CHAPTER 1

VISION, VISUALITY, AND THE AUDIENCE

The stage diagram found on the reverse of folio 91 of MS V.a.354, the manuscript that features *The Castle of Perseverance* (Figure 1.1), has an instruction, written above an image of a central crenelated tower, that no person should sit there, “for lettynge of syt, for ther schal be the best of all.” While revealing something of how medieval audiences may have vied for the best position at the risk of impinging on the action, this note complements instructions on the placing of scaffolds on the cardinal points, the color of the costumes for the Four Daughters of God, the use of fireworks, the construction of a ditch (or the alternative “barring” of it), and the positioning of “ Coveytyse copbord.” There is a clear concern for the look of the playing area; it is essential to make the play work. Yet, the diagram’s preoccupation with “lettynge of syt” also gives us a glimpse into this play’s wider concern with vision as a process that can be interrupted, hindering an ideal outcome. Newhauser has written that “to ask epistemological questions in (and of) the Middle Ages and the Renaissance is to query the senses.” He also notes that:

On the one hand, in a (broadly speaking) Platonic tradition, the realm of ideas could be reached only by clearly circumscribing and surpassing the sensual. On the other hand, in the Aristotelian tradition sensation was directly connected to conceptualization, for the very basis of thought was sensory perception, as Aristotle states explicitly in a number of works. Cognition, in other words, was considered impossible without a prior act of sensation.

In the medieval period, vision was at the top of the hierarchy of senses, just as it is today. Our whole vocabulary of cognition is a discourse of vision—we look, we focus, we have a point of view, and our ideas appear to others. In the medieval period, vision could connect the soul directly
Figure 1.1 Stage diagram of *The Castle of Perseverance* from folio 91 of MS V.a.354.