Stages of Belief: The Nature of Audience Response in Medieval and Early Modern Drama

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STAGES OF BELIEF: THE NATURE OF AUDIENCE RESPONSE IN MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN DRAMA

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By
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ABSTRACT

STAGES OF BELIEF: THE NATURE OF AUDIENCE RESPONSE IN MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN DRAMA

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May 2014

Dissertation supervised by Professor Anne Brannen

Medieval theatrical audiences expected that dramatic performances would have some element of truth: they believed that what they saw performed was in some sense factual, and this belief was due in large part to their participation in the dramatic spectacle. By the end of the sixteenth century, however, audiences easily differentiated between reality and the fictional world of the stage. What became blurred was the difference between the fact of the performers’ lives and the fictional roles they embodied on stage. I make clear the connections between these responses through an analysis of a variety of texts, including “The Pinners Play” (York), the “Sacrifice of Isaac” (Brome), the Chester Cycle, The Knight of the Burning Pestle, a variety of antitheatrical texts, elegies and other texts written in response to the death of famed early modern actor Richard Burbage, and the biography of eighteenth-century actor Lavinia Fenton. It is my contention that medieval, early modern, and eighteenth-century audiences responded to dramatic performances as experiences that created the reality they seemed only to reflect. Although these
responses took different forms, they are fundamentally similar and related. This stems from the
drama’s function as a method of thinking about and processing reality. As such, audience
response to drama assumes, on some generally unexamined level, that drama bears some
relationship to reality, that it speaks some type of truth. Ultimately, this study reveals the
connections between these very different times and provides an important point of departure for
examining the role of belief and audience response in other genres and periods.
DEDICATION

To my husband, Frank – forever, and a couple of days after that.
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I would like to begin by expressing my gratitude to my committee, Anne Brannen, Laura Engel, John Lane, and Stuart Kurland, for their boundless patience, kindness, and support. I especially want to thank Anne Brannen for her advice and friendship, and for supplying me with an excellent role model as a scholar, teacher, and human being. I would not have attempted this project without her.

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A NOTE ON THE TEXT

There seems to be no standard way to reference titles in medieval drama studies. I have chosen to use italics to designate complete cycles and quotation marks to designate individual plays.
Introduction

“Something … that nearly belonged to the gods”: The Reality of Drama

There was something here that nearly belonged to the gods….Humans had built a world inside the world, which reflected it in pretty much the same way as a drop of water reflected the landscape….Inside this little world they had taken pains to put all the things you might think they would want to escape from — hatred, fear, tyranny, and so forth. …. They thought they wanted to be taken out of themselves, and every art humans dreamt up took them further in. Wyrd Sisters, Terry Pratchett

For many years, medieval religious drama was only studied, if at all, as a precursor to the brilliance of the Renaissance, a way to assess how far drama had advanced since the so-called Dark Ages. Charles Sears Baldwin spoke for many scholars in his 1914 An Introduction to English Medieval Literature when he argued: “Medieval drama … was quite indistinct, only beginning, feeling its way, and not finding its way till the Renaissance. Today drama is elaborate, highly artistic, the most distinct and the most difficult of all forms of composition. How far it has developed we can see almost startlingly by contrast with its medieval beginnings” (243). He allows only for the “striking exception” of the Wakefield “Second Shepherd’s Play,” arguing the writer was “surely a man of strong dramatic sense” who created a “little comic story” that “develops a dramatic complication and solution, and a dramatic reaction of character on character that make it a unified and coherent one-act play” (251). Otherwise, for Baldwin and other earlier scholars, the only reason to study medieval drama was to marvel at the contrast between it and the complexity and beauty of later dramatic texts; such scholars drew a clear line of demarcation between medieval and early modern drama, studying the former only, in Baldwin’s words, to explore “the roots of literature” (251).

It is easy to understand why medieval religious drama was overlooked. Medieval drama is, quite simply, extraordinarily different from the drama of any later period. For the great
religious cycles, for instance, performances travelled to the audience, often on pageant wagons, the actors were generally unpaid amateurs, and the audience usually played a role in the performance – they were the Israelites following Moses through the parted waters of the Red Sea, the gawkers watching Christ carry his cross through the streets of Jerusalem, or the souls being judged at the End of Days. In fact, this may be the biggest difference between medieval and early modern drama. Indeed, the audience not only had a role to play in the performance but also was not separated from the performance in any way – there was no fourth wall.

Furthermore, unlike Shakespeare, for example, medieval drama offers little reward for the casual reader. Compare the following soliloquy from *Hamlet* with Christ’s speech from the cross from the York “Crucifixion”:

---

To be, or not to be—that is the question:
Whether ’tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing end them. To die, to sleep—
No more—and by a sleep to say we end
The heartache, and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to. ’Tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep—
To sleep—perchance to dream: ay, there’s the rub,
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause. There’s the respect
That makes calamity of so long life -
(III.i.56-69)

Al men that walkis, by waye or strete,
Takes tente ye schalle no travaile tine!
Biholdes mine[е] heede, min[е] handis, and my feete,
And fully feele nowe, or ye fine,
If any mourning may be meete
Or mischeve mesured unto mine.
My Fadir, that alle bales may bete,
Forgifis thes men that dois me pine.
What they wirke wotte they noght.
Therefore, my Fadir, I crave
Latte never ther sinmys be sought,
But see ther saules to save. (lines 253-64)
---

1 The four surviving cycles include the York, Chester, N-Town, and Wakefield Cycles. Of the four, we know that York, Chester, and Wakefield were performed. N-Town, however, seems to be a collection of plays designed in imitation of the cycle format. According to Barry Windeatt, on the “Mystery Plays: A Brief Insight and Link to Prose,” page on the University of Cambridge’s *Medieval Imaginations* database, there were at least sixteen other cycles: “Two plays are extant from a cycle at Coventry, and single plays survive from the cycles at Newcastle, Norwich, and Northampton, and from Brome in Suffolk …. Towns and cities where records indicate dramatic activity, but no plays survive, include: Aberdeen, Bath, Beverley, Bristol, Canterbury, Dublin, Ipswich, Leicester, Worcester, and perhaps London and Lincoln” (par 1).

2 The *fourth wall* is the term used to describe the separation of stage and audience; it allows for both actors and audience to imagine that the stage is a world generally similar to but completely separate from reality.
The differences are immediately apparent. Though Shakespeare’s language is complex, it is easily readable. This is not true of Christ’s speech. Although some of the words are easy to recognize, most require some effort, and more than a few (tente, bales, bete, pine, wotte) need some type of gloss or explanation. This does not hold true for Christ’s speech: to appreciate it aesthetically one needs to hear it, rather than just read it. Shakespeare’s language is complex and dynamic as written; one can read Hamlet’s meditation on suicide and appreciate the poetry without ever hearing it. The differences are deeper than just language and readability, however. Hamlet’s soliloquy is about Hamlet – though the reader can sympathize with what Hamlet is attempting to convey, he or she will not necessarily identify with Hamlet. Christ’s speech, on the other hand, is meant to evoke sympathy – the reader is meant to imagine the pain Christ feels. Additionally, Christ’s speech addresses everyone; it is communal, if not universal. Hamlet’s soliloquy, by way of contrast, is very much inner-directed. Indeed, the soliloquy is self-oriented, secular, and rife with uncertainty. It is almost completely antithetical to Christ’s speech. Nevertheless, it is fundamentally familiar to a modern reader in a way that Christ’s speech is not, because of these very qualities. These differences made the medieval drama seem not just inferior to the drama of later periods but completely alien.

Towards the middle of the twentieth century, however, scholarship on medieval drama changed drastically with the publication of such seminal works as O.B. Hardison’s 1965 *Christian Rite and Christian Drama*, followed a year later by V.A. Kolve’s *The Play Called Corpus Christi*. These texts, and the scholarly works that followed them, forced a reevaluation of medieval drama. Soon, medieval drama began to be studied for its own merits, a process amplified and expanded by the establishment in 1975 of the Records of Early English Drama (REED) project, which, according to their website, has published 27 collections of “surviving
documentary evidence of drama, secular music, and other communal entertainment and


ceremony from the Middle Ages until 1642 …” covering most of the British Isles. At the same
time, and spurred by the same impulses, scholars began studying medieval drama through


Dramas*, Katie Normington gives a brief history of these performances, designating Phillip

Butterworth’s 1972 staging of a portion of the *Wakefield Cycle* at Bretton Hall College as the

first such performance (26). Normington notes that it was the performance of the *York Cycle* at

Leeds University in 1975 that “firmly established the notion that modern staging could be a

genuine method of researching issues related to medieval performance” (27).


What scholars learned from these performances was nothing short of revolutionary. It

became clear that medieval religious drama was as brilliant as anything the Renaissance had to

offer, but this brilliance was only truly evident in performance before an audience. After

witnessing Christ’s silent stoicism during his torture at the hands of the Roman soldiers, Christ’s

speech on the cross during the York “Crucifixion” is transformed from mere biblically inspired

platitudes to a starkly beautiful acknowledgement of Christ’s humanity and a simultaneously

painful and joyous reminder of the audience’s culpability for and salvation through Christ’s

death. Performance also generally renders any language difficulties moot – the audience

understands the essence of the story, even if it misses some of the specifics.\(^3\) It hails the audience

as sinners responsible for Christ’s suffering and simultaneously promises them salvation.

However, it was not performance alone that revolutionized the way scholars thought about

medieval drama, but the effect of performance on the audience. It soon became apparent that the

most effective medieval religious drama was consciously constructed to encourage the audience

\(^3\) I witnessed this phenomenon in 2010 when I was fortunate enough to attend the Poculi Ludique Societas’s staging

of the complete *Chester Cycle* at the University of Toronto in May 2010.
to believe in the truth of the story being performed, and it is this belief and how this belief is transformed by the advent of the fourth wall during the early modern era that *Stages of Belief: The Nature of Audience Response in Medieval and Early Modern Drama* seeks to interrogate and explore.

**STAGES OF BELIEF: THE THEORETICAL BASIS**

Medieval theatrical audiences expected that dramatic performances would have some element of truth: they believed that what they saw performed was in some sense factual, and this belief was due in large part to their participation in the dramatic spectacle. By the end of the sixteenth century, however, audiences easily differentiated between reality and the fictional world of the stage. What became blurred was the difference between the fact of the performers’ lives and the fictional roles they embodied on stage. *Stages of Belief* explores the connection between these areas and seeks to engage with a variety of questions, including: Why was it appropriate to believe the events depicted on the medieval stage were real, but not those of other periods? How did early modern audiences “learn” that what they saw on stage was meant to be received as fictional rather than factual? Why did antitheatricalism resurface in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and why was it uniquely focused on the possibility of the audience confusing the events of the story with the events of lived reality? When and why did audiences begin conflating actors with the roles they performed? How is the belief in the reality of staged events in the Middle Ages related to the conflation of actor and role? How does the audience’s role in dramatic performance change from the Middle Ages to the early modern period? *Stages of Belief* seeks answers to these questions through an exploration of medieval and early modern texts, specifically the York “Crucifixion,” the Brome “Isaac,” the *Chester Cycle*, and *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, by situating these texts firmly in their cultural and
historical contexts. In addition to close reading and analysis of the primary texts, *Stages of Belief* also examines antitheatrical tracts as well as the life of famed Shakespearean actor Richard Burbage.

The underlying theoretical basis through which I approached this project is one that argues that art does not in fact imitate life, but instead produces it. As Jonathan Culler acknowledges in “Literary Theory,” “[s]ince Aristotle, literature has been seen as a mode of representation, an imitation of persons and actions, and theories of literature have sought to describe the relation of these representations to what they represent and the effects of the difference between them” (218). It is my contention, however, that literature, particularly drama, which relies on the visual, neither represents nor imitates but instead performs reality and in that performance produces reality. In this, I draw on Judith Butler’s definition of performativity in “Performatives Acts and Gender Constitution” as bringing into existence something rather than merely expressing something that existed prior to its performance. Butler, of course, is concerned with gender, specifically how gender “is real only to the extent it is performed” (907), that is, one’s behavior, one’s “various acts, postures, and gestures” are not, as common sense would seem to suggest, reflective or “expressive of gender” (907), but instead create and produce gender. In much the same way, drama creates and produces the reality it seems to reflect. However, what is produced does not reflect its production in a straightforward, linear correspondence, but is instead multivalent and unpredictable.

Audiences consume, to use Michel de Certeau’s terms in “The Practice of Everyday Life,” but what happens after consumption is incalculable. Certeau argues that consumers (audiences) are “sentences that remain unpredictable within the space ordered by the organizing techniques of systems. Although they use as their material the vocabularies of established
languages … although they remain within the framework of prescribed syntaxes … these ‘traverses’ remain heterogeneous to the systems they infiltrate and in which they sketch out the guileful ruses of different interests and desires. They circulate, come and go, overflow and drift over an imposed terrain, like the snowy waves of the sea slipping in among the rocks and defiles of an established order” (1251). In other words, audiences do not simply accept and reproduce the reality that is performed and produced for and with them but instead assimilate that reality in various ways with various effects and consequences.

I also draw heavily on theater theorists Eli Rozik and Anthony Kubiak, who argue for theater and drama as basic functions of humanity, deeply rooted in the very processes of human cognition. This complements the idea of drama as performing and producing reality. Both Kubiak and Rozik see theater as stemming in some way from instinctive processes of the human mind. Kubiak’s *Stages of Terror: Terrorism, Ideology, and Coercion as Theater History* posits that all theater is, in effect, a memory of a primal trauma in Lacanian terms, namely the realization in the “mirror stage” that despite one’s desire for a unified identity, that identity will always be fractured. Similarly, and perhaps more pertinently, Rozik’s *The Roots of Theatre: Rethinking Ritual and Other Theories of Origin* argues for theater as a medium, in Rozik’s words “a system of signification and communication” (22), seeing ritual, shamanism, carnival and many other areas posited as the origins of theater as utilizing theater or theatrical elements but decidedly not originating it. Rozik argues instead that theater is a natural process of human cognition, “rooted in an innate method of signification based on the operation of mental images …” albeit, Rozik feels, a primitive one (342). Such a view of theater links it to other “innate method[s] of signification” such as language and insists that the purpose of theater is neither education nor entertainment.
Rather than having some purpose that lies outside the self, theater allows us to think, explore, and come to terms with the world, a world of which a large portion is also a product of human cognition. In terms of actors and audience, if theater is an innate human trait we are all capable of being audience, all capable of being actors. According to Rozik, we need theater, desire theater, express ourselves through theater because it is part of the fundamental makeup of the human brain. Furthermore, this is true not only for the medieval and early modern eras but for all eras. Rozik argues that if we accept theater as a fundamental, instinctive activity of the mind,

[t]he basic relationship between spectators and the stage thus ceases to be the widely accepted one of watching a world of others with which one can identify or not. It becomes instead a confrontation with one’s own inner being, including conscious and unconscious layers, in the shape of a mytho-logical-theatrical description. Such a relationship is not one of identification, since it is the very same spectators on two levels: being and self-description. This activity, in which the psyche is the source of the raw material, the source of the system of signification, and the ultimate referent of the text, is also found in dreams, daydreams, and imaginative play ... (346).

*Stages of Beliefs* extends these arguments by arguing that the medieval audience’s response to religious drama – to both believe it was real and simultaneously recognize it as unreal – is a natural response to performance. In other words, if theater is a type of human cognition, whose purpose is to provide a way for us to better understand the world in which we live, it should not be surprising that a medieval audience, who already had a deeply rooted belief in the truth of the events of sacred history, would understand dramatic performance as another form of that truth.
Furthermore, since these basic cognitive processes remain, this response to drama does not disappear as the Middle Ages come to an end, but is instead transformed and displaced, for a variety of reasons, onto the actors.

**The Middle Ages and Audience Response**

In the Middle Ages, the relationship between the actor and the audience was much different than in most other eras - audiences were expected and encouraged to believe in the truth of the dramatic spectacle, much as they were expected to accept the mystery of faith inherent in the Doctrine of Transubstantiation. Indeed, for medieval theater the importance of the drama was its movement of the audience/participants from knowledge of sin to knowledge of grace. Medieval religious drama was thus not a reenactment of the stories of faith as much as it was an enactment, a making visible of forces and events that were ongoing even if they could not be perceived in the ordinary course of events. Lacking a fourth wall, the medieval dramatist was able to envelop the audience within the drama, and, thus enacted the eternal movement of salvation history. The actors who participated in the medieval religious drama were effectively unimportant as actors because everyone was, in a sense, an actor.

Furthermore, the medieval audience was fully involved in dramatic performance not only because of the lack of a fourth wall but also because of their investment in the truth of what they saw performed. This does not mean, for example, that a medieval audience believed that the actor playing the Virgin Mary in York’s “Joseph’s Troubles about Mary” was actually pregnant, but they did believe that the performance of these stories helped to enact events, usually imperceptible on this plane of reality, that were continuous and ongoing: Christ is always being born, Christ is always being crucified, Christ is always being resurrected. Such a concept almost immediately marks a medieval audience as naïve and childish, particularly in comparison to their
worldly and better-educated early modern counterparts. However, in addition to its relation to Rozik’s theory of the origination of theater it is also emblematic of a complex and profound worldview, though one which we have a difficult time grasping. As Carrolly Erickson argues in The Medieval Vision: Essays in History and Perception, we are “accustomed …to equate realness with materiality; for us, what is unseen and immaterial is assumed to be unreal until its existence is proved by the verifiable data of the senses” (6). Average medieval Christians, however, “did not ordinarily share this suspicion of the unseen, and used other means than sense perception to authenticate reality” (6). This is important to an understanding of the audience’s role in medieval drama and the nature of their belief in what they saw performed. With such an understanding, what C. Clifford Flanigan states in “Liminality, Carnival, and Social Structure” about medieval Germans (which applies equally well to the audience of medieval British drama) makes much more sense:

[B]y enacting the paradigmatic events of the culture’s prevailing myth in the places where daily life was lived and daily business was transacted, the events of biblical history were presented not as events long past, but as present realities involving German people of the fifteenth century. In the playing areas which were at the same time streets of the town, no clear lines of demarcation between audience and players could be drawn. All stood in the presence of Christ in the reserved sacrament, and all became participants in the one great drama of salvation sacramentally enacted before the eyes of the citizenry. (51-52).

Medieval drama is thus unlike modern drama in numerous ways. It was not just entertainment, though it was – and is – entertaining. Nor was it merely didactic, “a living picture book of biblical stories” (62) to use S.F. Crocker’s description from his 1936 article, “The Production of
the Chester Plays,” though it was certainly educational. Neither was it a religious ritual, though experiencing the events of sacred history must have been a spiritual experience for much of the audience.

Indeed, the often-rigid categorization with which modern scholars approach texts and ideas falls apart when applied to medieval literature. What truly marks the difference between the medieval and the modern is a lack of distinction between things and ideas for which we are used to clear differentiation: the sacred from the secular, the individual from the community, the natural from the supernatural, the audience from the drama. Erickson describes this medieval lack of distinction as a perception of reality as “all encompassing” and “multifold … knit together by a commonly held perceptual design” (8). Understanding this medieval perception of reality is crucial to understanding and recognizing the design, nature, and effect of medieval religious drama. It requires a recognition that medieval religious drama is always “both…and” and never “either…and.” Thus, for a medieval audience, what they witness as audience/participants is reality in a way that is both more important and more “real” than the lived reality of their everyday lives. The audience becomes the mob during Christ’s passion, the sinners obliterated by the flood in the Noah plays, the believers who betray their faith by paying to see the devil in Mankind. Essential to medieval drama is the notion that the audience will believe what they see, that they are, indeed, supposed to believe what they see. They came to these performances, most of them, with prior faith that was then strengthened and reinforced by their bodily participation in the Biblical narratives. Medieval drama does not reenact these stories or have the audience “pretend” to be the crowd welcoming Christ to Jerusalem (later the same crowd that calls for His crucifixion); instead, medieval drama enacts and makes manifest events that are continuous and never-ending.
An excellent and relevant metaphor for understanding a medieval audience’s response to medieval religious drama is through the Catholic Doctrine of Transubstantiation. According to Roman Catholic doctrine, when a priest consecrates bread and wine during the Liturgy of the Eucharist, the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ. The Doctrine of Transubstantiation became official church doctrine in 1215 by the decree of the Fourth Lateran Council. Alister E. McGrath, in *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought*, calls attention to the Doctrine’s reliance on Aristotelian foundations – specifically on Aristotle’s distinction between “substance” and “accident.” The substance of something is its essential nature, whereas its accidents are its outward appearances …. The theory of transubstantiation affirms that the accidents of the bread and wine remain unchanged at the moment of consecration, while their substance changes from that of bread and wine to that of the body and blood of Christ. (164)

It is important to recognize that this is not merely symbolic; indeed, the Catholic Church is very clear that the bread and wine are transubstantiated, that is, they change in substance from mere

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4 The feast of Corpus Christi was established in 1264 to celebrate and reinforce adherence to the Doctrine of Transubstantiation. According to Barbara A. Walters’s preface to *The Feast of Corpus Christi*, the feast was “added to the calendar in the wake of philosophical-theological debates about the Real Presence [of Christ in the Eucharist] …” (xv). The celebration of the feast included a procession in which the priest would display the Eucharist to the faithful. The Corpus Christi processions grew more and more elaborate over the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, according to Benedict J. Groeschel and James Monti in *In the Presence of Our Lord: The History, Theology, and Psychology of Eucharistic Devotion*, and involved the ringing of the church bells, the carrying of banners, and the decoration of both the church and processional route (235-236). Early literary scholarship linked the Corpus Christi celebration to the development of the cycle plays, which, in some cases were performed on or after the feast of Corpus Christi. Indeed, certain scholars and texts still refer to them as Corpus Christi plays, as does David Bevington’s anthology, *Medieval Drama*. However, scholars have begun to question this link. As early as 1982, Patrick J. Collins proclaimed, in “Narrative Bible cycles in Medieval Art and Drama,” that the cycles were “not a child of the Corpus Christi feast, nor of the liturgy which surrounded it” (119). More recently, Clifford Davidson’s 2007 *Festivals and Plays in Late Medieval Britain* argues that the “germ of the cycle … seems not to be found directly in the feast of Corpus Christi but rather in the attempt to imitate and even surpass continental rivals” (62)
bread and wine to the actual body and blood of Christ. This is possible, Thomas Aquinas explains in *Summa Theologica*, because God,

> can work not only formal conversion, so that diverse forms succeed each other in the same subject; but also the change of all being, so that, to wit, the whole substance of one thing be changed into the whole substance of another. And this is done by Divine power in this sacrament; for the whole substance of the bread is changed into the whole substance of Christ’s body, and the whole substance of the wine into the whole substance of Christ’s blood. (par 41).

This is a difficult concept to comprehend for both Catholics and non-Catholics alike. Ultimately, Aquinas argues, it is a matter of faith, for “[t]he presence of Christ’s pure body and blood in this sacrament cannot be detected by sense, nor understanding, but by faith alone …” (par 6).

Faith alone, then, explains why a Catholic can believe that he or she is consuming the body and blood of Christ even though the elements do not look, smell, taste, or feel like flesh and blood. Indeed, this is so because of “Divine Providence,” Aquinas explains:

> First of all, because it is not customary, but horrible, for men to eat human flesh, and to drink blood. And therefore Christ's flesh and blood are set before us to be partaken of under the species of those things which are the more commonly used by men, namely, bread and wine. Secondly, lest this sacrament might be derided by unbelievers, if we were to eat our Lord under His own species. Thirdly, that while we receive our Lord's body and blood invisibly, this may redound to the merit of faith. (par 60)

In the same way, medieval audiences believed that the performances they witnessed were not “events long past,” but “present realities.” Medieval audiences believed that they “stood in the
presence of Christ in the reserved sacrament,” and were thus “participants in the one great drama of salvation sacramentally enacted before the eyes of the citizenry.” Additionally, and simultaneously, the medieval audience understood that the actors were acting – no one was actually being crucified, sentenced to eternal damnation, or rising from the dead. However, these physical realities – actors, settings, stage properties – were just the “accidents” of outward form, the “essential nature” of the plays was completely and totally engaged with a higher reality, outside of and more important than the reality of the physical world.

The Sixteenth Century: Building the Fourth Wall

During the sixteenth century this dual perception – and with it the role of the audience – began to change. The sixteenth century as a whole was a period marked by great change. From Henry VII’s triumph in Bosworth Field in 1485 to his granddaughter Elizabeth’s ascension to the throne in 1558, England underwent a series of rapid and revolutionary changes. These changes, especially Henry VIII’s break with Rome, the influx of ideas from the Continent, the increasing influence of Renaissance and humanist ideals, and the Protestant Reformation radically altered the course of everyday life for the average citizen. All of these changes were both affected by and reflected in artistic expression. While some of these changes were subtle and gradual, the changes to the religious drama were overwhelming and relatively abrupt. Many of the cycles were simply edited to remove plays or passages newly deemed offensive, treasonous, or heretical. For example, many of the plays about the Virgin Mary were excised from performance. An exception to this is the Chester Cycle. The Chester Cycle was written and constructed much later than the other cycles and for much different reasons and can be thus explored as drama that is not quite medieval but not yet early modern. In fact, an examination of
the *Chester Cycle* reveals the construction of the fourth wall; moreover, the wall was deliberately structured to discourage the type of belief so common in the other cycles.

The fourth wall reinforces the fictional nature of drama and insists on its lack of relation to reality, forcing the audience into a new role. This new role is aptly described by Susan Bennett in her seminal work, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*: “Spectators are … trained to be passive in their demonstrated behaviour during a theatrical performance, but to be active in their decoding of sign systems made available. Performers rely on the active decoding, but passive behaviour of the audience so that they can unfold the planned on-stage activity” (206). As audiences accepted their new roles as outwardly “passive” but inwardly “active in their decoding,” the belief with which the audience responded to performance in the Middle Ages was transformed and displaced. Instead of believing the performance itself to be real, this instinct to believe shifted from theatrical performance to theatrical performer - the actor was glorified and conflated with his or her fictional roles, and the seeds of what would become cult of the celebrity were sown. The nature of the relationship between the actor and the audience thus changed in content but not in nature from the Middle Ages to the early modern era. The medieval audience believed what they were seeing, a belief made the more likely because the players in question were usually familiar to them. By the end of the sixteenth century, the instinct to believe shifted from the dramatic spectacle to the actor. Audiences become fascinated with the actors and the result was the creation of what would eventually become celebrity culture.

**A BRIEF CRITICAL HISTORY**

Although many scholars have explored the nature of the dramatic audience in various eras, none, to my knowledge, makes the connection between medieval drama and the very beginnings of the rise of celebrity in the early modern era. Most scholarly examinations of the
role of the audience are almost exclusively based on period. The majority of scholarship on audiences in the medieval period, for example, explores how medieval drama works, not necessarily why it works. Sarah Beckwith’s “Ritual, Church, and Theatre: Medieval Dramas of the Sacred Body,” for example, analyzes the similarities to and importance of the Doctrine of Transubstantiation to medieval drama. Other medieval theater theorists use modern drama scholars, such as Bertolt Brecht and Antonin Artaud, to explore the nature of medieval drama. These scholars attempt to regain something of the relationship between theater and audience that existed in the Middle Ages, but they are again more interested in how this relationship could be brought to life than why it happened in the first place. Similarly, scholars working in the early modern era tend to ignore the mechanics of the audience-theater relationship. In fact, many theorists that seemingly address this relationship really only speak of how playwrights attempted to control audience reaction. Both Jean Howard in Shakespeare’s Art of Orchestration and Ralph Berry in Shakespeare and the Awareness of Audience, for example, do not really discuss the audience per se as much as they discuss how Shakespeare manipulates theatrical and literary conventions to get his audience to respond in the way he desires.

One issue many scholars working in this area seek to address is the transformation from the medieval to the early modern. Although there are many studies of the drama’s transition, very few of them pay specific attention to the changing role of the audience or consider its importance, and those that do tend to be relatively recent. David Bevington’s 1962 classic From Mankind to Marlowe: Growth of Structure in the Popular Drama of Tudor England, for example, concentrates on how the characteristics and features of travelling players affected the stagecraft of late sixteenth century drama instead of looking at the audience’s role. Bevington

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5 See, for example, Normington’s Medieval English Drama: Performance and Spectatorship and Epp’s “Visible Words: The York Plays, Brecht, and Gestic Writing.”
traces the influence of the morality play genre on later work, but does not explore the changing nature of the audience’s role. Even studies that purportedly examine the role of the audience in the early modern era, such as Andrew Gurr’s *Playgoing in Shakespeare’s London* and Charles Whitney’s *Early Responses to Renaissance Drama*, do not explore the change in the audience’s role from the medieval to the early modern period. Instead, these works accept as standard the early modern response to drama, specifically, the acceptance of a divide between play-world and real world and an understanding that the play-world is not only fictional but also cannot have any noticeable, important effects on the real world. In other words, by ignoring how medieval audiences responded to medieval drama, the responses characteristic of the early modern era (and later periods as well) are seen as the only possible response to dramatic performance, thus eliding not only the fact that there was a change but also that there was the possibility of a different type of response. *Stages of Belief* seeks to fill this gap in the scholarship by tracing changes in audience response from the medieval to the early modern period. As theater changed in response to the various social, economic, and cultural forces at work in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the audience’s responses to dramatic performances changed as well. Rather than engaging with the drama as a depiction of “present realities,” the audience’s focus shifted to the actors.

**ACTORS IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND**

Much as in medieval drama as a genre, scholars tend to overlook the actors of the early modern era. The new type of theater that arose in the early modern period was immediately criticized by those who believed that attendance at the theater was an occasion of sin, both directly and indirectly. These moralists argued that theater patrons would imitate the scandalous behavior they saw portrayed on stage, positing a one-to-one correspondence between theatrical
performance and audience behavior. While the writers of these tracts were correct in assuming that audience response to theatrical performances was more complex than logic would suggest, they were mistaken in how this response was manifested. Just as audiences in the Middle Ages were able to believe simultaneously in the truth of the performance and the fiction of the performance, audiences in the early modern era understood the performances to be fictional, but rather than believe in the truth of the story being performed, they began to conflate the performers with the roles they performed. While it is true that the cult of celebrity would not fully evolve until after the Restoration, one can clearly see its beginnings in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century.

A lack of extensive information on early modern actors such as Edward Alleyn, Richard Burbage, Will Kempe, and Richard Tarleton has hindered scholarship in this area, but does not lessen its significance. Although none of these men achieved the sort of fame that actors would attain after the Restoration, the renown and financial gain they did secure is notable, as it allowed for an upward social mobility that would have been far less likely in a different profession. The evidence of Burbage’s fame in particular demonstrates how the audience’s relationship to the actors changed in form and function. The best evidence of this comes from the elegies written at Burbage’s death, most of which suggest that the characters he played have died as well. Indeed, C.C. Stopes argues in *Burbage and Shakespeare’s Stage* that one of the reasons that there is little recorded mourning for Shakespeare’s death is that “[m]en did not realize that Shakespeare was dead while Burbage lived. His power of impersonation was so great that he became his characters” (116). Burbage’s “power of impersonation” is highlighted as well in an oft-repeated
anecdote about Burbage and Shakespeare, which seems to have been first related in *The Diary of John Manningham*:

Vpon a tyme when Burbidge played Richard III. there was a citizen grone soe farr in liking with him, that before shee went from the play shee appointed him to come that night vnto hir by the name of Richard the Third. Shakespeare ouerhearing their conclusion went before, was intertained and at his game ere Burbidge came. Then message being brought that Richard the Third was at the dore, Shakespeare caused returne to be made that William the Conqueror was before Richard the Third. (39)

This anecdote (likely too good to be true) is interesting not just for its frat-boy humor but for what is left unmentioned. Manningham does not find it odd that a female spectator would fall in love with an actor’s role, even though that role is Richard III, not only an evil character but also a man “rudely stamp’d” and “[c]heated of feature by dissembling nature / Deformed, unfinish’d …” (I. i. 17, 20-21). What accrues to the actor then is not necessarily the physical traits of the characters they portray, but the traits that make them interesting characters, in this case, Richard’s charm, assertiveness, and power.

**STAGES OF BELIEF: TEXTUAL STRUCTURE**

*Stages of Belief* is divided into three chapters, followed by an epilogue. The first chapter, “‘The eye through which I see God’: Drama as Reality in the York ‘Crucifixion’ and the Brome ‘Isaac’,” provides an in-depth analysis of the audience’s role in medieval religious drama using as examples “The Pinners Play,” commonly known as the York “Crucifixion,” and the “Sacrifice of Isaac,” better known as the Brome “Isaac.” The York “Crucifixion” is the quintessential

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6 Manningham was a contemporary of both Shakespeare and Burbage. His diary, part of the Harley Collection and first published in the nineteenth century, continues to be of great interest to scholars of various disciplines.
medieval drama, brilliantly placing and defining its audience first as the sinners who participate in and require Christ’s crucifixion, and then as the Christians for whom Christ’s death is their salvation. This will illustrate the typical reactions and responses of a medieval dramatic audience. The Brome “Isaac,” on the other hand, at first glance seems to function very differently than the York “Crucifixion” – the audience seems inactive, mere passive watchers, more like a modern audience than a medieval one. Although medieval audiences were accustomed to roles as watchers, it was generally an active watching – they were the citizens of Jerusalem in the N-Town “Passion Play,” the Israelites passing through the Red Sea in the Wakefield “Pharaoh.” In “The Sacrifice of Isaac,” they could possibly have been the servants who accompanied Abraham and Isaac on their journey to Mount Moriah; however, they are denied this role and are instead merely watchers, onlookers who are displaced from active participation in the story by the structure of the play. What the medieval dramatist was actually doing, however, was positioning the audience members in a way that they were forced to identify with God – both the God who suffers the death of his Beloved Son, and also the God who allowed that death to take place. Just as in the York “Crucifixion,” the audience both required the deaths of Isaac/Christ as sinners, and received their salvation by virtue of those sacrifices. These two texts will illustrate how the audience’s belief in the truth of what they were seeing contributed to the meaning and effect of the texts, and explore as well how medieval dramatists utilized the cognitive processes of the human mind to bring the audience members to a realization both of their own sinfulness as well as the possibility of salvation.

The second chapter, “‘To find the mortal world enough’: The Chester Cycle and the Advent of the Fourth Wall,” focuses on the Chester Cycle, specifically on how it differs from the other cycles in four key areas: staging and structure, language, use of an Expositor figure, and
tone. In terms of structure, for example, the *Chester Cycle* was broken into a three-day event, rather than the single-day performance that was most common. These changes arose for a number of reasons and had the effect of increasing the distance between the players and the audience. Indeed, the breaking of the *Cycle* alone meant it could not, unlike York, enact events that were ongoing and continual. In other words, continuity – in terms of sacred history - itself was broken. The overall effect of all of these changes produced what would become the fourth wall. A brief comparison of the Brome “Isaac” to the Chester version reveals these differences. The Chester “Isaac” does not reconfigure the audience position as does the Brome version and thus allow for audience identification with God. Instead, the Chester version erects a barrier between the audience through Abraham’s dialogue and the expositor’s comments at the end of the play. The play becomes a tableau, frozen, a didactic story to be memorized and from which to learn, rather than the literal journey to salvation required by the Brome version. Here the key is tamping down the natural response to drama with which medieval dramatists engaged and instead erecting a wall to prevent such identifications from occurring.

The third and final chapter, “‘Add[ing] to Reality’: Antitheatricalism, *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, and Richard Burbage,” examines Francis Beaumont’s *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* as a reaction to the antitheatrical tracts common at the time, which were almost universally concerned with fear that the audience of any given dramatic performance would believe that what they saw was real and would in turn imitate what they saw performed. Modern scholarly reactions to these tracts generally ignore this concern, acknowledging them only, if at all, as religious naiveté or overzealous piety used to mask the more “logical” reasons that “really” underlie objections to the theater. *Stages of Belief*, however, argues that the antitheatrical polemicists were actually reacting to early modern drama as if it were medieval drama. Their
fear that the theater could or would influence the behavior of the audience outside of the performance space was a well-founded, though misdirected, fear. The antitheatricalists insisted that there was a simple one-to-one correspondence between theatrical performance and audience response: what an audience witnessed they would then replicate. This is an erroneous and reductive view of how audiences respond to dramatic performance.

It is this erroneous view that Beaumont satirizes in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*. Through his portrayal of the affable but dull-witted citizen and his wife, George and Nell, Beaumont demonstrates that the possibility of spectators taking a theatrical performance literally is not just absurd but impossible. Nell and George repeatedly interrupt the play and force the acting company to accept their apprentice Rafe as a player in a series of scenes of their own design, scenes that are only marginally connected to the original plot or to each other. As Alexander Leggatt observes in “The Audience as Patron: *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*,” [t]he play [George and Nell] want to see is essentially a series of star turns for Rafe and it does not bother them that the Rafe scenes become increasingly disconnected” (305-306). Here Beaumont introduces an additional target for his satire – the player as celebrity.

As the fourth wall became more and more entrenched, the audience’s impulse to believe was displaced from the play to the players. This is evident not only in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* but also in the experience of real players such as Richard Tarleton, Will Kempe, Edward Alleyn, and Richard Burbage. Of these, the most famous seems to have been Burbage, and the second part of this chapter analyzes Burbage’s fame using biographical materials as well as contemporary elegies and letters written after Burbage’s death. The outpouring of grief at Burbage’s death documented by these texts seems excessive both now and at the time it occurred. An anonymous poem written after Burbage’s death, entitled “De Burbagio et Regina,”
complains that “[t]he deaths of men who act our Queens and Kings / Are now more mourned than the real thing” (lines 6-7). However, when connected to the idea of belief and grounded in an understanding of audience response, this grief is easier to comprehend. Unable to believe in the truth of the story being told on stage, the audience’s focus shifted to the actor.

The epilogue, “‘Legendary Truth’: Lavinia Beswick, alias Fenton, alias Polly Peachum, alias the Duchess of Bolton” provides a glimpse of how audience response continued to be shaped by the issue of belief after the Restoration and into the eighteenth century. Perhaps of most significance in the eighteenth century, in terms of the relationship of the actors to the audience, is the explosion of celebrity culture. Unlike the anxiety expressed by the antitheatricalists in the early modern era, which was essentially directed at the content of the dramatic narrative, the actor becomes the site of this anxiety in a way not previously seen. Cheryl Wanko’s *Roles of Authority: Thespian Biography and Celebrity in Eighteenth Century Britain* makes this, as well as a number of related issues, clear. Wanko details the rise of celebrity, noting in particular the effect of the enormously popular *The Beggar’s Opera*. The actor playing Polly, Lavinia Fenton, is the subject of a slanderous and negative biography that continuously conflates her with the role, in fact calling her Polly throughout (59). The biography exemplifies the way the role of actor (for women) was conflated with that of prostitute, the conflation of the actor with the character, and the anxiety to which that conflation gave rise. Most specifically, this anxiety is directed at the understanding that identity can be performed. A number of issues arose – how, for example, one could tell a true aristocrat from an actor playing an aristocrat; how could actors be kept from gaining (either socially or financially) from their performances; and, finally, if actors could perform identity well enough to deceive the audience, how could the audience differentiate between what was real and what was fictional. None of these issues, however,
slowed or prevented the rise of the cult of the celebrity. Indeed, they only added to it. This celebrity culture further influenced the relationship between the actors and the audience. With images of actors and actors’ biographies for sale as well as other mementoes of performances, audiences began to feel an even more intimate connection with the performers. Bad performances were hissed, good ones applauded - to the extent such behavior became disruptive. Many scholars deal with the issue of the behavior of the eighteenth century audience, with most of them agreeing that these audiences were certainly not passive in the ways in which a modern audience can be deemed passive. This behavior stems in part from the audience members’ belief in the performances of these actors – they felt they knew them, and thanks to consumer culture, thought in a way that they owned them.

**ADDITIONAL POSSIBILITIES FOR SCHOLARSHIP**

No one text can hope to provide a thorough exploration of so broad and complex a topic. However, *Stages of Belief* does begin to make connections between medieval and early modern drama in new ways, connections made by rethinking drama’s purpose and function not just as a manifestation of and influence on specific social, cultural, and historical forces but also as a way of engaging with reality that is inherent in the very nature of humanity. In Rozik’s words, theater is a “confrontation with one’s inner being, including conscious and unconscious layers, in the shape of a mytho-logical-theatrical description.” In other words, theater is a fundamental part of human nature, one that allows us to communicate and interact with the world in which we live at a very basic level.

This project thus complicates the critical conversations surrounding the texts examined, as well as the scholarship that surrounds that liminal place between the medieval and the early modern, in order to trace the connections between the medieval and other kinds of drama. In
making such connections, I demonstrate that medieval drama is not as alien to modern readers, students, and scholars as it first seems. There is a great deal more to be accomplished in this area. While I have examined some of the possibilities, many more remain. In addition to the conflation of actors with the roles they perform, there is work to be done on how the audience’s impulse to believe relates to the details of the story being performed. Ultimately, I would like to see these connections extended not only to later periods, but also to other genres, such as film and television.

Daniel Gardner’s 2008 *The Science of Fear: Why We Fear Things We Shouldn’t and Put Ourselves in Greater Danger* begins to examine this area. Gardner argues that despite being “the healthiest, wealthiest, and longest-lived people in history” the majority of the Western world “is increasingly afraid” of a variety of things (terrorism, pedophiles, kidnapping, shark attacks) for very little reason (10). Gardner posits that repeated exposure to televised narratives (both real and fictitious) about various frightening but nonetheless unlikely events increases not only our fear of those events but also our conviction that these events are common and likely to happen. Such convictions, Gardner argues, are completely irrational because the actual likelihood of any of these events occurring is very, very small. Gardner uses theories first developed by psychologists Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, who were most interested in how people make various judgments. More specifically, Tversky and Kahneman theorize, as Thomas Gilovic and Dale Griffin explain in the introduction to *Heuristics and Biases: The Psychology of Intuitive Judgment* (both an updated version of Tversky and Kahneman’s original theories as well as reactions to those theories), “a cognitive alternative that explained human error without invoking

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7 For example, Gardner takes on the narrative that surrounds child abduction. He notes that a lot of time and attention is paid to a problem that will only affect an “indescribably tiny” number, in real numbers “about 0.00016” whereas real dangers are often ignored, using as an example accidental drowning and car crashes, which injure and kill far more children, but which gets far less attention than abduction (186).
motivated irrationality” (1). In other words, they attempt to offer a reason for seemingly irrational behavior without dismissing such behavior as merely irrational or erroneous. Kahneman and Tversky argue in “Extensional Versus Intuitive Reasoning: The Conjunction Fallacy in Probability Judgment” that in everyday life people do not use “exhaustive lists of possibilities or evaluate compound probabilities by aggregating elementary ones. Instead, they commonly use a limited number of heuristics, such as representative and availability” (20).

Gardner explains the representative heuristic very simply: “Appearance equals reality. If it looks like a lion, it is a lion. Or to put it in the modern vernacular, if it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it’s a duck” (25). The availability heuristic, according to Gardner, is best thought of as “the Example Rule” and means simply that “the easier it is to recall examples of something, the more common that must be” (47). Furthermore, Gardner notes, these cognitive processes do not differentiate between examples that are fact and examples that are fiction (51-58). It is obvious how these ideas could be applied to literary studies, specifically theater and film. Gardner himself uses audience response to the disaster-film The Day After Tomorrow, purportedly about the effects of global warming, to portray how audience members’ unconscious use of the availability and representative heuristics determined their perception of the real-life potential effects of global warming. The film depicts a number of fantastic events and Gardner notes that “[n]ot even the most frightening warnings about the effects of global warming come close to what the movie depicts” (58). Nevertheless, Gardner reports that “[a]cross the board, more people who saw the film said they were concerned about global warming, and when they were asked how likely it was that the United States would experience various disasters similar to those depicted in the movie – flooded cities, food shortages, Gulf Stream shut-down, a new Ice Age, etc. – people who had seen the movie consistently rated these
events more likely than those who didn’t. The effects remained even after the numbers were adjusted to account for the political leanings of the respondents” (58).

Examining audience response to television shows could provide similar scenarios. For example, the rise in popularity of television police procedurals such as CSI: Crime Scene Investigation, Criminal Minds, and the Law and Order franchise has produced something dubbed “the CSI Effect.” This term has been used to explain the booming enrollments many university forensic programs experienced as these types of shows became more and more popular, as well as jurors’ increasing demands for forensic evidence in various trials. Jeffrey Heinrick defines the CSI Effect in “Everyone’s an Expert: The CSI Effect’s Negative Impact on Juries,” as a “phenomenon where television ‘educated’ jurors are more likely to not convict someone who is guilty because procedures and techniques they observed from the fictional television show were not applied in the case” (59). The problem is that these shows are often unrealistic, resulting in “jurors who understand that the technology is there, but do not understand how or when it’s used” (61). This kind of influence is, in my opinion, much more common than we are aware of or are willing to credit.

In fact, Susan J. Douglas’s 2012 text Enlightened Sexism: The Seductive Message that Feminism’s Work is Done, argues that the proliferation of roles depicting women in power, such as “the hand-on-her-hips, don’t-even-think-about-messing-with-me Dr. Bailey on Grey’s Anatomy, or S. Epatha Merkerson as the take-no-prisoners Lieutenant Anita Van Buren on Law & Order, Agent Scully on The X-Files, Brenda Leigh Johnson as ‘the chief’ on The Closer, C.C.H. Pounder on The Shield, or even Geena Davis as the first female president in the short-lived series Commander-in-Chief” actually “mask, and even erase, how much still remains to be done for girls and women” (3,6). Such performances, she argues, “assure girls and women,
repeatedly, that women’s liberation is a fait accompli and that we are stronger, more successful, more sexually in control, more fearless, and more held in awe than we actually are” (5). In other words, the audience does not, for example, believe that they live in a world in which Gillian Anderson (as F.B.I. Agent Dana Scully) is an actual F.B.I. agent who is repeatedly involved in cases involving the supernatural, but they do believe, because that role exists, that the role is not just representative of reality (there are female F.B.I. agents) but more common than they actually are (there are many female F.B.I. agents). The similarities between these modern responses and those of medieval and early modern dramatic audience responses are unmistakable. Additionally, it shows how much more work is yet to be done in this area, work that will prove that medieval drama does not just show us our “roots” but our present and future as well.

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8 According to Peter Horne’s article for Police Chief magazine, “Policewomen: Their First Century and the New Era”: “As of June 2002, federal agencies such as the FBI and the U.S. Secret Service employed about 93,000 full-time personnel authorized to make arrests and carry firearms. Women accounted for 14.8 percent of these employees. Twenty percent of the FBI’s special agents are female” (par 9).
Chapter One
“The eye with which I see God”: Drama as Reality in the York “Crucifixion” and the Brome “Isaac”

The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees me. My eye and God’s eye is one eye, and one sight, and one knowledge, and one love.

Meister Eckhart, “True Hearing”

Medieval religious drama seems extraordinarily different from the drama of other periods because it seeks to engage its audience in a way much different from the ways most modern drama seeks to engage the audience. The medieval drama instead attempts to communicate to its audience that drama is a method of interpreting and producing reality. For the medieval dramatic audience, the drama enacts events that are ordinarily not accessible on this plane of reality. Medieval Christians believed that the events of the Bible, the events of sacred history, were both a-historical and a-temporal. As Boethius explains in The Consolation of Philosophy, “mans mynde, drowned and overcome with the blynde members of the body cannot (by the fyer or lyght of the soule oppressed by the bodye) know the subtyll coniunction or ioyning together of things” (125). In other words, mere mortals are incapable of seeing an overarching pattern to their lives. However for God, there is no past, present, or future; God sees the “subtyll coniunction” of all of history. That is to say, for God, everything that has occurred, is occurring, and will occur can be perceived simultaneously. For, Boethius explains, an eternal being, as God surely is, must “be always presente with it selfe, and myghtyr or stronge always to assiste it selfe, wanting nothyge, and to have always present the infynyte continuance of movable tyme” (134). Medieval dramatists sought to enact “the infynyte continuance of movable tyme” in order to allow the audience to participate in the events of sacred history, which is, ultimately, always a circular movement from sin to salvation. This movement would then be reproduced in the day-to-day lives of the audience members. This is not to argue that the actor playing God in the
Wakefield “The Creation and the Fall of Angels” really is creating man (lines 163-173). However, medieval audience members did believe that on some plane of existence, ordinarily inaccessible, this creation was occurring. The dramatic performance allowed them to witness that moment. Medieval religious drama thus made of its audience both witnesses and participants in the most important events of sacred history.

To those familiar with the history of religious drama in Europe, especially the genre commonly designated as “Passion Plays,” this understanding helps make sense of audience reactions to such works. During Holy Week, with its liturgical reenactment of the Passion, violence against Jews increased all over Europe. Similarly, anti-Jewish violence was disturbingly common after performances of Passion Plays. As early as 1338, leaders in medieval Freiburg edited the town’s Passion Play to remove scenes likely to increase violence directed at the city’s Jewish citizens. Such anti-Semitic responses occurred through the Middle Ages and beyond. For example, a dramatic performance of the Passion was banned in Rome in 1539 after its performance led to attacks on Jews. The majority of scholars view the dramatic reenactment of Christ’s passion as an incitement to the Christian audience, who would then attack Jewish citizens in retaliation for Christ’s suffering and death. Clearly, medieval dramatic audiences believed that what they saw was, in some sense, real. Furthermore, medieval drama was consciously constructed to encourage such belief. As Clifford Davidson argues in *Festivals*...

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9 See Fahlbusch’s *The Encyclopedia of Christianity: J-O*, page 809, for further details.
10 David Nirenberg’s *Communities of Violence: The Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages*, however, sees anti-Jewish violence during Holy Week and after dramatic renderings of the Passion in a much different light. Characterizing the majority of such attacks as ritualistic and controlled rather than chaotic and unrestrained, he argues in fact that “what is most conspicuous about Holy Week violence is its limits. In town after town, year after year, crowds of children hurled stones and insults at Jews and the homes of Jews without inciting broader riot” (223). Nirenberg even goes so far as to characterize this violence as not just ritualized but itself “ludic” (211), ultimately insisting that the violence represents a “reenact[ment] [of] the triumphant place of Christianity in sacred history, while at the same time circumscribing for and assigning to the Jews a place in Christian society” (229).
11 See, for example, Maccoby’s *A Pariah People: The Anthropology of Antisemitism* and Nicholls’s *Christian Antisemitism: A History of Hate*. 
and Plays in Late Medieval Britain the purpose of the medieval religious drama was to “[bring] viewers into the religious/historical scene of pain and suffering …. Indeed, these plays were intended to reinforce the collective memory of Christ’s pain and to do so as a way of promoting symbolic engagement with his suffering among a population that was accustomed to life in close proximity to disease, death, grief, and in times of dearth, malnutrition and hunger” (167). The behavior of the audience is proof that the audience believed in the reality, on some level, of what it saw performed, that it became, in fact, part not only of the collective memory, but also of their current reality – and the result in many cases was violence against Jews.

The situation in medieval England, however, was slightly different. Although continental expulsions of Jews became common over the course of the Middle Ages, England was among the first, expelling its entire population of Jews in 1290, a culmination of increasing anti-Semitism and virulent attacks on its Jewish citizens. There is no official record of Jews in England until after Cromwell gained power in the seventeenth century. This made for a unique reaction to the religious drama of the period. Whereas their continental counterparts focused their emotional reactions, at least in part, outside the drama and thus beyond the self, English dramatic audiences had no such outlet. As Gavin I. Langmuir notes in his discussion of medieval attitudes towards the Jewish “other” in Toward a Definition of Antisemitism,

[T]he Jews were used as a symbol to express repressed fantasies about crucifixion and cannibalism, repressed doubts about the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and unbearable doubts and fears about God’s goodness and the bubonic

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12 This includes the beginnings of and propagation of the blood libel, the myth that Jews ritually sacrifice children to use their blood in certain of their religious rituals. The death of a child named William of Norwich in 1144 prompted this accusation against the Jews and led to the canonization of the child as well as violent retaliation against Jews all over England.

bacillus that imperceptibly invaded people’s bodies. By attacking “Jews,” individuals who were poorly integrated in their societies and within themselves could express the tension they felt as a conflict between good and bad people, between Christians and Jews (306).

The audiences of medieval English drama had no such outside outlet, no way to “express the tension” created by what they saw performed, and thus, medieval English drama is then more insistent on personal reflection on the part of the audience, on its construction of the audience as involved not only in the performative aspects of drama but in the very fabric of the stories with which dramatic performance is concerned. This is not to argue that English medieval drama is lacking in anti-Semitism or hateful characterizations of the Jews. Nor am I attempting to argue that the early expulsion of Jews from England relative to neighboring countries is the sole source of this phenomenon. What cannot be denied, however, is the general sense of English medieval religious drama as inclusive and internal, rather than exclusive and external – it is about the audience, for the audience, by the audience – not necessarily concerned with a faceless Jewish other.

Indeed, for the majority of scholars this is the defining essence of the English medieval drama. Alexandra F. Johnston is perhaps representative, stating in her introduction to the second edition of *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Drama* that the audience of the medieval drama, “carried away with devotion … are to feel themselves present during the events as they unfold” (6). This allows the audience to become the sinners washed away by the flood in the Wakefield “Noah,” the literal cause of the appearance of the devil Titivillus in *Mankind*, and the Israelites following Moses through the parted waters of the Red Sea in the Wakefield “Pharaoh.” They are variously sinners and saints, persecutors and victims, the saved and the damned. This
conscious positioning of the audience is an essential and defining characteristic of medieval English drama, and when combined with the lack of a fourth wall, illustrates how the drama was deliberately structured to enhance and emphasize the audience’s natural tendency to believe in the truth of the story being performed. This concept is apparent in a variety of medieval plays but particularly so in “The Sacrifice of Isaac” from the Brome manuscript, better known as the Brome “Isaac” and the Pinners’ “Play of the Crucifixion” from the York Cycle, more commonly referred to as the York “Crucifixion.”

**AFFECTIVE PIETY AND AUDIENCE RESPONSE**

As Richard Collier argues in *Poetry and Drama in the York Corpus Christi Play*, what makes the *York Cycle* as a whole so effective and powerful is that,

there is as yet no distinction between the ‘reality’ constituted by the plays and the ‘reality’ constituted by the audience. However actual both might be, both are made incomplete and tentative by the fact that behind both, manifested in both, is the only reality of God. The lives of the people in the audience and the world they inhabit are finally as insubstantial as the play itself. … As a *speculum humanae salvationis* [mirror of human salvation], the drama is an image in which the action of God is revealed in terms of the actions of men and in which the actions of men are reflected in terms of the action of God. From its insistence on the here and now, the drama derives its vitality. But by leading from the contemporary to the eternal, from the particular to the universal, from man to God, it achieves its distinctive effectiveness – it fulfills, for the moment, the design of God (262-263).

In this sense, medieval drama is part of the trend of affective piety, born of the Doctrine of Transubstantiation and encouraged by the clergy. As Clifford Davidson explains in “Northern
Spirituality and the Late Medieval Drama in York,” this trend “insisted that Christians attempt actively to imagine and visualize the events of the sacred history as if they were present at the very places” (133). Affective piety therefore promoted meditation on the life of Christ, with particular attention paid to key moments, notable for their physicality, in particular His birth and death. Through the drama, these moments (among others) are brought to life in a way that allows the audience to become active participants in key events in salvation history.

Not all scholars view the cycle plays in this light, of course. Christina M. Fitzgerald argues almost the exact opposite in her exploration of the cycle plays, The Drama of Masculinity and Medieval English Guild Culture. Fitzgerald states,

[T]he York and Chester plays are producing something distinct from and even consciously counter to … affective modes. Instead of focusing on the suffering of Christ, and inviting identification and communion with his vulnerable humanity, the York and Chester cycles present Christ as an ideal of ‘masculine’ behavior …. For the participants, this drama also enacts an anxious and unfulfilled longing for the presence of God; even as it brings ‘Christ’ into the streets of medieval England, it simultaneously recognizes its own status as mere “play.” (11)

While this may be true of the Chester Cycle in some way, as I will discuss in the next chapter, the York Cycle in general and the “Crucifixion” in particular allowed people to experience, not just the “presence of God” but also the birth of Christ and the execution of Christ, and to see themselves as responsible for both, as participating in both. Humanity’s fragility necessitated both the Incarnation and the Crucifixion and, ultimately, the Resurrection and the promise of eternal life; the York Cycle allowed its audience/participants to realize their true roles in salvation history. Theater theorist Aleksandra Wolska, quoted in Jill Stevenson’s article “The Material
Bodies of Religious Performance in England," argues that the effect of the performance does not stop when the performance is over, “but continues in the body and mind of the viewer” (208). This is particularly true of the “Crucifixion.”

Deceptively simple on the page, reenactments of the “Crucifixion” and the other plays comprising the York Cycle forced scholars of the medieval drama to rethink their position on medieval drama; indeed, it was the earliest reenactments that prompted reevaluations of medieval drama in its entirety. Gail McMurray Gibson reflects on this in “On the Performance of Medieval Drama.” She deems the 1977 reenactment of the York Cycle at the University of Toronto as “nothing short of a conversion experience” for medieval scholars (8). Gibson goes even further, insisting that “[s]urely no one would question that interest in medieval drama studies was as importantly animated by the experimental processional performance of the York Cycle at the University of Toronto in 1977 as it was by V.A. Kolve’s The Play Called Corpus Christi, the book that in 1966 invented medieval drama studies as we know it. (A book which began, by the way, when two Yorkshire friends took [V.A.] Kolve to York to see the 1957 revival of the York plays)” (7). What often seems, at best, dull or, at worst, offensive on the page, seems nothing short of brilliant when staged. Each aspect of the play – staging, acting, language – is in fact deliberately constructed to allow the audience to become not just witnesses to a reenactment of the crucifixion of Christ, but also accomplices to it, just as they share in the salvation that stemmed from it. As Sarah Beckwith argues in Signifying God: Social Relation and Symbolic Act in the York Corpus Christi Plays, the audience members of the play “are … asked … to bear a terrible witness as [they] are addressed as participants at the scene of the crucifixion” (69-70). Although the audience members, as medieval Christians, were predisposed to believe what they saw, medieval dramatists made every effort to reinforce this using every
method at their disposal. In terms of the “Crucifixion,” the dramatist makes excellent use of numerous factors including the staging, the text, and the conditions of performance.

A QUESTION OF STAGING

The “Crucifixion” begins with Christ standing with the four soldiers charged with nailing him to the cross. Whether the players stood on the pageant wagon or on the street has become a matter of some controversy. Both Margaret Rogerson and Ralph Blasting, for example, in an issue of *Early Theatre* dedicated to the 1998 revival of the *York Cycle* at the University of Toronto, argue against what has become a rather common practice for modern performances of the cycle plays, namely staging the action of any given play on the street in front of the wagon instead of or in conjunction with action taking place on the wagon itself. The concern in terms of the “Crucifixion” specifically is that the audience would not have been able to see, as most of the action revolves around the four soldiers attempting to affix an already supine Christ to a poorly constructed cross. In other words, much of the action – until the final lines of the play when the cross is hoisted up above the heads of the crowd – took place not only on the street, but also literally on the ground.

Rogerson thus argues forcefully in “Raging in the Streets of York,” that modern interpretations of certain plays that read textual evidence as arguing for playing in the street are incorrect, noting that “[t]he capacity of actors to move an audience and make them part of the performed events without literally, ‘raging in the streets’, deserves greater recognition than it has yet received” (106). Here Rogerson alludes to an oft-cited piece of evidence for street-level playing, a description of the actor playing Herod as “raging in the street.” Rogerson in fact argues that the description of Herod’s raging in the street may have been recorded because it was a departure from, rather than a description of, the norm. Indeed, Rogerson feels that stage
directions that seem to indicate street level performance only read that way because of modern theatrical expectations. Similarly, Blasting argues for a symbolic reading of why most of the playing would have taken place on the wagon, not on the street in “The Pageant Wagon as Iconic Site in the York Cycle”: “[T]he use of the street as platea was limited specifically to its function as a contrast to the iconography of the wagon stage. Characters leave the wagon or approach it as a means of interrupting or re-establishing the iconic moment represented by that pageant. The dramatic effect on the audience derives from that tension: movement away from or toward the site represented by the wagon stage signifies the disruption or reconfiguration of the stasis of the site” (127). For both of these scholars, the use of the street as playing area is a modern conception, without much basis in historical fact. Blasting even cites the “Crucifixion” specifically, arguing that even if scaffolding was used at some of the stations to enable better viewing of the plays, as some scholars have argued, “sight lines were important and important action should remain on the wagons whenever possible” (134). Like Rogerson, he too feels modern preconceptions have been imposed on medieval drama, and that street level playing was not the norm. Blasting in fact goes even further, arguing that theatrical performances must have been “iconic” (129) simply because of time constraints.

These arguments do not hold, however. The revivals of York at Toronto have proven that all 47 pageants can be performed in one day, even when the performances are not merely iconic. Furthermore, much medieval drama simply does not make sense – either practically or theoretically – unless at least some of the action takes place on the street. This is the view of Martin A. Walsh, whose article “High Places and Travelling Scenes: Some Observations on the Staging of the York Cycle,” appears in the same issue of Early Drama as Rogerson’s and Blasting’s. Walsh, however, argues succinctly for use of the street as an extension of the playing
space: “[T]he wagon served only as the most important element in a more broadly conceived theatrical space. This space included the street around the wagon (platea) with quite probably the use of wide and ample steps on two or more sides, and perhaps even some other ‘riser’ elements apart from the wagon” (138). Walsh cites numerous textual references from the cycle that seem not to make sense if all playing is done on the wagon, but saves his most thorough argument for the “Crucifixion.” He cites specifically the section of the play in which the soldiers lift the cross with Christ on it, noting that

This action [takes up] some fifty odd lines and is not to be confused or conflated with standing up the cross vertically and setting it in its pre-existing ‘mortas,’ a task which the Soldiers accomplish in a mere six lines. Surely the cross would be centrally placed on the wagon top, and it seems rather ridiculous for the four soldiers to take over fifty lines to shift the crucified Christ only a yard or two over the wagon-top” (148).

Walsh’s argument is not only convincing from a practical perspective, but also makes sense from a dramaturgical perspective.

That is to say, if the purpose of the *York Cycle* as a whole and the York “Crucifixion” in particular is to force the audience to consider both their responsibility for the necessity of the Crucifixion, as well as their participation in the salvation brought about by Christ’s sacrifice, then having the majority of the action taking place on the ground in front of the pageant wagon is the most likely. Thus, for the beginning of the play the soldiers and Christ stand in front of the pageant wagon, necessitating the audience’s crowding around them in order to both see and hear. The audience immediately is taken into the action of the play, by enacting the audience that would have gathered on Calvary to watch the soldiers crucify Christ. Andrea Harbin’s “The
Citizens of York and the Archetypal Christian Journey: Pilgrimage and Ritual in the York Cycle,” in fact, argues for the plays as a type of “vicarious pilgrimage” (88) in which “[t]he street-drama format and the textual efforts to draw the audience into the action of the plays helped to create a ‘liminal space’ for the performance, where past and present, York and Jerusalem, become one and the same” (85). However, in this first section of the play there is more talking than movement, which creates an atmosphere less of pilgrimage than of amalgamation – York and Jerusalem are indeed “one and the same” as are the audience and the characters of the play. The four soldiers speak quickly, always in order from Soldier One to Soldier Four, using the same repetitive rhyme structure, giving the dialogue a humorous, almost sing-song, quality, which is further enhanced by the four soldiers speaking in turn.

**Theological Comedy**

This humor is precisely what is offensive to modern sensibilities. We cannot conceive of a dramatic reenactment of the Crucifixion of Christ that begins in such a lighthearted manner. However, it fits in with the festive quality of the cycle as a whole. Practically speaking, it was a celebration. It would have been a day free from work for many in the audience, a time to socialize and have a good time, all while watching their friends, neighbors, and perhaps relatives behaving in an unusual, if not overtly comic, fashion. Indeed, as O.B. Hardison has noted in *Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages: Essays on the Origin and Early History of Modern Drama*, the tone of medieval drama is the same as of medieval theology – it is essentially celebratory and comic rather than mournful: “[t]he experience of the participants is transition from guilt to innocence, from separation to communion” (284). Indeed, it is this

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14 This is not to necessarily disagree with Harbin’s thesis, merely to look at it from a different perspective.
15 Namely, abab abab cdcd
16 This is also in keeping with human nature. In many occupations that revolve around death, such as doctors, police officers, and of course, soldiers, workers engage in dark humor as a way of coping.
overall tone of the cycle and the specific tone at the beginning of the York “Crucifixion” that seemed so distasteful to earlier scholars; it seems irreverent and disrespectful, at the least. What is easily missed is how the dramatist has already subtly positioned the audience as co-conspirators in Christ’s death rather than mourners of it. They were talking, laughing, most likely even eating and drinking while Christ is being prepared for execution. It was exactly this self-centered behavior that necessitated Christ’s sacrifice at all. It was only through staging of the play that this construction becomes clear. Thanks to revivals of the cycle plays, few scholars still show their disdain for medieval drama as a whole, although the language and poetry of the drama often continues to be considered weak in comparison to luminaries such as Shakespeare and Jonson.

**The Language of the Plays**

Indeed, even some medievalists overlook the importance of the poetry of the plays. Gail McMurray Gibson, for example, in the same article in which she lauds the performance of medieval drama deems, the texts of the drama as “less books than trace elements of living performance” (7). In a similar vein, Clifford Davidson insists in “Positional Symbolism and English Medieval Drama” that “the texts of [medieval drama] fare far better when understood as dialogue to be fleshed out and made visible on the stage” (66-67). Though no serious drama scholar would argue that performance is unnecessary to the understanding of the work, or even that it should be secondary to a study of poetics, the language of the play should receive attention as well. Thus, in a relatively recent article exploring the language of the play, “Verbal Texture and Word Play in the York Cycle,” Richard Beadle still feels the need to call for a more thorough exploration of the cycle plays as poetry. He notes “[t]he intricate stanzaic forms used in a significant number of the plays suggest that their authors were conscious of writing for an
audience with a taste for listening to dramatic language patterned and shaped in various ways …” (170). Collier’s aforementioned Poetry and Drama in the York Corpus Christi Plays is one such exploration that was perhaps overlooked by Beadle. Collier argues that the authors of the York Cycle would have considered themselves poets and that what they fashioned with the cycle is what Collier terms “rhetorical poetry” (17). Thus, Collier argues,

[i]n judging the poetry of the York plays … we must initially allow rhetorical effectiveness as much weight as dramatic effectiveness. This is to be expected. First, because the traditions of poetry the dramatists drew from were themselves basically rhetorical. Verse that states and explains points of doctrine, verse that moves its hearers to meditation and repentance, verse that tells the stories of the Bible so that its hearers might remember and associate themselves with those stories – these are the kinds of poetry available to the dramatists (17).

It is not just in the staging and atmosphere of the play that the authors worked to enhance the reality of the piece for the audience. The language is also an important part of the puzzle.

**THE IMPORTANCE OF WORK IN THE YORK “CRUCIFIXION”: POSITIONING THE AUDIENCE**

What was being said, however, is as important as how it was said. For instance, many critics have commented on the emphasis on work in the “Crucifixion.” Beadle, for example, notes, “the Pinners Crucifixion [is] composed in language of a greater dramatic intensity appropriate to its subject [and] plays … on ‘work’, ‘travail’, and their cognates, both visually and conceptually as well as verbally” (168). This continual emphasis on work served to heighten the realism of the piece. The soldiers crucifying Christ had the same concerns as many in the audience – completing their work quickly and well and perhaps earning the respect of their superiors. As with the staging, this forced the audience to identify with the soldiers rather than
with Christ. Equally important is the use of the vernacular. The soldiers not only spoke of the concerns of their audience, they spoke in the language of the audience. Beadle’s study points out that the vocabulary of the play is comparatively small and consistent with “everyday speech. The fact that relatively little of this has become obsolete (though some items that have do remain in northern dialect) is undoubtedly one of the reasons why the plays communicate so directly to modern audiences” (173). The speech of the players was the speech of the audience because the actions of the players were the actions of the audience. The content of the language as well as the structure of the language added to the believability and reality of the play. It also served to reinforce the audience’s identification with the verbose and jocular soldiers rather than the silent Christ.

For some seventy lines, the soldiers banter back and forth about the importance of work and of doing that work properly – without actually ever doing any sort of work, a humorous gag the audience would not have failed to notice. Christ speaks only once, asking only that God not punish the soldiers for their actions. This leads to much merriment among the soldiers, who refer to Christ as a “warlowe” (line 63) and argue that it is for his words that Christ will be punished: “I hope that he hadde bene as goode / Have sesed of sawes that he uppe sought.” To which the first soldier replies, “Thoo sawes schall rewe him sore, / For all his sauntering, sone!” (lines 67-70). Almost immediately after this exchange, Christ willingly lays himself down on the cross, much to the amazement of the soldiers. This would have again necessitated jostling and movement on the part of the crowd. Christ is lying down on the ground, and the soldiers also quickly crouch down as they begin their task. What the dramatist has done here is nothing short of brilliant, as the crowd pressed and pushed to see their savior being crucified. It is here that the tone of the play shifts, as the soldiers attempt to nail Christ to the cross.
MOVING THE AUDIENCE: CHANGES IN LANGUAGE AND PERSPECTIVE

This shift is both spectacular and unexpected. Despite their knowledge of the events, despite the soldiers’ words, it would have been difficult for the audience to see the soldiers as evil. The soldiers shared the same language and the same concerns as the audience. Indeed, the “soldiers” would have been, in reality, friends, neighbors, relatives - familiar faces. The audience thus both identified and sympathized with the soldiers. Furthermore, for 100 lines nothing has happened – except that the soldiers have made the audience laugh, with their laziness, their rhythmic banter, and their continual speaking in turn. Indeed Christ’s brief speech about forgiving the soldiers must have seemed almost an interruption, an overly serious intrusion in the midst of their fun. At this point, however, the audience’s sympathies must of necessity change.

As soon as the violence begins, the soldiers begin speaking out of turn – at line 100 speech moves from the usual one, two, three, four to three, one, two, one, three. They are out of rhythm. The rhyme scheme falters as well, moving from abab abab cdcd, to abcb cbcb dede. They quickly discover that the holes for the nails have been bored incorrectly, that they, in fact “failis a foote and more!” (line 107). The soldiers regain the rhythm and speaking in turn, but the festive atmosphere has dimmed – the tone has gone from lighthearted and fun to monstrous (a monstrousness enhanced by their return to rhythmic speech) as the soldiers decide to attach ropes to Christ’s feet and arms and stretch him to fit the holes, rather than have them re-bored. They note with relish what their important work has wrought. The first soldier points out that “Ther cordis have evil encreased his paines, / Or he wer tille the booringis brought.” The second soldier agrees: “Yaa, asoundir are bothe sinous and veinis / On ilke a side, so have we soughte.” The third soldier remarks that Christ brought this on himself “Nowe all his gaudis nothing him gaines. / His sauntering schall with bale be bought” (lines 145-150). What is remarkable here is
the matter-of-fact, everyday tone of the soldiers’ comments. To the soldiers, they are not doing anything extraordinary – this is all part of a day’s work. The soldiers have not changed, but the audience members’ perceptions of them most certainly have.

It is this matter-of-factness that shifted the audience, who realized that they must not only identify with the jocular, slightly silly soldiers but also the barbaric and cruel soldiers. The audience must have considered how their own actions mimicked the soldiers. Joan Faust, in fact, in her exploration of the “Crucifixion,” “The Education of a Torturer: The Psychological Impact of the York Crucifixion Pageant,” insists that “the author of the Crucifixion uses carefully controlled psychological steps to lead the audience to have an interest in and eventually sympathy with the soldiers crucifying Christ.” Faust continues, arguing that “[b]y the end of the pageant, the audience members realize that they, too, could have been executioners of Christ” (par 7). Though I agree with Faust about the audience’s realization, the moment of this revelation comes earlier and it is here, as the violence begins, that they realized the implications not only of the action of the play, but their own actions within the play. The dramatist has forced the audience to confront their own culpability for the suffering of Christ.

As the play continues, so too does the egregious selfishness of the soldiers. After they have fitted Christ to the cross, Soldier Four volunteers to go tell “oure soveraines / Of all this werkis howe we have wrought” (lines 151-152). Soldier One informs them, however, that their work is not yet complete, as they now must “hing [Christ] / On heghte that men might see” (lines 155-156). This pronouncement brings on a chorus of complaints; the soldiers fear they will hurt themselves trying to lift the cross. They try twice to lift the cross and fail before finally managing to carry the cross to the top of the hill. They rest again before the final part of their work, complaining of Christ’s weight. Soldier Four expresses the feelings of all of the soldiers
when he blames Christ for the arduousness of the task: “He made us stande as any stones, / So boustous was he for to bere” (lines 227-228). Soldier One then decides to punish Christ one last time for the inconvenience he has caused them:

Nowe, raise him nemely for the nonys,
And sette him by this mortas heere,
And latte him falle in alle at ones;
For certis that paine schall have no pere. (Lines 229-222)
The soldiers allow the cross to fall into the mortise prepared for it, rather than simply placing it in the hole, thus brutally jolting Christ’s already broken and bruised body. The noise of the cross falling into the mortise on top of the pageant wagon must have been deafening, causing the audience to wince in sympathy with Christ. This agrees with Gibson’s account of the 1977 “Crucifixion”: “[The] gaunt, bearded Jesus was dragged to be roped to the heavy cross that was then heaved, lifted, and dropped into the mortice of a farm wagon. I still remember the terrifying thud, the anxiety I felt for the actor, (the jolt as the massive wooden cross fell down into place was terrific), and the strange, shocked silence of the spectators. Casual passersby, curious bystanders, medieval drama students and scholars who had flown long distance, all had been implicated by Jesus’ gaze and made crucifying crowd” (8). The emotional reaction of a medieval audience, believing in the implacable reality of the scene, must have been yet more intense.

Christ’s sufferings are not yet over, as the cross lists to one side, necessitating the soldiers’ wedging of the cross into the mortise – providing Christ with yet more jolts. It is only after the cross is completely upright, high above the heads of the audience, that Christ speaks again. He addresses the audience directly:
Al men that walkis, by waye or strete,
Takes tente ye schalle no travaile tine!
Biholdes mine[e] heede, min[e] handis, and my feete,
And fully feelle nowe, or ye fine,
If any mourning may be meete
Or mischeve mesured unto mine. (lines 253-258)

Christ’s speech drives home the point the dramatist has endeavored to make – Christ calls on the audience to “bear terrible witness” to His suffering, and to agree, as they must, that no one has ever suffered as He does. Again, the audience was reminded of their role in this suffering.

Christ’s next words, however, alleviate this guilt, as He prays:

My Fadir, that alle bales may bete,
Forgiffis thes men that dois me pine.
What they wirke wotte they noght.
Therefore, my Fadir, I crave
Latte never ther sinnys be sought,
But see ther saules to save. (lines 259-264)

His speech here is similar to his earlier speech, which was directed only at the soldiers. This speech, however, is for everyone: the soldiers who have caused his pain literally, and the audience who, aligned with the soldiers, caused his pain through their own sins – sins that were the equivalent of nailing Christ to the cross. Robert W. Hanning calls this “a counterstrategy of tropological entrapment” in “A Theater of Domestication and Entrapment” The Cycle Plays.” Hanning argues that this “entrapment” is “a method of impelling the audience toward right moral choices by first seducing them into wrong ones” (119). The dramatist has not just structured a
reenactment of Christ’s crucifixion. He has, in effect, enacted salvation history through this one short dramatic piece, moving the audience from sin to penitence and finally, to forgiveness and redemption.

**MEMORY AND THE MEDIEVAL DRAMA**

The York “Crucifixion” amply demonstrates how the best of the medieval drama is constructed, how it is designed to make use of the fact that the audience members believed what they saw. This is of course due partly to the medieval English sacred worldview, the idea that what were of lasting importance were not human events, but sacred events. As Robert Edwards in “Techniques of Transcendence in Medieval Drama” argues, medieval drama concerns itself not with truth, as may be argued for secular drama, but with “transcendence” (104), that is, medieval drama was written to unite the everyday with the awareness of the events of sacred history as always eternally occurring. Indeed, he notes that “[o]ne of the commonplaces of medieval thought was Augustine’s belief that knowledge of God was innate in one’s memory” (106-107), the collective memory to which Davidson refers in *Festivals and Plays in Late Medieval Britain*. Here Davidson argues that the cycle plays “were intended to reinforce the collective memory of Christ’s pain and to do so as a way of promoting symbolic engagement with his suffering among a population that was accustomed to life in close proximity to disease, death, grief, and in times of dearth, malnutrition and hunger” (167). In this sense then, medieval drama was a way for the audience to remember what they already knew, to physically participate in and become witness to events in which they have already, in some sense, participated.

The relationship between theater and memory is the topic of Marvin Carlson’s *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine*. Carlson argues that every performance brings with it the ghost of performances past as well as of events in the real world. He uses as an
example Kelsey Grammer’s playing of Macbeth– how do audiences separate Grammer’s at the time popular TV persona Frazier from Grammer and allow him to become Macbeth (9)? This works with the performer’s real life as well – could we, for example, accept Mel Gibson in a role as, say, a Jewish resistance worker during World War II after his relatively recent anti-Semitic outbursts? Or the face of American masculinity and machismo, John Wayne, in the role of the washed-up, alcoholic, and (most importantly) silly Waco Kid in Mel Brooks’s Western parody Blazing Saddles? Probably not, for these memories are far too strong.17 However, what was different for the Middle Ages in terms of memory and theater was the emphasis on the sacred rather than the secular. Memory as something personal and individual was not important; what was of utmost importance, rather, was the memory of Christ’s sacrifice, the memory of the Fall – memory was communal rather than individual, external rather than internal. Even when these memories were personal, they are still sacred. When told to meditate on the Virgin and St. Anne, Margery Kempe internalized communal extra-biblical stories and made of them a “mystical” encounter, made them, in fact, her memories of helping to feed and clothe the Christ child, of encountering the Blessed Virgin herself as a child. These memories in effect allowed Kempe to perform the role of mystic. In the Middle Ages, then, salvation history as communal memory is the premise on which most drama is based. The goal of most medieval religious drama is therefore to make these narratives as real as possible so that they become memory – the collective memory, of course, but individual memory as well.

This goal, of making these stories not just “come to life” but to become life, is shared by most medieval English religious drama. How this goal is accomplished, however, differs. Indeed,

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17 Interestingly, according to an interview with Brooks available on the DVD release of the film Blazing Saddles, Brooks did ask John Wayne to play this role. Wayne replied “I can’t do this. This is, this is too dirty. I’m John Wayne. I can’t do this. …. I’m going to be the first one in line to see this movie. I’m going to get you a big audience, but I can’t do this.”
one could argue that the York “Crucifixion” is in some way the “easiest” play to understand in this fashion. The idea that, as sinners from conception, all Christians are culpable for Christ’s death is common Christian dogma. My own experiences teaching this piece at a Catholic university are proof of this – students, even those with little or no exposure to medieval literature or history, quickly “get” the York “Crucifixion” and the dramatist’s intent. It, quite simply, makes sense. Indeed, this is most likely why, when discussing medieval dramatic audiences, many scholars end up using the “Crucifixion” to explain medieval audience response.

THE BROME “ISAAC” AND THE ROLE OF THE AUDIENCE

This response is less easy to see in other medieval plays, particularly ones in which the audience seems to have no clear-cut role. This is particularly true of the various extant versions of the story of Abraham and Isaac. These include pieces from all four cycle plays, and two fragments, “The Sacrifice of Isaac” from the Brome manuscript, generally known as the Brome Isaac, and the Northampton “Play of Abraham and Isaac.” All of these plays follow the standard biblical details from Genesis 22,18 in which God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac. Abraham agrees but just as he is about to carry out the commandment an angel intervenes. The angel tells Abraham that his willingness to sacrifice his son has proved his unwavering obedience to God; the angel then points to a ram that Abraham should sacrifice in Isaac’s place. These basic details do not change, nor does the lack of a clear-cut role for the audience, but it is here where the relationship between drama and memory becomes complex. If the goal of medieval religious drama is to make the narrative so real that it becomes memory, what happens if the memory is of God commanding a father to kill his only child? To complicate this process, these playwrights consciously did not provide an active, clearly identifiable role for the audience.

18 All biblical references and quotations are from the Douay-Rheims Bible unless otherwise noted.
Instead, each of these versions struggles to engage with this brief but nevertheless complex story in a way that remains true to the biblical details but also attempt to explain this disturbing story to the audience – to make of it a memory that does not portray God in a harsh light. None of the dramatizations of the Abraham and Isaac story allows for a physically active role for the audience and this is deeply connected to the subject matter. An atypical, almost Brechtian distance between audience and drama is constructed so that the audience can grasp the import of the story without becoming so emotionally involved that it hinders comprehension. Of all of these versions, however, only the Brome manages to include the audience in way similar to that of the York “Crucifixion” while still maintaining this lack of physical participation. Maintaining this lack of physical participation reinforces the underlying importance of the story without shying away from the implications of God’s commandment compelling Abraham to commit human sacrifice.

**THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC IN MEDIEVAL DRAMA**

The story of Abraham and Isaac was an extraordinarily popular dramatic piece in the Middle Ages, as J. Burke Severs notes, in his 1945 article “The Relationship Between the Brome and Chester ‘Plays of Abraham and Isaac,’” “Among the English mystery plays which entertained and instructed our British forebears of half a millennium ago, the story of Abraham and Isaac was one of the most popular in the whole sacred history, for no fewer than six different plays on the subject are extant – more than for any other story in the cycles” (137). Rosemary Woolf, a mere ten years later, repeats Severs’s approbation, calling the Isaac plays “the most consistently well told tale[s] of all those in the Corpus Christi cycles” (805). Although numerous reasons exist for the popularity of the story of Abraham and Isaac as dramatic subject matter in the Middle Ages, most scholars point to the typological significance of the story – Isaac’s near
sacrifice prefigures the ultimate sacrifice of Christ. In Woolf’s article, itself entitled “The Effect of Typology on the English Medieval Plays of Abraham and Isaac,” she argues that “[t]he mediæval plays of Abraham and Isaac cannot be disassociated from this background of typological interpretation” (808). For Woolf, “Isaac is the hero,” a position that stems from “the common recognition in the Middle Ages of Abraham’s sacrifice [of Isaac] as a type of the Crucifixion, and it is this figurative meaning of the story which modifies character and action, and at the same time deepens them by adding such an august allegorical signification” (806). In “Art and Exegesis in Medieval English Dramatizations of the Sacrifice of Isaac,” Robert M. Longsworth takes Woolf’s argument even further, arguing that although Abraham is “[t]he central actor in the biblical story” and “the tale concentrates on his ordeal – which is the test of his faith – and Isaac [is] little more than a necessary furnishing in the narrative” (120). By highlighting Isaac’s role, medieval dramatists changed the import and emphasis of the biblical story to suit typological needs.

Even scholars who disagree with Woolf’s and Longsworth’s assessment of the importance of Isaac as a type of Christ continue to concentrate on typology. Peter Braeger’s “Typology as Contrast in the Middle English Abraham and Isaac Plays,” for example, suggests that Abraham is a type of God, and his “generous action is really only a shadow that suggests God’s; his offering of Isaac is a human and so partial version of God’s more spectacular offer of Christ” (134). Similarly, Effie MacKinnon’s 1931 examination of the York version of the play, “Notes on the Dramatic Structure of the York Cycle,” argues the importance of Abraham’s role as Christ’s forefather (443), whereas Jerome Baschet’s “Medieval Abraham: Between Fleshly Patriarch and Divine Father” notes Abraham’s symbolic importance in the Middle Ages. Abraham was seen as symbolic of “heaven, the place of celestial reward, the ultimate aim of

These typological connections are easily visible in the *York Cycle’s* version of the play. Indeed, it is the only medieval play to portray Isaac explicitly as a thirty year old man. Additionally, Abraham references the “thre daies jornay” (line 89) to the place of sacrifice and specifically tells Isaac he must carry the wood for the sacrificial fire on his back (lines 151-152). Many of Isaac’s lines sound very similar to Christ’s words. For example, Isaac, bound to the altar, tells Abraham of his overwhelming fear but nevertheless says, “Do with me what ye will” (line 284). This is very similar to Christ’s agony in the garden when he prays to God, “My Father, if it be possible, let this chalice pass from me. Nevertheless not as I will but as thou wilt” (Matthew 26:39). After the angel’s intervention, the York version replaces the sacrificial ram of the biblical account with a lamb to make these connections to Christ even more explicit. Although the typological connections are not always as clear as they are in this version, such connections are certainly one reason for the popularity of the story as dramatic material. However, typology alone cannot explain the popularity of the story.

**THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC AS COMPELLING DRAMA**

Indeed, a further reason must be the details of the account itself. The story of a father willing to sacrifice his cherished son at the arbitrary request of a god is inherently dramatic (in the popular sense of the word). It is quite simply a compelling narrative, one guaranteed to hold the attention of any audience, even when they are aware of the typological connections, even when they are aware of the ending of the story. Janette Richardson attempts to argue for both the typological and the dramatic positing, in “Affective Artistry on the Medieval Stage,” the
dramatists as writing for two audiences, the learned and the unlearned. For the uneducated, Richardson contends, the dramatists’ goals were simply to engage the spectators through emotional empathy in an episode that in a way duplicates the basis of Christian doctrine so that they have, in a sense, experienced what cannot actually be experienced on earth – salvation. To the degree that they have suffered with Abraham and Isaac, they have lived the divine pattern of redemption, however briefly, and from this affective involvement should come effect, their strengthened affirmation of Christian belief and the mode of life it requires. (17)

In this sense, then, the story functions in the same manner as the “Crucifixion.” The educated audience members, however, “would know that, according to Christian belief, Genesis 22 prefigured the crucifixion of Christ: Abraham, like God, is willing to sacrifice his son; Isaac, like Jesus, is the unprotesting victim; the ram, like the ‘lamb of God,’ makes possible death that is not untimely death” (18). Although I disagree with Richardson’s description of two audiences, as most any member of the medieval audience would have been well versed in the typological attributes of the story, her description of the plays of Abraham and Isaac as affective is undeniable.

Earlier scholars often dismissed medieval drama as a whole in terms of its ability to affect an audience in any serious or meaningful way – J. H. Schutt is perhaps representative, telling prospective students in a 1929 article, entitled “A Guide to English Studies: The Study of the Medieval Drams,” that “[w]hoever takes up the study of the Medieval Drama in the hope of discovering products of literary beauty will find himself disappointed. Comparatively little of all that has come down to us counts as literature” (11). Even as late as 1972, Longsworth dismissed
the Abraham and Isaac plays as bad drama calling the “pathos [of the stories] … usually blatant and often silly” (121). Most scholars, however, agree with Woolf’s assessment of the stories as “well told” in all senses, with “no development of character and no incidental action which is irrelevant to the story” (805). The capacity of the story to move the audience emotionally is similarly evident and must have been one of the reasons for its popularity on the medieval stage.

**MEDIEVAL DRAMA AS BIBLICAL EXEGESIS**

There is, however, an additional reason for the story’s popularity and it is perhaps the most important. What the medieval playwrights were doing, in accordance with theologians and other scholars, was trying to explain what seems inexplicable, namely, God’s test of Abraham by commanding human sacrifice, which seems to run counter to the image of the loving Judeo-Christian God. In her exploration of the Towneley version of the story of Isaac, “Didactic Characterization: The Towneley Abraham,” Donna Smith Vinter argues that the dramatists “fill in and develop what might have been the human motives of the agents” (118) and they do this to explicitly move the audience emotionally, in Richardson’s terms, “to affirm the abstract precept embodied in the specific example and thus disseminat[e] ‘heart-ravishing knowledge’” (12). The problem with the story of Abraham and Isaac, however, is this “heart-ravishing.” The story is not only typological and compelling, it is also disturbing. In “Homiletic Design in the Towneley ‘Abraham,’” Robert Bennett highlights this very problem, quoting V.A. Kolve, who was the first to argue that no matter what the playwright did with the basic outlines of the story “[w]e still have a God who imposes a ‘cruel test’ out of ‘arbitrary caprice’ …, though this was probably not the image of God that any of the Christian medieval playwrights wanted to convey” (6). Indeed, the medieval playwrights who attempted to flesh out the story joined a long line of scholars who have examined this biblical passage, and who have attempted to reconcile this “cruel” and
“capricious” God with the God of John 3:16, the God who “so loved the world, as to give his only begotten Son; that whosoever believeth in him, may not perish, but may have life everlasting.”

Although all of the versions of the play engage with the “cruel” God versus the loving God in some way or another, the Brome “Isaac” attempts this reconciliation in a very distinctive way. Like other versions, it is deliberately structured to maintain a distance between the play and the audience that is completely different from most other surviving drama of this period – particularly the York “Crucifixion.” What it does differently is to realign the role of the audience in order to highlight the parallels between Abraham’s suffering over the loss of Isaac and God’s suffering over the sacrifice of Christ. This is not mere typology at work again, however. This reconfiguration of the audience’s usual role not only highlights the parallels between Abraham and God, but also between Abraham and the human audience, and, by extension between God and the audience. Again, the construction of the drama is inherently linked to its subject matter – it does not allow for the audience to physically participate in salvation and redemption through the story of the sacrifice of Isaac in a manner similar to that of the York “Crucifixion” precisely in order to subsume and reconfigure the perception of God’s seeming cruelty, a process physical enactment would disrupt.

Thus, the atypical passivity of the audience allows them to make the connection between Abraham and God, but also to realize their role in the sacrifice. It is not God who requires Christ’s sacrifice, or Isaac’s, but humanity – the cruelty of the command is thus transferred from God to the human audience. If the play were constructed differently, the audience would have become overly focused on God’s commandment to sacrifice Isaac, rather than realize that it is they who are ultimately responsible for that sacrifice. Thus, the enforced passivity of the
audience forces the audience to not only see the resemblance between Abraham and God, but also to realize their own role in the sacrifice, without experiencing the dissonance engendered by having a loving, merciful God issue a commandment to kill an innocent child. It is this very dissonance, however, caused by the harsh and abrupt commandment, between traditional conceptions of God and the cruelty of the God depicted in Genesis 22 that has been the subject of almost infinite theological and philosophical consideration from myriad perspectives, a process that began with the earliest of Scriptural interpretation and continues even now. With the exception of the relatively modern dismissal of the story as not reflecting an actual historical event and therefore not attributable to God, exegesis of Genesis 22 has always taken a few set, though complex, paths.

**THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC: POSSIBLE INTERPRETATIONS**

Many scholars interpret the sacrifice of Isaac as a necessary test of Abraham, the man who would become the progenitor of God’s chosen people, though some temper this assessment by arguing that God knew full well Isaac would never be harmed. Other scholars argue that true faith necessarily involves pain and sacrifice of some sort, and the sacrifice of Isaac (commonly referred to as the Aqedah in biblical scholarship) is but an extreme example of this truth. This leads to the most common Christian analysis of the story, as previously discussed, as being one of many Old Testament events that simultaneously demonstrates the central paradox of the nature of faith itself while prefiguring the ultimate Christian paradox, God’s sacrifice of His Beloved Son, Jesus Christ. The medieval dramatic retellings of this story

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19 See, for example, Gossai’s “Divine Vulnerability and Human Marginality in the Akedah.”
20 See, for example, Lippman’s “The Real Test of the Akedah: Blind Obedience Versus Moral Choice.”
21 There are various spellings of Aqedah; I have chosen what seems to be the most common variation.
22 See, for example, Shaalman’s “The Binding of Isaac.”
encompass all of these hermeneutical possibilities and are themselves later echoed by theologians beyond the Middle Ages.

Jon D. Levenson, for example, in *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity*, works in the tradition of seeing Isaac as a type of Christ, examining sacrifice and redemption as a constant theme in Scripture:

> [T]he father’s choicest son receives his life anew, and the man who, one way or another gave him up or should have done so, gets back the offspring who had been marked for death. Further reflection [leads] to the conclusion that the analogy holds true for other important sons in Genesis as well [as for Joseph] – Ishmael, Isaac, and Jacob – and for the man the church believes to be the son of God. (ix)

For Levenson, this variously repeated subject stems from the ancient practice of child sacrifice:

> “[T]hough the practice was at some point eradicated, the religious idea associated with one particular form of it – the donation of the first-born son – remained potent and productive” (ix). Levenson emphasizes the most important part, namely that all of these sacrifices and near-sacrifices, including God’s sacrifice of his own Son, “necessarily entail[s] a bloody slaying” (223). Indeed, the problem for readers *is* this “bloody slaying” at the heart of these accounts, which cannot be explained merely by noting parallels between the Aqedah and the Passion. It is the recognition of actual human pain and suffering that makes these stories, and particularly the Aqedah, so incomprehensible, necessitating complex exegesis, a process in which the medieval dramatic explorations of the story participate.

These interpretations tend to examine the story along similar lines, moving freely back and forth between dissecting Abraham’s response to God’s commandment and God’s motivation
in issuing it. An interesting example of the latter is Bodoff Lippman’s consideration of the story, “The Real Test of the Akedah: Blind Obedience Versus Moral Choice.” Lippman argues for the “possible existence of a remarkable, coded, counter-message in the Akedah, that exists in parallel with the traditional meaning of the text – which has always been accepted but never fully understood.” This ‘counter-message” indicates that God was “testing Abraham’s willingness to refuse to commit murder even when commanded by God to do so” (par 5), that Abraham knew God would never permit him to sacrifice Isaac and that even if He would, Abraham would refuse, and finally, that this willingness to refuse a command from God that would violate human morality was the reason for God’s approval of and rewarding of Abraham. Lippman’s explanation is an example of a “midrash.” These commentaries function to make sense of Scripture in a way that fits with traditional interpretations as well as with Judaic law. Thus, for Lippman as well as for other scholars, the command cannot be literal, as it would violate human morality, of which God is not only the author but also the highest example: by His very nature, God cannot command the murder of an innocent. Lippman’s reading is similar to Norman Kretzmann’s reading in “Abraham, Isaac, and Euthypro: God and the Basis of Morality,” who also insists that God, as “an absolutely perfect being [which] is perfect goodness itself” (44, could not have seriously issued a command to murder. Rather, the commandment was merely a test of Abraham’s obedience to God, and Abraham’s obedience derives from his knowledge of God’s inherent “perfect goodness” which would not have allowed Abraham to do anything immoral.

23 A midrash is defined as “a Rabbinic homiletic commentary on a text from the Hebrew Scriptures, characterized by non-literal interpretation and legendary illustration” or “the mode of exegesis characteristic of such a commentary” (OED Online).
THE CHESTER “ABRAHAM AND ISAAC”

This is how the Chester “Abraham and Isaac” seems to work. Although Abraham grieves seemingly as much and as genuinely as he does in the Brome version, the conversation he has with God in the play prior to Isaac’s birth negates this reaction, and makes of it mere playacting. Prior to Isaac’s birth, Abraham prays for a child, a true heir rather than the “nurrie” Ishmael (line 54). God replies to Abraham’s request, telling him “Nay Abraham, frend, leeve thou me - / thy nurrie thine hayre hee shall not bee; / but one sonne I shall send thee / begotten of thy bodye” (lines 157-160). God does not stop with this promise, however, but continues

Abraham, doe as I thee saye –

looke and tell, yf thou maye

stares standinge one the straye

that unpossible were.

Noe more shalt thou, for noe neede,

number of thy bodye the seede

that thou shalt have withouted dreede;

thou arte to mee soe dere.

Therfore Abraham, servante free,

looke that thou bee trewe to mee;

and here a forworde I make with thee

thy seede to multiplye.

Soo myche folke forther shalt thou bee,

kinges of this seede men shall see;

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24 The reasons for the Chester playwright’s dramaturgical choices will be explored more fully in the next chapter.

25 According to the Middle English Dictionary Online, a “child reared or supported but not entitled to the privileges of a descendant.”
and one chylde of greate degree
all mankynde shall forbye (lines 161-176)

With this prophetic promise, God has told Abraham he shall have a son and from this line will come Christ, the “chylde of greate degree / all mankynde shall forbye.” Even before Isaac is born, then, Abraham knows what his future holds – God has already made this covenant with him. The effect of this information necessarily relieves some of the tension and sadness the story induces. Unfortunately, as explanation it fails to suffice; it turns the entire story into a sort of trivial exercise, a mind game in which both God and Abraham participate, neither revealing their knowledge that the other cannot and will not actually mean or carry out the command.

**The Sacrifice of Isaac: Testing Abraham**

Other scholars reject this type of explanation, instead arguing that God issued the command to test Abraham’s obedience because God truly was unsure not only of Abraham’s continued faithfulness and compliance with His laws but also of his suitability as the progenitor of the Israelites. This reason for the test is Hemchand Gossai’s focus in “Divine Vulnerability and Human Marginality in the Akedah.” He notes in particular the use of the Hebrew word “nissah” in Genesis 22, arguing that the word when used in the Bible always signifies an “emphasis … on the relationship between Yahweh and Israel” (4). Whereas previously Abraham had been subject to trials testing his merit alone, Gossai claims, “this critical test will shift the focus from individual attachment to corporate responsibility. … Abraham must not only face the reality of a father-son relationship being placed under extraordinary strain, but also be reminded that he is the father of ‘multitudes’” (5). Furthermore, Gossai argues, this is “a legitimate test for Abraham” as he is “unaware that God does not intend to kill Isaac” (14). Gossai concludes that
[T]he fundamental *raison d'être* for the Akedah was to satisfy God. Abraham is praised for his willingness to give up his son, the very son who is the promise bearer. The detachment is lauded. .... Thus, it is not so much Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice as it his willingness not to hold onto. Perhaps if there is a redemptive value in this type of testing, it is to ensure that one does not hold onto a treasure in an attempt to create an indistinguishable bonding, thereby suffocating its identity and robbing it of its life. The “test” is brutal, though the potential to hold on also has death-like implications. Moreover, this issue is so important to God that God is willing to stake his very interest and promise on the line. (14)

For Gossai, then, the command to sacrifice Isaac is necessary to prove Abraham worthy to be father of a people numerous as the “stars of the heaven” (Genesis 22:17). The test “satisfies” God in that it means God has chosen well, that Abraham will continue to comply with all that is asked of him.

The Towneley playwright’s “Abraham” also focuses on Abraham’s obedience and the necessity of proving Abraham’s continued obedience, at least in part. He presents Abraham as the very picture of deference. Indeed, at one point, Abraham even offers to sacrifice Sarah in addition to Isaac if God were to ask it of him:

What so he biddys me, good or ill
That shall be done in euery steede;
Both wife and child, if he bid spill,
I will not do agans his rede. (Lines 85-88)
This over-exuberance though disconcerting at best, nonetheless demonstrates Abraham’s suitability, his “willingness not to hold onto.”

Abraham’s continued compliance is also the subject of Herman E. Shaalman’s essay, “The Binding of Isaac,” in which he argues that though God is “omniscien[t]” He is not “omnipotent[t]” – that is, God “may not be able to compel compliance” (37). Furthermore, Shaalman declares, Abraham has both a history of questioning God, in the case of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and of meekly giving in to painful requests, as when Sarah demands the removal of Ishmael and Hagar from their household (39-40). It is because of Abraham’s vacillations, according to Shaalman, that God must test him: “If Abraham was to become the ancestor of a people who, because of its covenant with God, would be tested over and over again in excruciating ways, then God needed to be sure that Abraham was in fact capable of passing ultimate questions of faithfulness and obedience” (40) Shaalman and Gossai both see the test as both legitimate and necessary, but only Shaalman attempts to address the cruelty of the request.

Shaalman notes that after the angel’s intervention and the substitution of a ram for Isaac, the account in Genesis states only, “Abraham returned unto his young men,” (Genesis 22:19) - there is no mention of Isaac. Shaalman posits from this an irreparable rift in Abraham and Isaac’s relationship, arguing, “Isaac’s absence from the text is implicit evidence of a break between son and father that never healed. Isaac never sees his father again” (42). Furthermore, Shaalman argues that later stories in Genesis imply the dissolution of Abraham and Sarah’s marriage as well:

Not only is there not a word of her being notified, let alone consulted, when Abraham took her son away, but there is not word about her when Abraham returns to Bersheva. The next time Sarah’s name appears in the text is after her
death. “It was told to Abraham that Sarah had died.” And where? In Hebron! Are we not entitled to assume that Sarah had left Bersheva before Abraham’s return? .... To put it in contemporary terms, Sarah separated herself from her husband who had become repulsive to her because, as she pieced it together, he had been willing to take away her only son for God knows what dark purposes. (43)

The cruelty of God’s command – no matter how necessary or legitimate – echoes throughout Abraham’s immediate family. He is left alone, abandoned by all he once loved. One cannot help but note here Abraham’s overeager desire to double the sacrifice with Sarah in the Towneley play.26

THE IMAGO DEI: INTERPRETING GOD’S NATURE

Unfortunately, it is here that Shaalman, Gossai, and the Towneley playwright’s explanations fail. Whereas Gossai and the Towneley playwright never address the possible aftermath of Genesis 22, Shaalman takes refuge in blithe assurances that suffering is a necessary part of faith, stating that Abraham’s “acceptance of God’s promise is ours, but so is his pain and woundedness”(44). For Shaalman, this pain is as much a part of covenant with God as is joy, “a gift but also an obligation, it is an act of grace by a loving God but also a task difficult if not impossible to carry out adequately”(44). However, Shaalman’s exegesis – in concert with the Towneley play - still avoids the basic question raised by the Aqedah: are God’s actions really those of “a loving God,” or are they more reminiscent of the ancient gods, who demanded payment of blood and flesh, and were arbitrarily vicious and terrifying? It is this aspect that

26 Sarah actually appears in only one version of the play, the Northampton; however, she does not abandon Abraham as Shaalman contends. Instead, her worry for Isaac’s wellbeing on the journey to Mount Moriah heightens the tension, particularly as Abraham does not tell her of God’s command. Once Abraham and Isaac return and Abraham shares with her God’s initial command, after a brief exclamation (“Alas, where was your mynde?” (line 345)) she quickly joins Abraham in praising God and pledging her obedience.
explains the fascination of the story and demands explanation, particularly for a medieval audience, who could not have seen the Christian God in relation to the ancient gods.

Gossai acknowledges this image of “God as wrathful and violent,” a “God that might well be pleased with, and well-served by, child sacrifice …” requires an explanation in order to avoid a restructuring of the “theological undergirding and meaning of the imago dei” (1-2), even as he himself avoids providing one. However, though Shaalman seemingly attempts to resolve this disparity, he ultimately not only fails, but actually undermines his attempted explanation by resorting to banal generalities about “bonding with God” requiring “pain and woundedness” while failing to address the cruelty to both Isaac and Sarah, who unlike Abraham, did not choose to participate in yet another test, but are seemingly used as tokens by both God and Abraham. Furthermore, Shaalman takes refuge in extra-biblical stories to end his essay, arguing that eventually everything was resolved, and Abraham, at least, died contented, if not happy:

After Sarah’s death, Abraham married again. Some traditional commentators claimed that he found and took back Hagar and produced other sons. It was as though he restored her and himself to their erstwhile relation. He died “fulfilled,” his turbulent life stilled. He was buried in the same cave that he had bought to bury Sarah with whom he was thus reunited in death. He was buried by his two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, who apparently were reconciled over their father’s grave. Thus the Abrahamic cycle ends with every breach healed and every wound closed. (45)

However, every “wound” is not “closed,” as Shaalman’s explanation fails to reconcile the two images of God. This failure is perhaps typical of all explanations of the Aqedah – both
theological and dramatic - suggesting that there can be no resolution, except perhaps in outright dismissal of the story.

One such view is that of Donald Capps’s “Abraham and Isaac: The Sacrificial Impulse,” which refuses to attribute the commandment to God at all, arguing instead that “human sacrifice, whatever form it may take, has absolutely no religious legitimation – which is to say that, if Abraham thought he was acting in response to a command from God, he was deluding himself” (183). Capps even takes the “biblical storyteller” to task, stating that if the “[storyteller] thinks that Abraham was hearing a voice from God and not merely hearing voices – in the same way that paranoid and dissociative personalities hear voices – then he is also self-deluded, based on the fallacious idea that God, and not humans, is the author of victimization” (183). There is the merest hint of this viewpoint in the N-Town “Abraham and Isaac.” Here, Isaac is almost manically obedient, delighted to be sacrificed. Indeed, he has almost to convince Abraham of the necessity of the task:

Almyghty God of his grett mercye,
Ful hertyly I thanke thee, sertayne.
At Goddys byddyng here for to dye,
I obeye me here for to be sclayne.
I pray yow, fadyr, be glad and fayre
Trewly to werke Goddys wyll.
Take good conforte to yow agayne
And have no dowte your childe to kyll. (Lines 145-152)

Abraham, however, not only grieves heavily, as in many of the other plays, he seems almost angry, an emotion not present in other versions. In fact, he tells Isaac, “Alas dere sone here is no
grace” (line 129), an interesting word choice considering the common and conventional association of grace with God, to the point that it becomes an inherent aspect of God’s nature. Nonetheless, this faint doubt is not the same as outright dismissal. For those who view the story as part of their faith history, as was undoubtedly true for the medieval playwrights and the medieval audience, however, whether the story is taken literally or symbolically, the story must serve some purpose, and dismissal is not an option.

Though I feel any interpretation that dismisses the story as less than factual is completely impossible for a medieval text, the Towneley version of the play does bear some relation to this argument, much more so than N-Town’s “Abraham and Isaac.” Although Towneley’s version presents Abraham as an exemplar of obedience, as previously argued, nowhere in the Towneley play does Abraham ever tell Isaac that it is God’s will that he be sacrificed, leaving Isaac to continuously question his father as to why he must die. While this could simply be an error of transcription or evidence of a poorly written work, some scholars argue for the omission as intentional. In “The Distinctions of the Towneley Abraham,” Edgar Schell, for example, argues that this omission allows the play to address the meaning of pain in human life, inexplicable pain, “when disaster strikes without the explicit and comforting assurance that God has willed it” (323). Schell, much like other scholars, therefore resists attempting an explanation of God’s seemingly cruel command in favor of viewing the story as yet another example of the inability of human consciousness to account for God’s motives and reckoning: “[O]bedience, all appearances to the contrary, moves in concert with God’s benevolence” (324). Schell and the Towneley playwright seem to be arguing that the human mind is, in other words, incapable of comprehending God’s will or motives.
THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC: FAITH VERSUS REASON

In this popular type of explanation, God and faith in God stand outside the bounds of rationality and are inexplicable by human reasoning. This is where, unsurprisingly, most explanations of the Aqedah, including the medieval plays, eventually fall. The Brome “Isaac” is very much of this tradition but in a way that allows for a role for the audience beyond Towneley’s “God works in mysterious ways” platitudes. Indeed, the Brome “Isaac” most resembles the most famous and oft-referenced example of this view, Soren Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling. Kierkegaard examines the story from every possible angle, poetically describing Abraham’s anguish while repeating Abraham’s essential and unwavering commitment to God, even in the face of pain and seeming cruelty. For Kierkegaard, Abraham is the highest example of faith, a faith in a God with whom “we cannot converse” for we “have no language in common” (29). The faithful cannot understand God, they can only believe. This “only” should not be taken as trivializing the act of belief, for, as Kierkegaard describes it, it is a most complex and nearly impossible achievement. The response of Abraham to the commandment to sacrifice his beloved son exemplifies both the difficulty and the necessity of the act. He imagines Abraham’s journey to “the land of Moriah”:

He arrived neither too early nor too late. He mounted the ass and rode slowly along the way. During all this time he believed; he believed that God would not demand Isaac of him, while he was still willing to sacrifice if it was demanded. He believed by virtue of the absurd, for human calculation was out of the question, and it was indeed absurd that God, who demanded it of him, in the next instant would revoke the demand. He climbed the mountain, and even at the moment when the knife gleamed he believed – that God would not demand Isaac.
He was no doubt surprised then at the outcome, but by a double movement he had
gained his original condition and therefore received Isaac more joyfully than the
first time. (29)

For Kierkegaard, the only resolution is faith, even if it does not make any sense, in fact,
especially because it does not make any sense. One cannot understand or comprehend God and
one should not try to – one should only believe “by virtue of the absurd” – for it is the only
conception of God of which human consciousness is capable.

This perception of faith as mysterious and not irrational, but, rather, a-rational, is an
important aspect of the medieval conception of God and most easily recognized in the medieval
conception of God’s mercy. Humanity does not deserve mercy – for if it were deserved, it would
be justice – but receives it nevertheless. The grace of God’s mercy is illustrated in the 15th
century morality play The Castle of Perseverance in which the protagonist, Mankind, spends the
majority of his life cavorting with Covetousness and the seven Deadly Sins. With his very last
breath, he states “I putte me in Goddys mercy!” (881) which leads to a debate among the four
daughters of God, Mercy, Truth, Righteousness, and Peace. Truth and Righteousness argue that
Mankind deserves to be sent to Hell, while Mercy, with the support of Peace, argues for his place
in heaven with God. Righteousness argues logically that:

For, schuld no man do no good

All the dayes of his live,

But hope of mercy by the rode,

Schulde make bothe were and strive,

And torne to gret grevaunse.

Whoso in hope dothe any Dedly Sinne
Righteousness’s speech is rational and just from a human perspective – it is not fair for a person who has sinned against God’s laws his or her entire life to ask for mercy with his or her dying breath and be accorded a place in heaven alongside those who were virtuous.

However, God does not act according to human ideas of fairness and justice - “For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God” (1 James 1:20). Thus, Mercy wins because she must, as the very essence of God, and always will – but this is not something explicable in human terms. Mankind is brought to dwell in heaven and God says to him, “Ful wel have I lovyd the[e], / Unkind thow[gh] I the[e] fonde. / As a sparke of fire in the se, / My mercy is sinne-quenchand” (lines 3600-3603). For medieval Christians, indeed for believers of any time, this simultaneously makes no sense and makes perfect sense, for as Paul asks in first Corinthians, “Hath not God made foolish the wisedome of this world?” (1:20). It is, in Kierkegaard’s terms, absurd, but it is the only thing possible for humans, as it at once makes feasible our ability to live in this world and know there is more. In his Concluding Unscientific Postscript, Kierkegaard states, “If I am capable of grasping God objectively, I do not believe, but precisely because I cannot do this I must believe. If I wish to preserve myself in faith I must constantly be intent upon holding fast the objective uncertainty, so as to remain out upon the deep, over seventy thousand fathoms of water, still preserving my faith” (92). It is a contradiction that can become paralyzing, possibly even undermining faith if contemplated too long because of the insufficiency of human reason; the only solution is to accept the contradiction without seeking a solution.
THE BROME ISAAC: THE MYSTERY AND ABSURDITY OF FAITH

This is especially true of God’s commandment to sacrifice Isaac – it is cruel and arbitrary from a human perspective; it cannot be reconciled with the image of the Judeo-Christian God, the God who could say to Jeremiah “‘Before I formed thee in the bellie, I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the wombe, I sanctified thee” (Jeremiah 1:5) The Brome “Isaac” both works with this contradiction and subsumes it through dramatic form, encompassing all of these various problems without seeking to resolve them, and thus anticipates and defuses any potential cognitive dissonance in the audience. The play focuses on many of the issues that preoccupy theologians and philosophers, acknowledging various aspects of the exegesis of the Biblical account while still allowing it to function as more than mere story. For example, as Bennet’s “Homiletic Design in the Towneley Abraham” notes, there is in the Brome “Isaac” the idea that God was testing Abraham’s suitability as the progenitor of both the Jews and eventually the Christians. Bennet notes that the Brome “Isaac” depicts God as “discover[ing] Abraham’s fidelity for future humanity, not for himself” (7), quoting from one of two speeches by God in the play, when God states that “All men schall take examplell [Abraham] by / My commaw[nd]mentys how they schall fulfill” (309). Bennet concludes that “God’s motives in the Abraham episode have been questioned and answered by the Brome playwright” (7). Although the conception of Abraham as a model of perfect obedience is indeed one aspect of the story, it is reductive to argue that this is the only element at work.

Indeed, the Brome playwright also works to illustrate the mystery and absurdity of faith, depicting Abraham’s continued love for God, after the angel tells him not to harm Isaac, but to instead slaughter an animal in his place. Abraham is overjoyed, telling Isaac, “Full glad and blithe we may be,” (line 405) to which Isaac replies, “A, fader, I thanke owre Lord every dell /
That my wit servyd me so well / For to drede God more than my detth. (lines 408-410).

Logically and rationally, Abraham should be furious with God, and Isaac should be furious with his father for the suffering they have just endured. Instead the text depicts them as “full glad and blithe” and continuing to praise God, demonstrating the absurdity of faith. Indeed, the Brome playwright anticipated Kierkegaard’s beautifully wrought explanation by some 300 years.

Isaac and Abraham thus embody the mystery of faith, a concept that Gail McMurray Gibson argues “is the very essence of the medieval drama: “[T]he imaging of scripture in human flesh … is the generating force of the medieval religious drama. The highest purpose of medieval biblical drama … [is] the sacramental revelation of the mysterium of the word made flesh” (par 8) in “Writing Before the Eye: The N-Town Woman Taken in Adultery and The Medieval Mystery Play.” The playwright does not, however, stop with the representation of the inscrutability of faith but also emphasizes the relationship between the stories of the Old Testament and the stories of the New Testament. Vinter illustrates this function of medieval drama in stating, “in the rich circular and oxymoronic logic of the Christian apprehension of the time, the time before Christ and the time after Christ can be seen to correspond. They do so at the hands of the medieval playwrights, who deny themselves few opportunities to suggest the contemporaneity of the stories they tell” (121). This is particularly true of the Brome playwright, who uses this circular perception of time, Kierkegaard’s “double movement,” to lasting effect on the audience.

**The Role of the Father: Abraham and God**

Despite the popular typological rendering of Isaac as a type of Christ, the focus in the Brome version is less on Isaac’s parallels to Christ and more on Abraham’s parallels to God. Using the “rich circular and oxymoronic logic of the medieval mindset,” what becomes
important is not Isaac’s similarities to Christ but Abraham’s similarity to God. Specifically, how his all too human grief echoes the unimaginable depths of God’s grief – and how the responsibility for that grief rests solely on humanity. However, it focuses on these relationships in such a way that it does not devolve into banalities or force dismissal. As Clifford Davidson illustrates in “The Sacrifice of Isaac in Medieval English Drama,” the rendering of the Akedah becomes a “hermeneutic method … capable of enriching a story [that does not] become a mechanism for denying its literal meaning by resolving into a mere abstraction” (30). The playwright’s adept handling of the subject matter and unusual structuring allows parts of the story to remain a mystery by maintaining an atypical distance between the play and the audience. The traditional medieval positioning of the audience, as we have seen, situates the audience in such a way that they physically experience both sin and redemption – Hanning’s “counterstrategy of tropological entrapment.” This “counterstrategy,” according to Hanning, is necessarily physical, what he refers to as becoming “kinetically involved, straining both physically and mentally with the actors as they move toward the climax. We are irresistibly invited to become, in effect, the coperformers of the action” (120). This is the opposite of the responsibility of modern theater audiences, as Susan Bennet states in Theatre Audiences, “[s]pectators are … trained to be passive in their demonstrated behaviour during a theatrical experience, but to be active in their decoding of the sign systems made available” (206). Conversely, medieval audiences were “trained” to be active physically and thus gain powerful insight through the body – medieval drama is not necessarily an affair that requires the same kind of intellectual “decoding” as does modern drama. The Brome “Isaac,” like its medieval dramatic counterparts, restrained the physical participation typical of the audience of the time but, unlike
the other plays, simultaneously played on emotional responses that both hindered and encouraged decoding.

Indeed, the audience of the Brome “Isaac” could not help but be emotionally involved in the subject matter. As John R. Elliot’s “The Sacrifice of Isaac as Comedy and Tragedy” acknowledges, Abraham’s responses are “fully human: while he is quick to acknowledge his duty and obedience to God, he is equally quick to confess the anguish it costs him” (48). Indeed, Abraham’s pain and anguish after God issues his commandment are incredibly overdetermined, almost excessive – Abraham references the “wo[u]nd” in his “harte” (line 121), the breaking of his “harte” (line 128) and the heaviness of his “harte” (line 96) no less than fourteen times from the moment the angel announces the commandment until the angel rescinds it, a space of only 247 lines, culminating in his “aside” standing over Isaac’s bound body on the altar:

Loo, now is the time cum, certeyn,
That my sword in his necke schall bite.
A, Lord, my hart reysith therageyn!
I may not find it in my harte to smite.
My hart will not now thertoo.
Yit fain I woold warke my Lordys will.
But this yowng innocent lyghth so stoll
I may not find it in my hart him to kill.
O Fader of heyvn, what schall I doo? (lines 297-305)

This repetition makes clear the unimaginable extent of Abraham’s suffering, a suffering that is only compounded by Isaac’s behavior. Isaac does not beg his father to cease, or argue the injustice of the act. Rather, Isaac pleads with his father for mercy, not to stop but to finish
quickly, saying “A, mercy, fader, w[h]y tery ye so / And let me ley thus longe on this heth? / Now I would to God the stroke were doo” (lines 306-308). Abraham replies, “Now, hart, w[h]y wolddist no thow breke on / thre? / Yit schall thou not make me to my God on-mild” (lines 311-312). This excess of repetition, along with Isaac’s “full mild” (line 170) acceptance of Abraham’s actions and the necessity of them, cannot but powerfully affect an audience, particularly a medieval audience, every one of whom, in that age of high infant mortality, had been affected in some way by a child’s death. The Brome “Isaac” brings to life what remains invisible in Scripture – God’s overwhelming anguish at the death of his “beloved Son” (Luke 9:35).

**THE AUDIENCE AS GRIEVING FATHER**

This emotional reaction is compounded by the audience’s atypical passivity and function as omniscient voyeurs. Although medieval audiences were accustomed to roles as watchers, it was generally an active watching – they are the citizens of Jerusalem in the N-Town “Passion Play,” the shamed crowd awaiting a public execution in the N-Town “The Woman Taken in Adultery.” In Brome’s “The Sacrifice of Isaac,” as would have been possible in other versions, they could possibly have been the servants who accompany Abraham and Isaac on their journey to Mount Moriah, “the lond of v[i]sion (line 63); however, they are denied this role and are instead merely watchers, onlookers who are displaced from active participation in the story by the structure of the play. They are positioned to be as helpless as Abraham and as culpable as God. The audience’s position in the Brome Isaac completes the realignment of roles in the story – Abraham is God, Isaac is Christ, and the audience by default is also necessarily associated with God, the God who suffers the loss of his “beloved” child, but also the God described by Robert Bennet as “a petty tyrant …” (7). Thus, the parallel between the Aqedah and the Passion is
complete, as it is the believers, the audience, who require the blood sacrifice of redemption in Christ, not God. The creatures created in God’s image encompass the twin roles of loving parent and wrathful deity – it is our spitefulness and our sin that demands the sacrifice and, unlike in the Aqedah, we do not have the infinite love and mercy essential to be able to rescind the request. The cruelty of God’s request is displaced, or rather, re-placed where it belongs, onto humanity. A physical enactment of the story, that is, the audience becoming physically part of the dramatic action as they do in the York “Crucifixion,” would have disrupted this repositioning, leading to a reconfiguring of the story that would force either dismissal or outrage, a questioning of God’s loving nature. Instead of adding to the cultural memory of humanity’s responsibility for Christ’s death, the memory would have been of the God’s cruelty, Abraham’s pain, Isaac’s fear. Had the audience become physically involved, the emotions of the story would have been overwhelming, prohibiting them from making the necessary connections. The alignment of the Christian God with the bloodthirsty and capricious gods of the ancients would have been inconceivable and incomprehensible to the medieval Christian mind, for it is humans who are malicious and jealous, not God.

This dis(re)placement is further illustrated by the speech of the “doctor” at the end of the play, which supposedly explains to the audience the nature of what they had just been watching. The “doctor” interprets the play:

For this story scho[w]it[h] yowe [here]

How we schuld kepe, to owre po[we]re,

Goddys commaw[nd]ementys withowt groching.

Trowe ye, sorys, and God sent an angel,

And commawndyd yow yowre child to slayn,
By yowre trowthe, is ther ony of yow
That either wold groche or strive ther-ageyn?
How thingke ye now, sorys therby?
I trow ther be thre or four, or moo –
And this[e] women that wepe so sorrowfully
Whan that hir childryn dey them froo,
As nater woll, and kind.
It is but folly, I may well avooe,
To groche agens God or to greve yow;
For ye schall never se him mischevyd, well I know,
By lond nor watyr – have this in mind.
And groche not agens owre Lord God,
In welthe or woo, w[h]ether that he yow send,
Thow[gh] ye be never so hard bested;
For whan he will, he may it amend,
His comaw[nd]mentys treuly if ye kepe with goo[d] hart –
As this story hatn now schowyd yow befor[n]e – (lines 440-462)

What is fascinating here is the discrepancy between what the audience members had actually seen take place, and what the doctor says they have seen take place. The audience does not witness Abraham as the picture of obedience, nor do they perceive him as faithfully resigned to Isaac’s death. Abraham mourns throughout the play; from the moment that he receives the command, until the angel orders him to hold from striking, he is in agony. What the Doctor insists on is what Davidson deems “a kind of Christian stoicism” after forcing “members of the
audience [to] call to mind the emotions implied in the threat of Kindermort against Isaac in the play” (“Sacrifice of Isaac” 36). Davidson’s argument, however, overlooks the constructed nature of the Doctor’s command, which is not to “call to mind the emotions” evoked by the death of the child, but to once again illustrate the suffering of God as figured in Abraham. The argument that God works in mysterious ways is neither comforting to a parent, nor a bromide capable of alleviating grief. It is not overreaching to suggest that those in the audience who had lost a child would have been at the very least uncomfortable with the Doctor’s speech. This discomfort (perhaps anger) would have further emphasized the nature and size of God’s sacrifice of Christ, as it would then lead to sympathy for the grief of Abraham, a sympathy enhanced by the insensitivity of those who argue that one should not complain or grieve at the loss of a child, as it is God’s will. The Doctor’s speech is thus structured to reinforce the dis(re)placement that occurs during the play itself – it once again displaces cruelty from God, and re-places it on humanity.

The appeal of the story of God’s command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac is due to its symbolism, its plot, but most of all to its disjunctive nature – it does not fit the customary view of the loving nature of God. The Brome “Isaac,” unlike other artistic re-imaginings of the story, does not attempt to address directly this disjunction. Instead, it incorporates it into a recognition of the fundamental incomprehensibility of God, while simultaneously resituating the audience in order to implicate them as ultimately responsible for the cruelty of the command. This repositioning is different from the typical structure of a medieval play, yet ultimately creates the same effect. Whereas the York “Crucifixion” takes the audience on a physical journey through both sin and redemption, the Brome “Isaac” instead demands of its audience a complex spiritual, emotional, and intellectual journey. It is a story that requires its audience to be watchers and

27 Infanticide.
travelers, a literal journey to “the land of v[i]sion” with Isaac and Abraham in order to realize once again humanity’s actual position as the sinners that demanded the sacrifice through which they become worthy of the infinite mercy of God.
Chapter Two  
“To find the mortal world enough”: The Chester Cycle and the Advent of the Fourth Wall

The transformation was not sudden or once-for-all, but it became increasingly possible to turn away from a preoccupation with angels and demons and immaterial causes and to focus on things in this world […]. In short, it became possible – never easy, but possible – in the poet Auden’s phrase to find the moral world enough.

Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve*

In “The Idea of a Person in Medieval Morality Plays,” Natalie Crohn Schmitt describes how many modern scholars approach medieval studies: “[O]ur categories assume a clear distinction between allegory and symbol on the one hand, and the literal on the other. … Our presupposition is that what is literally there is sensible, materially there and that every medieval person really knew this, and knew that what we call abstractions are in the mind only, but for convenience and ease of thought he thought of the abstract in terms of the concrete. But, the predominant medieval view was that the Real was unseen and immaterial” (306). Indeed, for medieval Christians this “unseen and immaterial” Reality with-a-capital-R was much more important than the trivial concerns of ordinary reality. The concerns of the physical world, which Schmitt describes as “more like a garment [medieval man] wore about him than a stage on which he moved” (305), were of much less importance than the concerns of that other Reality, for it was this Reality that encompassed, eternally and unceasingly, the events of sacred history. The medieval cycle plays engaged with this Reality, by reproducing these events and thus enabling the audiences to, at least momentarily, experience physically the usually “unseen and immaterial” Reality. Such an understanding of the prevailing medieval conception of reality allows modern scholars to understand medieval drama as neither an homage to a sacred story nor a re-enactment of that story. Nor is it a mere didactic tool, creating, in S.F. Crocker’s words from his 1936 article “The Production of the Chester Plays,” “a living picture book of biblical stories”
(62) to educate the illiterate. Rather, medieval drama is an *enactment*, a making visible of events that usually cannot be accessed on this plane of existence. And it is this enacted nature that prompted the medieval audience to identify with the events and the characters as if the performance were, in some sense, real.

**THE CHESTER CYCLE, THE FOURTH WALL, AND BRECHT**

As these philosophical underpinning began to change, however, the drama changed as well. This is most apparent in the *Chester Cycle*, which resembles the other cycles in terms of staging and subject matter but is radically different in terms of purpose and effect. The *Chester Cycle* deliberately holds the audience at a distance in a way that reconfigures the role of the audience, making of them spectators rather than participants. In this reconfiguration, we can see the slow but purposeful construction of the fourth wall, and with it, the first indications of modern drama. The deliberate distancing of the audience, characteristic of the *Chester Cycle*, has led some scholars to argue that most medieval drama is Brechtian in effect.28

Bertold Brecht famously argued that the theater should be an alienating experience. Drama, he argues, should not “fling” the audience “into the story as if it were a river and let itself be carried vaguely hither and thither” (201). Instead, for Brecht, effective drama reveals itself as a construct to prevent the audience’s identification with it. Brecht goes on to set forth a theory of effective drama as stylistic, rather than realistic – “the individual episodes have to be knotted together in such a way that the knots are easily noticed” (201). Indeed, for Brecht, this is the only way in which drama can affect reality and inspire change. This emphasis on the real-world implications of drama perhaps explains why so many scholars see a relationship between avant-garde theater in general - and Brecht’s theories in particular - and medieval drama. Ultimately,

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28 See, for example, Potter’s comparison of the medieval drama to Brecht in his *The English Morality Play: Origins, History and Influence of a Dramatic Tradition*, 3-4.
however, while the theories of the avant-garde theater provide a way into understanding how the medieval drama can work now, it does not help us to understand medieval drama as it was. Indeed, Janet K. Ritch’s “The Role of the Presenter in Medieval Drama” is very clear on this point: “Brecht’s purpose is totally incompatible with the ethos of the Middle Ages in which ritual and theatre, the secular and the sacred, orality and literacy, the stage and everyday reality were fully intertwined” (260). In other words, to understand how medieval drama was conceived, produced, and performed in the Middle Ages, these theories are not helpful, because the theories underlying much avant-garde theater in general come from a completely different approach to the world, as Ritch so aptly observes.

In addition to the supposed alienating effect of the dramatic structure of the cycle plays, another possible argument that supports an alignment of Brecht’s theories with medieval drama is that the use of many different actors to play the same characters, as is necessary for the cycles, would also erect that Brechtian distance between the audience and the players, would, in effect, make “the knots … easily noticed.” This is Katie Normington’s exact argument in Medieval English Drama: Performance and Spectatorship: “Audiences of the medieval plays could not expect to identify with the actors as they might in a modern play. There was no consistency within the representation of the characters: each new pageant deployed a new actor for the role. … It is likely that because of this the audience would maintain a Brechtian distance and employ critical judgment rather than emotional identification with the characters.” Normington does, however, allow, “such a suggestion depends on medieval spectators viewing with the same strategies as a contemporary audience” (73). This is a key issue and represents, in my opinion, a misunderstanding of the difference, for a medieval audience, between a reenactment and an
enactment, a difference that necessarily changes the strategies used by a medieval audience to engage with drama.

THE MEDIEVAL PERCEPTION OF REALITY

It also speaks to the differences between the ethos of the Middle Ages and those of later eras. Although there are many key differences, what is perhaps most pertinent about the medieval ethos is a lack of boundaries – between the secular and the sacred, between the self and the community, and, most importantly, between the tangible world of lived reality and the intangible world, the world for which medieval Christians was both more important and more real. In The Medieval Vision: Essays in History and Perception, Carrolly Erickson compares the medieval concept of reality to “an enchanted world in which the boundaries of imagination and factuality are constantly shifting. At one time the observed physical limits of time and space may be acknowledged; at another they may be ignored, or, from another point of view, transcended” (6). Erickson is careful to point out that this flexibility of perception does not mean that [medieval men and women] were unable to distinguish between the imagined and the tangible. Nor does it imply that they were puzzled or deluded about the difference between material and immaterial existence. Here it is our habits of mind which hamper us, accustomed as we are to equate realness with materiality; for us, what is unseen and immaterial is assumed to be unreal until its existence is proved by the verifiable data of the senses. Though they were far from being credulous, the medievals did not ordinarily share this suspicion of the unseen, and used other means than sense perception to authenticate reality. (6)
This is the world described by the Pearl poet as the place where the Lamb of God dwells both eternally blissful and eternally wounded:

Delit þe Lombe for to deuise
Wyth much meruayle in mynde went.
Best wat he, blyþest, and moste to pryse,
Þat euer I herde of speche spent;
So worþly whyt wern wedeȝ hys,
His lokeȝ symple, hymself so gent.
Bot a wounde ful wyde and weete con wyse
Anende hys hert, þurȝ hyde torenté.
Of his quyte syde his blod outsprente. (lines 1133-1137)

As in Pearl, this world can be perceived through dreams, as well as through visions, prayer, and, of course, death.

An additional way to access this world is, of course, through art – specifically, literature. The literature of the Middle Ages is filled with stories of and about this world. They demonstrate again and again the liminal quality of what Erickson terms “medieval perception.” Erickson notes that a key trait of this perception is the aforementioned lack of boundaries:

[M]edieval people tended to perceive an all-encompassing, multifold reality, knit together by a commonly held perceptual design. All-encompassing, because no part of experience or knowledge was conceived to be alien to the pattern of Christian revelation. Manifold, because it was a cultural habit to endow individual things with multiple identities. And in terms of a common perceptual design, because it was the mutually held network of beliefs, expectations and assumptions
about reality that made medieval culture comprehensible to those who loved their mental lives within its bounds. (8)

Literary scholars have often commented on this “all-encompassing, multifold reality.” Judson Allen, for example, speaks to this issue of a “multifold reality” in the medieval lyric in his article “Grammar, Poetic Form, and the Lyric Ego: A Medieval A Priori,” in which he argues that the medieval lyric is intended to be occupied by the hearer or reader who in so doing becomes his or her “true self – whether lover, Christian, warrior, or suffering type” (219). Similarly, Schmitt explores medieval conceptions of symbolism and allegory as they are portrayed in the morality plays, noting that the vices are depicted as actual characters, and thus “the plays do not allow us to make a clear distinction between that which exists independently as outside agent and that which is internal motive (27). Schmitt ultimately concludes “that for the medieval person the distinction between literal and allegorical was not what it is for us and had not the sharpness of a contradiction, and that these plays which we call allegories are to a far greater extent than we have realized representations of phenomenological reality” (32). Schmitt is arguing that for the medieval person, reality was not limited, as it is most often for the modern person, to the tangible world of lived reality.

This concept of reality is important to an understanding of the cycle plays. Thus, for example, the fact of many actors playing the same roles works to enhance the audience’s participation in the drama, rather than distancing them from it, because a variety of actors playing the same roles is also a “representation[s]” of this “phenomenological reality.” Within the medieval framework of belief that perceives the events of salvation history as ongoing and continual, it makes perfect sense that there is more than one Joseph, more than one Abraham, more than one Christ. The appearance of the physical bodies of the actors is unimportant, they
are, in Aristotelian logic, the mere “accidents” of outward appearance that have nothing to do with its “substance” – the importance lies in allowing everyone to experience and see these events as they occurred. The actors enact something that is ordinarily incapable of being viewed on this plane of existence. They are able to make briefly visible that intangible world.

This concept of enacting rather than re-enacting works on the same level as medieval anachronism. Medieval dramatists were not too ignorant to understand that, as in the “Second Shepherd’s Play,” for example, medieval British shepherds did not witness the birth of Christ. Instead, anachronism is used deliberately as a way to tie into this belief system that everything is always already happening – Christ is born in Jerusalem and York, indeed, in France and Spain and the wilds of Africa; geography is something that matters only on this plane of existence, the plane of existence that is incidental and transitory. On the true plane of existence, the only one that matters, Christ is born everywhere and always, over and over again. Everyone witnesses His birth; everyone witnesses His death and resurrection. Thus every image, every role, every story accrues limitless layers of meaning. This is what prompts Johann Huizinga’s assessment in The Autumn of the Middle Ages, in reference to the Doctrine of Transubstantiation, in which he notes that “[e]very symbol, by virtue of the fact that all of them are ultimately aligned around the central miracle of the Eucharist, attains a super-value, a much stronger degree of reality, and at this level signification is no longer symbolic, it is identity …” (239). Of course, for Huizinga, this is yet more evidence of a failing culture, one that has gone stale, and though perhaps – like autumn itself – beautiful, nevertheless on the verge of death. Another way, and a better way, to look at this aspect of the Middle Ages is as a culture in which literally everything is not just connected but also inextricably entwined
This not-quite-overdetermined interconnectedness is readily apparent in medieval drama. Very little about the cycles can be easily categorized or separated. In what genre, for example, should the York “Crucifixion” be placed? This play employs elements of tragedy and comedy and ends with the torture and execution of the only living God (in the eyes of a medieval audience), but yet promises both salvation and redemption. Structurally, these divisions are lacking as well. During a performance, the actors moved through and blended in with the audience. The playing space itself was similarly fluid, with some of the action on the pageant wagon and on the street, thus merging play-world and real world seamlessly, because for the medieval audience there was no such division. This lack of separation helps explain why, in the medieval drama, there is no fourth wall. This term, first coined by French philosopher Denis Diderot, he explains in an essay entitled “De la Poesie Dramatique,” from which Patrice Pavis quotes in her Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analysis: “Whether you are composing or acting, think of the spectator as if he did not exist. Imagine, at the edge of the stage, a great wall that separates you from the stalls; act as though the curtain would never rise” (154). This concept would have been alien to a medieval audience and to medieval actors. C. Clifford Flanigan acknowledges this in “Liminality, Carnival, and Social Structure: The Case of Late Medieval Biblical Drama,” in which he argues, speaking of medieval German drama,

[B]y enacting the paradigmatic events of the culture’s prevailing myth in the places where daily life was lived and daily business was transacted, the events of biblical history were presented not as events long past, but as present realities involving German people of the fifteenth century. In the playing areas which were at the same time streets of the town, no clear lines of demarcation between audience and players could be drawn. All stood in the presence of Christ in the
reserved sacrament, and all became participants in the one great drama of salvation sacramentally enacted before the eyes of the citizenry. (51-52).

At the close of the Middle Ages, however, this changed, and changed radically - indeed the “lines of demarcation between audience and players” became quite clear. There was a movement from a drama which “present[ed] realities” to a drama in which, as Elizabeth Burns describes in *Theatricality: A Study of Convention in the Theatre and in Social Life*, “there is an agreement between all those who take part in the performance, either as actors or spectators, that the two kinds of real events inside and outside the theatre are not causally connected. [N]obody really believes the actors to be the people they represent … because action that significantly alters the state of the situation, such as murder, death by other causes, copulation and birth, are always simulated” (15). This is not to argue, of course, that the audience believed, for example, that the actor playing Christ was actually crucified or that the actor playing the Virgin Mother actually gave birth. However, there was no agreement “between all those who take part in the performance …that the two kinds of real events inside and outside the theatre are not causally connected.” Indeed, for both medieval audiences and medieval dramatists, the reverse was true – the two kinds of real events were very much connected. This new agreement that Burns describes, so familiar to us now, first came into existence in the sixteenth century, for a variety of reasons.

**THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY: BETWEEN THE MEDIEVAL AND THE EARLY MODERN**

The literature of the sixteenth century occupies a liminal position, as does the century itself. Most timelines place the end of the Middle Ages in England at 1485 after Henry VII’s defeat of Richard III at Bosworth Field, and his subsequent ascension to the throne. Of course, such a clear demarcation is purely academic. As with any other era, there is much overlap between periods.
What is undeniable, however, is that the period from Henry VII’s ascendance to the throne and Elizabeth’s rule, a span of just 73 years, was a time of rapid and radical change for England. Thanks to his father’s conservatism, Henry VIII inherited a small but relatively stable kingdom. It quickly became apparent, however, that Henry did not inherit any of that conservatism itself. As David Loades describes in *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, the tenor of the young king’s reign was set soon after his father’s death. Henry had withdrawn from a betrothal to his brother’s widow, Catherine of Aragon, arranged for him when he was still a child (19). However, before his coronation, Henry changed his mind and married Catherine. Henry claimed to be “acting in response to his father’s dying wish” but, in truth, Loades argues this was “no more than a pious fraud.” In fact, Loades continues, “the simple fact seems to be that [Henry VIII] pleased himself” (22). This selfishness would become a key characteristic of Henry’s reign, as would the violence he employed in executing - two days after he was crowned - Edmund Dudley and Sir Richard Empson, his father’s former ministers. The final defining trait of Henry’s reign was his lavish lifestyle. Unlike his father, who preferred to build up his coffers rather than splurge on costly entertainments, luxurious clothing, and expensive delicacies, Henry relished extravagant expenditures and grand gestures. At the same time, Henry conceived of himself as a humanist, a devout Catholic, and a brilliant warrior – a true Renaissance man. These contradictory impulses and traits both influenced and reflected the turbulent sixteenth century.

Other areas of life were undergoing immense changes in the sixteenth century as well. One of the most notable, for example was the increasing population. In “Economy and Society,” J.A. Sharpe notes an increase in population at the very beginning of the sixteenth century, which in turn affected grain prices and availability, decreased wages, and led to an increase in rents (32-34). Obviously, any significant societal change such as this creates a ripple effect that, in turn,
impacts other areas in multiple, often interconnected ways. However, for the purposes of this project, the two most important changes of the sixteenth century, those that had the most impact on the drama, were the Reformation and the Renaissance.

Greg Walker, in “The Renaissance in Britain,” notes that the terms Renaissance and its close associate humanism have come to mean different things than they did originally:

The Renaissance, in reality not one movement but a number of pan-European related phenomena, was largely initiated by Italian humanists in the fourteenth century. Humanism … was essentially an academic reform movement dedicated to the rediscovery of Greek and Roman literature and culture in their original languages and forms, and the cultivation of classical style as the informing principle behind a new educational curriculum. But the words ‘humanism’ and ‘Renaissance’ have acquired wider connotations, coming to stand for a fundamental reappraisal of the nature and ends of human existence and a new appreciation of the potential dignity of human achievement. (145-46)

Just as important, if not more so, was the Reformation. The term Reformation, that is, the effort to reform or restore the Roman Catholic Church to its supposed former purity and glory, most often refers to the Protestant Reformation. The beginning of the Protestant Reformation is generally dated to 1517, when Martin Luther first presented his Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences, more commonly known as “The Ninety-Five Theses.” Luther’s text was essentially a manifesto that criticized many common practices and beliefs of the Catholic Church. Soon there was a complete break between the Catholic Church and the reformers, a break that began in Luther’s native Germany and spread to other European countries.
In England, however, the Reformation had a different form. Indeed, in 1521 Henry VIII wrote the *Assertio Septum Sacramentum*, which Diarmaid MacCulloch’s “Henry VIII and the Reform of the Church” characterizes as “Henry’s rebuke to Luther … a vigorous and … remarkably concise and effective defence of traditional religion …” (166). For writing this defense in the face of an ever-widening schism between the orthodox church and the reformers, Henry was rewarded with “the papal grant of a title to rank alongside those of the Holy Roman Emperor and the Most Christian King of France: Defender of the Faith” (166). MacCulloch notes that Henry “obstinately cherish[ed] this honour, and hand[ed] it down to his successors” (166). Despite his own changing religious views, Henry retained his distaste for Luther, and so, the Reformation proceeded much differently in England than anywhere else. This allows Steven Ellis to characterize the Reformation in England, in “The Limits of Power: The English Crown and the British Isles,” as “a religious manifestation of the same policies of centralization and cultural imperialism which had characterize Tudor rule, particularly since the 1530s” (61). The Henrician Reformation ultimately changed little, at least at first, in terms of doctrine, but its effects in practice were nothing short of revolutionary. In “The Change of Religion,” Diarmaid MacCulloch characterizes it as “the one sixteenth-century event which deeply and immediately affected all parts of the British Isles.” Furthermore, MacCulloch continues, it caused a “shift from a visual presentation of Christianity to a bibliocentric one” (71). This shift had far-reaching implications, for not only the ordinary practitioners of Christianity in the British Isles, but also in the reshaping of Erickson’s “medieval vision,” a vision that became, slowly but thoroughly, modernized and, thus, more recognizable to modern readers and scholars. Patrick Collinson’s “Protestant Culture and the Cultural Revolution,” argues that the results of this process “seen most starkly in the case of the drama, was an advanced state of separation of the secular from the

29 Defense of the Seven Sacraments
sacred, something without precedent in English cultural history” (36). The “all-encompassing, manifold reality” became evidence of a backward, idolatrous, and misguided era rather than a celebrated feature of the culture. Eventually, this “medieval vision” would be almost eradicated, replaced with multiple dichotomies – the real and the unreal, the true and the false, the orthodox and the heretical, the theatrical and the realistic.

The reshaping of the medieval view of reality into one that is more recognizable and more modern, in turn reconfigured expressions of that view, particularly in terms of the artwork produced in this period, and reactions to that artwork. Walker comments on Sir Philip Sidney’s disappointment in sixteenth-century letters in his Apology for Poetry, stating,

What annoyed Sidney most was the [sixteenth century] playwrights’ lack of decorum, their failure consistently to apply classical precepts, resulting in a hybrid product, neither one thing nor the other. In fact, this charge might be levelled at most of the artistic disciplines in Britain in the sixteenth century. Yet it was this very ‘mongrel’ failure to conform to pure generic categories which was to produce most of what is now seen as characteristic of the Renaissance in Britain” (145).

This “mongrel” quality, which Sidney condemned and which Walker deems “characteristic of the Renaissance in Britain” is in fact representative of this liminal period, not quite medieval, but not yet early modern. Sidney’s rant against drama that “be neither right tragedies nor right comedies, mingling kings and clowns” (50) could, in fact, be describing most any of the cycles.

**The Chester Cycle’s Syncretic Nature**

The Chester Cycle exemplifies this liminality - it is often characterized as part medieval and part Tudor. The medieval nature of the cycle is easily recognizable in terms of its staging,
specifically, its use of pageant wagons, and subject matter: the entire breadth of salvation of history, from creation until the Day of Judgment. Indeed, plays from Chester are routinely used in anthologies of medieval drama.\textsuperscript{30} Many medieval scholars, however, are quick to disagree. Lawrence Clopper, for example, in “The History and Development of the Chester Cycle” states explicitly “that the cycle as we know it was largely an invention of Tudor times “(220). There are even some scholars who see in it traits of the Elizabethan era. This is true of Peter Meredith’s examination of the issue in “Make the Asse to Speake’: Or, Staging the Chester Plays” which recognizes that while “[i]t is still common to talk of the Chester Plays as medieval …” an examination of the records in terms of staging leads scholars to the conclusion that “Chester must be considered a sixteenth-century, almost an Elizabethan, play” (50-51). Thus, it is time to consider anew how we as scholars describe the \textit{Chester Cycle}. It is a text that is neither purely medieval nor purely early modern but is instead a syncretic work: it contains unmistakable strains of medieval, Tudor, and Elizabethan characteristics, the effect of which helped originate something new – namely, the fourth wall and with it, modern theater. Examination of the \textit{Chester Cycle} thus reveals how, if not why, theater changed from an art form that “present[ed] realities” to the modern and more familiar theatrical experience in which “the two kinds of real events inside and outside the theatre are not causally connected.”

Of all of the cycle plays, Chester is the one for which scholars have the most information. There are five extant versions of the full cycle, potentially contemporary descriptions of the cycle,\textsuperscript{31} and an almost inexhaustible supply of criticism. It is this abundance that produces such

\textsuperscript{30} The frequent anthologizing of plays from the \textit{Chester Cycle} marks them as representative of medieval drama. However, the opposite is most likely true: these plays are chosen because they have more in common with modern drama than they do with medieval drama.

\textsuperscript{31} This possibly contemporary description comes from five “Breviaryes” begun by Robert Rogers, a sixteenth-century archdeacon of Chester Cathedral, and revised and expanded by his son, David. These texts contain descriptions of performances of the \textit{Chester Cycle}, though scholars dispute whether the descriptions relate something either of the Rogers actually witnessed. For an excellent and thorough discussion of the “Breviaryes,”
confusion. In addition to the question of periodization, questions abound about when and where the text was performed, why it was changed from a one-day to a three-day performance, how the cycle was staged, its relationship to other cycles, the influence of Protestantism, its purpose and so on.  

Chester differs from the other cycle plays in a variety of ways. It is in examining these differences that Chester’s syncretic nature becomes obvious. These differences, when combined, reveal as well the slow process of constructing the fourth wall.

The *Chester Cycle* differs from the other cycle plays in four key areas: staging and structure, language, use of an Expositor figure, and tone. Unfortunately, for some of these areas there exists no clear scholarly consensus. This is particularly true in terms of overall structure, possible staging, and composition. Nonetheless, with five complete manuscripts plus the potentially contemporaneous account of the Rogers’s “Breviarye,” which, Steven E. Hart and Margaret M Knapp note, in “*The Aunchant and Famous Cittie*”: *David Rogers and the Chester Mystery Plays*, “appears to be the only extant written record of an English cycle play in performance” (2), Chester has become a locus for critical attention, resulting in the revision of some long-standing theories. Shearle Furnish comments on this critical attention in “The Chester Plays (circa 1505-1532, revisions until 1575),” noting that over “the course of the twentieth century the Chester cycle of mystery plays has undergone a profound change in scholarly perception. Once seen as the earliest and most primitive of the four surviving English cycles …” the extant Chester plays are now generally considered a Tudor achievement and among the last

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32 Although almost all scholarship on Chester touches on these areas in some ways, Happe’s *Cyclic Form and the English Mystery Plays: A Comparative Study of the English Biblical Cycles and their Continental and Iconographic Counterparts* provides a concise discussion of the three-day structure as well as the influence of Protestant beliefs, 240-255. Similarly, Coletti’s “The Chester Cycle in Sixteenth-Century Religious Culture” offers a cogent analysis of the “difficulty of parsing the ‘master categories’ of Catholic and Protestant in the Chester plays” (535-36) while Mill’s “The Chester Cycle” in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre* provides a broad overview of Chester’s differences from the other cycles.
to reach their most developed state” (356). Indeed, a slowly emerging majority of scholars seems to believe that Chester, as we have it, is not a sixteenth-century revision of a medieval text, but is instead a sixteenth-century composition. As early as 1973, Hans-Jürgen Diller’s *The Middle English Mystery Play: A Study in Dramatic Speech and Form* argued that “the plays as we have them constitute a sixteenth-century reaction to earlier popular forms of dramatic activity” (74). Lawrence Clopper expands on this, arguing against the common understanding of Chester’s history as a “medieval cycle [that] was complete in the early fifteenth century, [and although] elaborated and enlarged by the end of the fifteenth century, …continued more or less unchanged from the late fifteenth century until its demise in 1575.” Rather, Clopper continues, “the sparse evidence of the fifteenth century suggests that the Corpus Christi play was more a Passion play than a cycle; the evidence of the sixteenth century is that the cycle as we know it was largely an invention of Tudor times and that the extant texts are versions performed in the final decades of the cycle’s existence” (“History and Development” 220). Alexandra F. Johnston is even more specific, arguing in “The York Cycle and the Chester Cycle: What Do the Records Tell Us?” that the five complete manuscripts - none of which agree with one another, not even the two that appear to have been completed by the same scribe - are “all versions of an exemplar which was

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33 David Mills and R.M. Lumiansky present an exhaustive comparison of the five versions in their edition of the cycle, *The Chester Mystery Cycle: Volume I – Text*, see especially the introduction, ix-xl, and textual notes, 533-624. The following is a brief summary of their conclusions. The five complete manuscripts have been designated Hm, A, R, B, and H (there are three other manuscripts, which contain fragments of the cycle: M, containing a fragment of Play XVIII; P, containing Play XXIII; C, containing Play XVI). Hm is missing Play I, however, a nineteenth-century addition to the manuscript includes Play I and the Late Banns. It may be a reading text (xiii-xiv). A has all of the plays and is marked by the use of small stars throughout, some seemingly for decoration and some, perhaps, “to mark four- or eight-line stanzaic divisions and thereby to fill out the shorter lines,” however, “no consistent usage occurs” (555). A is most likely also a reading text (xvii). Manuscript R includes all of the plays, as well as the Late Banns and the Proclamation. With the exception of the Proclamation, which is in a different hand, R was completed by one scribe, the same scribe who produced A (xviii-x). B includes the Late Banns in addition to the Plays. Its purpose is unclear (xxii-xxiii). H includes the plays, as well as a table listing the guilds responsible for each and the titles of the plays in Latin. H has a number of unique variations from the other manuscripts, including a scene from Play III, called the “Raven and Dove” scene, not present in the other manuscripts, as well as sizable differences in Play V, which makes it an Advent play, not the Old Testament play it is in the other manuscripts. Furthermore, it is missing scenes from Play VII and Play XVIII, and is the only manuscript apart from R that has the
itself a compendium containing within it variant versions of episodes to be chosen by the civic authorities as they saw fit for any given performance” into which “[s]tage directions and marginal notations that probably reflect individual performance practices have been incorporated” (21). In other words, the Chester Cycle as we know it is most like an anthology, containing various versions of certain plays. When it came time for a performance of the cycle (or even just part of it), the city fathers would choose not only which plays would be performed but also which versions of those plays would be performed. The manuscripts as we have them now include not only reading copies but also performance editions, recognizable, in Johnston’s view, by the notes and marks on the texts.

**THE CHESTER CYCLE AND THE HENRICIAN REFORMATION**

Understanding the *Chester Cycle* in this way helps to explain its syncretic nature; it arose, in Diller’s words, as “a sixteenth-century reaction to earlier popular forms of dramatic activity.” David Mills seems to concur in “The Chester Cycle,” published in Richard Beadle and David Fletcher’s 2008 *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Drama*. Mills states that Chester is “self-consciously different from both the ‘sophisticated’ contemporary drama and from the cycle plays of other towns …” (125). These differences arise from a number of factors. The most oft cited is, of course, the Reformation and the many changes in religious practice that occurred in the sixteenth century. The King’s Great Matter, as his infatuation with Anne Boleyn and his desire for a divorce from Katherine of Aragon was often described, began in 1525. By 1534, Parliament had enacted the *Act of Supremacy* which deemed Henry “the only supreme head in earth of the Church of England, called Anglicans Ecclesia; [who] shall have and enjoy, annexed and united to the imperial crown of this realm, as well the title and style thereof, as all honors,

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final lines of Play XVIII (xxviii). H “seems to have been a presentation copy for someone of antiquarian taste” (xxvii).
dignities, preeminences, jurisdictions, privileges, authorities, immunities, profits, and commodities to the said dignity of the supreme head of the same Church belonging and appertaining …” (np). This act marks, in my opinion, the true end of the Middle Ages and set off a series of changes in England that were nothing short of revolutionary. Though the Chester Cycle was neither censured nor suppressed by the changes Henry implemented, it does show the effect of those changes.

When, how, and if Henry’s Reformation influenced the Chester Cycle is a subject of great interest to literary critics. Similarly, much scholarly energy has been devoted to unraveling the Catholic and Protestant strains extant in the cycle. Peter Travis argues in “The Credal Design of the Chester Cycle” that the cycle is designed to reflect the twelve articles of the Apostles’ Creed, a design imposed in an “allegorical” fashion on the cycle by a recusant, necessary because “the author’s interpretation of Ecclesiam Catholicam and Sanctorum Communionem were inimical to the state and to protestant dogma …” (243).

However, the exact opposite can be plausibly argued as well. The Apostles’ Creed was not the exclusive province of the Roman Catholic Church; indeed, it was included in Cranmer’s Book of Common Prayer as early as 1552. Additionally, a re-commitment to the Apostles’ Creed makes sense for any type of reformer, who would believe fervently that he or she was not reforming as much as restoring things back to their original, pure condition. While the idea of the credal design may be unique to Travis, his use of the cycle’s seeming acceptance and reinforcement of the Doctrine of Transubstantiation, and its character as “inimical to the state and to protestant dogma,” echoes and is echoed by other scholars. Unfortunately, the fact that the cycle seems to accept the Doctrine of Transubstantiation proves nothing. The Ten Articles, issued in 1536, reinforced acceptance of the doctrine, as did the later (1539) Six Articles. In fact,
it was not until Elizabeth’s reign that the idea of the Doctrine of Transubstantiation as “repugnant to the plain words of Scripture” (“Article XXVIII”) became official Church of England doctrine through the *Thirty-Nine Articles*.

**CHESTER’S LESS-THAN-NOBLE RESISTANCE**

Travis also makes use of a claim that has been repeated so often it has become almost axiomatic. Namely, Travis notes, “the city of Chester is famous for its noble resistance against pressures to ‘correct’ its cycle” (243). This is an idea repeated by scholars such as David Mills in “‘None had the like nor the like darste set out’: The City of Chester and its Mystery Cycle”:

> As the century progressed, play-cycles came under severe attack. Their origins in the Feast of Corpus Christi which celebrated the now controversial doctrine of transubstantiation, and other aspects of doctrine which they might contain, made them theologically and politically subversive. Moreover, particularly to a Puritan mind, they could seem a blasphemous mimesis of sacred subjects which blurred the important distinctions between worship and entertainment, between divine miracle and dramatic illusion. (5)

Mills repeats these claims a couple of years later in “Theories and Practices in the Editing of The Chester Cycle Play-Manuscripts” in which he notes that Chester’s “city fathers” fought long and hard to “make [the] plays acceptable to local and national objectors during the sixteenth century” (110). While it is true that Chester’s “city fathers” did indeed attempt to keep staging the *Chester Cycle*, their motives are neither clear-cut nor necessarily “noble.” Mills is not of course the first to make this claim, which has its origin in Harold Gardiner’s 1946 *Mysteries' End: An Investigation of the Last Days of the Medieval Religious Stage*. It is a theme picked up and reiterated by Glynne Wickham’s *Early English Stages*, Martin Stevens’s *Four Middle English*
“Watching the Watchers: Drama Spectatorship and Counter-Surveillance in Sixteenth-Century Chester,” and many others. Many of these scholars assume that Chester’s fight to continue staging the cycle, stemmed from deep-rooted Catholicism and hostility to new practices. While zealous devotion to Catholic dogma may have played some role, there were other equally important reasons for Chester’s desire to continue to host a mystery cycle.

One reason the city seemed so determined to stage the cycle has to do with an aspect of the city of Chester overall on which many scholars comment: Chester’s extensive civic pride. Prior to the performance of the Chester Cycle as we have it now, the height of Chester’s prosperity occurred in the thirteenth and fourteenth century. This was followed by a gradual decline, particularly in terms of trade, due to silting of the harbor. However, Chester began to recover by the late fifteenth century. It is likely that Chester wanted to celebrate, highlight, and feed its recovery. Chester is described by C.P. Lewis and A.T. Thacker in A History of the County of Chester as “most strongly linked [to] Coventry. Its merchants regularly passed through Chester en route for Ireland …” (par 12). It is not at all far-fetched to presume that Chester may have tried to replicate Coventry’s success with the mystery cycle, an event that brought fame and

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34 Interestingly, Stevens argues that “the Chester cycle itself may have been written as a defense not only of playcraft but of the mystery cycles as a legitimate expression of the Catholic religion at a time when reform was in the air” (308).

35 This assumes that suppression of the mystery cycles was something that actually occurred, at least prior to the reign of Elizabeth. Some scholars are beginning to question this assumption. In 1980, Bing D. Bills questioned the possibility of suppression in “The ‘Suppression Theory’ and the English Corpus Christi Play: A Re-examination.” Bills argues convincingly that “the notion of a conscious campaign against those plays, beginning with Henry and culminating with Elizabeth is not credible,” concluding “Puritanism was only one factor, and a very late one at that, contributing to the final disappearance of the medieval cycle play” (167). Paul Whitfield White picks up this argument in Theatre and Reformation: Protestantism, Patronage, and Playing in Tudor England. He states, “It is indeed true that the civic-sponsored biblical cycles in the north of England, some of which retained popish elements, were condemned by early Elizabethan ecclesiastical officials, but even these were not censored out of existence by Protestant authorities as once thought. Many conformed to Reformation teaching, and it now appears clear that financial problems and declining public interest had as much to do with their demise (4-5). Finally, Lawrence Clopper’s 2001 Drama, Play, and Game: English Festive Culture in the Medieval and Early Modern Period, states decisively that any censorship of cycle plays did not occur until “approximately fifteen years into Elizabeth’s reign” (268).
recognition to Coventry as well as economic revenues. Doubtlessly, the possibility of financial gain was an additional reason. Attracting additional revenue to a city that was just beginning to climb out of a slump is an obviously advantageous strategy. Records show that Coventry’s play cycle, with which Chester’s city fathers would have been quite familiar, “was a national and not merely a local event,” according to R.W. Ingram’s introduction to the Records of Early English Drama text, Coventry (xvii). This national event may have cost money to hold but it also brought money in, especially during the eight-day celebration called “the ‘Great’ or ‘Corpus Christi’ fair” (xix). It is not at all farfetched to suppose that Chester, a city “strongly linked [to] Coventry,” may have decided to try to replicate Coventry’s success. This too can explain the move from Corpus Christi to Whitsun, as Lawrence Clopper posits (“History and Development” 245), as well as the expansion of the cycle from a one-day to a three-day event. While it is true that the move from Corpus Christi to Whitsun could have been motivated, as Peter Happe claims in Cyclic Form and the English Mystery Plays: A Comparative Study of the English Biblical Cycles and their Continental and Iconographic Counterparts, by a desire to lessen the emphasis on the Eucharist and to increase the focus on the Holy Ghost in accordance with Protestant beliefs, there is also a simpler explanation. A three-day performance theoretically tripled the potential revenue of a one-day performance. Furthermore, it also alleviated some of the financial burden on the guilds by allowing them to share resources. Clopper notes, for example, that “[i]n August 1531 or 1532 the goldsmiths and the masons made an agreement to share the pageant wagon owned by the vintners and dyers” (“History and Development” 222). This is a logical strategy for a city trying to pull out of an economic slump.

This is not to suggest that there were no spiritual motivations whatsoever for the performances. Nor am I arguing that the changing religious climate had no effect on the Chester
Cycle. Nonetheless, the alterations to the overall structure of the play can be more fully explained by reasons that are financial and civic, rather than religious. Furthermore, although additional changes to Chester, including its tone, language, and the use of the Expositor figure, do reveal the effects of the evolving religious atmosphere on the play, the very willingness of the city to alter the cycle to fit the political landscape speaks to reasons other than religiosity for the fight to keep staging the cycle. What is more pertinent is a side effect of this alteration, namely the increasing of the distance between the players and the audience, due to the undermining of the “all-encompassing, multifold reality, knit together by a commonly held perceptual design” described by Erickson. By breaking the cycle into a three-day event, that interconnectedness that is the defining characteristic of the medieval worldview is broken as well. Furthermore, the breaking of the cycle means that it cannot enact events that are ongoing and continual and contributes to the building of the fourth wall.

**The Tone of the Chester Cycle**

Whether prompted by religious, civic, or financial reasons the differences between the Chester Cycle and the other extant cycles are not limited to its move to Whitsun or its three-day structure. One of Chester’s more distinctive features is its tone. Numerous scholars have noted Chester’s more formal and intellectual tone in comparison to the other cycles, although they disagree about the origin of this difference. Waldo F. McNeir’s “The Corpus Christi Plays as Dramatic Art,” for example, attributes it to the skill of the playwright, as does Joseph Candido’s “Language and Gesture in the Chester Sacrifice of Isaac.” Kathleen M. Ashley, on the other hand, posits the influence of nominalism as the reason for Chester’s “solemnity, its spareness, and its austere uniformity of style and meter” (387) in “Divine Power in the Chester Cycle and Late Medieval Thought.” Other scholars, like Martin Stevens in “The Chester Cycle” and
Christina Fitzgerald in *The Drama of Masculinity and Medieval English Guild Culture*, argue for the presence of the Expositor as the source of Chester’s unique tone. Still others, such as Shearle Furnish in “The Chester Plays (circa 1505-1535; revisions until 1575,) and Theresa Coletti in “The Chester Cycle in Sixteenth-Century Religious Culture,” argue for thematic causes. Coletti states, for example, that Chester’s less-emotional tone is “exceptionally well suited to the spiritual matters that preoccupy the Chester plays: rival epistemologies of word and image, access to and interpretation of scripture, revelation of divinity through signs and wonders” (538). The exact cause, of course, cannot be decided in terms of who is right and who is wrong. Instead, Chester’s unique tone, like so much else about the cycle, can be attributed to numerous, complex reasons, including, but not limited to, its language and structure, the use of an Expositor figure and the changing religious climate, as well as the skills, preferences, and preoccupation of its playwright(s).

In addition to the source of this unique tone, also at issue is how exactly the tone should be understood. It has been praised, as in Peter Travis’s “The Dramatic Strategies of Chester’s Pagina,” in which he admires the playwright(s)’s “intelligent control of emotions” (287). It has also been condemned, as when Diller describes Chester as “the most barren of the cycles” (81), which “serve[s] to inform the reader or spectator, [but] do[es] not express any relationship between man and his surroundings” (83). Whether one views the tone as “intelligent” or “barren,” what cannot be argued is its difference from the other cycles. Unlike the cycles of York, Towneley, and N-Town, the *Chester Cycle* is much less concerned with the tradition and practices of affective piety. Matthew Milner’s *The Senses and the English Reformation* provides a precise definition and description of affective piety:
Any mediating speculation, sight of the image of pity, the Crucifixion and the Passion, let alone an image of a saint or the experience of liturgy, especially the mass, the hearing of music, smelling of holy odours, offered ‘vivid verisimilitude[s] through which deeply felt piety caused the percipient to be pulled into the depiction in a kind of ‘personal relationship’ or ‘confrontation’. As a means of ‘communication’ it created a ‘living relationship’ between believers and the object of their faithful sensible desire. Whether the smallest personal devotional image or the greatest communal solemnity, the principle remained constant, making late-medieval piety not simply ‘a way of seeing’ ‘the symbolic character of the world’ as Scribner called it, but an unfolding of the sacred and God and religious sensing. As an aesthetic immersion in the sacred replete with tactile, gustatory, olfactory, aural and visual mediation. (74)

This “unfolding” is, on the whole, largely absent from the Chester Cycle. Instead, the tone of the Chester Cycle helps to reverse and alter the process. Rather than an “immersion in the sacred,” Chester offers instead an edificational and intellectual experience, meant to inspire contemplation and meditation. Chester’s tone renders the audience’s experience one of the mind rather than of the body.

**THE CHESTER “ABRAHAM AND ISAAC”**

Although this tone has been much remarked on in the cycle as a whole, it has been particularly examined in the “Abraham and Isaac” episode.36 Fitzgerald, for example, notes

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36 See, for example, Braeger “Typology as Contrast in the Middle English Abraham and Isaac Plays,” Fowler’s *The Bible in Early English Literature*, Frantzen’s “Tears for Abraham: The Chester Play of Abraham and Isaac in Works by Wilfred Owen, Benjamin Britten, and Derek Jarman,” and McCaffrey’s “The Didactic Structure of the Chester Sacrifice of Isaac.”
The Chester [Isaac] uncharacteristically remains on the level of the abstract and theological, controlling interpretation with the figure of the Expositor (who appears elsewhere in the cycle less obtrusively) and limiting it to typology. It also adds to the Isaac story episodes of Abraham’s life involving Lot and Melchysedeck, taking the focus away from the domestic drama of father and son. While there is some limited use of local color, the ultimate tone of the play is formal and distant, placing Abraham in the typological roles of priest and God the father” (73).

Certainly, the Chester “Isaac” packs none of the emotional punch of the Brome version. The Chester play is most decidedly not about dead children or grieving fathers. Instead it remains, as Fitzgerald observes, at the level of typology. There is a distinct and simplified one to one correspondence – Abraham is God the Father, grieving but determined to sacrifice his only begotten son for the greater good and Isaac is Christ, both human, as when he worries about his mother’s reaction, and divine, as when he accepts his fate willingly. Furthermore, God’s prior acknowledgment of Abraham’s countless descendants has already relieved much of the tension and anxiety inherent in the story. God, in fact, tells Abraham that if he “bee trowe” (line 170) then God will his “seede … multiplye” (line 172). God then promises Abraham:

Soe much folke farther shalt thou bee,
kinges of this seede men shall see;
and one chylde of greate degree
all mankind shall forbye (lines 173-76).

This promise lowers the emotional impact of the story, which contributes as well to Chester’s tone.
THE CHESTER “CRUCIFIXION”

This same tone is carried throughout the rest of the cycle, particularly in the depiction of Christ’s crucifixion. It would be reasonable to expect that this play would provide more emotional involvement than the sacrifice of Isaac as it, by necessity, moves beyond typology. Furthermore, the Expositor does not appear in the” Crucifixion” play so it lacks one possible buffer between the audience and the play. Nevertheless, this play too demonstrates Chester’s unique tone, perhaps even more so than does “Abraham and Isaac.” The story of Christ’s crucifixion is emotionally charged, even in a culture in which the Christian faith is not as deeply rooted and ubiquitous as it was in medieval England. One need only think of the emotional audience responses to Mel Gibson’s 2004 *The Passion of the Christ* to understand how deeply upsetting a portrayal of any crucifixion, let alone the crucifixion of one’s savior, can be.37

Furthermore, there are any number of dramatic additions that can enhance this effect – the reaction of Christ’s mother, his interaction with the thieves, his agonized cry to God. However, the Chester Cycle takes advantage of none of these. Wickham argues that the drama in the Middle Ages became a way to express and enhance faith because “[t]he emotions of the recipient are open to assault through two senses at once, and as his emotional temperature rises, the auditor-spectator has the focal length of his imagination steadily enlarged to a point where the mind may perceive truth, meaning, reality, unobtainable by processes of the intellect alone” (310). It is here that the Chester Cycle’s syncretism becomes apparent once more, as it functions in exactly the opposite manner of Wickham’s description. Indeed, as Peter Travis argues:

37 My own experiences with the film validate this argument. In an introductory literature and composition course, I had students watch Gibson’s film after reading the York “Crucifixion.” By the end of the film, many of my students were in tears or otherwise visibly distressed; a few left class before the film was over (I had told students prior to showing the film that they did not have to watch it and that they could leave at any time if they felt it was too much). Although it spurred excellent class discussions and insightful essays, I do not think I would repeat the experience.
Chester’s dramatic principles are controlled by a vision of Christ’s mission clearly
different from the visions of the other cycles. In establishing a basic dramatic
rhythm reminiscent of ritual, in formalizing the characters of evil into a collective,
impersonal force, in affording occasions for the expression and release of the
most painful emotions evoked by Christ’s tortures, and in insisting upon an
intellectual apprehension of the significance of Christ’s dying, Chester
coordinates its strategies into a dramatic pattern which finally demonstrates the
salvific power of Christian belief. Chester’s major rhetorical pressures therefore
do not emphasize the theme of God’s mercy, nor the shared guilt of the spectators
watching Christ’s death, nor the imperative need for mercy in their lives; rather, it
requires of its audience a communal assertion of awakened faith in the divinity of
Christ’s Person and in the sacred truth of those historical events re-enacted upon
the pageant stage. (“Dramatic Strategies” 276)

Thanks to the creeping influence of Protestantism as well as changes in dramaturgical fashion,
the tone of the Chester “Crucifixion”\textsuperscript{38} holds its audience sternly at a distance – attempting not to
“assault” the emotions but to inspire the intellect.

One of the ways in which this distancing is achieved is the sheer amount of action
depicted in Chester’s “Crucifixion” – it is almost overwhelming. At just under 500 lines,
Chester’s “Crucifixion” is quite long, exceeded only by the Towneley version at 666 lines. Like
most of the cycles – with the exception of York – the Chester “Crucifixion” draws on all four
biblical narratives, though it relies most heavily on the Gospel of John. The play depicts the
following events: the procession to Calvary, the conscription of Simon of Cyrene, Christ’s

\textsuperscript{38} The exact title of the play as listed in R.M. Lumiansky and David Mills’s edition of the cycle is “The Passion.”
For ease of reference and to avoid confusion, however, I will refer to it as the Chester “Crucifixion” throughout.
encounter with the Daughters of Jerusalem, the casting of lots for Christ’s garments, the nailing of Christ to the cross, Pilate’s insistence on affixing the sign reading “INRI” to the cross, the complaint of the Jewish authorities regarding the sign, Jesus’s forgiveness of his persecutors, his conversation with the two thieves, his provision of a new “son” (the disciple John) to care for the Virgin Mother, his beseeching of God, the crowd’s mistaken belief that he called out to Elijah, the offering of vinegar for him to drink, his death, the conversion of the Roman centurion, the piercing of Christ’s side with a spear, Joseph of Arimathea’s application to Pilate for Christ’s body, and the claiming of the body by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. In addition to these events, all of which are mentioned in at least one of the gospels, Chester’s playwright adds the common medieval motif of brutally stretching Christ to fit the cross, as well as the apocryphal story of Longinus, the blind Roman soldier ordered to pierce Christ’s side with a spear, who has his sight restored by the blood and water that flows from the wound.

The abundance of action and dialogue acts as a buffer between the audience and the play-world. There is quite simply no time or place for the audience to become emotionally involved. It is not the sheer amount of material alone that forces a barrier between the audience and the play, however. Towneley’s “Crucifixion,” for example, is longer than Chester’s version, and covers many of the same events. The difference in what Towneley chooses to emphasize, however, alters the audience’s involvement. There are many examples of direct address in the Towneley version, for example, that actively attempt to bring the audience into the world of the play, and in that way, to participate in enacting the events of sacred history. One such example is Christ’s address to the audience. Much like York, after being brutally racked and then nailed to the cross, Christ addresses the audience in a manner which leaves them no choice but to participate:

I pray you pepsill that passe me by.
That lede your lyfe so lykandly
heyfe vp your hartys on hight!
Behold, if euer ye sagh body
Buffett & bett thus blody,
Or yit thus dulfully dight;
In warld was neuer no wight
That suffred half so sare.
My mayn, my mode, my might
Is noght bot sorow to sight
And comfroth none, bot care
My folk, what have I done to the,
That thou all thus tormente me?
Thy syn by I full sore.
What have I greuyd the? answere me,
That thou thus nalys me to a tre,
And all for thyn erroure;
where shall thou seke socoure?
This mys how shall thou amende? (lines 233-251)

These powerful lines, which incorporate “The Improperia,” or “The Reproaches of Good
Friday,”[^39] traditionally sung during the Good Friday liturgy, could not help but directly involve

[^39]: The Improperia are usually chanted or sung; however, many modern churches omit them entirely. Below is the
text of part I of the Improperia, from Palmer and Burgess’s edition of The Plainchant Gradual: Parts I & II, 137-
139.

O my people, what have I done unto thee?
Or wherein have I wearied thee:
Answer thou me.
Because I brought thee forth from the land of Egypt
the audience in the action of the play-world, giving Towneley a completely different tone than Chester.

Indeed, Chester’s “Crucifixion” features no direct address. Instead, the play-world is most decidedly closed. Even the grief of the Virgin Mother is muted. Although Mary does speak her grief, it is addressed to Christ and his persecutors rather than the audience, whereas in the Towneley “Crucifixion” Mary speaks directly to the women in the audience:

Madyns, make youre mone!
And wepe ye, wyfe`s, euerichon,
with me, most wrich, in wone,
The childe that borne was best!
My harte is styf a stone / That for no bayll will brest. (lines 395-398).

These words come in the midst of Mary’s heartrending attempt to convey her indescribable grief:

Mi sorow it is so sad / no solace may me safe;
Mowrnyng makys me mad / none hope of help I hafe;
I am redles and rad / ffor ferd that I mon rafe;

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thou hast prepared a Cross for thy Saviour
Holy God
Holy Mighty
Holy and Immortal, have mercy upon us.
Because I led thee through the desert forty years,
and fed thee with manna
and brought thee into a land exceeding good:
thou hast prepared a Cross for thy Saviour
Holy God
Holy Mighty
Holy and Immortal, have mercy upon us.
What more could I have done for thee that I ha\n\nI indeed did plant thee, O my Vineyard
with exceeding fair fruit: and thou art become very bitter unto me:
for vinegar, mixed with gall, thou gavest me when thirsty,
and with a spear thou hast pierced the side of the savior.”

40 The forward slash here and in the following quotations from the Towneley text is part of the original text and does not indicate a line break.
Noght may make me glad / to I be in my grafe. (lines 382-385)

Similarly, in N-Town’s version, though Mary does not speak directly to the members of the audience, they are still invited to share her grief:

Thow he had neyvr of me be born,
And I sey his flesch þus al xxxto torn,
On bak behyndyn, on brest beforne,
Rent with woundys wyde,
Nedys I must wonyn in woo,
To se my frende with many a fo
All torent from top to too,
His flesch withowtyn hyde. (lines 238-245).

Here Mary expresses exactly what the audience members are feeling: Jesus may not be their son, but to “sey his flesch þus al xxxto torn, / On bak behyndyn, on brest beforne, / Rent with woundys wyde” they must “wonyn in woo.” Thus, in both N-Town and Towneley, mourning for Christ is both communal and heartfelt. However, the tone is entirely different in Chester. Although Mary’s grief is depicted and given voice, it is alternated with that of Mary Magdalene, Mary Jacobi, and Mary Salome. In this way, Mary’s grief is shared - but only with these other women – the audience is kept separate.

The audience members’ emotions, and, thus, their involvement, are also held in check by the lack of dramatic suspense. Of the four cycles, only Chester repeatedly alludes to Christ’s Resurrection. Just as in Chester’s “Abraham and Isaac,” the audience already knows that this sacrifice is but a prelude to a miracle. Of course, the audiences for any of the cycles already

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41 All references to the text of N-Town’s play are from “The Procession to Calvary and the Crucifixion of Christ” available on University of Maine at Machias’s website, The N-Town Cycle From Stage to Page – Medieval and Renaissance Drama. For ease of reference, I will refer to it as the N-Town “Crucifixion” throughout.
knew how the story ended, so to speak, but during an enactment there was still that tension, that possibility that things would not turn out well. During a medieval performance of the Towneley “Crucifixion,” for example, it would have been hard to remember that Christ would be resurrected, that Mary’s grief – and the grief of the “wyefes” and “madeyns” in the audience - would be so quickly and wondrously assuaged. The possibility of Christ’s resurrection is mentioned in the other cycles’ “Crucifixion” plays (again, except for York) but generally only by one of Christ’s persecutors in a mocking fashion. For example, in the N-Town “Crucifixion,” one of Christ’s persecutors replies scornfully to Christ’s words of forgiveness, “’3a! Vath! Vath! Now here is he / þat bad us dystroye / oure tempyl on a day, / And withinne days thre / He xulde reysyn't aȝen in good aray” (lines 105-8). The only exception is John’s words of reassurance to the Virgin Mother in the Towneley “Crucifixion”:

Comly lady, good and couth,
ffayn wold I comforth the
Me mynys my master with mowth,
told vnto his menyee
That he shuld, thole full mekill payn
and dy apon a tre,
And to the lyfe ryse vp agayn,
apon the thryd day shuld it be ffull right!
ffor-thi, my lady swete,
Stynt a while of grete!
Oure bale then will he bete
As he befor has hight. (lines 373-81)
Even here, however, the tone is hopeful but not assured, and it offers, for the Virgin Mother, “no solace” and “none hope.” In addition to being close to what a woman in that circumstance might actually have felt, it also sustains the dramatic tension.

The Chester “Crucifixion,” on the other hand, repeatedly reminds the audience not only that Christ will rise but also that he has agreed to this death. As Travis argues, “Chester implies that the power ultimately controlling the [the soldiers torturing Christ] is divine, and that Christ’s fleshly suffering is to some degree of his own creation and under his Father’s control” (“Dramatic Strategies” 282). Reminders of Christ’s power, albeit a power held in strict abeyance, are scattered throughout the text. For example, when Simon of Cyrene is pressed into service to carry the cross for Christ, he warns the soldiers:

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The devill speede this companye!
For death hee is not worthye,
For his sake, syckerlye,
I hould you all forlorne.

To beare no crosse am I entent
for yt was never myne assent
to procure thy professites judgment,
full of the Holy Ghoost. (lines 21-28)
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Similarly, Mary Salome reminds the audience of Christ’s power, saying

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Come downe, lord, and breake they bandes,
Lose and heale thy lovely hands.
Or tell me, Jesu, for whom thou wondes,
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syth thou art God and man.” (lines 281-84)

It is in John’s speech to the Virgin Mother, however, that this conviction that all will be well is most easily observed. Here John’s tone is confident; in fact, he seems almost surprised at the depth of Mary’s grief:

> Conforte thee nowe, sweete Marye
> for though we suffer this anoye,
> suster, I tell thee sekerlye,
> on lyve thou shalt hime see
> and ryse with full victorye
> when he hasse fulfilled the propheceye
> Thy sonne thou shalt se, sekerlye,
> within these dayes three.42

(lines 337-44)

John twice uses the word “sekerlye,” meaning, according to the Middle English Dictionary Online, “with certainty, without mistake, definitely, assuredly; really, actually, in fact.” Emotional involvement, then, seems not only unnecessary but also almost ridiculous. What is required for the Chester “Crucifixion” is an intellectual conception of the events – Christ’s crucifixion was necessary to redeem humanity - ergo, it is not something to be mourned, but welcomed. The tone of the “Crucifixion” requires the audience to contemplate the material, not to experience it and in this way the tone helps to create a modern dramatic experience.

42 Here the playwright seems almost to flirt with Gnosticism, possibly a result of the slow influx of Protestant thought, which, in its contempt for the body, bears a slight resemblance to Gnostic beliefs.
THE LANGUAGE AND STYLE OF THE CHESTER CYCLE

In addition to its unique tone, the language and style of the Chester Cycle are also notable for their differences from the other cycles, particularly in terms of unity. Numerous scholars have commented on Chester’s rhyme scheme, which is noticeably consistent throughout the cycle. This is often attributed to a hypothetical redactor(s) who seems to have been heavily influenced by the Stanzaic Life of Christ. Martin Stevens argues for a “single redactor [who] would have assembled the regynalls from the several guilds and given them continuity. This redactor could well have used the Stanzaic Life of Christ as a unifying source … and he could also have put the plays into the reasonably uniform stanzaic form that we discover in extant copies of the Chester plays.” Ultimately, Stevens continues, the Chester Cycle “is a carefully unified play and that, undoubtedly, it is the product of a single intelligence” (Four Middle English Mystery Plays 265). Whether or not the Chester Cycle is the work of a single individual is debatable, but the sense of the cycle as “carefully unified” rings true. The effect of this unification, however, is to erect a barrier between the audience and the players. The cycle becomes too polished, too perfect, too much like a re-enactment rather than an enactment. The enactment need not be unified – because it already is unified, both by the faith of the participants and by the lack of separation between actors and audience, between play and reality. In Chester, the audience is not part of the play as they are in York and Brome. Instead, they are trained to keep their distance, in myriad ways.

43 See, for example, Clopper’s “English Drama: From Ungodly Ludi to Sacred Play,” Howard-Hill’s “The Evolution of the Form of Plays in English During the Renaissance,” and Severs’s “The Relationship Between the Brome and Chester Plays of ‘Abraham and Isaac.’”
THE BANNS OF THE CHESTER CYCLE

This distancing began with the reading of the Banns. The Chester Cycle, like other cycles, began with a reading of the Banns announcing when and where the festivities would take place. For Chester, two versions of the Banns exist, referred to as the Early Banns and the Late (sometimes Pre-Reformation) Banns. The differences between the two in terms of content are notable. The Early Banns, dated to 1540, mention the Virgin Mary twice, first in reference to the Wrights’ play of the Annunciation and the Nativity and second in reference to a play apparently put on by the women of Chester:44

The wurshipffull wyffys of this towne
ffynd of our Lady thassumption
It to bryng forth they be bowne
And meytene with all theyre might. (85)

These references are unsurprisingly missing from the Late Banns, as is the following explanation of the celebration of Corpus Christi:

Also maister Maire of this Citie
With all his bretheryn accordingly
A Solempne procession ordent hath he
to be done to the best Appon the day of corpus chrwri
The blessed sacrament caried shalbe
And A play sett forth by the clergye
In honour of the fest I
Many torches there may you see

44 All references to the text of the Early Banns are to the version reproduced in Baldwin et al’s Chesire: Including Chester, 81-87.
Marchdiunty and craftys of this Citie
By order passing in theire degree
A goodly sight that day

They come from saynt maries on the hill
the churche of saynt lohns vntill
And there the sacrament leve they will. (86-87)

The Late, or Post-Reformation Banns on the other hand, not only removed references to Mary and the celebration of Corpus Christi, as might be expected, but they also attempted to direct and constrain the behavior of the audience.

The first sixteen lines of the Early Banns give a brief overview of what an audience might expect of the cycle overall, before moving, at line 17, to a description of each play. The Late Banns, on the other hand, do not begin the descriptions of individual plays until line 72. The preceding lines try to direct the audience’s potential reaction. The audience is told “Not to compare this matter or storye / Wi the age or tyme wherein we presentlye staye / But to the tyme of Ignorance whearin we doe straye” (241). The Banns here tell the audience that in comparison with contemporary works, the Chester Cycle will, of course, fall short. However, if compared to things composed before the Reformation, “the time of ignorance,” then the audience would have seen that in “this lande throughout / None had the like, nor the like durste set out” (241). This idea is repeated in the next two verses. The Banns declare that if the audience members dislike what they see, they should “Goe backe againe to the firste tyme I saye / Then shall yow tinde the fine witte at this daye abounding / At yat daye & yat age, had uerye smale

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45 All references to the Late Banns are to the version reproduced in Lawrence Clopper’s Chester, 234-47, reproduced from David Rogers’s Breviary dated July 1609 (232) and include Rogers’s commentary.
beinge” (21). The next verse apologizes for the old-fashioned language and reminds the audience – again – that they will be seeing something from “the time of ignorance”:

Condemne not oure matter where groosse wordes you heare
which Importe at this daye smale sence or vnderstandinge
As sometymes postie, bewtye, in good manner or'in feare
with suchlike wilbe vttered in theare speaches speakeinge
At this tyme those speches caried good lykinge
Thoe if at this tyme you take them spoken at that tyme
As well matter as wordes, then all is well, fine. (241)

This caution is repeated in a few of the descriptions.

In the description of play 6, for example, the Wrights’ “The Annunciation and the Nativity” reminds the audience that “In the scriptures a warrauwe not of the midwiues reporte /
The author tellithe his author, then take hit in sporte” (243). This refrain is repeated in the conclusion of the Banns:

Of one thinge warne you now I shall

That not possible it is these matters to be contruyed

In such sorte and cunninge & by suche players of price

As at this daye good players & fine wittes coulde devise. (247)

This repeats what has become a common theme, namely that this ancient production cannot possibly measure up to what “good players & fine wittes coulde devise” currently. Indeed, the Banns continue, if this production had been overseen by contemporary players and “wittes” then shoulede all those persones that as godes doe playe

In Clowdes come downe with voyce and not be seene
ffor noe man can proportion that godhead I saye
To the shape of man face, nose and eyne
But sethence the face gilte doth disfigure the man yat deme
A Clowdye coueringe of the man a Voyce onlye to heare
And not god in shape or person to appeare (247).

This is new: the audience is reminded that the “face-gilt,” that is, the golden mask customarily worn by the actor playing God, covers a mere man. The audience should understand that God “in shape or person” does not appear. David Mills’s edition of The Chester Mystery Cycle: A New Edition with Modernised Spelling glosses this part of the text as a way to “defend the players from the charge of blasphemous impersonation” (12.201-3). This interpretation agrees with David Rogers’s gloss, which reads, “he wisheth men not to take the sighte of the play only but to conceaue of the matter so as it mighte be profitable, and not offendiue” (247). There is, however, another way to view this warning.

It can also remind the audience not to mistake the actor playing God for God himself: the actor is only a man and nothing more. The repetition of the word “man” not only in these lines but also in the next four, serves to emphasize this point:

    By Craftes men and meane men these Pageanttes are played
    And to Commons & Contrymen accustomablye before
    If better men and finer heades now come what canne be sayde
    But of common and contrye players take yow the storye. (247)

So too does Rogers’s explication “not to take the sighte of the play only but to conceaue of the matter,” the audience is being directed, in other words, not to believe what they see but to contemplate what they hear. This will then be both “profitable, and not offendiue.”
This movement away from the visual was typical of the period according to Huston Diehl’s “To Put Us in Remembrance’: The Protestant Transformation of Images of Judgment,” in which he argues that rather than merely banning potentially “dangerous” images, it was more common to “transform sacred images of the Middle Ages into allegorical images – images that are obvious fictions and therefore cannot be construed as efficacious or idolatrous” (180). Although Diehl is more concerned with 17th century works, this concept is, nonetheless, applicable to the Chester Cycle. Of course, this transformation did not occur merely by warning the audience in the Banns. To have the audience hold the material at a distance, to undermine that sense of enacting events, required much more than a mere verbal warning, the breaking of the cycle into a three-day event, or even the unique tone. What bolsters the effects of these changes is the addition of the Expositor. This figure acts as a gatekeeper by commenting not only on the events of the plays but also by analyzing them.

**THE CHESTER CYCLE AND THE FIGURE OF THE EXPOSITOR**

The Expositor is not merely a gatekeeper and critic, however. The Expositor’s most important function is to model for the audience appropriate behaviors and reactions. Unlike in earlier medieval drama, the audience in the Chester Cycle does not have a participatory role. As David Mills explains, “In contrast to the sometimes urgent demands for empathetic response made by York and Towneley, Chester holds its material at a contemplative distance, inviting its audience to ponder its plays calmly and thoughtfully” (“Chester Cycle” 125). The response expected from this audience, in other words, was most definitely not the same as the responses expected from audiences of the other cycles. Chester is structured in a way that expected a modern rather than a medieval response. As Susan Bennett has observed in *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception,* modern “[s]pectators are … trained to be passive in their
demonstrated behaviour during a theatrical performance, but to be active in their decoding of sign systems made available. Performers rely on the active decoding, but passive behaviour of the audience so that they can unfold the planned on-stage activity” (206).

This passivity is not the usual behavior of the medieval spectator. The change in roles and expectations, from active behavior/passive decoding to passive behavior/active decoding, required practice, or, to use Bennett’s concept, training. The Expositor guides this role reversal; by modeling active decoding and limiting both physical and emotional participation, he trains the audience to fulfill their new roles. This training guides the audience’s reaction by moving the significance from the visual to the verbal. Although the figure of the Expositor only appears in five of the twenty-four plays, his presence casts a large shadow. In each play in which he appears, the Expositor served to make sense of the action as well as to explain what the action signified. His presence served to underscore the idea that what the audience sees cannot be taken at face value. The Expositor appears in play 4, “Abraham, Lot, and Melchizedek” and “Abraham and Isaac,” play 5 “Moses and the Law” and “Balaack and Balaam,” play 6 “The Annunciation” and “The Nativity,” play 12 “The Temptation of Christ” and “The Woman Taken in Adultery” and play 22, “The Prophets of Antichrist.” Through his explanations and reminders of how to understand the plays in which he appears, the Expositor also functions as a barrier – a proto-fourth wall.

The figure of the Expositor has excited much critical attention. The majority of this attention sees the Expositor, in the same way Melissa Walters does in “Performance Possibilities for the Chester Expositor”:

Introduced into the play to fix and control meaning, Expositor undermines the vision of unity in Christ …. At the same time as an aesthetic of inclusion writes
the whole history of man from creation to doom onto the specific geography of
the town, Expositor introduces an aesthetic of distance and contemplation and
delocalized, disembodied truth. (188-189)

Other scholars, such as Martin Stevens, see the Expositor as actually bringing the audience
further into the play sphere: “The Expositor is a unifying device in the cycle, and he gives
Chester a very special tone. Through him, we gain the impression that the Chester playwright
seeks a direct relation to his audience” (Four Middle English Mystery Cycles 269). While an
Expositor figure can function in this way, as does the figure of the Doctor in the Brome “Isaac,”
this is not true of Chester’s Expositor. Instead, Chester’s Expositor, as David Mills notes in
“Brought to Book: Chester’s Expositors and His Kin,” “stands between the performers of the
historical action and the audience, objectifying the action to them and creating a meditative
distance between audiences and players within the close and intimate space of the street-theatre”
(314). This “meditative” distancing begins with the Expositor’s first appearance in the fourth
play, “Abraham, Lot, and Melchyzedak” and “Abraham and Isaac,” which combines the story of
Abraham, Loth, and Melchysedeck with the story of Abraham and Isaac.

In the first part of the play, Abraham has just rescued Loth “his brother,” and is preparing
to visit Melchysedeck, “kinge” and “Goddes preyste” (lines 33-34) to present his tithe to God in
gratitude for his victory. Melchysedeck greets Abraham with “wyne, withouten were / and therto
bred white and cleare” (lines 65-66). Abraham presents Melchysedeck with a “horse, harnesse,
and petrye” (line 93). After Loth also presents his tithe, the Expositor steps in to explain “what
may this signifye” (line 113). His explanation is necessary, he says, so that “the unlearned
standing herebye / maye knowe what this may bee” (lines 115-116). The Expositor goes on to
explain that
By Abraham understand I maye
the Father of heaven, in good faye;
Melchysedeck, a pryest to his paye
to minister that sacramente
that Christe ordained the foresayde daye
in bred and wyne to honor him aye.
This signyfeth, the sooth to saye,
Melchysedeck his presente. (lines 137-144)

This speech makes obvious the Expositor’s didactic function. However, the Expositor here also serves to emphasize the symbolic nature of the characters and their actions and to demonstrate to the audience members how to respond to what they have seen and heard. The first words the Expositor speaks (“By Abraham understand I maye”) makes this clear and the repetition of “signyfe” and its variations throughout the Expositor’s lines reinforces the Expositor’s role as gate-keeper: he makes sure that the audience realizes that was has gone on during the play is merely symbolic – it is not an enactment, but merely a re-enactment, designed to entertain and instruct “the unlearned.”

The Expositor appears again after God instructs Abraham about the importance of circumcision. Here the Expositor emphasizes the difference between the past and the present, to remind the audience once again that they cannot believe what they see, as it does not signify on its own but merely “betokens” (line 194) the past: “[T]his was sometyme an sacrament / in the ould law truely tane” (lines 195-196). The Expositor’s final appearance for this play occurs after Abraham’s near sacrifice of Isaac. Here the Expositor again emphasizes the symbolism of what the audience has seen: “in example of Jesus done yt was / that for to wynne mankinde grace /
was sacrificed one the roode” (lines 465-467). Although the audience members would have been less emotionally involved in this version of the story then they would have been in the Brome version (as previously argued), because of God’s promise to Abraham, that he would have “one sonne,” who would be “begotten of [his] bodye” (lines 159-160) and from this son would spring descendants as numerous as the “stares standing one the straye” (line 163), it must have still been emotionally affecting to hear a child plead with his own father to spare his life. Phillip McCaffrey agrees in “The Didactic Structure of the Chester Sacrifice of Isaac.” He argues that “[t]he Expositor … functions as a control over the emotional involvement of the audience. [After Isaac’s brush with death at the hands of his father] the Expositor pulls his audience out of this involvement, leads them back from the intense detail to the larger viewpoint, establishing an emotional pattern for the pageant as a whole” (25). The Expositor does this through reinforcement of the story as merely symbolic, culminating in him kneeling down to pray:

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   Such obedyence grante us, O lord,
   ever to thy most holye word;
   that in the same wee may accorded
   as this Abraham was beyne.
   And then altogether shall wee
   that worthye kinge in heaven see,
   and dwell with him in great glorye
   for ever and ever, Amen. (476-483)
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Here Abraham is reduced to an example of virtuous obedience, a saint for the audience to emulate. The audience members’ roles too are greatly reduced. No longer do they identify with God and Abraham as parents, grieving over the death of a child, and witnesses to the depths of
God’s love and sacrifice. Instead they are mere spectators, who may or may not take the lesson of obedience to heart.

The differences between the Chester “Isaac” and the Brome “Isaac” are even more striking when one considers that the two plays share more than just the same story. Many scholars argue convincingly that the similarities between the two indicate a much closer relationship. Indeed, the assessment of previous generations was that Brome was based on Chester. “The Metres of the Brome and Chester Abraham and Isaac Plays” (1926) by Margaret Dancy Fort, for example, argues in the same teleological way as did Karl Young and E.K. Chambers, that Brome must have been based on Chester because the Chester version has a regular metrical structure and the Brome does not. Further scholarship, however, disproved this conclusion and it is generally accepted that Chester is, as J. Burke Severs argues in “The Relationship Between the Brome and Chester Plays of ‘Abraham and Isaac,’” not a “a crude antecedent, but a corrupt descendent, of Brome” (141). This means that the training role that the Expositor fulfills is not inherited but a deliberate addition. This is not to argue, of course, that the Expositor figure was deliberately constructed as a means of enforcing a distance between the audience and the play-sphere. Michelle Butler’s “The Borrowed Expositor” argues quite convincingly for the origins of and motivations for using an Expositor figure: “In the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, the dramaturgy of cycle drama was responding to changing circumstances; innovative alterations were being incorporated into cycles, and the cycle genre itself was being consciously recognized and imitated – and innovated” (86). Nonetheless, a definite side effect of the addition of the Expositor is the construction of the fourth wall.
This effect builds with each of the Expositor’s appearances and culminates in “The Prophets of Antichrist.” The play presents a series of biblical figures – Ezekiel, Zacharias, Daniel, and John the Evangelist – recounting prophecies, which the Expositor then interprets. The play ends with the Expositor reciting the fifteen signs of the end of the world. David Mills’s headnote to his edition of the play notes that “[t]here is no dialogue or action, and no set is specified. The figures are simply mouthpieces for their pronouncements, though each will have his own iconographic dress and/or symbol” (375). This play, therefore, is less a play than a series of soliloquies performed by the actors and the Expositor. It represents a transition between the medieval and the early modern. As James Hirsh notes in *Shakespeare and the History of Soliloquies*, “audience-addressed soliloquies” were quite common in the Middle Ages, in contrast to the preference for “self-addressed soliloquy” in the classical era:

By the late sixteenth century, the tables turned again, more decisively than ever before. Audience address by characters in the midst of the action, a staple of medieval and early sixteenth-century drama, came to seem amateurish, undramatic, outmoded, and exhausted as a dramatic convention. Dramatists still employed audience-address but narrowly circumscribed their use and insulated them from the fictionalized action. (19)

This perfectly describes “The Prophets of Antichrist.” There is no action in this episode and the audience address is indeed “narrowly circumscribed.” In fact, in the 117 lines spoken by these four characters, there are only six instances of explicit audience address. The Expositor, on the

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46 Ezekiel: “Hearken, all that loven heale!” (line 1)
Zacharias: “I, Zacharye – men, leeves yee mee” (line 49)  
“out of two hills – leeve yee mee” (line 53)
Daniel: “and spake greate wordes, leeve yee mee;” (line 142)
John: “One I will tell you anon” (line 180)  
“forsooth as I you tell” (line 208)
other hand, has four times the amount of direct address (24) and speaks nearly twice as many lines (215). Even more interesting is how the Expositor addresses the audience. Unlike the “audience-addressed soliloquies” performed by the prophets, the Expositor’s lines are not soliloquies. If they must be categorized, they have more in common with sermons. However, these are not typical medieval sermons, designed to engage the emotions of the audience and leave them “weeping, shrieking, and fainting” as was wont to happen after “impassioned preaching,” according to Hans Peter Broedel’s essay “Preaching” in *Renaissance and Reformation*.

Instead the Expositor’s words are calm and reasoned, carefully explicating the content of the visions. Furthermore, the Expositor addresses the audience as if he were a member of the same social group – using pronouns such as “we,” “us,” and “our” seven times through the course of the episode. This inclusive speech aligns the Expositor with the audience and, more importantly, sets up a division between the Expositor and the audience and the world of the play. By addressing the audience as if he were a member of the audience, as he does most often in the recitation of the “15 signs.” The Expositor both reveals and contributes to the construction of the fourth wall. This play neither enacts a spiritual truth nor reenacts a biblical event. Indeed, it does not even tell a story. Instead, the audience is reminded forcefully that what is important is not what they see the players doing but what they hear the Expositor saying. The actors playing the prophets are merely symbolic – they do not represent anything real. Instead, what is important is the Expositor’s explication of the prophecies and his analysis of the fifteen signs of the Apocalypse. This play expands and reinforces the Expositor’s role, which itself expands and reinforces the distance between the audience and the players.
As “a sixteenth-century reaction to earlier popular forms of dramatic activity,” the Chester Cycle serves as a link between the medieval and the early modern. Responding to numerous pressures – the influence of newer dramatic forms, the desire to preserve and enhance Chester’s cultural and financial reputation, the ever-changing religious influences – the Chester Cycle shifted, changed, and emerged as a different kind of drama, a drama of the mind, rather than of the body. Indeed, in this sense, the Chester Cycle is not a medieval text, no matter what the actual textual history may turn out to be. Instead, the Chester Cycle offers a way to link the medieval to the early modern. In trying to move beyond the medieval understanding of memory and the nature of reality, the Chester playwrights constructed a syncretic drama, offering enough of the familiar to appeal to the audience while simultaneously previewing what was to come. In so doing, the playwrights had to move beyond Erickson’s “all-encompassing, multifold reality, knit together by a commonly held perceptual design,” to one that allowed for the complexities of dichotomy. Dichotomy implies by its very nature, a divide, a barrier that keeps one side from the other. In attempting to move beyond what they described as “the tyme of Ignorance” while still reaping the benefits of staging a play cycle, the Chester playwrights introduced multiple divisions – in its structure and in its techniques. These divisions were not, of course, all of their own devising, but instead reflected (and affected) the changing sociocultural experience.

Nonetheless, these divisions provided an opportunity to develop the fourth wall. The Chester Cycle did not construct the fourth wall all by itself, nor is it singlehandedly responsible for beginning its construction. However, study of the cycle does reveal how, where, and why the fourth wall came into existence. Therefore, it also reveals the strategies by which modern audiences were “trained to be passive in their demonstrated behaviour during a theatrical
performance, but to be active in their decoding ….” This is not meant to imply that I believe that the medieval audience that attended and enjoyed the performances of the *Chester Cycle* were passive in the way a modern audience might be, even though, rather than experiencing an enactment of sacred history, they were signaled to maintain their distance, to think about what was being portrayed rather than participate in it. Indeed, the behavior of the audience for the *Chester Cycle* would most likely have been foreign and shocking to a modern audience, an audience only familiar with passive decoding. Study of the *Chester Cycle*, nonetheless, provides scholars with is an idea of how dramatic audiences learned to respond to drama as it changed and evolved in ways that are recognizable as modern.
Chapter Three

Literature adds to reality, it does not simply describe it. It enriches the necessary competencies that daily life requires and provides; and in this respect, it irrigates the deserts that our lives have already become.

C. S. Lewis, qtd in Holmer’s C. S. Lewis: The Shape of His Thought

As England entered the early modern era, one of the most distinctive changes from the medieval period was a transformation of the perception of reality, which was to have revolutionary consequences for the theater and for dramatic audiences. In the Middle Ages, Michael O’Connell argues, in “God’s Body: Incarnation, Physical Embodiment, and the Fate of Biblical Theater in the Sixteenth Century,” “theatre ma[de] present ‘the truth of the god’ on stage; the stage [did] not merely refer to a reality beyond itself, nor should take this ‘truth’ ‘in some vacant and abstract sense. Theatrical presence [was] not mere sign but a use of corporeality to ‘body forth’ the fiction it portray[ed]” (64-65). The many changes of the sixteenth century, however, transformed this world view. As Patrick Collinson notes, in “Protestant Culture and the Cultural Revolution,” the effect of these cultural changes “was an advanced state of separation of the secular from the sacred, something without precedent in English cultural history” (36). The Chester Cycle, a liminal work, at once medieval, in terms of its staging and subject matter, and early modern, in terms of purpose and effect, exemplifies the radical changes that were still to come for the drama in the sixteenth century, changes that transformed the drama from moveable productions, enjoyed by all levels of society, with no fixed boundaries between players and audience, to an event performed at a fixed location, accessible only to those who could pay for entry, and with a clear demarcation between the players and the audience. Of all the changes the drama underwent in the movement from the medieval to the early modern, however, the greatest
may have been to the role played by the audience. By the end of the sixteenth century, audiences
were no longer supposed to believe that the events depicted on the stage were presenting “‘the
truth of the god’” or, indeed, any truth at all. Nor could the audience any longer expect to have
any participatory role in the drama, as they always had in the Middle Ages; they had become
spectators only. By the time Shakespeare reached the height of his power, the fourth wall was
firmly and irrevocably 47 in place. As Michael Hattaway describes it in “Playhouses and the Role
of Drama,”

Nothing in a Renaissance playhouse was ever designed to persuade a spectator to
‘believe in’ a place or a character; everything on stage proclaimed its status as a
sign. Plays were enacted in distinctive fictive worlds that were created within the
frames of specifically theatrical architecture. These frames were always visible,
essential signs of those conventions for game and revelry that govern the action.

Although they traded in spectacle, Renaissance playhouses had no mechanism for
illusion. Indeed dramatists encouraged their audiences to join in a collaborative
endeavor of imaginative play, proclaiming the impossibility of a literal
‘representation’ …. (136)

However, despite Hattaway’s argument that the early modern stage proclaimed “the
impossibility of literal representation,” the nature of the interconnected relationships of audience,
play, and players meant that the fourth wall, though completely reconfiguring the theatrical

47 In the twentieth century, many theater theorists attempted to break or destroy the fourth wall. Most famous is, of
course, Brecht, who argues in “Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction” that the destruction of the fourth wall
is necessary to alienate the audience. In this way, the “spectator [is] no longer allowed to submit to an experience
uncritically […]” (71). For Brecht, It is only through alienation that theater can move the spectator to change the
world around him. Similarly, Antonin Artaud posits “The Theatre of Cruelty,” which would destroy the fourth wall
through “revolting spectacle,” which would in turn render the audience incapable of “giv[ing] themselves up, once
outside the theatre, to ideas of war, riot, and blatant murder” (82). In the 70s, Augusto Boal followed in Brecht’s and
Artaud’s footsteps in Theater of the Oppressed, breaking down the fourth wall as a way to revolutionize society
(140-155). Although all three of these men were and are extraordinarily influential, the fourth wall, though
permeable, remains a fixture of most mainstream drama.
experience, was still, and would remain, permeable. Indeed, the impulse to believe in the truth and reality of that which is performed or portrayed is deeply rooted, very much a part of our make-up as human beings, and cannot be subverted by stagecraft or its lack. What can change, however, is the object or focus of that belief. Thus, as the conditions of performance changed during the early modern era, the impulse to believe changed as well and was displaced from the play to the players.

**The Sixteenth Century: Changing Perceptions**

Prior to the early modern era, dramatic audiences believed that the events they saw depicted during a theatrical performance were, in some sense, real. This belief in the reality of dramatic performance was the deliberate intent of medieval dramatists, who utilized the natural impulse to believe as a way of enacting events that were normally inaccessible on this plane of existence. As O’Connell explains,

> The religious theater was “play” and “game,” but it had also grabbed its audiences by the throat. In spite of what we are used to hearing (much of it deriving from the antitheatricalists themselves) about the rowdiness and profligacy in the theater, English men and women in the sixteenth century were used to taking seriously what they saw on stage. Theater had not simply taught, it had embodied and enacted the central myths of the culture and drawn audiences’ minds and affections powerfully into them. (81-82)

Over the course of the sixteenth century, however, this idea of a theatre that “embodied and enacted the central myths of the culture” would be fractured by the revolutionary changes of the era, changes that would affect every aspect of English culture, including the drama. These changes are evident in embryonic form, as considered in chapter two, in the *Chester Cycle*. The
differences between the *Chester Cycle* and other medieval drama seem minor, however, in comparison to the differences between medieval drama and what has come to be designated early modern drama. It is for this reason that many early scholars saw no real relationship between the drama of the medieval and the early modern period\(^{48}\) - they differ drastically in both form and function.

These drastic differences have a variety of causes, but the two most important for the purposes of this project are the Reformation and the Renaissance. The latter is perhaps most often cited, particularly in terms of the Renaissance and the resultant interest in humanist philosophy. Howard B. Norland, for example, in *Drama in Early Tudor Britain: 1485-1558*, argues that a “new dimension was introduced into early Tudor Britain by humanists who brought from the Continent an enthusiasm for classical languages and learning” (xxiv). Stephen Greenblatt, too, argues for the specific influence of the Renaissance, though in vaguer terms, as in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, when he comments on “the perception … that there is in the early-modern period a change in the intellectual, social, psychological, and aesthetic structures …(1). Here Greenblatt is speaking specifically of how these structures that “govern the generation of identities” changed (1), but this opinion reflects as well his more recent work, *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern*, in which he states, “[s]omething happened in the Renaissance, something that surged up against the constraints that centuries had constructed around curiosity, desire, individuality, sustained attention to the material world, the claims of the body” (9).\(^{49}\) As Glynne Wickham argued in the second volume

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\(^{48}\) Certainly this idea was originated by Young’s *The Drama of the Mediaeval Church* and Chambers’s *The Medieval Stage*. In the first volume of *The Medieval Church*, for example, Chambers sees the theater of the early modern era as reclaiming, “under the influence of humanism … [a] theatre” that was able to “recover a stable organization upon lines which had been departed from since the days of Tertullian” (vi).

\(^{49}\) Here one can see a remnant of what was once the prevailing scholarly view that the Renaissance liberated humanity from the oppression and misery of the “Dark Ages,” specifically in the idea that, prior to the Renaissance, humans were bound by “constraints” from which the Renaissance released them.
of his mid-twentieth century text, *Early English Stages: 1300-1660*, a view still relevant today, however, it is possible to overstate the importance of the Renaissance, particularly in England. There, the Renaissance was “a fitful and hesitant affair” (21) according to Wickham, who claims that just as “Catholicism and the Latin language, … are identified with each other” so too was “the classical Renaissance” associated “with the Papacy and the Anti-Christ” (25). Therefore, Wickham continues,

> [E]ven those Elizabethan poets schooled in neo-classic literature had by no means rejected the traditional dramatic fabric of the religious stage. We may conclude … with a fair claim to accuracy, that Italian neo-classical example made heavy inroads upon the English drama, both in point of subject matter and of its treatment, but that the Reformation served to temper the pace of its progress and thus to preserve a marked degree of continuity in English dramatic structure. The result is that Elizabethan and Jacobean plays, however noticeable the influence of Seneca, Plautus, Terence and Horace, mirror their origins in mediaeval religious plays with equal clarity” (30).

Greg Walker’s more recent (2002) analysis, “The Renaissance in Britain,” reiterates Wickham’s view, noting that, “[a]n alternative history of British drama … would … chart, not only the vernacular playwrights’ gradual reception of classical elements from abroad, but also their continued resistance to them,” due in large part to the “robust, indecorous, and accommodating vernacular tradition” inherited from the medieval drama (161). Indeed, in England the radical changes that did occur in drama, though of course influenced by the Renaissance, were seemingly most affected by the religious changes ushered in by Henry VIII’s children, beginning with his short-lived son Edward VI and completed by his daughter by Anne Boleyn, Elizabeth I.
Both Edward (more precisely, since Edward was a minor, his ministers) and Elizabeth set out to finish their father’s incomplete Reformation, transforming England from a country that was decidedly Catholic (lacking only a Pope) to a truly Protestant country. This transformation would have a profound impact upon all artistic forms, but most especially on the drama. Theatrical performances were substantially reconfigured in all aspects, but the most radical and interesting change, however, was the change in the audience’s role and perceptions. Dramatic audiences no longer believed (or, perhaps, were no longer supposed to believe) that the world of the theatre and the world of lived reality were connected on some higher level. However, the impulse to see dramatic performance as in some way true, in some way causally connected to reality, did not simply fade away or disappear but was itself transformed by the radical changes occurring at all levels of society. Rather than believing in the truth of the story being performed, this impulse to believe mutates and is displaced. Instead, the players become objects of belief and from this stems a nascent celebrity culture that would bloom fully only after the Restoration.

**The Rise of the Professional Player**

Prior to the early modern era, the players received little attention as players, particularly in terms of the cycle plays. Often amateurs, the medieval players’ personalities were unimportant. What was important was enacting the truth of the story they were performing. Lesley Wade Soul’s “Performing the Mysteries: Demystification, Story-Telling and Overacting like the Devil,” speculates that medieval actors were telling a story about the character they were playing in such a way that left space “for the audience to ‘complete’ the performance in their own responses,” calling it “a particularly appropriate kind of acting for a drama one of whose purposes … has been to bring previously hidden mysteries out into the streets, mingling the ineffable with the everyday” (227). The changes of the early modern era, however, which
greatly restricted the “mingling” of “the ineffable with the everyday,” prompted a transformation in the way dramatic audiences responded to theatrical performances. The focus shifted from play to player. Evidence of this shift is perceptible in audience members’ responses to individual actors, such as Richard Burbage, as well as in the anxieties expressed by the antitheatrical polemicists anxieties brilliantly mocked and undermined in Francis Beaumont’s *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*. Further evidence of this shift is the early modern era’s fascination with what Greenblatt has termed “self-fashioning.” Unlike in the Middle Ages, when religious dogma as well as the phenomenon of affective piety meant that everyone should strive to imitate Christ as closely as possible, in the early modern era, Greenblatt argues, “a powerful alternative … began to be articulated” resulting in “an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process” (2). Therefore, Greenblatt continues, one of the foremost characteristics of the time “is the ability and willingness to play a role, to transform oneself, if only for a brief period and with mental reservations into another. This necessitates the acceptance of disguise, the ability to effect a divorce … between the tongue and the heart. Such role-playing in turn depends upon the transformation of another’s reality into a manipulable fiction” (228). This engagement with transformation, disguise, and performance coincides with what Louis Montrose calls, in *The Purpose of Playing: Shakespeare and the Cultural Politics of the Elizabethan Theatre*, a “stunning anomaly,” the rise of the “professional players” (37).

These players were “men who made their living by pretending to be what they were not; their calling was to imitate the calling of others” (37). Some, such as the antitheatricalists, viewed this as “willful confusion and subversion of the divinely ordained categories of difference that had brought order out of chaos at the foundation of the world” (36). For others, it was a delightful and enthralling marvel, evidenced, as Montrose notes, by the ability of “at least
some of these [players] – notably Alleyn, Burbage, and Shakespeare … to metamorphose themselves into relatively wealthy and respected citizens” (38). These metamorphoses were made possible by the patronage of dramatic audiences, who were fascinated with those who so publicly engaged in “self-fashioning.” This fascination with players represents an undeniable shift in the responses of dramatic audiences from the medieval to the early modern and is one of the key differences in the changes the theater underwent during the sixteenth century.

**The Henrician Reformation**

Scholars once attributed these differences to Henry VIII’s break with Rome in 1534, as does Wickham, for example, who, in the second volume of *Early English Stages* states that Henry’s declaration of himself as head of the church in England “automatically translated the subject matter of a predominantly religious drama into a political issue. State censorship becomes inevitable, and the very concept of drama as a means to mirror the cosmos in art is itself threatened: by 1660 this concept is virtually dead” (viii). While there was some censorship during the early part of the sixteenth century, it was of a local and sporadic nature, rather than a well-designed, national process; it was not until Elizabeth’s reign that it became a force that acted on the drama. Though once considered a settled matter, there is a growing consensus that there was little official censorship of the drama during Henry’s reign. In *Drama, Play, and Game: English Festive Culture in the Medieval and Early Modern Period*, Lawrence Clopper goes so far as to suggest that a refusal to recognize the “persistence of medieval drama in the sixteenth century” signals a desire to participate in “an intellectual scam to maintain a distinction between us, we moderns, and them, those medieval people” (269). This assessment, indicating a

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50 See, for example, Gardiner’s *Mysteries End: An Investigation of the Last Days of the Medieval Religious Stage*, both volumes of Wickham’s *Early English Stages*, and Stevens’s *Four Middle English Mystery Cycles: Textual, Contextual, and Critical Interpretations*. 

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lack of suppression of religious drama prior to Elizabeth, agrees with Eamon Duffy’s *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400-1580*, in which he argues that although Henry’s break with Rome introduced some changes to the practice of religion, Henry was at heart a traditionalist.

Henry, Duffy notes, “for all his cynicism and hatred of the papacy, remained attached to much of the traditional framework of Catholicism” (448). His efforts in this area were much like the rest of his reign – characterized by rapid, and often brutal, change. Nevertheless, for the majority of England, much of the practices and habits of religion changed little while Henry ruled. Indeed, Duffy notes, at Henry’s death,

[T]he fabric of medieval religion, torn and faded as it was by fifteen years of attrition, held. The people for the most part prayed upon beads, and the hallowing of bread, water, and candles, as well as the Holy Week ceremonies of the blessing of Palms and of the Paschal fire, were all …still retained in the Liturgy. Everywhere the observance of Lent was still enforced. And although the quenching of the lights before the saints and the gradual suppression of their cults led to the dissolution of many gilds, they were in principle still legal, and in fact many survived into the new reign. Above all, Masses satisfactory were sung, week by week and day by day, and in most of the parish churches of England the bede-rolls were still read and, in many places, the traditional bequests for requiems and “Diriges’ were still included as a matter of course in wills. (449)

The cycle plays, as part of this “fabric,” survived as well. Some of the material may have changed, but the basic form and function remained the same. Indeed, the cycles at York and Coventry continued to be performed much as they always had. Chester’s version alone, the latest
of all of the extant cycles, evidenced the changes of the sixteenth century and these changes, as previously argued, resulted more from financial and civic concerns than from religious ones.

TRUE REFORM IN ENGLAND

It was not until after Henry’s death that true reform came to England. Henry’s short-lived son Edward VI instituted, or perhaps more accurately, had instituted on his behalf by Archbishop Cranmer, various changes that would come to transform completely the political, cultural, and social landscape of England. Less than six months after Henry’s death, Duffy reports, Cranmer issued the 1547 Injunctions, which reinforced much of what Henry’s own Injunction of 1538 had set out but also went far beyond them. The 1547 Injunctions condemned pilgrimages, rosary beads, processions, the “abuse” of images, and the burning of candles anywhere other than on the altar. It also called for, as Duffy reports, “the removal of relics, images, pictures, and paintings” and ordered “the destruction of such images not only on the walls of churches” but in stained glass windows as well (451). A few months later, the Chantries Act was passed, which Duffy describes as “a disaster for lay religious life” that was “designed to eliminate the remaining institutional framework underpinning the daily round of intercession for the dead in many parishes. At the same time, in dissolving all religious guilds and stripping the remaining craft gilds of any property devoted to intercessory activity, the Act destroyed the main form of organized lay religious activity” (454). Although these moves did not spell the immediate end of the cycle plays, the 1547 Injunctions and the Chantries Act did signal the beginning of the end. Though Edward’s reign was brief, the changes implemented on his behalf were nothing short of radical. Henry’s reign may have been chaotic and unpredictable, but it retained a preponderance of the people’s most familiar and beloved religious habits and characteristics. This completely changed under Edward and affected not just religious practices but the whole of English society.
Duffy attempts to illustrate one such change using the changes to the funeral rite as described in the 1552 *Book of Common Prayer*. He notes that “the oddest feature of the 1552 funeral rite is the disappearance of the corpse from it,” that instead of being “a rite of intercession on behalf of the dead” it became “an exhortation to faith on the part of the living” (475). This change was representative, Duffy argues, of the truly revolutionary changes under Edward, through which “the boundaries of human community [were] redrawn” (474). This example illustrates as well the changes to the medieval perception of the world, which Carrolly Erickson describes, in *The Medieval Vision: Essays in History and Perception*, as “an all-encompassing, multifold reality, knit together by a commonly held perceptual design” (8).

Henry’s break with Rome introduced cracks into the foundation of medieval belief, but it had not shattered it. The spiritual life of the community may have been focused on the church but it was practiced in the community in myriad ways – there was no separation of the sacred and the secular. The Edwardine reforms, on the other hand, introduced a division between the two by separating the lay community from any form of religious expression that did not take place within the walls of the church. And even there, as Duffy reports, changes in the service spelled out by the 1549 Act of Uniformity “transform[ed] lay experience of the Mass” and meant that “most of those present at the parish Mass would be onlookers, not communicants” (464). The effects of these reforms were not limited to specific religious practices and beliefs but affected the way reality was both experienced and understood. Similar revolutionary changes – such as the slow rise of capitalism and industry – would serve to introduce divisions in all areas.

Although at first much resisted, the changes brought about by the Edwardine reforms, in

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51 I have chosen to imitate Duffy’s use of the term *Edwardine* to describe actions taken during Edward VI’s reign as *Edwardian* is generally used to refer to the reign of Edward VII in the early twentieth century.
conjunction with the influence of the Renaissance and technological and financial changes, served to transform society and the art that both reflected and affected it.

Duffy attempts to quantify not only the changes that occurred in the years following Henry’s death, but just how radical and alien those changes were. Although changes in practices and behaviors are easy to describe and document, changes in perceptions and perspectives are more difficult to articulate. Nonetheless, it is just this type of change that is the subject of this study – how the relationship of the audience to the play and the players changed, and changed drastically, from the medieval to the early modern period. What seemed to change was the nature of belief itself. Wickham’s *Early English Stages*, volume II, argues that the theatre of Shakespeare represents the pinnacle of medieval drama, and states that Shakespeare and his contemporaries had inherited a stagecraft based on representation by formal symbols [whereas] the theatre of the Stuart Court Masque and the Restoration public playhouse rejected this form of representation and is groping its way, however fitfully, towards the naturalism of actuality. From the Globe one can look backward over the centuries and, in the *sepulchrum* of the liturgical *quem quaeritis* and the *sedes* of later ceremonies, trace the beginnings of its stage conventions; but one cannot look forward. (4) Wickham attributes this rejection of medieval stagecraft to a preference for naturalism in both stage design and, eventually, speech. However, what I think he touches on here is this idea of the audience’s perception and attitude, especially in terms of belief. Medieval dramatic audiences expected not only to have a role in the dramatic production, but also to be able to connect the story being performed to some aspect of lived reality in a significant way. In other words, medieval audiences expected there to be some pertinent and personal truth in what they saw
performed. Again, this does not mean that medieval audiences believed that the actor playing Christ was really crucified or even that, as in the York “Crucifixion,” the Roman soldiers actually joked and complained while completing an honest day’s work, much as most working men do, the only difference being that their work involved torturing and killing another human being. What medieval audiences did believe, however, was that ordinary men and women, just like themselves, were actively responsible for the death of Christ and that it was important to comprehend, acknowledge, and do penance for their role in Christ’s death. It bears repeating that this was not mere symbolism. As Greg Walker is quick to point out in “The Cultural Work of Early Drama,” “[T]he York Pinners’ Crucifixion pageant does not simply represent the events of Christ’s Passion, nor does it merely show its spectators what it might have been like to have rejected or mocked Him, it allows them to feel what it – or something very like it - is like” (93). The medieval drama was thus real to its spectators in a way that drama seemingly never has been since - and it is this aspect that becomes subsumed, transformed, and displaced by the changes to the drama in the sixteenth century.

If the Chester Cycle previews these changes by erecting barriers between the drama and the audience, the drama of the sixteenth century attempts to convert these barriers into a full-fledged wall. Furthermore, this wall is constructed as a direct consequence of the religious changes of the sixteenth century. Drama and performance especially became associated with Catholicism at a time when reformers were actively instituting laws and proscriptions in conscious antithesis to Catholic rituals and beliefs. Catholicism, in the eyes of the reformers, focused paradoxically on both the physical – the movements of bodies on pilgrimages and in processions, the movements of fingers over beads, the actual consumption of the Body and Blood – and the symbolic – the priest’s vestments, the images of saints, the elaborately decorated
accoutrements of the Mass. The reformers thus sought to oppose methodically whatever they saw as associated with Catholicism. Therefore, they banned pilgrimages and processions, beads and decorations. They replaced a focus on physicality and symbol with strict attention to Scripture and curtailed lay participation to the point, as Duffy states, that, “most of those present at the parish Mass would be onlookers, not communicants.” Additionally, the physical and the symbolic – both, of course, essential traits and tools of the theater - were ever after tainted by their association with Catholicism. What must have been most disorienting and confusing, however, was the reality that long and deeply held beliefs were now not just wrong but both criminal and sinful: the mother of Jesus could not intercede on behalf of a sinner. Saints did not extend their protection to those who wore their symbols. It was both sinful and seditious to portray the Godhead on stage. Indeed, as Peter Womack notes in *English Renaissance Drama*, “[t]o an unprecedented degree, the Reformation itself had made belief a matter of controversy. Ancient authorities had been found to be corrupt; scripture was interpreted in radically different ways; monarchs denounced one another as heretics” (22). This is reflected in the drama of the time as well. For the first time in living memory, the audience was not supposed to believe in the subject matter, in the idea that drama could enact or make visible events usually inaccessible in this world, or even have a role in the drama. Drama became explicitly and purposefully disconnected from lived reality – and this is what truly differentiates the medieval drama from the early modern.

**The Transition from Medieval to Early Modern**

Although there are many studies of the drama’s transition from the medieval to the early modern, very few of them pay specific attention to the changing role of the audience or consider its importance, and those that do tend to be relatively recent. E.K. Chambers, for example, in the
first volume of *The Elizabethan Stage*, first published in 1923, mentions the audience rarely. Similarly, David Bevington’s 1962 classic *From Mankind to Marlowe: Growth of Structure in the Popular Drama of Tudor England* concentrates on how the characteristics and features of travelling players affected the stagecraft of late sixteenth century drama instead of looking at the audience’s role. The first two volumes of Glynne Wickham’s *Early English Stages: 1300-1660*, by way of contrast, do explore the role of the audience. In the first volume, for example, Wickham argues, the “Elizabethan stage did not owe its greatness to having superseded something effete and unwanted, but rather to the fact that the religious stage had bequeathed it an audience trained in the conventions of a magnificent stage-craft” (148). Indeed, Wickham’s essential argument is that the glories of the Shakespearean drama represent the pinnacle of medieval stagecraft:

> The universe represented on the stage of *The Globe, The Theater*, the ‘Rounds’ of St. Just and Perran, or the pageant carts of York and Chester was still essentially that of the Easter morning introit – *Quem quaeritis in sepulchro, O Christicolae?* – a human world which had put Christ to death, a Hell which he had harrowed and a Heaven to which he was shortly to ascend. No dramatist concerning himself either with the teaching of the Bible from the stage, or with the ethics of human conduct, could do so on a stage which did not make provision for spirit worlds, both wicked and beatific, in addition to the material world of everyday events: for the world of the here and now only acquired significance in relation to the two other worlds of all eternity. (156)

This does not, however, account for the very obvious changes the drama underwent in the late sixteenth century.
Wickham analyzes these changes more fully in the second volume, noting for example that one of the reasons the “Tudor governments” acted to contain and constrain theatrical performances at the time was directly caused by the role of the medieval audience as active participants:

When audiences had been trained over many generations to regard themselves as actively engaged in the stage action rather than as passive onlookers outside it, and when actors had been schooled in the techniques of communicating with those audiences through such devices as the soliloquy, the aside and the rhetorical question, it is clear that the physical conditions of performance came much nearer to resembling those of a modern public meeting than anything made familiar to us by ‘method’ actors segregated from their audience by orchestra pit, front of house curtain and proscenium arch. (16)

However, Wickham does not probe this further and ultimately designates the true causes of the changes in the theatre as “the proscenium arched stage” and a “new landscape-artist’s techniques of stage picture” (25). While it is true that these later additions to stagecraft helped to enhance the displacement of belief from the play to the players, it does not explain the changes in the role of the audience prior to these additions.

Andrew Gurr’s Playgoing in Shakespeare’s London is, as the title suggests, more interested in “the conditions of playgoing” than in the conditions of play-making, specifically how these conditions “changed radically” (xi). Gurr spends some time differentiating between the modern audience and the early modern spectator:

52 Of course, the behavior and experiences of the audience would not be truly “familiar to us” until late in the 19th century, when the house lights were first dimmed prior to the beginning of the performance. In “Theatrical Pragmatics: The Actor-Audience Relationship from the Mystery Cycles to the Early Tudor Comedies,” Hans-Jürgen Diller describes the modern convention of dimming the house lights as “the symbolic annihilation of the ‘ordinary world’ … suggesting that the ‘dramatic world’ leads an independent existence from our own” (157).
“Audience” is a collective term for a group of listeners. A “spectator” is an individual, seeing for him or herself. Modern playgoers are set up, by their physical and mental conditioning, to be solitary spectators, sitting comfortably in the dark watching a moving picture, eavesdroppers privileged by the camera’s hidden eye. In fundamental contrast the early modern playgoers were audiences, people gathered as crowds, forming what they called assemblies, gatherings, or companies. They sat or stood in a circle round the speakers who were enacting what they came to hear and see. An audience comes to hear, and therefore it clusters as closely as possible round the speaker. Spectators come to see, and so they position themselves where they can confront the spectacle. (1)

Indeed, Gurr argues that the early modern audience was more concerned about hearing than seeing, and, certainly, the experiences of spectators and performers at Shakespeare’s Globe, the modern re-creation of the original theatre, seem to confirm this argument. In “Performance Practice and Theatrical Privilege: Rethinking Weimann’s Concepts of Locus and Platea,” Erika T. Lin affirms Gurr’s observation, noting, “[m]odern theatres are constructed around sightlines” but “[e]arly modern playhouses functioned under a very different set of cultural assumptions” (287). For example, what would have been “the ‘twopenny galleries’” during the early modern era are now the most expensive seats in the house, whereas what would have been expensive in the early modern era – the “‘Lords’ Rooms’” – are cheaper because they do not provide as good a view” (287). Nonetheless, the differences between auditors and spectators, though important, do not tell us much about the changes the audience underwent from the medieval to the early modern. Gurr may be right in that early modern theatre attendees were auditors, whereas modern
attendees are spectators, but this does not explain the “radical changes” playgoers underwent, specifically the change in their roles from participants to auditors.

Unlike previous scholars, Charles Whitney’s *Early Responses to Renaissance Drama*, is not interested in charting a history of the drama from the medieval to the early modern or exploring the differences between auditors and spectators, but is instead a survey of how audiences responded to early modern drama, using references and allusions to drama in contemporary personal accounts, such as diaries and letters. Whitney argues that “players deliberately offered material for moral and practical benefit and use, accommodating and facilitating the diverse, creative applications audiences looked for” (2). In other words, early modern drama was not just meant to entertain but to educate as well. For audiences, “the emphasis … is as much on consumption as on production, on appropriation as on contemplation, and on creative re-performance as on creative performance” (1). Furthermore, this “mode of reception … became second nature to the audiences of Shakespeare” (1). Ultimately, Whitney’s argument is that “[p]laygoers carry their theatrical experiences with them from the theatre and continue to absorb, assimilate, and apply them” (5). Indeed, the responses of early modern theatre audiences, as described by Whitney, seem very similar to the responses critics and scholars assume of modern audiences. Though I agree that early modern theatre audience responses were similar to the audiences of today, and in fact more similar to modern responses than to medieval audience responses, Whitney’s lack of attention to what audience response was prior to the early modern era normalizes these types of responses and thus elides not only the fact that there was a change but that there was the possibility of a different type of response.

Similarly, *English Renaissance Drama* by Peter Womack, while examining in greater detail the role and perception of the audience, fails to acknowledge the changes these roles and
perceptions underwent, stating only that prior to the early modern era, “serious theatre was primarily a religious tradition” but “as Protestant orthodoxy established itself in the second half of the sixteenth century, this tradition was increasingly identified as Catholic, and so abandoned or suppressed” (21). Womack goes on to explain that the early modern audience “was an audience for whom pictures are not simply representations of the world, but coded messages asking to be deciphered – an audience, in other words, open to the constant possibility that the things we encounter in art are allegorical” (49). Womack continues, and though acknowledging the importance of Gurr’s argument that the theatre may have been more auditory than visual, nevertheless insists that the visual was as important as the auditory, since “it brings the characters out of those remote times and places and presents them to the spectators …. We remain in the theatre, and the famous men and women of the world appear to us like spirits” (41). He is quick to note that this is merely symbolic or allegorical; the audience does not, of course, believe that in the theatre “famous men and women appear to us like spirits.”

Left unsaid, and thus unexamined, however, is the reality that a very short time prior, spectators did believe in the reality of what was being portrayed. As Wickham states in the second volume of *Early English Stages: 1300-1660*, the medieval audience “directly … associated the characters in their biblical and moral plays with the here and now. Herod, Abraham, Peace or Lechery were assumed to have come, as it were, from their homes, to be among the audience, as visible, as tangible, as real in short, as human as any individual in that audience, speaking their language, conducting their social and political affairs along identical lines, and thus ironing out time past and time future into an immediate present equated with eternity” (vii). Again, this does not mean that the medieval audience confused the actor playing Herod with Herod himself, but it does indicate that the medieval audience understood there to be
a reality and a truth to what was portrayed on stage, that these matters had, and continued to have, real-world significance. To ignore how this has changed, as many, many scholars do, is to give credence to the unspoken assumption that the medieval audience believed this because they were more naïve, more ignorant, more popish, than, in Lawrence Clopper’s phrase, “[us] moderns.”

**ANTITHEATRICALISM AND EARLY MODERN THEATRE**

This unspoken assumption also accounts for the critical response to the antitheatricalism of the era. The battle to have any type of theatrical performance in or near London from the building of the very first theatre in 1576 is well documented, and the antitheatrical polemicists fought to persuade people of the dangers of going to the theater. Most scholars provide reasons for this antitheatricalism that range from a desire to eradicate the remnants of “popery,”\(^53\) a fear of rioting and violence,\(^54\) and a desire to reduce the number of plague outbreaks. And indeed, all of these elements had some influence on the antitheatrical tracts that flourished during the time. What is generally ignored, however, is what is often the main reason presented in these tracts, namely that the theatrical performances will lead the audience astray – that the audience will believe in and imitate what they see performed on stage. Phillip Stubbes’s 1583 *The Anatomie of Abuses* is representative:

> [I]f you will learne falshood; if you will learn cofenaeg; if you will learn to deceive; if you will learn to play the Hipocrit; to cogge, lye, and falifie; if you will learn to play the vice, to swear, teare, and blaspheme both Heaven and Earth; of you will learn to become a bawde, vnclean, and to deurginat Mayds, to deflour

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\(^{53}\) See, for example, Lake’s “Anti-Theatrical Polemics” in *The Anti-Christ’s Lewd Hat: Protestants, Papists and Players in Post-Reformation England.*  
\(^{54}\) As in the second volume of Wickham’s *Early English Stages: 1300 to 1660.*
honeſt Wyves: if you will learn to murther, flaie, kill, picke, fteal, robbe, and roue: If you will learn to rebel againſt Princes, to commit treaſons, to confume treafurs, to practife ydlenes, to fing and talk of bawdie love and venery: if you will learn to play the whore-maiſter, the glutton, Drunkard, orinceſtous person: if you will learn to become proude, hawtie, & arrogant; and finally, if you will learn to contemne God and al his laws, to care neither for heaven nor hel, and to commit al kinde of ſine and mischeef, you need to goe to no other ſchoole, for all these good Examples may you ſee painted before your eyes in enterludes and plays: wherefore that man who giventh money for the maintenance of them muſt needs incurre the damage of premunire, that is, eternall damnation, except they repent.

(145)

Scholarly responses to the fears expressed in Stubbes’s polemic (and echoed in other popular tracts of the time such as Anthony Munday’s A Second and Third Blaſt of Retrait from Plaies and Theaters, John Northbrook’s A Treatise against Dicing, Dancing, Plays, and Interludes. With Other Idle Pastimes, John Rainolds’s Th’Overthrow of Stage-Playes, Stephen Gosson’s Playes Confuted in Five Actions, William Rankins’s A Mirrore of Monsters, and William Prynne’s Histrio-Matrix) include attributing them to the religious naiveté or fervor of the authors and insisting that these fears are used as covers for more logical reasons that would somehow have been less acceptable to the intended audience of these tracts.

Thus Jonathan V. Crewe in “The Theater of the Idols: Theatrical and Anti-theatrical Discourse” (speaking specifically of Rankins), argues that the underlying reason for this antitheatrical prejudice was the “insupportable transgression of class and cultural boundaries” (50) that the theater encourages. Michael O’Connell, on the other hand, sees antitheatricalism as
related to iconoclasm, “part of a complex of oppositional stances toward what is coming to be called the *incarnationalism* of late medieval culture; images, sacraments, (and especially the Eucharist), vestments and elaborate ceremonial, veneration of relics, and the institution of pilgrimage also came under attack” (63). Jean Howard offers yet another possibility in *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England*, in which she argues that these tracts reflect “what was feared, and by whom, about specific aspects of social change in the late sixteenth century, of which the emergence of the public theater in 1576 stood for, for the polemicists, as instructive synecdoche” (23).

Though these critics do important work in unpacking the deeper fears and anxieties at the root of antitheatrical prejudice, their focus on underlying issues indirectly obscures connections between medieval and early modern drama. Even Jonas Barish’s influential *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* participates in this reaction:

The theater symbolized, or was taken to symbolize, a whole complex of attitudes anathema to the sober burgesses from whose ranks the London magistrates were elected, and whose views weighed heavily on the pulpits of the town. The theater stood for pleasure, for idleness, for the rejection of hard work and thrift as the roads to salvation. Its siren song held prentices from work and fickle parishioners from the church pew. It created disorders. It bred a class of upstart vagabonds who strutted the town in finery it was illegal for them to wear, and it added one more form of conspicuous consumption to the insolence of an already overprivileged aristocracy. It seemed to embody everything wrong with the social order, and doubtless its suppression seemed to some like the first concrete step that could be taken toward the establishment of the rule of the saints. (114)
Only one analysis takes the claims of the polemicists literally, Agnes Matuska’s “‘Masking players, painted sepulchers and double dealing ambidexters’ On Duty: Anti-Theatricalist Tracts on Audience Involvement and the Transformative Power of Plays.” Matuska notes, “[p]lays, it seems, indeed were understood as having the power of invading reality” (48). She limits this, however, by arguing that “the puritan attack on theatre targets and finds demoralizing not just any type of theatre and representation, but specifically one which features … allegedly immoral figures who not only epitomize playing, but typically act as figures of involvement as well, and corrupt the onlookers by invading their reality by fantastically metamorphosing it” (51-52), namely the Vice and Fool characters, characters which were, unsurprisingly, inherited from the medieval religious stage. Nonetheless, Matuska does not acknowledge the possibility that the polemicists’ concerns were in any way true. Indeed, none of these scholars take into account the possibility that these reformers were reacting to early modern drama as if it were medieval drama, that the prospect of a dramatic performance “invading reality” was all too real and, in fact, all too possible. In other words, what these tracts reflect is that the possibility of “invasion” was once, a short time before, the normal and desired function of and response to drama. Indeed, the antitheatricalists’ fear that the theater could or would influence the behavior of the audience was in fact a well-grounded, if misdirected, fear.

The antitheatricalists, much like modern moralists who argue that violent video games, films, and television programs have the power to turn children into sociopathic mass murderers, posit a one-to-one correspondence between theatrical performance and audience behavior. In other words, an audience that witnesses treasonous behavior, as in, for example, Shakespeare’s
Richard II, would in turn be disposed to commit treason themselves.\textsuperscript{55} This is an erroneous view of the process, however, particularly during the early modern era.

It is this erroneous view that is parodied in Francis Beaumont’s The Knight of the Burning Pestle, Beaumont’s only solo venture,\textsuperscript{56} which failed miserably when first performed in 1607. The Knight responds to the charges laid out by the antitheatricalists that the drama infects naïve audiences and influences them to replicate the behaviors they see performed. Stephen Gosson’s objections to the theater in Playes Confuted in Five Actions illustrate precisely to what it is The Knight is responding:

The dievel is not ignorant how mightily these outward spectacles effeminate, & softe ye hears of me, vice is learned wt beholding, sese is tickled, desire pricked, & these impressions of mind are secretly coveyed over to ye gazers, which ye plaiers do counterfeit on ye stage. As long as we know our selves to be flesh, beholding those exaples, in Theaters yt are incident to flesh, wee are taught by other mes exaples how to fall. And they that came honest to a play, may depart infected. (par 172)

Munday is even more explicit, arguing in A Second Blaſt of Retrait that while “al other euils pollute the doers onlie, not the beholders, or hearers” the “filthiness of plaies, and ſpectacles is fuch, as maketh both the actors & beholders giltie alike. For while they faie nought, but gladlie looke on, they al by fight and aflent be actors, that trulie may be applied vnto them that faieng of

\textsuperscript{55} This is likely why the Earl of Essex and his supporters paid for a special performance of Richard II the day before their planned rebellion, supposedly leading to Queen Elizabeth’s remark to her councilors, “I am Richard II, know ye not that?” In The Purpose of Playing: Shakespeare and the Cultural Politics of the Elizabethan Theatre, Louis Montrose argues that “the Essex conspirators subscribed to the belief that drama has the capacity to imitate action and, by example, to impel its audience to action – an understanding that they shared with the theatre’s most vocal defenders and detractors” (71).

\textsuperscript{56} In the introduction to the Revels Plays 2004 edition of The Knight, Sheldon P. Zitner provides an excellent summary of the scholarship, citing specifically work by E.H.C. Oliphant and Cyrus Hoy, that has attributed The Knight to Beaumont alone (8-10). Zitner does acknowledge, however, that “[i]t would be rash to deny the possibility that [John] Fletcher [Beaumont’s frequent and long-term collaborator] contributed to The Knight. But in the absence of better evidence than has been advanced for him, the current ascription to Beaumont alone must hold” (10).
the apostle, How that not onlie they which commit fuch things are worthie death, but alfo which fauour them that do them” (104). For Munday and Gosson, as for the other polemicists, what is seen transforms and infects the viewers – even those that “came honest to a play.” The Knight refutes these ideas through Beaumont’s characterization of George and Nell and the subtle argument that it is actually the audience that corrupts the players and, through them, the dramatist.

Beaumont’s The Knight of the Burning Pestle

These complex aims are reflected in the intricacy of the plot(s) of The Knight of the Burning Pestle. The Knight was debuted at the Second Blackfriars Theatre, according to Zitner, by “the Children of the Queen’s Revels, otherwise known … as the Children of Blackfriars” (12) and evidently missed the mark with its audience, as evidenced by the dedication written by the first publisher of the play, Walter Burre, and reprinted in Zitner’s Revels Plays edition of the text. Burre describes The Knight as an “unfortunate child, who in eight days (as lately I have learned) was begot and born, soon after was by his parents … exposed to the wide world, who for want of judgment, or not understanding theprivy mark of irony about it (which showed it was no offspring of any vulgar brain) utterly rejected it …” (51). Indeed, The Knight is a challenging work and it is not surprising that audiences had (and have) trouble with it. The play begins, ostensibly, as a drama entitled The London Merchant, a story of the star-crossed lovers Jasper, apprenticed to a merchant, and Luce, the merchant’s daughter, unwillingly betrothed to the dimwitted Master Humphrey. A sub-plot revolves around Jasper’s father, the jolly, carefree, and drunken Old Merrythought, and his dour and penny-pinching wife, Mrs. Merrythought.

57 All references to The Knight of the Burning Pestle are to Zitner’s edition, unless otherwise noted.
58 In “‘Down With Your Title, Boy!’: Beaumont’s Knight of the Burning Pestle and Its Insurgent Audience,” Booth relates the experience of the Royal Shakespeare Company revival of The Knight in 1981, during which “[o]n some nights, deceived audience members tried to ‘shush’ and restrain the heckler [i.e. the actor playing the citizen, George] in their midst” (53).
However, the play is interrupted before it truly begins by George, a citizen and grocer, and his wife, Nell. George and Nell do not wish to see a play that satirizes the citizens of London and offer their apprentice, Rafe, to play the hero in a play of their own devising, *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*. The two plays at first run parallel to each other in the first act, alternating among Jasper and Luce’s story, Rafe’s story, and then the Merrythoughts. However, the plots quickly become entangled in Act II, with Rafe intruding on both plots and George and Nell constantly interrupting to praise, belittle, and advise the players. In the third act, this intertwining becomes even more pronounced, with Nell interrupting a scene to tell Old Merrythought what she thinks of him. By Act IV, any semblance of an actual plot for Rafe has been abandoned and he is brought out dressed as a Morris dancer. In Act V, Rafe participates in a battle scene and a death scene. The two plots of *The London Merchant* are resolved and the entire play ends with a song, followed by the epilogue, in which Nell invites everyone back to her home for a “pottle of wine and a pipe of tobacco” (lines 6-7). With such a confusion of characters, plots, and sheer nonsense it is no wonder that its first audience “utterly rejected it.” Burre is also correct in noting that the audience probably misunderstood “the privy mark of irony about it,” most likely because they were not sure who or what was being satirized.

Indeed, *The Knight* is a bricolage in which it is possible to see a variety of issues and ideas. In addition to the three plots - none of which cohere or are resolved in any satisfactory manner – Beaumont inundates the audience with a dizzying array of popular and literary allusions. Zitner’s notes reference allusions to *1 Henry IV* in the induction (lines 71-81), *Richard III* (V. 138-159), Frederick I of Germany (III. 235), and even to the “Litany of General Supplication in the Book of Common Prayer” (note to III. 410-415) to name just a very few.
Beaumont packs his play with parodies, allusions, puns, and numerous references to popular culture.

**CRITICAL RESPONSES TO THE KNIGHT OF THE BURNING PESTLE**

The total effect is a work that readily lends itself to a variety of analyses. Scholars such as Dana Aspinall, John Doebler, Andrew Gurr, and David A. Samuelson\(^59\) see *The Knight* as, in Doebler’s words, Beaumont’s “saturiz[ing] easy middle-class morality through a ridicule of the Citizen and his wife [George and Nell], in turn a satire on stock response through the parody of a stock dramatic form” (343-344). Other scholars, however, like Roy Booth and Brent Whitted,\(^60\) acknowledge the mockery aimed at the Citizens but insist it is targeted toward the gallants as well. Whitted, for example, in “Staging Exchange: *Why The Knight of the Burning Pestle Flopped at Blackfriars in 1607,*” wonders if “[b]y allowing boy actors to critique the gallants’ aesthetic disposition by performing the intrusion of citizen tastes into their circle, might Beaumont have left his peers feeling as if their own critical acumen was being associated with the lowbrow musical tastes of George and Nell and their unfamiliarity with the practices, protocols, and vestments of the Blackfriars?” (par 36).

Still other critics see *The Knight* as a meditation on the intersection of art and commerce. For Matthias Bauer in “Doolittle’s Father(s): Master Merrythought in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle,*” the play, through the character of Old Merrythought, presents “the spirit of play, of theatrical music making entertainment itself as a counter-world to the sphere of urban money-making or middle class pretence” (49). Similarly, “The Audience as Patron: The Knight of the

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\(^{59}\) See, for example, Aspinall’s “The Role of Folk Humor in Seventeenth-Century Receptions of Beaumont’s *The Knight of the Burning Pestle.*** Doebler’s “The Knight of the Burning Pestle and the Prodigal Son Plays,” Gurr’s critical introduction to a 1968 edition of *The Knight,* and Samuelson’s “The Order in Beaumont’s *Knight of the Burning Pestle.*”

\(^{60}\) See Booth’s “Down With Your Title, Boy!: Beaumont’s *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* and Its Insurgent Audience.”
"Burning Pestle" by Alexander Leggatt sees The Knight as a commentary on “the perennial problem of the serious artist: how does one resist the tyranny of the audience and maintain the right to work on one’s own terms, when the audience is paying the bills?” (298-299). For Leggatt, “Beaumont’s point … is that when one element of theatre gets out of balance like this, when the audience takes its demands to extremes, then theatre does not just become impossible: it spins off into a dizzying void of absurdity. There is a warning here about the excessive power of the audience as patron that is offered far more lightly, and cuts far deeper, than all of Jonson’s lectures” (311).

GEORGE AND NELL AS TYPICAL THEATERGOERS

Despite these often disparate views, a common thread running through scholarship on The Knight is that George and Nell represent the common theatergoer whose dull (or absent) artistic sensibilities are coupled with a crass commercialism – a caricature that is simultaneously comical and embarrassing. Whitted, for example, notes their “plebian tastes” (par 34) and Leggatt sees them as representative of an “audience [that] abuses its power” (296). Likewise, Aspinall argues that The Knight aligns itself with the nobility by “manifesting … a singular obsession with squelching and burying the regenerative and leveling impulses of folk humor” (par 28), of which George and Nell are representative. Lee Bliss’s “‘Plot Mee No Plots’: The Life of Drama and the Drama of Life in The Knight of the Burning Pestle,” posits a similar argument, describing George and Nell as “naïve playgoers [that] enact the destructive potential of the untutored, egoistic imagination” (4) who “fail to see that the values central to the romances they love, and with which they wish to identify themselves, are precisely those they reject in ‘The London Merchant’: daring over caution; love matches over economically or socially advantageous ones, idealism over distrust, hoarding, or any form of ‘principled’ self-
interest” (16). Unlike other critics, however, Bliss argues that Nell and George are ultimately likeable and admirable characters whose “use of romance for private self-glorification also expresses a less ignoble yearning to see themselves as participating in the idealized, golden-world romance traditionally reserved for an aristocratic audience” (19-20). This echoes Ronald F. Miller’s analysis of the characters in “Dramatic Form and Dramatic Imagination in Beaumont’s The Knight of the Burning Pestle,” in which he states,

Vulgar and common [George and Nell] may be, with truly appalling tastes; but by their own irrepressible billing and cooing, their ponderous assurance of their own dignity, their enthusiasm, their ability to get caught up totally in the illusion of the moment, they disarm us as creatures whose affections, like their vulgarities, are considerably larger than life-size. Caught up by their vigorous response to the theater, we find it difficult not to wonder if they do not really represent an ideal audience after all. (71)

In attempting to divine Beaumont’s point or clarify the target of his satire, however, I think scholars have misread George and Nell’s function within the play and, thus, Beaumont’s intent. They do not represent the middle class theatergoers “with plebian tastes” on whom the starving artist relies for financial freedom even as he loathes their existence. Instead, George and Nell represent a fictional audience, specifically the one created by the antitheatrical polemicists who posit an audience full of Georges and Nells easily and naively led astray by both players and playwrights. Through George and Nell, Beaumont satirizes and makes ridiculous the idea that theatrical audiences will take what they see performed onstage seriously in any way.

One reason scholars have struggled with how to understand George and Nell is the contradictory ways in which they are characterized throughout the play. Indeed, these scholars
describe George and Nell as naïve, insensitive, ignorant, and lowbrow. All of these descriptors are apt though perhaps slightly vague. In fact, George and Nell are, in a word, stupid. Not merely uneducated or naïve or unfamiliar with the theater, they are hopelessly and ridiculously dense. At no point do they realize the players are mocking them, particularly by their suggestion of the title *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, which is nothing more than a bawdy play on words. As Gurr notes in the introduction to his edition of the play: “Shakespeare’s Ancient Pistol pronounced his name ‘piżl’, that is, pizzle, a penis as well as a firearm, and the grocer’s emblem carried the same joke. *The Burning Pestle* in other words hinted at lust and venereal disease with its adjective …” (5). Similarly, the conversation between George and Nell during the interludes also reveals their stupidity. In the second interlude, for example, they discuss the scene “painted on the cloth” (line 12) with Nell wondering if it is “The Confutation of Saint Paul” (lines 12-13). George replies that it depicts “Rafe and Lucrece” (line 14) meaning, of course, “The Rape of Lucrece.” Their dimwittedness is most evident, however, in their literal-minded response to the dramatic performances.

At first, George and Nell seem to be responding to the play with the usual suspension of disbelief. They discuss the characters and the events of the play as if they were real but no more real than when people today participate in what is often called water-cooler talk, dissecting fictional characters and worlds as if they were real, but not actually believing they are real. It is not until they realize that Luce means to trick Humphrey, described by Nell as “the kindest young man that ever trod on shoe leather” (I. 202-3), that the audience realizes that George and Nell are taking the plot very literally indeed – George reassures his wife that Humphrey will

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61 Zitner chooses to leave this vague in his gloss, quoting from Michael Hattaway’s edition of the play in which Hattaway defines the word *confutation* as “[a] bawdy malapropism, as Dr. T.W. Craik pointed out … for ‘The Conversion of St. Paul’” and then merely noting “cf. Fr. *con* and Lat *futuo*” meaning presumably that it is a pun on the Latin *confutuo* meaning, “to have intercourse with” (103, notes 12-13).
have Luce and if not, George will “make some of ‘em smoke for’t” (I. 206). This continues throughout the play. Nell interrupts the players to inform Mrs. Merrythought that Jasper did not lie about being thrown out of the Merchant’s service, offering her husband as a witness (I. 383-86), and later attempts to dress the “wounds” Humphrey receives in a battle with Jasper and advises him to report Jasper to the authorities:

    Come hither, Master Humphrey. Has he hurt you? Now beshrew his fingers for’t.
    Here sweetheart, here’s some green ginger for thee. – Now beshrew my heart, but
    ’a has peppernell in’s head as big as a pullet’s egg. – Alas, sweet lamb, how thy
    temples beat. --- Take the peace on him, sweetheart; take the peace on him. (II.
    261-66)

George routinely threatens to interrupt the play to make events unfold to his own satisfaction and in one notable scene pays the actor (who is playing an innkeeper who is in turn playing a knight) for Rafe’s lodgings (III. 178-80).

    In this particular scene, Rafe has already taken on the persona of the Knight of the
    Burning Pestle and in his adventures through the “desert,” when he comes upon Mrs.
    Merrythought and her youngest son, Michael, who scream and run off upon seeing him,
    dropping all of their money in their fright, which is quickly discovered and appropriated by
    Jasper. Rafe, as a noble and chivalrous knight, has no choice but to take up Mrs. Merrythought’s
    cause and attempt to help her reclaim her possessions. When she tires, he seeks refuge in what
    was to have been the fictional Bell Inn in The London Merchant but is for Rafe,
    
    An ancient castle, held by the old knight
    Of the most holy order of the Bell,
    Who gives to all knights-errant entertain.
There plenty is of food, and all prepared
By the white hands of his own lady dear.
He hath three squires that welcome all his guests:
The first, hight Chamberlino, who will see
Our beds prepared, and bring us snowy sheets,
Where never footman stretched his buttered hams;
The second, hight Tapestro, who will see
Our pots full filled and no froth therein;
The third, a gentle squire, Ostlero hight,
Who will our palfreys slick with wisps of straw,
And in the manger put them oats enough,
And never grease their teeth with candle-snuft. (II. 365-379)

Continuing their mockery of George and Nell, who have thrust Rafe into the midst of their play, the other players indulge Rafe’s story but threaten its integrity by insisting on payment for Rafe’s lodgings for a “night.” The actor playing the Tapster, “hight Tapestro,” insists that Rafe owes him twelve shillings and, when Rafe refuses to break character, threatens to have Rafe arrested (III.174). At this point, George steps in and pays the player, and Rafe continues his adventure.

Even more confusingly, George and Nell do not always take the play literally, and this inconsistency thus adds to the audience’s sense of them as impossibly moronic. For example, they take the plot of *The London Merchant* literally, but do not always confuse the players with the characters they play as when, for example, Nell stops the play to admire one of the players. During a scene in which the Merchant, Luce’s father, and Humphrey meet to discuss Humphrey’s betrothal to Luce, Nell interrupts them to ask her husband if he had ever seen “a
prettier child? How it behaves itself, I warrant ye, and speaks, and looks, and perts up the head!” (I. 93-95). It is apparent that here Nell is quite aware of the actor as a boy, a child, rather than as a fictional character. Similarly, neither George nor Nell ever loses sight of Rafe’s relationship to reality, despite his performance. In other words, though George and Nell do confuse the details of Rafe’s adventures with reality, they never forget that Rafe is also their apprentice, and they continuously offer him encouragement and praise whenever he appears. Despite their depiction as foolish and inconsistent, however, it is clear that there is no malice in Beaumont’s portrayal of George and Nell. Therein lies the root of the confusion.

Indeed, as Barbara Knight Degyansky points out in “A Reconsideration: George and Nell of The Knight of the Burning Pestle,” both Beaumont and the audience seem to like George and Nell. Indeed, Degyansky goes so far as to argue that The Knight “is a celebration of life that grows out of the values that Nell and George typify. Doebler and others ignore the broader appeal and ennobling aspects of The Knight of the Burning Pestle and of Nell and George in particular” (32). Lee Bliss is slightly less positive than Degyansky but nevertheless concedes that “George and Nell are the most vital characters in The Knight; their well-rounded presentation makes them more than simply satiric characters” (5). There are numerous reasons to like George and Nell – Nell’s boundless empathy, George’s fatherly pride, and their generosity to the players and to the audience. At the end of the play, for example, Nell speaks directly to the “gentlemen” on stage and the audience as a whole:

I thank you all, gentlemen, for your patience and countenance to Rafe, a poor fatherless child; and if I might see you at my house, it should go hard but I would have a pottle of wine and a pipe of tobacco for you; for truly I hope you do like the youth, but I would be glad to know the truth. I refer it to your own discretions
whether you will applaud him or no; for I will wink, and whilst you shall do what you will. I thank you with all my heart. God give you good night. (V. 3-12)

As Bliss argues, George and Nell “[e]xercis[e] both too much and too little imagination, [and] flip-flop between under- and over-distancing without ever finding that degree of suspended disbelief necessary to establish the special time and space in which drama can operate. Almost simultaneously, Nell refuses to let actor disappear into character …. Yet they also treat its action as always present a few feet away, ‘real’ within its believed fiction yet also physically happening in their own nontheatrical world” (6-7). George and Nell are ultimately, however, too likeable for the audience to feel comfortable mocking them and too vacuous for the audience to identify with them. It is this back and forth, inconsistent portrayal that may have ultimately contributed to the play’s failure with its original audience by obfuscating not only the target of Beaumont’s satire but also the intent of his play.

Other scholars, however, read the failure of the play differently. Whitted, for example, argues that it was Beaumont’s “misreading of the socioeconomic dynamics of the Blackfriars audience” that was responsible for the play’s failure (par 5). Joshua S. Smith, on the other hand, in “Reading Between the Acts: Satire and the Interludes in The Knight of the Burning Pestle,” declares that “Beaumont twists the satire of the drama to such a degree that it is precariously not legible as such … and it is precisely such unintelligible satiric aims that may well have resulted in the drama’s commercial failure” (495). For other scholars, Beaumont’s metatheatrical explorations expected too much of the audience. Booth, for example, argues “[t]he play was of its time, but before its time, an intelligent theatrical game written before even fully formed serious discussion of theatre had developed ” (57). However, if The Knight is read alongside the
polemics of the antitheatricalists, a new understanding of the play overall, and of the characters of Nell and George particularly, is possible,

GEORGE AND NELL AS ANTITHEATRICAL CONSTRUCTS

Indeed, Beaumont’s decision not just to make George and Nell caricatures, but caricatures of caricatures, makes sense as a response to the content of the various polemics against the theater, so popular at the time. George’s and Nell’s over-the-top and overdetermined stupidity and naiveté are meant to inspire a feeling of disbelief in the audience. The audience is not meant to jeer at George and Nell as representative of citizen patrons of early modern theatre but rather to see them as the fictional audiences described by the polemicists, and realize the impossibility of their existence. George and Nell are meant to demonstrate the absurdity of an audience taking what they see on stage as real in any way, let alone allowing it to influence their behavior. George and Nell’s inane commentary, foolish behavior, and credulity seemingly undermine the arguments of those who would have it that the theater audience is infected by the performance of the players very simply because not even the most ignorant, uneducated, and simplistic audience member could ever sink to the level of ignorance embodied by George and Nell. Their behavior does not merely push the boundaries of imagination, it demolishes them, and in so doing, makes ridiculous the idea that “they that came honest to a play, may depart infected.” Beaumont takes this even further, however, by implying that it is the spectators who demand the violence and sexuality that the polemicists saw in the theatre, rather than the players or the dramatist.

Though presumably concerned for the souls of all who might become victim to the iniquity of the theatre, the majority of the antitheatricalists were particularly concerned for the
fate of the souls of the female spectators. Munday, for example, in *A Third Blaft of Retrait*, speaks specifically of the effects on “citizens wiuves, vpon whom the Lord for enſample to others hath laide his hands.” He recalls how these wives

\[H\]aue euen on their death beds with teares confeſſed, that they haue receivued at thole ſpectactles ſuch filthie infections, as haue turned their minds from chaſt cogitations, and made them of honeſt women light huſwiues; by them they haue diſhonered the vefſels of holines; and brought their huſbandes into contempt, ther children into queſtio, their bodies into ſicknes, and their foules to the ſtate of euerlaſting damnation. (125)

Furthermore, Munday makes clear, it is not because these women were already corrupt. In fact, Munday declares the “moſt honeſt wife, is the ſooneſt aſſalted, and hath ſnares laid to entrap her, as, if God aſſiſt her not, ſhe muſt needes be taken” (125). In *The Knight*, Nell is one such “honeſt wife.” Beaumont makes clear that this is Nell’s first encounter with the theater, as when she first joins her husband on stage at the beginning of the play and explains to the gentlemen seated on the stage:

By your leave, gentlemen all, I’m something troublesome; I’m a stranger here. I was ne’er at one of these plays, as they say, before; but I should have seen *Jane Shore* once, and my husband hath promised me any time this twelve-month to carry me to *The Bold Beauchamps*; but in truth he did not. I pray you, bear with me. (lines 49-54)

Thus it is not possible that Nell has already been corrupted, at least by the theater. Furthermore, Beaumont portrays Nell as admirable, despite her foolishness.
In fact, careful examination of the character reveals that Nell is not only kindly and generous – as when, for example, she goes out of her way to be helpful, offering Mrs. Merrythought a remedy for the chilblains that affect her youngest son after their trek through the “desert” with Rafe - Nell is also brave and honorable. She refuses to allow Mrs. Merrythought to believe a lie about Jasper, despite her dislike of Jasper. She goes even further when Old Merrythought refuses to help his wife and youngest son, interrupting the action of the play in attempt to persuade him to treat his wife better:

I had not thought, in truth, Master Merrythought, that a man of your age and discretion, as I may say, being a gentleman, and therefore known by your gentle conditions, could have used so little respect to the weakness of his wife. For your wife is your own flesh, the staff of your age, your yoke-fellow, with whose help you draw through the mire of this transitory world. Nay, she’s your own rib. (III. 541-548)

Nell’s description of marriage and her sincerity are touching. Furthermore, she does not rail at Merrythought or threaten him, but speaks to him gently and politely. Through Nell, Beaumont brings to life Munday’s “citizen wi[fe], vpon whom the Lord for enſample to others laide his hands.”

However, by also portraying Nell as director of the action of the play, and, furthermore, a director who wants bloody, violent spectacle, Beaumont undermines the arguments of Munday and others of his ilk. Nell has not been corrupted by the theater rather, she, along with her husband, is the agent of corruption. Beaumont makes this clear from the very beginning of the play, when George interrupts the Prologue to insist on a play about a grocer who will “do admirable things” (line 34). When the Prologue asks what the grocer will do, Nell bursts out
excitedly, “Let him kill a lion with a pestle, husband; let him kill a lion with a pestle” (lines 42-43). From the very first, it is the audience, specifically, the “moſt honſt wife,” who wants to see violence, not the players who insist on portraying it - an idea that is reiterated when the Prologue is finally permitted to finish his introduction:

From all that’s near the court, from all that’s great
Within the compass of the city walls,
We now have brought our scene. Fly far from hence
All private taxes, immodest phrases,
Whate’er may but show like vicious
For wicked mirth never true pleasure brings,
But honest minds are pleased with honest things.
--- Thus much for what we do, but for Rafe’s part you must answer for yourself. (lines 113-121).

Here Beaumont makes clear that the players have good intentions but the demands of the audience have already imposed “immodest phrases” and “[w]hate’er may but show like vicious.”

Indeed, what we are able to see of *The London Merchant* suggests that it is an inoffensive and, in Bliss’s words, “conventional little romantic comedy” (8). George and Nell, however, alter its plot for the worse, not just by introducing into it elements of the romance, but by disregarding the importance of narrative at all. Even Rafe attempts to impose a coherent narrative on the play into which he is thrust, but this too breaks down as George and Nell’s requests become increasingly ludicrous and nonsensical. Although at first Rafe attempts to provide for the audience an exposition of the story in which he finds himself, George and Nell repeatedly undermine Rafe’s authority. As the Knight of the Burning Pestle, for example, Rafe
dedicates himself to assisting Mrs. Merrythought as the damsel-in-distress. However, George and Nell force Rafe to abandon this storyline in order to fight Jasper after Jasper has beaten Humphrey and run off with Luce - thus not only intruding on Rafe’s plot but on Jasper and Luce’s plot as well. After Humphrey has been beaten and Nell tends his wounds, George calls for one of the players, “Sirrah boy, come hither” (II. 268) and then requests “Rafe come in and fight with Jasper” (II. 269) to which Nell adds, “[a]y, and beat him well; he’s an unhappy boy” (II. 270). The player tries to reason with George: “Sir, you must pardon us; the plot of our play lies contrary, and ‘twill hazard the spoiling of our play” (II. 271-272). George will have none of it, however, replying, “Plot me no plots. I will ha’Rafe come out. I’ll make your house too hot for you else” (II. 273-274). The player acquiesces, warning once again that neither he nor the rest of the players can be held responsible for what is happening on stage: “Why sir, he shall; but if anything fall out of order, the gentlemen must pardon us” (II. 275-276).

Eventually everything does indeed “fall out of order” due to the demands of George and Nell, particularly Nell and her desire for bloody spectacle - a thread that runs throughout the play. She makes clear her desire to see Rafe “kill all that comes near him” (II. 138) and offers encouragement during fight scenes such as “Break’s pate, Rafe; break’s pate, Rafe, soundly” (II. 309) and “Kill, kill, kill, kill, Rafe” (III. 351). Nell’s appetite for destruction is not something that the dramatic performance has imposed on her; indeed, quite the reverse is true. Nell – and George – desire violence, and the players acquiesce to their wishes, even at the expense of their plot and, potentially, their earnings. The players, in fact, remonstrate with George and Nell, telling them that their requests will “utterly spoil our play and make it to be hissed, and it cost money” (III. 296-297). Both George and Nell are oblivious to these issues, however, and demand ever more arbitrary performances, such as a battle scene for Rafe. Bliss
and Leggatt argue that the players’ compliance with the wishes of the audience as represented by George and Nell reflects Beaumont’s engagement with the issue of the commercialization of art. However, it is also representative of Beaumont’s response to the antitheatrical tracts.

Through exaggeration, the play attempts to undermines the arguments of the antitheatricalists and counters with one of its own, namely that rather than the players and dramatists infecting the audience with a desire to sin, the reverse is true – the players and playwrights merely provide the content the audience demands. Through the players, Beaumont denies responsibility for what is portrayed on the stage – the players and by default the dramatist are merely giving the audience what they want. This is still a common response to those who decry the content of popular entertainment, but it is not, of course, original to Beaumont. As Louis Montrose relates in *The Purpose of Playing: Shakespeare and the Cultural Politics of the Elizabethan Theatre*, Shakespeare’s company, despite acceding to the Earl of Essex’s request to perform *Richard II* the day before Essex’s attempt at rebellion, in what many took as Essex’s desire to inspire others to join his cause, were not held responsible. Montrose argues that their exoneration stems from the perception of the company as “deferr[ing] to the wishes of their betters” in addition to behaving out of purely commercial interest - the conspirators offered them more money to perform that particular play (73). This is Beaumont’s exact argument in *The Knight*: for Beaumont, if anyone is being led astray it is not the audience, but instead the players and the dramatists who are merely trying to earn a living by providing the audience – their betters – with exactly what they desire to see.

*The Knight* also engages with what was becoming an increasingly common occurrence – the audience’s captivation with particular players. As Leggatt notes, “[t]he play [George and Nell] want to see is essentially a series of star turns for Rafe and it does not bother them that the
Rafe scenes become increasingly disconnected” (305-6). Indeed, George and Nell demand Rafe’s presence on stage over a dozen times. After their interruption of the Prologue, George and Nell suffer through fewer than 70 lines of the first act before asking after Rafe’s whereabouts (I. 67). George even threatens the players in order to see Rafe. In the first interlude, for example, George interrupts the boy dancing to say, “Sirrah, you scurvy boy, bid the players send Rafe, or by God’s – and they do not, I’ll tear some of their periwigs beside their heads” (lines 11-13). Indeed, even when caught up in The London Merchant, both George and Nell display an oddly anxious yearning for Rafe’s presence. In Act II, for example, Nell is pleased to hear that the Merchant will allow his daughter to marry Humphrey, and wonders why George “dost not rejoice with” her (II. 42). George replies that if he “could but see Rafe again, [he would be] as merry as [his] host, i’faith” (II. 43-44). Similarly, after Rafe pledges to find and assist Mrs. Merrythought and exits the stage, Nell tells George querulously, “I will not have him go away so soon. I shall be sick if he goes away, that I shall. Call Rafe again, George calls Rafe again” (II. 134-136). George and Nell are positively star-struck – by their apprentice. Here Beaumont may be lampooning a relatively new phenomenon, the player as celebrity.62 This is also where a judgment of the antitheatricalists’ fears as completely without substance breaks down, for it is through the relationship of the player to the audience that the dramatic performance does, in fact, “invade reality.” Whereas in the medieval cycle plays the audience’s focus was on the content of the play, its relation to reality, and their own roles in the drama, in the early modern era the various socio-cultural changes which affected the theater forced a reconfiguration of how the

62 Although it is well-established, by scholars such as Joseph Roach, who argues in his influential study of celebrity It, that celebrity culture first began after the Restoration and that we can “connect[s] the Stuart Restoration and the theater it launched, a marketing revolution within the larger consumer revolution of the long eighteenth century, to (3), I argue that the faintest glimmerings of celebrity culture are appreciable in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, beginning with players such as Edward Alleyn, Will Kempe, and especially, Richard Burbage, on whom I will focus in the last sections of this chapter.
audience responded to drama. The newly-created fourth wall, the product of these changes, forced a displacement of the belief audiences once had in the story on to the players.

SEEING IS BELIEVING: CONFLATING THE ACTOR WITH THE ROLE

In other words, audiences came to believe that the roles the players performed were indicative of the players as people. This does not mean that early modern audiences believed that Edward Alleyn was really Tamburlaine or Richard Burbage was actually King Lear or Othello. Rather, audiences came to associate the characteristics of the role with the player inhabiting it. This is readily perceived in The Knight of the Burning Pestle as George and Nell attribute to Rafe the person the feelings and characteristics Rafe the actor, in character, exhibits on stage. Rafe as a person is a non-entity, a tabula rasa on which the audience, via George and Nell, inscribe their desires as various personas for him to enact. In his first scene, for example, Rafe portrays a grocer, a position for which he is actually being trained by George, who chooses as his emblem “a burning pestle” in “remembrance of [his] former trade” (I. 266-67). Nell comments that it is unsurprising that Rafe “will not forget [his] old trade” because he “wert ever meek” (II. 269-70). Similarly, when Jasper bests Rafe in a fight, George decides it must be because “Jasper is enchanted” because, George says, otherwise “[h]e could no more have stood in Rafe’s hands than I can stand in my Lord Mayor’s” (II. 328-30). This is not because grocers’ apprentices were known for their strength or prowess in battle but because Rafe is not perceived as a grocer’s apprentice, but as a knight with, in George and Nell’s eyes, right on his side. This continues throughout the play. Nell requests a love scene for Rafe in which “the King of Cracovia’s daughter” (IV. 55-56) falls in love with him. Rafe refuses the lady’s advances because she “trusts in Antichrist and false traditions” (IV. 94) and because he has a lady of his own. Nell
“commend[s] Rafe yet that he will not stoop to a Cracovian. There’s properer women in London than any there, iwis” (IV. 128-129). Later in the play, Rafe takes on the part of a Morris dancer on May Day (IV. 27-64), a valiant soldier (V. 89-160), and, in a death scene, a tragic hero (V. 290-343). Rafe takes on the attributes of each role he performs, leading George and Nell to “recall” that this reflects Rafe’s true character – as when Rafe comforts Mrs. Merrythought in Act II. Nell says to George that “Rafe was ever comfortable” (II. 349) and relates an incident in which Rafe comforted her:

I shall ne’er forget him, when we had lost our child; you know it was strayed almost, alone to Puddle Wharf, and the criers were abroad for it, and there it had drowned itself but for a sculler; Rafe was the most comfortablest to me. ‘Peace, mistress,’ says he, ‘Let it go; I’ll get you another as good.’ (II. 352-357)

The joke here, of course, is that Rafe was not trying to comfort Nell at all but to have his way with her. Indeed, this scene undermines all of the traits attributed to Rafe – constancy, bravery, humility, honesty – throughout the play, as what true “knight” would “comfort” an anxious mother by attempting to solicit sexual favors? Indeed, what Beaumont unknowingly highlights through Rafe, or through what Rafe lacks, is the audience’s ability and inclination to see the player as himself equivalent to the role he plays.

Beaumont may have intended Rafe’s lack of identity to be a subtle rebuke to the antitheatricalists, all of whom railed at the lewdness of the players, both on and off stage. Munday in his *A Third Blaſt* describes players as “Camelion[s]” who are not only as coarse and corrupt as the parts that they play but coarse and corrupt because of the parts they play:

Are they not as variable in hart, as they are in their partes? Are they not as good practifers of Bawderie, as inactors? Liue they not in fuch fort themſelues, as they
gie procepts vnto others? doth not their talke on the flage declare the nature of their difpofition? doth not euerie one take that part which is proper to his kind? ....

If (it be his nature) to be a bawdie plaier, and he delight in fuch filthie & curled actions, fhal we not thinke him in his life to be more difordered, and to abhor virtue? (148)

This is not the picture presented through Rafe, however. Instead, the audience sees Rafe as forced to perform by his master and mistress – indeed, Rafe never says or does anything that is not in response to George and Nell or part of one of his characters. And while Nell’s anecdote about Rafe’s prowess at providing comfort renders a portrait of someone less than honorable, it is still the case that he is forced to play. Here Rafe’s relationship with George and Nell symbolizes the players’ relationship with the audience – Beaumont depicts the players as being directed by, influenced by, and beholden to the audience, rather than the other way around, as the antitheatricalists would have it.

What both Munday and Beaumont unwittingly touch on here is the relationship of the player to the audience and how that relationship is filtered through the roles the players performed. In the Middle Ages, the player, in enacting what could not usually be perceived, was unimportant – the truth did not inhere in the actor’s body, but in the story that body performed. With the changes of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, however, the actor’s physical body began to be noticed, remembered, and desired. As J. Leeds Barroll argues in “The Social and Literary Context” in the third volume of The Revels History of Drama in English, “[w]hen an Englishman of Shakespeare’s time went to the theatre, he went to see not only a play but a company of actors – perhaps even a particular, favorite actor. In many cases, then as now, the spectator would be more interested in the performers than in the play” (58). Similarly,
Jeremy Lopez insists, in “Imagining the Actor’s Body on the Early Modern Stage, that “one of the most important attractions of the theatre for an early modern audience was the chance to see the bodies of the actors on display, in motion, and in improbably positions” (191). The most sought after bodies of the time included Richard Tarlton, Will Kempe, Edward Alleyn, and Richard Burbage. Of these, the most famous seems to have been Richard Burbage.

**RICHARD BURBAGE: “THE MOST FAMOUS ACTOR OF THE ELIZABETHAN STAGE”**

Burbage was the son of James Burbage, actor and builder of the first purpose-built theater in England. As Sidney Lee noted in *Richard Burbage: A Short Biography*, written at the beginning of the twentieth century,63 “Burbage was doubtless associated with his father’s profession from childhood and made his debut at James Burbage’s Theatre in Shoreditch as a boy. Before 1588 he had secured some reputation on the stage” (par 2). Modern scholars concur, often referring to Burbage, for example, in terms similar to those of Gerald Eades Bentley’s 1941 *The Jacobean and Caroline Stage: Dramatic Companies and Players*, in which he dubs Burbage “the most famous actor of the Elizabethan stage” (395).64

Burbage, however, was more than just a mere player. In fact, he also may have had a tremendous impact on the very shape of early modern drama. Bart Van Es’s *Shakespeare in Company* explores Burbage’s financial and political role in regard to Shakespeare and argues that along with a sizable financial inheritance and inside theatrical knowledge, Richard (and his brother Cuthbert) inherited his father James’s important political connections, which he and his

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63 There are few modern biographies of Richard Burbage. I have therefore relied on biographical details from authors like Lee, as well as C.C. Stopes’s 1913 text, *Burbage and Shakespeare*. These details are generally repeated in more recent scholarship, such as Holmes’s 1978 *Shakespeare and Burbage* and Gurr’s 1987 *Playgoing in Shakespeare’s London*. The most recent is Van Est’s *Shakespeare in Company*, which also repeats much of the biographical details first presented by Lee and Stopes, while offering a new analysis of Burbage’s (and others) importance to Shakespeare’s success.

64 See, for example, Stopes’s *Burbage and Shakespeare’s Stage*, Holmes’s *Shakespeare and Burbage*, and Gurr’s *Playgoing in Shakespeare’s London*. 
brother then strengthened and extended in order to increase the popularity, fame, and wealth of their company (235). Van Es makes the case that these connections, as well as Burbage’s financial role in the company (by 1600 he and his brother owned fifty percent of the company’s shares (237-238), influenced the content and type of plays Shakespeare wrote. Specifically, Van Es argues, Burbage’s roles increased in length and number:

In the years 1594 to 1598, when the power balance between sharers was relatively equal, so too was the division of parts. In no play did the lead role take more than a quarter of the line total and on average the largest part had less than a fifth of the overall lines. In plays that can be dated from 1599 to 1608, starting with Henry V, the division is very different: eight of the fourteen plays written in that period have a lead who speaks over a quarter of the line total, and major parts … speak more than 30 percent of the whole. The lead part from 1599 onwards, moreover, is almost always suited to Burbage…. There are eleven dominant roles in the plays dated 1599-1608, which on average take 29 percent of the lines: of this total, nine are strongly suited to what we know of Richard Burbage’s style. (237)

Though this has fascinating ramifications in terms of Shakespeare’s art, it also has tremendous implications for this project. Namely, Van Es indicates that Burbage was not only a prodigiously talented actor, he was also a highly visible player, perhaps the most visible player, in some of Shakespeare’s most brilliant works, performing extraordinary and emotional roles that included Richard III, Othello, Lear, and Hamlet. Of course, Shakespeare did not merely write to please one of the largest shareholders in the company. Shakespeare created characters and stories that

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65 The roles attributed to Burbage vary widely from scholar to scholar. See, for example, the second volume of Bentley’s The Jacobean and Caroline Stage: Dramatic Companies and Players, Barroll’s The Revels History of Drama in English: Volume III, 1576-1613, and Lee’s Richard Burbage: A Short Biography. The four roles listed are common to all.
allowed Burbage to hone, refine, and emphasize his acting skills as well as to explore complex and difficult characters in a way that was new for the time.

At a time when many actors were still declaiming their roles in the style of a rhetorician, Burbage’s style seemed to offer something new. As Gurr notes, “Burbage was the first player to be acclaimed for the success of his art of ‘personation’. Before that Marlovian language and the grand gestures of an Alleyn were the model for tragic playing. It was Shakespeare who created parts for Burbage that allowed him to differentiate himself from Alleyn’s characteristically verbose style” (126). It is this “art of ‘personation’” that likely contributed to Burbage’s fame.

According to Richard Flecknoe’s *A Short Diſcourſe of the Engliſh Stage*,

[Burbage] was a delightful Proteus, fo wholly transforming himſelf into his Part, and putting off himſelf with his Cloathes, as he never (not fo much as in the Tyring-houſe) assum’d himſelf again until the Play was done …. He had all the parts of an excellent Orator, (animating his words with ſpeaking, and Speech with Action) his Auditors being never more delighted than when he ſpoke, not more forry then when he held his piece; yet even then, he was an excellent Actor ftill, never falling in his Part when he had done ſpeaking; but with his looks and gesture, maintaining it ftill unto the heighth, he imagining Age quod agis, onely ſpoke to him: fo as thofe who call him a Player do him wrong, no being leſs idle then he, whose whole life is nothing else but action; with only

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66 The fame Richard Burbage, and other well-known players of the era, experienced was fundamentally different from the fame experienced by the actors of the long eighteenth century (and beyond) for a variety of reasons. One of these reasons, which Roach dubs “a necessary condition of modern celebrity” is that the celebrities’ “images circulate widely in the absence of their persons” (3) There is no evidence that players such as Burbage circulated or had their images circulated at all, a phenomenon that would become relatively commonplace after the Restoration, when actors’ images began to appear on commodities such as fans, cards, and china. Furthermore, although, as Julie Stone Peters demonstrates in *Theatre of the Book 1480-1880: Print, Text, and Performance in Europe*, “[p]rint was central to the late fifteenth- and sixteen-century theatrical revival” (7), it had not yet reached the level Cheryl Wanko describes in *Roles of Authority: Thespian Biography and Celebrity in Eighteenth-Century Britain*. Here Wanko attributes to the rise of print culture the creation of “a prototypical figure with whom our century is very familiar: the celebrity” (4). I will examine this “prototypical figure” more closely in the epilogue.
this difference from other mens, that as what is but a Play to them, is his Business: so their Business is but a play to him. (279-280).

Burbage, the “delightful Proteus,” came to inhabit these extraordinarily complex and compelling characters, all of which (with the exception of Lear) deliver at least half a dozen soliloquies during the course of the plays.

Though conventionally seen as the character thinking aloud or arguing with himself, the soliloquy, along with the aside, are points of contact between the players and the audience, times when a skilled actor such as Burbage, in concert with a skilled dramatist, engages the audience’s sympathies and emotions on behalf of the character – sympathies and emotions which then are linked with to actor as well. Kent Cartwright argues along similar lines in Shakespearean Tragedy and Its Double: The Rhythms of Audience Response, in which he states that during a soliloquy “the actor starts to reveal himself to that audience, no longer wrapped within the bubble of mise-en-scene or the stage conflict that creates and sustains character. He must play less out of the situation and more out of himself. To some degree, a soliloquy invites the audience to see beyond the actor-as-character and into the actor-as-self” (101). Thanks to Burbage’s unique position in the company, Burbage had the opportunity to “invite[s] the audience to see beyond the actor-as-character and into the actor-as-self” time and again, as in Hamlet’s famous advice to the players:

Speak the speech … trippingly on the tongue….Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand … but use all gently, for in the very torrent, tempest, and … the whirlwind of passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness …. Be not too tame neither, but let your own discretion be your tutor. Suit the action to the word, the word to the action – with this special observance,
that you o’erstep not the modesty of nature. For anything so o’erdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as ‘twere, the mirror up to nature, to virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and time of his form and pressure. Now this overdone or come off, thought it make the unskilful laugh cannot but make the judicious grieve – the censure of the which one must in your allowance o’erweigh a whole theater of others. (III. ii. 1-7, 15-26)

Many scholars take this as both a critique of then-current acting styles as well as a description of good acting. Richard Courtney, for example in *Shakespeare’s World of Death: The Early Tragedies*\(^67\) argues,

> When Shakespeare began writing, the actor's identity with the character was still not complete…. The leading London player was Edward Alleyn … [who] ‘ranted’: he went through the motions at a distance from the character. This was not distancing in Brecht’s sense; Alleyn was more like a puppet than an actor, at least as we would conceive the actor today. By the time we reach *Hamlet*, Shakespeare has instituted a change …. The actors forget themselves in their characters, and then the spectators can more easily forget their own world in the *play-world*. Much of the appeal of the man, Hamlet, occurs because we so directly experience his intimate feelings. We see the actor as *Hamlet* – it is as though [the actor] is appealing to us in his own person. But the actor does not *totally* become Hamlet. Rather we know Hamlet *through* the actor – much as we know others in life through their social roles. (137)

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\(^{67}\) See as well Van Es’s discussion in *Shakespeare and Company*, 238-248, and Gurr’s *The Shakespearean Stage: 1574-1642*, 112-114.
Burbage, in effect, spent more time with the audience than any of the other actors and this allowed the spectators to know Burbage through Hamlet just as they “[knew] Hamlet through” Burbage. In short, Burbage left an indelible mark on those who saw him perform.

Burbage’s intimacy with the audience, combined with his business acumen, made Burbage a wealthy man. As Montrose notes, “[i]t is a gauge of the social value, and the market value, accruing to their protean skills that at least some of these player-entrepreneurs – notably, Alleyn, Burbage, and Shakespeare – managed within a relatively short time to metamorphose themselves into relatively wealthy and respected citizens” (38). Similarly, Van Es reports that the “Burbage family acquired a country residence in addition to their London property and had strong bonds of connection with the higher echelons of power” that was “on a scale that was grander than that of Shakespeare and the other fellows in the Chamberlain’s/King’s Men” (238). There were other indicators of Burbage’s rising status as well. Indeed, Burbage was well enough known, Van Es relates, to be written into two plays as himself, in *The Second Part of the Return from Parnassus, Or the Scourge of Simony* and in John Marston’s *The Malcontent* (233).

Burbage’s success as an actor, specifically his skill at making a fictional character come to life, is also attested to time and again in the numerous elegies written at his death. The anonymous “A Funeral Elegy on the Death of the famous Actor Richard Burbage” attests not only to Burbage’s fame but his talent at what Gurr dubs “personation”:

> He’s gone, and with him what a world are dead,
> Which he reviv’d, to be received so
> No more: young Hamlet, old Hieronimo,
> Kind Lear, the grieved Moor, and more beside,
> That liv’d in him, have now forever died.
Oft have I seen him leap into the grave,
Suiting the person, which he seem’d to have,
Of a sad lover, with so true an age
That there I would have sworn he meant to die.
Oft have I seen him play this part in jest
So lively that spectator, and the rest
Of his sad crew, whilst he but seem’d to bleed,
Amazed thought even then he died in deed. (lines 12-24)

Poetic license links the death of Burbage with the idea that the characters he portrayed died as well. However, how profoundly people may have been affected by Burbage’s death is suggested by a letter reprinted in C.C. Stopes’s *Burbage and Shakespeare’s Stage* from the Early of Pembroke to Viscount Doncaster, in which Pembroke relates that he is writing the letter while his friends were “at the play” which he “being tender-harted, could not endure to see so soone after the loss of [his] old acquaintance Burbadge” (117). Stopes even argues that one of the reasons that there was little mourning (or, at least, little mourning that was recorded) for Shakespeare after his death was because “[m]en did not realize that Shakespeare was dead while Burbage lived. His power of impersonation was so great that he became his characters” (116).

Indeed, for Stopes, “it was in the death of Burbage that to the world our Shakespeare died” (116). While this may be exaggeration on Stopes’s part, there is evidence that Burbage was mourned deeply not just by friends such as Lord Pembroke but by the whole of London.

According to Van Es, “so voluminous were the declarations of regret that they caused a minor scandal because they reputedly dwarfed the recognition of the death of Queen Anne, which also occurred in 1619” (232). An anonymous poem entitled “De Burbagio et Regina”
seems to support this point, written to parody the outpourings of grief at Burbage’s death as well as, presumably, to scold those who seemed to be overreacting to the actor’s death:

Hung be the Heaven's with black, yield day to night.
Comets importing change shoot through the sky.
Scourge the foul fates that thus afflict our sight,
Burbadge the player has vouchsafed to die;
Therefore in London is not one eye dry:
The deaths of men who act our Queens and Kings
Are now more mourned than are the real things.
The Queen is dead! To him now what are Queens?
Queans of the Theatre are much more worth.

* * * * *

Dick Burbage was their mortal God on earth.
When he expires, lo! all lament the man,

But where's the grief should follow good Queen Anne? (117-118).

This outpouring of grief for a mere actor seems excessive. However, when it is connected to the idea of belief, to the roles he played, and the intimacy he enjoyed with the audience, it becomes easier to understand. As the audience’s role and focus changed from the medieval to the early modern era, the audience’s inclinations and desire to believe that some type of truth inheres in the drama is transformed. No longer able to believe in the truth of what is being performed on stage, the audience’s focus shifts to the actor: Burbage’s fame is thus a direct result of the changes to the drama that occurred during the early modern era as well as a descendant of the medieval engagement with the cycle plays.
BURBAGE AS RICHARD III

In all four of the Shakespearean roles with which Burbage is most often associated, and which of course contributed to the fame that rendered London inconsolable at this death, the audience sympathizes with the character despite the character’s many flaws. Nowhere is this more true (or seemingly more inexplicable) than in Richard III, Shakespeare’s exploration of the evil, deformed, and murderous king whose death led to the rise of the Tudors. Richard is never portrayed as anything less than a villain, someone to be hated and despised is. Indeed, Richard shares with the audience all of his plots and machinations, telling them from the very first that he is “subtle, false, and treacherous” (I. i. 37) and “determined to prove a villain” (I. i. 30).

Nevertheless, the audience roots for him, is in fact seduced by him – feelings which then accrue to the player, in this case, Burbage.

As “The Masks of Richard the Third” by Waldo McNeir argues, “the line separating spectator from player is stretched so thin that the demarcation becomes precarious as Richard seduces [the audience] along with his other victims …” (174). This seduction begins immediately, in the very first scene of the very first act, as Richard describes himself and his response to the current peace:

But I, that am not shaped for sportive tricks
Nor made to court an amorous looking-glass;
I, that am rudely stamp’d, and want love’s majesty
To strut before a wanton ambling nymph;
I, that am curtail’d of this fair proportion,
Cheated of feature by dissembling nature,
Deform’d, unfinish’d, sent before my time
Into this breathing world, scarce half made up,
and that so lonely and unfashionable
That dogs bark at me as I halt by them;
Why, I, in this weak piping time of peace,
Have no delight to pass away the time,
Unless to see my shadow in the sun
And descant on mine own deformity:
And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover,
To entertain these fair well-spoken days,
I am determined to prove a villain,
And hate the idle pleasures of these days. (I. 1. 14-31)

With these words, the character, and in turn the player, ensnares the audience, who cannot help but feel sorry for someone so unloved and mistreated. This sympathy and admiration grows as Richard manages, despite his deformities and even despite making her a widow and killing her father-in-law, to beguile the Lady Anne into marriage (I. ii). This is not to say that the audience delights in Richard’s behavior or even desires his success. Indeed, the audience recoils, as it must, from Richard’s ability to kill without qualm. Nonetheless, that initial sympathy remains and increases each time Richard’s manipulations succeed, in no small part, as McNeir notes, because Richard has made the audience his “accomplices” a role about which they may feel “uneasy” while nevertheless relishing their “vicarious enjoyment of Richard’s virtuosity in villainy” (173).

The audience’s position in regard to Richard is very similar to the audience’s position in regard to the soldiers crucifying Christ in the York “Crucifixion.” During the play, the audience,
through their laughter at the soldiers and their behavior during the play, become co-conspirators in Christ’s death.\textsuperscript{68} This was, of course, the purpose of the play: the audience members are made to realize their responsibility for Christ’s crucifixion and are then absolved of that responsibility by the words that the actor playing Christ speaks from the cross and by the (for the medieval Christian) reality of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. As \textit{Signifying God: Social Relations and Symbolic Acts in the York Corpus Christi Plays} by Sarah Beckwith demonstrates, during the play, the audience members are made to “bear a terrible witness as they are addressed as participants at the scene of the crucifixion” (69-70). Though at first drawn into the soldiers’ story by their humor and resemblance to the audience, the audience soon shifts allegiance to Christ, at which time they experience guilt – an unbearable tension that is resolved by Christ’s speech from the cross, in which he forgives all, both ancient Roman soldiers and medieval English Christians, who were responsible for his agony. The audience thus, as O.B. Hardison notes in \textit{Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages: Essays in the Origin and Early History of Modern Drama}, “transition[n] from guilt to innocence, from separation to communion” (284).

The advent of the fourth wall, however, limits any such resolution for an early modern audience. Nor is there, in \textit{Richard III}, a lasting shift in sympathy. Though the audience commiserates with and mourns each of Richard’s victims in turn, ultimately their positive feelings for Richard never truly falter. This is linked to not only the amount of time they spend with Richard but how much of that time is spent as Richard’s confidants. This feeling in turn imbues the audience with a feeling of superiority on two levels. Not only do they know how Richard truly feels, they also know how the story ends.

At the end of the play, Catesby expresses the audience’s feelings for Richard, a combination of admiration and wonder, during the doomed battle at Bosworth Field:

\textsuperscript{68} For a fuller discussion of the York “Crucifixion” and its audience, see Chapter 1.
The king enacts more wonders than a man,

Daring an opposite to every danger:

His horse is slain, and all on foot he fights,

Seeking for Richmond in the throat of death. (V. iv. 2-5)

Similarly, the audience cannot but be roused at Richard’s final brash declaration that he has “set [his] life upon a cast / and … will stand the hazard of the die” (V. iv. 9-10). However, even as the audience marvels at Richard’s defiance, they are simultaneously discomfited by their own appreciation for such an evil and immoral figure. Furthermore, there is no chance of resolution, let alone absolution, inherent in the drama, as would have been the case for the medieval audience. Instead, these feelings are then transferred to the actor, at once resolving the tension and absolving the audience of their complicity. As the actor and the audience repeat this experience, the actor becomes increasingly associated with, and eventually completely conflated with, the laudable aspects of the character. For an early modern audience, then, it was not only Richard III’s boldness they admired, but Burbage’s.

**The Intimacy of the Actor-Audience Relationship**

The outpouring of grief at Burbage’s death makes more sense when viewed from this perspective. Dramatic audiences felt as if they knew Burbage because of his many performances of complex and multivalent characters on whose behalf the sympathies and the emotions of the audience were engaged. In other words, the emotions and behaviors that Burbage portrayed on stage accrued to Burbage the person. This explains not only Burbage’s “social” and “market value” but also his fame. This seems, perhaps, counterintuitive. Indeed, audience members who confuse an actor with the role that he or she plays are generally considered unstable in some way, at best eccentric, at worst mentally ill. However, it has become a commonplace of theater theory
that actors bring with them to the stage the “ghosts,” to use Marvin Carlson’s term in *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine*, of previous roles. Andrew James Hartley explains this clearly in “Character, Agency and the Familiar Actor”: “One of the elements that an actor’s body brings to the stage is its degree of familiarity. Particularly in the case of ‘stars,’ a known or famous actor adds a particular *frisson* to a role, not simply because of celebrity fetishism, but because the performance must necessarily be under(over?) written by the audience’s memory of the actor’s previous performances” (159).

It is my contention that the reverse is true as well. The actor thus carries that *frisson* with him into the real world and is forever associated with the characters he has played. As Hartley argues, “[c]haracter inheres not in the text but in the performative body, but it is not the actor’s manipulation of the body that determines how character is read …”; instead, “the generation of meaning” stems from “the audience’s participation in concert with the performance practices of the actors” (174). It makes sense that this generation of meaning continues outside of the physical boundaries of the theater and spills over into lived reality. Early modern audiences who experienced Burbage performing some of Shakespeare’s finest characters would have witnessed Burbage experience the agony of Hamlet, the grief of Lear, the ambition of Richard III, the passion of Othello. Furthermore, they would have felt that they knew him, and knew him intimately. Had they not witnessed him mourn, seduce, murder, and love? Had they not heard his confessions, witnessed his struggles, and repeatedly served as his only confidant? As *Theatrical Convention and Audience Response in Early Modern Drama* by Jeremy Lopez argues, early modern audiences “enjoyed – and playwrights enjoyed them – *responding* visibly, audibly, and physical …” (34). This type of response that does not simply cease once outside the playhouse; it cannot be simply turned off.
Furthermore, much as medieval dramatists had crafted their works in order to engage the audience as participants, early modern dramatists similarly crafted their works in such a way as to extract from the audience this emotional response. This is particularly true of Shakespeare, according to Jean E. Howard in *Shakespeare’s Art of Orchestration: Stage Technique and Audience Response*. Howard sets forth how Shakespeare very carefully “crafted [his plays] to control and shape what an audience hears, sees, and experiences moment by moment in the theater and this verbal and visual orchestration is central to the effectiveness and meaning of every play” (2). For Howard, then, Shakespeare was always “indirectly orchestrating the theatrical experiences of the viewer” (6). This orchestration obviously extended to taking into account the talents and traits of his star player, as Van Es argues. Of course, Shakespeare’s indirect orchestration is so effective that nearly four hundred years after his death, and the death of Burbage, scholars are still debating the meanings of his works and audiences are still moved by his words.

Unlike the texts, however, performances are intangible, elusive, and perishable. Just as Shakespeare orchestrated his plays, however, the actor in turn directly orchestrates, through his or her body’s performance of the dramatist’s words, the audience’s response. That dual orchestration provokes a response that carries over into everyday life, and the actor becomes inextricably associated with the roles he or she plays in complex and intricate ways. Audiences thus, in a sense, believe in the reality of the dramatic performance, at least as it pertains to the actor. This belief is the same belief reserved in the Middle Ages for the story being performed, though irrevocably transformed and reconfigured by the changes of the early modern era. It is this transformation of the audience’s response to drama that truly defines the movement from medieval to early modern, and gives birth to what will eventually become the cult of the
celebrity in the eighteenth century. Van Es argues about Burbage that “[t]he external evidence offers coherent witness to his talents and an almost unbroken history of the plays in performance – from Joseph Taylor to Thomas Betterton through Garrick, Kean, Olivier, and beyond – is testament to his line” (248). For Van Es, then, we can see the future through Burbage. Equally true, however, is that we can also see the past. From the audience as accessory to the “Crucifixion” in York, to their role as grieving parent in the Brome “Isaac,” the audience’s belief in the drama leads directly to Burbage and beyond. The barriers raised by the Chester Cycle that became a full-blown fourth wall during the Reformation diverted and displaced that belief, but it could not extinguish it. What remains “almost unbroken,” then, is how audience belief both shapes and is shaped by theatrical performances and how theatrical performances in turn shape and are shaped by the audience.
Epilogue

“Legendary truth”: Lavinia Beswick, alias Fenton, alias Polly Peachum, alias the Duchess of Bolton

History has its truth, so has legend. Legendary truth is of a different nature from historical truth. Legendary truth is invention, the result of which is reality.

Victor Hugo, Ninety-Three

The celebrity and success of Richard Burbage, and other early modern actors, is a far cry from the celebrity and success enjoyed by modern actors. Though Burbage had fame and fortune, there is certainly no indication, for example, that his appearances in public caused the kind of furor associated with public appearances by modern celebrities such as Jennifer Lawrence or Ryan Gosling. In fact, by modern standards Burbage’s celebrity was quite subdued. It is even possible that this relatively subdued form of celebrity may have become the norm. However, everything changed with the closing of the theaters in 1642. Professional theater remained suppressed for the next eighteen years, and did not return to England until Charles II was restored to the throne in 1660.

Charles II was an enthusiastic patron of the theater and, upon the restoration of the monarchy, Charles quickly licensed two of his friends and companions-in-exile, playwright Thomas Killigrew and former poet laureate William Davenant, to form two theater companies. These companies and the drama they performed were quite different from anything seen in England before, influenced as the theater was by the eighteen-year long break, combined with new dramatic techniques, technologies, and tastes acquired by the court in exile. In place of the open-air theater of the Globe were Killigrew’s renovated tennis court and Davenant’s purpose-built theater, which Elizabeth Howe’s The First English Actresses: Women and Drama, 1660-1700 describes as “impressively equipped … with changeable scenery …” (1). In addition to structural changes, the type of drama produced and enjoyed reflected the air of celebration that
accompanied the king’s Restoration. The greatest change to English theater, however, was the introduction of female actors to the English stage. The use of women to play women’s roles was hailed by most theatergoers as a brilliant innovation, and the practice quickly moved from curiosity to convention.

**The Rise of the Female Celebrity**

The introduction of women to the English stage was paralleled by an intensification of the phenomenon of celebrity. In his influential study of celebrity entitled simply *It*, Joseph Roach traces the rise of celebrity culture. He defines “It” as “a certain quality, easy to perceive but hard to define, possessed by abnormally interesting people” (1) with “characteristic manifestations” that include “public intimacy (the illusion of availability), synthetic experience (vicariousness), and the It-Effect (personality-driven mass attraction)” (3). Roach argues that this quality first appeared in 1660 and thus “connects the Stuart Restoration and the theater it launched, a marketing revolution within the larger consumer revolution of the long eighteenth century, to Hollywood” (3). I argue, however, that the connections are deeper. Indeed, the rise of celebrity culture in the long eighteenth century was not something new, but part of the same process of belief that was so apparent in the Middle Ages and transformed by the advent of the fourth wall in the beginning of the early modern era, which repositioned the audience’s focus, moving it from play to player. This belief’s most common manifestation is in the conflation of the actor with the role he or she performed, which became even more common in the eighteenth century and quickly surpassed and eclipsed the level to which it rose with Richard Burbage and his peers. This is most evident in the reaction to female actors of the time, who were conflated with their
roles so frequently and so thoroughly that their own identities were often erased and replaced, to the audience at least, by those of their most popular roles.\(^6^9\)

Although male actors were also affected by the audience’s response and conflation of the actor with the role, such responses did not affect them equally, for a number of reasons. \textit{Roles of Authority: Thespian Biography and Celebrity in Eighteenth-Century Britain} by Cheryl Wanko argues for the growing print market, specifically in the numerous biographies, autobiographies, and Memoirs of actresses, as one factor in the rise of celebrity specifically for female actors (3). Additionally, the physical image of the female actor was also circulated and made available for purchase; as Felicity Nussbaum recounts in “Actresses and the Economics of Celebrity,” as a way “[t]o heighten their fame and marketability, actresses … found themselves to be represented by goods or articles of trade” (158) and their likenesses appeared on “portraits, fans, playing cards, chinaware and screens” (159). Nussbaum attributes this effect as well to a “remarkably supple” line “between theatre and life, public and private, … especially in regard to women’s sexuality” (150) a line crossed by the “[m]ale playgoers [who] preyed on the early actresses, sometimes paying a fee to visit them backstage in the hope of gaining sexual favours” (150). She extends this theory in \textit{Rival Queens: Actresses, Performance, and the Eighteenth –Century British Theater} to argue that the actors themselves, particularly in prologues and epilogues, “actively shaped their identities to make celebrated properties of themselves in a historical period marked by the increasing privatization of property and identity, even as identity increased in circulation and commodification” (17). Finally, Nussbaum argues that, “[t]his effect is in part a result of the culture’s regarding the feminine as more accessible than the masculine, and its

exercise of a double standard in centering on the actress as a locus of cultural desire” (16). Not only is “the feminine more accessible than the masculine,” but the feminine body is both more accessible and less easily discarded or disguised as is the masculine.

In other words, women have historically been considered (and are currently considered) to be more embodied than men. This entrenched notion, a bedrock of western views on gender, is usefully described in Marge Piercy’s poem “The Moon is Always Female,” in which she wishes to “take off [her] sex like a dress” (line 4) in the same way that the male gender can be discarded by men at will, noting for example that, “[t]he priest, the doctor, the teacher / all tell us they come to their professions / neuter as clams …” (lines 6-8). An example of this was the early modern convention of having boys and young men perform women’s roles, a practice that seems strange to us now, but was seemingly well-accepted and did not create problems for audiences in terms of the suspension of disbelief. Howe quotes an audience member’s reaction to a 1610 performance of Othello, for example, in which the spectator uses female pronouns to refer to the actor performing Desdemona (20). As Howe argues, “boy or not, she was a woman to [the spectator]” (20). The same did not hold true for female actors. Although female actors did take on roles that required them to dress and behave as men, these “breeches roles” were in fact a way to showcase the female body and, as such, emphasized gender identity rather than blurring it.

When beliefs about the female body were combined with the instinct to believe in the truth of the performance, the female actor’s identity was conflated with that of the role she portrayed, in the same way the male actor’s identity was conflated with that of the role he portrayed in the early modern era, itself a transformation of the audience’s inclination to believe in the truth of dramatic performance. As Nussbaum argues, the “woman player acting on the stage possessed both the imagined body of the character she represented as well as her own
actual body as a person. Yet these two bodies – the virtual body of the role and the real body of 
the actress – were not easily separated into discrete entities; their highly sexualized bodies create 
double trouble as spectators bring privileged knowledge to their interpretation of the actress’ 
roles” (“Actresses and Economics” 150). This helps to explain why many female actors were 
often referred to by the names of their most famous roles. Although this happened to almost all 
of the most famous female actors of the long eighteenth century, including Nell Gwynn, 
Elizabeth Barry, Anne Bracegirdle, and Mary Robinson, to name just a few, an extreme example 
is that of Lavinia Fenton, who in 1728 originated the role of Polly Peachum in John Gay’s 
immensely popular *The Beggar’s Opera*.

**The Beggar’s Opera and the Success of Lavinia Fenton**

Gay’s work, written to compete with and parody the popular operas of the time, is set in 
London’s underworld, focusing on the supposed love story between Polly Peachum, daughter of 
fence and bounty hunter Mr. Peachum, and Macheath, a dashing and amoral highwayman.70 *The 
Beggar’s Opera* combined music with social and political satire in an entirely new way and was 
an instant success. Hal Gladfelder, in his introduction to his edition of *The Beggar’s Opera* and 
its sequel *Polly*71 describes the play as not just “the most successful dramatic work” of the year 
but also “of the century” (vii). The play ran for sixty-two nights, a record-breaking streak,72 and 
brought immediate fame to its cast, particularly seventeen-year old Lavinia Fenton as Polly.

Wanko relates how many of the actors involved in the first performances of *The Beggar’s 
Opera* were catapulted into the limelight:

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70 All references to *The Beggar’s Opera* are to the Penguin Classic text edited Bryan Loughrey and T.O. Treadwell, 
published in 1986.
71 *Polly* was never performed, as Robert Walpole, target of the satire in both works, quickly censored it. Gay did, 
evertheless, publish the text and profited handsomely despite and, most likely, because of Walpole’s intervention. 
72 Indeed, the work has never ceased to be performed and has spawned many imitations, most notably Brecht’s 
*Threepenny Opera*.
The play’s main characters and the actors who portrayed them were celebrated in verse, reproduced in prints, and advertised as appearing on china, screens, and fans – some of the first theatrical memorabilia. Most important, they inspired … thespian biographies: of Lavinia Fenton (Polly Peachum), of “Mackheath” (a mock biography, only slightly connected with Thomas Walker, who played this role), and of James Spiller (Matt o’ the Mint). The three performers concerned were not particularly popular. … or bastions of theatrical authority …. In fact, none of them had stellar theater records – until *The Beggar’s Opera*. This play changed both their lives and the genre of thespian biography. Somehow, it transformed average performers into figures who received exceptional attention … (52).

What is most interesting to Wanko is how these biographies differ from other biographies of the time. Generally, she argues, late seventeenth and early eighteenth century standards for biography assumed that character in terms of class and social position was stable (10) and frowned on the inclusion of details of a subject’s personal life as superfluous and rude (9). This was not the case for the biographies of these actors, which resembled, according to Wanko, the increasingly popular criminal biography, concerned with “socially marginal people, especially criminal types including robbers, murderers, bawds, and traitors” (11).

Wanko sees three reasons for the popularity and proliferation of thespian biographies. First, it was a profitable enterprise for the authors. Second, it reflected an intense interest in the “players’ ability to confuse social expectations and transcend many conventions of class, morality, and decorum” (14). Actors “fit awkwardly into existing social categories both high and low; thus a new cultural formation arose to describe the type of person who fraternized with –
even married into – the upper classes, while doing a job that still legally defined its practitioners as vagrants” (14). Consequently, actors became the focus of both anxiety (as class lines were transgressed) and desire (on the part of those who were attracted to that transgression). Wanko’s third and final reason is related to and dependent on the second: such biographies acted as a form of patrolling of those desires, as “the subject’s material commodification as a book indicates market control of players’ lives” (16).

I propose a fourth reason, not just for the increased popularity of thespian biography, but also for its resemblance to criminal biography, particularly in the case of the cast of *The Beggar’s Opera*. Namely, these biographies are the written representation of the conflation of the actor with the role, a phenomenon intensified by the advent of the female actor and the ways in which the female body was conceived of in general by the dominant culture and in particular by the eighteenth-century theater audience. These different but related strands interacted in myriad ways, resulting in a perfect storm that produced identities for female actors that were bound up with the roles they portrayed in ways that cannot always be traced. The biography of Lavinia Fenton in particular exemplifies this phenomenon.

Wanko describes the biography, entitled *The Life of Lavinia Befwick, alias Fenton, alias Polly Peachum*, as one that “denies her public achievement and condemns her path of upward mobility” (60) whereas in *Rival Queens*, although Nussbaum acknowledges that “[i]n the memoirist’s eyes, Fenton’s real dramatic talents made her worthy of a stage career but also aligned her with prostitution,” she notes as well that “one could certainly argue that a significant theme weaving through the biography is polite admiration for Fenton’s remarkable ease in seeming to be a lady of quality in spite of her modest beginnings and her marginal status as a working woman …” (99). Nussbaum ultimately concludes that *The Life of Lavinia Befwick,
alias Fenton, alias Polly Peachum “explained her being welcomed into the best circles of women of rank in spite of her sexual prolifigacy because of her discriminating taste, conversational skills, and considerable dramatic talent” (100).

Though these two differing readings seem diametrically opposed to each other, an examination of The Life reveals that the biography can be seen as both admiring and condemning Fenton, referred to throughout as Polly, often at the same time. For example, the anonymous author begins by announcing his purpose to “add, if possible, a further Luſtre to the great name she has already acquir’d” (1) and on the very next page describes Fenton’s “Mother, like herſelf, [as] not of a very ſcrupulous ConſiENCE” (2). This contradictory tone, which is extended throughout the text, reflects the influence of the role of Polly Peachum on the perception of Lavinia Fenton. The anonymous author does not merely conflate Polly with Fenton but additionally attributes the indeterminate nature of Polly as character to Fenton as well, a duality attributable to the difficulty in “reading” a performance.

POLLY PEACHUM: INNOCENT AND NAÏVE

The character of Polly in The Beggar’s Opera can be read and performed “straight,” that is, as the innocent and sweet character she appears to be, the only moral center of an otherwise immoral world, or it can be read and performed ironically, thus indicating that Polly is, at heart, as criminal as Macheath or her parents. Wanko, for example, describes the character as “the innocent, modest Polly” a view shared by Toni-Lynn O’Shaughnessy in “A Single Capacity in The Beggar’s Opera.” O’Shaughnessy argues that “Polly’s role could offer an optimistic view of human nature … (215) and that it is “possible to go through each of Polly’s speeches and demonstrate that they may at least as credibly be spoken with artless sincerity and generosity as
with duplicitous irony” (221). Certainly, an examination of the text of the play allows for such a reading.

Polly is the only character that seems to demonstrate any sense of traditional or mainstream moral values or ethics. Indeed, Polly’s marriage to Macheath sets up the central conflict of the story, as her parents are very much against the marriage. However, Mr. and Mrs. Peachum do not disapprove of the marriage because Polly marries without their approval or even because Macheath is not only a criminal but a notorious Lothario, but because Polly’s marriage puts their criminal activities at risk of discovery. In the first act, Peachum explains the problem to his wife in simple terms: “a husband hath the absolute power over all a wife’s secrets but her own. If the girl had the discretion of a court lady, who can have a dozen young fellows at her ear without complying with one, I should not matter it; but Polly is a tinder, and a spark will at once set her on a flame” (I. iv. 50). Furthermore, Peachum implies, Polly would be undervaluing the worth of her virginity and tasks his wife with “instruct[ing] her how to make the most of her beauty” (50).

When the Peachums find out Polly is already married to Macheath, they become infuriated. Polly’s mother rants at her, calling her “baggage,” “hussy,” and “inconsiderate jade” (I. viii. 55) and eventually faints after Polly tells her of her love for Macheath, saying, “Love him! Worse and worse! I thought the girl had been better bred” before fainting from the “shock” (I. viii. 57). Polly’s mother later laments Polly’s behavior, explaining to her husband that “[i]f she had only an intrigue with the fellow, why the very best families have excused and huddled up a frailty of that sort. ’Tis marriage, husband, that makes it a blemish” (I. ix. 59). Similarly, her father asks Polly, if she thought “your mother and I should have lived comfortably so long together, if ever we had been married” and wants her to admit she’s “ruined” a term generally
used to mean that a young woman has lost her virginity prior to marriage, not that she has married prior to losing her virginity. This is, in fact, Polly’s stated reason for the marriage, which she relates in Air VIII:

When he kissed me so closely he pressed

’Twas so sweet that I must have complied

So I thought it both safest and best

To marry, for fear you should chide. (I. viii. 57)

In this way, Gay establishes the topsy-turvy world of the Opera, in which what is valued in mainstream society is not only devalued, but condemned.

This is enhanced by the Peachums’ solution to Polly’s “aberrant” behavior. The Peachums, concerned that Macheath will put their criminal activities at risk, decide to turn Macheath over to the authorities. Once he is executed for his crimes, Polly will then stand to inherit Macheath’s similarly ill-gotten estate. Mr. Peachum presents this to Polly as simple common sense, hoping, perhaps, to believe that it is in fact the real reason for Polly’s marriage:

PEACHUM. And had you not the common views of a gentlewoman in your marriage, Polly?

POLLY. I don’t know what you mean, sir.

PEACHUM. Of a jointure, and of being a widow.

POLLY. But I love him, sir: how then could I have thoughts of parting with him?

PEACHUM. Parting with him! Why, that is the whole scheme and intention of all marriage articles. The comfortable estate of widowhood, is the only hope that keeps up a wife’s spirits. Where is the woman who
would scruple to be a wife, if she had it in her power to be a widow whenever she pleased? If you have any views of this sort, Polly, I shall not think the match so very unreasonable...

POLLY. How I dread to hear your advice! Yet I must beg you to explain yourself.

PEACHUM. Secure what he hath got, have him peached the next Sessions, and then at once you are made a rich widow.

POLLY. What, murder the man I love! The blood runs cold at my heart with the very thought of it.

PEACHUM. Fie, Polly! What hath murder to do in the affair? Since the thing sooner or later must happen, I dare say, the Captain himself would like that we should get the reward for his death sooner than a stranger.

Why, Polly, the Captain knows, that as tis his employment to rob, so tis ours to take robbers; every man in his business. So that there is no malice in the case. (I. x. 61)

Polly is, of course, horrified by her father’s plan and refuses to have any part of it. Polly warns Macheath, and convinces him to go into hiding for a few weeks, hoping in the meantime, her parents might reconsider.

After pledging his undying love to Polly, Macheath goes to a tavern, and asks the porter to find his favorite ladies of the town. Two of the women Macheath sends for to betray him, and he is captured by Peachum and taken to Newgate to await execution. There he encounters Lucy Lockit, a former lover, pregnant with his child. He convinces her that he is not really married to Polly and that he will marry Lucy, if only she will help him escape. He manages this, despite
Polly’s appearance at the prison. After Lucy frees Macheath, she is berated by her father not because she let Macheath escape, but because she did it for love, rather than money. When he discovers Macheath’s escape, Lockit asks her approvingly, “Did he tip handsomely? How much did he come down with? Come hussy, don’t cheat your father; and I shall not be angry with you” (III. i. 96). When Lucy admits that she did it for nothing, her father is deeply disappointed, telling her that she “will always be a vulgar slut” (III. i. 97), much as Polly’s parents had berated Polly for being in love.

Macheath flees to a gaming-house, but is soon recaptured. Meanwhile, Polly has gone to visit Lucy, who is intent on poisoning Polly. Before she can poison her, however, Macheath is brought back in chains. Both Polly and Lucy beg their respective fathers to spare Macheath, to no avail, and Macheath is taken away and quickly sentenced to death. Polly and Lucy then come to visit Macheath, who is understandably not equipped to offer comfort to either woman. Especially depressed because he is out of liquor, Macheath begs Polly and Lucy to leave him alone, in Air LXCII: “O leave me to thought! I fear! I doubt! / I tremble! I droop! See my courage is out” (III. xv. 120). Macheath’s despair quickly departs when the jailor returns to inform Macheath, “[f]our women more, Captain, with a child apiece! See, here they come.” To which Macheath replies, “What – four wives more! This is too much. Here – tell the Sherriff’s Officers I am ready” (III. xv. 120) and Macheath is led off to be executed. At this point, the player and the beggar who had begun the opera return, and the player tells the beggar that he cannot have Macheath executed, “for an opera must end happily” (III. xvi. 121). The beggar acquiesces and everyone is brought back out for a dance, during which Macheath acknowledges that Polly is indeed his lawful wife.
Polly is presumably happy with Macheath’s acknowledgement despite being surrounded, literally, by proof of Macheath’s lack of constancy. Indeed, Polly does not, at any point, berate Macheath for his many affairs, particularly his mistreatment of Lucy. Although a modern spectator might misunderstand this behavior, contemporary audiences would have recognized Polly as exemplifying the constancy and obedience expected of a wife. In fact, Polly seems to be unaffected entirely by the moral decay with which she is surrounded and thus provides the needed contrast to the immoral behavior of the other characters. In this way, her loyalty to Macheath makes the many who betray him seem all the worse.

Polly also serves as a contrast to Lucy. Both women have similar backgrounds – their parents have both respectable and criminal professions and both are often surrounded by other criminals. Polly’s behavior, however, differentiates her from Lucy, therefore insisting by contrast that Lucy allowed herself to be infected by this world, while Polly remained pure. For example, whereas virtuous Polly insisted on marriage before giving in to Macheath’s attempts at seduction, Lucy, who has almost the same exact experience as Polly – as evidenced by a comparison of Polly’s song from Air VIII when she sings “When he kissed me so closely he pressed” to Lucy’s confession to her father in Air LXI, “But his kiss was so sweet, and so closely he pressed” (III .i. 97). Unlike Polly, who concludes her admission with what should bring relief to any parent’s ears, “So I thought it both safest and best / To marry, for fear you should chide,” Lucy’s confession, on the other hand, ends by revealing that she “languished and pined till [she] granted the rest” (III .i. 97).

In addition to her loyalty and virtuousness, Polly also proves a model of sobriety and charity. Not only does she not participate in Lucy’s example of taking “strong-waters,” for which Lucy accuses her of being “squeamishly affected” (III. ix. 72) and hypocritical, she also does
not realize Lucy’s true intent. Though she is not so naïve that she is unaware that Lucy is not simply being a gracious hostess when she repeatedly insist that Polly have a drink, Polly merely thinks that “[b]y pouring strong-waters down my throat, she thinks to pump some secrets out of me” (III. ix. 112); it never once crosses her mind that Lucy means to kill her. In this way, Gay demonstrates that Polly is not only virtuous and true but so good she cannot even conceive of the crimes the others in her life are ready to commit.

**Polly Peachum: Corrupt and Ironic**

Certainly, as O’Shaughnessy argues, the character can be both perceived and performed this way. O’Shaughnessy argues that Polly has only been considered as immoral as the other characters because of the influence of William Empson’s analysis, “The Beggar’s Opera: Mock Pastoral as the Cult of Independence,” in which he describes Polly as “selfish” and argues that “the most shocking effect of pathos, like the play’s best jokes, come from a firm acceptance of her parents’ standards …” (242). For O’Shaughnessy, it is “[o]nly when irony and cynicism are assumed does Empson’s reading seem inevitable” (219). A more useful reading than either Empson’s or O’Shaughnessy’s is acknowledging the possibility that both readings could be accurate, but a definitive answer could only be seen in performance, an answer that would then only be accurate for that particular performance.

Polly most certainly shows loyalty and devotion, as O’Shaughnessy points out, noting that “Polly consistently places Macheath’s welfare as she understands it above her own comfort, and chooses the greater good of faithful love over more immediate advantages” (219). However, she also tells her father that she “know[s] as well as any of the fine ladies how to make the most of myself and of my man too. A woman knows how to be mercenary, though she hath never been in a court or at an assembly. We have it in our natures, papa. If I allow Captain Macheath some
trifling liberties, I have this watch and other visible marks of his favour to show for it” (I. vii. 53-54). In this satirical world, being like “any of the fine ladies” immediately aligns Polly with immorality. Additionally, Polly is not just aware of her parents’ criminal activities, she participates in them, at one point accepting stolen goods on their behalf from Nimming Ned, namely “a damask window curtain, a hoop-petticoat, a pair of silver candlesticks, a periwig, and one silk stocking” (60) potentially symbolizing that Polly may have all of the outward trappings of virtue but none of the real thing.

In addition, celebrating Polly for her loyalty and devotion to “Macheath’s welfare” ignores the fact that Polly is not only attracted to but has devoted herself to a notorious criminal. As for Polly’s choice of “the greater good of faithful love,” it is a choice that marks her as a fool, as Macheath is certainly not deserving of such love. Furthermore, as Steve Newman demonstrates in “The Value of ‘Nothing’: Ballads in The Beggar’s Opera,” Polly’s romantic notions themselves are “not so far from her parents’ system,” as is depicted in her romantic imaginings of Macheath’s death in Act I, Scene XII:

Methinks I see him already in the cart, sweeter and more lovely than the nosegay in his hand! I hear the crowd extolling his resolution and intrepidity! What vollies of sighs are sent from the windows of Holburn, that so comely a youth should be brought to disgrace! I see him at the tree! The whole circle are in tears! Even butchers weep! Jack Ketch himself hesitates to perform his duty, and would be glad to lose his fee, by a reprieve. (64)

Newman points out as well that Polly expresses similarly overwrought and thus artificial emotions in Air XII when she beseeches her parents to remember that “on the rope that hangs my dear / Depends poor Polly’s life” (I. x. 62), which Newman characterizes as “ludicrous” (274).
Newman concludes that Polly’s passion and love for Macheath are in fact “artificia[l]” and that her romanticizing of Macheath’s death “reconstitutes her as more of an observer of than a fellow sufferer in Macheath’s death” (274-75). In fact, Newman concludes, “Polly’s martyrdom is ‘something of a mirage,’ generated in part by romances, ‘play-books,’ and self-regard” (276).

The only direction a reader/spectator has from the “text” in deciding how to view Polly is the beggar’s statement at the end of the play. The player questions the beggar’s choice of ending the opera with Macheath’s execution (III. xv. 120), arguing that such an ending runs contrary to the expectations of the audience, who know that an opera is meant to have a happy ending (III. xvi. 121). The beggar replies that he was aiming for “strict poetical justice. Macheath is to be hanged; and for the other personages of the drama, the audience must have supposed they were all either hanged or transported” (III. xv. 120). The beggar does not exclude Polly from this blanket condemnation, perhaps hinting as to the true nature of the character. It is, however, a hint only and depends on performance for a definitive answer.

THE LIFE OF LAVINIA BEIWICK, ALIAS FENTON, ALIAS POLLY PEACHUM

This duality is paralleled by the perception of Lavinia Fenton herself. Her biography, written at the height of her success, suggests Fenton was a whore who knew, as does Polly, “how to make the most of [herself]” (I. vi. 53). Her biographer’s claims that though Fenton was “above asking Money for dispensing her Favours” she was not “not so foolish as to surrender before she sees the glittering Bait, for by some pretty witty Tale, Smile, Parable, or Fable, she insinuates so finely, that her Sparks are always ready to offer a Diamond Ring, a Green Purse, a Watch, Gold Snuff-Box, or some valuable Trincklet” (33-34). This description of Fenton is remarkably similar to Polly’s blithe assurance to her father that “[i]f [she] allow[s] Captain Macheath some trifling liberties, [she has a] watch and other visible marks of his favour to show for it” (I. vii. 53-54).
Likewise, Polly’s devotion to Macheath is paralleled by Fenton’s devotion to her lover, described as a Portuguese nobleman, for whom, at one point, Fenton sells all of her jewelry in order to allow him to return home, a kindness, her biographer notes, “feldom found in a Woman wholly abandon’d to Pleasure” (26). Fenton’s biographer paints Fenton as a whore with a heart of gold, perhaps known more for “her Senfe, and the good Ufe she makes on’t” than her beauty (39), but a whore nonetheless. Polly can be read in the same way and the anonymous biographer could have been speaking equally of her when he pronounces that Fenton “may pafs for an accomplih’d worthy Lady, if the Publick will allow an Actrefs the Title” (47).

Ultimately it is impossible to know how to view either Polly or Lavinia, for each is bound up with the other’s character. Was Lavinia Fenton, like Polly, a whore with a heart of gold or was Polly Peachum perceived as a whore because she was played by Lavinia Fenton, who after all did leave the stage at the behest of her married lover, the Duke of Bolton, with whom she lived for the next twenty years – bearing him three illegitimate children - and finally married shortly after his wife’s death? These questions are impossible to answer, mainly because we have little actual information about Fenton beyond what was reported in the Life. There is one other biography of Fenton, written by Charles E. Pearce in 1913 and entitled “Polly Peachum”: Being the Story of Lavinia Fenton (Duchess of Bolton) and The Beggar’s Opera. It relies on the Life and so adds nothing to an accurate depiction of Fenton. It is interesting, however, because despite using details from the 1728 text, it casts them in an entirely different light.

Pearce, in fact, seems quite infatuated with Fenton, despite her having been dead, at the time the book was published, for over 150 years. Pearce frequently refers to her as “Polly” and declares that without Fenton, “it is quite possible that The Beggar’s Opera would have simply taken its place in the long list of dramatic productions the names of which have alone been
handed down to the present day” (43-44). He not only disavows the more salacious details of the 1728 text, he occasionally seems to invent things to support his understanding of Fenton. For example, he asserts, Fenton “is credited with no adventures, no escapades, no scandalous intrigues…. We can fancy her always placid, always natural, always in a good humour. Her portraits seem to suggest that all went well with her, that she was ever basking in the smiles of Fortune” (203). He glosses over her affair with the married Duke of Bolton and touts her decision to leave the stage (to live with Bolton) as exemplifying “a self-denial rare indeed among the female favourites of the public” and in so doing spared herself, unlike those other “favourites,” the “mortification of seeing the characters in which they once thought themselves unapproachable, enacted by younger and perhaps handsomer women, while they themselves are faded, feeble, old, or – fat!” (224). Pearce’s depiction of Fenton, though bizarre and entertaining, gets us no closer to the “real” Fenton, who will most likely always remain something of a cipher.

The fascination with Fenton, and the questions raised both about her as a person and the character she portrayed, underscores the audience reaction to female actors in the eighteenth century, a reaction that is related to the responses of medieval dramatic audiences. It also exemplifies how drama does not merely reflect reality but also produces reality. The reality produced may not duplicate what the audience has perceived in a one-to-one, linear correspondence, but is instead molded and formed by the audience’s own experiences, beliefs, and desires. Part of the reality produced by Lavinia Fenton and the audiences who witnessed her performances, both on and off stage, was celebrity culture, a culture that is not limited to the eighteenth century.
CONCLUSION

It is important to understand that medieval, early modern, and eighteenth-century audiences responded to dramatic performances as experiences that created the reality they seemed only to reflect. Although these responses took different forms, they are fundamentally similar and related. This stems from the drama’s function as, to use Eli Rozik’s term from *The Roots of Theatre: Rethinking Ritual and Other Theories of Origin*, “an innate method of signification” (342). In other words, drama is a way we think about and process reality. As such, audience response to drama assumes, on some generally unexamined level, that drama bears some relationship to reality, that it speaks some type of truth. It is my contention that this fundamental response is still very much at work today. Furthermore, this response is not limited to drama but is true as well of our responses to other visual narratives, particularly film and television. It is crucial not to mistake this for the reductive, one-to-one correspondence posited by modern-day moralists, who echo the early modern antitheatricalists by claiming that viewing fictional violence inspires real-life violence. Instead, the real life consequences of such responses are never that straightforward; in fact, they are commonly unintended and often unforeseeable.

For example, Susan J. Douglas’s 2012 text *Enlightened Sexism: The Seductive Message that Feminism’s Work is Done*, argues that the proliferation of fictional roles depicting women in power, rather than resulting in real women actually achieving such power, instead “mask, and even erase, how much still remains to be done for girls and women” (6). Such performances, she argues, “assure girls and women, repeatedly, that women’s liberation is a fait accompli and that we are stronger, more successful, more sexually in control, more fearless, and more held in awe than we actually are” (5). Similarly, Daniel Gardner’s *The Science of Fear: Why We Fear the Things We Shouldn’t - and Put Ourselves in Greater Danger* argues that we believe that the past
was a simpler, better time and that “the future … is a black void of uncertainty in which so many things could go horribly wrong. This world we live in really is a more dangerous place” (297). This belief, Gardner maintains, is encouraged by constant exposure to images of danger, both real and fictional, that encourage pessimism (if not nihilism) despite the incontrovertible truth that for the most part “we really are the safest, healthiest, and wealthiest humans who ever lived” (296). What both Douglas and Gardner are trying to convey is simply that fictional narratives shape not just our responses to the world in which we live, but shape that world as well – they, in fact, produce reality.

This is not a new idea, at least not to those of us in literary studies, who have always known the importance and power of fiction, in all its forms. Surrounded as we are by visual narratives, however, our task as scholars to seek to understand what kind of reality such narratives might produce takes on increasing urgency. *Stages of Belief* has allowed me to trace the form, function, and effects of this power in the Middle Ages and the early modern era, as well as to outline briefly how it worked in conjunction with the rise of celebrity culture in the eighteenth century. It provides as well a starting point for yet more scholarship in this area.

In *It*, Joseph Roach argues for what he terms “a deep eighteenth century”:

The deep eighteenth century is the one that isn’t over yet. It stays alive among us as a repertoire of long-running performances. … The deep eighteenth century is thus not merely a period of time, but a kind of time, imagined by its narrators as progress, but experienced by its subjects as uneven developments and period returns. As Michel Seres and Bruno Latour succinctly put it, “Time doesn’t flow; it percolates.” The rationale for imagining a newly complicated three-dimensional period, acknowledging the steadily accelerating commercialization of leisure from
1660 as a long but spastic revolution, is in part the consequence of its culturally prescient texts and discourses, but mainly of its prolific performances and behaviors, which constantly mutate but also persist, rolling through the longue durée like human waves through crowds of complicit strangers.

Roach’s argument is broad and sweeping, a grand pronouncement. Yet it is not broad enough, not sweeping enough, not grand enough. It begins much too late, for those “culturally prescient texts and discourses” and those “uneven developments and period returns” did not begin in the eighteenth century, just as they did not, as Roach so keenly notes, end with it. Rather, this all began in the Middle Ages, when anonymous playwrights crafted drama tailored to work flawlessly with the natural response of a spectator, in recognition of the drama’s origin in the cognitive processes of the human mind, and the audience responded to it as another form of reality, one just as important and legitimate as the one we now insist is the only form of reality. This response, often overlooked and misunderstood, “mutate[d] but also persist[ed]” through the early modern era, through the eighteenth century, and continues today.
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