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## Woman as Termagant in The Towneley Cycle

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The woman characters in the cycle plays are usually interpreted as termagants or saints, and the quality of these characterizations is usually denigrated as merely stereotypical, with the emphasis on presenting women negatively. However, a close and dispassionate reading of the Towneley Cycle shows that women are neither more nor less negatively presented than are men, and that the critics, in their zeal to convict others of misogyny, have in fact been reading with double standards.

Most critical attention has been paid to Noah's wife in Noah and Gill in *The Second Shepherds' Play*. But little critical attention has been paid to the other woman characters in the cycle, characters who ought to be important to any interpretation of women's roles in these plays or any production of the cycle. These women include the Virgin Mary, the mothers of the slaughtered innocents, and Mary Magdalene. These women have been virtually ignored as women, although the mothers of the innocents have been commented upon as part of the grotesque in medieval comedy (Billman 413-414).

More importantly, little attention has been paid to the woman characters who do not appear in these plays. While V. A. Kolve has shown that certain Biblical scenes were considered more important to the purpose of the cycle plays (57-100), it would seem that a

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misogynistic playwright missed some golden opportunities to create negative portrayals of women. Couldn't Sarah be a potential comic shrew in a play of Abraham and Isaac? If a playwright wanted to use a woman flouting authority to prefigure man's rebellion against God, wouldn't Miriam flouting that of Moses be a fine example? Other possible foils for a saintly man abound in the Old Testament, including Jezebel and Job's wife. If a playwright were intent upon presenting women as shrews and termagants, he could have chosen scriptural examples, rather than relying on mere tradition, as he did in the case of Noah's wife, or simply creating a fictional character, as he did with Gill.

Critics usually justify their negative interpretation of the women characters by proving the misogyny of the culture in which they were created (Fries 84, Woolf 138-39). It would certainly be impossible to disprove that such misogyny existed, although some recent research has shown that women's position was not as bad as such widespread proofs of misogyny might lead us to believe. Women, although oppressed to a certain extent, often had more control over their lives than women in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries (Casey 226).

The plays themselves acknowledge misogynistic teachings. Noah, Mak, Joseph, the Second Shepherd, and Peter and Paul all complain about their wives or the general nature of women. Noah, of course, first describes his wife as "full tethee, / For litill oft angre;/ If any thyng wrang be,/ Soyne is she wroth" (Noah, 11. 186-190). He later

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warns the men in the audienc;e to chastise their wives: "Yee men that has wifys, whyls thay ar yong , If ye luf youre lifys, chastice thare tong. / Me thynk my hert ryfys, both levyr and long. / To se sich stryfys, wedmen emong" (Noah, 11. 397-401). The Second Shepherd describes his wife in even more negative terms: "For as euer rede I pystyll, I have oone to my ferel As sharp as thystyll, as rugh as a brere;I She is browyd lyke a brystyll, with a sowre-loten chere; I Had she oones wett hyr whystyll, she couth syng full clerel Hyr Paternoster. / She is as greatt as a whall.I She has a galon of gall;I By hym that dyed for vs all, / I wald I had ryn to I had lost hir!" (Secunda Pastorum, 11. 100-108). He, too, warns the men in the audience against marriage: "Bot, yong men, of wowyng, for God that you boght,I Be well war of wedyng, and thynk in youre thoght: I 'Had-I-wyst' is a thyng that seruys of noght. / Mekyll styll mowrnyng has wedyng home broght. / And grefys, I With many a sharp showre; / For thou may cach in an owrel That shall sow the full sowrel As long as thou liffys" (91-99). Mak complains similarly about Gill to the shepherds: "She drynks well, to; / Yll spede othere good that she wyll do!I Bot shol Etys as fast as she can,/ And ilk yere that commys to mani She bryngys furth a lakan--I And, som yeres, two./ Bot were I now more gracyus and rychere be far, I I were eten out of howse and of harbar.I Yet is she a fowll dowse, if ye com nar; I Ther is none that trowse nor knowys a wan Then ken I./ Now wyll ye se what I profer?--<sup>1</sup> To gyf all in my coferi To-morne at next to offeri Hyr hed-maspenny" (237-252).

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More surprising is the general condemnation of young women offered by Joseph when he learns of Mary's pregnancy:

"I myght well wyt that yowthedel wold haue lykng of man" (The Annunciation, 11. 161-166). He concludes that "Certys, I forthynk sore of hir dede, / Bot it is long of yowth-hede, / All sich wanton playes; / ffor yong women wyll nedys play theml with yong men, if old forsake them,I Thus it is sene always" (299-304). And Peter and Paul denounce Mary Magdalene's report of the resurrection because it comes from a woman:

"And it is wretyn in oure lawI Ther is no trust in womans saw, / No trust faith to belefe; / ffor with thare quayntyse and thare gylel can thay laghe and wepe som while, / And yit nothyng themy grefe" (Thomas of India, 11. 29-34), and "Till an appyll she is lyke--I Withoutten fail ther is none slyke--I In horde ther it lyse, / Bot if a man assay it wittely , / It is full roten inwardly / At the colke within; / Wherfor in woman is no laghe, / ffor she is withoutten aghe, / As crist me lowse of syn" (38-46).

We never meet the wife of the Second Shepherd, and Noah's wife and Gill may seem to fulfill their husbands' criticisms. However, Joseph, Peter, and Paul are proven wrong in their judgments of women, and an examination of Noah's wife and Gill in relation to their husbands calls the husbands' word into question. The Towneley Cycle actually seems to defend women against their misogynistic accusers.

The behavior of the "termagant" wives is at least understandable. Past interpretations

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have been especially hard on Noah's wife, assuming that her behavior in the first two thirds of the play stems from her lack of respect for authority (Fries 83-84, Gardner 7) or her materialism and worldliness (Campbell 80-81, 82). Critics have focused on her activity of spinning as showing her fallen nature (Hirshberg 29-30). Noah has been presented as the saintly patriarch who has to put up with his nagging, unpleasant, violent Uxor. Even the critics who have rightly recognized that Noah hits his wife before she hits him in the Towneley version of the play (Daniels 27) and that Noah's wife has some complaints about him (Campbell 80-81, Nelson 398), decide that Noah's wife is simply another presentation of a wife who needs male control (Nelson 397, Campbell 80) or that Noah can hardly be blamed for striking such a scold (Daniels 27) who needs chastisement (Schless 238).

Although Noah's wife seems shrewish, she complains, and perhaps justly, about Noah's behavior as a husband: "To dede may we dryfe, or hf, for the, / For want./ When we swete or swynk,I Thou dos what thou thynk,I Yit of mete and of drynki Hauwe we veray skant" (Noah, 11. 192-198). Noah does keep secrets from her, as she complains, and the most important secret of all is, of course, the ark. Noah also beats her, and although the seriousness of such behavior is defused by the fact that she hits back, it seems unreasonable to blame a woman in her position for being somewhat surly to her husband. However, Noah's secretiveness and his lack of provision are not the real reasons for his wife's behavior.

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Noah is presented as a very serious man, constantly meditating upon the sins of the world and the wrath of God. His wife comments on this tendency: "thou art alway adred, be it fals or trew. / Bot God knowes I am led--and that may I rew--I Full ill;/ For I dar be thi borow, / From cuen vnto morow/ Thou spekys euer of sorow; I God send the onys thi fill!" (200-207). His anger at his wife is comparatively cheerful. Although beating his wife seems to be a rather unpleasant reaction to her baiting of him, one can't help but wonder if beatings wouldn't be preferable to living with a saint as gloomy as Noah.

Uxor's refusal to enter the ark in order to finish her spinning also serves to humanize Noah. Noah and the audience need to remember that Noah is a fallen creature as well as his wife, and his behavior in this scene certainly reminds us of that fact. Uxor's refusal to enter the ark prompts another fight, one which is terminated by their mutual admission of weakness and pain. Noah does not walk away from this brawl with the selfrighteous comfort of keeping charity with his wife, as he did from the earlier battle ("For all if she stryke, / Yit fast will she skryke; / In fayth, I hold none slykel In all medill-erd. / Bot I will kepe charyt&eactue;, for I haue at do" [231-235]); rather, he is humbled, not only by his physical pain and weariness, but by the fact that he has to take advice from his children (Campbell 82-83).

Uxor has usually been thought to change once she gets on the ark, but critics seldom comment on the fact that Noah has changed

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even more greatly. Rather than treating his wife as if she were a termagant, as he does in the earlier scenes, he asks her advice (472) and allows her to steer the ship (433). When she suggests that he send out the raven to look for dry land, he doesn't argue about her choice, but sends the raven and some birds of his own choice, the doves (479-484). When the doves return and the ravens stay away, he does not chide his wife with her poor choice, he merely suggest why they have not returned (499-504)

Both Noah and his wife grow through their experience with the Flood, but Noah proves to have learned as much as his wife about marriage and living. While on the ark, they pray together to God (427-432). Previously Noah had saved his prayers for moments away from his wife, as if he thought that her prayers would not be considered by God. Certainly the critics would agree with him; they describe his wife as a stumbling block to Noah's performance of God's will (Daniels 28). But God tells us at the beginning of the play that Noah's wife as well as Noah behaves as He would have people behave: <sup>1</sup>'Sayf Noe and his wife,I For thay wold neuer stryfel With me then me offend<sup>1</sup>

(106-108).

Gill, in The Second Shepherds' Play, fares even worse at the hands of the critics. While Noah's wife is at least believed to have been redeemed at the end of the play, Gill is left holding the sheep, as it were. Noah's wife has Noah to vouch for her to a certain extent: one can assume that the wife of an Old Testament patriarch must have some good

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qualities, or at least have been predestined to be good. Gill is the wife of a sheep stealer, and deceitful herself. The critics' explanation of her behavior is usually that she exits in the play as a contrast to the Virgin Mary (Fries 84).

But the case of Gill is somewhat more complicated. Mak, we assume, is an even worse provider than Noah, and he is a thief as well. Gill does not necessarily object to his stealing, as her helpfulness shows, but she does object to his lack of care for herself and their many children. Some scholars have taken Mak's evaluation of Gill at face value, and have denounced Gill as a character representative of all seven of the deadly sins, as well as inhospitable (Thompson 305). It seems fair to ask, however, how many thieves would welcome the owners of the property that they were trying to conceal. But Gill, like Noah's wife, spins. If spinning represents the work that mankind would have to perform after the Fall, Mak's complaints about her laziness (especially since she would have to be constantly pregnant or recovering from pregnancy) seem unreasonable.

Gill, once she has gotten over her fear that Mak will be caught for stealing sheep, does her best to keep him from being caught. She suggests that they pretend that the sheep is a baby, in hopes that the shepherds will not recognize him in swaddling clothes. Of course, the scene thus enacted is a parody of the Nativity that the shepherds soon attend, but it is not necessarily demonic. Nor should Gill be described as a "distortion" of the Virgin, "fit to be clothed in "the purple and

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scarlet of the whore of Babylon," as one scholar has suggested (Marshall 734). And to describe the scene as "infernal" (Vaughan 488) seems a bit like over-reading. The Mak-Gill-lamb trio is comic, and to imagine its being played as demonic or infernal is absurd.

The scholars who interpret Mak and Gill and the stolen sheep as a demonic parody of Christ's Nativity seem to have missed the point. The play shows the fallen, but comical, world of sheep stealing, cold nights, and hungry wives and children, which is to be relieved by the coming of the Son of God. Gill is certainly a postlapsarian woman, but she is not any more evil than Mak, and Mak is really no more evil than the shepherds.

The matter of infernal relations actually vindicates Gill to a certain extent. While Mak has resorted to witchcraft to put the shepherds to sleep, we never see Gill resort to any such measures. She relies on her own wits to survive, and even has a bit of fun with the situation, as when she tells the shepherds that if she is lying, she hopes to eat the "child" in the cradle (535-538).

Gill is more supportive of her husband than Noah's wife is of him, but she does use dishonesty to achieve her goals. But is the sin of stealing and lying about it greater than the sin of defying one's husband's authority and making him look like a fool? We are never told, as Noah and his wife end happily, while Mak and Gill simply end when the shepherds discover their ruse. Mak is taken out and tossed in a canvas, but Gill seems to escape punishment.

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No critics have ever condemned the mothers of the slaughtered innocents for their behavior when the soldiers attempt to murder their children, for they assume that it is normal for these women to resort even to violence to protect their families and way of life. But Noah's wife and Gill act from the same motives. Noah's wife wants to protect the status quo, but she also wants to change her husband's behavior. Gill helps her husband beguile the shepherds in order that she and her family might be fed.

Most of the scriptur~ woman characters in the Towneley Cycle are less interesting than these two misunderstood wives. Such characters as Rebecca, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, have little more than walk-on parts, and much less character than their more human counterparts. But the characters of the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene are interesting for a study of women in this cycle of plays.

The Virgin Mary, although presented as the Mother of Christ with all of the implications of that role, has a great deal in common with the other women characters in the cycle. When she hears that Herod wants to kill her son, she reacts in a manner very similar to that of the mothers of the slaughtered innocents in Herod (79-89, 96-102, 105-112, 157-160). She finds Herod's command hideous, and she becomes primarily concerned with how she and Joseph will protect the Child. Her attitude is reminiscent of that of the other mothers, thus reminding us that the Mother of God is, in fact, a mother.

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Her response to her Son's crucifixion is also very like the response of the mothers of the slaughtered innocents (309-338). She weeps and goes nearly mad (383), and at one point even wants to know why this is happening to her son. She questions the will of God in a most human fashion (434-445).

In The Play of the Doctors, when she believes that she and Joseph have lost Jesus, Mary also reacts with great emotion (193-200). When the couple finds Him in conversation with the learned teachers, she urges Joseph to interrupt them (213-216). When Joseph expresses a desire not to, she agrees to accompany him and behaves rather assertively (229-232), so much so that Joseph sends her ahead of him (233-236). Apparently medieval theology, misogynistic though it was, has room enough for the assertive woman.

These realistic portrayals of women show that women were not portrayed in an overly positive fashion. But these presentations should not be interpreted as negative portrayals of women in general. There are male characters who are more negatively portrayed. Herod and Caesar, Cain, and even Noah and Joseph are humanly presented.

The case of Joseph is particularly interesting. Joseph's behavior in some cycles is actually worse than his behavior in the Towneley Annunciation, yet the critics have exonerated him. His behavior is interpreted as comic, or as a teasing of his wife Mary (Kolve 247-253). But couldn't Gill and Noah's wife also be teasing their spouses?

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Women are not only not negatively presented in this cycle, they are vindicated through the character of Mary Magdalene in Thomas of India. Mary Magdalene is one of the first people to see the risen Christ. When she brings the disciples the news of His rising, however, they react with scorn. Paul and Peter tell her plainly that she cannot possibly know what she is talking about, simply because she is a woman. Thomas uses the same reasoning later in the play (240-241). The Magdalene is of course, vindicated, but womankind is vindicated, too. The misogynistic apostles are proven incorrect, but, at the same time, the women are proven correct. The inclusion of Paul in a group of disciples only underscores this point. Paul was not a disciple, he was not even converted until after Jesus' ascension, but he appears in this scene as a denouncer of women. His appearance is important, for Paul was the apostle whose letters command women to keep silent and to be submissive to men. Paul has been accused of misogyny, and is sometimes blamed for misogyny in the Christian Church. His anachronistic appearance as a disciple is appropriate for showing how mistaken

wholesale condemnation of women is.

Women, therefore, are not singled out as negative characters in the Towneley Cycle of plays. Women are presented comically, but no more negatively than men. In some ways they are presented more positively. The male characters who represent misogyny are often plainly shown to be wrong in their denunciation of women. The authors of the Towneley Cycle seem to have deliberately created women characters that show that woman is not a second-class citizen in the sight of God.

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