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DAUGHTERS OF EVE

DAUGHTERS OF EVE:  
THE ROLE OF THE SHREW IN  
MIDDLE ENGLISH RELIGIOUS DRAMA

By

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## ABSTRACT

The occasion for this study was an awareness of a need for an isolated examination of the shrew figure in medieval drama. Owing to the limits of time and space regulating this research, its scope has been limited to English religious drama, and specifically to cycle and other biblical drama.

This study examines the relationship of the dramatic shrew to the shrew in other literature of the period, the relationship between the shrew and the Virgin Mary, and the nature and purpose of comic characterization in essentially didactic drama. Chapter One is a discussion of the ecclesiastical and literary influences on the development of a shrew type in the Middle Ages, Chapter Two is an investigation of how Mary is presented in the drama, and Chapter Three is a systematic examination of the shrew in the drama. This study attempts to show that the characterizations of Mary and the shrews combine to form an integrated didactic commentary on ideal feminine behaviour and on modes of salvation peculiar to women.

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This work I dedicate to my mother.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Chapter I: Introduction.....	1
Notes to Chapter I.....	20
Chapter II: The Ideal: Mary.....	22
Notes to Chapter II.....	38
Chapter III: The Shrew.....	40
Notes to Chapter III.....	73
Chapter IV: Conclusion.....	76
Notes to Chapter IV.....	79
Bibliography.....	80

CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTION

Before beginning to examine the role of a particular type of woman in the English cycle drama, it will be necessary to survey the influences which establish the concept of women in medieval English literature in general. Only by understanding the overall images of women prevalent at the time can the role of the shrew in drama be approached in its proper context. Furthermore, it will be necessary to examine the traditions peculiar to the cycle drama itself before attempting to define and place a particular character-type in the drama.

Chaucer's Wife of Bath summarizes the medieval view of women when she says in her "Prologue":

For trusteth wel, it is an impossible  
That any clerk wol speke good of wyves,  
But if it be of hooly seintes lyves, <sup>1</sup>  
Ne of noon oother womman never the mo.

Heavily influenced by the misogyny of the Church Fathers, clerical and popular images of women in medieval England clearly reflect the classical Christian dichotomy between woman as mother of mankind's downfall, and woman as mother of mankind's redeemer; temptress and virgin; Eve and Mary.

Christian misogyny does not have its foundations in either the Old Testament or the teachings of Christ, but in the epistles of St. Paul. Virtually the first Christian

exegete, Paul was also the first biblical writer to emphasize the misogynistic implications of the creation and fall: woman's subjection to man, and woman's responsibility for the fall.

Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in transgression. (I Tim.2:11-14)

The belief that women are particularly sinful and ought therefore to be more humble is very apparent in Paul:

For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, forasmuch as he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of the man. For the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man. Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man. (I Cor.11:7-9).

Furthermore, Paul seized upon hints in the gospels and formed a general condemnation of sex and marriage: "if they cannot contain, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn" (I Cor 7:9). While the condemnation of sex and marriage is not necessarily misogynistic, it is so when the object of sexual lust is seen as evil, or when guilt about desire is conveniently projected to female lust and seductiveness.

This perception of woman as morally and intellectually inferior, which has its basis in Paul's Epistles, was carried on and repeated with variations by Church Fathers such as



Philo, Tertullian, Origen, Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine and, later, Thomas Aquinas. Of course, these exponents of Christian thought during the early centuries were all clerical celibates, men whose attitude toward women would almost necessarily be distorted. All of the early Christian writers assumed the mental and moral frailty of women, dwelt upon the vexations of marriage, and reviled the body and sexual desire. From the myth of the Fall, and the stories of Samson, Solomon, and David, the Fathers derived the conviction that woman's attractiveness is one of the greatest perils to man's soul.

During the Middle Ages, the teachings of the Church Fathers pervaded Christian thought, but were also combined with classical Greek and Roman influences, neither of which is particularly sympathetic to women. While the Greeks and Romans tended to make specific attacks against shrews and harlots, medieval writers were apt to make generalized attacks against all women. The combination of influences resulted in a large body of religious and secular misogynistic literature both in England and on the Continent. Great lovers of "authorities", medieval secular poets had a stock list of women who tempt or ruin virtuous men. The list includes Eve, Rachel, Judith, Delilah, Solomon's "strange women", Job's wife, Bathsheba, and some classical examples such as Xanthippe, Livia, Dido, Clodia, and Cleopatra. Such lists appear in Chaucer's "Wife of Bath's Prologue" and "Parson's Tale",

in John Lydgate's "Examples Against Women", and in a nasty invective of Gawain's in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. The standard examples seem to be used almost as formulas; they are so old and hackneyed as to be a literary exercise rather than an arraignment.

Two other strictly medieval factors also affect the medieval image of women: the secular cult of courtly love, and the religious cult of the Virgin. Both cults present distorted ideals of women. The courtly love tradition raised certain women on to a pedestal, and held that the love of a woman (ultimately an adulteress) was free of sin, and the source of virtue. The cult of the Virgin re-inforced clerical celibacy and anti-feminism, and created an ideal impossible for most lay women to realize.

Both of the distorted ideals of women gave rise to anti-feminist and anti-matrimonial satire very different from the asceticism and misogyny of the Churchmen. The elevated position of the lady in the courtly love tradition could easily be knocked down by satirists who disputed the ideal by attempting to portray women more "realistically" -- to the point of rejecting them altogether. At the same time the idealization of the Virgin Mary fuelled satire by contrast; Mary (here noted for her humility rather than her virginity) and the fictitious Griselde were virtually the only examples of good women which the defenders of women

could produce, while the satirists relied on the age-long list of their detractors, beginning with Eve and ending with the contemporary woman. John Lydgate's "Bycorne and Chichevache" is a typical satire on the shortage of humble women; Bycorne grows fat on a diet of humble husbands, while Chichevache starves for want of humble wives. The mythical beasts find "more thane thritty Mayes... But yit oone Gresylde never I fonde."<sup>2</sup> The wives become more prudent to avoid being eaten by Chichevache:

For nowe of nuwe for theyre prowē  
The wyves of ful hyegh prudēce  
Haue of assent made theyre avowe,  
For to exile Pacyēce,

...  
To make Chichevache fayle  
Of hem to fynde more vitayle. (11.113-19)

But the husbands continue to succumb to Bycorne, for their shrewish wives have become so strong that

O cely husbandes! woo beon yee!  
Suche as can haue no pacyēce  
Ageyns youre wyves vyolēce. (11.124-26)

Lydgate's poem expresses the contemporary fashion in anti-feminist and anti-matrimonial literature.

Looking specifically at popular or "bourgeois" literature on marriage, such as popular sermons, lyric poems, the Canterbury Tales, and the drama cycles, one finds that two traits in women are specifically high-lighted: shrewishness and infidelity. Marital conflict in these works is mostly treated with high humour; while the shrews and

adulteresses portrayed have obviously usurped authority, they are not treated with the disdain and horror of the Churchmen. The genre in question here is satire on specific feminine behaviour, satire which is misogynistic but is not the same as the asceticism and renunciation of the early clergy.

Asceticism and renunciation of women still influenced the medieval church of course, but there seems to have been an acknowledgement of the need for marriage, and thus for women. Like all things medieval, marriage was placed in a hierarchy, and it rated third, after virginity and chaste widowhood. The vernacular sermon, undoubtedly the single most influential factor in popular culture in the Middle Ages, did concern itself with the nature of marriage and with the proper place of women in daily life. G. R. Owst, in Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England, discusses sermons about women's vanity, their lechery, and their ability to tempt, but also about qualities associated with shrewishness: talking too much, gossiping, shirking duties, and minor disobedience. A famous anecdote told by preachers and recounted by the Knight of Tour Landry, concerns women who gossip in church while "the fende sate on hore shuldrys, wryting on a long role als fast as he myght."<sup>4</sup> One sermon connects women's propensity to gossip directly with Eve and Mary:

Eve, oure oldest moder in paradise,  
held long tale with the edder, and  
told hym qwhat god had seyde to hire  
and to hire husband of etyng of the  
apple, and bi hire talkyng the fend  
understod hire febylnes and hire  
unstabilnes, and fond therby a way  
to bryng hir to confusioun. Our lady  
sent Mary did on an othere wyse. Sche  
tolde the aungel no tale, bot asked  
hym discretly thing that she knew not  
hir-self, ffollow therfore our lady in  
discret speking and heryng, and not  
cakeling Eve that both spake and herd  
unwisely... Oure lady seyn Mary... was  
of so litel speche that nowere in the  
gospel we fynden of hir speche but  
iiii tymes and tho were wordes of gret  
discrecion and grete myghte.<sup>5</sup>

Owst also points to anecdotes in sermons about women's  
contrariety; typically, the husband knows that his wife  
will do the opposite of whatever he commands, so he commands  
her not to eat the poisonous sweet, or climb the rotting  
ladder, and the inevitable happens. Owst concludes:

This reproof for the disobedient shrew,  
strange as it sounds coming from emissaries  
of the Christian gospels, has further a  
noteworthy little history of its own in the  
annals of literature... this traditional  
pulpit theme passes into various ballads  
and hymns until the great master of the  
Elizabethan drama, Shakespeare himself,  
immortalizes it in his own version of  
The Taming of the Shrew.<sup>6</sup>

The ultimate source of the comical shrew archetype  
is not of much concern here. Obviously, the Judeo-  
Christian concept of the position of women is a large  
influence on any female archetype in primarily Christian  
literature. It is tempting to attribute the satirical

literature to the influence of the Church and homiletic literature, but it is not necessary to do so. Francis Lee Utley states that satire of women grew into a rhetorical art, indulged in for the entertainment of both writer and reader. As he points out in the introduction to his vast catalogue of satire and defense:

When, in a surge of enthusiasm for modern feminism, we attribute satire on women to unhappy marriages, unrequited love, or clerical bitterness, we should beware of the categorical imperative.<sup>7</sup>

Utley warns against several generalizations about the satires: that of believing that satire on wives is an exclusively medieval phenomenon, that of believing that clerical asceticism is the sole influence and that of believing that it is limited to a "bourgeois" tendency. Each of these is a factor, but Utley rightly attempts to emphasize the universality of the satire rather than its specific medieval contexts.

Nevertheless, one can look at the various forms such satire took in English literature of the Middle Ages. Two types deal exclusively with marriage: the chanson de mal marié, or husband's lament, and the chanson de mal mariée, or wife's lament. Both types are actually satires against women, for the wives' laments quickly slip into ribaldry as the speaker, usually in a tavern setting, with other wives

and widows, describes her husband's failings in graphic detail, much like Chaucer's Wife of Bath. More common are the chansons de mal marié. These poems are usually monologues, because the husband cannot escape his shrewish wife long enough to go to the tavern or she is such a spendthrift that he has no money to go. Some deal with specific charges against wives: obstinacy, pride, desire for mastery, lasciviousness, ugliness, incessant nagging, and reckless spending. One is soon reminded of present-day comedians such as Henny Youngman or Rodney Dangerfield who have only to say "My wife..." to elicit a laugh. One husband cannot get his wife to feed him:

If I ask our dame fleych,  
 Che brekit myn hed with a dych:  
 'Boy thou art not worght a reych'  
 I dar not seyn quan che seyght, 'Pes!'

If I ask our dame chese,  
 'Boy' che seyght, al at ese,  
 'Thou art not worght half a pese.'<sup>8</sup>

Another husband explains his patience:

All that I may swynk or swet,  
 My wife it wyll both drynk and ete;  
 And I sey ought, she wyl me bete;  
 Carfull ys my hart therfor.

Yf ony man have such a wyfe to lede  
 He shal know how 'iudicare' cam in the Cred;  
 Of hys penans God do hym med!  
 Carfull ys my hart therfor.<sup>9</sup>

Another expresses surprise at the change in roles he is witnessing:

Nova, noua, sawe yow euer such?  
The most mayster of the hows weryth no brych.

Syns that Eve was procreat owt of Adams syde,  
Coud not such newels in this lond be inuentyd:  
The masculyn sex, with rygurnesse and prid  
With ther femals thei altercalt, therself beyng schentyd,  
And of ther owne self the corag is abatyd;  
Wherfor it is not acordyng to syth to mych,  
Lest the most mayster may were no brych.<sup>10</sup>

Other lyrics condemn marriage altogether, bemoan the consequences of not choosing a wife as carefully as one does a horse, and warn against May-January couplings. The lyric below expresses the need to choose with care:

Man, bewar of thin wowing,  
For wedding is the longe wo.

Lok er thin herte be set;  
Lok thou wowe er thou be knet,  
And, if thou se thou mow do bet,  
Knet up the heltre, and let here goo.

The poem goes on to warn against young wives and widows both:

Wyvys be both stowte and bolde  
Her husbandes ayens hem durn not holde  
And, if he do, his herte is colde,  
Howsoevere the game go.

Wedowis be wol fals, iwys,  
For they cun both halse and kys  
Til onys purs pikyd is,  
And they seyn, 'Go, boy, goo.'<sup>11</sup>

A husband cannot win; there are complaints about being married too late, and too soon, and against the perils of disparity in rank, wisdom, and virtue.



Many of the later lyrics are based heavily on Chaucer's "marriage group", especially the "Wife of Bath's Prologue," the "Merchant's Tale", which tells the tragic story of January and May, and the "Clerk's Tale", about the Patient Griselda. Chaucer is very adept at the art of satire on wives, putting the complaints into the mouths of appropriate characters, such as the embittered Merchant, or the celibate Priest in the "Nuns' Priest's Tale". Some of Chaucer's imitators lacked his light touch, though, and his subtle irony. It should also be noted that both Chaucer and his close follower John Lydgate could write with equal zest on either side of the question. Chaucer's Legend of Good Women and Lydgate's "Epistle to Sibille" re-inforce the view that their interest in the woman-question was literary rather than personal, and that they wrote satire on women because it was fashionable and entertaining.

Defenses of women are few, and are almost necessarily dry, as Utley points out:

That satire still bulks larger in quantity is not entirely the fault of the times, but in part a tribute to its taste. For, honorable as they may be, defenses are on the whole more long-winded, less unified, and less witty and amusing; they represent sobriety which protests when it is being teased.<sup>12</sup>

Defenses typically cling to the Virgin Mary as a symbol of perfection, or, like the Wife of Bath, attribute the satires to the sensuality and frustration of wicked men. But the best satire is not meant to be taken so seriously, and that is probably why most defenses are boring and lifeless.

Much of the satire is truly humorous. Various rhetorical devices are used successfully to create an ambiguity which shows that in a relationship between a shrew and henpecked husband, both parties can be at fault. For all the husbands' bewailing their sorry state in Chaucer's "marriage group", it is very difficult to pity them, because they are such fools. January's lechery, the miller's and the carpenter's stupidity, and the Nuns' Priest's meekness have to be in part responsible for their troubles. Likewise, the henpecked husband who sits in the road while his wife drinks in the tavern seems to deserve his fate.

The stereotype of the noisy, henpecking, shrewish wife appears in literature of all periods, but never so often or so vehemently as in the Middle Ages. The influence of clerical celibacy and selective biblical exegesis played a role in the fashion, but it was above all a fashion, a part of a great debate on the nature of women, in which ingenuity counted more than a strict portrayal of reality. Shrewishness lends itself to lively plots, interesting characterization, and a witty, humorous style and it is

primarily for this reason that the shrew became a popular image in medieval literature.

In the English cycle plays the shrew is also a stock source of humour. The shrew and the henpecked husband obviously belong in lyric poetry, didactic anecdotes, or a collection of tales. But we must question the place of any comic character or action in a drama which portrays biblical stories and events. Here we must look at the nature of the drama, the principles of selection, and the explanations offered for the presence of comic action.

Critics and historians make several assumptions about the English cycle plays, as they have been called, although their precise structure as "cycle" remains open to question. Such plays present the history of the known human world from Creation to Doomsday: the whole story of man and his hope of salvation. For sheer enormity of scope and popularity the mystery cycles are remarkable. As V. A. Kolve explains:

[The Corpus Christi drama] was rich and elaborate to a degree we would associate only with professional theater. It staged the largest action ever attempted by any drama in the West, an action that included the comic and the pathetic, the grotesque and the transcendental, all in one complete design; and though some fifteen hours were required to play the story out, its audience came to watch it again and again. It held the stage for more than two hundred years, the most truly popular drama England has ever known.<sup>13</sup>

Such drama may be called "comprehensive", but it does not, of course, present every single incident in the Bible.

Only the more dramatic incidents are selected for inclusion; these appear to be repeated from cycle to cycle, while within each cycle unity is achieved through "figures". The figural approach to biblical events, used first by St. Paul and followed by the Church Fathers, saw certain Old Testament events as types, with corresponding New Testament events as anti-types. The Creation pre-figures the Birth of Christ, the murder of Abel pre-figures the murder of Christ, the flood pre-figures the Last Judgement, most of the patriarchs pre-figure Christ in some way, and Eve pre-figures Mary. John Dennis Hurrell writes,

The cycles as a whole achieve their unity by repetition of the theme of pre-figuration, an aspect of the promise of salvation that brings the Creation and Judgement Day together in a single apprehension of truth transcending time. Likewise, within each play, the acceptance of the idea that behind apparent differences of time and place there is a god-given unity, or that the separate phenomena which we call historical events or geographical location are in no real (i.e. spiritual) sense isolated from each other, makes it possible for the dramatist to mold an artistic form out of what is usually called the use of anachronisms.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, the events portrayed in the plays, and the characters within them, were chosen carefully to form a meaningful whole.

The applications of typology to the presence and function of the shrew in the drama are numerous. Although there are no shrews in the Bible, we will see that one

function of the shrew is as a type of Eve and, therefore, an anti-type of Mary. As a contemporary, anachronistic figure, she also symbolizes the presence of the fallen world in the redeemed world. This concept appears to be somewhat contradictory. If, as Eric Auerbach writes,

figural interpretation establishes a connection between events or persons, the first of which not only signifies itself, but also the second, while the second encompasses or fulfills the first. The two poles of the figure are separate in time, but both, being real events or figures, are within time, within the stream of historical life,<sup>15</sup>

then only two poles of the figures appear to be operating. But when there is invented action, and invented characters superimposed onto the scriptural reality, a third factor is introduced: the contemporary perception of reality. It will be shown that while the shrew in the drama may take the form of an Old or New Testament character, she will be typologically related to both Eve and Mary, and at the same time she will represent an image of the place of the contemporary woman in the scheme of salvation.

As has been stated, the shrew is basically a comic type, but the presence of the comic element perhaps needs further explanation. Of course, the Bible is not a comical book, and any comical episodes in the cycle drama are consequently invention. There are several ways of explaining the invention and the intrusion of the comic into primarily biblical drama. Arnold Williams claims that the comic is used to help the audience identify with scriptural matter:

In the cycle plays the comic always flows directly from the method of the cycles, which is the attempt to make Scriptural story human and contemporary. We see everything through the eyes of the common citizens, and the disparity between that point of view and the one we are accustomed to in "religious" literature produces a comic irony that is never absent for long in any of the cycles.<sup>16</sup>

Williams' observation is valid; often the comic elements are anachronistic, and they always blend contemporary images with the scriptural matter. The shrew has been shown to be a contemporary comic phenomenon; one of her functions in the drama is to help show great events in Christian history with which "everyman" could identify.

A. P. Rossiter's views agree for the most part with those of Williams, that contemporaneity of conception leads to infiltration of non-scriptural matters, which are often comic. But Rossiter believes that darker forces are also at work in combining the comic with the sacred:

We are left to wrestle with the uncombinable antimonies of the medieval mind: for these immiscible juxtapositions constantly imply two contradictory schemes of values, two diverse spirits; one standing for reverence, awe, mobility, pathos, sympathy, the other for mockery, blasphemy, baseness, meanness or spite, Schadenfreude, and derision. Above all, it is the fact that the other spirit is comic that compels reflection and analysis; for the evaluated effect of the ambivalence reaches out toward a searching irony.<sup>17</sup>

Although Rossiter refers mostly to plays of the passion to support his claims, we shall see that the comic role of the shrew can also be shockingly grotesque and base. Whether or not the combination is an "uncombinable antimony", one can readily see that much of the comic action in the plays is not just light foolery; indeed, in many other literary contexts laughter is associated with the demonic, and austerity with the sacred. Rossiter's mistake is in failing to see the synthesis of the two poles within the plays.

Stanley J. Kahrl challenges Rossiter's statement by calling the darker side the "verisimilitude of satire", and attempting to show that grotesque comic elements are used only for the purposes of verisimilitude and contemporaneity.<sup>18</sup> Kahrl oversimplifies the underlying didacticism of the plays; he also cites only two examples to prove his point, while Rossiter cited many to justify his. A middle road is perhaps needed; there is a darker side to the comedy which is both compelling and interesting to examine, but we need not call anything "uncombinable" which has obviously been combined.

Kolve disagrees vehemently with Rossiter's evaluation; he believes that comic action is usually integrally related to the scriptural matter at hand:

...sometimes (the cycle dramatists)  
invent a comic action simply in order  
to parallel the central action of the

play, to honor and adumbrate that action by playing it twice, in different modes... The one thing all these have in common is their formal seriousness: however funny, bumptious, coarse, or improvisatory these comic actions may seem they have their roots in serious earth; they are intimately and intricately involved in their play's deepest meaning.<sup>19</sup>

Kolve's theory can be applied exhaustively to almost any comic action in the plays; unfortunately, it can be used as a preconclusion, and hinder further investigation of comic action in its own right. Kolve's understanding of "religious laughter" is also radically different from Rossiter's; Kolve establishes that the Church Fathers and other religious writers saw a definite place for laughter in man's make-up. He believes that no defamation or mockery is intended:

.....the evil and the demonic behave stupidly because that is their nature, and the proper reaction to this example of the rightness of things is laughter. In the Corpus Christi drama, as in the sources it drew upon, severance from God is chiefly a result of man's stupidity, of his failure to be intelligent... Stupidity, even in social terms, is funny, but when it willfully expresses itself in opposition to God's plea-- a plan not only intelligible but known-- it becomes more than merely laughable. It is also, in some outrageous sense, perverse, and the laughter it attracts is correspondingly unrestrained and unsympathetic.<sup>20</sup>

If Kolve is correct, that the laughter is "unsympathetic", then the motive of contemporaneity asserted by Willians, Rossiter, and Kahrl is greatly compromised; if the playwrights



introduce comic characters to help the audience identify with the scriptural matter, an "unsympathetic" response would denote certain failure. Kolve is right in saying that in the plays man's severance from God results from stupidity-- this is certainly true in the case of the shrew-- but surely the audience must respond with sympathy, and with reference to its own experience. The alternate response would be disdain, in which case we would have to deny that any action in the plays is comical at all. The drama is definitely didactic, but it is not barren of humour, difficult as it may be for the modern mind to understand the nature and function of the humour.

We will see that the role of the shrew in the drama encompasses all aspects of the comic: contemporaneity of conception, the grotesque, the demonic, the descant on the scriptural matter, and the satirical tradition discussed earlier. In the drama we are presented with both sides of the debate on women, as well as both poles of comedy and seriousness, for we are presented with the serious ideal in Mary, the typological prototype in Eve, and the shrew herself in various forms. The second chapter will therefore examine the image of Mary in the cycle drama as a basis for contrast, and the third will deal with the purpose and function of the shrew.

NOTES TO CHAPTER I

<sup>1</sup>Geoffrey Chaucer, The Complete Poetry and Prose of Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. John Fisher (New York, 1977), p.118. All subsequent references are to this edition.

<sup>2</sup>John Lydgate, The Minor Poems of John Lydgate, ed. Henry Noble McCracken (EETS o.s. 192, 1961), p. 433.

<sup>3</sup>G. R. Owst, Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England (Cambridge, 1933), See Chapter VII, "The Preaching of Satire and Complaint: Part III".

<sup>4</sup>Owst, Literature and Pulpit, p. 387.

<sup>5</sup>Owst, Literature and Pulpit, p. 387.

<sup>6</sup>Owst, Literature and Pulpit, p. 390.

<sup>7</sup>Francis Lee Utley, The Crooked Rib: An Analytical Index to the Argument about Women in English and Scots Literature to the End of the Year 1568 (Columbus, 1944), p. 21.

<sup>8</sup>Richard Leighton Green, ed., The Early English Carols (Oxford, 1973), p. 240.

<sup>9</sup>Greene, ed., Carols, p. 240.

<sup>10</sup>Greene, ed., Carols, p. 241.

<sup>11</sup>Greene, ed., Carols, p. 239.

<sup>12</sup>Utley, Crooked Rib, p. 50.

<sup>13</sup>V. A. Kolve, The Play Called Corpus Christi (Stanford, 1966), p. 1.

<sup>14</sup>John Dennis Hurrell, "The Figural Approach to Medieval Drama", College English, 26 (1965), p. 603.

<sup>15</sup>Erich Auerbach, "Figura", in Scenes from the Drama of European Literature: Six Essays by Erich Auerbach, (New York, 1959), p. 53.

<sup>16</sup>Arnold Williams, "The Comic in the Cycles", in Neville Denny, ed., Medieval Drama (New York, 1973), p. 123.

<sup>17</sup>A. P. Rossiter, English Drama from Early Times to the Elizabethans (New York, 1950).

<sup>18</sup>Stanley J. Kahrl, Traditions of Medieval English Drama. (Pittsburgh, 1975). See Chapter 4, "Character and Verisimilitude".

<sup>19</sup>Kolve, The Play, p. 173.

<sup>20</sup>Kolve, The Play, p. 140.

## CHAPTER II

### THE IDEAL: MARY

Ne hadde the appil take ben, the appil taken ben,  
 ne hadde neuer our lady a ben heuene qwen;  
 Blyssid be the tyme that appil take was, 1  
 Ther-fore we mown syngyn, 'deo gracias!'

Although Mary's role in the New Testament is quite limited and even ambiguous, apocryphal gospels and the Church Fathers developed her into a major component of the Christian religion. By the time the English mystery cycles were written, Mary had become the Queen of Heaven, co-redemptrix with Christ, the second Eve, the redeemer of womankind in particular, and the feminine Ideal. The Cult of the Virgin flourished during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, with lyric poetry, Marian Laments, cathedrals dedicated to the Virgin, religious orders, and proclamations of new Marian feasts, but of course the legacy of the Cult never disappeared, and remains a part of the Catholic Church to the present day.

With the existence of the tradition of satire on women prevalent in medieval England, Mary as Ideal Woman becomes especially important as a basis for contrast with the satirical object. Mary is never herself an object of satire in lyric poetry; she is always the stock example used by the defenders of women. "The Thrush and the Nightingale," a thirteenth century bird-debate, is a typical example of this device. The thrush contends that women always

deceive men, that they will sell themselves for a little gold, and that the experiences of Adam and Samson prove women's guile. The nightingale argues that women are virtuous and sweet, but he does not succeed in convincing the thrush until he cites the example of the Virgin Mary; at that point, the thrush concedes completely:

Nigttingale, I wes woed,  
 Other I couthe to luitel goed,  
 With the for to strive,  
 I sugē that icham ouercome  
 Thoru hire that bar that holi sone,  
 That soffrede wundes fiue.

Hi swerie bi his holi name  
 Ne shall I neuer sugen shame  
 Bi maidnes ne bi wiue.  
 Houe of this lond wille te,  
 Ne rechi neuer weder I fly  
 A-wai ich wille driue.<sup>2</sup>

Mary is a woman in a singular position as mother of God; but she was viewed as not only different from other women, but also as an ideal example for women to follow.

As a popular and didactic genre, the cycle drama portrays Mary as an ideal in her various roles of virgin, wife, mother, and woman. Although the cycle plays are concerned mostly with biblical events, there is throughout the cycles free borrowing from apocrypha. Scholars may debate whether or not the medieval audience knew the difference between biblical and apocryphal elements; the fact is that naive or unscholarly Catholics today believe implicitly in many Marian legends which are not biblical. Mary makes only two brief appearances in both the Gospel of Mark and the Gospel

of John; Matthew and Luke supply the narratives of Christ's birth and infancy from which most Marian legends derive. Joseph receives no mention at all in Mark or John; in Matthew he is typologically linked to the Old Testament Joseph. Paul's Epistles, which were probably written before any of the gospels, make no mention of Mary or Joseph. Mary's role in the gospels is in fact ambiguous; on several occasions, such as the marriage at Cana, the Temple Doctors episode, and in some of Christ's retorts, Christ seems to rebuke his mother and to reject his earthly family.

It is from apocrypha such as the Book of James and the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew that many embellishments leading to the idealization of Mary derive. These apocrypha are the sources of legends about Mary's conception and youth, her vow of virginity, her betrothal and marriage to Joseph, the trial by ordeal, Joseph's old age, the chastity of their marriage, Salome's doubting, and details of the flight into Egypt. The uncanonical gospels help to make the biblical stories more accessible by expanding on hints of the personalities of Mary and Joseph, as well as by amplifying the miraculous element. The same method is used by the cycle dramatists in attempting to make the biblical material dramatically compelling, and many details of characterization are based on the apocryphal accounts. Joseph in the Bible is not necessarily an old man, but in the Book of James he attempts to refuse Mary, saying:

I have sons, and I am an old man, but  
 she is a girl: lest I become the  
 laughing-stock of Israel. (9:2)<sup>3</sup>

The dramatic Joseph is always portrayed as an old man. Likewise, the concept of Mary's vow of virginity, and her dedication to God's service are anachronisms which are not found in the Bible but which originate in the Book of James:

And Mary was in the temple of the Lord  
 as a dove that is nurtured; And she  
 received food from the hand of an angel. (8:1)

Such a detail becomes especially important in the Middle Ages, and the playwrights do not fail to emphasize the vow of virginity and the chastity of marriage, which are not, however, mentioned in the Bible. Later exegesis adds further flourishes to the Ideal, such as the Assumption and Coronation, the Immaculate Conception, and Mary's powers of intercession.<sup>4</sup> Although they are not biblical, all of these detail have long been accepted as dogma by the Catholic Church, and certainly by the writers and the audience of the cycle plays.

Mary is undoubtedly the major female character in the cycles, appearing in no fewer than ten plays in each. The present study will concentrate on the characterization of Mary as ideal woman and ideal wife, because these aspects are the most relevant points of contrast to the characterization of the shrew. There is always restraint in the playwrights' handling of Mary; she is always exempt from the comic or burlesque treatment other characters are given. Mary stands up as a paragon in contrast to other characters; the playwrights accord total respect to the Mother of God.

Certain aspects of the Marian legends are emphasized throughout the cycles. Mary's virginity and obedience are constantly emphasized, as well as her moral superiority over Joseph, who in the plays is not an ideal husband, but a flawed one. The Ludus Coventriae contains the most extensive material on the early life of Mary, including her vow of virginity:

A-geyns the lawe wyl I nevyr be  
 but mannys ffelachep xal nevyr folwe me  
 I wyl levyn evyr in chastyte  
 be the grace of goddys wylle.

Of course a vow of virginity is blatant anachronism; to medieval society a woman's vow of virginity was acceptable and even holy, but to the Jews, barrenness and spinsterhood were terrible stigmas and no institution or tradition existed in which a young woman could make such a vow. The other cycles do not mention such a vow, but do repeatedly assert the chastity of Joseph and Mary's marriage, usually by explaining the necessity for them to have married at all. In the Annunciation Prologue of York, the Doctor explains:

And for the fende suld so be fedd  
 Be tyne, and to no treuth take tentt  
 God made that mayden to be wedde,  
 Or he his sone un-to hir sentte.  
 So was the godhede closed and cledde  
 In wede of weddyng whare thy wente;  
 Ant that oure blysse sulde so be bredde,  
 Ful many materes may be mente. (11.25-32).<sup>6</sup>

Christ himself offers the same explanation to the Doctors in the Ludus Coventriae "Christ and the Doctors", but adds a sociological reason which enhances the realism of the marriage of necessity for the medieval audience; a woman



with a baby could hardly travel alone:

To blynde the devyl of his knowlache  
 and my bryth from hym to hyde  
 that holy wedlock was grett stopage  
 the devyl in dowte to do A-byde  
 Also whan sche xulde to egyte gon  
 and fle from herowde for dowte of me  
 be-cause sche xulde nat go Alon  
 Joseph was ordeyned here make to be  
 my ffadyr of his hyg mageste.  
 here for to comforte in the way  
 these be the cawsys as ye may se  
 why Joseph weddyd that holy may. (11.245-255)

In the Chester Shepherds' play, Mary offers her own explanation:

This man maryed was to mee  
 for noe sinne in such assent  
 but to keepe my virginitee,  
 and truly in non other intent. (11.512-515)?

The marriage is clearly established as a marriage of necessity,  
 and not the more normal sexual union. Mary is referred to  
 several times as God's spouse. In the Ludus Coventriae

"Mary in the Temple", Anne tells Mary:

Dowtere, the Angel tolde us ye xulde be a quen  
 Wole ye go se that lord your husband xal ben  
 and for to love hym and lede with hym your lyf  
 telle your ffadyr and me her your answeere let sen  
 Wole ye be pure maydyn and also goddys wyff.  
 (11.12-15)

The York "Annunciation" also refers to Mary as "Godes  
 spouse".

Mary's situation is unique, in that she is married by  
 necessity to one man while bearing the child of the Holy  
 Spirit. Chaste marriage was held as an ideal by the medieval  
 church; Chaucer's Parson, whose tale is a convenient assem-  
 blage of conventional moral ideas, says:

Man sholde loven hys wyf by discrecioun,  
 paciently and atemprely, and thanne is she  
 as though it were his suster

and

certes, if that a wyf koude kepen hire  
 al chaast by licence of hir housebonde so  
 that she yeve nevere noon occasion that he  
 agilte, it were to hire a greet merite. These  
 manere wommen that observen chastitee  
 moste be clene in herte as well as in body  
 and in thought.<sup>8</sup>

Joseph and Mary are no doubt chaste in the plays, but their courtship and marriage do not appear to be ideal. Joseph is portrayed as a grumbling old man, more suited to be the husband of a shrew than of an ideal woman. It will be shown that the playwrights adopt this characterization of Joseph to highlight the ideal qualities of Mary, while also providing contemporary comic relief which could not be provided by so exalted a character as Mary.

Mary is clearly chosen by God, and is his willing handmaiden; all four cycles have plays of the Annunciation in which the angel Gabriel's Salutation and Mary's fiat are paraphrased. Joseph is not so clearly singled out by God. Only the Ludus Coventriae includes the apocryphal marriage-auction in which Joseph's rod blooms; even so Joseph responds to his lot with protest:

I am an old man so god me spede  
 and with a wyff now to levyn in drede.  
 It wore neyther sport nere game

...  
 An old man may never thryff  
 With a yonge wyff so god me saue.

("Betrothal of Mary", ll.268-279)

In the other cycles, Joseph does not appear until after the Annunciation; he is characterized then as a hen-pecked, cuckolded husband. The Cult of Joseph and the Holy Family appeared later; in the cycle plays Joseph could be maltreated to the limit as long as the dignity of Mary was not impaired.<sup>9</sup>

In the Gospel of Matthew, Joseph on learning of Mary's pregnancy, doubts her virtue, but does not want to shame her by repudiating her publicly. An angel appears to him and reassures him: "that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost." Joseph then accepts Mary as his wife. In all of the cycles, Joseph reacts strongly and comically to Mary's pregnancy; he seems to be particularly concerned with exonerating himself and finding out who the father is. His speech in these plays is punctuated with "Old Man's Laments", asides to the audience on the danger of marrying a young wife. In the Towneley and Chester plays of Joseph's doubts, he laments his fate in a monologue. The Chester Joseph wails:

God, lett never an ould man  
take to wife a yonge woman  
nay seet his harte her upon,  
lest hee beguyled bee.  
For accorde ther maye be none  
ney the may never bee at one;  
and that is seene in manye one  
as well as one mee.

(Play 6,11.145-148)

More interesting are the versions in the other cycles, in which Mary responds to Joseph's complaints. The York Joseph is quite obnoxious:

Joseph: Thy wombe is waxen grete, thynke me,  
Thou arte with barne, allas! for care!  
A! maidens, wa worthe thou!  
That lete hir lere swilke lare.

ii Puella: Joseph, ye sall nogt trowe,  
In hir no febill fare,

Joseph: Trowe it noght arme! lefe wenche, do way!  
Hir sidis shewes she is with childe.  
Whose is't Marie?

Mary: Sir, Goddis and youres

Joseph: Nay, nay, now wate I wele I am begiled.  
And resonne why  
With me flesshely was thou nevere fylid,  
And I forsake it here for thy.

(11.95-107)

The abuse goes on for several hundred lines; finally the angel Gabriel appears to Joseph and explains. Joseph apologizes to Mary and her response is quite simple:

Forgiffnesse sir! late be! for shame,  
Slike wordis suld all gud women lakke.

(11.297-8)

The Ludus Coventriae Joseph is by far the most malicious; he utters a very nasty Old Man's Lament:

Ya ya all Olde men to me take tent  
and weddyth no wyff in no kynnys wyse  
that is a yonge wench be myn a-sent  
ffor doubte and drede and swych servyse  
Alas Alas my name is shent  
all men may me now dyspyse  
and seyn olde cukwold thi bow is bent  
newly now after the fresche gyse  
Alas and welaway  
Alas dame why dedyst thou so.

(11.48-58)

This Joseph goes so far as to threaten to invoke the law, and have Mary stoned. Mary meekly prays:

A gracyous god in hefne trone  
 comforte my spowse in this hard cas.

(11.84-85)

When Joseph repents, Mary is duly forgiving; she will not let him kiss her feet, but bids him kiss her lips instead, showing that their chaste marriage is not without love. The juxtaposition of the obedient, innocent Mary to the belligerent, accusing Joseph is very effective in these episodes.

Even after Mary's exoneration and the birth of Christ, Joseph continues to act as a hen-pecked husband. In all four cycles, Joseph grumbles about Mary's insistence on going through with the Purification. His role is also expository, pointing out Mary's great obedience in carrying out an article of God's law which really does not pertain to her. Thus the Ludus Coventriae Joseph says:

To be purefyed have ye no nede  
 ne thi son to be offryd so god me spede  
 ffor fyrst thou art ful clene  
 Undefowlyd in thought and dede  
 and a-nothyr thi son with-owtyn drede  
 is god and man to mene  
 Wherefore it nedyd not to bene  
 but to kepe the lawe on moyse wyse.

(11.107-114)

In the Coventry Weavers' version, Joseph is obstinate in his protestations, making an Old Man's Lament and complaining bitterly about Mary's unreasonable request:

Dame, all this cumpany wyll sey the same  
 Ys itt not soo? Speyke men, for schame!  
 Tell you the trothe ase you well con!  
 For the that woll nott there wyffis please

Ofte-tymis schall suffer moche dysees;  
Therefore I holde hym well at es  
Thatt hathe to do with non.

(11.472-8)<sup>10</sup>

The same reluctance on Joseph's part is evident in the York and Towneley plays of the Flight into Egypt. In Towneley, Joseph responds to the angel's instructions grumbling:

This is a febyll fare,  
A seke man and a sare  
To here of sich a fray;  
My bonys ar bursyd and bare  
ffor to do; I wold it ware  
Comen my last day  
Tyll ende.

(11.31-37)<sup>11</sup>

When Mary asks where they will go, he snaps:

Tyll egyp weynd shall we;  
ffor-thi let be thi dyn  
and cry.

(11.113-115)

At one point he resumes his earlier lament:

That bargan dere I by  
Yong men, bewar red I  
Wedying makys me all wan.

(11.148-150)

No matter how comical and contrary Joseph is, Mary always remains calm and devoted, frequently praying for him and herself. Rosemary Woolf notes that in other literary traditions, such as Eastern dialogues, Mary participates in the burlesque with Joseph, but

by contrast in the mystery plays the fabliau world exists only in Joseph's imagination, while Mary lives in the spotless and serene world of the Annunciation.<sup>12</sup>

The didactic point in the characterization of Mary and Joseph is obvious; even if a husband is old, jealous, obnoxious, and belligerent as the husbands in the chansons de mal mariée are,<sup>13</sup> an ideal wife should respond with the serenity of Mary. It should be noted, though, that in many episodes Mary and Joseph's relationship is more amiable, and is presented as the exemplary marriage of the "Holy Family" tradition.

Mary is directly contrasted with several women, notably the Mothers of the Innocents and Salome, who will be discussed as shrews in the following chapter. The contrast with Eve is perhaps too obvious and hackneyed to receive much mention in the cycle plays, but there are references in some of the plays. God in the Towneley Annunciation makes the ingenious parallel between Eve and the Fall, and Mary and the Redemption. A man (Adam), a virgin (Eve), and an angel (the devil), were the actors on the scene of the Fall; but another man (Christ), another virgin (Mary), and another angel (Gabriel) bring salvation, and the tree of Calvary rises over the tree of Eden:

ffor reson wyll ther be thre,  
 A man, a madyn, and a tre:  
 Man for man, tre for tre,  
 Madyn for madyn, thus shall it be.

(11.31-34)

Later God addresses Gabriel:

Angell must to Mary go,  
 ffor the feynd was eue fo;  
 he was foule and layth to syght

And thou art angell fair and bryght;  
 And hayls that madyn, my lemman,  
 As heyndly as thou can.

(11.61-65)

In the Ludus Coventriae Annunciation, the angel plays on the Eva-Ave anagram:

Amonge All women blyssyd art thu  
 here this name Eva is turned Aue  
 that is to say with-oute sorwe ar ye now.  
 Thou sorwe in yow hath no place...

(11.218-221)

Woolf states that the plays of Joseph's Doubts bring "the two worlds of the Fall and the Redemption into dramatic collision" because when Joseph treats Mary like Eve the "ironic reversal" underlines the fact that Mary is the second Eve, woman redeemer.<sup>14</sup> This irony is similar to the traditions of lyric poetry, when husband and wife appear to over-react to imaginary failings in their spouses.

One point of contrast with Eve is explicit in all of the cycles: the painlessness of the birth of Christ. In Genesis God's punishment to Eve is that "in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children". All of the cycles (except Towneley, from which the play is missing) interpret the sorrow as pain in labour. In the Ludus Coventriae play of the Fall, God warns Eve that she will

...bere thi chyldere with gret gronynge  
 In daungere and in deth dredynge  
 in to thi lyvys ende.

(11.337-40)



The Chester Eve tells Cain and Abel of her own pain in bearing them:

My sweete children, darlinges deare,  
 yee shall see how I live heare  
 ...  
 This payne, theras had beene no neede,  
 I suffer on yearth for my misdeede.

(Play.2,11.497-502)

Pain in childbearing was God's curse on womankind, and yet according to apocryphal legend Mary is spared. All of the cycles (except Towneley, which omits the nativity per se) allude to this detail. Joseph is absent during the birth of Christ, and when he returns Mary tells him that the process was painless. The Chester Mary tells Joseph: "Payne felte I non this night" (Play 6, line 505); the Ludus Coventriae Joseph says: "Payne nere grerynge felt I ryght non" (Birth of Christ, 1.222). The York Mary tells the Magi:

For I consayved my sone sartayne  
 With-uten misse of man in mynde,  
 And bare hym here with-uten payne,  
 Where women are wonte to be pynynd (11.291-94)

The stress on the painlessness of Mary's childbearing underlines the contrast with Eve, but it also emphasizes the supernatural nature of the event. Mary as an ideal in the cycles can be disturbing; one can clearly see the didactic implications of her relationship with Joseph, but when the supernatural is stressed -- in references to her virginity, painless labour, Assumption, and Coronation, she becomes atemporal, almost a divinity herself. As an ideal, she encompasses both the ethereal nature of an immortal diety, and the real, contemporary nature of a wife, mother, and character in a play.

Cornelius Luke has written a book length work on the "Christocentricity" of Mary's role in the cycle drama.<sup>15</sup> His argument is that "although worship is tendered the Virgin, it is apparent that this worship befalls her only in virtue of her divine maternity".<sup>16</sup> Obviously, the Catholic Church in general singles Mary out as Mother of Christ, but in the cycle plays, this is not her only asset. She is also presented as ideal woman and wife, in contrast to and sometimes in direct juxtaposition to other women, the shrews. Mary's presence is not consistent throughout the cycles; she leaves the limelight when Christ's ministry starts, and when she does appear after that her role is minimal, and necessarily christocentric. The York cycle and the Ludus Coventriae include plays of the Glorification of Mary; Towneley had them at one time but lost them. Luke complains of the Glorification group's lack of dramatic interest:

... the plays are too unnatural and tenuous. They strive to project the mundane into the heavenly. They are too lacking in human experience.<sup>17</sup>

When differentiates the level of interest of the Glorification plays from that of the earlier Marian nativity plays is not the extent of christocentricity in Mary's role, but the extent of humanity. When she is presented with a very human husband, her relationship with him is presented as an ideal and essentially human one. Although the somewhat unnatural chastity of their marriage is never challenged or compromised, they are shown to have some problems before and after the

birth of Christ. Mary's reaction to the problems of marriage is held up as the ideal wifely response, as is her obedience and humility to God. The domestic scenes are dramatically interesting and at the same time important to the development of the feminine ideal of the cycles.

While the supernatural virgin birth of Christ is Mary's raison d'être in the Christian religion, the cycle plays consciously concentrate on legendary material about her more realistic, human experience. She is treated with a reverence that is accorded few characters in the cycle drama. The didactic message about ideal behaviour is made much clearer when the human element is emphasized; the humanity and contemporaneity of Joseph highlights Mary's piety, and allows us to see it concretely. Mary's piety and ideal example is also highlighted by contrast in the example not to be followed, the shrew, to which we shall now turn.

NOTES TO CHAPTER II

<sup>1</sup> Carleton Brown, ed., Religious Lyrics of the Fifteenth Century (Oxford, 1939), p. 120.

<sup>2</sup> Carleton Brown, ed., English Lyrics of the Thirteenth Century (Oxford, 1932), p. 107.

<sup>3</sup> Montague Rhodes James, trans. and ed., The Apocryphal New Testament (Oxford, 1926).

<sup>4</sup> See Marina Warner, Alone of All Her sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary (London, 1976). Warner, a skeptic, researches and recounts the entire history of Mariology in a scholarly way. She is concerned with the constant accretions to, and lack of biblical evidence for the Marian legends. She notes that the Immaculate Conception was not proclaimed dogma until 1854, the Assumption in 1950, and the Coronation in 1954.

<sup>5</sup> Ludus Coventriae "Betrothal of Mary" 11.36-39. All quotations from the Ludus Coventriae are from Ludus Coventriae or The Play Called Corpus Christi, ed. K. S. Block (EETS e.s. 120, 1922).

<sup>6</sup> All quotations from the York cycle are from York Plays, ed. Lucy Toulmin Smith (New York, 1963).

<sup>7</sup> All quotations from the Chester cycle are from The Chester Mystery Cycles, eds. R. M. Lumiansky and David Mills (EETS s.s. 3, 1974).

<sup>8</sup> Chaucer, Complete Prose and Poetry, p. 385 and p. 390.

<sup>9</sup> See V. A. Kolve, The Play Called Corpus Christi,

Chapter Ten, "Goodness and Natural Man". Kolve discusses the history of the Cult of Joseph, and the characterization of Joseph as natural man.

<sup>10</sup> "The Weavers Pageant" in the Two Coventry Corpus Christi Plays, ed. Hardin Craig (EETS e.s. 87, 1957).

<sup>11</sup> All quotations from the Towneley cycle are from The Towneley Plays, ed. George England (EETS e.s. 71, 1907).

<sup>12</sup> Rosemary Woolf, The English Mystery Plays (London 1972), p. 173.

<sup>13</sup> See examples of the Chansons de mal marié in Chapter One.

<sup>14</sup> Woolf, Mystery Plays, p. 172.

<sup>15</sup> Brother Cornelius Luke, The Role of the Virgin Mary in the Coventry, York, Chester, and Towneley Cycles (Washington, 1933).

<sup>16</sup> Luke, The Role, p. 23.

<sup>17</sup> Luke, The Role, p. 104.

CHAPTER III

THE SHREW

Now say well by women, or elles be still,  
 For they neuer displesed man by ther will;  
 To be angry or wroth they can no skill,  
 For I dare say they thynk non yll.  
 Of all creatures women be best,  
 Cuius contrarium verum est.

- Fifteenth Century ballad.<sup>1</sup>

It will be best to begin with a definition of the term "shrew". A shrew is a woman whose most striking feature is her contrareity. In the context of drama the shrew is a comic figure, as she is in lyric poetry and satire; she provides comic relief in the form of low, domestic comedy. It will be shown that in medieval religious drama, however, the role of the shrew goes beyond the comic surface and becomes a didactic and eschatological commentary on the position of contrary women in the scheme of salvation. The ideal womanly qualities which are applauded in the Marian plays are conspicuously absent in the portrayal of the shrew; the shrewish qualities which are satirized in the lyric poetry are manifested in the dramatic shrew, but with religious significance.

While satire on women did grow out of clerical misogyny, it had become a rhetorical art in medieval England, as shown in Chapter One. The secularization of the satire made it less scathing, and stereotypes such as the ale-wife, the

hen-pecked husband, the May-January coupling, and the shrewish wife developed as primarily comic rather than serious or didactic types. But when these primarily secular types are placed in religious drama, they take on religious significance in conjunction with the nature of the drama. The drama squares with the medieval world-view, the most important events being the Fall, the Redemption, and the Judgement. The shrew's place in this world view is as a daughter of Eve, a woman of the fallen world, a woman not redeemed, and a woman whose ultimate fate is damnation.

The shrew appears in various forms in the cycle drama. Some of the shrews are placed in direct juxtaposition to Mary; all are typologically or iconographically associated with Eve. The shrews' contrareity and Eve's sinful disobedience intermingle in a variety of ways. The biblical Eve's disobedience is disobedience to God as well as to her husband, while the secular shrew in the lyric poetry is only contrary to the desires of her husband. The dramatic shrew is at times disobedient to the will of God, or at times simply contrary, and the Eve of the cycle drama is also portrayed in both guises. As well, the shrews are sometimes iconographically or directly in collusion with the devil; like Eve they are too easily led astray. The lack of distinction between disobedience to the human and to the divine, combined with the implications of a woman's association with the devil, serves to form a generality of conception. The shrews, Eve, and the devil, combine to form one side, with

God and the Virgin Mary on the other. The didactic intent and result of the generality are very effective.

The characterization of Eve in the drama is especially interesting insofar as she is a shrew only by implication through speeches made by Adam and by Satan, not by her own words. It is perhaps the seriousness of Eve's offense which leads to a somewhat sympathetic portrayal of the character. Woolf explains;

Eve, however, could not be characterized with mocking derision: contempt is displayed in what is said about her but not in the presentation of her as a debased and comic figure. There is therefore a discrepancy between Eve herself and the comments made about her by the devil and Adam, a discrepancy that would jar if understood in terms of psychological realism.<sup>2</sup>

There are a few instances in the plays in which satirical traditions are used. The Chester Satan plots against Eve in terms of women's general contrareity:

That woman is forbydden to doe  
for anything the will thereto.  
Therefore that tree shee shall come to  
and assaye which it is.

(Play 2, 11.185-88)

In the York, the Ludus Coventriae and the Norwich Grocers' versions, Satan appeals to Eve's vanity by flattering her beauty in such terms as "fair wife" and "comely dame".<sup>3</sup>

Both of these imputed weaknesses in Eve before the fall are subsequent invention, for there is no hint of such specific motives in Genesis. Adam's rebukes after the Fall also contain some satire and some invented additions to the biblical



account. The Chester Adam is especially abusive; after he eats the apple he curses Eve, exclaiming:

Yea, sooth sayde I in prophecye  
when thow was taken of my bodye-  
mans woe thou would bee witterlye;  
therefore thou was soe named.

(Play 2, 11.269-72)

When God has pronounced their punishment, Adam hurls more abuse at Eve in an aside to the audience similar to but much less comic than those made by such characters as Joseph and Noah:

Nowe all my kynde by mee ys kente  
to flee womens intycemente.  
Whoe trusteth them in any intente,  
truely he is disceaved.  
My licoureuse wyfe hath bynne my foe;  
the devylls envye shente mee alsoe.  
These too together well may goe,  
the suster and the brother.  
His wrathe hathe donne me mucche woe;  
hir glotonye greved mee alsoe  
God lett never man trust you too,  
The one more than the other.

(11.348-360)

The York Adam also warns: "Nowe god late never man aftir me triste woman tale" (Play 6, 1.149). The York Eve uncharacteristically retorts to Adam's recrimination that her "witte was light".

Sethyn it was some knyth it sore,  
Bot sythen that woman witteles ware,  
Mans maistrie shulde have bene more  
agayns the gilte.

(11.133-138)

One might be reminded for a moment of the Wife of Bath's

struggle for sovereignty, but only for a moment, because overwhelmingly in the cycle plays Eve is humble, and is treated sympathetically.

The playwrights could not resist some anachronistic invention about the abused husband in the story, but it would be inappropriate to treat Eve comically. This is mainly because of the magnitude and necessity of her crime to the perception of history, which rules the cycle form. The shrews are in league with Eve, but it will be shown that their attempts to thwart the divine plan are always abortive whereas Eve was successful. Sister Mary Aquin studies the concept of Eve in the cycles and concludes:

Specifically, through the Eve-concept the plays set forth the fundamental truth of woman's high place in God's plan -- the help-mate of man, to rule him by love even as she honored and obeyed him as the head of the human race; of the deliberate choice by the first woman to use this influence as a counsellor of evil; of the heritage of woe she thus brought upon herself and her children. As a result of such vivid lessons, the medieval man realized that he was a member of a fallen race, that he personally had inherited the consequence of the first sin, and for that very reason had the responsibility of warring against Satan; but he knew too that the issue was not doubtful if he did his part, for the promise of final victory given in Paradise was unfolded before his eyes in the plays that followed.<sup>4</sup>

The message must have specific meaning to the women in the audience, especially when Adam pointedly refers to Eve's femininity in contemporary terms. The shrews in subsequent

plays, in consciously making the same choice that Eve made, fly in the face of the lessons to be learned from the Fall and the Annunciation. The consequence of Eve's decision, though, is much more devastating than are the consequences of any later shrew's decision; thus Eve cannot be treated comically while the others can.

The shrews who are juxtaposed to Mary are portrayed in various modes of the comic, from the grotesque to the satirical to the farcical. Salome, the doubting midwife, is a grotesque figure whose inappropriate skepticism is contrasted with Mary's faith and whose contrareity is suitably punished. The character of Salome, well known to the medieval audience,<sup>5</sup> derives from apocryphal accounts in both the Protevangelium and the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew and appears in the Chester and Ludus Coventriae versions of the Nativity. Salome doubts not only Mary's virginity, but that Mary could remain intact through the birth of a child, and that the child could be born "clean". In a highly grotesque scene, she examines Mary for herself:

for that is false, in good faye.  
 Was never woman clene maye  
 and chyld without man.  
 But never the latter, I will assaye  
 whether shee bee cleane maye,  
 and knowe yt if I can.

(Chester Play 6, ll.534-39)

Salome is contrasted in both versions to a believing midwife, Tebell in the Chester, and Zelomy in the Ludus Coventriae.

Doctrinally, Salome in doubting the virgin birth is also denying the divinity of Christ. The incident closely parallels the doubting of Thomas; each doubter is contrasted to believers, and each "proves" the truth of the most miraculous articles of Christian faith, the Incarnation and the Resurrection. Salome's hand becomes withered and is restored when she repents and worships mother and child. While Joseph's doubts earlier could be treated comically, Salome's doubting is grotesque, if not terrifying. Her role emphasizes the innocence and purity of Mary, who never questioned God's plan for her. Mary's easy acceptance of the miraculous conception and birth compared to Salome's grotesque probing illustrates the difference between a redeemed woman of God and a tainted earthly woman.

In the plays of the Slaughter of the Innocents, fallen women are similarly contrasted to Mary. Both the mothers of the children and Mary are faced with the same situation, the edict from Herod that boys under two years of age must be killed, but Mary is spared grief by divine intervention, while the other mothers must watch their children die. Woolf finds the treatment of the mothers surprising:

According to Matthew there was fulfilled at this time Jeremiah's prophecy of Rachel weeping for her children... In the exegetic tradition Rachel is a type of the church, and within the patterning of the action in the mystery plays one might have supposed that the mothers in their grief would anticipate the Virgin at the Cross. Often, however, the mothers are shown as women of spirit, who in their encounters with the soldiers give almost as good as they get, meeting the sword strokes with blows from

distaff or cooking pan and matching abuse  
with abuse.<sup>6</sup>

Although it seems incongruous that such a tragic event would be treated comically, two of the cycles and the Digby "Killing of the Children" portray the mothers as shrewish, vengeful women. The Digby version is the most comic, with the invented character of the braggart-coward Watkin who fears the mothers:

the most I fere is to come among women,  
for thei fight like duelles with Rokkes  
whan thei spynne.

(11.223-24)<sup>7</sup>

The mothers seem more concerned with fighting Watkin and the soldiers than with pleading for their children's lives or bewailing their deaths; they evenaully beat Watkin with their distaffs "with a mery hart" (1.348). The distaff may be a iconographical suggestion of the fallen Eve, but it seems that the Digby play as a whole is too secularized to be taken seriously. Furthermore, the play is not known to be part of a cycle, and the absence of a contrast with the behaviour of Mary makes any theological meaning in the portrayal of the mothers rather ambiguous.

The Towneley and Chester plays present the same kind of interpretation of the Slaughter of the Innocents; the mothers are intent on wreaking vengeance on the soldiers and are apparently not too concerned with their sons. A Towneley mother calls the soldiers "harlot and holard" (1.358); another beats a soldier, as a shrew beats her husband,

until he cries "Peace".

iii Mulier: have at the, say I! take the  
ther a foyn!  
Out on the I cry haue at thi groyn  
An othere!  
This kepe I in store.

iii Miles: Peasse now, no more!

(11.380-385)

Likewise, the Chester mothers call the soldiers "scabbed dog" (1.297) and "fowle harlott" (1.353) and beat them:

And on buffett with this bote  
thou shalt have to boote  
And thow this, and thou this,  
though thou both shyte and pisse!

(11.355-58)

The implications of the characterization of the mothers are complicated. They are obviously comical; Chaucer alludes to their outraged outbursts in describing January's reaction to the sight in the tree:

And up he yaf a roryng and a cry,  
As dooth the mooder whan the child shal dye.  
"Out! Help! Allas! Harrow! "he gan to crye.

(Merchants' Tale, 11.2364-66)

The mothers in both the Towneley and Chester versions exclaim in almost the same words. Yet comedy under the circumstances seems totally inappropriate. In all versions, the portrayal of the wives is dependent upon the characterization of the soldiers as debased knights, inversions of the chivalric ideal.<sup>8</sup> But Herod and his soldiers are also clearly demonic figures, similar to the comic devils of the morality

plays. One would expect the victims of such figures to be portrayed as helpless, submissive subjects. Instead, the playwrights choose to exploit satire of women to complement the satire of romance.

The comic characterization of both soldiers and mothers makes the event less terrifying, and at the same time makes it difficult to pity the mothers; no pity for the children is solicited. By contrast, Mary's reaction to Herod's edict is emotional, but she is not resentful or vengeful. Mary first hears of the edict when Joseph tells her that an angel has appeared to him and that they must flee; she is concerned with her son and his innocence:

Alas,full wo is me!  
Is none so wyll as I!  
My hart wold breke in three  
My son to see hym dy.

(Towneley "Flight", ll.157-60)

Of course any child of two years is innocent; it is the reaction of the mothers which is being compared, not the sons. The comparison is highly unfair because of the divine intervention which Mary receives, but the implication is that, since Mary is more worthy of being spared sorrow than any other mother, they are therefore somehow deserving of their lot. The situation is unsatisfactory because we only see the mothers as their sons are being slaughtered, and we only see Mary after she has been told that her son is saved. Furthermore, while the behaviour of the mothers is inappropriate under the circumstances, they are not opposing the will of

God, but of very sinful men. Any didactic lesson to be learned from their vengeful boisterousness is therefore blurred. No matter how comic the surfaces of the plays are, the deeper meaning is unsettling and the biblically-sound, sympathetic treatment of the mothers in the York and Ludus Coventriae versions seems more fitting.

The "Second Shepherds' Play" of Towneley presents a different kind of contrast between Mary and a shrew. Here an entire plot is juxtaposed to the Nativity, with many symbolic points of contrast. It has become a critical commonplace that the comic, sheep-stealing plot is a burlesque or travesty of the Nativity.<sup>9</sup> Rosemary Woolf writes that "the whole episode could be considered a witty pretense at typology"<sup>10</sup> and cites equivalences between Mak and Joseph, the sheep and the Christ child, and Gyll and Mary. At the same time there is an obvious movement in the play from the cold, wintry world of the Fall to rebirth in Christ. Upon close examination, one finds that the theme of the Fall and Redemption of womankind in particular is developed in the contrast between Gyll and Mary.

The Play begins with the shepherds lamenting various aspects of the fallen world: cold, hunger, exploitative landowners, and shrewish wives. The Second Shepherd utters a long lament on wedded life, very similar to the chanson de mal marié, ending with:

She is greatt as a whall,  
She has a galon of gall:



By hym that dyed for us all,  
I wald I had ryn to I had lost hydr.

(11. 105-108)

The monologue is comical, but as it is placed within the context of the other laments, it is clear that such a marriage is part of a world in need of renewal. When Mak arrives, he too complains about his wife, but he adds another strike against women: their fertility. He complains about his wife's laziness, but adds:

And ilk yere that commys to man  
She bryngys furth a lakyn  
And som yeres two.

(11.241-243)

In describing his dream, itself a parody of a prophetic vision, Mak says:

I thocht gyll began to crok and trauell full sad,  
welner at the fyrst cok of a yong lad,  
ffor to mend our fok then be I never glad.

...  
A house full of yong tharmes  
The dewill knock outt thare harnes!  
Wo is hym has many barnes  
And thereto lytyl brede.

(11.386-94)

Later, in the midst of the charade, Mak again complains:

I haue barnes, if ye knew,  
Well mo then enewe,  
Bot we must drynk as we brew  
And that is bot reson.

(11.499-502)

Fertility is seen as a curse in the fallen world. One remembers God's punishment to Eve: "in sorrow shalt thou bryng forth children" (Genesis 3:16). The contrast with

Mary is obvious: as a virgin Mary does not "drink as she brews"; her childbearing is a totally joyous event, exempt from any connotations of the sin implicit in sexual relations. A peasant's concerns about his growing family must also be a contemporary allusion, and the audience would certainly be able to identify with Mak's complaints. The miraculous virgin birth and the readiness of the world for a Saviour is thereby amplified to the medieval audience.

The theme of Eve's curse is utilized again when Gyll makes plans for the mock-nativity:

Syng lullay thou shall for I must grone,  
And cry outt by the wall on Mary and John  
ffor sore

(11.442-44)

and as she plays out her part:

Go to an other stede I may not well qweasse.  
Ich fote that ye trede goys thorow my nese.

(11.487-88)

Mary is of course exempt from pain in childbirth, but the Nativity itself is not shown in this play; the details are implied by inversion in the mock-nativity. The curse of woman's fertility and pain in childbearing parallels the joy of the Annunciation and divine birth, while in the same satirical tone Mak's "lullay" parallels the angels' alleluia.

Mak has been viewed as a demonic character, but surely his domestic situation compromises his fearsomeness; he is a hen-pecked husband. Two comic scenes show Mak banging on the door in vain while his wife dawdles and baits him.

Her excuse is that she is spinning, the same excuse used by the Towneley Noah's wife in refusing to board the ark:

I am sett for to spyn, I hope not I myght  
Ryse a penny to wyn, I shrew them on hyght!

(11.298-299)

The icon is again reminiscent of the fallen Eve who must sweat alongside Adam. Although Mak is a villain, he seems more like a beguiled Adam in his relationship with his wife. It is Gyll who concocts the scheme against the shepherds; after Mak accepts it she gloats:

Now well is me day aright,  
That euer was I bred.  
This is a good gyse and a far cast;  
Yit a woman avyse helpys at the last.

(11.339-340)

The connotations of "a woman's advise" again point to Eve. Mak is all too willing to accept her advice and is himself a demonic character, but the effect of the comic fighting has been to establish that his wife has the mastery in the relationship in the same way that Eve was able to invert the God-given order.

The play as a whole presents a linear progression from the fallen world to the redeemed world, from lament to farce, and eventually to the joy and wonder of the Adoration. But the juxtaposition of Gyll to Mary is finite; Gyll does not repent her part in the ruse, nor is she punished as Mak is. The effect of the abrupt shift from Gyll to Mary re-inforces the absolute divergence of their characters. Gyll's topological role in the play is as a concrete reminder of Eve,

the woman who brought about the sorry state of the world in the first half of the play. The details of her characterization which liken her to Eve -- the spinning, the groaning in (mock) labour, and the shrewishness -- are not necessary to the development of the sheep-stealing episode, and are therefore supplied by the playwright for the purpose of creating the typological contrast between Eve and Mary. The contrast fits very well into the construction of the play, and the didactic message is made clear through the overall contrast between the fallen, earthly farce and the heavenly event that redeems it. Jeffrey Helterman notes that the method is similar to that used in poetry in defense of women, part of the medieval debate discussed in Chapter One:

...it works like the first part of a débat, in which the poet presents an almost convincing argument for the opposition before he produces his own evidence. Several songs in praise of the Virgin use misogyny as a prologue to Mariology.<sup>11</sup>

"The Thrush and the Nightingale", mentioned above, is an example of such a structure. The first portion of the "Second Shepherds' Play" can be seen as an "almost convincing argument" because Gyll is not, after all, successful with her scheme, and because no harm ultimately comes of the sheep-stealing.

The Mak farce in its entirety, and the characterization of Gyll in particular, are purely invented phenomena, invented for comic diversion, didactic commentary, contemporaneity of conception, audience identification, and typological contrast.

In a similar way, the characterization of Noah's wife in three cycle versions and one non-cycle version is invention. Noah's wife is mentioned in passing in Genesis; God tells Noah that there will be a flood, that he must build an ark and bring his wife, his sons, and his sons' wives into the ark with him; Noah does so. The information given in Genesis is quite sparse, and the medieval playwrights felt the need to expand. Usually, the expansion is on the character of Noah's wife.

Typologically, Noah himself is at once a type of Adam and of Christ. He is a second Adam because he is given a second chance at Creation, as the Noah in the Ludus Coventriae "Noah" play states:

In me Noe the secunde age  
 in dede be-gynneth as I yow say  
 afftyr Adam with-outyn langage  
 the secunde fadyr am I in fay.

(11.14-18)

He is a type of Christ because of his obedience to the will of God, and again because through him God gives sinful mankind a second chance. The flood, likewise, is a type of both the Fall and the Incarnation, because it both destroys and renews. Noah's wife, then, could either be a type of Eve or of Mary. From the scanty reference in Genesis, one might assume that she would be considered a type of Mary, because she is apparently obedient. Anna Jean Mill states that, indeed,

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Mill lists many continental versions of the Noah legend sharing common elements: Noah's promise of secrecy, the corruption of his wife by a devil-character, her use of an intoxicating substance for the discovery of Noah's secret, Noah's naming of the devil, a trick by which the devil enters the ark, the expulsion of the devil, and an animal used to plug the hole the devil makes. There are variations on the central theme: sometimes Noah's wife's association with the devil is reduced to simple delaying tactics, and sometimes Noah's hammer is silent before he lets out the secret, but noisy afterwards.

Most relevant to this discussion, though, is the version which appears in illustrations and French captions in the fourteenth-century Queen Mary's Psalter, which, according to Mill, "is considered by expert opinion to be the work of an English illustrator".<sup>13</sup> In this version, an angel orders Noah to build the ark, enjoining him to secrecy. The devil approaches Noah's wife in the form of a man and asks her where Noah is, to which she replies that she does not know. The devil gives her grains with which to make a potion that will make Noah reveal his secret. She does so, and the angel chastises Noah. In the last illustration, when the dove returns, Noah cries "Benedicte",

"E li diable sen fuyit par mi le founz de la neef;  
e la coulouere bote sa coue par mi le pertus".<sup>14</sup>

The parallel with Eden is clear; the devil approaches the woman alone and convinces her to corrupt her husband, but

here the devil is expelled rather than the humans. It would not be too much to assume that the playwrights were to some extent familiar with this version of the legend, because motifs of it appear in almost every version of the play.

The exception is the Ludus Coventriae "Noah and Lameth" play, in which Noah's whole family is completely co-operative and the characters are not at all naturalistic, since their speeches simply echo and support those of Noah. This version is quite different from the others. Noah's family leaves during a digressive scene showing Lameth's killing of Cain, and the tone throughout is very serious and didactic. The digression, perhaps, serves the same purpose as the disobedience of Noah's wife in the other plays: that of showing the pervasive influence of evil which caused God's wrath. But this play, in which Noah's wife is a type of Mary and which distinctly lacks comic action, is the exception to the rule.

The Newcastle Play of Noah is clearly based on the same kind of legend as the story in Queen Mary's Psalter. Unfortunately, the only surviving text is found in a 1736 history of Newcastle, and is highly corrupt and fragmentary.<sup>15</sup> But the connection with the apocryphal legend, and the Evetypology, are unmistakable. The devil, like Eve's serpent, approaches Noah's wife with a threat:

I come to warn thee of thy skaith:  
I tell thee secretly,  
And thou do after they husband read  
Thou and thy children will all be dead. (11.117-120)

The wife is at first reluctant to listen to the devil, but soon agrees to give Noah the intoxicating potion the devil provides. There is an element of devil-naming, for Noah says:

What the devil!  
What drink is it!

(11.156-7)

When he confesses his activity, the wife comments:

Who devil made thee a wright?  
God give him evil to fayre -  
Of hand to have such slight  
To make ship less or mair  
When thou began to smite  
Men should have heard wide-where.

(11.172-7)

She hints that the axe has been silent so far, and when the angel comes to help Noah, his speech supports this:

God hath thee help hither send,  
Thereof be thou right bold  
Thy strokes shall fair be kend  
For thou thy wife has told.

(11.191-5)

Noah finishes the ship and goes home to fetch the rest of the family. The fragment ends with the devil damning those who will not believe in him. The action of the play would no doubt have continued in the same way as the story in Queen Mary's Psalter. Its importance is in the clear parallel with the apocryphal legends, and the use of Eve-typology through the devil character and the intoxicating substance, but also in the naturalistic and comic portrayals of the characters.

Motifs of Noah's wife's connection with the devil, and hence with Eve, exist in the remaining three cycles, but are



extremely toned down and reworked. In the Chester, York, and Towneley plays, Noah's wife delays entering the ark, for one reason or another, but she is not apparently in active collusion with the devil. The playwrights tend to de-emphasize the blatant parallelism with Eve, and to realize the comic possibilities of a shrewish, but not explicitly demonic wife. There are no magic potions or devil characters, and the delays occur when the wife is asked to board the ark, not before. Her motives for delay determine the extent to which Eve-typology is used, and the playwrights' handling of the character and the motifs determine her overall effectiveness.

In the York "Fysshers and Marynars" play, the wife does not appear until the ark has been built and Noah sends his son to fetch her. She refuses to go:

1 filius: Dame, I wolde do youre biddyng fayne,  
But yow bus wende, els bese it warre

Uxor: Werre! that wolde I witte.  
We bowrde al wrange, I wene.

(11.63-6)

There is no real reason for her belligerence, and this comic tone continues when she finds out about the flood and the ark:

Now Noye, in fayth the fonnes full faste,  
This fare wille I no lenger frayne,  
Thou arte nere woode, I am agaste,  
Fare-wele, I wille go home agayne.

(11.89-92)

But motives appear as the wife expresses resentment at the secrecy in which Noah has built the ark. When Noah explains

that the secrecy was God's will, she answers "Thow shulde have witte my wille" (1.123). She hesitates to enter the ark because she is afraid to "leve the harde land" (1.76) and she is uneasy at leaving her friends to die:

Uxor: Now, certis, and we shulde skape fro skathe,  
And so be safyd as ye saye here,  
My commodrys and my cosynes bathe  
Tham wolde I wente with us in feere.

Noe: To wende in the watir it were wathe  
Loke in and loke with-uten were.

Uxor: Allas! my lyff me is full lath,  
I lyffe overe lange this lare to lere.

(11.142-8)

The wife does board the ark, though, and no more is heard from her until the flood has subsided and she says:

For wrekis nowe that we may wynne,  
Oute of this woo that we in wore,  
But Noye, where are nowe all oure kynne,  
And companye we knewe before.

(11.267-71)

Noah answers:

Dame, all ar drowned, late be thy dynne  
And sone thei bought ther synnes sore.

(11.272-3)

By the end of the play, Noah's wife presumably learns that she must submit to God's will, and that her friends could not be saved. The element of secrecy is retained from the apocryphal legends, but is not developed at all. The typology is obscured by the comic element and by the elegiac tone of the wife's reluctance. There is something pathetic in her wish that her friends could be saved, because although they

are sinners, she is apparently a sinner herself for opposing God's will by attempting to cling to the sinful world. Her feistiness is subdued at the end of the play, but her attachment to the fallen world is not really concluded satisfactorily; she does not become spiritually renewed like the world around her.

In the Chester "Noah's Flood", the comic possibilities are increased by erratic behaviour on the part of Noah's wife. She willingly helps Noah build the ark and load the animals, but when asked to board the ark, she snaps:

By Christe, not or I see more neede  
though thou stand all daye and stare.

(11.103-4)

At this point God gives Noah more explicit instructions, and outlines His plan of salvation, but Noah's wife is not convinced, for when Noah asks her again to board the ark, she refuses, in an effort to save her friends too. As the flood approaches and the friends draw near, we see exactly what she wants to save:

And lett us drinke or wee departe,  
for oftetyes wee have done soe,  
For at one draught thou drinke a quarte  
And soe will I doe or I goe.

(11.229-32)

Finally, one of her sons forces her into the ark, and her final action in the play is to smite Noah once she is in.

The drinking motif adds to both the comic and the symbolic effects of the play. There is not the pathetic or elegiac tone of the York Noah's wife's reluctance, and so the

comic effect of the shrewishness is fully realized in the Chester version. But the drinking gossips also clearly symbolize the sinfulness of the world, just as Mrs. Noah's drunken blindness symbolizes the unrepentant sinner's blindness to the modes of salvation. Possibly, it is a transference of a completely different legend: that of Noah's drunkenness. Because Noah's wife disappears from the play once the flood is underway, there is no evidence of her learning a lesson, or of a change in her relationship with Noah. Her role in the play seems to be simply comic relief, and a brief metaphor of recalcitrant sinners.

The fullest realization of the motifs hinted at in the York and Chester plays, as well as the Eve-typology found in the Newcastle fragment occurs in the Towneley play of "Noah and his sons". Written by the Wakefield Master, who also created Gyll of the "Second Shepherds' Play", this version combines, from the beginning to the end of the play, the most comic of the Noah's wife characters with the most subtle and effective typology. Working presumably from the same kinds of sources as the other playwrights, the Wakefield Master succeeds in extending his metaphors and taking full advantage of typological and iconographical associations not found in the York and Chester versions of the play.

Only in the Towneley play does Noah speak first, before God. This gives the play "more human relevance and meaning", as Richard J. Daniels points out,<sup>17</sup> and it allows

Noah rather than God to trace out the path of mankind's downfall. He begins with the fall of Lucifer, and goes on to tell of the fall of "Adam, and eue that woman" (1.30) whom God commanded "on the tre of life to lay no hend" (1.35). Without explicitly blaming Eve for the downfall, Noah reminds the audience of the creation play they have presumably just witnessed, and of Eve's guilt. He calls on God for mercy, and God reveals his plan, explaining that:

As I say shal I do: of veniance draw my swerd,  
 And make end  
 of all that beris life,  
 Sayf Noe and his wife,  
 ffor thay wold never stryfe  
 With me ne me offend

(11.103-8)

It should be noted that God considers both Noah and his wife worthy, and also that Noah appears as a common, humble man.

After hearing God's plan, Noah goes home to tell his wife, but he fears her reaction may be negative:

ffor she is full tethee  
 ffor litill oft angre  
 If any thyng wrang be  
 Soyne is she wroth.

(11.186-9)

His fears are justified; he greets her innocently enough, but is answered with a stream of abuse. He tries to tell her the news, but cannot break into her rantings long enough. Finally, he threatens to hit her: "We! hold thy tong, ram-skyt, or I shall the still" (1.217). She dares him, and he does. Here the comic aspect is emphasized, for there is absolutely no reason for the wife's feistiness, and it is

established that this is the usual course of communication in their relationship. Also, the secrecy motif is played upon, although in this case God has not enjoined Noah to secrecy, and it is not voluntary on his part.

Noah builds the ark alone and then asks his wife to come aboard. Her first reaction to the news of the flood is fear. She mocks the ark:

In faith I cannot fynd  
which is before, which is behynd.

(11.330-1)

But like Gyll, the real motivation behind her reluctance is her preoccupation with spinning on her "rok" or distaff. She mentions it in her first quarrel with Noah, and twice in her refusals to board the ark:

Sir, for Iak nor gill will I turne my face,  
Till I have on this hill spon a space  
on my rok.

(11.336-7)

and

this spyndill will I slip  
Apon this hill  
Or I styr oone fote.

(11.364-6)

The spinning motive is fundamentally different from the motives found in the Chester and York versions, because it lacks the elegiac tone of the York wife, and the comic-symbolical associations of the Chester. Most importantly, it is a direct iconographical representation of the fallen Eve. Jeffrey Alan Hirshberg establishes the existence of the iconographical tradition in England by citing many

illustrations in Bibles and church windows in which Adam is shown digging while Eve is spinning on a distaff.<sup>18</sup> The use of this icon for Noah's wife, he suggests, is ironic, because with Eve it symbolizes the hardship of toil of Adam's counterpart, while for Noah's wife it becomes an excuse for disobedience and contrareity. The link with Eve is echoed when Noah calls his wife "begynnar of blunder" (11.406). It is important that the wife's belligerence at entering the ark is associated with Eve, for it must be shown that she is not only disobedient to Noah, but also to God, and that it is not only a wife and her husband, but a demonic element and a divine element, as in the apocryphal legends. The clear association is lacking in the Chester and York versions, and that detracts from the overall shape of the plays.

After more comic action, the wife finally boards the ark when the water has risen. They continue to fight once on board, until they are exhausted:

Uxor: Out, alas, I am gone!  
oute upon the, mans wonder!

Noah: Se how she can grone, and I lig under;  
Bot, wife,  
In this hast let us ho,  
ffor my bak is nere in two.

Uxor: And I am bet so blo  
That I may not thryfe.

(11.408-14)

It is not relevant that they are still fighting; what is important is that she is finally in the ark, and thus following God's will.

V. A. Kolve considers the concepts of order and mastery to be the most important in the play, and he notes the use of astronomical imagery to support them.<sup>19</sup> While Noah and his wife are fighting, Noah says:

Behold the heven! The cateractes all  
That are open full even, grete and small  
And the planett is seven left has thare stall.

(11.343-5)

When the fighting has ceased, the wife comments:

I se on the firmament  
Me thynk, the seven starnes.

(11.422-3)

Kolve sees this imagery as representing the re-establishment of order and rightful mastery: wife to husband as man to God. But the fact is that the fighting went on before Noah's observation and before his wife's refusal to board the ark, and stops only when the two are physically exhausted. We must separate the comical fighting from the wife's disobedience to God's, and not only Noah's will. In doing so, we can see the astronomical imagery as representing the disorder caused by the wife opposing of God's will, and the order restored when she is where He wants her to be, in the ark.

Husband and wife get along for the rest of the play, but there is one more important scene: the release of the raven and the dove. The basic motif is biblical; in Genesis Noah sends off a raven, which does not return, and then a dove, which returns empty-handed. He sends off the dove again a week later, and this time it returns with an olive



branch in its beak, which shows Noah that the waters are abating. In the Chester and Ludus Coventriae plays, Noah simply sends off a raven and a dove, and the dove returns. In the York version, he sends the raven, and only when his son advises him that the raven will not return does he send the dove. In the Towneley play, it is Noah's wife who suggests that Noah release the raven, which he does, while also sending out a dove. The raven, of course, does not return, and Noah explains that it is always hungry and without reason, contrasting it to the dove, which is always gentle and true.

This episode can be interpreted in a variety of ways. Richard J. Daniels claims that the harmony between Noah and his wife in the scene shows the restoration of order, for it is Noah's wife who first hails the return of the dove. Josie Campbell claims that the incident is irrelevant.<sup>20</sup> Hirshberg claims that the wife's "advice to send the raven is the last attempt to foil the divine plan of salvation".<sup>21</sup> None of these explanations really works. The incident is certainly relevant, because it is a conscious reversal of the biblical account. It cannot be viewed as an attempt to foil the divine plan, either, because of the fact that the raven is biblical, and the explanation could not possibly be applied to the more usual Noah's release of the raven.

Using Hirshberg's own data, one can formulate a much more plausible explanation. Hirshberg notes that Philo Judeaus interpreted

Noah's casting out of the raven (as) an  
 expulsion of whatever residue of darkness  
 there was in the mind which might have led  
 to folly,<sup>22</sup>

and that Jerome saw the ark as a type of the church, and the  
 raven as "the devil expelled from the ark by baptism".<sup>23</sup>

If we look at the wife's casting out of the raven in the  
 light of Philo's and Jerome's exegesis, the act can be  
 interpreted as a purging of her own demonic qualities,  
 exhibited in her earlier disobedience. There is also an  
 echo of the apocryphal legend in which Noah's wife aids the  
 devil in gaining entrance to the ark, and the devil is  
 expelled at the end of the journey.

It is the casting out of the raven, or demonic element,  
 which completes the restoration to order in the play, and  
 not the superficial harmony between Noah and his wife. When  
 the dove returns, the wife is fully in tune with the modes  
 of salvation, and has a new-found awareness of God's grace.  
 It is she who notices the dove's return, and she interprets  
 it correctly:

A trew token ist we shall be savyd all,  
 ffor whi?  
 The water, syn she com,  
 Of depnes plom,  
 Is fallen a fathom,  
 And more hardely.

(11.516-22)

Thus the motif of the wife's rebellion and collusion with  
 the devil is finally concluded by her "conversion" to know-  
 ledge and awareness. The conversion happens simultaneously  
 with the rebirth of the world after the flood -- a rebirth

which is a type of the Incarnation.

From Noah's first speech recalling the sin of Eve, through the iconographical association between the wife and Eve established by the distaff, to the final release of the raven by the wife, the wife is clearly tied to Eve, and this determines the effectiveness of the play. The comic fighting is not necessarily relevant to the Eve and the devil motifs, for if taken too seriously the reader finds herself having to apologize for Noah's participation in it and his lack of patience when he hits his wife back.<sup>24</sup> God states at the beginning of the play that He considers both Noah and his wife to be good people, and worthy to be saved. From Noah's first mention of his wife, we can see that their marriage is not quite ideal, but this is only comic effect. The fighting only becomes relevant when the wife, like Eve, opposes God's will as well as her husband's. At that point, she is, like the wives in the apocryphal legends, in collusion with the devil. When she boards the ark, she is following God's will, but reluctantly. Only when she notices the return to order among the stars does she begin to realize the grace of God, and the release of the raven, at her request, symbolizes the release of any remnant of opposition. When the dove returns, she is completely in tune with God's will; she is renewed with the world around her.

Without using an actual devil character, a poisonous substance, or the sensationalism of the Newcastle fragment, the Wakefield Master presents his own reworking of the

apocryphal tale by using subtle iconography and symbolism. He develops fully the association with Eve only hinted at in the Chester and York plays, by having it drawn out from the beginning to the end of the play and by having the play conclude, appropriately, with a renewal in the character of Noah's wife. At the same time, the Towneley Noah's wife is the most comical of the wives, because Noah himself is comical, responding to her baiting.

Millicent Carey notes the similarity between the character of Gyll in the "Second Shepherds' Play" and the Towneley Noah's wife, pointing to the vigorous phraseology each uses, the fact that they have the same name, and the fact that both use spinning as an excuse for not complying with their husbands' requests.<sup>25</sup> The similarity really ends there. Noah's wife is different from Gyll because the patriarch Noah is different from Mak, because the Flood story is serious and biblical whereas the mock-nativity is invented farce, and most importantly, because Noah's wife, unlike Gyll, is allowed to change from a woman like Eve to a woman like Mary. While types of Eve are only contrasted with Mary in the plays of Salome, the mothers of the innocents, and Gyll, the actual process of repentance is shown in the Towneley Noah's wife, who moves from disobedience of God's will to faith. The farcical element contained in the York and Chester "Noah" plays take on more specific spiritual meaning in the Towneley version where it is used to develop a

mode of salvation particular to any woman in the audience who conducts herself as a shrew.

The didactic intent in the characterization of every one of the shrews over-rides the comic exterior. There is always a point of contrast to good or exemplary behaviour, either in the Virgin Mary, or in the shrew's husband, or, ultimately, in the reformed shrew herself. Although the shrew is humourous in the immediacy of the action at hand, there is always underlying symbolism which indicates that she is, like Eve, a damned woman. Rossiter, who writes of the "gothic grotesque" in medieval drama, claims that an "unholy zest" can be used to create a positive "zest for holiness".<sup>26</sup> The comic portrayal of the shrew is a negation of the spiritual value of her actions and is contrasted with the respectful and pious portrayal of the Virgin Mary.

NOTES TO CHAPTER III

<sup>1</sup> Greene, ed., Carols, p. 235.

<sup>2</sup> Woolf, Mystery Plays, p. 123.

<sup>3</sup> See Sister Mary Aquin, "The Vulgate and the Eve-concept in the English Cycles", Catholic Biblical Quarterly, 9 (1947), p. 427. Aquin suggests that the emphasis on Eve's beauty may stem from the Anglo-Saxon Genesis. The pre-chivalric society viewed beauty in women in an exclusively negative light; cf. also "Thryth" in Beowulf.

<sup>4</sup> Aquin, "Vulgate and Eve-Concept", p. 435.

<sup>5</sup> See Woolf, Mystery Plays, p. 179. Woolf notes that the story of Salome is recounted in the Stanzaic Life of Christ, Higden's Polychronicon, and the Legend aurea.

<sup>6</sup> Woolf, Mystery Plays, p. 207.

<sup>7</sup> All quotations from the Digby "Killing of the Children" are from The Digby Plays, ed., F. J. Furnivall (EETS e.s. 70, 1967).

<sup>8</sup> See Woolf, English Mystery Plays, p. 205. Woolf notes the satire in the treatment of the soldiers in the Chester and Towneley versions, and especially in the Digby; she sees Watkin as a remote cousin of Sir Thopas.

<sup>9</sup> See M. M. Morgan, "'High Fraud': Paradox and Double-Plot in the English Shepherds' Plays", Speculum, 39 (1964), pp. 676-689; F. J. Thompson, "Unity in The Second Shepherds' Tale", MLN, 69 (1949), pp. 302-6; and John Spiers, "The Towneley

Shepherds' Plays" in The Age of Chaucer, ed. B. Ford, (1954), pp. 167-175.

<sup>10</sup> Woolf, Mystery Plays, p. 190.

<sup>11</sup> Jeffrey Helterman, Symbolic Action in the Plays of the Wakefield Master (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1981), p. 101.

<sup>12</sup> Anna Jean Mill, "Noah's Wife Again", PMLA, 55 (1941), P. 615.

<sup>13</sup> Mill, "Noah's Wife Again", p. 620.

<sup>14</sup> From captions in Queen Mary's Psalter; see Mill p. 621.

<sup>15</sup> See Hardin Craig, English Religious Drama of the Middle Ages (Oxford, 1968), pp. 303-5.

<sup>16</sup> All quotations from "The Newcastle Play" are from Non-Cycle Plays and Fragments, ed. Norman Davis (EETS s.s. 1, 1970).

<sup>17</sup> Richard J. Daniels, "Uxor Noah: A Raven or a Dove?", The Chaucer Review, 14:1, p. 25.

<sup>18</sup> Jeffrey Alan Hirshberg, "Noah's Wife on the Medieval Stage: Iconographical and Dramatic Values of her Distaff and Choice of the Raven", Studies in Iconography, 2 (1976), pp. 25-40.

<sup>19</sup> Kolve, The Play Called Corpus Christi, pp. 146-51.

<sup>20</sup> Josie P. Campbell, "The Idea of Order in the Wakefield Noah", The Chaucer Review, 10:1, p.p. 23-32.

- <sup>21</sup> Hirshberg, "Noah's Wife...", p. 30.
- <sup>22</sup> From Philo, Questions and Answers on Genesis; see Hirshberg, "Noah's Wife...", p. 33.
- <sup>23</sup> From Jerome, Dialogues Contra Luciferianos; see Hirshberg, "Noah's Wife...", p. 33.
- <sup>24</sup> See, for example, Woolf, Mystery Plays, p. 143: "The Wakefield Master has, however, developed the character pattern of Noah's wife at the cost of obscuring the allegorical significance of Noah". Or see Josie Campbell, "The Idea of Order", p. 81: "...in his domestic life, Noah could hardly be held up as a paragon of virtue... he is too quick to respond to Uxor's dare to strike her". Millicent Carey more accurately sees "two Noes" - the man of God and the husband. The Wakefield Group in the Towneley Cycle (Baltimore, 1930), p. 95.
- <sup>25</sup> Carey, Wakefield Group, p. 197.
- <sup>26</sup> Rossiter, English Drama, p. 79.



## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION

Rosemary Woolf notes that the construction of the cycles is similar to that of the Canterbury Tales:

... varieties of style and metre co-exist equably so that the tone ranges among the lyrical, satiric, homiletic, comic, and narrative or functional, without conveying a disunified effect. The cohesion, which in The Canterbury Tales is provided by the frame-work, in the cycles is supplied by unity of subject-matter, and in both the material is bound by recurring thematic patterns in situations and character, May and Dorigen, Eve and Mary.<sup>1</sup>

It is important to remember that the shrew in the cycle drama is a part of an organic whole. This fact, along with the reading of the texts presented here, justifies forming far-reaching conclusions about the primarily didactic role of the shrew, and about the use of contrast and typology in the development of the didactic message. Religious drama is by nature didactic, just as Bible stories have always been used by Christians as moral parables, but the playwrights have seen fit to invent characters and actions in order to make specific moral comments about this particular type.

The shrew remained a popular character in English drama well into the Renaissance, often becoming the central interest in a play as drama became secular. When the religious framework is removed, drama becomes more entertaining than

instructive, and the role of the shrew becomes more strictly comic than didactic.

The shrew as she appears in John Heywood's A Mery Play Betwene Johan Johan the Husband, Tib His Wife, and Sir John the Priest<sup>2</sup> has more in common with the shrew in French farce and fabliau than with the shrew in English religious drama.<sup>3</sup> Totally lacking in didactic and typological connotations, the character becomes a flat, amoral stereotype. Furthermore, this kind of shrew is also an adulteress, whereas the shrew in religious drama is never unfaithful. Remnants of the religious implications in the role of the shrew can be seen in the anonymous Taming of a Shrew in which the heroine bases her final sermon on the old argument of Eve's turpitude:

Then to His image did He make a man,  
Old Adam, and from his side asleep  
A rib was taken, of which the Lord did make  
The woe of man, so termed by Adam then  
"Wo-man", for that by her came sin to us;  
And for her sin was Adam doomed to die.  
As Sarah to her husband, so should we  
Obey them, love them, keep and nourish them,  
If they by any means do want our helps;  
Laying our hands under their feet to tread...

Yet without a biblical basis, the play as a whole is not as forceful a moral tale as the religious shrew plays are.

The shrew is by no means the most important character in religious drama, as she can be in secular drama, but rather only a small part of a vast whole. As the medieval "world view" tends to have a place for all things, so medieval religious drama has a place for many different character types and modes of expression. Although these are often invented

rather than biblical, nothing that could compromise the overall didactic intent is allowed to gain control. The shrew, an invented character, is likewise constrained by the framework in which she appears.

NOTES TO CHAPTER IV

<sup>1</sup> Woolf, Mystery Plays, p. 304.

<sup>2</sup> In Bevington, ed., Medieval Drama (Boston, 1975).  
Cf. also Tom Tyler and His Wife and Tom Ingelend's The Disobedient Child.

<sup>3</sup> Scholarship has not found that the French is an influence on the comic in the cycles, but rather that the comic elements evolve from English sources. See Louis Wann, "The Influence of French Farce on the Towneley Cycle", Wisconsin Academy of Arts, Sciences, and Letters - Transactions, 19(1918), pp. 356-368.

<sup>4</sup> The Taming of a Shrew, ed. F. S. Boas (London, 1908), pp. 62-63.

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