

**THE DOCTOR'S EPILOGUE TO THE BROME
ABRAHAM AND ISAAC: A POSSIBLE ANALOGUE**

By DAVID MILLS

The Brome play of Abraham and Isaac concludes, in lines 435-65,¹ with an epilogue by a Doctor. Rosemary Woolf's comments upon the Doctor's speech reflect what is probably a generally felt unease at this conclusion to the play, and also offer a possible explanation:

There is one small peculiarity about the Brome play which may finally be noted: it is the epilogue of the doctor, written in different metre, which turns the play into an exemplum for parents who grieve excessively for the death of their children. Unlike a typological exposition, this moral is disconcertingly constrictive . . . The Brome *moralitas* turns the play into a complement to *The Pearl*, and it is possible that these parallel studies in rebelliousness and obedient acquiescence in loss may have been occasional works, the occasion being some bereavement, which of necessity can no longer be identified.²

Miss Woolf's comments raise a number of problems which merit more detailed development and scrutiny,³ but two comments only concern me here - that the play may have been "occasional" and that the final *moralitas* is "an exemplum for parents".

In her proposals in *The English Mystery Plays*, Miss Woolf seems to have resolved for herself an uncertainty which is evident in a footnote that she had written fifteen years earlier:

In the Brome play the doctor's remarks at the end about mothers who are not resigned when their children die suggests [*sic*] a topical allusion in its preciseness, although this may also have been a traditional moral of the story, since it is drawn by St. Jerome in a letter to Paula (Epistle xxxix, P.L., XXII, 472).⁴

Although the Jerome quotation is cited in *The English Mystery Plays*,⁵ the possibility of "a traditional moral" has there been dropped in favour of "a topical allusion". Yet there is good reason for believing that the exemplary address to grieving parents after the account of "Abraham and Isaac" was indeed familiar to the fifteenth century, for it appears in Vincent of Beauvais's *Speculum Historiale*, lib.I, cap. cvii, with the side-heading: "Apostrophe ad parentes lugentes obitum filiorum". The exposition reads:

Putasne aliquis nostrum ex ipsa historica narratione tantum animi robur acquirit, ut cum forte amittitur filius morte communi, et omnibus debita, etiam si sit unicus, et dilectus, Abraham sibi in exemplum deducat, et magnanimitatem eius ante oculos ponat?⁵

Vincent is, however, merely retailing the words of Origen - a writer whose works were familiar to Jerome, Miss Woolf's analogue⁷ - as transmitted in the translation of Rufinus. In his *In Genesisim*. homilia viii, Origen addresses, specifically, the fathers in the Church:

Multi estis patres in Ecclesia Dei, qui hæc audistis. Putas aliquis vestrum ex ipsa historiae narratione tantum constantiæ, tantum animi robur acquirit, ut cum forte amittitur filius morte communi, et omnibus debita, etiamsi sit unicus, etiamsi sit dilectus, adducat sibi in exemplum Abraham, et magnanimitatem eius ante oculos ponat? (col. 207)⁸

challenging them to contemplate the sacrifice of their own child as the Brome doctor specifically challenges the men in his audience (*trowe 3e, sorys 443; how thyngke 3e now, sorys 447*).

It is here that I wish to turn to Miss Woolf's interpretation of the Doctor's epilogue as "an exemplum for parents". In fact, the Doctor's speech takes Abraham's sacrifice as an image of obedience and its rewards much as Origen does. God made a terrible demand of Abraham, one which we ordinary men and women could not contemplate; fortunately, He will not demand that kind of sacrifice from us. But He will exact sacrifices from us, and if we patiently acquiesce in His demands, we will gain reward from Him.

In the opening stanza of his exposition, the Doctor stresses the exemplary nature of the action:

For thys story schoyt 3owe [her]
How we schuld kepe to owr po[we]re
Goddys commawmentys wythowt grochyng. (440-2)

In this he merely echoes the intention announced by God in His opening speech:

All men schall take exampyll hym be
My commawmentys how they schall fulfyll. (45-6)

This interpretation is also that of Origen, who argues that professions of belief are not enough; gestures of faith are also needed:

Propter te hæc scripta sunt: quia et tu credidisti quidem Deo, sed nisi opera fidei expleveris, nisi in omnibus præceptis etiam difficilioribus parueris, nisi sacrificium obtuleris, et ostenderis quia nec patrem, nec matrem, nec filios præferas Deo. (cols. 207-8)

But these gestures will not be those of Abraham. The Doctor taunts his audience - "If an angel asked you to kill your child, I believe there might be three or four of you, or more, who would complain or resist. And what would these foolish women think who cry when their children die a natural death":

Be 3owre trowthe ys ther ony of 3ow
 That eyther wold groche or stryve therageyn?
 How thyngke 3e now, sorys, therby?
 I trow ther be thre ore a fowr or moo;
 And thys women that wepe so sorowfully
 Whan that hyr chyldryn dey them froo,
 As nater woll, and kynd⁹ (445-51)

As can be seen from Vincent's quotation, Origen is less mocking in tone in his address to the hearers, but his question has the same rhetorical purpose. He does not mention mothers, but like the Doctor, he compels us to confront the essentially unnatural nature of the sacrifice as opposed to natural death which is our usual experience:

Et quidem a te non exigitur istud animi magnitudinis,
 ut ipse alliges filium, ipse constringas, ipse gladium
 pares, ipse unicum jugules. (col.207)

- the point already made by the action of the Brome play, but taken up in the Doctor's stress on the normal circumstances of infant mortality - as *nater woll, and kynd*.

The Doctor's mocking tone immediately then gives place to a serious and positive address:

Yt ys but folly, I may wyll awooe,
 To groche a3ens God or to greve 3ow (452-3)

God does not demand acts from us comparable with the unnatural act of sacrifice required of Abraham, but He requires patient acquiescence in His will, and obedience to His commandments. There are two reasons for patience and obedience - first, because you cannot harm God anyway (*for 3e schall neuer se hym myschevyd*, 454); and second, because it lies in His power to make amends (*for whan he wyll, he may yt amend*, 459). Hence the Brome play is not "an exemplum to parents" specifically, but a general example of Man's need of patience before the demands of God:

And groche not a3ens owre Lord God,
 In welthe or woo, wether that he 3ow send (456-7)

And as such, it seems perhaps more obviously comparable with *Patience* than with *Pearl*, Miss Woolf's point of comparison.

This movement from the immediate subject of the sacrifice and the death of children is also an aspect of Origen's homily.¹⁰ Origen in effect considers Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac in two ways. First he emphasises God's demand that Man should renounce all worldly

desires, for Abraham's love of Isaac is merely an image of our love of all manner of worldly vanities which we must renounce to follow Christ:

Quis vestrum putas audiet aliquando vocem angeli dicentis: Nunc cognovi quia times tu Deum, quia non pepercisti filio tuo vel filiæ tuæ, vel uxori, aut non pepercisti pecuniæ, vel honoribus sæculi, et ambitionibus mundi, sed omnia contempsisti et omnia duxisti ut stercore, ut Christum lucrifaceres, vendidisti omnia et dedisti pauperibus, et secutus es verbum Dei? (col. 208)

This "active" sacrifice is only hinted at by the Doctor's reference to *welthe* 457 and forms no part of his main moral. But later in his discussion, Origen stresses the rewards which God gives for sacrifices of all kinds, clearly including the acceptance of deprivation; and he goes on to cite the example of Job's patience at the loss of his worldly wealth, and his reward:

Et videmur offerre Domino hostias, sed nobis quæ offerimus redonantur. Deus enim nullius indiget, sed nos vult divites esse, nostrum desiderat per singula quæque profectum. Hæc nobis figura ostenditur etiam in his quæ gesta sunt erga Job. Et ille enim propter Deum perdidit omnia cum dives esset. Sed quia pertulit bene agones patientiæ, et in omnibus quæ passus est, magnanimus fuit, et dixit: 'Dominus dedit, Dominus abstulit: ut Domino placuit, ita factum est, sit nomen Domini benedictum': vide ad ultimum quid de eo scribitur: 'Recepit', inquit, 'omnia dupla quæ amiserat.' Vide quid est amittere aliquid pro Deo, hoc est multiplicata recipere tibi. (cols. 209-10)

Origen thus concludes with the "passive" image of endurance rather than the "active" image of renunciation, as does the Brome Doctor.

From this emphasis on patient and faithful endurance of adversity, Origen moves easily to a vision of the reward of eternal life

Et aliquid amplius Evangelia promittunt, centuplum tibi pollicentur, insuper et vitam æternam, in Christo Jesu Domino nostro, cui est gloria et imperium in sæcula sæculorum. Amen. (col. 210)

The Brome Doctor makes a similar transition:

And feytheffully serve hym qwyll 3e be qvart,
That 3e may plece God bothe euynd and morne.
Now Jhesu, that weryt the crown of thorne,
Bringe vs all to heuen-blysse! (462-5)

It therefore seems unnecessary to postulate that the Brome Doctor's speech suggests a specific occasion for the play's composition. The address to grieving parents was already a familiar

moral. But that address, in Origen and in Brome, is merely part of a wider exposition within which it should be evaluated. Anyone familiar with Vincent would be led to Origen's homily, and there would be nothing inherently improbable in postulating that the Brome playwright also knew Origen. But more important than a putative direct source is the fact that the Doctor uses a number of arguments found also in the homily, and therefore presumably familiar; and that he marshals them in support of the general theme of patience with which Origen concludes and which similarly may well have been a familiar moral. In reaching this conclusion, both writers accept that the sacrifice of Abraham is beyond the experience or capacity of their audience, who may therefore take courage in facing the lesser demands which God will make of them. The Brome Doctor thereby acknowledges the emotional conflicts realised within the play, and appropriately allows the audience to derive its moral without denying the value of the emotions displayed and evoked by the play.

NOTES

- 1 All references and quotations are from *Non-Cycle Plays and Fragments*, edited by Norman Davis, EETS, SS 1 (London, 1970), "V The Brome Play of Abraham and Isaac".
- 2 *The English Mystery Plays* (London, 1972), p.153.
- 3 One may note in particular that "written in a different metre" gives a misleading impression of the metrical uniqueness of the speech; see the discussion of the play's verse-forms by Norman Davis, *op.cit.*, pp.lxv-lxvi.
- 4 "The Effect of Typology on the English Mediaeval Plays of Abraham and Isaac", *Speculum* 32 (1957), 813 fn.42; the italics are my own.
- 5 *Op.cit.*, p.379, fn.52. It may be noted that Jerome's use of the example is somewhat different from that in Brome. His point is not only that Abraham joyfully sacrificed Isaac while Paula grieves at the death of her daughter; but also that Isaac was Abraham's only son, whereas the daughter was *unam de pluribus*.
- 6 Cited from the facsimile reprint of the edition published by Balthazar Bellerus, (Duaci, 1624), p.39.
- 7 Jerome and Rufinus were at one time friends and admirers of Origen, although Jerome later became violently anti-Origenist.
- 8 Cited from Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* XII; column references in the text relate to this edition.
- 9 I assume that *How thyngke* 447 must again be understood at 449 to provide a verb for *thys women*, posing a parallel question: *How thyngke 3e now, sorys - How thyngke thys women*. But syntactically one could understand *by* 447 at 449: "How thyngke 3e now, sorys, therby, and [by] thys women . . .?" ("How do you think about killing your son, and about these women who grieve?").
- 10 For a discussion of Origen's general attitude to sacrifice, see R.J. Daly, "Sacrifice in Origen", *Studia Patristica* 11 (1972), 125-9.