Doubting Mary: Early English Drama from N-Town to Shakespeare

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★ **Introduction: "That Barbarous Species of Theatrical Representation called**
MYSTERIES"[1]

 This dissertation concerns late medieval English theatrical trials of the Virgin and their

afterlife during the Renaissance,[2] focusing in particular on the N-Town plays (Cotton Vespasian

V. viii), a scribal compilation of forty-two pageants dramatizing Christian history from Creation

to Doomsday located by current scholarly consensus in late fifteenth or early sixteenth-century

East Anglia, a hub of late medieval dramatic activity.[3] It builds on recent work on the late

medieval English cult of the Virgin (by Adrienne Boyarin and Gary Waller), as well as on the

intersection of religion, gender, and sexuality in medieval English drama (by Gail Gibson and

Theresa Coletti).[4]

 Despite the many advancements made in medieval drama criticism over the past two

decades, old misconceptions die hard (Coletti *Mary Magdalene* 10-12). I would like to take this

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[1] I take this quotation from Thomas Warton, *The History of English Poetry, from the Close of the Eleventh to the Commencement of the Eighteenth Century* (London 1778). The complete quote is as follows: "The fashion of acting spiritual dramas, in which at first a due degree of method and decorum was preserved, was at length adopted from Constantinople by the Italians; who framed, in the depths of the Dark Ages, on this foundation, that barbarous species of theatrical representation called MYSTERIES, or sacred comedies" (2.368-9).
[2] Although there are many recent articles and chapters on the Virgin in medieval English drama (by Gail Gibson, Theresa Coletti, Lisa Lampert, Emma Lipton, and Merrall Price, to name a few), there have been very few scholarly monographs on the subject: see Johannes Vriend, *The Blessed Virgin Mary in the Medieval Drama of England* (J. Muusses Purmerend 1928) and Elizabeth Witt, *Contrary Marys in Medieval English and French Drama* (Peter Lang Pub Incorporated 1995). On the Virgin Mary in Renaissance English drama, see Regina Buccola and Lisa Hopkins eds, *Marian Moments in Early Modern Drama* (Ashgate 2007); Ruben Espinosa, *Masculinity and Marian Efficacy in Shakespeare's England* (Ashgate 2011); Gary Waller, *The Virgin Mary in Late Medieval and Early Modern Literature and Popular Culture* (CUP 2011).
[3] The date 1468 is written on fol. 100v of the N-Town manuscript, yet the scribe's handwriting suggests the early sixteenth century. Studies of the scribe's dialect place him in East Harling in south-central Norfolk; scholars have also argued for Norwich, Bury St Edmunds, and Thetford. See Fletcher 163-7. On N-Town's relation to East Anglian culture, see Peggy Granger, *The N-Town Play: Drama and Liturgy in Medieval East Anglia* (Brewer 2009).
[4] See Gail Gibson, *Theatre of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages* (UChicago 1989); Theresa Coletti, *Mary Magdalene and the Drama of Saints: Theater, Gender, and Religion in Late Medieval England* (UPenn 2004); Adrienne Boyarin, *Miracles of the Virgin in Medieval England: Law and Jewishness in Marian Legends* (CUP 2010); Gary Waller, *The Virgin Mary in Late Medieval and Early Modern English Literature and Popular Culture* (CUP 2011). I am also indebted to the concept of character as elucidated by Elizabeth Fowler in *Literary Character: The Human Figure in Early English Writing* (Cornell 2003).

opportunity to bust some of these pernicious and lingering myths.[5] First, contrary to popular

master narratives of the history of Western theater that understate the extent and influence of

medieval traditions,[6] "drama flourished in Western Catholic Europe for more than five hundred

years and its roots go back to the very beginnings of Christianity" (Muir *Biblical* 1). Medieval

drama is often dismissed on the grounds that it was supposedly uninfluenced by Classical

traditions, an allegation that effectively renders medieval traditions illegitimate, excluded from

the illustrious genealogy of Euripides and Shakespeare (*Norton Drama* 1.25-6). Yet scholarship

long ago established firm links between medieval and Classical as well as between Renaissance

and medieval theatrical traditions.[7] (As is often pointed out, Shakespeare probably saw the

Coventry cycle.[8]) Furthermore, macro-histories tend to argue that before the Reformation, the

deep anti-theatricality of the Catholic Church suppressed "organized dramatic activity" (*Norton

Drama* 1.26). Yet while scholars debate whether medieval drama existed in spite or because of

Christianity (to borrow a phrase from E.K. Chambers), myriad dramatic texts and extensive

records of performance prove the existence of an extremely popular and profoundly Christian

late medieval English theatrical tradition, tolerated (at the very least) by the Church (1.16).

Next, contrary to the notion that the medieval Church kept the Bible from the laity by

banning its translation and dissemination, late medieval Biblical drama promulgated vernacular

scripture in public thoroughfares all over "France and Germany, Italy, England, and the Low

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[5] I have used the *Norton Anthology of Drama* (2009) and Greenblatt's *Will in the World* (2004) and *The Swerve* (2011) as maps of the current contours of these old misapprehensions.

[6] Infamously, the nineteenth-century German Romantic August Wilhelm von Schlegel wrote that "no drama was to be found in all Europe during the Middle Ages" (Rozik 90).

[7] On the influence of the Classics on medieval drama, see E.K. Chambers, *Medieval Drama*, 1.25-40 and Rozik 90-128. See also Hunningher, Boggess, and Forse. On the influence of medieval English drama on Renaissance English drama, see Emrys Jones, O'Connell, and Perry and Watkins.

[8] Greenblatt describes this in *Will in the World*: "In late May or June, in the time of long, sweetly lingering twilights, [he] could have seen one of the great annual Corpus Christi pageants" (37). The tyrant Herod seems to have made an especially big impression on Shakespeare: Hamlet complains about actors who out-Herod Herod and Falstaff mocks a bombast by calling him "Herod of Jewry" (2.1.19-21).

Countries" with impunity (Muir *Biblical* 6). Entire communities performed living Bibles made

by the laity for the laity.[9] For this reason, E.K. Chambers describes medieval Biblical drama as

"an essentially popular thing, a *ludus* maintained by the people for its own inexhaustible wonder

and delight" (Chambers 2.147). Biblical drama not only demonstrates the laity's familiarity with

Scripture but also their creativity. Adapting the Bible to local political urgencies, the York and

N-Town plays depict Jesus as a Lollard heretic and his persecutors as bishops.[10] (While the

Wakefield plays, on the other hand, make the opposite choice, depicting devils in Hell as

Lollards [XXX.211-4].) Respecting the close ties between Biblical drama and the Bible, I refer

to New Testament criticism throughout this dissertation, especially to the work of Ulrich Luz,

François Bovon, Bart Ehrman, and (most of all) Jane Schaberg.[11]

Biblical drama stages sophisticated theological controversies, inviting its audience to

grapple with the trickiest knots in Christian intellectual history—especially, as I will go on to

argue, the problem of the virgin birth. Drama brings the medieval university into the

marketplace, encouraging its spectators to wrestle with Augustine on original sin and Duns

Scotus on the Immaculate Conception—and to grapple with heretical and heathen contenders

like Marcion (Tertullian's polemical opponent), Celsus (Origen's), and Jovinian (Jerome's).

Drama weighs in on these debates, adapting and altering theology according to its own needs and

desires. Scholars have found that the York cycle, for example, promulgates a vernacular theology

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[9] Scholars continue to debate the extent of clerical involvement in the making of religious drama. Tydeman summarizes the critical consensus on this matter: "That the anonymous dramatists were clerks in at least minor orders has for a long time been regarded as virtually axiomatic…But…documentary support for clerical involvement in the cycles, as either authors or participants, has so far not been forthcoming…in our present state of knowledge, the most likely creators of the sequences appear to be the laity" ("Introduction" 25-6).

[10] See Nisse "Staged Interpretations" 427-52. For more readings of local political critiques made by Biblical drama, see Beckwith, *Signifying* 42-58.

[11] See Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7: A Commentary* (Fortress 2007); François Bovon, *Luke 1: A Commentary* (Fortress 2002), Bart Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (OUP 2004); Jane Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus* (Sheffield 2006).

that blends Incarnational devotion, affective piety, and Lollardy.[12] And I will argue (building on the work of Gail Gibson and Theresa Coletti) that N-Town takes up and manipulates the Marian theology of English theologians like Anselm of Canterbury, Eadmer of Canterbury, and Aelred of Rievaulx (in opposition to Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Aquinas) in order to sanctify the body, sexual deviance, and art (especially theater). My discussion of sexuality depends upon the work of Peter Brown on early Christian culture and Jacquart and Thomasset on medieval medicine.[13]

The narrative that newfound intellectual freedom gave birth to Renaissance drama implies that some oppressive force (presumably the Catholic Church, or perhaps primitivism more abstractly) imposed Christian theater on late medieval playwrights and audiences.[14] (Implying that although medievals suffered through moralities, miracles, and Corpus Christi pageants, they secretly yearned for secular plays with Classical themes.) Thus, when Burbage opened the doors of the Theater in 1576 (literally on top of the foundations of a dissolved priory), he freed the genius of Classic drama from the shackles of the Dark Ages.

This is very a motivated (and even polemical) narration of the historical shift in theatrical practice that occurred over the course of the sixteenth century. First, our extant texts of late medieval English drama are predominately but by no means exclusively religious; secular medieval plays with Classical themes certainly exist (like, for example, Medwall's fourteenth-century *Fulgens and Lucrece*).[15] Second, contrary to the association of medieval drama with oppression and Renaissance drama with freedom, sixteenth-century ordinances censored and

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[12] See Coletti *Mary Magdalene* 4-8, 127, and 191 and Nisse *Defining* 5-8.

[13] See Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (Columbia 2008) and Jacquart and Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine In the Middle Ages* (Polity 1988).

[14] As William John Birch put it in 1848, "Shakespeare was foremost in leading the triumph over the old order of things" (12). As Greenblatt puts it in *Will in the World*, Shakespeare "lifted" "the heavy weight of moral instruction" and "piety" from medieval drama to create his new and improved Renaissance style (34-5).

[15] For an overview of medieval English secular drama, see Tydeman "Introduction" 9-17; see also Loomis and Pendelton.

suppressed miracles and Corpus Christi plays. In other words, Renaissance laws forbade medieval drama. While theater historians debate whether or to what extent popular consensus accepted or resented these laws, no one denies the fact that, in 1576, the Dean of York commanded that "no pageant be used or set forth wherein the majesty of God the father, God the son, or God the holy ghost…be counterfeited or represented" (Groves 55). This ordinance (and others like it) undermines the narrative that Renaissance playwrights turned away from Christian to secular themes because they were putting away childish medieval things and becoming modern men. Perhaps they turned away because Christian themes became too hot to handle.

It is often assumed that medieval drama's religiosity makes it incapable of being questioning, revolutionary, or subversive.[16] Milton's Biblical *Paradise Lost* is universally applauded for soaring above the Aonian mount to pursue things (supposedly) unattempted yet in prose or rhyme. Yet medieval Biblical drama attempted (and accomplished) these very things on the public stage, where Milton feared to tread. A theatrical version of *Paradise Lost* could never have been performed at the Red Bull during the English Renaissance, but its equivalent occurred as regularly as clockwork in the Middle Ages. Once a year, Chester's Satan usurped God's throne (1.197-204) and Wakefield's Mak and Gil lampooned the Virgin Birth (XIII.287-637). As Lynette Muir argues, the "freedom of thought and personal interpretation" afforded to Christians by medieval Biblical drama "could not survive the religious upheavals of the sixteenth century" (Muir *Biblical* 9).

In this dissertation, I will argue that perhaps more than any other medieval dramatic text, the N-Town Play takes enormous liberties with its sacred source material—not only in its

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[16] For example, William Tydeman writes, "It was the function of drama in the Middle Ages…to demonstrate a predetermined theosophy…For this reason medieval drama is predominantly celebratory and confirmatory rather than questioning or revolutionary: the status quo is more often upheld and justified rather than challenged or subverted" (*English* 8-9). Coletti agrees that these assumptions "until recently have held sway in early drama studies" (*Mary Magdalene* 11).

embrace of apocryphal and anachronistic content but also in its bold irreverence. I attribute N-Town's creative audacity to its intimate relationship with the Virgin Mary, its star and patron.[17] As I explain at length in Chapter 1, the late medieval cult of the Madonna of Mercy afforded massive benefits to its devotees: Mary protected her favorites (artists, criminals, and lovers) from the wrath of God, affording them enormous freedoms. N-Town, under Mary's protection, ranges freely within the zodiac of its own wit.

★ **The Late Medieval English Cult of the Virgin**

The N-Town manuscript comes from a time and place of intense Marian devotion.[18] The cult of Mary dominated late medieval culture, especially in England ("the dower of the Virgin," as Lydgate put it) and even more so in East Anglia ("England's Nazareth," home to the extremely popular Marian shrine at Walsingham) (Gibson *Theatre* 138).[19] In the twelfth century, English theologians (Anselm of Canterbury, Eadmer of Canterbury, and Aelred of Rievaulx) elevated Mary the status of the Trinity, claiming her immaculate sinlessness, her power to save souls, and her contribution to creation and redemption (Gibson *Theatre* 139; Boyarin 1-4). Several centuries later, it was again English theologians (William of Ware and Duns Scotus) who laid the groundwork for papal acceptance of their countrymen's theory of Mary's Immaculate Conception (Graef 299-302). England's besotted adoration of the Virgin provoked the Continental theologian Peter of Celle (an opponent of the theory of the Immaculate Conception) to wonder if the soggy climate had not addled their wits:

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[17] Indeed, Hardin Craig argues that the N-Town plays were not a Corpus Christi cycle but rather a Saint Anne's Day cycle (79, 119).

[18] For overviews of Mariology, see Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (Yale 2009) and Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (OUP 1976).

[19] Gibson writes, "The Marian fervor that we associate today with Italy or Spain…was in the Middle Ages of English renown" (*Theatre* 138). Boyarin concurs, arguing that "England influenced Continental devotional practice, rather than the other way around" when it came to Mary (2). Of the shrine at Walsingham, Gibson writes that it "had become by the fifteenth century not only the most important pilgrimage site in England but an international center of pilgrimage whose importance was probably rivaled only by Santiago de Compostela in Spain and by Rome itself" (*Theatre* 139). See also James and Waller.

England is an island surrounded by water, hence her inhabitants are understandably

affected by the property of this element and are often led to add and unfounded fancies,

comparing their dreams with visions…For the humid brain is more quickly affected by

the fumes of the stomach, and depicts certain images of its own which…have no relation

to the truth and are called phantasms or dreams. (Graef 252-3)

Peter of Celle could not fathom any other explanation for "English levity," the phrase he used to

describe the enthusiasm of England's faith in Mariology, a system of legends almost entirely

based on Apocrypha rather than "the authority of Scripture" (Graef 252).

They had to be: the canonical Gospels rarely mention Mary.[20] All told, she speaks on

only four occasions in the canonical gospels: the Annunciation (Luke 1.34 and 1.38), the

Magnificat (Luke 1.46-55), the Finding in the Temple (Luke 2.48), and at the Wedding at Cana

(John 2.3 and 2.5).[21] Mark (the earliest Gospel) mentions Mary only twice and both times her

presence serves to demonstrate her unimportance. In Mark 3, for example, Mary's arrival

interrupts Jesus' preaching. In retaliation, Jesus publicly undercuts her. He asks, "Who is my

mother?" and answers, "whosoever shal doe the wil of God" (Mark 3.31-5).[22] In other words, the

carnal bond of motherhood means nothing in comparison to the importance of the spiritual bond

of Christian community.

But the centuries—and especially the Middle Ages—lacquered layers and layers of

legend around these narrative grains of sand. By the late fifteenth century, the mythology of

Mary had spun stories about every event from the birth of her mother (Saint Anne) to her myriad

post-mortem adventures in late medieval Europe as a mighty (and micromanaging) saint. N-

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[20] Luke mentions her twelve times (1.27, 30, 34, 38, 39, 41, 46, 56), Matthew five (1.16, 18, 20; 2.11; 13.55), Mark twice (3.31; 6.3), and John twice (2.1-12; 19.25-6).

[21] Until the third chapter, all Biblical quotes in English will be taken from the Rheims Douai Bible (1582-1610).

[22] In the second incident, Mary's name and her relation to Jesus are used to embarrass him: a heckler dismisses him as "the son of Mary" (Mark 6.3).

Town draws on this rich source material to produce more Marian pageants than any other English dramatic text. While other English Biblical cycles (York, Chester, Wakefield) introduce Mary at Gabriel's annunciation of the birth of Jesus (expanding on Luke 1.26-39), N-Town precedes the Annunciation with three Marian pageants (each unique in the English tradition) detailing her story from the annunciation of her conception through her childhood and adolescence. N-Town also contains the only extant dramatization of the legend of the Trial of Mary and Joseph from all of medieval Europe (Sugano 379). Furthermore, N-Town is the only extant cultural artifact in which Jesus appears first to his mother after his Resurrection (35.73-136). In the canonical Gospels, the Virgin is not even present at the Discovery at the Tomb.

Shrines called "cupboard Madonnas" or "vierge ouvrantes" proliferated across Europe ("from Portugal to Poland, and as far north as…Sweden"): statues of Mary that opened up to reveal, inside her womb, a tiny Trinity (Newman 269).[23] Like these statues, N-Town contains its dramatization of the Life of Jesus inside a Marian frame, beginning the New Testament with Mary's Annunciation (and not Jesus') and ending with Mary's Assumption and Coronation (rather than Jesus' Ascension). N-Town not only expands Mary's role, it also changes the power dynamics between her and her son. In the canonical Scriptures, Jesus repeatedly rebukes Mary for interfering with his divine mission. In one such moment in the Gospel of Luke, Mary finally finds twelve-year-old Jesus in the Temple and says, "Sonne, why hast thou so done to us? behold thy father and I sorowing did seeke thee" (2.48). Jesus answers, "What is it that you sought me? did you not know, that I must be about those things, which are my father's?" (Luke 2.48-9). In N-Town, this back talk does not stand. Mary scolds Jesus:

Youre Faderys wyl must nedys be wrought.

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[23] Newman points out that "late medieval images of God without the Virgin are in fact quite rare" (*God* 247). See also Verdon and Ross 47-52.

> It is most wurthy that it so be,
>
> Yitt on youre modyr have ye sum thought
>
> And be nevyrmore so longe fro me! (21.265-268)

In a 180-degree reversal of Biblical precedent, N-Town's Jesus responds to his mother's rebuke with humble obedience. He *apologizes*:

> Now for to plese my modyr mylde,
>
> I shal yow folwe with obedyence.
>
> I am youre sone and subjecte childe
>
> And owe to do yow hygh reverence. (21.273-6)

N-Town's Jesus bows to the carnal power of maternity, demonstrating the extent to which late medieval Incarnational theology respected the sanctity of redeemed flesh.[24] According to the logic of this Incarnational theology, as we see from this moment in N-Town, Mary can even trump God the Father.

The Protestant Reformation soon put a stop to Mary's reign.[25] Reformers used the evidence of Biblical moments like Luke 2.49 to disprove the theory of Mary's Immaculate Conception, the linchpin of her medieval powers. To the iconoclast Hugh Latimer, the questions Mary asked of Jesus in the Gospels, like her question at Luke 2.48 ("Sonne, why hast thou so done to us?"), "had a smell of ambition" that proved her sinfulness, exposing Catholicism's veneration of Mary as idolatry (*Sermons* 117). One can only imagine Latimer's horror had he

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[24] I am deeply indebted to Leo Steinberg, Barbara Newman, and Bruce Holsinger's work on late medieval Incarnational theology. See Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* (UChicago 1996); Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine* (UCal 1997) and *God and the Goddesses: Vision, Poetry, and Belief in the Middle Ages* (UPenn 2003); Bruce Holsinger, *Music, Body, and Desire in Medieval Culture: Hildegard of Bingen to Chaucer* (Stanford 2001).
[25] See Peters and Kreitzer.

ever been exposed to the aroma of the N-Town manuscript, in which all the highest ambitions of Mariology were so fully realized.

★ **Critical History**

Yet despite the zeal of N-Town's Marian devotion, the N-Town plays are infamous for their shockingly disrespectful treatment of the Virgin. And with good reason. N-Town subjects the Virgin to a seemingly endless sequence of accusations of whoredom, trials of chastity, and threats of violence. Detractors accuse Mary of being a "scowte," "quene," and "bold bysmare" (14.182, 41.392, 14.298). Her virginity is tested by means of an onstage post-partum gynecological exam and a potentially lethal ordeal involving magical poison. She is threatened with mutilation (14.188-193), death by stoning (12.95-7), and fire (41.84). In 1950, A.P. Rossiter (a follower of E.K. Chambers) described the tone of N-Town's Marian pageants as that of

> […] the tragical farce of the servant-girl who has slipped up, and who is bullied and
> nagged with every shaming comment and indecent inquisition. For all this, the whole is
> *not* made coarse and absurd: the pathos of the girl's plight is felt, and indignation, with a
> kind of fear, is evoked by the busy slanderers with their leering eyes and prurient
> tongues. Yet they are funny. (71)

Rossiter communicates a heady mix of feelings: Mary's plight moves him, sparks his indignation, and frightens him—and yet he also finds her detractors' threats and insults funny. This is the classic response provoked by a medieval phenomenon that has been given many names: the profane (Durkheim and Mircea Eliade), *sermo humilis* (Auerbach), the carnivalesque (Bakhtin), the Gothic (Huizinga and Michael Camille).[26] My dissertation focuses on N-Town's expressions of this phenomenon—shocking moments that have been flummoxing readers and spectators for centuries.

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[26] For an overview, see Epstein and Robins 3-29.

Even in the fifteenth century, these moments ruffled feathers.[27] A fascinating entry from the York memorandum book for 1431-2 contains a complaint from the Goldsmith guild about a play that they refer to as the "pageant in which Fergus was beaten," meaning the episode of Mary's Funeral.[28] (Fergus is a name often given to one of the villainous Jews who attacks Mary's funerary bier with the intention of humiliating and destroying her corpse.) Though York's play of Mary's funeral is not extant, N-Town's is, and it provides a clear picture of the Goldsmiths' problem. It is an especially violent and obscene pageant. The villainous Jews call Mary all manner of dirty names— "that bychyd body" (41.396), "that fise," meaning fart (41.83)—and threaten to "don her all the dispith [they] can here devise" (41.85). In response, God doles out N-Town's most spectacular punishment: death by dismemberment (41.476). So, the Goldsmiths complain:

> [...] the Masons of this city have been accustomed to murmur among themselves about their pageant in the Corpus Christi play in which Fergus was beaten. The subject of this pageant is not contained in the sacred scripture and used to produce more noise and laughter than devotion. And whenever quarrels, disagreements, and fights used to arise among the people from this, they have rarely or never been able to produce their pageant and to play in daylight as the preceding pageants do. Therefore, these Masons have been striving with great need to be relieved from this pageant of theirs and assigned to another which is in harmony with sacred scripture, and which they will be able to produce and play in daylight" (*REED York* 732).

In short, the Goldsmiths claim that the pageant of Mary's funeral provokes disorder, specifically laughter and fisticuffs. The audience response they describe perhaps demonstrates the pageant's

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[27] And earlier: see Chambers 2.99.
[28] See Evans "When a Body Meets a Body" 193-212.

popularity; it recalls early modern descriptions of raucously enthusiastic crowds at the theater.[29]

That aside, the Goldsmiths do *not* appreciate the crowd's wild reaction and blame it on the

pageant's basis in apocrypha rather than the canonical Gospels. In other words, the Goldsmiths

suggest that the pageant's blatant apocryphal illegitimacy causes or encourages the audience's

unruliness.

After the Protestant Reformation, English consensus began to share the Goldsmiths'

suspicion that apocryphal drama caused disorder. Indeed, it became common to perceive Biblical

drama as inherently apocryphal and illegitimate. The sixteenth-century jest book *A Hundred*

Merry Tales tells the story of an incompetent preacher who added at the end of his sermon: "Yf

you beleue not me, then for a more suerte & suffycyent acutoryte, go your way to couentry, and

there ye shall se them all played in corpus cristi playe" (100).[30] The joke is that this preacher

mistakes Biblical drama for the Bible: he believes in the ultimate authority of the illegitimate

Coventry Corpus Christi play. This anecdote critiques the Catholic pedagogical strategy of

attempting to indoctrinate the laity with a false, theatrical Bible instead of the true and naked

text. It accuses the Catholic clergy of leading their flocks far astray by directing them towards

the *locus* and *platea*.

Another revealing post-Reformation anecdote reaffirms these concerns about Biblical

drama. In 1644, John Shaw catechized an old man who barely recognized the name Jesus Christ.

Shaw reports that when he mentioned Jesus, the old man said, "I think I heard of that man you

speake of, once in a play at Kendall, called Corpus Christi play, where there was a man on a tree,

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[29] Shakespeare's *The Famous History of the Life of King Henry VIII* describes Londoner spectators:
    Thefe are the youths that thunder at a Playhoufe,
    and fight for bitten Apples, that no Audience but the
    tribulation of Tower Hill, or the Limbes of Limehouse,
    their deare Brothers are able to endure. (5.3.55-8)
[30] See Groves 37.

& blood ran downe" (*REED Cumberland* 219).[31] Shaw narrates this anecdote as evidence that medieval Catholic methods of indoctrination had been so incompetent that they failed to properly convert the English population from paganism. Shaw emphasizes that the old man only remembers what he saw ("a man on a tree," "blood"); he has no recollection of any sacred words. In other words, Shaw accuses Biblical drama of replacing the Word with an idol.

This polemical narrative became official literary historiography by means of the extremely influential *History of English Poetry*, *from the Close of the Eleventh to the Commencement of the Eighteenth Century* written by Thomas Warton and first published in 1778. In it, Warton penned a damning account of medieval Biblical drama (which he refers to as mysteries):

> To thofe who are accuftomed to contemplate the great picture of human follies, which the unpolished ages of Europe hold up to our view, it will not appear furprifing, that the people, who were forbidden to read the events of the facred hiftory in the bible, in which they were faithfully and beautifully related, fhould at the fame time be permitted to fee them reprefented on the ftage, difgraced with the groffest improprieties, corrupted with inventions and additions of the moft ridiculous kind, fullied with impurities, and expreffed in the language and gefticulations of the lowest farce. (2.373-4)

It astonishes Warton to conceive of the perversity (the folly, as he puts it) of the Catholic Church's choice to forbid the real Bible (the source of truth and order) and yet allow the mysteries. He accuses the mysteries of the crimes of theatricality (of representing events on the stage, as he says), creativity (inventing and adding), and low-down obscenity. And yet whereas sixteenth and seventeenth-century reformers tended to blame the Bible-hoarding clergy for the existence of apocryphal drama, Warton focuses blame on the savage laity. He argues that the

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[31] See Groves 35.

clergy tried and failed to eradicate heathen drama (which, they noticed, "made the people less religious") and then, in their desperation, joined forces with it in a last-ditch attempt to save the peoples' souls (367). Though he concludes that their combination of Catholicism and pagan theatrics created a monster even "more capricious and absurd" than heathen drama (373), he grudgingly praises the mysteries for "soften[ing] the manners of the people" by weaning them off chivalric tournaments (the medieval equivalents of blood-soaked Roman arenas, as he sees it) (209).[32] Warton's values and assumptions haunted medieval drama criticism for quite some time. Until quite recently, scholars continued to justify Biblical drama as a top-down didactic enterprise limited by the simplicity of its audience.[33]

Warton's excoriation of the mysteries piqued the interest of Lord Byron (Steffan 295). In his preface to *Cain: A Mystery*, Byron writes,

> The following scenes are entitled A Mystery, in conformity with the ancient title annexed to dramas upon similar subjects, which were styled Mysteries or Moralities. 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 productions, whether in English, French, Italian, or Spanish. (v)

Seeking to embarrass and baffle his Christian critics, Byron playfully excuses his atheist manifesto by arguing that its blasphemy pales in comparison to the more liberal profanations of medieval religious drama.[34] While *his* high-toned blasphemy stems from Classical and

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[32] Warton assumes that had the clergy given the laity access to the Bible, none of this would have been necessary. Yet, overall, he tends to emphasize the culpability of the people in his framing of the problem.

[33] For example, the *Cambridge Companion to Early English Theater* (CUP 1994) makes the following introductory remarks about medieval religious drama: "The plays' shared evangelizing purposes should never be ignored: their authors' primary business was to instruct the populace in those truths essential to their salvation by rendering them accessible" (18). The newer *Cambridge Introduction to Early English Theater* (CUP 2006) makes no such assumptions.

[34] Making a similar but far bolder move, Matthew Lewis justified *The Monk* with the excuse that its obscenity paled in comparison to the Bible's, of which he writes: "the annals of a Brothel would scarcely furnish a greater choice of

Enlightened philosophy, Byron reminds his Christian critics that *their* team defiled the Bible with heathenism of a much less respectable pedigree. Byron laughs at Christianity for having unwittingly set a self-defeating precedent: the case of medieval Biblical drama, he argues, gives all subsequent playwrights equally liberal access to scripture, an opportunity of which he merely takes advantage.

Byron criticism tends to argue that *Cain*'s "only conformity to the old Mystery plays was Byron's title" (Steffan 295).[35] Yet Byron selected a medieval pageant marked by its irreverence. When God chastises Cain in the Wakefield cycle, Cain talks back: "Whi, who is that hob-ouer-the-wall?" (2.297). Wakefield's Cain exposes the theatricality of God, identifying him as a mere actor piping up from behind a thin partition. Furthermore, he calls God a "hob" (meaning hobgoblin), using the ancient and powerful polemical technique of embarrassing deities by comparing them to their rivals and predecessors, thus exposing the resemblances between them (*MED*). Cain does not seem to care one bit that God has condemned him for all eternity. As Kristina Simeonova notes, "Spiritual damnation, held by religious dogma to be the utmost terror for any Christian, is rendered laughable" (75). Byron's characterization of medieval Biblical drama as liberal and profane is not inaccurate.

In the academic Renaissance of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century, scholars inspired by James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* approached medieval drama as "scientific anthropologist[s]" (Chambers 1.94). E.K. Chambers argued that aspects of late medieval religious drama ("the rude humor of the folk, with its love of farce and realism") derived from

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indecent expressions" (186). Chaucer used a similar excuse for *The Canterbury Tales*: "Crist spake hymself ful brode in holy writ / And wel ye woot no vileynye is it" (*GP* 739-40).

[35] Steffan goes on to explain the "major differences of purpose and conception between the primitive Mysteries and Byron's psychological drama," the most important of which is that "Byron's sensitive, affectionate, and aspiring murderer does not belong in the company of these crude peasants" (299).

more "primitive" folk customs (2.147), which in turn derived from pagan rituals. He found this

genealogy most clearly evident in the figure of the devil:

> For your horned and blackened devil is the same personage, the same vague tradition of
>
> the ancient heathen festival about him, whether he riots it through the cathedral aisles in
>
> the Feast of Fools, or hales the Fathers to limbo and harries the forward spectators in the
>
> marketplace of Beverly or Wakefield (2.148).[36]

Thus, Chambers agrees with Warton's diagnostic of medieval drama's comic irreverence as

symptomatic of heathenism (Warton 373). Like Warton, Chambers argues that the Christianity of

the Middle Ages was "but skin deep" (1.95). Echoing sixteenth-century reformers, Chambers

exposes the pagan fertility goddess (or idols, as reformers put it) lying just under the surface of

medieval images of Virgin Mary (1.98, 1.109). Yet while the discovery of thinly veiled

heathenism offended Warton, Chambers finds it "delightful" (1.391).[37]

Today, Chambers stands as a "monument to incorrect thinking" in medieval drama

criticism (Parker "Who's Afraid?" 7). One of the many ways that Chambers erred, according to

later generations of scholars, was by assuming the irreverence of the makers, texts,

performances, and consumers of medieval drama. (Another of his errors, and perhaps the most

damning, was his own irreverence [Parker 17].) In the mid-twentieth century, V.A. Kolve

countered Chambers' (and Rossiters') representation of drama's "unholy zest" and "zest for

unholiness" (Rossiter 73). In an attempt to bring medieval drama into the (literary-canonical and

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[36] Hired to adapt Chambers' monograph on medieval drama for a popular audience, A. P. Rossiter rewrote
Chambers' "vague tradition of the ancient heathen festival" as a vivid, elaborate spectacle of "the drunken orgy of
the bacchanal or the sexual orgy of the primitive fertility cult" where gods and men engaged in "the frenzies of
intoxication or of animal lust" (15). For more on Rossiter, see Brooks 451.
[37] By contrast, Rossiter excuses medievals for "cling[ing] stupidly to the old magical rituals and be[ing] of the
devils' party" by arguing that "it was only natural for mere men" to do so (33).

Robertsonian) fold, Kolve insisted on its piety. Though Kolve argued that drama was the "*locus classicus*" of "laughter in a medieval religious context," he contained laughter inside strict limits:

> Here we need only notice that never in these plays is one invited to laugh at God the
> Father, Christ, or the Virgin. They move in a mimetic world which includes the comic,
> the violent, the noisy, the grotesque, but though that world acts upon them, it never really
> touches their characters. They were reverently conceived and have about them a sanctity
> that defies circumstance. (138-9)[38]

Kolve attempts to resolve the tension between the sacred and profane within a "fully Christian point of view" (140). In order to accomplish this, he must insist that drama does not laugh *at* but rather *with* Christianity. He argues that it laughs only *at* the damned (140). Chambers, Rossiter, Byron, and Warton interpreted medieval drama as an agent loyal to heathenism and opposed to Christianity. Kolve, by contrast, understood drama as the agent of God's judgment and heard its laughter as the laughter of a devil dragging a sinner to hell (141). Kolve's reading has proven very influential. Since the 1960's, consensus in medieval drama criticism has maintained that God gets "the last laugh"—and, thanks to eschatological allegory, every laugh (Bevington 240).

Rather than following Chambers by interpreting medieval drama's irreverence as heathenism (which is taken to be essentially distinct from purely pious Christianity) or following Kolve by reductively resolving irreverence into obediently orthodox devotion, this dissertation follows the recent work of John Parker, Steven Justice, and Noah Guynn by taking experimental

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[38] Kolve insists that he has put aside "purely modern notions of religious decorum" (124); furthermore, he specifies, "In saying that laughter is carefully controlled in the Corpus Christi drama, I do not mean to imply a polite, sophisticated amusement" (139).

approaches to the problem of medieval drama's "two ways of one mind," as Rossiter put it (71).[39]

The first chapter concerns the Virgin Mary's sexuality in the N-Town Plays, focusing on allegations of her adultery. In this chapter, I demonstrate that rather than merely rebounding off Mary to discredit her detractors, slanderous accusations of her sexual crimes resonate with positive aesthetic and theological significance. When N-Town uses pantomimes, metaphors, exegetical comparisons, and dirty jokes to represent Mary as a guilty fabliau adulteress in a divine comedy (dallying with the Trinity, angels, and mankind in kaleidoscopic combinations), this is not necessarily or exclusively insulting. Mary's promiscuity symbolizes her marriage to the Trinity, her redemption of Eve, her supersession (or cuckolding) of Judaism, and her advocacy for indiscriminate mercy. Furthermore, N-Town spins the possibility of Mary's adultery as *euangélion* (glad tidings, good news), celebrating the virgin birth not only as a sexless union but also as God's miraculous metamorphosis of evident guilt into perfect innocence—and Mary's exceptional sinlessness not only as abstinence but also as license.

After establishing the complexity of Mary's sexuality in the first chapter, I pursue the ritual function of her trials in the second, arguing that medieval drama invites the audience to doubt and abuse her. N-Town glosses its obscene and violent harassment of the Virgin as a festival of proof endorsed by God, who rewards the repentant audience with blessings and festivities. Although the Pope outlawed the ritual humiliation of saints in the thirteenth century, the practice of attacking sacred images to elicit miracles seems to have flourished in religious theater, most notably in the Marian miracles of the Cornish *Beunans Meriasek* and the N-Town

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[39] See John Parker, *The Aesthetics of Antichrist: From Christian Drama to Christopher Marlowe* (Cornell University Press 2007); Steven Justice, "Did the Middle Ages Believe in their Miracles?" *Representations* 103 (2008), 1-29 and "Eucharistic Miracle and Eucharistic Doubt," *JMEMS* 42.2 (2012), 307-332; Noah Guynn, "Sacrament and Scatology: Penitential Humor in André de La Vigne's *Le meunier dont le diable emporte l'âme en enfer* (1496)," The University of Virginia, Medieval Colloquium, February 22, 2013, Lecture.

manuscript. Finally, by comparing theatrical scenes of ritual humiliation to heretical spectacles of iconoclasm staged by Lollards, I demonstrate that the two resemble each other so closely that they can be difficult to distinguish.

Pushing this strange resemblance between opposites further, my final chapter follows the history of English theater through the sixteenth century and the seismic upheaval of the Protestant Reformation, which ostensibly banished the Virgin from England and the English stage. Recent restorations of the presence of the Virgin to Shakespeare's work have argued that he salvaged her miraculous wholeness and bequeathed it to modern theater, thereafter imbued with the magic of medieval faith. I contest the implication that the medieval Virgin lacked the supposedly modern quality of fractured, ambiguous complexity. In *1 Henry VI*, Shakespeare echoes this confusion in his contradictory representation of Joan of Arc as saint and witch, virgin and whore. When pregnant Joan claims virginity and sainthood against all evidence and in the face of violent threats and obscene mockery, she repeats dialog from medieval Marian pageantry. Furthermore, I argue that Protestant iconoclasts restaged medieval theatrical practices when they attacked Catholic miracles.

For the chief engineers of the construct of the Renaissance (Michelet, Burckhardt, Weber), history steadily marched away from the superstitious Dark Ages and towards the promise of a secular future (Brotton 9-10).[40] Looking back from a post-secular perspective,[41] I challenge the received idea that the Reformation demystified medieval enchantment. Yet while recent post-secular interventions in pre-modern literature have emphasized the survival of

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[40] Arguably, Jules Michelet (who coined the term "Renaissance") originated the modern notion of the period's secularity. Many other influential maintainers of the Renaissance construct have agreed, from Max Weber to Greenblatt. For critiques of this narrative, see Butterfield and Aers.

[41] For more on post-secularism, see Habermas, Charls Taylor, and Smith, Whistler, and Anderson.

Catholic faith after the Reformation, my project foregrounds the existence and lasting influence of medieval doubt.

Chapter 1: The Virgin Whore

★ **Introduction: Ave Eva**

In N-Town's "Fall of Man," the serpent—described as "a werm with an aungelys face"

(2.220)—tempts Eve to eat an apple from the "tre of cunnyng" and become God's equal:

Of this appyl — yf ye wyl byte —

Evyn as God is, so shal ye be!

Wys of connyng — as I yow plyte —

Lyke onto God in al degré!

Sunne and mone and sterrys bryth,

Fysch and foule, bothe sond and se,

At your byddyng bothe day and nyth:

Allthynge shal be in yowre powsté.

Ye shal be Goddys pere! (2.100-108)

Taking the serpent for a "fayr aungell," Eve listens.[42] Motivated by her desire to become God's

"felaw in kunnyng" (2.114) and his "pere of myth" (2.121), she disobeys God's injunction and

takes a bite of the forbidden fruit.[43] In retaliation, God curses "Womman" to bear her children

with "gret gronynge, / in daungere and in deth dredynge" (2.256-7) and to serve man as his

"undyrlyng" (2.253-4).

Yet hope is not lost. In the second century, Justin Martyr penned the first (extant)

argument that Mary was a second Eve just as Jesus was a second Adam: he argued that while the

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[42] This closely follows the Vulgate's Genesis: the serpent promises Eve that eating from the forbidden tree of knowledge of good and evil ("*lignum…scientiæ boni et mali*" 2.9) will not kill her, as God said it would, but will rather give her and Adam knowledge of good and evil, making them like gods ("*et eritis sicut dii, scientes bonum et malum*" 3.5). For an overview of commentary on the Hebrew, see Kvam, Schearing, and Ziegler 22-40. For more on Christian interpretations of Genesis, see 108-116 and 225-6.

[43] For medieval English commentary on Eve's sin of pride, see Flood and Peters 133.

virgin Eve "conceived the word of the serpent, and brought forth disobedience and death," the Virgin Mary obediently conceived the Word and freed mankind from death (305). This exegetical comparison saturates the medieval cultural imagination (Gambero 38-9; Warner 50-67). Medieval artists paint and carve Mary and Eve as mirror images: for example, in a fifteenth-century *Biblia Pauperum* held in the British Library, an image of Eve, the forbidden fruit, and the serpent reflects a mirror image of the archangel Gabriel, a chaste lily, and Mary.[44] Making a similar gesture, N-Town's play of the Annunciation reflects the letters in Eve's name to spell out letters that signify Mary: when Gabriel first salutes the Virgin, he says, "Here, this name *Eva* is turnyd *Ave*" (11.219), a beloved medieval anagram. In Luke 1.28 in the Vulgate, Gabriel's first word to Mary is "Ave" (or "Hail"), which, reversed, spells "Eva."[45]

Just as the letters of "Ave" reverse the letters of "Eva," N-Town's Mary reverses Eve. The Prophet "Mycheas" (Micah) foretells that "evyn lyke as Eve modyr of wo was, / so shal a maydyn be modyr of blyss" (7.53-6). In defiance of Eve's curse, Mary does not bend to her husband's will as an underling. Rather, he bends to hers—literally. Joseph stoops to kiss her feet (12.185) and vows to "serve" her, "ryght as [her] owyn wyl is," "at foot and honde" (12.207-8). Unlike Eve, Mary gives birth without pain or pollution but rather with joy and laughter (15.182).[46] While God polices and punishes Eve's hunger for forbidden fruit, he indulges Mary's carnal appetite.

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[44] I refer specifically to the British Library Blockbook C.9 d.2, printed in the Netherlands circa 1470; see Labriola and Smeltz 15, 57, 99, and 143-5. For a catalog of examples of late medieval English images of Mary/Eve typology, see Peters 139-140.The most fabulous medieval image of this concept is Berthold Furtmeyer's *Salzburg Missal* (1481); in it, Mary and Eve each pluck an object from the tree of knowledge: Mary picks a Eucharistic wafer from the Crucifix, Eve an apple from Satan's mouth (Rubin 312).

[45] This anagram was popularized via the ninth-century hymn *Ave maris stella*: *Sumens illud Ave / Gabrielis ore, / funda nos in pace, / mutans nomen Evae* ("Taking that sweet Ave, which came from Gabriel, confirm peace within us, changing Eve's name"). See Reynolds 133.

[46] As of the fourth century, this belief was orthodox doctrine throughout Western Christendom. Gregory of Nyssa was the first to argue that Mary did not suffer pain in childbirth. He writes, "Since she who introduced death into nature by means of sin was condemned to give birth in suffering and travail, it was necessary that the Mother of Life, having conceived in joy at the beginning, should bring the pregnancy to a conclusion in joy too" (Reynolds 80).

In N-Town's "Nativity" pageant, pregnant Mary craves cherries, though the fruit is out of

season and the branches out of reach. As many have pointed out, medieval culture did not fixedly

identify the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil as an apple; it was often

represented as a pear, grape, date, or cherry.[47] Thus, Mary's cherry and Eve's apple can both

represent the forbidden fruit of Genesis.[48] In the wider context of late medieval English writing,

and as so clearly illustrated by Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*, cherries

symbolized worldly brevity and sweetness. Often employed in blazons, cherries adorn ripe

cheeks and lips. And although the first witnesses of cherries' explicit sexual reference (to

virginity or testicles) do not occur until the sixteenth century (*OED*), sexual significance does

seem to be at play in late medieval usage. For example, late medieval painters who sought to

represent the love shared by the Madonna and Child often put cherries in their hands; though

some artists paint five or three cherries (symbolizing Jesus' wounds or the Trinity), others (most

notably Joos van Cleve and Quentin Massys) include only two cherries—perhaps contrasting

Jesus' ripe fruit against Joseph's pair of rotten pears (a common attribute of his in northern art of

this period, symbolizing his impotence).[49]

Like Adam, Joseph chastises his wife for her "wylde" carnal appetite (15.19, 15.37). And

like Adam, against his better judgment, he enables her forbidden desires. He says, "Youre desyre

to fulfylle I shal assay, sekyrly" (15.36). Yet Joseph cannot satisfy Mary's desire. In a mime of

impotence, he fails to climb the tree. In anger, Joseph snipes, "lete hym pluk yow cheryes begatt

yow with childe" (15.39). So God, the father of Mary's child, satisfies her craving: he blooms the

tree and then bends the branches so she can eat her fill. This flips the script of Genesis: Woman

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[47] See Carr 133-47.

[48] In late medieval symbolism, the cherry often represents the Trinity, Jesus as Eucharistic food, and his blood on the cross. See Carr 133-5.

[49] See, for example, Gerard David's *Holy Family*.

hungers, God satisfies. Mary is not punished or prohibited but rather fulfilled. Typology, double-edged, cuts both ways.[50] Mary's redemption of Eve does not make her Eve's opposite, but rather her mirror image—reversed yet identical.[51] Eve tried to get God's apple and lost; Mary retrieves it for her. God cannot resist Mary.

English theologians of the twelfth century were the architects of the Mariology that undergirds N-Town's Marian pageantry. In a prayer to the Virgin, Anselm of Canterbury wrote, "whoever turns to, and is regarded by you, cannot possibly be lost" (Graef 214). His student, Eadmer of Canterbury, building on Anselm's ideas, argued that Mary reigned over the universe at the right hand of the Trinity (9.574C; Graef 217), thereby expanding the Trinity into a four-part God that his followers called the "Quaternity" (Graef 253).[52] Eadmer's devotion to Mary knew no bounds—he thanked Mary for saving mankind and for creating God (11.578A-B; Graef 217). Furthermore, Eadmer claimed that while God controlled justice, mercy fell under Mary's jurisdiction—meaning that she (and not Jesus) would administrate salvation on Doomsday. Eamder even argued that Mary had the power to reverse God's decisions: he said that she could pluck damned souls right out of the pit of Hell (Graef 220).[53]

As these extremely popular (and extremely controversial) ideas spread to the Continent, a consensus solidified that Mary had the power to intercede with God—and, furthermore, that God was unlikely to deny her requests. According to Eadmer, God *could not* deny her—"even if the merits of him who invokes her do not deserve it"—in other words, even if her devotee did not

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[50] For more on typology, see Parker 43-86.

[51] Peters and Newman agree that the polysemy of the Mary/Eve comparison has been sadly mistaken for a binary; see Peters 130-132 and Newman *Sister* 167-171.

[52] Peter of Celle coined this phrase. Perhaps I should not call Peter of Celle the follower of Eadmer, as they fought so bitterly over the Immaculate Conception—however, despite their differences, Peter of Celle seems to have accepted many (though by no means all) of Eadmer's innovations.

[53] See Eadmer's *Tractatus de Conceptione Sanctae Mariae* 35ff (316Aff). These ideas soon spread to the Continent. Conrad of Saxony wrote that Mary "prevents her Son from striking sinners; for before Mary there was no one who dared thus hold back the Lord" (Graef 291).

merit saving (Graef 216).[54] Such was the power of *her* merits. Theologians of a more

Christocentric persuasion made sure to qualify Mary's power; Aquinas, for example, would only

allow that Mary had the power to mediate "in some way" (Graef 280). Despite these hesitations,

myriad medieval images depict Mary interfering with God's just punishments. She hides sinners

under her robe from the devil and from the wrath of God; unseen by Michael and Jesus, she

sneakily drops her rosary into the scales of Doom and tips the weights in her client's favor.[55] In

this aspect, Mary was called the Mother of Mercy—a title with which N-Town hails her again

and again (8.9; 9.8; 11.338; 41.119; 41.526).

By the fifteenth century, Eadmer's bold theory that Mary created God and saved mankind

had found many followers in England and on the Continent. In her prayers, Bridget of Sweden

hails Mary as "the Savior" (Graef 309). Hildegard of Bingen, Godfrey of Admont, and many

more honored Mary as the "recreatrix," arguing that when she gave Jesus flesh she recreated, and

substantially improved, God's universe (Newman *Sister* 163). Perhaps most remarkably,

Bernardino of Siena preached that Mary dominated the Trinity. He understood her power as

deriving from her own independent virtue: he said, "Even if she had not been the Mother of God,

she would nevertheless have been the mistress of the world" (Graef 316). He interpreted the

Annunciation not as God's overshadowing of Mary, but as Mary's overpowering of God:

> O unthinkable power of the Virgin Mother!...One Hebrew girl invaded the house of the
>
> eternal King; one girl, I do not know by what caresses, pledges or violence, seduced,
>
> deceived, and, if I may say so, wounded and enraptured the divine heart and ensnared the

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[54] *Invocato autem nomine matris suae, etsi merita invocantis non merentur, merita tamen matris intercedunt ut exaudiatur* (6.570B).

[55] For an in-depth study of images of Mary protecting sinners under her robe (referred to by art historians as the Madonna of Mercy) from Italy during the in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, see Castaldi. For English examples of Mary interfering with Judgment, see Marshall, *Medieval Wall Painting in the English Parish Church*—specifically wall paintings from the Church of All Saints in Lathbury, the Church of St James the Great in South Leigh, and the Church of St Botolph in Slapton.

Wisdom of God….(Graef 317)

According to the teachings of this vein of Mariology, which runs from Anselm of Canterbury to Bernardino of Siena, Mary reigns supreme—over the universe and the Trinity.

While musing on the parallelism of Mary and Eve, Saint Ambrose came up with the idea that the benefits of Jesus and Mary's redemption far exceeded the disadvantages of Adam and Eve's transgression to the extent that he considered their fall happy—a "*felix culpa*".[56] ("Felix" in the sense of "fruitful" or "fortunate.") Ambrose rewrote the tragedy of Genesis as a divine comedy. By the late Middle Ages, Christians' estimation of the happiness of the fall had risen to astronomical heights, as evinced by the lovely anonymous fifteenth-century lyric "Adam lay ybounden":

> Ne hadde the appil take ben,
>
> The appil taken ben,
>
> Ne hadde never our lady
>
> A ben hevene quen.
>
> Blissed be the time
>
> That appil take was! (*Middle English Lyrics* 147)

While Ambrose emphasized the benefits that mankind accrued from Jesus' self-sacrifice, this poem celebrates Adam's crime specifically because it led to Mary's coronation as the Queen of Heaven.[57] Considering the advantages of the dominion of Mary, it becomes clear why late medieval Christians would celebrate Eve's transgression. According to the Mariology of the fifteenth century (according to which Mary could save unrepentant, undeserving, guilty sinners),

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[56] The phrase *felix culpa* is first witnessed in a fourth-century hymn attributed to Ambrose: *O felix culpa, quae talem ac tantum meruit habere Redemptorem!* ("O fortunate fault, which has merited such and so great a Redeemer!").

[57] And unlike Ambrose, who pairs Adam with Jesus and Mary with Eve, this poem pairs Adam with Mary—leaving Jesus out of the equation entirely. Mary seems to have replaced her son.

the Fall seems like a lucky break.

Jumping off from this foundational idea, N-Town offers an interpretation of the temptation of Eve that far outdoes the positivity of Anselm's concept of the *felix culpa*. In N-Town, when the serpent tempts Eve, he promises her that if she bites, she will become God's equal—his "pere" and "felaw." She will reign over "allthynge"—the sun, moon, stars, fish, fowl, sea, land, night, and day. This catalog of powers and privileges precisely foretells N-Town's later encomiums to the Virgin as the "Qwen of Hefne, Lady of Erth, and Empres of Helle" (11.335), reigning at Jesus' right side in Paradise (41.345-7; 526). N-Town makes it clear that it considers Mary God's equal. Jesus himself describes Mary as his partner in salvation:

> All this werlde that was forlorn
>
> Shal wurchepe you, bothe evyn and morn;
>
> For had I not of yow be born,
>
> Man had be lost in helle. (35.105-108)

Here, Jesus recapitulates the widely held medieval theory (*so* unpalatable to later reformers) that Mary's pregnancy saved mankind in partnership with—and, according to some (like Eadmer and Bernardino), *before*—Jesus' crucifixion. Later, in N-Town's play of "The Assumption of the Virgin," Dominus tells Mary, "Yow to worchepe, moder, it likyth the hol Trinyte" (41.523). Sugano anxiously glosses the verb "worchepe" as "to honor," but it could just as likely mean "to revere" or "to render religious homage to" (*MED*).

Considering the fervor of N-Town's devotion to Mary, Satan's address to Eve reads like more like a positive prophecy than a negative temptation. N-Town allows for the possibility that Mary did not fix Eve's error so much as she fulfilled the serpent's charming promises. This effectively turns Eve's sin, the original sin, inside out. N-Town's countrywomen and

contemporaries Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe expressed comparable theories about the virtue of sin—or, to use Julian's term, sin's "bihovelinesse" (*Vision* 13.45). Julian believed that "Alle shalle be wele, and alle maner of thinge shalle be wele" (*Vision* 13.61); Margery agreed, arguing that God's "lofe…qwenchith al synne" (1575). More specifically to N-Town, through Mary's power, Eve's concupiscence becomes a virtue as pure as chastity.

★ **The Immaculate Conception**

Before Mary is even born, scandal already imperils her reputation. The angel announcing her impending conception commands her father Joachim to offer her to the Temple at the tender age of three so that "non evyl fame" will spring from her (8.193). The angel offers no explanation of why evil fame would spring from Mary. He does not need to. N-Town defends Mary's virginity—from threats vague and particular, spoken and unspoken—with a zeal that could also be called paranoia. The plays resurrect ancient anxieties and defense mechanisms from the second-century apocryphal Gospel of James, which, as many scholars have it, was written to combat polemical attacks waged by pagans, Jews, and heretics.

Following the apocrypha, N-Town specifies that Mary's feet never touched unconsecrated earth.[58] Her mother carries her to the foot of the fifteen steps that lead up to the Temple, where she walks for the first time—on sacred as opposed to unclean soil (8.45, 94-101). In response to Mary's dangerous new mobility, the Temple and Heaven join forces to inundate her with chaperones. Her entourage includes five maidens, seven priests, and hosts of angels. She is *never*, as her guardian angel tells her, "lefte here alone" (9.275). Perhaps most disturbingly, N-

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[58] Actually, in the Gospel of James, Mary takes her first seven steps when she is six months old, but Anne snatches her up and vows that "as the Lord my God liveth, thou shalt not walk on this earth until I bring thee into the Temple of the Lord" (362). N-Town collapses the apocryphal accounts of Mary's first seven steps and her fifteen steps to the Temple.

Town emphasizes that Mary never eats worldly food.[59] As soon as she has been weaned, angels

begin to deliver manna—"aungelys mete" (9.248)—direct from Heaven. This ensures that Mary

never digests, farts, or defecates, possibilities that greatly concerned Christians in the second

century (and, to varying degrees, ever after).[60] Manicheans, Gnostics, and pagans delighted in

accusing the doctrine of the Incarnation of defiling God by trapping him in a filthy womb and

covering him with feces, female semen, and menstrual blood. They enjoyed making gross

catalogs: Porphyry, for example, lists "blood of choron and bile and even worse things" (Cuffel

60); Mani "blood and flesh and women's ill-smelling effluent!" (Cuffel 64). In response,

Christian apologists capitulated to their opponents' objections (demonstrating their concord with

its assumptions) and rushed to sanitize Mary's body.[61] They denied that she ever defecated or

farted; they stipulated that she excreted no pollutions (blood or afterbirth) in labor. Centuries

later, N-Town still feels the need to protect Mary's purity from food and the ground, which it

considers dangerous threats.

Yet while N-Town polices Mary's purity so strictly and so obsessively, it understands her

purity as sacred sexual deviance.[62] Especially in the early pageants that dramatize Mary's

infancy narrative ("Joachim and Anna" and "Presentation of Mary in the Temple"), N-Town sets

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[59] The Gospel of James specifies that Anne "made a sanctuary of her bed-chamber, and allowed nothing common or unclear to pass through" Mary's body (362) and that in the Temple, Mary "received food from the hand of an angel" (363).

[60] Pieter W. Van Der Horst demonstrates that manna was believed to produce no waste (65-66). He quotes an argument from the Gnostic Valentinus that Jesus never "excreted solids" (66). Cuffel writes, "For pagans, Manichaeans, and many Christian groups of late Antiquity, the most offensive aspect of the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation was the contact between divinity and the virgin Mary's womb" (59); see also Cuffel 58-66.

[61] As Cuffel demonstrates, Tertullian is the exception to this rule. Rather than arguing that Mary's womb was magically clean, Tertullian argued that God patiently endured the horrors of Mary's unexceptional womb just as he endured the humiliation of the Crucifixion (Cuffel 62). Tertullian also occasionally takes another tack and argues that childbirth is not unclean (Cuffel 65-66).

[62] Today, we tend to associate obsessive interest in virginity with reproductive hetero-normativity, but in a medieval Catholic system in which celibacy is a lifelong option for men and women (nuns and the celibate clergy), virginity functions as something more than a guarantee of legitimate patriarchal lineage. The queer capacity of medieval virginity has been discussed by Evans in "Virginities" (22-3) and Gaunt (441); Jankowski discusses the queerness of early modern virginity at length (see especially 6-12).

up a battle between Jewish family values and the heroically queer Holy Family.[63] At every turn, the Jewish high priest, Ysakar, persecutes Mary and her parents for their disobedience of the sexual commandments of the Old Testament. First, Ysakar exiles Mary's childless father, Joachim, from the Temple for his failure to obey God's commandment to increase and multiply (Genesis 1.38). Ysakar tells Joachim that infertility is a "tokyn" of being "cursyd" by God (8.104) and reminds him that "amonge all this pepyl, barreyn be no mo" (8.106)—amongst Jews, infertility is not allowed.[64]

Until an angel intervenes, the situation is most tragic. Anna and Joachim are wracked with shame—they use the word "shame" repeatedly (five times) to describe their feelings (8.89, 92, 124, 132, 153). The "grett slawndyr" (8.62) and "fowle fame" (8.127) of their infertility makes Anna weep (8.66) and quake with dread (8.78). Joachim's "hevyness" and "shame" drive him from his wife and neighbors (8.123-4) into his pastures, where stares "al hevely" at his sheep, which, unlike him, "be lusty and fayr and grettly multyply" (136-7). The plot seems poised to turn the tables on Ysakar and give Judaism its come-uppance for persecuting the forerunners of Christian celibacy.

And indeed, at the climax of the pageant, God's angel announces to Mary's parents that, despite their infertility, they will miraculously conceive a child. While it might seem that God does not foil Ysakar so much as completely give in to his demands, this is smoke and mirrors—one of many tricks that God plays on his enemies in N-Town. Anna is not just pregnant with just any child: she is barren and yet miraculously pregnant with the Virgin Mary, celibacy's greatest

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[63] For more on the intersection of religion and queerness in medieval contexts, see Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Duke 1999) and Karma Lochrie, *Heterosyncrasies: Female Sexuality When Normal Wasn't* (University of Minnesota 2005); and Robert Mills, "Ecce Homo?" in *Gender and Holiness: Men, Women, and Saints in Late Medieval Europe*, ed. by Samantha Riches and Sarah Salih (Routledge 2002), 152-73.

[64] This law collapses and exaggerates several Jewish laws intended to encourage the duty of procreation; Schaberg notes that the Gospel of James "was written by a non-Jew ignorant…of Jewish customs" (164).

champion. As the angel informs Joachim, Mary will end the tyranny of sexual reproduction: "as [Mary] shal be bore of a barrany body, / So, of her shal be bore without nature Jhesus" (8.195-6). Mary will give birth to Jesus "without nature"—outside of the bounds of the laws of nature, thus breaking its power forever. As Lydgate puts it in his *Life of Our Lady*, the virgin birth forced Nature to "gife up hol her right" (3.978-80). In N-Town (as in Lydgate), "nature" represents not only the scientific laws that govern the natural world, but also Judaism and the Old Testament— specifically Judaic readings of Genesis 1.38, God's commandment to increase and multiply.

N-Town recapitulates an ancient debate between Christianity and Judaism.[65] Second Temple Judaism took Genesis 1.38 to mean that God endorsed lawful sexual procreation; it was almost universally accepted that sexual reproduction was a good (at least neutral and at most blessed) method of perpetuating the chosen seed.[66] From very early on, Christian thinkers scorned "carnal Israel" for this (as they had it) overly optimistic and literal reading of Genesis.[67] Augustine saw sexual reproduction as ineluctably tainted by sin—as being sin itself, Eve's *original* sin. Thus, while Jewish traditions celebrated marriage, Saint Paul could only muster up the backhanded endorsement that "it is better to marry than to be burnt" (1 Corinthians 7.9). In response to the threat of concupiscence, Paul set up a hierarchy of Christian lifestyle choices: the best could dedicate themselves to pure renunciation and the rest could marry or burn. The Church dedicated its elite forces to perfect celibacy—at first, virgin martyrs and desert hermits, and much later, the celibate clergy.[68] The second-tier institution of marriage was cordoned off to the laity. As the Wife of Bath explains in her Prologue, virgins were considered "pured whete-

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[65] For more on this distinction between Judaism and early Christianity, see Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (UCal 1993).
[66] The Essenes are the much-discussed exception to this rule; see Boyarin 3 and Brown 37-40.
[67] See Augustine, *Tractatus adversus Judaeos* vii.9 and Boyarin 1.
[68] Peter Brown argues that the concept of clerical celibacy began to appear in practice in the fourth century (357); scholarly consensus tends to locate the firm and universal establishment of the practice in the eleventh century (Parish *Clerical Celibacy* 3).

seed" (143) while wives were cheap "barly-breed"; virgins were "vessels al of gold" (100) while

wives were made of "tree" (wood).

Following a long-established tradition, N-Town represents Mary as the world's first

virgin, a pioneer of Christian sexual values. When Mary reaches puberty, Ysakar orders her to

marry and procreate: every damsel, he says, "whatso sche be," must marry "to the encrese of

more plente" (10.10-11).[69] Mary refuses. She informs Ysakar that she has made a vow of

virginity to God. Furthermore, she chastises him for crossing her: "Such clene lyff shuld ye

nouht, / In no maner wyse, reprove" (10.72-3). To make the authority of Mary's vow airtight, N-

Town supports her with Augustine's exegetical justification for clerical celibacy.[70] N-Town

constructs a queer genealogy, a holy anti-kinship: barren Anna gives birth to the Virgin Mary

who gives birth to Jesus, a virgin martyr and a biological dead-end who nevertheless gives

spiritual birth to billions of converts, each free—thanks to Mary's trailblazing stand against

marriage—to choose to defy the old law of sexual procreation by taking a vow of celibacy.

And yet N-Town (like Christianity more broadly) hedges its bets. Though Mary is a

sworn virgin, she is also a wife and mother. Though Anne is barren, she is also fertile. Peter

Brown makes the compelling case that despite Paul's preference for celibacy and Augustine's

association of sexuality with original sin, the "silent majority" of Christians in the late Classical

and early medieval period "believed as firmly as did their Jewish neighbors that God had created

humanity for marriage and childbirth" (401). Scholars often remark that by the late Middle Ages,

this silent majority found its voice.[71] Seeking a better endorsement for their lifestyle than 1

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[69] As Emma Lipton points out, N-Town exaggerates its sources in order to make this law eve more unreasonable (102).
[70] Augustine cited Psalm 75:12, "*Vovete et reddite* in Scripture have we" (10.94), taken to prove that "to mak a vow to creaturys, it is lefful" (10.93). See Augustine's commentary on Psalm 76 in *Expositions of the Psalms*, 73-109.
[71] See Ashley and Sheingorn 1-68 and Nixon 11-40.

Corinthians 7.9, this majority invented the cult of Saint Anne, a system rooted in Mariology rather than Christology.

In opposition to Paul and Augustine's sexual values, the cult of Anne celebrated marriage, procreation, and the sacred capacity of genealogy. According to a medieval tradition (begun by Haymo of Auxerre in the ninth century), Saint Anne married three husbands (a so-called *trinubium*—two shy of the Wife of Bath's official number) and gave birth to three different Marys—the Virgin Mary, Mary Salome, and Mary Cleophas (Ashley and Sheingorn 11-12). All told, Anna produced five sainted grandchildren: Jesus Christ, James the Less, Joseph the Just, James the Great, and John the Evangelist (Ashley and Sheingorn 12). In the N-Town manuscript, a genealogical table for Anna has been charted on the leaves that begin the Mary plays.[72] Images of this extended holy family proliferated in the late Middle Ages: in illuminations, paintings, altarpieces, woodcuts, stained glass, and statues, Anna sits surrounded by her many children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren (Sheingorn 169-98).[73] Fertility fills and overflows these crowded family portraits: naked babies cuddle and wriggle in the laps of their mothers and crawl around the edges of the frame, peering out from under their grandmother's skirts; children run around playing with toys, fruit, and puppies.

This is hardly monastic. Rather, this version of the Holy Family celebrates seemingly Jewish family values. Perhaps for this reason, the distinction between Judaism and Christianity sometimes completely vanishes in N-Town's "Joachim and Anna" and "Presentation of Mary in the Temple."[74] Although the text describes Ysakar as a Jewish priest of the Temple and firm proponent of the Old Law, it also clearly identifies him as a "Crysten" (9.172, 174, 185). He

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[72] See Sugano 8-9 and Meredith folios 37 recto and verso.
[73] See, for example, Ashley and Sheingorn 174, 186, 191.
[74] Sugano notes, "N-Town, particularly in the Mary Play, offers the most positive presentation of the Jewish 'priesthood' in medieval drama" (357 n30).

worships the Trinity, administers the sacraments, quotes the New Testament, and sings Catholic liturgical hymns (9.178-182, 9.217). The cult of Saint Anne (as refracted through N-Town) distinguishes between itself and Judaism on new grounds, scaling back the level of conflict. Rather than excluding holiness from sexual reproduction and elevating celibacy at marriage's expense (as did Paul and Augustine), the cult of Anne subscribes to the belief that Mary rendered sexual reproduction optional (rather than mandatory) but not inferior. In other words, it believed in the standard array of Christian sexual options but not in the standard hierarchal organization of those options. In fact, the cult of Anne depends on the idea that when Mary broke the curse of Eve, she ameliorated its effects on all women (and not only herself), therein loosening Augustine's link between sexuality and sin. Thus, Anne could be Mary's peer in Heaven despite her three sexually active marriages.

These beliefs depend upon the theory of the Immaculate Conception. In the twelfth century, Anselm and Eadmer of Canterbury argued that Mary existed completely free of the taint of original sin. It did not go unnoticed that this directly contradicted Augustine's concept of original sin as sexual in nature and sexual in its means of communication (Nixon 72). For this reason, Anselm and Eadmer's new theory faced enormous resistance (Graef 221). Bernard of Clairvaux argued that the Immaculate Conception was impossible: postlapsarian reproduction could not possibly fail to express and transmit original sin. He protested:

> Could sanctity by any chance have mingled with the conception in the marital embrace, so that [Mary] was conceived and sanctified at the same time? Reason does not admit this…How could sin not have been present where concupiscence was not absent? (Graef 221).[75]

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[75] See also PL 183 335C. Aquinas agreed, writing: "…the Blessed Virgin contracted [original sin] since she was conceived in sexual desire and the joining of husband and wife" (Nixon 14).

In response, Robert of Ware and John Duns Scotus came up with the theory of preventative atonement, which eventually triumphed in Catholic theology.[76] Duns Scotus reasoned that God prevented Mary from catching original sin: rather than removing it, God excluded it (Graef 299-302). Though this smoothed ruffled Christocentric feathers by attributing the miracle to God rather than to Mary, Duns Scotus' argument by no means resolved the debate about the Immaculate Conception (which lasted centuries) or clear up the rampant confusion about what the Immaculate Conception actually entailed. Virginia Nixon shows that theologians, mystics, clerics, and laypeople often mistook immaculatist positions for maculist arguments, and vice versa (15-16).

The deed itself proved especially confusing. Some maintained that Anne and Joachim miraculously copulated without "fleshly lust" or "sexual sensations" (Nixon 71-2). A sixteenth-century French cycle from Valenciennes vividly dramatizes this theory: it stages the scene of Mary's conception as an epic battle fought between angels and devils in Anne and Joachim's bedroom (Muir *Biblical* 90). Others believed that Anne and Joachim conceived Mary without having sex at all. According to a very prevalent tradition, Mary was conceived with just one kiss. According to the Gospel of James, after hearing the good news from the angel, Anne and Joachim sprinted to reunite, embracing when they met at the Golden Gate of Jerusalem.[77] In the medieval imagination, their kiss at the Golden Gate came to represent the Immaculate Conception and sinless marital love (Ashley and Sheingorn 18).[78] This clarifies very little: although the kiss replaces sex, it also euphemistically represents it.

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[76] Mary's Immaculate Conception was officially made doctrine in 1854.
[77] Ashley and Sheingorn note that the earliest extant manuscript of the Gospel of James specifies that Anne conceives during the angel's annunciation but that later manuscripts put the conception in the future tense (7-8).
[78] The Orvieto cycle, for example, explicitly states that the Immaculate Conception took place at the Golden Gate (Muir *Biblical* 90).

The theory of the Immaculate Conception contradicted the Christian sexual values preached by Paul and Augustine. It provoked strenuous efforts of comprehension, reconciliation, and containment. Yet it also proved extremely popular (in high and low circles) and, in the absence of strict or clear rulings on the subject, Christians adapted it as they saw fit. It is worth emphasizing that though some believed that Anne conceived without sex and others that she conceived without lust, no one ever claimed that Anna was—like her daughter—a virgin. She is certainly not a virgin after the birth of Mary: according to the theory of the *trinubium*, she subsequently had two sexual partners and four children. What about *before* the birth of Mary? The Gospel of James calls Anne barren, but not virginal—a precedent that subsequent texts follow (361). Indeed, in Osbert Bokenham's fifteenth-century *Life of St. Anne*, Joachim bitterly complains about the exhaustive labors (448) he has expended dewing Anne's field with his seed (432) for twenty years—he compares his efforts to those of a farmer who diligently waters his crop "eche day" (442).

Following this cue, N-Town suggests that Anna and Joachim had a reputation for sexual excess. When Mary looks back on her infancy and narrates the history of her conception, she says that because her parents "hadde nothyr frute nere chylde,"

Reprevyd they wore of wykkyd and wylde.

With grett shame, thei were revylyd,

Al men ded them dyspyce. (10.49-52)

Rather than attributing her parents' shame to Judaism's (alleged) superstitions, Mary emphasizes that her parents were reprieved for being "wykkyd and wylde," a phrase with sexual connotations. In Middle English, "wild" can mean "perverse, wicked; lascivious, wanton; also,

lusty" (*MED*).[79] Mary suggests that her parents earned a bad reputation in their community for

engaging in non-reproductive sexual activity—*excessively*. This excess might mean very little:

after all, Anna and Joachim could only discover their infertility by trying to reproduce, and yet

their infertility would retroactively exclude them from the right to even begin to try. They could

not possibly avoid this double bind. And yet Jewish law (Mishna Yebamoth 6.6, specifically),

allows a husband to divorce his wife or marry a second if his marriage has not produced children

after ten years. Disobeying this law, Joachim waits *twenty* years before abandoning his barren

wife. Ysakar has to force him to do so by means of public humiliation.

When God elects Anne to be the mother of Mary, he endorses both infertility and fertility.

He demonstrates that he loves barren wives as much as fertile mothers (opposing Judaism, which

prefers mothers) and he demonstrates that he loves fertile mothers just as much as celibate clerics

(opposing the medieval Christian Church, which prefers monks and nuns). The most remarkable

point that N-Town makes is that God's election of Anna *also* demonstrates that he loves

excessively sexually active but infertile wives as much as fertile wives. N-Town's God endorses

the "ese" of "engendrure" and not only its "office" (127), to use the Wife of Bath's terms.

Indeed, scholars have noticed that hagiographies of Saint Anne tend to depart from

generic expectations by characterizing her marriage as blissfully happy (Nixon 71). Other late

medieval saintly wives—like Saint Hedwig of Poland, Saint Elisabeth of Hungary, and Saint

Birgitta of Sweden—only tolerate their husbands in order to obey their father's wishes, produce

royal offspring, and evangelize in powerful circles (Nixon 72).[80] Hagiographies stress that Anne

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[79] This term sets off a recurring pattern: repeatedly, we will see the word "wild" used in accusations and prohibitions made to Mary: see 10.394; 15.19; 15.37.

[80] Dyan Elliott argues that Saint Elisabeth of Hungary is, like Anne, an exception to the rule in that she loves her husband; see *Spiritual Marriage* 85-118 and especially 86. However, I think that although Elisabeth (and Bridget) are portrayed as affectionate and obedient to their husbands, it is still abundantly clear that they would rather be virgins. The same cannot be said of Anne.

and Joachim, by contrast, are deeply in love. Bokenham narrates that they make the perfect

match: alike in status (229), age (244), and temperament (233-6)—"lyche to lyche" (239). This

phrasing implies their sexual harmony: they are matched in their biological inclination and

ability to render the marriage debt. Bokenham also emphasizes Anna's adoration of her husband.

When she begs God to return Joachim to her, Anna says:

> For, Lorde, Thou knowyst how affecteuously
>
> I hym now love and evere have do,
>
> Syth we fyrst knyt were lawfully,
>
> Past alle creatures; Lorde, helpe me so! (342-5)

This level of marital enthusiasm is very unusual coming from a saint. Chaucer's Saint Cecilia

warns her husband that he "shullen dye" if he touches her (155-8); the mystic visionary Angela

of Foligno saw the death of her husband and children as "a celestial windfall" (Elliott *Spiritual

Marriage* 235); Margery Kempe (a would-be saint) found the marriage debt "so abhominabyl"

that she would rather "drynkyn the mukke in the chanel" than render it (62). Hagiographies of

Saint Anne, by contrast, often pause for prolonged encomiums to marital bliss—and specifically

infertile marital bliss.

N-Town emphasizes Anna and Joachim's mutual affection in its staging of the kiss at the

Golden Gate.[81] After hearing the good news from the angel, Anna exclaims:

> I am so joyful, I not what I may say!
>
> Ther can no tounge telle what joye in me is:
>
> I to bere a childe that shal bere all mannys blys,
>
> And have myn hosbonde ageyn — ho myth have joys more? (8.231-4)

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[81] Though N-Town specifies that Anne conceives after the kiss (8.223), it also represents the kiss at the Gate as a symbol of the Immaculate Conception.

Anna gets to contribute to salvation, reproduce, *and* have her husband back again. Shame turns

to bliss. Her joy is so powerful that she describes it with the inexpressibility topos (no tongue can

tell her joy) and a question (who might have more joy?). Perhaps the answer is no one, not even

Mary. Anna could very well represent the zenith of Christian joy as some late medievals saw it.

She gets to have twenty years of infertile marital bliss, three rounds of childbearing with three

different husbands, and all the privileges of sainthood. She has it all.

And yet experts on the cult of Anne argue that despite her exceptional capacity to occupy

the roles of both saint and wife, she cannot bestride the impassible gulf between "sexual activity

and sanctity" (Nixon 72). In support of this claim, Virginia Nixon catalogs certain hagiographers'

shrill protestations that Anne married not for "fleshly love" but only in order to obey her father

and produce heirs (Nixon 71). Bokenham, for example, after relaying the information that Anna

and Joachim cohabited for twenty years without issue, anxiously adds "in chast maryage and not

vycyous" (260). However, N-Town demonstrates the flexibility of this concept of "chast

maryage" by describing Anna and Joachim's magical "kusse of clennesse" (8.241) as sacred and

loving but also as pleasurable—even orgasmic. It uses erotic language to describe Anne's

sexually active chastity.

After the kiss at the Golden Gate, Anna says, "Ther was nevyr joy sank in me so depe!"

(8.243). This lyrical effusion has sexual connotations—"sinken" can mean "to become

submerged," "to penetrate," and "to make an impression on the mind, feeling, or senses" (*MED*).

This last meaning suggests a pre-modern medical notion stemming from Aristotle that strong

impressions (made by heat, semen, the soul, or a particularly intense thought or sensation) had

the power to cause conceptions (Laqueur 58-9).[82] Although N-Town's "kusse of clennesse"

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[82] *The Secrets of Women* describes semen making an impression in the womb like "an artificer with his work" or a
smithy hammering an iron (64-5); see also Cadden 200-201 and Donnifer and Spinner 97-130.

represents Mary's conception without sexual intercourse, it does not expunge imagery of penetration, insemination, or orgasm. Indeed, according to one prominent medical theory of the day, conception could not occur without female orgasm (Laqueur 49-50). N-Town represents the Immaculate Conception as a chaste but also sexual kiss.

When the angel announces the Immaculate Conception to Joachim, he explains God's motivation for the redemption of mankind in this way: "God is avengere of synne and not nature doth lothe" (8.178). This statement suggests that God redeems Adam's transgression because he does not hate nature (he loathes sin, not nature), therein making an anti-Augustinian distinction between "nature" (which, in this pageant, has stood for sexual reproduction) and original sin. Though circumlocutory and achieved by means of negation, the angel's statement suggests that God tolerates sexuality. The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception supports this position of tolerance. In his arguments against the Immaculate Conception, Bernard argued that if Mary had to be perfect in order for Jesus to be perfect, and if Anne had to be perfect for Mary to be perfect, then "the exemptions would have no end" (Ashley and Sheingorn 13). In other words, the Immaculate Conception threatened to purify all Mary's ancestors, the entire chosen seed of Israel leading all the way back to Eve. N-Town agrees, comparing Anne's miraculous conception to those of Sara and Rachel in the Old Testament, who were likewise barren and yet made pregnant (8.181-8). This comparison raises the possibility that Sara and Rachel, like Anne and Mary, conceived without sin. As Bernard notes, this suggests that Mary saved Eve right from the start, nipping God's curse of original sin in the bud.[83]

This possibility appalled Bernard and Aquinas. But it seems to have delighted Anne's devotees. When Margery Kempe asks, "Jhesu, what schal I thynke?" (544), he responds by giving her a vision of "Seynt Anne gret with chylde" (547). This vision serves to illustrate his

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[83] As we will see later in this chapter, Chaucer narrates this course of events in *The Merchant's Tale.*

point that reproductive marital sex is "no synne" (1563). He tells Margery, "I lofe wyves also" (1568). The Wife of Bath agrees that "God clepeth folk to hym in sondry wyse, / And everich hath of God a proper yifte" (102-3); her gift from God, she informs us, is her "instrument," which she uses "as frely as [her] Makere hath it sent" (149-50). Margery and the Wife of Bath both characterize their lifestyles as Christian. They have it on good authority: Mary's and Anne's.

N-Town suggests that Anne not only proves the sanctity of marriage and motherhood, but also of sexuality divorced from reproduction. Mary confirms and augments this celebration of pleasure for pleasure's sake. The angel announcing Anna's conception prophecies that Mary "shal be blyssyd in her body and have joys fyff" (8.191); Joachim echoes back the phrase "blessed body," remarking, "A, Anne, blyssyd be that body of thee shal be bore!" (8.204). N-Town emphasizes that the bodily joy and bliss Mary will experience will contribute to (or even cause) salvation. Although N-Town prevents Mary from touching unconsecrated earth, it pauses to focus on the moment when she kneels down and kisses the sacred soil of the Temple (9.276). This kiss (like her parents' at the Golden Gate) paradoxically represents carnal renunciation with a gesture of sensual affection. Although N-Town denies Mary worldly food, it lingers on her feasting on supernatural "confeccyons" (9.246-51), "eche day" and at "alle howrys" (9.258-9). The text stresses the superiority of this food, a synesthetic riot of sensations. Mary exclaims, "All maner of savowrys in this mete I fynde! / I felt nevyr non so swete ner so redolent" (9.256-7). It tastes, feels, and smells better than anything and also like many things at once.

Likewise, although Mary makes a vow of virginity, she practices celibacy by marrying God, as Anna describes it: Anna calls Mary "pure maydyn and *also* Goddys wyff" (9.33). Mary confirms this, describing her vow of virginity in this way:

Clennesse and chastyté myn hert owth,

Erthely creature nevyr may shove.

Such clene lyff shuld ye nouht,

In no maner wyse, reprove.

To this clennesse I me take.

This is the cawse, as I yow tell,

That I with man wyll nevyr mell.

In the servyse of God wyl I evyr dwell:

I wyl nevyr have other make. (10.66-78)

Mary stresses that she will not have sex—with men. While she says that no "erthely creature" may ever "shove" her, she leaves open the possibility that an *un*earthly creature might.[84] The verb "shouven" has our contemporary sense of "to push" ("to thrust"; "to knock down"; "to stick in")—the sexual sense of which comes across quite plainly (*MED*).[85] Mary continues in this vein, saying that she "*with man* wyll nevyr mell"—which suggests that she *will* mell with God. This verb, "mellen," comes up again and again in N-Town's Marian pageants, probably because it so neatly encapsulates Marian theology's take on the Incarnation: it means "to join sexually, have sexual intercourse with," and "to blend, to mix" (*MED*).[86] Lastly, Mary says that she will live in the service of God and "wyl nevyr have other make": in other words, God will be her "make"— her "spouse," "mate," "lover," and "peer" (*MED*). Thus (as we will see later in this chapter), Mary's renunciation of earthly lovers need not preclude unearthly ones like God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. In short, the flipside of N-Town's paranoid protection of Mary's virginity is its orgiastic celebration of her exceptional pleasures.

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[84] More precisely, the syntax leaves open the possibility that the object of "shove" is either Mary herself or the "clennesse and chastyté" that her heart owes to God.

[85] According to the *MED*, at least one usage (1[f]) means to "cuckold one's husband."

[86] While orthodox consensus maintained that God and man were joined (separate but equal) in Jesus, N-Town (like Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich) prefers imagery of mixture.

The erotic aspects of the cult of Mary are hardly understudied. It is a familiar concept to

historians of Mariology; Gail Gibson has studied it in drama, Barbara Newman in theology, Leo

Steinberg in art, and Gary Waller in history. These scholars argue that the late medieval passion

for the Incarnation allowed and even encouraged cultural expressions of what Steinberg calls

"genital theology" (238-9). As Gibson, Newman, Steinberg, and Waller argue, this theology

redeems and celebrates Mary's marriage, motherhood, and her body, even (if not especially) her

genitals. However, N-Town's suggestion that God approved of Anne and Joachim's non-

reproductive sex life pushes the limits of genital theology (as it is currently understood). N-Town

not only applauds Anne and Mary's genitals, the potential instruments of sexuality, it also

extends that ovation to lust in action.[87] As I have argued, in pageants 8 and 9, N-Town's God

endorses Anne's infertile sexual activity. In the pageants to which I now turn, N-Town takes

things much further by depicting Mary as a promiscuous adulteress, guilty of melling with

deities, angels, and men.

★ **Joseph's Doubt**

It is often said that few doubted Mary's virginity before the early nineteenth century—

besides the odd heretic or trumped-up Jewish boogeyman.[88] Yet medieval Biblical drama

presents a pageant that modern editors call "Joseph's Doubt" (Muir *Biblical* 96-7).[89] In this

pageant, Joseph returns home (after a prolonged business trip) to find Mary pregnant; he

immediately, explicitly, and extensively accuses her of adultery. At the pageant's conclusion, an

angel descends to take Mary's side, at which point Joseph falls into line and apologizes most

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[87] The New Testament scholar Jane Schaberg also studies the tradition of Mary's sexual activity, but she reads the evidence as suggestive of rape (following the lead of the *Toledoth Yeshu*) rather than adultery (which is what Celsus suggests).

[88] Warner writes, "The earliest Christians had to leap to the Virgin's defense on account of slanders…These rumors enjoyed brief lives" (35); Luz, "Apart from a few Jewish Christian and Gnostic groups of the first centuries, the virgin birth has been widely contested only since the early nineteenth century" (100).

[89] In the English tradition, the pageant of "Joseph's Doubt" occurs in N-Town, York, Chester, Towneley, and Coventry.

abjectly. Critics have taken this happy ending as proof that medieval drama seeks to condemn and dismiss Joseph's doubt and celebrate faith in Mary's perfect virginity. But Biblical drama does not confine slanderous accusations against the Virgin to "Joseph's Doubt." Rather, it systemically casts doubt on her virginity.

It does so on good authority. The plot of "Joseph's Doubt" expands upon Matthew 1.18-24. Matthew narrates that after discovering Mary's pregnancy, "Ioseph, for that he was a just man, & would not put her to open shame: was minded secretly to dimisse her" (1.19). In other words, Joseph assumes that Mary has committed adultery. This slanderous suspicion stands in a position of great authority: in a canonical gospel, firstly, and secondly, in the mouth of Mary's own husband—"a just [*dikaios*] man," as Matthew calls him, who would, centuries later, become the patron saint of the universal Catholic Church (Albright and Mann 8).

Many late Classical and medieval commentators manage to get around the problem of Joseph's doubt by arguing that Joseph did not, in fact, suspect Mary of adultery, but rather immediately assumed the doctrine of the virgin birth. They argue that Joseph, being a "*dikaios*" Jewish man, would had to have been familiar with the Book of Isaiah. Reading Isaiah 7.14, he naturally would have come to the same conclusions as future Christian exegetes (like his narrator, Matthew) and understood that the prophecy that "a virgin shal conceiue, and beare a sonne, & his name shal be called Emmanuel" referred to Mary and Jesus. Never mind that in the Hebrew Bible, Isaiah prophesies that an "*almah*," meaning "eligible girl," shall conceive—as opposed to a virgin, "*parthenos*," as translated by the Septuagint (Albright and Mann 8).[90] And never mind that Judaism understood "Emmanuel" to refer to King Hezekiah (Luz 97-98). According to Saint Jerome, Joseph's first sight of Mary's pregnant belly revealed to him that the promised day had

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[90] Parker points out that many Jews in the first century AD read the Septuagint rather than the Hebrew Bible (178-82).

finally come. For *this* reason, Joseph resolved to dismiss Mary, out of respect: he feared to poach

on God's turf (Luz 94).

Though perhaps not entirely persuasive, such arguments are at least plausible if for no

other reason than Joseph's ambiguous silence. In Matthew, Joseph never speaks his doubts—he

resolves to dismiss Mary "secretly." It is unclear whether this means that Joseph secretly

resolves to dismiss her or resolves to dismiss her secretly. (English Bibles tend to double down,

adding the words "was minded" to extend the adverb to both verbs: so in the King James, for

example, Joseph "was minded to put her away privily." In other words, Joseph hides his

resolution to hide his resolution.) Everything in Matthew 1.18-24 happens inside Joseph's mind,

including his conversation with the angel, who comes to him while he sleeps. Though it speaks

volumes, Matthew's version of Joseph's doubt is completely silent. Jerome praises Joseph for

this discretion, interpreting his silence as the best possible response to "that mystery which he

did not understand" (*Commentary* 63). N-Town's sources, from Pseudo-Matthew to Lydgate,

agree that (in Lydgate's words) Joseph, being "rightfull," did not "be traye" Mary with thought,

word, or action (398.1238-9).

Not so in Biblical drama. Rather than resolving or suppressing the inherent tension in this

particularly fraught Biblical episode, N-Town raises its volume to a high dramatic decibel. N-

Town's Joseph not only doubts Mary out loud and in very insulting terms, he does so in front of

her servants and the audience. Throwing discretion to the wind, Joseph accuses Mary of

committing adultery with "sum other man" (12.28) and/or "sum boy" (12.75). When he asks

Mary, "whoos childe is this?" (12.47), she answers with the names of the usual suspects: Joseph,

Jesus, God the Father, the Holy Spirit, and the archangel Gabriel. In a running joke, the pageant

accumulates more and more candidates for paternity, parodying the doctrine of Mary's virginity by portraying her as a promiscuous adulteress.

★ **The First Suspect: Joseph**

Historically, the first and most obvious guess as to the father of Mary's child has been her husband, Joseph. Until the fourth century, sects of Christians (early on, the Ebionites, and later, the School of Antioch, most importantly Diodorus of Tarsus and Nestorius) believed that Jesus was the biological son of Mary and Joseph and the adopted son of God (Ehrman 155-6; Graef 36). N-Town's plot recapitulates this historical first response: in "Trial of Mary and Joseph," as soon as the news of Mary's pregnancy hits the streets, the entire village (including the local bishop) immediately assumes Joseph's paternity (14.86-88; 14.205, 218). The rumor has its roots in Matthew and Luke, who drop plenty of troubling hints that Joseph fathered Jesus. Indeed, Luke calls Joseph Jesus's father (2.41, 48). Furthermore, Matthew begins his narration of Jesus' birth with a genealogy that maps out Jesus' ancestors through Joseph rather than through Mary— an odd choice if Joseph and Jesus are not related by blood (Matthew 1:1-17).[91] This bothered early scribes to the extent that they felt the need to alter this passage to clarify Mary's virginity (Ehrman *Misquoting* 96; Schaberg 43-4).

Despite this little hiccup, the rest of Matthew's account of Jesus' birth reassuringly denies Joseph's paternity.[92] Luke's account of Jesus' conception, on the other hand, provides no such reassurance. In Luke 1.35, Gabriel explains to Mary that the power of God will "come upon [*eperchesthai*]" Mary and "overshadow [*episkiazein*]" her (Bovon 89). These verbs are used elsewhere in the Old and New Testament to describe God's abstract influence over all kinds of

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[91] In his genealogy, Matthew skips over Joseph: he writes that Jacob begat Joseph, "the husband of Mary, from whom was born Jesus" (1.16). Although this avoids explicit attribution of Jesus' paternity to Joseph, it does not deny it (Schaberg 43).

[92] Matthew clearly states that Joseph is not Jesus' father: he writes that Joseph did not consummate his marriage to Mary until after she gave birth to Jesus (1.25).

earthly events, from pregnancies to recoveries from sickness (Galatians 4.29; Acts 5:15). Luke leaves open the possibility that, with God's blessing, Mary and Joseph make a baby the old-fashioned, natural way (Schaberg 65-9; Fitzmeyer 338). In other words, God arranges it, Gabriel foretells it, and Mary and Joseph accomplish it.

Last but hardly least—whether or not Matthew and Luke independently or cooperatively, sporadically or consistently, allow for the possibility of Joseph's paternity, they both explicitly state that Mary and Joseph had children after the birth of Jesus. Matthew ends his narrative of the annunciation by writing that Joseph "knew [Mary] not *until* she brought forth her first-born son" (1.25). Some commentators insist that the word "until" in Greek "does not necessarily imply that after the time indicated something changed" (Luz 98). But the word "until" is the least of their problems. Matthew casually refers to Jesus's siblings (12.46). And he is not alone in this: the New Testament refers to Jesus's siblings in Luke 8:19-21; Mark 2.21; Galatians 1:19; and Acts 1:14. It is no wonder that until the fourth century, many (if not most) Christians—including Origen and Tertullian—subscribed to Matthew's report that Mary lost her virginity to Joseph (Graef 42; Warner 44).

The second-century apocryphal Gospel of James attempted to help the cause by making Joseph an old widower with children from a previous marriage (thus explaining Jesus' siblings), reluctant to take a young wife (and so unlikely to consummate their marriage).[93] Although the Gospel of James intended to protect Mary's chastity with this measure, it did not go far enough for Jerome, who found its depiction of Joseph as a once-fertile patriarch deeply troubling, his old age at the time of his marriage to the Virgin notwithstanding. (It seems that Jerome reckoned that if Joseph did it once, he could do it again. And that would not do.) Jerome insisted that Joseph, like Mary, made a vow of perpetual virginity and dedicated his life to chastity (Graef 90-91). As

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[93] See *The Protoevangelium of James* 363 and *The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* 372.

Jerome wrote, since "fornication ill befits a holy man," it follows that Joseph, "who was deemed worthy to be called the father of the Lord, remained a virgin with Mary" (39).

Jerome's reading won: by the late Middle Ages, the traditions of Mary's perpetual virginity and Joseph's celibacy dominated Western Christian culture. Of course, alternatives to this narrative did not completely vanish. Antennae could still pick up alternative signals. For example, the early fourteenth century Middle English poem *Cursor Mundi* describes Joseph as widowed rather than celibate: it notes that "his wijf was ded" (617).[94] But by and large, consensus characterized Joseph as a perpetual virgin and the union of Mary and Joseph as a "spiritual marriage," a "*syneisaktism*": "the domestic relations under which two self-professed ascetics of different sexes decide upon chaste cohabitation" (Elliott *Spiritual* 3). N-Town subscribes to this tradition. When Mary and Joseph wed, they both vow to "kepe clene" forever (10.292) and the bishop declares their sexless compromise "the holyest matrimony that evyr was in the werd!" (10.331).

The late Middles Ages understood Joseph as Mary's protector and caregiver—her "wardeyn and kepere," as N-Town puts it (10.290). Paraphrasing Aquinas, N-Town's Jesus explains his parents' marriage to the doctors in the Temple:

An old man Joseph, as I yow say,

[Mary] weddyd be meracle onto his wyff,

Her for to fede and kepe alway

And bothyn in clennesse be maydonys o lyff. (21.237-40)

Late medieval theologians claimed that without Joseph's protection, Mary would have been stoned to death *and* starved to death (Luz 93). She needed a legitimate patriarch to protect her.

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[94] Furthermore, the Limburg Echtverbintenis (Betrothal) calculates Joseph's age at forty years at the time of his marriage to the Virgin (Muir *Biblical* 92).

Commentators (both medieval and modern) express discomfort with the idea of the mother of Jesus pregnant outside of wedlock—despite their acknowledgement that they do not consider her husband to be her child's father. Nevertheless, they prefer that Mary keep up appearances. As Ambrose argues, had Mary conceived out of wedlock, promiscuous teenager girls could "cover themselves with the excuse that the Mother of the Lord had also been oppressed by ill fame" (Aquinas *Summa* 3.29).

Yet these theories and traditions hardly afforded Joseph the respect he is afforded today. By contrast, medieval altarpieces, ballads, and farces mock Joseph as a figure of fun, a ridiculous old fool (Huizinga 153).[95] Today, devotional imagery pictures the Holy Family as a patriarchal nuclear family: Joseph takes care of Mary and Jesus, who respect his authority. In the Middle Ages, however, Jesus and Mary were the power couple and Joseph the third wheel, "God's cuckold" (Newman 284). Though this began to change in the fifteenth century, thanks to the "top-down" efforts of theologians like Jean Gerson, the process of Joseph's sanctification took centuries to accomplish (Newman 287).[96] Indeed, Joseph did not escape his bad reputation until at least the seventeenth century (Sheingorn 161-2).[97]

In many late medieval images, Joseph wears no halo, but rather a *pileum*, a hat that marks him as Jewish, and clothes that mark him as Mary's social inferior.[98] In Melchior Broederlam's late fourteenth-century Dijon Altarpiece, Joseph, marginalized to the utmost edge of the frame, turns away from Mary and Jesus; their loving embrace, in turn, excludes him. Joseph often

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[95] As Eustace Deschamps put it, "C'est Joseph le rassoté"—the fool" (1:277-78 no. 150).
[96] For more on Jean Gerson's rehabilitation of Joseph, see McGuire 231-239 and 261-298, Vasvari 163-89, and Sheingorn 161-180.
[97] Wilson pushes it back to the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Italy and Sheingorn finds evidence that Joseph was portrayed in a positive light in medieval artifacts from twelfth-century England and thirteenth-century Germany.
[98] See Schreckenberg 125 (1), 127 (6), 131 (13 and 14), 135 (22), 136 (23), and 139 (30). See also Sara Lipton 15-18.

watches from the margins while Mary and Jesus kiss, chin-chuck, feed, and pet each other.[99] He

sleeps through the birth of Jesus, napping in the far corner. In images like the late fifteenth-

century Portinari Altarpiece by Hugo van der Goes, visual clues imply that Joseph has cuckold

horns, and a missing shoe signifies his foolishness.[100] Frequently, Joseph's carpentry tools serve

as sad phallic props: in the Mérode Altarpiece, he impotently drills holes in planks, unaware that

in the very next panel, the Holy Ghost is impregnating his wife. As Louise Vasvari puts it, "the

old man is 'up' only to 'screwing,' 'boring,' 'pounding,' and 'planking' a passive piece of wood"

(168). And as I have already mentioned, Joseph mimes his impotence by offering Mary and

Jesus rotten fruit, in contrast to the ripe and luscious grapes, pears, or cherries already dangling

in their lovingly intertwined fingers. Not only did medieval tradition relegate Joseph to base

servitude, it also mocked him for doing a terrible job of it. Though theologians like Aquinas and

Jean Gerson maintained that Mary needed Joseph to survive, their opponents portray Joseph as

completely superfluous if not bungling—except in his contribution of comic relief.

  N-Town enthusiastically participates in the tradition of depicting Joseph as an "olde

cokwold," as he himself puts it (12.55). Emphasis on "olde": N-Town finds it endlessly amusing

to pillory Joseph for his hyperbolic decrepitude. When Joseph first enters, he declares, "For

febylnesse of age, my jorney I may not spede" (10.157). This is an understatement: dialog soon

reveals that Joseph not only "may not speed," but actually lies completely prone on the boards of

the stage (10.159-60). He complains, "Age and febylnesse doth me enbrase / That I may nother

well goo ne stond" (10.161-2). This is especially funny because Joseph is competing in a fertility

contest: the angel of the Lord commands that all the eligible bachelors of the House of David

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[99] For more images of Joseph at the margins, see Schreckenberg 130 (12), 131 (13 and especially 14), and 136 (23). See also Steinberg 48 (fig. 59), 72 (fig. 77), 79 (fig. 84), 132 (fig. 145), and 156 (fig. 171).

[100] See also the late thirteenth-century Bargello diptych of the *Adoration of the Shepherds*, in which Joseph's hat slips from his head, and, again, he has lost his shoe. For more on the significance of missing a shoe in medieval imagery, see Malcolm Jones 113-4.

compete for Mary's hand in marriage by bringing a "whyte yard" (10.128) or "*virgas*" to the

Temple and see whose yard "doth blome and bere" (10.132).[101] N-Town's phallic symbolism is

not subtle. While the other heirs of King David hurry across the *platea* with their impressive

yards firmly in hand, Joseph lies limp as a worm.

Furthermore, Joseph explicitly states that he cannot sexually reproduce: "Abyl to be

maryed," he says, "that is not I" (10.178). He elaborates: he is "old and also colde" (10.189)—

physically incapable of generating the heat necessary to turn blood into semen. As Peter Brown

inimitably explains Galenic theory, "To make love was to bring one's blood to the boil, as the

spirit swept through veins, turning blood into the foam of semen"—the human body as "espresso

machine" (17).[102] Joseph is too cold to make this happen. His seed (as the extremely influential

late thirteenth, early fourteenth century-medical tract *De Secretis Mulierum* explains) "is as thin

as water" and "not fit for generation" (137).

When Joseph's turn comes to offer his yard at the altar, he whines and stalls: "I am so

agyd and so olde," he complains, "That both myn leggys gyn to folde — / I am ny almost lame!"

(10.226-8). He even loses his symbolic phallus: "I kannot my rodde fynde!" (10.235). The text

describes this paltry offering as "a ded stok" (10.262). Period religious writing often calls idols

dead stocks; N-Town's use of the phrase suggests that Joseph's sexuality is as useless as a false

god, while Mary's sexuality, by contrast, is generative and efficacious. N-Town represents Mary

as the young, beautiful, blossoming flower of Christianity and Joseph as the Old Testament—

"old" taken to its comic extremity. Geriatric Joseph serves as a farcical analogue to the Christian

iconographic representation of Judaism as Blind Synagoga, her eyes veiled and standard broken.

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[101] *Virgas* can mean "a branch," "graft," or the male genitals (*Perseus*).

[102] Jacquart and Thomasset add that medieval medicine explained erections as arising "by means of much spirit" or *pneuma* (31), a substance often described as "flatulence," "a sort of gas" or "vapor" (79). When heated, this gas would need to be exhaled (80). For more on impotence, see 143 and 169-73. See also Laqueur 45.

Medieval depictions of Blind Synagoga sometimes replace the female allegorical figure with

Moses or a decrepit man, types that are visually and typologically comparable to Joseph—very

old, with a useless rod, horns, and one shoe off.[103] And yet despite all this, Joseph wins the

contest. As he holds his rod up to the altar, it blossoms with white "flourys fre" (10.262),

signifying that the Holy Ghost sits upon it and elects Joseph as Mary's bridegroom (10.197).

It might seem that N-Town defends Mary's purity by marrying her to Joseph. This is

certainly how scholarship has understood it: consensus maintains that N-Town clarifies that

Joseph poses no threat to Mary's virginity by emphasizing his decrepitude. Yet this reading does

not hold water. Rather than asserting Joseph's inability to reproduce, the miracle of the blooming

rod suggests the opposite. If we extrapolate tenor from vehicle, the metaphorical miracle mimes

Joseph's phallus serving as a vehicle for God's seed to enter Mary's body. Although Joseph

could barely stand up before approaching the altar, once he reaches it and begins to pray, he

stops complaining. At the end of his prayer, we learn that he has—miraculously—managed to

hold his rod aloft throughout his speech: when the rod blossoms, he exclaims, "I may not lyfte

myn handys heye. / Lo, lo, lo! What se ye now?" (10.255-6). In other words, Joseph holds his

rod erect until it bursts into blossom, at which point he drops his arms. This mimes the progress

of sexual intercourse from erection to ejaculation. God empowers and Joseph performs.[104]

This metaphorical model might seem to undermine the doctrine of Mary's perfect

virginity. Symbolic penetration by Joseph's phallus—no matter who contributed the seed or

power of erection—contradicts current understanding of Mary's inviolate body. And yet N-Town

phrases this slapstick miracle as yet another cuckold joke at Joseph's expense, an extension of

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[103] For Judaism as a decrepit man, see Gibson *Theatre* 152 and Schreckenberg 120 (2) and 63 (20). See also the *Triptych of the Burning Bush* by Nicolas Froment (1435-1486), which represents Judaism in relationship to Mary with an old man who typologically suggests Moses, Zachariah, Joachim, and Joseph.
[104] Only after this mime of assisted potency does Joseph revert to type, kvetching about his aches and pains.

the idea that God used Joseph as his tool. Indeed, the miracle of the blooming rod seems to be one of many ways that N-Town imagines the virgin birth.

❧ Mary's Locked Door

N-Town's play of "Joseph's Doubt" begins with Joseph banging on a locked door, shouting at Mary: "How, dame, how! Undo youre dore, undo! / Are ye at hom? Why speke ye notht?" (12.1-2). A servant answers, "Who is ther? Why cry ye so? / Telle us youre herand, wyl ye ought?" (12.3-4). Joseph shouts back, even angrier: "Undo youre dore, I sey yow to! / For to com in is all my thought" (12.5-6). Here we have a familiar farcical episode: the locked-out husband banging on his own door, trying to get in. Perhaps the most famous example of this scene comes from Plautus' *Amphitryon* (if via its descendent, Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*), which concerns a comparable love triangle, in that Jupiter replaces an absent husband's place in his wife's bed. The farcical mime of the locked door implies that although Mary has shut Joseph out (rejected and replaced him with another lover), Joseph makes a concerted—though impotent—effort to get inside (by banging on her locked door). As he says, "to com in is all my thought." This suggests that Joseph seeks to consummate his marriage to Mary, but that he has no ability to follow through due to his impotence. However, this does not stop him from trying.

In the standard January/May fabliau plot, the stock character of the *senex amans* marries a young woman, fails to satisfy her, and loses her to a young man who can. A conventional scene, often situated in the plot's rising action, narrates the decrepit husband's sexual advances towards his young wife, whose response tends to range from crafty tolerance to horrified disgust. William Dunbar's Middle Scots fabliau, *The Tretis of the Tua Maritt Wemen and the Wedo*, perhaps the most thorough and explicit British fabliau, repeats infelicitous sex scenes between impotent husbands and their young brides *ad nauseam*. Fabliaux cuckolds do not abstain. Rather,

they try and fail. What does this entail? In Dunbar's fabliau, cuckolds kiss (94), grip (100), beclip, clap (104), and shove (106) their poor wives. They scratch their cheeks and lips with their "hard hurcheone skyn"—hard hedgehog skin (107). And yet, as notes a young wife, "soft and soupill as the silk is his sary lume" (96)—his sorry tool is as soft and supple as a silkworm. The Wife of Bath confirms these reports. She confesses of her three "goode, riche, and olde" husbands that "unnethe mighte they the statut holde, / In which they were bounden" (204-5)—in other words, they could "unnethe" (scarcely, barely) pay the marriage debt they owed (*MED*). Yet that does not mean that their net amount of sexual labor diminished. On the contrary, she says, "As help me God, I laughe when I thinke / How pitously anight I made hem swinke" (207-8). She over-compensated for their disadvantage by making them work harder.

Dunbar's old cuckolds "may weill to the syn assent," but "sakles" (sinless) are their deeds (97).[105] In the Chester play of the Annunciation and the Nativity, Joseph resembles this remark, proclaiming, "These thirty winters, though I would, / I might not play no game" (6.135-6). Because of the indeterminacy of the words "would" and "might," Joseph could mean, "even if I wanted to, I could not" (purely hypothetical)—or, "though I want to, I cannot." Joseph's decrepitude does not shut down fabliau possibilities; rather, Biblical drama generates fertile opportunities for sexual farce from his impotence. In addition to portraying Mary and Joseph's marriage as spiritual and pure, N-Town also, paradoxically, portrays it as worldly—even as sexually active. While scholars often remark on the homeliness that characterizes late medieval devotion, the extent to which its drama domesticates the marriage of Mary and Joseph has not been fully appreciated.

N-Town's depiction of Mary's vagina as locked door intertwines science and theology. *De Secretis Mulierum* explains that the "the vulva" (which, as Jacquart and Thomasset note,

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[105] This line parodies Jesus' high-minded condemnation of adultery committed in one's heart from Matthew 5.28.

"designated a rather vague semantic field") "is named from the word *valva*, folding door,

because it is the door of the womb" (Jacquart and Thomasset 24; *DSM* 66). In the Old Testament,

Ezekiel describes a gate: "This gate shall be shut, it shall not be opened, and man shall not pass

through it: because the Lord the God of Israel is entered in through it, and it shall be shut for the

prince" (44.2). Ambrose glossed this as referring to Mary: "Mary," he writes, "is the door which

was closed and not to be opened" (Sugano 375).[106] In an earlier play, N-Town explicitly brings

this up, parading Ezekiel out in a pageant of Old Testament prophets to foretell the coming "of a

gate that sperd was trewly / And no man but a prince myght therin go" (7.45-8).[107] Joseph's

knocking on Mary's locked door represents this theological tradition, demonstrating the

resemblance between typology and farce. God has passed through Mary's locked gate (her

virginity) without unlocking it. God entered—Joseph cannot (Gibson *Theatre* 152-4).

However, after layering the image of Mary's virginity on top of the image of the locked

door on which Joseph bangs, N-Town has Mary open that door and welcome Joseph home.[108]

When Mary makes her entrance, she immediately says, "It is my spowse that spekyth us to! /

Ondo the dore — his wyl were wrought! / Wellcome hom, myn husbond dere!" (12.7-9). And in

he goes. Mary is a paradoxically virgin and wife, locked *and* open. Although medieval imagery

frequently depicts Mary as an enclosed and locked space, we must not neglect the other half of

this important Marian paradox. Mary is also wide open: her images sit with widespread knees

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[106] See also Ambrose *De institutione virginis* 320.

[107] It is worth noting that the verb "sperd" has a double meaning: to lock and to penetrate (*MED*). Thus, paradoxically, God locked Mary's vagina by penetrating it.

[108] Gibson reads this as "a comic parody of the Virgin's Divine Conception of Christ, a parody in which Joseph unwittingly re-enacts the…mystery of the Incarnation…" (*Theatre* 142). For Gibson, the comedy "is not *fabliau* so much as a remarkably inventive translation of the *porta clausa* mystery into dramatic action" (*Theatre* 151). While I take Gibson's point, I would argue that Joseph's reenactment of the Incarnation also fits into the progress of the fabliau plot and undermines the doctrine of Mary's virginity by suggesting that Mary and Joseph are sexually active.

and exposed breasts and stand with outstretched arms in open arches and the open air.[109] The pervasive eleventh century antiphon *Alma Redemptoris Mater* (familiar to readers of the *Prioress' Tale*) describes Mary as a permeable gate to Heaven: "*pervia caeli Porta*" (Bale 67-8). Typological and iconographic comparisons of Mary to a traversable portal refer to her role as Ecclesia, the figure of the welcoming Church, whose door never closes. N-Town interlaces this positive theological openness with the fabliau suggestion that Mary, after having taken a lover during Joseph's absence, begins, or resumes, their worldly marriage upon his return.

Later in "Joseph's Doubt," Joseph says, "Here may all men this proverbe trow: / 'That many a man doth bete the bow; / Another man hath the brydde'" (12.81-3). He frames the proverb with a piece of advice: all men should trust in its truth, he says, because of what they see "here," in this play. If we follow Joseph's advice and apply the proverb to the pageant, it implies that Joseph beat the bush—in other words, Joseph did all the work—but another man got the reward, the bird. If the bird represents Mary herself (or rather sexual possession of Mary's body), then Joseph suggests that he wooed Mary to no avail. Even this contradicts the defenses put into place by Saint Jerome and Jean Gerson, who claimed that chaste Joseph never even began to try to assay his wife. But it could also mean something else. If Mary is the bush and the bird is her baby, then beating the bush suggests the toil of matrimony: working to provide food and shelter—and laboring to pay the marriage debt. Effectively, Joseph implies that he has been attempting to impregnate Mary—to beget his own egg, rather than caring for God's cuckoo.[110] Here, Joseph represents himself not only as God's tool, but also as his rival.

✒ God's Cuckold

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[109] For medieval images of Mary that emphasize her openness, see *The Intercession of Christ and the Virgin* attributed to Lorenzo Monaco, Piero Della Francesca's *Madonna del Parto* and *Madonna della Misericordia*, and *The Annunciation* attributed to Petrus Christus. For more on the subject of Mary's widespread knees, see Caviness 8.
[110] One possible etymology for "cuckold" stems from Aristotle's description of the cuckoo as a bird that "brings forth in other nests than its own" (238).

Joseph refuses to marry Mary three times. Mary terrifies Joseph (10.270)—he fully expects her nag, rob, beat, and murder him (10.276-284). Following the misogynist rhetorical tradition of "advice against marriage" that derives from Jerome's *Adversus Jovinianum*, Joseph assumes Mary—like every other daughter of Eve—to be lecherous, deceitful, unscrupulous, thieving, and violent. Even after reluctantly giving in to God's commands, Joseph continues to harbor his suspicions about Mary. Critics have argued that N-Town neatly inverts Joseph's misogynist expectations by proving him wrong according to two generic sets of expectations, those of fabliau and advice against marriage: Joseph expects Mary to lie and cheat, but finds, in the end, that she remains chaste and true.

This would work nicely if Joseph were proven wrong. But is he? At his wedding, Joseph predicts that Mary will commit adultery. He is not the only one. The bishop also expects disaster. He warns that because Mary is young, Joseph is old, and "many man is sclepyr of tonge," Mary should avoid "evyl langage" by taking three chaperones with her to watch her at all times (10.344-351). The bishop justifies the need to supervise Mary by invoking anonymous, hypothetical people who talk too much (many men with slippery tongues). We need not look too far for a group to represent these skeptics: we could understand them as the haunting voice of pagan, Jewish, and heretical polemic—or as the audience itself. Mary's own mother reiterates Ysakar's fears, warning Mary to be "sad and sobyr and nothyng wylde" while her husband is away (10.394). Even Mary herself seems to expect that she will fall, like Eve before her. After Joseph's departure, weeping, she begs God to "save" her "maydenhed" (10.478-86). From what immanent threat? Perhaps from what everyone seems to fear: female concupiscence (10.478-86).

These many dire warnings build suspense and finally climax when Mary fulfills them by getting pregnant, apparently breaking the rules of her interlocking vows of celibacy and marriage.

This is exactly how Joseph, the bishop, and the neighborhood interpret her pregnancy. When first

confronted by Mary's swollen belly and many excuses, Joseph turns to the men in the audience

and warns them:

> Ya, ya, all olde men to me take tent
>
> And weddyth no wyff, in no kynnys wyse,
>
> That is a yonge wench, be myn asent,
>
> For doute and drede and swych servyse!
>
> Alas, alas, my name is shent!
>
> All men may me now dyspyse
>
> And seyn: "Olde cokwold, thi bow is bent
>
> Newly now after the Frensche gyse!" (12.49-56)

Joseph prompts "all olde men" to take in the full horror of his situation and, motivated by that

sight, to resolve never to marry a young woman. Diatribes of this ilk conventionally cite Mary as

the exception to the rule—as the opposite of Xanthippe, Clytemnestra, Jezebel, and Eve.[111] But

in Biblical drama, Joseph conventionally cites Mary as *the* negative exemplar, *the* definitive

proof of the misogynist rhetorical tradition he employs: he instructs his key demographic (old

men) to take his advice "for doute and drede and *swych* servyse" (my italics)—for dread of being

served like Mary served him.[112] Specifically, Joseph accuses Mary of having cheated on him,

humiliated him, and ruined his reputation. He complains that all men despise him as an "olde

cokwold… after the Frensche gyse."

Is he wrong? In the N-Town plays, Joseph formally plays the thankless role of an "olde

cokwold," fully immersed in the genre of fabliau ("the Frensche gyse"). N-Town mocks him

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[111] For more on advice against marriage, see Hanna and Lawler.

[112] Joseph frames the rhetoric of advice against marriage at Mary's expense not only in N-Town, but also in *The York Plays* 13.11-64, *The Towneley Plays* X.161-175, and Chester 6.145-152.

mercilessly, playing his humiliation and suffering for laughs (14.258-65). Despite Jean Gersons's protestations, far beyond being *a* cuckold, Joseph is perhaps *the* medieval cuckold, and the Nativity *the* template for comic adultery: old man, young wife, superior lover, and an ingenious excuse. Chaucer's Miller's and Merchant's Tale parody the Nativity story, as do many tales from Boccaccio's *Decameron*, the *Carajicomedia,* and myriad other examples from the wider fabliau tradition.[113] Every time N-Town treats Joseph like a fool, it proves him right: he is an "olde cokwold." And who else but his wife could have made him one?

Joseph's deep suspicions about Mary represent strongly held medieval cultural beliefs that stubbornly resist inversion. As Chaucer says, "man sholde wedde his similitude" (c3225). A marriage between a young woman (full to the brim with sexual needs) and an impotent old man undoes Paul's justification of matrimony: the sexual marriage debt serves to protect both parties from temptation. Fabliaux assume that if a young woman's prodigious lust is not fulfilled, she will seek satisfaction elsewhere. Critics tend to interpret this equation as irredeemable misogyny. Indeed, as many historians of sexuality have demonstrated, medievals often expressed the opinion that female sexuality raged at a fever pitch (far more intense than male desire) and could not be controlled by will or law (Laqueur 43-4). This belief propels many misogynist tirades across a wide expanse of pre-modern culture. However, medieval culture does not always and only condemn young wives for "following their appetite," as the Wife of Bath puts it (623). Fabliaux and courtly love romances *celebrate* sexual adventuresses.

Scholars like Anne Ladd and Lesley Johnson long ago demonstrated that in the overwhelming majority of fabliaux, the adulteress wins and escapes all punishment.[114] Furthermore, the authors of fabliaux seem to identify with their heroines, whom they praise for

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[113] See Kendrick 16-19 and Giles 28-31 and 65.
[114] See Ladd 92-107 and Johnson 298-307.

their vitality, creativity, and intelligence (Johnson 307). Medieval texts often root for female agents of irrepressible desire. In fact, when N-Town subjects Mary to the suspicions of her parents, neighbors, bishop, and crotchety old husband, it does not exclusively build suspense for Mary to reverse her wardens' expectations by dutifully abiding by their paranoid and joyless strictures. It also builds suspense in another genre: towards Mary's emancipation, reward, and revenge. Mary makes her doubters "fry in their own grease," as the Wife of Bath puts it (493-4). She fulfills their worst suspicions *and* wins God's favor, hooking the ultimate medieval fantasy lover—Jesus Christ himself.[115] (As we will see in the next section, N-Town participates in the tradition of depicting the Annunciation as the marriage of Mary and Jesus.) Mary gets hers and gets away with it. This fabliaux arc parallels the theological plot of Christianity's supersession of Judaism: love motivates God and Mary to break the law.

True, at the conclusion of the pageant, Joseph recants his accusations against Mary. After the angel's intervention, Joseph realizes that had Mary not been virtuous, "God wold not a be thee withinne" (12.201-2). In other words, God's election of Mary tautologically proves her virtue.[116] However, Joseph does not learn that Mary's child is his. He learns that God is his rival, that *God* has cuckolded him. Thus, Joseph does not learn that he is not a cuckold. Rather, he learns his place. He is God's cuckold and Mary is God's mistress. The reason that Mary is guilty of adultery and yet immaculate is that she is so powerful that she is above the rules. In *The Manciple's Tale*, Chaucer explains the distinction between foul adultery and true love: an adulteress who is "gentile, in estaat above / She shal be cleped his lady, as in love" while a "povre woman" will be called "his wenche or lemman" (212-222). If the status of a

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[115] Newman has described Jesus as a "fantasy husband" for medieval wives (*God* 273).
[116] Not for long: Joseph soon backslides yet again. But I will put this pattern of recurring doubt aside for a moment, returning to it in the next chapter.

gentlewoman—like Guinevere or Isolde—raises her from "lemman" to "lady," then what does

Mary's far higher estate accomplish? It makes her a perfect virgin.

★ **The Second, Third, and Fourth Suspects: God the Father, the Holy Ghost, and Jesus**

Did Mary have sex with God? There have been many answers to that question. In Luke,

Gabriel explains that the Holy Spirit will "come upon [*eperchesthai*]" and "overshadow

[*episkiazein*]" Mary (1.35). N-Town translates this as, "The Holy Gost shal come fro above to

thee, / And the vertu of hym hyest shal shadu thee so" (11.251-2). New Testament scholars stress

that Luke's verbs do not have sexual connotations (Bovon 52; Fitzmyer 337-8). Likewise, the

Middle English Dictionary does not list sexual meanings for the phrases "shadow" or "come

upon."[117] However, Matthew's angel tells a different tale: he explains, "What is begotten

[*gennēthen*] of her is of the Holy Spirit" (1.21).[118]

The sexual connotations of *this* word are unmistakable: "begat" implies that God

inseminated Mary. To get around this problem, New Testament scholars protest that the Greek

phrase used by Matthew (and Luke) to represent God clearly suggests that an abstract power—

rather than a palpable entity—impregnated Mary (Fitzmeyer 350). They argue that the subject of

the verb "beget" is not "the [Greek neuter, Hebrew feminine] Spirit as Mary's sexual partner"

but rather "God's creative intervention by the Spirit" (Luz 95; Fitzmyer 350). As Schaberg

points out, this only gets God and Mary out of the frying pan: making God's participation in

Mary's pregnancy too abstract allows for the possibility that God merely arranged or endorsed a

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[117] The earliest *OED* entry for a sexual meaning of the verb "come" is 1650 (17). However, the fifteenth-century Middle English Marian lyric "I sing of a maiden" seems to use the verb "comen" to describe God's impregnation of Mary in sexual terms.

[118] Here I use Luz' translation of Matthew 1.21 (89). The Vulgate translates the line as "*quod enim in ea natum est de Spiritu Sancto est*" (Matthew 1.21). The Rheims Douai Bible translates this as "that which is borne in her, is of the Holy Ghost." The Wycliffite Bible does the same: "for that thing that is borun in hir is of the Hooli Goost." The King James Bible (1611) uses the phrase "conceiued" instead of "born in." In N-Town's Joseph's Doubt, the angel translates Matthew 1.21 in this way: "I telle thee, God wyl of [Mary] be born / And sche, clene mayd as she was beforn" (12.156-7). However, in the Nativity pageant, Joseph uses the verb "begat" to describe God's relation to Jesus (15.39).

natural conception between Mary and a third party (Joseph or some other man) (111-114). On

the other hand, making God's contribution to Mary's pregnancy too concrete risks catching God

and the Virgin *in flagrante delicto*. Theologians and scholars in pursuit of the virgin birth must

walk a fine line.

New Testament scholars tend to turn to the influence of Greek and Egyptian pagan

mythology to explain Matthew's suggestion of a sexual relationship between Mary and God (Luz

92, 97; Bovon 45-46).[119] This was the very point made by the Greek philosopher Celsus in the

second century. According to Origen, Celsus argued that the evangelists recycled Greek myths

"in fabricating the story of Jesus' virgin birth" (57). Celsus found the relationship between God

and Mary deeply inappropriate: "God by nature does not love corruptible bodies," and so, he

argued, should not "love a woman" (57). Amusingly, Celsus was also scandalized that the

Christian God chose a "woman of no breeding—one unknown and un-regarded even by her

neighbors" (58). Demonstrating much better taste, Zeus and Apollo traded exclusively in

princesses. (Christianity capitulated to the terms this barb, turning Mary from a nobody into the

heiress of King David and princess of Nazareth.)

Origen and Justin Martyr tried their very best to defend Mary against Celsus' attack and

others like it. Contrary to what we might expect, both mount this defense by providing very

persuasive examples of pagan myths that resemble the virgin birth. Justin focuses on Perseus,

born of Danae and a golden shower that, as he tells it, impregnated her and yet preserved her

virginity (93, 254, 262). Origen's narrative of the virgin birth of Plato parallels Matthew's

account of the Nativity: "When Plato was born of Amphictione, Ariston was prevented from

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[119] New Testament scholars tend to argue that the concept of a virgin birth without a human father was foreign to the Palestinian Jewish tradition. They often cite Genesis' prohibition of the interbreeding of angels with the daughters of men as evidence of this theory (4.1-5). Surely, however, the presence of a prohibition does not prove the absence of a tradition, but rather the opposite. As Warner points out, the Old Testament consistently describes Israel as Yahweh as lovers; in fact, the cult of Mary builds on this foundation (123).

having sexual intercourse with her until she had brought forth the child which she had by

Apollo" (36). Origen and Justin intend for these examples to prove that pagans stole their virgin

birth myths from Christianity, and not the other way around (Justin 93, 254, 262). Yet neither

quibbles with the argument that certain pagan myths strikingly resemble the virgin birth. *That*

they both accept without hesitation.[120]

As the centuries turned, the relationship between Mary and God (and the Holy Ghost)

only accumulated more sexual significance. In the fourth century, Ambrose first identified Jesus

and Mary as the lovers in the Song of Songs, thus adding Mary's son to the list of her heavenly

lovers . By the twelfth century, this theme had been much embroidered. In his extremely

influential sermons on the Song of Songs, Bernard of Clairvaux wrote,

> Happy indeed were the kisses [Jesus] pressed on [Mary's] lips when she was nursing and
>
> as a mother delighted in the child in the virgin's lap. But surely will we not deem much
>
> happier those kisses which in blessed greeting she receives today from the mouth of him
>
> who sits on the right hand of the Father, when she ascends to the throne of glory, singing
>
> a nuptial hymn and saying, 'Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth'? (Warner
>
> 126)[121]

Inspired by Bernard's effusions, the high and late Middle Ages enthusiastically eroticized all of

Mary's maternal experiences: the Annunciation and Nativity became betrothals, marriages, and

consummations (Warner 130; Rubin 212).[122] Perhaps most well-known in the English tradition is

the fifteenth-century erotic Marian lyric "I sing of a maiden," which describes Jesus inseminating

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[120] This does not bother them because they dismiss these pagan copycats, as they see them, as "the forgeries of that treacherous serpent" (Justin 262). Origen calls them mere myths invented to make Greek heroes seem superior and supernatural (36-7). Yet this resembles Origen's own justification for the necessity of Jesus' virgin birth, which had to happen, he argues, in order to demonstrate Jesus' supernatural superiority (32).

[121] See also *PL* 183 col 996.

[122] Abbot Aelred of Rievaulx, *On the Annunciation*: "Notice, brothers, what nuptials these are, how heaven-made: in them the bridegroom is God, the bride is the virgin, and the bridegroom's messenger an angel!" (160). See also Graef 249.

Mary like dew falling on the fecund "gras," "flour," and "spray," echoing Hippocrates' theory

that "a woman's heat blazes most brilliantly when the male sperm is sprayed upon it, like a flame

that flares when wine is sprinkled on it" (170; Laqueur 50).[123] By the fifteenth century, European

images overwhelmingly portray the Godhead as an incestuous (and inter-species) marriage of

God the Father, Jesus the handsome young man, the animal Spirit (usually a dove), and Mary,

their beautiful bride, daughter, mother, and sister (Newman 247-52; Steinberg 3-5).

N-Town stages this tangled erotic web most spectacularly. In N-Town's pageant of

Mary's Assumption, the Trinity, a chorus of martyrs, and orders of angels sing catches from the

Song of Songs, identifying Mary as God's "bride of Lebanon" (326). The martyrs sing, "*Que est

ista que assendit de deserto, / Deliciis affluens, innixa super dilectum suum?*" ("Who is this who

comes up from the wilderness, / Flowing with delights, leaning on her beloved?") (41.343-4). A

three-personed figure, Dominus, answers by singing to Mary, "*Veni tu electa mea et ponam in te

thronum meum / Quia concupivit rex speciem tuam*" ("Come, my chosen one, and I will set you

upon my throne / Because the king has desired your beauty") (41.318-9).[124] After summoning

Mary's soul into his lap ("*in sinum Dei*"), Dominus calls her "my dowe, my nehebor, and my

swete frende" (41.510), crowning her as his queen and consort (4.526). As Gibson points out,

"Christ calls Mary to him in a liturgy of holy espousal and coronation that is the final and

ecstatic triumph of her creating womb" (168), which is adoringly described by the Trinity as its

"tabernacle of joye, vessel of lyf," and "hefnely temple" (41.511).

In this same vein, N-Town stages the Annunciation as a pyrotechnically dazzling

celebration of consummation. Once the Parliament of Heaven has decided to accomplish the

Incarnation, the Holy Ghost arranges the match between Jesus and Mary, telling Jesus, "I, Love,

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[123] This is the standard interpretation of this poem: see *Middle English Lyric* 325-349.

[124] It seems likely that Dominus would wear a mask with three heads or three faces, as was common in late medieval art; see Mills "Jesus as Monster" 38-43.

to youre lover shal yow lede" (11.182). Jesus takes on the role of the eager bridegroom,

chastising the Parliament of Heaven for taking too long to allow him access to Mary's body. He

hurries Gabriel (like Juliet hurries her nurse):

> Hyge thee! Thu were there apace
>
> Ellys we shal be there thee beffore!
>
> I have so grett hast to be man thore
>
> In that mekest and purest virgyne. (11.197-202)

Gabriel promises to hurry: "It shal be do with a thought" (41.213). But before he goes, the Holy

Spirit gives him two additional messages for Mary to serve as "tokyns" of truth (11.208). The

first token, taken from the Gospel of Luke, is the pregnancy of Mary's barren and elderly cousin

Elizabeth (11.208-10). The second token, *not* taken from the Bible, is orgasmic pleasure.

The Holy Ghost explains: "Her body shal be so fulfylt with blys / That she shal sone

thynke this sownde credible" (11.205-212). N-Town represents the moment of Mary's

conception with an elaborate special effect: "Here the Holy Gost discendit with thre bemys to

our Lady, the Sone of the Godhed nest with thre bemys to the Holy Gost, the Fadyr godly with

thre bemys to the Sone. And so entre all thre to her bosom" (110).[125] Mary can only describe the

feeling of being simultaneously penetrated by so many celestial lasers with the inexpressibility

topos: "I cannot telle what joy, what blysse / Now I fele in my body!" (11.305-6). N-Town's

most immediate source, Nicholas Love's *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, confirms that

Mary's orgasmic sensation marks the exact moment of Jesus' conception: "Our Lady was

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[125] Scholars emphasize that the stage directions suggest that all three persons of the Trinity inseminate Mary (*Theatre* 144; Meredith, "Carved and Spoken Words" 183), as in the theology of Godfrey of Admont, who argued that the Trinity "as a whole was active in the one flesh of the Virgin for the conception and birth of God's son" (Schafer 162-3).

fulfilled and enflamed with the Holy Ghost and in the love of God more burning than she was

before, and feeling that she had conceived, kneeled down and thanked God" (26).[126]

Medieval medicine held that heat caused and signaled orgasm and conception (Laqueur

46). *De Secretis Mulierum* explains conception in this way: "When a woman is having sexual

intercourse with a man she releases her *menses* [female seed] at the same time that the man

releases sperm, and both seeds together enter the *vulva* [vagina] simultaneously and are mixed

together, and then the woman conceives" (65).[127] In their landmark study of medieval medicine,

Jacquart and Thomasset demonstrate that medieval scientists strenuously debated whether or not

conception demanded an orgasmic emission of female seed (61-70): Aristotle said no (61-2),

Hippocrates, Galen, and Avicenna said yes (62-3). By the fifteenth century, it was widely agreed

that female seed contributed to conception, but also that its ejaculation signified excessive

concupiscence (Jacquart and Thomasset 69-70). This theory demanded that medieval theologians

explain how Jesus could have been conceived without any male contribution and yet also without

any excessively concupiscent emission of matter from Mary. Responding to this necessity,

Aquinas argued that the Holy Ghost rather than "the impurity of lust" drew only Mary's "purest

blood" into her womb (rather than concupiscent female seed, as in a normal conception), and

formed Jesus from that incorrupt matter (Summa 3.31.5. 66-9).[128] In other words, the Holy Ghost

moved the necessary fluids on Mary's behalf. It seems that Aquinas found orgasmic emission

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[126] Hildegard of Bingen confirms this idea, writing, "The warmth of a man kindles a woman to conceive. Therefore, the warmth of the living and unquenchable fire came to kindle the Virgin and made her fertile" (Newman *Sister* 175).

[127] See also Jacquart and Thomasset 70.

[128] Hugh of St. Victor and Hildegard of Bingen express similar ideas. Hildegard writes that the heat of God's semen "cleansed the foam of human pleasure from [Mary's] blood" and coagulated a "small clot" (embryonic Jesus) from this purified blood (Newman *Sister* 175).

and perfect virginity incompatible.[129] By contrast, N-Town includes an orgasm in its descriptions

of Mary's virginal conception of Jesus (and Anna's immaculate conception of Mary).

Furthermore, N-Town twice describes Mary's pregnancy as a symptom of sexual arousal.

When Joseph first notices that Mary is pregnant, he exclaims, "Thi wombe to hyghe doth stonde!"

(12.26), and then repeats a variation on this exclamation several lines down: "Thy wombe is gret;

it gynnyth to ryse!" (12.30). This vivid description of Mary's womb as visibly rising and

engorging is a remarkable way of describing a pregnant belly, one repeated later in the

manuscript by other detractors. In "The Trial of Mary and Joseph," Raise-Slander reiterates this

description, remarking to Back-Biter that Mary's "wombe doth swelle / And is as gret as thinne

or myne!" (14.80-81), comparing Mary's pregnancy to gluttony and reading her swollen belly as

a symptom of excessive carnal appetite. These descriptions by Joseph and Raise-Slander

characterize Mary's risen womb as a kind of female erection, the telltale sign of her "delyght"

(14.301). This concurs with medieval medicine. Galen and Avicenna held that female genitals

engorge and straighten when filled with *pneuma*, the "gaseous, perhaps also liquid modification

of vital heat" generated by arousal (Laqueur 45).

In their unpacking of this detraction, critics tend to dismiss its carnal insinuations as

merely insulting. Yet the sexual implications of Mary's high, risen womb perform a positive

Christian (and strongly anti-Judaic) role by inviting flattering and amusing comparison with

Joseph's impotence. Mary's womb stands and rises; Joseph limps and falls. This contrast

replicates N-Town's larger pattern of celebrating Mary's potent and triumphant sexuality as an

allegory of Christianity's supersession of Judaism. We could read Mary's victory over Jewish

sexual law as a triumph of austere virginity; N-Town, however, emphasizes Mary's triumphant

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[129] Likewise, Hildegard vociferously denies that Mary felt "the sweetness of lust" or any "human pleasure" (Newman *Sister* 174).

bodily pleasures. Liberated from the commandment to sexually reproduce with her husband, she conceives supernaturally, in orgasmic ecstasy, with a Trinity of supernaturally superior lovers (11.305-6). When Joseph exclaims at Mary's risen womb, he does not so much degrade her as praise her glorious fulfillment of carnality and sexuality—what we might call her late medieval "sex positive" significance.

Joseph interprets Mary's pregnancy as proof that he has been betrayed. He asks Mary, "Sey me, Mary — this childys fadyr, ho is? / I pray thee, telle me and that anon!" (12.36-7). Mary answers, "The Fadyr of Hevyn and ye it is; / Other fadyr hath he non" (12.38-9). Two fathers, one pregnancy. N-Town teases us, playing with the familiar idea of Jesus' two fathers by de-familiarizing the miracle, and making us see it from Joseph's very fresh perspective, his first impression. Joseph rejects Mary's explanation. Incredulous, he says:

Goddys childe — thu lyist, in fay!

God dede nevyr jape so with may!

And I cam nevyr ther, I dare wel say,

Yitt so nyh thi boure. (12.43-6)

Joseph rejects both the candidates Mary has nominated, God and himself. He dismisses the idea of God fathering a child as absurd, arguing that God has never "japed" in this way with a maiden— "japed" meaning "to trick," "to act foolishly," and "to have sexual intercourse with" (*MED*). Joseph is right that God has never japed this way with a maiden—*before.*

Critics have argued that Joseph's key error here is not his failure to recognize Mary's exceptionalism, but his slanderous suggestion that God has "japed" with Mary. Rosemary Woolf nicely expresses this pervasive reading: she writes that Joseph errs by "taking [Mary's] words in their crudest sense, as though she were saying that the Christian God had adopted the habits of

Jove" (170). (We return, again, to Celsus.) But elsewhere in the cycle, N-Town describes God's

relationship with Mary as sexual and as playful in contexts that are neither comic nor ironic. In

the Annunciation scene, the Archangel Gabriel hails Mary as God's "pleynge fere"—"fere"

meaning fellow, companion, or spouse (12.315)—God's playmate, in effect (*MED*). The

Annunciation pageant is often described as expressing "sublime theology" in a "lofty tone,"

standing in "stark contrast" to the "bawdy," "secular," and "crude" comedy of Joseph's Doubt

(Moll 146-8). (This way of thinking has its full expression in the editorial attempt to remove

Joseph's Doubt from the text entirely by distinguishing and separating it from the *Mary Play*

exemplar.) However, despite their many differences, the two plays conceptually echo each other

by describing Mary and God as playmates using phrases that have clear sexual connotations.

Erotic Marian imagery has its place in high as well as low contexts, if we allow for the validity

of this distinction between "high" and "low" at all.

Furthermore, in the same pair of passages, both pageants use the word "bower" to

describe Mary.[130] Joseph plays on its double meaning, denying that he ever came anywhere near

Mary's room or her womb; in the Annunciation, Gabriel describes Mary as "Goddys chawmere

and his bowre," playing on the same metaphor (12.316). Religious imagery often describes Mary

as God's vessel or container—architecturally, because Mary is the Church, and physically,

because Jesus lived inside Mary's womb, like a monk in a cell.[131] N-Town does not confine

erotic and playful descriptions of Mary's relationship with God to moments of comedy and irony.

By describing God as Mary's erotic playmate, Joseph participates in N-Town's larger devotional

strategy.

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[130] Gibson also points out the "unabashed eroticism of the word 'bower'" (*Theatre* 142).

[131] Caviness intensifies this idea of Mary as architecture by arguing that cathedrals called Notre Dame are Mary's "disemboweled frame" (14-15). For an instance of the image of Jesus as a recluse in Mary's womb, see Love *Mirror* 34. For a remarkable erotic Marian lyric describing Jesus' entry into Mary's womb, see Rubin 212.

★ **The Fifth Suspect: Gabriel**

Seeing that Joseph remains unconvinced by the idea that God impregnated Mary, Mary's maid adds that an angel, Gabriel, brought the good news. Joseph, not at all persuaded by this new evidence, draws his own conclusion:

> An aungel? Allas, alas — fy for schame!
>
> Ye syn now in that ye to say,
>
> To puttyn an aungel in so gret blame!
>
> Alas, alas, let be, do way!
>
> It was sum boy began this game
>
> That clothyd was clene and gay,
>
> And ye geve hym now an aungel name!
>
> Alas, alas, and welaway
>
> That evyr this game betydde! (12.71-9)

Joseph is shocked that Mary would dare to blame an angel for her pregnancy. He assumes that Mary attempts to disguise her lover (some pretty boy in fancy clothes) as an angel in a ludicrous attempt to excuse her bad behavior. To be more precise, when Joseph says, "sum boy began this game," he might mean that a pretty boy served as a go-between or pander for Mary and her lover (which is not, in a sense, inaccurate) or that a pretty boy was Mary's lover. Or both: the categories of go-between and lover often overlap, as evinced by Tristan and Isolde.

Joseph's suspicion of the Archangel is not unfounded. In one of his many attempts to explain the virgin birth, Origen argued that the sound of Gabriel's annunciation—by communicating Jesus as *logos* or Word—inseminated Mary through her ear (Warner 37). The centuries expanded upon this idea, comparing it to natural phenomenon reported in bestiaries:

cats and weasels, for example, were said to conceive through their ears.[132] Some depictions of

the Annunciation show a seminal speech bubble descending from the mouth of God the Father

into the ear of the Virgin as Gabriel sings his own independent scroll off to the side (Gibson 151).

More commonly, however, Gabriel's speech scroll curls around Mary's body, suggestively

intertwining or intersecting with the rays of light that emanate from God through an open

window (down which a tiny homunculus-Jesus or bird-Spirit sometimes descends). And in a

fourteenth-century Annunciation by Simone Martini and Lippo Memmi, a speech scroll extends

directly from Gabriel's mouth to Mary's ear (Carrol 35). Likewise, many textual versions of the

Annunciation stress that *Gabriel's* voice communicated God's seed. For example, this thirteenth-

century English lyric addressed to Mary attributes the agency of insemination to Gabriel:

"Thurru thin here [ear] thu were wid childe —/ Gabriel he seide it thee" (2-3).[133]

Similarly, N-Town has Gabriel deliver the Word to Mary (11.217). Gabriel promises the

Trinity to "do it": "In thyn hey inbassett, Lord, I shall go! / It shal be do" (11.213-4). This raises

the question of what, exactly, Gabriel will do. A clue is provided when, immediately after

experiencing the orgasmic token that marks Jesus' conception, Mary thanks *Gabriel*: "Aungel

Gabryel, I thank yow for thys" (11.307). It is unclear what "this" refers to. If Mary thanks

Gabriel for delivering God's message (the orgasmic token of conception), this raises the question

of how, precisely, Gabriel communicated God's orgasm and seed to Mary. Gabriel uses the word

"inbasset" (embassy) to describe his function. This term marks a late medieval development in

the field of diplomacy, the evolution of the mere messenger (or *nuncio*) into the lofty

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[132] See, for example, *Bestiary (Bodleian Library, Oxford MS Bodley 764)*: "Some people say that [weasels] conceive through their ear and give birth through their mouth, and others that it is the other way round, that they conceive through their mouth and give birth through their ear" (110).
[133] *Middle English Marian Lyrics* 87.

"ambassadour" or "procuratour," "one who acts or speaks for another" (*MED*).[134] In his role as

emissary, Gabriel represents God, acting and speaking for him. Perhaps Gabriel, then, begets

Jesus on God's behalf. N-Town makes it as difficult to draw a clear distinction between Gabriel

and God's contributions to Mary's pregnancy as to distinguish God's from Jesus' from the Holy

Spirit's. And thanks to the miracle of the blooming rod from "The Marriage of Mary and Joseph,"

we can also add Joseph to the mix: N-Town *also* makes Joseph a symbolic participant in the

nativity of Jesus. So many agents contribute to the promiscuously cooperative effort of the virgin

birth.

The Gospel of Luke mentions that when Gabriel first spoke to Mary, she "was troubled"

(Rheims Douai 1.29).[135] But according to the second-century apocryphal Gospel of James,

angels raised Mary. Why, then, would the sight of an angel frighten her? Commentators

answered that although angels attended Mary every day, Gabriel was the first to appear to her

disguised as a man. Following this tradition, N-Town's Mary explains to the audience,

"Aungelys dayly to me doth aper, / But not in the lyknes of man, that is my fer" (11.232-3).

Gabriel did not appear in the likeness of just any man: Pseudo-Matthew added that he appeared

as "a young man of ineffable beauty" (373). Medieval artists elaborated on this theme with

enormous enthusiasm: painters and sculptors of the Annunciation made the archangel

ridiculously pretty, expending on him all their very best hairstyles and outfits. Chaucer captures

Gabriel's signature look in his description of Absolon with his curls shining like gold, "strouted

[stretched out] as a fanne large and brode" and parted in the middle—as in the Mérode

Altarpiece, for example (3315). In his commentary on the Annunciation, Ambrose elaborated

that Mary's first sight of Gabriel's attractive disguise prompted a virgin blush: "It is the habit of

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[134] See Queller 85-109.
[135] The Vulgate uses the word "*turbata*," meaning "troubled, disturbed, disordered, agitated, excited" (Perseus).

virgins to tremble, and to be even afraid at the presence of man, and to be shy when he addresses

her" (*Catena* 27). It all begins to sound very romantic. Chaucer's savvy Nicolas thinks so: he

serenades Alisoun with *Angelus ad virginem*, playing Gabriel to her Mary (Kendrick 16).

Once Bernard of Clairvaux and Aelred of Rievaulx described the Annunciation as a

courtly romance, the pieces fell into place: God is the king, Mary his beautiful queen, and

Gabriel the handsome knight (Aelred 160). We all know how that story ends. In N-Town,

Gabriel pledges his service to Mary as a knight would to his lady. Mary instigates this: she

requests that Gabriel visit her regularly in her chambers (11.325-7), as "youre presence is my

comfortacyon" (11.238). Gabriel vows to serve her, since she is "the gentyllest of blood and

hyest of kynrede / That reynyth in erth in ony degree" (11.329-31). This emphasis on her rank

positions their relationship in a courtly milieu, setting up a generic expectation of a courtly affair

between Mary and Gabriel.

Boccaccio takes this expectation to its inevitable fulfillment. Joseph's accusation that

Mary's alleged angel was "just sum boy" recalls the most famous medieval joke about Gabriel

and the Virgin, the second tale of the fourth day in the *Decameron*. Boccaccio's heroine is

extremely vain: she considers herself heavenly, exceptional, and uniquely beloved of God—all

stock Marian epithets. Gabriel has always held a special fascination for this lady: she "never

failed to light a candle in his honor whenever she came across a painting in which he was

depicted" (306). An unscrupulous friar exploits this crush. Parodying the Annunciation, the friar

presents himself to the lady as Gabriel's emissary and makes an indecent proposal on behalf of

the archangel. In a clever manipulation of the ambiguities of Mary's pregnancy, the friar explains

that if the lady sleeps with him, his body will serve as the vessel through which Gabriel

communicates his intentions. (Just as Gabriel explains to Mary that he functions as the emissary

through which God communicates *his* intentions.) The lady acquiesces on the condition that

Gabriel abandon Mary, "of whom it was said that he was a great admirer, as seemed to be borne

out by the fact that in all the paintings she had seen of him, he was inevitably shown kneeling in

front of the Virgin" (306). It is funny because it is true. Medieval culture reimagined the

Annunciation as a courtly scene of adultery between a queen and her king's knightly ambassador.

★ **The Sixth Suspect: "Sum Boy"**

Joseph suspects that Mary's elaborate excuse (the angel, the Incarnation, and mankind's

redemption) covers up a tawdry affair with "sum boy." Subsequent pageants add various

anonymous locals from the village to this suspicion: "sum fresch yonge galaunt" (14.87), "a

yonge man" with "chere in bedde" (14.102), and an "archere" with pleasing "bolt" (14.166-9).

Nazareth's gossips assume that Mary sought out a young lover to supplement Joseph's meager

installments on his marriage debt, reasoning that "a yonge man may do more chere in bedde, / To

a yonge wench than may an olde" (14.98-99). Mary's neighbors (anticipating Othello) conclude

that this "is the cawse" (14.104). N-Town's detractors are not the first to make these accusations

against the Virgin. Whispers of this slur are spoken in the Bible. Pagan and Jewish polemicists

shouted it from the rooftops in late Antiquity. The medieval Church accused Jews, Muslims, and

heretics of repeating it. In late medieval England, Lollards confessed to having said it. In short,

the accusation of Mary's adultery has haunted Christianity since its inception.

Schaberg hears an "apologetic motif of response to rumor" in the canonical Gospels

(131). In other words, she argues that the report of Mary's adultery circulated in the first and

second century. For example, in John 8.41, an angry voice shouts at Jesus, "*We* were not born of

fornication," perhaps suggesting the currency of a rumor that *Jesus* was (139-41). In Mark 6.3,

yet another anonymous heckler calls Jesus "the son of Mary," an epithet that departs from the

Judaic convention of identifying sons by their fathers; Schaberg suggests that "his father is unnamed because there is doubt about who his father is" (142). In fact, Schaberg argues that neither Matthew nor Luke denies Jesus' illegitimacy. She points out that Matthew's annunciating angel does not deny Joseph's suspicion of Mary's adultery. The angel only tells Joseph not to dismiss Mary and gives the reason, "what is begotten in her is of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 1.20). As Schaberg notes, this could mean that the Holy Spirit abstractly arranged and blessed a natural (rather than supernatural) pregnancy. According to this reading, the angel instructs Joseph not to punish Mary, explaining that God approves of her pregnancy. Since Matthew so clearly states that *Joseph* did not impregnate Mary (1.25), this allows for the possibility that some other man did. Luke opens up even more options: his annunciating angel could be interpreted to suggest that God, the Holy Spirit, Joseph, or some other man impregnated Mary.

Christian apologists' records of anti-Christian polemic elaborate on this theme. "Let us imagine," Celsus writes, "what a Jew—let alone a philosopher—might put to Jesus" (57). From within this frame, Celsus takes his shot at Mary:

> Is it not true, good sir, that you fabricated the story of your birth from a virgin to quiet rumours about the true and unsavory circumstances of your origins? Is it not the case that far from being born in royal David's city of Bethlehem, you were born in a born country town, and of a woman who earned her living by spinning? Is it not the case that when her deceit was discovered, to wit, that she was pregnant by a Roman soldier named Panthera, she was driven away by her husband—the carpenter—and convicted of adultery? Indeed, is it not so that in her disgrace, wandering far from home, she gave birth to a male child in silence and humiliation?" (57).[136]

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[136] See also Schaberg 145-149.

In his rebuttal of this slander, Origen does not attempt to disprove any of Celsus' accusations. He merely denies them, arguing that God would not have subjected Jesus to "a birth more illegitimate and disgraceful than any" (32). This strikingly departs from Origen's characteristic pride in the ignominy of Jesus' birth, life, and death. Origen celebrates that Jesus came forth from a filthy womb, lived in abject poverty, fraternized with lepers and prostitutes, and died in agony on a cross, humiliated and abandoned. But he draws the line at illegitimacy.

Even before Celsus (as early as the end of the first century), rabbinic texts refer to Jesus as "the son of Pantera"—without any explanation of what that means (Schaberg 149).[137] The story behind this epithet is fully fleshed out the in the later *Toledot Yeshu*, an infamous and controversial Hebrew parody of the New Testament, which claims that Mary conceived Jesus when a neighbor named Pandera pretended to be her fiancée and raped her during her period of menstruation (153).[138] The *Toledot Yeshu* makes Jesus doubly unclean: he is illegitimate and *ben niddah*, polluted by menstruation (Cuffel 55-7). The rumor of Mary's adultery continued to trouble the Church as it strengthened and expanded over the course of the Middle Ages into a hegemonic empire (Cuffel 81-2).[139] In fact, insults against Mary's chastity proved so effective at uniting the Christian community in violent outrage against its enemies that slanders were often invented for the sake of political expediency.[140]

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[137] See Parker 180 for more on the theory that the name "Pantera" derives from the Septuagint LXX mistranslation of Isaiah 7.14 as "parthenos."

[138] This text is often dismissed as illegitimate; see Schaberg 152-3 for an overview of this discussion. The earliest extant version dates from the tenth or eleventh century; scholars debate about its possible earlier history, some claiming an Aramaic original text in the fifth century, others tracing the tradition back to the second century (Schaberg 152).

[139] The most well known example of this is the trial of the Talmud in Paris in in 1240; the Talmud was accused by an alleged Jewish convert to Christianity (one Nicholas Donin) of slandering Mary's virginity. It was found guilty and publicly burnt. See Maccoby 19-38.

[140] For example, in an attempt to fire up support against the caliphate, Eulogius of Cordoba, saint and martyr, accused Muhammad of promising to deflower Mary in Paradise (Tolan 93). See Price 448-452 for more examples.

At the time and place of N-Town's creation, the Church accused Lollards of this crime against Mary.[141] In his *Life of Our Lady*, Lydgate writes that "the govundy [bleary] syght of heretykez, ne may not systeyne / For to behalde, the clennesse" of the Virgin (936-8). According to fifteenth-century chronicles and court records, Lollard heretics' "govundy syght" beheld Mary as a whore.[142] In Reading, a Lollard named Katherine Cucklewe used her last words to preach that Mary conceived Jesus in sin; Margaret Sympson, who heard and believed, took to openly promulgating Jesus' illegitimacy in the streets (McSheffrey 68). In 1511, Elizabeth Sampson of London confessed before the bishop Richard Fitzjames of London that she had called Mary a "brent-ars Elfe," meaning a pagan idol infected by a burning venereal disease (McSheffrey 146-7). Sampson specifically directed her vitriol at several English black Madonnas (Our Lady of Walshingham, Our Lady of Willesdon, Our Lady of Crome), interpreting the statues' black surfaces as accumulated soot from the candles of countless idolaters and, figuratively, the rot of the pox. Playing on the double meaning of "avowtery" as adultery and idolatry (spiritual adultery), Sampson sees Marian shrines as highly trafficked brothels (Aston 466-479).[143]

Scholars tend to confine the concept of Mary's adultery to the sphere of anti-Christian polemic. But according to the logic of medieval Mariology, Mary does not have to play by strict rules: she can even commit adultery if she likes and still smell like roses. Thus, polemical slanders and late medieval orthodox devotional discourse often make the same claims about

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[141] The late medieval classification "heretic" extensively overlapped with the concepts of Jews, Muslims, and pagans. For the overlap between Jews and Lollards, see Ruth Nisse "Prophetic Nations" 95-115. Furthermore, Muhammad was seen as the arch-heretic and schismer; for this reason, a 1387 mandate by the Bishop of Worcester describes Lollards as "*the followers of Mahomet*" (Hart 382).

[142] Scholars advise that these polemical records be taken with a grain of salt. See Hornbeck xi-xviii and McSheffrey 10-15, who argue that statements allegedly made by Lollards often seem to be the inventions of their accusers in yet another instance of creating slanders against Mary to unite the orthodox community and justify its violence.

[143] The Lollard text "Of Weddid Men and Wifis and of Here Children Also" explains that since the Christian soul is married to God, the worship of false gods counts as "fornicacioun and avoutrie" (11). When condemning the culting of statues of Mary, Lollard polemicists often make the rhetorical move of ascribing sexual promiscuity to the statue (collapsed with Mary herself) in order to express their condemnation of adulterous idolatry. This slander is not unique to Lollards: an early seventh-century Palestinian text, the *Apocalypse of Zerubbavel*, claims that Jesus is the son of Belial and a ravishing idol, "a marble stone in the shape of a virgin" (Schafer 212-3).

Mary's sexuality. For example, the Lollard Elizabeth Sampson's seemingly slanderous interpretation of Mary's pilgrims as customers (and Mary as a prostitute) strikingly resembles the orthodox theories of Aelred of Riveaulx. In the twelfth century, Aelred advised all Christians to make Mary their courtly mistress: "The spouse of our Lord is our mistress; the spouse of our King is our queen; therefore, let us serve her" (Graef 249). Taking this comparison between Mary and a courtly mistress very seriously, the fifteenth-century French court painter Jean Fouquet used Agnes Sorel, mistress of King Charles VII, as his model for a very elegant panel painting of the bare-breasted Virgin (Rubin 310). But far beyond the scope of this one especially apt example, Waller catalogs myriad Marian devotees from the ninth century through to the present day who describe themselves as the "lovers" and "slaves" of their "mistress," the Blessed Virgin, using language borrowed from courtly romances, troubadour and Petrarchan lyrics, and, more recently, psychoanalysis and queer theory (47-48).[144] Medieval texts and images represent Christians as being, like Jesus, Mary's children, lovers, and clients, suckling at her breast, nestling under her robes and inside her body, marrying her with pomp and circumstance, and visiting her for trysts (Newman 237-8). For example, a very popular Marian miracle tells the story of a young man who fell in love with a beautiful statue of Mary: he places a ring on her finger and the statue "closed its finger around the ring," signaling their betrothal (*Cantigas* 55-6). When he tries to marry a real girl, Mary interjects herself in his bed "between his bride and himself" and scolds him: "Why did you leave me and have no shame of it?" (*Songs* 56).[145] Mary, as N-Town puts it, is "mannys frend" (41.521), which could mean "paramour" as well as "ally" (*MED*).

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[144] See Warner 121-176 and Althaus-Reid 47-86.
[145] Women too served Mary as lovers: Margery Kempe calls Mary her "lady" and her "maystres" (134). These terms tend to be interpreted in the context of domestic servitude, but they also resonate with courtly love.

Bernard of Clairvaux promised that in Paradise, Christian souls would finally share Mary's intimate kisses and caresses with the Trinity (Warner 129-30). This fantasy proved infectious. In the visions of saints and mystics like Catherine of Siena, Bridget of Sweden, and Margery Kempe, Mary functions as an avatar: Margery, Bridget, and Catherine insert themselves into Mary's sensory pleasures. Like Mary, they marry the "manhode" of Jesus, the "Godhed" of the Father, and "the Holy Gost" (189-195). Like Mary, they feel God's orgasmic token of Jesus' conception: "the fyer of love," "wondir hoot and delectable" (193-4).[146] Unsurprisingly, Margery goes furthest: she claims that Jesus invited her to "take [him] to [her]" as her "weddyd husbond" and "swete sone," to "kyssen [his] mowth" (196). (Although Bernard specified that Christians would have to bide their time until Doomsday before sharing this particular pleasure, Mary's exclusive privilege until then, Margery could not wait.) These saints and mystics do not erase Mary when they take her place. In Margery's vision of her marriage to God the Father, Mary happily welcomes her to the heavenly harem: "And than the Modyr of God…preyed that [Margery and God] myth have mech joy togedyr" (Kempe 191-2). Mary seems to hold the Wife of Bath's philosophy on sharing spouses: "He is too greet a nigard that wil wenre [refuse] / A man to lighte a candle at his lanterne: / He shal han nevere the lasse lighte, pardee" (337-9).

In this same spirit of communion, N-Town stages Mary's joy as public entertainment for all to enjoy. When Anne conceives Mary, she tells the audience that she bears "a childe that shal bere all mannys blys" (9.233); when Mary conceives Jesus, Gabriel says, "Thorwe youre body beryth the babe, our blysse shal renew" (11.337). These moments emphasize that Mary's bodily pleasures generate bliss for all mankind to share. Ravishing music and stunning special effects

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[146] They also share Mary's woes. Tradition maintained that Mary experienced labor pains during the Crucifixion; Margery imitates this too (Lochrie *Margery Kempe* 181). See 5120-5174 for Margery's scribe's discussion of the practice of weeping amongst late medieval mystics and saints.

confirm this good news: through these spectacles, the audience participates in Mary's joys sensually as well as imaginatively, in the moment as well as in anticipation.

N-Town also invites the audience to partake in Mary's pleasures by joining her in more worldly sexual games. Early on in the pageant of "The Trial of Mary and Joseph," Raise-Slander and Back-Biter speculate wildly about the many possible sexual scenarios that might have led to Mary's pregnancy. They go on at some length, painting vivid pictures of decrepit, impotent old Joseph trying his best to dance and play with Mary—and of some fresh young gallant laying his legs to her (as they put it) on the sly:

> Such a yonge damesel of bewté bryght
>
> And of schap so comely also
>
> Of hir tayle ofte tyme be light
>
> And rygh tekyl undyr thee, too! (14.94-7)

Tail is, of course, a medieval dirty word for the genitals, while "tekyl" literally means "ticklish" and figuratively means lascivious or loose, as does "light" (*MED*). In other words, Raise-Slander supposes that because Mary is so delightful to behold, she must be promiscuous.[147] Raise-Slander phrases his fantasy in the second person, specifying that Mary's light tail would be right ticklish under *you*. His second person address invites spectators and readers to imagine Mary tickling them—or rather *us*. Back-Biter responds,

> Be my trewth, al may wel be,
>
> For fresch and fayr she is to syght,
>
> And such a mursel — as semyth me —
>
> Wolde cause a yonge man to have delyght! (14.90-4)

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[147] N-Town, like late medieval culture more broadly, dwells on Mary's beauty. Her supporters and detractors draw on a shared bank of compliments to praise her beauty: she is fresh (14.91), fair (14.91, 121, 162, 167), and bright (14.94).

This might seem simply insulting. But devotional convention also describes Mary as food.

Theologically, Mary's flesh is Jesus' flesh and Jesus' flesh is the Eucharistic wafer, which

Christians eat.[148] N-Town insistently reminds us of this equation, describing Mary as "food"

(15.145), as white bread (10.274-5). By calling Mary a delicious morsel, Back-Biter preaches

orthodoxy. His speech advertises what N-Town offers: a different flavor of the much-craved

Eucharist.[149] N-Town invites the spectator to consume Mary's flesh: she is a feast for their eyes.

❧ The Adulteress' Excuse

In "Joseph's Doubt," Mary and her maids try to set Joseph's mind at ease with

explanations that only exacerbate the problem. They completely immerse Joseph in Catholic

doctrine: the virgin birth, the incarnation, the Trinity, original sin, and redemption.[150] The joke is

that it all sounds absurd—it all sounds, to Joseph, like desperate and preposterous lies. Later in

the manuscript when Mary's neighbors hear her version of the story, they have the same

reaction: they hear the New Testament as an old lie. The local Summoner scoffs, "Ya, on this

wyse excusyth here every scowte / Whan here owyn synne hem doth defame" (14.182-3).[151] He

calls Mary "feetly," meaning crafty (14.128). Likewise, Raise-Slander and Back-Biter interpret

Mary's excuse as a new variation on a familiar fabliau ("The Snow Drop," or "De l'enfant qui fu

remis au soleil") in which a crafty adulteress tries to convince her husband that the bastard child

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[148] As Steven Justice has demonstrated, late medieval devotional culture imagined the consumption of the Eucharist with literal, bloody visions of cannibalism; see "Eucharistic Doubt" 312-15.

[149] On medieval craving for the Eucharistic wafer, see Bynum 53-63; for the relationship between the Eucharist and late medieval English drama, see Beckwith *Signifying* 114-117.

[150] Mary explains that her baby's father is "no man, but swete Jhesus…clad in flesch and blood"—adding another name to the list of potential fathers: God, Joseph, and now, additionally, sweet Jesus (12.64-5). To complicate things further, Mary elaborates that Jesus is his own father—and he is not a man, but he wears man's flesh. Her maid adds even more variables into the equation—explaining that, "Goddys Sone in Trynité / For mannys sake, a man wolde be" (12.68-9).

[151] The idea that "every scowte" tries to defend herself with Mary's excuse recurs in *Mariken von Nemmegen*. Mariken's aunt dismisses her niece's protestations of innocence with the logic that all whores pretend to be immaculate virgins. In the Middle English version: "And ye be a mayde styll to your belly were great!" (26); in (translated) Dutch, "And even if you've been practicing how to move up and down for a long time already, you're all virgins until your belly swells" (34-35).

she (and his handsome squire) conceived during his absence derived from an innocent accident

with a snowflake. Raise-Slander sarcastically applies the adulteress' excuse from "The Snow

Drop" to Mary's case:

> In feyth, I suppose that this woman slepte
>
> Withowtyn all coverte whyll that it ded snowe
>
> And a flake therof into hyr mowthe crepte,
>
> And therof the chylde in hyr wombe doth growe! (14.306-9)[152]

In other words, Mary's detractors suggest that her pregnancy defies any alternative to the most

basic explanation: she got knocked up. They protest, "To us thi wombe thee doth accuse!"

(14.303).

Critics have tended to take for granted that N-Town's medieval audience would

completely dismiss these comparisons between Mary's truth and the lies of adulteresses. And yet

medieval theology emphasizes the resemblance between the two. According to a firmly

established interpretation of the Incarnation, God intentionally camouflaged the truth of the

virgin birth as a lie in order to trick the Devil.[153] In "Christ and the Doctors," Jesus explains that

God intends for Mary "To blynde the devyl of his knowlache / And my byrth from hym to hyde"

(21.245-6). Their plot works: in "Parliament of Hell," Satan says, "If that he be Goddys childe /

And born of a mayd mylde, /Than be we ryght sore begylde" (24.23-5). In other words, the devil

did not recognize Mary as the virgin mother of the Messiah prophesied in Isaiah because God so

convincingly disguised her as an adulteress. On these firm theological grounds, medievals could

applaud the craftiness of Jesus and Mary's seeming lie, which duped the Devil and the Temple.

(And, by that logic, continues to dupe any sinner who mistakes the virgin birth for adultery.) Yet

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[152] Furthermore, this ironic explanation of Mary's pregnancy strikingly resembles Lydgate's forty-two examples of virgin births in nature (2.652-931).
[153] For more on the theological idea that Jesus tricked Satan, see Aulen 63-71 and Parker 169-78.

while this clever theological excuse seeks to use the resemblance between the virgin birth and an adulterous slip-up as a means of disarming the dangers of that resemblance, the polysemy of Mary's pregnancy resists neat resolution. Mary's truth not only resembles a lie, it also destabilizes both categories. The virgin birth shares this quality with the lies of adulteresses in fabliaux and courtly romance, from which (as N-Town suggests) we have much to learn about medieval understandings of Gospel truth.

In Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale*, Pluto and Proserpina—like God in Genesis—sit in judgment of an infraction in a garden. Like Eve, May suffers from a "greet appetite" for forbidden fruit (2335). In a clever attempt to escape her blind husband's jealous supervision, May pretends to suffer a potentially lethal craving for "smale peres grene" high up in a tree so that she may climb beyond his reach to an assignation with her lover (2333). The pears encapsulate several symbolic meanings: they represent the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil; concupiscence (Augustine's reading of the apple's significance); and the object of May's concupiscent lust, her lover Damian (specifically his testicles). Pluto and Proserpina's argument about May's crime resembles Biblical drama's pageant of the Parliament of Heaven, in which Mercy argues with Justice about how to punish Eve. In some dramatic iterations of this trial—most notably the Dutch Marian miracle play *Mariken von Nemmegen*—Mary argues as mankind's advocate against the devil's lawyer, Masscheroen (92-103). In *The Merchants Tale*, Pluto plays the part of Justice or Jehovah, condemning all women to death and suffering: "A wylde fyr and corrupt pestilence / So falle upon youre bodyes to-nyght," he proclaims (2252-3). Proserpina cleverly circumvents this cruel law—just as Mercy, Mary, and Jesus so cleverly supersede the Law of Moses without breaking it. Proserpina blesses women with the ability to

come up with ingenious and shameless excuses: "For lak of answere," she promises, "noon of hem shal dyen" (2271; 2268-70).

Both Proserpina and Pluto comment on the schism between Christianity and Judaism allegorized by their debate. Pluto supports his draconian misogyny with maxims from Solomon, who Proserpina dismisses as a "Jew" and idolater (2278; 2295). Jesus, she argues, loves women and thus, she implies, condones adultery.[154] Proserpina's salvation of May represents Christianity thrice over: Christian mercy motivates her decision and Christian craftiness enables and is the substance of her gift. Using Proserpina's gift, May explains to her husband, "Ful many a man weneth to sen a thyng, / And it is al another than it semeth" (2408-10). This excuse—that things are not always what they seem—fits the virgin birth like a glove. It hardly seems coincidental that the tale ends with a nod to Mary: "Thus endeth heere my tale of Januarie / God blesse us, and his mooder Seinte Marie!" (2418). Critics tend to assume that medieval religious morality would support Pluto in his condemnation of all women as evil and irredeemable. But Chaucer associates Pluto with Judaism and Proserpina with Christianity. May and Proserpina's sophistry—like Mary and Jesus' redemption of mankind—outmaneuvers justice.[155] The resemblance between Mary's excuse to Joseph in N-Town and the lies of adulteresses in fabliaux expresses the Christian preference for love over justice.

★ **Christ and the Adulteresses**

Commentary on Matthew 1.19 often wonders why the evangelist calls Joseph "just" for deciding to protect his seemingly guilty wife from the Old Testament's death penalty for adultery

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[154] In an infamously ambiguous passage from his *Tristan*, Gottfried von Strassburg describes Jesus tolerance of Isolde's adultery. Gottfried writes, "Christ in His great virtue is pliant as a windblown sleeve. He falls into place and clings, whichever way you try Him, closely and smoothly, as He is bound to do. He is at the beck of every heart for honest deeds or fraud. Be it deadly earnest or a game, He is just as you would have him. This was amply revealed in the facile Queen" (248).
[155] For more on the tradition of Mary as mankind's crafty lawyer, see Boyarin 32-3.

(Deuteronomy 22.21-22).[156] Some theologians argued that Matthew's praise condemned the cruelty of the old law (Luz 95). Jerome, by contrast, contended that the righteousness of Joseph's decision depended entirely on the exceptionalism of the case. He asks, "But how is Joseph thus called just, when he is ready to hide his wife's sin?" (45). His answer: "This may be considered a testimony to Mary," that Joseph remained perfectly "confident in her purity" despite her evident guilt (46). But what if she really had been guilty? Would it have been "just" to evade the law then?

John 8.1-11 offers an ambiguous answer. In this episode, scribes and Pharisees bring Jesus a guilty adulteress and ask for his verdict, hoping to catch him in a double bind: if he frees her, he breaks the law; if he condemns her, he contradicts his own party platform of mercy. Ingeniously, Jesus finds a loophole: he says, "He that is without sinne of you, let him first throw the stone at her" (8.7). Thus, no one can lift a finger against her. Technically, Jesus could, as he is without sin. But he does not. Instead, he tells her, "Goe, and now sinne no more" (8.11). Jesus' apparent leniency in this case troubled many Christians. Augustine wondered,

> What then Lord? Do You favor sin? No, surely. Listen to what follows, Go, and sin no more. So then our Lord condemned sin, but not the sinner. For did He favor sin, He would have said, Go, and live as you will: depend on my deliverance: howsoever great your sins be, it matters not: I will deliver you from hell, and its tormentors. But He did not say this. (Aquinas *Catena* John 8.1-11.)

Augustine reassures himself with the promise of Doomsday. Jesus, he argues, only postpones his judgment of the guilty adulteress. On Doomsday, we can surmise, she will pay for her sins.

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[156] See Aquinas *Catena* 45-47.

(Though this was not soon enough for some.[157])

Unfortunately for theologians seeking to prove that Jesus was hard on sexual crime, the pattern established by John 8.1-11 recurs time and again. Jesus fraternizes with many women of ill repute: the "sinful woman" who kissed and anointed his feet (Luke 7.36-50); Mary Magdalene, possessed by seven devils (Luke 8.2, Mark 16.9); the Samaritan foremother of the Wife of Bath (John 4.1-42); and many more.[158] (This pattern of evidence provoked Martin Luther to remark—perhaps in jest, perhaps not—that he considered Jesus to have been a promiscuous ladies' man.[159]) These narrative seeds grew into the massive medieval cult of Mary Magdalene as reformed prostitute and Jesus' intimate favorite, often conflated with the Madonna (Coletti 171).

Jesus' affinity with sinful women extends back even before his birth (Schaberg 34). Matthew's genealogy of Jesus includes four scandalous women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. Tamar cleverly disguised herself as a prostitute in order to trick her father-in-law into impregnating her, thus forcing him to keep his contractual obligation to include and protect her as a member of his family (Genesis 38 1-28).[160] Rahab was a prostitute who defied her king to

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[157] Aquinas, for one, supported the death penalty for adultery—just so long as "zeal for justice" rather than "vindictive anger or hatred" governed the process (*Summa*, 3.60.1). Or to be more precise, Aquinas argues that secular law, and not the Church (which "yields a spiritual sword"), can condemn adulteresses to death. He argues that husbands could righteously turn their wives in for execution if motivated by justice and not vengeance (3.60.1). Indeed, in his landmark study of medieval law, Brundage concludes that ecclesiastical and civic authorities increasingly condemned adultery, and were willing to punish it with death (519). See also Helmholz 94-8. In Italy, husbands who murdered their adulterous wives were not charged with murder but rather only forfeited claim to dowry (Brundage 520); for more on honor killing in medieval Italy, see also Cantarella 229-244.

[158] For example, the woman "diseased with an issue of blood" (Matthew 9.20-21) and the woman bent double by a devil for eighteen years (Luke 13.10-17).

[159] I quote the passage in full: "Christ was an adulterer for the first time with the woman at the well, for it was said, 'Nobody knows what he's doing with her' [John 4:27]. Again with Magdalene, and still again with the adulterous woman in John 8 [2-11], whom he let off so easily. So the good Christ had to become an adulterer before he died" (Luther *Table Talk* 154).

[160] Tamar was a childless widow. Her first husband was executed by Yahweh; his brother Onan, her second husband, was also executed by Yahweh (for masturbating) (Schaberg 34). Additionally, in some versions of the story, Yahweh speaks to Judah to explain Tamar's pregnancy, letting him know that "it is through me that this thing comes" (Schaberg 35).

protect Joshua, her Israelite customer (Joshua 2.1-3; Schaberg 37). The outsider Ruth won a

place in Judah by seducing Boaz on the threshing floor (Ruth 3.7-15).[161] And last but certainly

not least, Bathsheba infamously committed adultery with King David (2 Samuel 11). These

foremothers of Jesus contributed to the sacred Stem of Jesse by means of seduction, adultery,

and prostitution. New Testament scholars tend to argue that their depravity serves as a foil to set

off Mary's purity (Schaberg 32-33). But as Schaberg points out, they could also be said to

exegetically mirror Mary, whose pregnancy, like theirs, seemed criminal until purified by God's

special favor.

 While the Chester and York cycles pass over the episode of Christ and the Adulteress

rather quickly, N-Town (uniquely in the English tradition) devotes an entire pageant to the

subject, expanding the evangelists' 11 lines to 297. Critics have long noted that N-Town's

pageant of "The Woman Taken in Adultery" strongly resembles "The Trial of Mary and Joseph."

In a much-cited passage, Bevington writes, "The adulterous woman recalls Eve as a fallen

woman, and yet by her dignity in the face of oppression she also reminds us of the Virgin Mary

bravely facing her detractors" (460). In both pageants, a sympathetic heroine suffers the cruel

insults of a brutal and corrupt ecclesiastical court. In both pageants, she stands accused of

adultery. Verbal echoes bind the two sets of accusations. Both Mary and the adulteress are

insulted with the same slurs: "scowte" (24.145; 14.182); "bysmare" (24.146; 14.298); and

"queen" (24.69, 119, 149; 41.392). Both sets of detractors harass their victims with a common

store of old saws, dirty jokes, and violent threats. In short, N-Town seems to compare Mary and

the adulteress.

 The pageant of "The Woman Taken in Adultery" begins with a sermon preached by Jesus

directly to the audience:

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[161] This passage is much debated; see Schaberg 37-8.

Man, I cam down all for thi love!

Love me ageyn — I aske no more.

Thow thu myshappe and synne ful sore,

Yit turne agen and mercy crave.

It is thi fawte and thu be lore:

Haske thu mercy and thu shalt have. (24.19-24)

This is good news indeed. Iterating the motif of the Christ-knight, N-Town depicts Jesus as a courtly supplicant begging mankind to requite his love.[162] He adds only one stipulation to his extremely generous pre-nuptial contract, warning his listeners that he will deny them mercy if and only if they deny mercy to their neighbors (24.35-6). Jesus outlines a stark opposition between Christian love and mercy on the one hand and the sins of "cruel jugement" (24.8), vengeance (24.25), and "wrath" (24.31) on the other.

These sins materialize as the Jewish villains Scriba and Phariseus, who overhear Jesus' message of mercy and dismiss it as "his dalyauns" (24.101), meaning "amorous talk or to-do; flirting, coquetry," even "sexual union" (*MED*). They elaborate:

On hym beleve many a score:

In his prechynge he is so gay,

Ech man hym folwygh ever more and more!

Agens that he seyth, no man seyth nay. (24.53-6)

Scriba and Phariseus besmirch Jesus' preaching with winking accusations of sexual deviancy: the word "gay" can mean "joyous, merry, gay; light-hearted, carefree," but also "wanton, lewd, lascivious" (*MED*). They accuse Jesus' evangelism of promiscuously seducing "many a score" of converts with its suspiciously irresistible charms and then inviting further transgression with

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[162] The best-known English example of the Christ-knight motif occurs in the *Ancrene Wisse*, 7.82-9.

its irresponsible leniency. With these complaints in mind, Scriba and Phariseus come up with

their plot to entrap Jesus. Their neat stratagem pairs his mercy with the adulteress' guilt: they

hope to use her harlotry to expose his.

This accusation of deviancy extends back to Christianity's earliest days. In the second

century, rumors abounded of Christian sects (specifically the Epiphanes, the Carpocrates, and the

Nicolaitans) interpreting the Gospels' message of mercy and communion as an endorsement of

free love and orgies. While many scholars dismiss such rumors as slanders with no basis in

reality, Peter Brown argues that "one cannot rule out the existence" of these sects (61). Whether

baseless or grounded in fact, sexual promiscuity represented Christianity in the pagan

imagination for much of Late Antiquity. Tacitus and Pliny the Younger wink about "the vices

with which the name Christian is associated"; a century later, Origen complained that pagans

were still "repelled from approaching Christians even for a simple conversation" by the same

suspicions (Oulton and Chadwick 29).[163] Though history elected renunciation as the triumphant

interpretation of the Gospels, second-century pagans, Jews, and unorthodox Christian sects heard

another message. They interpreted the Gospels as a call to sexual freedom. (These sects passed

their torch to the medieval Brethren of the Free Spirit and then the early modern Family of

Love.[164])

Not only do N-Town's villains repeat this ancient slander, but its no-holds-barred version

of Jesus' mercy resembles it. Augustine may have insisted that Jesus did not "favor sin," "For

did He favor sin, He would have said, Go, and live as you will: depend on my deliverance," but

his hypothetical absurdity echoes Jesus' sermon in N-Town. N-Town's Jesus tells the audience

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[163] In his refutation of Carpocrates and Epiphanes, Clement of Alexandria complained that "through them the worst calumny has become current against the Christian name" (Oulton and Chadwick 42).
[164] Scholars debate whether the rumor that these sects participated in free love was pure polemical invention or grounded in fact.

to depend on his deliverance no matter how great their sin: all he asks for is their love. "Iff thu aske mercy," Jesus promises, "I sey nevyr nay" (24.16). N-Town preaches this message of Christian leniency consistently, advertising the infinitude of Jesus' love and Mary's grace.[165]

The pageants of "The Trial of Mary and Joseph" and "The Woman Taken in Adultery" mount a full-frontal satirical assault against the interdependent judicial systems that governed late medieval sexuality: village gossip and the ecclesiastical courts. It is a critical commonplace that the crime of the adulteress pales in comparison to the crime of her captors. Critics often identify the crime of her persecutors as lust, projecting the adulteress' sin onto her accusers.[166] Yet in his sermon, Jesus frames the pageant as a critique of "jugement," not of lust (24.8).[167] The adulteress' fornication and Jesus' mercy stand united in opposition to the adjudications of Scriba and Phariseus. Jesus uses the adulteress' transgression as an opportunity for conversion, substituting his "dalyauns" for her lover's. At the beginning of the pageant, Jesus asks the audience to return his love. At the end, the adulteress fulfills this request by becoming a lover of Christ rather than a lover of some "harlot," as her partner in crime is called (24.125).

This switch works because the variables are interchangeable. N-Town repeatedly identifies Jesus as a "harlot": in "Trial Before Herod," the tyrant calls Jesus "thu onhangyed harlot" (30.221); in "The Procession to Calvary," "Judeus 2" also calls him "harlot" yet again (32.34). Sugano translates the slur as "scoundrel," but the *Middle English Dictionary* demonstrates that by the early fifteenth century, the term could mean "a man of licentious habits; a male lecher." L. R. Poos confirms that although "harlot" had been a gender-neutral and non-

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[165] N-Town's leniency has provoked anxious commentary very much like Augustine's on John 8.1-11. Bevington feels the need to protest that N-Town "does not condone sexual promiscuity" (460).

[166] Bevington writes that N-Town's Jesus "indicates plainly that the scribes and Pharisees are as guilty of lust as the frightened woman they are harassing" (460), a statement that equates slut-shaming and lustfulness.

[167] Contrary to N-Town's tolerance of the adulteress in this pageant, it punishes a promiscuous woman in its Doomsday pageant. In "Judgment Day," devils capture an impenitent "sclutte," a shrewish and lecherous "salte sewe" (42.118-121). Conveniently for me, the fragment ends before she meets her fate; Mary's Assumption is the last complete pageant in the manuscript.

sexual term before the fifteenth century, it had sexual connotations by the later fifteenth century (591-2). This is amply demonstrated by N-Town's use of the term to describe the adulteress' lover, which suggests that it could also have sexual connotations when used against Jesus (especially considering that his enemies have already characterized him as a sexual deviant). N-Town deconstructs slurs like "harlot," "witch," and "heretic" by making them weapons in the hands of Christianity's enemies and badges of honor shared by Jesus, Mary, and the adulteress.[168] Like Jesus and the adulteress, Christianity and harlotry belong together.

❧ Marian Miracles

Medievalists have long been puzzled—and sometimes openly appalled—by the counter-intuitive morality of Marian miracles in which the Virgin champions guilty sex criminals, particularly those who break vows of sexual renunciation: runaway nuns, pregnant abbesses, and incontinent clerics. In *The Medieval Mind*, published in 1962, Henry Osborn Taylor provides a catalog of miracles of this ilk, observing in an aside, "Ethically some of them leave much to ask" (506-509). Regarding the same phenomenon, R. W. Southern comments on Mary's capriciousness: "Like the rain, the protective power of the Virgin falls on the just and the unjust alike—provided only that they have entered the circle of her allegiance" (248).

Late medieval English Marian miracles amply warrant these remarks. For example, in the miracle classified by Boyarin as "The Drowned Sacrisant," a sinful cleric drowns on his way "to have don advowtery" (Mirk 81-2).[169] Luckily for him, he has the words "Ave Maria" on his lips as he falls into the water (Mirk 82-3). When the devil tries to drag him to hell, Mary intervenes. Though Satan proves that the sinner "was in [his] service," Mary, the better lawyer, wins on the

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[168] The word heretic appears at least four times in the N-Town manuscript: 18.73-4, 18.76-7, 26.170, 26.309-310. (Note that at 18.73-4, a later hand changed "men" to "heretics.") Only tyrants and their minions (specifically Herod, Annes, Rewfyn, and Episcopus Legis) ever use the word heretic, and they only use it to describe their Christian victims, including Jesus.

[169] Or to visit "his harlot," as the *Cantigas de Santa Maria* has it (*Songs of Holy Mary* 18).

technicality that "he was in [her] houres" (84-85). Mary restores the cleric to life and plants him

back on the shore. Thus, saying "Ave Maria" trumps guilt and replaces repentance.[170]

Another miracle, told in the Middle English mid-fifteenth century *Alphabet of Tales*,

begins with a beautiful nun named Beatrice who struggles to keep her vows of celibacy (319).[171]

When her willpower finally cracks, she stops on her way out the door of the nunnery to explain

to a statue of Mary that she "may no langer susteyn þe temptacion of [her] flesh" (320).

Abandoned by her lover, Beatrice falls into destitute prostitution. Yet when she walks by the

nunnery fifteen years later, she discovers that the nuns believe she has been there all along,

keeping "clene & in gude name" (ibid). The statue of Mary, it turns out, covered for her,

disguising herself in Beatrice's "clothyng & in abbett" and "fulfill[ing] [her] offes" (ibid).

Mary does not blanch at grimmer crimes. In another vein of tales, she protects incestuous

infanticides.[172] In one such story (Bodleian MS e Museum 180), Mary saves a woman

impregnated by "hyr owne sonne" who then breaks their baby's neck (Boyarin 179).[173] In a

milder iteration of this narrative (from *An Alphabet of Tales*), Mary saves an abbess impregnated

by "hur awn syb-man" (11). When the abbess begins to show, her nuns tattle and summon the

bishop. But before he arrives, Mary steps in, delivering the child, whisking him away to a hermit

and scouring the birthing bed of all evidence of the curse of Eve. When the bishop storms in, the

abbess and her bedchamber appear as immaculate as Mary and the stable in Nazareth after the

birth of Jesus (12). The abbess, like Mary in the apocryphal Infancy gospels (and N-Town and

Chester), is subjected to a post-partum gynecological exam by stubborn skeptics; her body, like

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[170] In Mirk's happy ending, the cleric disavows adultery and "was a ful good mon aftur" (87); in the *Cantigas*, however, this episode ends with the sinner's bodily salvation, providing no further information about whether or not he reformed (*Songs of Holy Mary* 18).
[171] See also Wynkyn de Worde 70-1 for another version of the story.
[172] Boyarin classifies these miracles under the rubric "Blood on the Penitent Woman's Hand" (189). See also Boyarin 178-9.
[173] See also Boyd 126 and 129.

Mary's, triumphantly bears "no sygne þat sho sulde be with childe" (ibid). Mary arranges a

perfect crime—her own.

Systemically, in fact, Mary's clients' crimes strikingly resemble her own. Mary appeared

to be an adulterous, guilty by all signs until rescued by God's favor. According to N-Town (and

Bernardino of Siena), Mary won God's favor through seduction: her beauty and merits ravished

him. In the genre of Marian miracles, the Virgin redistributes her exceptional share of God's

favor, in turn, to *her* favorites, her devotees. She saves those she loves. And she seems to love

criminals who remind her of herself.

★ Conclusion: Incarnational Theater

Scholars have noted that the authors of fabliaux phrase their adulterous heroines as

exemplars of their own artistic craftiness (Johnson 307). Similarly, the makers of Marian

miracles tend to favor narratives that celebrate their own art. In an infinite regress, the painter of

the series of Marian miracles on the walls of Winchester Cathedral's Lady Chapel painted an

image of Mary saving a sinner painting the walls of a chapel.[174] The compiler of the thirteenth-

century *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, who describes himself as Mary's troubadour, tends to favor

tales in which Mary saves troubadours.[175] Across the spectrum of the genre of Marian miracles,

artists of all stripes—troubadours, minstrels, poets, stonemasons, sculptors, and painters—hold a

special place in Mary's heart.[176]

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[174] See also *Cantigas* LXXIV.

[175] *Cantigas* Prologue: "I wish from this day forth to be [Mary's] troubadour, and I pray that She will have me for Her troubadour and accept my songs, for through them I seek to reveal the miracles She performed. Hence from now on I choose to sing for no other lady, and I think thereby to recover all that I have wasted on the others…Therefore I pray, if it be Her will, that what I shall say of Her in my songs be pleasing to Her, and if it pleases Her, that She give me the reward which She gives to those She loves" (*Songs of Holy Mary* 2).

[176] See also *Cantigas* numbers 8, 202, 259, and 363.

It is no wonder that medieval artists saw Mary as their ally.[177] Mary not only offers her clients protection from judgment and thus unprecedented artistic license, she also models the highest aspirations of worldly makers. According to the Mariology of Eadmer of Canterbury, Hildegard of Bingen, and Bernardino of Siena, Mary remade the world, improving on God's creation with the powers of her carnality and individual merit. It is a scholarly commonplace that medieval artists dreaded innovation, fearing to overstep the sacred boundary that made creation God's exclusive prerogative. Under Mary's wing, they had nothing to fear. Artists seeking permission to create something new found in her an ideal patron and exemplar.

In this spirit, N-Town claims Mary's protection for the creative enterprise of Biblical drama. In "Joseph's Doubt," when Joseph says, "It was sum boy began this game / That clothyd was clene and gay, / And ye geve hym now an aungel name!" (12.75-7), his complaint functions as a meta-theatrical joke: Gabriel *is* "sum boy" dressed up in a fancy costume, taking on the name of an angel—an actor in a costume in a play. And so is Mary, for that matter: in medieval theater, the role of Mary was played by attractive teenage boys in drag.[178] The word "game," which Joseph repeats in the next several lines ("Alas, alas, and welaway / That evyr this game betydde!"), means joke, sport, trick, or entertainment—meanings that parallel an array of medieval labels for theater, like *ludus* (or game), *jocus* (or joke), and play.[179] In fact, N-Town explicitly describes itself as "game": it begins by promising its audience that, "Whan that ye come, ther shal ye sene, / This game wel pleyd in good aray" ("Banns" 518-19).

Joseph's rhyme scheme associates "game" with "shame" and "blame"—an association made all the clearer when reading the manuscript, because the scribe has drawn brackets that

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[177] Miri Rubin remarks that in the fourteenth century, "Writing about Mary—like writing about the eucharist—was a challenging occasion for display, since, as we have seen repeatedly, Mary was full of contradiction" (269).
[178] See Normington 55-70.
[179] See Wickham 3-4 and Kolve 8-32.

delineate the rhyme scheme, visually linking rhyme to rhyme (Meredith xxi). This link between

blame, shame, and game holds true in medieval expressions of anti-theatrical prejudice, which

accuse theatrical play of the shameful and blameful crimes of carnality, blasphemy, and

idolatry.[180] Here, in N-Town, Joseph accuses Mary of blaspheming by calling an actor an angel

and by attributing her suspicious and embarrassing pregnancy to God. Joseph's opposition to the

mingling of the sacred and profane (actors and angels, God and pregnancy) echoes the anti-

theatrical prejudice against drama's fallen, carnal imitations of the sacred. By linking sacred

theater and Mary's pregnancy in this way, N-Town suggests a comparison between Biblical

drama and Jesus' Incarnation. As Mary said earlier, Jesus is a god who puts on the flesh of

mankind. Jesus uses this language to describe the Incarnation: having decided that only an entity

who is "both God and man" can redeem mankind, he says, "Lete me se how I may were that

wede" (11.177-8). He wears it well. Specifically, Jesus puts on Mary's flesh, another instance of

cross-dressing. Essentially, N-Town describes Jesus' Incarnation as a theatrical performance.[181]

Joseph confirms this association by also using the meta-theatrical word "gyse" to

describe Mary's alleged affair: "Than has thu begownne a synful gyse!" he tells her (12.31);

"gyse" meaning "custom" or "business," but also "clothing" or "disguise" (*MED*). Mary's

adultery, like N-Town, masquerades as profanity. N-Town justifies this disguise in the play of

"Christ and the Doctors"; Jesus explains that Mary is a trap that God lays for the Devil, blinding

his knowledge of the Incarnation and gaining the advantage of surprise for Jesus' Harrowing of

Hell (21.245-6).[182] In "Joseph's Doubt," Joseph chastises Mary for the "sinful guise" and

"seeming evil" of her pregnancy. But N-Town demonstrates that this seeming sin leads to

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[180] See Barish 66-79.
[181] For more on this theme, see O'Connell 63-88.
[182] See Kinservik 190-192.

salvation; by using meta-theatrical terms to describe the Nativity story, it suggests that religious

drama can also seem sinful and yet have special powers of redemption.

The Middle English translation of the Dutch Marian miracle play *Mariken van*

Nieumeghen proves this point by having the Virgin and theater join forces to save a lost soul.

The devil's paramour happens to stop to watch a miracle play in a village square.[183] Seeing "her

lyvyng played before hyr face," the paramour repents.[184] When the infuriated devil tries to drag

her to hell, Mary intervenes to save her beloved client.[185] In the Dutch original, the Virgin

restores the girl's Christian name, which just happens to be her own: Mariken (Little Mary).[186]

Mariken remembers hearing it said that "a play often tymes were better than a sermant to some

folke" (33). Her experience proves this true. Theater, like the Virgin, can reach souls lost far

beyond the reach God and the Church. *This* excuse, like Mary's, is so good that it can license and

redeem almost anything—even adultery, even theater.[187] And, as I will go on to argue in the next

chapter, even disbelief.

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[183] In the Dutch version, this play is a Marian miracle; the Middle English translation does not specify the content of the pageant.

[184] This phrasing suggests not only that the play's representation of sin reminded the devil's paramour of herself, but also that she recognized an affinity between herself and drama on a more meta-theatrical level.

[185] This differs from the Dutch original, in which Mariken's uncle saves her.

[186] Satan stole Mariken's first consonant when he seduced her, turning her into Emmiken.

[187] It cannot excuse everything. N-Town repeatedly hammers home that Jews who repeatedly refuse to succumb to Mary will receive no mercy from God. Stubborn Jews demonstrate, to the audience, the horrible consequences of not joining the supposedly inclusive and merciful cult of Mary. N-Town identifies cruelty and judgment as the sins of Judaism; according to this logic, Jews who insist on a cruel and judgmental reading of Mary's pregnancy (the theory that she should be hated and punished for having fornicated) hoist themselves on their petard by provoking cruel judgment from God. (This is the same logic we see at play in *The Merchant's Tale*: Portia excuses her lack of mercy by characterizing her judgment as Shylock's cruelty returned back upon itself.)

Chapter 2: "Trye the Trewthe Owth"

★ **Introduction: "The fool says in his heart, there is no God"**[188]

Chaucer's Miller slyly introduces his tale as "a legende and a lyf / Both of a carpenter

and of his wyf" (3141-2), framing his fabliau as a parody of the legend of Joseph the Carpenter,

God's cuckold.[189] In his Prologue, the Miller expounds on the logic undergirding his satire of the

divine comedy. He begins with the definitive statement, "Who hath no wyf, he is no cokewold"

(3143). In other words (extricating his double negative and untangling his syntax), all husbands

are cuckolds. This follows from the theory of women's total depravity, often expressed in a

variety of medieval (and post-medieval) genres but most closely associated with advice against

marriage—the assumption that the daughters of Eve, unlike the sons of Adam, lack the ability to

resist the temptations of flesh and the devil.[190] Rather, they are born bad and only get worse. As

clerks like Jerome and Jankyn (the Wife of Bath's fifth husband) argue, female adultery is

inevitable—and, due to women's fiendish craftiness, *invisible*. Advice against marriage ascribes

such ingenious cunning to wives it commonly counsels husbands to admit defeat rather than

engage in the futile pursuit of hard evidence. And yet, as the Miller points out, it is an open

secret that "who hath no wyf, he is no cokewold." Thus, wifely infidelity is obvious and yet

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[188] Scholars have pointed out that medievals tend to dilate commentary on disbelief under the aegis of the fool of Psalms 13 and 52 who "says in his heart that there is no God" (Kolve *Telling Images* 224). More recent work is proving that medievals did not only laugh about skepticism but also took it seriously in non-comical philosophical contexts. See H. Lagerlund, *Rethinking the History of Skepticism: The Missing Medieval Background* (Brill NV 2010); Fatemeh Chehregosha Azinfar, *Atheism in the Medieval Islamic & European World: The Influence of Persian and Arabic Ideas of Doubt and Skepticism on Medieval European Literary Thought* (Ibex 2008); Michael J. Buckley, "Thomas Aquinas and the Rise of Modern Atheism" in *Denying And Disclosing God: The Ambiguous Progress Of Modern Atheism* (Yale 2004).
[189] The points of comparison between *The Miller's Tale* and the Nativity of Jesus are well established: not only do the two plots run parallel, Nicholas also sings *Angelus ad virginem* to Alisoun, taking on the role of Gabriel making his annunciation, and Absolon serenades Alisoun with the Song of Songs, Jesus' love song to Mary (Kendrick 16, 96).
[190] For more on the medieval version of the theory of women's total depravity, see Bloch 13-36.

imperceptible, certain and yet beyond the powers of proof—rather like Anselm's concept of

Christian faith.[191]

The Miller continues:

I have a wyf, pardee, as wel as thow:

Yet nolde I, for the oxen in my plogh,

Take upon me moore than ynogh,

As demen of myself that I were oon;

I wol bileve wel that I am noon. (3162)

The Miller argues that although it is a truth universally acknowledged that all husbands are

cuckolds, individual husbands can and should save themselves a lot of trouble ("moore than

ynogh," as he puts it, which suggests a superfluous burden in addition to man's allotted share of

woe) by believing that they are not. Taking up his own case, the Miller weighs this unnecessary,

excessive knowledge of the truth (his own cuckoldry) against the utility of his team of oxen. The

choice is easy: he would rather have ignorance. This weighing compares two tasks (plowing and

marriage) at two levels of difficulty (hard "ynogh" and too hard, "moore than ynogh"): plowing

with and without a team of oxen and marriage with and without a full acknowledgement of

female adultery. The helpful technology of the plow improves the Miller's quality of life, but not

as much as the savvy choice to ignore female infidelity—his technology of ignorance.

These two tasks (hard labor and marriage), not coincidentally, represent God's curses of

humanity in Genesis. The Miller pays Adam's debt to God by laboring hard in the sweat of his

brow in his fields and in his marital bed; he sees no reason to overburden himself with a full

recognition of the fact that God has additionally (and, as he suggests, excessively) burdened him

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[191] Anselm argued that the "ontological incommensuration" between humans and God makes God inexpressibly
incomprehensible to humans (Adams 33-4); as Anselm puts it, "God is a being greater than we can conceive of."

with cuckold horns and illegitimate heirs by making women so irredeemably bad.[192] This particular burden need not be actively borne: while Adam's curse demands active labor, men need not confront their unfaithful wives. This is a small mercy that the Miller is in no position to pass up. So he chooses to "believe well": to keep up the fiction of his wife's capacity for Christian virtue. He frames this faith in women as a joke, as a self-preserving strategy to ameliorate the cruelty of the fallen world. The Miller is not in denial: he is not blindly unaware that his faith in his wife's chastity is completely unwarranted. Rather, he craftily performs the role of the fool.

> The Miller concludes with this advice:
>
> An housbonde shal nat be inquisityf
>
> Of Goddes pryvetee, nor of his wyf.
>
> So he may fynde Goddes foyson there,
>
> Of the remenant nedeth nat enquire. (3163-6)

As many critics have pointed out, the term "pryvetee" could refer to "private affairs," "sacred mysteries," or "genital organs" (*MED*); furthermore, the sentence's syntax allows for the "pryvetee" to be the possessive complement of God, the wife of the inquisitive husband (the subject of the sentence), or, additionally, Mary, the wife of God (Kendrick 18). These multiple semantic possibilities suggest that an inquisitive son of Adam might discover similarly unbearable secrets in the private affairs and private parts of his wife, the Virgin, and God.[193] We already know one of these privy secrets: the husband's inquisition would discover his wife's

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[192] It was a common late medieval concept that female adultery was Purgatory on earth for husbands ("wyfly purgatorye"), and that suffering through it did them good (though not their wives). For example, see Lydgate *Disguising at Hertford* 87 and Chaucer *The Merchant's Tale* 1670.
[193] Kendrick focuses on the possible reference to God's genitals (11).

adultery. And, the suggestion winks, Mary's adultery—and thus the illegitimacy of Jesus and Christianity.

In other words, an inquisitive Christian who scrutinized the New Testament could all too easily destroy his faith in Mary's virginity. After all, when Gabriel announces the virgin birth in the Gospel of Luke, even Mary herself has a moment of doubt. She asks, "How will this be?" (1.34).[194] An inquisitive Christian might notice that none of the canonical Gospels give any convincing evidence for Mary's Immaculate Conception, perpetual virginity, bodily assumption, or coronation in Heaven—the pillars of medieval Marian theology (all based on apocrypha). He might notice references to Jesus' siblings (Matthew 12.46; Luke 8:19-21; Mark 2.21; Galatians 1:19; and Acts 1:14) and Joseph's paternity (Matthew 1.16; Luke 2.41, 48). He might notice that Matthew claims that God begets Jesus (1.21), which might remind him (as it has untold others) of the decidedly unchaste liaisons of Zeus. He might notice that Matthew and Luke leave open the possibility that some man other than Joseph impregnated Mary (Schaberg 65-9, 82-8). Or perhaps the Miller simply means to suggest that *any* serious reflection on the virgin birth (with or without recourse to the Bible) would prompt disbelief. After all, we all know where babies come from.[195]

The inquisitive Christian who came to these conclusions might suffer grave consequences. He might not only lose his faith in Mary, but also bring all of Christianity toppling down with it. So much depends on Mary's virginity. This was the point made by Celsus, who mused: "Odd that the kingdom of God, the core of [Christian] teaching, is made to hang on the disgrace of a

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[194] Augustine argued that this question proved that Mary had made a vow of perpetual virginity, the world's first vow of clerical celibacy (Graef 95). Thus, N-Town has Mary clarify, "I dowte not the wordys ye han seyd to me, / But I aske how it shal be do" (11.247-8).

[195] Medievals learnt the logic of cause and effect with this example from Boethius: "From an antecedent an argument is taken. If she has a borne a child, she has lain with a man. I take the antecedent: but she has borne a child; I take the consequent: therefore she has lain with a main. From consequences in this way. I take the consequent: but she has not lain with a man; I conclude the antecedent: therefore, she has not borne a child" (Logan 19). Mary's persecutors in N-Town often make this very point; see, for example, 14.214-8.

rejected woman, whose husband turned her aside" (58). In his rebuttal, Origen disagrees with

Celsus' facts but not with his stakes. Origen proves Jesus' legitimacy with the tautological

argument that had Jesus been illegitimate, he would have preached nothing but "licentiousness"

(32-33). In other words, Origen agrees with Celsus that if Jesus was illegitimate, then so is the

New Testament.

Facing this abyss, the Miller chooses to pretend not to see. He implies that he assumes

Jesus' illegitimacy but would rather fake faith in Mary's preposterous excuse of the virgin

birth—in the same way that he assumes his wife's adultery but would rather pretend to believe in

her fidelity. His choice plays on the theological commonplace that Christians should consciously

avoid inquiring into Mary's pregnancy. This ancient approach to the virgin birth reaches back as

far as the second century: Ignatius of Antioch praised the Gospels for their discretion in not

explaining the virgin birth in any explicit detail. Ignatius understood Mary's pregnancy as "a

mystery wrought in the silence of God" (Gambero 28). In the twelfth century, the Syriac

theologian Jacob Bar-Salibi advised Christians to imitate the silence of the evangelists: "Believe!

Believe strongly! Do not question. Neither Gabriel nor Matthew was able to say *how* [the virgin

birth] happened" (Luz 99).[196]

Participating in this tradition, late medieval England preachers instructed their

parishioners not "to be to *inquisitiff* how that itt may be that the virginitie and the moderhede be

both in Oure Lady" (Ross 221-2)—so closely echoing the phrasing of the Miller's advice. In his

commentary on the virgin birth in *The Life of Our Lady*, Lydgate prays that anyone who

expresses *any* "doute or ambiguyte" about Mary's virginity be sent straight to Hell with a

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[196] Indeed, this approach dominates contemporary theological consensus on Mary's pregnancy. According to Luz, moderns take the virgin birth "as a fact that is 'accessible only to faith' [as in Catholic catechism 498], avoided as difficult, interpreted as a sign [as by Karl Barth], or rejected as a pseudo-explanation of the miracle of the incarnation [as by Emil Brunner]" (100).

cankered, silenced tongue (2.912-14, 920-24).[197] Yet he admits (in the same breath) that

"evidence," "man's Reason," and "experience" all deny the virgin birth (2.907-8). In other

words, Lydgate seems to assume that Christians will not be able to believe in this miracle

(because it is impossible and inconceivable) and so commands them to shut up about it or go to

hell. The Miller need only slightly recalibrate the wording of this kind of faith in the virgin birth

in order to parody it. After all, Lydgate effectively orders Christians to lie by omission; he tells

them not to admit that they do not believe. The Miller follows this advice to the letter, if in a

different spirit. He counsels men not to inquire, but only because already know the awful truth:

women are false and God is too. He advises Christians to *pretend* to believe. He goes for fiction,

not faith.[198]

The Miller characterizes faith (in wives or God) as totally ludicrous but also beneficial.

He suggests that just as it might prove easier to live day in and day out with an incorrigibly

treacherous (and fiendishly discrete) wife without ever openly confronting that treachery, it

might also prove easier to pretend to have faith in God and his mysteries. Preempting Pascal, the

Miller wagers that it is beneficial to perform Christian faith.[199] And yet the Miller's comparison

between God and cheating wives infects faith with a particularly virulent strain of suspiciousness

fortified by sexual jealousy and misogyny. Pascal promises skeptics that faith is the better bet,

yielding infinite rewards (121-5). The Miller offers no such promise: he assumes the worst (that

wives and God are false) and counsels the performance of denial for the sake of quotidian

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[197] He adds, "With hym I am no better in charyte," he concludes, "he getyth no more of me" (2.925-27).

[198] Scholars tend to contain the audacity of the Miller's *Prologue* by taking the Reeve and the first-person voice of the so-called "Chaucer pilgrim" at their word and interpreting everything Robin says as "a synne and eek a greet folye" (3145-6). See Kendrick's overview of this critical approach, 7-9. This escape clause is by all means an option any reader can take, according to Chaucer's rules. However, according to these same rules, the reader is also free to fall. Rather than trying to excel at the moral tests proctored by Chaucer's apologies and disclaimers, I propose that we fully explore the Miller's theological system.

[199] Pascal advises those who "cannot believe" to begin to approach faith by pretending to have faith. He promises that the performance of faith (taking holy water, going to mass) "will make you believe quite naturally, and will make you more docile" (124-5).

convenience (not endless bliss). Any medieval Christian who ever lazily cheated the system by only pretending to believe would laugh at this joke. It must have killed. As Steven Justice's recent work on medieval faith in miracles demonstrates, "deep skepticism, tacit and pervasive…attached itself routinely to [miracles] and still larger matters, like the reality of God" (21).[200] And yet academic and popular consensus continues to maintain that the medieval mind was incapable of even a moment of disbelief in Christian dogma because of a *blocage mental* that afflicted the inhabitants of the Dark Ages, rendering them incapable of doubt.[201] In this chapter, following in the footsteps of Steven Justice, John Parker, and Noah Guynn, I aim to prove this wrong. Medieval faith is not credulous, but modernity's faith in it is.[202]

★ Moments of Doubt

In Saint Mary's Church in Chalgrove, Oxfordshire, a fourteenth-century chalk painting (whitewashed during the Reformation and rediscovered in the mid-nineteenth century) depicts the Funeral of the Virgin (Rubin ill. 17). A Jewish stereotype (easily identifiable by his hooknose) attacks Mary's funerary bier. N-Town's play of Mary's Assumption expands upon his motivation: this Jew doubts Jesus' claim to be the Messiah (41.53-6) and Mary's claim to be a virgin (41.392). Furthermore, he identifies Mary as a dangerous "renogat" (41.42) who threatens

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[200] Steven Justice, "Did the Middle Ages Believe in their Miracles?" *Representations* 103 (2008), 1-29. See also his more recent article, "Eucharistic Miracle and Eucharistic Doubt," *JMEMS* 42.2 (2012), 307-332.

[201] I take the phrase *blocage mental* from Jan Bremmer, quoting Louis Febvre (11, 22). Only the odd eccentric has ever asserted Chaucer's skepticism, all clustered in the mid-twentieth century: the ranks include R. T. Lounsbury (see the rebuttal of John. S. P. Tatlock), Aldous Huxley (see the rebuttal of Alice Kaminsky), and Roger Sherman Loomis (see "Was Chaucer a Free Thinker?" 21-44). The recent volume on *Chaucer and Religion* edited by Helen Cooper (Brewer 2010) summarizes current consensus: "For Chaucer, Christianity was a given, and faith was effectively the only option" (xi).

[202] It seems to me that modernity forces medieval faith to play the role identified by Michel de Certeau as "the subject supposed to believe," the symbolic order's cornerstone (200). See Michel de Certeau, "What We Do When We Believe," in *On Signs*, ed. Blonsky (Johns Hopkins 1985), 192-202. In his commentary on de Certeau, Slavoj Zizek offers an illustrative example: "According to a well-known anthropological anecdote, the primitives to whom certain superstitious beliefs were attributed (that they descended from a fish or from a bird, for example), when directly asked about these beliefs, answered: 'Of course not—I'm not that stupid! But I have been told that some of our ancestors actually did believe that…' In short, they transferred their belief onto another" (29). Likewise, modernity has transferred its belief onto the Middle Ages.

to "cause the comownys to ryse" (41.81).[203] Fearing that the cult of Mary's corpse could spark a revolution against Caesar and the Temple, he plots to burn her body and scatter its ashes (41.84-7). The chalk painting in Chalgrove commemorates the exact moment when this persecutor dares to touch Mary's bier with his hand, a moment N-Town describes with a stage direction: "*Hic saltat insanus ad feretrum Marie et pendet per manus*" ("Here the madman leaps to Maria's bier and hangs there by his hands"). In punishment for this sin, God fastens the offending arm to the bier, withers it, and wracks it with pain (41.423-5).

Academic commentary on such moments—moments in which skeptics doubt and attack the objects of Christian faith, like Mary's body—tends to foreground God's *contrapasso*, interpreting his triumph as so absolute that it retroactively erases the crime it punishes. God's judgment is taken to dominate the response of the audience throughout the pageant; it is argued that as slanders and attacks occurred, the audience would interpret the slanders eschatologically, perceiving them as nothing but tally marks in the eternal ledger of sin (Kolve 141). Thus, critics of medieval drama explain that detractions against the Virgin are "neatly inverted," "trumped," and "conquered" (Lipton 120; Lampert 131; Carlson 199).

Though I disagree, I cannot deny that the plots of Marian pageants lend themselves to this reading by ending with spectacular punishments of skeptics. For example, N-Town's pageant of Mary's Assumption climaxes when Belsabub and Belyal dismember an unrepentant Jewish detractor of Mary (41.476) and drag him into the pit of hell (41.486-7) to "brenne and boyle" for all eternity (41.483). The message seems clear. This Jew doubts, insults, and profanes Mary; in response, God punishes him, therein (as Kolve argues) demonstrating the reign of Christian doctrine over the text's meaning (141). Critical attention focuses on the final bloody scene,

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[203] For the sake of simplicity, I am combining four Jewish figures (Princeps 1, 2, 3 and Episcopus Legis) into one joint entity. They identify themselves as Jews (41.40-52) and Mary identifies them as Jews (41.224, 228-9).

assuming that this is where a medieval eye would naturally focus (and even assuming that this is all a medieval eye would see). And yet the attention of some fourteenth-century artist in Chalgrove selected a different and far more ambiguous moment in the narrative. Chalgrove's chalk painting of the hook-nosed Jew grasping Mary's bier in Chalgrove commemorates the very zenith of his affront rather than its resolution. The Jew's hand is not visibly withered, severed, or metamorphosed into clay (all popular late medieval options for representing his punishment). Rather, his left hand appears to have just gotten stuck to the bier: he swings above the ground, perhaps having been yanked off his feet an instant before by the force of his grip.[204] The stage direction describing this moment in N-Town ("Here the madman leaps to Maria's bier and hangs there by his hands") confuses whether the Jew clings to the bier of his own free will (demonstrating his firm commitment to attacking Mary) or whether God sticks him there as a supernatural punishment. It is impossible to make this distinction because the punishment so exactly resembles the crime. *This* is the moment frozen in time in Chalgrove, the painted snapshot at which parishioners would stare year in and year out. Not the moment when two out of three of the Jews convert to Christianity; not the moment when the third, unrepentant Jew is torn apart and dragged to Hell. But rather this moment: the climax of Mary's defilement. This image projects, so cinematically (using the very walls of the church as a screen), a medieval interest in doubt.

Medieval Biblical drama embodies and gives voice to that interest. In defiance of Lydgate's curse against those who dare to express any "doute or ambiguyte" about the virgin birth, N-Town repeatedly (even obsessively) subjects the Virgin to daringly probing (as we will soon see) trials of virginity, continuing an ancient tradition of experimenting with Mary's body

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[204] Below him, his peers seem to be falling to the ground, having just been smitten with painful madness, as N-Town describes (41.409-418).

to test the strength of faith and truth of doctrine. As she gives birth to Jesus, Mary promises the

audience that her child will prove her virginity once and for all: "The chylde that is born wyl

preve his modyr fre, / A very clene mayde" (15.180-1). Yet across the English tradition of

Biblical drama, objections to Mary's protestations of innocence continue to assert themselves

after the birth of Jesus. In the Chester cycle, as soon as Mary goes to the Temple for purification

(her first foray since labor), the very first man she encounters, Simeon, doubts the virgin birth

(11.30-40). In N-Town, Mary's corpse is accused of whoredom at her funeral (41.392). In York,

the Virgin must drop her girdle to Doubting Thomas as she ascends to Heaven to prove her

body's incorrupt purity to the Apostles (45.166-9).[205] Late medieval English stained glass panels,

chalk paintings, illuminations, and relics lovingly commemorate the precise moment when Mary

drops this token of proof—lingering (yet again) on a moment that inextricably knots doubt and

proof.[206] When Mary says that Jesus will prove her virginity, she must mean on Doomsday, and

that is not here yet.

Contrary to the critical narrative that God answers doubt with punishment, N-Town's

Joseph doubts Mary in three successive pageants (10, 12, and 15) and God answers each

incidence of his skepticism with miraculous demonstrations of Mary's righteousness. Each time,

Joseph converts, repents, and bears witness to the truth. And yet his faith does not seem to take;

Joseph's doubts resurface again and again. Joseph is never penalized for these recurring doubts.

He loses no limbs, suffers no torture. God and Mary tolerate Joseph's insulting suspicions and

threats, patiently providing him with fresh proof at every turn.[207] Joseph is not the exception to

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[205] For an analogue, see Jacobus de Voragine 2.82.
[206] See also Marks 92-3.
[207] Criticism has tended to explain this by arguing that Joseph never really threatens or insults Mary. Kolve explains that Joseph's behavior falls within the category of marital "fussing" (251). Yet Joseph explicitly and repeatedly accuses Mary of adultery and deceit. Furthermore, he threatens to have her stoned to death (12.95-7), a threat completely unique to N-Town that has gone largely unacknowledged.

the rule, but rather the prevalent pattern of how N-Town represents and responds to doubt:

tolerantly. In fact, criticism has already acknowledged this in its identification of Joseph as an

Everyman (Kolve 247; Gibson 164).

Joseph also contradicts the argument that drama projects doubt onto demonic, exotic

Jewish villains and then spectacularly punishes them, thus containing skepticism. Joseph is both

Jew and Christian, saint and persecutor, witness and skeptic. He is far from alone in this: in each

of N-Town's Marian pageants set before the Crucifixion, the overwhelming majority of the

characters (all simultaneously Jewish and Christian due to the temporal flux of medieval Biblical

drama's double setting in the deep past and medieval present) implicitly or explicitly assert their

skepticism of Mary's virginity (whether by expressing their own doubts or preemptively

expressing doubts that they assume others are thinking); in each pageant, only one scapegoat is

ever punished. True enough, that one scapegoat structurally represents the sins of the entire

community. However, there is an important distinction between a zero-tolerance approach to

doubt and N-Town's far more lenient approach, which tolerates doubt within certain limits

marked by the transgressions of a scapegoat. Furthermore, N-Town's limits (as I will go on to

argue) are expansive, flexible, and even permeable. After all, skepticism propels the engine of

each pageant's plot. Without doubt, there would be no occasion for the theatrical proof of special

effects, the *raison d'être* of miracle plays. Why would drama so unwisely spurn the hand that

feeds it? Doubt and drama are natural allies rather than enemies, linked in an intimate

symbiosis.[208]

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[208] A prevalent theory (best represented by Max Gluckman) understands the medieval carnival as a "safety valve" (19). Applications of this theory to medieval drama have put undue emphasis on one item in a dialectical equation: if the process of faith depends on rituals of doubt, this does not equal the dominance of faith and the erasure of doubt (as has been argued) but rather an endless codependent struggle.

Criticism often speaks of "moments" of doubt or profanation.[209] This characterization of doubt as brief, self-contained, and unimportant suggests that Biblical drama's plot structure resembles a sequence of hierarchical steps ascending to the all-important, all-determining conclusion: Doomsday (and within each pageant leading up to it, an eschatological preview characterized by punishment and closure).[210] Yet this model does not accurately reflect the repetitive, cyclical nature of medieval Biblical drama. The York register, the Wakefield compilation, and the Chester manuscripts are often called "cycles."[211] This term refers to the staging of Biblical drama, best attested to by extensive records of performances of the Corpus Christi cycle in York. In York, from before dawn until the middle of the night (Beadle 88), each pageant performed itself on a feedback loop between twelve and sixteen times (Twycross 39). (Rather like the theatrical experiments of Ionesco.) As the wheels of each pageant wagon turned, each feedback loop circled the city (Twycross 40). These many smaller circles shaped one immense narrative cycle of Christian history, from alpha to omega, Creation to Doomsday. This cycle, in its turn, cycled through the years with every annual performance.

This cyclical pattern discourages taking any pageant's conclusion as its be-all, end-all. In cyclical drama, each moment happens again and again. There will be no final resolution—that is,

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[209] "If the sacred and the profane are obverses of each other, they are so in the way that two sides of a Moebius strip are obverses: strictly opposites to each other yet occupying the same space, they also turn into each other. Instances in lived life, in personal habits, and in collective self-definition during which the demarcation line between the sacred and the profane is put to the test may be spoken of as "profanatory moments" (Epstein and Robins 10-11). Note how the profane is reduced from the endless obverse of a Moebius strip to a mere "moment."

[210] Deviating from this pattern, N-Town never fully realizes Doomsday, trailing off abruptly in its midst (42.130). A speech marker reading "Deus" appears in the bottom right-hand corner of the manuscript's last leaf, followed by absence. Coincidentally (and yet evocatively), the last quire detached itself from the compilation; thus, N-Town's God never condemns nor punishes the guilty.

[211] The N-Town manuscript is a scribal compilation tied to no particular records of performance; textual evidence suggests that the compiler took various pageants from various exemplars (as Lawrence Clopper puts it) "on an ad hoc basis without complete success" (187). For this reason, critics have warned against reading N-Town as a coherent whole, against calling it a "cycle," and against comparing it to proper Corpus Christi cycles like York or Coventry. Yet N-Town's scribe-compiler used the cyclical pattern established by Corpus Christi cycles as his organizational model; this seems to be justification enough for reading its pageants in relation to each other and to their analogues. See also Fowler's model of medieval literary character (1-28).

until Doomsday. And demonstrating Doomsday's inability to come early, the York Corpus

Christi cycle performed the End of Days sixteen times per day once a year for several hundred

years. Thanks to the complex temporality of Biblical drama, Christian history occurs in the

ancient Middle East and in late medieval England. It recurs even now: Biblical drama still loops

in reading and performance, destabilizing the distinction between the past and the present and re-

iterating the dialectic of faith and doubt that constructs and deconstructs Christianity again and

again. Biblical drama recycles doubt: it is powered by doubt and must keep doubt alive.

★ **N-Town's Nativity Pageant**

In the Gospels, the Pharisees come to Jesus and demand that he prove himself with a

miracle—Jesus sighs and rebukes them, saying, "the naughtie and advouterous generation

seeketh for a signe: and there shal not a signe be giuen it" (Matthew 16.4).[212] This moment

generated centuries of prohibitions against demanding proof from God—such as the warnings

made by Ignatius of Antioch, Anselm, and Lydgate about inquiring into the mystery of the virgin

birth. And yet, contradicting the position expressed in Matthew 16.4, Jesus generously performed

many spectacular miracles for audiences of skeptics. Most strikingly, he invited Doubting

Thomas to finger his wound (John 20.24-9). These performances of proof led Augustine to argue

that "miracles were necessary before the world believed, in order that it might believe" (*City of

God* 22.8).[213] In other words, Augustine held that the Christian faith depended upon miraculous

proof.[214] In this spirit, many Christians sought to explain Mary's virginity with reason and with

evidence. Ignatius' anti-explanation of Mary's pregnancy as "a mystery wrought in the silence of

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[212] See also Luke 11, John 12, and Mark 8.

[213] Augustine did not understand miracles as explosions of the laws of nature; he argued that miracles only contradict "what we know of nature" (*Against Faustus* 26.3). Furthermore, Augustine maintained that although miracles were no longer necessary (Christianity having already been established), they continued to occur (he lists many that he himself witnessed), though on a smaller scale (*City of God* 22.8-9).

[214] Weddle points out that early Christians sought to differentiate themselves from the Gnostics, who understood miracles as problematic "marks of attachment to the world and thus of spiritual immaturity" (171).

God" failed to satisfy (Gambero 28). A ravenous hunger for proof of the virgin birth created an industry of eyewitness reports, miraculous tokens, and even catalogs of examples of parthenogenesis in nature.[215] N-Town's Nativity pageant falls into this camp of empiricists, skeptics, and materialists. In her 1999 study of N-Town's Nativity pageant, Gail Gibson pauses to make the following offhand observation: "This play seems to resolve doubt less than to invite the continued groping of Mary's—and God's—privy secrets," playing on the Miller's joke (20).[216] This chapter expands upon her thesis. As we will see, N-Town's Nativity pageant seeks after a sign in a far more invasive manner than the Pharisees—and Mary is happy to oblige. N-Town invites the testing of Mary to a degree that medieval drama criticism has not fully recognized.

The episode of the doubting midwife from N-Town's Nativity is perhaps the most infamous trial of Mary's virginity in medieval European drama.[217] The legend derives from the second-century apocryphal Gospel of James (365-6). In the Gospel of James, Joseph fetches two "Hebrew midwives" to attend to Mary in the cave where she prepares for childbirth (365). The first midwife witnesses the miraculous birth of Jesus: she enters the cave (building suspense towards the more intimate penetration to come) and sees a "luminous cloud" overshadow Mary, followed by a blinding flash of light, from which the baby Jesus appears (365). This first midwife, converted by these miraculous tokens of proof, exits the cave and preaches the doctrine of the virgin birth to a second midwife named Salome. Salome remains unconvinced: she says, "As the Lord my God liveth, unless I thrust in my finger, and search the parts, I will not believe

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[215] Origen argued that virgin births were established facts in science by equating spontaneous generation and parthenogenesis (Warner 36). Lydgate expands Origen's catalog, listing forty-two different virgin births found in nature (2.652-931).

[216] Ruth Evans agrees. In a study of medieval virginity, she uses N-Town's Nativity as an example of a trial of virginity raises questions about "the meaning of faith; how to show devotion; the limits of knowledge and of recognition," ultimately demonstrating that "virginity can never be a sure thing" ("Virginities" 22). She connects this to "faith and miracle," which, like virginity, "plug the gap between suspicion and certain knowledge" (ibid).

[217] Evans sums up the consensus nicely: "Surely (we think now) this is sacrilege—or bad taste?" ("Virginities" 21).

that a virgin has brought forth" (365). True to her word, she marches into the cave and "put[s] in her finger," which instantly "drop[s] off as if burned with fire" (365).[218] (By contrast, medieval images of the Nativity often depict Salome with a cleanly severed stump, as if her hand had been chopped off with an axe.[219]) This spectacular punishment fully and immediately convinces her; healed by faith, she goes on to become an evangelist of Marian dogma (366). Skeptics make the best witnesses.[220]

By seeking a midwife's help to begin with, Joseph casts doubt on Marian dogma: his request for medical assistance implies that he assumes Mary will suffer pain in childbirth. This contradicts the doctrine of the painlessness of the virgin birth, which was standard throughout Western Christendom as of the fourth century (Reynolds 80). Unfortunately for the Gospel of James, it hails from centuries earlier (long before the establishment of Mary's painless childbirth), thus inadvertently highlighting the changeability of supposedly eternal truths. Jerome lobbied for the condemnation of the Gospel of James, arguing that it exposed its own falsity by bringing midwives to Mary as if she required their help (Graef 90).[221] And yet Jerome's belief in Mary's painless virgin birth, despite his protestations, derived from apocryphal rather than canonical traditions.[222] (After all, the Gospel of James was invented to correct Matthew and Luke, who both clearly contradict the doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity, a foundational principle of Mariology.)

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[218] For more on this kind of divine punishment, see Nichols 29-41.

[219] See *The Spitz Master: A Parisian Book of Hours* figure 13 (22-3).

[220] For more on the value of midwives as witnesses, see Ryan 435-48.

[221] The Gospel of James was condemned by Pope Innocent I in the fifth century and by the Gelasian Decree in the sixth century (Warner 29). Ehrman argues that the Gospel of James was condemned because while it established Mariology, it did not go far enough in its claims for her purity and so became not only obsolete but also embarrassing—even threatening (*Apocrypha* 32).

[222] As Ehrman notes, the early Church's basic calendar of Marian festivals (the foundation of the cult of Mary) were almost entirely rooted in the Gospel of James (31).

Then again, even if Joseph only sought midwives in order to secure witnesses with impressive medical credentials (and not to allay his own fears), this would still imply the necessity of medical proof of Mary's virginity. Indeed, the Gospel of James believes this necessity to be so urgent that it subjects Mary's body to a trial that has struck readers from the fifth through the twenty-first century as so probing that it fails to prove anything other than shocking impertinence. It is very difficult to read this trial as a triumph of faith; its doubtfulness is so disturbing that it stubbornly resists dismissal or denial.[223] The Gospel of James stands as a monument to just how hard it was for early Christians to accept the doctrine of the virgin birth.

And apparently it did not get any easier. The Gospel of James was updated, expanded, and Latinized at some point between the seventh and ninth century; this new version, the so-called Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, circulated in the Middle Ages (Ehrman *Apocrypha* 75). And although the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew functions as a correction of James, it only augments the importance of Mary's gynecological trial. In Pseudo-Matthew, Mary is not tested once but rather twice, by both the first and second midwife (374-5). Following this pattern of augmentation, N-Town dilates Pseudo-Matthew's episode of the doubting midwife to almost two hundred lines and subjects Mary to two *onstage* gynecological exams. The only other extant English dramatic text to feature Mary's gynecological exam is the Chester cycle. In Chester, Salome *almost* touches Mary, but her hand falls off before she can. The stage direction reads, "Then Salome shall attempt to touch Mary in her private parts, and at once her hands shall dry up" (118). In subsequent lines, Salome specifies that the withering of her hands made them instantly incapable

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[223] Scholars often justify the Gospel of James by arguing that its extreme methods were a necessary defense against anti-Christian polemicists.

of sensation; in other words, she would not have felt anything even if she managed to achieve a mere second of contact (6.521-2). Yet N-Town revels in what Chester tries so hard to avoid.[224]

Unsurprisingly, N-Town's Nativity play has consistently rankled its readers. From very early on, complaint focused not on the most glaringly obvious concern, the two gynecological examinations of the Virgin, but rather on the narrative's apocryphal illegitimacy.[225] Cleverly, nineteenth and early twentieth century commentators make the episode's apocryphal origins function as a tactful euphemism for the pageant's obscenity. E.K. Chambers only says that N-Town is "most legendary" in its "elaborations" on "certain embroideries," including, as he so discretely puts it, "the *obstetrics* at the Virgin Birth" (126). Even Rossiter skirts the issue, obliquely describing Mary's midwives as "going too far" and as "the kind of the thing which made the well brought up Byron describe miracle plays in general as 'very profane productions'" (67). Mid-twentieth-century critics discuss the matter more openly, but also with more evident shock and disgust. Rosemary Woolf dismisses the episode as "aesthetically inadequate" to sacred matters and completely "tasteless" (79).[226]

Departing from this critical tradition of treating N-Town's doubting midwife as an embarrassing vulgarity (to be swept under the rug, snickered at, or tut-tutted), Kolve interpreted Salome's trial of the Virgin not as an affront to Christianity, but as efficacious Christian didacticism. Kolve gives N-Town credit for so vividly depicting the horror of doubt. He describes Salome's gynecological examination as "a terrifying action, and so the audience would understand it" (139). In other words, they would *not* enjoy it. (Because that, he implies, would be

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[224] Evans ("Virginities" 21), Muir (101), and Gibson ("Seen" 16) also point this out. Muir notes that many Continental Nativity plays edit their apocryphal source so that Salome's hand withers because she dares to touch the baby Jesus, not Mary's body (Muir *Biblical* 101). Gibson mentions "a Nativity play performed at Lucerne from 1450 to 1616, in which…the entire Nativity takes place behind drawn curtains" ("Seen" 16).

[225] The late fourteenth-, early fifteenth-century satire *Piers the Plowman's Crede* complains about "miracles of mydwyves…at the lulling of oure Ladye" (77-81), calling this legend out for its blatantly apocryphal illegitimacy.

[226] Woolf tries to defend N-Town: she blames the "apocryphal subject matter" and not the author of N-Town (who, as she puts it, "was not lacking in poetic awareness") 79.

unthinkable.) Nor would they have wanted it; Kolve argues that the medieval audience would

never have doubted or disrespected Mary, not even for a moment.[227] This raises a problem.

Kolve justifies N-Town's horrifying pedagogical methods by means of their positive results,

implying the necessity of the lesson. And yet he also insists that the lesson was superfluously

preached to the choir. Thus, doubt is an urgent threat that justifies any defense and yet it is also

completely alien to the Christian community. So where is the doubt coming from?[228]

In recent decades, medieval drama criticism has put a face on doubt in and delineated its

markedly Jewish features.[229] In the past, Rosemary Woolf read N-Town's Nativity pageant as an

"illustration of skepticism rebuked" (178); more recently, Merral Price and Lisa Lampert agree

but add a new context, interpreting Salome as "the Pauline stereotype of the Jew as stubbornly

blind to the truth" (Price 441). The N-Town plays provide ample evidence for their reading:

many pageants feature villains explicitly labeled as Jews by speech markers, stage directions,

and dialog. These Jews doubt Christian claims, insult and attack Christians and Christian

symbols, and then face the wrath of God.[230]

And yet although N-Town never explicitly identifies Salome as Jewish,[231] Price and

Lampert classify Salome as a negative Jewish stereotype on the grounds that she doubts the

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[227] Kolve writes, "Mary knows she is pure and so do we" (139)—"we" meaning the medieval audience.

[228] Kolve argues that medieval drama's doubters represent the damned in Hell (140-1).

[229] For alternatives to these readings, see Leshock, Cutts, and Lepow.

[230] Like, for example, the torturers in N-Town's Passion Play (labeled with the speech markers Judeus 1, Judeus 2, and Judeus 3) or the persecutors in Mary's Assumption, who are described (by others and themselves) as the "Jewys" who "slew" Jesus (41.224, 229; 41.53-58). See also Chazan 13-18.

[231] The best evidence that N-Town *implicitly* characterizes Salome as Jewish is her firm adherence to two Old Testament laws: the commandment of sexual reproduction and the curse of Eve. When Salome denies the virgin birth, she says, "In byrth, travayle *muste sche nedys have* / Or ellys no chylde of her is born! (15.206-7). Her phrasing ("must needs have") suggests that it is impossible and that the Torah forbids it. N-Town also emphasizes Salome's role as a disciplinarian of the old law by having Joseph beg Mary to stop smiling and laughing in front of the midwives, of whom he seems terrified: "I pray yow, spowse, do no more so! / In happ the mydwyvys wyl take it to grame" (15.183-4).

virgin birth, favors material proof, and incurs divine retribution.[232] Price argues that Salome

embodies a polemical Christian construct of Judaism because she tries to "prove through

experience what should have been believed through faith" (Price 442); Lampert echoes: "She

cannot accept through faith but must use her hand not onto to see but to touch the truth" (126).

They back this up with the textual evidence of Salome's apology:

> Alas, alas, and weleawaye,
>
> For my grett dowth and fals beleve!
>
> …Alas, the tyme that I was born
>
> Thus to offende agens Goddys myght!
>
> …Alas, alas for my lewdnes!
>
> …Alas, that evyr I her assayde! (15.254-9; 265; 277)

Salome accuses herself of the sins of "dowth" and "lewdness" (a term that suggests a

combination of ignorance, wickedness, and dirty-mindedness) and apologizes for her "false

beleve" (*MED*).[233] This selection of evidence seems to suggest that N-Town's Nativity does not

really question Mary's virginity but rather uses a Jewish scapegoat to illustrate the terrifying

dangers of skepticism for a pious Christian audience, confirming their certain knowledge that the

wages of doubt are torture and dismemberment.

And yet the details tell a different story. Firstly, *two* midwives attend Mary in N-Town

(as in the Gospels of James and Pseudo-Matthew): Salome and Zelomy, which are (not

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[232] Jeremy Cohen defined "the hermeneutical Jew" as "the Christian idea of Jewish identity, crystallized around the theological purpose the Jew served in Christendom," "a theologically and doctrinally crafted Jew" (2). This is a necessary and brilliant intervention. And yet, strangely, when applied to medieval drama, the concept of the hermeneutic Jew has often been used to demonize doubt and then project it onto Jews.

[233] "False" means "contrary to fact, reason, or authority; erroneous, untrue, wrong," but also "faithless" or "disloyal," "wicked" or "bad" (*MED*). In other words, Salome is doubly wrong: incorrect and wicked.

coincidentally) two versions of one name. Before Salome begins to interact with Mary, Zelomy approaches, saying,

> With honde lete me now towch and fele
>
> Yf ye have nede of medycyn.
>
> I shal yow comforte and helpe ryght wele
>
> As other women, yf ye have pyn. (15.218-21)

Zelomy's speech might seem completely blameless. She appears to ask Mary's permission to perform the test, a gesture of respect. However, "lete me now towch and fele" is not phrased as a question (may I touch and feel?) but as an imperative; it resembles a request but constitutes a command. Furthermore, while Zelomy brackets her speech inside diplomatic conditionals (repeating "if" twice), she still unavoidably implies skepticism of Mary's claim of virgin motherhood. Zelomy phrases Mary's need for medical assistance (in other words, Mary's normalcy) as a conditional possibility, not as a certainty: *if* the test establishes that Mary has need of medicine, Zelomy offers to help. But note that the necessity of the test is never in question: Zelomy posits the test as a foundational requirement on which her conditional possibilities depend. And while Zelomy's interest in helping Mary might seem kind, it is actually deeply insulting. As Jerome pointed out, Mary does not need help; she is *not*, as Zelomy assumes she is, like "other women." In short, Zelomy doubts Marian doctrine and skeptically demands material, empirical proof. She demands to "towch and fele."

Mary has no problem with this. In fact, Mary *invites* Zelomy to test her: "Tast with youre hand yourself alon" (15.225). "Tast" means both taste and test, a double meaning that strongly emphasizes the material, sensual carnality of the trial in a positive rather than negative sense (*MED*). Zelomy takes Mary's invitation, examining her vagina with her hand. N-Town does not

punish Zelomy for this. Zelomy's hand does not wither. In fact, nothing happens to her at all. Her test is consequence-free. Indeed, it would be more accurate to call it beneficial: Zelomy is given the opportunity to taste Mary's sacred body, engaging in the very first (and perhaps most intimate) communion in Christian history.

Zelomy's examination proves that Mary's vagina is unpolluted by blood or afterbirth and that her breasts are full of milk. She announces that the Virgin "nedyth no waschynge" and is "clene and pure," "withoutyn spot or ony polucyon" (15.230-4).[234] And yet despite having witnessed Zelomy's examination and heard her report (two sensory modes of access to the miracle), Salome *still* remains skeptical. She does not err by failing to take the virgin birth on faith alone; this is never an option. After all, according to Augustine, this was the age of miracles, when God happily provided proof to skeptics. God gives Salome ample material proof; the problem is that she demands too much of a good thing.

Certainly, there are many important differences between Salome and Zelomy. Unlike Zelomy, Salome phrases her doubt very explicitly, in the form of an out-and-out denial: she exclaims, "It is not trewe!" (15.242). She continues:

I shal nevyr trowe it, but I it preve

With hand towchynge, but I assay.

In my conscience it may nevyr cleve

That sche hath chylde and is a may. (15.246-9)

The word "cleave" was used in the Wycliffite Bible, as in the King James, to translate God's definition of marriage in Genesis from Latin to English: "a man schal forsake fadir and modir,

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[234] Although it is often assumed that Zelomy is feeling for Mary's hymen (Evans "Virginities" 20-21), Zelomy does not explicitly mention a hymen; rather, she says that she is searching for blood, afterbirth, and the pollutions of birth delineated by Judaic law. Although Western medicine widely acknowledges the hymen as of the late twelfth century and uses the term "hymen" as of the late fifteenth century [Bicks 71-2], medieval treatises tend to emphasize the membrane's indeterminacy and unreliability (Kelly and Leslie 104; Salih 20-21).

and schal cleue to his wijf, and thei schulen be tweyne in o fleisch" (2.24). In the Vulgate, the verb is "*adhærebit* [adhere to]" (*Perseus*). This is how intimately Salome feels attached to her doubt: it sticks to her conscience with the adhesive force of gluey clay. She is married to her doubt; they are one flesh. In short, Salome is far more stubborn than Zelomy. She is also ruder. And yet despite these important distinctions between the two midwives, Salome repeats Zelomy's demand for proof very closely. Zelomy said, "With honde lete me now towch and fele / Yf ye have nede of medycyn" (15.218); Salome says, "I shal nevyr trowe it, but I it preve / With hand towchynge, but I assay" (15.247). Both midwives' speeches turn on the same condition: they promise to believe if and only if their hands touch proof.

One might expect Mary to protest against Salome's aggressive demand. And yet she invites Salome just as she invited Zelomy. In fact, Mary repeats her invitation almost exactly:

Yow for to putt clene out of dowth,

Towch with youre hand and wele asay:

Wysely ransake and trye the trewthe owth

Whethyr I be fowlyd or a clene may. (15.250-4)

In Middle English, the word "ransack" means, as it does for us, "to plunder," but it also means "to investigate, to scrutinize, or (as seems most relevant here) to medically examine a wound" (*MED*). Mary wants to put Salome "clene out of dowth": "clene" being the word she uses to describe her own miraculous purity. Mary claims to be "a clene may," unpolluted by the curses that Eve brought down on women. This phrase (clean maid) is repeatedly used to describe Mary throughout this pageant and the N-Town plays at large. Here, Mary uses the word "clean" to describe the state of pure belief unpolluted by doubt that she wants Salome to achieve by means of material proof.

To Zelomy, Mary said, "Tast with youre hand" (15.225); to Salome, she says, "Towch with youre hand" (15.251)—just as Jesus will say, many pageants later, to Doubting Thomas, "Put thin hool hand into my ryght syde, / And in myn hert blood, thin hand that thu wynde" (38.339-40). Jesus' phrasing (like Mary's) celebrates the carnality of the test he demands: he asks Thomas to "wynde" (meaning "swirl") his whole hand in his heart's blood (*MED*). Just as Jesus invites Doubting Thomas to put his finger in his wound, Mary invites her midwives to put their fingers in her vagina. She describes this empirical touching as a method of purifying the mind. Furthermore, Mary specifies that she wants Salome to "wysely ransake" and "wele asay" her—modifying the verbs describing inquisition ("ransake," "assay") with positive qualifiers ("wysely," "wele"). This does not sound condemnatory. In fact, Mary seems to be praising testing.

Critical commentary on this pageant has exaggerated the difference between Salome and Zelomy. Woolf describes Zelomy as "the faithful midwife" who "examines the Virgin but in a spirit of reverence" (178), unlike Salome, who is "skeptical of the miracle" (179). Price and Lampert follow suit, arguing that Zelomy and Salome approach Mary "in entirely different spirits" (Price 442). Yet both midwives doubt the virgin birth and demand proof. Woolf, Price, and Lampert emphasize that Zelomy only seeks to discover if Mary requires medical assistance, as if that suspicion did not presume the falsity of the doctrine of the virgin birth (which stipulates that Mary felt no pain in childbirth). Their reading fits the Chester Nativity play, in which the first midwife (named Tebel) laudably takes Mary's virginity on faith alone, without testing her body (6.504-511). In Chester, this clearly distinguishes the first midwife from the second: the first takes it on faith and the second demands proof. Making the moral of the story completely explicit, Chester's Expositor explains, "unbeleeffe is a fowle sinne" (6.721). Yet, by contrast, N-

Town has both midwives demand proof of the virgin birth, receive invitations from Mary, and thrust in their hands.

Critics have suggested that Salome is punished for her gynecological examination of Mary, as if the exam itself is the problem. But really, it is Zelomy who fully examines Mary (thoroughly, with hand intact), and she is not punished in the slightest. The important distinction that N-Town makes between Zelomy and Salome is not that one midwife is skeptical, carnal, and empirical while the other is not, but rather that Salome refuses to accept her own eyewitness access to Zelomy's first-hand examination of Mary's body. This is also the distinction made by the Apocryphal Gospels of James and Pseudo-Matthew, which chastise Salome for demanding her own personal tactile access to Mary's vagina even after having been given so much material proof already. This warning makes practical sense: as Augustine pointed out, Christianity would severely limit its scope if it promised to deliver miraculous experiences to every single skeptic forever (*City of God* 22.8). The effective evangelism of the Gospels of James and Pseudo-Matthew depends on the persuasive authority of their written, allegedly second-hand testimony of eyewitness reports. (The Gospel of James claims to be the work of Jesus' brother, who spoke directly to Salome.) Salome's transgression trains readers to accept Gospel truth as proof enough. (Proof enough, not faith alone.)

Even this limitation hardly limits. N-Town's Nativity pageant (and the Gospels of James and Pseudo-Matthew) caves to Salome's demand for a second trial, implying that God owes humanity not one but *two* gynecological examinations of his mother. After all, Salome receives the proof that she demands, even though God slaps her wrist for asking. Furthermore, God's chastisement of Salome functions as yet another token of proof, a provision that implies an underlying assumption that readers and spectators—unsatisfied after two trials of chastity—

hunger for more. Though N-Town may (briefly) penalize Salome, it never punishes the

anonymous Christian consumers in the audience for their unspoken demand for still more

miraculous special effects; rather, it assumes (and depends upon) the infinitude of their craving.

★ N-Town's "Trial of Mary and Joseph"

N-Town's "Trial of Mary and Joseph" foregrounds its medieval rather than its historical

setting more strikingly than any other pageant in N-Town (and perhaps in English Biblical drama

more broadly).[235] It begins with a speech by a "dean" or, as he is later identified, a "somnore"

(14.138)—as in Chaucer's infamous "saucefleem" summoner, "a minor non-clerical officer of

the ecclesiastical courts" (Riverside Chaucer 822):[236]

> Avoyd, serys, and lete my lorde the buschop come
>
> And syt in the courte, the lawes for to doo!
>
> And I shal gon in this place, them for to somowne!
>
> Tho that ben in my book, the court ye must com too!
>
> I warne yow here all abowte
>
> That I somown yow all the rowte! (14.1-6)

The Summoner orders the audience ("serys") to make way for the bishop (and the bishop's

minions, two canon lawyers) to parade to an ecclesiastical courtroom mounted on a scaffold.[237]

He locates the setting of the play not as Nazareth, but as "this place," meta-theatrically

commenting on the *platea* (the open space shared by audience and actors). From the *platea*, the

Summoner directly addresses the spectators surrounding him, inviting them to the scaffold as

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[235] "The 'Trial' is perhaps the most contemporized play of the cycle" (Moll 151).

[236] Sugano argues that the Den "could either be a church official with jurisdiction over part of an archdeaconry or a guild officer. While both are possible for this particular Den, the latter seems more likely, as this Den does not appear to have either the authority or the decorum of the clergy" (379). Yet there is a strong vein of anti-clerical discourse in N-Town. Furthermore, the text explicitly uses the word "somnore" to describe the character's office (14.138).

[237] The bishop is once identified, by stage directions, as "Abizachar," linking him to Ysakar in the Mary plays (14.125). For an overview of the critical debate over N-Town's staging, see Spector 2.544-9.

spectators and summoning them to court as defendants—he advises them to bring full purses unless they want their cases to go very badly (14.25-8).[238]

The Summoner calls names from a list of accused suspects: a catalog of familiar types from estates satire including "Bertylmew the Bochere," "Geffrey Gyle," "Kytt Cakelere," "Letyce Lytyl Trust," and "Malkyn Mylkdoke."[239] While some of these names merely suggest professions ("Bertylmew the Bochere"), many suggest sins: guile, lying, cackling or chattering, and milking ducks, which broadly means being foolish and more specifically means gossiping (Jones 167). It is unclear whether actors interspersed throughout the crowd answered to these names and came forward to form a theatrical audience distinct from the real spectators (Moll 155-7), or whether (and this second option seems more likely) the actor playing the Summoner pointed out unsuspecting members of the crowd, hailing them as liars, cacklers, and busy-bodies.[240] The pageant uses the guilt (original and particular) of the spectators to summon them to the scaffold as sinners, integrating them into the plot and implicating them in Mary's persecution.

Once the audience arrives at the scaffold, they are introduced to two allegorical Vice figures, Raise-Slander and Back-Biter. Although Price interprets these figures as "identifiably Jewish" (445), N-Town seems to characterize them as allegorical embodiments of the sins of N-Town's medieval Christian audience. Raise-Slander and Back-Biter address the spectators directly in a very chummy tone—calling them "syrs" (14.34) and "fayr pepyl" (14.35), and offering them friendly blessings: "God save yow all!" (14.34). They meta-theatrically introduce

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[238] The Summoner says, "And loke ye rynge wele in youre purs, / For ellys youre cawse may spede the wurs" (14.25-6). Perhaps this demand for bribes functioned as a request for payment for the actors (as in *Mankind*), demanding that the audience catalyze the plot with their money (Spector 2.468).

[239] For more on estates satire, see Mann 1-16. Many of the names also appear in Lydgate's *Disguising at Hertford* (see lines 44, 79, 93, 101, 115, 125) and Skelton's "The Tunnyng of Elynour Rummynge." For more on character in "The Tunnyng," see Fowler 134-78.

[240] Bryant argues that the names refer to spectators (341); Fewer argues that the names suggest the "East Anglian civic polity" (130); Moll argues that the names "denote those individuals who would participate in a riding" (155).

themselves as dramatic conventions: "I am Bakbytere, that spyllyth all game, / Bothe kyd and knowyn in many a place" (14.62-3), like, for example, the *platea* of *The Castle of Perseverance*, in which Bakbytere plays a part. Once the bond between these Vices and the crowd has been established (on the grounds of their shared meta-theatricality, their conscious presence in the contemporary moment), Raise-Slander and Back-Biter spread the rumor that Maid Mary made a vow of virginity and yet "her wombe doth swelle" (14.74-81).

By telling the audience that Mary is pregnant, Raise-Slander and Back-Biter formally accuse her of a serious crime. In the fifteenth century, breaking a vow of spiritual marriage constituted a mortal sin in heaven and a crime in the ecclesiastical courts (Elliott *Spiritual* 139-40).[241] Simply by listening to Raise-Slander and Back-Biter accuse Mary of having broken her vow, N-Town's audience entangles Mary in the web of the law. According to late medieval English legal process, gossip becomes defamation when it is said publically, in the presence of the people—and defamation necessitates a trial (Lipton 119-21).[242]

As in the Nativity play, Mary eagerly welcomes her trial. In fact, she uses the same phrase to the Summoner that she used to Salome: she says that she wants the "trewthe" to be "tryed owth" (14.180-1). When the Bishop commands her to drink the water of God's vengeance, Mary tells the audience, "I hope thurowe Goddys sonde / Here to be purgyd before youre syght, / From all synne clene" (14.291-3). Mary's phrasing suggests that slander has polluted her and that she requires purification. This calls into question the model put forward by Kolve, according to which Mary is never touched by slander. Here, Mary herself says that she needs to be cleansed

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[241] See also Moll 149-150.

[242] As Squires, Hunt, and Lipton point out, this gossip would only necessitate a trial if Mary had a bad reputation; they assume that she did not (Squires 278; Hunt 13-4). And yet many authoritative characters in N-Town (the archangel Gabriel, for one) mention that Mary is in constant danger of earning a bad reputation (see 8.194; 10.344-51). N-Town consistently represents Mary's reputation as extremely vulnerable to slander.

by a trial.[243] Furthermore, Mary emphasizes the public and spectacular nature of the trial she requires: she specifies that she needs to be tested "before youre syght" and, as she adds several lines later, "beforn youre face" (14.295). Eager to drink the potion, she says, "I pray yow, lett me nought" (14.325).[244] She says that she wants "all this fayr peple" (meaning the audience) to see her cleanness (14.337). Mary demands a trial for purification and for proof.

N-Town's version of Mary's trial treats her more roughly than do the versions of the trial told in the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew and Lydgate's *The Life of Our Lady* (the pageant's ultimate source and closest analogue, respectively). In Lydgate's *Life of Our Lady*, no one out-and-out accuses Mary of any crime, nor is she insulted or harassed in the slightest degree. Lydgate emphasizes that when the bishop hears the rumor that Mary is pregnant, he suspects only Joseph: "For in my self perfytely I knowe / She is a mayde, but if it be for [Joseph]" (2.1398-9). Logically, the bishop must also doubt Mary, but he carefully phrases his doubt as if it pertains only to Joseph—a respectful gesture N-Town does not imitate. Lydgate's bishop stresses that he believes in Mary's virginity; he states that he only goes through with the trial in order "to voyde" "all suspecion" and "all ambiguyte" (2.1416-7). He identifies the source of this "suspecion" as "tungez large" (2.1419). We never hear any individual give voice to these doubts; they are everywhere but nowhere. Lydgate's characters maintain total deniability.

By contrast, in N-Town, the bishop, the canon lawyers, the Summoner, Raise-Slander, and Back-Biter all explicitly accuse Mary of breaking her vow of chastity. They insult her with slurs that suggest promiscuity and prostitution: one canon lawyer calls her "a bold bysmare" (14.298) and the Summoner calls her a "scowte" (14.182). The Summoner harasses Mary, asking

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[243] Moll also notes Mary and Joseph's desire to clear their names (152-3)

[244] Mary's persecutors try to prevent the trial. One canon lawyer says, "Se, this bolde bysmare wolde presume / Ageyn God to preve his myght!" (14.298-9); the second lawyer backs this up, warning Mary: "With Goddys hygh myght loke thu not jape" (14.314-5).

her, mockingly, whether the archer who "shett the bolt" pleased her "ryght well" (14.166-9).

Furthermore, the Summoner threatens her. He informs her that if she were his wife, he'd

"beschrewe" her nose every day (14.192).[245] The German historian Valentin Groebner has

collected an extensive catalog of medieval instances of husbands cutting off their wives' noses to

punish them for adultery.[246]

The Summoner is not alone in threatening Mary. The entire court seems to fully expect

the potion of God's vengeance to hurt Mary.[247] The ordeal by potion derives from the Book of

Numbers, which advises that if a jealous husband suspects his wife of adultery, he should watch

her drink water on which priests have "heaped curses with execration"; if she is guilty, she will

be "subject to these maledictions" and they will make her "thigh to rot" and her belly to "burst

asunder" (Numbers 5.11-31).[248] When the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew applied this ordeal to

Mary, it respectfully diluted the potion's potency: Pseudo-Matthew relates that the bitter waters

demonstrate guilt by making a sign appear on the face of the drinker (rather than by making the

drinker's belly explode, as in Numbers) (373-4). Lydgate elaborates that the potion tastes "sowre

or swote" depending on the drinker's innocence or guilt (2.1425). Rather than taking up this

tradition of dilution, N-Town returns a potent threat of violence to the ordeal. Although the

potion has no effect on Mary or Joseph, when Raise-Slander drinks from the bottle, it tortures

him: "Out, out! Alas, what heylith my sculle? / A! Myn heed with fyre me thynkyht is brent!"

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[245] "Shreuen," meaning "to curse," is often used in prohibitive threats (*MED*). For example, when Chaucer's Chauntecleer escapes the fox, he says "I shrewe vs bothe two, / And first I shrewe my self, bothe blood and bones / if thou bigyle me ofter than ones" (3425-7).
[246] Reference to this punishment can also be found in Marie de France's *Bisclavret* (68-72).
[247] N-Town's bishop (who is Mary's kinsman) warns Mary that if the ordeal proves her guilty, he will revenge himself upon her for shaming him (14.327-9). In other words, he threatens her with two rounds of punishment.
[248] Schaberg argues, "What was expected to happen to the wife ("a sagging thigh, a distended belly") was related in some way to pregnancy; the outcome of the ordeal would probably be miscarriage or sterility" (187 n132). See also Miller 188-93.

(14.364-5).[249] In other words, N-Town (departing from Pseudo-Matthew and Lydgate's *Life of Our Lady*) threatens Mary with the possibility of agony.[250]

N-Town's persecutors are not only more disrespectful and threatening than the detractors in Pseudo-Matthew or Lydgate, they are also less apologetic. After Mary passes the test by water in Lydgate's *Life of Our Lady*, the spectators fear the wrath of God: they "gretely werne dismayed / leste that of theym, take were vengeaunce / For thay so farre, haue goddess myght assayed" (2.1572-4). Begging for Mary's forgiveness, they fall prostrate before her and beat themselves in the chest: "They bonche ther brestez with fistez wondir sore" (2.1576). By contrast, N-Town's bishop only asks the spectators to kneel rather than fall prostrate (14.370). The bishop apologizes to Mary on behalf of himself and his minions in this way: "All cursyd langage and schame onsownd, / Good Mary, forgeve us here in this place!" (14.372-4). The bishop uses the meta-theatrical term "place," thus securing forgiveness for the actors, the audience, and the pageant itself. He does *not* ask the spectators or actors to "bonche ther brestez with fistez wondir sore" (to beat themselves up about it, in other words).

Furthermore, N-Town's bishop thanks Mary for her patience: "Now, blyssyd virgyne, we thank yow all / Of youre good hert and gret pacyens" (14.378-80). Mary models N-Town's ideal audience response: she is a good sport about it. Demonstrating her tolerance, she returns the bishop's thanks: she says to him, "I thank yow hertyly of youre benevolens" (14.382). Mary also formally blesses the court (and the audience) by interceding with God on their behalf: she prays, "He mote yow spede that ye not mys / In hevyn of hym to have a sight" (14.392-3). Although Pseudo-Matthew, Lydgate, and N-Town all agree that the trial of Mary and Joseph ends with a celebration, N-Town is the only text that has Mary express thanks and give blessings to her

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[249] The stage direction reads: "*Hic bibit et scenciens dolorem in capite, cadit.*" ("Here he drinks, and feeling pain in his head, he falls.")

[250] For more on the legality of the trial by ordeal, see Lipton "Language" 129-35.

persecutors.[251]

And quite a celebration it is. The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew concludes the episode of the trial by water with a festive procession: "And [Mary] was led down to her house with exultation and joy by the people, and the priests, and the virgins. And they cried out, and said: Blessed be the Lord forever, because he hath manifested thy holiness to all His people Israel" (374). Lydgate elaborates that "the noyse" of their festivity made the heavens ring:

> And euery wightys tunge
>
> For Ioye and myrthe, gan hym gloryfie
>
> And all the day, thus in meloydye,
>
> Thay led further, tyl it drewe to eve. (2.1586-9)

Following suit, N-Town's pageant ends with a stage direction that reads: *Explicit cum gaudi* ("it ends with joy").[252] In the manuscript, this line has been framed with a decorative border of small squiggly circles—a notable embellishment in an otherwise rather plain and undecorated text (Meredith fol. 81v).

N-Town glosses its obscene and violent harassment of the Virgin as a festival of proof endorsed by Mary herself, who rewards the audience for their suspicions, insults, and threats with thanks, blessings, and celebrations. In the context of medieval devotional practices, this is not so very strange. Patrick Geary argues that in the thirteenth century, Christians (clerical and lay) engaged in a devotional practice that he terms "ritual humiliation": the abuse of relics and

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[251] Moll also notes this pageant's "striking" tolerance of seemingly sacrilegious doubt and abuse. He concludes that the pageant is "wholly secular": "What is striking in the scene is the lack of 'religious' material. There is no reference to the Bishop's resistance to God's plan. There is no reference to the Doctors' inability to believe prophecy" (152).

[252] At the conclusion of N-Town's "Trial of Mary and Joseph," the Bishop invites himself (and the cast and audience) to Mary's home, "To do yow servys with hygh reverens" (14.380-1). Mary declines, but encourages the bishop and "this pepyl" to go home to his house (14.383-5). Mary and Joseph remain alone on the scaffold for final comments, after which "it ends with joy," according to the final stage direction. I assume that the crowd moved from the scaffold to a hall where everyone shared a feast, as this series of statements seems to suggest.

sacred images as a method of punishing local saints "in order to force them to carry out their duties" (135).[253] For example, in 1250, the Archbishop of Rouen reported that whenever the crops failed, villagers knocked down, whipped, and insulted their local statue of the Virgin (Rollo-Koster 140). Although the Pope forbade this custom in 1274, instances of ritual humiliation are documented as late as the early sixteenth century, when locals in Foix threw a Madonna to the ground because of bad weather (Powell 93). Helen Parish finds evidence of the influence of ritual humiliation on late medieval English sermons, art, and hagiography (76). Ritual humiliation also seems to have flourished in late medieval religious theater.

The best example of ritual humiliation in late medieval British drama comes from a late medieval Cornish play dedicated to Saint Meriasek.[254] In *Beunans Meriasek*, a mother (identified by speech markers only as "woman") kidnaps an image of the baby Jesus out of the arms of a statue of the Madonna in order to force Mary to answer her prayers. A tyrant, King Massen, has imprisoned the woman's son and plots to hang, draw, and quarter him (101). When the woman's prayers to Mary fail, she decides to take more extreme measures:

> Mary, these many times have I prayed to you for my son, but where is the gift of your consolation? Can it be that you are unmoved by my tears? If there is such a thing as mercy, why, Mary, won't you hear me this night? Mary, I am left with no choice since to pray is useless. My son is in chains, Mary, listen and believe. In place of my precious child, your little one shall go home with me today. (101)

The woman pries a statue of the baby Jesus out of a statue of Mary's arms (101). Her strategy works: Mary explodes the doors of the tyrant's prison and zaps the fetters off the woman's son's legs (102-3; 104). Mary says to the son: "Tell [your mother] that although I may have seemed

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[253] I specifically refer to the subcategory of ritual humiliation that Geary calls "humiliation as coercion" (134). See "Humiliation of Saints" 123-40. See also Little 26-30, 83-5, and 133.

[254] See *The Life of Meriasek*, 90-105. For the dating of the play, see Murdoch 212.

slow in giving heed to her prayers, it was never my wish to forget her" (103).[255] Far from being

insulted, Mary seems to appreciate the woman's efforts.

The practice of ritual humiliation blurs the line between devotion and desecration. Many

late medieval English records describe scenes of destruction in churches and shrines while

ascribing no motive to the crimes, leaving historians baffled. For example, in Byfeld,

Northhamptonshire in 1416, a parish clerk decapitated a statue of Mary and then set the severed

head on fire (Aston 173); in Exeter in 1421, someone (the perpetrator was never caught) tore

apart of an image of Mary in a Franciscan friars' close (Aston 174). Both cases have been

studied as potential examples of Lollard iconoclasm, and yet scholars must admit that there is no

explicit evidence of heretical motives in the records of either incident (Aston 174; Foreville

691).[256] So many impulses could have motivated these crimes. As we have seen, they resemble

devotional (but heterodox) acts of ritual humiliation. They also resemble the kind of iconoclastic

attacks confessed to by Lollards.[257] They could also be classified as hooliganism, as motiveless

malignancy.[258] In other words, late medieval attacks against sacred symbols have the capacity to

confuse the distinction between veneration, iconoclasm, and vandalism. Likewise, N-Town's

"Trial of Mary and Joseph" confronts modern readers with slanders of the Virgin that echo anti-

Christian polemic and yet provoke prayers and blessings.

★ **Conclusion: "Pleyinge of þe most Ernestful Werkis of God"**

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[255] "Ov banneth genes heb nam / ham banneth y roff theth vam / lauer in delle deathy / kyn thevely dethy pel / ov boys heb y clowes lel / ny vennen y ankevy" (*Beunans Meriasek* 3705-3710).

[256] For the first desecration, see Thompson 27-8. Note that inquisitors attempted to frame this parish clerk as a Lollard by accusing him of knowing Sir John Oldcastle (Aston 173). For the second desecration, see Foreville 691.

[257] For more Lollard crimes against statues of saints, see Aston *Lollards and Reformers* 167-79.

[258] The crime of stealing statues of the baby Jesus continues to occur with great frequency. (There is even a "Baby Jesus Theft" entry on Wikipedia.) Although some (for example, the Catholic League) interpret these acts as motivated by anti-Christian feeling, the police and the legal system tend to classify them as acts of criminal mischief. For example, in 2006, *The New York Times* that four teenagers from Sayerville, NJ had stolen "more than 25 plastic baby Jesus figurines, which they planned to burn in a bonfire"; they were charged with "criminal mischief." See "4 Arrested in Theft of Baby Jesus Figurines," *The New York Times*, Jan. 3, 2006.

At the climax of N-Town's "Trial of Mary and Joseph," Mary proves her virginity by miraculously surviving the trial by potion without suffering any pain (14.346-353). The bishop proclaims: "I cannat be non ymagynacyon / Preve hyr gylty and synful of lyff!" (14.350-1). In other words, the evidence of her innocence is so persuasive, so infallible, that he cannot even imagine how he might disprove it. Raise-Slander seems to take the bishop's words as a challenge. He knows exactly how to cast doubt on this miracle. He accuses the ecclesiastical court of conspiring to spare Mary (14.355). He says, "Be my fadyr sowle, here is gret gyle! […] The drynk is chaungyd by sum fals wyle / That sche no shame shulde have this steed" (14.356-7).[259]

Raise-Slander's accusations are not inaccurate. Mary's miracle was a "fals wyle" arranged with "gret gyle": the magical "botel of Goddys vengeauns" is merely a prop. The ecclesiastical court did conspire to spare Mary from shame; they followed a script leading towards her justification. At the very climax of the miracle, the moment of truth, Raise-Slander's objection tears away the veil that Coleridge called "the willing suspension of disbelief" (and that Diderot called "the fourth wall"). He exposes miracle plays as mere plays. Though yet another staged miracle brings Raise-Slander into line, his objection lingers in the air. Those words cannot be unsaid. Indeed, Raise-Slander's words risk raising suspicion against all miracles.[260]

According to the late medieval anti-theatrical diatribe "A Tretise of miraclis pleyinge," this is precisely the problem with religious drama. The "Tretise" argues that by pretending that special effects are real miracles, theater destroys faith: "rikt as pleyinge and bourdynge of þe most ernestful werkis of God takiþ awey þe drede of God þat men shulden han in þe same, so it

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[259] Note that Raise-Slander specifies that some guile or wile has spared Mary from shame "this steed" (this time), implying a meta-theatrical awareness that there will always be another trial of Mary.

[260] Christian, Jewish, and Muslim medieval religious polemicists often accuse their rivals of faking miracles. For example, Christian polemicists accused Muhammad of being a Christian clerk (thwarted in his ambition to become Pope) who trained a dove to eat seeds from his ear in order to manipulate his followers into believing that he received dictation from the Holy Ghost (Metlitzki 199).

takiþ awey oure bileue" (34-5). Remaking God's miracles as theatrical special effects, the "Tretise" concludes, corrodes mankind's fear of God, without which faith cannot exist.

Theater is untrustworthy. Its guilt is a foregone conclusion: everyone knows that it is made up of nothing but lies and tricks. Just as Chaucer's Miller's joke about cuckolds and Christians depends on a deep cultural distrust of wives, Raise-Slander's objection plays with a comparably deep suspicion against theater. N-Town's Marian drama combines these two untrustworthy elements in an attempt to justify the ways of God to man by means of theatrical representations of the miracles of the Virgin. This endeavor seems doomed to fail. What could be more risky than fake proof of the virgin birth? I suggest that N-Town chose a losing battle on purpose in order to explore doubt—to inquire into God's privy secrets. English Renaissance drama did not have to import its skepticism from Greece and Rome. It inherited a rich theatrical tradition of doubt from its vernacular predecessors.

Chapter 3: Mary's Second Coming

★ Introduction: Reforming the Virgin

Recently, scholars have become quite interested in the presence of the Virgin Mary in Renaissance culture at large and in Shakespeare's plays in particular.[261] Or rather, they are interested in her apparent absence—Mary herself never actually sets foot on the English Renaissance stage. Although the Reformation did not immediately result in a national ban on dramatic representations of the Trinity or the saints, it did lead (though slowly and uncertainly) to the diminishment of religious pageantry and the burgeoning of commercial London theater. This was in some part due to subtle (and perhaps untraceable) cultural shifts, but also to specific local ordinances like that made by the Dean of York in 1576 ordering that "No pageant be used or set forth wherein the majesty of God the father, God the son, or God the holy ghost…be counterfeited or represented; or anything played which tend to the maintenance of superstition and idolatry" (Groves 55).[262] Though this specific ordinance does not mention Mary in particular, evidence suggests that reformers singled her out for eradication.

While the mysteries survived—though censored and repackaged—until the anti-Catholic crackdown of the 1570's, Marian drama did not fare as well (Groves 33-6). As early as the 1540's, twelve leaves containing three Marian plays were unceremoniously cut out of the Towneley manuscript (Stevens 258-9).[263] In the same decade, officials in York, Lincoln, and

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[261] See, for example, Ruth Vanita, "Mariological Memory in *The Winter's Tale* and *Henry VIII*," (SEL 2000); Katharine Goodland, *Female Mourning and Tragedy in Medieval and Renaissance English Drama* (Ashgate 2006); Regina Buccola and Lisa Hopkins eds, *Marian Moments in Early Modern Drama* (Ashgate 2007); Ruben Espinosa, *Masculinity and Marian Efficacy in Shakespeare's England* (Ashgate 2011); Gary Waller, *The Virgin Mary in Late Medieval and Early Modern Literature and Popular Culture* (Cambridge 2011).

[262] Paul Whitfield White argues that it is questionable that there ever was any "central policy to crush the religious drama" (127).

[263] Stevens hypothesizes that this excision was made between 1548 and 1554 (259-260).

Towneley forbade the performance of several Marian pageants.[264] While other pageants remained stable as England fluctuated back and forth between Protestantism and Catholicism, York's Mary plays had to change with the times: Edward VI banned them, Mary I restored them, and Elizabeth I banned them again (Stevens 260-1). The mysteries were still being performed in London, Preston, and Kendall as late as 1605; furthermore, some medieval character types (like devils, vices, tyrants, and virgin martyrs) shifted from pageant wagons to playhouses and lived on, largely unchanged.[265] Mary, by contrast, vanished (Groves 36).

It is no wonder. Reformers worked very hard to get rid of her. In the late 1530's, iconoclasts destroyed countless images of the Virgin. They desecrated her statues, chopping off her noses, breasts, arms, and heads—and cutting her infants out of her embraces (Waller 12-13). The Virgin of Walsingham was stripped naked and burnt in Smithfield, the place where criminals were executed.[266] The same was done to her "sisters" of Ipswitch, Doncaster, Penrice, and more (Latimer *Sermons* 395). The sheer multitudes of Marys staggered reformers—"that ladye in that place and that ladye in that," they complained (Bale "Image" 4r). They found papists worshipping "Our Lady in so many places," even in wells, trees, milk, girdles, and candles (Thomas 37-8). Stage representations of Mary must have particularly rankled—in its celebration of Corpus Christi, cycle drama elevated Mary to the status of the Trinity and worshipped the flesh she contributed to Jesus' Incarnation. To iconoclasts, that stank of idolatry.

Though Protestants sought to eradicate all idols of Our Lady, they did not want to eliminate Mary herself.[267] They only wanted to reform her—which meant drastically diminishing

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[264] Specifically the pageants of her death, assumption, and coronation, probably the same three removed from the Towneley cycle; see Stevens 258-261 and 263.

[265] See also Cox and Wasson.

[266] See Waller 1; Parish *Monks* 78; Aston *England's Iconoclasts* 173; and Wriothesley 1.83.

[267] Many protest that Mary did not simply vanish after the advent of Protestantism: see Karant-Nunn and Wiesner-Hanks 32-4 and Heal. Yet consensus maintains that her powers definitely declined, even in Catholic contexts; see Peters 217.

her powers and importance.[268] Reformers charged Catholics with having "eclips[ed] the glory of God's mercy and the worthiness of Christ's satisfaction" by making Mary their mediator, god, and savior (Crashaw 16-17). To correct this, reformers sought to replace the false idol of Mary, adorned with apocryphal legends and illegitimate powers, with the *true* Mary that they found in the naked Gospels. This Mary, they argued, was neither goddess nor queen, but rather (as Luther puts it) a lowly servant, "milking the cows, cooking the meals, washing pots and kettles, sweeping out the rooms" (Karant-Nunn and Wiesner-Hanks 46). The German Lutheran preacher Johannes Wigand describes reformed Mary as "a weak, stupid human being, just like other people" (Kreitzer 41).

Although Protestants honored Mary as God's humble handmaiden, they did so with extreme caution, preaching a message of emulation, not adoration. As reformers saw it, the excesses of late medieval devotion demanded overcompensation: Latimer writes, "I will give as little to her as I can (doing her no wrong), rather than Christ her Son and Savior shall lack any parcel of his glory" (*Sermons* 227).[269] Mary was stripped of her power of intercession, her triumph over Satan, and her contribution to salvation. No longer immaculately conceived, painless in childbirth, or exceptional in any way, Mary became, as Crashaw puts it, "a creature, a woman" (36).

The Flower Portrait of Shakespeare appears to be an authentic seventeenth century painting of the features of Shakespeare familiar to us from the engraving in the First Folio. Yet X-ray analysis revealed it to be nineteenth-century forgery painted on top of a late medieval image of the Madonna and Child (Groves 5; Cooper 72-5). Mary lies just under the surface— often, as in this instance and others, literally: recusants hid images and relics under floorboards

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[268] Prayers like the Ave Maria and Salve Regina were redirected from Mary to Jesus; see Kreizter 32-34 and Peters 215. The liturgical calendar was also revised to diminish Mary's importance; see Peters 215-17.
[269] See also Crashaw 16.

and in walls, iconoclasts whitewashed frescoes, and the thrifty recycled antique canvasses. Scholars have long recognized Mary in the cult of the Virgin Queen and Neo-Platonic encomiums to exceptional, celestial beloveds (Berry 9-10). These kinds of Renaissance adaptations of Mary have been described as encryptions, ghostly echoes, and, most predominantly, as pangs of nostalgia. It is often argued that the English people missed medieval Catholicism and longed for their lost culture.[270] Many scholars argue that much was lost because of the Reformation: enchantment, faith, and social wholeness. Others add that the loss of Mary irreparably harmed women by depriving them of their heavenly advocate, exemplar, and representative.[271] For these reasons, Renaissance resurrections of Mary (especially Shakespeare's) are often interpreted as attempts to restore medieval virginal wholeness to fragmented modernity.

The theory that Shakespeare heals the wound of modernity by restoring Mary and magic to his skeptical audiences assumes that doubt and promiscuity belong to modernity. It assumes that whereas disbelief in sexual honor, that "essence that's not seen," drives the plots of early modern drama, medieval pageantry (and medieval Christianity) trusts in the truth of Mary's monolithic virginity. And yet skepticism is the engine that propels medieval Marian drama. In N-Town, detractors doubt Mary at every turn. Far from being purely virginal, she is promiscuously identified as virgin, mother, wife, and adulteress. Indeed, medieval Marian drama resembles a rehearsal of the attacks waged by the forces of the Reformation against the cult of the saints. Until now, scholarship on the continuity of Mary into the Renaissance has consistently argued

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[270] Some explain this by arguing that the Reformation was forced on the English people, who resisted (see Haigh and Duffy). These scholars also emphasize the importance of recusant Catholicism (residual and Counter-Reformation). Others argue that England never abandoned Catholicism, but integrated Catholicism and Protestantism to form Anglicanism; see Groves 33.

[271] See Buccola and Hopkins 6; Waller 15-8 and 202-4; Maillet 96; Vanita 311-4, 320; Espinosa 31-4.

for the survival, against all odds, of medieval wholeness and faith. In this chapter, I make a case

for the continuity of medieval promiscuity and doubt.

★ **"Satan can change himselfe into an angell of light, the deeplier to deceiue"**

Shakespeare's portrait of Joan of Arc has been called "schizophrenic," "fractured," and

"disjunct"; Michael Taylor gives voice to a widely held opinion when he declares her the most

"discrepant" character in all of Shakespeare (44).[272] The discrepancy (it is argued) lies between

her charismatic heroism on the one hand and her pathetic villainy on the other.[273] For many, the

scene in which Joan consorts onstage with devils, thus proving herself a witch, comes as a shock

(5.3.1-24).[274] This scene, it is widely agreed, splits Joan's character into polar opposites.[275] Some

simply refuse to accept her fall, insisting that the author intends for us to interpret Joan's

confessions of whoredom as lies and her turn to witchcraft as tragic despair (Hattaway 24).

Others deny that Shakespeare slanders Joan at all, blaming the play's clearest moments of

character assassination on his alleged co-authors: Thomas Nashe, Robert Greene, and/or George

Peele.[276] Still others interpret Joan's contradictions as errors, though they forgive Shakespeare on

the grounds of his youthful inexperience (Hardin 25).

I want to expand the scope of this critique. Joan is not only the most discrepant character

in Shakespeare, but in history—especially in the history of Christianity. After the Church began

persecuting local heretics who loudly identified themselves as Christians, martyrdom became

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[272] See Taylor 40-44 and Jackson 22.
[273] Evidence of Joan's popularity with audiences and readers begins with an illustration in Bell's Shakespeare (1776) of the much-admired eighteenth century superstar Mrs. Sophia Baddeley as Joan, wearing an attractive Amazonian costume and posing heroically. For more on Mrs. Baddeley, see *A Biographical Dictionary* 202-208.
[274] All quotes from *1 Henry VI* are taken from the Oxford Shakespeare *Henry VI, Part One* edited by Michael Taylor (OUP 2003).
[275] See Taylor 44-45 and Jackson 20-21.
[276] For more on the theory that the play was co-authored, see Taylor 145-205.

much harder to blame on pagan tyrants.[277] Joan represents this problem. Blame for her death

cannot be effectively externalized: the Church sent her to burn in 1431, and then, in 1920,

reversed its position and canonized her.[278] Joan's case is the only instance of such a complete

reversal: no other heretic has ever become a saint, or vice versa.[279] The Church's turnaround has

never been forgotten; from the beginning, Joan's history was too contested to leave conveniently

consistent records. Of all the Christian martyrs, Joan's sainthood is the most fraught, and the

most subversive. (Which perhaps explains her wide popularity.[280]) Her martyrdom accuses the

Church itself, and yet the Church honors her for it.

On top of that, the Hundred Years' War and Protestant Reformation played tug of war

with Joan's reputation. Because of the conflict within France between the supporters of the

Dauphin and those of the English, even the earliest French histories of Joan are contradictory:

royalists made her a hero, Burgundians a villain (Fraioli 1). The templates for both versions of

Joan—good and evil—were constructed by opposing sets of chroniclers, hagiographers,

polemicists, and playwrights at roughly the same time, and out of a shared pool of source

material (Tricomi 17). When English, Protestant chroniclers joined the textual fray, they

excoriated Joan as a witch.[281] Yet Joan's tangled history tended to frustrate even the most

motivated attempts to stick to the single purpose of assassinating her character. Sixteenth-century

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[277] In *Proving Woman* (Princeton 2004), Dyan Elliott argues that the Church changed its position on sainthood beginning with the Fourth Lateran in 1215, afterwards preferring obedient ascetics (particularly noblewomen who internalized martyrdom via lethal doses of self-discipline) rather than the defiant radicals of yore, primarily because the heretics persecuted by the Inquisition effectively claimed the original kind of martyrdom for themselves (85-111).

[278] See Tricomi n51 and n52.

[279] Elliott confirms that Joan is the only case of such a "360-degree revolution" (165), but offers two comparable examples (both from the thirteenth century) that confused sainthood and heresy: the Inquisition investigated Armannus Punzipulus of Ferrara and Guglielma of Milan as candidates for canonization, but discovered beds of heresy instead (150-165).

[280] For more on Joan in popular culture, see Blaetz.

[281] See Hardin 25-35, especially 26. It is often argued that earlier, pre-Reformation sources are not uniformly negative. However, the slander that Joan pled her belly (which is widely agreed to be the nastiest smear of them all) was invented early on, circa 1464-70, in Continuation G of the prose *Brut* (Bernau 214).

English chroniclers, most importantly Hall, Holinshed, and Stowe, tell inconsistent stories about Joan, and make some very counter-intuitive editorial choices.[282] They sometimes omit a detail from their sources that would tar her: Hall, for example, inexplicably neglects to repeat the convenient slander that Joan pled her belly at the foot of the gallows, declaring herself pregnant in an attempt to get a nine-month stay of execution (and thus contradicting her famous claim of perfect virginity).[283] They also contradict each other: Hall, for example, writes that that Joan confessed her crimes at the foot of the stake, and died "in good mynde" (159), while Holinshed reports that she relapsed, and died "obstinate" (1577.4.1246). Sometimes they even contradict themselves: Stowe's version of Joan altered with every edition of *Chronicles* and *Annals* he published (Hardin 27).

Joan changes from a virgin to a whore depending on the purpose of the author at the helm. Those in her favor—like Christine de Pisan—applaud her virginity, while her enemies undermine it. Although no one (until Shakespeare, that is) denied that Joan's virginity had been proven (several times) in court, this did not stop her detractors from making insinuations. All slanders against her chastity remained tethered—albeit loosely—to the documented fact of her virginity, and yet, nevertheless, when chroniclers compiled reports of Joan's technical virginity alongside the facts of her militarism and cross-dressing, the stain of her monstrous and immodest behavior bled, discoloring everything. Hall insinuates her inchastity on these grounds:

> Where was her womanly pity, when she taking to her, the heart of a cruel beast, slew, man, woman, and child, where she might have the upper hand? Where was her womanly behavior, when she clad herself in a man's clothing, and was conversant with every losell,

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[282] I say "Holinshed" for the sake of brevity; *Holinshed's Chronicle* was written by committee. See Patterson 3-31. Some argue that even in the sixteenth century, English accounts of Joan could be positive (see Hardin 26-7), but I find the evidence unpersuasive. It does seem clear, however, that Shakespeare's sources, as Levine puts it, "were by no means monovocal" (43).

[283] As Hardin puts it, "That Hall would omit this detail is strange, since it is a dandy smear" (28).

giving occasion to all men to judge, and speak evil of her and her doings? Then these

things, being plainly true, all men must needs confess, that the cause ceasing, the effect

also ceaseth: so, if these moral virtues lacking, she was no good woman, then it must

needs, consequently, that she was no saint. (158-9)

In other words, Hall suggests that it if Joan was "no good woman" (the fact of her virginity

notwithstanding), she was no virgin. Holinshed employs similar tactics to undermine Joan's

chastity. When referring to "hir virginitie" (which he admits was proven in court), he adds, "(if it

were anie)" (1587.6.604). It existed, he admits, and yet he insinuates that it did not.

"Satan," Holinshed warns his reader, "can change himselfe into an angell of light, the

déeplier to deceiue (1587.6.604).[284] He intends for this maxim to prove Joan a devil, despite her

angelic appearance. But he opens up the disturbing possibility that since the devil can appear to

be an angel, good and evil might be completely indistinguishable. He attempts to use this

extremely slippery concept to firmly establish the certainty of Joan's villainy. The attempt is

doomed to fail. No chronicler on either side of the many debates about Joan (waged between

royalists and Burgundians, the French and the English, or Catholics and Protestants) seems at all

capable of narrating a completely coherent account of Joan—her history is too tangled to

straighten into pure invective or encomium. Thus, Joan's contradictions in *1 Henry 6* are not

errors made by the playwright, but inescapable paradoxes inherent in her identity.

★ Mary and Joan

In all his plays, Shakespeare mentions Mary by name fewer than a dozen times—usually

in offhand oaths ("By holy Mary") or place-names ("Saint Mary's chapel").[285] The majority of

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[284] See 2 Corinthians 11.14 and Shaheen 27-8. Reformation polemicists had a penchant for this passage (Parish *Monks* 49).

[285] For example: "By holy Mary," *Henry VIII* 5.2.3042; "For at Saint Mary's chapel…, " *King John* 2.1.851; "…blessed Mary's son," *Richard II* 2.1.738.

the remainder occur in *1 Henry 6*: there are more references to the Virgin Mary in this play than in any other play attributed to Shakespeare. This is because Joan of Arc repeatedly declares herself to be the second coming of the Madonna. In this, she repeats the claim made by the late medieval French saint play *Le mistère du siége d'Orléans*, which also compares Joan to Mary—though in a very different key.[286] In *Le mistère du siége d'Orléans*, Joan's imitation of the Virgin demonstrates her sanctity. In Shakespeare's *1 Henry 6*, it insinuates Joan's whorish falsity.

While the resemblance between Joan of Arc and Elizabeth I (that other famous version of the Virgin who was, like both Joan and Mary, subjected to extremities of blame and praise) has been studied in great depth, the resemblance between Mary and Joan has gone largely unnoticed.[287] In his study of the influence of medieval Marian drama on *1 Henry 6*, Albert Tricomi sees Joan and Mary as polar opposites: he argues that while Shakespeare exposes the seemingly virginal Joan as a whorish witch, medieval drama never questions Mary's chastity (Tricomi 15, 21-2).[288] By contrast, I suggest that Joan's fraught sexual identity does not make her Mary's opposite but rather her double.

Le mistère du siége d'Orléans introduces Joan as a heroine and a saint. She enters for the first time with the explicit approval of God the Father, who grants the desperate prayers of the Dauphin after Mary intercedes on France's behalf (Muir "French" 136).[289] By contrast, *1 Henry 6* introduces Joan as a devil. Joan's introductory scene begins when the French enter with boasts and are quickly beaten back by Talbot. In this expositional scene of humiliation, the Dauphin

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[286] See Muir "French Saint Plays" 123–180.
[287] For comparisons of Joan and Elizabeth, see Marcus 60-70 and Montrose 153-82. The only two critics who have connected Mary to Joan are Espinosa and Tricomi.
[288] The idea that medieval culture did not question Mary's virginity is repeated by Espinosa 33 and Buccola and Hopkins 10-11.
[289] See *Le Mistere du Seiege D'Orleans* 6.813-7.064.

turns to Joan and sells her his soul—a move framed as a cowardly and unsportsmanlike trick.

Just before Shakespeare's Joan enters, the Bastard of Orleans describes her:

> Be not dismay'd, for succor is at hand.
>
> A holy maid hither with me I bring,
>
> Which, by a vision sent to her from heaven
>
> Ordained is to raise this tedious siege
>
> And drive the English forth the bounds of France.
>
> The spirit of deep prophecy she hath,
>
> Exceeding the nine sibyls of old Rome.
>
> What's past and what's to come she can descry.
>
> Speak: shall I call her in? Believe my words,
>
> For they are certain and unfallible. (1.2.48-59)

The Bastard's opening imperative, "be not dismayed," recalls, amongst other scriptural

revelations, the Gospel of Luke: the angel said to the shepherds, "Be not afraid" (2.10).[290] But

the angel brought tidings of the birth of *the* Saviour, "which is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2.10-11)—

solus Christus, not *solus* Joan. Here, a bastard, rather than an angel, assuages the fears of the

French army, rather than the blessed shepherds; Joan brings "succor" from a petty siege, rather

than Jesus salvation from sin. This contrast proves a polemic point—that Catholicism twists

scripture for worldly (and thus depraved) ends. Indeed, the Pope's entanglements with empire,

politics, and war appalled reformers; they often compared the Pope and the Turk, picturing both

as tyrants armed to the teeth and dripping with jewels. Later, Joan claims that Mary commanded

her to save France; "Her aid she promised and assured success," she says. Reformers harped on

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[290] These quotes are from the Geneva Bible. Following Shaheen's recommendations, all subsequent Biblical quotes in this chapter will be taken from the Geneva Bible of 1587 or the Bishop's Bible of 1568, with occasional reference to Rheim's New Testament of 1582 (13-25).

the Catholic habit of mixing Mary and warfare, mocking papists for praying to Mary for help in the fight against the Turk (Kreitzter 34, 61).[291] Reformers also liked to joke about the absurdity of praying to God, Mary, and the saints for help in battles—both sides pray, they pointed out (Parish 75-6). Praying to Mary for help with wars, they argued, does not work. Here, Joan proves their point: by promising Mary's aid, she prefigures France's fall.

The Bastard's description of Joan's revelation begins a recurring pattern: Joan's speeches (and speeches about Joan) pervert Biblical annunciations—primarily *the* Annunciation Gabriel delivered to Mary. *Le mistère* makes the same move, but with deep sincerity: after a debate in heaven (imitating the Parliament of Heaven pageant that precedes the Annunciation in the medieval cycle tradition), an archangel (Michael rather than Gabriel) tells Joan that she has been chosen by God (7.065-7.192). *Le mistère* praises Joan by making her a type of Mary. This same comparison, in *1 Henry VI*, smears Joan—because Protestantism interpreted creative, additive re-stagings of scripture as corrosive lies rather than devotional offerings. *Le mistère* rehearses Biblical history to inaugurate a new saint, while *1 Henry 6* sees Joan's imitation of Christ and Mary as blasphemous.

The Bastard calls Joan "a holy maid." Many readers have taken this as gospel truth, refusing to believe any of the subsequent detractions the text makes at the expense of Joan's sexual purity. However, in the context of Protestant polemic, the Bastard's seeming compliment has enormous capacity to insult. For reformers, maidenhood was *un*holy. Luther maintained that celibacy was unnatural, unsustainable, and disobedient. He argued that God had commanded mankind to marry and reproduce, and built men and women for the purpose (Karant-Nunn Wiesner-Hanks 88-170). The Protestant theory of mankind's total depravity dominated early

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[291] For example, the English Jesuit Henry Garnet described the Virgin Mary as a knight, comparing her to "a well settled array of a pitched army"—"she mightily overcometh, not only her own, but also her devout clients', adversaries" (A5v-A6r); see also Espinosa 42.

modern England and made the cultural imagination deeply skeptical of chastity. Luther believed that only an extremely tiny minority could resist their God-given sexual urges; "it is impossible," he writes, "that the gift of chastity is as common as the convent" (Karant-Nunn Wiesner-Hanks 140). Consequently, reformers interpreted the Catholic Church's claim of institutional sexual purity as a lie covering up systemic corruption. They intimated that behind the walls of monasteries and convents, sodomy, bestiality, and infanticide raged (Karant-Nunn Wiesner-Hanks 169).

Polemic railed against the hypocrisy of the clergy to the extent that celibacy became code for its opposite. Reformers worked hard to invert the meaning of Catholic virginity, compiling enormous lists of historical alleged virgins and then picking each apart. They attempted to prove hundreds of medieval saints to be whores, either by pointing out (or inventing) narrative discrepancies in their source material, or simply by scoffing.[292] When Bale imagined the cup of the Whore of Babylon, described in Revelations as being full of the filth of fornication, he saw a cup brimming with liquid clerical celibacy (Ryan 74).[293] Renunciation became depravity.

So when the Bastard calls Joan "a holy maid," it tars her. This becomes completely explicit later in the play, when the Bastard calls Joan "holy" a second time. Observing Joan and the Dauphin (surprised by a midnight attack) running naked together across the stage, he quips, "Tut, holy Joan was his defensive guard" (2.1.50). The Bastard plays on a double meaning: the adjective "holy," describing Joan, becomes Joan's hole. (In other words, while Joan was supposed to be guarding the Dauphin, he was guarded, in the sense of armored or encased, by her

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[292] See Parish *Monks* 55-6, 86-7. Some examples include John Bale's *A Mysterye of Inyquyte* (London 1545) and *The first two partes of the Actes, or unchaste examples of the English votaryes* (London 1551).

[293] In many ways, the meaning and value of the terms "virgin" and "whore" resisted inversion. Reformers continued to hate whoredom and to value "true" virginity (though they argued that it was extremely rare). Consequently (due to their sense of true virginity's impending extinction), reformers hated whoredom even more than their Catholic predecessors. See Breintenberg 19-20 for an overview of this argument.

vaginal sheath.[294]) This second use of "holy" follows inevitably from the first: Joan cannot be

holy because she has cursed sexual organs, condemned by the Fall to a state of irresistible

sinfulness. Her claim to be exceptional—holy despite her hole—signals only the exceptionalism

of her pride.

The Bastard says that "heaven" sent Joan a "vision," and thereby "ordained" her with a

divine mission and "the spirit of deep prophecy." In the context of Reformation ideology, this

also makes Joan seem very suspicious.[295] Reformers held that angels no longer delivered God's

messages (it being unnecessary after Jesus' mission); therefore, any new prophet had to be one of

the "false Christes" predicted in Matthew 24.24—a very popular passage amongst polemicists

(Parish 48-9). In the Renaissance, prophecy became associated with Satanism to the extent that,

in 1559, Elizabeth made soothsaying illegal.[296] Joan's power to descry "what's past and what's to

come" marks her as a herald of the apocalypse—the false prophet warned against in

Revelations.[297]

The Bastard only continues to insult Joan when he says that she exceeds the "sibyls of old

Rome." Sibyls did not have positive connotations in Reformation polemic—especially not sibyls

described as Romish.[298] In a letter to Cromwell, Latimer mocks a statue of Mary by calling it

"our great Sibyll." He jokes that he hopes she will be bestowed "to some good purpose"—

namely, the same purpose Joan served: to "make a jolly muster" by burning at the stake (Latimer

Sermons 395). Latimer's comparison between an idol of Mary and the sibyls of Rome classifies

Mary as yet another type of pagan deity or demon. Reformers often make this connection; Luther

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[294] See Williams 160. Guarding continues to be mined for sexual jokes for many lines; soon after this, the Dauphin confirms that he was "most part of all this night / Within her quarter…about relieving of the sentinels" (2.1.68-9). Williams reads sentinels as erections, relief as orgasm (252).
[295] I acknowledge that there are hints of Calvinist theology in this description; Calvinists held that the elect, or saints, were ordained by visions from Heaven.
[296] See Tricomi 11 and Ryan 62. See also *Tudor Royal Proclamations* 2.126.
[297] See Rev. 16.13, 19.20, and 20.10.
[298] For the opposite argument, see Jackson 25.

writes that the Catholic clergy turned Mary into "a goddess, like those of the pagans" (35).[299]

The Bastard frames this speech with his concluding claim that his words are "certain and

unfallible" (Tricomi 12). Sexually illegitimate, idolatrous, and satanically ambitious (via this

grab for infallibility), the Bastard resembles the Pope of Protestant polemic. This opening

description of Joan is damning.

When Joan enters, her first act onstage is the performance of a miracle. The Dauphin,

attempting to "try her skill," switches places with the Reignier, Duke of Anjou (1.2.60). Joan,

miraculously, remains unfazed, and immediately recognizes the true king. "I know thee well,"

she tells him, "though never seen before / Be not amazed" (1.2.67)—therein quoting yet another

Biblical annunciation. In Mark 16:6, the three Marys enter Jesus' sepulcher and find an angel

who says, "Be not amased."[300] Jesus, they are told, "is risen, he is not here." The contrast

between Joan's self-annunciation and its Biblical precedent demonstrates the distinction between

the Catholic cult of the saints and Protestantism's creed of *sola scriptura* and *solus Christus*.

From a Protestant perspective, Joan's comparison between herself and Jesus constitutes a Satanic

bid for his crown.[301] Furthermore, she crassly attempts to upstage his greatest miracle—which is

also, in Mark's account, the least showy and thus, for reformers, the most tasteful. The line that

begins with "be not amazed" concludes with an even bolder reach: Joan claims, "there's nothing

hid from me." The Bastard alleged his own infallibility and Joan's powers of prophecy; here, she

pours salt on the wound by claiming omniscience, an exclusive attribute of God. This is how

reformers understood popes and saints (especially Mary)—as upstarts encroaching on God's

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[299] For more on the medieval roots of the comparison between Mary and pagan goddesses, especially Venus, see Camille *Gothic Idol* 221-2.

[300] This quote must come from the Bishop's Bible, which uses the word "amazed" rather than "afraid" (as does the Geneva Bible) or "affrighted" (as does Rheims).

[301] Similarly, Crashaw complains about a Catholic hagiographer's alleged boast that a statue of Mary (Our Lady of Hall) performed more miracles than Jesus (18-19).

territory.

Shakespeare takes the legend of Joan's miraculous recognition of the Dauphin from Hall.[302] It might seem strange that both Hall and Shakespeare (the authors of some of the most negative accounts of Joan ever written) chose to repeat a narrative that serves to prove the legitimacy of Joan's claims. Shakespeare makes no effort to undermine the miracle he recounts. It happens quickly, over the course of seven lines, and is in no way belittled or questioned within that space, by dialog or stage direction. This self-evident miracle has greatly contributed to readers' impression that Shakespeare must have made some kind of error: he proves Joan to be a saint here and then later proves her to be a witch. Hall too narrates Joan's miracle without debunking it. He does, however, drench it in sarcasm: "What should I reherse," he asks, "how they saie, she knewe and called hym her kyng, whom she neuer saw before?" (148). Though Hall expresses shock that anyone could believe or write down "suche phantasies," he (like Shakespeare) offers no explanation as to how Joan might have faked her seemingly efficacious miracle, either with sorcery or special effects. Nor does he explain why he himself wrote down such a fantasy (as he considers it pernicious and absurd to do so). Hall frames his narration of Joan's miracle as a question. He asks the reader, should I rehearse this? The expresses sarcasm, but also anxiety.[303]

In her study of reformist polemic, Helen Parish finds that reformers habitually recycled Catholic accounts of miracles without bothering to expose them as tricks—just as Hall and

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[302] The earliest records suggest that when Joan first arrived in Chinon, the Valois court mocked and doubted her until she persuaded the Dauphin by revealing to him her miraculous knowledge of the contents of his private prayers (Fraioli 7-8).

[303] Protestant polemicists were troubled by the question of whether or not they should repeat Catholic words and ideas. For example, in the midst of reproducing every line of a Jesuitical tract that deeply offends him, Crashaw pauses to ask his readers, "But shall we hear them? No some will say, let blasphemy rather be buried in the depths of oblivion" (34). Yet he decides to go on, justifying himself this way: "the shameless whore of Babylon," he writes, "glorieth in her own shame" (34). Crashaw, then, contributes to the whore's shameless self-advertisement. Yet his contribution counts in her ledger of sin, not his (because she started it). Crashaw implies that he earns points in Heaven for helping the whore to dig herself in deeper.

Shakespeare neglect to explain away Joan's miraculous recognition of the Dauphin (46-7). We could interpret this pattern of omission as a studied technique: perhaps by neglecting to explain, polemicists hoped to make the falsity of Catholic miracles seem all the more obvious. (Or, to phrase that another way, perhaps the falsity of the miracles seemed so evident to reformers that they felt no need to explain how or why.) This pattern reveals the profound instability of the distinction between polemical opposites. Reformist repetitions of Catholic miracles depend on the reader to invert signs into their opposites (miracles into shams, angels into devils), which begins a process of rotation that can threaten to spin out of control. This danger is evident from the way that the play—and this moment in particular—has been interpreted: to some it reads like invective, to others encomium.

After performing her miracle, Joan commands the French nobles to leave her alone with Charles. Her boldness does not go unnoticed: "She takes upon her bravely at first dash," Reignier says in an aside to his peers—the first in a long line of such jokes at Joan's expense (1.2.71). The point is that Joan not only attempts to rise above God, but also above her social superiors. The desperate Dauphin enables Joan's uppity rebellion, encouraging her to wear armor, give commands, and become a saint—therein infringing on the prerogatives of men, the nobility, and God. In her revolt against the Protestant great chain of being (God ruling an abject mankind managed by fathers and absolute monarchs), Joan resembles reformist polemic's critique of Mary. Reformers accused Mary of "ambition": they interpreted Jesus' Biblical rebukes of her as evidence of her "arrogance" and "vainglory."[304] Papists, reformers argued, exasperated these already existent flaws by raising Mary above God. Reformers saw it as their duty to put Mary

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[304] See, for example, Matthew 12.46-50 and Luke 2.3-4. Latimer writes, "…we read in the gospel of St Matthew, that once [Mary] was pricked with vain-glory; for when [Jesus] was preaching, she came would needs speak with him, for she would have been known to be his mother: which doing of hers no doubt had a smell of ambition" (*Sermons* 117). See also Latimer *Works* 383-4.

back in her place—to "set her in her degree" (Latimer *Sermons* 226). Joan fulfills this tragic

trajectory, her rise foreshadowing her fall.

Finally left alone with the Dauphin, Joan makes her first long speech—in which she

explicitly compares herself to the Virgin:

Dauphin, I am by birth a shepherd's daughter,

My wit untrained in any kind of art.

Heaven and Our Lady gracious hath it pleased

To shine on my contemptible estate.

Lo, whilst I waited on my tender lambs,

And to sun's parching heat displayed my cheeks,

God's mother deigned to appear to me,

And, in a vision full of majesty,

Willed me to leave my base vocation

And free my country from calamity.

Her aid she promised and assured success:

In complete glory she reveal'd herself.

And whereas I was black and swart before,

With those clear rays which she infused on me

That beauty am I blest, with which you see.   (1.2.72-86)

Whereas trial records demonstrate that Joan claimed to have received her visions from Margaret,

Catherine, and Michael (and while Holinshed's Joan calls upon "our Ladie, saint Katharine, and

saint Annes"), the Virgin Mary is the only saint named by Shakespeare's Joan.[305] Throughout the

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[305] See Barrett 59-60, 83, 97. For a longer discussion of which saints Joan names in historical records, see Espinosa 48.

play, Joan emphasizes that Mary is the primary source of her power. From a Protestant

perspective, Joan replaces God with Mary: Mary appears to Joan while she waits on her tender

lambs, just as the burning bush spoke to Moses as he kept sheep (Exodus 3.1-2). Thus, Joan

plays the part of Moses and Mary the role of Jehovah.

Joan reports that Mary "deigned" to appear to her in a vision "full of majesty," revealing

herself "in complete glory." According to Protestant theology, this is a huge mistake: Mary

possesses neither majesty nor glory. (Nor does she belong in the sky: because reformers rejected

the apocryphal account of Mary's bodily assumption, they believed that Mary was dead in the

ground.) Reformers loathed it when Catholics attached words like "glorious" and "majestic" to

Mary's name, giving her inappropriate titles. Crashaw rails against those "who never speak of

the Virgin Mary, but with the title of Queen of Heaven, Lady of Angels, the gate of Paradise, the

fountain of mercy, or some such other titles, fitting none but him that is God" (61).[306] Joan

describes herself as a lowly shepherdess, "base" and "contemptible." This posturing at humility,

in a polemical context, undoes itself: one can hear Joan's ambition in her bitter false modesty—

the same false note reformers heard in Catholic Mary's contradictory (and, as they saw it,

hypocritical) abject humility and God-like power. Later in the play, Joan confirms these dark

hints when she denies her peasant father and pretends to be "issued from the progeny of kings"

(5.5.38).

But perhaps the most vexed term Joan attaches to Mary is "gracious." When Joan calls

Mary "Our Lady gracious," she enters the fray of one of the most important Marian controversies

of the Reformation. In the Vulgate, Gabriel hails Mary with the epithet "*gratia plena*," or (as

Rheims translated it) "full of grace" (Luke 1.28). In N-Town too, Gabriel says, "Heyl, ful of

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[306] Luther also emphasizes this point: "See what words we use for the Blessed Virgin Mary in the *Salve Regina*. Those who call her our life, our consolation, and our sweetness should actually be satisfied that she is a weak vessel" (Karant-Nunn and Wiesner-Hanks 36).

grace" (11.217). The controversy began when Erasmus and Andreas Keller, examining the Greek,

translated "*κεχαριτωμένη*" to mean something more like "favored" (Kriezter 32).[307] In English, it

was translated (in both the Geneva and Bishop's Bible) as "freely beloved." The difference

between "full of grace" or "gracious" on the one hand and "favored" or "freely beloved" on the

other reveals a fault line dividing Catholics from Protestants. Catholics understood "gracious" to

mean that Mary possessed an infinite supply of grace and therefore could dispense it to others via

intercession. (Furthermore, while more Christocentric Catholic theologians like Bernard of

Clairvaux and Aquinas understood Mary's grace as a gift from God, die-hard devotees of Mary

like Eadmer of Canterbury and Bernardino of Siena argued that Mary's grace derived from her

own merits.) Protestants, by contrast, argued that the phrase "freely beloved" proved that Mary

had no grace of her own to bestow on others—God chose to *favor* her with unmerited love, not

to *bestow* any of his powers upon her.[308] Thus, Joan's description of Mary as "gracious" seems

designed to irk Protestants.

Joan claims that Mary infused her with clear rays of light and miraculously changed the

color of her skin and the quality of her appearance (the two are conflated), from "black and swart"

to fair and beautiful. This miracle recalls Jeremiah 13.23: "Can the blacke More change his skin?

…*then* may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do euill" (Geneva Bible). In other words,

neither Joan nor the black Moor can change from black to beautiful or from evil to good. Joan's

apparent alteration, therefore, actually marks her as a hypocrite, a "white-limed wall."[309] Joan is

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[307] Following their example, Luther translated the phrase as "holdselig" (lovely) rather than "voller gnade" (full of grace) (Karant-Nunn and Wiesner-Hanks 36).

[308] "Freely" signals that Mary did not earn God's love by having any exceptional merit. This follows the theory of *sola gratia*.

[309] The phrase "white-limed wall" comes from a passage in *Titus Andronicus* (4.2) that paraphrases Matthew 23.27, which describes hypocrites as being "lyke vnto paynted sepulchres, which in dede appeare beautifull outwarde" (*Bishop's Bible*). Joan's blackness might also refer to the notion that dark skin was an inheritance from Ham, son of Noah, for the crime of disobedience (copulating with his wife in the ark). Tricomi sees a reference to N-Town's play of the Crucifixion (13).

that "white devil" so often referred to in early modern English invectives on hypocrisy,

Catholicism, and whoredom.[310] She says that she miraculously changed from black to white; we

are not supposed to believe in the truth of this apparent transformation. After all, as Holinshed

warned, "Satan can change himselfe into an angell of light, the déeplier to deceiue."

The assumption that Joan's body could not have been miraculously purified implicitly casts

doubt on the doctrine that Mary's mortal, sinful flesh became the immortal, immaculate body of

Jesus.[311] Uncomfortable with Catholic Incarnational theology, Protestantism emphasized Jesus'

preaching rather than Mary's body. Medieval celebrations of the Incarnation (including Corpus

Christi plays) discomfited reformers because their exaltation of redeemed carnality threatened

the Protestant doctrine of total depravity. Joan's blackness, in the context of Protestant theology,

affirms her abjection: her flesh, like all flesh, is stained black by sin.

But for the late medieval cult of Mary, blackness had another meaning. The beloved in

the Song of Songs says, "*nigra sum sed formonsa*" ("I am blacke but beutiful," *Rheims Douai*

1.4). Joan's speech paraphrases this particular passage. The beloved says, "Marveyle not at me

that I am so blacke, for why? the sunne hath shined vpon me" (*Bishop's Bible* 1.5); Joan echoes

her, saying that she was "black and swart" because she displayed her cheeks to "the sun's

parching rays." Catholic typology often compared Mary to Solomon's beloved, and, indeed, the

statues of Mary at Walsingham and Willesdon, two of England's (and Europe's) most popular

pilgrimage sites, were black.[312] As we saw in the previous chapter, Lollards fixated on their

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[310] See, for example, Thomas Adams, *The white deuil, or The hypocrite uncased in a sermon preached at Pauls Crosse* (London 1612), or sermons and tracts by Lancelot Andrewes, Zacharie Boyd, and Francis Herring. English translations of Luther also favor the phrase; see Thomas Vautroullier, *A Commentarie of M. Doctor Martin Luther upon the Epistle of S. Paul to the Galathians* (London 1575), 28/21. The similar phrase "the fair devil" is more closely associated with whoredom; see the use of the phrase in *Othello* and *The Dutch Courtezan*.
[311] See also Espinosa 48-9 and Ryan 63.
[312] For more on black Madonna's, see *Marian Moments* 77-9. For more on the importance of Walsingham, see *Theatre* 139 and James and Waller, *Walsingham in Literature and Culture from the Middle Ages to Modernity* (Ashgate 2010).

blackness, taking it as evidence that the statues were filthy idols. To recap, one Lollard called

Our Lady of Willesdon a "brent ars Elfe," implying that the statue suffered from a venereal

disease caused by excessive avowtery, meaning both idolatry and adultery (McSheffrey 146-7).

This polemical strategy intensified during the Reformation. In 1530, for example, Thomas

Bilney called the same statue (the black Madonna of Willeson) a "stewed whore" (Jones 33).

Likewise, a reformist tract from 1528, *Read Me and Be Not Wroth or The Burial of the Mass*,

accuses Our Lady of Willeson of being a madam and its devotees of being whores and

whoremongers:

> As for whoredom and lecherousness, [Our Lady of Willesden] is the chief lady mistress,
>
> common paramour of bawdry. Many men as it is known, reap more children than their
>
> own by her miracle's promotion. Wives to deceive their husbands make unto her many
>
> errands under color of devotion. (107)

Blackness, for both Catholic and Protestants, represents concentrated fleshliness, and as such can

signify the redemption of the flesh or its total depravity. Black Joan claims to have been

whitewashed by Mary, parodying what reformers saw as Catholicism's attempt to whitewash the

body of a creature, a fleshly black idol—a whore.

Finally, Joan concludes her speech with a sexual temptation.[313] She promises the Dauphin

that if he "receive[s her] for his warlike mate," he will win the war (1.2.92), baiting him with

promises of sexual and military conquest. Joan's proposal of martial matrimony (like Pharaoh's

daughter's temptation of Solomon) tempts the Dauphin to adulterate his soul's marriage to God

(1 Kings 3.1-3). To entice the Dauphin further, Joan offers him the opportunity to test her

courage in a trial by combat. This proposition comes loaded with sexual innuendo. Joan assures

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[313] This is explicit: the scene concludes with the comment, "These women be shrewd tempters with their tongues" (1.3.102).

that Dauphin that if he "buckles" with her in "single combat," "thou shalt find that I exceed my

sex" (1.2.89-90, 95)—turning the cliché of Marian exceptionalism into a come-on. This begins

the play's long-term strategy of exploiting the overlap of sexual and military signifiers to tarnish

Joan's alleged virginity.[314] When Joan overcomes the Dauphin, he compares her to an Amazon

who fights with the sword of Deborah (1.2.104-5).[315] Joan corrects him: "Christ's mother helps

me," she says, "else I were too weak" (1.2.106). This emphasizes that Catholic Mary is the

unholy force behind Joan's unnatural ability to fight like a man (or rather better).

Once defeated by Joan, the Dauphin hints at an even darker power lurking behind Joan's

miracles. He says,

Whoe'er helps thee, 'tis thou that must help me:

Impatiently I burn with thy desire;

My heart and hands thou hast at once subdued.

Excellent Pucelle, if thy name be so,

Let me thy servant and not sovereign be. (1.2.107-112)

In effect, Joan's worship of Mary infects the Dauphin and spawns an even lower form of idolatry.

Joan claims that Christ's mother helps her, and the Dauphin echoes her, but with a difference:

"*Whoe'er* helps thee," he says, "'tis *thou* that must help me." He slides down the slippery slope

from Christ to Christ's mother to Joan, a danger warned against by reformers. Polemicists told

horror stories about sinners turning from the creator to some creature and then to "the very

pictures of creatures" (Crashaw 19). The Catholic villagers of Sichem, it was told, worshipped a

tiny idol of Mary in an oak tree, and then (when the idol went missing) the tree itself, and then

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[314] Shakespeare certainly did not invent this strategy. Even the earliest accounts of Joan interpret her militarism as evidence of sexual depravity; see Fraioli 1-4.

[315] Holinshed specifically mentions the allegedly French habit of comparing Joan to Deborah, arguing that this comparison is a transparent attempt (on the part of the French) to hide the shame they truly but secretly feel for having succumbed to a witch (Shaheen 31).

(when the tree rotted), countless, tinier idols made out of black rot (Crashaw 26-7). Similarly, Joan turns from God to Mary and then turns the Dauphin from God to her body. Indeed, the Dauphin's lust for Joan's flesh very quickly expresses itself as a desire to venerate her relics: he eagerly anticipates worshipping her corpse and entombing her ashes in an immense pyramid (1.7.17-27). He specifies that Joan's pyramid will be even bigger than Rhodope's, a legendary Greek prostitute for whom, it was widely believed, the pyramids of Memphis had been built. Thus, Catholicism slides all the way back into ancient Egyptian paganism, seen as the cult of dead whores.

Furthermore, by referring to the source of Joan's power as "who'eer" rather than "Christ's mother" (which was how Joan put it), the Dauphin opens up the possibility that someone other than Mary might be helping Joan. Blinded by the creature before him, he does not care who she represents. It could be "whoe'er," anyone—even, implicitly, Satan. Moments later, the Dauphin refers to Joan as "the Bright star of Venus, fallen down on the earth" (1.2.140-145). Though this sounds nice enough, patristic commentators understood Isaiah 14.12's reference to "*Lucifer*" in the Vulgate to signify Satan, and thus Satan became associated with the morning star, which was called Lucifer ("light-bringing") in Latin.[316] Joan claims that heavenly powers changed her from black to white, a transformation that the text compares to the black devil's ability to shine like a bright star.

The Dauphin's carelessness proves the point, often made by reformers, of papism's inherent promiscuity. Protestantism understood the cult of the saints as an indiscriminate orgy. The undiscerning Dauphin does not care if Joan comes from heaven or hell, nor does he seem to care whether or not she is actually a virgin: he calls her "excellent Pucelle," but then adds, "if thy

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[316] However, the word "Lucifer" also has the power to demonstrate the instability of opposites: Jesus is also called "Lucifer" in 2 Peter 1.19.

name be so." The Dauphin wants "help"—not spiritual salvation, but relief from sexual and

military frustrations. He makes this clear: he says, "Impatiently I burn with thy desire"—

meaning Joan's desire to be his partner in war and lust. The Dauphin ends the scene with the

statement, "No prophet will I trust, if she prove false" (1.3.150). He wagers his trust in all

prophets (implicitly, including the one prophet, Jesus) on Joan's truth, which will prove false.

Effectively, the Dauphin denies himself any access to salvation by betting everything on Joan.

His self-destructive, all-or-nothing gamble represents a reformist perspective on the cult of the

saints: Protestants believed that any infringement of *solus Christus* effectively broke the soul's

marriage to God, leaving the adulterer abandoned and alone (though surrounded, like Joan in

5.3.1-24, by myriad chimeral devils). In this vein of thought, reformers interpreted the

promiscuity of Catholic devotion as a total absence of devotion—plurality as zero. The

Dauphin's wager makes this line of reasoning clear: Charles' vow of fealty to a saint ensnares

him in atheism.

Many have read such moments in English Renaissance literature as evidence of a great

"disenchantment," to use Weber's term. The theory is that the polemical warfare waged between

Catholics and Protestants razed faith to the ground: by interpreting Catholicism as atheism or

Satanism, reformers inadvertently subverted the entire structure of devotion.[317] According to this

theory, moments like this (when the Dauphin wagers his faith) had the power to unleash a new

kind of skepticism that would attack not only its intended target, but also its makers.[318] Thus, *1*

Henry VI could be read as evidence of secularization. Joan attempts to restage Marian miracles,

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[317] This theory is cogently expressed by Marshall, who outlines various antiquated theories—Weber's notion of Protestant disenchantment and the Whig progress narrative of the Scientific Revolution (130-132)—and then concludes with a more current narrative: "The most significant outcomes of the Reformation can in fact be expressed as a series of paradoxes. The Reformations, Catholic and Protestant…set out to sacralize the whole of society, and ended up creating the long-term conditions for its secularization" (133).

[318] See, for example, Dollimore 9-16, 47-52, and 83-108, as well as Sommerville and Greenblatt *Will in the World* 31-2.

but finds herself in the wrong place at the wrong time: no one believes her because faith died with the Middle Ages. The Dauphin exploits her, his nobles snicker behind her back, and the English instantly dismiss her as a "vile fiend" (3.2.44) and "railing Hecate" (3.2.63). And once the post-Reformation mind destroyed Joan, the argument goes, it then began to deconstruct Jesus. In other words, by inviting its audience to turn signifiers inside out (virginity into whoredom, devotion into atheism) Reformation polemic initiated a precedent of demystification that eventually led to the Enlightenment and modernity. This theory assumes that disbelief only began to happen after the trauma of the Reformation. But the satire of religion staged in *1 Henry 6* actually rehearses medieval theatrical traditions.

★ **"Now heaven forfend! the holy maid with child!"**

1 Henry 6's debt to medieval Marian drama is most evident in Joan's final scene, her execution, which closely parallels the medieval Biblical pageant of Joseph's Doubt.[319] In the scene in question, Richard, Duke of York and his henchman, the Earl of Warwick, bring captured Joan before them to confess her crimes.[320] This scene begins with Joan defiantly reprising her self-identification as the second coming of the Virgin. She vaunts (about herself, speaking in the third person): "Joan of Arc hath been / A Virgin from her tender infancy, / Chaste and Immaculate in very thought" (5.5.49-51). In other words, she declares that her chastity of thought (and, implicitly, also of body and action) has remained constant since her birth—a boast that has already been visibly disproven to the audience by her post-coital flight across the stage with Charles, as well as by her more recent sexual proposition of several devils

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[319] Although many critics have remarked that Shakespeare often restages this scene, its use in *1 Henry 6* (which is, I would argue, its most explicit reiteration) has gone largely unnoticed. Scholarly attention has focused on Shakespeare's explicitly innocent Marian heroines—like Hermione, Desdemona, and Hero—rather than on guilty Joan. See O'Connell 484, Groves 43, Waller 157-180. As Muir notes, Shakespeare also inherited this trope from the wider dramatic genre of Marian miracles and hagiographical romances, including such medieval plays as *Berte, femme du roi Pepin* (Cangé XXXI, 1373), *Reine de Portugal* (Cangé IV, 1342), *Le roi Thierry et sa femma Osanne* (Cangé XXXI), and *L'impératrice de Rome* (Cangé XVII, 1369); see Muir, *Love and Conflict* 91-99.

[320] In 2.4.34-6, Warwick signals his support for the House of York by plucking a white rose.

(5.3.18-19). Then Joan makes an even bolder claim—that she is "immaculate," free from any spot of sin, including the original. "Immaculate" immediately evokes Mary (it is her epithet and attribute)—and an important contemporary theological controversy about Mary's body.

From the high Middles through the Renaissance, theologians wrangled over the theory of Mary's Immaculate Conception. The earliest reformers agreed with Christocentric medieval theologians like Bernard and Aquinas that Mary had been purified *after* conception, at the moment of her animation. This concord did not last long.[321] By the 1590's, the consensus amongst the Protestant English was that Mary had been born sinful like everyone else (Latimer *Works* 226-232). The new concept of Mary's sinfulness did not threaten Jesus' purity: it was maintained that the Holy Ghost cleansed her flesh of any stain at the moment of Christ's conception, thus sparing Jesus from any contact with pollution. This allowance did very little for Mary: reformers sometimes remarked that the birth of Jesus poured all supernatural purity out of Mary's body, leaving her as bereft and unremarkable as an "empty saffron bag" (Latimer *Works* 60).

By the height of the Reformation, the Catholic doctrine of the Immaculate Conception was capable of striking Protestants as gravely offensive—even as whorishly immodest. Crashaw writes: "Let [Catholics]…speak and write that [Mary] was conceived without sin original, and have a holy day for it, but they cannot prove it…though the whore of Babylon, affirm as much of herself, yet was she never so impudent, as to conclude it an article of the faith" (44-5). Crashaw argues that if the most whorish and impudent woman imaginable—the Whore of Babylon herself—made a claim to be immaculate, even *she* would not dare to be so impertinent as to try to pass her boast off as sacred dogma. Therefore, he argues, the Catholics who declare Mary's sinlessness to be an article of the faith are even more impudent than the Whore of Babylon. This

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[321] Luther's position on this question is much debated; see Kreitzer 8, 124.

accusation also impacts on Mary: although Crashaw puts the burden of responsibility not on

Mary but rather on her devotees (according to his syntax, they are impudent on Mary's behalf),

he strongly suggests that the Virgin's attribution of supernatural chastity indicates a certain

whorish persuasion.[322]

Joan's declaration of immaculate sinlessness provokes a similar response from York.

York dismisses her with a bored, "Ay, ay," and then turns to the guards and says, "away with her

to execution" (5.5.54). Yet Warwick generously adds that the guards should place pitch on her

stake in order to shorten her torture, "because she is a maid" (5.5.55-8). This demonstrates that

Warwick, at this point, does not doubt Joan's claim of virginity. His faith in her chastity does not

last long. At this point, Joan—finally realizing the imminence of her death—pleads her belly.[323]

"Seeking to eetch out life as long as she might," as Holinshed puts it, she says:

> Will nothing turn your unrelenting hearts?
>
> Then, Joan, discover thine infirmity,
>
> That warranteth by law to be thy privilege:
>
> I am with child, ye bloody homicides.
>
> Murder not then the fruit within my womb,
>
> Although ye hale me to a violent death. (5.5.59-64)

Joan attempts to use a loophole in the law by which the infirmity of pregnancy (caused by the

curse of Eve) miraculously becomes privileged access to salvation. In medieval drama, this is

exactly how Mary hopes her persecutors will interpret her pregnancy. Joan and Mary receive the

same response: laughter. In N-Town, when Mary insists that she is a virgin despite her evident

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[322] In his phrase "…though the Whore of Babylon affirm as much of *her*, yet was *she* never so impudent as to conclude it an article of the faith," the words "her" and "she" imply that some other singular female person (Mary) is the specific butt of these remarks rather than plural Catholic men and women in general.
[323] The timing of this comes from the heavily Protestant genre of crime writing: the criminal always confesses at the foot of the gallows. See Martin 27.

pregnancy, her detractors snicker and make snide remarks about old cuckolds and young wives. They find her claim of virginity preposterous. "To us thi wombe thee doth accuse," they protest (14.303). Likewise, York scoffs at Joan, "Now heaven forfend! the holy maid with child!" (5.5.65). York's allusion to Mary's pregnancy (a "holy maid with child") cuts both ways. In one sense, York contrasts Mary and Joan. He juxtaposes a holy to an unholy pregnancy to emphasize the absurdity of Joan's attempt to copy Mary, who was the only one of her kind. Yet his deep sarcasm—" the holy maid with child!"—undermines Mary's miracle as well as Joan's. We could interpret this as a new, post-Reformation skepticism—and yet this joke (the unlikelihood of the virgin birth) is the foundational principle of medieval Marian comedy. York merely repeats the objections of Mary's medieval detractors. They say, "Thu art with chylde, we se in syght!" (14.302). In other words, they know that it is impossible for a virgin to be pregnant. As Salome says in N-Town's Nativity pageant, "it may nevyr be" (15.242).

Warwick chimes in, calling Joan's pregnancy "the greatest miracle that e'er ye wrought" (5.5.66), sarcastically making the point that pregnancy requires no miracle. Rather than a reversal or wonder of nature, it is the most natural, common thing in the world. By calling Joan's pregnancy her greatest miracle, Warwick suggests that she never performed any. This aspersion on Joan casts a shadow on Mary too: the real miracle, as the jokes of Chaucer, Boccaccio and medieval drama hint, is that anyone bought her excuse.

York and Warwick decide that because Joan lied about being a virgin and because her child is the bastard of their enemy, both mother and child deserve to die. Seeing that naming the Dauphin as her lover has not stalled her impending doom, Joan tries again. First, she says, "You are deceived; my child is none of his: / It was Alencon that enjoy'd my love" (72-3). This does not move the hearts of her persecutors any more than did the Dauphin's name. So she names one

more father, making an unholy trinity: "'Twas neither Charles nor yet the duke I named, / But Reignier, king of Naples, that prevail'd" (5.5.76-8). York and Warwick are highly amused that Joan seems to have had so many lovers that she does not know who impregnated her. York says, "Why, here's a girl; I think she knows not well-- / There were so many—whom she may accuse…And yet, forsooth, she is a virgin pure" (5.5.83). Yet while this promiscuous list of potential fathers might seem like a departure from Marian drama, it is not. In the pageant of Joseph's Doubt, it is a running joke that although Mary says she is a virgin, she names a long catalog of paternal candidates, including Joseph, Jesus (man and god), the Trinity, and Gabriel.

Warwick comments that Joan has clearly been "liberal and free" (5.5.82). These are words often used in Renaissance English to subtly slander women (Iago favors both), as "free" and "liberal" can mean "generous, magnanimous" as well as "sexually promiscuous or available" (OED).[324] (The word "fre" is also used to describe Mary in N-Town [15.180].) Here, York and Warwick use these terms' double meanings to undermine the late medieval Marian theology of mercy: Mary was known for dispensing indiscriminate, undeserved favors to her favorites (often criminals, lovers, and artists). Favoritism, after all, described the reason for Mary's own intimate access to Jesus' ear: it was believed that he granted her requests because she was his mother and consort and he loved her too much to say no. By contrast, the Protestant God could not be swayed by the feminine charms of either his mother-wife or any other saint from the heavenly harem of virgin brides Catholic tradition bestowed upon the Trinity. In other words, medieval Catholicism celebrated Mary for being both liberal in both senses of the word—magnanimous and promiscuous. In *1 Henry 6*, the same joke has a different punch line. Although N-Town and

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[324] From the *OED*: "free" 19; "liberal" 3a and 8.

1 Henry 6 insult Mary and Joan with similar insults and subject them to similar humiliations,[325] in the end, their narratives diverge. In N-Town, Mary triumphs and in *1 Henry 6*, Joan burns. In this final twist, *1 Henry 6* imitates the spin that Protestant iconoclasts put on medieval ritual humiliation. As I will argue in the next section, they spun it 360 degrees: right back to where it started.

★ **Conclusion: "I will make thee ceasse from playing the harlot" (Ezekiel 16.41)**

During the first waves of Reformation iconoclasm, Hugh Latimer stripped Our Lady of Worcester of its jewels and clothes, exposing "the similitude of a bishop, like a giant, almost ten feet long" (Aston 173).[326] Latimer intended for this ritual to resemble the Old Testament's humiliations of prostitutes, as in Ezekiel 16.37-41:

> Beholde therefore, I wyll gather together all thy louers with whom thou hast taken
> pleasure…I wyll gather them together rounde about against thee, and wil discouer thy
> shame before them, that they may see all thy filthynesse…I wyll geue thee ouer into their
> handes, and they shal destroy thy hie place, and breake downe thy hye places, they shall
> strip thee also out of thy clothes: thy farre iewels shall they take from thee, and so leaue
> thee naked and bare…thus wyll I make thee ceasse from playing the harlot, so that thou
> shalt geue out no more rewardes (*Bishop's Bible*).

Following Latimer's lead, reformers re-enacted this ritual humiliation of the Virgin all over England, stripping Madonnas naked, humiliating them, and then setting them on fire. They did this to disprove that Mary would strike back. Reformers dared the people to attack these idols: "Throw them down thrice," they urged, "They cannot rise, not once to help themselves" (Parish

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[325] Joan's detractors call her "trull" (2.2.28) and "giglot wench" (4.7.41). In N-Town, Mary's enemies call her "bolde bysmare" (14.298) and "scowte" (14.182). Mary is snidely called "quene," meaning prostitute rather than "Queen of Heaven" (41.392). Similarly, Talbot inverts the meaning of Joan's epithet "La Pucelle" (the virgin), calling her "puzzel or pucelle," playing on an English mispronunciation to achieve a slur for whore (1.5.85).
[326] See also *Letters and Papers of the Reign of Henry the Eighth* 14.1.155 (no. 402).

77).[327] Latimer and Cromwell sarcastically called bonfires of images "miracles" (Aston 236)—

the joke being the total absence of any phenomenon other than rapid oxidation.

Yet despite Latimer and Crashaw's characterization of Protestant iconoclasm as the

explosive destruction of the past, reformers repeated medieval theatrical traditions when they

desecrated Catholic images. Like the mother in *Beunans Meriasek*, they took the baby Jesus from

Mary's arms: for example, in his *Chronicle of London*, Stowe reports that an "image of the

Blessed Virgin" was "robbed of her Son, and her arms broken" in West Cheap in 1581 (238).[328]

Like the tyrant Hadrian in Hrotswitha's *Sapientia*, iconoclasts hacked at the breasts of virgin

saints: for example, when the English took Cadiz in 1596, they attacked a statue of Mary, cutting

off its nose, breasts, and arms (Waller 14). And like the detractors in Marian drama, they called

the Virgin a whore. And the images did not respond.

Latimer fully expected the people of Worcester to abandon their faith in Mary's image

after it did nothing to defend itself from assault. Many did. Some villagers, however, continued

to worship her naked and humiliated image. One Thomas Emans kissed the statue and said, "The

figure is no worse than it was before," and added darkly, "I trust to see the day that they shall be

stripped as naked that stripped her."[329] The same problem also arose in Walsingham. Villagers

continued to report miracles performed by Our Lady even after she had been carted to London

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[327] "Hugh Latimer carried the figure of Saint Rumwold to the doorway of Saint Paul's, shattering the popular legend that the image was impossible to move" (Parish *Monks* 77).

[328] The baby was replaced in 1596, but soon after "the image of Our Lady was again defaced, by plucking off her crown, and almost her head, taking from her her naked child" (239). Crashaw sheds light on this iconoclastic impulse to remove Jesus from Mary's arms:

> Generally in all places where the mother and the son, the Virgin Mary and our Lord Jesus be pictured together in their churches, she is always set forth as a woman and a mother, and he as a child and infant, either in her arms or in her hand, that so the common people might have occasion to imagine, that look what power of overruling and commanding the mother hath over her little child, the same hath she over her son Jesus…is it not admirable that still they will make him an infant, still in his mother's arms, still under her power, and still all miracles must be wrought by her, and at her picture, as though either he could not, or in his mother's presence would not, or (at the least) as though she had many enemies, and therefore needed miracles, and Christ none? But alas who seeth not that the atheism and profaneness of the world causeth even the name and religion of Christ to be blasphemed…(30-1)

[329] See also *The Letters and Papers of the Reign of H8* 12. 2.218 (no 587).

and reduced to ashes. In a letter to Cromwell, Sir Roger Townshend complained, "I cannot

perceive but the seyd Image is not yet out of sum of ther heddes" (Moreton 39). Likewise, in

Cadiz, priests returned the maimed statue of Mary to her niche, renaming her *La Vulnerata*

(Waller 14). This broken image is still worshipped today. Iconoclasts intended their rituals to

demystify idols. But to some witnesses, the humiliation of Mary looked just like a Corpus Christi

play. As I argued in the previous chapter, medieval drama had trained its spectators to expect

nothing—nothing but illusory special effects and winking theatrical tricks, "fals wyles" and "gret

gyle," as Raise-Slander puts it.

In *The Pilgrim*, William Thomas refers to "certain images" of Jesus and Mary ("those

roods and these our Ladies") that "with engines that were in them could beckon, either with their

heads and hands, or move their eyes, or manage some part of their bodies, to the purpose that the

friars and priests would use them" (37-8). An entry in Wriothesley's *Chronicle* for the year 1538

describes one such rood in the town of Boxley, Kent that "turned its head about, rolled its eyes,

foamed at the mouth, and poured forth tears down its cheeks" (Aston 236). Reformers arrested

this rood "for certain idolatry and craft that had been perceived": specifically, "the said

rood…was made to move the eyes and lips by strings of hair, when they [Catholic clergy] would

show a miracle" (74).[330] Iconoclasts pulled this statue off its cross, dragged it into the public

square,

> and there showed openly to the people the craft of moving the eyes and lips, that all the
>
> people there might see the illusion that had been used in the said image by the monks of
>
> the said place of many years time out of mind, whereby they had gotten great riches in
>
> deceiving the people thinking that the said image had so moved by the power of God,

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[330] See also *The Letters and Papers of the Reign of H8* 14.1.155 no. 402: "…the roods at Boxelegh and other places, which moved their eyes and their lips when certain keys and strings were bent or pulled in secret places."

which now plainly appeared to the contrary. (74)[331]

The iconoclasts showed the audience that the "image was made of paper and clouts from the legs upward; each leg and arm's were of timber," implying that they assumed that the credulous locals expected to see sacred flesh.[332]

Art historians have discovered late medieval statues of Jesus and Mary with hinges in their joints, hooks in their backs, and holes behind their eyes and mouths.[333] Dozens, in fact, have been cataloged in Germany by the pioneering work of Johannes Taubert and Johannes Tripps, and more recent work has identified many more in Italy and elsewhere in Europe (Haastrup 146). They are life-size and poly-chromed (Paoletti 86). They wear skin, human hair, clothes (necessarily, as they were sculpted with life-like genitals), and jewels.[334] They were made with joints so they would be able to move: their arms can fold, their heads can turn, their mouths can move, and their eyes can open and shut (Powell 83-4). They can bleed (Paoletti 97).

Evidence suggests that these life-sized, jointed puppets were used in late medieval liturgical celebrations: they were crucified and then entombed in sepulchers and then raised into heaven (or rather the rafters of the Church) (Powell 84). It seems clear that late medieval drama and liturgy mutually influenced each other. A similar prop is used in the gory *Croxton Play of the Sacrament*, which features an image of Jesus "with woundys bledyng" (713-4). In his account of an analogous French miracle play in 1513, Philippe de Vigneulles' describes a

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[331] Stories like this abound. There was a candle that supposedly miraculously burnt forever, but which, allegedly, priests admitted to refueling. Our Lady's milk turned out to be "a piece of chalk or ceruse." See *The Letters and Papers of the Reign of H8* 14.1.155 no. 402.

[332] At the climax of this spectacle, the iconoclasts "took the said image of the rood into the pulpit and broke the vice of the same, and after gave it to the people again, and then the rude people and boys broke the same image in pieces, so that they left not one piece whole" (75-76).

[333] See Taubert, Haastrup, Tripps, Toscano, Paoletti, and Powell 81-94.

[334] The most strikingly examples are perhaps Oswald Bockstorfer aus Memmingen's fifteenth-century *Crucifix* (Powell 84-5; Tripps 49, 166) and *El Santo Christo de Burgos*: this remarkable fifteenth-century statue has joints in its neck, arms, fingers, and legs; it wears a human-hair wig and leather skin (from a cow). See Martinez 207-246. See also Paoletti 97 n4 and 5.

Eucharistic host stabbed by Jews that issued forth "a great abundance of blood… just as if it were a child who pissed"; he notes that this was accomplished "by means of a secret" (Sebastian n712).

Protestant reformers alleged that the Catholic Church had used theatrical illusions to "delude the common people" into thinking that "lying wonders" were "true miracles" (Crashaw 18). Yet medieval drama, liturgy, and ritual practice suggest a much more sophisticated medieval audience than this—and a much more complex and playful medieval theory of the relationship between earnest and game. Watching an early sixteenth-century miracle play, Philippe de Vigneulles is aware that he is witnessing special effects; he takes pleasure in their artifice (Sebastian n712).[335] His descriptions of special effects echo Protestants commentary on fake miracles: Philippe notes that wonders are performed by means of "devices and secrets [*par engiens et secrets*]." Scholarship has often taken early modern iconoclasts' word for it that medieval people never witnessed (or even imagined) demystifying desecrations before the Reformation. Yet performances of Reformation iconoclasm restage—rather than swerve away from (as Greenblatt has it)—medieval theatrical traditions. The uncanny resemblance between these supposed opposites encourages us to reevaluate the received dichotomy between the superstitious Middle Ages and the disenchanted Renaissance, as well as between faith and doubt more broadly.

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[335] See also Grantley and Enders 124.

★ Coda: Joseph's Doubt in Renaissance Revenge Tragedy

As many have pointed out, Joan has "genuine sexual power" (Tricomi 11). Renaissance tragedy is full of sexually charismatic anti-heroines who have the ability to masquerade as virgins. They tend to come to bad ends, but death does not put a damper on their charisma. These anti-heroines also tend, like Joan, to rehearse scenes from medieval Marian drama. The list includes Beatrice Joanna in Thomas Middleton and William Rowley's *The Changeling*, Annabella in John Ford's *Tis Pity She's a Whore*, Vittoria in Webster's *The White Devil*, and, most importantly, Evadne in Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Maid's Tragedy*. And like *1 Henry 6*, *The Maid's Tragedy* very closely imitates the medieval pageant of Joseph's Doubt.

The scene of the wedding night between Amintor and Evadne begins with Evadne resisting her husband's advances. She tells him that she will "not go to bed"—"not for the world" (2.1.151-2). He asks, "Why, my dear love?" She answers, "Why? I have sworn I will not" (2.1.154). Throughout the scene, Evadne and Amintor speak in rapid-fire stichomythia, a technique characteristic of the debates between saints and their persecutors in medieval hagiographic dialog and drama (as in the plays of Hrotswitha, for example). After getting over his initial shock, Amintor concludes that her refusal is "but the coyness of a bride" (2.1.159), and assumes that she has promised "the virgins / That were [her] old companions" to preserve her maidenhead (2.1.191-2). Evadne rebuts that she has no maidenhead to preserve: she asks, "A maidenhead, Amintor, / At my years?" (2.1.194-5).

Amintor simply cannot process this—without missing a beat of the metrical line, he asides: "Sure, she raves" (2.1.195). As it begins to dawn on him that Evadne really has sworn that she will never consummate their marriage, he faces a peculiarly Protestant nightmare. Banished from his wife's bed, he sees God's promised refuge of marriage as irrecoverably lost—

as if Evadne's rejection caused a universal fall. (Her name, after all, is Eve.) If women have

rebelled, Amintor fears, young men will have no choice but to give in to the depravity of the

flesh and damn themselves through irresistible fornication. This thought is too terrifying, and he

pulls back from it: "She can but jest," he tells himself (2.1.229).

But Evadne remains steadfast, vowing by "all things holy" to permanently refrain from

consummation (238). At this point, Amintor takes up the theory that Evadne has made a Catholic

vow of celibacy to God. That it takes him so long to come up with this hypothesis shows us how

far we have come from the Reformation: it is well into the seventeenth century, and the

possibility of a vow of perpetual virginity does not readily occur to Amintor's mind. It is far

from his first guess. But when the thought does arise in his mind, he tackles it with conventional

Reformation counter-arguments against clerical celibacy. He tells Evadne,

> Thou hast ta'en an oath,
>
> But such a rash one, that, to keep it, were
>
> Worse than to swear it: Call it back to thee;
>
> Such vows as those never ascend the Heaven (2.1.252-255).

This is the theory espoused by Luther: that God hates vows of celibacy and does not heed them

because they contradict his injunction to marry. But Amintor's Lutheran rebuttal has no effect on

Evadne, who firmly continues to maintain her seemingly Catholic position with the passion,

fearlessness, and constancy of a virgin martyr. "When I call back his oath," she vows, "The pains

of hell environ me!" (2.1.271-2). In response, Amintor begins to out-Herod Herod. His righteous

Protestant indignation sounds more and more like the rage of a lustful pagan tyrant as he turns to

threats of rape and torture. Evadne remains firm—she knows that a higher power protects her.

She vaunts, "I fear thee not. Do what thou dar'st to me! / Every ill-sounding word, or threatening look, / Thou show'st to me, will be revenged at full" (2.1.280-282). All saints make this threat.

The higher power Evadne refers to, however, is not God. She soon rids Amintor (and the audience) of this misapprehension:

> Alas, Amintor, think'st thou I forbear
>
> To sleep with thee, because I have put on
>
> A maiden's strictness? Look upon these cheeks,
>
> And thou shalt find the hot and rising blood
>
> Unapt for such a vow. (2.1.285-289)

The play seems to have taken a deliberate turn away from hagiography. However, even after this confession of promiscuity, Evadne continues to mimic the dialog of hagiography. She explains, "I do enjoy the best, and in that height / Have sworn to stand or die: You guess the man" (2.1.296-7). These lines are taken from the mouths of virgin saints who reject their earthly suitors in favor of God and his angels. Her reason is typical of hagiography—it is, for example, what Saint Cecilia says to Valerian on their wedding night in Chaucer's *Second Nun's Tale*:

> I have an aungel which that loveth me,
>
> That with gret love, whether I wake or slepe,
>
> Is redy ay my body for to kepe;
>
> And if that he may knowen, by my hede,
>
> That ye me touche or love in vilonye,
>
> He right anon wil slay you with the dede,
>
> And in youre youthe thus ye shulde dye. (152-158)

Similarly, as we have seen, Evadne has warned Amintor that a superior rival will kill him if he touches her. Evadne's excuse also draws on the conventions of Marian drama. In N-Town, Mary tells Ysakar (who is, in some ways, her suitor), "In the servyse of God wyl I evyr dwell: / I wyl nevyr have other make" (10.77-8).[336] In other words, God is the only mate Mary will accept. When Ysakar insists, Mary threatens him: "Such clene lyff shuld ye nouht, / In no maner wyse, reprove" (10.72-3). When Amintor demands to know the name of his rival, he sounds very much like one of Mary's detractors—like Joseph, who asks, "Sey me, Mary, this childys fadyr, ho is?" (12.36), or like her bishop, who demands to know "who hath wrought this wrake" (14.208).

When persecutors and detractors demand to know the name of Mary's lover, her answers are often obscure and polyvalent. Similarly, Evadne circumnavigates naming the man, building suspense before the big anagnorisis. "You dare not strike him," she hints (301). This clue recalls Joseph's cuckoldry: he could not strike his rival, because his rival was God. Instead, Joseph had to accept his humiliation as a blessing. Amintor, it turns out, is similarly situated. Finally, Evadne reveals the truth:

> *Evadne*: Why, 'tis the King.
>
> *Amintor:* The King!
>
> *Evadne:* What will you do now?
>
> *Amintor:* 'Tis not the King!
>
> *Evadne:* What did he make this match for, dull Amintor?
>
> *Amintor:* Oh, thou hast named a word that wipes away
>
> All thoughts revengeful! In that sacred name,
>
> "The King," there lies a terror. What frail man

---

[336] In the apocryphal birth narratives, Ysakar attempts to force Mary to marry his son, and woos her for that purpose. In N-Town, Ysakar attempts to force Mary to marry a member of his tribe.

Dares lift his hand against it? (2.1.304-310)

Amintor, stunned, repeats the phrase "the King" three times—allowing us to hear the unspoken

qualification "of heaven." Joseph's rival was the King of Heaven; Amintor's is just the king.

(But Amintor endows the king with sacred authority comparable to that of God, which fits with

the historical development, in the seventeenth century, of the institution of absolute monarchy.)

Evadne's name plays on "Eve." The patristic fathers read Eva backwards and spelled

Ave. This mnemonic device reminded medievals of the theological symbiosis of Eve's fall and

Mary's triumph. The Reformation did away with Mary, it is often said, but kept and emphasized

Eve (Krietzer 39). Yet Mary and Eve are two sides of the same coin. If Eve remains, so does

Mary. Here, a Marian scene is all about Eve. I argue that the Renaissance did not lose Mary, but

rather began a process of forgetting certain aspects of late medieval Mariology by vilifying them,

splitting a multi-faceted goddess into many shards. Mary's adulterousness has been forgotten,

and so we can no longer see the continuity between the medieval Virgin and the Renaissance

Evadne.

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