

UCLA

Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies

Title

Language and Gesture in the Chester Sacrifice of Isaac

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0083v4kv>

Journal

Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 3(1)

ISSN

0069-6412

Author

Candido, Joseph

Publication Date

1972-10-01

Peer reviewed

LANGUAGE AND GESTURE IN THE CHESTER *SACRIFICE OF ISAAC*

Much recent criticism of the medieval cycle plays has emphasized their visual appeal.¹ Certainly these plays are replete with opportunities, suggested by the text, for moments of striking stage action. In the Chester *Fall of Lucifer*, for instance, the title character tries various means to enlist the support of his fellow angels in his rebellion against God. One of the most obviously visual of his persuasions occurs when he exhorts them to "behold [his] body, both handes and head!" (l. 167).² The request is a curious one and suggests that perhaps these two parts of Lucifer's body are more elaborately attired than the others, or at least somehow more prominently visible to the angels, and hence to the audience. At any rate, this request focuses our attention on Lucifer's hands and head, encouraging an audience reaction which the alert director, medieval or modern, could underscore by judicious use of costume, makeup, or gesture. Such dramatic opportunities occur frequently in the Chester plays and often have more than merely sensational impact. For instance, similar references to the hands and head occur throughout the cycle as a whole, often helping to clarify theme or suggest stage action. In *The Creation*, Eve is told that her progeny will "broke"

¹ See, for instance, V. A. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1966), p. 5, and Arnold Williams, *The Drama of Medieval England* (East Lansing: Michigan State Univ. Press, 1961), p. 103. See also the extensive attention given to medieval staging by Glynne Wickham, *Early English Stages* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959), pp. 112-176, and F. M. Salter, *Mediæval Drama in Chester* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1955; rpt. New York: Russell & Russell, 1968), pp. 81-108.

² All citations of the Chester plays are to *The Chester Plays*, ed. Hermann Deimling and J. Matthews (EETS e.s. 62, 115: Oxford Univ. Press, 1892, 1915).

the "heade" of the serpent (l. 307); Octavian says in *The Nativity* that he wants to see "how many heades" he has (l. 252), and in the same play Salome's "handes [are] dryed up" as a result of her scepticism regarding Mary's virginity (l. 555). In one of the later plays of the cycle, *Christ appears to two Disciples*, Jesus approaches Thomas and entreats him to "putt [his] hand" in His "woundes" (ll. 245 ff.). Each of these references to hands and head, like many others throughout the cycle, either emphasizes important thematic considerations or presents opportunities for striking visual effects.

Perhaps the play in which such references are most fundamentally related to theme is *The Sacrifice of Isaac*. Here the dramatist repeatedly draws our attention, by both verbal and visual means, to the actions of hands and the primary "action" of the head — that of cognition. It is the interrelationship between these two elements in both language and gesture that helps to unite the play structurally, as well as to provide much of the dramatic tension.

One of the most prominent features of *The Sacrifice of Isaac* is its distinct three-part structure. The play is basically composed of three major events: Abraham's tithe-giving, God's appearance to Abraham, and the attempted sacrifice of Isaac — each preceded and followed by the expositor's comments. Yet each of these three sections is also distinct in the kind of hand movements and thought processes it contains. In the first section the primary stage "action" is the exchange of gifts between Abraham and God — or more precisely, between Abraham and Melchisadech, who functions as a symbolic replacement for God. Accordingly, the language of this section abounds in references to hands and acts of giving. We learn instantly that God has "geven victorie" (l. 20) to Abraham, a fact which Abraham expresses in remarkably apt terms:

To worship the I will not wond,
that 4 kinges of vncouth land
to daye hast sent into my hand,
and of riches great araye. (ll. 25-28)

But the hands of Abraham are not only filled with riches, for we quickly discover that he has delivered his nephew Lothe from "Enemyes handes" (l. 43) and into his own. In appreciation

of this bounty, Abraham resolves to offer his thanks to God by giving Melchisadech a "tyth" of all he has acquired.

At this point the verbal references to hands and giving are visually realized in the stage action. When Melchisadech hears from Armiger that Abraham is entering the city, he extends his hands toward heaven,³ stating his determination to fulfill his office "And present [Abraham] with bread and wyne" (l. 61). Melchisadech's gesture is, of course, a striking stage effect; yet it also has thematic implications. He is the symbolic intermediary between God and Abraham, the man through whom Abraham will give his tithe to God; but he is also God's priest, and as such, bestows his own gift, the bread and wine with all of their New Testament overtones, upon Abraham. Melchisadech's reaching toward the heavens thus has the visual effect of drawing God into the exchange with Abraham, an idea he underscores by stating that he is performing "godes will" (l. 64), and which is later made visual with the giving of the bread and wine, a symbol of Christ. Throughout the entire episode in which the gifts are exchanged, the hands of both chief participants are highly visible. Melchisadech offers Abraham the bread and wine; Abraham takes it, then offers his horse laden with gifts, which Melchisadech in turn receives. Moreover, each action is accompanied by several lines of dialogue concerning the gift being given or received, which could suggest highly stylized, perhaps even exaggerated, acts of giving. Certainly the repeated use throughout the scene of such words as "geve," "present," "receave," "take," and "offer," provides a verbal background consistent with such an idea. The measured pace of the scene also contributes gravity to the action, so presenting opportunities for extended and studied movement that would keep the hands of both participants constantly before the audience's eyes. Thus the hand motions in the first section of the play express voluntary, stylized, controlled action — sometimes symbolic but always clearly visual.

If the most prominent stage action in the first part of the play is the exchange of gifts, then its counterpart in the section which follows is the exchange of promises — this time directly between

³ The Latin stage direction reads "*Melchisadech extendens manus ad Caelum.*"

God and Abraham. God appears to Abraham and immediately promises to send him an heir who will greatly multiply his seed if Abraham promises to "be trewe" (l. 170) and agrees in addition to see that each male child is circumcised eight days after birth. Abraham gladly accedes to the terms of this covenant, and the promises are sealed as he kneels in reverence to God. The most striking feature of the encounter, however, is the fundamental way in which its exchanges differ from those of the preceding section. Here there is none of the stylized action of hands which characterized the earlier meeting with Melchisadech, but rather the apparent absence of any meaningful action at all. (The text provides seven explicit stage-directions in Latin in section one, none in section two.) Moreover, there are no references to hands in either the dialogue or the implied movements of the second section, and the only gesture which is mentioned at all is Abraham's final kneeling, for which the text furnishes no stage direction.

If we look at the nature of these actions, however, the reason why the playwright chooses to omit overt motion from the scene becomes clear. The exchanges in section two, unlike those in section one, are purely cognitive in nature; that is, they involve personal understanding and belief, not outward symbolic displays. The stage picture that the scene presents to us is thus one of surface inaction; yet this is precisely the effect the dramatist wishes to achieve, for the primary "action" of the scene does not take place externally but occurs within the minds of the participants. As usual, the dialogue helps to stress the internal nature of the action. Abraham begins his conversation with God by appealing to His rational nature. He claims that his own lack of a legitimate heir is "one thing that [God will] see" (l. 149), and God responds in kind by adjuring Abraham, "leve [i.e. believe] thou me" (l. 157). These two references to perception and belief set the stage for God's speech which immediately follows and which unites both mental processes:

Abraham, doe as I thee saye:
 looke vp and tell me, if thou maye,
 starres standing on the straye;
 that vnpossible were.

no more shalt thou, for no neede,
 number of thy bodye the seede
 that thou shalt have withouten dreede,
 thou art to me so deere. (ll. 161-168)

As Abraham looks up and sees the stars, his understanding operates in a dual manner. Not only is he visibly apprehending the stars which number as many as his future progeny; he is also participating in an act of trust — a belief that God will keep His promise. When a few lines later Abraham asserts his determination to carry out God's wishes regarding circumcision, the trust is sealed and the promises exchanged — all without a single overt gesture. Indeed, no stage movement could express the nature of this exchange more appropriately than the simple eloquence of Abraham's stillness before God. In a sense, then, the absence of overt action is the scene's most striking visual effect, for it emphasizes the drastic difference between this motionless exchange and the active ones which preceded it.

The final section of the play, in which Abraham nearly slays his son, synthesizes the previous exchanges of gifts and promises by concentrating both kinds of giving in the act of sacrifice. Isaac is first a gift from God to Abraham in fulfillment of His promise, and ultimately a gift from Abraham to God, fulfilling His servant's pledge of obedience. But more important than these motivational factors is the manner in which they are expressed dramatically. Here the playwright fuses the earlier references to hands and cognition to define the precise nature of Abraham's sacrifice, and, as before, his dramatic skill consists in the unification of language and gesture. As soon as Abraham learns that he must sacrifice his son, he responds in terms reminiscent of the two previous exchanges:

My lord, to thee is my entent
 ever to be obeydent,
 that sonne that thou to me hast sent,
 offer I will to thee. . . . (ll. 217-220)

Abraham's acquiescence to God's will, his "obedyence," is repeated no fewer than twelve times throughout the section, and calls to mind his pledge to be "trewe" to God, which was sealed in the preceding episode. But here, as in the first element of the tripar-

tite structure, the hands of Abraham are also highly visible and fundamentally involved in the action. Isaac frequently calls our attention to his fear of Abraham's "drawen sworde" (l. 266), suggesting not only its visual prominence, but also providing opportunities for the imaginative actor to brandish or sheath it at opportune moments — perhaps to express greater or lesser resolve. In fact, references to the sword almost always introduce scenes which heighten the dramatic tension.

One such instance occurs immediately after Abraham and Isaac arrive at the place of sacrifice. Isaac, who at this point senses some personal danger, says to Abraham:

Father, tell me of this case,
why you your sword drawen hase,
and beare yt naked in this place. . . . (ll. 277-279)

Three lines later he says:

I praye you, father, leane nothing from me,
but tell me what you thinke. (ll. 283-284)

This juxtaposition of references to the sword which Abraham holds in his hand and to the question of what he "thinks," concentrates the physical and mental actions into a single dramatic moment. The stage picture is that of a man torn by two powerful but opposing forces — the determination to act in response to God's command, and the impulse not to act in response to the pressures of paternal love. In visual terms this conflict is precisely that expressed by the contrast between the active dramaturgy of the first section and its inactive counterpart in the second. It is quite unlikely, therefore, that Abraham's hand movements at this decisive moment would be as stylized or controlled as they were in section one. The profound difference between this kind of sacrificial giving and the relatively painless gift-giving of the earlier episode would be clearly evident to the audience by the actions of Abraham's hands. In fact, the next time the dramatist calls our attention to this conflict, the same point is again realized visually. After Isaac learns that it is God's will that he be slain, he says to Abraham:

be I once out of your mynde,
your sorrow may sone cease. . . . (ll. 319-320)

Whether intentionally or not, Isaac focuses directly on the cognitive problem and elicits a response from Abraham which again draws it to the visual surface. Dropping his sword to the ground, Abraham says:

For sorrow I may my handes wring

 O Isaac, blessed mot thou be!
 almost my wyt I lose for thee (ll. 323-326)

The hands which are now being wrung in despair are the same ones which only a few moments earlier were ceremonially offering gifts to God. The dramatic impact of the scene, however, goes even beyond this contrast with past events. By having Abraham mourn the loss of his "wyt" at the same time that he wrings his hands, the playwright again concentrates the tension between cognition and action into a single dramatic moment in which Abraham both enacts and verbalizes his mental strain. As before, the contrariety between an outward action and an inner resolve becomes manifest in the scene's language and gesture. Long before Shakespeare conceived Hamlet's advice to the players, the Chester dramatist knew the importance of making the action fit the word.

After this scene of hand-wringing, the action moves slowly, inexorably toward the climactic moment of the sacrifice itself. Here Abraham takes his son and ties him to the altar; then lifting the sword above Isaac's head, he utters a last prayer which reflects both his mental anguish and his faith in God:

Ihesu, on me thou have pittie
 that I haue most in mynde! (ll. 415-416)

With this final expression of the conflict between thought and action rendered in dialogue and gesture, the sword begins its descent. At this moment, of course, God's angel intervenes, but the manner in which the intervention is staged is crucial to the scene's visual impact. An English version of the stage-direction at this point tells us that "the angell comes and takes the sword by the ende and stayeth it. . ." (l. 411). If this direction is carried out, the visual image produced reconciles the opposition between Abraham's internal and external actions. We are presented with the symbolic conjunction of God's and Abraham's hands through the in-

strument of Abraham's obedience — the sword. In addition, this visual joining of hands combines with a joining of wills, for the angel tells Abraham that he can well see his desire to do God's "byddinge" (l. 428), and Abraham replies that indeed "[God's], bydding I shall doe" (l. 438). Thus the conflict is finally resolved and the murderous blow redirected to God's latest gift to Abraham, the lamb. With the enactment of this newly enjoined sacrifice and a fresh exchange of promises reminiscent of the second episode, the scene ends harmoniously.

It is clear that only a dramatist of considerable sophistication could so thoroughly integrate language and gesture to achieve so total a dramatic effect. Such terms as structural unity, dramatic tension, and patterns of language and gesture are more commonly associated with the Chester playwright's Elizabethan successors, but we should note that these elements are already present in the Chester texts, and if in the texts, why not on the stage? Certainly *The Sacrifice of Isaac* presents opportunities for moments of dramatically significant action, and most important of all, it is action which enhances the meaning of the play. The consistent patterning of hand movements in relation to the thought processes which parallel and contrast with them serve more than a purely structural purpose. They also create moments in which the dramatist's thematic intent is translated into apprehensible stage gesture.⁴

Joseph Candido

Indiana University
Bloomington, Indiana

⁴ For an example of how this concept of the unification of language and gesture has been fruitfully applied to Shakespeare, see Robert Hapgood, "Speak Hands for Me: Gesture as Language in *Julius Caesar*," *Drama Survey*, 5 (1966), 162-170.