

THE PUZZLE OF THE N.TOWN MANUSCRIPT REVISITED

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Scholars have long recognised that this is an eclectic compilation of plays. As early as 1913 W.W. Greg called his fourth Cambridge lecture on the *Bibliographical and Textual Problems of the English Miracle Plays*, 'Ludus Coventriae: the Fabrication of a Cycle',¹ and concluded his analysis, 'One thing, I think, is certain: the extant manuscript was written, not for the purposes of acting, but private reading'.² In the exhaustive introduction to her edition of the plays in 1922, K.S. Block stated five major points about the manuscript she laboured so hard to understand and edit:

1. MS. Vesp. D. viii is the compiler's book, not a transcript of another MS.
2. It contains a collection of plays made according to a plan which was subject to alteration as it proceeded.
3. Some of the plays and groups of plays had had a separate existence, having been acted as separate plays or groups.
4. One portion of the MS. certainly and probably two, quires N, P, Q, R, and quires S, T, have also had a separate existence ...
and
5. The compiler had command of other versions of plays or groups of plays from which he drew.³

Unfortunately, Miss Block's careful consideration of the manuscript that raised serious questions about its nature went largely unheeded until Stanley J. Kahrl and Peter Meredith produced their facsimile edition of the manuscript in 1977. In their very brief introduction they accepted Miss Block's analysis of the manuscript as correct and paid long overdue homage to her scholarship. From their careful analysis they concluded,

that the Marian (Contemplacio) group (plays 8–11, 13) was a separate and self-contained composite Mary play; secondly that the first Passion sequence (quires N, P, Q, R) was undoubtedly a separate manuscript, though written by the main scribe, and incorporated into the present compilation ... thirdly, that the work

of reviser B was directed primarily at once again re-grouping the plays, this time clearly for theatrical production ... ⁴

It was Peter Meredith who took up the editorial challenge and extrapolated from the N.Town manuscript two long plays unique in the canon — the *Mary Play* and the two-part *Passion Play* — and edited and published them separately (1987 and 1990).⁵

Meanwhile, the Early English Text Society had commissioned Stephen Spector to undertake a new edition of BL MS Cotton Vespasian D VIII, that was published in 1991.⁶ Spector, though acknowledging the eclectic nature of the manuscript, accepts the basic premise behind the dominant scholarship on the manuscript, that there was an earlier Creation to Doom cycle for which the long and detailed Proclamation (or Banns) was written. His discussion of the Proclamation (and the numbered ‘pageants’ that it describes) assumes that somewhere in the ‘back story’ there is a Creation to Doom cycle similar to the plays in York and Chester. The generally accepted understanding is that the man who produced the manuscript was a professional scribe who had been commissioned to produce a single manuscript from several quite different play texts. Since Meredith ‘released’ the *Mary Play* and the *Passion Play*, most scholars have argued that the Proclamation represents a description of one of the several disparate exemplars that the scribe had before him — what Alan Fletcher, in fact, calls ‘the Proclamation play’⁷ — that was a Creation-to-Doom cycle performed in procession on pageants into which the scribe has woven material also available to him in the Nativity and Passion sequences — a stand-alone play on the childhood of Mary and a two part *Passion Play*. Then, the argument goes, the scribe added to the collection two more Marian plays that are not mentioned at all in the Proclamation — a Candlemas play on the Purification of the Virgin and a play on the Death and Assumption of the Virgin. The *Purification* play was copied out by the scribe interrupting the ‘Herod’ sequence, but the *Assumption* play was an independent booklet in another hand simply incorporated into this manuscript. This is the understanding of the manuscript as Spector presents it and he preserves the division of the manuscript into 42 separate episodes based on the large red numbers that the compiler scattered through his work.

But Peter Meredith continued to work on the manuscript, and the more he confronted the inconsistencies and other problems, the less sure he was about the true nature of the manuscript. In his introduction to his edition of the *Passion Play* in 1990, he speculated that the manuscript might

be a 'workshop copy' — possibly one belonging to a theatrical entrepreneur who lent out plays. He goes on,

If this were a manuscript for lending out, it could serve a multitude of purposes: a two-part Passion Play, a St Anne's day celebration (or any feast of the Virgin Mary), a cycle of varying size or any number of smaller plays, to be performed anywhere (the 'N' town of the proclamation).⁸

In 1991, the year *after* the publication of his edition of the *Passion Play*, he published a complex analysis of BL MS Cotton Vespasian D VIII, 'Manuscript, Scribe and Performance: Further Looks at the N.Town Manuscript',⁹ that examines all the peculiarities of the manuscript. In his first paragraph he writes,

The N.town plays ... is a compilation of bits of plays that have very likely been performed, but they are, in this manuscript, in the process of being put together into a different kind of play, and what we have here is the process and not the finished product. No doubt the main scribe or the person who was directing his activities had some general idea of the sort of product he wished to see, but not only is the idea general, it does not seem to have had much to do with dramatic or theatrical (or even literary) considerations.¹⁰

I have come to the same conclusions as Meredith offers here, but would like to argue that the text came about because the scribe was more concerned with the form of the manuscript he was creating than its content.

Miss Block gave us the first clue. The first point in her summation of her findings is, 'MS. Vesp. D. viii is the compiler's book, not a transcript of another MS'¹¹ — in other words, it is a *compilatio*. But in the late Middle Ages there were very definite rules for the creation of a *compilatio*. In 1976 Malcolm Parkes published a seminal article 'The Influence of the Concepts of Ordinatio and Compilatio on the Development of the Book'.¹² In it Parkes provides us with an authoritative explanation of the evolution in scribal practice during the later Middle Ages that led to the production of many manuscript 'books' that were what we would call anthologies — collections gathered together sometimes because all the works were by the same author, sometimes because they treated the same kind of subject matter. The idea behind the creation of such collections was to make the material more accessible for the reader or user. A compiler would take the material he wished to gather together and impose 'a new *ordinatio* on

materials he had extracted from others'.¹³ *Ordinatio* simply means 'arrangement'. A compiler, then, would take the material he wished to present and arrange it in a format to aid his reader or user. After quoting Bonaventure's definitions of *scriptor* ('scribe'), *compilator* ('compiler'), and *commentator* ('commentator'), Parkes writes,

The compiler adds no matter of his own by way of exposition (unlike the commentator) but compared with the scribe he is free to rearrange (*mutando*). What he imposed was a new *ordinatio* on the materials he extracted from others ... The *compilatio* derives its value from the authenticity of the *auctoritates* employed, but it derives its usefulness from the *ordo* in which the *auctoritates* were arranged.¹⁴

Parkes then goes on to describe how Vincent of Beauvais suggested that material should be arranged in a compilation:

In working out his scheme, with commendable humility, he followed the example of the Almighty '... ut iuxta ordinem sacrae scripturae, primo de creatore, postea de creaturis, postea quoque de lapsu et reparatione hominis, deinde vero de rebus gestis iuxta seriem temporum suorum, et tandem etiam de iis que in fine temporum futura sunt, ordinate disserem.' ('So that I may set [them] forth, then, in order, according to the order of holy scripture, first [matters] concerning the Creator, then the creatures, then also the fall and redemption of man, from there truly deeds done according to the order of their times, and finally also those things which are to be at the end of time.')

Vincent of Beauvais, then, is establishing the order of his compilation as chronological from the moment of the first act of the Creator to the end of time. I suggest that when the compiler of BL Cotton Vespasian D VIII was commissioned to create his *compilatio* of plays, he gathered his separate exemplars together and chose his Creation-to-Doom order to follow, with Vincent of Beauvais, 'the example of the Almighty' of strict chronological order. But the material he was working with — the plays as written — did not exactly conform to that strict chronology of episodes according to scripture and so he imposed a new order on the material to meet the requirements of the form he had chosen. There is no reason to assume that this professional scribe was trying to emulate the plays in York and Chester (where he may never have been). Early drama scholars have been misled by the rules of compilation.

There are many examples in the manuscript of the effect this strict adherence to chronology had on the order of the plays that he copied but the one most familiar is the interpolation of the unrelated 'Joseph's Doubts' pageant between the 'Annunciation' and the 'Visit to Elizabeth' episodes in the *Mary Play*. 'Joseph's Doubts' is a good play but its near fabliaux-like humour is entirely different in tone and approach from the gentle, meditative *Mary Play*. But for the compiler chronology was paramount. As the larger narrative unfolds 'according to the order of their time' Joseph must have accepted his role in the divine plan before he accompanies Mary on the visit to Elizabeth. Peter Meredith discusses this interpolation in his edition of the *Mary Play*.¹⁶

The two episodes Meredith removes from *Passion Play I* can also be explained by the scribe's attempt to fit all the exemplars before him into chronological order. The first one, discussed by Meredith in Appendix 1,¹⁷ is in the hand of the main scribe but squeezed onto a single leaf (fol. 143) interpolated between leaves 7 and 8 of Quire N. The added episode dramatises the sequence in all three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew 21: 1–7; Mark 11: 1–7 and Luke 19: 29–35) of Christ despatching two disciples to fetch the ass for him to ride at the Entry into Jerusalem. The addition adds a canonical detail to the story of the Entry and is inserted in the proper chronological place before the actual Entry, but in the context of the play as written it makes no dramatic sense. As Meredith remarks,

It introduces Christ early in the play and spoils the effect of the Entry into Jerusalem heralded by Peter's sermon and John's excited words of preparation (I 395–8). The vagueness of the stage direction at l. 43 suggests a practical uncertainty about the addition.¹⁸

The playwright of the original exemplar (copied at some earlier time by the same scribe)¹⁹ ignored the story in the Synoptic Gospels and provided an exciting and quite unscriptural scene where Peter and John raise the expectations of the crowd urging them to welcome the arrival of the long hoped for Messiah. Without the pedestrian scene that has been interpolated, the anticipated entry of Christ will be the first appearance of the central figure in the unfolding story. Here we see the scribe unwittingly creating a weaker dramatic situation for the sake of detailed chronology.

The other passage Meredith removes in his edition of the *Passion Play* (fols 149–151) is the one containing two episodes apparently at the Last Supper — the repentance of Mary Magdalen and the foretelling of the

Betrayal.²⁰ Here it is possible that the situation is much like the situation with 'Joseph's Doubts'. The scribe must have had among his exemplars a play on the episode of the incident in the House of Simon the Leper similar to the one that existed in the York Cycle. We do not have the text of that play, since it was never entered in the official civic Register of the play, although fols 106^v–110^v were left blank for it.²¹

The episode in the house of Simon the Leper caused great trouble for the Bible harmonists — those who sought to determine an agreed chronology for scriptural events. The episode occurs in all four Gospels. Matthew and Mark put it in Holy Week but on the Wednesday of that week at the House of Simon the Leper; John puts the episode in the home of Mary, Martha, and the resurrected Lazarus and six days before the Passover, while Luke records the episode earlier in the Ministry at the house of Simon the Pharisee. The episode in York was placed between the Transfiguration and the combined episode of the Woman Taken in Adultery and the Raising of Lazarus, so seeming to be following Luke, except that the episode is set in the house of Simon the Leper. The N.Town scribe, faced with an exemplar dramatising an episode including a dinner that three of the four Gospels said took place in Holy Week had only one place to put the material — in the sequence of the Last Supper although as Meredith says, 'The introduction of the forgiveness of Magdalene here in *Passion I* directly contradicts the prologue of the Demon (I 40) where Magdalene's forgiveness is described as already obtained'.²²

The second addition in this sequence, the foretelling of the Betrayal, repeats what is said later in the sequence, on fol. 155^v, where Christ makes his dramatic statement after Judas has received the bread,

On of ȝow hath betrayd me,
 Þat at my borde with me hath etc.
 Bettyr it hadde hym for to a be
 Bothe vnborn and vnbegete.

Passion Play I 771–4

Here again, in his concern to include all he had before him in an acceptable chronological order, the scribe has blunted the dramatic power of *Passion Play I* as written. It is perfectly possible that the exemplar containing the repentance of Mary Magdalen was a stand-alone play to be performed in Holy Week in which the foreshadowing of the betrayal would have been perfectly appropriate. Meredith, who is both a man of the theatre and an editor, recognised and excised episodes in both the *Mary Play* and the *Passion Play* that hindered the dramatic effect without

commenting on why the scribe (who is in many other ways scholarly and meticulous) did what he did.

One other glaring example of the compiler's obsession with chronology is the way he breaks up 'very awkwardly ... the continuous action of the *Magi* and *Massacre* plays'²³ by inserting the liturgical 'Purification of the Virgin' Play between the angel sending the Kings home directly and the Flight into Egypt. Here the compiler was faced with one of the most complicated cruces in Biblical chronology — the story of the Kings and Herod. There are two entirely different canonical stories of the birth of Christ — the story in Matthew 2 of the visitation of the Kings and Herod culminating in the Slaughter of the Innocents, and the more expansive story in Luke 2 of Mary and Joseph, the Nativity, the Annunciation to the Shepherd and their Adoration, followed eight days later by the Circumcision of Christ and, forty days later, by the Purification of the Virgin. This created major problems because of confusion among early commentators about the date of the story of the Kings. They were concerned that Herod ordered the death of 'all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men' (Matthew 2: 16). Why the specification of two years? Those who created the 'Bible Harmonies' and subsequently the Infancy Gospels and vernacular treatises struggled with how to put the Purification of the Virgin episode that Luke clearly tells us happened forty days after the birth of Christ (Luke 2: 22) and the story of the Kings in proper chronological order. The *Diatessaron*, the Gospel Harmony of the second century theologian, Tatian, places the Purification between the Shepherds and the Magi.²⁴ Other later Bible Harmonists exercised great ingenuity. The popular *Pseudo Matthew*, for example, has a two-year gap between the Purification and the whole story in Matthew.²⁵ Others, including Nicholas Love in *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, assumed that the Purification occurred between the departure of the Kings for home and the Flight into Egypt. It is this tradition that the compiler follows, simply 'dropping' the gentle and liturgical Candlemas play into the middle of the chilling play of Herod. By so doing, he pulled apart a unique treatment of the Herod story, disguising a powerful proto-morality play that moves from the hubris of Herod at the beginning to the exultation of the Death as Herod is dragged to Hell at the end. The *Purification*, secure on its own with the beauty of the Candlemas liturgy, is a 'stand-alone' play that bears no dramaturgical or thematic relation to the bombast and terror

of the *Herod* play. Separate the two plays and we have two very different but unique additions to the canon.

The compiler, having established the order in which he was going to copy his exemplars, was then faced with the need to provide the other essential ingredient of a compilation — a *tabula* or finding guide. Malcolm Parkes describes how Vincent of Beauvais felt strongly that ‘the new division of the material [must] be made obvious to the reader’ and that the new ‘divisions had to be carefully and clearly labelled’.²⁶ He then further describes the various ways later scribes created *tabulae* or tables of contents and indexes to help the reader find what he was looking for in non-dramatic works.

As far as we know, there was no standard form for a finding guide for a compilation of plays. However, we do have other examples of Proclamations or Banns. One of the features of the Proclamation of another fifteenth-century East Anglian play, *The Castle of Perseverance*, is that, like the N.Town Proclamation, it tells the story of the play in descriptive vignettes. It is possible that the compiler knew (or knew of) the banns to the *Castle* and saw in the detailing of the contents of the play a kind of *tabula* suitable for his compilation of texts.²⁷ These he called ‘pageants’. Drama scholars have assumed he was using the word in the sense of a ‘play in a mystery cycle’ (MED) but the *Middle English Dictionary* also records that spelling as a variant of *pagina* or ‘page, writing in a book’. This usage has many northern citations but also several from works from the Midlands. Alan Fletcher, in his chapter on N.Town in the *Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, suggests that the compiler had ‘a rather learned or readerly interest in the material he was working with’ and his work betrays ‘a desire to give it a certain literary ‘finish’ indifferent to practical dramatic use’.²⁸ The second meaning of *pageant* may have been more familiar to him than the first meaning. Whatever the intention of whoever commissioned the compilation, it seems the scribe was not familiar with dramatic texts and fell back on the more familiar form of the verse and prose treatises that were keyed to Bible Harmonies. The large red numbers that appear in the manuscript are almost entirely keyed to single Biblical or apocryphal episodes within what are frequently multi-episode plays. By doing this, the compiler provides, probably by accident, on the one hand, a series of plays whose original forms (allowing for the pattern of strict chronology he imposes) are still retrievable but also, on the other hand, a ‘finder’s guide’ that would enable a reader or user to navigate

the manuscript and find dramatisations of particular Biblical or apocryphal episodes.

The first quire of the manuscript makes it clear that episodes rather than plays as written were his primary concern. The Proclamation ends with 'Amen' midway down fol. 9^v about half way through Quire A. At the top of fol. 10^r is the name 'Robertus Hegge Dunelmensis', the first known owner and then, without further title, God begins the first speech of the Creation and Fall of the Angels. This episode ends with the despairing speech of Lucifer as he falls to Hell on fol. 11^r, after which is written the speech heading *Deus*. The speech belonging to that speech heading begins at the top of fol. 11^v. The only suggestion that this speech begins a second and separate play is the large red '2' written against the first three lines of the speech. The speech headings and speeches are written continuously. Then, the Creation and Fall of Man continues until near the bottom of fol. 17^r where it ends with Eve's lament at their expulsion from Paradise. Again the compiler continues to write without a break with a speech-heading 'Abell' and the speech that begins the episode of Cain and Abel. Like Play 2 in the *Chester Plays*, the episodes of the Fall and Expulsion and Cain and Abel seem to be run together where the first parents are part of the tragedy of the murder of one son by another. The only indication that 'Cain and Abel' is a new play is the large red '3' set against Abel's first speech. The episode ends with God's curse of Cain and Cain's terrified decision to hide from the retribution that is to come. It ends half way down fol. 20^v, the last folio in Quire A. If the large red numbers were not there to identify the three separate narratives as corresponding to the first three Proclamation 'pageants', there would be no question that this is not a single play with several connected episodes telling the story of the Creation and Fall of the Angels from patristic tradition and the Creation of the World, the Creation of Man, the Fall, the Expulsion, and the consequences of the Fall in the children of Adam and Eve, all from Genesis 1: 1-4: 15.

Although his prime purpose seems clearly not to be theatrical, the scribe has nonetheless provided a manuscript in which it is easy to find dramatisations of individual episodes in the Biblical narrative. The presence of the hand of Reviser B at various places throughout the manuscript provides evidence that the manuscript as it existed in the first quarter of the sixteenth century²⁹ came into the hands of someone who undertook to produce some of the plays — particularly those connected with the Christmas season and the Passion. One of the sections of the

manuscript where we find Reviser B at work is the Nativity sequence where in both the *Shepherds* and the *Magi* plays he alters many words from an older form to one more fitted to the date of his revisions. He also interpolates new material into the *Herod* play (fols 95–6) and a new speech for John the Baptist to open for the *Baptism* episode (fol. 112).³⁰ He also makes changes in the *Passion Play* to fit his ideas as a director.³¹

Borrowing and adapting plays from other sources seems to have been a common practice in England. We have evidence that other Biblical plays were shared one way or another. It has long been known that three of the six surviving plays on Abraham and Isaac (Chester, Brome, and Northampton) share common themes and characterisation. Peter Meredith has shown that at least ten of the plays in the Towneley manuscript originated from the York Plays, four from the York before the major revisions in the 1420s and six that were still being performed in York.³² Although the N.Town manuscript is a book that seems designed primarily as a reading text, as W.W. Greg suggested a century ago,³³ and as Alan Fletcher confirms as he refers to the ‘readerly’ nature of the manuscript,³⁴ it appears that it was possible to use it also as a source for a production, actual or imagined, of one or more of the episodes.

But what were the original plays on which the manuscript was based? It is perhaps not impossible to extrapolate from the manuscript the plays as they were written. In Appendix 1, I have provided a chart suggesting what seems to me to be the nature of the twenty-two exemplars that comprise the collection. They vary widely in size, complexity, and genre. First of all there are the two major plays that Peter Meredith untangled from the chronological imperative of the scribe — the *Mary Play* and the *Passion Play*. Then there are the plays that seem to me to be ‘stand-alone’ plays that dramatise a single story or episode copied into the manuscript in their proper chronological order with little editorial attention — ‘Moses’, ‘Jesse Root’, ‘The Trial of Mary and Joseph’, ‘The Nativity’, ‘The Shepherds’, ‘Christ and the Doctors’, ‘The Woman Taken in Adultery’, ‘The Raising of Lazarus’, ‘The Ascension’ (with ‘The Choosing of Matthias’, which is a short play based on Acts 1 that, like the ‘Pentecost’ play that follows, could have been written as short parish pieces for the specific feast days), ‘The Assumption of the Virgin’, and ‘The Judgement’. ‘Joseph’s Doubts’ and ‘The Purification of the Virgin’ are also ‘stand-alone’ plays that can easily be extracted from the place they come in the manuscript and studied and performed for what they are. I have already considered the possibility that ‘Creation’ to ‘The Death of Cain’ is a single play made up of four episodes

and that the 'Herod' play with the Purification removed is a powerful and chilling play. The curious 40-line 'Procession of Saints' that comes between the two parts of the *Passion Play* has all the marks of a scribal confusion that was never corrected.

There remain three other sections of the manuscript to be considered: the double-episode play of 'The Road to Emmaus and The Appearance to Thomas'; the Noah, Abraham, and Isaac sequence; and finally the Baptism to Temptation sequence. The post-Resurrection material is a self-contained and complete Easter play that might have been played by a parish during Easter week to supplement the liturgical celebrations of Good Friday and Easter Sunday.³⁵ These plays were often performed on Easter Monday. Like many of the other 'stand-alone' pageants in the manuscript, the play has a sense of completeness that does not depend on the surrounding episodes for its rhetorical or dramatic impact. It begins with the *Peregrini* sequence, but then moves back to the gathered disciples with the pilgrims telling their news. Thomas enters in despair to be persuaded of the truth of the Resurrection by the appearance of Christ and the command to feel the wounds. The play ends with a forty-line formal declamatory speech by Thomas rehearsing the manifestations of the Resurrection. Each of the first three eight-line stanzas ends with the Latin *Quod mortuus et sepultus iterum resurrexit*. The last stanza ends with a ringing and direct address to the audience:

Truste wel Jesu Cryst, þe Jewys kyllyd the same;
 The fende hath he feryd, oure feyth þat evyr avexit.
 To hevyn 3ow brynge, and saue 3ow all in-same
 That mortuus et sepultus iterum resurrexit. Amen.

38: 389-92³⁶

The Noah and Abraham and Isaac sequence fills fols 21 to half way down 30. The Creation to Cain sequence ends half way down fol. 20^v with the rest of the leaf left blank. 30^v is also left blank, with the Moses play beginning on fol. 31. Like the Creation to Cain sequence, there is no real break between the two episodes. The Noah episode ends with eight people left in the world — Noah and his family. Noah then exhorts his family to sing songs of praise. There follows a stage direction specifying what they are to sing — *Mare vidit et fugit* ('The sea saw and fled'), *Jordanis conuersus est retrorsum* ('The river Jordan flowed backward'), and the familiar *Non nobis Domine, non nobis, sed nomini tuo da gloriam* — followed by a second stage direction *Et sic recedant cum nauī* separated from the list

of songs with a *paragraphus* and followed immediately on the same line by *Introitus Abrahe et etcetera*. There is no speech-heading for Abraham's long opening speech. As in the Creation sequence, if the large '5' was not in the right margin, it would not be obvious that a new episode was starting.

The Noah episode is unique in the canon. *Uxor Noe* is not a comic character as she is in other dramatic versions of the story, indeed the episode is almost sombre in its presentation of the Flood. The interpolation of the scene, again unique in the English dramatic tradition, where the figure of Lamech, now blind and led by a boy, kills Cain, adds to the darkness of the treatment. This scene 'covers' the period of the construction of the Ark and is based on a common tradition attempting to make sense of Lamech's song about blood revenge in Genesis 4: 23–4.³⁷ The play begins with Noah directly addressing the audience introducing himself and his family 'here on rowe' (4: 11). He announces that he is the 'Secunde Fadyr' after Adam (4: 17). *Uxor Noe* and the sons and daughters-in-law then introduce themselves in static verses that underscore their collective piety. This scene ends with a fervent prayer to God by Noah,

Pu save us sekry bothe nyght and day,
Synne þat we noon done

4: 90–1

God despatches an angel to command Noah to build the Ark and, although he complains that he is too old to do such a thing, he quickly obeys and the family leaves the playing area. It is at this point that the Lamech episode is interpolated (4: sd at 141 and lines 142–197). Noah and his family re-enter with the Ark singing, and after a brief period on the flood the birds are sent out and the play ends with the cast singing the familiar canticles emphasising the power of God over the natural world and mankind. This ending is unlike any other treatment of this story. The other *Noah* plays have joyous comedic endings with the re-establishment of the covenant with God through the appearance of the rainbow and God's promise never to flood the earth again.

When we consider the treatment of the Abraham and Isaac story that follows, however, we can see how these two episodes could have been conceived as one stand-alone play. The Abraham and Isaac episode is the shortest and most biblical of the six extant treatments of the story in early drama.³⁸ It closely follows the biblical account emphasising the choice that God is forcing Abraham to make between obedience to the divine will and his love for his son. Here there is no mention of Sara and the potential marital conflict that is such a feature of the plays in Chester and the Brome

and Northampton manuscripts. Isaac agrees with his father that if the sacrifice is God's will it must be done and the scene at the altar of sacrifice is poignant but brief. When the Angel stops the sacrifice he emphasises the blessing of the seed of Abraham and the future of the chosen people (5: 216–28). The message of the Angel, in some measure, replaces the treatment of the rainbow and the promise of God never to flood the world again missing from the end of the Noah sequence. Abraham's response is to praise God and, as Noah had done at the beginning of his episode, he turns to the audience and draws them in to the action of the play.

Now God, allthyng of nowth þat made,
 Evyr wurcheppeyd he be on watyr and londe.
 His grett honouwe may nevyrmore fade
 In felde nor town, se nor on sonde.
 As althyng, Lord, þu hast in honde,
 So saue us all wherso we be.
 Whethyr we syttyn, walk, or stonde,
 Evyr on þin handwerke þu haue pyté. 5: 257–64

The relationship with God, so broken at the beginning of *Noah*, with the human race starkly reduced to eight souls at the end of the episode, is now, through the blessing of Abraham's seed, re-established for everyone including the audience.

There are detailed stage directions in Latin in the Noah episodes. The staging could be quite simple. There would need to be an elevated place for the actor playing God but he does not speak directly to Noah but sends an Angel to do his bidding. The rest of the staging could be an open space — either outside or, given the extensive music, inside a church. When Noah has accepted his commission to build the Ark he and his family are said to exit *locum interludii* as Lamech and his guide enter. At the end of the Lamech episode, he and his companion 'withdraw' or 'go away' (the verb is *recedere*) as Noah and family enter *cum nauis cantantes*. As we have seen, the same verb is used at the end of the episode as Noah and family leave the playing space and Abraham begins his speech. Although there are no stage directions in the Abraham section, the figure of 'God above' to whom he prays could remain and the action of the play calls only for a 'hey hille' (line 83) which, like the Ark, could be a wheeled set piece.

A similar open *platea* with some fixed *sedes* and wheeled set pieces would also work for the last sequence of episodes that I believe belong together — the Baptism, the unique Parliament of Hell, and the

Temptation. The contiguous stories of the Baptism and the Temptation are briefly told in Mark 1: 9–13 but expanded in Matthew 3: 13–4: 11. The episode that the playwright inserts between the biblical events is the conversation among the devils exploring the ‘Abuse of Power’ theory popular in the early Church where the birth of Christ of a human mother was a ‘divine deception’ to confuse the devil.³⁹ The theory was supported by the story of the Dream of Pilate’s Wife, so effectively portrayed in *Passion Play II*, where the Devil, realising that Jesus *was* the Son of God, tries to stop the Crucifixion because he knows that his power will be broken when Christ harrows Hell. In the Parliament of Hell episode, Satan expresses his fear that Jesus ‘wyl lese oure lawe’ (23: 19) and affirms that if he is ‘Goddys childe’ (23: 23) ‘short xal ben oure spede’ (23: 26). It is Belial who suggests that Satan tempt Jesus claiming that ‘If þat he synne ... He may nat be Kynge of Blys’ (23: 44–5). The ‘Abuse of Power’ theory reached the height of its acceptance during the reign of Pope Leo the Great (d. 461) but it was still current in the theological schools of the late Middle Ages through the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard. Medieval playwrights used it to heighten the confrontation between the forces of Good and Evil.

The sequence of Baptism to Temptation begins with the new speech for John in the hand of Reviser B — the man who altered some of the plays in the compiler’s manuscript for performance. The original opening lines are not there and the red number 22 is missing. What we have is a strong speech in three stanzas by John the Baptist identifying himself and emphasising the need for repentance and baptism. The baptism itself is straightforward and God speaks from heaven announcing his pleasure. Jesus says ‘now I passe forth into wyldernes’ (22: 121) and the stage direction says *Hic Jesus transit in desertum*, moving away from John’s position on the banks of the Jordan. Jesus then has nine lines foreshadowing the Temptation after which John delivers his 50-line sermon that ends the Baptism episode. In a ‘place and scaffold’ performance pattern Jesus can be in full view of the audience praying in the ‘wilderness’ during John’s sermon and the scene in Hell which follows. John exits with the line ‘For now my leve I take’ (22: 183), and although a folio and a half are blank before the speech heading for Satan’s first speech there is no ‘amen’ or *explicit* to indicate that the play is ended, and no heading for the scene in Hell. There is no break at all between the last speech of the scene in Hell — Belial’s farewell to Satan — and the speech by Jesus that announces that forty days have passed. The temptations are short and pointed and end with Satan’s scatological lament ‘For sorwe I lete a crakke’

(23: 195) while angels descend to minister to Jesus. I believe that these three episodes were written as a continuous action using two set pieces, Heaven and Hell, and a substantial *platea* into which could be rolled set pieces for the pinnacle of the Temple and the mountain.

Of course, this analysis of the nature of the East Anglian *compilatio* that has come down to us inevitably raises the question of where the manuscript was commissioned and held. Gail McMurray Gibson long ago made a strong case on contextual grounds for Bury as a dramatic centre.⁴⁰ I was long sceptical about monastic involvement in popular drama,⁴¹ but my edition of the Berkshire records for REED led me to analyse the relationship between the important Benedictine abbey at Reading and the playmaking traditions of its dependent parish of St Laurence where rich records of a tradition of parish drama survive.⁴² I have argued that the same conditions that existed in Reading to create an active play-making collaboration between the monastic house, the parish, and the town government existed in Bury,

a rich, powerful and sophisticated patron in the abbey; parish clergy appointed by the abbey, strong lay organisations — in Bury's case confraternities — that are the virtual town government associated with the parishes; a playing space for the asking and all the resources of people and skills available in the parishes.⁴³

But many other monastic houses in East Anglia with libraries and scriptoria, such as Thetford Priory, could have been the home of the N.Town manuscript.

I have tried to demonstrate the wide variety in size, subject matter, staging, and genre, that the plays the N.Town manuscript presents to us. My analysis of the hypothetical exemplars copied by the scribe is but the first step in a new approach to this collection. Others may find different configurations buried under the chronological presentation of the main scribe. Many of the N.Town plays are unique in medieval English drama in their treatment of the biblical and apocryphal episodes. To study these plays for what they are and not for what we have for too long thought them to be, will be a richly rewarding enterprise for us all.

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Appendix
Suggested Contents of the N.Town Manuscript

<i>Episodes</i>	<i>Plays</i>	<i>Number of lines</i>	<i>Number of speaking characters</i>
1. The Creation of Heaven; Fall of Lucifer	1. Creation to the Death of Cain	611	9
2. The Creation of the World; Fall of Man			
3. Cain and Abel			
4. Noah	2. Noah and Abraham and Isaac	616	14
5. Abraham and Isaac			
6. Moses	3. Moses	194	2
7. Jesse Root	4. Jesse Root	136	27
8. Joachim and Anna	5. <i>The Mary Play</i>	1596	31
9. The Presentation of Mary in the Temple			
10. The Marriage of Mary and Joseph			
11. Parliament of Heaven; Salutation and Conception			
13. The Visit to Elizabeth			
12. Joseph's Doubts	6. Joseph's Doubts	224	6
14. The Trial of Mary and Joseph	7. The Trial of Mary and Joseph	405	8
15. The Nativity	8. The Nativity	321	6
16. The Shepherds	9. The Shepherds	154	6
17. There is no Play 17			
18. The Magi Visit Herod; Adoration of the Magi	10. The Herod Play	618	14
20. Flight into Egypt; Slaughter of Innocents; Herod's Death			
19. The Purification	11. The Purification	206	6

21. Christ and the Doctors	12. Christ and the Doctors	290	5
22. The Baptism	13. Baptism to Temptation	404	6
23. The Parliament of Hell; The Temptation			
24. The Woman Taken in Adultery	14. The Woman Taken in Adultery	296	5
25. The Raising of Lazarus	15. The Raising of Lazarus	496	11+ 'all disciples'
26. Prologue; The Conspiracy; The Entry into Jerusalem	16. <i>Passion Play I</i>	1075	36
27. The Last Supper; The Conspiracy with Judas			
28. The Betrayal			
29. Herod; Trial before Annas and Cayphas			
30. The Death of Judas; The Trials before Pilate and Herod	17. <i>Passion Play II</i>	1935	53
31. Satan and Pilate's Wife; The Second Trial before Pilate			
32. Procession to Calvary; The Crucifixion			
33. The Harrowing of Hell Part 1			
34. The Burial; Guarding the Sepulchre			
35. The Harrowing of Hell Part 2; Appearance to Virgin Mary; Pilate and the Soldiers			
36. Announcement to the Three Maries; Peter and John at the Sepulchre			

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37. Appearance to Mary Magdalen			
38. Cleophas and Luke; The Appearance to Thomas	18. Cleophas and Luke; The Appearance to Thomas	392	5
39. The Ascension; The Selection of Matthias	19. The Ascension; The Selection of Matthias	95	5
40. Pentecost	20. Pentecost	39	15
41. Assumption of Mary	21. Assumption of Mary	500	18
42. Judgement Day	22. Judgement Day	130	6

NOTES

1. W.W. Greg *Bibliographical and Textual Problems of the English Miracle Plays, Lectures Delivered as Sandars Reader in Bibliography in the University of Cambridge, 1913; Reprinted from 'The Library', 1914* (London: Alexander Moring, 1914) 108.
2. Greg *Bibliographical and Textual Problems* 143.
3. *Ludus Coventriæ or The Plaie called Corpus Christi: Cotton MS. Vespasian D. VIII* edited K.S. Block *EETS ES 120* (1922) xxxiii–iv.
4. *The N-Town Plays: a Facsimile of British Library MS Cotton Vespasian D VIII* edited Stanley J. Kahrl and Peter Meredith (Leeds Texts and Monographs Medieval Drama Facsimiles 4; University of Leeds School of English, 1977) vii.
5. *The Mary Play from the N.Town Manuscript* edited Peter Meredith (London and New York: Longman 1987), and *The Passion Play from the N.Town Manuscript* edited Peter Meredith (London and New York: Longman 1990).
6. *The N-Town Play: Cotton MS Vespasian D.8* edited Stephen Spector, 2 vols *EETS SS 11* and *12* (1991).
7. Alan J. Fletcher 'The N-Town plays' in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre* edited Richard Beadle and Alan J. Fletcher (Cambridge University Press, 2nd edition 2008) 183–210 at 188–91.
8. *Passion Play* edited Meredith 3.
9. Peter Meredith 'Manuscript, Scribe and Performance: Further Looks at the N.Town Manuscript' in *Regionalism in Late Medieval Manuscripts and Texts* edited Felicity Riddy (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1991) 109–125.
10. Meredith 'Manuscript, Scribe and Performance' 109.

11. *Ludus Coventriae* edited Block xxxiii.
12. This first printing was in *Medieval Learning and Literature: Essays presented to R.W. Hunt* edited J.J.G. Alexander and M.T. Gibson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976). The article was re-printed in *M.B. Parkes Scribes, Scripts and Readers* (London: Hambledon Press, 1991). I cite from the 1991 printing.
13. *Parkes Scribes* 59.
14. *Parkes Scribes* 59.
15. *Parkes Scribes* 60. Translation my own.
16. *Mary Play* edited Meredith, Appendix 2, 124–33.
17. *Passion Play* edited Meredith 229–32.
18. *Passion Play* edited Meredith 230.
19. *Passion Play* edited Meredith 7.
20. *Passion Play* edited Meredith 234–41.
21. The civic Register of the York Plays is now British Library Additional MS 35290, and except for a single guild copy (the Scriveners' *Doubting Thomas*, York City Archives, Sykes MS) is our only source for these plays. The most recent edition is *The York Plays: A Critical edition of the York Corpus Christi Play as recorded in British Library Additional MS 35290* edited Richard Beadle, 2 vols EETS SS 23 and 24 (2009 and 2013 for 2011).
22. *Passion Play* edited Meredith 234.
23. *Ludus Coventriae* edited Block xxviii.
24. *Ludus Coventriae* edited Block xxviii.
25. *The Gospel of Pseudo Matthew*, chapters 14–17 in *The Apocryphal New Testament* translated M.R. James (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926).
26. *Parkes Scribes* 62.
27. In his chapter on N.Town in *The Cambridge Companion*, Fletcher comes close to the same understanding of the nature of this MS although he accepts the premise that the scribe was consciously writing a 'Creation to Doom' cycle based on the existence of a 'Proclamation Play'; *Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre* edited Beadle (1st edition, 1994) 177, edited Beadle and Fletcher (2nd edition 2008) 197–8.
28. Fletcher 'N.Town' in *Cambridge Companion* (2008) 187.
29. See note 4.
30. *The N-Town Plays: A Facsimile* xxiv.
31. Fletcher 'N.Town' in *Cambridge Companion* (2008) 188–9.
32. Peter Meredith 'The Towneley pageants' in *Cambridge Companion* (2008) 152–82 at 167.

33. See note 2 above.
34. Fletcher 'N.Town' in *Cambridge Companion* (2008) 188–9.
35. I discuss the existence of these plays in 'The Emerging Pattern of the Easter Play in England' *Medieval English Theatre* 20 (1998) 3–23.
36. All quotations from the text are from the Spector *EETS* edition. He uses the play numbering provided by the scribe in the manuscript.
37. Spector provides a detailed note on the medieval sources 2 424.
38. At 264 lines it is just under half the length of the treatment in Chester and the Brome manuscript and two-thirds the length of York and the Northampton manuscript. Only the truncated Towneley version comes close to its length and even it is 23 lines longer.
39. See Timothy Fry 'The Unity of the *Ludus Coventriae*' *Studies in Philology* 48 (1951) 527–70.
40. Gail McMurray Gibson *The Theater of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages* (University of Chicago Press, 1989).
41. See Alexandra F. Johnston 'Wisdom and the Records: Is There a Moral?' in *The Wisdom Symposium* edited Milla Riggio (New York: AMS Press, 1986) 87–101.
42. The records of St Laurence, Reading are accessible online as part of the new initiative of Records of Early English Drama to post pre-publication collections. Alexandra F. Johnston 'Reading St Laurence Parish' *REED Pre-Publication Collections* online at <www.reedpub.org>, accessed October 15, 2014.
43. Alexandra F. Johnston 'Playmaking in Bury St Edmund's: an Argument by Analogy' *ROMARD* 49 (2010) 39.