Introduction

The purpose of this work is to investigate the nature of implicit and explicit staging conventions in the performance of medieval and early sixteenth-century English theatre. The work examines the extent to which staging conventions conditioned *agreed pretence* between instigators and witnesses. The principal forms of evidence to be discussed consist of stage directions in plays, ecclesiastical accounts, civic records, eye-witness descriptions and other contemporary writing. As a means of bringing staging conventions into focus I propose to examine a number of modern assumptions concerning medieval English theatre performance processes, their nature and terminology. There are many modern theatrical concepts and terms that are used today to discuss the nature of medieval English theatre that were not used in medieval times. Concepts and terms such as *character*, *characterisation*, *truth* and *belief*, *costume*, *acting style*, *amateur*, *professional*, *stage directions*, *effects* and *special effects* are all examples of post-medieval terms that are applied to the English theatre. There is no English medieval evidence of these designations. The words and modern concepts that they embody are often used to discuss medieval conditions, and, while they might serve as part of a useful modern theatrical vocabulary, they run the risk of imposing modern theatrical consciousness on medieval conditions, in the process distorting or covering up what is known about medieval English theatre practice. My purpose in restricting theatrical terms in this work to those in use in the early sixteenth century and earlier is not intended as a pedantic one but simply as an attempt to minimise inaccuracies in understanding brought about by unconscious, unthinking and misleading analysis. I am well aware that I run the risk in this work of unwittingly using modern terminology and associated concepts that mask understanding of medieval performance conventions.

Little has been written about staging conventions in the performance of medieval English theatre. It is the aim of this work to investigate evidence of these practical concerns. The staging conventions to be examined are

those concerned with 'outdoor and indoor' performance, 'casting and doubling', 'rehearsing, memorising and cueing', 'coming and going', 'playing, feigning and counterfeiting', 'dressing and disguising', 'expounding and monitoring', 'effecting effects', 'timing and waiting' and 'hearing, seeing and responding'.

All theatre, in its execution, is governed and guided by staging conventions as determined by the purpose of the work, the conditions within which it is performed, and the time taken to move towards and complete its audience perception and reception. Such conventions may be implicit or explicit, conscious or unconscious, and deliberate or accidental. They determine ways in which audiences relate to the theatrical event; they condition rules of engagement for audiences; they establish relative realities and pretence; and they guide (and sometimes condition) audiences in their responses. Where there is a shortage of evidence concerning medieval theatrical processes and their adopted conventions, there is a temptation to fill in the gaps concerning known conditions drawn from modern practice. In the main, such unwitting or unacknowledged assumptions fall back on culturally ingrained naturalistic ones. These are clearly inappropriate. Absence of medieval evidence of the kind that might otherwise satisfy modern criteria of staging conventions does not imply an absence of medieval staging conventions. This work is therefore concerned with attempts to identify these kinds of medieval conventions in order to determine their significance before, during and after performance.

The largest and most fundamental convention to be investigated is that concerned with the nature of *agreed pretence* between those who instigated the theatre and those who witnessed it. *Agreed pretence* is the basis upon which all theatre takes place, even though the agreement may not be explicitly stated. Most frequently the compact between the instigator and the witness is a tacit one and is upheld as long as the spectator voluntarily consents to witness the performed theatre. The staging conventions through which *agreed pretence* is made tangible vary according to the purpose, nature, content and tradition of the work.

One of the most underworked and possibly undervalued forms of evidence to be examined as a means of identifying and determining staging conventions is what is today referred to as the *stage direction*. Much of the evidence presented in this investigation exists in so-called *stage directions* in the manuscripts of plays, their facsimiles and first-printed editions. The term stage direction did not enter the English language until the late eighteenth century,[1] and thus modern understanding of the words derives from this period and later. So, when dealing with apparent *stage directions* in

medieval plays there is a clear need to identify their nature, purpose and function within their perceived original context.

Are so-called *stage directions* in medieval play manuscripts actually stage directions as we understand the term today? That is, are they instructions or guidance to those who put on the play as to how, in what way or when some action should be completed and by whom it should be delivered? Even though these concerns embody understanding of the nature and purpose of modern stage directions, their medieval functions do not always fall within these parameters. It has been generally assumed that supposed stage directions in medieval English play manuscripts exist as practical instructions or guidance to instigators of performance in the manner of modern stage directions. But is this so? There is a good deal of leeway as to the nature and functions of stage directions in modern theatre. George Bernard Shaw's so-called stage directions adopt a quite different stance from those of Harold Pinter or Samuel Beckett.[2]

One of the ways of defining modern stage directions is as *explicit* and *implicit* kinds. The latter form may not be distinguishable from the text of the play, for it is embedded in it as content. The explicit stage direction, however, exists outside the imagined world of the text and determines specific practical requirements of players and/or others who present the work in performance. The explicit stage direction informs and requires what these people should do or what practical tasks should be completed. Thus, while not of the text, the explicit stage direction relates to it and is conditioned by it; it is of pivotal significance in converting the text into performance. This form of stage direction is invariably presented in modern play scripts in a different typeface and spatial layout from that of the text and thus made distinguishable from it. However, the implicit stage direction is essentially of the same kind in both modern and medieval texts. The demands made by the narrative for action to be performed are of the same intrinsic order.

Consequently, in attempts to examine stage directions in medieval play manuscripts it is the same, alternative or equivalent forms of explicit stage directions found in modern plays that need to be identified and examined. Given the identity and purpose of explicit stage directions, they are much more secure in their ability to provide evidence of staging conventions and practice than implicit ones. The value of the implicit stage direction and its content as evidence is weakened and relegated in importance because of the imaginative narrative that clothes it. There is one exception to the perceived weakness of the implicit stage direction, and that is when it is quite clear that the narrative requires the player to directly address

the audience. An example of this sort of condition occurs when a player, teacher or other official operates as an expositor or takes on expository functions (see Chapter 7). With this exception, I shall concentrate on the examination of explicit and not implicit *stage directions*.

Even though it may be possible to distinguish between the implicit and explicit stage directions in modern plays, it is not always possible to do this in English medieval plays. There are several reasons for this. As a means of articulating and explaining these reasons I propose to cite examples from a specific representative source. Appropriate examples exist in the *Towneley* manuscript Huntington MS HMI,[3] where *stage directions* embrace the range of modes and conventions found in other medieval play manuscripts.

One of the reasons it is sometimes difficult to distinguish the implicit *stage direction* from the explicit variety in medieval texts is that *stage directions* are not located on the manuscript page with any consistent visual pattern or spatial convention – even within the same manuscript. Sometimes, explicit *stage directions* appear within the text of the play; they are part of the same line pattern and width as the text, and written in the same or similar black ink. An example of this kind of presentation may be seen in the *Towneley Creation*, where an explicit *stage direction* states: 'Tunc exibunt demones clamando, & dicit primus' (Then the demons shall go out with shouting (noise) & the first shall say).[4] (See Figure 1.)

Some other *stage directions* follow the same pattern of presentation but stand out from it because they are rubricated: that is, written in red ink. One such example of this convention exists in the *Towneley* play of *Pharao*, where it is recorded: 'Tunc intrat moyses cu*m* virga in manu, etc' (Then Moses shall enter with a rod in his hand etc).[5] (See Figure 2.)

This kind of *stage direction* was clearly added after the main text had been copied. The general practice with rubricated subject matter was that the scribe left an appropriate amount of space in order to include it at a later stage. It is clear from the positioning of a number of *stage directions* that the scribe omitted to leave an adequate amount of space in order to insert the *stage direction*. Consequently, some *stage directions* are squeezed into available spaces created by the scribe who copied the text. A case in point occurs in the *Towneley* play of *Iacob*, where we find the direction 'hic diuidit turmas in tres partes' (here Jacob shall divide his hosts into three parts).[6] (See Figure 3.)

It is, of course, possible that the scribe did not know (at the time of writing) that a *stage direction* was to be inserted into the text. Additionally, the scribe who copied the text was not always the same person who copied out the *stage directions*. Other explicit *stage directions* occur between

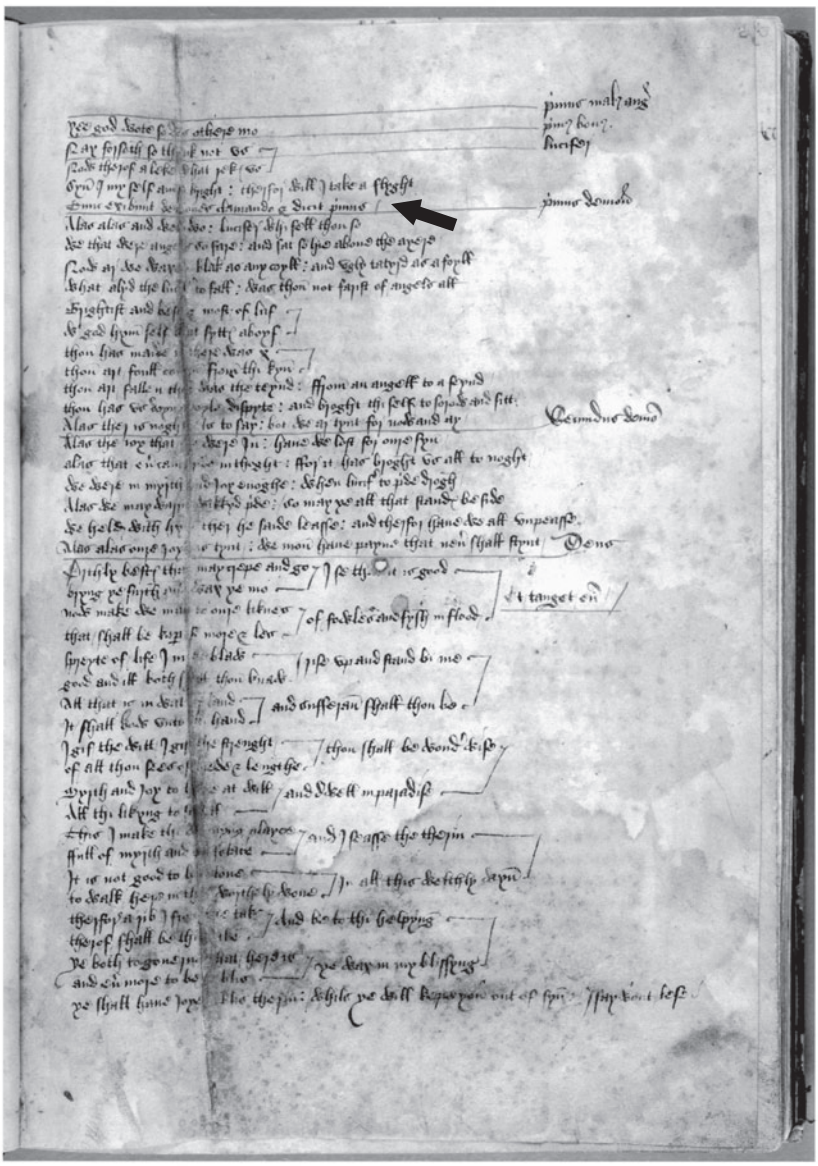

Fig 1 Huntington Library, MS HM1, fol. 2r. Explicit *stage direction* written in black as part of the same line pattern and width as the text.

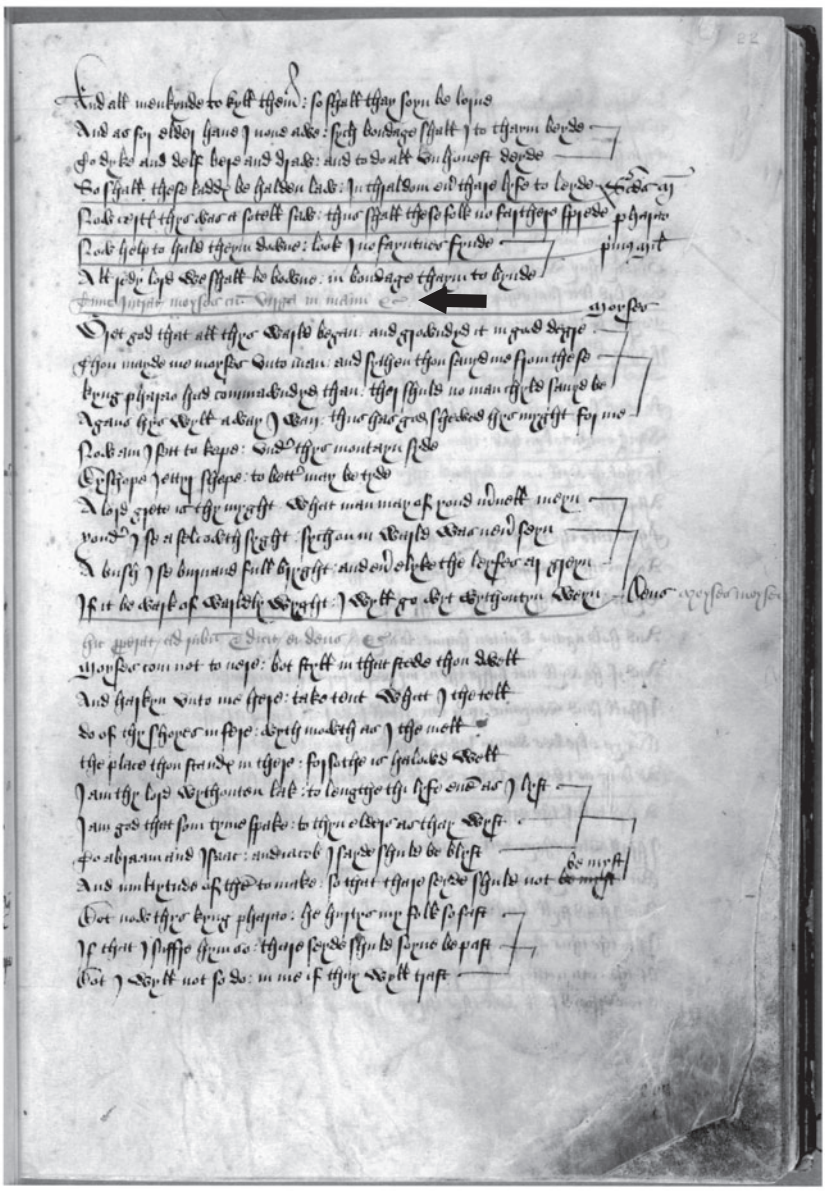

Fig 2 Huntington Library, MS HM1, fol. 22r. Rubricated *stage direction* written as part of the same line pattern as the text.

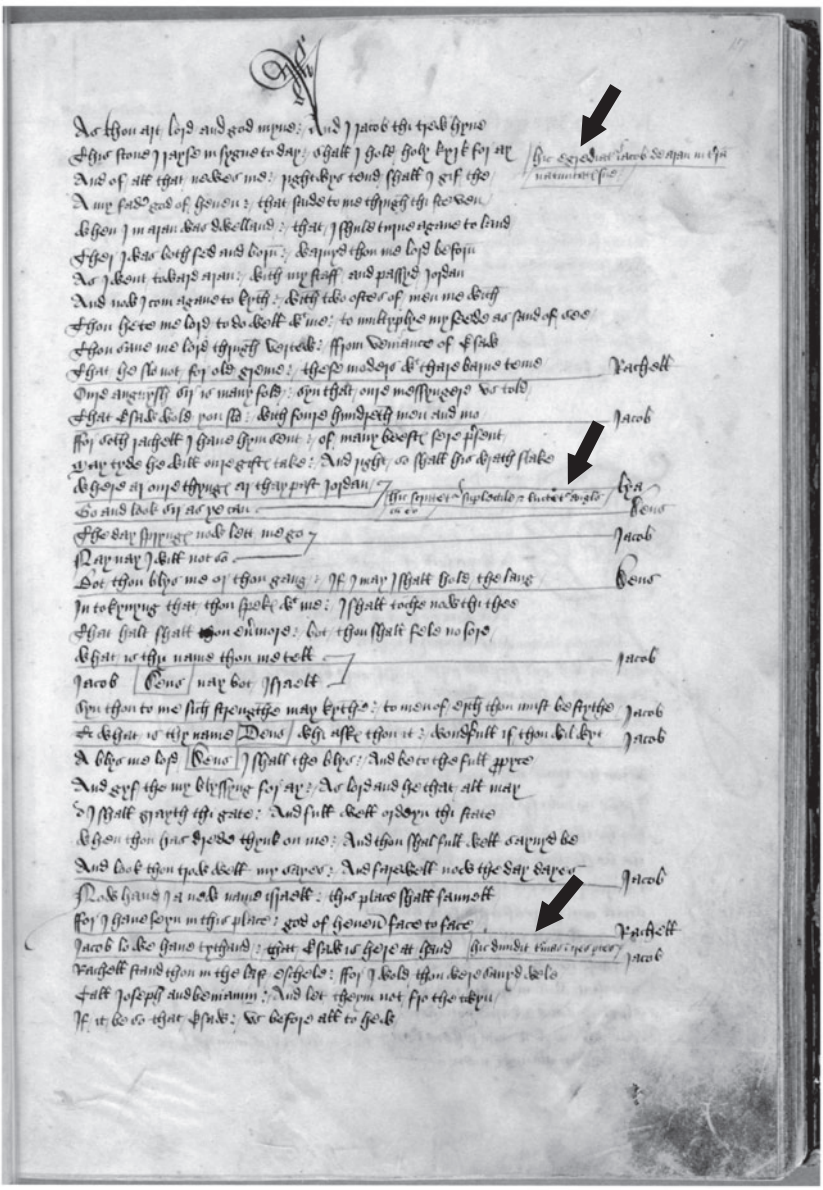

Fig 3 Huntington Library, MS HM1, fol. 17r. *Stage direction* squeezed into available space after copying out the text.

existing lines of the text and overlap left or right boundaries of it. Such an example occurs in the *Towneley Resurreccio domini*: 'Tunc veniet centurio velut miles equit*ans*' (Then the centurion shall come as a knight riding).[7] (See Figure 4.)

This example is also rubricated. Sometimes, such directions are placed in spaces to the left and right of the text – thus, in the margins. A clear example of this arrangement occurs in the *Towneley Oblacio Magorum*, where the *stage direction*, written in English, states: 'here ryse thay all vp'.[8] (See Figure 5.)

Not only is there considerable inconsistency as to the positions that *stage directions* occupy on the page, but there is also a difference in their preferred language. As is evident from the examples above, most of the *stage directions* in the *Towneley* manuscript are written in Latin. Only three are written in English.[9] However, the language of the *stage direction* does not seem to dictate its purpose.

An area of potential confusion arises when the kind of *stage direction* that might be labelled 'explicit' states a requirement determined by the biblical narrative. What does this sort of instruction tell or ask of the reader/participant? Firstly, it tells the reader what happens at this point in the biblical narrative. But, because this kind of statement is usually accurate in its fidelity to the biblical narrative, it often presents ambiguous practical information as a *stage direction* that requires imminent staged action. Is it possible, at this point, for the player to be suitably informed by this kind of *stage direction* as to what to do, or is the reader/participant simply being reminded of the significance of the biblical narrative? If the latter is so, why is this? To further complicate matters, this kind of *stage direction* may be seen to operate as a link between two scenes that differ in both time and place within the biblical narrative. If this sort of *stage direction* were absent, then neither the reader nor the player would know that the scene had moved to another time and location. So is this kind of direction included as a narrative link, a reminder, an instruction or a record? Is there any evidence that the player read the manuscript?

Four *stage directions* in the incomplete *Towneley* play of *Iacob* illustrate these points very clearly. This play is unusual, for no other of the same name and subject matter appears among additional English medieval cycles or collections of plays, and because of its close adherence to the biblical narrative. Of the 142 lines of which the play is composed, no fewer than 118 lines are directly attributable to the biblical narrative.[10] A similarly close correspondence occurs with five of the six *stage directions* in the play: they each owe their source to the bible. The first of these *stage directions*

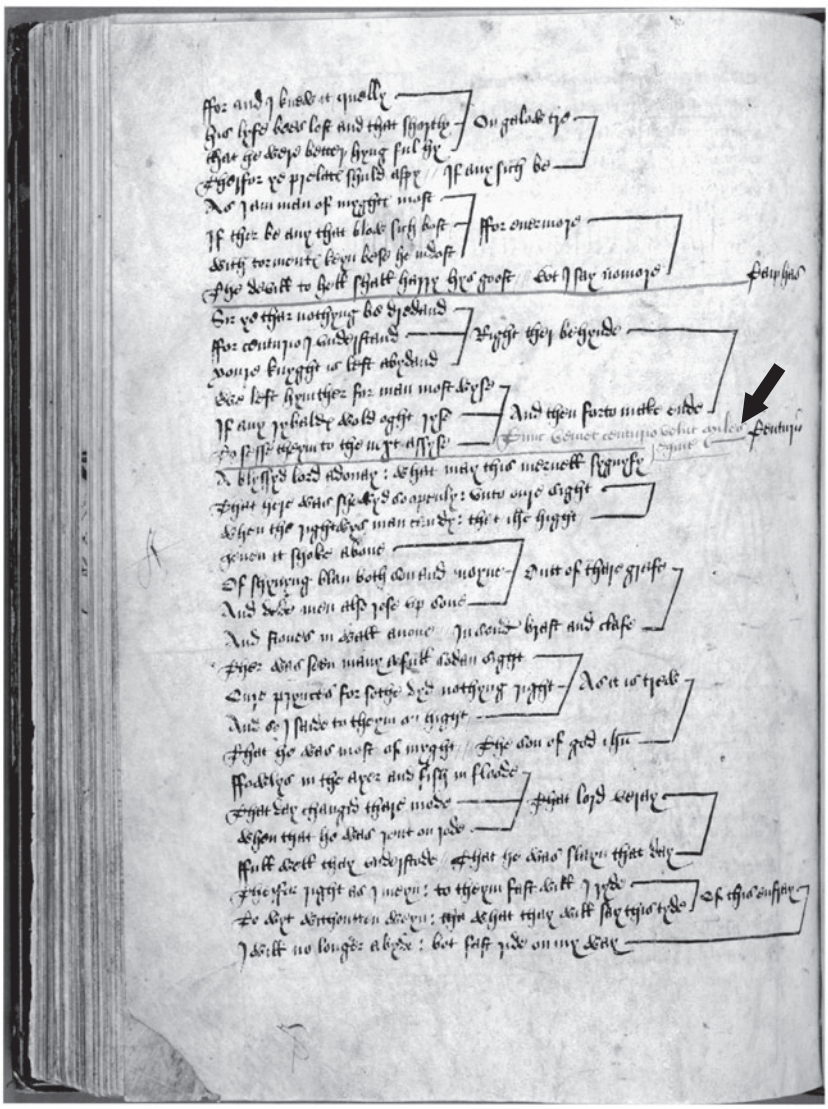

Fig 4 Huntington Library, MS HM1, fol. 101v. Rubricated *stage direction* that overlaps the right boundary of the text.

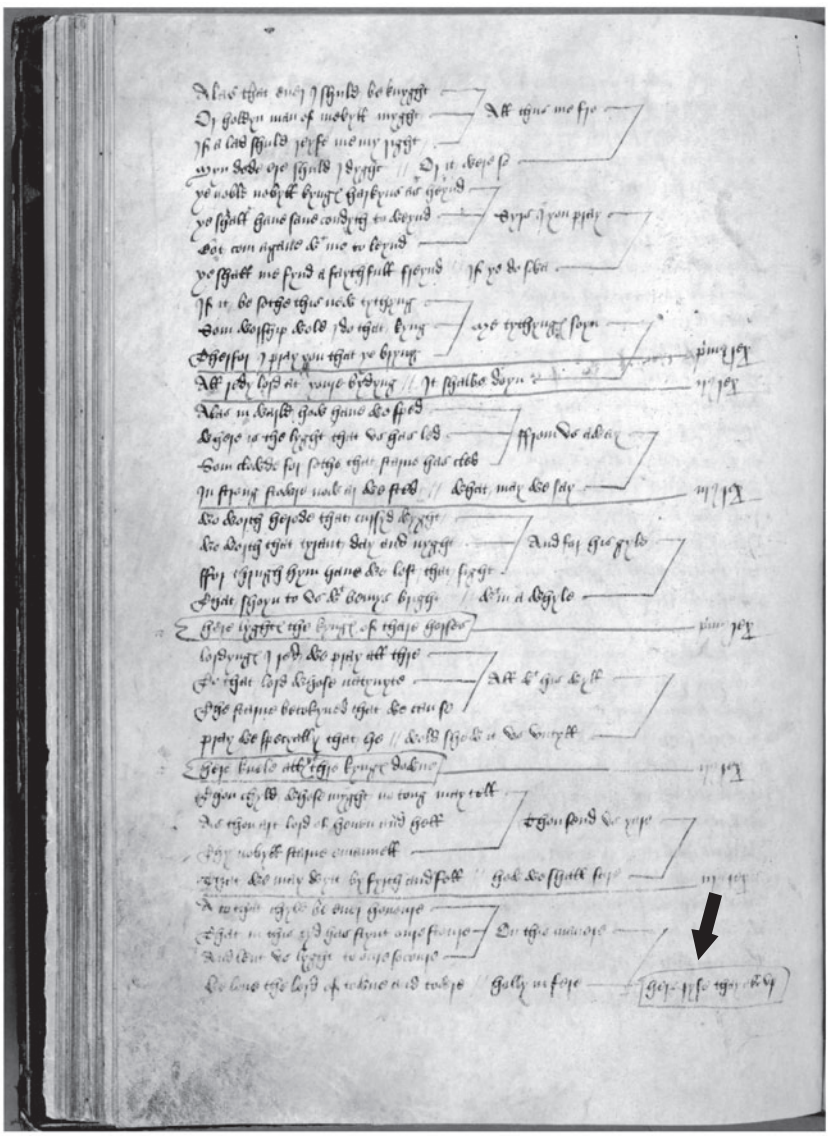

Fig 5 Huntington Library, MS HM1, fol. 51v. *Stage direction* placed in right margin.