

Rereading the Brome *Abraham and Isaac**

Kusue Kurokawa

Among the English mystery plays which entertained the medieval audience, the story of Abraham and Isaac was one of the most popular in the whole sacred history. The story is treated in each of the four surviving cycles: York, Towneley, Chester and N-Town. Besides these there are the Northampton and the East Anglia Brome (a manuscript from Brome Manor in Norfolk) plays. In shaping the biblical cycle of plays which describes the history of man's redemption from the Creation to the Last Judgement, the story of Abraham and Isaac was obviously the most befitting subject to include because of its popularity among the audience and of its typological significance.

Since the days of St. Augustine, the story of Abraham and Isaac has been read as a prefiguration of the Crucifixion. In his *City of God*, Augustine commented on the figurative roles of Abraham and Isaac, and explained that Abraham was a type of God the Father, and that his son Isaac, as the willing victim, was a type of Christ.¹ Just as God willingly sacrificed his son Christ for the sake of man, so Abraham willingly determined to sacrifice his son Isaac for the sake of God. The grief and compassion of Abraham for Isaac as a sacrificial victim was considered as foreshadowing God's grief and compassion for Christ who was to die on the cross.

Medieval dramatists, at least in the first stage of shaping the cycles, picked up the story, not because of its dramatic potentiality, but because of its significance in explaining the meaning of Christ's sacrificial death on the cross to the lay audience. None of them doubted its significance established by the early Fathers of the Church, such as St. Augustine in catechetical and exegetical homiletics. They more or less based their elaborations of the spare details on such interpretation. Therefore, all the extant medieval versions of the story owe much of their characterization to this typological symbolism.

With such literary tradition, primary stress has been put on the validity of typological exegesis and the detection of figures and types in the critical studies of the cycle plays in the past few decades. Naturally, however, the awareness of the dramatic potentialities of the cycle plays has been raising some basic questions recently as to the appropriateness of typology as a useful critical method. To mention one example, it must be conceded that the medieval dramatists too conscious of the typological or tropological significance had to elaborate their characters in some static and figuratively determined way. Not only were they

constrained to elaborate the characters' actions by their typological weight, but also they were equally influenced by the necessity of making transparent the typological significance of those characters' lives. For example, too much excessive emphasis on typology imposes limitations of the handling of the characters and causes their distortion. Abraham, as a type of God, must willingly offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice, and Isaac must not resist his role as "victim". Rather, they must accept the facts heroically and magnanimously.

Thus, it was Arnold Williams who strongly criticized the overtly subtle and overtly verbal analysis of the figural approach. He stressed that the fundamental criteria for a critic should be "whether the typology functions under the conditions which govern any plea produced by actors on a stage,"² and stated that "any meaning to be effective must be conveyed by theatrical means. I am persuaded that most typologists forget this. They are suggesting meanings appropriate for literary texts but inappropriate for the stage."³ It is just in this point that some other critical method of the Abraham and Isaac plays has been sought for recently. For, as Williams properly points out, too much subtle figurative features of the play could only be seen by a close scrutiny of the text, but unmistakably they would escape the audience's recognition in just a one-time viewing on stage.

On closer examination, conflicting views seem to have existed even among the medieval dramatists about the treatment of typology in drama. They all agree in admitting the customary typological significance of the play. But it is only in Chester that the allegory is explicitly expounded by the expositor at the end. The N-Town and the York dramatists are rather formal and reserved in bringing the story up to date for the audience, while on the other hand, the Towneley and the Brome dramatists are not: these two authors have more flexible voices and more dramatic sense.

The Brome dramatist we are going to discuss apparently followed the conventional typological tradition, but substantially, he chose an alternative path. His chief interest was not typology but humanity. What he had to do first, therefore, was to achieve dramatic pathos, which is one of the most widely found qualities of great theatre, and, through its achievement, to preach the virtue of obedience.

In this brief essay, I'd like to discuss the dramatic qualities of the Brome *Abraham and Isaac*,⁴ and to show how character and action are fully developed, quite independent of their allegorical interpretations. Moreover, I'd like to suggest some other critical method for evaluating the play. I'd like to define the Brome *Abraham and Isaac* as a secular homiletic play for the lay audience rather than as a sophisticated typological play for a select audience. The reason for my choice of the Brome is simply that it is the best of the English Abraham and Isaac plays, a most satisfying example to show the amalgamation of the two opposites: doctrine and drama.

We'll start with a passage from Rosemary Woolf's *English Mystery Plays* in which she comments on the Brome *Abraham and Isaac* play as follows:⁵

The Brome play is a little more ample, Isaac's compassion for his parents being yet more intensified, and his willingness to die being yet more movingly expressed. The amplifications are felicitous, but the general effect of the accumulation comes close to excess.

A little further on, in discussing the relationship between the Brome and Chester plays of the same title, she again remarks that "the Brome author may have embellished the Chester text with sentimental variations on the basic pattern."⁶

Here, Woolf's stricture on the play can be summarized like this. She admits the existence of a more poignant dramatic pathos in the Brome than in the Chester, but comments that "the general effect of the accumulation comes close to excess."⁷ In other words, she asserts that the underlying typological significance of the play is sacrificed to the Brome dramatist's "sentimental" naturalism, and, therefore, is somehow blurred.

It was Woolf, I understand, who first suggested the significance of typological interpretations in the *Abraham and Isaac* plays.⁸ Of course, her comments will merit hot discussion and close scrutiny. However, I disagree with her comment that the sentimentalism in the Brome undercuts the religious seriousness or meaning of the play. Conversely, I do think that the excessive typological interpretation suppresses the pathos of Isaac's sacrifice and blunts the struggle within Abraham. Let's examine the details more closely.

The Brome play, like the other *Abraham and Isaac* plays, owes its construction to *Genesis* 22: 1–9, and apparently exploits the typological interpretation. In the biblical source, the central figure used to be Abraham, and the story used to be concentrated on his ordeal which was the test of his faith. But in the Brome play, as in the other *Abraham and Isaac* plays, the focus has been shifted from Abraham to his son Isaac to meet the demands of the prefigural system. The analogy of the sacrifice of Isaac with the Crucifixion of Jesus has incurred the distortion of emphasis on the characters. Accordingly, the central figure became Isaac in place of Abraham.

Isaac is no doubt considered as a type of Christ. Commanded by his father to go up the mount with him for a burnt offering to God, Isaac joyfully obeys him. He never doubts his father's intention and cheerfully chatters along. He bears the faggots of wood on his back and travels to the hill.⁹ But Isaac soon becomes uneasy and reluctant, seeing his father with a heavy countenance, and with no beast for a offering. He becomes frightened and terrified to know that he himself should be a "victim". However, when he is told that his death is God's will, his fears lessen and reluctance goes away into obedience at last, not easily nor spontaneously, though.

Abraham tries to bind Isaac's hands (243), lay him down on the altar (277), and lay a covered cloth over his face (285). All these actions on Isaac, as might be expected, carry the kind of ritual force appropriate to the torturing of Jesus at the Crucifixion. Thus, Isaac is explicitly a type of Christ and the analogy of the sacrifice of Isaac with the Crucifixion of Jesus is skillfully exploited.

However, here is the end of such a figurative approach. The Brome dramatist tries to go beyond this allegorical picture of Abraham and Isaac as mere types and humanize them. He doesn't have his characters' typological value so strongly in mind as to forget their humanity. As the play goes on, their natural human feeling as father and son grows to make for a strong emotional conflict which creates dramatic tension between them. Particularly, special emphasis is placed on the presentation of Isaac with the purpose of eliciting the dramatic pathos.

Isaac in the Brome is depicted as a favourite and young child¹⁰ of the aging but tenderly affectionate patriarch Abraham. The presentation of Isaac as a young child is quite effective in stressing his pathetic figure. This can best be illustrated by comparing the Brome with the York or the N-Town¹¹, where he is represented as a grown man.

The York Isaac, for example, is a young man of "Thyrty zere and more sumdele," as Abraham says (82), at the time of his sacrifice, and his mature age was evidently intended as strengthening the typological connection between Isaac and Christ, for Christ was about that age at the time of the Crucifixion, or, as *Luke 3 : 23* suggests, Christ began to lead his public life about thirty years of age.

The N-Town dramatist makes no explicit statement of Isaac's age, but seems to depict him as a man of mature sentiments:

Al-myghty god of his grett mercye
Fful hertyly I thanke þe sertayne
At goddys byddyng here for to dye
I obeye me here for to be sclayne

(145–48)

The York Isaac, alike the N-Town, almost wholly lacks dramatic pathos in this point. The physical maturity serves to emphasize his submissiveness and free will but is less effective in depicting him as the pathetic figure.

In the Brome play the sweetness and innocence of Isaac as a child serves to evoke the pathos. He becomes increasingly interesting to the dramatist as well as to the audience, and less manageable as a type of Christ. When told that he is to be sacrificed, Isaac is shocked and terrified at his fate. Although he finally accepts his doom meekly and willingly, as said above, it takes quite long to accept it. Isaac makes

warm and childlike appeals to familial affections.

Yff I haue trespassyd aȝens ȝow owt,
With a ȝard ȝe may make me full myld;
And wyth ȝowre scharp sword kyll me nogth,
For iwys, fader, I am but a chyld.

(169–72)

YSAAC. Now I wold to God 'my' moder were her on þis hyll!
Sche woold knele for me on both hyre kneys
To save my lyffe.
And sythyn that my moder ys not here,
I prey ȝow, fader, schonge ȝowr chere,
And kyll me not wyth ȝowyre knyffe.

(175–80)

He invokes pity by imagining his mother's reaction to the news of his death, asks of his father if it really is God's will for him to die. Isaac should be a willing victim, and his anguish be never so as intense as Abraham's. But the Brome Isaac shows, he has fears of his own fate, protests against it, and appeals to his father for mercy. His submissiveness doesn't come immediately or so easily. He wrestles with the meaning of his impending death. His mental anguish and inner struggle is emphasized at the cost of typological consistency. Thus, Isaac is much more than a mere allegorical figure.

Isaac accepts his doom meekly after all. His childlike devotion invokes pity and heavy pathos. He is now a comforter, no longer a victim, of his father, saying that Abraham's other children would outlive him and soon remove his sense of loss. Then comes the climax when Isaac asks his father to kill him as quickly as possible, so that he can be released from the agony of death:

YSAAC. A, mercy, fader, wy tery ȝe so,
And let me ley thus longe on þis heth?
Now I wold to God þe stroke were doo.
Fader, I prey yow hartely, schorte me of my woo,
And let me not loke thus after my degth.

(306–10)

Thus, at the very moment before his imagined death, the Brome Isaac has come a long way from the typically typological, heroic acceptance of his fate. He asks his father to use his knife skillfully, and to turn his face downwards away from the stroke because he is trying to alleviate the physical pain of his death.

Moreover, unconsciously enough, the Brome Isaac even recognizes the arbitrary quality of his fate. Without any proper explanation, God's command which determines his fate has been given to Isaac. God's pleasure, however, might as easily have meant life for him as death. The recognition of the capricious nature of God in His dealings with men seems so horrible to Isaac.¹² Then after such anguish follows the time of rejoicing. The angel is sent down from Heaven and the tragic moment is turned into a happy one. Isaac praises the sheep that will replace him in the sacrifice:¹³

A, scheppe, scheppe! blyssyd mot þou be
That euer thou were sent down heder!
Thow schall thys day dey for me,
In the worchup of the Holy Trynyté.
Now cum fast and goowe togeder
To my fader in hy;
thou þou be neuer so jentyll and good,
ÿt had I leuer thou schedyst þi blood,
Iwysse, scheppe, than I.

(358–66)

This Isaac is really an image of a young boy joyfully aware that he has escaped death and is still alive. He has experienced an ordeal which he thinks had neither cause nor consequence. Even after the Angel's appearance and the substitution of the ram for his life, he is not even sure that it was God's command at all. Nor can he trust his own father fully after such a terrible experience. Kneeling at the altar to blow on the coals for the sacrifice, Isaac suddenly asks his father, "But fader, wyll I stowppe down lowe, / ðe wyll not kyll me with zowre sword, I trowe?" (377–78) The dramatist ends the play with the phrases that Isaac is "full glad" (343), Abraham "rygth myry" (372), and the angel "blythe". (316) The conclusion, however, seems to be less a celebration of the mystery and wonder of God's mercy than a joyful relief of a young boy who has escaped impending death. I don't take it that such representation of Isaac contributes to the typological meaning given to him.

The Brome play has also a partially reluctant Abraham. In the opening scene, Abraham repeatedly talks of his love to his son Isaac and prays to God for his health and grace. "I love the best / Off all the chyldren that euer I begat," (31–32) he says.

However, when he first learns of God's command that he sacrifice Isaac, Abraham agrees promptly to carry out the order without any apparent serious conflict.

ABRAHAM. Wollecom to me be my Lordys sond,
And hys hest I wyll not wythstond;

(68–69)

To the Angel's applause to his prompt decision, he replies thus:

I love my chyld as my lyffe,
But ȝyt I love my God myche more,
For thow my hart woold make ony stryffe,
ȝyt wyll I not spare for chyld nor wyffe,
But don after my Lordys lore.

(81–85)

He never asks why God has given him such an ordeal, nor is he in conflict what way to choose. His devotion means he will do as God commands without question. Very little is made of his inner conflict in the first stage of the play.

However, soon after that, Abraham begins to show his mounting reluctance to sacrifice his dearest son. First, Isaac's filial obedience that "I am full fayn to do ȝowre bedyng (119)" deeply wounds his heart. He is driven by a surge of pity when Isaac shows affectionate sweetness and simple fortitude, begging him not to prolong killing him any longer since God's will can't be denied:

YSAAC. Now, fader, aȝens my Lordys wyll
I wyll neuer groche, lowd nor styll;
He mygth a sent me a better desteny
Yf yt had a be hys plecer.

(190–93)

Abraham's humanity and natural parental feeling makes for a strong emotional conflict. He is torn asunder by the two conflicting kinds of love: love of God and of his son. Abraham exclaims how gladly he would die in Isaac's place. His mental anguish and sorrow is so overwhelming that it grieves Isaac immensely. Isaac begs forgiveness for thus grieving his father and general forgiveness of all trespasses he has ever committed against him. Abraham exclaims that Isaac has never grieved him

once in all his life, and instead of forgiveness, gives his blessing upon this dearest son. Divided by the two conflicting wills, of the reason in wanting to obey God, and of the heart in wanting to protect his son, Abraham desperately tries to reconcile them.

ABRAHAM. Loo, now ys the tyme cum, certeyn,
That my sword in hys necke schall bite.
A! Lord, my hart reysyth therageyn,
I may not fyndygth in my harte to smygth;
My hart wyll not now thertoo,
ÿt fayn I woold warke my Lordys wyll;
But thys ðowng innosent lygth so styll,
I may not fyndygth in my hart hym to kyll.
O, Fader of Heuyn! what schall I doo?

(297–305)

Both Abraham and Isaac face the same conflict between obedience to God and to familial love. In this double-valued situation, the dramatic tension is heightened to its climax and an accumulation of pathos.

The Brome dramatist knew of the importance of character and feeling. He built up the characters of Abraham and Isaac with such deft touches of verisimilar dialogue and realistic psychology that they are real people. Thus the dramatist was successful in making them vivid and popular to the common audience of the day.

I don't think that such readings of Abraham and Isaac in the Brome play undercut religious seriousness or typological meanings, as Woolf argues. Overstressing only the typological significance in evaluating the play, as some typologists tend to do, seems to be misleading.

When the Brome dramatist chose to emphasize humanity through the realistic representations of the characters, he necessarily destroyed the effectiveness of typology and chose an alternative way. The treatment of the characters by the dramatist strongly suggests a better reading. In other words, the Brome *Abraham and Isaac* can be defined as a "homiletic drama". I would call it "homiletic" for want of a better name. It means a drama which combines the moral and religious teaching of the homily with exciting dramatic movement.

Throughout the play, including the epilogue by the doctor in the closing section, the dramatist's concern is mainly focused on the right and dutiful relationship between parent and child and on the virtue of obedience and its reward. No doubt, behind the author's concern exists the connotation of the relations between God and man, and of the obedience to the will of God and its reward, which itself can be quite independent of the typological analogy of the Crucifixion and the Redemption of

mankind. The Brome dramatist tries to give the more practical lessons on obedience to the medieval audience.

Isaac is dramatized as an ideal son, alike in his quick obedience, in his filial piety, and in his readiness to receive punishment for any wrongdoing. As we've already observed, he protests against the sacrifice and is horrified at the prospect of his own death. However, once he has realized that his death is requested by God, he says meekly:

I am full sory thys day to dey,
But ȝyt I kepe not my God to greve;
Do on ȝowre lyst for me hardly,
My fayer swete fader, I ȝeffe ȝow leve.

(251–54)

He accepts his fate voluntarily, becomes a sweet and thoughtful comforter of his father, and even begs that his mother be protected from this horrible knowledge:

But, fader, I prey ȝow euermore,
Tell ȝe my moder no dell;
Yffe sche wost yt, sche wold wepe full sore,
For iwysse, fader, sche lovyt me full wyll;
Goddys blyssyng haue mot sche!
Now forwyll, my moder so swete,
We too be leke no mor to mete.
ABRAHAM. A, Ysaac, Ysaac! son, þou makyst me to gret,
And wyth thy wordys thow dystempurst me.

(255–63)

This tender concern for his mother again expresses the proper affection of the idealized child for his parents.

As for Abraham, the task of sacrificing his son becomes more difficult, for all his early determination and confidence to fulfill his duty. Isaac's filial tenderness touches Abraham's parental feeling. He no longer is the dutiful patriarch but the sorely tried and afflicted father.

Then, after all those sufferings of the parent and child, the Angel as *deus ex machina* is sent down from Heaven with joyful relief to them, and God's reward is provided in the form of the ram as a substitute for Isaac. Thus the play demonstrates a traditional homily that if we patiently acquiesce in God's demands, we will gain

reward from Him.

The theme of obedience and reward is discussed further again through the parent-child relations in the epilogue of the play. There, at the end of the play, the doctor comes on to the stage. After emphasizing the exemplary nature of action, he appeals to his audience thus:

Trowe ze, sorys, and God sent an angell
And commawndyd zow zowre chyld to slayn,
Be zowre trowthe ys ther ony of zow
That eyther wold 'groche' or stryve therageyn?

How thyngke ze 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 kynd;

(443–51)

He tauntingly says there may be three or four mothers among the audience who will complain or resist against an angel's command to offer their children as a sacrifice. What would they do when their children die a natural death? Then, he advises such silly mothers not to grudge against God. God requires patient acquiescence in His will and obedience to His commandments. The two reasons for it, he explains, are, "For ze schall neuer se hym myschevyd," (454) and "For whan he wyll, he may yt amend." (459) However, the doctor mocks that his audience are far from his wishful thinking.

What the doctor intends to do here is to preach to his audience the ideal relations between parent and child. He tries to bring home to the mothers that they should not give way to immoderate grief, but be prepared and patient, even when visited by such horrible ordeals. Then, God will reward them for their patience and obedience, which has just been marvellously exemplified in the foregoing section of the play. This is the core of the doctor's teaching.

With reference to the treatment of typology in drama, Rosemary Woolf again passes strictures on this epilogue by the Brome doctor as follows:¹⁴

Unlike a typological exposition, this moral is disconcertingly constrictive, and from the purely literary point of view even more infelicitous than the fairly common moral that the play demonstrates how children should be obedient to their parents.

Woolf renounces this exemplum as quite incongruous to the typological concept of the play. I again disagree with her stricture because I find it quite effective.

The Brome doctor's epilogue is very unusual because it doesn't emphasize the central matters of the Crucifixion and the Redemption of mankind at all which the subject of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac generally requires to do. But through practical everyday teaching, it skillfully illustrates the homiletic nature of the play. The Brome play is not merely an exemplum to parents specifically, but an exemplum to us all.¹⁵ God demands that we should renounce all our worldly possessions, even our dearest children, to follow him, for the parents' love of their own children is merely a mirror of our worldly desires. The epilogue emphasizes that God's will is the highest of values, and that man's obedience is the greatest possible virtue.

Thus, the sub-theme of the grieving mothers for their dead children becomes closely connected with the main theme of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. In other words, the Brome dramatist is trying to relate the subject matter to the family theme of the parent-child relationship and to challenge the audience to identify themselves with the characters.

By shaping the play as a kind of homiletic family drama, the Brome dramatist succeeds in getting inside the collective consciousness of the audience, and through their subconscious participation deftly combines the moral and religious teaching of obedience with the exciting dramatic movement of the play.

To conclude, there is a strong possibility that the dramatist has borrowed much from current sermon material of the day, although we can hardly ever hope to trace the sources and determine the exact range of his indebtedness to the pulpit literature. The Brome *Abraham and Isaac* always reminds us that it is distinctly the creation of the common people in which the everyday homilies and pulpit manuals of the day are dramatized in lively and forceful forms.

NOTES

*. This essay is based on a paper read at the 3rd meeting of the Medievalists' Round Table, held at Keio University in October, 1988.

1. St. Augustine, *City of God*, V, tr. Eva Matthews Sanford & William McAllen Green (London, 1965), Book XVI, XXXII.
2. Arnold Williams, "Typology and the Cycle Plays: Some Criteria," *Speculum*, 43 (1968), 677.
3. *Ibid.*, 680
4. Future references to the Brome Abraham and Isaac play are taken from *Non-Cycle Plays and Fragments*, ed. Norman Davis, EETS, s.s.1 (London, 1970). All the subsequent line

references to this play will be inserted after each quotation.

5. Rosemary Woolf, *The English Mystery Plays* (California, 1972), 151.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. Woolf has suggested typological reading of the story in “The Effect of Typology on the English Medieval Plays of Abraham and Isaac,” *Speculum*, 32 (1957), 805–25.
9. Here a couple of major typological motifs are treated: the wood Isaac bears symbolizes the cross Jesus bore; his journeying to the place of sacrifice, Jesus’ way to the Calvary.
10. Woolf emphasizes the significance of the ages of Abraham and Isaac in typological interpretations (Woolf, *op. cit.*, 813 & 819). See also Minnie E. Wells, “The Age of Isaac at the Time of the Sacrifice,” *Modern Language Notes* 54 (1939), 579–82.
11. *The York Plays*, ed. Richard Beadle (London, 1982); *Ludus Coventriae or The Plaie called Corpus Christi*, ed. K. S. Block, EETS, c. s. 120 (London, 1922, repr. 1974).
12. In the Northampton Abraham play, there is a touch of rebuke for God in Abraham’s prayer of thanks to Him after Isaac’s life is saved (*Non-Cycle Plays and Fragments*, p. 41, ll. 346–53).
13. Another typological motif here: ‘rame’ (351) or ‘jentyll scheppe’ (368) as a substitute for Isaac’s life is, of course, a type of the *agnus dei*.
14. Woolf, *The English Mystery Play*, 153.
15. David Mills states that such exemplary address to grieving parents who will not become resigned to the death of their children was quite popular in the 15th century (“The Doctor’s Epilogue to the Brome *Abraham and Isaac*: A Possible Analogue,” *Leeds Studies in English*, XI (1980), 105.