Drama in Sermons: Quotation, Performativity, and Conversion in a Middle English Sermon on the Prodigal Son and in A Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge

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DRAMA IN SERMONS: QUOTATION, PERFORMATIVITY, AND CONVERSION IN A MIDDLE ENGLISH SERMON ON THE PRODIGAL SON AND IN *A TRETISE OF MIRACLIS PLEYINGE*

BY ERICK KELEMEN

Medieval England's most severe vernacular antitheatrical state-
ment, the *Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge* (ca. 1380–1425), is also its
fullest expression of dramatic theory.[1] Though it finds nothing
redeeming in theater, rejecting it as ineffectual and blasphemous
while extolling preaching instead, the *Tretise* is itself a theory of the
theater that quotes and disputes another theory of the theater—
making it an antagonistic dialogue of theories. The fact that the
Tretise has two distinct authors, one providing a continuation to the
other's text, further compounds its dialogic character. In this sense,
the *Tretise* employs drama's constituent linguistic form in order to
further an unrelenting antitheatrical position.[2]

I take this basic contradiction to be more than a symptomatic
voicing of exactly the thing the *Tretise* tries most to suppress, more
than a case of contradictory desires in the speaking subject. This
fundamental contradiction in the *Tretise* is instructive, worth follow-
ing out not so that we might rescue medieval drama from its medieval
detractors, but so that we might engage it with current critical
thought—so that we might see, that is, what the *Tretise* can reveal
about performativity and its relation to conversion. When the *Tretise*
places preaching in opposition to playing, it argues that preaching is
able to produce effects denied to playing, that preaching is
performative while the theater is not. But its performative formula-
tion of preaching creates problems for its own rejection of theater.
While the *Tretise* and the theater it militates against share the
conversion of their listeners as an ultimate concern, they disagree
about mimesis's ability to convert listeners, and this divergence
ultimately derives from the way in which narrative and metaphor
structure the subject's experience of conversion. In order to trace out
in more detail this complex set of theoretical relations among
mimesis, the performative, identification, and conversion, I will focus

on a few specific texts: the *Tretise*, of course, but also a representative Middle English sermon contemporaneous with the *Tretise*, and, ultimately, the parable of the prodigal son, which this sermon retells as its main exemplum. I want to show how the emblematic conversion narrative of the prodigal son story (Luke 15:11–32) as it appears in sermon number 32 in Woodburn O. Ross's *Middle English Sermons* provides a context and countertext for the *Tretise*'s rejection of theater.[3] The representation of conversion in the parable and in the sermon's retelling of it shows that conversion foregrounds a fundamental instability in the subject, which problematizes any simple understanding of the function of mimesis in a didactic medium, sermon, or drama.

THE *TRETISE*

The *Tretise* is an unusual document, objecting to the theater in a period that saw an efflorescence of it, yet responding only obliquely. Except in part, with a brief nod to a "pley of Anticrist and of the Day of Dome" (101–2), the *Tretise* never mentions the cycles, those most authorized, expensive, extravagant, and wide-spread theatrical productions. Rather, the term "miraclis," as Clifford Davidson writes, "seems to have been intended as a broad category that would link [it] with a spectrum of dramatic activity ranging from the staging of religious scenes to representations on feast days and seasons such as Christmas" (2). The *Tretise* proceeds against the theater in large part by answering unnamed defenders of the theater, an anonymous "they," summarizing their six defenses as though from another document— "here agenus they seyen that." The *Tretise* claims that "they" claim:

1) that miracle plays are a form of "the worschip of God";
2) that they convert people "to gode livinge";
3) that they often move people "to compassion and devocion, wepinge bitere teris";
4) that, because some people will not be converted "by ernestful doinge . . . but by gamen and pley," it is profitable to "fulfillun and sechen alle the menes by the whiche me mowen leeve sinne and drawen hem to vertues";
5) that, since people must have some kind of recreation, miracle plays are "bettere . . . (or lesse yvele) . . . than by pleyinge of other japis"; and
6) that miracle plays are like the pictorial arts that represent miracles of God, except that miracle plays are better, because a painting "is a deed bok, the tother a quick" (95–96).

Judged by actual theatrical practices as far as we understand them, these points amount to a convincing defense of the theater, fairly representing arguments that practitioners and defenders of the theater might make.[4]

For both the *Tretise* and its unnamed opponents the primary concern is the conversion of the listener—only the last two of the defender's six points do not directly concern conversion, that is, bringing people to believe and sustaining that belief. Whereas the defenders of the theater claim that as a form of worship plays convert listeners, the *Tretise* argues that "it is fer more occasion of perverting of men, not onely of oon singuler persone but of al an hool comynte, as it makith al a puple to ben occupied in vein" (100). In the *Tretise*'s terms, the question is between doing things in "pley" and in "ernest." It argues that

> sithen an erthely servaunt dar not takun in pley and in bourde that that his erthely lord takith in ernest, myche more we shulden not maken oure pleye and bourde of tho miraclis and werkis that God so ernestfully wrought to us. (94)

Play produces monstrous effects, the very opposite of conversion: errors in belief, reversals of Christ, and scorn for God. Play is pernicious, as it so often is in medieval aesthetics, since it disconnects sign and deed. For this reason, the *Tretise* strongly objects to priests taking part in miracle plays—priests must be serious; there must be a connection between the signs and substances of priests. Priests should stick to sermons, where the word and deed are connected. The *Tretise* objects to a misdirection of energies, a desire by players to be seen by the world rather than by God, a distraction of the audience from "charite" to "lustis."

The wrinkle in these well-worn arguments, is, of course, that the very plays the *Tretise* objects to are performances of biblical and hagiographic texts. This is the point that the anonymous defenders of the theater raise in their final defense, comparing drama to painting. If miracle plays present pious narratives, the logic goes, in what sense can they be idolatrous, as the *Tretise* claims when it likens miracle plays to the golden calf? Again, the question hinges upon proper interpretation on the part of the audience—conversion.[5] And it is in this regard that the *Tretise* opposes theater to preaching: "now on dayes myche of the puple worschipith and preisith only the lickenesse of the miraclis of God as myche as the word of God in the prechours

mowth by the whiche alle miraclis be don" (112). This, I think, is the central formulation of preaching for the *Tretise*: positioned against "lickenesse" is "the word of God in the prechours mowth." Instead of preaching, the people worship and praise mimesis. Moreover, contrary to the arguments of the defenders of theater, it is through preaching that "alle miraclis be don." It is the word of God—the Word—that is performative, that produces miracles and conversions, to use the *Tretise*'s terms.[6] To imitate it, to produce likenesses of it, is to destroy its efficacy.

<div align="center">THE SERMON AND "THE CONFESSION OF THE PRODIGAL SON"</div>

The experience of reading and teaching sermons, however, has long shown us that the task of drawing distinctions between preaching and theater is not so easy, that (especially in the medieval period) dramas and sermons share, as it were, the same stage.[7] The theoretical opposition of preaching to theater, of sermon to drama, doesn't always hold in practice, for the sermon that converts is often very dramatic, seducing audiences at the most emotionally charged moments by blurring generic boundaries. Ross's sermon number 32 provides a particularly vivid example of this kind of seductive genre-blending, and I think it may be no small coincidence that it makes such full use of the parable of the prodigal son as its final exemplum, since this narrative more than any other would also provide so much material for playmakers (and preachers still) in the Renaissance.[8] The exemplum (which occupies the last quarter of the sermon) is not a strict translation of the parable, even though the sermon often quotes the Latin text. This is important because the parable is already fashioned as an orally transmitted tale and needs no changes to make it suitable as a spoken text. Rather, the changes introduced to the translation make an already oral text into another kind of oral text, a dramatic one, though not a script. My primary evidence for this claim is "The Confession of the Prodigal Son," an eight-line poem embedded in this exemplum at the moment when the prodigal returns and asks forgiveness of his father. It runs:

> For my synne þat I haue wrouthe
> I am not worthye to be þi sonne,
> For I haue synned in will and thowthe,
> þer-fore I make ful drery mone.
> I to þe knalage my trespasse
> With lowlynes of herte; þis may þou see.
> There-fore, fadur, graunte me þi grace
> And all my synnes forȝeve þou me.

The confession itself continues for another line in prose: "ȝiff it be þi will, fadur, haue mercy and pete on me, and lat me not spille." [9]

This poem and its exemplum context very much have a dramatic feel to them. The verses, to begin, are entirely in the voice of the son, as would be a speech from a drama, and the prose ending's internal rhyme suggests that, rather than a composition for this particular sermon as is sometimes the case with verse in sermons, the poem is a memorial reconstruction of a longer piece (by two lines, anyway), suggesting an oral performance as a source for the sermon writer's memory. In fact, *will* and *spill* are a popular rhyme pair in Middle English verse and drama, appearing twelve times in Chaucer's works alone and often in the cycle dramas.[10] The Chester *Abraham and Isaac* play uses *will* and *spill* in that moment of high drama between father and child, when Abraham reveals to Isaac his fate:

> ABRAHAM: Ah, Isaack, Isaack, I muste thee kyll.
> ISAACK: Alas, father, ys that your wyll,
>   your owne chylde for to spyll
>   upon thys hilles bryncke?[11]

And, even more dramatically, in the Northampton *Abraham and Isaac*, the rhyme pair comes in the nick of time, just as the angel stops the sacrifice:

> ANGELUS: Habraham, leue of and do not smyte;
>   Withdrawe þyn hond, it is Goddes wille!
>   Take vp Isaac, þi son so whyte
>   For God wol not þat þou hym spille.[12]

One can see that the rhyme pair functions in these lines much in the way that it would function in "The Confession," with a child coming before a father whose will can spare or spill the child. These examples—to which could be added many more—are enough, I think, to suggest the prose line that ends the prodigal's speech is a memorial reconstruction of what was once verse.

I insist on this memorial quality because I think it the best explanation for another peculiarity in the verses themselves, the metrical irregularity of line six—"With lowlynes of herte; þis may þou see"—which has one foot more than the others. I ascribe this irregularity to the latter part of the line, "þis may þou see," which is an essentially empty phrase. It would be easy enough to keep the rhyme and fill out the metrical requirements by substituting a

standard speech attribution, which one might expect in narrative verse: "said he." "The Confession" instead preserves the voice of the son in a way that ought to remind one of drama's emphasis on spectacle, on being seen. The Chester Cycle version of *Adam and Eve* fills lines and supplies rhymes with the essentially empty phrases "well I see," or "now I see," and the Harley 2124 manuscript of the Chester *Abraham and Isaac* uses a similar phrase, "well se I."[13]

Though such is by no means always the case, one might reasonably expect speech attributions of the "he said" or "said he" sort once in ten lines of dialogue from narrative verse, especially in an exemplum which frequently—as many as nine times for only five speeches—supplies such speech attributions in its prose portions. Interrupting a speech after a pronoun or appositive to supply a speech attribution is the exemplum's method, as the passage in which the elder son complains to his father demonstrates:

> "For-sothe, fadur," he seid, "I haue grett cause for to be wrouthe. For I," he seid, "haue ben a good childe to þe and many ȝeres haue serued and muche labour haue I had, and I neuer brake þi biddynge, and ȝitt dud þou neuer such a disporte to me. But my broþur þat neuer dud þe good but haþ wasted all ys goodes and lyved in lecherye, to hym þou hast mad a grett comforthe, and not to me. For-sothe, fadur," he seid, "þou arte vnkend to me." (169)

These attributions, coming after the address, "fadur," and after the subject of the speech, the elder brother's "I," indicate a preacher with some skill in handling a quoted speech in order to manipulate the pace of the passage as well as its emotional emphasis. The lack of speech attributions in "The Confession," by contrast, makes one suspect that the preacher did not write "The Confession," that he is instead quoting it from memory. "The Confession" avoids the easy and metrical narrative speech attribution and remains within the register of the speaker, as speeches in dramas do, emphasizing the visual rather than the aural (*see* rather than *said*, performance rather than disembodied speech). It is as though the preacher were quoting from a play, or, just as likely, revising a remembered narrative poem to work better as a dramatic speech.

The alterations that the exemplum makes to the parable—eliminating, adding, and reordering details—also mark it as concerned more with the spectacle, action, and noise that are typical of drama, than with the quiet, psychological suggestiveness of the biblical narrative. For instance, the exemplum inserts the prodigal's highly-

charged emotional actions upon seeing his father, falling "downe lowly, seþhynge and vepynge" (168), while the biblical text is particularly silent about the son's behavior. Likewise, while the parable simply says that the elder brother refuses to go in to the house and join in the celebration of his returned brother, the exemplum has him running away—"fast he went a-veyvard" (169). And while the parable explains that the father came out to entreat him, the exemplum adds more visual detail and greater emotion. The father "rose vp and ȝede owte of is own gate and faste with a grete will cryed aftur is sonne" (169). The exemplum replaces the parable's inaction—which represents the elder brother's anger well but which is not very striking visually—with sudden movement, and it equally enhances the simple movement of the father.

Perhaps most peculiar, though, is the fact that the exemplum changes the parable's order of events in a small but significant way. In the parable, the father sees the son from afar and runs to him, welcoming him with an embrace and a kiss before the son speaks to him. In the exemplum the order of these events is altered: the son falls down, crying, and delivers "The Confession," after which the father runs to him and welcomes him. For the traditional exegeses of the parable, the order is important, since the father's actions represent the unexpected grace that God shows to repentant sinners before they can even speak their repentance. But the exemplum's order creates more action—the son's falling, weeping, and speaking—and would seem therefore to work better on stage. This change recalls the parable's treatment in *Courtois d'Arras*, a Norman French prodigal son play from around 1200. *Courtois* adapts the parable liberally, focusing much of its action in a comic tavern scene that details the prodigal's financial ruin, but the play is faithful enough to be instantly recognizable as derivative. It is clear in *Courtois* that a similar change in the order of the narrative (having Courtois speak to his father before his father recognizes him) serves the requirements of the stage and its compression of time and space. While Courtois works on the pigfarm, the play gives him an extended soliloquy (a little over one hundred lines) that charts the course of his decline into starvation, at the end of which, Courtois returns to his father's home and sees his father, who does not immediately run to him. Courtois says:

> *Il me voit, si ne me ravisse*
> *por chou c'onques mais ne me vit*
> *en teus dras ne en tel habit;*

> *chou me fait honteus et couart;*
> *et que me valent si regart*
> *quant il ne me puet renterchier?* [14]

> [He's seen me. He doesn't know me
> Because he's never seen me before
> In clothes like these and in such a state —
> It makes me feel ashamed to go in.
> What good does all his staring do
> When he cannot recognize who I am?]

Courtois here calls attention to the physical changes that privation has brought on him, partially because they are significant tropologically in marking the prodigal's peripety, but also because they can be only referred to and not represented in a performance that keeps its main actor on stage while his character goes through such a degeneration. It is only logical that Courtois must speak to his father first, just as the prodigal does in the exemplum:

> *Biaus dous peres, tes chaitis fius,*
> *qui folement parti de toi,*
> *n'onc ne volt coire ton castoi*
> *ne ta volente otroier,*
> *te vient por Diu merchi proier,*
> *tous repentans de son meffait.*

> [Gentle father, your wretched son,
> Who foolishly departed from you,
> Who never believed the warnings you gave,
> Nor ever carried out your wishes,
> Has come to ask for Christian mercy,
> Repentant for the wrong he's done.]

Even then, the father does not recognize Courtois until ten lines later. The father also emphasizes the supposed physical changes when he says, *"ja mais ne te reconneüsse"* [I never would have known you, boy].[15] Not only does the son's speaking first in the exemplum increase the spectacle, but, as with the model of *Courtois*, it reinforces the passage of time as a drama might.

Now, *Courtois*, while enchantingly similar to the exemplum in some ways, is not a source for it nor for "The Confession." Nor is there an English prodigal son play extant to which one can trace the features of the exemplum that differ from the parable. Rather than argue for a lost source, an ur-prodigal play, I suggest instead that we should understand the exemplum as evidence of a reader's interpre-

tive practice. The changes in the exemplum, if they do not necessarily suggest a prodigal son play influencing the reception of the parable, are at the very least evidence of a reading (and writing) strategy that understands the prodigal's narrative through the medium of a mimetic performance and its literary genre, drama. The preacher seems to have a theatrical production of the parable in mind when retelling it as an exemplum, in much the same way that readers today often seem to understand a novel through the medium and language of film—its scenes, camera perspectives, and voiceovers—whether or not a film based on the novel exists. If the exemplum is not quite evidence of a particular play influencing a particular sermon, it nevertheless seems to be evidence of theater and the contingencies of performing a drama influencing sermon practice.

QUOTATION

More troubling for the *Tretise*'s theoretical attempts to separate preaching from theater is that when the preacher switches into verse, he also switches into drama and theater. He imitates the son when he speaks as him for a few lines. The sermon at that moment shares with drama the mimetic activity that the *Tretise* rejects so strenuously. One might object that the sermon merely quotes "The Confession" and the narrative of the prodigal son, so that the generic borders of sermon and theater remain distinct. But the appropriating act of quotation does not and cannot contain and control one text within the confines of another. When we think of texts and contexts, our paradigms are of internally focused forces, of contexts that permit, inform, and determine readings of the text. My point is that those forces of determination are equally focused externally, from the quotation upon its immediate surroundings and from the larger text upon its contexts. Because it has a separate existence outside the text which cites it, one might say a quotation infects (not simply affects) the text into which it is inserted, altering the genetic makeup of the new text. The verses accentuate and focus the larger performance text, the sermon, in that the sermon quotes the speech or poem at the narrative's climactic moment, at the climactic moment of the sermon itself. At its key moment, the sermon changes registers and slips into a dramatic speech. The preacher speaks about the son and as the son, alternates between explicator and actor, slips from sermon to drama and back.

Far from constituting an objection, quotation is itself a kind of mimesis, a performance of the quoted speaker by the speaker who

quotes. As such, quotation indexes not only the permeable boundaries among texts but also among speakers, adding metaphysical worries about presence to the mix of issues in the *Tretise*'s theory of drama and preaching. In direct quotation one both speaks as another and allows another to speak *through* one. The former paradigm equates quotation with a kind of mimesis in which a frame of discourse securely distinguishes the "two" speaking subjects as separate, but the latter paradigm indicates how this mimesis also implicates the one who quotes in complex and contradictory relationships with the quoted, an intersubjectivity that can be difficult to untangle. In quotation one allows another's voice to inhabit one's own. Quotation is a surrender of control that paradoxically requires a kind of self-mastery, folding the speaker into an identificatory process in which the boundaries of the self and other are momentarily unclear. It suggests the degree to which the subject is a performance of characteristics and a changeable expression of desires—the degree to which the subject is a series of identifications rather than a historically stable essence.

It is precisely these metaphysical worries about mimesis and presence—authorial presence in actions and representations, presence of the self to the self—that are particularly troubling for the theorists who composed the *Tretise*. These worries remain problematic even when the mimetic activity amounts to as little as a preacher quoting directly. Identification in and with mimetic activity is present even in the briefest direct quotation, like the eight-line "Confession." The preacher quotes and, in this sense, identifies with and as the prodigal—and, to add a further involution, does so at precisely the moment when the prodigal identifies himself. That the prodigal has rehearsed what he will say in the field and is now quoting himself redoubles the moment with identificatory and mimetic activity. The preacher performs the son who performs a version of himself for his father. The fact that a preacher stands in for Christ, the archetypal preacher, extends the metaphysical problems from the direct quotation to the whole sermon. Sermons are, after all, "the word of God in the prechours mowth" (112). Preaching itself is an imitation.

THE PARABLE

Sermon practice challenges the *Tretise*'s attempt to oppose theater and drama, but it does not prove the *Tretise* wrong and the defenders of the theater right. Instead, it provides an opportunity to understand the irresolvable terms of the conflict. Because the parable is a

narrative of conversion, that fundamental change in the subject, it provides an especially pertinent text for understanding the debate between the *Tretise* and the defenders of the theater over conversion. The parable provides a model of conversion which suggests that the subject's experience of conversion, structured by a narrative of substitution and allegorization, foregrounds a basic instability in the subject, on which both the theater and antitheater can make their conflicting claims about mimesis's performative efficacy—its ability to convert listeners.

Like the prodigal's journey *"in regionem longinquam"* (13) and return to the familiarity of his father's home, conversion is an identification in its subjects. The prodigal son's movement to extremity (figured as poverty and starvation in the distant country) and back tropologically mimics the archetypal movement of identification, the detour through the other that determines the self. When the prodigal comes to his senses and wonders why he is starving when his father's servants have plenty (*"In se autem reuersus, dixit: Quanti mercennarii patris mei abundant panibus, ego autem hic fame pereo!"* [17]), and when he decides what to do and what to say to his father (*"Surgam, et ibo ad patrem meum, et dicam illi: Pater, peccaui in caelum, et coram te"* [18]), the parable shows that the convert's identificatory process involves an interpretation of his situation that is also a self-interpretation carried out as a narrative in progress, an autobiography in which the sinner not only moralizes his past but also prepares himself a future, a script of sorts. Although the peripety paradigm of conversion suggested by the prodigal's narrative might be subsumed by medieval theologians' long view of a processive or life-long conversion, conversion itself remains an identification.[16] In *Strangers to Ourselves*, Julia Kristeva remarks that St. Paul's representation of Christian conversion takes the form of a "journey between two dissociated but unified spheres that [Christians] could uncover in themselves: a journey between 'body' and 'soul,' if you like—a 'transubstantiation,' as one would say later on."[17] This journey that Christians must "uncover in themselves" is a narrative of self-interpretation that Christians can tell about themselves, a narrative about the metaphoric displacement of one self by another, of an incorporation of the other (the soul) within the self (the body). The subject rejects the body, except as a signifier, for a more psychologically real element of the self, the soul, an internal yet external self, an internal other. More than operating only as a tidy metaphor for conversion, the journey indicates the narrative movement—the sub-

stitution—which structures the experience of conversion as an identification: as the narrative of making and understanding metaphors of the self.[18] Identification and conversion are narrativizations of the self understanding the self in a process from vehicle to tenor, from signifier to signified.

I have already claimed that the "The Confession," the poem which the prodigal speaks from the middle of a Middle English sermon, is very much about identification, but I want to illustrate the degree to which identification drives "The Confession," the exemplum, and the parable. The prodigal's poem opens with one kind of self-identification, the prodigal's expression of his sense of self, of his sinfulness, for which he has remorse, and of his sense of unworthiness to be called by the name of his father. But the poem's closing hides another kind of identification within the rhetoric of a plea for mercy and grace—a cautious, tentative identification with his father and that man's as yet unknown desires, against which desires the son specifically sets his own death. The rhyme pair *will* and *spill* clarify the prodigal's ultimate identification with his father in that it specifies the terms of his dilemma. If the father wishes it, he will not die. That is, if the father accepts him home, if the father claims him despite his unworthiness—ultimately, if he is the father's desire, his will—he will not die. In each text of the tale, from the parable to the exemplum to the Old French play, the prodigal's confession insists upon this question of paternity, we might say, of the law of the name of the father. A Christian conversion, then, the parable suggests, requires an identification with Christ—as Word, Logos, Law—in a way that figures Christ as a nourishing father who will not desire the subject to die, who will desire the subject in return for the subject's desire.

The Lacanian idea of Law is more than appropriate here, for many cases of *will* and *spill*'s appearance in Middle English literature present a situation in which one person's life depends upon the desires of another, a ruler, whose word is literally the law and, most importantly, who is usually a father or a father figure. I have already noted the use of the pair in examples from the Chester and Northampton *Abraham and Isaac* plays. Similarly, the Chester Cycle's *Woman Taken in Adultery* uses the rhyme pair at the crucial moment when the First and Second Jews press Jesus for a judgment on the sinning woman, his desire as the patriarch determining her life or death:

SECUNDUS PHARISEUS:
Mayster, why art thou so styll?
What writest thou, if it be thy will?
Whether shall we spare or spill
This woman found in blame?[19]

In this case as in the others, *will* and *spill* describe a troubled relationship between desire and death, an economy of excess and want, embodied in a patriarchal figure whose word has the power of life and death over another. In each of these cases *will* and *spill* mark a naming of desire that attempts to fix the relations of self and other in these moments of extremity. This understanding which the rhyme pair *will* and *spill* calls up is not only judicial, but is also sexually inflected, a fact which further clarifies the identification expressed in the prodigal's confession. This sexual meaning best appears in Chaucer's "Miller's Tale," when Nicholas tells Alison, "Ywis, but if ich have my wille, / For deerne love of thee, lemman, I spille." The open, forceful sexuality of Nicholas's invasive touching—"he caughte hire by the queynte"—suggests that *will* should be understood as sexual desire and *spill* should be understood not only as to die, in its roguish sense of orgasm, but specifically as to ejaculate wastefully.[20] The Chester play of *The Woman Taken in Adultery* provides an apt analogue for the confession, for the woman's sins are roughly the same as the prodigal's (at least according to the elder brother). Christ writes the Pharisees' sins in the dust, an inscription that becomes emblematic both of the woman's sins and of their sins: spilling seed in the infertile dust, wanting to waste a life. The movement and phraseology link the sins of the accusers with that of the accused, and because the text of the play does not reveal the words that Christ writes, the audience of the play becomes wrapped up in the narrative movement, their desire to *read* mirroring that of the Pharisees', making their desires complicit with the accusers' desires and similar to the woman's. Christ's answer is a non-answer which reverses the illicit understanding of desire, replacing it with God's will, that transcendent desire for the subject, who is figured in the sinning woman.

This double meaning helps explain why a pair of lines from "The Confession" that could not be remembered in their entirety and that, on first reading, seem superfluous nevertheless manage to survive even in their mangled form in the confession. In the tale of the prodigal son's misbehavior and repentance, three contemporary meanings of *spill*—to lose a liquid, to waste something, and to end a

Erick Kelemen   13

life—blend. The prodigal's sin is that he indulged his desire: "in þe synne of lecheri," the sermon explains, the prodigal "wasted all is good." The meanings of *will* and *spill* mirror the common psychological and religious cause-and-effect connection between the "unproductive" sexual act and death, reinforcing the parable's indications that the prodigal has nearly brought himself to death by indulging unlawfully in his desires. The prodigal's use of the terms *will* and *spill* indicates that the son's identification with the father is an identification with the interdictory desires of the Father, the figure of the Law that holds against certain kinds of sexual relations—an identification theorized in the Christian belief system as a conversion. The prodigal asks his father to forgive or erase his sin—"lat me not spille"—and so to prevent his death by substituting the father's desires for his own.[21] The son's closing lines are a moment of cautious, tentative identification not only with his father but, as *will* and *spill* would suggest, with the Father, Lacan's "capital-O" Other, with the Law, which, as Lacan writes, "superimposes the kingdom of culture on that of a nature abandoned to the law of mating," all of which is set against the possibility of the son's own death.[22] The richness of the moment of identification which closes the prodigal's speech to his father makes the speech highly dramatic, charged with an emotional intensity, an "indefinable pathos," as Judith Roof puts it, that exceeds "both reason and cause and effect," one that derives from the redoubling identifications of audience with son, with father, and with Christ, or Logos or Law, abandoning or at least disavowing, in this identification, their bodies and their bodies' desires and infirmities. "Drama is," Roof writes, "an undefinable transformative process, evoking both an emotional intensity and extraordinary instance of change."[23]

As an identification that discovers in the subject a metaphoric relationship between body and soul, conversion positions an old self, which the subject aligns with the desires of the body, to stand in contradistinction to a new self that is aligned with the desires of the soul. But conversion's movement to this new self does not eliminate the old. Rather, the old is a necessary foundation upon which the new self rests. In fact, the old self must remain for the new self to function. The relationship between the new and old selves is analogous to Lacan's explanation of the relationship between the conscious and the unconscious. The unconscious, Lacan suggests, is the "[i]mpediment, failure, split," in the smooth functioning of the conscious, "that something [that is] for a moment brought to the light of day." The appearance of the unconscious, when "the subject

surprises himself in some unexpected way," becomes absorbed by the conscious, explained away, corrected, or dismantled through laughter.[24] Similarly, the sinful self in the convert's self-narrative remains— must remain—as a possible eruption that the subject struggles to prevent, cover, or expiate. The old self must remain as a possibility for the narrative to continue as a self-interpretation. Within each convert must lurk the potential apostate.

This double self, this double awareness of self, creates a subject whose primary task is to observe its older incarnations as they continue in their sinful desires and to repudiate those selves and desires. Such self-awareness creates a fundamental instability in the subject's reception and interpretation of mimetic representations of biblical texts. As Roof shows, the relations between audience and actor are already complicated and enhanced by an audience subject position that oscillates between an awareness of mimesis as mimesis and an identification with the narrative trajectory of the mimetic representation. The conversion oriented performance thus adds a further complication to Roof's reception paradigm in that conversion asks that the subject identify itself in such a way that the oscillation is split once more, alternating among observations of the mimetic frame, the image, and the subject's own reception of that image as both sinner and convert.

By recognizing the intensity of the lure of identification in these narratives and the speeches which punctuate them—by recognizing the way in which conversion is specifically a radical identification with the Other, imagined as both internal and external to the subject—one can begin to map out the foundation of the irresolvable differences between the theater and the *Tretise*. Because conversion proceeds as an identification, the subject interpreting itself through the other, it possesses the fundamental instability of metaphor on which both the theater and the antitheater can make their conflicting claims about the relative performative efficacy of theater and of sermons—about the (perhaps differing) abilities of theater and of sermons to convert listeners. Conversion duplicates and relies upon the logic of the performative, wherein the signifier seems to produce the signified by force of its utterance, while it simultaneously unmasks itself as a deferral of presence. In the performative, the signifier reveals itself as a stand-in for the signified, a metaphor, and yet in this revelation, it claims to make present that which it represents. In conversion, the convert reveals his or her material self as a stand-in for another, his or her soul, and yet in voicing this

standing-in, the convert expresses an identification which speaks into existence that identification. In each case, metaphor structures the function—of conversion, identification, performative, mimesis. And in each case, metaphor creates a fundamental instability, for the logic of metaphor allows a statement to be both true and false simultaneously.

This fundamental instability in the performative, identificatory process of conversion complicates the question of the efficacy of mimetic representations of biblical narratives because mimesis itself, as imitation, redoubles the metaphoric detour which the subject goes through in conversion. In a sense, a conversion is a performance and performative, a mimesis of conversion. As Roof explains, the audience's identification with a character is actually an identification with the narrative trajectory. In the case of the prodigal son, this identification is with his confession, with the act of conversion.

The theater of God's word can, therefore, see itself as more effectual than preaching, because the foregrounded mimesis impels the reader into the (self-) interpretive arena in a way that a sermon cannot. And the writers of the *Tretise* can complain that the theater reverses God's word, emptying out all miracles of the presence of God by mimicking them, whereas preaching is the vehicle "by the whiche alle miraclis be don" (112). The *Tretise* can claim that the mimetic performance of God's word strays too far from the word and causes the audience to be caught up in the spatial lure of dramatic activity and spectacle, caught up in the world of the signifier and missing entirely the other world of the signified. At the same time, it can claim that preachers have a special access to the world of the signified by allowing God to speak unmediated, without translation into the physical realm of signifying bodies.

In this way the *Tretise* positions itself as a kind of older brother against a younger brother of theater. The *Tretise* has been faithful and has been serious, toiling in the field, while the theater has gone through the distant land of metaphor, has played, and has returned to a festival. The *Tretise*, like the elder brother, is the voice of theory, keeping to the outside, the questioning, objecting figure. The theater can grant the *Tretise*'s objections about its lures and traps; as theater, it sides with excess—as it sees it, the excess of mercy, rejoicing over the one member of the community who is saved more than over the ninety-nine righteous Lollards at their sermons. And yet the *Tretise* is right, too. As with the elder brother, its objection is not misplaced, its castigation accurate—the theater *is* dangerous.

Drama in Sermons

Perhaps this is the way we should read the *Tretise* in its double authorship, its two part structure: as the complaint of an elder brother, addressed first to a larger audience, then to a more specific one, the "half frynde" of the second half (104). To look at the *Tretise* in this way is to recognize a certain doubleness in the elder brother of the parable, but it is also to recognize that the father does not address the elder brother's complaint directly, that the parable ends with the father and the elder brother still outside the house, still engaged in dialogue. We never hear the half-friend's response. The dialogue that the *Tretise* begins or continues remains unresolved.

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NOTES

I wish to thank James M. Dean, Lois Potter, Judith Roof, Catherine Belsey, and Ruth Evans for helpful comments on earlier forms of this essay.

[1] Unless otherwise noted, all references to the *Tretise* are from *A Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge*, ed. Clifford Davidson, Early Drama, Art, and Music Monograph Series, vol. 19 (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan Univ., 1993). Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number. For recent discussions of the *Tretise*, see Glending Olson, "Plays as Play: A Medieval Ethical Theory of Performance and the Intellectual Context of the *Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge*," *Viator: Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 26 (1995): 195–221; and Ruth Nissé, "Reversing Discipline: *The Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge*, Lollard Exegesis, and the Failure of Representation," *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* 11 (1997): 163–94.

[2] For the double authorship of this document, see Davidson's introduction to the *Tretise*, 4. Nicholas Davis puts forward the Wycliffite preacher Nicholas Hereford as the single author of the tract, though he admits that the style and argument divide into two clear parts ("The *Tretise of Myraclis Pleyinge*: on Milieu and Authorship," *Medieval English Theatre* 12 [1990]: 124–51). On dialogue as the constituent form of drama, see Marvin Carlson, "Theater and Dialogism," in *Critical Theory and Performance*, ed. Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1992), 313–23.

[3] Except where noted, citations of the sermon are from *Middle English Sermons, Edited from British Museum MS Royal 18 B. xxiii*, EETS 209, ed. Woodburn O. Ross (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1940), 162–70. For the parable of the prodigal son, see Luke 15:11–32, in *Novum Testamentum Latine, Secundum Editionem Sancti Hieronymi*, ed. John Wordsworth and Henry J. White, 2nd ed. (1911; reprint, London: The British and Foreign Bible Society, 1973).

[4] See Davidson's introduction to the *Treatise*, 3.

[5] See Karla Taylor's remarks about the *Tretise* and the medieval debate about what one might call conversion aesthetics in "A Text and Its Afterlife: Dante and Chaucer," *Comparative Literature* 35 (1983): 1–20.

[6] See Davidson, who writes, "The 'word' [here] is to be identified with the Word (*Logos, Verbum*) of John 1. This identification would also later be generally made by Protestants, especially the Puritan ministers of the late sixteenth and early seven-

teenth centuries who likewise saw the final result as the conversion of the soul through encounter with the Word in the course of hearing it preached" (154).

[7] See, for instance, Marianne G. Briscoe, "Preaching and Medieval English Drama," in *Contexts for Early English Drama*, ed. Marianne G. Briscoe and John C. Coldewey (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1989), 150–72. "Sermons," Briscoe writes, "were far less important to medieval culture as sources of literary invention or topoi than as transmitters and preservers of traditional scriptural truths and exegetical interpretations. Sermons were foremost instructional and hortative rhetoric" (156). It is in a view of dramas as instructional and hortative rhetoric that Briscoe suggests scholars "begin to understand the real influence of medieval preaching" on drama (156). It is along those lines that Jody Ender's book, *Rhetoric and the Origins of Medieval Drama* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1992), argues that drama is a part of a broad continuum of rhetorical practice, into which drama, like legal proceedings, would fall. Siegfried Wenzel's *Preachers, Poets, and the Early English Lyric* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1986), has shown how sermon literature and lyric poetry frequently possess an unexpected interdependence, how verses in sermons go "beyond being merely decorative" (8), how sermons document the "remarkably vigorous life" of oral-traditional verse and the "fundamental contribution" which preachers made to this life (208), as well as how some poetic dialogues which have sermon contexts provide a link between preaching and playacting (52).

[8] For the popularity of the prodigal son as a plot-device in Renaissance English drama, see Alan Young, *The English Prodigal Son Plays: A Theatrical Fashion of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, Salzburg Studies in English Literature, Jacobean Drama Studies, 89 (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, 1979). To my mind, Young's definition of the paradigm is too narrow, excluding many plays that other readers would not hesitate to classify as prodigal son plays, including *Interlude of Youth* and *Hickscorner*. For a discussion of the trope in Elizabethan prose fiction, see Richard Helgerson, *The Elizabethan Prodigals* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1976). In an essay on Hamlet and its use of the prodigal son's narrative ("What Hamlet Remembers," *Shakespeare Survey* 10 [1977]: 67–97), Helgerson writes that, "No narrative pattern was more popular in the late sixteenth century" (77).

[9] Carleton Brown and Rossell Hope Robbins, *The Index of Middle English Verse* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1943), supply the title "The Confession of the Prodigal Son" (#837) for the verses, 168–69.

[10] In Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd. ed., ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), see "The Miller's Tale," 3277–78; "The Man of Law's Tale," 282–85, 587–88, 813–15; "The Wife of Bath's Tale," 897–98; "The Clerk's Tale," 503–4; *Troilus*, 4.263–64; *Legend of Good Women*, 1574–75, 1916–17, 1936–37; "ABC," 180–81; and "Complaint to His Lady," 115–16. In the Chester Cycle alone, the rhyme pair appears in the Cain play, 585–87; the Noah play, 42–43; Abraham, 286–7; Balaam, 208–10; Innocents, 4–8, 260–64; and Adulteress, 250–51. References to play titles and lines from the Chester Cycle, here and in the text, refer to *The Chester Mystery Cycle*, EETS SS 3, ed. R. M. Lumiansky and David Mills (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1974).

[11] Chester, 285–88.

[12] "The Northampton Play of Abraham and Isaac," ll. 263, in *Non-Cycle Plays and Fragments*, EETS SS 1, ed. Norman Davis (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), 32–42.

[13] *Adam and Eve*, 133, 258 ("now I see"); *Abraham*, see note to line 426.

[14] See *Courtois d'Arras: Jeu du XIIIe Siècle*, 2nd ed., ed. Edmond Faral, Les Classiques Français du Moyen Age (1911; reprint, Paris: Librairie Honoré Champion, 1961), 590–95. Unless otherwise noted, translations are from Richard Axton and John Stevens, *Medieval French Plays* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), 137–64. Axton and Stevens's translation preserves Faral's line numbering.

[15] *Courtois*, 600–5, 617.

[16] See Karl Morrison's remarks upon conversion being misread by modern readers through a peripety paradigm, *Understanding Conversion* (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 1992), 7.

[17] Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1991), 81. Later in her study, Kristeva will remark similarly that "psychoanalysis is then experienced as a journey into the strangeness of the other and of oneself, toward an ethics of respect for the irreconcilable" (182).

[18] For a discussion of the function of metaphor in identification, see Diana Fuss, "Look Who's Talking, or If Looks Could Kill," *Critical Inquiry* 22 (1996): 383–92. She writes, "Metaphor, *the substitution of the one for the other*, is internal to the work of identification" (390).

[19] *Woman*, 249–52.

[20] See Chaucer's "The Miller's Tale," 1.3277–78, 1.3276.

[21] "Confession," 168, 169.

[22] See Jacques Lacan, "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis," in *Écrits*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977), 66.

[23] See Judith Roof, "'A Succession of Phantasies': Lacan's Dramatic Metaphor," *Literature and Psychology* 34 (1988): 33–43, at 37, 37–38.

[24] Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977), 25, 31, 28.