

ABSTRACT

“Nyle thou sin more after”: Forgiveness as Resurrection
in Medieval Sermons and Cycle Plays

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This thesis explores the Christian concept of forgiveness as presented in a select Medieval sermon and three cycle plays all featuring the same story from the Gospel of John. While this thesis is not meant to argue for any sort of causality between sermons and cycle plays, studying their relationship is important. Examining Medieval sermons and cycle plays written on similar themes reveals similarities between the two forms. Both are didactic types of Medieval literature which are meant to be experienced live and to be embodied. Also, both seek to effect behavior or influence understanding in the audience, even though they differ in authority. Taken together, sermons and cycle plays reveal a breadth of Medieval understanding of the concept of God’s forgiveness as presented in Scripture and in Church teaching and help us consider humanity’s response.

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“NYLE THOU SIN MORE AFTER”: FORGIVENESS AS RESURRECTION IN
MEDIEVAL SERMONS AND CYCLE PLAYS

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The concept of forgiveness is central to the Christian faith. Forgiveness assumes the idea of sin and the premise that any transgression of divine law is unacceptable and deserving of judgement by a holy God. Christians, however, believe that through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ—a being fully God and fully man—humankind can receive pardon from sins. The responsibility of Christians is to continually seek forgiveness as they realize, repent, and confess sin. Christianity stresses the limitless power of God to forgive. This daily repentance from sin and reception of forgiveness is much like death and resurrection. The Apostle Paul describes the Christian by saying, “So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.”¹ Furthermore, Christians are expected to extend interpersonal forgiveness to their neighbors. As Saint Augustine writes, “Counsel corresponds to the merciful: for this is the one remedy for escaping from so great evils, that we forgive, as we wish to be ourselves forgiven.”² Christians are meant to respond to the great mercy of Christ with love of their own, both to God, full of thankfulness, and towards others, in forgiveness and mercy. Because

¹ Romans 6:11 (ESV)

² St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, Dods, Marcus., Stothert, Richard., Findlay, William., Salmond, Stewart Dingwall Fordyce., King, John Richard., Cunningham, John George., Pilkington, Joseph Green., Haddan, Arthur West., Wallis, Robert Ernest., Innes, James., Holmes, Peter., Gibb, John. *The Works of Aurelius Augustine: A New Translation*, 7.

forgiveness is so important to Christian theology, it has been a significant topic in Christian formation throughout history. Lessons on forgiveness feature prominently in many didactic literary forms, including but not limited to Medieval sermons and cycle plays. This may be because forgiveness, while one of the most important topics of Christian belief, is also among the hardest to put into regular practice.

This thesis will explore the Christian concept of forgiveness as presented in a select English Medieval sermon and three English religious plays, known as cycle plays, all featuring the same story from the Gospel of John. While this thesis is not meant to argue for any sort of causality between sermons and cycle plays, studying their relationship is important. Examining Medieval sermons and cycle plays written on common themes reveals similarities between the two forms. Both are didactic types of Medieval literature which are meant to be experienced live and to be embodied. Also, both seek to effect behavior or influence understanding in the audience, even though they differ in tones of authority. One can also notice that sermons tend to be more focused on orthodoxy, while cycle plays emphasize orthopraxy. Taken together, sermons and cycle plays reveal a breadth of Medieval understanding of the concept of God's forgiveness as presented in Scripture and in Church teaching and help us consider humanity's response, to walk in newness of life. We are instructed, like the woman caught in adultery in John, to sin no more. As it is expressed in a Medieval sermon, "Nyle thou sin more after." The forgiveness of God in Jesus offers rebirth and hope.

Forgiveness in Christian Scripture

The importance of forgiveness is evident throughout the Old and New Testaments of the Christian Bible, usually in the context of repentance from sin. Isaiah 55:7, for example, says, “Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.”¹ This passage demonstrates the expectation that when human beings turn away from sin and feel remorse for their sins, they receive God’s forgiveness. As discussed later in Chapter Two, this model suggests that personal repentance is the only thing required before receiving forgiveness. For a Christian, it is a part of God’s consistent character to be faithful in forgiveness to those who ask: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”² Repentance is implied in this context, as a Christian who recognizes what sin is would not confess without the intention of changing. This continual repentance from sin and seeking forgiveness from God is an essential part of the Christian life as one strives to eliminate, with the power of Christ, actions which grieve God and go against his commands.

For the Christian, it is equally important to extend forgiveness to others. This interpersonal forgiveness is meant to be an outpouring of gratitude in response to one’s own received forgiveness from God. Christians love because they are first loved by God and forgive because they have been forgiven. This can be seen in Paul’s epistle to the

¹ Isaiah 55:7 (ESV)

² 1 John 1:9 (ESV)

Colossians, which says, “Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.”³ This reciprocal forgiveness is both commanded and practical. Christians are called to be set apart in their forgiveness because they are holy and beloved. As one recognizes one’s own sin, it should be easier to forgive the sins of another, thus also avoiding hypocrisy.

Jesus’ parable of the unforgiving servant in the Gospel of Matthew (18:21-35) explains the importance of forgiving others by showing the weight of one’s debt. In it, a servant is forgiven a sum of money which was too large to possibly be paid back, but then this servant turns and demands a small debt from a fellow servant repaid. As servants report to the master, the first servant is then sent to debtor’s prison for failing to forgive others as he himself had been forgiven. When one truly understands the weight of what one has been forgiven, reciprocal forgiveness is required.

Also on the topic of forgiveness is the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15. A son asks for his inheritance early from his father, insulting him before leaving to a far country and squandering his wealth in a life of sin. After he finds himself so poor that he wishes to be fed with the slop of pigs, he decides to return home and beg his father to be made a servant in the household. While the son is far off, the father gathers servants and runs out to meet him, clothing him with fine clothes and welcoming him with welcome arms. He requires nothing of the son, but throws a large celebration, saying “My son was

³ Colossians 3:12-13 (ESV)

dead, and is alive again; was lost, and is found.”⁴ The story also features a negative story of a lack of forgiveness, for the older brother of the one who left cannot bring himself to forgive once his brother returns. Instead, he complains that he never received such a celebration, and the story ends with his father reiterating that it is fitting to celebrate a return to life.

The Pericope Adulterae

One of the most interesting scriptural passages featuring forgiveness is the story of the woman caught in adultery, also known as the *Pericope Adulterae*, from the Gospel of John. This story is not a parable— as Jesus often tells—and is presented as an incident of Christ encountering a sinner. In this account, a woman is brought by the Pharisees before Jesus to be judged. Jesus begins writing in the dirt, an element unique to this story. The Pharisees continue to ask Jesus for a judgement, instead he points out their own sin, causing them to leave. Then when Jesus and the woman are left without the Pharisees, he forgives her.

There is great debate regarding this passage. Because the passage does not appear in the earliest manuscripts of John, many people question its canonicity and whether it should still be taught and studied in the same way as the rest of Scripture. One 2020 article listed eleven primary positions on the *Pericope Adulterae*, seven of which argue for its canonicity and four of which do not. Some argue that it is canonical and should be preached regularly, some that it is non-canonical, but should be preached cautiously,

⁴ Luke 15:24 (ESV)

while some think that it should not be preached at all.⁵ Canonicity becomes more complicated when we consider the standard for such designations is debated, especially between Catholic and Protestant lines.

As Jennifer Knust and Tommy Wasserman note, the *Pericope Adulterae* does not appear in writing until around the fourth or fifth century A.D, several hundred years after the event would have taken place.⁶ Many of the early manuscripts which include it put the text in brackets or with an asterisk.⁷ It is also often put in different places in Scripture, most commonly later in John or at the end of Luke. It also has some variations in content, with some changes in details, such as including what Jesus wrote.⁸ Christopher Keith suggests that the passage was inserted to show that Jesus could write, which was much less common than the ability to read, although the Greek word can also mean “draw.”⁹

Then there is further debate as to whether it was mentioned by early church fathers, with some Biblical scholars claiming that no church father mentioned the passage until the twelfth century,¹⁰ while some scholars claim that the *Didascalia Apostolorum*

⁵ “Text-Criticism and the Pulpit: Should One Preach About the Woman Caught in Adultery?” *The Gospel Coalition*.

⁶ Knust, Jennifer, and Tommy Wasserman. *The Present and Absent Pericope Adulterae*, 2.

⁷ “Lecture 33: Some Famous Textual Problems: John 7:53-8:11 | Free Online Biblical Library.”

⁸ Knust, Jennifer, and Tommy Wasserman. *The Present and Absent Pericope Adulterae*, 4.

⁹ “Manuscript History and John 8:1-8:11.”

¹⁰ This is discussed by Dr. Daniel Wallace in the 33rd Lecture of his Textual Criticism Class on Biblicaltraining.org.

and Didymus the Blind reference the passage.¹¹ There is also the problem that the linguistic style is very different from the rest of John, with some arguing it is more similar to the writing of Luke.

No clear consensus has been reached about how to teach from this passage. Whether or not it was established in early Church tradition, it was certainly established by the Medieval period which is examined in this thesis, until it was questioned by nineteenth-century scholars.¹² Despite the controversy, the story is a powerful one, and it was thought of as important enough to be included in three of the four play cycles, out of the many parables and stories to draw from. While everything within it is consistent with scripture, the story uniquely shows Jesus' forgiveness and the importance of man's forgiveness in a personal and human context.

Medieval Christian Penance and Reconciliation

In the Medieval context, the practice of penance is associated closely with divine forgiveness. Penance in the Middle Ages, as today, is a form of punishment one voluntarily undertakes to help realize the weight of sin and be fully absolved. Penance is a key part of the sacrament of Reconciliation, which requires the steps of contrition, confession, absolution, and satisfaction. The Catholic Catechism describes sin as harming the sinner's relationship with both God and the Church, which is why penance is needed:

¹¹ This is mentioned by The World Heritage Encyclopedia, and by Jon Gleason in "The 'Pericope Adulterae' and the Oldest Manuscripts." *Mind Renewers*, February 10, 2012. Accessed March 25, 2021.

¹² Knust, Jennifer, and Tommy Wasserman. *The Present and Absent Pericope Adulterae*. 248.

Sin is before all else an offense against God, a rupture of communion with him. At the same time, it damages communion with the Church. For this reason, conversion entails both God's forgiveness and reconciliation with the Church, which are expressed and accomplished liturgically by the sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation.¹³

Ignatius of Antioch describes its importance within Church unity when he writes, "For where there is division and wrath, God doth not dwell. To all them that repent, the Lord grants forgiveness, if they turn in penitence to the unity of God, and to communion with the bishop."¹⁴ Penance is therefore a means of restoring the Christian to holy community, both with God and with the Church. While not specifically scriptural, it is part of the tradition that arose within the Catholic church in order to help the scriptural elements like feeling sorrow for sin.

The goal for Medieval Christians was to live between the immense fear of God's righteous judgment and the fantastic forgiveness provided by God for all situations. Ashley Null, in *Thomas Cranmer's Doctrine of Repentance: Renewing the Power to Love*, describes the situation by saying, "Fear of divine punishment would cause grief, but because Christians had hope that this pain would bring about forgiveness, they also had joy."¹⁵ The grief of penance can lead either to attrition, sorrow from fear of punishment, or contrition, detesting sin for offending God.¹⁶ There is a delicate balance between two weighty burdens—fear and sorrow—and Medieval religious literature

¹³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed., sec. 1440.

¹⁴ Antioch, St Ignatius of. "Letter of Ignatius of Antioch to the Philadelphians."

¹⁵ Null, Ashley. *Thomas Cranmer's Doctrine of Repentance: Renewing the Power to Love*, 8.

¹⁶ Null, Ashley, 1.

frequently emphasized that both emotions must be felt in order to properly experience repentance from one's sins.

In its earliest forms, Christian penance was meant to be a public act; one does something external which God and the community can see. Pilgrimages were a common form of public penance. Such arduous journeys were a public declaration, similar to the ways that baptism or marriage were public declarations. Around the 7th century however, Irish monks created and began to teach a private system, wherein acts of penance were more for the penitent than for the community.¹⁷ This is also the period of creation of penance literature, books written to prescribe for a sinner what penance they should do for a given sin. They were often fairly severe, especially for sexual sins, with one book suggesting fasting for up to fifteen years.¹⁸ These books were not perfectly enforced, and some may have served more to deter rather than punish certain behaviors.¹⁹ However, this initiated a somewhat transactional way of thinking about sin and forgiveness, because by the 11th century, we find monks performing penance on behalf of their community.²⁰ This removes the element of personal remorse from repentance, and lets the penitential act suffice for true repentance. In addition to penitential handbooks, there were also Medieval handbooks for confessors. These books prepared believers to receive grace, but it also gave them a language to define themselves. They often included lists of

¹⁷ Madigan, Kevin. *Medieval Christianity: A New History*, 48.

¹⁸ Madigan, Kevin, 48.

¹⁹ Madigan, Kevin, 48.

²⁰ Madigan, Kevin, 53.

sins and appropriate penances, along with examples of forgiveness which helped orient individuals in relation to both God and the Church.²¹ Literature for penance and confession helped Medieval believers to grasp the nature of forgiveness as understood within Christianity at the time.

Overview of the Present Study

This study considers Christian ideas of forgiveness as presented in selected late-Medieval English sermons and cycle plays. Specifically, this thesis examines how the story of the woman caught in adultery from the Gospel of John is used in didactic performance literature of the period. The purpose of this study is to better understand the complex Christian discourse on forgiveness that may have been experienced by an English person in the late middle ages and the system of penance and reconciliation that characterized the Church at the time. The thesis will suggest that the story of the woman caught in adultery as presented in these particular didactic texts offers special insight into the nature of sin, repentance, forgiveness, and even resurrection.

The thesis is organized into four chapters. This current chapter introduces the theological basics of sin and forgiveness in Christianity. This chapter also describes the penitential system which grew out of that to shape the Church as it was experienced by those in Medieval England.

Chapter Two of the thesis discusses Medieval English sermons, how they were preserved, and how they are studied today. This chapter then uses a selected English sermon on the John text of the woman caught in adultery, BL/Add 40672/164, to examine

²¹ "Handbooks for Confessors." *Obo*. Accessed March 15, 2021.

how the story can function as a critique of the penance system. The sermon also highlights the importance of repentance and forgiveness as distinctly important. Finally, it points out that Scripture reveals as much as it is meant to, and that speculation is vain and prideful.

The third chapter discusses cycle plays, including the history and scholarship surrounding them. The chapter then examines and summarizes three pageants on the *Pericope Adulterae*, noting the similarities and differences between the three of them. The plays are from the York, N-Town, and Chester cycles. By studying all three plays, one can see a difference of emphasis, and a range of views on sin. Most importantly, the plays demonstrate the consistent idea that forgiveness is like resurrection in the way that one gains new life and freedom.

The fourth chapter offers some conclusions of the relationships between sermons and plays, and considers important differences in the direction of forgiveness in the selected examples. Finally, this chapter offers reflections on the wonderful quality of divine mercy as shown to humanity in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

CHAPTER TWO

Forgiveness and Penance in Medieval Sermons

This chapter will relate themes of forgiveness and repentance established in the first chapter to a specific sermon from Medieval England. This chapter will briefly introduce the field of sermon study and the issues of identifying, locating, and translating a sermon on the specific theme. The chapter then presents an analysis of a particular Wycliffite sermon which demonstrates the opinion that the Medieval penitential system made grace unnecessarily transactional, to the point where one effectively “pays” a good action in exchange for a bad action. The sermon focusses on the difference between God’s law and man’s law, with the intent to show that man’s law has gone astray and that the audience should seek a return to God’s law. The sermon also foregrounds feelings of remorse and sorrow by the sinner. Most importantly, the sermon shares about the power of God to totally change the convicted and repentant sinner.

Sermon Study

The study of sermons in Medieval England might seem like a relatively simple task, based on the assumption that the practice of sermonizing has been relatively unchanged over the last several centuries. In truth, however, even defining a sermon in the Medieval context can be difficult. We can use the few extant texts that we have, along with outside sources, such as the way sermons are parodied, in order to reconstruct what

would have made a recognizable sermon.¹ The most basic definition of a sermon is a religious discourse from a pulpit in a recognizable public place delivered by a cleric or monk with official and spiritual authority to preach.² In a broader context, H. L. Spencer points out in the book, *The Sermon*, “Extended usage of such words as ‘sermon’ or ‘preaching’ to denote any admonition or exhortation of an improving kind, probably a long, tedious harangue, and, consequently one to which the listeners felt disinclined to pay attention, was widely current in Middle English.”³ Even with this base definition in mind, English Medieval sermon studies are difficult to approach for many reasons. One difficulty in sermon studies is the problem of reconstructing live events from a written record. This is, coincidentally, a similar problem in the study of Medieval plays, as will be noted in Chapter Three.

Often, the extant texts of English medieval sermons are not as simple as they seem because of the many ways they have been removed from the spoken word. The surviving texts were either written beforehand as inspiration for a performed sermon or written after for the sake of providing an associated reading experience.⁴ The texts

¹ While more common in continental Europe than in England, parodic sermons were a distinct genre which “parodies not only the content of the serious sermon but its structure and stylistic tricks too” according to Malcom Jones in “The Parodic Sermon in Medieval and Early Modern England,” from *Medium Aevum*, Vol. 66, No. 1 (1997), pp. 102.

² Spencer, H. L. “Middle English Sermons” in *The Sermon*, (597-660) Directed by Beverly Mayne Kienzle (Brepols, Turnhout- Belgium, 2000), 602.

³ Spencer, H. L. “Middle English Sermons” in *The Sermon*, 602.

⁴ Fletcher, Alan J. *Late Medieval Popular Preaching in Britain and Ireland: Texts, Studies, and Interpretations*, 13.

written after a sermon, called *reportatios*, were often recorded in Latin, even though sermons were likely spoken in the vernacular (Middle English).⁵ This is probably because the scribes who created *reportatios* were comfortable with written Latin, a more unified language than English at the time. Texts written in advance as model sermons cannot be understood as accurate documentation of the spoken sermon event; based on the size of manuscript and lectern, along with the cramped, small handwriting style common to so many of them, they were likely not brought to the pulpit to be read from.⁶

There is much debate about how accurate the written texts are compared to the spoken sermon.⁷ Charlotte Steenbrugge, author of *Drama and Sermon in Late Medieval England: Performance, Authority, Devotion*, hypothesizes that the vague nature of many of the extant sermons is because they are actually model sermons, and therefore do not reflect what was actually preached.⁸ She contrasts this with Jussi Hanska's view:

Jussi Hanska, conversely, has noted that, where both the written model sermon and a *reportatio* of the preached sermon survive, the differences between the two tend to be minimal. Consequently, he argues that 'it is safe to assume that model sermons also reflect quite well the style and content of actual Sunday sermons.'⁹

⁵ Briscoe, Marianne G. "Preaching and Medieval English Drama" in *Contexts for Early English Drama*. Edited by Marianne Briscoe and John Coldewey, 168.

⁶ Fletcher, Alan J. *Late Medieval Popular Preaching in Britain and Ireland: Texts, Studies, and Interpretations*, 12.

⁷ Steenbrugge remarks that Monica Hedlund emphasizes the difference between sermons and model sermons. She demonstrates with a comparison between a model and a *reportatio* and argues that is actually a new sermon with a different focus and style.

⁸ Steenbrugge, *Drama and Sermon in Late Medieval England*, 21.

⁹ Steenbrugge, 21.

Hanska's view posits that sermons should be largely reliable to the spoken version of the text. While they may not be a word-for-word copy, the style and theme can help one get an idea of what the sermon was like. It seems likely that there is quite a bit of variation in how close a model is to the sermon, as not all preachers preached in the same way, and given the relatively few extant manuscripts, trends may be difficult to accurately ascertain.

In addition, all sermon texts were subject to embellishment afterwards for easier reading.¹⁰ Sometimes scribes or preachers would add notes and edits to the sermons to clarify or specify a point which is not made as well as it could have been in the original sermon. For these reasons, the Medieval sermon texts we have are likely a quite imperfect record of what was actually preached to English congregations. However, keeping in mind this failing, it seems necessary to somewhat trust in the extant record of sermons, whether they be written before or after the event. Otherwise, there is nothing to work with; while the manuscripts may be imperfect, they can still be studied for their historical value.

Another difficulty in studying Medieval sermons is the diversity of types.¹¹ There is a wide range of lengths, styles, and language throughout the manuscripts still available to us. Most sermons follow a specific structure. As Steenbrugge writes:

The medieval sermon is not simply any didactic, exhortative, moralizing discourse; it is a specific genre with its own actors and setting and its own generic features, including the use of a theme, an opening prayer, a prayer for the success of the sermon, the use of Latin, the quotation of *auctoritates*, the inclusion of

¹⁰ Briscoe, Marianne G. "Preaching and Medieval English Drama" in *Contexts for Early English Drama*. Edited by Marianne Briscoe and John Coldewey, 168.

¹¹ Steenbrugge, *Drama and Sermon in Late Medieval England*, 20.

practical lessons aimed directly at its audience, the use of *exempla*, and a well-defined structure.¹²

This is a structure which, while unique to sermons, does not encompass all examples. This can make sermons even more difficult to define, as moralizing speeches, such as those seen in plays, fall into a grey area.

To study sermons, one must also be able to identify and find the most useful examples. The major Middle English sermon archives are in Cambridge, London, and Oxford.¹³ Most of the extant manuscripts are collections of sermon cycles— some in Middle English, some in Latin, and some in both— organized by a common topic. Sometimes the sermon cycle is made up of a full year preached by a certain preacher such as the *English Wycliffite Sermon Cycle*, or *Northern Homily Cycle*, a collection of model sermons produced early in the fourteenth century.¹⁴ Some cycles are a collection of special interest, such as sermons for a specific community or event. Still others are collections of a bishop or preacher who has archived his own sermons in chronological order, such as Thomas Brinton’s work in British Library Harley 3760.¹⁵ Sermons are often divided into major categories when being sorted, such as Lollard sermons, or anti-Lollard sermons.¹⁶ There are also many versions of the work by John Mirk, specifically his “Festial” which was adapted many times widely across Britain and Ireland.

¹² Steenbrugge, 44.

¹³ Spencer, H. L. “Middle English Sermons”, 611-614.

¹⁴ Illig, Jennifer. “Through a Lens of Likeness: Reading ‘English Wycliffite Sermons’ in Light of Contemporary Sermon Texts,” 12.

¹⁵ Illig, Jennifer, 12.

¹⁶ The Lollards were those who followed the teaching of John Wycliff, a proto-protestant in England. Usually those who were uneducated or only spoke English were

Another challenge faced by the scholar exploring this material is that the field of sermon studies is relatively young. It was largely pioneered by Gerald R. Owst in the 1920s and 30s, and for years he remained as one of the most authoritative voices in the field.¹⁷ He is best remembered for *Preaching in Medieval England: an Introduction to the Sermon Manuscripts of the Period c. 1350-1450* (1926), and *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England* (1933). His scholarship emphasized the connection between sermons and vernacular literature of the period. His work established the debt of English literature to the message of the Medieval Church.¹⁸ He examined allegory, satire, drama, and linguistics as parts of his sermon studies. Alan J. Fletcher went so far as to say about him, “His works and their thrust in this respect succeeded in setting an agenda whose influence continues to be felt even some eight decades later.”¹⁹ Clearly Owst’s legacy was significantly relevant to the field, even beyond simply pioneering it.

More recently, however, scholars have voiced criticism of Owst’s conclusions and the limitations of his work. In *Late Medieval Popular Preaching in Britain and Ireland: Texts, Studies, and Interpretations* (2009) Fletcher pointed out Owst’s limited focus on the lens of contemporary vernacular literature, rather than putting these sermons in

called the derogative ‘Lollard’, while the more neutral term, usually used for educated preachers was ‘Wycliffite’. They taught against Catholic teachings, which is part of why there are so many “anti-Lollard” sermons.

¹⁷ Fletcher, Alan J. *Late Medieval Popular Preaching in Britain and Ireland: Texts, Studies, and Interpretations*, 4.

¹⁸ Owst, G. R. *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England; a Neglected Chapter in the History of English Letters & of the English People*, Preface.

¹⁹ Fletcher, *Late Medieval Popular Preaching*, 4.

conversation with plays, songs, or focusing on the spoken elements. Fletcher also recognized a cultural patriotism and Anglocentrism, part of Owst's need to justify the study to others who were not interested in the study of sermons.²⁰ Fletcher points out that the study of sermons now encompasses a pan-European scope but can still be broken down into smaller units for individual study or comparison.²¹ However, he recognizes his indebtedness to Owst, who opened up the field to a larger group.

Steenbrugge notes that "Historical sources from late medieval England and the texts themselves suggest that the relationship between sermons and drama was not as significant as G. R. Owst claimed."²² While she admits there were points of connection, she points out that evidence is inconclusive and that there are very few instances of direct influence, certainly less than in continental Europe. She argues that one should think in terms of cross-fertilization across genres rather than a marked relation between the two. This contradicts Owst's conclusions, showing the way scholarship has changed since his time.

Meanwhile Marianne G. Briscoe has much more biting criticism about the quality of Owst's work. She finds that his selective use of evidence and confusing references make his scholarship unreliable. She thinks his treatment of dates is uncritical and too general and critiques the fact that he created all of the "woodcuts" that illustrate his book.

²⁰ Fletcher 4.

²¹ Fletcher, 4. Fletcher argues that the regional unit which make sense to study English sermons should also include Ireland, and to a lesser extent Scotland and Wales, if they had any major surviving sermon texts.

²² Steenbrugge, Charlotte. *Drama and Sermon in Late Medieval England: Performance, Authority, Devotion*, 14.

She says of him: “Owst’s reading and use of evidence are highly selective and his views are often patronizing; his preaching surveys are difficult to use, and he provides no bibliographies. Instead, he streams his references through pages of footnotes.”²³ She uses Owst as evidence that the field she entered was still young and difficult, because someone so unreliable and difficult to read was still seen as authoritative. Although Owst is no longer authoritative, he is still important to the contemporary study of sermons, even if only to be debated, and as a foundation for the way scholarship of sermons has changed since his time.

Finding a Sermon

Having learned a bit of the complex history of sermons, I sought to find a sermon related to forgiveness, which was only possible because sermon anthologies are sometimes organized by theme or subject. Therefore, a good place to start was Veronica O’Mara and Paul Suzanne’s *A Repertorium of Middle English Prose Sermons*, published in 2007. This collection contains summaries of several hundred Middle English sermons, organized by collection, but containing indices which groups sermons by theme, biblical reference, or location. Some of the most common scriptural references in sermons in this volume are Genesis 3:19; the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6-7 and Luke 6; John 14; Hebrews 11:6; and several passages from James (2:13, 2:30, 4:4, 4:6, and 6:16 in particular). A full analysis of proportional representation of verses in sermons would probably lead to fascinating understandings of the Medieval Christian world in England,

²³ Briscoe, Marianne G. “Preaching and Medieval English Drama” in *Contexts for Early English Drama*. Edited by Marianne Briscoe and John Coldewey, 150-151.

however such is not the task of this thesis. Some of the largest concepts throughout the sermons are “Ave Maria,” “Death,” “Eucharist,” “Incarnation,” “Last Judgement,” “Love,” “Penance,” “Repentance,” and “Sin.” Again, a study of which concepts were most commonly mentioned would be fascinating.

The problem of this present study is to identify sermons on forgiveness, which is not one of the topics listed in O’Mara and Suzannes’ *Repertorium*. So, I needed another way to find sermons which might discuss forgiveness without it being the primary theme. After finding Marc B. Cels’ article, “Forgiveness in Late Medieval Sermons: On the Unforgiving Servant.”²⁴ I thought I might find sermons with scriptural references of this parable, found in Matthew 18:21-35. I also looked for other stories or scripture references with themes of forgiveness, such as John 8:1-11. Going back to O’Mara and Paul Suzanne’s *A Repertorium of Middle English Prose Sermons*, I soon compiled a list of around twenty sermons related to John 8 and Matthew 18.

The *Repertorium* includes a summary of the sermons, without the actual text, however the sermons I was looking for are located in various manuscripts and collections. Some I accessed through the British Library, which required searching only for digitized versions since I wanted a version that I could read without travelling to the United Kingdom. Similarly, while the Bodleian Library in Oxford holds a useful manuscript, I was reliant on the digitized resources available in their online library. Few of the sermons on my list were available in that resource. However, once I found some full-text manuscripts in a volume of Wycliffite sermons, I realized that the book included

²⁴ Cels, Marc B. “Forgiveness in Late Medieval Sermons: On the Unforgiving Servant.” *Medieval Sermon Studies* 62, no. 1 (January 1, 2018): 42–60.

some from my list compiled from the *Repertorium*. I also looked through many works from the Early English Texts Society, such as their collection of Middle English Sermons and their collection of Lollard Sermons.

BL/Add 40672/164

In the end, I selected a Wycliffite sermon which focused on John 8:1-11, BL/Add 40672/164. The story from this section of text explores the theme of forgiveness and also happened to be shorter in length, which made it much more manageable to translate and to analyze. To exactly transform the Middle English text into contemporary English would far remove the text from the original. However, the Middle English of the extant text can be quite difficult to approach, with unfamiliar symbols and phrasing. I have attempted to mitigate these difficulties for my own analysis, by making the Middle English more readable and understandable, even if it still has some archaic wording. In many ways my work was more of a re-spelling than a translation, as the primary difficulty with many of the archaic words is the variation in uses of letters. There were some words which I could not find a perfect translation for, and you will find these marked with asterisks. If I did find a translation to one of these asterisked words, but felt that changing would significantly alter the text, I included the word's meaning in parentheses next to the uncertain word. Appendix A of the thesis presents a working translation into a more readable form for the purposes of analysis.

Very few details are known about the sermon, with no author, date, or geographical location; all that is known is that it is a Wycliffite sermon, written for the Saturday on the third week in Lent. Being a Wycliffite sermon means it was given either by John Wycliffe, a fourteenth-century proto reformer, or a preacher who followed in his

beliefs, derisively called the Lollards. Wycliffe emphasized literal readings of the Bible, and claimed that confession, prayers for the dead, and many devotional practices were not necessary to the life of the believer.²⁵ The extent of his radical beliefs did not stop there. He went so far as to call pilgrimages, prayers, and offering to crosses or images examples of idolatry.²⁶ Near the end of his life, he and his ideas were blamed for a peasant uprising, and he lost the support of many. After his death, his followers were often punished by being burned at the stake.²⁷

The sermon first retells the story of the woman caught in adultery from John 8. First, Jesus is teaching in the Temple when Pharisees and scribes bring the woman to him. They ask if she should be stoned, as it says in Moses' law, hoping to trick him into either forsaking the law or forsaking his own teachings. Jesus bows down and writes in the dirt. After the Pharisees ask again, Jesus says, "He that is without sin of thou, cast he first a stone on her" (lines 13-14). He then continues to write, and the Pharisees leave, beginning with the oldest. Jesus asks the woman where her accusers are and if anyone has condemned her, and she says, "No man, sire" (18). Jesus responds with, "And I shall not damn thee. Go thou and nyle [do not] thou sin more after" (18-19). The sermon quotes the whole passage before explaining some important ideas drawn from the story. This inclusion of the whole passage from the Bible (included in italics in Appendix A) is significant because it is consistent with Wycliffe's beliefs about scriptural accessibility.

²⁵ Volz, Carl A. *The Medieval Church: From the Dawn of the Middle Ages to the Eve of the Reformation*, 220.

²⁶ Volz, 220.

²⁷ Volz, 222.

Wycliffe is famous for being the first to translate the complete Bible into a vernacular language. Before this, most Bibles in existence were handwritten scrolls of the Latin Vulgate text. These were extremely valuable, and only possessed by the parish priests. While there were small portions of the New Testament in English, Wycliffe's was the first complete Bible available for the common people.²⁸ He used translations from the Vulgate, rather than the Hebrew or Greek, but his translation is still fairly accurate.²⁹ He conscripted his students and friends to multiply copies, all handwritten, and spread them across Europe. This makes the inclusion of the vernacular more significant, as the author's usage is consistent with Wycliffe's desire for the common man to be able to experience Scripture for themselves rather than just hearing from the clergy.

The sermon has three main points. The first of which is that Jesus' teachings are not inconsistent with the law of Moses, and the fault of any contradiction lies in mankind's misapplication. The second discusses the problems of the penitential system, showing that penance is an unjust burden put on Christians, which has no scriptural justification. The last warns the audience not to worry too much about what Jesus wrote in the dirt, as it is not meant to be known.

The first fascinating element of this particular sermon's discussion of John 8:1-11 is the discussion of legal authority. The author makes a distinction between "God's law" and "man's law." In the passage, it is uncertain whether Moses' law and man's law are meant to be equated or contrasted. It seems that they are equal in so far as they are

²⁸ Carrick, J. C. *Wycliffe and the Lollards*, 142.

²⁹ Carrick, 143.

different from God's law as given by Jesus, but they are contrasted in that Moses' law seems to be what is being referenced when the author says, "Here men say that God's law is just, both the old law and the new; but of man's law they say not so, but suppose that it be oft unjust." (lines 22-24) This means the author is arguing for three primary laws. The first of these laws is Moses' law, the truth as revealed to Moses through the law codes found in the Pentateuch. This is the earliest of the four laws. The second is man's law, which is humanity's ancient interpretation of Moses' law with additions and extrapolations in practice as taught by the Pharisees and Sadducees of Jesus' time. Over time, the sermon author believes, man's law strayed from God's truth because of human failure. Man's law is the second, much later, of the three laws. Finally and most importantly, there is God's law as explained through the teachings and example of Jesus throughout his ministry. This is the third and most complete law, because it explains and fulfills Moses' law, and shows a concrete picture of love in practice.

The author of the sermon wants to defend Moses' law and God's law, while renouncing man's law. This also allows the author, and audience, to understand a fourth law. Although he will also call it "man's law," he means man's then-current interpretation of God's law as put forth by the Catholic Church. It mirrors what he described earlier by the older "man's law" of the Pharisees and Sadducees. If the Church's law was correct at first, it has since strayed from God's truth because of human failure. It is a powerful and fascinating parallel which the author draws in order to give weight to his message. It is also a potentially dangerous challenge to the Church.

Furthermore, the sermon author seeks to specifically challenge the system of penance, which leads to two major problems in his eyes. The first problem is that

penance seems to be an unjust burden. It is more than Jesus requires in order to receive forgiveness. In Scripture, Jesus does not require any action on the part of the sinner other than the sorrow of sin and sincere trust in God's goodness. See for example Jesus' parables of the unforgiving servant and the parable of the prodigal son. This view is consistent with Wycliffe and the Lollards, who argued against the penitential system of Catholicism. In the story of the unforgiving servant, the master forgives the servant for the entire debt, requiring nothing of the servant. Only when the servant is found to be unforgiving of a far smaller debt with a fellow servant does the master decide to punish him. The parable is told to explain the importance of interpersonal forgiveness, which is consistent with Christ's statement: "He who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her" in the John 8 passage. Similarly, in the parable of the prodigal son, the father required no penitential act of the son to atone for his sins. The returning son is received home unconditionally; all he had to do was recognize his faults and feel remorse at what he had done. Once a character in these stories seeks repentance and feels contrition, God is ready to forgive. In each case the offender must recognize their faults and want to change, which is the role of contrition. As soon as they have, they receive forgiveness.

In this way, the prodigal son parallels the woman caught in adultery. In both cases, the sinner deserves punishment but receives mercy instead. The woman expects condemnation and death, the prodigal son expects to be made a servant, and both are given more than they could have hoped for. This grace is like a rebirth, as both are now free from their mistakes to live a new life. The woman is told to "go and sin no more", while the prodigal son "was dead, and is alive again." Both of these statements delineate

a new stage of life. Interestingly, this parallel of God's mercy with resurrection will also be a feature of one cycle play explored in Chapter Three.

In the eyes of the author of this sermon, any penance added to sincere repentance is an unjust burden, like the many extra laws of the Pharisees, which the believer should not have to suffer. An act of penance can thus be seen—much like an indulgence—as something which allows one to sin as long as the believer does an atoning act afterwards. As the writer of the sermon says, “no shrift that now is used is good to man, but in as much as it letteth man to sin” (35-36). The author argues that sin has come to be thought of as transactional; there is a price for each sin which can be paid by the sinner. The author seeks to sharply contrast this view with the view presented in the passage from John 8. There is nothing that the woman caught in adultery can possibly do for Jesus to save her from her sins. The sermon shows what God requires of forgiveness in the story, and it is certainly not penance. The sermon hearkens to Jesus' words, saying God seeks “sorrow for sin that is done, and flee for to sin after” (44). This emphasis on sorrow for sin is consistent with the prodigal son story.

The sermon also shows the importance of interpersonal forgiveness, even if it is not the central theme. By mentioning Jesus' challenge to the Pharisees, and the responsibility of the priests, the sermon establishes the importance of forgiving each other. This theme of interpersonal forgiveness is shared with the story of the unforgiving servant. As Jesus made clear to the Pharisees, “*He that is without sin of thou, cast he first a stone on her*” (12-13). In contrast, Jesus is the only one present without sin. He is the only one within his rights to condemn her, yet he does not. He offers a forgiveness which

requires nothing of the sinner but that she “*Go thou, and now nyle (do not) thou sin more after*” (17-18). Given the sinfulness of each person, there is a responsibility to forgive.

A fascinating rhetorical element of the sermon is the author’s use of a reference to “men” to avoid being tied to certain ideas. He uses “men say” (34-35) or “men doubt” (19) to make points, some of which support his argument, and some of which are in opposition. For instance, in line 34-35 the author claims that, “Here men say, if they durst, that no shrift that now is used is good to man, but in as much as it letteth man to sin.” This rhetorical device allows him to argue that the system of penance is unjust and spiritually harmful as it allows men to stay in sin. Meanwhile in the latter reference, he claims, “And here men doubt commonly how Moses’ law and men’s law keep righteousness of God in damning of wicked men.” This is contrary to his point because his goal is to show how God’s law is just. The author is thus not using an appeal to what men believe just as an authority, nor just as a refutation of the masses. The author employs a reference to “men” as a mask so that neither the author nor those who believe like him can be charged for the beliefs expressed in the sermon. While the exact date and location of this sermon is uncertain, it is likely that these beliefs challenged the penance system of the Catholic church. Such a challenge would have been unpopular or even dangerous to the preacher. Looking at what happened to Wycliffe’s followers shows that the stakes for what was considered heresy at the time were often quite high.

A final noteworthy element of the sermon is the last point about not musing over what Christ wrote in the dirt. The most common theory at the time was that Jesus wrote the sins of the Pharisees, and that they fled for fear that someone else would see them. The author mentions this prominent theory about what Jesus wrote yet says not to

question. This line of thinking seems particularly contrary to mainstream Medieval practice. Many Medieval thinkers have a reputation for asking impossible questions, such as how many angels could stand on a needle's point, even though this reputation seems to be an invention of the 17th century.³⁰ Enlightenment thinkers like William Sclater and William Chillingworth sought to establish the intellectual progress that they had made compared to the Medieval period; they mocked how Medieval thinkers debated “needless points” such as the number of angels that could stand on a pin's head. No evidence that this question was actually a debate of Medieval thinkers has ever been found, but the reputation has continued. Other sermons on this subject have attempted to guess at what exactly is happening in this situation, and the plays have very specific answers to what Jesus did. Instead, the author claims that “such vain curiosity were a tempting of God” (48) and that instead the audience should rest in the fact that they have all that they are meant to know. This claim is also consistent with Wycliffe's beliefs, as it points out that the Scripture says everything that the reader needs to know, rather than from tradition or the Church.³¹

Conclusion

One can see through the story as recounted how Jesus' extreme claim is meant to be followed. The woman in the story likely knew the law and that she was breaking it. She therefore had a theoretical understanding of what was right according to God, but

³⁰ Roberts, Dunstan. “The Death of Lord Herbert of Cherbury Revisited.” *Notes and Queries* 63, no. 1 (March 2016): 45–46.

³¹ This is reminiscent of the Sola Scriptura belief from Martin Luther later and in Germany.

this encounter with Christ's total goodness and forgiveness is so convicting that it actually leads her to change. Different from the law, this meeting with Jesus shows what is right in a tangible form, thus causing a change in the individual who meets him. While this woman would certainly sin again in her life, she could draw on her experience with Jesus to guide her and convict her. In the same way, when one now sees Jesus' love and forgiveness, he or she can be guided and convicted by Christ themselves. The sermon author implies with this sermon that hearing or reading Jesus words helps the people who cannot see him to interact with him. Stories help make a person or event more tangible, and this sermon seeks to make the love and forgiveness of Jesus all the more available to the congregation.

Looking at this Wycliffite sermon, one can get some concept of forgiveness in the Medieval world. The sermon emphasizes seeking forgiveness from God, pointing out that God does not desire penance. The sermon makes clear that all God requires are sorrow for sin and turning from it afterwards. This critique of the penance system stands in contrast to the Medieval Catholic Church. The sermon also points out the importance of forgiving others, as seen in the negative example of the Pharisees and the positive example of Jesus. The sermon shows that because of mankind's sinful nature and tendency to corrupt God's law, both seeking and giving forgiveness are necessary parts of the Christian life.

CHAPTER THREE

Forgiveness and Reconciliation in Medieval Religious Drama

As the themes of forgiveness, repentance, and penance were discussed in the context of a Medieval English sermon in Chapter Two, now I will turn to discuss similar themes within three religious plays that each recount the *Pericope Adulterae*. One is the twenty-fourth play from the York cycle; the second is the twenty-fourth play from the N-Town cycle; and the third is the twelfth play from the Chester cycle. By studying points of comparison and contrast among the plays, one can notice themes, emphases, and questions unique to each version of the story which help to flesh out a fuller understanding of the concept of Christian forgiveness. For example, the Medieval choices about what other Bible stories to pair with the *Pericope Adulterae* reveals nuanced ideas about forgiveness in Christ Jesus. Studied as a set, the three plays reveal the different emphases of divine and human forgiveness, the role of sin, and the connection between forgiveness and resurrection.

Cycle Play Activity

To study forgiveness in cycle plays, we must first define the associated terminology, which is complicated by the variation found in the scholarship. Cycle plays, also called “mystery plays,” are long collections of plays made up of smaller pageants,

which together tell the whole story of the Bible, from creation through to final judgement. The name “mystery plays” refers to the fact that the craft-guilds who assembled the plays were often called “mysteries.”¹ The craft-guilds were local collections of men of a certain trade. In the English context, each guild was responsible for assembling a certain pageant. Richard Beadle explains in *York Mystery Plays: A Selection in Modern Spelling*, “The craft-guilds therefore became responsible for furnishing the pageant-wagon on which the play was to be performed, and for finding suitable actors, properties, costumes, and so forth.”² Often, the guild which performed a given pageant was connected to the subject matter in some way, thematically or practically. For example, the shipwrights put on “The Building of the Ark” and the vintners put on “The Marriage at Cana.” Most commonly, the term “play” is used for the larger work, while “pageant” is used for the smaller episodes, but sometimes the smaller episodes are referred to as plays.

Beadle laments the change to “mystery plays” from their original “Corpus Christi plays,” called so because they were traditionally performed on the feast of Corpus Christi.³ The feast of Corpus Christi was promulgated in 1264, and it was confirmed at the Council of Vienne in 1311.⁴ It came to England by 1318, and to York by 1325.⁵

¹ Beadle, Richard, and Pamela M. King, eds. *York Mystery Plays: A Selection in Modern Spelling*, xv.

² Beadle, Richard, and Pamela M. King, eds, xii.

³ Beadle, Richard, and Pamela M. King, eds, x.

⁴ Nelson, Alan H. *The Medieval English Stage: Corpus Christi Pageants and Plays*, 11.

⁵ Beadle, Richard, and Pamela M. King, eds. *York Mystery Plays: A Selection in Modern Spelling*, x.

Corpus Christi was a summer feast day which focused on celebrating the body of Christ in several different ways. It focused primarily on the host of the Eucharist but also celebrated the Church as the body of Christ and the Incarnation of God in Jesus. When the feast of Corpus Christi began, it centered around a procession through the town of the clergy and a vessel of the Sacred Host, blessed communion bread and wine which were the body and blood of Christ. There has yet to be any documentary evidence of why the plays were performed in a processional style or how they came to be attached to the feast of Corpus Christi.⁶ There were older theories about the ways that the plays slowly evolved from earlier works, but most of those are unsatisfying to modern historians. One theory suggests that the *Quem Quaeritis* trope (a spoken call and response portion of Easter Mass) expanded into liturgical dramas, which somehow took on the much less authoritative and secularized tone of the cycle plays. As Alexandra Johnson, the author of the chapter “An Introduction to Medieval English Theatre,” writes:

The old theories argued an evolution along Darwinian lines from mimetic tropes associated with the Mass, to representational Latin plays on religious themes, to a vernacular religious drama performed by the laity that became increasingly secularised until it finally yielded to the polemic drama of the sixteenth century. Such theories will not stand in the face of our increasingly sophisticated understanding of western medieval culture and the cross currents of the politics and theology of the western Church.⁷

While the earlier tropes were likely related in some way, the explanation of a gradual change from earlier versions does not satisfactorily answer how these plays, which are

⁶ Beadle, Richard, and Pamela M. King, eds, x.

⁷ From Johnston, Alexandra F. “An Introduction to Medieval English Theatre.” Chapter. In *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, edited by Richard Beadle and Alan J. Fletcher, 1.

both full of theology and central to civic enjoyments, came to be. Another theory is that an outpouring of religious devotion caused the plays, but this is also insufficient as it does not account for the organization and mastery seen in the plays.⁸ Cycle plays were documented across Western Europe, including Poland, Germany, France, and England.

There are four extant English cycle plays, which were long thought of as the regular form of Medieval drama, and so individual plays which were found were assumed to be part of a larger work. There is a cycle from York, one from Chester, one associated with Wakefield or Towneley, and one known as the N-Town cycle because the script uses “n-town” for the name of whatever town it was being performed in at the time.⁹ There are also references in textual and documentary evidence of other cycles from Coventry, Newcastle, and Beverly.¹⁰ However, there have been some challenges to traditional understanding of these plays. For example, it is now believed that only the York and Chester cycles were actually performed consecutively, and that those two are the exception rather than the rule.¹¹ The N-Town and Wakefield plays seem to be compilations, which may not have been performed in their present form.

⁸ Hopper, Vincent F. *Medieval Mystery Plays, Morality Plays, and Interludes*, 18.

⁹ Fletcher, Alan J. “The N-Town Plays.” Chapter. In *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, edited by Richard Beadle and Alan J. Fletcher, 183–210. (2nd ed. Cambridge Companions to Literature. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 185.

¹⁰ Johnston, Alexandra F. “An Introduction to Medieval English Theatre.” Chapter. In *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, edited by Richard Beadle and Alan J. Fletcher, 1–25. (2nd ed. Cambridge Companions to Literature. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 8.

¹¹ Johnston, 8-9.

English cycles are thought to have been performed on pageant wagons which moved through the city in the course of a day during the Corpus Christi feast. There is very little evidence to understand how or why this processional staging came about, but some theorize that it was inspired from the existing processions of the Sacred Host.¹² In such a procession, the laity and clergy followed a monstrance carrying the Sacred Host through the streets of the town.¹³ This was apparently common for festivals of any kind, but in England this procession also joined with local guilds, making it a civic event, possibly more so than a religious one.¹⁴ This was a time where church and state were far from separate, so this connection between civic guilds and the religious institution of the church is not foreign to this setting. Whatever the reasons, the form of processional staging would come to be closely associated with English cycle play activity.

Alan Nelson has argued, based on the number of lines and how quickly they can be said, that a true processional staging is somewhat unrealistic:

Assuming even the strictest discipline and the most rational behavior on the part of all casts and pageant masters, true-processional production fails to recommend itself as a satisfactory method of staging a play. The inconvenience to the actors, to the audience, or both, is considerable. Nor does burden of the inconvenience rest equally on all. Cast of early plays and short plays in the cycle have relatively little to do and plenty of time for the small efforts required. But cast of long plays must perform at a fast rate, and the slightest delay will provoke the most unfortunate consequences.¹⁵

¹² Beadle, Richard, and Pamela M. King, eds. *York Mystery Plays: A Selection in Modern Spelling*, x.

¹³ Beadle, Richard, and Pamela M. King, eds., x.

¹⁴ Nelson, Alan H. *The Medieval English Stage: Corpus Christi Pageants and Plays*, 11.

¹⁵ Nelson, 33.

The problem lies in the variance of pageant length, which causes other plays to be delayed, making the whole thing slower. Then there is the problem of advancing; if they wait to all advance at once, they lose time waiting for everyone to finish. This basically would make each pageant as long as the longest pageant, not to mention the question of how they could have effectively communicated to everyone to move simultaneously. Nelson argues that a set location might be more realistic, but ultimately the answer to how all of the plays could possibly be performed in a moving system has yet to be satisfactorily answered. However one saw them all, it seems that the plays were performed in the open air rather than indoors.

Many of the most prominent voices in the field of Medieval English Cycle play studies are collected in the 2008 *Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*. This volume includes scholars such as Richard Beadle, Alan Fletcher, Pamela King, Alexandra Johnston, and Meg Twycross. Although the field is older than sermon studies, it has remained fairly small, likely based on the scant number of texts. Nevertheless, many of these cycle plays are still performed in revivals even today.¹⁶ Despite the relative youth of the area of study, there is a journal called *Medieval Sermon Studies*, which regularly releases relevant scholarship to the field.

¹⁶ According to John McKinnell in “Modern Productions of Medieval English Drama,” a chapter from the aforementioned *Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, the first revivals of any of the Corpus Christi Pageants came in 1901, with a few individual plays performed until 1938. Then in 1951, there were independently organized cycle play productions in Chester, York, and Coventry. Since then, there have been regular revivals, with too many to briefly mention here.

The York Play

The version of the *Pericope Adulterae* as told in the York play was produced by several guilds collectively: the capmakers, the plumbers, the patternmakers, pouch-makers, and bottlers. These were likely smaller guilds which could not put on a whole pageant by themselves. This version of the play includes both the stories of the woman caught in adultery and the raising of Lazarus. Why these two stories are connected is uncertain—there are several chapters and events between these two stories in the Gospel narrative of John—but the result is a statement on the way forgiveness is like resurrection, returning one to true life. As one is truly and fully forgiven, the past loses power over the individual, and the one who is forgiven finds a new freedom. Both resurrection and forgiveness give new life to one who is dead.¹⁷

The York text itself is missing two leaves, about 120 lines of text. While most of the story is still present, it is unfortunate to not have the complete original manuscript. What we do have begins with four Jews who have just caught a woman in adultery. They discuss her sin for several pages, and it seems like one has the idea to go to Jesus. This is where the first page is missing, so the primary interaction between Jesus and the Jews is lost. From the story we know that the Jews bring the woman to Jesus and ask if she should be stoned as the law of Moses commanded. Jesus begins to write in the dirt, and when the Jews press him, he tells them “He who is without sin among you be the first to

¹⁷ It could also be that the author is trying to make the same connection of the story of the healing of the paralytic man found in Matthew 9:1-8, Mark 2:1-12, and Luke 5:17-26. In each of these passages, a paralytic man is brought before Jesus (through the roof) and Jesus first forgives his sins, then heals him, showing that he has power to do both as God. The author could be making a similar point by connecting these stories.

throw a stone at her.”¹⁸ According to most medieval understanding, at this point the Jews notice that their sins are being written in the dirt and flee so they are not caught. The extant text picks up after the missing leaf with the Jews running away. Then Jesus asks the woman where her accusers went and if anyone has condemned her. After she says that no one has, he says, “Neither do I condemn. Repent. / Of all thy miss I make the free. / Look thou no more to sin assent.”¹⁹

After the woman thanks him, an apostle mentions that they love Christ’s teachings and his grace to those who others would condemn. Christ responds by mentioning that it is important that each is aware of his own sin, and that “Whoso shall others blame, / Look first themselves be clean.”²⁰ These lines echo the statement he assumedly made earlier in the passage, some form of “He who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.” It also echoes Matthew 7:3-5,²¹ which discusses how one must see clearly of his own sin in order to see another’s properly. After another apostle seeks to understand, Jesus speaks again about the importance of forgiving others, this time using language from Matthew 6:14-15²² where Jesus explicitly says that

¹⁸ John 8:7 (ESV)

¹⁹ Purvis, J. S. *The York Cycle of Mystery Plays; a Complete Version*, 168.

²⁰ Purvis, 168.

²¹ Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? 4 Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is the log in your own eye? 5 You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.

²² 14 For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, 15 but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

forgiveness is essential to entering the kingdom of God. He then claims that soon they will see that his Father, “Will muster might yet more.”²³

At this point a messenger appears telling Jesus to come to Bethany because Lazarus is sick and likely to die. From there, the play follows fairly closely to the account from John 11, including the misunderstandings of the apostles that Lazarus may not be dead, the warning to Jesus not to travel because the Jews seek to kill him, Jesus comparing himself to the light, and the resolve of the apostles to die with Jesus. However, as soon as Jesus arrives at Bethany, the narrative changes slightly from the telling in the Gospel of John. Mary speaks first, rather than being summoned after Jesus speaks to Martha. Because stage directions are unclear, it is possible that this speech of Mary’s is before Jesus arrives, or in a different location. Mary, then Martha, both have speeches which express the depths of their feelings of loss of Lazarus, and disturbingly both women mention wanting death. Mary says, “Ah, death do thou devoir, / and have me hence away.”²⁴ Martha goes so far as to say, “Would God in ground I had my grave, / That death had covered and concealed.”²⁵ Both are surprising extremes which show just how much they grieve for their brother. It is also interesting that despite many of the direct lines from Scripture, neither of these speeches include the line that both women say

²³ Purvis, J. S. *The York Cycle of Mystery Plays; a Complete Version*, 169.

²⁴ Purvis, J. S, 170.

²⁵ Purvis, J. S, 170.

to Jesus in John's account, which is "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."²⁶

At this point, the second leaf is missing, including the 60 lines which likely included Jesus hearing from both women and eventually weeping as his spirit is troubled. The text returns again with a character (possibly Martha) mentioning how the stone shall soon be moved aside. Then Jesus prays to God, thanking him for hearing him and answering his prayers, and calls Lazarus out of the tomb in Latin. Then in another change from the Biblical story, Lazarus speaks, praising Jesus and declaring his divinity. In a fascinating moment Lazarus addresses both those standing around him and the audience, saying, "Therefore, ye folk now here, / Serve him with main and might; / His laws look that ye hear; / Then will he lead you to his light."²⁷ The play concludes with Mary and Martha celebrating Lazarus' return and Jesus telling them he must go to Jerusalem, but not without first leaving them a blessing.

The N-Town Play

The N-Town version is considerably different than the York play. It does not combine the story of the woman caught in adultery with the raising of Lazarus, although they are adjacent in the order of the cycle. It is also complete, as far as we know; thus it has more details than the York version.²⁸

²⁶ John 11: 21, 32 (ESV).

²⁷ Purvis, J. S. *The York Cycle of Mystery Plays; a Complete Version*, 171.

²⁸ The translation that I used also did not change the text to modern spelling, so any quotations may look more unfamiliar in spelling.

The N-Town play begins with a short sermon of sorts from Jesus. This speech includes a Latin quote from Ezekiel 33:11 which functions like a theme at the beginning of some Medieval sermons, but it seems less formal and more authoritative than many other sermons of the day, as it is presented from the mouth of Jesus. In this speech, Jesus implores those listening to repent of their sins because God is eager and willing to forgive. He also mentions his love for mankind and how he has come to die for humanity. He tells those listening to be merciful and forgiving to one another, as they have been forgiven. The scene then picks up with a scribe and a Pharisee discussing what to do about Jesus, as they fear he is leading the people astray. An accuser arrives, telling the two that he knows of a man who has entered the house of a harlot and is currently with her. He advises that they hurry to catch them in the act. The Pharisee then has the idea to bring the woman before Jesus to try and catch him in an inconsistency. He believes that Jesus must either show mercy and be inconsistent with Moses, or give judgement and be inconsistent with his previous teachings.

The three hurry to the house and a young man comes out in his underwear and boots, holding his pants in his hand. He threatens to stab anyone who gets in his way and violently curses the Pharisees who decide not to deal with such a scoundrel. The Pharisee, scribe, and accuser stand outside and shout to the woman to come outside, all the while taunting her and slandering her. She comes out to them, begging for mercy that her sinful life would not be exposed. The accuser tells her there will be no mercy, and that she will die for her adultery. She then attempts to bribe them to hide her shame, offering gold and silver to keep her name. The scribe tells her that they intend to make an example out of her to other adulterers. Since she is going to die for her adultery, the woman then asks to

be killed right there rather than letting her sin be exposed. She says, “I pray yow, kyllle me prevvly. / Lete not the pepyl know my defame.”²⁹ She is so afraid of the shame that would accompany her exposed sin, she would rather be instantly killed. The scribe refuses, continuing to taunt her, and the three bring the woman to Jesus, demanding that he give judgement.

Jesus begins to write in the dirt as the Pharisees ask whether the woman should be killed or shown mercy. As he continues to write in the dirt, the woman begs for mercy from Jesus, saying she has repentance in her heart; though she is worthy of grief for her oncoming death and shame, she prays that he would show mercy. The Pharisee says that as she has broken the law, she should no longer speak of grace. The accuser and scribe push Jesus for a judgement again, and he tells them that whoever of them has a clean life without sin can cast stones at her. The Pharisee, scribe, and accuser, then begin to run away, saying that Jesus wrote out their sins in the dirt, and that they must leave before they are arrested or killed for the things they have done.

The woman once more pleas for grace and mercy, mentioning that she knows her sins make her worthy of death but that she is sorry for them “with all myn hert.”³⁰ Jesus asks where her accusers have gone and why they have gone. After she quickly explains that they fled in shame, she continues to ask for mercy and begs to hear a word of consolation. Then Jesus asks if any man has condemned her, just as he does in York and in the gospel of John. She says that they have not, but that they put her in Jesus’ grace.

²⁹ Sugano, Douglas, and Victor I. Scherb, eds. *The N-Town Plays*, 189.

³⁰ Sugano, Douglas, Victor I. Scherb, eds., 189.

He tells her, “For me, thou shalt nat condempnyd be. / Go hom ageyn and walk at large. / Loke that thou leve in honesté / And wyl no more to synne, I thee charge.”³¹ The woman thanks Jesus and promises to turn from her old life.

The play concludes with Jesus giving another short sermon-like speech, which doubles as an exhortation to the audience about the importance of repentance. He mentions that as soon as one is contrite, God is ready and willing to forgive. He then speaks again of how his love is seen through his willingness to die. He ends with a benediction over the people, saying, “Now God that dyed for all mankende: / Save all these pepyl, both nyght and day, / And of oure synnys he us unbynde, / Hyghe Lorde of Hevyn that best may. / Amen.”³²

The Chester Play

The Chester play is fascinating for its own reasons. It was put on by the butchers, who in the York cycle put on the Death of Christ pageant. In the way that the York pageant combined the story of the woman caught in adultery with the story of Lazarus, the Chester cycle combines it with Christ’s temptation in the desert. The commonality between the two stories is the testing of Jesus, as pointed out by the Latin subtitle and the editor of *English Mystery Plays: A Selection*. First, Jesus is tested by Satan between human nature and divinity; then he is tested by the Jews between the old law and the new.³³ This connection of testing shows Jesus’ sovereignty, as he can overcome any test

³¹ Sugano, Douglas, Victor I. Scherb, eds., 192.

³² Sugano, Douglas, Victor I. Scherb, eds., 193.

³³ Happé, Peter. *English Mystery Plays: A Selection*, 388.

put before him. By placing these two together, the author is asserting that Christ is master over both spiritual and earthly powers.

The Chester play begins with Satan speaking about Jesus, describing him as a man who is somehow without sin. Satan doesn't know exactly what is going on, only that Jesus is quite a burden to the work he is doing.³⁴ He even goes so far to say that this might even be God, except that this Jesus is hungry, which is illogical for God. Then Satan approaches Jesus and attempts to tempt him in much the same way that he does in the Biblical story from Matthew 4:1-11. He begins by telling Jesus to make bread out of the stones around him, but Jesus refuses. Then Satan takes Jesus up to the high place of the Temple and tells him to throw himself down from this high place, because the scriptures say he will be caught. Jesus rightly points out that the scriptures also say not to test God, so he does not. Finally, Satan takes Jesus to a high mountain and shows him the kingdoms of the world, telling him to bow to Satan and all will be his. Jesus tells him to be gone, citing that the scripture says not to bow to anyone but God. Satan then had one more speech to the audience, where he laments not being able to catch Jesus in sin. He then claims that he must go back to hell, leaving the audience by saying, "Therefore I nowe myne intent, / Or I goe, to make my testament: / To all that in this place be lent, / I bequeath the[e] shitte."³⁵ As Jesus left the audience with a blessing at the end of the N-Town play, Satan leaves the audience with a curse. One can easily imagine this character biting his thumb at the audience as he leaves the stage in failure.

³⁴ Satan also makes clear to point out that Jesus' mother is sinless, which is a common theological point in Medieval Christian discourse.

³⁵ Happé, Peter. *English Mystery Plays: A Selection*, 394.

Then the doctor/ expositor character makes his first appearance in order to explain what was just seen. He is on stage twice in the play, at the end of each major story. In this section he compares Jesus to Adam, saying that Adam gave into gluttony, vainglory, and covetousness when he ate the fruit in the garden of Eden. The expositor then explains that Jesus did the opposite. He rejected gluttony by refusing to turn the stones to bread. He refused vainglory by not jumping from the peak of the temple, and he spurned covetousness when he refused the riches and land offered to him by Satan. He says that Christ overcame the challenges which Adam could not, and then mentions that Satan did not recognize Jesus as God, not due to ignorance but deception. He says, “For of his godhead Sathanas / That tyme was cleane deceyved.”³⁶

The play then continues with the story of the woman caught in adultery. Two Jews enter and quickly plot to catch Christ in a trap between Moses’ law and the mercy which he has been teaching. As the Jews approach Jesus and ask him what is to be done with the woman, he tells them that whoever is without sin can throw the first stone. Then he stoops to write in the dirt, a slight difference from both N-Town and the John account, where Jesus begins writing first. The Jews ask again, then notice what Jesus is writing in the dirt; seeing their own sins, they begin to flee. One even says, “Alas! That I were away, / Farr behynde Fraunce!”³⁷

As Jesus is left with the woman, the section is very similar to the York play, and the Scriptures. Jesus asks where her accusers have gone and if anyone has condemned

³⁶ Happé, 396.

³⁷ Happé, 397.

her. She tells him that they have fled, and he responds almost exactly as in Scripture: “Neither do I damne thee; thow, woman, / Goe forth, and Synne no more!”³⁸ Similar to the other two plays, the woman responds with a speech thanking Jesus and promising to serve and worship him because she now recognizes his divinity. This play does not include a response from Jesus like the other two; instead, the doctor/ expositor returns, summarizing the contents of the pageant since he was last on stage. He does not make much of an argument or exhortation, simply repeating for clarity what Jesus just did on stage. One fascinating point near the end of the speech is that he mentions that each Pharisee only saw his own sin: “For eche one of them had grace / To see theyr synnes in that place; / Yet none of other wyser was, / But his owne eche man knew.”³⁹ This is a grace because Jesus did not publicly humiliate the Jews in the same way they sought to harm the woman. The doctor seems to be making a related point to what Jesus says after forgiving the woman in the York play, namely that to see another’s sins accurately, one must first see one’s own sin. In this way, Jesus is giving these men an unearned mercy, by showing each man his sins privately.

Forgiveness in the Plays

There are many fascinating ways to compare these pageants. They differ in Jesus’ final message of forgiveness to the woman; and they present the main characters differently as they encounter sin and experience mercy, especially the woman. The first of these is Jesus’ final message of the section with the woman caught in adultery. There

³⁸ Happé, 398.

³⁹ Happé, 398.

is a surprisingly different emphasis between the two plays that include this speech, with one being focused on interpersonal forgiveness, and the other focusing on divine forgiveness. The Chester play does not include this passage, which is interesting because the other two do, and if it did it could make a slight majority. The York play has a distinct message of interpersonal forgiveness, it is a forgiveness between individuals. In it, Jesus emphasizes the importance of forgiveness for practical purposes, such as forgiving someone else so they will forgive you. He also goes beyond that to mention how one must forgive to enter the kingdom of Heaven. Meanwhile, the N-Town message has a distinct message of divine forgiveness. Jesus' speech focusses on the individual turning from sin and seeking forgiveness from God. It uses penitential language of repentance and contrition. So why such a difference in emphasis? Jesus' speech here is a kind of summary in which one can put the central message of the story concisely, and yet the pageants seem to disagree on what that central message is. This difference in interpretation is interesting because it causes one to ask if such a difference was widespread, or native to these plays, or if one was somehow informed by the other, perhaps changing so that it would not be too similar. While these two portions of the play are distinct, the central message is not incompatible. The opening speech of Jesus in the N-Town version also emphasizes the importance of forgiving others, showing that the theme is certainly present, even if it is not the focus of the summary that Jesus gives after his forgiveness.

One theory for why the N-Town play includes a message of repentance, while the York play includes a message of interpersonal forgiveness, is that the N-Town is the more orthodox of the plays. Steenbrugge explains of penance in plays:

Given the importance of the sacrament of penance for salvation in orthodox doctrine and given the contemporary debate surrounding the sacrament, it is of special interest to see how late medieval English religious plays depict penance and in particular what importance they attribute to contrition, auricular confession, and priestly absolution. If plays lean toward a Lollard position we would expect a disregard for confession and priests, and a concomitant emphasis on true contrition. Conversely, if the plays are orthodox, we would expect them to highlight the unique, salvific effect of confession and priestly absolution whenever penance and redemption are featured in the story.⁴⁰

While the N-Town play does not focus specifically on priestly confession, it certainly mentions contrition and has more emphasis on repentance than the York play. Initially, one might think that this argument is combatted by the fact that N-Town was the one of the two which is less Biblically accurate and more creative; expecting that to mean it would be the less orthodox. However, this is a false assumption, as orthodoxy and Scriptural accuracy were not necessarily synonymous in this time and place. As the Catholic tradition also draws from tradition and, occasionally, from logical extension, Biblical accuracy is not the only litmus test to see if a given work aligns with the proper beliefs of the church. There is no prevalence of *Sola Scriptura* to make the Bible the only test of orthodoxy. This means that N-Town may be the more orthodox, even if by this slight difference in emphasis.

The second major difference between the three plays is the roles of the characters. The N-Town version gives a slightly more active role to the Pharisee characters and adds the young man who was also in adultery. But most fascinating is the role of the woman in the N-town play, who is far more active than in any other version of the story. In the Biblical account from John 8, the woman says three words throughout the entire story;

⁴⁰ Steenbrugge, Charlotte. *Drama and Sermon in Late Medieval England: Performance, Authority, Devotion*, 123.

she says, “No one, Lord” in response to Jesus asking if anyone has condemned her. The York and Chester plays are mostly consistent with this version, with the addition of her words of thanks and praise after her forgiveness. Both versions include her as a fairly simple character, despite her centrality to the story. The N-Town play is markedly different to give her a much larger role. This woman seems to be a prostitute known by the accuser, when he says, “A fayre yonge qwene hereby doth dwelle, / Both fresch and gay upon to loke.”⁴¹ This is different from other versions and may have had an impact on the audience, as prostitution was taken seriously around this period.

The N-Town play also features the scene where the Pharisees catch the woman. It is a painful scene to read and certainly might have been to watch. They taunt and accuse her, shaming her with cruel names as she repeatedly asks for mercy. She becomes so distraught and hopeless that she wishes to be killed where she is standing rather than have her shame exposed. How she could have been a known prostitute but also have friends who were unaware of her shame is unclear, but in this culture of honor, public shame and disgrace can have a powerful effect on an individual. It is also possible her role was known to some like the accuser, but secret to many others. Then as she appears before Jesus, she interrupts the Pharisees’ questioning of Jesus several times in order to beg for forgiveness. She also makes it clear that she has repented of her sins, recognizing her worthiness of judgement.

The character of the woman in N-Town is also different because Jesus gives her the fullest picture of forgiveness, addressing the social aspect which seems to be unique to this version. All versions of the story address the nature of private repentance and

⁴¹ Sugano, Douglas, Victor I. Scherb, eds. *The N-Town Plays*, 187.

forgiveness; being forgiven by God is presented as more important than being forgiven by one's neighbors. However, the community is powerful, and the distinction between private and public sin is not to be ignored. According to the Chester play, Jesus let the Jews see their own sin, but none of the others, sparing them from the same humiliation which they have just put the woman through. The expositor points this out as a grace to them in the Chester play, but the York pageant adds another layer to this grace. When Jesus says "Go hom ageyn and walk at large," he is freeing her from the shame which she feared earlier to the point of death. It is a small line with heavy significance in light of the earlier passage. Because of her forgiveness and repentance, she is now a changed woman and free from her old life. This is reminiscent of the point that the York play makes by putting the story of Lazarus and the woman caught in adultery together. Forgiveness is like a resurrection. The woman is given fresh freedoms to live without internal guilt and external shame. The sins for which she was known are dead with her grief, and now she stands free from condemnation. All this together makes for a dynamically different character than the one presented in York, Chester, or in the Gospel of John.

Why might her role be so different than any other version? One reason could be that the author sought more opportunities to show her sorrow and repentance than were in other versions. Steenbrugge discusses the importance of the emotive portion of penance saying:

Theologians had long debated the exact roles of contrition and priestly absolution, but by the later Middle Ages the notion that priestly absolution was indispensable for forgiveness of sins was firmly established; hence, of course, the absolute necessity of auricular confession. This stress on the importance of confession and absolution did not invalidate the need for contrition and satisfaction. Middle English devotional texts are very emphatic about the necessity and importance of contrition for a true confession and hence forgiveness of sins: 'þou mayste wel perceyue with what manere compunccioun, contricion, and wepyng that þou

oweþ for to make confession for thi synnes.’ They also regularly stress the importance of external signs, particularly the need for and effect of tears, as in ‘contriscion ... thereof þu muste make a drynke, þat is to sey, thu muste wepe for þi synnes’ and ‘In þis freshe water of þin eyes washe þin foule soule.’⁴²

In, short, having the woman repeatedly show her sorrow at her sin could be beneficial in the eyes of the author, especially if that author was more orthodox and valued confession. This theory was already proposed when studying Jesus’ final speech, and valuing sorrow at sin could support it. This woman could have provided a perfect example of the repentant sinner for the audience to emulate, which may be why she speaks to Jesus more than in the York and Chester versions.

Furthermore, the author recognized the role of the audience as closer to the woman than to Jesus. In the York play, when Jesus turns to the audience after forgiving the woman and tells others to forgive, they relate themselves to him. The audience is invited to subconsciously put themselves closer to Jesus than to the woman in the story. Even if they are meant to see this speech as cautionary against being like the Pharisees, the play does not place the audience in the position of the woman. With the N-Town speech focused on repentance, the audience relates themselves more to the woman who has just been forgiven, this effect is enhanced by her expanded role in the N-town play. Even if she appears more flawed or desperate than in other versions, she also comes across as more fully human. The N-Town play does a particularly good job at showing the faults, passion, failures, and potential for redemption of humanity in the representation of a woman caught in adultery.

⁴² Steenbrugge, Charlotte. *Drama and Sermon in Late Medieval England: Performance, Authority, Devotion*, 118.

Another interesting distinction is the difference between the way Jesus tells the woman to “sin no more” in the three plays. While Chester and the Scripture itself are straightforward, the language of the other plays is more complicated and varied. In the York version of the play, Jesus forgives the woman and says, “Of all thy miss I make thee free. / Look thou no more to sin assent.”⁴³ The language is of freedom from an outside force. Jesus commands that she stop giving into temptation, as something external to her and her desires. In the N-Town version, Jesus tells the woman, “Loke that thou leve in honesté / And wyl no more to synne, I thee charge.”⁴⁴ This has a very different implication about sin, that it is internal and something willed, rather than simply assented to. There seems to be more agency implied in this play, which is consistent with the woman having more agency and a more dynamic role in the N-Town version than in the York. This distinction is an intriguing difference in choice of words and emphasis, but the plays are not truly at odds, especially with the line near the end of Jesus’ final speech in N-Town, saying, “And of oure synnys he us unbynde.”⁴⁵ This is more reminiscent of the external sin idea and is consistent with York. And although it is not in Jesus’ speech to the woman, the Chester play may have its own addition to this external theme when the woman responds to Jesus. She says, “From hence-forth synne I will flee.”⁴⁶ Fascinatingly, the image is still external, yet unlike the idea of sin as chains, the picture is sin as something pursuing. This is consistent with descriptions of sin as crouching at the

⁴³ Purvis, J. S. *The York Cycle of Mystery Plays; a Complete Version*, 168.

⁴⁴ Sugano, Douglas, Victor I. Scherb, eds. *The N-Town Plays*, 192.

⁴⁵ Sugano, Douglas, Victor I. Scherb, eds, 193.

⁴⁶ Happé, Peter. *English Mystery Plays: A Selection*, 398.

door in Genesis 4:7, and with Satan described as a lion in 1 Peter 5:8. Whether sin is shown as external or internal, all three plays show Jesus' power to free one from it.

Conclusion

In the York and N-Town versions in particular is the fact that both Mary and the woman caught in adultery for death because of their feelings of loss. Before discussing why, one should note the oddity of both of these characters mentioning that they wish for death. While the deaths which each character mentions are not strictly suicide, a Medieval audience member would likely have been struck by such an extreme wish. Suicide was thought of as one of the worst forms of stealing, as if stealing a life from God. So why would both Mary and this woman express such extreme desires, and what can comparing them reveal?

One way of seeing comparison is noting the similar effects from different causes. Mary is at such an extreme loss because her brother has recently died. With Lazarus' death, Mary of Bethany feels such an extreme grief that it is comparable to a death, and so extreme that physical death would be some kind of relief. On the other hand, the woman caught in adultery asks for death because she has been caught in sin. She does not want her shame exposed, and as she expresses to Jesus, she feels a deep remorse for what she has done. Before she has been forgiven by Jesus, it is as if there has been a death of sorts. The fact that her reaction is as extreme as Mary's in the York play shows that her grief over her sin ought to parallel the amount of grief from a death. In a sense, it is her own death she is mourning, as sin is described as making someone dead, and as Romans says, "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ

Jesus.”⁴⁷ Sin causes spiritual death, both as a consequence of wronging a holy God, and by the consequences of the harmful nature of sin.

This also fits with the idea of “grievous” sin. This term is used specifically to describe sin in the Catholic prayer for confession known as the *Confiteor*. This prayer of confession seeks to admit one’s most grievous sin before the heaven, and asks that Mary, the Archangel Michael, the Apostles, and the Saints pray to God on behalf of the sinner. In the Reformation the idea is clearly retained, for example in the Lutheran hymn “O Man, Thy Grievous Sin Bemoan.” This tradition reminds one that sin is well described as grievous, causing or characterized by severe pain, suffering, or sorrow.⁴⁸ This causes grief to both God and man; it is destructive and painful. Therefore, if sin is like death, it is fitting that forgiveness is like resurrection. Jesus gives a new life to the woman, and by seeing both of these plays in comparison, the grace which God gives is that much more powerful.

Looking at all three of the plays together, one can see different yet cohesive visions of forgiveness and sin. The York play combines the *Pericope Adulterae* with the story of Lazarus, showing that forgiveness is like resurrection. In it, Jesus emphasizes interpersonal forgiveness, shows sin as internal, and does not change the woman’s role from John’s Gospel account. The N-Town play meanwhile does not combine the *Pericope*, emphasizes divine forgiveness and external sin, and greatly expands the woman’s role. Finally, the Chester play combines the *Pericope* with Jesus’ temptation in

⁴⁷ Romans 6:23 (ESV)

⁴⁸ *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, s.v. “grievous,” accessed March 2, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/grievous>.

the wilderness, describes sin as external, and does not change the woman's role in the story from John or York. Each have distinct elements and focuses, but put together, one sees a more complete picture of the love and mercy of Jesus as shown through this story and expressed in Medieval Pageantry.

CHAPTER FOUR

Considering Forgiveness in Sermons and Cycle Plays

There are many ways of looking at the overlap between drama and sermon in the Medieval period. As Steenbrugge notes, “It is impossible to state with any certainty the exact correlation between late medieval sermons and religious plays in England because of the fragmentary, and at times contradictory, nature of the evidence.”¹ While this is certainly true, there are some major theories. First there is the belief that playwrights had the same perspective of preachers, and that many plays were written by those who preach. This view is argued held by Owst and is older in the field of sermon study. Briscoe argues against this theory in her chapter “Preaching and Medieval English Drama.” Briscoe does not specify exactly what she believes the relationship to be, but she casts doubt on most plays being written by preachers. Steenbrugge falls somewhere in between, but closer to Briscoe’s view, arguing that the relationship should be thought of as connected but not directly related. She specifies the differences between plays and sermons to explain why she also thinks most were not written by preachers, even if they have some similarities:

Likewise, there are very few instances in which late medieval English plays and sermons can be shown to have exerted a direct influence on each other. We should think more in terms of cross-fertilization across various literary genres rather than posit an especially marked relation between late medieval English religious drama and sermons. Indeed, in the remainder of this book some

¹ Steenbrugge, Charlotte. *Drama and Sermon in Late Medieval England: Performance, Authority, Devotion*, 14.

fundamental differences will emerge in the performance styles, didactic aims, and even, to some extent, the religious content of plays and sermons.¹

She focusses more on the function of each genre rather than on trying to prove a direct influence, as she says that few examples of direct connection exist. Nevertheless, she provides an important viewpoint in understanding the relationship between Medieval sermons and theatre.

Ann Marie Hubert, author of “Performing Piety: Preachers and Players in East Anglia, 1400-1520,” argues that plays and sermons are far more connected than most scholars believe. She focusses on East Anglia but argues for a redefinition of the understanding of relationship between sermon and play, arguing they should be thought of as related but not identical genres. She offers a more complex view than simple causality of one form upon the other. Rather, she argues for a slightly stronger version of a Steenbrugian “cross-fertilization.” Hubert writes,

The investigation of the East Anglian dramatic corpus through the lens of medieval sermon theory reveals that sermons and plays were mutually constitutive in this region, and posits each as interdependent co-contributors to a dynamic continuum of performativity characteristic of and distinct to fifteenth-century East Anglian devotional culture.²

She believes that in the period plays were learning from sermons as sermons were learning from plays, unlike the previously held belief that most plays were just drawing from sermons.

This concept of mutual influence between the forms makes them ripe for analytical investigation by those seeking to better understand theological concepts of the

¹ Steenbrugge, 14.

² Hubert, Ann Marie. "Performing Piety: Preachers and Players in East Anglia, 1400-1520," 2.

period. The two are not quite unified, nor completely independent. But by studying a sermon and several plays of the period, this thesis has attempted to get a glimpse into the cultural and religious streams which affected the laity of Medieval England. One can see the importance of sorrow for sin, for example, as communicated to the laity through both sermons and cycle plays. Even similar ideas were transferred in different ways, and certainly had different emphases. Nevertheless, both contributed to the world and understanding of the people of Medieval England.

Differences Between the Forms

There are two major differences in the way that Medieval English sermons and cycle plays functioned. Steenbrugge puts it this way:

This minimal cross-fertilization between plays and sermons comes to the fore especially in their didacticism and assumption of authority. The late medieval English sermons that have survived tend to adopt a straightforward authoritative tone and present clear, objective lessons and instructions to their congregation that promote docile, passive audience responses, during and after the preaching event: confess, accept this gloss, fast during Lent, on the one hand, but, on the other hand, do not discuss the sacrament, do not seek to have knowledge of matters beyond your comprehension. The Middle English plays that have come down to us, conversely, set out to encourage active, critical, emotional, personal engagement of the spectators with the play and its lessons.³

The first major difference is in authority. Sermons have a tone and message which is not meant to be questioned. The sermon is not open to many avenues of interpretation and is more focused on theological accuracy than anything else. Sermons are presented as objective truth, straightforward and clear. The plays on the other hand, are not presented as authoritative. They often use anachronisms and take interpretive license, with the goal

³ Steenbrugge, Charlotte. *Drama and Sermon in Late Medieval England: Performance, Authority, Devotion*, 155.

being to present a version of the story rather than strictly retell the Biblical version. They often encourage question or discussion and are open to interpretation. There is a much humbler tone to them, as the plays speak from a lay perspective. They make use of humor and offer lighthearted moments in a way that works uniquely in theatre. When the Pharisee in the Chester play wishes to be “Farr behynde Fraunce”⁴ there is a clear difference between the authority of sermons and the authority of cycle plays.

The second major difference between the sermons and the plays is in the didacticism of each type. Both are didactic in some way, seeking to draw the laity into these stories, that they may receive some truth from them. Both explain the Bible and make it available in a time when the Bible was far less accessible than it is now. They also both present moral messages, showing proper behavior for the Christian. Yet the modes of didacticism are vastly different from each other. Sermons are straightforward in their teaching, and generally offer an intellectual experience. While an emotion is not completely foreign to sermons, their aim is proper theology rather than stirring up the congregation. Young preachers were often warned by sermon manuals to avoid excessive noise and movement, or any other performative aspect that could interfere with the audience’s receipt of the sermon.⁵ An excessive performance could be seen as deceitful, as it obscures the Gospel, and might interfere with the straightforward learning that was meant to happen in a sermon.

⁴ Happé, Peter. *English Mystery Plays: A Selection*, 397.

⁵ Steenbrugge, Charlotte. *Drama and Sermon in Late Medieval England: Performance, Authority, Devotion*, 26.

Cycle plays, on the other hand, were an emotive experience in which the audience beheld and partook in the incarnation of these various stories. After showing a particularly moving passage, Greg Walker, the author of “The Cultural Work of Early Drama” chapter from the *Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre* notes:

This is didactic in the sense in which a blow in the face or a first kiss are didactic. It teaches us on the level of felt experience rather than absorbed knowledge, or rather on both together. Critics have quite rightly drawn attention to the capacity of this drama, and of the biblical plays especially, to present religious events and doctrinal truths through spectacle and stage picture, on the principle of ‘behold and believe!’: not so much representing the events of the Annunciation, the Nativity, or the Passion, as performing them afresh for each new generation of believers to witness.⁶

Plays, then, are capable of a completely different way of conveying the same story from the sermon. They emphasize emotion in the telling of the story and invite the audience to participate in the story they are witnessing.

Steenbrugge discusses the way that the cycle plays can involve the audience while considering the N-Town version of the story of the woman caught in adultery, as examined in chapter two:

The opening sermon contains relatively self-evident material, such as the call to repent your sins, to love God, and to forgive your neighbor if they trespass against you. Presumably any vaguely devout spectator would have made some kind of mental promise to adhere to Jesus’s commands—especially in view of the scribe’s and Pharisee’s reactions. When the plot develops, and the question of how to deal with the adulteress emerges, however, it is also plausible that these same spectators would not have found it so easy to forgive this sinner in the theatrical world and even harder to forgive an adulterer in the ordinary world... When Jesus refuses to condemn her, then, the message of the opening sermon—to forgive one’s neighbor—is brought home again to the spectators in a rather more personal

⁶ Walker, Greg. “The Cultural Work of Early Drama.” Chapter. In *the Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, edited by Richard Beadle and Alan J. Fletcher, 94.

way: many of the spectators may well have fallen short of this requirement for salvation in the little time that has elapsed since the opening sermon.⁷

Steenbrugge points out the way that the audiences' reactions are encouraged and expected. The play is more effective at convicting by causing the audience to recognize their own inability to forgive, and it needs the structure along with the emotional pull of Christ's forgiveness to accomplish that. A similar example is in the York crucifixion pageant, in which the soldiers are attempting to nail Jesus' hands and feet to the cross as he lies silently on the stage. The focus is on the soldiers, and their humorous attempts to pin Jesus down. The audience relates to them, and as the cross is raised, the audience sees that they have become implicated in condoning the cross, like the rest of humanity.⁸ The play accomplishes this not with the words of a sermon telling the individual of their guilt but bringing it to the audience's mind through the structure of the story. The plays seem to prefer to show rather than to tell, they are demonstrative in a way that applied particularly to the common man, helping one to see how to live on a level different from hearing a sermon. While cycle plays do teach lessons and are therefore didactic, they are often didactic in a way completely foreign to sermons.

Another way of framing the difference between sermons and cycle plays is the concern with orthodoxy versus orthopraxy. Sermons are concerned with teaching correct information, and with making sure that the congregation knows the right things. They were primarily intellectual, appealing to logos or ethos rather than pathos. This is

⁷ Steenbrugge, Charlotte. *Drama and Sermon in Late Medieval England: Performance, Authority, Devotion*, 55.

⁸ Beadle, Richard, and Pamela M. King, eds. *York Mystery Plays: A Selection in Modern Spelling*, 211-212.

reflected in the way that preachers were told to avoid excessive movement or performative tactics so that the orthodox message would not be obstructed. One can notice that BL/Add 40672/164 does not include an exhortation to action, other than the statement that the audience should not muse too much about what Jesus wrote. The sermon author is concerned with arguing against penance, but he offers little as to what the audience should do in their daily lives. Of course, this sermon might have been considered by most to be unorthodox because it argued against the established penance structure of the church, nevertheless, the sermon author is conveying his view of correct belief and trying to keep the audience consistent with the Scriptures. Another Medieval English sermon might be much more in concert with the ideas of the cycle plays. The plays, meanwhile, seem to be more concerned with orthopraxy, or how the audience should live. This is mirrored in the fact that plays convey their meaning by embodying it. While the verbal element of communication is common to both forms, plays use words alongside action and emotion, making their ideas more physical and tangible. The plays often do include a strong message of action to the audience, such as Jesus' message to the woman in the York and N-Town plays of Chapter Three. While the two plays did not pull the same message from the same story, they were both concerned with making clear a message to share with the audience. Furthermore, the usage of Jesus' expectation of forgiveness from the beginning of the N-Town play, along with the assumption that the audience will fail that expectation, demonstrates a practical example of how one ought to live by using the audience member himself or herself as a negative example. While the plays themselves did include some messages of orthodoxy, such as the discussion of God's limitless ability to forgive, they almost always filter it through practical action,

such as Jesus' appeal to the audience to seek God's forgiveness. The varying emphases of sermons as orthodox and plays as orthopraxical may have explained how both coexisted and contributed to the Medieval mind.

God's Mercy to Sinners

While sermons and cycle plays often differ in the way that they convey their message, there are some values which are common to both. For example, one can see in both BL/Add 40672/164, and the three plays on the *Pericope Adulterae*, an emphasis on the feeling of sorrow at one's sin which are part of the process of seeking forgiveness. The sermon author specifies it through contrast with the penance system. Rather than an act suggested by a priest, the author says that "end of this confession is sorrow for sin that is done, and flee for to sin after."⁹ As long as one feels the sorrow, thereby recognizing the weight of wronging a holy and perfect God, and resolves to work to avoid this sin in the future, the author believes that nothing else is required. The author wants to make clear that God's forgiveness is not transactional, and no amount of penance or other good work could pay for it. One of the most evident points of the *Pericope Adulterae* is that there is nothing the woman can possibly do to pay for her innocence. Jesus does not ask her to try; rather he forgives her and commands that she sin no more. Even the sorrow that the woman feels for her sin does not earn her Jesus' forgiveness, as he says that whoever is without sin should be the first to throw a stone, and he is the only one without sin. Therefore, if he forgives her, it is not out of obligation, but his own mercy. This is

⁹ Line 42-43 (See Appendix A)

always the nature of God's mercy; it is an unearned gift, born of God's love and generosity.

The N-town play in particular shows this idea well with the role of the woman. Throughout the play, the woman has an awareness of her own sin, and is constantly begging Jesus for mercy, despite her unworthiness for it. She very well demonstrates that the proper feeling of one who seeks repentance is sorrow. While Jesus speaks at the end of the play, mentioning contrition in a monologue, it was likely that the actions of the woman spoke louder to the audience. Her role provides the emotive connection to the audience and lives out the sorrow in a way that hearing from Jesus does not. She demonstrates particularly well the fact that sin leads only to death. She recognizes that her life is over as she is caught without the Pharisees and grieves as if she is suffering a death.

Sin leads to the death of relationships, of freedom, and eventually of the self. Thus, it is only by Christ's intervention of forgiveness that this woman finds new life. In this encounter, Jesus saves her from the immediate consequences of her actions with the Pharisees, but also corrects her path, leading to a new life in the moment, and eventually he takes her sin upon himself, saving her not just for the moment but for eternity. The forgiveness offered to the woman, made possible because of the cross, shadows Jesus' own resurrection. By freeing her from the death of sin, she is made new, born again, and raised to walk in newness of life. The picture of forgiveness is a smaller scale, and imperfect, as the woman would certainly need forgiveness again soon. Yet the story is a microcosm for the greater picture of forgiveness seen in Jesus' death and resurrection.

Both sermon and play hint at the greater truth behind the story, the goodness of God in the face of unworthy sinners. When faced with a woman who was dead in sin, rebelling against him with her action, Jesus did not simply let the Pharisees stone her, nor does he simply send her away with the Pharisees. Instead, he offered her forgiveness and new life. When he is in all rights to bring her death, he instead brings the woman out of it. And more, the forgiveness that he offers is not without cost. The cost of true forgiveness was paid by Christ in a very real and painful way on the cross. He suffered emotionally, as he agonized and sweat blood in the Garden of Gethsemane. He suffered physically under the lashes, the beatings, and the nails in his hands and feet. And he suffered spiritually as he took sin upon him, asking God why he had been forsaken. Not only did he spare the woman, but he gave his own life, of infinite value, for her sake, suffering and dying in the way that she deserved. All this was done so he could honestly tell her that he did not condemn her, and that she was free to go and live unbound from sin. As said in BL/Add 40672/164, “Nyle thou sin more after,” or as in the twenty-fourth N-Town play, “Go hom ageyn and walk at large.” He did the same thing for each of us, for we are like the woman in the story.

How can we refuse the incomprehensible love offered by Jesus, both in the *Pericope Adulterae*, and in the larger story of his life? Jesus shows that God does not require anything in exchange for forgiveness, no penance nor good work, but he continuously heaps the free gift of grace on the undeserving. When we recognize this, in limited human capacity, because no one can fully comprehend the weight of their own sin nor the weight of God’s forgiveness, it similarly changes the way we interact with others. We cannot possibly seek to be the Pharisees in the story, those who ignore their own

failures in favor of focus on the woman's. Jesus' actions of forgiveness to each person, along with his perfect example, demand an interpersonal forgiveness from the forgiven. The vastness of love shown to each one who recognizes it, overflows and spills into the life of a believer. In a small way, humans are given the opportunity to partake in Christ's work of bringing resurrection. While humans cannot give the everlasting new life that comes from Jesus, we can help bring healing, closure, and hope to others by means of forgiveness. After being given the greatest source of life, how can we not share life in small ways to those who we can? Forgiveness not only helps the one being forgiven, but often helps to remind us of the goodness of God towards us, turning our eyes back towards God. God is so good that he spares the penalty of death for the sinner, then pays that penalty himself, then offers forgiveness at the mere ask, and allows humans to share in the life-giving work of forgiveness. Surely "from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace."¹⁰

¹⁰ John 1:16 (ESV)

APPENDIX A

Sabato iij Septimane Quadragesime (Saturday in 3rd week of Lent) (BL/Add
40672/ 164)

This gospel telleth how that Christ saved a woman, and taught his church. John
saith how *Jesus went into the hill of Olives, and after in the grey morning he came
again into the temple.* And here we been taught to pray and think on God before
we preach. *And all the people came to Christ, and he sitting taught them. And*
5 *pharisees and scribes brought a woman taken in adultery, and they putted her in
the middle. And they said to Christ 'Master, this woman is now taken in adultery;
but in the law Moses bade us stone such a woman. But what sayest thou here?'*
And these things they said tempting him that they might accuse him, for they had
granted of Christ that he would always have mercy, and that he would keep
10 Moses' law; but they thought that the one of the these he must forsake, And so he
should always be taken in his own words or in his deeds. *But Jesus, bowing down,
with his finger wrote in the earth. And when they dwelt asking him, he reride*
(stood up) him and said to them 'He that is without sin of thou, cast he first a
stone on her'...* And after Christ bowing him wrote in the earth as he did first.
15 *And they hearing went away one after another, beginning at the eldest, and Jesus
left alone and the woman standing in the middle. And Jesus rearing him up, said
thus to the woman, 'Woman, where be they that accused thee? No man hath*

damned thee?’ And she said ‘No man, sire.’ And Jesus said to her ‘And I shall not damn thee. Go thou, and now nyle (do not) thou sin more after.’*

20 And here men doubt commonly how Moses’ law and men's law keep
righteousness of God in damning of wicked men, sith* it were better to the church
that men, that would profit thereto and keep them after from such sin, were saved
on lyue* (life or love), and not this deed. How then is this law rightful? Here men
say that God's law is just, both the old law and the new; but of man's law they say
25 not so, but suppose that it be oft unjust. And yet these that should hold God's law
sin oft in use of it. But this we take is belief that God's law is ever good, and men
sin not in use of it but if their sin before be cause. And therefore justices of each
law should be righteous and clean of life, for God must rule men of the law, how
they should judge in each case. And judgments of man's law be commonly false
30 now, for Christ would (willed?) for the time of grace that men should turn men by
preaching and good life and clean of priests, without such feigned laws. And so
such judgments be all evil or many of them. And thus priests should flee this and
take the certain way of Christ.

 But over this men doubt oft how that these shrifts came in, for
35 God's law speaketh not but of shrift made to God, and of general shrift to men,
and to stir them(*) and leave their(*) sin. And these shrifts be oft better for this
then these new rounnyngis*. Here men say, if they durst, that no shrift that now is
used is good to man, but in as much as it letteth man to sin. And so, if priests
preach fast as Christ had ordered them to preach, it seemeth that this were enough
40 with general confession. And so, all if it do good, nevertheless it doeth much

harm, for confessors han* here men to spoil the people by simony, and to fool
them many ways by covetousness and lechery. And so no dread ordinance of
Christ were better than these new laws, for, as Christ sayeth to this woman, end of
this confession is sorrow for sin that is done, and flee for to sin after. And this
45 must God do always, by giving of his grace; and he giveth gladly his grace to men
that keep his ordinance than he doeth to other men that leave it and keep man's.

Muse we not what Christ wrote here, as some dream that he wrote first to
the law and after he wrote the foul sins that the accusers had done, and moved
them to shame of them, and so to flee out of the place. But, however God
50 ordained of this, it is likely of belief that Christ wrote here as much as was
needful as to us to know, and keep we that as now, and muse we not about
uncertain, for such vain curiosity were a tempting of God

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