 'Il testo e il contesto`, p. 32.
[85] On Belcari's *Rappresentazione del dì del Giudizio*, see Ventrone, 'Politica e attualità`.
[86] 'Quant'è ignorante, cieco, stolto e pazzo | chi va cercando fuor di Dio letizia! | Qual cosa è più bestial ch'esser ragazzo | del mondo e del demon pien di tristizia? | El vero gaudio e 'l massimo sollazzo | si trova sol in divina amicizia | la qual s'acquista con fede operata, | servando ben le sante sua mandata' (ll. 401-408). On this topic, see Ventrone, *Il teatro civile*, pp. 166-192 and for the Savonarolan period, Eisenbichler, `Adolescence and Damnation`.

century editions.[87] Here, we will simply list nine of the different levels/contexts of use that can be traced, without attempting to be exhaustive.

1) Manuscripts record that the play was performed for the first time in 1449 in the Florentine church of Santa Maria Maddalena in Cestelli.[88] While we have no information about a possible involvement of the Cistercian monks of this church, from the educational content of the play, we can safely assume that Belcari composed it for the activities of a youth confraternity, whose members one can argue to have been the original intended readers and audience of the text.

2) Preaching in Padua in 1451, Roberto Caracciolo attested that he saw this play (probably in 1449), which was staged by some *devoti*, arguably confraternity members.

3) The *didascalie* – which seem to be written by Belcari but could have been added at a later time – enhanced the theological stance of the play, offering a further level of interpretation, which goes beyond what the spectators were presented with. Therefore, multiple levels of understanding of the play were inherent in the form in which it was transmitted already in the earliest manuscripts.

4) Probably at a later stage, as mentioned above, Belcari added a dedicatory sonnet to Giovanni di Cosimo de' Medici. This addition might suggest a (new?) political level of reading the text. In any case, it signals that the author considered his work worthy of circulating beyond the confraternal *milieu*, as a text not only to be performed but also to be read (an assumption that was not obvious in the early 1450s when the *sacra rappresentazione fiorentina* as a genre was in its infancy).

5) Rome, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, MS Vittorio Emanuele 483 shows that, in 1482, the play was part of the 'dramatic library' of a youth confraternity of Bologna, the Compagnia di San Girolamo. This is the only manuscript containing the play that is clearly connected with a specific confraternity, allowing us to consider it as part of a nuanced religious and civic educational project developed within a community of reading and acting.[89] Moreover, it shows that the text circulated beyond Florence and Tuscany before its first printed edition.

6) The text could play a role also within a family context, as shown by another manuscript: Siena, Biblioteca Comunale, MS I.VIII.37. On Pentecost of 1477, a father copied the play for his son, saying that he hoped that in future his son Francesco would be able and willing to stage it.[90] Evidently, the father was aiming to fulfil his educational duty by conveying

[87] On the manuscripts, see Newbigin, 'Il testo e il contesto', pp. 34-37. On printed editions, see Alfredo Cioni, *Bibliografia delle sacre rappresentazioni* (Florence: Sansoni antiquariato, 1961), pp. 64-71, to be checked now with the databases ISTC and EDIT16.

[88] Newbigin 'Il testo e il contesto', p. 22. Eisenbichler, 'Per un nuovo approccio', p. 298 mentions the involvement of the Compagnia di san Giovanni Evangelista, yet without providing any evidence.

[89] There is evidence that at least some of the plays were performed in Bologna. However, the archival research about this confraternity is still to be done, so we are not sure whether there is additional information about its theatrical activity. On this manuscript and the information about the performances in Bologna, see Vecchi, 'Le sacre rappresentazioni della Compagnia dei battuti in Bologna', and for the Compagnia di San Girolamo, see Masini, 'La catechesi a Bologna e la prima compagnia della dottrina cristiana'.

[90] 'Questa storia, o voi tu dire asembramento di festa del santo patriarca Abraam, ò ritrata io, Marcho di Francisco, a chontenprazione di Francesco mio figliuolo e perché gli venga voglia rasenprala in più bela forma diletar quando per lui saprà. Fata ne di de la Pasqua de lo Spirito Santo, anni 1477'; cit. in Newbigin, 'Il testo e il contesto', p. 37.

the crucial message of the drama, entrusting the text to carry out for his son the same educational role that Abraham played for Isaac.

7) Belcari's text can be found in miscellanies of poetic/devotional texts for personal or collective use. For instance, it is present in the miscellany composed between 1470-1473 by Giovanni d'Antonio Scarlatti (today: Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, MS C 35 Sup).[91]

8) The play became part of a literary 'monument', namely Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, MS Magliab. VII.690. This manuscript contains the collection of Feo Belcari's works which his son assembled after his death in 1484 as a way to memorialize and transmit his father's literary legacy.

9) From 1485 onwards, the play became available as a printed booklet. In this format it was adapted for personal as well as for collective reading and it enjoyed a lasting success well into the late sixteenth century, with editions published not only in Florence or Siena, but also in Venice, Rome, and Brescia.[92] Such a vast dissemination of the text (which circulated in thousands of copies) implies that, for many (lay) people, Belcari's drama arguably represented an important piece of the Bible they actually knew and could access.[93]

This is just an overview, based on a limited number of the manuscripts and printed copies transmitting the play. These types of sources provide us with crucial information regarding the circulation of the play and its readership. Yet, it does not allow us to pin down the exact contexts of its performances, which remain elusive. For example, for 1449 performance we know the place, but not the confraternity involved. We might assume that other confraternities in Florence staged this play, but which and when? The only connection with a specific confraternity is with the one based in Bologna, where we can assume that the play was staged at a certain point – and yet, at the present state of the research, we cannot be certain about this either. Thus, while we know a fair amount concerning the circulation of the text and its differentiated readership, we have no indication of how the play was performed beyond what information can be found out in the text itself.[94] In light of this situation, the brief testimony of Roberto Caracciolo becomes extremely precious. As a spectator of one of the earliest stagings of Belcari's play, he provides us with a glimpse about its reception.

The situation for the York play is almost completely the reverse. We have rather a lot of certainty and information about its staging, although we will always wish for more. We have, unfortunately, still little to no historical evidence for how the pageants were staged precisely and several important questions remain: How where the wagons oriented? Who acted? Were all plays performed each time the York Corpus Christi Play was performed? How was the hill staged in this particular play? As mentioned earlier in the paper, there are also important and unanswered questions about how the play(s)

[91] On this manuscript see Delcorno, 'La *Festa di Lazero rico e di Lazero povero*', pp. 66-68 (with bibliography).
[92] Cioni, *Bibliografia*, pp. 64-71.
[93] On this type of text as access to the Bible and on the increasing limitation to their circulation in the late sixteenth century (which however, did not hamper the circulation of Belcari's text), see Fragnito, *Proibito capire* and Delcorno, *In the Mirror of the Prodigal Son*, pp. 305-09.
[94] The text offers elements to speculate about the possible organization of the stage, the props used, and the special effects involved (from the arrival of the angel to the possible use of animals, to the singing and dance in the final scene).

changed in the course of the lifespan of the York Corpus Christi Play. On the other hand, we know that the drama was performed in some form or another for nearly two centuries on the same day in the same town. We know that the association between the play and the crafts of parchment makers and bookbinders was another constant feature. We even know where the usual twelve playing places, or stations, were in York, so that the performance of the play can be situated in a specific urban landscape. Given all this, we can be certain that the pageant must have been closely associated with civic pride and guild identity and that it became an established feature in the visual landscape and soundscape of the city. It must have been an integral part of both the experience and the expression of piety and devotion in late medieval York. We can then safely say that the play led multiple and multifaceted lives over the course of roughly two centuries as part of a well-established dramatic enterprise, namely the York Corpus Christi Play.

Unlike with the Belcari's *Abraham and Isaac*, we have but one manuscript of the York plays. This evidently is not the earliest version but a civic copy of the guilds' copy. The Register which contains the texts of nearly all the York pageants is remarkably uniform in style, which suggests that (a) the several sources were uniform and/or (b) that the scribe imposed his own style on the various copy texts. The latter is especially likely. This uniformity affects the lay-out, and also perhaps the content. For instance, throughout the whole Register there are very few stage directions, nearly all of which are rubricated, in a more formal script, and in Latin. Nearly all of them are music cues. Did the scribe decide that only these music cues were worthwhile copying? Depending on what the scribe or at least the producer of the manuscript envisaged as the purpose of the Register, one can easily see that nitty-gritty of staging information sometimes included in stage directions might have been judged of little use (similarly, we have seen that stage directions were heavily abbreviated in the transition from manuscripts to print in Belcari's text). If the York manuscript was to be used to check the faithfulness of the play (alongside the quality of the actors and wagons), arguably copying only the text sufficed. Maybe music cues were included because they pertain still to text, rather than mere stage actions. It is also possible, however, that the originals had few or no stage directions themselves.[95] If these plays were performed more or less annually, perhaps they reached a stage where everyone involved in the production knew what happened when and how, and there simply was no need to write it down.

The presentation of the text in the Register gives us a sense of how this manuscript was conceived. Richard Beadle calls it 'essentially a performance script, never intended as reading matter'.[96] While this is correct, it is also wrong. The manuscript was never intended for devotional reading, in the way that Belcari's play was circulated and some Middle English dramatic texts circulated as well. Ironically, the fact that the script is closely related to performance rather than reading may explain the sparsity of stage directions: some Middle English texts that did probably circulate as devotional reading material, like Belcari's play, have rather more and more extensive *didascalie*. This, of course, raises the question of whether the description of these bits of text as 'stage

[95] The use and content and language of stage directions in Middle English drama is extremely varied, but a sparse use of Latin stage directions in English play manuscripts is not in itself remarkable. Only one guild copy survives, the Scriveners' sixteenth-century copy of their play on *The Incredulity of Thomas*, but it is remarkably similar to the format of the plays in the Register, and this version also has no stage direction. It is unlikely that the Scriveners' 'original' was copied from the Register, though it is of course possible that the Register was consulted in some way or other; there is evidence that a later corrector of the Scriveners' copy checked the Register's version. See also Cawley, 'The Sykes MS of the York Scriveners' Play', p. 47.
[96] Beadle, 'York Corpus Christi Play', p. 101.

direction' is at all apt.[97] They could have been added (by whom? when?) to a performance text with devotional reading rather than staging in mind. On the other hand, while the York manuscript is likely to have been intended as a way of recording and/or policing the performances, it was not written to aid performances. There is no evidence that the York *Abraham and Isaac* text which has survived was ever used, or was ever intended to be used, by the producers and/or actors to help them stage the play. As such, it is a performance text, but at the same time it is emphatically not a performance text and very much intended and used as reading matter – although not for devotional purposes.

Also unlike the Italian play, the York *Abraham and Isaac* does not seem to have circulated, either as material intended for devotional reading or performance in other contexts. In some ways, this is not surprising. Given the great civic importance of these plays, there were good reasons to keep the texts firmly and exclusively associated with the guilds and the York Corpus Christi Play. This close link between play and guild/city, however, does not seem to have prevented some plays from travelling as performance texts. Several of the York texts appear, with alterations, in the Towneley manuscript. The purpose of this manuscript and the performance history of the plays contained therein is a whole different matter, which cannot be treated here.[98] But the Towneley manuscript does demonstrate that some of the York plays did circulate in the north of England and were adapted with performance in mind. The reason why the Abraham and Isaac play does not seem to have been one of those is likely to remain elusive.

Conclusion

The plays that we discussed in this paper were undeniably affected by their cultural and political context and, even more, by the social function they were expected to have in the (idealized) life of the town. Yet, it would be easy to make too much of that impact. Within a framework of a shared biblical interpretation of the story of Abraham and Isaac, the factors that shaped these plays include their very different social and economic settings, but no less their different theatrical contexts, the specific theological and pastoral aims of their writers and/or producers, and their multifaceted lives and uses as drama and/or reading material. What this comparison of an Italian and English Abraham and Isaac play brings to light is that, whatever their precise form, content, and uses, these plays were not only part of their contemporary religious culture but were important and influential shapers of that culture, enabling access to the Bible through adaptation and transformation of its text and message. Both in York and Florence, lay people were deeply involved in this process, which put them in contact not just the Bible itself but also a long-standing and varied tradition of re-narrating Biblical accounts such as Josephus *Judean Antiquities* or the *Middle English Metrical Paraphrase of the Old Testament*. While in York we have no information about who wrote *Abraham and Isaac*, lay members of the guilds were responsible for staging this biblical story for nearly two centuries. It was a fixture in a changing society. We can assume that – with all its possible variations – this became the actual version of the biblical story that many people in York were not only familiar with but probably knew best. In Florence, while we have less information about the actual performances of *Abraham and Isaac*, Belcari as a lay man wrote it as an instrument tuned

[97] This issue is discussed, for the Italian context, in Newbigin, 'Rubrics and didascalie'.
[98] For a good introduction to some of the complexities of the Towneley plays, see Epp, 'Re-editing Towneley'.

to young lay people's moral and religious education. Moreover, his play proved to be appealing for a large readership of (lay) people, within and outside the Tuscan town.

In different ways, in both York and Florence, this type of play contributed significantly to an innovative form of religious communication, which offered lay people an important entry point to a biblically based theological discussion. From this perspective, these dramas played a crucial part in the development of what Peter Howard has defined as 'public theology' – that is, a theological discourse developed in particularly vivid urban contexts that involved lay men and women as well as clerics, friars, and nuns.[99] Indeed, we can say that these two plays on the Abraham and Isaac story contributed to shaping the 'public exegesis' in York and Florence. In their unique way, these plays gave the people of these two cities an opportunity to think about the relevance of the Bible (albeit in a mediated and controlled form) for their life and society.

[99] See Howard, "Doctrine, When Preached, Is Entirely Civic".

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