

[Essays in Medieval Studies 2](#)

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**Typology as Contrast in the Middle English *Abraham and Isaac* Plays**

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The critics who discuss the typological signification in the Middle English mystery plays of Abraham and Isaac most often consider Isaac the central character. They note that, according to patristic exegesis, Isaac's willingness to die at his father's command prefigures Christ's acceptance of death on the cross. Abraham thus prefigures God the Father, who sacrifices his only son. In a widely accepted argument, Rosemary Woolf has maintained that this figural connection between Abraham and God compelled the medieval dramatists to present Abraham as a static character. Typological interpretation of the story, she writes, had ...

A straitening effect on the character of Abraham, for to the question of how Abraham would feel in this situation there was no answer which would not have been typologically inappropriate. Since Abraham prefigured the 'Father, he could not even momentarily show himself irresolute (1957, 819).<sup>1</sup>

Granted, none of the six surviving Middle English dramatizations of the story show Abraham seriously contemplating disobedience to God's command.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, in certain ways, the plays do concentrate more on the feelings and actions of Abraham than on those of Isaac. In each play, Abraham speaks many more lines than Isaac; in fact, in all but the

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Brome play, he speaks more than twice as many.<sup>3</sup> In each play, the dramatist shows Abraham in a growing state of perplexity and consternation even after Isaac has accepted his death; the Northampton play, in fact, shows Abraham still puzzling over God's purpose even after Isaac has been spared. In short, despite the typological critics' attention to the role of Isaac, the Middle English plays do seem to feature Abraham as their central character; despite his typological connection with God the Father, Abraham in these plays does offer a human, even dynamic response to God's unusual test.<sup>4</sup>

This portrayal of Abraham, however, does not really conflict with the typological relationship between Abraham and God. For patristic typology invites at once a comparison and a contrast between the Old and New Testament events it links. As V. A. Kolve suggests, for the writers of medieval dramas, "the differences between figure and fulfillment are as important as the similarities" (67). Of course, one key difference between the story of Abraham and Isaac and the story of the redemption is that while Isaac is spared, Christ is not.<sup>5</sup> But perhaps equally significant for the typology of the mystery plays is the difference in terms of charity between Abraham and God. Two passages, Woolf notes, appear frequently in medieval discussions of the generosity God displays by surrendering his son for mankind's sake: these are *John* 3:15--"For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son" and *Romans* 8:32 "He that hath not spared his own son, but hath delivered him up for us all" (817-818). For example, in Mirk's

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*Festial*, a collection of Middle English homilies, one sermon links the passage from *Romans*, 8 with the story of Abraham: "Then by Abraham ye schull understonde þe Fadyr of Heuen, þe whiche he sparyd no3t for no loue þat he had to hym" (77).<sup>6</sup> Surely the homilist does not mean here that Abraham gave up his son in precisely the same way that God the Father gives up his. Rather, the significance of the figural connection derives partly from the contrast it implies. If Abraham's willingness to give up his only son seems extraordinarily generous, then God the Father's even greater willingness to sacrifice his son is even more extraordinary. The Abraham story thus becomes a vehicle for describing and asserting the perfect charity of God the Father.

In fact, for this very reason, patristic discussions of the sacrifice of Isaac emphasize some contrasting elements in the typological relationship between Abraham and God the Father. For instance, in a list of similarities and differences between Abraham and God in his homily XLVII, *In Genesam*, John of Chrysostom cites the same passage from *Romans*, 8 on the charity of God the Father:

Omnia per umbram prefigurata sunt.... A patre ille in holocaustum offerebatur, et hunc Pater tradidit. Et hoc clamat Paulus, dicens, *Qui proprio suo non pepercit sed pro nobil omnibus tradidit eum....* Hucusque umbra: postea

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rerum veritas longe excellentior demonstratur (432). [All things were prefigured through a shadow. By his father that one was offered in sacrifice, and this one the Father delivered over. And Paul proclaims this, saying, "He who did not spare his own Son, but for us all delivered him." Up to this time, through a shadow; but afterwards, the truth of things is shown more clearly.]

In other words, Abraham's 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. In his Homily VIII, *On Genesis*, Origen also cites *Romans* 8:32 again, to demonstrate the charity of God the Father:

Nos vero haec conferamus cum Apostoli dictis, ubi dicit de deo: *Qui proprio filio suo non pepercit, sed pro nobis omnibus tradidit illum.* Vide Deum magifica cum hominibus liberalitate certantem. Abraham mortalem filium non moriturum obtulit Deo, Deus immortalem Filium pro omnibus tradidit morti (203). [Truly let us discuss these things with the words of the Apostle, where he says of God, "He who did not spare his own son, but for us all delivered him." Behold God com-

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peting with men in greatness of liberality: Abraham offered to God a mortal son, but not to death and God handed over to death his immortal son for men.]

In his *Sermon* LXXIV, Cesarius sets forth his typology of the Abraham and Isaac story with almost the same words, insisting on the same difference between the generosity of Abraham and the generosity of God:

Isaac figura et non veritas erat; in ipso designatum est, quod postea in Christo completum est. Videte Deum magna cum hominibus pietate certantem: Abraham mortalem filium non moriturum obtulit Deo, et Deus immortalem Filium pro hominibus tradidit morti (347). [Isaac was a figure and not the truth; for in him was designated what was afterwards completed in Christ. Behold God competing with men in generosity: Abraham offered to God a mortal son, but not to death; and God handed over to death his immortal son for men.]

This contrast helps explain what it meant to the Fathers of the Church and the medieval mystery dramatists and their audiences to consider Abraham a "type" of God the Father. Of the mystery plays of the Sacrifice of Isaac, only the Chester cycle explicitly treats of the typological link between

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Abraham and God the Father; near the end of the play, the Chester Expositor uses Abraham's sacrifice to remind the audience of the Father's greater gift of redemption:

By Abraham I may understand

the Father of Heuen that cann fonde

with his sonnes bloode to break that bonde

that the dyvell had brought us to (11. 469-472).

Here, as in the passages from the Church Fathers, Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac does not by any means elevate him to the perfection of God the Father. Rather, as a fully human action, it points typologically to the Father's still greater sacrifice. God's generosity perhaps takes the same form as Abraham's, as each offers his own son; but as all these passages suggest, surely God's gift exceeds Abraham's enormously in its significance and in the depth of love it reveals.

Thus, precisely for rendering the plays theologically even typologically valid, the dramatists of the Middle English

mystery plays needed to portray Abraham as a fully human character. By showing Abraham's tremendous virtue, the plays offer to the audience a model of human charity. But at the same time, by showing Abraham's weaknesses and doubts, the plays remind the audience that God's is an infinitely superior charity. Seeing Abraham as dynamic as moving from partial to fuller love and understanding helps the audience to consider simultaneously Abraham's goodness and his human frailty. The plays present

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Abraham in a state of growing anguish and perplexity as he wrestles with the complex issues he faces in God's test. Abraham knows from the beginning that he cannot disobey. However, as the plays progress, he becomes increasingly aware of the terrible consequences of his obedience.<sup>7</sup> Through this confrontation between love of son and love of God, Abraham emerges with a better appreciation of both of these relationships; he becomes a dynamic, not a static, character. This element of Abraham's character his capacity for moral growth, as it were provides a role model for the audience consistent with the cycle drama's didactic purpose.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, an Abraham who changes might suggest to an audience accustomed to typology a comparison with God the Father, pointing to the constancy of his perfect love for mankind.

According to Robert Edwards, the *Abraham and Isaac* plays contain a "sublimated violence" which "subverts the structure of human kinship"(167). However, in the Middle English mystery plays, at least, God's test actually strengthens the human relationships involved; through his experience Abraham's love for his son grows and deepens. Edgar Schell has suggested how this happens in the Towneley play. At first, he finds, Abraham takes a "philosophical" stance towards God's command; he makes no mention of his love for Isaac in the beginning of the play and, Schell notes, he even remarks that he would sacrifice his wife, too, if that were necessary (325-326). As he begins to prepare the sacrifice, the Towneley Abraham seems cold and stern; he doesn't even deem it necessary to explain his motives to Isaac.<sup>9</sup> Despite the

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boy's terrified pleas for mercy, Abraham remains firm: "That I say may not be denyde," he insists, "take thi dede therefore mekely" (11.180-181). But the boy's words and, no doubt, Abraham's own inner reluctance for the deed begin to effect a change in Abraham's expression of love for Isaac. When Isaac asks him, "When I am dede,.. / Who shal then be youre son?" Abraham responds with emotion for the first time in the play: "A, lord, that I shal abyde this day!" (11. 193-195). He still does not communicate these feelings to Isaac and, in fact, he attempts to control his emotions by commanding the boy, "Speke no swich wordis, son" (1. 197). Some lines later, after hearing Isaac call for his mother, Abraham turns to the audience and details his rising anguish:

Bot myght I yet of wepyng sese

til I had done this sacrificise;

It must nedes be, withoutten lese,

thof I carpe on in this kyn wise,

The more my sorwe it will increas. (11. 249-254)

The emphasis here on Abraham's growing emotional consternation is in fact typologically appropriate; it may recall the Father's even deeper love of his son and thus suggest, like *John* 3:15, how much he must have loved the world to have delivered his son over to sacrifice for it. Abraham's grief thus perhaps helps the audience understand the charity of God the Father. After the angel intervenes to save Isaac, Abraham thanks God sincerely but, significantly, only briefly. His immediate concern lies in showing Isaac that he still loves him: "To speke with thee I haue no

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space," he says to God, "with my deere son til I haue spokyn" (11. 276-277). Apparently Abraham's emotional experience has brought him closer to Isaac. His movement from an imperfect love to one more complete invites the audience to consider the constantly perfect love of the heavenly Father.<sup>10</sup>

Likewise, the N-Town, Brome, and York plays show Abraham's love for Isaac growing through God's test. At the beginning of the N-Town play, Abraham thanks God for giving him a son who, he says, "xal do me grett solace" (1. 20). At the end of the play, however, when Isaac has been spared, Abraham joyfully exclaims, "My childys lyffe is my solace!" (1. 198). This suggests a slight but potentially significant change in Abraham's attitude; he expresses here a love for Isaac himself and not just for the care Isaac will provide for him in his old age. In much the same way, the Brome Abraham seems to evaluate Isaac somewhat selfishly at first; only as he prepares to sacrifice his son does he begin to appreciate him more fully. In the beginning of the play, Abraham thanks God for allowing him a young child in his old age: "He scherys me soo," he says, "in euery place wer that I goo,/ That no dessece her may I fei" (11. 18-20). Though sincere, this expresses a less than perfect love; for Abraham, Isaac seems to serve chiefly as an emotional tonic. During the testing, however, Abraham recognizes Isaac's innocence and not only his own paternal sorrow as a motive for sparing him. "Thys 3owng innozent lygth so still," he comments, "I may not fyndyngth it in my hart hym to kill" (11. 303-304). Then he offers himself in Isaac's stead: "Iwysse I had

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as leve mysselfe to dye, / Yffe God will be plecyd with my dede, / And myn owyn bodye for to offere" (11. 279-281). Hence Abraham grows from a love prompted by self-interest to one that more fully recognizes Isaac's personhood. As they walk home together, Abraham several times asks Isaac to communicate his feelings:

Loo, Ysaac, my son, how thynke 3e

Be this warke? ...

Why, derewordy son. wer thou adred?

Hardely, child, tell me thy lore. (11. 403-404, 411-412).

This interest in Isaac's point of view is not found in Abraham's earlier speeches. Thus, overjoyed at having Isaac still alive, Abraham responds to him with fuller and deeper love than before. By comparison, the play implies, the love of God for his son must be much greater, and his willingness to offer that son in sacrifice for mankind's sake must be even more spectacular.

The York dramatist presents Isaac as a young man in his thirties perhaps to emphasize his typological similarity to Christ.<sup>11</sup> But it also serves to render more immediate Abraham's interest in the care that Isaac will provide for him and so it sets off more clearly the change that Abraham undergoes as he is tested by God. When the play opens, Abraham explains that since Isaac is now a grown man, "He is wighte hym-selfe to welde, / And fra me is all wightnes wente, / Therefor sal he by my beelde" (11. 56-59). He continues to describe Isaac this way even as

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he makes ready the sacrifice; how sorrowful, he remarks, "to bynd hym at shulde be my heeldel" (1. 223).<sup>12</sup> When Isaac is spared, however, Abraham responds to him less selfishly. Instead of expressing relief that Isaac will still be able to care for him, Abraham announces that it is time for Isaac to marry:

Nowe son, sen we þus wele hase spede,

That god has graunted me thy liffe,

It is my wille that þou be wedde,

And welde a woman to thy wiffe. (11. 357-360).

Appropriately, Abraham uses the same word "welde" to describe both Isaac's ability to handle himself at 1. 56 and his need to take a wife at 1. 360 suggesting that these roles, as Abraham sees them, are somehow connected. In part, as Richard Collier observes, this passage reminds the audience that through Isaac, the line of Abraham will give the world its Savior. Thus the passage helps locate the play in the cycle's larger narrative of the story of redemption. But Abraham's motivation for planning Isaac's marriage does arise from the human interaction in the play. In a sense,

having nearly lost his son in one way in a ritual of sacrifice Abraham can better confront really giving him up in another into adult life and marriage. Of course, for Isaac, marrying and caring for an aging father need not be mutually exclusive prospects. Nevertheless, by emphasizing Isaac's need to have his own family, Abraham shows that he no longer defines Isaac in terms of the filial care that he will provide.

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Hence, the closer typological between Christ and a grown Isaac has not prohibited the York dramatist from portraying a human or dynamic Abraham; indeed, to a certain extent Isaac's age intensifies Abraham's self-interest and so renders more significant the change that develops in his attitude through God's test.

Consequently, in these plays, the growth in Abraham's love for Isaac helps describe the perfect, more constant love and generosity of his typological counterpart, God the Father. In some of the plays, the testing also helps Abraham to a more mature perception of his relationship with God. Discussing the Towneley play, Schell has pointed out that through the test, Abraham learns "how obedience seems easier in prospect than it proves in practice" (325-326). According to the Fathers of the Church, in fact, this was part of the reason for the test. For instance, in *De Trinitate*, III, Augustine argues that "Per Deum ipse Abraham cognosceret quantas haberet vires cordis ad obendum deo" (884) [Through God Abraham himself came to know how much he possessed of strength of heart for the obeying of God]. For the Northampton dramatist as well, God's test seems designed to educate Abraham in the meaning of his commitment to faith and obedience.<sup>13</sup> In a long prayer at the beginning of that play, Abraham thanks God sincerely but perhaps naively for making the world such a pleasant place:

O gret God on hye þat al þe worlde madest,

And lendist vs oure living here to

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do þi plesaunce,

To þe hououre, to þe be joie and all dewe obesissance ...

To reioyse þat þou gaue me in erþe to my dalliaunce

And to plese þe, souereign Lord, I shall charge [Isaac]. (11, 35-42)

In this speech, words like "joie," "pleasaunce," "reioyse," and "dalliaunce" imbue this prayer of gratitude with a carefree, pleasant tone. As the play progresses, Abraham moves from this loving but simplistic prayer to more mature talk with God that reveals, along with love, an awareness of God's complexity. When the angel announces God's command for the sacrifice of Isaac, Abraham prays for the strength to obey, and then lapses at once into very human perplexity: "Now, goode Lorde, graunt me hert þertylle / þat I may do þat is þY wille.... / A, good Lord, what is now best to do?" (ll. 68-69, 72). This speech shows Abraham acknowledging before the omniscient God his own self-doubts. As he prepares for the sacrifice, Abraham continues to grapple with his reservations: "þe hye Lord bad me to do þis dede, / But my heft gruchep" (ll. 240-241). Significantly, even after Isaac has been spared, Abraham admits that he finds the divine will incomprehensible: "þou knowest myn hert now, and so þou didst afore; / Haddest not sent þyn aungel, Isaac had died þys day./ But goode Lord, saue þi plesaunce, þis pref was ri3t sore" (11. 278-280). Kolve finds in this prayer an "element of rebuke" (258). Surely the words do express Abraham's amazement that a loving God could ordain so

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fierce a trial. But by voicing this confusion, Abraham demonstrates a more complex perception of God than he did in his earlier prayer of thanks. Before, he conceived of God as one who made earth for man's "dalliaunce"; now he recognizes that obedience to so mysterious and omniscient a God sometimes involves hardships to man that seem unreasonable. Because it has helped Abraham to a fuller understanding of divine nature, then, the testing has not been futile. So, in the Northampton play, again, there is no equation between Abraham and God which flattens the characterization; instead, the dramatist takes care to distinguish the two en route to characterizing the infinite mystery

of God. In a sense, one might compare this presentation of Abraham to a comment made by Cyril of Jerusalem in his *Catechesis VI: On the Unity of God*: "A great and honorable man was Abraham, but only great in comparison with men, and when he came before God, then, speaking the truth candidly, he said, 'I am earth and ashes'" (33-34).

In conclusion, the contrast in the figural relationship between Abraham and God demonstrates that even an awareness of patristic typology would not prevent the medieval dramatists from making Abraham a human, dynamic character. The Abraham of the mystery plays is a good man, a role model for the audience; in nearly all of the plays he grows even more virtuous through the testing. But sometimes he is also a little selfish, or perplexed, or upset by God's command. Thus he is, for the audience, an approachable character. Furthermore, by representing Abraham's love for Isaac as dynamic, the

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dramatists might actually advance the typological significance of the plays more effectively. The Church Fathers argue over and over again that the sacrificing of Isaac prefigures God's perfect generosity in sacrificing his own son for man's sake. In the mystery plays, the changes in Abraham's attitude toward his son might provide for the audience both a model for their own relationships and, typologically, a hint of the New Testament fulfillment of the action: Abraham's story offers, as it were, a good father who becomes a better father, and so invites them to contemplate in turn the Best of fathers. Therefore, the human action of Abraham in the mystery plays establishes him as a believable character and, simultaneously, looks forward to that richer divine action that is the general subject of the cycle drama: God's gift of the redemption. For the dramatists to make Abraham as perfect as God would thus be at once bad theater and, typologically speaking, even, bad theology.

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## Notes

1. Woolf repeats basically the same argument in her 1972 study, pp. 146 and following. Other typological interpretations of the plays are frequently based on Woolf's. For instance, Longworth defines typology as Woolf does, citing many of the same patristic references (pp. 118-121). See also: Kolve, pp. 70-75, Meyers, pp. 145-146, Elliot, pp. 38 fl, and Edwards, p. 167.

2. The dramatists do not necessarily refrain from showing Abraham contemplating disobedience just because they wish to preserve the typological connection between Abraham and God the Father. More likely, the dramatists show Abraham as generally obedient because he is to serve for the audience as a model of human not divine goodness.

3. By "lines," I do not mean speeches, but individual lines of poetry. As printed in the standard editions of the cycle plays, I count the lines as follows: in the N-Town play, Abraham speaks 158 lines to Isaac's 60; in the York play, Abraham speaks 226 lines to Isaac's 92; in the Northampton, Abraham speaks 297 to Isaac's 58; and in the Towneley, Abraham speaks 199 to Isaac's 37. In the Chester play, Abraham speaks 108 lines to Isaac's 102 not counting, however, the first two-thirds of the play, in which Isaac does not even appear. So, really, only in the Brome play does the number of lines spoken by Isaac approach the number spoken by Abraham (Isaac, 153; Abraham 212). While this is not by any means conclusive, it does suggest that Abraham, and not Isaac, is the central character of the plays. See also Vintner, pp. 124-125.

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4. For some interpretations of the plays that might be called non-typological or even anti-typological see the studies by Vintner, Williams, MacCaffrey, and Reed. These studies generally treat typology as presented by Woolf that is, they assume that any typological interpretation would require an equation between Abraham and God (See, e.g., p. 681).

5. Collier, pp. 209-210, and Kolve, p. 72, note this key difference between Christ and Isaac.

6. On this same passage from Mirk's *Festial*, Woolf comments, "The two stories [the Sacrifice of Isaac and the Sacrifice of Christ] are so fused together that the "tie" of the second sentence could equally well refer to God or Abraham" (1957, p. 819). One might compare Mirk's passage with Augustine's remark in *De Civitate Dei* XV explaining why Abraham is called a "type" in Hebrews 11:19. Abraham is, Augustine asks, "Cuius similitudinem? nisi illius unde dicit apostolus, *Qui proprio filio non pepercit, sed pro nobis omnibus tradidit eum* [(537); a type of whom? unless of him about whom the apostle says, "He who did not spare his own son, but delivered him over for us all"]. While this certainly compares Abraham and God the Father, it by no means equates them; like other patristic writers, Augustine here applies *Romans* 8:32 only to praise the charity of God.

7. Schell applies this notion to the Towneley play with the versions of the other cycles; however, he basically accepts Woolf's application of a "typological" equation to the other plays (pp. 315-317).

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8. See Kolve's generally insightful chapter, "Goodness and Natural Man," pp. 237-264.

9. Woolf, 1957, p. 806, n. 4, holds that Abraham's silence on this matter weakens the typological connection between Isaac and Christ because Isaac, ignorant that God has ordained his death, is not in the Towneley play a willing victim for the sacrifice. In contrast, Schell states, "Whether he appears harsh only to be kind or for some other reason, the reticence of Towneley's Abraham makes his role more dense and more complex than that of any other" (324). Might not Abraham's silence about the nature of his sacrifice stem from an inability to communicate effectively with his son? John Gardner finds Abraham's sternness in this play a parallel to the loving and stern God the Father (238-240); however, Abraham's joy when Isaac is spared his eagerness to share his love with his son seems to imply that his severity with Isaac before and during the test is at least questionable morally.

10. The last few lines of the Towneley play have been lost, owing to some pages missing in the manuscript.

11. Collier, p. 209, and Roston, pp. 37-38, note this possibility; Williams (1961) comments that "Towneley and York lose force because they apparently do not conceive of Isaac as a child" (68). Reed argues that, on the contrary, York's portrayal of an older Isaac allows Isaac "active co-operation in the sacrifice."

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12. Reed does note the York dramatist's emphasis on Abraham's concern for Isaac as his "beelde"; chiefly, he finds that this points ironically to the psychological support that Isaac provides for his father during the sacrifice.

13. See Kolve, pp. 258-259: "The testing ... has no motivation whatever. The action is imitated from within the human condition. The dramatist no more understands the necessity of the action than do its human participants; like them, he only knows that man must obey." In fact, for the Northampton dramatist, it would seem that demonstrating this that is, helping Abraham, and, indeed, the audience, to appreciate the complexity of God is the reason for the action. Wintner, pp. 133-134, notes this same passage from Augustine to explain the meaning of the sacrifice for Abraham; but she finds that it helps characterize a "static" Abraham.