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Domestic Disturbance in the Medieval Dramatic Cycles
of Chester and York

by

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To Mac and Max

Abstract

The English medieval cycle drama of Chester and York has attracted much scholarship that is critical of the anachronism, anglicization, and inconsistency found in these plays' stagings of the Creation-to-Doom biblical narrative. By introducing the concept of *domestic disturbance*, this project demonstrates that these controversial features of medieval drama instead belong to a style of representation with which medieval audiences were familiar.

The introductory chapter provides a definition of *domestic disturbance*, and explains this concept's relationship to the relevant critical heritage. I propose that extraneous or inconsistent scenes should not be revised or excised; instead, we should consider that modern expectations of linearity, and of dramatic unity of time and place, may not accord with the medieval "horizon of expectations." *Domestic disturbance* allows for a better appreciation of the cycles' common strategies for subversion, as well as their differing attitudes towards conflict.

Chapters Two and Three are case studies demonstrating the efficacy of this theory. Chapter Two focuses on the Chester cycle's troublesome women: Mrs. Noah, and the Mothers of the Innocents, all of whom interrupt the spiritual narrative of the play in order to assert challenges to the patriarchal authority to which they find themselves subject. Chapter Three focuses on the less controversial figures of Mary, Elizabeth, and Eve, to demonstrate that domestic disturbance is not simply the work of a few troublesome women working against

the spiritual goals of the play, but part of a larger strategy for introducing domestic conflict into the biblical narrative, without necessarily undermining it.

Chapter Four extends the scope of domestic disturbance from the narrative of the plays to include their performance. Domestic disturbance is often a means of playing out gendered conflict, but any potential subversion is contingent on its presentation. This chapter compares features of medieval cycle drama against twentieth-century medieval dramatic scholarship relying on theories of the carnivalesque, in order to highlight the features of performance that contribute to medieval cycle drama's unique performance style; cross-dressed actors, performance in and on the streets, and an episodic-processional mode, all work to support the respective narratives of Chester and York.

Acknowledgements

Mrs. Noah's gossips knew about the value of good company and good drink, and I am grateful to all of the people who provided me with a similar sense of community, even in the face of what, on occasion, felt like impending doom. Garrett Epp, my supervisor, regularly provided good beer, great conversation, and expert guidance, whether I had written twenty pages or none; these meetings were the best kind of apprenticeship I could have asked for. Stephen Reimer and Pat Demers were also very generous with their expertise and their time throughout my program, and I am grateful to have had such incisive readers on my committee. I am also grateful to Kathleen Ashley and Stefano Muneroni for encouraging me to think past this project to the ones that lie ahead.

I am also indebted to the non-academic communities to which I have belonged: the women (and their partners) on my hockey teams in Edmonton, the people I worked alongside at the Manitoba Theatre Centre, and the women from Ms Purdy's in Winnipeg. My affiliation with some of these organizations is ongoing, and some have since long passed, but every one of these groups of people has shaped how I view performance, community, and friendship.

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Chapter One

Domestic Disturbance: Establishing a Medieval Dramatic Convention

As James Paxson has pointed out, "Anachronisms, the effect or device wherein a text presents some object that is 'out of its proper time,' has attracted hitherto incomplete and idiosyncratic theoretical appraisal in the criticism of English drama and literature" (321); surprisingly many critics over the years have considered such anachronism, along with other embellishment, irksome and inappropriate to the serious biblical subject matter. This project responds to this problem by introducing the term *domestic disturbance*.

The term *domestic disturbance* names, and thereby makes it possible to discuss, a disparate collection of features of medieval English drama that have been controversial in modern scholarship. The term *domestic* can be understood in two ways: firstly, in the sense of belonging to the home, and, secondly, pertaining to one's own country, in this case England, or, more specifically, the communities producing the plays: Chester and York. These meanings of *domestic* are quite different, and yet both convey a sense of here and now, whether on a small scale (for example, one's kitchen) or a large one (one's country). The second half of the term, *disturbance*, refers to the effect of these plays' strong insistence on place, and the issues, conflicts, experiences and ideas that are proper to that time and place, rather than, for example, proper to the temporal setting of the story being dramatized. For example, when Noah's Wife in the Chester play not only refuses to board the ark, but states that she wants to stay with her contemporary English

gossips instead,[1] Mrs. Noah's reference to the domestic (contemporary) time and place temporarily removes the setting of the play from the time of the Old Testament to the contemporary time of the performance in Chester. According to Paxson, "the Chester Plays express the same cultural need revealed in the York Plays to contemporize biblical narrative as a process unfolding within actual English geography. This [is a] uniquely native cultural project" (325-26). My interest here is in the specifically domestic emphasis of this project.

References to the domestic are common in both the Chester and York plays, and, while they each carry with them varying degrees of significance and controversy, what they all have in common is that they disturb, to varying degrees, the biblical narrative of the plays. These moments, therefore, are called *disturbances* which, according to the OED, is "the interruption and breaking up of tranquility, peace, rest, or settled condition; [also] agitation (physical, social, or political)." These references to the domestic, taken individually, may seem inconsequential, but taken together they can be seen to be disturbing the linear spiritual narrative of Creation to Doom by evoking familial, communal, or

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[1] Mrs. Noah's gossips are marked as belonging to a time and place familiar to a medieval English audience, not simply through their language, but even through their choice of drink. When the gossips begin to fear drowning, they come together to drink "a pottell full of malnesaye good and stronge" (l. 233). According to Jonathan Harris, in "More Malmsey, Your Grace? The Export of Greek Wine to England in the Later Middle Ages," Malmsey was a popular drink in the period. It was

> a type of sweet wine, which was originally associated with the Peloponnese. . . . When the Franks took over Monemvasia after 1204, they called the city and the wine they found there "Malvoisie." Malvoisie was in turn anglicized into Malmsey. By the fifteenth century, the type of grape which produced Malmsey was also being cultivated on Crete and Cyprus and even in Spain in order to produce the quantities needed to satisfy the market. (249)

national issues, conflicts, experiences and ideas that are outside the scope of the story. In short, domestic disturbances interrupt, revise, and/or adapt the grand biblical or spiritual narrative in order to negotiate the terms of power on and around the stage; the dramatic conflict is staged in the medieval "here and now" of the performance, bringing civic, economic, and/or familial concerns centre stage.

The goal of this dissertation is to hypothesize the existence of a medieval dramatic convention common to both the Chester and York Cycles, by focusing primarily on the surviving play texts and what they suggest about their own production. The majority of scholarship on Middle English religious drama has set out to clarify, quantify, or contextualize the difference between modern and medieval theatre, and this project is no different. Most of that scholarship, however, has taken a historical approach—historical in the sense of trying to recreate or imagine medieval theatre as it actually was when it was first produced—and indeed, a tremendous amount of information has been collected about these plays thanks to archival work, most notably the *Records of Early English Drama* out of the University of Toronto, and significantly more is known now about the plays than was known even fifty years ago. However, there are inevitable and potentially insurmountable obstacles to capturing the full historical past of these plays, in particular the late dates of many of the source texts, the paucity of performance records, and even the long-standing confusion about what to call these plays—all issues that will be addressed later in this chapter. Instead of trying to investigate or recreate past productions at specific times and places,

then, this project is interested in the dynamics and conflicts that repeatedly emerge in these plays, and their style of representation, in relation to what they might suggest about the horizon of expectations[2] medieval audiences shared.

After a brief explanation of the methodology used in this project, I will establish some basic historical information about the plays, and clarify some of the terminology that will be used to refer to these plays. The middle section of this introductory chapter will then summarize and analyze some popular arguments found in mid- to late twentieth-century criticism of these plays; by bringing together several decades of a particular line of scholarship, I assert that much modern criticism of the plays has tended to focus on the moments when the integrity of the linear narrative is disrupted in some way, (usually) by women, likely because of prevailing twentieth-century understandings of what good theatre is supposed to do, founded on, as Hans Robert Jauss puts it, "the prejudice of classical aesthetics that defines the beautiful as *harmony of form and content*" (41, emphasis in original). The York, Chester, Towneley, and N-Town texts[3] have been accused variously as being too didactic, too amateur, too inconsistent, too repetitive, and too irreverent. I do not care to engage in a discussion of the merits of such judgments; I do assert, however, that these various criticisms of medieval

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[2] While reader-response theory does not often comfortably align with the post-modern literary theories that inform this project, Hans Robert Jauss's idea that "the coherence of literature as an event is primarily mediated in the horizon of expectations of the literary experience of contemporary and later readers, critics, and authors" (22) is useful to this project. I will discuss the relevance of reader-response theory in the following section on methodology, below.

[3] Although the focus of this dissertation is on the York and Chester cycles, for reasons that I will explain in detail below, much of the criticism I will refer to makes little distinction between the four extant texts.

cycle drama are, for the most part, objecting to the same thing, namely domestic disturbance, and that this domestic disturbance ought not to be seen as a problematic feature of the drama, but instead as one of the defining features of this drama.

After outlining some of the features of domestic disturbance at the end of this chapter, I will, in subsequent chapters, discuss specific examples of domestic disturbance in order to demonstrate the efficacy of this model for interrogating the ways in which this drama functions; I will show that domestic disturbance is an effective model for explaining the existence of those diverse moments in the drama which have earned it so many years of rebuke, by demonstrating the function of domestic disturbance to challenge the patriarchal ideologies otherwise espoused by the biblical narrative. The end result, I hope, will be a more sophisticated understanding of the conventions of domestic disturbance within both the story and structure of medieval drama, and a more nuanced appreciation of the gender politics that so often drive the drama of these plays.

Approaching the "Theatrical Style": Theory and Methodology

Thirty years ago, Meg Twycross and Peter Norton experimented with cross-dressing in their productions of a selection of medieval plays in order to gather a sense of the "theatrical style" of the drama (Twycross 123). Like them, my goal is to understand more fully the theatrical style of these plays, but, unlike them, I am able to employ theories that have taken shape in the years since their study, namely queer theory, and its concepts of performativity and queer

historicism. These plays are surprisingly feminist, thanks to the number of female characters challenging the ideologies espoused by their male counterparts and by the plays themselves; additionally, these female roles are almost certainly being enacted by cross-dressed men, making these disturbances potentially queer as well as feminist. This dissertation employs methodologies from these theoretical traditions, as well as borrowing from the less recent reception theory of Hans Robert Jauss and his idea of the "horizon of expectations."

Queer theory resists easy definition because of the various ways in which it has been utilized; it is both a description of an area of inquiry (queer subjects) as well as a description of a theoretical approach. According to Annamarie Jagose's book on queer theory, "Like the theory of performativity, which to a large extent underwrites its project, queer opts for denaturalisation as its primary strategy" (98). One of the main tenets of performativity[4] is the false unity and transparency of sex and gender. As Judith Butler famously explains in *Bodies that Matter*, performativity does not mean that "one woke in the morning, perused the closet or some more open space for the gender of choice, donned that gender for

[4] Judith Butler's notion of performativity comes from J. L. Austin's discussion of what he calls "performative utterances." Austin is concerned with "a kind of utterance which looks like a statement and grammatically . . . would be classed as a statement . . . and yet it is not true or false. . . . If a person makes an utterance of this sort we should say that he is *doing* something rather than merely *saying* something" (235), as in the case of someone saying, "I do," in a wedding ceremony. According to Austin, the first rule of a performative utterance is that "the convention invoked must exist and be accepted" (237). Butler takes up this notion of the performative to explain the way in which gender is naturalized by way of repeated performances of it, by people *doing* gender on a daily basis, and by suggesting that the construction of identity categories is based on invisible conventions that have been accepted by virtue of having been constantly and consistently repeated.

the day, and then restored the garment to its place at night" (x); instead, "performativity must be understood . . . as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" (2). Denaturalisation of the "law of heterosexual coherence" (Butler, *Gender* 175) can be accomplished by making visible the practices by which this law is continually reinscribed, as with any other "self-evident" identity categories to do with sex, sexuality, and race, to name a few. In Chester and York, the cross-dressed men playing female roles and dramatizing gender conflict in these plays sometimes instantiate challenges to this "law of heterosexual coherence" by drawing attention to their cross-dressed appearance, and sometimes do not, depending on the degree of denaturalisation accomplished by the performance, and the context within which this denaturalisation occurs.

Queer theory is often opposed to feminism and lesbian and gay studies, because, arguably, the latter depend on stable identity categories, whereas queer resists and challenges them.

> Broadly speaking, queer describes those gestures of analytical models which dramatise incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire. Resisting that model of stability . . . queer focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire. Institutionally, queer has been associated most prominently with lesbian and gay subjects, but its analytic framework also includes such topics as cross-dressing, hermaphroditism, gender ambiquity and gender-corrective surgery.

> Whether as transvestite performance or academic deconstruction, queer locates and exploits the incoherencies in those three terms which stabilize heterosexuality. Demonstrating the impossibility of any "natural" sexuality, it calls into question even such apparently unproblematic terms as "man" and "woman." (Jagose 3)

In its efforts to destabilize heterosexuality, however, queer theory has earned itself a difficult relationship with feminist theory; despite having much in common, "such as the rich elaboration of the workings of normativity or the disruption of identity" (Weed x), queer theory "reduce[s] [feminism] almost to caricature: a feminism . . . bound to a regressive and monotonous binary opposition" (xi) of male and female. The difficulty identified by Elizabeth Weed in the above quotation is in the feasibility of talking about women when there is no essential category of woman, only iterations and citations of femaleness that are continuously circulating; if "woman" does not exist as a category, it begs the question, what is left to legitimize departments of Women's Studies, women's rights, and feminism itself?

I am conscious of this difficult interplay between queer and feminist theories but, as book collections such as *feminism meets queer theory* suggest, the intersection between these two theories can be very productive.[5] A feminist approach allows me to revisit assumptions about the roles of female characters, particularly the disruptive ones, in medieval cycle drama, in the context of the

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[5] *Feminism meets queer theory*, edited by Elizabeth Weed and Naomi Schor, is a collection of essays and interviews by feminist and queer scholars discussing, among other things, the place of feminism in a queer theoretical landscape, and vice versa.

larger gender politics of the plays. These female characters do subvert authority, whether that of their husband, or of God, through disobedience, violence, and even silence. My interest in these female characters, even if they are played by biological men, is in the strategies they use to subvert power, the means by which they are returned to their proper places, and the potential lasting repercussions of their struggle for the members of the audience who may identify with them. As Jill Dolan reminds us in *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, "the varied responses of spectators mixed across ideologies of gender, sexuality, race, and class" (121), and so, while not every member of any given audience will find such strategies of subversion attractive, the repetition of these struggles on stage suggests that a certain number of the participants were also interested in such matters.

Another difficult interplay of theories exists between performativity and performance. Queer theory, and its interest in performativity, is decidedly not interested in the deliberate "putting on" of identity which Butler references (above), and which is a prerequisite of theatrical performance. Performativity, queer theory, and much of feminist theory, is interested in how identity categories can be denaturalized; however, any theory of dramatic performance has to contend with the fact that most participants in a production, including the audience, are aware that what is happening on the stage is not real, and yet audiences are often invited to suspend disbelief and accept the artificial identity markers being utilized by the production. Any theatrical production has the ability both to rely on the conventions of identity markers to suggest character (by means of costume, voice, props, and so on), and, in turn, to call attention to the

artificiality of such identifiers, depending on the style of the production. The Chester and York plays are no different—the male actor playing Mary may draw little attention to his gender, but a male actor playing Mrs. Noah almost certainly will—and the following chapters will demonstrate that these plays frequently exploited this technique when staging gendered conflict between male and female characters.

The other theoretical challenge of this dissertation has to do with historical narratives and their own essentializing tendencies. What Carolyn Dinshaw calls "queer historicism" is helpful here because, as she explains it, queer historicism "intensely problematize[s] the body in time and reject[s] the protocols of any historicism grounded in coherent temporal progress" (110). Similar to the problem of self-evident identity categories, queer historicism addresses itself to the problem inherent in organizing the past into logical and linear narratives which so frequently tend towards chronologies of progress. As Dinshaw points out, medieval texts are particularly susceptible to this as "multiple temporalities are not unusual in [a] medieval context" (110); any linear narrative about medieval drama will necessarily elide other important elements of the plays, something which becomes evident once we consider some of the assumptions found in the critical tradition of the medieval cycle plays (below). Queer historicism allows me to "denaturalize" such narratives, and to question essentialist notions espoused by some scholars that these plays, being religious in nature, must therefore only accomplish spiritual goals, for example, and that these plays belong in a direct line of historical progress that privileges uniformity of

dramatic narrative over multiplicity of meaning. Scholarship on these plays has certainly been improved by considerations of medieval drama's historical context, but, at the same time, this emphasis on historical context has had the unfortunate effect of narrowing the range of interpretations available.

Lastly, I rely on some of the concepts attributed to reader-response theory, popular in the 1960s and 1970s, despite Susan Bennett's contention that "more recent post-structuralist theory has made evident the limitations of the reader-response approach" (34). In his introduction to *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* by Hans Robert Jauss, Paul de Man highlights Jauss's anti-essentialist stance by pointing out that

> few historians still believe that a work of the past can be understood by reconstructing, on the basis of recorded evidence, the set of conventions, expectations, and beliefs that existed at the time of its elaboration. What is different and effective in the approach suggested by Jauss are the reasons (implicitly) given for this impossibility: the historical consciousness of a given period can never exist as a set of openly stated or recorded propositions. It exists instead, in Jauss's terminology, as a "horizon of expectations." (Jauss xii)

Because "the set of conventions, expectations and beliefs" of any given period can never be reproduced in its entirety, because individual readers interact with various texts in a countless number of ways, Jauss's concept of a "horizon of expectations" provides a productive way of thinking about the process by which

conventions are established, reproduced, and altered as a result of the interaction between readers and texts, or, in this case, audience and script. According to Jauss, "The new text evokes for the reader (listener) the horizon of expectations and rules familiar from earlier texts, which are then varied, corrected, altered, or even just reproduced. Variation and correction determine the scope, whereas alteration and reproduction determine the borders of a genre-structure" (23). Given the repeat performances of the Chester and York plays in their respective cities over a long period of time, attention to the horizon of expectations and its effects seems especially relevant to a discussion of these texts.

Jauss's interest in what he calls the "social function of literature" is also fruitful, as it conceives of the possibility that literary experience "enters into the horizon of expectations of his [the reader's] lived praxis, performs his understanding of the world, and thereby also has an effect on his social behavior" (39). For Jauss, the horizon of expectations of literature "anticipates unrealized possibility, broadens the limited space of social behavior for new desires, claims, and goals, and thereby opens paths of future experience" (41). The suggestion that audiences have an effect on literary production, and that literary production anticipates and responds to experience, is a productive model for understanding how theatre audiences might shape the conventions of theatre even as theatre is simultaneously having an effect on audience's expectations of those conventions. This dialectical relationship between audience and text is significant in the context of discussing conventions surrounding cross-dressing and processional performance, both subjects of the final chapter of this dissertation.

The Plays and their Problems: Dates, Terms, and the Evolutionary Impulse

The plays that are the subject of this dissertation are associated with the cities of Chester and York, and they both have long and complicated histories. Each cycle is made up of a large number of short plays, sometimes called pageants or episodes, each of these dramatizing an event in Christian history from the beginning of time to Judgment Day; the collection of these events in chronological order is sometimes referred to as a Creation-to-Doom sequence. If performed primarily by amateurs, in procession, on the streets of the community producing the play,[6] as is commonly thought, these cycles would have been tremendous events, taking an entire day (in the case of York)[7] or three (in the case of Chester), and involving an entire community (along with people from surrounding areas) as participants and as audience members. In theory, these plays were performed once a year, and over a span of as much as 200 years, yet only a small number of these productions have been documented. Nonetheless, these plays were apparently well-enough known to have attracted Margery Kempe

[6] Medieval cycle drama did not take place in the purpose-built playhouse to which modern audiences are accustomed, but almost certainly on moveable wagons, and in the street where these wagons stopped for their performance. See Chapter Four for a discussion of this style of performance and its effects.

[7] There is some debate as to whether or not it was possible for all of the plays in the York cycle to be performed in one day; see Richard Beadle's "The York Cycle: Texts, Performances, and the Bases for Critical Enquiry" (118-19) for a discussion of the possibility that some guilds might have opted out of the cycle performance on a given year.

and her husband to York for the staging of the plays in 1413.[8] Chaucer's Wife of Bath states in her prologue that she loved to attend "pleyes of miraclis" (3.558),[9] and Chaucer's "Miller's Tale" offers two references to early English drama (1.3124, 3384).[10]

Production of these plays was not a small undertaking: responsibility for each pageant was doled out to trade guilds that were then responsible for producing their own small portion of the Christian story, and the entire community was involved in its production. For example, York had anywhere from 45-56 plays in its cycle,[11] necessitating a large number of participants to act,

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[8] In Chapter 11 of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, Margery describes returning with her husband from York on Friday, Midsummer's Eve. According to B. A. Windeatt in his edition of this text, this is likely 23 June, 1413:

> After seeing Phillip Repyngdon (who became Bishop of London in 1405) about her vows of chastity (chapter 15), Margery later visits Archbishop Arundel (chapter 16), who died in February 1414. Moreover, Margery—married c. 1393—records that she bore her husband fourteen children (chapter 48). Between 1405 and 1414 Midsummer's Eve fell upon a Friday only in 1413. As Corpus Christi Day in 1413 fell on 22 June, it is likely that Margery and her husband had seen the Mystery Plays performed at York. (305, n. 1)

[9] I concur with Melvin Storm who reasons that, given the strong confluence of allusions to the character of Noah's wife, the Wife of Bath's reference to the broadly-defined miracle plays almost certainly included the more narrowly-defined medieval cycle plays (304).

[10] As Alexandra Johnston points out, in "Chaucer's Records of Early English Drama," Chaucer's references to "Pilates voys" and Absolon's star turn as "Herodes upon a scaffold hye" in the Miller's Tale (1.3124, 3384) are "among the earliest extant references to Biblical drama in England and as such are important records of early English drama" (14).

[11] The number of available plays changed over the course of the York cycle's history, and certainly not every play was performed each year. A total of 56 plays are recorded in a second list that accompanies the *Ordo Paginarum*,

build sets, mend costumes, and supervise production on an annual basis.[12] That "liberties" were taken with the subject matter, no matter how reverential the tone of the productions, should not be remarkable in these circumstances given the familiar subject matter, and the large-scale participation in each community.

How these plays came to be is a question under frequent debate. It was long thought that medieval drama could be located in a direct line of progress from the liturgy to Shakespeare and other early modern drama; O. B. Hardison summarizes this once-popular and persistent theory:

> [A] dramatic instinct asserted itself in the *Quem quaeritis* trope of the Easter liturgy. The trope grew, was detached from the liturgy, and eventually became genuine drama. . . . At first the dramas were given in the church and in Latin. Later they were presented in the churchyard, and vernacular began to be used. In the course of this development they were expanded, and much comic and farcical material was added. . . . [I]ndividual plays tended to be collected and presented in groups. By the early fourteenth century large-scale cycles had been created which form the basis of the Passion plays and Corpus Christi cycles of the fifteenth century. (26)

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dated c. 1420, which "survives practically unaltered to give a picture of the cycle at a relatively early stage in its career" (Beadle 25). Beadle adds, "by the time the Register was compiled the cycle may be said to have consisted of 50 plays," 45 of which were recorded by the main scribe (27).

[12] Beadle points out that "the Corpus Christi play was usually an annual event" (20), but the performance was "sometimes cancelled because of external circumstances (such as war and plague in 1558)" (n. 43).

This narrative of progress is something to which Hardison was objecting as long ago as 1965, but this evolutionary model has proven very difficult to overcome, even if, as Hardison points out, "The resulting form [of the story of medieval drama's development] is closer to a chronicle than a history in the true sense of the word" (26).

Regardless of the details of their collective development, however, each play offers its own particular challenges to a study such as this one. As has often been pointed out, most recently by Tony Corbett in his *The Laity, the Church and the Mystery Plays: A Drama of Belonging* (2009), the Chester cycle as it has come down to us is not contemporaneous with the production of these plays: "The Chester cycle, or parts of it, is contained in eight manuscripts, three single-play fragments and five manuscripts which contain the complete cycle, with variations both great and small. The earliest of the full manuscripts is dated 1591, the latest 1607" (13). If the age of the texts is not problematic enough, R. M. Lumiansky and David Mills's 1974 Early English Text Society edition of *The Chester Mystery Cycle* uses one manuscript, Huntington Library MS HM 91108, as its base text, "including plays from other manuscripts where their versions proved superior" (Corbett 13). Given that none of these manuscripts is contemporary with a performance of the plays in Chester, and given that the main scholarly edition of the cycle is in some ways an anthology of the best of the plays Chester has to offer in its extant manuscripts, the criticism that the text we know of as *The Chester Mystery Cycle* was never actually performed in medieval Chester is a fair

one.[13] In addition to not knowing when, if ever, and in what context the Chester cycle plays as we know them were performed, this cycle is not a Corpus Christi play[14] in the way that York's cycle is; according to David Mills, in *Recycling the Cycle*, the Chester plays moved sometime before 1521 (112) from what was presumably a one-day performance around the celebrations of Corpus Christi, to a performance over the course of the three days following Whit Sunday (116), rendering the once-common label of "Corpus Christi play" inaccurate as a general term meant to refer to all of these plays.

The York cycle is less controversial, but certainly not without its problems as a stable historical artifact. The manuscript containing the York Plays is British Library, MS Additional 35290, and, with the exception of a copy of the Scriveners' play of the *Incredulity of Thomas,* which can be found in the

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[13] In May of 2010, scholars and performers gathered in Toronto to experiment with a three-day-long reconstruction of the Chester Cycle based on notes made by Protestant preacher Christopher Goodman, who saw the play in 1572. He was concerned that the play would cause "peril and danger to her Majesty" (Chester 2010), and took these notes to use as evidence of his charge. Goodman's notes indicate two things: first, that the play as it was seen in 1572 may have been more Catholic than the later extant play texts indicate; and second, that the division of episodes may have been more flexible than has heretofore been thought.

[14] Corpus Christi is a moveable feast, dating back to 1264, which "celebrates Christ's presence in the Host consecrated at the Mass, effectively an annual affirmation of the doctrine of transubstantiation" (King 7), usually by way of a procession of the Host through the city. While the precise nature of the relationship between the plays and Corpus Christi is unclear, Pamela King argues in *The York Mystery Cycle and the Worship of the City* that the York Cycle is a celebration "specific to the feast of Corpus Christi, rather than a reprise of Christian history located at the time of the feast because the weather was likely to be good and the day long" (9). It is certainly plausible that there would be some relationship between feast and play; in Chester, the play was moved to Whitsun after the Reformation.

Yorkshire Museum's Sykes manuscript, this manuscript is the only extant text of the play.[15] According to Richard Beadle, editor of *The York Plays* (1982), "the manuscript was intended to be the official record of the text of the York Corpus Christi play, and was the property of the corporation" (11). Beadle dates this manuscript sometime between 1463 and 1477, and reasons that it was "compiled from the various 'originals,' prompt copies in the form of small booklets, held by each of the gilds having responsibility for a play in the cycle" (11). The *Ordo Paginarum* "consists of a list of the gilds which performed plays in the Corpus Christi cycle, together with a brief description of each play" (24), and, even though most of these entries date between 1415 and 1433, this *Ordo* "resembles in many particulars what was set down in the manuscript sometime between 1463 and 1477" (11). Despite these similarities, however, the annotations and marginalia in both the Register of 1463-1477 and the *Ordo Paginarum* suggest that the York cycle underwent frequent emendation, revision, and reorganization over its performance history. For example, sometime between the *Ordo* and the Register, the Plumbers' "Woman Taken in Adultery" and the Hartshorners'

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[15] Although there is only one complete copy of the York play, it also includes two instances of duplication. The manuscript includes two copies of the Cardmakers' play, "The Creation of Adam and Eve," one written by Scribe A and one by Scribe B: "it seems that the unsigned quire [written by Scribe A] . . . was at some time separated from the rest of the manuscript" (Beadle 417). Beadle adds that "it is beyond doubt that both were made from the same 'original'" but that text *B* is "slightly superior textually" (417). There is also some duplication in what was once identified by Toulmin Smith as plays XVI and XVII, which Beadle, in his edition, has combined into a single play, XVI: "Herod/The Magi." The reason for this has to do with "the repetition of identical scenes in what the manuscript presents as successive plays" (430); Beadle sees this as an indication that the Masons and the Goldsmiths, while responsible for their own parts of the production of a single play, would have come together to perform the duplicated scenes with "the Three Kings moving between the two *loci*" (430).

"Raising of Lazarus" were combined into the Cappers' Play XXIV. The manuscript on which Beadle's edition of *The York Plays* is based gives a fairly compelling snapshot of what the York cycle might have looked like at some point in that fourteen year window between 1463 and 1477, but it is impossible to say with any certainty that this manuscript provides a historically accurate picture of a performance of the York cycle in any given year. One notable example is the suspension of the Marian plays—covering the death, funeral, and assumption of Mary—between 1548 and 1554, when it returned only to be prohibited again in 1561 (Beadle 27-28).

Despite the historical uncertainties that the York and Chester cycles carry with them, they nonetheless have a richer and more complete background than the much discussed Towneley and N-Town texts, and indeed are the only two plays that can properly be called cycles.[16] The N-Town manuscript can be roughly dated to 1460-1477.[17] According to Alan J. Fletcher,

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[16] The terminology used to discuss these plays is inconsistent. "Cycle" is a popular term for referring to the collection of plays and not the individual episodes within a play, but this terminology suggests that each of the episodes is designed to be performed as part of "a full, sequential, dramatic production" (Epp "Towneley Plays" 124). For Chester and York, "cycle" does appear to be the appropriate term, but the Towneley and N-Town have no reliable performance records, and these manuscripts appear to be more akin to anthologies than coherent sequences. For the purposes of this dissertation, I use "cycle" to refer to the York and Chester plays specifically, and "play" to refer to any of the four play collections generally (Chester, York, Towneley, or N-Town). When discussing episodes within the larger collection, I also use "play" when the context is clear that I am discussing one part of the whole; if a passage may be confusing, I resort to "episode" or "pageant" for the sake of clarity.

[17] The N-Town manuscript is in the British Library (MS Cotton Vespasian D.8).

> the plays of Cotton Vespasian D. viii are not tidily compliant, and resist the totalizing project that the idea of a "Corpus Christi cycle" has sometimes risked becoming. . . . Nor has the Creation-to-Doom scope of the manuscript's content, which superficially invites comparison with the other three major mystery play[18] collections of Chester, Wakefield and York, come about for comparable reasons. . . . [I]t is juster to recognize the fascinating *difference* of this manuscript. (163)[19]

One of the differences that feature in this manuscript is its "literary" quality; "its glosses betray a desire to give it a certain literary 'finish' indifferent to practical dramatic use" (Fletcher 167), and, as Peter Meredith has argued, "the N. Town manuscript contains not a cycle of pageants but a composite collection of plays, pageants and, in one case, speeches, of distinct origins and of varying forms. Despite this, most scholars continue to talk of them as a cycle" (vi). Martin Stevens, in *Four Middle English Mystery Cycles*, does attempt to discuss the N-

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[18] According to David Bevington, the term "mystery play" was popular because the plays were "performed by various trades or 'mysteries'" (227). The term comes from the Latin *ministerium* and French *mystere* or *métier*: "This term is of Continental origin, however, and was not current in medieval England, whereas the cycles were frequently referred to in their own time as Corpus Christi plays" (227).

[19] Fletcher describes the N-Town manuscript, sometimes known as the Hegge plays, as being East Anglian in origin, but whether it comes from Coventry (hence *Ludus Coventriae*, as these plays were formerly known), Lincoln (even though "any Lincoln affiliation of [these plays'] written dialect had . . . been seriously undermined" (164)), Norwich ("until it was observed that whatever its provenance, the manuscript probably had no relation to the Norwich civic play cycle" (165)), Bury St Edmunds or Thetford (as Fletcher proposes), it is unclear. Peter Meredith reasons that N-Town "seems the best title for plays without a home" (vii).

Town plays as "product rather than process" (184), pointing to his own interest in finding the unity within the manuscript, rather than "the positing of strata of composition and multiple authorship" (211), but concedes that a study of these plays is "fraught with difficulty and uncertainty" (182) and that "the opinion that the N-Town cycle is a unified work of art worthy of consideration as a single drama has not had wide acceptance in published scholarship" (210). According to Pamela King, "It is now well known that the so-called N. Town Plays represent a compilation whose circumstances of performance, actual or conceptual, differ markedly from the civic cycles" (1). Of all the extant texts, the N-Town manuscript is the least interesting with respect to domestic disturbances, in part because of its doctrinal conservatism, and in part due to its likely status as a devotional compilation rather than performance text.

The Towneley manuscript,[20] dated c. 1460, is named for the Towneley family who had the manuscript when it was discovered and printed in the early nineteenth century (Meredith "The Towneley Cycle" 134); the plays within it were once more commonly called the Wakefield plays, but the evidence that this manuscript was associated with the town of Wakefield, in Yorkshire, has come under question since 1983,[21] as has the notion of an identifiable playwright known

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[20] The Towneley manuscript is Huntington Library, MS HM 1.

[21] As Epp points out in "'Corected & not playd': An Unproductive History of the Towneley Plays," the association has been questioned since the first public notice of the MS, and several times since. Corbett adds:

> since 1983, Barbara Palmer had begun to argue against the association of Wakefield with the plays, and against the manuscript's status as a play cycle. In 2002, she produced an essay in *Research Opportunities in Medieval and Renaissance Drama*

as the Wakefield Master, who was given credit for writing a number of the pageants. As Corbett puts it, "The traditional image of a cycle performed, possibly by trade guilds in Wakefield, and containing some material culled from York and some stunning plays by the Wakefield Master, is gradually unraveling" (15). According to Peter Meredith,

> The first problem with the cycle is, then, one of names and origins. A second . . . problem is the kind of performance that is appropriate to it. . . . With no town records to serve as a context for the cycle we are thrown back on the manuscript and the text itself. . . . A more basic problem even than those of provenance and staging is the nature of the cycle itself . . . because of the absence of related records for Towneley. ("The Towneley Cycle" 135)

Further complicating matters are the internal contradictions within the text. Garrett Epp, examining its potential as a performance text, describes Towneley as "a collection of heterogeneous texts and groups of texts" with "disjunctions" that are "obvious"; these texts have "different staging requirements and uses of language," and "various social, intellectual, and theological views . . . inform the individual texts" ("Towneley" 138). It is extremely unlikely that the Towneley manuscript is a performance text.

> which unpacks many of the givens of traditional scholarship on the Towneley manuscript. (15)

In 1994, however, Martin Stevens and A. C. Cawley produced an edition of the Towneley Plays for the Early English Text Society, stating, "there can be little doubt of the association of the MS with the town of Wakefield" (xix).

Despite their problems, I strongly suspect that there are features of both the Towneley and N-Town manuscripts that are influenced by the convention of domestic disturbance as well, to varying degrees.[22] For instance, the Second Shepherds Play (Towneley), which famously begins with the theft of a sheep only to end with a Nativity scene, could be described as containing the most extreme example of domestic disturbance; the domestic almost entirely displaces the spiritual narrative, to the point that the Nativity actually appears to be a disruption of the contemporary narrative. However, it is for the reasons given above, as well as for the sake of brevity, that I am limiting the scope of this project to the Chester and York cycles alone. I will occasionally make reference to relevant plays from N-Town and Towneley when such comparisons can be useful to the discussion, but the focus of this project is on the York and Chester cycles, the ways in which domestic disturbance informs the structure of these plays, and the nature of their production choices, even if the choices themselves are, ultimately, different.

There is much that is still not known about the York and Chester cycles, and the following section will address issues of consistency within these plays. For the purposes of this project, the long and uncertain process of revision and emendation that the York and Chester cycles underwent will be considered to be

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[22] The N-Town manuscript appears to contain the least offensive material, and is therefore not prone to the kind of negative scholarly criticism that sometimes plagues Chester, York, and in particular, Towneley. This is probably due to the fact that N-Town is the most pious and contains the least conflict of all the extant manuscripts, whereas Towneley is the opposite. A more comprehensive project than this one might also make the case that the critical acclaim scholars have historically showered on the "Wakefield Master," the legendary, hypothetical, and anonymous "author" of a handful of plays in the Towneley manuscript, is due to this manuscript's excessive use of anglicization and anachronism.

evidence of a performance tradition establishing itself. This means, for example, that a scene that Mary Wack has determined is a Tudor addition to an otherwise medieval play—such as the Tapster scene at the end of Chester's "Harrowing of Hell"—should not be excised from the text, but examined for what it can tell us about what was already there. What has come to us, however imperfectly, as the York and Chester cycles is what has endured as drama suited to that community and its particular standards, preoccupations, and desires at that particular time; taken together, the scenes that "don't fit," for whatever reason, form a large body of evidence that suggests that fitting, in the way that some twentieth-century readers understand it, is not a priority in these plays.

Evolution to Excision: A Critical Tradition

Eleanor Prosser observed in 1961, "Almost all scholarship for the last half century has been marked by an earnest desire to understand the mysteries, by an eager search for something—anything—good to be said about them" (12); as I will show below, some scholars continued the search in the decades that followed. This search for "something—anything—good to be said" is different in degree and kind from the extant (medieval) contemporaneous objections made by Wycliffite (or Lollard) segments of the population.[23] Texts such as *A Tretise of*

[23] Criticism of medieval drama exists in between the medieval and twentieth centuries, of course, most notably the critique of the mystery plays made by Lord Byron, in the 1821 preface to his own play, *Cain: A Mystery*. He compares his play to the "ancient . . . mysteries," stating, "The author has by no means taken the same liberties with his subject, which were common formerly, as may be seen by any reader curious enough to refer to those very profane

Miraclis Pleyinge (c. 1380-1414) and the Banns announcing the upcoming productions in Chester, register anxiety about the effect the plays will have on audiences, and the overall quality of the productions themselves. Although it could be expected that the anxieties provoked in two such different historical periods would be somewhat different, an impulse is evident in some twentieth-century medieval dramatic scholarship to excise, or explain away, those aspects of the drama that are judged to be inappropriate. That such a degree of difference exists between some contemporary and twentieth-century objections suggests that the gap between the two strands of criticism is attributable to a misunderstanding on the part of modern scholars of the conventions of the drama, conventions that would have been unremarkable to contemporary audiences (and critics) of medieval drama.

The Late Banns (also known as the Post-Reformation Banns),[24] an announcement for the upcoming production of the Chester cycle, offers apologies for the "tyme of Ignorance" (Salter l. 40) from which these plays came, and the "grosse wordes" audiences may hear as a result:

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productions" (Byron 155). Byron makes no reference to the liberties he himself takes with the subject matter in his play.

[24] The date of the Late Banns is given by Clopper as sometime between 1548 and 1575; the difficulty in arriving at a more precise date is due to the fact that there are four extant versions of the Late Banns, all with "signs of revision and multiple authorship" (Clopper 236). Clopper explains, "Whereas A must have written the original version after it became apparent that the Early Banns needed thorough revision, writers B and C probably made their revisions when the plays came under attack in Elizabeth's reign. . . . We should allow the possibility that the . . . copies represent the cycle at, perhaps, three different times or for three different occasions" (236). The fourth extant version is ignored by Clopper because it is a nineteenth-century copy of one already considered.

> Condempne not our matter where grosse wordes you here
> which ymport at this day small sence or vnderstandinge
> as sometyme postie lewtie in good manner or in feare
> with such like wilbe vttered in there speeches speakeinge
> at this tyme those speeches carried good likeinge
> tho if at this tyme you take them spoken at that tyme
> as well matter as wordes then is all well and fyne. (ll. 50-56)

Here can be found an early example of the anxiety later expressed by modern scholars on the question of the quality of plays. The anxiety takes on a slightly different quality from what modern examples (below) express, however. The author's "Interminglinge there with onely to make sporte / some things not warranted by any writt / which to glad the hearers he would men to take yt" (ll. 11-14), has been read as a criticism of the play's mingling of "comedy and the serious matter of religious drama" (Clopper 236). However, according to Lawrence Clopper, who cites the emphasis on "true words" throughout the Late Banns, "the objection was to the inclusion of legendary or non-canonical material" (236), and not to the mingling of comedy and religion. The anxiety expressed in the Post-Reformation Banns is, instead, focused on excluding un-authorized texts from the play, presumably to make the Chester performance acceptable to Protestant authorities.

A much older text than the Chester Late Banns is *A Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge*, dated between 1380 and 1414 and therefore contemporary with the plays' earlier productions. Its principal complaint is that "we shulden not maken

oure pleye and bourde of tho miraclis and werkis that God so ernestfully wrought to us. For sothely whan we so doun, drede to sinne is takun awey" (94). Notably, this document is not interested in criticizing the plays for their content. According to Clifford Davidson's introduction to his edition of the text, "the stated purpose of the plays was to bring people around to belief. . . . Unfortunately, according to the Lollard or Wycliffite text, the playing of miracles is spiritually subversive, a practice that instead undermines faith and inverts the values to be found in true religion" (14); in other words, "it is the *illusion* that is being rejected" (8, emphasis in original) by the authors of *A Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge*. By comparing the *Tretise* with other contemporary (and less critical) reactions to drama in this period, Davidson concludes, "In normal circumstances, therefore, those who produced and watched the late medieval vernacular religious plays seem to have seen nothing harmful about seeing a drama as *play* or recreation, which would not need to interfere with its devotional function and indeed might enhance that dimension of the theatrical scene" (31, emphasis in original).

The so-called Chester Early Banns[25] seem to confirm Davidson's impression of audiences seeing nothing inherently harmful in combining the *play* of drama with devotional material. Unlike the Late Banns, there is very little commentary in the Early Banns. The lines are short, and the stanzas are compact and to the point; however, audiences are asked to "here with good intent / And lett

[25] The date of the Early Banns is not without some controversy. See Lawrence Clopper's article, "The History and Development of the Chester Cycle," in which he concludes, "The *terminus a quo* for the Early Banns . . . is 1505-1521, when they were written for the Corpus Christi play; between 1521 and 1532 they were revised to make them conform with the shift to Whitsuntide and the performance over a three-day schedule" (228).

your eares to be lent" (Salter ll. 6-7), and after each guild has described their pageant, the audience is told,

> whoo so comyth these playes to see
> with good deuocion merelye
> hertely welcome shalle he be
> And haue right good chere. (ll. 173-176)

In the Early Banns, devotion and cheer are not mutually exclusive; instead, they appear to be complementary.

What these three examples suggest is that for the duration of these plays' popularity, the criticism they earned was focused on the danger of performance as an illusory medium, as in the case of *A Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge*, or the danger of dramatizing unauthorized texts, as in the case of the Chester Late Banns. Anachronism, anglicization, and comedy do not figure as detriments to these plays' artistic value; it is in twentieth-century criticism that critics can be seen to struggle with the liberties taken by these plays with their religious subject matter.

To establish why so many twentieth-century critics "have been interested in devils, raging tyrants, and clowns, in the shrewishness of Noah's wife, and in the sheep-stealing episode of the Towneley Second Shepherd's Play" (6), as Hardin Craig complained, we have to begin with the evolutionary model made popular by E.K. Chambers in his *The Mediaeval Stage* (1903), and echoed by Joseph Quincy Adams in his *Chief Pre-Shakespearean Dramas: A Selection of Plays Illustrating the History of the English Drama from Its Origin down to*

Shakespeare (1924).[26] According to his preface, Chambers's book "endeavors to state and explain the pre-existing conditions which, by the latter half of the sixteenth century, made the great Shakespearean stage possible" (I.v-vi). Twenty years after Chambers, Adams makes a similar statement in his anthology's preface, explaining that he has "aimed to tell, as clearly as may be in selections, the story of the origin and development of the English drama" (iii). Both men are asserting the importance of medieval drama, but, ironically, at the expense of the drama itself, since it is set out as interesting primarily as a precursor to Shakespeare and the other great playwrights of his time. Implicit in these statements of medieval drama's importance as a precursor to bigger and better theatre is the belief that, on their own, these plays have little merit except as a stage of development in the steady march of dramatic progress.

This evolutionary approach, shared by Chambers, Adams, and others, is an example of a kind of Darwinism that, as O. B. Hardison (1965) points out, has pervaded the study of early English drama:

> In retrospect, it can be seen that English drama provides the ideal subject for evolutionary investigation. It appeared to have developed in relative isolation from outside influences, and its development appeared to be continuous—the sort of gradual, incremental growth demanded by biologists. . . . Moreover, the evolutionary hypothesis gave scientific respectability to a theory

[26] To these, O. B. Hardison would add Karl Young's *Drama of the Medieval Church* (1933) and Hardin Craig's *English Religious Drama in the Middle Ages* (1955). I would also add A. P. Rossiter's *English Drama from Early Times to the Elizabethans* (1950).

> already widely held. . . . Drama had "arisen" from simple medieval beginnings, had "flowered" in the work of Marlowe, Shakespeare, and Ben Jonson, and had then passed into a phase of "decadence" until its expiration in 1642. (4)

There are variations in this evolutionary model. Hardison observes that Karl Young, in his *Drama of the Medieval Church* (1933), tries to distinguish himself from Chambers's model only to develop his own evolutionary model. Hardison explains, "Young's Darwinism is . . . a fundamentally revised theory in which the concept of mutations—sudden, radical changes—had replaced the concept of development by minute variations" (20).[27] Both models seem to imply that, as Eleanor Prosser states, it is not until "the people, restless under constant sermonizing, demanded and got comic interpolations do we begin to find drama worth the studying" (Prosser 7).

The linear framework of medieval drama evolving into better drama is so pervasive that, for much of the twentieth century, this defined the scholarly debate; the question was not about medieval drama itself but about how medieval drama may or may not have influenced future drama, which scenes were evidence of drama's progress and which scenes were throwbacks to a more primitive time. As Hardison colourfully puts it,

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[27] Other evolutionary models have been proposed; in the prologue to Rossiter's *English Drama from Early Times to the Elizabethans,* he discusses "the law of primitive survival," using the examples of "the human 'tail' (*os coccyx*) and 'appendix'" to "represent a principle to which analogues may be found in the comparative anatomy of drama" (11).

> History has become teleological, interpreted both intentionally and unconsciously in terms of what texts anticipate rather than what they are. The texts themselves have been read as though they were intended for production under conditions vaguely foreshadowing Covent Garden and for audiences vaguely like the rowdies in the Victorian gallery. (33)

This emphasis on evolution, then, imbues all past drama with the present, or with a more recent past (Covent Garden, the Victorian gallery). This evolutionary model, further, invites scholars to consider medieval drama as its component parts, some of which survive in future mutations of English drama, and others that become extinct. As if early drafts of better documents to come, these plays come to be analyzed by scholars as if they are imperfect works in progress; scenes are highlighted for their effectiveness in conveying the overall theme(s) of the play, others are criticized for not keeping with these larger themes, more are identified as foreshadowing future dramatic scenes, and still more are dismissed as not entertaining, pious, didactic, or funny enough to survive.

Much criticism of the medieval cycle plays has to do with individual plays that scholars have found wanting, usually for intrusions of comedy when the tone should have been serious, or with entire cycles that are shown to be conveying a certain message or point that the occasional intrusion of comedy may or may not support. As Stanley Kahrl explains, “humour or its absence [is a] critical yardstick often used to evaluate the early plays” (21). While some scholars celebrated comedy as a sign of English drama’s eventual evolution into greatness, others

reacted against the comedy as detracting critical attention away from the proper subject of a medievalist's focus, the religion. Hence Hardin Craig's defense of medieval drama:

> the authors and revisers of this religious drama were seeking in ways that often seem crude to us to convert the world to Christ and establish the belief of the faithful. . . . Critics of the medieval religious drama have treated excrescences and aberrations as if such things, thought of as looking forward to the dramatic masterpieces of the Renaissance, were the end and purpose of centuries of dramatic activity. (6)

As Craig illustrates, the conflict is about whether religion or comedy is the proper subject of medieval dramatic scholarship. However, the constant that underlies that dichotomy is the assumption that the drama is "crude," because it is inconstant, because drama cannot be both religious and comic and be good.

The comedy/religion dichotomy is only one point of contention in dramatic scholarship, but it can be attributed to the evolutionary model of viewing medieval drama that renders medieval drama transitional, embryonic, or imperfect. As a result, the question of what does and does not belong according to any given model is always being revisited, with the offending plays or scenes occasionally called into question for their authenticity, either because they are a later addition, or because they are not of a quality befitting the creators of the plays. Coherence and consistency are implicitly celebrated, while disunity and difference are evidence of textual corruption. This invites a search for original

texts, the play texts that may have actually been performed, underneath the surviving and later revisions of these same texts; as Kahrl explains, the "habit [has arisen] of attempting to reconstruct earlier versions of the surviving cycles rather than concentrating on the qualities of the text that have survived" (21).

For example, A. P. Rossiter, who states that "it is plain that there was a true contact between the medieval 'miracle-play' and the Elizabethan world, and that the allusions of Shakespeare and others touch on living memory and not mere legend or antiquarian myth" (66), argues that "all four of the English cycles . . . have been extensively revised, never completely; so that what one reads by nature's light is a kind of palimpsest with geologic 'intrusions' of varying date and intention" (66). Rossiter's analysis of the Chester Cycle, in particular, demonstrates how his evolutionary model encourages him to read the plays for what "fits" the proposed trajectory and what does not:

> The earliest [of the manuscripts] in origin is Chester, dating from c. 1327. Five of the twenty-five plays are from the Old Testament, and it is probable that the whole grew from a small group of episodes with an expositor (*Preco, Doctor*, or *Nuntius*), based on a few prophets (including Balaam and Brunell), the Nativity, Epiphany, etc.—i.e. in close contact with the liturgic stage. *It is consistent that the cycle is the most low-toned and didactic, with the farcical little developed*. (67, emphasis added)

Rossiter identifies the small group of episodes that form the seed of the Chester cycle, but concludes that, because the plays are more didactic and less farcical

than those from the other cycles, the Chester cycle must therefore be the least developed of the group. This presumes a linear trajectory from liturgical and didactic to farcical and entertaining, from "medieval 'miracle-play'" to "the Elizabethan world." In Rossiter's estimation, "From a literary point of view the workmanship [of the cycle plays] is never far from crude, and in the older strata, insipid to a degree beyond *Hymns Ancient and Modern* at its tritest" (66). Interestingly, when one compares Rossiter's evaluation of Chester to that of Alfred Pollard, as Prosser does, one finds that Chester is no longer low-toned and didactic but celebrated as having a higher "religious tone" that is not "spoilt by any obtrusive didacticism" (xxxvii, as cited in Prosser 8). Prosser rightly concludes, "no clear cut standard has been agreed upon" (7) for determining what good medieval cycle drama is.

Chester's "The Harrowing of Hell": A Case against Unity

The problem with evaluating these plays in light of that which follows them in the early modern period is that critics appear to have conflicting ideas of what medieval drama is supposed to do, and few consider the possibility that medieval drama might do any combination of these things. Even after the various evolutionary models for understanding medieval drama passed out of medieval dramatic scholarship in the 1970s, this impulse towards imposing linearity and unity on the drama remained a crucial feature of some more recent studies; many pages have been written about particular plays or scenes, discussing their ability to satisfy a particular standard imposed upon the whole. For example, Peter

Travis, in his book, *Dramatic Design in the Chester Cycle*, proposes to excise a few scenes in the Chester cycle, including the conflict between Noah and his wife in "Noah's Flood" (which I will discuss in more detail in Chapter Two), and the alewife scene at the end of the "Harrowing of Hell" because, "since there was no official Protestant version" of the Harrowing (67), it was "apparently tacked on to leaven the seriousness and the importance of the entire pageant" (68).

Like Travis, Mary Wack argues that the tapster scene at the end of "Harrowing of Hell" and the domestic conflict between Noah and his wife in "Noah's Flood" are "structural[ly] anomal[ous]" and that they were therefore added in "the second half of the sixteenth century" (34). Her argument about the Flood scene, which she later extends to the Harrowing of Hell scene, is based on the observation that it "does not participate in large-scale unifying structures of the cycle, such as prophetic parallels and evocations of authority that link one play to the next. Furthermore, it violates the general tendency of the cycle to preserve historical patterning and not to mix Biblical time with contemporary references" (33-34). The qualities identified by Wack as evidence of the scene's late addition to the cycle are based on criteria of uniformity and coherence.

Chester's "Harrowing of Hell" dramatizes Jesus's entrance into hell to rescue the righteous, and the devils' reluctance to believe that Jesus has the power to do so. Once the harrowing of hell is complete, Adam gives a closing speech, saying,

> Nowe goe wee to blys, ould and yonge,
> and worshippe God all willinglye;

and thiderward I read we singe

with great solempnitie. (17.273-276)

Michael then sings "*Te Deum Laudamus*." But the play does not end there; a tapster emerges, bemoans her place in hell, saying, "endles sorrowe and paynes cruell / I suffer in this case" (283-284). She describes herself as a very contemporary figure in medieval Chester, being once "a taverner, / a gentle gossippe and a tapster, / of wyne and ale a trustie bruer" (285-287) who sold false measures and "marred . . . good malt" with herbs and ashes (296). Mary Wack reasons that this anachronistic and Anglicized addition to the "Harrowing of Hell" can be attributed to the later half of the sixteenth century because of political factors in the city of Chester that prohibited women between the ages of 14 and 40 from working in taverns.[28]

In opposition to Wack's and Travis's arguments for excising the tapster scene is R. M. Lumiansky's reading of "The Harrowing of Hell," in which he argues, "the comic scene is a functional and effectively unified portion of the Chester *Harrowing of Hell*" ("Comedy" 7). Lumiansky helpfully summarizes the opposition to this scene's inclusion before ultimately concluding that it is thematically relevant to the rest of the play:

[28] Wack perhaps gives too much credit to the sixteenth-century exclusion of women from the brewing trade, considering that wives, widows, and *femmes soles* were all "regularly in trouble with the authorities for using false measures, adulterating their ale, or selling too dear; in 1497, for example, 94 people allegedly used false measures" (Lewis and Thacker, citing Chester's Sheriff's Books, ZSB 4, f. 94 and v.).

> It would seem . . . that the presence of the third scene of the Chester *Harrowing of Hell* should not be questioned because it may be a later addition, because the play is short, because the metrical pattern in the scene is somewhat irregular, or because the scene is realistically comic. The heart of the matter, however, is whether or not the scene is effectively related in theme to the rest of the play. ("Comedy" 9)[29]

While Lumiansky's goal of establishing a thematic unity within the play may appear more attractive than excising scenes for any of the above reasons Travis and others have to offer, Lumiansky's effort is fundamentally similar to Travis's and Wack's in its quest to establish a particular unity that will explain this scene's presence in the play.

For Wack, that unity is predicated on solidarity between women who work. When the tapster in the "Harrowing of Hell" announces,

> tapsters of this cittye
>
> shalbe promoted here with mee

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[29] Lumiansky lists the following scholars who argue that this scene is a late addition: R. H. Wilson 414; Hardin Craig 197; and A. C. Cawley 157. The theory that "someone added the scene because the play is 'comparatively short'" comes from Deimling xxvi. Homer A. Watt makes the case for realistic comedy in "The Dramatic Unity of the 'Secunda Pastorum'" in which he states,

> there is often a lack of unity and economy in the plays, and the added bits of contemporary realism are foreign to story and mood. The entire effect, in brief, is agglutinative, as though the authors were torn between a responsibility to reproduce the biblical originals and a desire to entertain the audience by odd items of bickering among characters, monologue acts, and occasional slapstick stuff wedged into the play to provide entertainment but totally unrelated to the main biblical action. (158)

for breakinge statutes of this contrye,

hurtinge the commonwealth (301-304)

she is asserting solidarity with a certain portion of the community; in Wack's estimation, additions such as this one "embody a tension between women and/or women's communities and the patriarchal order of both Biblical history and the city of Chester. In both scenes [from "Harrowing of Hell" and "Noah's Flood"] this tension is expressed through references to communities of women structured around drink" (35). She makes the case that "In this way, the ["Harrowing of Hell"] scene gave Chester women an opportunity to recognize and reaffirm their own solidarity, as well as to confront the social forces that threatened or restricted it" (46).

I will return to Wack's argument in Chapter Two in reference to the Flood plays; for the purposes of this discussion, however, it is worth pointing out that while Wack's reading of this scene is attractive for the way in which it addresses the potential in this drama for representing female affinity groupings, in this case, of women who drink and sell alcohol, she overemphasizes the importance of the late date of this scene in her explanation of its efficacy. There is, for instance, the reference to similarly deceitful tapsters and millers in Chester's "Slaughter of the Innocents," in which the demon who takes Herod to hell pauses to warn:

No more shall you trespas. By my lewtye,

that filles there measures falseye

shall beare this lord companye;

the gett none other grave.

I will you bringe thus to woe,

and come agayne and fetch moe

as fast as I maye goe. (10.450-456)[30]

Wack does not address other representations of women in the Chester cycle, against which she could have compared the validity of her argument for the lateness of the two scenes under discussion. As I will show in the following chapters, there are other women in Chester, such as Eve, Mary, and the Mothers of the Innocents, who feature in scenes not attributed to this late date, and who nonetheless are able to assert solidarity within a community not otherwise addressed by the religious subject matter of the cycles. These diverse female characters that appear at various points in the Creation-to-Doom sequence suggest that the female transgression Wack wants to highlight as late sixteenth century additions to the cycle may actually be consistent with scenes including other female characters in the plays, and not solely anomalous reactions to contemporary legal and social changes.

In highlighting a scene's consistency with other scenes in the same cycle, I do not want simply to replace one unifying structure with another. It is not my contention that all of the anachronistic and/or anglicized scenes and conflicts that

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[30] Lumiansky, in his article, "Comedy and Theme in the Chester *Harrowing of Hell*," quotes the Diemling 1892 EETS edition of this play, which includes a more overt reference to tapsters:

No more shall you Tapsters by my lewtye,
That fills your measures falcly,
Shall bear this lord [Christ] company,
They gett none other grace. /
I will bring this into woe, /
As fast as ever I may go. (12, quoting Diemling 203)

I will analyze in the following chapters are thematically consistent with each other; there are very real differences that must be acknowledged between the violence that occurs between Chester's Mr. and Mrs. Noah and the comic misunderstanding that arises between York's Mary and Joseph. Despite the thematic diversity that can be found in the Chester and York cycles, these scenes and conflicts nonetheless evince this drama's strategy of inconsistency that, despite modern assumptions about the importance of the unity of dramatic time and place, nonetheless enables these particular plays to explore contemporary issues that, for whatever reason, resonated with the producers of these plays at the time of their production. The contemporary issues that recur the most often in scenes which diverge in some way from the liturgical material have to do with gender politics; the Chester and York cycles by no means exhibit the same gender politics, but their strategy for playing out these conflicts is nonetheless the same: domestic disturbance.

Domestic Disturbance: Defining a Convention

The modern expectation of a linear narrative and the concurrent expectation of the unity of dramatic time and place are what make domestic disturbances noteworthy. Medieval drama's relaxed attitude towards a consistent representation of time and place stands in stark contrast to some twentieth-century critics' insistence on the unity and linearity of time, and the progress that necessarily comes with it. Hardin Craig demonstrates this contrast in his assessment of the (lack of) style of medieval drama:

> When one considers the origin of the mystery plays within the medieval church, an origin without thought of dramatic or histrionic effect, and when one considers also how these plays passed into the hands of very simple medieval people—authors, players, managers, and all—one can see that their technique was inevitably naïve and firmly conventional. Their distances were symbolic distances and their time was symbolic time. . . . The drama of the medieval people was anachronistic because it was symbolic and not realistic because . . . its portrayers had not in the modern meaning an historic sense. This drama had no theory and aimed consciously at no dramatic effects, and, when it succeeded, its successes came from the import of its message or from the moving quality of some particular story it had to tell. (Craig 9)

According to Craig, symbolic time and anachronism is evidence of the inevitable naïveté of the producers of these plays; it is conventional, in the derogatory sense, because the people are simple, and the drama succeeds only when the (religious) message is inherently moving itself, and not because of any sense of artistry on the part of the people involved in the production.

V. A. Kolve, however, was one of the first scholars to raise the possibility that anachronism and Anglicization actually was part of a dramatic theory. In contradiction to Craig's point, that the drama "aimed consciously at no dramatic effects" (Craig 9), Kolve reasons that "Much of the anachronism and Anglicization requires little explanation: it furnished convenient ways of talking,

it saved the trouble of long, complicated expositions of foreign terms and institutions, and it filled some very considerable gaps in knowledge" (122).[31] As Kolve implies here, anachronism and anglicization can be effective methods for audiences to learn from the past and apply that knowledge to the present. Leslie Aronovick concurs with Kolve, adding, "Anachronism translates and relays messages from the past into the here-and-now of medieval England. Within these dramas, then, the past is 'played as an image of present time' and current location, as an imitation of all time" (160). All of this is done with a didactic purpose: "Ultimately, [Kolve] stresses, history is valuable to the pageant authors not for 'what it can teach us of the past' but for 'how it can remedy the present.' The remedy, of course, is to draw moral lessons from the past and ally them for future salvation" (Aronovick 160).

Arnovick's summary of the importance of anachronism is useful for the way in which it reveals the impulse towards consistency that even an argument in favour of anachronism has difficulty avoiding. For Kolve and Aronovick, then, anachronism in these plays is interesting for the way in which it reveals an interest on the part of the medieval dramatists in educating audiences and in bridging the historical distance between biblical past and medieval present. Robert Hanning is interested in anachronism as a didactic tool; he is specifically concerned with the stereotypical farcical and physical battles between husbands and wives, such as

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[31] Kolve adds that "certain uses of anachronism and anglicization were deliberate and meaningful in deeper ways" (122), referring to "the will of God expressed in time from outside time" (119) which makes possible "a distinct kind of anachronism" (119). He illustrates this point by referring to the moment the Chester Abraham's cries out, "Jesu, one mee have pyttye" (4.415), just as he is about to kill his son, Isaac, and before the Angel intervenes to save him.

Noah and his wife in the plays about the Flood. These often comic but always domestic conflicts are a type of anachronism for the way in which these scenes appear to exploit a narrative gap in the religious subject matter in order to develop conflict that temporarily directs attention away from the spiritual towards the comical medieval present. For example, the Book of Genesis informs us that Noah has a wife, but is silent on the subject of Mrs. Noah's reaction when her husband tells her about the impending flood; the various Flood plays dramatize an imagined response, which includes plenty of conflict, before ultimately getting back onto the biblical script. Hanning describes such scenes of domestic conflict as part of what he calls a strategy of "domestication and entrapment" (119). He discusses these conflicts in terms of a "domestication of the cosmic," beginning with the anachronisms of "Christian oaths and English (indeed, local Yorkshire) geological and topical references put in the mouths of shepherds living in Palestine before the Incarnation" (118), in the case of the Towneley Second Shepherds' Play, but moving quickly on to the "assimilat[ion] [of] the behavior of biblical husbands and wives to stereotypical jokes at the expense of nagging or otherwise troublesome wives and their beleaguered husbands" (118).

For Hanning, the plays' strategy of domesticating the cosmic is a "counterstrategy of tropological entrapment—that is, a method of impelling the audience toward right moral choices by first seducing them into wrong ones. The theatrical experience thus creates within its spectators an unwilled confrontation with their own sinfulness—the necessary prelude to any attempt at reform" (119). He argues that there are two types of tropological entrapment:

> In the first, a play presents characters or situations that, by Christian moral and theological standards, deserve only condemnation and then draws the audience into imaginative sympathy with them. . . . The second type of tropological entrapment depends on the dramatization of a single action, so carefully prepared in language and gesture or movement as to generate a good deal of tension within the audience as they wait for the action to happen. . . . But when the action is sinful, we, by our kinetic participation, are entrapped and implicated in actions that defy God's law or reject his love. (119-120)

Hanning's theory about tropological entrapment is ingenious, but like Kolve's before him, it is limited to seeing the significance in these domestic disturbances as only relevant to the spiritual and didactic goals of the whole cycle, and not as informative in their own right for the issues they enact when interrupting Christian time.

One of the effects of anachronism and Anglicization is didactic; however, such violations of the dramatic unity of time and place also do additional work by interrupting the linear narrative in order to stage the domestic. Anachronism can also break up unity itself by temporarily suspending the structures that create the very sense of what "belongs," and what does not "fit." For example, while V. A. Kolve and Robert Hanning see anachronism as a technique to help bring audiences to an awareness of the cycle plays' relevance to their spiritual lives, Paxson points out,

> Although one would be reticent to doubt this pragmatic appraisal of the device's function, it is important to notice the consequently loaded theoretical stakes. In particular, the affective explanation of anachronism's function promotes the device's *familiarizational* utility. As a point of fact, tropes advertise the strangeness of mimesis, narration, and language. For the old Russian Formalists, tropes and figures promoted *defamiliarization* or estrangement. (333)

This emphasis on defamiliarization allows for the possibility that anachronism is not only, or even primarily, pragmatic; anachronism may very well be an avoidance of such practical considerations as spiritual education, and instead be a deliberate attempt to inject other story lines, conflicts, issues, and drama into a well-known and often-repeated narrative.

Most modern scholars, as a general rule, will have very little experience with plays that dramatize a Christian narrative from Creation to Doom; few modern plays are so chronologically ambitious, and such a wide-ranging day(s) long production will have to handle time differently from more self-contained and significantly shorter modern plays. O. B. Hardison compares these cycles of Creation-to-Doom to noncyclical plays, pointing out that "the line of time [in the cycle drama] is continuous from beginning to end. Every event has a past extending back and a future extending forward to eternity, and *any interruption of the sequence is arbitrary*" (288, emphasis added). By contrast, "the writing of a noncyclical play requires just such an interruption. One segment of the time line

must be treated as complete in itself. The first scene must somehow be made independent of what comes before, and the last must have the quality of finality: e.g., "they were married and lived happily ever after" (288). Any interruption of that Creation-to-Doom narrative is going to be arbitrary to some degree—arbitrary in the sense of both the subject and the timing of the interruption, so long as no essential plot points are revised—since Christian time will continue to march on. In other words, so long as Mrs. Noah boards the ark, it matters little what transpires between husband and wife beforehand. Domestic disturbances are not interested in plot, linear narratives, or overarching themes, and it is, in a way, the arbitrariness and the defamiliarizing effect of these disturbances that is at the root of their irksomeness to so many twentieth-century scholars.

Such a confluence of styles, purposes, and effects is not unique to medieval cycle drama; other medieval literature is routinely celebrated for such stylistic disruptiveness. For instance, comparisons are often made between the style and subject matter of these plays and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Kolve points out that "varieties of style and metre co-exist equably so that the tone ranges among the lyrical, satiric, homiletic, comic, and narrative or functional" (304). If Kolve can celebrate the juxtaposition of such a range of styles as an "aesthetic method" by which "each small piece of the large whole seems to acquire an instinctive life through which it becomes happily knit to an adjoining part, even though this particular juxtaposition may not have been part of any author's contrived and conscious design" (304), then it is not so far of a stretch to imagine anachronism, and by extension, domestic disturbance, as a literary device

proper to the cycle drama of Chester and York. As Tison Pugh points out in the introduction to his book, *Queering Medieval Genres*, "With the breakdown of the classical generic system and the rise of vernacular languages, medieval literature embraced a plenitude of generic forms in which few clearly marked boundaries cordoned one genre from another" (14). If Chaucer's work can be celebrated for its range of style and subject matter, and if medieval literature in general can be seen as having a flexibility with respect to what is proper to any particular genre, then medieval drama's use of domestic disturbance—in the form of interruptions to the narrative by way of reference to issues, conflicts, or events that are outside their proper time and place—should be treated as a deliberate and self-conscious dramatic style.

This dissertation proposes that in the medieval cycle plays of Chester and York, at least, those moments in the drama that represent an infidelity to the unity of time and place (anachronism and anglicization), and those that represent an infidelity to tone and theme (farce, domestic conflict), are actually rejecting such notions of fidelity in order to temporarily establish a new order in which other issues can play out. These domestic disturbances have earned rebuke more often than praise from those critics focused on establishing medieval drama within an evolutionary line of progress that culminates in the great works of Shakespeare and other early modern dramatists. Instead, scholars should have a wider appreciation for medieval cycle drama's interest in what does not fit, or else they risk continuing to overlook the gender and power struggles that do not necessarily unify the plays, but certainly provide an interesting undercurrent to them.

These undercurrents are the focus of the following two chapters. Domestic disturbance in medieval drama facilitates a playing out of gender politics, and this can be attributed to what these scenes of domestic disturbance are disturbing; in Chester, where the depiction of God is of a mighty and omnipotent force, the domestic disturbances that feature gendered conflict seem all the more disruptive of the obedience and acquiescence that such a conception of God may require. In York, where God is a comparatively benevolent and cooperative figure, the domestic disturbances we find are represented as less combative and more cooperative. Chapter Two takes up these issues by considering domestic disturbances primarily from the Chester cycle, involving a few of medieval drama's trouble-makers: Lucifer, Noah's wife, and the Mothers of the Innocents. Chapter Three focuses on the domestic scenes from both Chester and York involving women who try to obey God, particularly Mary in "Joseph's Doubts" and Eve in "The Fall of Man." In this third chapter I will show that while the two cycles may not have had the same attitudes towards these female characters, they used the same strategy of domestic disturbance to convey them.

The types of domestic disturbances that are discussed in Chapters Two and Three are suggestive of women's experiences or perceptions in the medieval past; however, as Stephen Rigby cautions, "We need . . . to distinguish between society's gender *ideology*, the conceptions about sexes current in religion, literature, learning and so on, and the *reality* of gender relations. As we shall see, there could often be a considerable disparity between medieval theories and gender and actual social practice" (Rigby 243). If it is possible to divide the study

of gender into these two categories, then this project is concerned not with the reality of gender relations but with the ideological forces that appear in the plays that contest, negotiate, and establish the norms of gender relations. This project makes no attempt to account for what life was actually like for living and breathing women in Chester and York at the time of these plays' productions, firstly, because that would necessitate a much broader area of study than these cycle plays, and, secondly, because these female characters are fictional representations of gendered relations that may or not have influenced (or even reflected) the lives of female audience members. Attempts to tie specific instances of domestic disturbance to specific people or historical events often come at the expense of understanding the kinds of conflicts and complications that these plays were interested in exploring.

The issue of talking about gender ideology is further complicated when we remember that these plays are almost certainly staged by cross-dressed men, the subject of Chapter Four. There is already a wide gap between what is performed in theatre and what is lived outside the theatre; to add the likelihood that these ideological gender struggles were played by men makes the gap between representation and historically ascertainable fact even wider. However, both the conventionality of men performing as women, and the consistency with which gender issues are raised in these plays, suggest that these domestic disturbances are suggestive of gender relations in these communities, even if they cannot be established with any historical certainty. In this chapter, an examination of theories of cross-dressing, and its inevitable associations with the carnivalesque,

moves the discussion away from the gendered subject matter of domestic disturbance to this convention's interaction with the theatrical style and techniques of the productions themselves, in order to reveal the flexibility and diversity of representation in these plays.

Taken together, what these domestic disturbances show is that medieval dramatists did actively take up gender power relations as a subject worthy of dramatic representation, and that patriarchy is indeed contested, even if we cannot say to what degree patriarchy was actually changed by these challenges posed in the drama. Rigby, discussing patriarchy and its challenges as term of study, explains,

> The systematic subordination and social inferiority of women and their relative exclusion from access to wealth, status and power is carefully captured by the term "patriarchy." Two warnings are however necessary if this term is to be employed by historians. Firstly . . . patriarchy . . . can exist only in historically specific and changing forms. Secondly, the concept of patriarchy is often defined in terms of the "oppression" which women suffer. There is thus a tendency, when discussing gender inequality in medieval England, to engage in a debate about whether to emphasize the independence enjoyed by women or to stress the constraints and disabilities from which they suffered. (243-244)

The following chapters endeavour to focus on both of the extremes Rigby mentions here, highlighting "the constraints and disabilities from which [women

in these plays] suffered" while at the same time investigating the ways in which these female characters found "independence" within the patriarchal structures in which they found themselves. In these plays, this independence comes mostly from women forming communities of their own, based on shared affinities and not on obligation or power. This is a study of how medieval female stage characters successfully find ways to interrupt the march of Christian time with their own domestic concerns, and in the process form their own communities which, to varying degrees, are able to contest the oppression they find themselves experiencing.

Chapter Two

"The Business of Distaffs and Pot-Ladles": Domestic Violence and Female Community in Chester

Complaints about medieval drama, even well-meaning attempts to apologize for, or explain away, anachronism and other interruptions, raise the possibility that this lack of coherence may actually be conventional, and that it may be doing a certain ideological work heretofore unappreciated. The Chester cycle has earned more than its share of defenders and detractors, but what makes it stand out as being the most inconsistent of the extant medieval play collections is also what makes it the most interesting in terms of the kind of ideological work these domestic disturbances can do. What becomes evident is that domestic disturbance is a dramatic convention used by the producers of the Chester cycle in a way particular to that play alone. The specific choices about the degree and type of disturbance, made within the range of available traditions circulating at the time, are evidence of an anxiety in the Chester cycle about authority and the hierarchical structures that support it. Throughout the cycle, authority and hierarchy are repeatedly reinforced, only to be disrupted by communities of like-minded women, particularly in "The Slaughter of the Innocents" and "Noah's Flood," who see little reason to obey.

"It is my will it shoulde be soe": Establishing God's Authority in Chester

Scholarship on the Chester cycle has not been shy about advertising this play's numerous shortcomings. Even those who wish to explain their appreciation

for the cycle, like Peter Travis, have to confront what they see as weaknesses in the play. Travis enumerates the features of the Chester cycle that give scholars pause:

> Of the four extant English cycles, Chester, it is generally agreed, is the most conservative, the least realistic, the most reminiscent of Latin liturgical drama. Its diction is generally direct and simple, its metrics quite regular and strongly reliant upon those of the lyric, its verse-form best adapted to simple emotion and economy of thought, its stage actions often sparse and formal. Because of its minimal dramatic embellishment and its relatively austere fidelity to Scripture, Chester has often been considered, or dismissed, as a crude and simplistic prototype of the three other, more elaborate, cycles. For example, Rosemary Woolf has concluded her full and sensitive study of the Corpus Christi plays with the judgment that Chester's "simplicity of method is reflected in the thinness of [its] imaginative texture." (Travis 27-28, citing Woolf 306)

Travis explains that this is why he wrote *Dramatic Design in the Chester Cycle*; it is "in part . . . an implicit response to the sparse critical acclaim Chester has been accorded in the past few decades" (28).

Martin Stevens similarly concedes that, if the Chester cycle is found to be unexciting, "it is probably because the Chester stanza can become tedious in its steady application" (266); he nevertheless credits Chester for being "a carefully unified play . . . that undoubtedly . . . is the product of a single intelligence" (265).

While some may accuse the play of being didactic, "No doubt . . . from the use of the Expositor" (269), who at times intrudes on the action of the drama to direct the audience's response to the play, Stevens sees the narrator figure as "a binding force, a figure who helps significantly to give unity to the cycle" (269). Here Stevens, like Travis before him, tries to defend the Chester cycle in the face of negative criticism, not by reshaping our own anachronistic expectations of what theatre ought to do, but by asserting a different kind of unity for Chester by hypothesizing that the drama is "the product of a single intelligence" and that any anomalous moments in the play can actually be explained as a "binding force." As the following discussion of "The Slaughter of the Innocents" and "Noah's Flood" will show, the respective resistance of the Mothers of the Innocents and Mrs. Noah are frequently considered by scholars to be anomalous, and, as a result, these moments have invited a great deal of explanation that elides, rather than explores, these scenes' disruptive effects.

The general strands of criticism (and attempts at recuperation) of the Chester cycle can be seen in the above examples from Stevens and Travis. One useful theme that has emerged in scholarship on the Chester cycle, and that may go a long way in helping to re-cast the domestic disturbances that have troubled so many readers of the drama to date has to do with the representation of God. It has often been remarked by readers of the Chester cycle that the dramatization of God's character is strikingly authoritarian, with an emphasis on his omnipotence and on other hierarchies of power. This dramatization of God as the ultimate authority pervades the cycle, even in the plays in which he does not appear. As in

the world he credits himself with creating, his influence is felt throughout the Chester cycle in the numerous struggles for authority that appear throughout, and in each case, the figure of authority, whether in the form of God or some other patriarch, has his authority—and the hierarchical structures on which his authority is based—re-established. This emphasis on omnipotence and authority, in turn, is why Chester offers some of the most spectacular domestic disturbances of all of the extant cycles.

The opening play of the Chester cycle, "The Fall of Lucifer," establishes omnipotence and authority as God's most striking character traits. The first words out of God's mouth are

> *Ego sum alpha et oo,*
>
> *primus et novissimus*.
>
> It is my will it shoulde be soe;
>
> hit is, yt was, it shalbe thus. (1.1-4)

He describes himself as "grete" (5), a "pearles patron ymperiall" (11), "prince principall" (22), and adds that "the might of [his] makeinge / is marked" in him (32-33). The word "might" appears three times in the first 100 lines of the play, each time in reference to God's power. It appears one last time in "The Fall of Lucifer," at line 193, this time in a speech given by Lucifer after he has usurped God's throne. Lucifer plays the role of God when he says to his fellow angels, "I ame your comforte, bouth lorde and head, / the meirth and might of the majestye" (192-93). God's emphasis on his own might is so marked in this play that it becomes a character trait, one that Lucifer adopts when he tries the role on for

himself. "The Fall of Lucifer" appears actively to highlight the idea of God's might, and reinforces this idea by parodying any claims to power offered by any other characters.

One of the "governing ideas" of the Chester cycle, as identified by Stevens, is "the depiction of a powerful God whose image dominates the cycle from the outset" (272), a stance echoed by Kathleen M. Ashley when she points out that in the cycle one can find the

> formulation that God is, above all things, omnipotent, the blending of other characteristics into that of divine power, the stress on the divine freedom of action. . . . The other cycles offer various descriptions of God—His wisdom, love, beauty, justice, truth, righteousness. Chester is almost exclusively concerned with the one concept of omnipotence. (Ashley 56)

Similarly, F. M. Salter concludes his study of the Chester plays by arguing that "the multiplicity of individual plays does not confuse, but conveys a single overpowering impression of God's might and majesty, His justice and His mercy" (105).

This emphasis on power can be seen in God's handling of his disobedient angels. The Chester "Fall of Lucifer" is structured around the testing, failure, and punishment of Lucifer and Lighteborne, in order to reinforce God's might. Before departing, God says to the angels, "Nowe, Luciffer and Lightborne, loke lowely you bee. / . . . exsalte you not to exelente into high exaltation. / Loke that you tende righte wisely, for hence I wilbe wendinge" (68, 70-71). To this general

advice, God adds a more explicit command when he says, "Touche not my throne by non assente" (91), to which Luciffer replies, "Ney, that will we not in deed, / . . . / Thy greate godhead we ever dreade" (94, 96). Lucifer's expression of obedience seems clear enough, but God speaks yet again, this third time adding a warning about their possible expulsion from heaven if they do not keep their word; he says, "The same covenante I charge you houlde, / in paine of heaven your forfeyture" (108-09). All of this anticipation of God's departure and the angels' inevitable failure to obey him establishes very clearly the expectations God has for Lucifer and Lighteborne, and the consequences they can expect to suffer if they disobey his word. Once God departs, and Lucifer and Lightborne nonetheless set their sights on God's throne, the good angels even try to reason with the bad angels, reminding them of the consequences of their actions; when the bad angels nevertheless transgress, they are punished accordingly, emphasizing in the process God's omnipotence and the imperative of obedience.

God's character, as Ashley points out above, is unlike the character of God in the other cycles. Travis also notes this difference: "Whereas God in the N-Town and Wakefield cycles never warns the angels against proud ambition, and in York merely suggests in one line that they be 'stabill in thoghte,' Deus Pater in Chester harps at length on the necessity of angelic obedience to his will" (73). And unlike the other cycles, God in the Chester cycle "conspicuously departs, . . . his clear intention being to test by his absence his angels' obedience and love" (Travis 73). Much of the rest of the Chester cycle follows along these lines; in a number of plays scenes are dramatized in such a way that they give emphasis to

the importance of obedience, and by extension, to God's omnipotence, of which "Noah's Flood" and "The Slaughter of the Innocents" are but two examples. Stevens highlights the impact of this characterization of God on the dramatization of the religious narrative when he notes that

> This representation of God the Father leads in turn to an emphasis upon Jesus's divinity rather than his humanity, and further to a neglect of Mary as a leading dramatic figure. Finally, it puts the emphasis on God's works with the result that the cycle has the most developed Ministry section among English Corpus Christi cycles and it enacts, in line with that focus, the greatest number of miracles. (Stevens 273)

The cycle plays of York and Chester may follow many of the same dramatic conventions, but these conventions are deployed in a way particular to the concerns of their respective cycles. As Martin Stevens suggests, the Chester cycle's preoccupation with an all-powerful God has a tangible influence on the dramatization of the action that takes place in this cycle.

For example, in the opening play of the Chester cycle, God's omnipotence influences the rest of the cycle by defying all other claims to power that are not directly authorized by him. Stevens describes God's opening speech in "Fall of Lucifer" as "creat[ing] a vocabulary of power that will cause his feckless human imitators—all those ranting tyrants—to be bereft of an authentic language by which to proclaim their authority. In fact, he sets a tone by which all subsequent attempts to claim power, including Lucifer's, will be reduced to parody" (Stevens

274). If, as Stevens and others have argued, the all-encompassing power of God is one of the primary thematic concerns of the Chester cycle, then it can only be dramatically conveyed through a repetition and confirmation of that power as it is challenged by other characters and/or situations. In several of the plays within the Chester cycle, female domestic disturbance is the means by which the dramatist chooses to introduce subversion that is, in turn, contained, thereby reinforcing the power of authority figures who stand in for God. However, the repeated testing of authority in these plays also has the dramatic (and paradoxical) effect of making authority open to testing, inviting the kind of challenges to authority that figures like the Mothers and Noah's wife offer.

With the Chester cycle's pre-occupation with representing and deploying power, it is no surprise that it is, as a result, critical of women. Stevens notices this connection when he writes, "The emphasis on a powerful God in the Chester cycle seems also to inspire the persistent elevation of man above woman. In fact, the Chester playwright is almost virulently antifeminist" (277). Mary Wack echoes this sentiment when she calls the Chester cycle "the most 'medieval' and conservative of the great dramatic cycles" (33), but adds, "from the perspective of women and work, it seems rather an uneasy negotiation between past and present, between medieval traditions and sixteenth century commentary" (33). Wack's focus is on Noah's Wife in "Noah's Flood," and the Tapster from "The Harrowing of Hell," both of which she identifies as late additions to the Chester cycle, additions which reflect changes in social and political policy in the sixteenth-century. However, a close reading of "The Slaughter of the Innocents"

will show that the Chester cycle's "embod[iment] [of] a tension between women and/or women's communities and the patriarchal order of both Biblical history and the city of Chester" (35) is evident beyond merely the two scenes that Wack identifies as Tudor additions to the medieval cycle.[32] "The Slaughter of the Innocents," as I will show below, also embodies the tensions between women's communities and the patriarchal order, suggesting that these tensions were available in the Chester cycle well before the sixteenth-century changes identified by Wack as "loss of economic opportunity, of economic freedom, of freedom of dress, of friends and community at childbirth, of civic status" (46). This is not to suggest that the Tudor additions addressed by Wack are not significant reflections of women's sixteenth-century experiences—only to suggest that the Chester cycle may have leant itself to such domestic disturbances well before the Tudor period, perhaps as a condition of the very authoritarian and conservative quality for which it has been criticized.

A close reading of both "The Slaughter of the Innocents" and "Noah's Flood," with brief comparisons to their counterparts in the other cycles, will serve to illustrate that, although the characterization of conservatism and authoritarianism may be true for the Chester cycle as a whole, its preoccupation with power and authority is ultimately what creates opportunities for some of medieval religious drama's most spectacular examples of domestic disturbance in Mrs. Noah's gossips and the Mothers of the Innocents who defend their children

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[32] Wack here follows Peter Travis's *Dramatic Design in the Chester Cycle*, which argues, along with Oscar L. Brownstein, that the battle between Noah and his wife, as well as the final tapster scene in the Harrowing of Hell, are Tudor additions to the play.

against Herod's knights. These domestic disturbances form a critique of the masculinist structures of authority that are aligned with the Christian impetus of the plays, and suggest a conscious engagement on the part of the play's producers with the gender politics of its time.

"The business of distaffs and pot ladles": Maternal Resistance in "The Slaughter of the Innocents"

In "The Slaughter of the Innocents" can be found one of medieval drama's most overt domestic disturbances; through the Mothers' attempts to defend their children's lives we find an explicit challenge to patriarchal and political authority by powerless women. In this play, performed by the Goldsmiths, Herod orders the murder of all knave children under the age of two, after the Magi fail to return from worshipping the Christ child. Herod's knights initially refuse to carry out this order, until Herod emphasizes the scope of such a slaughter. Before the knights set out to murder the children, however, the audience is presented with a scene in which the Angel leads Joseph, Mary, and Jesus safely into Egypt, to avoid Herod's wrath. In the meantime, the knights face extended resistance from two mothers trying to protect the lives of the children in their care. The knights prevail, but one of the murdered children is revealed to be Herod's own son. Upon hearing this, Herod dies before the audience's eyes, and is taken away by a Demon. The play ends with a scene depicting the Holy Family, with the baby Jesus alive and well, returning safely to Judea.

The general story is adapted from Matthew 2.13-18,[33] the only gospel book that mentions the Slaughter of the Innocents. The details of Chester's adaptation are taken from a number of sources, including the *Stanzaic Life of Christ* which, according to Mills, "was composed in Cheshire, . . . [and] circulated within the local community" ("Playing the Show" 21). Sophie Oosterwijk traces the general tradition of the Massacre in medieval art, architecture, song, and literature in her article, "'Long Lullynge Haue I Lorn!': The Massacre of the Innocents in Word and Image." Her article explains that the brief story narrated in Matthew developed into a rich tradition that included the introduction of defiant and defensive mothers in place of a solitary mourning mother, and "the use of implements, rather than hands" (25) in their resistance to Herod's knights. The obvious and most popular choice of implement was the distaff, which stood in opposition to the knights' swords, though the knights were sometimes depicted in medieval art using their bare hands to kill the children. According to Oosterwijk's study of medieval art,

> Although Matthew's account contains no details about the way in which the Innocents were supposed to have been killed, two distinct types of infanticide emerged in visual representations of the Massacre. Early depictions in which the soldiers grab the

[33] Herod, perceiving that he was deluded by the wise men, was exceeding angry; and sending killed all the men children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the borders thereof, from two years old and under according to the time which he had diligently inquired of the wise men.
17. Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremias the prophet, saying:
18. A voice in Rama was heard, lamentation and great mourning; Rachel bewailing her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not.
(cited in Oosterwijk 4) .

> infants by the legs in order to dash their bodies to the ground increasingly gave way to an alternative type, in which Herod's soldiers use swords and spears for their butchery, even though they may still be seen holding the victims by the limbs. (6)

These mothers' resistance, in itself, is not unique to the vernacular drama; what is significant, however, are the effects of the resistance exercised by these particular mothers for the patriarchal, hierarchical, and tyrannical rule of Herod in the Chester play.

In the Chester "Slaughter of the Innocents," the mothers are ready for a fight from the moment we see them on stage. According to Theresa Coletti, "All six versions [in medieval drama] enact the tension between the world of masculine and political power on the one hand, and the figures of compassionate, comic, and aggressive maternity on the other" (246). In the case of the Chester play, the mothers trade insults with the knights, then the second mother threatens, "Bee thou soe hardye . . . / to handle my sonne that is so sweete, / this distaffe and thy head shall meete" (301-303). The language suggests that both mothers are wielding these improvised weapons; one says, "One stroke yett I will assaye / to give or that I wend" (327-28), and later, "I shall cracke thy crowne" (344). The speeches suggest that the knights do take a good beating from the mothers, as when one mother says:

> Have thou this, thow fowle harlot
> And thou knight, to make a knott!
> And on buffet with this bote

Thou shalt have to boote.

And thow this and thou this,

Though thou both shyte and pisse!

And if you thinke we doe amysse,

Goe buskes you to moote. (353-360)

Though the Chester play is the most graphic and elaborate of the group, the majority of the six extant plays dramatizing the story of the Slaughter of the Innocents depict verbal and physical violence towards Herod's knights, with some variation in degree of violence and choice of weapon. In the case of the Coventry play, for example, one mother threatens,

here with my pott-ladull

With hym woll I fyght.

I schall ley on hym as thogh I wode were,

With thys same womanly geyre. (864-867)

Of course, regardless of the level of resistance put up by the mothers, or whether they use distaffs or ladles against the knights, the children are murdered in the end. However, in that space between Herod's orders and the return of the knights after they execute those orders, the narrative is violently interrupted to convey a message of motherly devotion and political resistance.

These scenes of violence between the mothers and the knights have been criticized by modern readers for being too comic, too farcical, or a detriment to

the play as a whole.[34] Lumiansky and Mills critique Chester's adaptation of its source material: "The laments of the women are suggested by Matthew 2/17-18, and were a feature of the liturgical drama. Here, however, the sense of sorrow is subsumed under the vindictiveness and comic belligerence of the women" (154, vol. II, note to ll. 325-36).[35] T. W. Craik, in his study of "Violence in the English Miracle Plays," similarly concludes that "the business of distaffs and pot-ladles is so unsatisfactory. Every spectator . . . will naturally pity the mothers, and it is unseemly to make their sorrow take the form of grotesque and comic violence. What is wanted is something more like the Virgin Mary at the foot of the cross" (195); here Craik is referring to the mothers of the Innocents as types of the mother Mary, both sets of mothers bewailing the death of their children. Craik's criticism of the "business of distaffs and pot-ladles" echoes criticisms made of the violence between Noah and his distaff-wielding wife who refuses to board the ark in the Flood plays; in both cases, women take up their distaffs in the face of catastrophic and spiritually significant events, rejecting pity and piety for resistance and action. In both cases, these scenes put the Christian narrative on pause, as it were, to do different ideological work, enriching the overall dramatic effect of the play.

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[34] Lumiansky and Mills, in their EETS edition of this play, point out that the repetition that occurs in these scenes of violence (ll. 305-36, 337-76) may not be designed to be performed sequentially, but instead might be written as "different versions of the massacre, giving different effects" (Vol. II, p. 154, note to ll. 325-36). This is offered as a "tenuous alternative" to another theory that there were actually four women on stage, rather than two.

[35] See Oosterwijk n.92, for a history of critical complaints about what is seen as the comedic overshadowing the "tragic potential" of this play.

A closer reading of the Chester "Slaughter of the Innocents" suggests that rather than staging grotesque and comic violence for easy laughs, this particular play is structurally deliberate in its escalation of violence, in order to emphasize the gender and power imbalances between the mothers and Herod's knights. In regularly alternating speeches, both soldiers announce their intention to murder, and both mothers give insulting replies. Later, the second knight says to the first mother,

> Dame, thy sonne, in good faye,
> hee must of me learne a playe:
> hee must hopp, or I goe awaye,
> upon my speare ende. (321-324)

He repeats this speech almost verbatim to the second mother moments later (361-364), emphasizing by contrast the horror of his actions by using the words "play" and "hop." In Rosemary Woolf's words, "The game metaphor here very horribly conveys enjoyment in the savagery" on the part of the soldiers (206). The mothers are also paralleled throughout, doubling the impact of the action through repetition: both mothers call the knights "thieves," both threaten violence and have to defend their children physically against the knights, and after losing the struggle, they both react violently.

In addition to this play's deliberate escalation of violence, achieved through repetition, alternating speeches, and echoing speech and action, "The Slaughter of the Innocents" makes some important structural choices in the way the subject matter is presented. While the tragedy is drawn out through the

examples given above, significant plot twists are added to heighten the impact of that tragedy. For instance, Herod's death occurs after the second mother reveals that it was Herod's son she had tried, and failed, to protect from Herod's own murdering knights. There is also the cut-away from the immediate action—Herod's order to slaughter the male children—to reveal to the audience that the Holy Family has already escaped to Egypt, effectively precluding any possibility that the baby Jesus will be slaughtered even in the very moment his slaughter is being commanded. This manipulation of dramatic time and place pointedly highlights the tragic impotence of Herod's command to murder all boys under two years of age in hopes of killing the baby Jesus.

So while Craik is probably correct to say that audiences will pity the mothers in most any staging of the Slaughter of the Innocents, this does not mean that the violence they enact in their resistance is superfluous or dramatically ineffective. One effect of this violence, in addition to conveying the spiritual message of martyrdom, is to highlight the absurdity of Herod's rule, especially as he flails about looking for someone to blame for his son's death other than himself. When he is first told that his son has been killed, Herod blames the second mother, asking, "Could thow not speake? Could thou not praye / and say yt was my sonne?" (415-416). Such a rebuke only reinforces the probable futility of such an objection; Herod's knights were not open to negotiation during the slaughter, as is evidenced by the suggestion that they did not even stop to check the gender of the babies they were killing (to which we will return, below). Herod also blames his knights for not recognizing his son's princely clothing when he

says, "Hee was right sycker in silke araye, / in gould and pyrrie that was so gaye" (409-10);[36] however, Herod stops short of actually blaming his knights because he knows the fault is ultimately his own for giving the order. As Travis points out, "Told of his son's death, Herod waxes wroth one last time, and this time his anger progresses into an intimation of justice, for his son, the future king, has been killed by his own father's attempt to manipulate the future" (137). The play places blame squarely on Herod's shoulders by staging his ineffective efforts at finding a scapegoat for his son's death, in the process giving the audience license to question the authority to which Herod is entitled.

While Herod is working out his own guilt and responsibility for his decision, we are reminded of the knights' initial objections to Herod's order; they, too, do not escape condemnation, even though they go unpunished in the play. The first knight initially complains about Herod's order to slaughter all of the boys under two, saying, "A villanye yt weare, iwys, / for my fellowe and mee / to

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[36] According to Oosterwijk,

> such a distinctly dressed infant son of Herod remains to be identified in medieval art. Other plays omit this episode altogether; the York and Coventry plays instead end with Herod's realization of Christ's escape and his pursuit, whereas the Towneley play concludes with the king giving thanks to "Mahowne" for what he still believes to have been a successful action. Yet other plays finish with a scene of divine retribution: in the Digby play, Herod dies rather abruptly from terror after hearing about the mothers' cries for vengeance, whereas the Chester and N-Town plays emphasize the horror of the king's death as devils come to claim him. Herod's death and damnation would have been a further way of appeasing, as best as possible, the minds of medieval audiences upset by gruesome spectacle of the Massacre; in fact, the blows aimed by the mothers at Herod's soldiers may have served a similar purpose in a play where the outcome for the Innocents was known to be a tragic one. (35)

sley a shitten-arsed shrowe" (155-157); as Woolf wryly adds, "the vileness of their speech of course instantly bel[ies] their care for the standards of chivalry" (205). It is only after Herod assures them that they will slay "neyther on nor two / . . . / but a thousand and yet moo" (169-171) that they agree to carry out his orders. The knights here are taken in by the scope of the task, rather than considering its implications, and what follows is literally overkill. The fight put up by the mothers, in addition to the information that the Holy family has already fled to Egypt, only strengthens this play's implicit critique of Herod's political wisdom and the patriarchal authority he wields over his knights and his female subjects.

That this critique is gendered is suggested by more than what Coletti describes as the "symbolically gendered weapon" (252) of the distaff. After the first child is murdered, the second mother tries to save the second child's life by doing some gender-bending. This seems a particularly deliberate choice on the part of the playwright(s), given the source material. The account of the Holy Innocents in *The Golden Legend* explains that Herod ordered the slaughter of children two years old and under because

> Herod had gathered from the Magi that the Lord was born the day the star appeared to them; and since a year had passed with this journey to and from Rome, he concluded that the Lord was a year old plus any remaining days. So, fearing that the child may be a changeling—in other words (since even the stars were at his service), *he might have changed his age or bodily appearance—*

> the king vented his rage on children older than this one child and up to two years of age, or under, i.e. down to, the age of one day. (Jacobus de Voraigne 57-58, emphasis added)

While Herod is focused on the potential manipulation of Christ's age, however, the Mothers are focused on the manipulation of gender. When told to hand over the baby in her arms, the second mother claims that the remaining child, who we later discover is Herod's son, has "two holes under the tayle" (367); the mother pointedly adds that, if the knight does not believe her, "kysse and thou may assaye" (368). The insult—telling the knight to "kiss the baby's ass"—and the assertion that the child has "two holes," highlights the difficulty of discerning the sex of the baby without actually examining its anatomy, and therefore introduces the opportunity in and through the gender confusion that is readily available to the Innocents, a gender confusion that challenges "the very notion of gender identity, seeing it as 'unfixed and in process,'" allowing "feminists to deconstruct the opposition between 'man' and 'woman' as discursive metaphysical categories" (Evans 142).

The gender confusion instantiated by the mother's insult to the knight operates on two levels. First, there is the editorial gender confusion caused by Lumianski and Mills's gloss of the second mother's explanation that her child has "two holes under the tayle." Lumiansky and Mills, in the Early English Text Society edition of the Chester cycle, erroneously define the two holes as "the orifices of anus and penis only, lacking the third 'hole,' the female pudendum"—this reading is later repeated by David Mills in his modernized edition of the plays

where he similarly glosses "two holes" as "penis and anus." Their gloss of "two holes" would suggest that the second mother wanted to bring the male gender of her child to the attention of the second knight, something that makes little sense in the context of this scene. She is here responding to the second knight's order that the child "must hop upon [his] spear. / And [*if*] hit any pintell [*penis*] bear, / [He] must teach him a playe" (362-64). The point of the second mother's response is to *deny* that her child has a penis, in an attempt to save its life, whereas the reading put forward by Lumiansky and Mills in their editions of the play suggests that somehow the male gender of the child is announced by the mother to help save this child from the massacre, despite the second knight explicitly stating that if the child has a penis, he will teach him a play—i.e. murder him—with the tip of his spear.[37]

Second, this gender confusion demonstrates Herod's vulnerability, which is a result of his own excess of patriarchal power. Herod repeatedly and explicitly insists on killing all the "*knave*-children" (119, 151, 179, etc.), for fear that the baby Jesus may be missed (173-176), but he does not consider the fact that girls and boys under the age of two might be easily mistaken for one another, or that his own son and patrilineal heir might not only be killed in the process, but might be passed off as a girl in a woman's desperate and futile attempt to save the child's life. Herod's fixation on the gender of the child who threatens his crown

[37] T. W. Craik, in his 1973 essay, "Violence in the English Miracle Plays," is to my knowledge the only critic who has commented upon the mother's reference to the child's "two holes." He explains it simply as "a lively denial from one woman that her baby is a boy" (179). Craik is silent on the implications, if any, of this gender-bending baby turning out to be Herod's son.

ironically blinds him to the dangers he is causing to his own crown by failing to protect his son. Herod is rooted in a patriarchal model that justifies his, and his son's, place in the society. The mothers, however, with a more flexible idea about gender and its signification, are aware that a little gender-bending might potentially save a life.

This play's violent gendering of the Innocents draws focus to the constructedness of gender itself, and invites the audience's sympathies for the rebellious mothers. According to Hill-Vasquez,

> the audience of the play, having taken on the role of Herod's disempowered subjects and thus having opened themselves up to an experience and response more feminine than masculine, might likely identify with the rebellious women, seeking alternatives to earthly hierarchies of gender, class, and other social roles. (Hill-Vasquez 143-44)

Denise Ryan similarly notes that the Mothers are rebellious and sympathetic, pointing out that "the women are once again seen to be using the limited means available to them to settle their disputes, and that the level of resourcefulness which they are obliged to display in doing so is itself evidence of the gender-specific nature of their efforts" (90). Women with their distaffs and quick comebacks are pitted against men with their swords and their royal orders, in what is ultimately a critique of tyrannical and patriarchal power. In this context, Herod's sudden death after hearing about the murder of his child, his only heir,

seems less bizarre, and suggests that though the mothers were unable to save the Innocents, they were able effectively to end Herod's reign.[38]

When considered more carefully, the violence in "The Slaughter of the Innocents" is more sophisticated than the accusations of mere farce or didacticism seem to imply. These women with their domestic tools deal a blow to what Claire Sponsler calls "the bases of masculine authority" and "accepted patterns of social control" (141). Though they cannot stop the massacre—because that would change the course of Christian history—these medieval mothers can, and do, interrupt that history for as long as possible with the tools that are at hand. Rather than enacting resistance for the sake of easy laughs, the behaviour of the mothers defending the children in their care disrupts the narrative in order to criticize the forms of authority that make such an exercise of power—in the form of the massacre—possible. Although the mothers fail to stop the slaughter, they succeed in slowing it down long enough to shape and define the significance of such brutal action.

"Get thee a new wife!": Mrs. Noah and her Gossips in "Noah's Flood"

Noah's wife is another example of a female character in medieval religious drama who disturbs the Christian narrative with her domestic concerns.

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[38] Here we find another interesting deviation from *The Golden Legend* account of the Slaughter of the Innocents. In the Chester play, it is implied that Herod only has the one son, whose murder would then mean the end of Herod's rule. By contrast, *The Golden Legend* and the *Stanzaic Life of Christ* attribute several sons to Herod, and prolong his death (and the death of his sons) over a much longer period of time. This suggests that the dramatist made a deliberate choice to punish Herod swiftly, and to limit (and eliminate) his male heirs immediately.

Though Mrs. Noah "barely gets a nod in the cataclysmic flood narrative of Genesis 6-9 . . . she is a vivid presence in several of the cycles. Her various portraits dramatize a spectrum of stereotypical behaviors familiar from contemporary anti-matrimonial literature and fabliaux" (Potkay and Evitt 111). The critical tradition, however, has been to read Mrs. Noah's recalcitrant behaviour in relation to the impact this has on the typological and theological significance of the plays in which she appears, as Sarah Sutherland points out when she complains, "comparatively little space . . . is allotted to Uxor's effectiveness as a dramatic character" (182).

One reason for this is that there are five versions of Noah's wife in English medieval drama, and no authoritative Biblical source for her actions. The tendency (and temptation) is to subsume the variants of these five characters into a single uber-*Uxor*, a stable signifier of Noah's wife and her role in an overarching (and unified) theological scheme. Because most of the Mrs. Noahs of medieval drama refuse to board the ark, modern readers develop a general sense of her character being merely a stereotypical shrew, the convention of her recalcitrance ultimately limiting investigation into the conditions of her resistance to her marital and spiritual duty. Instead, Mrs. Noah's character is revealed to be remarkably versatile as a medieval figure of resistance. Mrs. Noah's refusal to board the ark is both thoroughly conventional, according to the legends identified by Anna Mill as circulating in Europe in the medieval period, and tailored to the ideological struggles particular to each of the cycles in which she appears, suggesting a more sophisticated understanding and deployment of Mrs. Noah's

character than the usual accusations of mere farce imply. In the case of the Chester play, the Noah family's struggles dramatize an irreconcilable opposition between Mrs. Noah's female community of gossips and the patriarchal hierarchy espoused by Noah, an opposition that troubles rather than confirms the religious narrative of the play.

There are five extant flood plays in middle English, all of which include Noah's wife: Chester, York, Towneley, N-Town, and Newcastle.[39] Anna Mill, in trying to make sense of the numerous differences between the Flood plays, argues that the Newcastle version of the Flood play is "an integral part of a persistent legend" (615). Citing folk tales, Swedish art, and Queen Mary's Psalter, Mill identifies a few elements of this legend: "the corruption of the wife by the evil one, the use of an intoxicating potion for the discovery of Noah's secret, the devil-naming, [and] the trick by which the devil enters the ship" (616). While the Newcastle Flood play is the most faithful illustration of the legend as identified by Mill, it is interestingly the most anomalous Flood play of the group. While Mill stops short of proposing a chronology of influence, she does point out that

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[39] There is also evidence in guild records of a Noah play at Hull, but no script has survived. A Flood episode also appears in the Cornish *Creation*, but it is not in English and therefore beyond the scope of this project. According to Lynette Muir, the convention of a resistant Mrs. Noah is rarely found in Continental medieval religious drama: "The majority [of plays] portray Noah and his family as righteous in their obedience to God, an obedience which is seen as directly opposed to the disobedience of Adam" but

> A small, mainly English, group follows an Eastern legend which makes Mrs Noah succumb to a temptation of the devil (as Eve had done before her) and seek to prevent Noah's salvation. The closest to the original story is the Newcastle *Noah* play. . . . Other English plays omit the explicit temptation by the devil but use the legend to justify an anti-feminist portrayal of Mrs Noah as disobedient and bad-tempered. (73)

> Folktales cannot be dated. . . . The extant manuscripts of miracle plays may lag considerably behind the original texts; the earliest extant record of a play may date from a time when the play is a going concern and has obviously been firmly established for a considerable period. . . . All that can be said with certainty is that by the end of the thirteenth century, with Enikel's Chronicle, the legend is fully established in literature; by the fourteenth century, with the English Queen Mary's Psalter and the Swedish Edshult paintings, in art; that its growth and survival with many variants in the folk-lore of a wide range of peoples are singularly persistent. (626)

This persistent legend provides a sense of what might have been conventional, and how each dramatic instance of the convention may have been adapted for its own specific purposes. Mill points out that, "Were it not for the central episode of the dilatoriness or recalcitrance of Uxor, one might dismiss these other traces [of the legend] as accidental or inspired dialogue" (625). As I will show below, these "traces" are also evidence of a deliberate manipulation of the horizon of expectations to recast Mrs. Noah's recalcitrance for different ends in different cycles.

Two of the Flood play motifs identified by Mill are particularly relevant here: the means by which God instructs Noah to build the ark, and the question of whether or not the flood is a secret kept from Noah's family. In the Newcastle and N-Town plays, it is an angel who communicates the details about the flood to

Noah from God, but in the remaining three plays God speaks directly to Noah. The way God breaks the news to Noah, and what he emphasizes in his instructions to build the ark, provides useful information about the focus of each particular play. Further, each play's use of the secrecy motif will influence how each respective Mrs. Noah reacts when it is time to board the ark; for example, in Newcastle, the secrecy motif is the reason Mrs. Noah follows the devil's advice to use a truth potion on her husband. Similarly, the York and Towneley Mrs. Noahs are caught by surprise when they are told about the flood, and they both object to boarding the ark.[40] According to Garrett Epp, the York Noah's "wife has deliberately been left ignorant and thereby disempowered" (233); her reluctance is thereby given psychological motivation, in addition to the type of theological significance John Gardner notes when he argues that "The [Towneley] wife's refusal to enter the Ark, a traditional element of the Noah story, . . . becomes, as a result of the typology developed throughout, a representation of late repentance" (11).

The reasons given by the Mrs. Noahs of both Towneley and York are also significant, particularly with respect to their cycles' emphasis on work. In Towneley, Noah is amazed by his own ability to "begyn such a wark" as the ark when he's "sich an old dote" (3.174, 387, 385); but his wife, who has no idea where he is or what he's been doing, accuses him of being lazy and not working as much as she does: "When we swete or swynk, / Thou dos what thou think" (3.283-84). She values hard work, while "he perpetually complains as he builds

[40] The N-Town play offers no resistance from Mrs. Noah.

the ark: 'My bonys are so stark: / No wonder if they wark, / For I am full old'" (Normington 129, citing 3.388-90). When her husband tells her to board the ark, she refuses, saying,

> Sir, for Iak nor for Gill
>
> Will I turne my face,
>
> Till I haue on this hill
>
> Spon a space
>
> On my rok. (3.486-90)

Similarly, in the York cycle, which is particularly self-conscious about its intersections with the craft guilds producing it,[41] Noah ironically declares that "of shippe-craft can I right noght; / Of ther making haue I no merke" (8.67-68)—ironic because, in York, the Flood play was produced by the Shipwrights. This play's emphasis on work is echoed in Mrs. Noah's objection to boarding the ship because she still has "tolis to trusse" (9.110); she has to pack her household tools. In the case of both York and Towneley, Mrs. Noah's objections to boarding the ark are indicators of their disbelief. Being kept so long in the dark about something so literally earth-changing gives these particular wives the dramatic impetus to refuse. Further, the reasons they give for refusing to board the ark, namely their own work, are appropriate to the particular worlds in which they live.

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[41] Martin Stevens writes, "One senses in reading the manuscript of the plays and the copious municipal records from York that the cycle itself is a corporate work" (17), which makes much use of "trade symbolism" (30).

In the Chester cycle, however, the entire Noah family is present when God gives his instructions to Noah, and, unlike in the other Flood plays, Noah's wife participates in the construction of the ark, along with Noah, their three sons, and their son's wives. The absence of the secrecy motif in the Chester Flood play is what allows for such a display of familial, and hierarchial, cooperation unique among the Flood plays. The Chester God says to Noah, "Destroyed all the world shalbe— / save thou, thy wife, thy sonnes three, / and there wyves alsoe with thee" (3.37-39). Noah replies, "Thy byddinge, lorde, I shall fulfill" (45), and immediately turns to his family, ordering,

> Have donne, you men and weomen all.
>
> Hye you . . .
>
> to worche this shippe, chamber and hall,
>
> as God hath bidden us doe. (49-52).

The absence of the secrecy motif allows the family to hear God's command, and yet Noah nonetheless inserts himself into that chain of command, relaying God's commands through him to his "houshould" (43). This highlights the importance of the hierarchical chain of command in this dramatic world, as does the very structure of the ark they have been ordered to build; Normington points out that God instructs Noah to build the ark with three levels (3.34), giving the ark a "hierarchical design" (Normington 130). The hierarchical order is then further emphasized by the order of responses to Noah's command, beginning with each of his sons, then his wife, then each of his son's wives. To an audience wondering

what qualities God looks for in a family about to be saved from the world's destruction, it might appear that order and obedience are ideal.

This orderly and obedient hierarchy is shown to be gendered when Mrs. Noah comments that the wives will "bringe tymber" because "women bynne weake to underfoe / any great travell" (65, 67-68);[42] in response to the sons' brandishing of their respective tools—an axe, a hatchet, and a hammer (54, 57, 62)—the women declare that they will do the gathering—of "tymber," "hackestocke," "slytche," and "chippes" (65, 69, 73, 77). Even the animals carried onto the ark signify a hierarchical (and gendered) process; "while Noah's sons carry lordly and powerful animals, the women are left to bring creatures which are either domestic, for example cats, mice, birds, or those which have sinister and sly associations, such as wolves, marmosets, bears, weasels, ferrets" (Normington 127). Finally, when the ark is built, and Noah's wife says that she sees no need to get on it, Noah first commands, "Good wife, do nowe as I thee bydd" (102), and when she does not, he concludes, "Lord, that weomen bine crabbed aye, / and non are meeke, I dare well saye" (105-06), equating his wife's gender with her disobedience. And so, "even as the scene projects an image of a harmonious community of work, it also declares that this community is stratified along gender lines" (Wack 44). As Stevens points out,

> The final speech in the pageant is a resolution by God to bring bounty to the earth and never again to destroy mankind with flood

[42] Salter imagines these lines being delivered to comic effect by Mrs. Noah, who "staggers in under a load that would collapse an ox!" (30), thereby undermining the anti-feminism implicit in her speech.

> waters. Yet, despite this new beginning, the role of God as destroyer, as the all-powerful judge of mankind, lingers and sets the tone of the entire action that follows. (Stevens 276)

This expression of God's power extends through Noah and his own household, "for the husband is the wife's head, even as Christ is the head of the Church" (Evans 146). On the whole, "mastere" (111), of the patriarchal and hierarchical variety, is what characterizes the politics of this play, and is brought into relief by the physical altercation that occurs between husband and wife on the ark.

Scholars are generally quite eager to explain away the violence in this play, as William Marx does when he suggests that Noah's wife accidentally runs into Noah when she finally boards the ark (120), or as Sutherland does when she states, "threatened force signifies God's vengeance on a wicked world, while the received blow stresses Noah as a type of Christ and foreshadows God's covenant with Noah after the Flood" (185). In both cases, a typological reading of the play informs their criticisms/revisions of the play. However, Warren Edminster, making specific reference to the Towneley Flood play, cautions us against reading in this way:

> despite the typological tradition and the seemingly obvious typological references, reading the *Processus Noe* typologically has always been hazardous. For example, if Noah is a type of Christ, then Uxor, the bride of Noah/Christ can logically be inferred to be the Church. Yet Uxor's peevish disobedience seems inappropriate for the actions of the Church, and the violent

> behavior of Noah seems equally unsavory as a representation of Christ. Since the burlesque elements of the play interfere with and alter the overall lessons that can be drawn from the typology, previous scholars have limited the typological import to the beginning and end of the play and rationalized away apparent thematic failures or contradictions. (76)

One example of this rationalization of "thematic failures and contradictions" can be found in Rosemary Woolf's criticism of the so-called "Wakefield Master," the mythical author of the best-known of the Towneley plays,[43] because the domestic violence between Noah and his wife "obscur[es] the allegorical significance of Noah" (143); she compares the Wakefield master unfavorably with the Chester author, "who in his understanding of religious allegory is above suspicion, [and who] had similarly, though far more briefly, made Noah's wife give Noah a last cuff and a last word of abuse before passing through the door of the ark" (143). By leaving the domestic abuse at the door of the ark, Woolf reasons, the Chester author is able to preserve the allegorical significance of the ark as the Church and the salvation it offers.

A closer reading of Chester, however, shows that this reading does not accord with the text. Woolf elides the clear indications in the play that Mrs. Noah is forcibly carried onto the ark by her sons; when Shem says, "In fayth, mother, yet thow shall [get on the ship] / whether thou will or nought" (243-44), the question of the ark's typological significance, or of the Noah family's inherent

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[43] For a more detailed discussion of the Towneley play and its problems, see Chapter One.

love for each other, is rendered problematic. As Garrett Epp points out, "the Chester Noah does not wrestle with his wife, but sends his sons to carry their recalcitrant mother forcibly onto the ark where, immediately after he welcomes her aboard, she greets him with a blow" (225). Noah says, "Welcome wyffe, into this boote" (245), indicating that he is speaking from the ark itself; when his wife responds with, "have thou that for thy note!" (246), it is a clear indication that Mrs. Noah is on the ark at the time she strikes her husband. "It seems all too easy to allow presumptions regarding how things have been to rule perception of how things are, and of how things should be" (Epp 236), and Woolf is not alone in her projection of an allegorical model, and of an author whose "understanding of religious allegory is above suspicion" (143), onto the Flood plays. The inclination towards typological and theological readings of medieval drama is so strong that some scholars will offer revisionist readings of the Flood plays in order to support their readings.

For example, Travis's reading of the Chester Flood play emphasizes harmony over discord, and typology over dramatic tension. Rather than accidentally misreading the text, as Woolf does, Travis tries to make the case for excising the offending scene.

> Pagina III dramatizes a serious event in biblical history, God's saving Noah and his kin while the world is cleansed of the lost and damned. In the Chester cycle as a whole, Noah's salvation counterbalances the sins committed before his time, exemplifies man's evolution in his relationship to God, his community and

> nature, and looks forward to the two remaining Old Testament pageants, which dramatize further advances in human culture and foreshadow the coming of Christ. (99)

For this reading to work, Travis argues that the Flood play "sustains its vision of social harmony from beginning to end" and that, "Like living didactic icons, Noah's family, tools in hand, realize the hardworking social ideal which Adam's family had hoped to achieve" (100). This "social harmony" is achieved by Travis only after excising the section where Noah's wife objects to boarding the ark, what he describes as "a sudden break in character consistency and in Chester's 'historical realism'" (100). He justifies excising the battle between Noah and his wife by relying on the arguments of Richard Axton and Oscar Brownstein, both of whom argue that the domestic battle between husband and wife is a late addition to the "Old Play" and therefore in "violation of a carefully controlled dramatic tense, and of a historical vision of 'pre-Christian' time, both central to the design of Chester's Old Testament Group" (Travis 67).

Marx takes yet another approach to the conflict between husband and wife. He argues strongly *against* typological readings of Mrs. Noah, as well as any reduction of her character to a stereotypical shrew, and describes how the conflict can be staged in such a way as to reinforce the spiritual significance of the Flood play as a whole. Ironically, he goes to great lengths to elide the violence Mrs. Noah enacts upon her husband after boarding the ark, by postulating that Noah "is standing in Mrs. Noah's way . . . and causes a collision that makes her spill the household goods" (120). Other extra-textual inventions of this kind (i.e.,

a peal of thunder, liturgical language) point to the trouble Marx took in his direction of this play to establish marital harmony and spiritual coherence for this couple, and to ignore the tensions that remain unresolved at the end.

The trouble to which Travis and Marx both go to make their respective cases about the play is an indication of just how difficult such domestic disturbances are to reconcile with the religious subject matter of the plays; however, it is also evidence that such "inconsistencies," if they are so difficult to avoid, may have been deliberate, and not as offensive to medieval audiences as they appear to be to twentieth-century critics. A closer examination of the reasons for Mrs. Noah's refusal of her husband's order to board the ark, and the subsequent violence between them, suggests that, though she is necessarily caught up in this patriarchal hierarchy, her obedience has limits.

In Chester, a cycle characterized by its focus on God's omnipotence and the importance of hierarchical authority, Mrs. Noah's reasons for refusing to board the ark are telling. She knows the Flood is coming, and has even helped in the construction the ark. Nonetheless, Mrs. Noah states adamantly that she "will not owt of this towne, / but [she has her] gossips everyechone" (3.200-01). She adds that

> They shall not drowne, by sayncte John,
> and I may save there life.
> The loved me full well, by Christe.
> But thou wilte lett them into thy chiste,
> elles rowe forthe, Noe, when thy liste,

and gett thee a newe wyfe. (203-208)

Her attachment to these women, and the language she uses to describe that attachment, stands in contrast to the otherwise sparse emotion in this play. Stevens reminds us that "the Chester cycle is sparse in dramatizing acts of love and reward. Noah is, of course, singled out as God's exception, but God speaks virtually no personal words to him (he limits his praise to calling Noah 'righteous,' 42/18, 47/115)" (Stevens 276), and there is little affectionate language used amongst the members of Noah's family. Mrs. Noah's attachment to her gossips therefore appears strong, and stands in stark contrast to the obedience demanded by God and her husband.[44]

It is exactly this dilemma that the play sets out, that of Mrs. Noah having to choose between her friends and her family. This opposition between friendship based on mutual interests and family based on hierarchical obedience is further reinforced when Japheth attempts to appeal to his mother's maternal feelings by pleading, "Mother, wee praye you all together— / for we are here, *youre own childer*— / come into the shippe for feare of the wedder" (237-239, emphasis mine); to this she simply replies, "that will I not for all your call / but I have my gosseppes all" (241-42). It is at this point that she is dragged onto the ark and then

[44] Woolf points out that Mrs. Noah's excuses, in Chester as well as in York, "are on par with those in the parable made by the guests invited to the marriage feast, and it is important to interpret them in this way, as otherwise the attachment of Noah's wife to her friends might be taken as a sympathetic sign of human feeling, which the authors manifestly do not intend" (140). Whatever the authors' intentions, Mrs. Noah's affection for her gossips in Chester is readily apparent, enough so for Woolf to be making a case *against* this reading.

hits her husband, and this is the last we hear of Mrs. Noah in the Chester Flood play.

This play's emphasis on the family is notable, particularly when Noah's sons (and their wives) play such a negligible role in all of the other extant Flood plays; in this context, her refusal to leave behind her gossips registers as being more than nostalgia for a lost world, as we find when York's Mrs. Noah laments the friends she has lost.[45] Unlike in York, where the friends Mrs. Noah mourns are abstract and undefined for the audience, in Chester these gossips come onstage to plead for their lives, and to sing a drinking song. As Mary Wack explains, "Before the waves submerge them, they join together in a moment of fellowship around drink, as they have often done in the past ('oftetymes wee have done soe'). The women's community is thus formed onstage at this moment, constituted by the rejection of Noah's authority" (44-45), making concrete the homosocial bonds Chester's Mrs. Noah is loath to break.

Wack makes the argument that "drinking songs offer a model of community that challenges and inverts masculine martial and civic authority" and points to "civic legislation of the 1530s that reshaped women's relation to the civic body in ways likely to produce anxieties needing collective staging and mediation" (35). Her argument depends upon a reading of the tapster scene in "The Harrowing of Hell" as being added to the Chester Cycle at a late date,

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[45] In York, Mrs. Noah says of her "commodorys" and "cosines," "tham wolde I wente with vs in feere" (147); shortly afterwards she laments, "My frendis that I fra yoode / Are ouere flowen with floode" (154-55). Finally, once dry land is in sight, Mrs. Noah asks, "But Noye, wher are nowe all oure kynne / And companye we knwe before?" (272-73).

because of this legislation. But when we consider the tapster scene alongside two other scenes that make reference to tapsters, alcohol, or false measures, namely "The Slaughter of the Innocents" and "Noah's Flood," the historical context for the scene in "The Harrowing of Hell" takes on less significance. Lumiansky and Mills, in their gloss of the tapster scene in "The Harrowing of Hell," note that "Legislation for the control of alcohol was passed in Chester in 1503-4, but a new, tougher code of practice was introduced by the mayor, Henry Gee, in 1533, covering many of the abuses here revealed" (Vol. II, p. 275, note to ll. 276-end).[46] The abuses described by the tapster, who is left behind in hell after Jesus has freed the rest of the damned, include "mispendinge much malt, bruynge so thinne, / sellinge smalle cuppes money to wynne, / against all trueth to deale" (ll. 306-8). A similar reference to alcohol, and specifically false measures, leading to hell appears in the "Slaughter of the Innocents"; however, these lines are not attributed to any historical event or questioned for being a late addition to the play. A demon of Lucifer's, who arrives on the scene to take Herod away, adds a warning before he departs: "By my lewtye, / that filles there measures falselye / shall beare this lord company" (450-2). While these lines are not nearly as developed as the tapster scene in "Harrowing of Hell," they echo that scene enough to suggest that, in the Chester cycle, it was commonplace to associate tapsters with deceit and, ultimately, damnation.

[46] One significant piece of legislation, which Wack, Lumiansky and Mills all mention, is that by 1533, "no woman in Chester under the age of forty was allowed to keep an alehouse or tavern" (Lumiansky & Mills, Vol. II, p. 275).

Alcohol is once again associated with the damnation of women in the Flood play, in the scene in which Mrs. Noah's Good Gossips appear on stage and remark that "The fludd comes fleetinge in full faste, / one everye side that spredeth full farre" (225-6). In their fear of drowning, they gather together and have a kind of a toast:

> And lett us drinke or wee departe,
> for oftetymes wee have done soe.
> For at one draught thou drinke a quarte,
> and soe will I doe or I goe.
>
> Here is a pottell full of malnesaye good and stronge;
> yt will rejoyse both harte and tonge.
> Though Noe thinke us never so longe,
> yett wee wyll drinke atyte. (229-36)

While no one has made specific reference to hell in this scene, the implication is clear: these women represent some of the sin of which the world is being cleansed. Even though these women are not selling false measures, as in the above examples, alcohol still marks them out as being sinners, "for oftetymes wee have done soe [drink]" (230). When we consider all three of the above references to alcohol and damnation, it becomes evident that there is more than just the historical context of regulations to consider. Mrs. Noah's choice of her homosocial drinking community which, so far as we can tell, exists simply to socialize and drink "a quarte" and then maybe "a pottell" (231, 233), is a rejection

of the heterosexist reproductive imperative at work in God's commands, in favour of affinity groupings, a community of women with shared interests that have no practical or (re)productive end.[47] This is seen in "The Slaughter of the Innocents" as well, a play with plenty of emphasis on women's community.

Once the Noah family has finished building the ark, a catalogue of animals is described as they are brought on board; once the last fowl is accounted for, Noah immediately turns to Mrs. Noah and says, "Wyffe, come in. Why standes thou there?" (193), as if she is the next item in a long list of creatures required in the new world. And after the flood, God spends a surprising amount of time emphasizing the type of foods they are allowed to eat, the vengeance he will have if anyone sheds the blood of another person, and the promise he makes to Noah "and all [his] seede for [his] sake" (302) never to flood the world again. There is an ideal of rational, regulated, and productive behaviour that is made evident in critiques of Mrs. Noah's behaviour, such as that made by Katie Normington that Mrs. Noah is "significantly undermined by the debauchery of her drinking and gossiping" (127); but what makes Mrs. Noah's behaviour so attractive to scholars (and, I imagine, medieval audiences) is that she so blatantly defies such ideals, both in her own domestic life with her family, and within the context of the Chester cycle as a whole. Mrs. Noah is enigmatic because she chooses affinity over responsibility; she chooses her relationship with her gossips over, and in

[47] This is not to suggest that Noah's wife, herself, will be expected to reproduce, necessarily, only that her presence in this newly-cleansed world is required if her family, as a whole, is going to undertake the responsibility of repopulating the earth after the flood; Mrs. Noah is not afforded the opportunity to opt out of this task.

defiance of, the heterosexist reproductive obligation implicit in the responsibility of being a "mother of the entire race" (Davidson 51), and in defiance of the hierarchies of authority that demand her participation. Certainly, "the audience of the pageant did not receive Mrs. Noah in a homogenous manner" (Normington 123), but Mrs. Noah's struggle reveals the possibility that obedience is not the only option. Kicking and screaming, Mrs. Noah does end up on the ark in the end, satisfying the typological requirements of the Flood story within the larger religious narrative; simultaneously, however, Mrs. Noah's resistance, just like the fight put up by the Mothers of the Innocents, interrupts the march of Christian time—this domestic disturbance explicitly critiquing the very patriarchal authority that the producers of the Chester cycle appear so anxious to reinforce.

Chapter Three

Why God Keeps Sending His Angels: Divine Intervention and the Gender Politics of Domestic Disturbance

Domestic disturbance is not limited to female characters who object to being told what to do. The convention of domestic disturbance does not require an obstinate, shrewish female to interrupt the narrative—these obstinate, shrewish females of the previous chapter are simply much more likely to be accused of causing such disruptions by their fellow characters, by audiences, and by scholars alike. Similar conflicts between women and the men who are supposed to control them are found in the plays depicting the Fall of Man and those depicting Joseph's Troubles with Mary. Domestic disturbance operates differently and to different effect in the York and Chester dramatizations of these stories—the York cycle is using domestic disturbance to celebrate marital cooperation, whereas the Chester cycle is redeploying hierarchical relationships between men and women—but in each instance we see the couples Adam and Eve, and Mary and Joseph, negotiating the power dynamics between them, and God.

Unlike Mrs. Noah and the Mothers of the previous chapter, Eve and Mary are not seeking out conflict in their respective plays, and yet the conflicts of which these characters find themselves at the center are significant enough to warrant divine intervention, whether by God himself or by one of his angels. What this suggests is that the ideological work domestic disturbance does in these plays, to challenge gendered hierarchies of power and the gendered expectations of behaviour that come with them, is not merely an agenda attributed to a handful

of disgruntled female characters, but the effect of dramatic choices made by the producers of the York and Chester cycles.

Eve and Mary are in some ways unlikely allies, particularly given Eve's reputation as original sinner, and Mary's as mother of Christ and the salvation he brings with him. Their very difference from each other is given as the basis for typological reading; Rosemary Woolf points out that the notion of Mary being a second Eve "was such an ancient and traditional commonplace of religious thought that it would be scarcely necessary for the dramatists to formulate it within the plays" (172). For instance, the N-Town

> Gabriel addressed the Virgin in a famous pun which epitomised this reversal, "here this name Eva is turnyd Ave," whilst in God's doctrinal prologue to the Towneley Annunciation the beautiful symmetry of the divine plan of redemption is set out succinctly:
>
> > For reson wyll that ther be thre,
> > A man, a madyn, and a tre.
> > Man for man, tre for tre,
> > Madyn for madyn; thus shal it be. (Woolf 172)

Rather than emphasize the features which allow for such a symmetrical reversal, however, the York and Chester cycles notably under-represent some of the more traditional differences between them in order to highlight their shared interest, if differing success, in demonstrating faith and obedience.[48] And so while a

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[48] The York cycle's "The Annunciation and the Visitation" opens with the character, Doctour, explaining

> howe man was made withouten mysse,

typological reading of these two figures may place Eve in the same category as some of the trouble-making women in these plays, the York and Chester scripts suggest that Eve is also aligned with Mary in important ways.

By focusing on characters who are less likely to draw as much critical attention as the trouble-makers in the drama, I am following the lead of scholars such as Chester Scoville, who reminds us that

> Too often . . . the assumptions of early modernism coloured the perceptions of our criticism of these plays, with the result that villains such as Herod have taken centre stage in much of our thinking when we regard medieval plays. Indeed, medieval plays contain much that is lurid, much that is gruesome, and indeed much that is verisimilar to life; all literature and drama do so. But the focus on these aspects in medieval plays has, I believe, led to a merely partial understanding of their nature, a distortion that only recently has started to be corrected. (7)

Usually such a complaint is designed to draw attention away from the more sensational aspects of these plays and towards their more spiritual subject matter.

> And sette whare he sulde euer haue bene
> . . . . . .
> And howe he lost that comforth clene
> And was putte oute fro paradys. (2-6)

In the following stanza, the Doctour explains that God, "His sone he saide that he suld sende / To take kynde of mankyn, / In a mayden full mylde" (20-22). The Doctour is narrating the events of Christian history, as told by the prophets, to set the scene for the angel Gabriel's arrival. However, he does not imbue these two details (the Fall of Man and the Annunciation) with the same kind of recapitulation narrative that the above examples from N-Town and Towneley do. The Chester play of the same name makes no reference to Adam and Eve or Christ's role in correcting original sin.

However, by raising the possibility that domestic disturbance is instantiated by female characters who try to act faithfully as well as those who do not, I am highlighting the widespread prevalence of domestic disturbance in both York and Chester, removing it from the simple purview of disobedient women, and locating it instead at the centre of gendered conflict in these two cycles.

This chapter begins with a discussion of "The Fall of Man" (York) and "Adam and Eve" (Chester), which dramatize the decision by Adam and Eve to eat the apple, and God's punishment of them; the second half of the chapter takes up "Joseph's Troubles about Mary" (York) and "The Annunciation and the Nativity" (Chester), both of which feature an elderly Joseph who discovers his young wife is pregnant, fears he has been cuckolded, and contemplates leaving Mary on her own to face the consequences of her behaviour. What all four plays suggest is that the recapitulative relationship between Eve and Mary is not as prevalent in the York and Chester cycles as it is in the other manuscripts, and that the issues that emerge in terms of the power of female affinity groups (Chester) or the importance of marital cooperation (York), are not imposed on the plays by trouble-making female characters; instead, they are written into the very structure of the conflicts these plays stage, whether in the form of marital conflict, divine intervention, or some combination of the two.

Domestic Disturbance in Eden: Divine Intervention and Eve's Culpability

The character of Eve, and her role in facilitating the Fall by eating the fruit of the forbidden tree and offering it to Adam, has often been relegated to the ranks

of troublesome and trouble-making women. However, "The Fall of Man" (York) and "Adam and Eve" (Chester) depict an Eve who, like Mary, tries to act as she should. Eve necessarily fails by taking the fruit, of course, but her culpability for this failure is moderated in these plays by the circumstances in which she is placed and by her reactions to them. This is not to say, however, that the Chester Eve and the York Eve are the same. The Chester Eve is singled out for punishment far more overtly than her counterpart in York, and, as we would expect in the Chester cycle, she has far less to say in her own defense than her counterpart in York. The York Eve, on the other hand, is put on equal footing with Adam, being assigned the same punishment as her husband, and they leave paradise a much more cooperative couple than their counterparts in Chester.

I have already noted in the previous chapter that the Chester cycle is characterized by Martin Stevens, among others, as being the most misogynist of the extant play cycles,[49] and Chester's "Adam and Eve" certainly serves to illustrate this point. The demon who plans to tempt Eve says, "That woman is forbydden to doe / for anythinge the will therto" (185-186), and "wemen they be full licourouse" (199). Rosemary Woolf calls this statement "a flagrantly anachronistic generalisation" (123); Eve is the first and only woman in existence at this moment in time, and it is an impossibility for the devil to make such generalizations. The statements made by the demon are in contrast with how God describes the woman he has created for Adam: "Hit is not good man only to bee; /

[49] "The emphasis on a powerful God in the Chester cycle seems also to inspire the persistent elevation of man above woman. In fact, the Chester playwright is almost virulently antifeminist" (Stevens 277).

helpe to him now make wee" (129-130). This is not simply a case of a creator admiring his creation, either; Adam echoes this sentiment when he sees Eve for the first time and says,

> Therfore man kyndely shall foresake
> father and mother, and to wife take;
> too in one fleshe, as thou can make,
> eyther other for to glad. (157-160)

Adam's statement, while positive about marriage, is also anachronistic given that Adam has no parents to forsake in favour of his wife. This, taken together with anachronistic generalization about women made by the demon, suggests that Chester's "Adam and Eve" is consciously engaging with the stereotypical dramatic asides to sympathetic members of the audience, usually offered by beleaguered husbands such as Noah, and usually involving some generalized criticism of women.[50] In this case, then, Adam's positive remark about marriage suggests that the play is engaging with the convention in order to undercut it, thereby illustrating by contrast Adam's happiness rather than the usual

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[50] The Towneley Flood play offers the best example of this direct address to the audience. Here Noah complains about his wife:

> Yee men that has wifys,
> Whyls thay ar yong,
> If ye luf youre lifys,
> Chastice thare tong.
> Me think my hert ryfys,
> Both levyr and long,
> To se sich strifys
> Wedmen emong;
> Bot I,
> As have I blys,
> Shall chastyse this. (3.573-583)

exasperation or anger spouses tend to express in medieval dramatic asides. This is still paradise, after all.

Anachronistic assumptions about women are at work in the devil's approach to Eve as well. These yet-to-be-created women and their associations with deceit are referenced by the devil when he decides to disguise himself in the "maner of an edder . . . / that wynges like a bryde shee hase— / feete as an edder, a maydens face" (193-195). He does not give an explanation for why he plans to take on the guise of this particular creature; however, the fact that he uses the pronoun "she" and has taken on "a maydens face" suggests that part of his plan to beguile Eve has to do with stereotypes about the kind of trouble women get into when they are together, anticipating the gossips in the Flood play who get together to drink and sing, symbolizing all the worldly sins that God is trying to eradicate and that the devil is trying to promote. This disguise also suggests that the devil believes that women are more likely to trust other women, whether they are aware that they are doing wrong or not. If the serpent is operating on these anachronistic assumptions, however, Eve does not behave as the type of woman that the serpent expects to encounter.

Unlike Eve of the York play, whom Katie Normington describes as being depicted "from the moment of her creation . . . as vain and proud" (93), the Chester Eve kindly explains to an inquiring serpent that

> Nay, of the fruite of yche tree
> for to eate good leave have wee,
> save the fruite of one wee must flee;

of hyt wee may not eate.

This tree heare that in the middest is,
eate wee of hit wee doe amysee.
God sayde we should dye iwys
and if we touch that tree. (213-220)

In Chester, Eve is well aware of the rules and seems quite happy to follow them, until the serpent explains that, if she eats the fruit of the forbidden tree against God's wishes, she will be "as wyse as hee" (224). He adds,

your eyne shalbe unknyt.
Like godes yee shalbe
and knowe both good and evill alsoe.
. . . . . .
and bee like godes both too. (227-229, 238)

The serpent deceives Eve by ironically promising that, like a god, she will know both good and evil; Eve, being in paradise, only knows good, and does not seem to realize that all she will gain is knowledge of the bad. The devil also pledges, "And but thou finde yt to thy paye, / say that I am false" (235-236). This strategy to get her to trust him, by assuring her that she can call him false if she does not like the fruit (or the consequences of eating it), is also ironic, in that the serpent and the audience know very well that he is already false, and her calling him so will have absolutely no effect on him.

The inability of Eve fully to realize the ramifications of her deal with the devil is underscored by this play's treatment of Adam's dream. According to George Ovitt, Jr., "The Chester 'Creation' is unique . . . in introducing into the midst of the prelapsarian vision of unity between God and man the suggestion of an impending fall. In Chester, Adam sleeps as God creates Eve, and when he awakens, he feels a momentary confusion" (77). Upon waking, Adam asks,

> A lorde, where have I longe bine?
> For sythence I slepte much have I seene—
> wonder that withouten weene
> hereafter shalbe wiste. (137-140)

But it is not until after they have eaten the fruit that Adam makes reference to the dream again, in the first of increasingly misogynist statements made by Adam. Once Eve concludes that she should not have trusted the serpent (266), and both realize that they are naked and ashamed, Adam announces,

> Ya, sooth sayde I in prophecye
> when thou was taken of my bodye—
> mans woe thou would bee witterlye;
> therfore thou was soe named. (269-272)

At the moment, it appears as if Adam is having an "I told you so" moment, the inevitable result of hindsight being 20/20, forgetting that at the time of his dream he had only good things to say about his wife.

However, once the couple is banished "from this lee" (361), Adam's misogyny becomes stronger and even more gratuitous and anachronistic; he declares,

> Nowe all my kynde by mee ys kente
> to flee womens intycement.
> Whoe trusteth them in any intente,
> truely hee is disceaved. (349-352)

For good measure he adds that his "licourouse wyfe hath bynne [his] foe" (353) and that she belongs with the devil: "These too together well may goe" (355). It is not long afterwards, notably, that Adam relates the content of his dream which prophesied the events that Eve has set in motion by giving Adam the fruit: Cain and Abel, the destruction of the world by both flood and fire, and the Last Judgement. According to Kevin J. Harty,

> The inclusion of Adam's dream in Chester Play II ["Adam and Eve"] allows the playwright and his audience briefly to transcend the moment of Adam's sin before these subsequent events are staged. Adam's actions are shown to be part of a divine plan wherein all men will fall with Adam but wherein all men will also be given the chance for reunion with God at the Last Judgment through the effects of the Incarnation. (9)

This necessarily raises the question of culpability in a situation in which events are preordained, and by extension, of the appropriateness of Adam's anger towards Eve.

The misogyny in this play is so strong that Woolf criticizes it in no uncertain terms, saying, "In the plays of the Fall an attack upon women grows naturally out of Adam's biblically based accusation of Eve, but becomes far more heavily accentuated than the narrative and psychological context could warrant" (123). Woolf reasons that "The heavy emphasis upon Eve as the prototype of foolish, obstinate, disobedient women, very obviously begins a pattern which is incomplete, and thus signals that only half the story has been told: Eve thus derided can only be the *first* Eve and the *second* Eve is yet to come" (123, emphasis in original). The Fall, noted as the first in a series of significant events in Christian history, begins the criticism of women, but also anachronistically *anticipates* the future sins of women, making Eve reciprocally guilty of all that has yet to come in addition to her initial transgression, provoking Adam's anger for all that he has come to realize about the Christian future as well. It is worth noting that Adam's misogyny begins only after he eats the fruit, suggesting that his sentiments should also be taken as evidence of his fallen state.

Eve, like Adam, was fully aware of the rule forbidding them to eat the fruit of the forbidden tree, and Eve, unlike Adam, did not have the benefit of the dream vision that Adam had which told of all the events to come. Despite having had the vision, Adam was unable to anticipate his own fall, making it difficult to condemn Eve for her actions. According to Ovitt, "Adam is powerless to understand what he has seen until the commission of sin has given him the knowledge that innocence could not give" (78), and surely that concession can be applied to Eve, who in this play did not have the benefit of a prophetic vision, and

whose innocence precluded her from anticipating the devil's malicious intent. In Maureen Fries's words,

> The place of Eve in biblical commentary and Christian liturgy has always been ambiguous. Seduced by the serpent and seducing Adam, she represents on the one hand the role of woman (in Aristotelian terms) as formal cause of the Fall; and on the other hand, because of God's promise that her seed shall crush the serpent's head, she prefigures the Virgin Mary as Adam prefigures Christ. (1)

In Chester's "Adam and Eve," the producers play up the ambiguity of Eve's culpability, even in the face of Adam's scathing anger towards her, in order to invite a reconsideration of conventional representations of her place in Christian history.

If we turn away from questions of culpability, however, and consider the impact of this ambiguity on the events of the play, it becomes clear once again that the Chester cycle is concerned with issues of authority and power. According to Harty's analysis of Adam's dream in the context of the Chester cycle's first three plays,

> In both Falls [Lucifer's as well as Adam's], the sinful act is characterized as play. The Domination warns Lucifer that he has begun a parlous playe (I.207), while Lucifer disguised as a serpent in the Garden of Eden intends to teach Eve a playe (II.111-12).

> Most strikingly, the sins of both Lucifer and of Adam and Eve both involve an attempted usurpation of the godhead. (3)

Both plays also stage the subsequent punishment of that attempt, and that punishment is severe despite the playful nature of the transgression. The nature of the punishment doled out by God is noteworthy for the way in which it instills hierarchies in which domination by another becomes a form of punishment in and of itself. God punishes first the serpent, ordering him to go "upon [its] brest," and promising to make "emnytie betweene [them]" (301, 303). He says to the serpent,

> Betweene thy seede and hirs alsoe
> I shall excyte thy sorrowe and woe;
> to breake thy head and be thy foe,
> shee shall have masterye aye. (305-308)

After sentencing the serpent to "troden bee full under foote / for [its] mysdeede todaye" (311-312), God turns his attention to Eve, and her sentence is as follows:

> thy much payne I shall multyplye—
> with paynes, sorrowe, and great anye
> thy children tho shall beare.
> And for that thou haste done soe todaye,
> *man shall master thee alwaye*;
> and under his power thou shalte bee aye,
> thee for to dryve and deare. (313-320, emphasis mine)

Eve is very explicitly given mastery over the serpent, but she is put under the power of man. God finally turns to Adam, chastises him for taking his "wyves

counsell" (323) rather than God's, and sentences him to work "with greate travell . . . / one earth to gett [his] livinge" (327-328). God gives a very detailed description of the kind of labour Adam will have to perform, "for thou haste byne to me unbayen" (338). For God, the transgression is not Adam being misled by his wife, but his failure to obey God, even if he was not aware that he was disobeying God when he accepted the fruit from Eve. The punishment God decrees for Adam is for failing to obey Him as His master, creating a strict linear hierarchy for the sinners in this play: the serpent is the lowest of all, mastered by Eve, who is mastered by Adam, who must obey God.

V. A. Kolve points out that the Chester God's sentencing of Eve to be under man's power "establishes, clearly enough, a theological norm for marriage, but equally clearly, one often at odds with empirical fact" (148). He reminds us of all the wives in medieval drama who do not obey this edict, using Mrs. Noah as his case in point. Ultimately, the Chester cycle's insistence on creating and protecting hierarchical authority only serves to highlight the difficulties, and perhaps undesirability, of preserving such structures, a difficulty highlighted by the fact that God himself has had to come down from heaven to enforce them. By contrast, the York cycle's "The Fall of Man" seems acutely aware of the models of authority advocated by the Chester God and supported by the Chester Adam's misogynist interjections, and tempers them to advocate instead, insofar as it is possible to do so given the subject matter and source material, for a more balanced view of the culpability of the first couple.

In the York "Fall of Man," Satan, unlike his counterpart in Chester, decides to deceive Eve because he is envious of God's favour towards the couple. His plan is straightforward; he says, "In a worme liknes wille Y wende" (23), and unlike the Chester serpent, he has nothing degrading to say about womankind. His strategy is similar to that in Chester—he makes inquiries about what fruit they can eat, and invites Eve to consider the reason one tree might be forbidden when none of the others are. Like the Chester Eve, who is well aware of the prohibition against eating the fruit from that particular tree, the York Eve explains,

> for oure lord God forbeedies us itt,
> The frute therof, Adam nor I
> To neghe it nere;
> And yf we dide we both shuld dye. (36-40)

And just as in Chester, the York Satan convinces Eve that the only reason the tree is forbidden is because "Who etis the frute of good and ille / Shalle have knowynge as wele as hee" (50-51). In this cycle, however, Eve is far more skeptical than her counterpart in Chester. She pointedly asks,

> What wirshippe shulde we wynne therby?
> To ette therof us nedith it nought,
> We have lordshippe to make maistrie
> Of alle thynge that in erthe is wrought. (56-59)

Eve's very practical objection indicates that she will not blindly follow Satan's advice.

Satan is able to convince Eve, however, by making her a promise that is difficult to refuse. He tells her that, if she eats the fruit,

> For right als God yhe shalle be wyse
> And pere to hym in all-kyn thynge.
> Ay, goddies shalle ye be,
> Of ille and gode to have knawyng,
> For to be als wise as he. (69-73)

Even though the York Eve offers a bit more resistance than the Chester Eve, in the end it is the promise of knowing both good and bad, of being like gods, that convinces the Eves of both the York and Chester plays to eat the fruit. However, in York, Eve's resistance makes her a slightly more sympathetic character for not giving in, at least not until the offer was simply too good to pass up.

Eve's culpability is mitigated to an even greater degree in York when she convinces Adam to eat the fruit by telling him exactly what Satan had told her. In the Chester cycle, Adam is deceived by Eve because she does not disclose the source of the fruit she offers; in the York cycle, on the other hand, Adam is given the same sales pitch by Eve that she just received from Satan. The audience soon discovers that Adam is just as tempted by promises of knowledge and godliness as is his wife; she says, "We salle be goddis and knawe al thyng" (103), and Adam is convinced to eat the fruit as well. Immediately upon eating the fruit, Adam blames Eve for her "ille counsaille" (107), adding, "A, Eve, thou art to blame, / To this entysed thou me" (108-109). But Eve locates her suffering and shame alongside Adam's, as if refusing to accept the blame. When he says, "This

werke, Eve, has thou wrought, / And made this bad bargayne" (118-119), she replies, "Nay Adam, wite me nought" (120). She then explains that "the worme . . . / With tales untrewe he me betrayed" (122-123). Adam seems to accept this explanation, and laments his having believed her. When Eve suggests they cover themselves with fig leaves, he replies, "ryght as thou sais so shalle it bee, / For we are naked and all bare" (133-134). Adam, though clearly upset at his wife's "bad bargayne," refrains from unleashing the same kind of anger upon her that his counterpart in Chester does, and instead appears willing to be cooperative with his wife as they await their punishment from God together.

This sense of being in this together continues for Adam and Eve in God's punishment of them. Although Adam tries to claim in his own defense, "Eve garte me do wronge" (142), and Eve argues, "A worme . . . entysed me thertill" (147), God's punishment of them suggests that their sins are the same. The serpent, as in Chester, is singled out for punishment and told, "on thy wombe than shall thou glyde, / And be ay full of enmyte / To al mankynde on ilke a side" (155-157). Unlike Chester, however, Adam and Eve are not given separate punishments; they are simply told, "Adam and Eve alsoo, yhe / In erthe than shalle ye swete and swynke, / And travayle for youre foode" (160-162). Sarah Beckwith has suggested that "the York cycle is concerned with the moment of the fall as the inauguration of work, [and] the subordination of woman to man through her sexual and maternal nature" adding that "it is also concerned with the inauguration of shameful and acute self-consciousness" (45). While it does seem that the York cycle is casting the Fall as the inauguration of work, and perhaps of

self-consciousness, it less clear to me that the York play is concerned with "the subordination of woman to man through her sexual and maternal nature," particularly when read against the Chester cycle's "Adam and Eve" play. What stands out in contrast is the way in which the York play seems actively to resist the kind of gratuitous misogyny that occupies the Chester plays, and instead appears to minimize the domestic disturbance that Eve's mistake instantiates. Casting her error as a "bad bargayne," as she does when she explains herself to Adam, suggests a sin neither sexual nor maternal in nature, but an error in calculation. If the York cycle is as preoccupied with issues around work as others have argued, and therefore, as Martin Stevens has argued, "was more nearly a communal enterprise than any other extant English cycle" (17), then in this context, a "bad bargayne" is serious indeed, one that can affect one's livelihood and one's community. In York, this is indeed the case, as both Adam and Eve are sentenced to "swete and swynke, / And travayle for [their] foode" (161-162). Eve's transgression is not a sexual one, but a bad bargain that has consequences for her family's labour.

Finally, the suggestion of the Fall being somehow the result of a gendered sin is undermined further when we consider the nature of the deception being perpetuated. Eve does not deceive Adam, but tells Adam what she knows; the deception is Satan's who, in the York play, makes no attempt to disguise himself as a woman, or to trade on some stereotypical womanly weakness, as he does in Chester; he merely makes Eve (and, by extension, Adam) an offer she cannot refuse. In York, not one aspect of the fall—the deception, the sin, or the

punishment—suggests that Eve's mistake is sexual or gendered. In fact, in the York "Creation of Adam and Eve," God says he will make a woman to be "faythefull frende and sybe" to man (40). The divine intervention in the York "Fall of Man" appears designed to intervene in readings that would hierarchize their sin; this play instead sends the couple out of paradise as more or less equal in their suffering, making room for York's domestic ideals alongside the religious ideals of the play.

Rather than pursue the stereotypes of fabliaux in its representation of the marriage between Adam and Eve, the York "Fall of Man" makes use of divine intervention to assign an equal share of the blame on both parties. In the York "Fall of Man" there are no significant anachronistic or misogynist moments; in this case, it is the divine intervention itself that is the domestic disturbance, intervening in the disagreement between Adam and Eve to undermine the usual structures of blame put on Eve, in favour of a more or less equal partnership between spouses. In the Chester "Adam and Eve," the anachronistic and gratuitous misogynist moments of the play, instigated by both Satan and Adam, are held up for examination. In Chester, divine intervention puts the play back on track, as it were, and allows the events of the Christian story to continue forward; it is left to the audience to decide whether the model put forward by God—that of a strict hierarchy of authority—is warranted by the actions of both Adam and Eve. Both plays dwell on the question of Eve's culpability, and each offers its own version of events according to each cycle's respective domestic concerns.

There's Something about Mary: The Paradox of Pregnant Virginity

In contrast to the plays about the Fall, which have not earned nearly as much critical discussion, the plays depicting Joseph's Troubles about Mary, in which Joseph cannot believe at first that the young Mary's pregnancy could be the result of anything other than an adulterous tryst, have inspired critical interpretations that, in Theresa Coletti's words, "give their comedy its due, finding in the plays dramatic strategies that subsume their folkloric and fabliau impulses within a redemptive scheme large enough to embrace puns on typological exegesis and portraits of moral goodness" ("Paradox" 65). In contrast to the conventional critical response to those overtly disruptive women who are the subject of the previous chapter—the response most often being to dismiss those domestic disturbances as textual corruption and/or cheap attempts at easy laughs—the critical tendency is to embrace the comedy and conflict found in plays such as "Joseph's Troubles about Mary," and explain their integral role in the spiritual lesson the plays have to offer.

This discrepancy between the scholarly treatment of the "folkloric and fabliau impulses" found in the Troubles plays and those impulses found in plays featuring more disruptive women is partly due to the fact that scholarship on the character of Mary in medieval drama tends to focus on the N-Town cycle's very positive presentation of her in "Trial of Joseph and Mary," in which the holy couple is tried in court for adultery, and after a series of tests involving the

drinking of potions by sinners and the pure alike, Mary's good name is restored.[51] This extensive scholarly interest in the N-Town play comes at the expense of the other appearances made by the Virgin (and her husband, Joseph) in the cycle drama of this period.

The discrepancy between the treatment by scholars of comedic conflict featuring disruptive women and comedic conflict featuring pious women can also be attributed to the role-reversal of husband and wife. Unlike the Flood plays, which feature a disbelieving wife, reluctant to board the ark and skeptical about the catastrophic flood from which this ark is designed to save them, the Troubles plays feature a husband who rejects the spiritual explanation and instead allows his mind to turn to more immediate and visible matters, such as his wife's all-too-apparent adultery. Brother Cornelius Luke rhetorically asks, "Just as the Wakefield *Noe* play makes Noe share much of the comedy with his wife, why should not our author too transfer to Mary some of the comic excitement and ridiculous obstinacy of Joseph, a dramatic foil that even a medieval playwright must have sensed?" (38). Evidently, producers of the drama felt the same way, as the York and Chester plays also share this comedic strategy.

There are significant limits to how much comedy can be drawn from the confusion between Joseph and Mary, however, without it coming into conflict with the reputation her character brings with her. In praise of the Towneley play,

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[51] For scholarship on Mary in the N-Town plays see, for example, Cindy L. Carlson's "Like a Virgin: Mary and Her Doubters in the N-Town Cycle" and "Mary's Obedience and Power in the Trial of Mary and Joseph," Emma Lipton's "Performing Reform: Lay Piety and the Marriage of Mary and Joseph in the N-Town Cycle," and J. A. Tasioulas's "Between Doctrine and Domesticity: The Portrayal of Mary in the N-Town Plays."

Luke explains, "In the midst of absurdity and ridiculous excitement [Mary] alone remains as we should expect of the Mother of God" (38). In contrast, Noah's image is not nearly as important as Mary's; even though Noah is in the spiritual right, and his wife is the one who is skeptical, the plays about the flood often poke fun at Noah's age, his work ethic, and his masculinity.[52] However, Mary is a different case; Tasioulas explains that "The medieval world viewed her as a model for all people" (240), and Carlson, writing mainly about the N-Town Mary, judges her to be "a mere woman but nevertheless a woman peerless in her obedience and purity, [who] exemplifies a humility that emerges victorious over more obvious uses and abuses of power" ("Obedience" 352). Although the "absurdity and ridiculous excitement" that Luke points out as a feature of the battle between the sexes is common to both the Flood and the Troubles plays, the reversal of the roles of husband and wife, and the necessity of protecting the chaste character of the Virgin Mary, mean that she simply cannot engage dramatically with her husband the way that Mrs. Noah can with hers.

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[52] The York Noah, in "The Building of the Ark," describes himself as a "wretche unworthye" (8.42), "full olde and oute of qwarte" (50), who "of shippe-craft can [he] right noght" (67). These endearing shortcomings are played to a different effect in the Towneley Flood play; when the Towneley Noah sets to working on the ark, he complains of his bad back, and calls himself an "old dote, / All dold, / To begin sich a wark" (3.382, 385-87). In the meantime, his wife accuses him of having a poor work ethic:

> When we swete or swink,
> Thou dos what thou think,
> Yit of mete and of drynk
> Haue we veray skant. (283-286)

She also calls him fearful, saying that he is "alway adred, / Be it fals or trew" (291-292). It is difficult to imagine that any playwright of this era would be able to make similar aspersions on Mary's character, even it the context of comic marital conflict.

Rather than attempt to derive comedy at the expense of Mary's reputation, then, the Troubles plays rely on the paradoxical nature of Mary's pregnant virginity to instantiate the domestic disturbance in these plays. Luke makes the point that "Nothing at all disrespectful to that character [of Mary] can be introduced" (38); in this case, the dramatists of these plays have little choice but to give Mary almost nothing to say, in turn allowing the comedy to arise from the misunderstandings that ensue. Mary, being a paragon of chastity, cannot offer much verbal or physical resistance to her husband's misreading of her pregnancy. In Chester, Mary does not speak a word to her husband, and, when Mary does speak in York, it is only to insist that the child is both Joseph's and God's. This leads to a type of comedy that "exploits highly charged topics such as age and sexuality in marriage, adultery, cuckoldry, and illegitimacy, and that explores the interaction of domestic and economic relationships" (Coletti "Paradox" 67), dramatizing for us the conflicts that ensue when perfect chastity clashes with human (mis-)understanding.

These scenes of human misunderstanding are exactly why the Christian narrative is interrupted, in order to deal at length with Joseph's doubts. The episode of Joseph's Troubles is not essential to the Creation to Doom narrative in any way; a production could have gone from Annunciation to Nativity with no comment from Joseph and maintained the religious import of the story. However, producers were able to exercise a certain degree of artistic freedom in their portrayal of the Troubles episode because, as with the Flood plays and the Massacre of the Innocents, there is very little biblical material with which the

writers would have to contend. Scoville summarizes the minor role Joseph plays in the Bible:

> Joseph plays a role in only two of the four canonical gospels: Matthew and Luke. In Matthew, angels visit Joseph to assure him of Mary's virginity (Matthew 1:20-21), to warn him to flee with Christ to Egypt (Matthew 2:13), and to advise him to return with Christ to Nazareth (Matthew 2:20). Joseph says not a word in response, but follows instructions and vanishes, his role as plot device fulfilled. In Luke his role is even humbler. (56)

The bulk of the material mined for production in the plays about Joseph's Troubles, then, comes from apocryphal sources, and it appears that no cycle playwright has been able to pass up the comedic opportunity presented by Joseph's doubts about the paternity of Mary's baby.

The main source of material used to depict Joseph's doubts is concentrated in the *Protevangelium* and *Pseudo-Matthew*. Scoville explains that the *Protevangelium* "introduces the elderly Joseph of medieval art, and the cranky, comical Joseph of the cycle plays. It tells at length of his troubles about Mary, and provides a detailed account: Joseph is in another town for the first months, so that the sight of Mary's pregnant body catches him by surprise" (56). More details are introduced in *Pseudo-Matthew*: "the maids who defend Mary's innocence and tell Joseph of the angel," his conclusion that a man has disguised himself as an angel to deceive Mary, and "his humble apology to Mary" (Scoville 56). Although these apocryphal details can be found in the Chester and York Troubles plays in a

variety of combinations, each cycle's adaptation of this material takes certain significant liberties that are evidence of the respective preoccupations of each cycle.

One way in which Chester's "The Annunciation and the Nativity" is unusual among contemporary dramatizations of Joseph's Troubles in that it is Mary who returns home to Joseph, rather than Joseph returning to Mary after having been away.[53] In the case of Chester, it is actually Elizabeth who announces Mary's arrival, saying, "Joseph, God thee save and see! / Thy wife here I brought to thee" (121-122). The reason for Elizabeth's introduction of Mary to her own husband is suggested in a conversation they have immediately preceding their arrival at the house:

> *Elizabeth*: Marye, now redd I that wee gone
> To Joseph thy husband anon,
> lesse hee to misse thee make mone;
> for now that is moste neede.
> *Maria*: Ellizabeth, nece, to doe so good is,
> *leste he suppose one mea amysse*;
> but good lord that hath ordayned this
> wyll witnes of my deede. (113-120, emphasis mine)

[53] This, despite the confusion of scholars such as Cindy L. Carlson, who mistakenly confuse the Chester play with the rest of the cycles, describing the Joseph of the Chester cycle arriving home to find a pregnant wife ("Like a Virgin" 201).

Both Elizabeth and Mary are already afraid that Joseph may think that Mary has done something wrong, and they make this clear to the audience before the two of them even enter Joseph's home.

Mary and Elizabeth are anticipating the "inevitable human puzzlement over the idea of a virginal maternity that paradoxically defied nature and logic" (Coletti "Paradox" 66); their fears are confirmed when Joseph expresses his confusion and suspicion. He asks, "Whoe hasse made her with chyld?" (124). Mary is presumably standing in clear view of him to have provoked his question in the first place, yet Joseph addresses himself to Elizabeth and not Mary when he says, "Now hasse shee [Mary] gotten her, as I see, / a great bellye like to thee [Elizabeth] / syth shee went away" (130-132). Joseph's addressing of Elizabeth in this way allows the play to do two things simultaneously: first, by drawing attention to the parallel between these two women, Joseph inadvertently points out their similarity, that each became pregnant through divine intervention. These two women are testimonies to God's great reach, their pregnant bodies on display for the audience to contemplate. Simultaneously, the direction of Joseph's statement to Elizabeth and not to Mary, even though she is standing in front of him, registers Joseph's anger at having been cuckolded, highlighting the stark contradiction between the truth, and the only possible explanation for Mary's pregnancy. Joseph distances himself from Mary's pregnancy, by pointing out that he is not responsible for it, and by not speaking directly to his wife; without overtly accusing Mary of cuckolding him, Joseph is making his suspicions quite clear.

In Chester's "The Annunciation and the Nativity," every detail of Mary's homecoming is designed to make Mary appear as guilty as possible, and provoke as much conflict as possible without her having to say a word. The producers of the play do not allow the character of Mary to be tarnished by involving her in a heated marital dispute; however, her presence, silent, chaste, and pregnant on stage, nevertheless invites such doubts from the audience as well as from the character of Joseph. Mary is silent, but the domestic disturbance occurs nonetheless. The sight of his pregnant wife causes Joseph to react with bitter exclamations about young women who marry old men. He first blames himself, saying, "Well I wist an ould man and a maye / might not accord by noe waye" (125-26). He then addresses himself to God, pleading:

> God, lett never an ould man
> take to wife a yonge woman
> ney seet his harte her upon,
> lest hee beguyled bee.
> For accorde ther may never bee at one;
> and that is seene in manye one
> as well as one mee. (145-152)

For Joseph, the disappointment and betrayal he feels is not unique to him, but instead points to what he believes is a universal truth that all young women beguile old men. He casts himself as belonging to the fabliau stereotypes of what befalls old men who marry young women.

However, thanks in part to Mary's silence, Joseph has little choice but to identify himself in terms of these stereotypes. Joseph describes himself as the stereotypical old man who is inevitably cuckolded when he laments,

> myne yt [the child] is not . . .
> for I am both ould and could;
> these xxxtie winters, though I would,
> I might not playe noe playe. (133-136)

Joseph's complaint that he "might not playe noe playe" sets the stereotypes about marriage between an old man and a young woman against the ideals of chastity exemplified by the virginal Mary, dramatizing the incompatibility of the two extremes. He can only engage with the stereotypes that are already circulating about young women who marry old men, because a discussion about their particular situation and what makes it exceptional is not possible so long as Mary does not intervene. Mary's silence coupled with Joseph's assumptions about marriage lead him to arrive at the best, most honourable, conclusion he can think of, determining that, "For loth is mee my wife to shende, / therfore from her will I wende / into some other place" (139-140). Ultimately, this play suggests that the stereotypes of which Joseph is so fond, and with which the majority of the audience presumably would be familiar, are actually incompatible with the ideals of chastity that Mary espouses.

The Chester cycle's emphasis on power, authority and obedience continues to be evident in "The Annunciation and the Nativity," not only in Mary's silence in the face of her husband's accusations, but in the resolution of

the situation. Joseph concludes that it would be best for him simply to leave Mary; an angel must intervene on Mary's behalf in order to correct Joseph's "feeble thought" (161) and prevent the dissolution of their marriage. The Angel says to Joseph, "Take Marye thy wife and dread thee nought, / for wickedly shee hath not wrought; / but this is Godes will" (162-164); once the Angel explains that the child she bears will "save mankynd that did amisse" (167), Joseph is satisfied and proclaims, "I will noe man bee her foe" (170). He concludes his speech by addressing God: "Lord God, most of might, / with weale I worshipp thee" (175-76). Joseph addresses only God and the Angel, and has yet to speak directly to Mary even once in this play. He accepts God's will, celebrates the fact that "Christe is in our kynde light" (173), and re-asserts God's praiseworthy might. The Chester play creates the conflict between Joseph and Mary in order to highlight God's mysterious power.

The effect of this conflict, however, is to bring into question the forces that made such divine intervention from an almighty God necessary, and to make visible alternative configurations for human relationships. Had Mary been able to speak on her own behalf, and explain her visit from the angel Gabriel, it is possible that Joseph would have believed her. Instead, Mary, as the paragon of chastity, remains silent, leading Joseph to think the worst and play out a stereotypical fabliaux scenario while she silently watches, revealing the risk inherent in adhering too closely to the model of hierarchical power to which Mary and Joseph both subscribe. Although Mary herself stays silent, it is Elizabeth who protects Mary from enduring the full potential of her husband's anger when she

speaks on Mary's behalf at the opening of the play. Mary and Elizabeth's awareness of the negative response they are likely to elicit from Joseph when he sees Mary's pregnant body is clear in their decision to face Joseph together; in a striking parallel with the flood play from this same cycle, the Chester Joseph, like Chester's Noah, finds himself up against an alliance of like-minded women. Unlike the gossips in the Flood play, whose affinity for one another is grounded in drink, the affinity between Elizabeth and Mary is based on their divinely-inspired pregnancies. And although each play casts these alliances differently—the women in the Flood play are sinners, after all, whereas Elizabeth and Mary in the Troubles play are decidedly not—it is in both cases an alliance of women that is set against the patriarchal authority of their respective plays.

Ironically, in the case of Joseph's Troubles, the divine intervention of the angel, who reassures Joseph that Mary is, indeed, still a virgin, serves to affirm and validate the alliance between Mary and Elizabeth, and consequently undermine in a small way the strength of patriarchal authority that is supposed to prevail. In the light of this tension between female affinity groupings and male patriarchal power, Joseph's final words, "Lord God, most of might, / with weale I worshipp thee" (175-176), takes on a different significance. Joseph's own authority is undermined by his misreading of Mary's pregnant body, requiring patriarchal authority itself, in the guise of God's almighty power, to be insistently shored up at the end of this play. Chester's Troubles play, while featuring a very silent and inactive Mary, nevertheless enacts a kind of gender politics not unlike what we find in this cycle's Flood play, where once again female community is

accorded enough power to unsettle the patriarchal structures of authority against which it is formed.

In the York play on the same subject, "Joseph's Trouble about Mary," Mary is a little more vocal in her own self-defense, but no more alone than her counterpart in Chester. When Joseph returns home to Mary and her maidens, he asks, "Whose [baby] ist?" Mary responds, "Sir, Goddis and youres" (103), and her maidens steadfastly defend Mary's virtue to Joseph. As in the Chester play, we find in York evidence of a playwright shaping the action in order to create the conventional domestic disturbance; unlike in the Chester play, however, where the fact of Mary's pregnancy is a surprise to Joseph but revealed to the audience much earlier, the York play features a Joseph who knows his wife is pregnant before we do, and who is ultimately complicit in the escalation of the conflict that ensues.

According to Scoville, the York Joseph is "unique among his parallels" because the play "is begun in the middle of the plot, rather than with the initial discovery of Mary's pregnancy" (58).[54] The play opens with a substantial

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[54] Although Scoville is correct that the York play is unique since Joseph already knows his wife is pregnant, he also argues that the play opens with Joseph having "questioned Mary" and deciding "he must go back to speak to her again" (58). Eleanor Prosser expresses a similar concern when she questions why "the action reverts twice to the original complication (when Joseph returns home he seems to discover Mary's pregnancy for the first time)" but attributes this to a poorly-inserted inquisition scene tacked into the middle of an "old narrative monologue much like the Chester play" (92). Indeed, the text does not say how Joseph discovers his "yonge wiffe is with childe full grete" (43), but there is no indication that he had already questioned Mary by the time of the play's opening monologue, and is going back to speak to her again. Neither his ironic reference to his "yonge virigne" (77), nor his greeting to Mary—"Gramercy Marie, saie what cheere, / Telle me the soth, how est with the? / . . . Thy wombe is waxen

monologue in which Joseph laments his old age and his failing body and asks God to "stynte this striffe" (20). Joseph makes the familiar lament about having "wedded a yonge wenche" (12), asking, "how lange sall I lede this liff" (14). Joseph complains that his decision to go into the temple, where he held the flowering wand and was told that he should marry, "was to me a bad barganne, / For reuthe I may it ay repente" (23-24). His characterization of the marriage as a bad bargain is repeated shortly afterwards when he complains, "The bargayne[55] I made thare, / That rewes me nowe full sare" (35-36). It is not until more than forty lines of complaint that the audience is told that the reason for Joseph's speech is that he has discovered that his wife is pregnant: "I am begiled—how, wate I noght. / My yonge wife is with childe full grete, / That makes me nowe sorowe unsought" (42-44). These repeated lamentations of sorrow and regret demonstrate Joseph's escalating feelings about being betrayed by his wife. From being too old to marry, to wishing he never went into the temple, to an outright statement of having been deceived, Joseph goes on to imagine who might be the father of this child, and whether he should leave home. His monologue ends with a decision:

> Of my wendying wil I non warne
>
> Neuere the lees it is myne entente
>
> To aske hir who gate hir that barne,

---

grete, thynke me" (92-93, 95)—makes sense if he had already questioned her beforehand. Neither Scoville nor Prosser considers the possibility that Joseph had seen Mary from a distance, or perhaps heard of her pregnancy from a third party.

[55] The bad bargain made by Joseph echoes another bad bargain made in the York plays: Eve's bargain with the serpent.

Yitt wolde I witte fayne or I wente. (71-74)

This opening monologue, occurring before the audience has even had a chance to see the pregnant Virgin Mary, establishes the emotional impact of such knowledge for Joseph, but it also makes clear to the audience that Joseph has already made up his mind about what has happened, and what he will do about it.

The opening monologue is Joseph's opportunity to process the shocking information about his wife's pregnancy, which casts the insistent interrogation of Mary that follows this opening monologue in a different light from that which occurs in Chester's "The Annunciation and the Nativity." Unlike the Chester Joseph, who is struggling to understand what he is seeing during his questioning of Mary, the York Joseph has already gone through this process in his opening monologue, so much so that he has already decided what to do and is only seeking the name of the baby's father. This arrangement of events suggests that the York Joseph is much more intent than his counterpart Chester on seeking out the conflict that ensues, and this is evident immediately upon his return home. Joseph announces his arrival with the greeting, "All hayle, God be hereinne," and asks, "Whare is that yonge virgine / Marie, my berde so bright?" (75, 77-78). Joseph's certainty that Mary is guilty of cheating on him is evidenced by his ironic inquiring after his "yonge virgine" Mary. His own certainty of her guilt, and his readiness to leave her once he finds out the name of the father, however, is ironically undercut by his statement that "God be hereinne." The audience is well aware that Mary is carrying the baby Jesus in her womb, but we are also made well aware that there is no way Joseph could possibly know that.

What stands out in the York Troubles play, particularly in contrast to its counterpart in Chester, is how determinedly Joseph pursues the question of the child's paternity, and how cryptically Mary and her maidens deny any wrongdoing. Similar to Chester's Mary, the York Mary protests very little, and only in a cryptic way, leaving Joseph to think the worst. However, unlike Chester, where the series of accusations and denials is quite short, leaving Joseph's doubts to accumulate almost entirely on their own, in York a structure of alternating and escalating accusations and denials appears calculated to derive the maximum conflict from what will ultimately amount to a serious misunderstanding of the simple statement that the child is both God's and Joseph's. This escalation of conflict can be seen in the rather comical way Mary's maidens defend her. One maiden swears to Joseph that "trulye her come neuer no man / . . . For we haue dwelt ay with hir still / And was neuere fro hir day nor nyght" (114-118). Another maiden rushes to join in the defense, and says truthfully:

> Na, here come no man in there wanes
> And that euere witnesse will we,
> Saue an aungell ilke a day anes
> With bodily foode hir fedde has he,
> Othir come nane. (123-127)

Despite two eleven-line stanzas of denials, one stanza for each maiden, Joseph ends up with more damning information than that with which he began.

Naturally, Joseph assumes that an angel, or someone who looked like an angel, had been to see his wife. Joseph concludes,

Thanne se I wele youre menying is

The aungell has made hir with childe.

Nay, som man in aungellis liknese

With somkyn gawde has hir begiled,

And that trow I. (134-138)

At this point, having confirmed what he already thinks he knows, Joseph turns to lamenting again, asking why they have to make up such wild stories, and declaring that he will not be able to look another man in the face.

When the declarations of innocence offered by the maidens fail to work, Mary begins to defend herself, in another series of escalating exchanges. After a series of denials, Mary finally exclaims, "Joseph, yhe are begiled, / With synne was I neuer filid, Goddis sande is on me sene" (214-216).[56] In a nice reversal of Joseph's proclamations that he was beguiled by her, Mary points out that it is he who has been deceived by the appearance of her body. Of course, Joseph does not believe her, exclaiming, "Goddis sande? Yha Marie, God helpe!" (217), and adding, "I trowe not it be swa. / The soth fra me gif that thou layne, / The childe-bering may thou noght hyde" (225-227). Her body defines her as being a certain kind of woman, a pregnant one and therefore an adulteress, and Mary cannot, or will not, offer any more convincing explanation than that it is "Goddis sande." "Because the visibility of her pregnancy and motherhood, when combined with

[56] Rosemary Woolf points out that "the phrase 'I am begiled' echoes through all the plays and becomes almost a refrain in York. Joseph as it were imagines himself married to the type of character whom we have already seen in Noah's wife, and of whom the ancestor and archetype was Eve" (171). See the opening half of this chapter for a discussion of why that is, actually, not the case in the York and Chester representations of Eve.

the invisibility of her virginity, presents such a challenge to the constitution of the chaste female body, characters in the cycle plays want to discredit Mary's chastity, discover her unchastity, and degrade her with insults" (Carlson "Like a Virgin" 200). Joseph, confronted with a disconnect between the sign of the pregnant body and what it signifies, is unable to identify the category of pregnant virgin, and as a result he continues to misunderstand. This epistemological problem "permits us to see how dramatic representations could be at once perfectly consonant with theological tenets and fully cognizant of the impact of the glaring contradictions in the sex and gender system that Christian belief required" (Coletti "Paradox" 73). From the time the angel reassures Joseph that Mary is not lying to him, it becomes impossible to identify an adulteress with any certainty. "Even the visual evidence of pregnancy . . . proves only the existence of pregnancy; it does not prove a precedent sexual act" (Carlson "Obedience" 357).

Reconciliation happens here, as in the Chester play, but it takes quite a different form. In the Chester play, an Angel tells Joseph that the child is God's, and Joseph believes it, declaring God to be mighty and great. The York play, however, has gone so far to reinforce the reasonableness of Joseph's doubt, that the angel Gabriel cannot simply tell Joseph that his wife is carrying God's child, but has to explain the miracle to Joseph:

> The childe that sall be borne of her,
> Itt is consayued of the haly gast.
> All joie and blisse than sall be aftir,
> And to al mankynde nowe althir mast.

Jesus his name thou calle,
For slike happe sall hym fall
Als thou sall see in haste.
His pepull saffe he sall
Of euyllis and angris all,
That thei ar nowe enbraste. (266-275)

The angel's explanation convinces Joseph, and, by contrast, highlights the fact that Mary offers up none of this information to Joseph herself, despite having been told all of this in the previous play, "The Annunciation and the Visitation." Rosemary Woolf reasons that "in the mystery plays the fabliau world exists only in Joseph's imagination, while Mary still lives in the spotless and serene world of the Annunciation. This discrepancy between Mary's real world and Joseph's cynical fantasies make the religious pattern much more pointed" (173). Rather than explain to Joseph what has happened to her body, Mary relies on God to clear her good name, as when she says to Joseph: "Now grete God he you wisse, / And mende you of your mysse / Of me, what so betyde" (230-232).

Mary's virtue and chastity is emphasized again when she refuses Joseph's request for forgiveness and says instead, "Forgiffnesse sir? Late be, for shame, / Slike wordis suld all gud women lakke" (296-297). That it might be absurd for a wife to forgive her husband speaks to the play's over-arching gender politics, and signals an important difference between the Chester and York plays. In Chester, marital harmony is not a priority; instead, Joseph must be corrected by God and recognize God's authority. In York, by contrast, marital harmony is restored by

Joseph's acceptance of what he did not (and could not) know, and the humility that is evidenced by his asking for forgiveness and offering to bear his wife's possessions on his back for the journey to Bethlehem. Harmony in this play, however, does not require a reversal of power; Mary remains aware of her place, and does not allow her husband to ingratiate himself towards her. As a result, Mary's chastity is never truly challenged—not in the audience's eyes, at least, and it is ultimately restored in Joseph's—despite the domestic disturbance caused by her pregnant body.

Notably, nothing actually changes in the York Troubles play. The play opens with Joseph knowing full well that his wife is pregnant, and suspecting that she has had an affair, yet it takes almost 300 lines of innuendo and escalating conflict before the truth is revealed to him. Carlson points out that

> The York Cycle relies heavily on an "official" interpretation of its own drama in the "Doctour of the Annunciation" [sic] and of Symeon in "The Purification," yet Joseph, in "Joseph's Trouble About Mary," is allowed plenty of stage time to lament that he, an old man, ever allowed himself to be talked into the comic (to others) and inappropriate marriage to a young woman. ("Like a Virgin" 205)

It is as if the play wants to emphasize how much time is taken up by unnecessary but understandable doubt when the angel instructs Joseph, "Brynge [Mary] to Bedlem this ilke nyght. / Ther sall a childe borne be, / Goddis sone of heuen is hee" (279-281). This play appears to invite the audience to contemplate just how

long Joseph has been in doubt, and just how impossible it would be to wait for him to arrive at the truth on his own—so much so that an angel must intervene the night before Mary is to give birth. The York play resists blame by emphasizing how understandable Joseph's doubt is; no amount of simply stating that the child is both God's and Joseph's can possibly make Joseph understand why Mary is pregnant.

Carlson argues that in the Troubles plays generally, "Without belief and repentance, these characters who act with 'common sense' expectations combined with some level of low malice attack Mary's integrity" ("Like a Virgin" 200); however, these characters' use of "common sense" in the face of miraculous events serves to renew a sense of how "uncommon" miracles actually are, in turn inviting sympathy for those characters, such as the York Joseph, who are temporarily misled by their "common sense." In fact, according to Eleanor Prosser, "The many vernacular versions [of Joseph's Troubles] deal sympathetically with his understandable suspicions, and as a result playwrights found in their sources no indication that Joseph should be judged for his lack of faith" (89), hence the Chester Joseph having "almost no sorrow for his doubt, merely relief at coming to knowledge" (90). The York playwright, however, "realized that after the extended portrayal of Joseph's doubts—after his scorn of Mary, his derision of what the audience knows to be the truth . . . he must be reconciled with Mary" (91). Coletti appears to agree with Prosser's reading when she makes the point that "The consistency with which dramatists irreverently detail the idea of Joseph's 'troubles' may in fact be seen as their attempt to come

to terms with what Martin Walsh has called the 'essential absurdity of the Virgin Birth'" ("Paradox" 86, citing Walsh's "Divine Cuckold" 297). In order to emphasize the absurdity or miraculous nature of Mary's pregnancy without demonizing Joseph for not believing, the York play introduces an angel to explain what has happened the night before Jesus's birth. This is an explanation that, in its magnitude, exculpates both Joseph for his doubt and Mary for her silence. By emphasizing the miracle, human error is emphasized but not demonized, and domestic disturbance is portrayed as an inevitable result of the meeting of the human and the divine.

In both the York and Chester Troubles plays, an angel intervenes to reconcile what appear to be irreconcilable differences between a husband's "common sense" reading of the sign of his pregnant wife's apparently adulterous body, and a wife's inexplicable (and therefore unexplained and undefended) miraculous chastity. The divine intervention in both plays, while accomplishing the similar task of keeping the holy couple together, achieves this goal in disparate ways—in Chester, the angel exculpates Mary and inspires in Joseph a renewed sense of God's power; in York, the angel inspires in Joseph (and Mary) a sense of humility that leads to their reconciliation. In the plays about the Fall of Man, we see similar patterns at work—in Chester, hierarchy is reinforced in God's punishment of Adam, Eve, and the serpent, whereas in York, neither Adam nor Eve is singled out in their expulsion from paradise.

In both cycles, the relationship of the divine intervention to the domestic disturbance is different, but they do tend to follow certain trends that are

consistent within each cycle: as already discussed above, the York cycle tends to offer conciliatory divine intervention into domestic disturbance, whereas the Chester cycle tends to resolve domestic disturbance by bringing in reinforcement—divine intervention in the shape of God's almighty power. It does not only take disruptive women to instantiate domestic disturbance; female characters with good intentions also seem to invite divine intervention through the disturbances caused by their choices and their relationships. Given that there are so few women in medieval drama, and yet so many scenes of domestic disturbance involving female characters, it is probably fair to suggest, as Theresa Coletti does about the Troubles plays generally, that the drama manages "simultaneously to deploy *and* to undercut traditional discourses of gender" ("Paradox" 67, emphasis mine). That this can happen with such frequency and consistency within each of the York and Chester cycles, suggests that both cycle dramatists, while not necessarily having the same ideas about women and gender roles, nevertheless used similar dramatic conventions to convey their respective concerns, within their respective cycles, about gender and its relationship to authority.

Chapter Four

The Theatrical Style of Medieval Religious Drama

The previous chapters have concentrated on the ways in which domestic disturbance is instantiated by various interruptions to the biblical narrative, primarily by way of the inclusion of gendered conflicts involving mothers, wives, cousins, caretakers, and friends. Domestic disturbance also includes the less sensational, but no less significant, anachronism and anglicization of the biblical subject matter and setting. As James Paxson summarizes it, "bishops interrogate Christ in the Temple, Latin tags pepper characters' speeches, contemporary place-names dot the 'biblical' landscape, soldiers wear armour and bear the title 'Sir'" (322). These different types of domestic disturbance take different forms, but both the sensational domestic conflicts between men and women and the relatively innocuous anachronisms are part of the same convention that eschews the dramatic unity of time and place. In this chapter I argue that there is yet another aspect of domestic disturbance which can be found in the style of the performance itself.

Identifying past performance styles with any certainty is admittedly extremely difficult. In past scholarship discussing medieval theatrical style, various questions have been raised about how medieval drama might have been staged, what the atmosphere surrounding the performances might have been, and what effects such performances might have on audiences, and both cross-dressing and the carnivalesque have figured largely in these discussions. However, just as the dramatic texts appear unconcerned with policing an imagined boundary

between the biblical narrative and domestic conflicts of various sorts, the style of the performance is similarly unconcerned with policing consistent boundaries between actor and audience, stage and street, and the biblical there-and-then and the medieval here-and-now. This is the result of a number of performance factors, including cross-dressed male actors playing female roles, episodic processional performance in the streets, community members being cast in dramatic roles, and the sense of spectacle and celebration surrounding the performances in Chester and York, all of which contribute to a performance style of domestic disturbance.

After first discussing cross-dressing and its representational contingency in some detail, I will demonstrate that the carnivalesque, as it has been used by medieval dramatic scholars, is too all-encompassing a term to apply to a dramatic convention evoked sporadically at certain times and in certain contexts. The parallels between the carnivalesque and domestic disturbance are productive, however, in helping to define domestic disturbance as a performance style. In the first chapter, I discussed how prevailing notions of "good" theatre—defined as being unified in dramatic time and place—unduly affected early- to mid-twentieth-century perceptions of medieval drama to the point of obscuring, at times, other elements of the drama; "carnivalesque" readings of medieval drama have had similar consequences, at times lending too much weight to the subversive potential of these plays' disruptive moments. This chapter ends with a discussion of the *platea* and the procession as examples of two elements of the dramatic performance which contribute to the theatrical style of domestic

disturbance, a theatrical style which is occasionally incursive and disruptive of, but which never completely displaces, the religious import of the drama.

Troubling Transvestism: Cross-dressing and its Effects

In previous chapters I argued that the convention of domestic disturbance was instantiated by not only the disruptive women of the biblical drama, but the non-disruptive ones as well, and both the York and Chester plays are, to varying degrees, concerned with questions of gender and power. So far, however, gender relations in the cycles have been discussed as if the roles being played were transparently male or female, even though cross-dressed male actors played the female roles. The repercussions of cross-dressing in medieval performance have not been analyzed by medieval academics to the same degree that they have been by their early modernist counterparts; medieval cross-dressing on stage has been variously ignored, considered unproblematic, or has invited associations primarily with the carnivalesque and the comic. Such associations informed cross-dressing experiments organized by Meg Twycross and Peter Norton in the early 1980s, which highlighted presumptions at work in some medieval dramatic scholarship of this era that cross-dressing on the medieval stage lent itself either to inherently comic, or inherently pious (and therefore unremarkable), performances. But, as will be discussed in more detail below, the preponderance of the available evidence suggests that cross-dressing on the medieval stage was expected, and it was therefore unlikely to have provoked such polarized reactions. Instead, the

significance of cross-dressing in medieval drama is dependent upon the performance context, and not on the practice of cross-dressing itself.

Before Marjorie Garber's *Vested Interests* (1992) and Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990)—now considered to be two foundational texts in scholarship on gender and cross-dressing—Meg Twycross, Peter Norton, Peter Happe, Sarah Carpenter and others participated in their own gender-bending exercises, the results of which appeared in the 1983 volume of *Medieval English Theatre*. According to Twycross, she cast men in female roles[57] since "most of us know . . . that in medieval English mysteries the women's parts were played by men, but no-one seems to have followed through the implications of this in terms of theatrical style" ("Transvestism" 123). Following Twycross, Norton twice staged the N-Town "Visitation" and the Towneley "Noah," once with women in the female roles, and once again with men.[58] Audience members recorded their

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[57] Specifically, Twycross cast men

> to play the parts of Anna the prophetess and the Blessed Virgin Mary in the production of the Chester Purification and Doctors which was [her group's] contribution to the Leeds Festival performance of the Chester Cycle on 30th April – 2nd May 1983, and which [they] also performed at Chester itself and in various other places during the summer of 1983. ("Transvestism" 123)

[58] Peter Norton, according to Twycross's article, did a "practical project" on the subject of cross-dressing for Twycross's class. Twycross explains that it

> was first presented to a largely undergraduate audience at Lancaster, where it occasioned a lively and useful discussion; but [they] also took it to the METh meeting on "Characterisation" at Salford on 26th March 1983. [Norton] chose two strongly contrasting scenes; the N-Town Visitation, which centres on the two serious female roles of Mary and Elizabeth, and the first fight episode from the Towneley Noah, which shows Mrs. Noah at her most comically combative. Each of these scenes was played twice, first with women and then with men playing the female roles. The

impressions of these productions, and raised questions about the difficulties of "mask[ing] one's own sex" (110), the difference between "presentation" and "impersonation" (111), the issue of the "sexual availability" of certain actors (113), and the comedic potential in watching a male actor playing Mrs. Noah attack her husband (114). Some of the responses reprinted in *Medieval English Theatre* may seem theoretically unsophisticated almost 30 years later, after the explosion of popular interest in cross-dressing on English stages (particularly in association with early modern theatre),[59] and the concurrent proliferation of interest in theories of gender and performativity,[60] but the critical heritage of these ideas informs more recent work on the carnivalesque, and therefore I re-trace them here.

Before discussing the implications of cross-dressing in terms of the "theatrical style" to which Twycross is referring, we must revisit her assertion that "most of us know . . . that in medieval English mysteries the women's parts were played by men" ("Transvestism" 123). As Katie Normington has pointed out in her recent *Gender and Medieval Drama*, "the debate as to whether women

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> male characters were played by the same actors both times. At Lancaster, the male and female actors had not seen each other's performances; for Salford, when they had, [they] worked on slightly different aspects of the characterization. ("Transvestism" 123)

[59] Authors of studies of early modern English cross-dressing on the stage include: Stephen Greenblatt, Jonathan Goldberg, Jean Howard, Lisa Jardine, and Valerie Traub. Examples of popular interest in cross-dressing on the early modern English stages include the film *Shakespeare in Love* (1998).

[60] Early key studies on gender and performativity include Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990), Marjorie Garber's *Vested Interests* (1992), and Sue-Ellen Case's "Towards a Butch-Femme Aesthetic" (1988).

specifically participated in the medieval mystery plays has been revisited through the recent work of Jeremy Goldberg" and James Stokes (36). Stokes, in his study of the records of Somerset, argues that "evidence shows that Somerset women were involved in every recorded aspect of drama and other entertainments in the county throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance. The question thus involves the extent to which that involvement was unique to Somerset or typical of the situation elsewhere in England and on the continent" ("Women and Mimesis" 180). A closer reading of Stokes's evidence, however, indicates that the majority of his examples of women's involvement in performance (which he defines rather broadly as including dancing, singing, the playing of musical instruments, the sponsoring of entertainments, and the teaching of music lessons)[61] come from the 1600s; these examples lend some convincing evidence for his point that

> the "sudden" appearance of women on the stage in 1660—often cited as an example of an abrupt, mysterious shift in theatrical taste—might more accurately be seen as the natural culmination of a cultural process that has been mostly obscured by the fierce battles of the time between Puritans and others over the legitimacy of theater itself. (189)

[61] Stokes's definition of performance, while broad, is in line with the definition of performance used by the editors of the Records of Early English Drama (REED). Although the REED project is invaluable for making accessible a full range of records on all types of performance in medieval and early modern England, there is some danger in conflating all of these performance records as evidence of specifically theatrical activity, thereby misrepresenting to a certain degree, as Stokes inadvertently does, the participation of women in early English theatre.

However, they do not address the question of the place of women on specifically medieval stages. According to Stokes, women in Somerset did not appear in connection with guild drama until 1607, "when the six Wells craft guild companies staged a series of mid-summer shows" (176). The only evidence Stokes provides of female involvement in performance before the 1500s refers specifically to dancing girls: "In 1483-84, dancing by the wives of nearby Croscome brought in six shillings for that parish, while between 1476 and 1547-48 the maidens' guild in Croscombe routinely collected much more money than the other guilds, less only than the parish-wide Robin Hood and King's games" (178). Stokes offers no evidence from Somerset that women acted in biblical plays, and Normington, summarizing the evidence for the rest of England, agrees that "Evidence of women's participation within the Corpus Christi cycles is scant, and it is commonly accepted that they played no part in this means of cultural production" (36).

However, there is not much more evidence to say that women did *not* act in the plays, something that has attracted the curiosity of Jeremy Goldberg. There is evidence from Anna Jean Mill in her article, "The Hull Noah Play," that a man named Alan Taylor played Mrs. Noah in Hull from 1485-87 (496). There is also "Ryngolds man Thomas that playtt pylatts wyff" for the Coventry Smiths in 1496 (*REED: Coventry* 86), and, in 1499, either Thomas or some other man is paid for "his wages" (93). Unfortunately, the records for Chester and York are not as specific. Given this evidence, it becomes apparent that there is not an overwhelming difference in the amount of evidence for and against cross-dressing

in medieval drama,[62] which leads Jeremy Goldberg to argue that it is possible that women acted in the early fourteenth century, during a period when guilds were less formalized, and civic control of the plays was less apparent. Citing a conference paper which Goldberg presented in 1998,[63] Normington summarizes his argument in this way: "He postulates that these mixed gendered groups could have performed the early mystery plays that are known to have existed in York from around 1360" (Normington 36).[64]

While I do agree with Stokes, Normington, and others[65] that "women's contributions to early dramatic history in England need to be seen as much more

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[62] Twycross points out,

> Unfortunately, there are no named actors playing female parts in Chester. As Peter Meredith has pointed out, however, there are some interesting gaps. In the Smiths' Purification of 1561 (67) it looks very much as if Thomas Ellam, listed next to Anna as earning 12d for his performance, played the missing role of the Virgin Mary. However, since the role of Joseph is also missing, he might have played that, leaving the role of Mary for another male actor, William Loker, who is paid 16d "for plleyinge" (Mary is usually paid slightly more than Joseph in this production). (Twycross 125, citing Clopper's *Records of Early English Drama: Chester*)

[63] Goldberg's unpublished paper is entitled "From Guild Drama to Civic Drama: Why Women Lose out and Why They Were There in the First Place."

[64] There is also the example and potential influence of France to consider, as many others do (see Goldberg, Twycross, *et al.*); the simplified version of this argument states that since there is an abundance of evidence of female actors playing female roles in medieval French drama, it is possible, but unlikely, that the practice was carried across the English Channel and influenced English dramatic practice.

[65] See Glynne Wickham, *Early English Stages 1300-1660*, 1.271. Wickham is generally supportive of the idea of women's involvement in medieval theatre, but acknowledges that this was not the normal practice: "although it is generally true that female parts were played by boys or young men in the Middle

significant than has hitherto been acknowledged or understood" (Stokes "Women and Mimesis" 176), the quality of the evidence, as opposed to the quantity of it, suggests that women's performance in medieval drama was limited to dancing and music,[66] and their participation in cycle drama specifically was primarily that of the backstage variety. The most-cited example of female involvement in the cycle drama is an example of women producing a play, and not acting in it; the Chester Early Banns announces:

> The worshipful wyffys of this towne
>
> Ffynd of our Lady thassumpcion
>
> It to bryng forth they be bowne
>
> And meyntene with all theyre might. (ll. 1539-40, from *REED: Chester* 37-38)[67]

Ages and in Tudor times, women could and did perform both as amateurs and professionals in so far as society would allow them to." He adds, "as women were not usually given any training in the art of oratory it was normally found that men and boys were more reliable performers than women" (272). For a discussion of the relative abilities of boy and adult male actor's voices, see Richard Rastall's "Female Roles in All-Male Casts."

[66] Another example of likely female performance comes from the stage directions to the third dance in *Wisdom*, which states: "Here entreth six women in sut, thre dysgysyde as galontys and thre as matrones, with wondryfull vysurs congruent; here mynstrell, a hornepype" (l. 752 stage direction). That the stage directions specify that half of the women are to be dressed as matrons and the other half as gallants is convincing evidence that women did go on stage, but as part of a dance troupe and not as actors.

[67] There is no extant text for the Chester Assumption of Our Lady, but records collected in *REED: Chester* indicate that it was performed in 1499 and again in 1515-16: Mayors List 9 (BL Add. 11335, f. 23) records that it was played at "the Abbey gates the 25 of August" (cited in *REED: Chester* 22), and the "wyfus of the town assumpcion beate marie" are included on the list of guilds for 1499-1500 (BL Harley 2104, cited in *REED: Chester* 22-23); Mayors List 5 (BL

According to Normington, Goldberg admits the circumstantial nature of his evidence; in the absence of better evidence, then, medieval dramatic scholars have to operate on the assumption that Twycross was right when she said that "most of us know . . . that in medieval English mysteries the women's parts were played by men" ("Transvestism" 123). This is not to negate the influence that women did have on the production of these plays, something that forms the subject of a substantial portion of Normington's *Gender and Medieval Drama*; however, when it comes to the specific question of cross-dressing in medieval drama, it becomes clear that women did not act in medieval cycle drama, and that female roles in these plays were played by male actors.

I have re-traced various arguments here about cross-dressing on medieval stages, despite ultimately arriving at the same conclusion Twycross arrived at in 1983, in order to emphasize the existence of an enduring tradition of male actors playing female roles in medieval England, one that continued well into the seventeenth century.[68] Female characters were played by male actors, and this was a practice so common that it, in itself, would be unlikely to draw attention to itself. This is not, however, to "downplay[ ] the complexity of theatrical crossdressing as a cultural practice" in the Middle Ages, something against which Claire Sponsler and Robert Clark caution us (319). Sponsler and Clark argue that

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Harley 2125) in 1515-16 states that "the shepards play & the Assumption of our lady was played in St Iohns churchyard" (cited in *REED:* Chester 23-24). The Assumption, along with a "shepards play," was also played in the churchyard of St. John's Church in 1515–16 (*REED: Chester*, 22, 23–24).

[68] 1660 is the date most commonly given for the introduction of women onto the English stage.

the reason medieval cross-dressing has not garnered the kind of attention that early modern cross-dressing has is that "the Middle Ages are usually seen as being characterized by a monolithic patriarchal regime to which modern constructions of sexuality and otherness are held not to apply. Crossdressing on the medieval stage, from this perspective, can be safely bracketed as standard and, therefore, unproblematic" (319). The last two chapters have shown that these plays are actively engaging in questions of gender politics and their relationship to authority, through the convention of domestic disturbance. Questions of authority and patriarchy are consistently raised by the plays in a continuous negotiation of the terms of that authority. Nonetheless, the point remains that cross-dressing is conventional in medieval drama, and so domestic disturbance is unlikely to be instantiated by the mere presence of a male actor in female clothing, because that would be unremarkable within this stage convention; instead, these disturbances would be instantiated by a more complicated representation depending not only on the male actor in female clothing, but especially on the particular context within which the cross-dressed actor acts.

Returning to the responses to and reflections on Meg Twycross's and Peter Norton's cross-dressing experiments, we can see a degree of awareness that the context is key in determining the effect of cross-dressing on stage. As Peter Happe explains, "audiences can be induced to limit the range of their responses by the direction. The question of sexual realism hardly arises: the context is definitive" (111). However, his analysis of the two productions of the Flood play, and representations of Noah's wife in particular, suggests that his interest in

dramatic context is outweighed by his interest in the biological gender of the actor and its effects. According to Happe, the effects are extreme:

> The woman as woman was forceful and firm, but the man as woman exploited the sexual difference as part of the comedy. The femininity was ridiculed in the exchanges by making it coarse. The effect was an invitation to the audience to ridicule women, or a female stereotype. At the same time agility and strength was recognizable in the male Mrs. Noah, and this strength was outrageous. The male actor playing Mrs. Noah was a challenge because some of what she, the character, was up to was the challenge to Noah's (God's) essentially male domination. The harsh voice and powerful gesture of the male actor—which of course were in no sense hidden—exploited the revolutionary aspect and strengthened the dramatic tension. In the light of this the ultimate gentleness of the Wakefield Mrs. Noah would have been all the more pointed. (110-111)

In Happe's reading of the dramatic effects of cross-dressing, two things are evident: first, that there is some essential difference between a man and a woman playing the role of Noah's wife,[69] where a male actor playing a female role in

[69] In *Gender Trouble*, Butler points out that the "gendered body is performative" and that it has no "ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality" (173). In other words, "acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires *create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core*, an illusion discursively maintained for the purpose of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality" (173, emphasis

religious drama "push[es] the dramatic function of the women characters towards comic or pious stylisation" (111); second, that the comedy of the above-described scene depends on "exploit[ing] the sexual difference as part of the comedy" (110) in order to make the (male) Mrs. Noah's rebellion and, later, her acquiescence, "all the more pointed" (111). In this model, cross-dressing's effectiveness is attributable to its extremes of characterization.

Happe is by no means alone in his essentialist reading of a male actor being more effective in the role of Mrs. Noah than a female actor. Sarah Carpenter echoes Happe's sentiments when she writes,

> I think the man Mrs. Noah does make more coherent sense of Noah's part, so that though the farce is stronger and cruder, the moral sense is also stronger and sharper. Certainly I felt no sense of unfairness in Noah's treatment of the male Mrs. Noah, whereas it is inevitable, however sketchy, with the female Mrs. Noah. (Happe 112)

Carpenter concurs with Happe's reading of the male Mrs. Noah as being more effective, particularly due to the extremes (in this case, of farce) that are seemingly available to a male actor that are not available to a female actor. Diane Wyatt adds that she thought "the man had the distinct advantage" due to his "robust physique [which] allowed the fight to be made the most of physically" (114). She describes the "casting of a man [as] very satisfying and enjoyable: it worked perfectly in the comic-virago tradition—one we all, of course, recognise,

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mine). Happe's analysis of the male vs. female actor playing Noah's wife mistakes the illusion of difference for an essential difference between the two.

so that we as audience came to it from our experience of the panto Dame and comparable outrageous comic drag, with the appropriate expectations" (114).

Wyatt's comparison of medieval cross-dressing to comic drag in this case is informative because it points to late twentieth-century expectations about cross-dressing and its performance style. Wyatt is referencing what Butler describes as "gender parody" (*Gender Trouble* 174); however, Butler adds, "parody by itself is not subversive" (176). What gives certain drag performances subversive potential is its "contingency":

> Indeed, part of the pleasure, the giddiness of the performance is in the recognition of a radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender in the face of cultural configurations of causal unities that are regularly assumed to be natural and necessary. In the place of the law of heterosexual coherence, we see sex and gender denaturalized by means of a performance which avows their distinctness and dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity. (175)

In the case of medieval drama, which always has male actors playing female roles, most cases of cross-dressing will not call upon the modern expectations Wyatt, Carpenter and Happe brought with them to their experiments in staging. Because medieval audiences expect it, most male actors playing female characters would not enact the kind of "parodic repetitions [that are] effectively disruptive, truly troubling" (Butler *Gender Trouble* 177); instead, their parody would

"become domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony" (177).

This extended discussion of Twycross's cross-dressing experiments is useful for illustrating that the terms of the experiment (male vs. female actors in female roles) have obscured other important factors in performance, and narrowed the scope of the inquiry (and the conclusions that can be made from such an inquiry). By attempting to decide whether a male or a female actor was better in the role of Mrs. Noah, there was little consideration of the possibility that men of different ages, sizes, builds, demeanours, and so on, might also have an effect on the overall impression they achieved. For example, it is possible to imagine a number of different casting choices that would have had various effects, and would not be restricted to the two choices required by the binary of male/female. In the Chester Flood play, after God has instructed Noah to build the ark, Noah puts his family to work. Mrs. Noah announces that the wives will "bringe tymber" because "women bynne weake to underfoe / any great travel" (3.65, 67-68); the women gather "tymber," "hackestocke," "slytche," and "chippes" (65, 69, 73, 77). This gendering of duties could be read as anti-feminist, considering that the sons carry heavier and arguably more masculine items, such as an axe, a hatchet, and a hammer (54, 57, 62). F. M. Salter, however, hypothesizes that Mrs. Noah's statement, "wome bynne weake to underfoe / any great travel," is being delivered for comic effect; he imagines that she "staggers in under a load that would collapse an ox!" (30). For the line to be comic, then, many would assume that the actor playing Noah's wife would have to be a burly male strong enough to carry a

heavy load of wood; however, there is equal comedic potential in a surprisingly strong female actor doing exactly the same thing. Funnier still might be a slight male or female actor carrying an impossibly high tower of lighter material made to look like wood, in effect doubling the comedic effect through the absurdity of both the apparent weight of the wood and the statement that women are weak.

There are any number of casting possibilities that would make delivery of that single line from the Chester Flood play comic. However, by asking audience members to choose either the male or the female performer, Twycross and Norton reinforced their audience's presumption (and their own) of an essential difference between a male and a female performance, thereby attributing any *stylistic* difference in their performances to the essential difference of biological sex, to what Judith Butler several years later described as the "institution of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality [which] requires and regulates gender as a binary relation" (*Gender Trouble* 30). Happe's willingness to attach particular dramatic styles to particular genders appears, in part, to be have been invited by the very framing of Twycross's experiment: "most of us know . . . that in medieval English mysteries the women's parts were played by men, but no-one seems to have followed through the implications of this in terms of theatrical style" (Twycross 123). Unfortunately for the effectiveness of these experiments, the assumption of the essential difference of biological sex blinded Twycross, Norton, and the respondents to the countless other performance factors (physical build of the actor, types of props, blocking of scenes, etc.) with which they could have experimented.

Further, the assumption that cross-dressed actors playing female characters are effective for their extreme comic or parodic representations appears to have contributed to the emerging excitement about the subject of carnival in the mid-1990s. If these female characters are being played for maximum comic effect, described as "outrageous" (Happe, Wyatt) and helping to make "the farce . . . stronger and cruder" (Carpenter), and if, as I have argued in the introductory chapter, these comic women made it difficult for typologically-minded scholars to make their case for the coherence of the plays, then it is not surprising that these "outrageous" moments would be identified as "festive" moments of "reversal," and opportunities for "subversion" on the part of these otherwise oppressed female characters. By overlooking the complexities of gendered representation, the potential for female empowerment is enlisted in a burly man who must (by virtue of the gender essentialism which dictates his casting) perform as a farcical and stereotypical shrew. However, I will show below that these plays do have the potential to be subversive of existing gender politics. This subversion may be augmented by men playing female roles, but the conditions that imbue the conventional practice of cross-dressing with subversive potential rest in the style of the performance, as cross-dressing alone is not enough to create this effect.

Medieval Drama and the Carnivalesque: "Should we admit the world of carnival into our interpretation of the plays?"

Previously held assumptions about medieval dramatic cross-dressing, which are informed both by a belief in an essential difference between male and

female gender, and in a fundamental opposition between farce and piety, carnival and doctrine, have occasionally also informed carnivalesque readings of medieval drama. For example, Joseph Ricke argues that, in what he calls the "English marketplace cycles,"

> we find the two faces of medieval festivity: *the authoritative, ecclesiastical face*, which according to Bakhtin "was turned to the past and sanctioned the existing order," and *the carnival face* of the women and men in the marketplace—laughing, mocking, miming, drinking, eating, loving, fighting, and sometimes even negotiating power. (276, citing *Rabelais* 88, emphasis mine)

Noah's wife being the favourite example of festivity in these plays, Ricke makes the association between carnival and gender explicit by using her as a prime example of a "stereotypical shrew" who "cries out (or better, acts out) in the market place: 'You can't have it both ways: I cannot be oppressed for being both a shrew and a sheep (or weaker vessel), for being both too "masculine" and too "feminine," for being both dangerous and harmlessly silly'" (274). Ricke is here associating the outrageous behaviour of shrews such as Mrs. Noah with masculinity, and their femininity with their ultimate submission. In other words, the danger inherent in the comedy of the Towneley Noah play, which Ricke describes as "riotous," "fabliau-like" (271), and featuring a "farcical punching match" (272), is ultimately not so dangerous that the shrew cannot be "tamed" and "represented as finally submissive to the authoritative, patriarchal ordering their cultures required" (264). He then adds that the "final taming does not cancel

out the socially liberating function of the representation" and that "the shrew figures [such as Mrs. Noah] serve a parodic, dialogical function, loudly mocking and shocking their audiences into seeing new sides of the authorized discourse concerning the space and place of women" (264).

Ricke's willingness to attribute this potential subversion, and the subsequent recuperation of patriarchal structures, to the carnivalesque is founded upon a similar kind of assumption about extremes of representation that appear in responses to the Twycross and Norton cross-dressing experiments discussed above. Ricke reasons that

> powerful, strong, and extremely funny women, as comically represented by young men, act out and speak out fantasies of freedom from men . . . who are represented, when in confrontation with their shrews, as silly and all but powerless. In other words, the central experience of the two plays, as opposed to the official doctrines that are preached along the way, is the representation of strong women pounding and expounding their ways into our attention. (268-69)

Ricke attributes his identification of a presentation of extremes in the Towneley Noah play to the condition of men playing women comically so as to make the actual men look "silly and all but powerless." He opposes this comic experience of "seeing" the play to the official doctrine, alluding to the carnivalesque binary of carnival and doctrine, but attributes this to the extreme representation of gender that he assumes must follow from a comic cross-dressed performance.

The evidence on which Ricke bases his carnivalesque reading of the Noah play is the assumption he makes about the style of Noah's wife's performance, a style informed by the very extremes of gender representation highlighted in the previous section. Ricke's overall argument, that even after troublesome female characters are brought back under the authoritative structures from which they came they can still signify the potential for subversion, is an attractive one, but the reason for attributing this potential for subversion to the carnivalesque, and not to any number of other factors, is unclear. Ricke asks his readers, "should we admit the world of carnival into our interpretation of the plays?" but he does not ask whether there is another way, besides carnival, to talk about the potential subversion by women that he identifies.

Instead, Ricke sets carnival in opposition to doctrine, asking rhetorically, "Shouldn't we keep our 'readings' of the plays tied in to the doctrinal, ecclesiastical story they tell and sell? Which approach [carnival or doctrinal] provides a more accurate approximation of the concerns and spirit of the mystery cycle environment?" (271). When given the choice between these two evidently opposing approaches, carnival is set up as the obvious choice for Ricke. But again, as with the Twycross and Norton experiments, the question frames the answer, and Ricke does not interrogate the point Natalie Zemon Davis makes, and which he cites (270): "the joke, the story, the comedy, or the carnival, topsy-turvy play had much spillover into everyday 'serious' life. . . . [P]lay with the various images of woman-on-top, then, kept open an alternate way of conceiving family structure" (Davis 143). Implicit in her point about the potential "spillover" of

subversion "into everyday 'serious' life" is that this subversion can be facilitated by any number of forms: "the joke, the story, the comedy, or the carnival." According to Davis's logic, while carnival can certainly lead to the staging of potentially subversive women, the subversive potential of resistant women on the medieval stage need not be an indicator of carnival.

The alignment of subversion with carnival is a feature of some medieval dramatic scholarship, and it does appear to be a function of essentialist or binary thinking about medieval dramatic performance. This section will focus on the ways in which Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas have been appropriated by some medieval dramatic scholars, and how that appropriation ultimately misrepresents how the York and Chester plays achieve their dramatic effects. Even though Mikhail Bakhtin includes "the performance days of miracle plays, mystery plays, *soties* and so forth" (*Dostoevsky* 129) in his generous description of carnival, closer study of the medieval religious cycle drama in York and Chester, specifically, suggests that these plays were a far cry from the carnival that some late twentieth-century scholarship would encourage us to imagine.

The association of medieval cycle plays with the Feast of Corpus Christi is a common starting point for dramatic scholars interested in discussing the carnivalesque aspects of these plays. This is in large part due to the cyclical nature of carnival; as James C. Scott explains, "Gluttony, carousing, and drinking are superseded by fasting, prayer, and abstinence. In most carnival rituals . . . a figure representing the spirit of carnival is ritually killed by a figure representing Lent" (177). Martin Stevens links medieval drama to this ritual cycle, reasoning that

"Any examination of the Corpus Christi cycles must recognize that the Feast of Corpus Christi was at once a religious and a civic holiday" (49). He establishes an opposition between, on the one hand, "the liturgy and the procession of the Eucharist" and, on the other, the "dramatic procession and the performance of pageants," in order to argue that the "latter was the manifestation of . . . the *carnivalesque*" (49, emphasis in original). Using the example of York as a "model by which the procession can be viewed as a fairly typical ritual" (50), Stevens cites the 1426 decision by York officials to separate the dramatic procession from the feast day; he reasons that this decision was put in place "so as to separate the disorder of the popular celebration from the solemn purpose of the religious observance" (51). Here Stevens relies on an association between carnival and disorder to explain the separation of the York cycle from the feast.

Clifford Flanigan makes a similar claim for a dichotomy, and concomitant conflict, between the festive drama and the civic order; he cites the "festival, almost saturnalian, atmosphere [that] prevailed" during the productions, this time in reference to plays believed to have been performed in Coventry: "On performance day itself in Coventry there was a strictly ordered parade in which every guild member was to march with his guild. Yet the time of the performance provided opportunities for disorder of various sorts, against which civic officials issued sundry cautions" (54). According to Stevens and Flanigan, the medieval religious drama was an opportunity for popular (and therefore disorderly) celebration that went against the ecclesiastical purpose of the day.

However, Pamela King's recent study of the York Cycle's relationship to Corpus Christi suggests that the opposition that scholars such as Stevens are so anxious to reinforce between the drama and the feast may not be as extreme as they imagine. In *The York Mystery Cycle and the Worship of the City*, King argues that "the York Cycle [is] not simply . . . dramatised biblical narrative produced as an adjunct to the feast of Corpus Christi, but as a customised celebratory event" (28). She adds, "liturgical and paraliturgical material, teaching and preaching, influence the texture of the whole cycle, from the selection of episodes listed in the earliest records, to the treatment of those episodes as recorded in the Register" (28).[70] Her research suggests that the "verbal texture" (28) of the cycle accords with "contemporary doctrinal moves to re-emphasise the importance of the Eucharist" (29). King's argument is not that the drama and feast were opposed, but that the ideals of one informed and supported the shape, structure, and content of the other, and vice versa.

Clifford Davidson echoes this sentiment when he explains that

> the sponsor of these Corpus Christi pageants, the city Corporation, was an elite body determined that that they should perform a function more serious than mere entertainment, for the stated goals were to reinforce devotion and to enhance the honor of the city. Nothing could be further from the carnivalesque, though, of

[70] Like York, the Chester play was also associated with Corpus Christi day for a large portion of its history, but moved to "Whitsun from at least 1521, with a final outing at Midsummer in 1575" (King 2).

> course, this did not mean there was no room in these pageants for laughter. (*Festivals and Plays* viii)

If, indeed, drama and doctrine did support and shape each other in York to some degree, it would suggest that the feast and the drama were not mutually incompatible modes of solemnity and celebration, but that their relationship to each other is more contextual and complicated, and far less diametrically opposed than these carnivalesque readings would suggest.

There is also little evidence to suggest that these performances were characterized by widespread disorder. Clifford Flanigan references the "prodigious eating and drinking" that marked the days of the performance,[71] but only cites a study by Charles Phythian-Adams which revealed that "the trade guilds responsible for the plays in that city [Coventry] purchased such quantities of beer for their rehearsals that it was difficult to imagine how it could all have been consumed" (54).[72] The only thing that evidence of large amounts of beer at rehearsals demonstrates, however, is a likelihood of drunken rehearsals, or perhaps post-rehearsal revelry, and suggests very little about the state of the general population on performance days. Anthony Gash, also reading Phythian-

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[71] Clifford Flanigan points out that "civil unrest seems always to have been a possibility at play time; towns frequently took special precautions that order be kept at these times, and the church offered indulgences for attendance at the plays on the condition that the recipient engage in no lewd or disorderly behavior" (54). However, records of actual "unrest" are surprisingly few.

[72] For the guilds that kept detailed records of rehearsal expenses, Coventry's expenses for ale (see *REED: Coventry*) are included in lists of other play-related expenses, with payments for costumes, sets, and food, among other things. This suggests that meat and ale were common forms of "payment" for the actors; nothing in these lists indicates that the drinking that occurred had any noteworthy consequences.

Adams, concludes, "English historians such as Phythian-Adams . . . believe that the subversive potential of rituals of status-reversal and misrule was generally well controlled, and that their meaning was ultimately conservative" (81).[73] While it is difficult to argue for the absence of something, the shortage of archival material indicating disorder, civic unrest, or even complaints from the more serious segments of society as a result of these productions suggests that perhaps these were not such unruly events after all.

Similarly, *The Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge*, a document that almost certainly includes medieval religious drama in its definition and criticism of *miraclis*,[74] makes no mention of the potential social disorder these plays were supposed to engender, and instead criticizes these plays for creating a kind of spiritual disorder by seeming to be for "the worschipe of God" when it actually intended "to plesyn . . . the world" (ll. 187-189). The issue which informs most of the criticism in the *Tretise* is a mistrust of any drama which "presents only 'signis withoute dede.' . . . That the *sign* is detached from the 'dede' surely is the most serious charge that can be hurled at theatrical representation which presents

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[73] Here Gash is discussing medieval drama's place within an annual cycle of festivities including Christmas, May Day and Midsummer, Hock-tide, and of course Corpus Christi.

[74] Clifford Davidson explains in his introduction to *The Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge* that

> if there were a "precise" meaning of the term "miraclis," . . . it was not used in the *Tretise* in any exact way but instead seems to have been intended as a broad category that would link the word "miraclis" with a spectrum of dramatic activity ranging form the staging of religious scenes to representations on feast days and seasons such as Christmas. (2)

images and movement that allegedly pretend to be something they are not" (Davidson *Tretise* 27). The principal complaint the *Trestise* offers has to do with representational stability, but no mention is made of the immediate social effects these plays might have on the crowds gathered to watch the performance. It does seem that if these plays were the site of the kind of carnivalesque social disorder and revelry alluded to in the above-mentioned studies, the effects of this would not have escaped the notice of those already critical of the drama on spiritual grounds.

Civic disorder or political unrest are not essential for a successful carnival, of course, but this reductive understanding of medieval cycle drama's relationship to the carnivalesque can be found circulating within some medieval dramatic scholarship, and it has affected how these plays are understood by modern readers. As I will illustrate in more detail below, the carnivalesque, as it has been taken up by some late twentieth-century medieval dramatic scholars, is not an ideal model for describing the performance style of the York and Chester plays. However, a discussion about the ways in which the carnivalesque does not align with medieval cycle drama in these plays is helpful for developing a more nuanced understanding of subversion as it functions in these particular plays.

One important example of the difference between carnival and medieval cycle drama can be found in their strategies for subversion. Part of what makes the carnivalesque so attractive is its ability to "evade everyday relationships of power and replace them with a different relationship of power" (Scott 176). An important indicator of this shift in power appears to be the creation of an

opportunity for the populace to express themselves, absent from the normal power relations that would prevent them from doing so. This is the dichotomy set out by Bakhtin between "the forms of political, philosophical, and theological oppression mediated in monological and authorized discourse on one hand, and liberating dialogical popular discourse on the other" (Flanigan 55). This dichotomy has the effect of making "Popular culture . . . thus regarded by Bakhtin . . . infinitely freer than high culture" (Flanigan 55). It could be said that the large-scale involvement of the community required for the production of these plays does give medieval religious drama a quality of the "popular" and might suggest that these plays "allow[] certain things to be said, certain forms of social power to be exercised that are muted or suppressed outside this ritual sphere" (Scott 173). However, if the plays are the "popular culture" to the "high culture" of the ecclesiastical feast of Corpus Christi, then we would expect to find the drama-as-ritual-sphere to be more overtly transgressive than it is. As Scott suggests in his description of how "hidden transcripts" work, the ritual sphere is the place for the suppressed to exercise social power; however, if medieval religious drama represents that ritual sphere for the people of Chester and York, then one would expect gendered and political conflicts and disruptions to be even more pervasive than they are, and the "authorized" or ecclesiastical aspects of these plays to be subject to far more criticism and mockery than we find. In the case of the Chester and York plays, the required dichotomy of "popular" and "high" cultures does not hold when the plays manage to represent both at once.

Another limitation of carnival with respect to medieval drama is the central role of the script within the performance. Although the Chester records give us little to go on, in York the performance of the plays appears to have been carefully regulated; according to Margaret Rogerson, "The official proclamation for the [York] play included in the 1415 *Ordo Paginarium* [instructs] the players . . . to be 'well arrayed & openly spekyng'" (Rogerson 113), and it also threatens fines for anyone arriving late to their performance (*REED: York* 25). Similarly, in 1476, an ordinance was passed indicating that "plaiers and plaies" shall be examined for their ability to bring honour to the city, and directs "all other insufficiant personnes either in Connyng voice or personne to discharge ammove and avoide" (*REED: York* 109). While the script itself is never explicitly mentioned, the qualities listed ("connyng," "voice," and "personne") suggest that an actor who cannot remember his lines or deliver them well could be discharged from his role. Further, the care with which officials, such as John Clerke, took to record actual performances against the official text is also suggestive of the interest this city took in preserving the integrity of its script and therefore its performance.[75]

This is not to say that scripted performances can never be carnivalesque, only that it is unlikely in this particular case. It is reasonable to suggest that some

[75] John Clerke (1510-1580), is identified by Richard Beadle as Scribe C, the person responsible for "numerous marginal observations and alterations" in the York manuscript (16). According to Beadle, "many of Clerke's annotations were likely to have been the result of comparing the written text with what was going on in performance" (19).

elements of carnival can be and are scripted; Scott describes it as the sphere in which

> the young can scold the old, women can ridicule men, cuckolded or henpecked husbands may be openly mocked, the bad-tempered and stingy can be satirized, muted personal vendettas and factional strife can be expressed. . . . It is the time and place to settle, verbally at least, personal and social scores. (173)

Certainly, plays exist which do these things. However, according to Roberta Mullini[76] in her essay on John Heywood's plays, "Carnival 'does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators'" and "'Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people'" (31, citing Bakhtin *Rabelais* 198). The York and Chester cycles already have relatively few examples of scripted moments in which "personal and social scores" might be settled; further, there is the additional complication of how it is possible for a rehearsed and scripted production to "not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators." Social scripts can be understood as having the effect of blurring such distinctions, in that everyone is in some sense both an actor and a spectator,[77] and within the

[76] Although not specifically about medieval cycle drama, her paper makes extensive use of the most popular ideas associated with the Bakhtinian carnivalesque that were circulating at this time in scholarship on early English drama. Since my primary concern here is not solely to reproduce Bakhtin's ideas about carnival but also to describe the features of the carnivalesque as medieval and early modern dramatic scholars have adapted them, Mullini's rehearsal of Bakhtin's most relevant concepts is useful.

carnivalesque these social scripts may change depending on the expectations participants may have about what is about to happen; however, the degree to which the action of a dramatic performance such as the Chester and York cycles is scripted, to the point that there are rehearsals, dialogue to memorize, and scenes to block, suggests that such a blurring of distinctions is significantly less possible than it is with less scripted, or socially scripted, performances.

Despite the regulated and scripted nature of the performances in Chester and York, scholars such as Ricke and Mullini understand direct address to the audience as an indicator of a carnivalesque performance, and they attribute to this technique the potential to blur the line between audience and spectator, and to involve the audience in the action as it is occurring on stage. Ricke makes this point when discussing the Towneley Noah play, but notably no such direct address occurs in the York Flood play, and the closest we come to a direct address in the Chester Flood play is when Noah exclaims,

> Lord, that weomen been crabbed aye,
> and non are meeke, I dare well saye.
> That is well seene by mee todaye
> in witness of you eychone. (3.105-108)

Whether or not the example from Chester is directly addressed to the audience depends on whether one reads "in witness of you eychone" as referring to the audience, to his sons and their wives who are all assembled near the ark, or to

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[77] See Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) for a discussion of social scripts and their ability to turn people into metaphorical actors and spectators.

both. At any rate, if the direct address is scripted, as it would have to be for modern readers to know about and discuss it, then this would seem to limit its transgressive potential, particularly when it is not a technique repeated in the York or Chester plays with much frequency.[78] Unlike a genuine ad-lib, of which we would have no record unless a member of the audience saw fit to preserve that event elsewhere in print,[79] a scripted direct address would likely be undermined by its very predictability, appearing in a script that is performed with regularity.

It is also worth noting that the text is necessarily an example of authorized discourse, by the very nature of it being produced and policed by civic authority and of it having survived many years of production and emendation, and to attribute to it transgressive potential because of the occasional direct address would be to overstate the effects of a single dramatic technique taken out of its context. This is not to say that the scripts that have come down to us bear any precise resemblance to the plays as they were actually performed. As Anthony Gash points out, "Even in approaching the mystery cycles which were perhaps the most rigorously supervised type of medieval play, it is important to keep in mind that the 'books' are at best incomplete guides to what actually took place in performance" (75). But given the fact that there exists for the York cycle both the

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[78] The direct address to the audience is used more frequently in Towneley.

[79] There is a possibility that John Clerke was recording such ad-libbed moments in York when comparing the performances against the text. However, Clerke mostly provided stage directions and "allusions to the fact that certain texts were 'defective,' 'wanting' or obsolete" (Beadle, *York* 18). Nonetheless, it is theoretically possible that the scenes mentioned here were once ad-libbed and then integrated into the official script by a predecessor of Clerke's early in York's performance history.

Ordo Paginarium (c. 1415) and the Register (1463-1477), and that statutes existed to ensure that "good players [are] well arrayed & openly spekyng,"[80] there is a demonstrable interest in preserving the integrity of the performance, both on stage and on record. Even if we acknowledge that it is difficult to determine how accurately these texts replicate a particular performance in a particular year, it is not difficult to posit that *the text*, in whatever form it took, was protected, and that true extra-textual action or speech (i.e., that which is not already scripted or blocked in rehearsals) would have been discouraged.

It could be argued that any scripted theatrical performance would fail to fulfill the criteria that blurs the "distinction between actors and spectators"; by virtue of having dialogue written, scenes blocked, and entrances and exits to remember, there will necessarily be a distinction between actors putting on the play and spectators watching it, no matter how caught up in the action they all may be. A degree of audience involvement is certainly possible, and occasionally encouraged, by different types of theatrical performance, but this seems to be a long way away from the spirit of the idea that, as Mullini emphasizes above, "everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people" (31). This is not to say, however, that there is no place for carnivalesque readings in any medieval drama; Anthony Gash makes a good case for reading *Mankind* within this framework, and, despite this play being scripted, staged by actors distinct from audience, and performed by a small company instead of an entire

[80] York *Ordo Paginarum* (*REED: York* 25).

community, the connections are informative about the limits of broadly applying the carnivalesque to dramatic productions.

In his article, "Carnival Against Lent," Gash summarizes Bakhtin's main points in this way: "What distinguishes the carnival world from the extra-carnival life which it parodies was that it was created and apprehended through laughter, in opposition to the Church which sustained its authority by promoting fear and guilt" (81). This is the dichotomy familiar to us from Ricke's study of carnivalesque shrews in medieval cycle drama. However, Gash adds the concept of the grotesque to the discussion, a topic that others working specifically with the cycle drama tend to leave out. Gash explains that

> Where official doctrine directed attention to the eternal fate of the individual soul, and induced shame about the body and about sex, carnivalesque iconography was governed by "the grotesque canon of the body," coded in hybrid effigies such as those of pregnant old hags laughing, or hell's mouth as a fertile cornucopia, and in the exaggeration of physical processes, apertures and protuberances symbolizing the collective, ancestral body of the people which perpetually renews itself. (81, citing *Rabelais* 24-30, 303-87)

Gash goes on to apply these notions of the carnival to *Mankind*, a play that is appropriately "ambivalent" or "dialectical" in that it "is explicitly associated with the Church as a temporal authority, and set against an 'underworld' of festive, tavern, comic infernal and excremental language which parodies the 'high' language" (82).

Given his material, Gash's carnivalesque reading of *Mankind* makes a great deal of sense, and it describes the play as echoing and responding to themes surrounding the carnivalesque, rather than instantiating or enacting a carnivalesque event in its totality. The script of *Mankind* very deliberately, I think, sets Mercy and his association with religious salvation in opposition to the Three Ns (New Guise, Nowadays, and Naught) and their association with (under-) worldly damnation. The Three Ns parody a wedding service and legal proceedings, they make scatological jokes, beheading jokes, and sexual double-entendres—"the festive idiom of reversal and parody is being used both to express and conceal anti-clerical sentiments. Even remarks which look at first like sheer nonsense often contain an anti-clerical barb" (Gash 90). Gash's argument is not built on the performance context of the play, but it is built on the clear relevance of the carnivalesque to the over-arching themes of *Mankind*, and to the scope of material in the script that lends itself to such a reading; in other words, it appears that everything in the play is deliberately working towards a carnivalesque reversal and parody of the ecclesiastical.

The carnivalesque aspects of *Mankind* stand in contrast to the Chester and York plays, where a much smaller portion of the script invokes anti-clerical sentiments, associations with the under-world, excremental and/or infernal comedy, or the grotesque. Yet, according to Mullini, this is what Bakhtin emphasizes the most: "what Bakhtin stresses most in his study of Carnival and of Rabelais is the role played by the grotesque realism of physical manifestations. The hyperbolic dimensions of physical details and the regenerative power of the

cycle of life are considered to be among the basic features of the Carnival spirit" (37). A case could be made for the "cycle of life" being mirrored in the cycle plays, given their Creation to Doom structure, but in carnival this is usually associated with "grotesquerie, profanity, ridicule, aggression, and character assassination" (Scott 176), something which abounds in *Mankind*, but is much harder to find in the York and Chester plays. Also, it should be noted that while *Mankind* aligns itself with carnivalesque themes in a fairly productive way, it still faces many of the same limitations as cycle drama, particularly in its scripted and rehearsed form.

I ask, in this section, how appropriate it is to apply the carnivalesque to the religious cycle drama of medieval England, as Joseph Ricke does when he asks, "Should we admit the world of carnival into our interpretation of the plays?" (271). It would seem that the answer to Ricke's rhetorical question is no. As has been illustrated by Ricke, Stevens, and others, the carnivalesque framework for understanding medieval cycle drama too often brings with it an inaccurate or incomplete picture. Flanigan's own reservations about Bakhtin's relevance to the study of medieval drama are based on his questions about the consistency of Bakhtin's theory and the shortage of historical evidence: "Bakhtin insists on describing official culture in wholly negative terms, while 'carnival' and 'festival,' as expressions of a popular mentality, are invested with exclusively positive values" (56). Flanigan adds that "Bakhtin's notion of festivity sets it in such a radical perspective that he is forced to make claims for its powers and its subversiveness which cannot be historically justified, least of all by a study of the

late medieval biblical plays" (57). In the end, Flanigan labels Bakhtin (along with Victor Turner) "essentialist" (57).

Similarly, Warren Edminster, who revisits the carnivalesque in 2005, a decade after the height of its popularity in medieval dramatic scholarship, provides an important cautionary word about Bakhtin's popular theory:

> Bakhtin's ideas are not always appropriate to the study of English drama. Bakhtin's focus ranged between the Classical Age and the Enlightenment, and he was concerned with French culture rather than English. Moreover, Bakhtin occasionally over generalizes or overstates his case, finding universal trends to support his overriding theories rather than qualifying his work with exceptions or contradictions. (xii)

This disclaimer about Bakhtin's ideas seems particularly appropriate when discussing medieval religious drama specifically. Although the focus of this chapter is not Bakhtin's ideas themselves, but rather the effects of Bakhtin's ideas—as they have been circulated by medieval dramatic scholars—on our perceptions of the cycles and their performance context, the following review of the touchstones of Bakhtin's theory will show that the cycle drama does not particularly lend itself to a carnivalesque model that includes parody and/or mockery of power, curses and insulting words or expressions, the grotesque body, laughter opposed to fear and guilt, hybrid effigies (such as "hell's mouth as a fertile cornucopia"), "the exaggeration of physical processes" and the perpetual renewal of the body (Mullini, Gash).

The drama that is the subject of this dissertation exhibits remarkably few features of the carnivalesque. The structure of the dramatic cycles, which begin and end with the beginning and end of time, appear to preclude any sense of the perpetual renewal of the body. "Physical processes" are almost entirely absent from the cycles, to the degree that even the creation of life is represented as momentary and painless, as in the case of Adam and Eve's creation, or Jesus's birth (below). Hell is featured in a handful of plays, but it is not celebrated in any consistent way, and those who populate it are rarely pleased about being there.[81] Finally, while the plays certainly feature their moments of laughter, insults, and perhaps even some comic violence,[82] when the plays are taken in their entirety these moments are, as I described in the introduction to this dissertation, moments that interrupt the action of the play, not moments that overtake and define it.

Domestic disturbances, by contrast, occur frequently and consistently enough in the narrative to constitute a dramatic convention in the drama, one that troubles and potentially subverts the narrative being told in various ways, but they do not take over the entire dramatic event in a parody of the Christian narrative. They are what allows the drama to belong paradoxically to both "popular" and "high" culture, if such a dichotomy can be said to exist in Chester and York. And within the context of domestic disturbance, cross-dressed male actors playing

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[81] See Chapter 1 for a discussion of the figure of the tapster in Chester's "Harrowing of Hell" who bemoans her place in Hell.

[82] The York play depicting the crucifixion of Christ is a good example of this, as is, perhaps, the Chester Flood play. The Towneley versions of these plays are referred to most often for their potentially comic violence, but see Epp's "Noah's Wife: The Shaming of the 'Trew,'" for a discussion of whether or not domestic violence should be equated with comic violence.

female roles do not always do so to be subversive (though they sometimes are). What domestic disturbance and the carnivalesque do share, however, is an interest in celebrating and understanding subversion, even if the degree and type of subversion is quite different. What seems to draw some scholars of medieval cycle drama to the idea of the carnivalesque, despite the above-mentioned misalignments between the drama and the theory, is that it once provided the best possible framework for understanding these interruptions or disturbances. However, as I have shown, the cycle plays of Chester and York cannot instantiate the full scope of the subversive effects of carnival because they are not structured in such a way as to allow it; the very nature of their construction and performance cannot erase all distinctions between stage and street. By demonstrating the shortcomings of the carnivalesque as a model for understanding medieval cycle drama, I hope to have provided a clearer picture of the relationship between medieval cycle drama and its disturbances, and in the process made room to discuss the features of medieval cycle drama's particular performance style as an extension of those very domestic disturbances for which the carnivalesque cannot fully account.

Subversion and Spectacle: The Episodic-Processional Theatrical Style of the Chester and York Plays

Existing carnivalesque readings do not always apply to medieval cycle drama, both practically, in terms of its production, and thematically, in terms of the types of symbolic structures that tend to be associated with carnival that are

not found in the York and Chester plays. The enthusiasm found in some medieval dramatic scholarship for the carnivalesque, however, speaks to a desire to account for the very real disruptions of the Christian narrative that appear to have subversive potential. However, as Davis reminds us, carnival is only one of a number of ways to enact subversion (143). This section will focus on the risks specifically associated with a safety-valve/status-quo theory of subversion, a concept frequently associated with discussions of festivity and carnival, but also applicable to discussions of subversion more generally, which is where I will turn my attention. There are three features specific to the performance style of both Chester and York which enable these plays to avoid this safety-valve/status-quo framework: an episodic structure, processional performance, and occasional use of the *platea*. What makes these features noteworthy is that they prevent the totalizing illusion of unity—the establishment of "culturally sanctioned . . . arrangements" (Sponsler and Clark 320)—against which subversion is both called forth and nullified.

Ironically, perhaps, medieval cycle drama's so-called inconsistency, which earned it so much of the criticism summarized in the first chapter of this dissertation, and which makes it unsuitable for the carnivalesque readings discussed in the previous section, is the very thing that enables the degree and variety of subversion that we find in these plays. Domestic disturbance, understood as the interruption of such familiarizing concepts as time and space with concerns from the medieval here-and-now, is not only enacted within the text through the gendered conflicts discussed in the previous chapters—conflicts

which interrupt the time and place of the Christian narrative—but within the very structure of its performance, performance that presents each chapter of the story as an independent episode, within a procession, staged by local actors in and on the streets of Chester and York.

Chris Humphrey, in his book, *The Politics of Carnival: Festive Misrule in Medieval England*, points out that "on the whole . . . arguments about misrule have been put in rather exclusive terms; . . . misrule works like a safety-valve, and the status quo is restored after a period of temporary inversion" (20). We can see this exclusivity echoed in James Scott's reading of carnival, which he describes as an opportunity for venting the aggression and airing the grievances of society; according to him, the degree of debauchery during carnival, the "grotesquerie, profanity, ridicule, aggression, and character assassination" (176), will depend on how strict life is during the rest of year. Scott explains that carnival "serves to displace and relieve social tensions and hence restore social harmony. This is a familiar variant of the safety-valve theory—the idea that once the people get the hidden transcript off their chest, they'll find the routine of domination easier to return to" (177).

Both Scott and Humphrey rightly go on to contest these models for understanding carnival and misrule as being overly simplistic. Scott challenges the efficacy of the safety-valve theory, by asking, "Why is it that a ritual modeling of revolt should necessarily diminish the likelihood of actual revolt? Why couldn't it just as easily serve as a dress rehearsal or a provocation for actual defiance?" (178). Like Scott, Claire Sponsler and Robert Clark are looking for

ways for subversion to exist outside the safety-vale/status-quo model. Sponsler and Clark, here discussing the potentially subversive effects of cross-dressing, attempt to carve out room within the safety-valve/status-quo framework for what they call "queer moments." In their paper they argue that

> the use of a crossdressing main character [such as Robin Hood] results in queer moments which cannot be entirely undone by the ultimate return of culturally sanctioned sexual and status arrangements, and further, that the queerness of those moments was certainly not lost upon the plays' medieval audiences, even if the reading of these dramas as "queer" is, of necessity, a modern one. (320)

While trying to make the case for "moments which cannot be entirely undone by the ultimate return of culturally sanctioned sexual and status arrangements," Sponsler and Clark nevertheless make the familiar concession that such "queer" moments are inevitably "resolved" through the theatre's "ritualistic way of hemming in the danger of crossdressing, confining it to a specially licensed area where it can do little harm" (338). For Sponsler and Clark, the "hemming in" of cross-dressing is figured in terms of that which endures overcoming the momentary; the "ultimate return of culturally sanctioned . . . arrangements" wins over "queer moments." While Humphrey, Scott, Sponsler and Clark, among others, try to find ways to discuss subversion outside of the safety-valve/status-quo framework, it is extremely difficult to do so without returning to the problem of recuperation.

Much analysis of subversion is based to some degree on the premise that we know subversion when we see it; subversion occurs when the authority and invisibility of the status quo is challenged or brought to light, and it is often recognized as such just before it is recuperated in the end and the status quo is restored. While it is almost impossible to determine, evaluate or measure with any certainty the effects of such subversion, particularly when that hypothetical subversion has taken place in a historical past, there is an implicit ideal that some residue of subversion might remain after the momentary transgression is resolved, as in the above example from Sponsler and Clark. This is the safety-valve/status-quo problem: the theory is that pressure mounts as a result of power imbalances within a society, transgression acts to vent (a segment of) society's grievances, and once the pressure has been released to a manageable level, power relations return to the status quo. Within this metaphor of a zero-sum pressurized system, however, no enduring change is possible, regardless of whether or not the world is turned upside down in carnival, or male actors wear women's clothing on stage. Regardless of how pressure is vented, in this model, the status quo is always restored.

This problem with talking about subversion is well known, and while it is most starkly delineated in the previously-discussed carnivalesque readings of the plays, this is a problem familiar to all scholars interested in subversion and its potential effects. Jean Howard invokes this problem with subversion in her influential essay, "Cross-Dressing, the Theater, and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England." Although the subject matter is Renaissance drama, her paper

advocates for a longer historical view of cross-dressing and its politically subversive potential, and she responds directly to the safety-valve/status-quo dilemma of reading cross-dressing. She writes, in reference to the anti-theatrical polemics of the time,

> I am going to argue that the polemics signal a sex-gender system under pressure and that cross-dressing, as fact and as idea, threatened a normative social order based upon strict principles of hierarchy and subordination, of which women's subordination to man was a chief instance, trumpeted from pulpit, instantiated in law, and acted upon by monarch and commoner alike. I will also argue, however, that the subversive or transgressive potential of this practice could be and was recuperated in a number of ways. As with any social practice, its meaning varied with the circumstances of its occurrence, with the particulars of the institutional or cultural sites of its enactment, and with the class position of the transgressor. As part of a stage action, for example, the ideological import of cross dressing was mediated by all the conventions of dramatic narrative and Renaissance dramatic production. (20)

In the cases in which scholars took subversion as an indication of the carnivalesque, or as an inevitable result of cross-dressing, the subversion was inevitably trapped in the dichotomous safety-valve/status-quo framework summarized above. However, if the potential for subversion, applied to early English drama more generally as Howard suggests, is "mediated by all the

conventions of dramatic narrative and . . . dramatic production," then we need to look not only at the moment of subversion in question, but at the performance context from which it comes.

Making reference to the medieval historical context, Sponsler and Clark make a similar point to Howard when they argue optimistically that, despite the theatre's "hemming in" of the danger of cross-dressing, "In the case of late medieval performance, where the 'theater' is often a guildhall, a city street, or a village green, that border [between theatre and 'world beyond'] would have been all the more porous" (338). Our tendency is to define subversion within and against a larger, unified, power structure, state, or concept. As with the festive/ecclesiastical, carnival/doctrinal, or male/female dichotomies that repeatedly emerge in the scholarship discussed above, the thing being subverted is usually monolithic, and the subversion a reversal of that singular, unified, concept or state. However, there are features of the Chester and York plays that undermine this monolithic understanding of subversion and recuperation, including the *platea* as a performance space that disrupts the actor/audience dichotomy, and the episodic structure of the plays, which interrupts a singular narrative trajectory. With episodic performance in the street, the Chester and York plays even disrupt the usual dynamics of a procession, and as a result ask their audiences not to choose between the two halves of a binary, but to have a much more flexible and unstable relationship with the performance, and therefore with the subversion it enacts.

Robert Weimann helpfully defines the *platea* through its etymology:

> The Latin word *platea* . . . originally indicated the open space between houses—a street or public place at ground level. As Italian usage suggests, the *platea* developed into the ground floor of an auditorium. But, before the separation of actors and audience was taken for granted, the *platea* or "place" corresponded to the "plain" in the Cornish Round or "the green" in Lindsay's *Satire of the Three Estates*. (79)

In the context of medieval drama specifically, the *platea* is loosely defined as the area immediately in front of the platform on which the play was staged, usually the street. Kolve defines "the 'place' [as] simply the area in front of the stage or scaffold, to which the actors might descend if necessary. It was never geographically localized, and there was no pretense that what went on there went on in an imagined locality relevant to the action" (23). Cami Agan, summarizing existing scholarship on the *platea*, explains, "critics seem to agree in the generalities of the platea. . . . [I]t was a space other than the locus, it represented nonlocalized space, and it is present in each surviving medieval drama" (345). In the case of the Chester and York plays specifically, the *platea* is the area on the street, likely in front of or beside a pageant wagon, in which actors might perform scenes instead of performing them on the main (elevated) stage.

The *platea* sparked discussion among medieval dramatic scholars primarily because of two stage directions in the Coventry *Nativity* play. The stage direction at line 539 in this play indicates that "the iii kyngis spekyth in the strete"; the stage direction at 783 states, "Here Erode ragis in the pagond and in

the strete also." Even though, as Margaret Rogerson points out, "There are very few explicit stage directions in the text of the York Corpus Christi Play, and none of them specifies street-level playing" (113), and that we should be careful not to apply our assumptions about Coventry's performance to York, there are still "large numbers of implicit directions in the dialogue to compensate for this deficiency" (113-114). The York *Nativity*, *The Shepherds*, *The Flood*, and *The Slaughter of the Innocents* are only a few of the plays in York which implicitly involve the street in their performance; according to Rogerson, "opportunities for street-level playing present themselves time and again within the action of the pageants as well as at the beginning and end" (115).[83] While use of the *platea* is not without some controversy, and it is likely impossible to be certain of exactly when and in what ways it was used, the plays do appear to use the street as a performance space with some frequency.

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[83] Rogerson cautions that

> while we cannot rule out the possibility of actors "raging in the streets of medieval York" on some occasions, we should not be swayed to unqualified assumptions that the medieval players made consistent and extensive use of the additional playing area that was available on the roadway. We can envisage, with strong justification, that an effective form of "raging in the streets" was achieved in medieval York without setting foot on the ground. (121)

Rogerson arrives at this conclusion by reasoning that "the medieval community was accustomed to viewing biblical events within the strictures of the leaded windows of religious buildings or the limits of the boarders of manuscript miniature paintings" (121) and therefore would be more astute at transforming "the cramped confines of the wagon platform into the vastness of the Holy Land" (121). While I do appreciate the parallel drawn by Rogerson here between image and play, I am also reluctant to believe that audiences would not engage with the drama through its own conventional modes of representation; whether or not that mode is informed by the visual media described by Rogerson remains an open question, since presumably audiences could engage with different media in different ways.

The function of the platea is commonly understood to be a secondary acting space where actors could bring the action closer to the audience. However, Agan postulates that it is also a liminal space between stage and audience. Relying on Victor Turner's conception of liminality,[84] she reasons that "when action takes place on the platea . . . that action invites a liminal moment, a moment when the audience stands on the threshold between the action(s) in the drama and the drama of their own lives" (351). Agan explains, "individuals are on the threshold between normative 'everyday' cultural events, and that in the liminal state, individuals or groups may reinforce or seek to change those normative events" (353). Given the discussion above of the safety-vale/status-quo problem of talking about subversion, this concept of the liminal does allow us to think about the potentially subversive moments in the drama as exactly that—moments of transition, or to borrow Turner's phrase, the "betwixt and between"—and not as full-scale revolution or a complete inversion of authority. Change is possible, and even desired, although, as Turner cautions us, "this liberty has fairly narrow limits. The neophytes return to secular society with more alert faculties perhaps and enhanced knowledge of how things work, but they have to become once more subject to custom and law" (15). Agan's reading of liminality is something akin to the "transgressive potential" referred to by Howard, or the "queer moments" highlighted by Sponsler and Clark; recuperation of the status

[84] For Victor Turner, "Liminality . . . breaks, as it were, the cake of custom and enfranchises speculation. . . . Liminality is the realm of the primitive hypothesis, where there is a certain freedom to juggle with the factors of existence" (15).

quo ("custom and law") is still a given, but the participants are still somehow changed by the process of going into and coming out of the liminal state.

However, Agan's conception of the liminality of the *platea* is too narrowly focused to capture cycle drama's full range of representation, and it is unlikely that audiences would have experienced the *platea* in this way. Agan describes the *platea* as having the power to challenge the separation between spectacle and spectator in order to further the spiritual goals of the play: "Those who witness action in the *platea* may enter the liminal realm more freely and have the opportunity to draw self into the action/message of the play" (351). This transformation of audience members into participants is key for Agan, since, "For members of a medieval audience, the act of viewing is an opportunity for reviewing or strengthening both individual and communal faith" (354). Here, Agan prioritizes the doctrinal function of the plays, to the point of ignoring completely the other issues that emerge in the plays. According to her, "To engage in the practice of affective piety seems clearly connected to Turner's liminal moment: the believers stand on the threshold, witnessing both the pain of the biblical Crucifixion and its relevance to the cosmic moment of salvation, in order to reaffirm and intensify their own faith" (354). This may be the case in this particular example, but the *platea* should not be limited to functioning on behalf of the spiritual experience only, particularly given the other instances in which the *platea* was most certainly used.

Agan's focus on the spiritual aspect of these plays leads her to attribute a very specific role to the *platea* that is not always supported by the action in the

text. For example, Agan refers to the scene in the York *Birth of Jesus* in which Joseph "appears to leave the manger-stage in search of wood" (14.40-85), during which time Mary gives birth to Jesus in the space of a stanza. Agan reasons that

> Because the author makes such a point of separating Joseph from the scene of the birth and because he is in search of firewood, we may assume that he descends from the stage into the platea. Certainly this would give the audience an appropriate vision of such a crucial cosmic moment, as it would also create an appropriate distance from that moment for both Joseph and the audience members. (356)

For Agan, the distance from the Nativity created by Joseph's quest for firewood amongst the people allows for a heightened appreciation of the significance of the scene, and at the same time aligns members of the audience with Joseph, thereby bringing them into the action: "While he searches on the platea for wood, he must surely connect to the audience, as he is engaged in an everyday task of pragmatic concerns" (356). Joseph does not see the Nativity from the *platea* where he gathers wood; he only sees the light of the star, which causes him to return to find the newborn Jesus, "so that when he begins to follow the star, the audience moves with him back to the scene of Christ's birth" (357). There is a clear relationship between the holy moment being staged above the audience's level, as it were, and the secular *platea*, where concerns more familiar with audiences and their everyday experiences are enacted.

Agan makes a similar argument for the Towneley Flood play, arguing that materials for the assembly of the ark would have been found on the *platea*[85] and that once the ark was constructed and the family was gathered on the pageant wagon, the *platea* would signify the earth, which is "a site of desolation, death, and nothingness created by the flood" (360). However, as already discussed in Chapter Two, the dichotomy between the ark as the location of spiritual salvation and the *platea* as the site of earthly sin and secular concerns does not hold when Mr. and Mrs. Noah fight after they are both already aboard the ark. The fighting clouds the distinction between the two worlds, and ruptures the dichotomous relationship between *platea* and stage that Agan wants to reinforce. In this case, the *platea* does not logically support the spiritual import of the play.

However, if, as Agan points out, "the audience members, in continual 'threshold' moments, must continually make a choice as to what the *platea* means in a given moment within the play" (367), then the *platea* is a secondary space not bound by the same rules that define the performance space of the main acting area, and in relation to which audience members must always redefine their relationship. In this case, the dichotomy of secular *platea* and spiritual stage is actually unnecessary for understanding the *platea*'s role. Instead, the *platea* can be seen as another way in which the performance style of the drama is able to

[85] Agan's repeated interest in having characters gathering items from the *platea* is problematic from a purely pragmatic standpoint; one has to wonder about the logistics associated with such a directing choice: How feasible is it for a member of the acting company to arrive ahead of the wagon, pre-set these items on the street (amongst the crowd?), police the audience so that these props do not go missing during the performance, and do this at every performance station? It would not be impossible to orchestrate, but it does not seem to be the most efficient way to get the play up and running upon its arrival at each station.

disturb or disrupt; in this case, even the relationship between audience and actor is not fixed, but instead undergoes constant negotiation.

The episodic, processional style of performance used in York and Chester requires a similar kind of fluctuating relationship between audience and actor; it changes their relationship without erasing the distinction between them. Understanding the processional mode is important to a study of cycle drama because, according to Twycross, processions are seen as "potential engenderers of the mystery-play cycles" ("Approaches" 9). Kathleen Ashley, in an introductory chapter to her essay collection on this subject,[86] summarizes a "generation of cultural historians using explanatory models from anthropology": "Their analyses . . . tended to focus on the issue of whether processions produced social harmony or reinforced social distinctions (potentially leading to conflict)" (*Moving Subjects* 7). This tendency to see processions as creating harmonious (or conflictual) relationships within the communities that produce them is echoed by James Stokes, who makes the following case:

> in villages and small towns, no less than Corpus Christi processions or guild shows in cities and large boroughs, the processional entertainments had coherence and clear semiotic design. . . . [Traditional processions] were carefully structured, symbolically coherent affirmations, in mimetic form, of traditional communal values, customs, and beliefs, and theatrically conceived

[86] The collection is entitled *Moving Subjects: Processional Performance in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*.

> maps for illustrating legal, religious, and economic relationships. (241)

Although Stokes's interpretation of processions is overly (and perhaps deliberately) general, the impulse to ascribe to procession a community-building and harmonizing function is quite common.

Twycross's take on procession is similarly focused on community, but she acknowledges the distinctions that must be preserved within the whole: "The urban procession confirms the sense of community in various ways. It may be made up of a series of discrete groups, but merely the fact that they have all consented to take part, if for different reasons, communicates a sense of solidarity" ("Approaches" 17). This is slightly less utopian than Stokes's model, but nonetheless, according to Twycross, the procession is a context within which, "If there are differences of opinions or dissensions, we forget them for the duration of the show, for the promotion of the greater good" ("Approaches" 18).

Although processions must have goals, or in Ashley's words, "symbolic purposes for which they are undertaken, with their attendant mythologies and ritual activities" (14), those goals are often multifarious and not necessarily harmonious. This is because processions, like any other large-scale undertaking, will necessarily involve people with multiple and conflicting interests working within, around, and sometimes against the previously established norms established for any particular event. One need only consider the example of a modern-day Pride parade, which includes people and organizations as diverse as dykes showing off their leather on bikes, businesses who want to appear gay-

friendly to potential customers, drag kings and queens campaigning for titles, and queer church organizations spreading a message of acceptance, among many others. Ashley reminds us that processions require people to be "socio-political subjects" who "participate either by processing or observing the procession" (14); at the same time, the processions themselves are "a muti-layered performance mode [that] create multiple meanings and thus fulfill a wide variety of functions within their societies" (14). Processions and their audiences take many forms, making such generalizations about their harmonizing function even more difficult to sustain.

The issue is further complicated by discussions of what exactly happens in a procession. Both Ashley and Twycross point out that "procession" is a general term used to describe a number of performance modes that have some important differences, particularly as it pertains to the relationship between the audience and performance. Twycross tentatively describes some processions as a kind of an "encounter custom," in which audiences encounter the processing participants; but she cautions that "classifying them as 'an encounter custom' depends upon the spectators being cast in the 'passive' role, the participants as 'active'" ("Approaches" 9). She makes the important point that "some processions do not need spectators. Others are pointless without them" (9). Twycross draws the conclusion that the relationship between spectators and participants cannot be generalized:

> So have all processions the same basic scenario? Well, what actually happens? A body of persons proceeds in an orderly and

> formal fashion along a predetermined route. If we see it from the participants' point of view, it is a journey. If we see it from the spectators' point of view, it is a succession of persons, or of modules of information, passing a fixed point. It is going to matter whether the procession is designed primarily for the participants or for the spectators. (9)

A modern Pride parade will necessarily look very different from a medieval Corpus Christi procession, and yet they do depend upon some fundamentally similar structures of movement, participation, and representation.

Also, processions do not always consist of actors processing past spectators. There are processions that meet each other, as in the case of "late medieval royal entries, where the royal retinue's procession into town typically encountered a procession of civic and ecclesiastical officials coming in the opposite direction to meet them and to accompany them into the urban spaces they controlled" (Ashley 15); modern examples of this might include the moment in a gay pride parade when a procession arrives at its (usually politically-significant) destination filled with supporters, when it encounters anti-gay protesters somewhere on the route, or when it simply passes by frustrated motorists. The many forms processions take complicate attempts to define them and their relationship to the audience.[87]

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[87] A common type of procession in medieval England, "beating the bounds," could be described as having no audience at all, since its purpose is both to remind participants of, and thereby reaffirm, the boundaries of the parish; spectators and participants are one and the same. Thanks to Stephen Reimer for reminding me of this processional form.

In the case of the medieval cycle drama of Chester and York, which is processional in nature, we find a procession of people proceeding, in Twycross's words, "in an orderly and formal fashion along a predetermined route" ("Approaches" 9); however, this procession is unlike any of the usual variations in form in that it moves forward in fits and starts, with each group stopping to perform its play before moving onto the next station to stop and do it again. This procession does pass a fixed point, but in York and Chester, the length of the procession would tax any single spectator who wished to watch the entire event from a single location. In these ways, then, the processional nature of this drama is to some degree working against itself: the audience is neither encouraged to remain in a fixed location to witness the entire procession, nor is it encouraged to follow the procession to the next station, because to do so would be to find oneself watching the same play being performed repeatedly throughout the day. Instead, the structure of this particular procession encourages audience members to engage with the performance in a non-linear and fragmented fashion. It is easy to imagine spectators moving between stations, picking and choosing their favourite pageants, seeing them out of order, and even taking long breaks to attend to other matters during the day.

Interestingly, in the same essay collection edited by Ashley, Theodore Lerud makes a case for understanding the drama as processional visual tableaux, or "quick images"; in his reading, he focuses on the dramatic backdrop created by the buildings in the streets, and the quick images as "aids to memory and spiritual understanding" (235). This is the only article in the collection about procession to

address specifically the Chester or York plays,[88] and it does so entirely at the expense of any sense of processional sequence or movement. For Lerud, the visual tableaux created by the actors against the backdrop of the city is key to understanding the import of these plays, and the processional aspect of these plays is therefore overlooked in favour of a more episodic structure. However, the framework of domestic disturbance allows for the possibility that the Chester and York cycles were both episodic and processional at the same time.

While it is certainly tempting to embrace the processional nature of medieval cycle drama as belonging to a type of "processional entertainments" which were "forms of communal mimesis played out upon the local landscape in ways that temporarily transformed the entire parish into a kind of stage and affirmed the integral relationships of constituent elements within the community" (Stokes, "Processional" 252-253), more careful consideration of the particular examples of Chester and York suggest that it is possible that the plays in question also disrupted these "integral relationships" at the same time, not only through their disruption of the official religious subject matter in order to play out more domestic concerns, which has already been discussed in previous chapters, but in their evocation and revision of the common modes of procession. The result is a procession that proceeds in fits and starts, and refuses the basic understanding of a procession past a fixed audience that is waiting to witness the entire spectacle from beginning to end.

[88] Lerud also considers examples from N-Town.

Given this performance structure, the importance of the whole, in practice, gives way to the episode, and each episode represents only fragments of the whole; the individual plays preclude audiences from taking in the entire story, never mind engaging in the kind of search for over-arching (usually doctrinal) unity that informs so much of the criticism summarized in the first chapter of this dissertation. The episodic-processional structure is what enables the moments of potential subversion already discussed; it does this, to some degree, by trading the longer narrative for the more immediate spectacle, and thereby changing the stakes of the subversion when it appears. For example, if the Flood play was the only play being performed that day, one might make a successful case for a temporary inversion of power being recuperated by Noah's success in forcing Mrs. Noah aboard the ark; however, the Flood play is only one episode among many being performed on that particular day, and it will be performed more than once. Also, those who wish can follow the procession and watch that particular instance of subversion and/or recuperation over and over again; it is also presumably possible to see these scenes out of order, by moving against the direction of the procession. This episodic-processional mode of performance precludes medieval cycle drama from belonging to the typical frameworks for understanding subversion. The breaks in the narrative encourage audiences to enjoy subversion in its moment, and to celebrate the spectacle of it.

The spectacular aspect of medieval cycle drama's performance is often overlooked, but it is arguably the most subversive aspect of these plays. Burly men cross-dressed as wives, "raging" on the *platea*, and an episodic processional

style are ultimately manifestations of the drama's ability to play and be playful; processions lend themselves particularly well to spectacle because of the above-mentioned barriers to truly defining what a procession can and should do, or be. Sponsler and Clark's description (above) of the "borders" between medieval theatre and the "world beyond" being "porous" because of the particular stages used ("the 'theater' is often a guildhall, a city street, or a village green"), is echoed by Louis Marin, who explains that parades and processions are able to create "passages from one law to another, from one system of rules to another [which] are, properly speaking, 'outlaw' passages, and thus they betray an element of danger" (43). Part of this danger is derived from the undefined and constantly changing rules for processional performance, giving audience members a particularly important and ever-changing role in relationship to the performance. Contrary to Bakhtin's refusal of the distinction between actor and spectator, for Marin, "In the parade, even if it includes an important 'spectacular' component, the spectator is always more or less implicated as an actor . . . whose role and function is precisely to watch the parade go by" (51).

Using Marin's model, the spectator is a kind of participant whose job it is to spectate, maintaining a clear and fluctuating divide between those who watch and those who perform. The distance between spectacle and spectator may change due to the inherent flexibility of the performance—for example, action moving into the *platea*, audience members being dragged onto the stage, direct address or actor "asides" to the audience, or anachronistic references to the present time of the performance—however, this does not mean that Marin's spectator is demoted

to being less important. In fact it is the responsibility of the spectators of a parade to establish the spectacle as an event worth watching, and this accords the spectator a means of exercising a degree of power over the very event that proceeds in front of them.

The reason for this is the spectacle itself. According to Hal Foster, "in [both] the commodity and spectacle all traces of productive labor and material support are erased; they fascinate us because they exclude us, place us in the passive position of the dreamer, spectator, *consumer*" (82). The spectacle's subversive power is a function of its refusal of the "real." Just as "gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin" (Butler *Gender Trouble* 175), the spectacle erases the "dividing line between self and world. . . . [I]t likewise erases the dividing line between true and false, repressing all directly lived truth beneath the *real presence* of the falsehood maintained by the organization of appearances" (Debord 153). Applied to medieval religious drama, the spectacle enables a kind of freedom for spectators to experience the full stylistic range of the drama, by producing a complicated and multifaceted combination of familial fisticuffs, raging in the streets, and cross-dressed actors addressing fellow "women" in the audience, alongside the spiritually charged moments of the Crucifixion, the Nativity, and the Fall of Man. No one in the audience mistakes the spectacle for the real—such an idea is implausible in a production that, for instance, crucifies Christ repeatedly throughout the day, and promises no more floods over and over again—instead,

the spectacle is celebrated for the way in which it can suspend the very rules on which the "real" is predicated.

The idea of a removal from the real and its effects is not unique to post-modern theory; it can also be found in medieval writing about verisimilitude. Davidson's introduction to *A Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge* cites the condemnation expressed by Gerhoh of Reichersberg of drama performed by the monks of Augsburg circa 1161 (*Tretise* 7). Davidson points out that "the element of *game* was found particularly noxious, for Gerhoh, like the later writers responsible for *A Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge*, saw stage spectacle as presenting an illicit form of *pleasurable* experience" (8, emphasis in original). Despite the "stated purpose of the plays [in *A Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge*] to bring people around to belief and to sustain them in that belief" (14), the authors of the *Tretise*, like Gerhoh, might instead describe watching *miraclis* as "spiritually subversive, a practice that instead undermines faith and inverts the values to be found in true religion" (Davidson *Tretise* 14). However, according to Davidson, the fears shared by Gerhoh and the authors of *A Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge*, that spectacle and play might undermine faith, was not widespread in this period: "In normal circumstances . . . those who produced and watched the late medieval vernacular plays seem to have seen nothing harmful about seeing a drama as *play* or recreation, *which would not need to interfere with its devotional function*" (31, emphasis mine). Davidson feels the need to caution us, however:

> Such playing . . . needs to be understood in terms appropriate to its own time; post-modern literary theory, which has a reputation for

> distorting the past to fit current presuppositions and prejudices, will not be very helpful. *Playing* is in the vernacular plays something to be displayed—i.e., something to be seen by members of an audience, who are encouraged to engage themselves imaginatively in the scenes that are represented before their eyes. The *purpose* is in the end thus something more than mere recreation, though the recreative element is not by any means denied. (31, emphasis in original)

While Davidson is right to refuse to distort "the past to fit current presuppositions and prejudices," his general distrust of post-modern literary theory seems misplaced. If we understand the "recreative element" as that which does not exist to further directly the presumed spiritual goals of the plays, but which nonetheless does not overthrow those spiritual goals but only exists alongside them exploring different issues and goals, then parallels may be drawn between this and domestic disturbance, with its "post-modern" effects of refusing dichotomizing structures of secular/religious, actor/audience, and street/stage. The spectacle allows us to consider the possibility that medieval audiences were able to have a sophisticated engagement with the various facets of the performance because of the drama's playfulness of theatrical style.

Post-modern theories about spectacle help to describe a different way of understanding the audience's relationship to each episode, and each moment of subversion staged in front of them—audiences are called upon to define the event, to witness the story, and to call it into being, certainly; they are also called upon to

accommodate disruptions to the usual stage/audience relationship, as in the case of action on the *platea*, or to create their own disruptions to the narrative, as when audience members leave the performance space for whatever reason, and eschew their role of spectator at points throughout the day. The *platea*, the procession, and the episodic emphasis it brings with it are features of medieval religious drama that contribute to the flexibility and diversity of representation and subversion that we find in these plays. These features of the drama have sometimes encouraged interpretations that emphasize the harmonizing effect of procession, the (temporary) erasure of distinctions, and the transformation of audiences into participants; instead, these features of the York and Chester cycles delineate performer from audience, and episode from narrative, by way of these occasional and controlled incursions into the medieval here and now of the performance moment, disturbing the Christian unity of time and place in the process of staging diverse and divergent conflicts and issues. This is another form of domestic disturbance, one that shapes and defines the theatrical style of these plays.

Chapter Five

Domestic Disturbance: Summarizing a Medieval Dramatic Convention

James Paxson complains, "On the whole, the critical tradition hazily or reductively perceives medieval dramatic anachronism as monolithic" (322). As I hope to have shown in the previous chapters, there is nothing monolithic about domestic disturbance in its variety of forms, and with its variety of effects. The minor anachronistic references to Christ by Old Testament characters may not, in themselves, warrant much discussion beyond the simple fact of their existence, but they are part of a much larger convention that, if its wide application is any indication, medieval audiences expected and enjoyed. Contrary to the discomfort twentieth-century scholarship has expressed with the temporal and stylistic inconsistency these domestic disturbances introduce to the otherwise linear and pious spiritual narrative, it is evident that medieval audiences were not bothered by such incursions. Rather, the producers of the York and Chester cycles opted to employ domestic disturbance as a technique that allowed them to play out domestic conflict with some serious, if perhaps only temporary, ideological consequences for the hierarchical status quo in these plays.

This technique, which allows room for playing out domestic conflict within an otherwise tightly scripted narrative structure, is only possible because of the representational and stylistic flexibility of the performances themselves, and because of the ability and willingness of medieval audiences to engage with such flexibility. Here we come to a fundamental difference between the horizon of expectations of the majority of medieval audiences and that of some twentieth-

century scholars working on medieval drama: if we accept as historical fact that the majority of the people of York and Chester participated in the production of their respective play cycles, and did so on a frequent and perhaps annual basis, then it would be paternalistic to suggest that the "inconsistencies and gaps" that are evident could only be regarded "as a negative feature," as early scholars have done (Flanigan 44). These plays take the shape they do because that is the shape of cycle drama expected by their audiences, and audiences expect it because cycle drama is produced that way; the prevalence of domestic disturbance in these plays generally, and their very different effects in the York and Chester cycles, suggests that this is not an accidental or singular phenomenon, but rather that it has been cultivated and honed over years of repetition, revision, performance, and positive response.

When we consider the scripts of each cycle play more closely, and resist the temptation to conflate one cycle narrative with another, what becomes evident is that the producers of the cycle in each respective city were actually quite willing to revise and adapt the spiritual narrative for their domestic purposes. Work done in the last thirty years on the York cycle, prompted largely by Alexandra Johnston, Margaret Rogerson, and the 1979 publication of the relevant records in the first volume in the *Records of Early English Drama* series, illustrates that pageants were moved around, given to different guilds in different years, and even removed entirely from the cycle when they did not have the

desired effect.[89] More recent work on the Chester cycle has revealed that divisions between plays within the cycle may have been extremely flexible, particularly late in Chester's performance history when it was being performed for Protestant audiences.[90] These texts are flexible and adaptable to the political and social climate of their immediate production. These plays absolutely have a spiritual message to communicate to their audiences: the Christian narrative of Creation to Doom is at the centre of both the York and Chester cycles; however, these plays also reveal something of their own character in and through the domestic disturbances that interrupt that narrative. In Chester, it is an emphasis on hierarchy and power that begins with God, and filters down to all human relationships; this rigid power structure is met with challenges by the women who are subject to it. In York, it is a prioritizing of issues of work, trade, and familial negotiation; conflict also occurs in these plays, of course, but the resolution we find often minimizes the use of power man has over woman in order to advocate cooperation between them.

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[89] For example, "The Play of the Assumption of Our Lady" in York was performed at least twice, in 1499 and 1515-16, but no record of it appears after 1538 (*REED: Chester*, 22, 23–24). See Johnston's extensive publication record for evidence of how the archives have transformed what we know about these plays, beginning with "The York Mercers and Their Pageant of Doomsday, 1433-1526."

[90] Christopher Goodman attended a performance of the Chester cycle in 1572, and took extensive notes about what he saw to use as evidence to attempt to stop future productions. The project, Chester 2010, was a performance experiment to adapt the extant texts to accord with the 23 pageants Goodman saw. What the project participants found was that "the producers of Biblical drama treated the narrative as a continuous string that could be divided into different lengths and cut in different ways for any particular performance" ("Comparing Chester Manuscripts and Editions"), contrary to the individually-crafted plays that are found in York.

This is one the most striking features of domestic disturbance in the York and Chester cycles, that so many of the interruptions to the spiritual narrative occur in order to play out gendered conflict that otherwise would not be a priority in the story. It is also striking that, as Katie Normington remarks, "The experience of gender difference is highlighted despite the fact that a man enacted Mary's role" (67); all of the female characters were played by male actors. The mere fact of men playing women's roles is not particularly noteworthy until such cross-dressing becomes a part of the ideological conflict that ensues, which it does at certain key intervals in the cycles, such as when Mr. and Mrs. Noah engage in a physical brawl in Chester, or when (a male) Mary announces that she is pregnant and still a virgin. There may be little to say about the male actor playing Elizabeth, for example, but the representational flexibility that comes with domestic disturbance—the willingness of these plays to break from linear narratives and the unity of time and place—makes it possible for the at-times unremarkable cross-dressing of male actors to become a powerful site of ideological contestation when the action warrants.

This willingness to embrace anachronism, to imbricate the various manifestations of the domestic with the religious narrative, can be seen in the very style of these performances, as well as in their subject. Paxson reasons

> The adoption of simultaneously or synchronically staged pageants, a process that undermines the very concept of linear arrangement and thus of linear temporality, amounts to a kind of "anachronism" in the medium of histrionic presentation itself. This complex kind

> of interplay between medium, poetic form, and text, bespeaks a level of self-reflexive sophistication that goes beyond the point of ideological self-consciousness and into a realm of semiotic self-consciousness. (329)

By making room in our analysis of the plays for the episodic, processional style of performance, what might once have appeared as naïve and unconscious artistry on the part of the producers of these plays instead suggests a self-conscious and deliberate manipulation of time, space, and literary convention in order to convey the biblical story as well as the conflicts, experiences, and issues of the medieval present.

If the plays are not always about salvation, even though they often are, audiences must be given credit for being able to negotiate their relationship not only to the action (defined in the simplest sense as that which is taking place on stage), but also to the changing objectives of the text. Theories around spectacle, and its relation to play and game, are key for understanding how this occurs. Audiences are able to engage with the plays on the level of spectacle precisely because there is no expectation of unity, of linearity, or of realism, despite what modern audiences might expect. Margaret Rogerson reminds us of the need to be "conscious of the caveat often stated, but sometimes too quickly forgotten, that modern audiences are not the same as medieval ones" (Rogerson 106). Medieval audiences are faced with a narrative scope that defies the type of audience engagement modern audiences might expect from a stage play; this is an important difference in the horizons of expectations and it should not be

overlooked. Medieval audiences of the cycle drama are given the opportunity to inject themselves into the spectacle—not as actors, but as spectators enabling the spectacle that they are observing—and just as easily slipping away from a production of the Last Supper to get a bite to eat with a friend. Audiences are able to do this in part because domestic disturbance informs both the content and the style of the production.

That the York and Chester cycles spend so very much time playing with the power dynamics that exist between men and women, and between husbands and wives, is highly suggestive of the kinds of ideological struggles with which medieval audiences themselves were most engaged. It is extremely tempting to make a logical leap and conclude that this is indeed the case: medieval people in Chester and York must have been fraught with anxiety about how men and women ought to relate to each other. However, that is not the case being made here. Audiences are too diverse, and the connection between the subjects of the entertainment we watch being performed and our own lives is imprecise and often illogical: otherwise, modern entertainment would suggest that there is an epidemic of vampirism going on right now in North America, due to the huge popularity of the *Twilight* franchise, or that people are regularly doing extremely stupid and embarrassing things due to the recent spate of Judd Apatow films that continue to be extremely successful at the box office. As Twycross explains, "This in a nutshell is our problem when we attempt to study the festivities of the past. We can try to observe and understand their intentions and traditions, but we do not belong to their community. Equally we are trapped in our own traditions

and presuppositions, and unconsciously judge them accordingly" (Twycross, "Approaches" 20).

We are not only removed from the historical context, which the important archival work being done through the *Record of Early English Drama* is addressing, but we are removed from the representational context too, one that can only start to be grasped through a kind of exercise in imagination: what does this genre of drama suggest about what audiences might expect from it? A horizon of expectations does not necessarily say very much about who we *are*, but it can certainly tell us something about what we expect to see when we buy a ticket for a Broadway musical, or attend a Pride parade, or see a Nativity play in church; this expectation, in turn, helps to shape what is produced for our consumption, and both are constantly changing in response to each other. In the case of medieval drama, then, the prevalence of domestic disturbance, and the issues it brings with it, suggest that this is what medieval audiences expected to see on stage, and the satisfaction of this expectation, among many other competing and complementary expectations, is likely why these plays endured for as long as they did.

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