

NO PLACE LIKE HOME: THE NORTHAMPTON 'ABRAHAM AND ISAAC' PLAY: A RE-APPRAISAL

David Mills

The subject of Abraham's sacrifice of his son Isaac at God's command, as recounted in Genesis chapter 22, verses 1–13, forms the basis for six medieval plays — those of Brome, Chester, N.Town, Northampton, Towneley, and York.¹ As is usually the case, the biblical narrative offers no explanation for God's seemingly arbitrary and horrific command and does not explore the thoughts and emotions of father and son. These issues had to be addressed by the medieval playwright in order to stage the action and explain it to the audience. York adopts an implicitly typological approach in making Isaac 'Thyrty zere and more sumdele' (82), Christ's age at the time of His passion, so that the adult Isaac becomes a willing collaborator in his own sacrifice. The other five plays, however, make Isaac a child, thereby intensifying both the pathos and the horror of the situation and setting the action against an implied background of normative familial and paternal love. However, by stressing the anguish of the two main characters, the plays then need to justify the emotional expense by the reward that it brings from God.

Among these six plays, the Northampton play has received only limited, and somewhat qualified, critical attention. Found on folios 59 to 86 of Dublin: Trinity College MS D.4.18, a composite volume which includes records of Northampton, it is generally agreed that the text was written in that town or its neighbourhood. The manuscript text can be confidently dated to 1461 on the basis of the surrounding material.² However, no record has yet been found of any dramatic performance in the town of Northampton, and the manuscript date and location are not secure guides to the date and place of original composition.

In 1898–99 Brotanek, who provided an early edition of the play, suggested that it lay outside the English tradition, claiming significant correspondences with the equivalent episode in *Le Mistere du Vieil Testament*.³ The play had some merit to those who valued naturalism; Hardin Craig, in passing, praised its 'dignity and no small amount of spirit',⁴ but later critics have been more reserved in their appraisals. William Tydeman compares the play unfavourably with the Brome play on

the same subject, arguing that its opening dialogue 'renders the ensuing action something of a controlled experiment' and that the play 'dissipates something of the familial bond between Abraham and son'.⁵ To those who prefer a typological treatment of Old Testament episodes, the Northampton 'Abraham' has proved an awkward anomaly. Rosemary Woolf emphasised its unique features which she felt wilfully impaired its typological significance:

[The author] has pursued his own eccentric aim by stripping away the typological elements in the characterisation of Isaac until he is left with the bare minimum of one line.⁶

In this paper I consider the achievement of Northampton play. It honestly exposes its difficulties in justifying the sacrifice and exploring with perception and sensitivity the emotional tensions and loyalties within a patriarchal household. It also shows an unusual awareness of dramatic unity in time, space and action.

I wish to focus on two distinctive features of the play —its justification for God's command and its introduction of the character of Abraham's wife Sara.

The Moral of the Play

Though the biblical account provides no explanation of God's command, it can be supplemented from the work of the first-century Jewish historian Josephus in his *Antiquities of the Jews*, in which he paraphrases biblical events, drawing upon wider authorities. This work was familiar to the Fathers of the Church and finds its way into their commentaries and into histories such as the *Historia Scholastica*. Josephus offers what became the traditional explanation that God tested Abraham's faith and priorities by demanding the sacrifice of his son Isaac:

[God] being desirous to make an experiment of Abraham's religious disposition towards himself, appeared to him, and enumerated all the blessings he had bestowed upon him ... Accordingly he commanded him to carry him [Isaac] to the mountain Moriah, and to build an altar, and offer him for a burnt offering upon it; for that this would best manifest his religious disposition towards him, if he preferred what was pleasing to God before the preservation of his own son.⁷

The successful outcome of this test is then rewarded by the renewal of God's covenant to Abraham that he will be the father of a chosen people.

Three of our plays spell out that covenant as the consequence of the test. In the Chester version, which follows the promise of a son and the injunction to circumcision, God offers no initial explanation, but in its concluding lines He renews His covenant with Abraham and the Expositor provides both typological and exemplary meanings for the audience. God's Angel in York, though also peremptory, tells Abraham that 'God wille assaye þi wille and cheere' (67) and returns at the end to reaffirm the covenant (335-51). In N.Town the Angel offers no initial explanation (73-88) but reaffirms the covenant finally (187-92, 209-32).

In two other plays the benefit is less clear. In Towneley, where Abraham recounts the sad lot of fallen Man, God presents the trial to the audience as a bargain:

I will help Adam and his kynde,
Might I luf and lewte fynd 49-50

and something of this is communicated at the start to Abraham by Him:

Of mercy haue I herd thi cry
Thi deuoute prayers haue me bun 65-6

but the Angel offers no elaboration on this promise at the end of the play. Brome's God explains His purpose to the audience:

I schall asay now hys good wyll,
Whether he lovyth better hys chyld or me 44-5

and the Angel perhaps offers Abraham hope in adding to the command 'But in thy hart be nothyng dysmayd' (93). But no explanation of God's purpose is given at the end; instead a Doctor draws the twin morals of obedience to God and the folly of grieving over infant death (435-65).

But though the Northampton playwright dutifully acknowledges this 'test of faith' motive, his words suggest that he is neither convinced nor particularly interested in it. His God is from the outset deterministic and omniscient:

Of all þing þer euer was I am þe begynnere
Boþe hevenly and erthly, and of hem þat ben in hell;
At my bidding was wrought boþe goode man and synnere.⁸ 1-3

Even sin becomes part of divine intent rather than the product of rebellious human free-will. Abraham, accordingly, is pre-chosen to fulfil a divine purpose:

But ȝit siþ he [Mankind] haþ displesid me, I haue made proviaunce
 Þat anodre of his kynde shal plese me ayeine
 Þe which haþe euer be my seruauñt in al manere obseruaunce,
 Abraham is his name ... 9–12

Proviaunce, a variant of *purveiaunce*, refers to 'divine foreknowledge, divine providence or governance' (*MED purveiaunce* (b)) and suggests the predetermined role of Abraham. The playwright then goes on to reveal, honestly but naively, his puzzlement at the need of an omniscient God for such a test:

Now he [Abraham] shuld loue me moste, as reson wold and skylle,
 And so I wot well he doþe, I dyd it neuer mystrest,
 But ȝit, for to preue hym, þe truþe wol I fele. 19–21

The passage counters the doubtful conditionals (*shuld*, *wold*) by the seemingly assured assertions (*I wot well*, *I dyd it neuer*), only to turn back upon itself (*but ȝit*). It is as if in some way God doubts the validity of His own knowledge.

At the time of sacrifice, Abraham finally confronts the same issue but can answer only speculatively and inadequately:

But God haþe chose þe for his owne store
 In counfor of al my mys ... 246–7
 Parauenture in batayle or oþer myschef þou myȝtest dye
 Or ellis in anoþer vngoodely veniaunce. 250–1

The lines find a parallel in Josephus:

I suppose he thinks thee worthy to get clear of this world neither by disease, neither by war, not by any other severe way, by which death usually comes upon men, but so that he will receive thy soul with prayers and holy offices of religion, and will place thee near to himself, and thou wilt be to me a succourer and support in my old age, on which account I principally brought thee up, and thou wilt thereby procure me God for my Comforter instead of thyself.⁹

The passage clarifies the slightly puzzling claim that the sacrifice will be 'in counfor of al my mys' but the claim that the good die young and miss a

world of trouble resonates to the present in its inability to deal with child-death and are even less convincing in the context of ritual human sacrifice.

Abraham restates the paradox on being instructed to spare his son:

Now, Lord, I know wele thou dydest but asay
What I wold sey þerto, ouþer ye or nay.
Þou knowest myne hert now, and *so þou didest afore*.

276–8 (my italics)

That final phrase suggests at least puzzlement, at worst bitterness, and seems to question the necessity for the whole action. Abraham subsequently echoes line 278 to Sarah:

Now he knoweþ myn hert verayly. 354

By attesting the omniscience of God in those phrases ‘And so I wot well he doþe’, ‘and so þou didest afore’, the text causes the audience itself to question the action He has required.

Such a doubt is even given open expression by Abraham:

But, goode Lord, saue þi plesaunce, þis pref was riȝt sore.
But ȝit I þanke þe hye
Þat I haue my sones lyve.

280–2

Deferential though it is, that phrase ‘saue þi plesaunce’ suggests that the suffering of Abraham and his son have been purely for God’s delight, and the only comfort is that God did not take his ‘plesaunce’ to the ultimate conclusion. God’s response, the covenant of His blessing for future generations, including the coming of Christ, produces from Abraham only a two-line acknowledgement, not of his blessing but of God’s overriding power:

A, lord, ithanked euer be thy myght,
By tyme, by tyde, by day and nyght. 301–2

This uncertainty about the value of the trial leads to a cursory and weak concluding moral for audience. Starting from the un-theological conclusion that God’s love has been earned (*wonne*):

And ȝit I haue wonne his love truly.
And euermore, goode Lord, gramercy
Þat my childe is not kylled. 363–5

Abraham defines God's favour to him in negative terms — 'my childe is not kylled'. This weak personal justification is echoed in the final quatrain to the audience:

Now ye þat haue sene þis aray,
I warne you all, boþe nyȝt and day,
What God comaundeþ say not nay,
For ye shal not lese þerby

366–9

That repeated 'not' (365, 369) emphasises that obedience produces only negative preservation, not positive benefit, an absence of loss. It would seem that the interest of the episode for the playwright lies not in what men should believe but in how men behave.

Sara

Sara, Abraham's wife and the mother of Isaac, has no place in the biblical narrative. In two of our plays she serves as a point of appeal for the child Isaac, a loving and protective figure who would defend him against the threat from his father. Brome, which is often considered the source of the Chester play, presents her as a wished for but absent imagined supplicant:

Now I wold to God my moder were her on þis hyll!
Sche wold knele for me on both hyre knees
To save my lyffe
And sythyn that my moder ys not here ...

175–8

Chester (296–300) has no counterpart to 178, losing the sad recognition of the reality of isolation that it contains. A further emotional reference to his mother (255–61) instructs Abraham 'Tell ȝe my moder no dell' (256; Chester 322) and includes a farewell to Sara as if she were actually present (260–61). Brome's Abraham responds by expressing his distress (262–3) whereas Chester offers the inadequate response: 'thy mother I cannot please' (324). On the other hand, Towneley's Abraham despatches Isaac home:

Go home, son. Come sone agane,
And tell thi moder I com ful fast.

105–6

but surprisingly makes little use of Sara as Isaac's point of appeal: 'Let now be seyn / for my moder luf' (211), and N.Town does not use her as reference at all. She would be an unlikely point of appeal for the adult Isaac in York.

Northampton, however, gives Sara a visible presence on the stage and a character and voice. Again, Josephus provides a starting-point for this approach, though not a source:

Now Abraham thought that it was not right to disobey God in anything, but that he was obliged to serve him in every circumstance of life, since all creatures that live enjoy their life by his providence, and the kindness he bestows on them. Accordingly, he concealed this command of God, and his own intentions about the slaughter of his son, from his wife, as also from every one of his servants, otherwise he should have been hindered from his obedience to God.¹⁰

This act of concealment generates the irony and tone of the first dialogue between Abraham and Sara. The second dialogue, in which Abraham returns to Sara and reveals what has happened, and all three are reconciled, is indicated by the conclusion of Josephus' account:

So Abraham and Isaac, receiving each other unexpectedly, and having obtained the promises of such great blessings, embraced one another; and when they had sacrificed, they returned to Sarah and lived happily together, God affording them his assistance in all things they desired.

Sara's importance is signalled by the set of the play, which requires a domestic *locus* and a 'hill' for the sacrifice, thereby implicitly inscribing the two sites as respectively female and male dominated spaces. The dialogue between God and the Angel is at a remove from the domestic *locus*, Sara's scaffold, towards which Abraham sets out (45–7 and sd) only to be intercepted by the Angel. Abraham's cry of 'Vndo þese zates' (84) directs the servants to open a stage-set ('youre halle', 323) that represents their home, where we see Sara and Isaac and the two servants (directly addressed at 97). Sarah probably remains on that set in sight of the audience throughout the action, since the stage-direction after 317 reads:

Et equitat versus Sarem et dicit Sara (my emphasis).

Significantly, Abraham does enter the hall when he reaches it or later when he returns to it and calls Sara out for their conversation (323). Her presence throughout represents a continuing reminder of the female, domestic values that are being violated, and in view of her opening anxiety (see below), we may imagine her looking out anxiously for the return of her husband and son in the direction of the hill of sacrifice.

Unlike the biblical hill, which is the distant land of Moriah, that hill is here made realistically visible to Sara at a distance from her scaffold, since Abraham speaks of 'þat hille on hye' (96) and 'yondre hille' (337) (Brome '3on mownte', 123; Chester, 'that hylle there besydes thee', 214; N.Town '3on hey hylle', 83). Other plays similarly indicate the hill-stage. The altar is already prepared upon it ('þat auter there', 168). The journey to and from the hill is made on horseback ('myne asse', 97; 'his horse', 121; 'my horse and Isaac also', 136; 'oure horses', 305, 397). The journey is also on horseback in York but on foot in Brome, Chester, N.Town, and Towneley, where the Angel leads. But here the hill is where Abraham commands, free from domestic constraints. Sacrifice is Man's business, directed by the male-envisaged God.

Isaac's journey is therefore becomes a rite of passage, a moment when he moves from the mother's care, as a child, to the father's, as a man. Abraham counters Sarah's concern for Isaac's childish well-being with the stern view that it is high time the boy learned his duty to God while he still has a father to teach him. His injunction:

Perfore aray the and go with me
And lerne how God shuld plesid be 100-1

gives new meaning to his earlier vow to God:

And to plesse þe, souereigne Lord, I shall charge hym perfytly,
Isaac my son so dere. 42-3

Abraham recognises that his willingness to perform the horrific act to which he has promptly and seemingly mindlessly agreed (61-5; compare 345) violates the values of the home. He knows that Sara will be distraught at his news, yet he casually dismisses her expected response ('no forse', 80). While he has promised God's angel that he will carry out the deed 'without fraude outhere cauelacion' (71), he decides to act less openly with his wife:

Now doughtles I shal go and se
How prevely that I can it do. 82-3

This 'privy' strategy highlights the gulf between the female and male values within the play, which includes the gulf between human and divine priorities. Abraham here, as he will do later, controls and censors the narrative. We may also read this as an act of self-censorship, a refusal himself to articulate and confront the task to which he is committed.

In the biblical account Abraham rose up early in the morning and travelled for three days to the land of Moriah. The journey-time is sometimes mentioned by the playwrights (Towneley 69; York 89) but elsewhere ignored. The Northampton playwright, however, gives an urgency to God's command which is reflected in both Abraham's brusque manner and his immediate exit after collecting Isaac from home. God instructs the angel:

And say þat I comaunded and charged hym aboue all þinge,
 The furst dede þat he doþe, or mete ouþer mele,
 To make sacrificse vnto me of Isaac his son 3ynge 23-5

although the angel does not repeat this injunction to Abraham. Abraham's refusal to enter the hall and determination to leave immediately can be read as a response to God's will, as well as his reluctance to engage in more detailed explanation with Sara. It also naturalistically suggests that Abraham is trying to displace self-reflection by action. Performance time and 'real' time are expressly said to coincide. The play occupies part of an evening, since Abraham says at the start:

I haue ben out all day 44

and throughout, Abraham's brisk, no-nonsense manner drives the action forward in a stream of imperatives (*abide, taketh, come, take, spare, geue, care, let, come on, hye*). He urges Isaac to hurry:

Come on, son, a riȝt goode pace
 And hye vs þat we were þere. 158-9

so that one has a sense of time rapidly passing and of Abraham's desire to get the matter over,

Sarah is characterised stereotypically as the protective mother. The playwright emphasises the vulnerability of Isaac as the first-born and only child ('For she haþe hym and no mo', 76). Her anxious concern is underlined from her first words at Abraham's return, suggesting perhaps a recognition of his own vulnerability in advancing years ('I wax right gray', 114):

How³ haue ye fare whil ye haue be oute?
 Without fayle, I haue had gret doute.

Last any thinge did you grevaunce. 89-91

'Where have you been till now. I've been worried sick in case something had happened to you!' Abraham's immediate resolve to set off to sacrifice

taking Isaac with him puzzles Sara, who cannot understand the need for haste. She supplies the concern for his welfare signally absent from Abraham's response, perhaps seeming overprotective in her agitation. Isaac should stay at home because it is so cold (110-1); she instructs the servants to give him a quiet horse and guide it carefully, and make sure he doesn't get dirty (121-5); and urges them to get back quickly (134-5). Her response to Abraham:

Then, siþe ye wol haue forthe my childe 120

contains an implicit protest, while the possessive 'my' contrasts with Abraham's previous 'þis childe' (114) and suggests the role of maternal protection.

The injunctions of Sarah to take care of Isaac becomes ironic as Isaac learns of the true nature of the journey, and submits to binding (224) and being placed on the altar (232). The childish anticipation of the augmented pain of a botched execution (225-7) contrasts touchingly with Isaac's protest at the discomfort of the bonds:

A, soffte, gentil fader: ye bynde me sore. 229

Abraham's seemingly casual 'geue me þi hode' (146) as they set out leads the audience's expectation towards the beheading to come. On the hill, the news is broken to Isaac almost as an aside. Prefaced by 'Do as you're told' ('loke þou be not þeragayne', 162) and, in one breath:

... here þi bodi shal be brouȝt to nought
Vnto sacrificise on this hille.

Lay downe þat wode on þat auter there,
And fast delyuer þe and do of þi gere. 166-9

As in the other plays, Isaac seeks a rationale for the act — 'Why me?' (174-5), 'Have I displeased you?' (171-2), 'Have I displeased God?' (184), then appeals, like his Brome and Chester counterparts, to his mother's response:

But, gentil fader, wot my modre of þis,
Þat I shal be dede? 186-7

where 'gentil' mocks the projected action. We recognise the emotional damage here as Isaac imagines a parental conspiracy for his destruction. Abraham's self-obsession is darkly comic in its surprised tone and its inadequate or understated final line:

She? Mary, son, Crist forbede!
Nay, to telle her it is no nede;
For whan þat euer she knoweþ þis dede
She wol ete after but litel brede. 188–91

This looks back to Abraham's 'privy' strategy, his reluctance to confide in Sara. Isaac's response suggests some relief that there is at least one parent who has not betrayed him.

His own words seem to bring to Abraham's realisation the opposition between the stern command of God and the love of a parent:

Ye, son, God most be serued ay,
Bi modre may not haue her wille all way.
I loue þe as wele as she doþe, in fay,
And ȝit þis dede most be do 196–9

The opening two lines sound stern — that 'all way' suggests that Sara normally does 'haue her wille', the stern assertion of patriarchal over matriarchal authority. But the last two lines with the key words 'I loue þe' unlock a new register of emotion in Abraham, as if he only now recognises the enormity of what he has promised to do, the language of the heart ('dere hert', 208, 230; 'goode hert', 222; 'fayre hert-rote', 236; 'hert-rote', 256; 'my hert gruccheþ', 241; 'my hert is wondre sore', 243). This anguish is self-directed; the balance of 'blode/blede' in

My blode aborreþ to se my son blede 242

neatly equates the internal and external horror of the action.

With the release of Isaac, Abraham resumes his previous brusque and authoritarian manner. At first it seems that Abraham will keep the whole affair from Sarah:

And let not þi moder wete of þis stryve,
I pray þe, son, hertly 284–5

but it emerges merely as another strategy to maintain control of the narrative. Abraham leads Sara away from the hall-set. He builds up to the revelation slowly, creating suspense in the audience as they await the reaction. His approach is slyly oblique. He promises to tell her how God has dealt with him (325) and then invites her to speculate on the sacrifice, producing an intrigued response:

[ABRAHAM.] I went for to sacrifice:
But how trowe you, telle me verily?

SARA. Forsoþe, souereigne, I wot not I,
 Parauenture som quyk best? 326-9

Abraham is struck by the ironic applicability of this speculation:

Quyk? Ye forsoþe, quyke it was! 330

and goes on to describe what actually happened. Sara voices our naturalistic response, amazed that her husband could countenance such an act:

[SARA.] Alas, where was your mynde?
 HABRAHAM. My mynde? Vpon þe goode Lord on hy! 345-6

R.T. Davies notes how in such questioning

dialogue is sharpened and the dramatic tension heightened by a play of ideas focussed in repeated words has commented upon the playwright's use of repeated words.¹¹

Abraham's response suggests a tone of complete surprise, as if the thought of resisting God's will had never occurred to him. The effect is comically and revealingly naturalistic.

The outburst of emotion is soon ended by the angel's intervention and on his return to Sara the image of the stern patriarch is preserved. If Isaac keeps his promise, his emotional 'lapse' on the hill will never be revealed to Sarah. Only at the end of the play does Abraham rather reluctantly allow her a hint of his previous emotion:

Isaac haþe no harme, but in maner I was sory ... 362

'In a way I was sorry' understates Abraham's words at the point of execution. While the failure adequately to account for God's demand leaves the play without a convincing moral, it provides a fascinating study of a man driven by his patriarchal role of dutiful obedience and authority who has been compelled to reveal momentarily a level of emotion in himself that he had previously suppressed.

In his brief discussion of the Brome and Northampton plays, Daniel T. Kline interestingly comments:

In both cases the son is threatened for the father's sake, and furthermore Isaac manifests symptoms characteristic of child abuse by internalising Abraham's violence as his own fault and by acquiescing dutifully in his father's threat of murder. Both the manifestly violent patriarchal family structure and the supporting

theological violence that presents a father ready to murder his son is rationalized as a prefiguration of the eventual death of Jesus on the cross ... Because it is necessary for familial, cultural, and theological coherence, violence against the child is accepted when the social end is ideologically justified.¹²

Significant though the modern parallel is, Northampton signally fails to justify that violence and offers no typological support for it. Rather, it honestly realises both the dangers of patriarchal absolutism, from the Deity to the familial head, and the resulting conflicts of emotions and loyalties which affect father, mother, and child.

University of Liverpool

NOTES

- 1 The texts of Brome and Northampton are in *Non-Cycle Plays and Fragments* edited N. Davis *EETS SS 1* (1970); Chester in *The Chester Mystery Cycle Vol. 1* edited R.M. Lumiansky and David Mills *EETS SS 3* (1974); N.Town in *The N-Town Play Vol. 1* edited Stephen Spector *EETS SS 11* (1991); Towneley in *The Towneley Plays Vol. 1* edited Martin Stevens and A.C. Cawley *EETS SS 13* (1994); York in *The York Plays* edited Richard Beadle (London: Arnold, 1982). R.T. Davies's modern-spelling edition of the N.Town Plays, *The Corpus Christi Play of the English Middle Ages* (London: Faber, 1972), which includes the N.Town play, prints the other five plays as an appendix in modern spelling, but without line numbers.
- 2 For details of the manuscript, and a facsimile of it, see *Non-Cycle Plays and The Winchester Dialogues* edited Norman Davis (Leeds Texts and Monographs Medieval Drama Facsimiles 5; Leeds: University of Leeds School of English, 1979) 33–45.
- 3 Rudolf Brotanek 'Abraham und Isaac: Ein mittelenglischen Misterium aus einer Dubliner Handschrift' *Anglia* 21 (1898–9) 21–55.
- 4 Hardin Craig *English Religious Drama of the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955) 308.
- 5 William Tydeman 'An Introduction to Medieval English Theatre' in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre* edited Richard Beadle (Cambridge UP, 1994) 29.
- 6 Rosemary Woolf *The English Mystery Plays* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972) 152.

- 7 *The Works of Flavius Josephus* translated William Whiston (The excelsior Edition; London and Edinburgh: William P. Nimmo, [1865]), 'The Antiquities of the Jews' Book 1, cap. 13, page 37.
- 8 Quotations from *Non-Cycle Plays and Fragments* edited Norman Davis *EETS SS 1* (1970).
- 9 'Antiquities' 1, cap 13, page 37, Compare *Historia Scholastica* PL 198 (1855) col. 1105: ... *quem Dominus quidem iudicasset dignum, non aegritudine, non bello, non aliqua passione, humanam vitam finire ...*
- 10 Josephus, 'Antiquities' 1, cap. 13, page 37.
- 11 *The Corpus Christi Play of the English Middle Ages* edited R.T. Davies (London: Faber, 1971) 66.
- 12 Daniel T. Kline 'Textuality, Subjectivity, and Violence: Theorizing the Figure of the Child in Middle English Literature' in *Children and the Family in the Middle Ages* edited Nicole Clifton *Essays in Medieval Studies* 12 (Proceedings of the Illinois Medieval Association, 1995), 23–38; online at <http://www.illinoismedieval.org/ems/VOL12/kline.html>.