

## NO PLACE LIKE HOME: THE NORTHAMPTON 'ABRAHAM AND ISAAC' PLAY: A RE-APPRAISAL

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The subject of Abraham's sacrifice of his son Isaac at God's command, as recounted in Genesis chapter 22, verses 1–13, forms the basis for six medieval plays — those of Brome, Chester, N.Town, Northampton, Towneley, and York.<sup>1</sup> As is usually the case, the biblical narrative offers no explanation for God's seemingly arbitrary and horrific command and does not explore the thoughts and emotions of father and son. These issues had to be addressed by the medieval playwright in order to stage the action and explain it to the audience. York adopts an implicitly typological approach in making Isaac 'Thyrty zere and more sumdele' (82), Christ's age at the time of His passion, so that the adult Isaac becomes a willing collaborator in his own sacrifice. The other five plays, however, make Isaac a child, thereby intensifying both the pathos and the horror of the situation and setting the action against an implied background of normative familial and paternal love. However, by stressing the anguish of the two main characters, the plays then need to justify the emotional expense by the reward that it brings from God.

Among these six plays, the Northampton play has received only limited, and somewhat qualified, critical attention. Found on folios 59 to 86 of Dublin: Trinity College MS D.4.18, a composite volume which includes records of Northampton, it is generally agreed that the text was written in that town or its neighbourhood. The manuscript text can be confidently dated to 1461 on the basis of the surrounding material.<sup>2</sup> However, no record has yet been found of any dramatic performance in the town of Northampton, and the manuscript date and location are not secure guides to the date and place of original composition.

In 1898–99 Brotanek, who provided an early edition of the play, suggested that it lay outside the English tradition, claiming significant correspondences with the equivalent episode in *Le Mistere du Vieil Testament*.<sup>3</sup> The play had some merit to those who valued naturalism; Hardin Craig, in passing, praised its 'dignity and no small amount of spirit',<sup>4</sup> but later critics have been more reserved in their appraisals. William Tydeman compares the play unfavourably with the Brome play on