Gender and Medieval Drama

KATIE NORMINGTON

Gender in the Middle Ages

Volume 1

GENDER AND MEDIEVAL DRAMA

The focus of this study is upon the Corpus Christi plays, supplemented by other performance practices such as festive and social entertainments, civic parades, funeral processions and public punishments. The main argument relates to the traditional approaches to women's non-performance in the Corpus Christi dramas, but other factors are considered and analysed, including the semiotics of the cross-dressed actor and the significance of the visual and spatial language of the processional stage to gender debates. In conclusion, there is a series of readings which reassess the dramatic portrayal of a selection of holy and vulgar women – the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene, Mrs Noah and Dame Procula. The emphasis throughout the book is upon a performance-based analysis. Evidence from Records of Early English Drama, social, literary and cultural sources are drawn together in order to investigate how performances within the late Middle Ages were both shaped by, and shaped, the public image of women.

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Gender in the Middle Ages

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This series investigates the representation and construction of masculinity and femininity in the Middle Ages from a variety of disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives. It aims in particular to explore the diversity of medieval genders, and such interrelated contexts and issues as sexuality, social class, race and ethnicity, and orthodoxy and heterodoxy.

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For

Tim, Beatrice and Oliver

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AM	*Annuale Mediaevale*
CD	*Comparative Drama*
CE	*College English*
CR	*Chaucer Review*
EETS	Early English Text Society
	ES Extra Series
	SS Special Series
JDTC	*Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*
JPL	*Journal of Popular Literature*
JRMS	*Journal of Renaissance and Medieval Studies*
JWH	*Journal of Women's History*
MÆ	*Medium Aevum*
METh	*Medieval English Theatre*
MFN	*Medieval Feminist Newsletter*
MLQ	*Modern Language Quarterly*
MLR	*Modern Language Review*
NLH	*New Literary History*
NTQ	*New Theatre Quarterly*
OED	*Oxford English Dictionary*
PMLA	*Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*
PP	*Past and Present*
REED	Records of Early English Drama
RORD	*Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama*
SPCK	Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge
STP	*Studies in Theatre Production*

INTRODUCTION

The breadth of dramatic activity within the Middle Ages is one of the most astonishing of any period of time. The records of performance that survive, through both extant texts and documentation of dramatic events, indicate that a huge number of theatrical events took place during the medieval year. The nature and purpose of medieval drama were far-reaching. Medieval drama included religious and liturgical plays, miracle plays, saints' plays, folk plays, mummers' plays, and interludes as well as more diverse performance events such as chivalric displays and love games. But there were many other ways in which performances took place. Events such as processions, dancing games, the Boy Bishop feast, masquerades and funeral corteges all formed part of the cultural practices of the Middle Ages. Itinerant performers such as troubadours and waits added another dimension to the dramatic events of the medieval year. Part of the reason for the large scope of dramatic activity is that it was not contained by a theatre building. The performances that this book discusses were executed on the streets or inside churches, halls and other public spaces. As Glynne Wickham points out, it takes 'an effort of imagination to rid our minds of the image of the normal modern theatre built deliberately to exclude daylight, and illuminated artificially by electricity'.[1]

The plethora of dramatic events in the Middle Ages has provided critics with a problem of how to categorise them. Glynne Wickham separates events into three fields, that of worship, recreation and lastly commerce, but admits that they overlap and are 'never wholly distinct from one another'.[2] Other scholars have followed this pattern. William Tydeman introduces the subject by dividing it into 'drama of devotion' (church drama), 'drama of pastime and profit' and 'drama of salvation' (those with a religious purpose).[3] Tydeman notes that previous academic fashion divided medieval drama into miracle plays, moralities, moral interludes etc. but that these were often arbitrary since there is 'a wide range of elements within a single piece, and similarities of staging that cut across generic boundaries'.[4]

It is of course beyond the scope of this volume to cover every form of medieval drama. Indeed to do so would risk turning this study into a general survey listing and categorising the appearances of any noteworthy gender matter. Although

[1] Glynne Wickham, *The Medieval Theatre*, 3rd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 4.
[2] Ibid., p. 1.
[3] William Tydeman, 'An Introduction to Medieval English Theatre', *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. Richard Beadle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 1–36.
[4] Ibid., p. 18.

I draw examples from a wide range of medieval performance events, the primary focus of the study is upon the Corpus Christi dramas. As outlined below, the choice of this is to do with the unique relationship that existed between the medieval community and these plays.

One of the most significant aspects of the English cycles is the relationship that the dramas held with their producing communities. The Corpus Christi cycles, performed annually in a number of towns between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, were staged by amateur actors and enacted in front of the townspeople. The local community undertook all aspects of the production of the pageants: producing, staging, acting, costuming, financing. It is a testimony to the popularity of these vernacular religious dramas that they continued to be performed in some form for over two hundred years.

One reason for the longevity of the cycles is that they are, in the words of Bakhtin, 'heteroglossic'.[5] The cycles, which tell the story of the history of salvation, contain a number of differing voices. Of course one of the primary 'utterances' is that of the religious narrative. But the extant texts also reveal that contemporary medieval concerns were reflected alongside the dramatic illustration of biblical history. For example, as well as relating salvation history many pageants took the opportunity to explore medieval institutions. The shepherds in the Towneley *Second Shepherds' Pageant* bemoan the harshness of the poll tax and the vestiges of the feudal system.[6]

In addition to these two textual threads, there are other voices which comprise the heteroglossia of the cycles. Since these biblical festive dramas were played out upon the stage of the medieval streets, the voices of the producers, actors and audience form an important part of the discourse.[7] The impromptu adlib of an actor, the lending of a piece of costume and the jibe of an audience member all helped to construct meaning in these public dramas. The cycles, therefore, illustrate a complex interplay between producing civic structures, the religious subject matter and the concerns of urban medieval audiences. The relationship between the production and reception of meaning within the cycles was intricate. As Gail McMurray Gibson notes: 'vernacular religious drama[s] were not only shaped by local facts and expectations, but served an active function in shaping them as well'.[8]

[5] Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 11.

[6] *The Towneley Plays*, eds. Martin Stevens and A.C. Cawley, EETS, SS 13 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pageant XIII, ll. 14–26.

[7] It is likely that York is the only cycle which was performed in the streets. It is possible that Chester and Towneley were played in a fixed place. The old quarry pit at Goodybower Close, Wakefield has been suggested as an amphitheatre. See William Tydeman, *The Theatre in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 133. Cawley argues that High Cross was used as a place for stationary performances at Chester (A.C. Cawley, ed. *Medieval Drama*, The Revels History of Drama in English, vol. 1 [London and New York: Methuen, 1983], p. 6). The N-Town plays were probably staged using place-and-scaffold in a fixed location (Christine Richardson and Jackie Johnston, *Medieval Drama* [London: Macmillan, 1991], p. 31). Such variation in the performance mode has led to speculation as to whether processional drama existed (Alan Nelson, *The Medieval English Stage: Corpus Christi Pageants and Plays* [Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1974], p. 14).

[8] Gail McMurray Gibson, *The Theater of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Later Middle Ages* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 40.

Within this heteroglossia I will focus upon the issue of gender representation. It is not surprising that the cycles highlight gender, for as Theresa Coletti notes:

> A drama that commandeered the attention and the resources of any medieval people for a long period of time and that was deeply embedded in the culture's prevailing modes of social organisation, in its dominant myths, and in its ceremonial and festive life must surely bear important relations to thinking about gender.[9]

But at first glance it is difficult to perceive how the dramas might contain material which pertained to women. The majority of the voices that formed the heteroglossia of the cycles were under male control. The producing civic and guild organisations were predominantly male, and the Christian antecedents of the cycles are misogynistic in their outlook. But as Coletti points out, the dramas were influenced by a matrix of factors which included social concerns, mythic/ideological influences and festive practices.

Although the cycles are on first glance the product of male institutions it is worth noting that these were not stable, fixed organisations, but 'the sites of many competing discourses of piety and politics, subject to change over times, locations of conflict even within small communities'.[10] The control that men held over the representations of women was therefore less stable than might be assumed. As Bartlett points out, 'this process shapes female subjectivity in complex, sometimes self-contradictory ways and provides appealing alternatives to the traditional, and often misogynistic, identities constructed for women'.[11] Thus, if the cycles are viewed as the product of a fluid rather than rigid social structure, an alternative reading of women's representation within medieval drama may be possible.

The transmission and reception of the cycles was through a heteroglossic matrix, which included the female citizen. The pageants were not, and could not be, under the sole control of patriarchal forces. I therefore postulate that there are three direct ways in which women shaped, and were shaped by, the Corpus Christi cycles: through their discourse as spectators; by their assistance with the production of the pageants; and last, through visual signals created both by the appearance of women characters on stage and the semiotics of stage production.

The response of women as audience members was important. Medieval town audiences were heterogeneous in their composition: men, women and children from a variety of ranks viewed the pageants. In fact, because the roles within the pageants were enacted solely by men, it is arguable that in some small towns, for example Wakefield, women and children comprised the majority of the audience.[12] I will examine the difficulties that are associated with determining the possible response that such a diverse audience may have had to watching the cycles

[9] Theresa Coletti, 'A Feminist Approach to the Corpus Christi Plays', *Approaches to Teaching Medieval English Drama*, ed. Richard K. Emmerson (New York: MLAA, 1990), p. 79.

[10] Anne Clark Bartlett, *Male Authors, Female Readers: Representation and Subjectivity in Middle English Devotional Literature* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 27.

[11] Ibid., p. 28.

[12] In 1377 the population of Wakefield was 567. Even if doubling occurred a vast percentage of the male population would have taken part in the pageants, leaving predominantly women and children in the audience (Martial Rose, ed. *The Wakefield Pageants in the Towneley Cycle* [London: Evans Brothers, 1961], p. 28). This does not allow for the considerable influx of 'tourist' spectators, that doubtlessly accompanied dramatic activity.

later. However, women's involvement in the production of meaning was not limited to their spectatorship. Though women did not normally perform within the cycles, they fashioned the plays through their involvement in the production process. Women undertook a number of backstage tasks, such as the making or loaning of costumes, stage accessories and properties.

The last way in which women were represented on the medieval stage was through the appearance of female characters. The women characters, though played by cross-dressed men, offered a representation of various images of womanhood. Many of these characters were of biblical origin and were influenced by the prevalent iconography which surrounded such 'holy women'. It is important to examine the breadth of these representations in order to understand how the enactment of these plays helped to construct an image of gender.

The biblical source material, of course, influenced the portrayal of women characters on the medieval stage. Much of this material is hostile to women, and places women at the margins of the central action. Theresa Coletti suggests that this marginality can be found within the cycles:

> The women who people the Corpus Christi cycles' texts and stages are helpmates and servants; they attest to events more often than they participate in them; they are, in many instances, marginal to the central action.[13]

It is true that many of the women characters who populate the pageants are marginal. However, it is important to note that amongst these 'marginal' women are the figures of the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene. Interestingly, these two iconographic women were moulded by the cycle dramatists to form a varied representation of womanhood. On the one hand, they are icons shaped by religious and cultural forces to represent remote and unattainable images of womanhood. On the other hand, they are humanised through their public presentation in the dramas and demonstrate concern with aspects of medieval women's daily life. For example, the Virgin Mary's relationship with Joseph is frequently highlighted within the pageants. Through such scenes as *Joseph's Trouble with Mary* spectator attention is drawn to the construction of gender relationships within the pageants, and by implication, to contemporary medieval society. The cycles significantly manipulated the images of holy women that they inherited from salvation history.

Set against these humanised, holy icons are the ordinary, vulgar women who populate the cycles. Coletti's comment might be taken to suggest that these are the 'helpmates and servants' of the dramas. However, this is far from the case. The most memorable cluster of secular women within the cycles are anything but helpful and servile. Mrs Noah, Mak's wife, Gyll in the Towneley *Second Shepherds' Pageant*, Dame Procula and the Mothers of the Innocents are all rebellious. These women wail against the conditions of their marriages, mothering and their status as workers.

These female characters of the cycle dramas are substantially developed from their biblical antecedents. The creators of the cycles present images of womanhood which were shaped by cultural, social and historic influences. By examining

[13] Coletti, 'A Feminist Approach', p. 80.

the function of the women who perpetuate the cycles it is possible to reveal the way in which women's roles within medieval society were reflected within the cycle dramas. In this light women characters provide an opportunity for new meanings to be tested.

This book will examine the role that women played within the Corpus Christi cycles. Though medieval women are silent within the production of the cycles, they are not absent.[14] I will investigate how the holy and vulgar women characters formed a discourse on gender issues for the medieval spectator. In turn, and in keeping with Gail McMurray Gibson's comments, I will analyse how the portrayal of the female characters was shaped by social and economic concerns regarding women in late medieval England.

In order to examine gender in the Corpus Christi cycles, it is necessary to explore the production and reception of meaning within the plays, the use of characterisation and staging within the cycles, and the cultural and historical influences which shaped the image of women within society.

PRODUCTION AND RECEPTION OF MEANING

Much twentieth-century scholarly thinking about the production of meaning within the cycle dramas has been influenced by E.K. Chambers's 1903 study. Chambers argues that the cycles were derived from Church Latinate drama and formed part of an evolutionary march towards Elizabethan theatre.[15] This view was upheld by Craig who went so far as to argue that the cycles could only be studied from a theological point of view, and that using the criteria 'of specialists in the technique of the modern drama or of drama in general is to bring the wrong equipment'.[16] Chambers and Craig both emphasised the importance of the institution of the Church in the production of meaning within the cycle dramas. These views suggest that the most important function of the cycles was the dissemination of religious doctrine.

During the latter parts of the twentieth century, critical opinion questioned the reliability of Chambers's thesis.[17] The cycles are now viewed as products of festive,

[14] Tracy Davis points out that informal modes of women's resistance must be examined. She notes that 'silence is not absence' (Tracy Davis, 'Questions for a Feminist Methodology', *Interpreting the Theatrical Past*, eds. Thomas Postlewait and Bruce McConachie [Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989], p. 65).

[15] E.K. Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1903; reprint, 1967), p. 126. Martin Stevens notes that Chambers's readings are based on a Darwinian influenced notion of evolution and progression. See Martin Stevens, 'Illusion and reality in the Medieval Drama', *College English* 32 (1971), pp. 448–64.

[16] Hardin Craig, *English Religious Drama of the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), p. 4.

[17] R.W. Vince draws attention to Hardison's point that Chambers and Young collected their historical evidence with an interpretation already in mind (Ronald W. Vince, 'Theatre History as an Academic Discipline', *Interpreting the Theatrical Past*, eds. Thomas Postlewait and Bruce McConachie [Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989], p. 13). John Wasson argues that evidence from professional acting shows that drama did not simply leave the Church and take to the streets. Records show that until the end of the sixteenth century Churches continued to host professional performances (John Wasson, 'Professional Actors in the Middle Ages and Early Renaissance', *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England*. An Annual Gathering of Research, Criticism and Reviews, no. 1, ed. J. Leeds Barroll [New York: AMS Press, 1984], p. 7). Kolve argues that Latinate drama is not an antecedent

civic and religious practices, rather than the property of the medieval Church. It is generally accepted that the cycles developed from the feast of Corpus Christi, which was held annually to celebrate the Eucharist and the act of transubstantiation. Miri Rubin places the feast's origins in the 1208 vision of Juliana of Mont Cornillon, a prioress of a Praemonstratensian community in Liège.[18] Despite a dogged start, the feast of Corpus Christi was officially adopted by 1311, and was celebrated on the first Thursday after Trinity Sunday (a moveable date between 21 May and 24 June – notably close to Midsummer's Day).

It is difficult to suggest how the feast developed into the cycle dramas in England. It appears that festival days were soon marked by clerical processions along petal-strewn streets. The focal point of the procession was a central figurehead representing Christ.[19] Gradually these celebrations were accompanied by civic dignitaries. During the fourteenth century the processions are thought to have become more elaborate: tableaux were now placed on moving waggons and sponsored by prominent crafts. It is probable that music and a few short lines of dialogue accompanied the processions by this stage.[20]

It is most likely that guild competitiveness encouraged the original pageants to become increasingly complex until they had to be presented as a separate spectacle.[21] At Chester, for example, the Corpus Christi festivities were originally held on one day, until expansion forced the cycle to be separated from the procession and performed on a second day.[22] At York the celebrations were enacted on one day until in 1426 Franciscan William Melton moved the feast to a separate day.[23]

The difference between viewing the cycles as developments of Latinate drama and acknowledging the festive and religious antecedents of the dramas is important. The control of production no longer lies with one institution, the medieval Church. Instead, as I outlined at the beginning, the dramas are shaped by many voices. These include the producing guilds, civic authorities and the community of spectators.[24]

In order to construct a hypothetical audience response we might turn our attention to the most tangible legacy of the Corpus Christi cycles – the extant texts. The twenty-first-century researcher must avoid the trap of treating these

of the cycle dramas since it does not share a cyclical form (V.A. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966], p. 34).

[18] Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 170.

[19] Ibid., p. 248.

[20] William Tydeman, 'An Introduction to Medieval English Theatre', p. 21.

[21] William Tydeman uses evidence from Spanish drama to support this theory of development (ibid., p. 97).

[22] By 1572 the cycle had moved to Midsummer's Day. (See David Mills, 'The Chester Cycle', *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. Richard Beadle [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994], p. 116).

[23] Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage*, vol. 2, pp. 400–1. The irregularities of the playing day of the Corpus Christi cycles has led Alexandra Johnston to state that the genre of the Corpus Christi dramas did not exist. Instead she recognises 'a form of episodic drama telling the story of salvation history' (Alexandra, F. Johnston, ' "All the World Was a Stage": Records of Early English Drama', *The Theatre of Medieval Europe*, ed. Eckehard Simon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 118).

[24] Tracy Davis debates whether there is such a thing as 'communal' reception or production (Tracy Davis, 'Questions for a Feminist Methodology', p. 70). I would certainly support the idea there might have been a difference between the way male and female spectators observed the action. High and low ranking women may have also seen the cycles in a different light.

texts as reliable, or as stable sites for the construction of meaning. There are several problems which must be addressed. First, there is a difficulty in interpreting the cycle texts as fixed records. The existing copies are in manuscript form, and may not be a very accurate record of the performances.[25] In addition, the cycles played for a period of two hundred years yet most manuscripts date from the fifteenth century.[26] It is difficult to know how much performance texts changed during that time. Some manuscripts do reveal later amendments.[27] As George Szanto suggests, flexibility of the performance texts must have been a key to their continued popularity:

> The plays were successful precisely because they were the product of a plural and evolutionary authorship, able to address itself to the material needs of the changing audience.[28]

The multiple 'authors' of the texts were able to shift the dramas to suit the differing demands of each generation of viewers.

The notion of authorship within the dramas is problematic. Chambers's interpretation of medieval drama supposes the Church maintained authorship and control of the texts. However, the situation does not appear to be this simple, and certainly no single author can be associated with any cycle.[29] I find Tony

[25] Martin Stevens believes the manuscripts could be so far from performance texts that scholarly study should only be conducted from a literary, rather than a dramatic, perspective (Martin Stevens, *Four Middle English Mystery Cycles* [Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987], p. 12).

[26] The York register dates between 1463–77 (Richard Beadle, 'The York Cycle', *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. Richard Beadle [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994], p. 90). The N-Town plays are dated as 1468. This is the date written at the end of the Purification play on the folio of the N-Town manuscript (Alan Fletcher, 'The N-Town Plays', *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. Richard Beadle [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994], p. 164). The Towneley manuscript dates from the end of the fifteenth or beginning of the sixteenth century (Peter Meredith, 'The Towneley Cycle', *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. Richard Beadle [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994], p. 139). The Chester manuscripts post-date their production. For example, the Huntington MS was written in 1591 (Mills, 'The Chester Cycle', p. 110).

[27] Peter Meredith has identified many later changes made to the N-Town plays (Peter Meredith, 'Scribes, Texts and Performance', *Aspects of Early English Drama*, ed. Paula Neuss [Cambridge: D.S. Brewer and Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes and Noble, 1983], pp. 13–29 and the Introduction to *The Mary Plays from the N-Town Cycle*, ed. Peter Meredith [London: Longmans, 1987]). Martial Rose believes that the alterations made to the Towneley manuscript are evidence of Protestant revision; the words 'correctyd and not playd' appear in the *John the Baptist* play; the word 'Pope' was removed from the Herod sequence; and the *Ascension* and *Judgement* pageants were shortened by twelve pages (Rose, ed. *The Wakefield Pageants*, p. 15). The 1519 Coventry City Annals salute the 'New Plays at Corpus Christi tyde which were reatly commended' (*Coventry:* REED, ed. R.W. Ingram [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981], p. 114). This entry shows that the plays were ever-changing.

[28] George Szanto, *Theater and Propaganda* (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1978), p. 104.

[29] The issue of 'authorship' is further complicated by the borrowing of pageants from another cycle. David Staines suggests that five pageants were borrowed by Towneley from York. See David Staines, 'The English Mystery Cycles', *The Theatre of Medieval Europe*, ed. Eckehard Simon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 80. Recent editorial work has, however, argued that for some cycles there appears to be a single, authorial scheme at work. Lumiansky and Mills's edition of the Chester manuscript shows such a practice at work, while the N-Town 'author' appears to be a skilful adapter, making a coherent series of plays out of what appear to be two sequences, the life of the Virgin and the Passion (*The Chester Mystery Cycle*, vol. 1, *Text*, eds. R.M. Lumiansky and David Mills, EETS, SS 3 [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974]). The Towneley cycle, despite its diverse origins, is seen by some to have

Davenport's suggestion with regard to the identity of the 'authors' to be the most helpful. Davenport, inspired by the 1933 work of Geoffrey Owst, *Literature and the Pulpit*, suggests that the cycle texts:

> were created by educated literary men in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries out of a combination of existing traditions of drama and religious material in sermons, instruction-books, scriptural summaries and paraphrases, commentaries and lyrics.[30]

Through this combination of sources it is possible to see the heteroglossia of voices that comprised the mystery cycles.

The other important 'author' in the production of the cycle dramas is the audience. It is possible to see that the dramas 'were not artistic unities created by a single author but a collaborative and participatory form of dramatic expression'.[31]

It is important to think about the demands that the audience brought to performances. There is, of course, a methodological problem here. There are few eyewitness records of medieval drama, and none which pertain specifically to the mystery plays. It is difficult to read the existing records with any sense of surety of their meaning. For example, Sheila Lindenbaum demonstrates that the Venetian Ambassador's eyewitness account of the 1521 London Midsummer Watch interpreted the event as 'unifying' the community, but the Drapers' records show the spectacle was to honour the Mayor and Sheriffs: a 'celebration of Oligarchy'.[32] This draws attention to the fact that each member of the audience interprets a performance differently. It is difficult to speak of the reception of meaning as a homogeneous response.

In order to understand the role of the audience in the reception of the mystery plays, it is necessary to imagine their response to the event. This would seem to be an impossible task. However, I find the work of Hans Robert Jauss to be helpful. He suggests that the spectator reaction can be pictured.

Jauss employs criteria from a 'horizon of expectation' through which to determine reader response. I utilise his ideas here to suggest possible spectator reception.[33] He cites three criteria through which we can construct an expected

developed a coherence from the rewritings of the Wakefield Master. However, Tydeman believes that the York pageants 'cannot be discussed as examples of cohesive wholes created according to conscious artistic principles' (Tydeman, 'An Introduction to Medieval English Theatre', p. 34).

[30] W.A. Davenport, *Fifteenth Century English Drama* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer and New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1982), p. 1.

[31] Richardson and Johnston, *Medieval Drama*, p. 24.

[32] Sheila Lindenbaum, 'Ceremony and Oligarchy: The London Midsummer Watch', *City and Spectacle in Medieval Europe*, eds. Barbara Hanawalt and Kathryn Rogerson, Medieval Studies at Minnesota, vol. 6 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), p. 179.

[33] There are differences between reader and audience responses. The dramas as live events produced their meaning through greater negotiation with their audience. The mystery plays were 'published' through their public enactment. Other medieval literary and cultural representations did not create their meaning in this manner. Literary forms and artistic representations, unlike the dramas, were fixed within time and space. This fixing meant that the reader had less opportunity to participate in the construction of meaning than the dramatic spectator. The dramatic spectator was influenced by many aspects of the structuring of the event, for example, the build up to the event (assistance with preparations), possible acquaintance with performers, the response of other audience members, and the place of spectatorship. Jauss makes little use of these factors.

response. These are: the norms of the genre (comparison with work already known); other literary and historical references (or the intertextuality of these); and last, the opposition between fiction and reality (the poetic and the practical).[34] Since the focus of this study is upon gender in medieval drama, I will specifically apply Jauss's criteria to issues which relate to the production and reception of meaning with regard to this matter.

It is a challenge to construct the 'horizon of expectation' for the mystery cycles. As Jauss points out:

> When the author of a work is unknown, his intent undeclared, and his relationship to sources and models only indirectly accessible, the philological question of how the text is 'properly' – that is, 'from its intention and time' – to be understood can best be answered if one foregrounds it against those works that the author explicitly or implicitly presumed his contemporary audience to know.[35]

It is, of course, difficult to discern what literary and cultural works women in a medieval audience may have known. The composition of the audience, as I have already pointed out, was wide-ranging. The knowledge of the spectators, which included royalty and the wives of merchants and artisans, would have been diverse. Anne Bartlett has charted the development of women's reading and notes that a massive increase in literacy took place between the late fourteenth and early sixteenth centuries. She maintains that most intelligent women of the merchant class had learned ways of reading and writing English, and that such skills were 'increasingly necessary for artisans, craftspersons, and merchants, of either sex'.[36] The most commonly owned books were the Bible, Saints' lives, books of sermons, missals, primers and service books.[37] It is difficult to analyse the ways in which this literary knowledge may have shaped audience expectation: each woman in the audience may have responded differently.[38] However, it is probably reasonable to assume that women had knowledge of the biblical characters and the lives of some Saints. Additional cultural reference points for a medieval audience may have been other productions of the Corpus Christi cycles. In other words, how far did the cycles become self-referencing? Local knowledge of the cycles, spectatorship at previous years' events and anecdotal eyewitness reports must have shaped much of the audience's response.

In addition to previous presentations of the Corpus Christi cycles, many spectators would have been familiar with other performance events. A number of festive practices, such as Midsummer, May Day and Hocktide celebrations, would have been well known.[39] Charles Phythian-Adams has examined the practice of hocking at Coventry and suggests that it was a moment, unlike the Corpus Christi

[34] Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, Theory and History of Literature, no. 2, trans. Timothy Balti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 24.
[35] Ibid., p. 28.
[36] Bartlett, *Male Authors, Female Readers*, p. 6.
[37] Ibid., pp. 11–14.
[38] As Bartlett points out, much medieval literature was filled with misogyny (ibid., p. 1). Drawing upon the examples of Christine de Pisan and Margery Kempe, Bartlett explores some of the possible responses that women might employ when encountering a misogynistic work (ibid., p. 21).
[39] Hocktide was commonly celebrated a fortnight after Easter. On Monday the men would enact a game in which women were captured at sword-point and bound: they had to beg for their freedom. On Tuesday the game was reversed and the women captured men.

cycle performance, when women were fully incorporated. 'For once there is no doubt that women did take part', he declares.[40] Many of these folk games involved women manipulating their own representation. However, these games were enacted within a festive time. It is difficult to argue that the representations shown, which in the case of hocking included women in control, affected the everyday consciousness of medieval spectators. I will examine this issue in more detail later in this book, but we cannot assume that festive representations affected contemporary perception of medieval women.

Although it is difficult to build a picture of audience response based upon the norms of the genre, it would be fruitful to examine Jauss's remaining criteria in more detail. To this end, I will first look at the stylistic features of the genre in performance (that is, the 'opposition between fiction and reality'). How the portrayal of gender during the medieval period was shaped by literary and historical models will concern the final parts of this chapter.

OPPOSITION OF FICTION AND REALITY: THE STAGING OF THE CYCLES

The third criterion from Jauss's 'horizon of expectation' is the opposition between fiction and reality. For Jauss, in order to establish the social relevance of 'literature' it is essential to examine this opposition. It is the point where literature functions beyond the mimetic that interests Jauss: 'the specific achievement of literature in social existence is to be sought exactly where literature is not absorbed into the function of a *representational* art'.[41] This point is very important for the Corpus Christi plays. Their production style did not merely re-present salvation history, but it also integrated contemporary analysis. Though the primary aim of the cycles was a didactic one – to promote religious example through the enactment of Christ's Passion – the style of the dramas was not mimetic. In fact, methods of production in the Middle Ages did not include the possibility of mimesis. The continual interplay between epic biblical iconography (Christ on the Cross) and contemporaneous commentary (the York tradesmen who make the cross) combined with particular staging methods to create a powerful spectacle.

The staging of the York cycle provides the clearest model through which to analyse the methods of production. York hosts the most comprehensive performance records, and it is likely that the production methods followed a processional pattern of staging.[42] It seems probable that each play was performed at ten to twelve stations around York city.[43] Records show that the pageant waggons had to be assembled at the first post at 4.30a.m.[44] However, the full York manuscript contains over fifty pageants, and there is much dispute as to whether they were ever played in

[40] Charles Phythian-Adams, 'Ceremony and the Citizen: The communal year at Coventry 1450–1550', *Crisis and Order in English Towns*, eds. Peter Clark and Paul Slack (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1972), p. 67.

[41] Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, p. 45.

[42] See note 7 for a discussion of the probable staging methods of the other cycles.

[43] Meg Twycross, 'The Theatricality of Medieval English Plays', *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. Richard Beadle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 40.

[44] Beadle, 'The York Cycle', p. 93.

their entirety.[45] Since the plays were performed on the open stage of the streets the audience were free to promenade and walk the city. It is likely that spectators often omitted to view certain pageants or watched others more than once. The processional mode of public enactment, which the episodic nature of the pageants encouraged, was one factor that prevented the cycles from being merely representational.

The style of presentation of the pageants at York sought to increase the iconographic qualities of the production. The pageants were performed on pageant waggons which were sometimes two-storied portable stages.[46] Viewing the pageants on such a stage increased the fictionality of the dramas since the waggons framed the performance space in a way which revealed the artificial construction of the spectacle. Pamela King notes the way in which the pageant waggon, and the use of the *locus* and *platea* staging spaces, increased the sense of pictorial action.[47]

The use of scenery also increased the iconographic value of the cycle dramas. The waggons were frequently decorated with painted cloths which hung from the sides, back and front (creating a concealed lower area, possibly suitable for Satan's entrances). Records show that the purchase of paint was one of the major expenditures, and this indicates a high degree of decoration.[48] Costuming was 'contemporary', but probably indicated the status of a character rather than creating a naturalistic portrayal.[49] Masks were employed for Herod, the devils and God, possibly because these were characters whose presence in the cycles was deemed to be beyond human portrayal.[50] The effect of having masked and unmasked actors appearing alongside one another has been identified by Meg Twycross and Sarah Carpenter: 'Stylisation ranges from the most formal and exotic to the most ordinary and familiar.'[51] Again, these methods would succeed in avoiding a mere mimetic presentation.

[45] There is still doubt about exactly how the pageants were enacted at York. For example, Martial Rose believes that each guild performed a dumb show while processing from one station to another (Rose, ed. *The Wakefield Pageants*, p. 135). Other theories include the audience promenading from pageant to pageant, or the playing after processing through the city at a final communal site (Tydeman, *The Theatre in the Middle Ages*, p. 113).

[46] Paula Neuss's research into the Cornish play, *The Creation of the World*, although not part of a Corpus Christi cycle, finds textual evidence which, in keeping with visual material from Valenciennes, suggests that pageant waggons had two levels (Paula Neuss, 'The Staging of *The Creacion of the World*', *English Medieval Drama*, ed. Peter Happé [London: Macmillan, 1984; reprint 1993], p. 191). This is substantiated by records from the 1433 York Mercers' inventory of their Doomsday pageant, which show that God resided in an upper level of the waggon. In addition to the waggons, it is possible that the ground in front of the 'stage' was used as a *platea* to provide extra playing space. Playing on the ground may have created unfavourable sight-lines and Wickham has postulated that at York extra scaffolds were used to supplement the playing space available on a pageant waggon (Glynne Wickham, *Early English Stages 1300–1600*, vol. 1, 1300–1576, 2nd edn [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980], p. 173).

[47] Pamela King, 'Spatial Semantics and the Medieval Theatre', *The Theatrical Space*, Themes in Drama, no. 9, ed. James Redmond (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 46.

[48] Meg Twycross, 'Apparell Comlye', *Aspects of Early English Drama*, ed. Paula Neuss (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer and Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes and Noble, 1983), p. 32.

[49] Guilds were frequently bequeathed or lent costumes (particularly women's dresses). Vestments were also borrowed from the Church (William Tydeman, 'Costumes and Actors', *English Medieval Drama*, ed. Peter Happé [London: Macmillan, 1984; reprint 1993], p. 181). This indicates that the Church was not wholly against the cycles, despite later reservations and decrees.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Meg Twycross and Sarah Carpenter, 'Purposes and Effects of Masking', *English Medieval Drama*, ed. Peter Happé (London: Macmillan, 1984; reprint 1993), p. 178.

It is difficult to assess the acting style that was employed. There are no direct eyewitness accounts of the performance of the mystery plays, and the texts contain few helpful stage directions. Contemporary records from medieval drama in France indicate that the actors displayed a 'lack of fluency of speech, propriety of diction, corrected accented pronunciation and any notion of what they are saying'.[52] The only records that pertain to the acting of the mystery plays are those that indicate measures taken to control the adequacy of the performance. The 1476 York Ordinance allowed anyone inadequate in skill – either vocal or physical – to be dismissed from performing.[53] The mayor also had the authority to judge the authenticity of the episode against the manuscript during rehearsal.[54] Several records of punishments suggest that attempts were made to control the standard. For example, at Beverley in 1452 Henry Cooper, a weaver, was fined 6s 8d for not knowing his lines.[55] Meanwhile at Coventry records show that the Smiths hired a 'professional' producer in 1453, probably in an attempt to ensure the quality of their pageant.[56] Beyond this, records provide no help in distinguishing the type of acting style deployed, and this field is open to speculation.

One possible indication about the style of performance can be found in the fact that actors may have played more than one part. Evidence suggests that popular and talented actors were 'hired' by other guilds. Evidence of doubling can be found in a 1476 decree issued at York which prohibited any actor from performing in more than two pageants.[57] It is possible that this came into effect because a greater frequency of appearances by one performer would have held up the procession of the pageant waggons.[58] Doubling could have led to interesting dramatic moments. Richardson speculates that the same actor played Gyll and Mary in the *Second Shepherds' Pageant* at Wakefield; the dichotomy of virgin/whore and the irony of the pageant would have thus been emphasised.[59]

Kolve hypothesises that the style of acting in the cycle dramas appeared similar to that of medieval pictorial images:

> Just as the halo around a saint's head in a picture imparts abstract meaning and gives the saint a kind of appearance familiar only in pictures, so the medieval drama stages actions which, though unlike anything we encounter in ordinary human life, are nevertheless as 'real' as anything in the play world.[60]

[52] This remark is attributed to a French procurator-general and pertains to the 1542 Confrèrie de la Passion. It is cited in G. Cohen, *Histoire de la mise en scene dans le theatre religieux francais du Moyen Age* (Paris, 1906, 2nd edn, 1925), p. 237; (quoted by Tydeman, 'Costumes and Actors', p. 184).

[53] Twycross, 'Theatricality', p. 43.

[54] *York*: REED, vol. 1, eds. Alexandra F. Johnston and Margaret Rogerson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), p. 109.

[55] William Tydeman, ed. *The Medieval European Stage 500–1550* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 241.

[56] *Coventry*: REED, p. 24.

[57] *York*: REED, vol. I, p. 109.

[58] This decree has been interpreted as a commentary on the production rather than casting methods. It has been used to support the thesis that the pageants were not performed at every station. See Stanley Kahrl, *Traditions of Medieval English Drama* (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1974), p. 46.

[59] Richardson and Johnston, *Medieval Drama*, p. 91.

[60] Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi*, p. 25.

I suggest that this style is one which utilises iconography in order to provide recognisable human characters. The effect, as Donna Smith Vinter has commented, is similar to Brecht's use of *gestus*. Smith Vinter believes that this device enabled the audience to witness divine and human elements simultaneously; that they were aware of the overall Godly design and the intimate human detail: '[it is] the Brechtian gest – that enables the playwrights of the cycles to create speaking pictures in which didacticism and drama are indistinguishable'.[61] In other words, the performance style was one which staged the dialectic between the character's function within the drama and their relevance to the medieval audience. This method would substantiate my argument that the female holy icons were humanised for their medieval audiences. The interplay between the sacred function of the Virgin (Christ's mother) and earthly concerns (she cannot ride a donkey well) ensured that the dramas had the potential to reflect and affect contemporary social behaviour. That a cross-dressed earthly man played the Virgin increased the artificiality of her status as a holy icon and the accessibility of her humanised moments. Jauss believes that the relationship between literature and social behaviour can be effective only when there is a clear link with life experiences:

> The social function of literature manifests itself in its genuine possibility only where the literary experience of the reader enters into the horizon of expectations of his lived praxis, preforms his understanding of the world, and thereby has an effect on his social behaviour.[62]

Jauss believes that such interactions between lived experience and literature can provide sites where possible response and future behaviour is tested:

> The horizon of expectation of literature distinguishes itself before the horizon of expectations of historical lived praxis in that it not only preserves actual experience, but also anticipates unrealized possibility, broadens the limited space of social behaviour for new desires, claims, and goals, and thereby opens paths of future experience.[63]

Through examining the portrayal of gender within medieval drama and establishing the historical context of medieval women's conditions, I hope to reveal some of the 'unrealized possibilities' that are situated within the dramas.

METHODOLOGY

Research into medieval theatre is not helped by the lack of standardisation in reference to the extant texts. The Towneley cycle is also sometimes known as the Wakefield cycle. The name Towneley comes from the Catholic family who were responsible for maintaining the manuscript, but it is now thought probable that the Towneley plays are from Wakefield.[64] Likewise, N-Town was originally referred

[61] Donna Smith Vinter, 'Didactic Characterisation – The Towneley *Abraham*', *English Medieval Drama*, ed. Peter Happé (London: Macmillan, 1984; reprint 1993), p. 87.
[62] Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, p. 39.
[63] Ibid., p. 41.
[64] Meredith, 'The Towneley Cycle', pp. 142–45.

to as the Ludus Coventriae cycle. These were once thought to have been part of the Coventry cycle, but the prologue demonstrates that the cycle is likely to have been performed in more than one place. An 'X' in the text marks the name of the town supporting the cycle, and it is now believed, through matching corresponding civic records, that the cycle was performed in different towns around East Anglia, and in particular Bury St Edmunds.[65] During this study I will refer to the cycles as Towneley and N-Town.[66]

The term 'mystery', as well as referring to a religious rite and especially the Eucharist, has been linked to the trade guilds.[67] The *OED* notes that the term may also apply to 'a highly technical operation in a trade or art', or specifically to 'Handicraft; craft; art; one's trade'. It is interesting to note that this verbal connection exists between the Eucharist and trade guilds.[68]

The debate over the names of the cycles shows the difficulty that exists within the terminology attached to medieval theatre.[69] Not only are the names of the extant texts in dispute, but the use of the term 'cycle' and 'play' is inconsistent within academic research. The texts themselves contain various terms including: 'ludus', 'processe', 'pagent', and 'shewe'.[70] For the purpose of this study I will use 'cycle' to refer to the whole collection of plays from that town, and 'play' or 'pageant' to indicate an individual drama within the cycle.[71]

The cycles themselves are also referred to as mystery, miracle or Passion plays. I prefer the term 'cycle' as it raises questions about the relationship of each play to the design of the overall structure. Staines notes that the origins of the term 'cycle' lie within Lucy Toulmin Smith's 1884 edition of the Brome *Abraham and Isaac* play: 'A cycle, therefore, could be any sequence of plays and the emphasis fell on

[65] In the late nineteenth century, studies of the dialect of the plays located them in the east of England. Since the 1960s the N-Town plays have been associated with Lincoln, and subsequently East Anglia. The plays were probably compiled in Bury St Edmunds, and played at surrounding small towns. (See Fletcher, 'The N-Town Plays', pp. 163–67 for a full discussion.)

[66] In doing this I am following the names attributed in the editions of the texts which are being consulted, namely *The Towneley Plays*, eds. Martin Stevens and A.C. Cawley, EETS, SS 13 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) and *The N-Town Plays*, ed. Stephen Spector, EETS, SS 11–12 (London: Oxford University Press, 1991). Other text editions are *The York Plays*, ed. Richard Beadle (London: Edward Arnold, 1982); *The Chester Mystery Cycle*, eds. R.M. Lumiansky and David Mills, EETS, SS 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974); *Non-Cycle Plays and Fragments*, ed. Norman Davies, EETS, SS 1 (London: Oxford University Press, 1970) and *Two Coventry Corpus Christi Plays*, ed. Hardin Craig, EETS, ES 87 (London: Oxford University Press, 1957).

[67] Lesley Soule points out that 'mystery . . . is an ideological technique by which one group achieves and maintains hegemony over another' (Lesley Wade Soule, 'Demystifying the Mysteries: Notes on Staging Medieval Drama', *STP* 12 [Dec 1995], p. 100).

[68] A further pun is found in the shipbuilders' pageant. There the display of Noah's 'craft' simultaneously refers to the ark and their trade.

[69] It seems likely that medieval critics had similar problems in applying critical terminology to drama. Meg Twycross points out that 'the treatise *Of Miraclis Pleyinge* suggests there was no separate critical vocabulary for plays and that visual and literary terms were more frequently applied' (Meg Twycross, 'Books for the Unlearned', *Drama and Religion*, Themes in Drama, no. 5, ed. James Redmond [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983], p. 89).

[70] Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi*, p. 55.

[71] The debate about terminology is raised by David Mills in the editorial preface to the journal *Medieval English Theatre* vol. 13 (1991). There the following terms are adopted: York and Chester cycles, N-Town and Towneley plays, and the names of individual pageants are italicised. Though I am adopting the last practice, I refer to the mystery dramas collectively as cycles.

the sequential pattern rather than on some central event.'[72] The use of 'cycle' adequately acknowledges the importance of the episodic design of the dramas.[73]

The term 'medieval' also raises debate amongst scholars. Paula Neuss explains that plays associated with the late Middle Ages frequently overlap with Renaissance drama and that such divisions are therefore misleading.[74] This idea is compounded by the belief amongst many scholars that the young Shakespeare may have seen a performance of the Coventry cycle. Eckehard Simon, rather eccentrically, defines the period of medieval drama as lasting from the 'tenth to the eighteenth centuries'.[75] The crossovers between medieval, Tudor and Elizabethan drama are indeed complex. The last recorded performance of the Coventry play is 1579 (Newcastle and Kendal cycles may have existed in some form until 1581 and 1605 respectively).[76] Meanwhile drama attributed to the Elizabethan period includes Thomas Legge's *Ricardus Tertius* (1578–79) and Edward Forcett's *Pedantius* (1580–81). Indeed, Shakespeare's first play probably dates from the early 1590s. Since medieval and Elizabethan drama may have run concurrently, it is difficult to distinguish between them through relying on the date of their performances.

Despite the confusion that much of this dating presents, and the recent adoption by medieval scholars of the term 'early drama', I will refer to the cycles as medieval drama. I believe that such a term does help to distinguish between the myriad of sixteenth-century dramatic activities and, therefore, helps to focus the study.

I will concentrate on the period between the first mention of the York cycle performance in 1376, and the last performance of the Towneley cycle and the first purpose-built theatre, built in Shoreditch by John Brayne and James Burbage in 1576. The Reformation foreshadowed the demise of the cycles. Luther's posting of the 95 Theses in 1517 and Henry VIII's establishment of the Anglican Church in 1534, signalled the religious changes. It was finally Elizabeth I's 1559 decree which forbade the playing of religious drama, although it took several years before the decree was to become effective. Gardiner reflects the belief that many of the cycles portray a Catholic sympathy (and were thus prohibited because of Elizabeth's fears of Catholicism).[77] I have already mentioned Martial Rose's evidence of Protestant tampering with the Towneley text.[78] But Alexandra Johnston further

[72] Cited in Staines, 'The English Mystery Cycles', p. 83.

[73] The structure and function of the Corpus Christi cycles has been a matter of scholarly debate. Steven Coote suggests that there is no need for the cycles to obey Aristotle's unities of time or place since the presence of God as a type of omniscient author, and the existence of eternity as a larger dramatic structure, serve to bind the dramas (Stephen Coote, *English Literature of the Middle Ages* [London: Penguin, 1988], p. 311).

[74] Paula Neuss, ed. *Aspects of Early English Drama* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer and Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes and Noble, 1983), p. x.

[75] Eckehard Simon, ed. *The Theatre of Medieval Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. xii.

[76] *Newcastle Upon Tyne:* REED, ed. J.J. Anderson (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1982), p. 71 and *Cumberland, Westmoreland, Gloucestershire*: REED, eds. Audrey Douglas and P. Greenfield (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), p. 18.

[77] H.C. Gardiner, *Mysteries End* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946), p. 67.

[78] Rose, ed. *The Wakefield Pageants*, p. 15. Bing Bills has warned against the over-application of the notion of religious suppression. He believes that such ideas over-emphasise the importance of the Corpus Christi cycles in relation to other medieval dramatic activity. See Bing D. Bills, 'The "Suppression Theory" and the English Corpus Christi Play: A Re-examination', *Theatre Journal* 32.2 (1980), pp. 157–68.

believes that 'the establishment of the theatres coincided with the actions to suppress community drama'.[79] The shift of theatre from outdoor to legitimate indoor theatre, the development of the professional writer and the rise of aristocratic patronage, all contributed to the decline of the cycles. Whether or not there was a deliberate plot to end the Corpus Christi cycles is debatable, but the 'coincidence' of the creation of theatre as a formal institution and the demise of the community cycles cannot be ignored. It is for these reasons that I have chosen to close this study in 1576.

Much of the argument employed within this book is concerned with the reception of meaning within the public enactment of the dramas. In attempting to apply reception theory to the Corpus Christi cycles I have already highlighted some of the difficulties in predicting audience response. For example, many of the criteria which Jauss established in order to discern audience reception cannot be applied to the cycles. In addition, the paucity of evidence about the dramas provides a substantial problem.

The Records of Early English Drama project has gathered evidence of dramatic activity from guild and town records, private inventories and wills. These volumes are a very valuable resource. However, there are problems in interpreting these accounts. I shall discuss these further in Chapter Two when I examine them in more detail. In short, there are difficulties in understanding the relationship between a printed record and the event that it recorded. In addition, the preponderance of the survival of civic records over religious evidence may distort the impression of the function of the cycles. It is easy to emphasise the secular rather than the sacred significance of the cycles.

The portrait of women's lives in the Middle Ages is also difficult to establish. The possible sources are those from historical records, literary and cultural representations. I have already outlined some of the problems of relying upon cultural representations of women. They were mainly created by men and usually portray the image of womanhood that suited their purposes. But it is also difficult to depend upon historical evidence. There are no large-scale studies which enable quantitative conclusions to be drawn, and women are frequently invisible in such studies. Most records, whether or not they pertain to women, are listed under the name of the head of the household. It is, of course, hard to overcome the bias which is present in such data. However, there are many small-scale studies of medieval women that offer sufficient material to provide a useful context against which to measure the portrayal of gender issues in medieval drama.

R.W. Vince discusses some of the methodological issues that surround historical dramatic research. Vince draws attention to the limitations of a scientific approach which seeks to discover empirical rules. He points out that when undertaking research into theatre history there are problems in the process of collecting data and organising this material. He argues for the necessity of a speculative interpretation when approaching dramatic history.[80] Vince acknowledges the impossibility of reaching quantitative conclusions and postulates that the most satisfactory approach is to test one's hypothesis through applying it to a

[79] Johnston, 'All the World Was a Stage', p. 128.
[80] Vince, 'Theatre History', p. 12.

variety of sequences.[81] This is the approach that would appear to be the most beneficial.

It is difficult to apply quantitative methods to the Corpus Christi cycles since they cannot be treated as an homogeneous body of drama. It is important to acknowledge the extensive regional diversity which is evident within both the extant texts of the cycles and records of production. Significant differences have been noted within the structure, production and verse of the extant cycles. For example, the structure of the cycles ranges from the coherently edited Chester version, to the disparate N-Town plays. Records of performance suggest that the York cycles were processionally staged on pageant waggons, while the N-Town plays were enacted on fixed scaffold-and-place staging. Davenport also notes a regionality within the verse and composition of the Corpus Christi cycles: 'East of the Pennines poetic style seems to have been more venturesome and flamboyant than is evidenced in the rather flat consistency of the Chester cycle.'[82]

The focus of my methodological approach will be to examine the representation of gender in medieval drama by comparing the social conditions of medieval women with their involvement and portrayal within the dramas. This investigation will also take note of dominant cultural representations of medieval women which form an important context for the dramas, namely the significant iconography of the Virgin and the Magdalene. The relationship between the social conditions faced by women, dominant cultural iconography and the representation of women within the dramas will be examined through a series of readings. For example, the participation by women in the production of the plays will be scrutinised against issues of their work patterns, aesthetics of the stage and women's place within civic institutions and the public arena. Mrs Noah will be examined as a working woman in late medieval England who faces increasing exclusion from the emerging urban pre-capitalist marketplace. The Magdalene will be studied against dominant medieval iconography, in particular the holy values of the Virgin and the vulgar influence of fallen women.

GENDER AND DRAMA

During the last fifteen years a feminist response to medieval drama has slowly begun to emerge. One of the most valuable responses to the mystery plays is Theresa Coletti's 1990 essay, 'A Feminist Approach to The Corpus Christi cycles', published in Richard Emmerson's very helpful volume *Approaches to Teaching Medieval English Drama*.[83] Coletti's work is one of a handful of readings which foreground the issue of gender in the mystery plays.[84] Other studies include those

[81] Ibid., p. 18.
[82] Davenport, *Fifteenth Century English Drama*, p. 10.
[83] Theresa Coletti, 'A Feminist Approach', pp. 79–90.
[84] See also Theresa Coletti, 'Purity and Danger: The Paradox of Mary's Body and the En-gendering of the Infancy Narrative in the English Mystery Cycles', *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature*, eds. Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), pp. 65–95 and ' "Ther Be But Women": Gender Conflict and Gender Identity in the Middle English Innocents Plays', *Mediaevalia* 18 (1995), pp. 245–61.

by Clifford Davidson, Kathleen Ashley and Ruth Evans.[85] All the approaches taken by these scholars assert that the mystery plays must have had some relevance for women members of the audience.[86]

Sue-Ellen Case notes that two major approaches to the study of women's roles in theatre have been followed – either a 'positive roles' focus, which assesses women for their independence, or a 'misogynistic roles' study, which notes that women were assigned certain roles by men, for example witch, vamp, bitch, virgin/goddess.[87] Both approaches encourage readings which limit the interpretation of women: they are, in effect either heroines or victims. They are both approaches which are an easy trap for feminist readings of the mystery plays.

The pitfalls of reading through these binary oppositions have been avoided by Coletti's later work which interestingly contextualises the Virgin Mary within the cycles by reading her alongside the public powers afforded medieval women. She deduces that: 'In the N-Town Trial plays, Mary's paradoxical body is deployed in order to upset institutions that order society.'[88] Similarly Evans's reading of Mrs Noah as a challenge to received sex-gender systems is accomplished through attention to the socio-economic status of medieval workers and in examining Uxor as subject rather than object.[89] Evans's reading of the gender encoding of bodies within the cycles transcends the limitations of binary oppositions. She utilises Caroline Walker Bynum's ideas on the 'permeable boundaries' of gender and the double-gendered body of Christ, alongside those of Foucault, so that Christ's body becomes a site for the demonstration of control.[90]

The work of Kathleen Ashley draws upon social and literary intersections in order to reach a reading of the importance of women's roles for medieval female spectators. She argues that the cycle dramas communicated multiple and contradictory messages to their audience, and that one of their functions was to serve as a type of conduct book for the female audience members. Ashley analyses the Towneley *Salutation of Elizabeth* and sees 'the greeting, gossip, and leave-takings' between Mary and Elizabeth, as exemplifying model conduct.[91] Her response to the cycles is one which foregrounds the rising merchant class experience:

[85] Clifford Davidson, 'Women and the Medieval Stage', *Women's Studies* 11 (1984), pp. 99–113. Kathleen Ashley, 'Medieval Courtesy Literature and Dramatic Mirrors of Female Conduct', *The Ideology of Culture*, eds. Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse (New York: Methuen, 1987), pp. 37–45. Ruth Evans, 'Feminist Re-Enactments: Gender and the Towneley Uxor Noe', *A Wyf Ther Was*, ed. Juliette Dor (Liège: Liège Language and Literature, 1992), pp. 141–54; 'Body Politics: engendering medieval cycle drama', *Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature*, eds. Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnston (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 112–39; and 'When a Body meets a Body: Fergus and Mary in the York Cycle', *New Medieval Literatures*, eds. Wendy Scase, Rita Copeland and David Lawton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 193–212.

[86] Ashley, 'Medieval Courtesy Literature', p. 26; Coletti, 'A Feminist Approach', p. 79; Davidson, 'Women and the Medieval Stage', p. 100; Evans, 'Feminist Re-enactments', p. 116.

[87] Sue-Ellen Case, *Feminism and Theatre* (London: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 6–7.

[88] Coletti, 'Purity and Danger', p. 82.

[89] Evans, 'Feminist Re-enactments', pp. 153 and 151.

[90] Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), pp. 118 and 123. For a full discussion of Bynum's ideas on the double-gendered body of Christ, see Chapter Three, 'The Body of Christ in the Later Middle Ages'.

[91] Ashley, 'Medieval Courtesy Literature', p. 29.

> The popularity of the cycle drama for over 200 years is, I would argue, a function of its success as a vehicle for effecting the symbolic transitions of power between church and state, between aristocracy and middle classes, and perhaps most significantly – between male-based definitions of conduct which prevailed in the ecclesiastical and upper-class institutions of the high Middle Ages and the female-based definitions of conduct which seem to characterise the ideology of the newly powerful bourgeoisie in the late medieval and early renaissance period.[92]

Ashley suggests that the versatility of the cycles formed part of the cultural code of exchange that occurred in the upper ranking parts of society. The cycle dramas helped to fashion the behaviour of women within late medieval England.

The survival of the cycles, at an amateur and sometimes semi-professional level, for well over two hundred years is an indication of the importance of the dramas. It is clear that the cycles performed a function and held an importance within medieval society which has rarely, if ever, been paralleled by other dramatic activities. I am interested in the cycles because they are a form of popular drama and express, beneath their religious function, the tensions of the town life. Inspired by Mervyn James's influential article, 'Ritual, Drama and Social Body', critics such as Sheila Lindenbaum recognise the communal function of the cycles, but tend to see them as containing a binding function:

> the play had as much to do with York's sense of its own identity and continuity as a community as with the desire to ensure the spiritual salvation of its individual citizens.[93]

I am suggesting something beyond this expression of communal identity and the 'significant expression of social unity and bonding, reinforcing the social units of craft group and city', which Richardson argues.[94]

Kathleen Ashley's work has proved especially useful. She suggests that the cycle texts are capable of a multiplicity of interpretations, and conducts a sophisticated feminist reading of them. Ashley states that:

> criticism of the past twenty five years has single-mindedly emphasised the drama's role in expounding and celebrating the history of man's salvation. I would like to suggest, however, that the cycle plays fulfilled many functions for late medieval society; they were thus capable of presenting multiple, even at times contradictory messages.[95]

A whole range of society viewed the cycles, and it was among the wide spectrum of society that they found relevance.[96] Women undoubtedly formed part of that audience.

[92] Ibid., pp. 36–7.

[93] Sheila Lindenbaum, 'The York Cycle at Toronto – Staging and Performance Style', *English Medieval Drama*, ed. Peter Happé (London: Macmillan, 1984; reprint 1993), p. 209.

[94] Richardson and Johnston, *Medieval Drama*, p. 23.

[95] Ashley, 'Medieval Courtesy Literature', p. 25.

[96] For example, in his study on the influence of the Corpus Christi dramas on child spectators, D. Thomas Hanks argues that the plays instructed children on many aspects of medieval culture: 'a philosophical and theological concept of history. . . the devotional stories . . . and . . . an attitude of outright condemnation of the upper classes, both religious and secular' (D. Thomas Hanks Jnr., ' "Quicke Bookis" – The Corpus Christi Drama and English Children in the Middle Ages', *Popular*

The first aim of this study is to reassess the cycles in terms of the representation that they have made of women, and, in particular, what view they presented of women in late medieval society. Through utilising medieval social history I will reassess the women of the Corpus Christi cycles. Too many theatre scholars have studied the Corpus Christi texts in isolation from the other historical material which surrounds them. However, I do recognise that, as Lisa Jardine asserts, 'just concentrating on the female characters, or protesting as political feminists at the sexist views expressed by the male character will not get us very far'.[97] The second aim is to consider how the images of women were controlled in the staging of the cycles.

The first section of this book will re-examine the issue of women's participation in the cycles. I will assess the way in which women's help with 'invisible' production tasks afforded them little public authority. Male performance of women's roles on stage affected the presentation of female characters. The festive enactment of the dramas, revealed through symbolic and spatial codes, also shaped the audience's interpretation of women characters. In particular, I will examine the way in which the notion of the vulgar and holy body, which is central to the Corpus Christi cycles, is used as a site to articulate gender issues.

The second section of this study will focus upon the textual representation of women in medieval drama. In particular I will concentrate upon the influence of holy iconography and socio-economic factors on the portrayal of women. Medieval drama was used as a site to test 'unrealized possibilities' for women's behaviour in late medieval England.

Culture in the Middle Ages, ed. Josie Campbell [Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1986], pp. 121–22).

[97] Lisa Jardine, S*till Harping on Daughters: Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), p. 1.

Chapter 1

WOMEN AND HISTORY

There are a number of issues to be raised when approaching medieval women's history. One major problem that has to be encountered is the paucity of large-scale records. The 1427 Tuscany tax surveys have been a very useful tool for researchers, but in Britain such comprehensive records do not exist. Scholars have been resourceful in basing their studies on parish records, though the scale of these hardly offers a convincing sample. Beyond the lack of documentary evidence (which would arguably affect the study of *both* genders) there exists the particular difficulty of women's absence. Since women were rarely the head of a household (unless they were widows), they are often concealed by their husband's name. For example, the Halesowen records from Worcestershire from 1271–1395 reveal that twenty-six per cent of the inhabitants were female.[1] But this is unlikely to be an accurate portrayal. It is probable that women comprised over half the population at Halesowen. Likewise, many women are absent from trading records since they practised under their husband's names.[2] The extant records from medieval Britain do not provide a reliable reflection of women's contribution to work patterns.

The study of medieval women's history is affected by a lack of consistent terminology and theoretical direction. For example, it is difficult to discern whether 'women' formed a separate and identifiable social group. While medieval society has been traditionally divided into the binaries of Church/laity or aristocracy/peasant, the separation on gender grounds seems less appropriate. Would, for example, the medieval noblewoman have enough experience in common with the rural peasant wife to form a social sub-group? Shulamith Shahar believes this to be the case and titles her study *The Fourth Estate*, but Power's book clearly divides women into separate categories such as 'The Lady', 'The Working Woman' and 'Nunneries'.[3] It would seem that medieval women could be best classified, not as a homogeneous body, but through rank or marital status.

Joan Scott interprets women's history as an attempt to write 'her-story'; an antidote to the exclusively male versions of '*his*tory'.[4] But I believe it is important to

[1] Rodney Hilton, *Class Conflict and the Crisis of Feudalism*, 2nd edn (London and New York: Verso, 1990), p. 85.
[2] Ibid., p. 133.
[3] Shulamith Shahar, *The Fourth Estate: A History of Women in the Middle Ages*, trans. Chaya Galai (London: Methuen, 1983), and Eileen Power, *Medieval Women*, ed. M.M. Postan (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975).
[4] Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 18.

go beyond issues of redressing the balance. In examining medieval women we must look further than the issue of sexual difference. The study of 'women' and the notion of separate sexes merely emphasises the biological differences between men and women. The danger in taking this approach is that *women* are made responsible for their failure to be more visibly active in medieval times. Defining the debate as one of *gender* difference allows for the inclusion of social and cultural factors.

The last difficulty in evaluating medieval women is to be found in the notion of feminism. Given that the ideology of 'feminism' is of nineteenth-century origin, is it appropriate to utilise such perspectives when assessing medieval women? The issue of equality, central to twentieth-century feminism, was unknown in the Middle Ages. It would seem that there are problems in applying feminist theory to medieval history. However, there are ways in which this can be resolved. Gottlieb suggests that we redefine feminism in order to engage in an analysis of women:

> Still to see that women as a group shared common problems that not only differed from men's problems but also somehow stemmed from men's defects, and to refuse to accept insults and contempt in silence – this is a plausible kind of feminism.[5]

Her suggestion that we observe the different nature of women's experience and their reaction to this as a definition of feminism is useful. This is a notion which can be applied to medieval women's experience.

However, the most important factor in examining women's history is to constantly remember that it is different from men's history, and should not be interpreted using the same guidelines.

WOMEN AND THE HOME

Christine de Pisan's sequel to *The Book of the City of Ladies*, the *Treasure of the City of Ladies*, addresses the practicalities of medieval living. One of the areas which receives her attention is the role of women within the home. Christine is careful to divide her book into three parts: each is written for women of a differing rank. However, her advice to princesses, women of the court and lower ranking townswomen is remarkably similar. In each case she advocates that women's function within marriage should be to encourage, serve and promote their husbands, to run an efficient household and to provide moral education for their children. The role that Pisan envisages is one with considerable power. For example, she expects that a woman should be able to deputise for her husband in his absence. She advocates that princesses should intercede in difficult situations (including the threat of war), and that through 'good counsel' they should pacify men.[6] The wives of artisans are advised to 'encourage their husbands or their workmen to get to work early in the morning', and that 'besides encouraging the others, the wife

[5] Beatrice Gottlieb, 'The Problem of Feminism in the Fifteenth Century', *Women of the Medieval World*, eds. Julius Kirshner and Suzanne Wemple (New York and London: Basil Blackwell, 1985), p. 346.

[6] Christine de Pisan, *The Treasure of the City of Ladies*, trans. Sarah Lawson (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 51.

herself should be involved in the work'.[7] Christine emphasises that women should play an active and influential role within the home.

Evidence from historical sources would seem to substantiate many of Christine's claims. For example, Barbara Hanawalt believes that women made a substantial contribution to the household. She has charted the contribution from the earliest stage of marriage (the contribution of the wife's dowry) to the fact that sixty-five per cent of men made their wives executors of their wills. Hanawalt sees medieval marriage as an economic, social and convivial partnership and believes that 'the wife's duty to obey, and the husband's right to ensure that she did, was a cornerstone of the ideal marriage'.[8] She utilises as evidence of the 'co-operative activity' of a marriage the fact that manorial court records reveal less than one per cent of crime was committed against family members.[9]

Further evidence of women's roles within the home can be obtained from *The Paston Letters*. Margaret Paston demonstrates the ability to manage her husband's affairs in his absence. Her letter, sent to John Paston on 8 April 1465, highlights her business acumen: 'I send you a copy of a deed that John Edmonds of Taverham sent me'; 'I have spoken with Burgess that he should have the price of the marsh'; and commands that John attend his son, 'have a fatherly heart to him'.[10] At other times she demonstrates awareness of local and national politics. On 7 January 1462 she informs John that 'people of the country beginneth to wax wild . . . men fear sore here of a common rising'.[11]

The centrality of women to the household was evident in all ranks of women. Rigby believes that townswomen played an important part in supporting their husband's trade, and notes that: '. . . women were crucial to the fortunes of the household-based industries of English Medieval towns [as] is suggested by the fact that most master craftsmen did not set up their own businesses until they were married'.[12] Rigby suggests that the average age of women marrying for the first time in the late Middle Ages was twenty-seven. Husbands tended to be the same age as, or slightly older than, their wives at marriage.[13] This supports the view that men had to gain the skill, and economic means, to support a household before they married. And that women brought considerable work experience to the marriage.

The medieval legal system ensured that women's position as wives was protected. Although on marriage a woman's property passed to her husband, through a dower a third of his land upon death would automatically be inherited by a wife and would remain in her possession despite her remarriage. Were a wife to be omitted from her husband's will she could bring a *praecipe* to the king's court.[14]

[7] Ibid., p. 167.

[8] Barbara Hanawalt, *The Ties that Bound: Peasant Families in Medieval England* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 213.

[9] Ibid., p. 207.

[10] *The Paston Letters*, ed. Norman Davis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 109–11.

[11] Ibid., pp. 92–3.

[12] S.H. Rigby, *English Society in the Later Middle Ages* (London: Macmillan, 1995), p. 275.

[13] P.J.P. Goldberg, *Woman is a Worthy Wight: Women in English Society 1200–1500* (Stroud, Gloucestershire and Wolfeboro Falls, New Hampshire: Alan Sutton, 1992), p. 12.

[14] Janet Senderonitz Loengard has found many cases of women fighting their brothers-in-law and even their sons for property rights, but no records of women suing their daughters. In one extraordinary case in 1199, Alice, widow of Ralph fitz Hugh, sued twelve men amongst whom were her son

But there is another side to this picture. Comments made by the Duchess of Brunswick as she lay dying offer an alternative perspective on the experience of 'women in the home':

> I have lived here in this castle like an anchoress in a cell. What delights or pleasures have I enjoyed here, save that I have made shift to show a happy face to my servants and gentlewomen? I have a hard husband (as you know) who has scarce any care or inclination towards women. Have I not been in this castle even as it were in a cell?[15]

The Duchess of Brunswick's feelings about the limitations of a life within the home are clearly in sympathy with the experiences of other medieval women. Despite Christine de Pisan's advocacy of an active role for women within the home, she is clearly aware of the limitations of marriage. She provides the following advice for widows: 'any woman ought to be very wary of remarriage . . . for those who have already passed their youth and who are well enough off and are not constrained by poverty, it is sheer folly'.[16] The arduous nature of a wife's work is captured in the popular fifteenth-century 'Ballad of a Tyrannical Husband'. The poem presents a defence of women's work against a husband's accusation that her role is easier than his ploughing. 'What have you to do, but sit here at home?' he demands. The wife retaliates by describing her day. Her sleep is disturbed by their child, on rising she milks the cows, makes butter and cheese, looks after the poultry and the sheep, bakes, brews, spins, feeds the livestock, and finally, cooks for her husband.[17] The arduous life of a woman who cares for the household and runs their smallholding is forcefully presented. The anonymous thirteenth-century treatise on virginity, *Hali Meidenhad*, also condemns married life. The writer attempts to convince young women to become nuns in preference to entering marriage. The author argues that marriage is belittling:

> Now thou art wedded, and from so high estate alighted so low . . . into the filth of the flesh, into the manner of a beast, into the thraldom of a man, and into the sorrows of the world.[18]

Obviously the author of this treaty is partisan, but it is evident that women were aware of the limitations of married life.

The Duchess of Brunswick's enclosure raises other issues. Jones suggests that 'Domestic discourse linked physical enclosure and household tasks to the purity of women's bodies and the scarcity of their speech.'[19] This identification between women's isolation within the household and their silent, chased image is

and grantees of her former husband (Janet Senderowitz Loengard, '"Of the Gift of her Husband": English Dower and its Consequences in the Year 1200', *Women of the Medieval World*, eds. Julius Kirshner and Suzanne Wemple [New York and London: Basil Blackwell, 1985], p. 240).

[15] Johannes Busch, 'Liber de Reformatione Monasteriorum', *Geschichtsquellen der Proving Sachsen*, ed. Karl Grube (Halle: 1886), p. 779; cited in Power, *Medieval Women*, p. 36.

[16] Christine de Pisan, *The Treasure of the City of Ladies*, p. 159.

[17] P.J.P. Goldberg, *Women in England 1275–1525* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), pp. 169–70.

[18] Emilie Amt, ed. *Women's Lives in Medieval Europe* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 91.

[19] Ann Rosalind Jones, 'Nets and Bridles: Early Modern Conduct Books and Sixteenth Century Women's Lyrics', *The Ideology of Culture*, eds. Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse (New York: Methuen, 1987), p. 52.

a powerful one. And one that served the dominant masculine institutions of the time. Edith Benkov argues that in medieval times women's discourse was a threat to society's patriarchal institution. She cites examples of medieval women deliberately misunderstanding or distorting the meaning and syntax of language.[20] Her suggestion is that women found an alternative way to speak their minds and make their presence felt.

Medieval women, through their use of speech, not only sullied the image of the pure and silent virgin, but also provided a threat to male control. In fact, women's speech was often viewed through the Virgin/whore dichotomy. The Virgin's silence is contrasted by Eve's loose tongue. It was through language that Eve created original sin. She fell through her idle chatter with the serpent, and then tempted Adam with her persuasive language. As Goldberg points out, 'women's conversation was all too readily understood by contemporaries as, at best worthless "jangling", at worst, subversive "scolding".'[21] Thus, the image of the female scold or nag, was one of the primary associations with women's speech.

There were, however, few alternatives to marriage for medieval women. Women who forsook marriage could trade as *femmes soles* or dedicate themselves to the holy orders. Eileen Power has suggested that women's involvement as Cathars and Beguines is a manifestation of women's dissatisfaction with marriage and the social conditions that women faced.[22] There is evidence that women traded independently of men, sometimes even though they were married. The 1453–54 Chamberlains' accounts from York show that a tailor, Robert Horman, paid 3s 4d to register his wife as an independent cardmaker.[23] A 1419 Borough ordinance from London reveals that a *femme sole* could employ female apprentices:

> Any married women who follow certain craft in the city by themselves without their husbands may take women as their apprentices to serve them and learn their crafts, and these apprentices shall be bound by their indentures of apprenticeship to the husband and his wife to learn the wife's craft.[24]

But there is substantial evidence that *femmes soles* struggled to support themselves. P.H. Cullum's study of charitable giving in late medieval Yorkshire notes that several *femmes soles*: 'although living and working independently were in need of charitable support due to the low level of their wages'.[25] The 1381 Southwark poll tax returns show a large number of independent women traders. However, they reveal that the majority of women were engaged as hucksters, spinsters, shepsters and laundresses.[26] The records suggest that only a few women

[20] Edith Joyce Benkov, 'Language and Women: From Silence to Speech', *Sign, Sentence, Discourse: Language in Medieval Thought and Literature*, eds. Julian Wasserman and Lois Roney (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1989), p. 261.
[21] Goldberg, *Women in England*, p. 44.
[22] Power, *Medieval Women*, p. 30.
[23] Goldberg, *Women in England*, p. 189.
[24] Ibid., p. 197.
[25] P.H. Cullum, ' "And Hir Name Was Charite": Charitable Giving by and for Women in late Medieval Yorkshire', *Woman is a Worthy Wight: Women in English Society 1200–1500*, ed. P.J.P. Goldberg (Stroud, Gloucestershire and Wolfeboro Falls, New Hampshire: Alan Sutton, 1992), p. 197.
[26] P.J.P. Goldberg, *Women, Work and Life Cycle in Medieval Economy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 93.

engaged in more diverse trades and that, by and large, *femmes soles* were limited in the trades they practised. The occupations undertaken by independent women traders were those of low status and poor pay. This suggests that women achieved greater status and wealth if they married.

Amy Froide points out that single women were expected to live as dependents and not as head of households; in fact they comprised only 1.1% of households in early modern England.[27] Evidence from Coventry shows that civic authorities forbade single women to take rooms. Sixteenth-century records from Manchester explicitly state that unmarried women living alone were 'abusing themselves with young men and others having not any man to control them to the great dishonour of God and evil example of others'.[28] This provides clear evidence of the fear that authorities had of the supposed corrupting effects of single women.

WOMEN IN PUBLIC

Studies of women in history have frequently distinguished between the role that women played in private and public forums. Judith Bennett has studied records from Brigstock, Northamptonshire, and makes two points about the public power afforded medieval women. First, Bennett argues that, 'the notion of a public sphere for males and a private sphere for females was much less important to medieval peasants than it was to the Middle Classes of the nineteenth century'.[29] Second, she concludes that although women often held powerful positions within public life, they rarely occupied authoritative roles.[30]

There is plenty of evidence that women engaged in tasks within the public world. For example, many women were involved in legal and monetary aspects of public life. An Italian painting titled 'A Visit to the Bank' shows numerous women handling scrolls (possibly wills) inside a bank. Nearly fifty per cent of the clients within the bank are women.[31] It is not surprising that women worked in monetary situations: they were known to drive hard bargains and be astute traders (or regraters). In the *Mirour de l'omme* the author declares:

> But to say in truth in this instance the trade of regratery belongeth by right the rather to women. But if a woman be at it she in her stinginess useth much more machination and deceit than a man; for never alloweth she the profit on a single crumb to escape her, nor faileth to hold her neighbour to the paying price.[32]

[27] Amy Froide, 'Marital Status as a Category of Difference: Singlewomen and Widows in Early Modern England', *Singlewomen in the European Past 1250–1800*, eds. J.M. Bennett and Amy M. Froide (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), p. 237.

[28] Cited in Froide, 'Marital Status', p. 240.

[29] J.M. Bennett, 'Public Power and Authority in the Medieval English Countryside', *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, eds. Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1988), p. 18.

[30] Ibid., p. 29.

[31] 'A Visit to the Bank', *De Septum Vitiis*, Italian Fourteenth Century MS. Add. 27695, fol. 8v. (British Library Board); reproduced in Power, *Medieval Women*, p. 58.

[32] J. Gower, *Mirour de l'omme*, ed. J. Sheat, (EETS, 1886); cited in Power, *Medieval Women*, p. 68.

Other evidence shows that women operated as money lenders, tax and rent collectors. For example, Margaret Paston of Norfolk utilised accountancy skills to act as a rent collector, and Court documents of 1387 show Juliana Wheeler of Hagley, Worcestershire, suing Philip Brough for non-payment of a loan of three marks.[33] The early fifteenth-century will of Stephen Thomas shows a touching faith in his wife's ability to deal with business matters:

> More write I not unto you, but the Holy Trinity keep you now, dear and trusty wife. Here I make an end, wherefore I pray you, as my trust is wholly in you, over all other creatures, that this last will be fulfilled, and all other that I ordained at home, for all the love that ever was between man and woman.[34]

Though these instances show women taking on public responsibility, it is within roles which are 'licensed' by men. A husband granted his wife the public space in which to operate as his representative. There are far fewer examples of independent women acting for themselves within a public sphere. Indeed, the examples that do exist are notable because of their rarity. For example, in 1431, while we might positively note there was a female commissioner, Lady Joan Abergavenny, we must also acknowledge that she was the only woman commissioner in Britain at the time.[35]

The lack of public power afforded women is obviously partially due to their lack of access to the civic power structures of late medieval society. Women could be admitted to most English guilds, although usually as wives and only occasionally as *femmes soles*. In fact, it is estimated that widows composed between two and five per cent of guild membership.[36] The attitude towards women's guild membership was subject to large local variation. For example, in 1372 the articles of the leathersellers' and pouch-makers' guilds allowed the wives of dyers automatic admission to the guild.[37] But some guilds, such as the Hull Weavers, excluded women.[38] Even if women did obtain guild membership, they rarely achieved status within the guild. There were, of course, exceptions to this. The York Mercers had a widow on their council.[39] The late fourteenth-century York dyers' ordinances reveal two women masters, one of whom was a widow.[40] In 1503 at

[33] Power, *Medieval Women*, p. 45 and Rodney Hilton, *The English Peasantry in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 103. There are other clues that suggest women existed in circles of influence beyond a private sphere. A study of the Yorkshire probate collection, of which about twenty per cent are women's wills, demonstrates frequent bequests by women to prisons. Their donations suggest direct knowledge of the conditions endured at the time, and indicate that many women were probably prison visitors. Cullum notes that women were more likely to make charitable bequests than men; a role which she identifies as reinforcing their image as healers and carers (Cullum, 'And Hir Name Was Charite', p. 194).

[34] From F.D. Furnivall, ed. *The Fifty Earliest English Wills*, EETS OS 78 (London, 1882); cited in Power *Medieval Women*, p. 40.

[35] Rigby, *English Society*, p. 269.

[36] Maryanne Kowaleski and Judith Bennett, 'Crafts, Gilds and Women in the Middle Ages', *Sisters and Workers in the Middle Ages*, ed. Judith Bennett (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 15.

[37] Power, *Medieval Women*, p. 55.

[38] P.J.P. Goldberg, 'Women', *Fifteenth Century Attitudes: Perceptions of Society in Late Medieval England*, ed. Rosemary Horrox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 131.

[39] Rigby, *English Society*, p. 277.

[40] Goldberg, *Women, Work and Life Cycle*, p. 121.

Southampton docks, wool packers and loaders were allowed to elect two women as wardens.[41]

It is difficult to determine the reasons as to why women achieved little public authority. The guilds that excluded women did so for the benefit of their own traders. Competition from a surplus of workers could be limited, and this form of social exclusion ensured that their own members enjoyed a protected status. But where women had access to guild membership why did they not progress further within the structure? Clearly, women had the ability to perform the tasks required of high-standing guild members. Women's ability to deputise for their husbands is testimony to this. The fears about women speaking in public, which I have outlined above, are another contributing factor to the lack of public visibility afforded women.

Martha Howell highlights another reason for women's exclusion from public life. Howell finds more freedom for women in public life in the northern cities of Europe. She examines the nature of the public work that women performed. She cites as examples of women's wide-ranging influence, their guild membership, money lending, work as managers of taverns, and the fact that ten per cent of the free citizens listed in Bruges between 1331 and 1460 were women. Howell, however, admits:

> The ideas that I have advanced suggest that women were excluded from positions of public authority in late medieval cities because they were strictly bound to the family. Because families did not monopolize rule in these cities, women had no access to rule.[42]

Howell raises two points here. First, powerful families controlled southern European cities. This position afforded considerable privilege to daughters of such families. Second, Howell suggests that women were tied to the family home, and implies that this prevented their greater public involvement. An examination of the usual work tasks that women performed must be undertaken in order to establish this latter point.

WOMEN AND TRADE

The 'Ballad of a Tyrannical Husband' reveals many of the popular work tasks that women undertook: childcare, tending livestock, making dairy products, baking, brewing and spinning. Many of these are activities that are tied to the home. However, evidence from historical records reveals that the jobs performed by women display a range from the expected to the extraordinary. For example, women were engaged as weavers, charcoal makers and sellers, spicers, haberdashers, silkmakers and embroiderers, and more unusually, there are records of them as goldsmiths, butchers, ironmongers, bookbinders and shoe-makers.[43] There is

[41] Power, *Medieval Women*, p. 61.

[42] Martha Howell, 'Citizen and Gender: Women's Political Status in Northern Medieval Cities', *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, eds. Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1988), p. 53.

[43] Goldberg, *Women, Work and Life Cycle*, pp. 94–6.

evidence of women as wholesale wool merchants trading abroad, and wills show daughters, rather than sons, inheriting metalworking tools.[44] The importance of women in trade is supported by medieval art. A fourteenth-century painting, 'Le Merchard drapier', shows a woman co-managing a shop. She stands speaking and gesticulating (as if she is indicating the length of a measure) while her male co-worker lays out the cloth.[45]

Two studies have examined the nature of women's work. Findings from the Tuscany 1427 tax survey suggest a pattern of servanthood for women. While Kowaleski's examination of over four thousand debt cases between 1378 and 1388 in Exeter, reveals that women were mainly involved in petty trade which frequently involved the purveying of victuals. They tended to work in more than one trade, with candlemaking, leather and cloth working being the most popular crafts.[46] Kowaleski's study also reveals women working as prostitutes in the city. Emma Northercote is recorded pursuing her clients, including priests, for their debts.[47] Although there is no evidence that prostitution was widespread, Goldberg suggests that a few women turned to it when other forms of employment were scarce.[48] As Karras points out, 'prostitution was one of the few careers open to them [women], and prostitutes, who in at least some parts of the profession could control their own working conditions, may have been less exploited than certain textile workers or domestic servants'.[49]

Medieval England reveals contradictory evidence as to how important women were to the economic health of the country. For example, in times of labour shortage, such as the immediate period following the plague, women were encouraged to seek work. In 1349, the Ordinance of Labourers made it compulsory for all men and women under the age of sixty to work for a craft or on the land.[50] Goldberg notes that:

> it is apparent from indictments under the Statues of 1351 that women, visible in manorial accounts before the Black Death, became a more conspicuous part of the post-plague labour force, particularly in pastoral regions, partly as a consequence of the shortage of male labour.[51]

Later, as women migrated to towns in search of work, the labour demand was more specialised, and women were increasingly unable to take part in such a market. This specialism had largely been encouraged by the 1363 Statute of Labourers

[44] Erika Uitz, *Women in Medieval Towns* (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1990), p. 40 and see Goldberg, *Women, Work and Life Cycle*, p. 128 for details of York armourer Adam Hecche's 1404 will in which he leaves his 'meyle work' tools to his daughter Agnes and his 'fourbourcraft' tools to his son.

[45] 'Le Merchard drapier' from *Tacunium Sanitatis*, fol. 94. Fourteenth Century (Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris); reproduced in Power, *Medieval Women*, p. 54.

[46] Exeter did not have guilds, but similar organisations called 'freedoms' were restricted to men (twenty-one per cent of male householders were members). See Maryanne Kowaleski, 'Women's Work in a Market Town: Exeter in the Late Fourteenth Century', *Women and Work in Pre-Industrial Europe*, ed. Barbara Hanawalt (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 145–64.

[47] Ibid., p. 154.

[48] Goldberg, *Women, Work and Life Cycle*, p. 152.

[49] Ruth Mazo Karras, *Common Women: Prostitution and Sexuality in Medieval England* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 6.

[50] Rigby, *English Society*, p. 253.

[51] Goldberg, *Women, Work and Life Cycle*, p. 289.

which allowed men to partake of only one trade and thus develop a specialist trade.[52] Women were excluded by this statute and continued to earn money through piecemeal work patterns. On average women were involved in three bye-industries.

As the population expanded in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the trades open to women appeared to lessen. There is direct evidence of women receiving lower wages for performing the same job as men. In 1444 a statute stated that male servants should be paid fifteen shillings annually and women ten shillings.[53] Finally, by the sixteenth century the scope of women's work was further limited. Many women had acted as brewers to provide ale for their husbands, and either exchanged the excess or traded to obtain other goods.[54] In 1552 Henry VIII, eager to increase the wealth of the royal exchange, imposed a tax on licensed sales of ale and, therefore, forbade private sale.[55] This was to have a profound effect on the work available to women. There are other ordinances that reveal the closure of opportunity available to women: many of them could no longer brew.[56] Bennett records that the brewing trade transformed between 1300 and 1600. Whereas in the early times it had been a small-scale, local industry undertaken by women working from their homes, by 1600 the trade was centralised and mainly controlled by large, commercial trading companies run by men.[57] In 1511 the Norwich worsted weavers excluded women on the grounds that their lack of strength produced inferior cloth.[58] As Goldberg notes:

> Contracting overseas markets and the receding impact of the plague, tended to invert the relationship between labour supply and demand. Women may be seen to have been the primary victims since their always precarious hold on the labour markets was thrust aside by males determined upon protecting their share of a contracting job market, hence the Bristol weavers' complaint of 1461 that 'likely men to do the king service in his wars' were threatened by female competition.[59]

It is clear that during times of plentiful male members of the workforce or when there was a recession, it is women's jobs that were most affected. Goldberg's illustration of the attitudes at Bristol demonstrates the demand that men be given work over women.

[52] Barbara Hanawalt, ed. *Women and Work in Pre-Industrial Europe* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. xiii.
[53] Ibid., p. 12.
[54] Ralph Hanna comments that brewing is often too heavily associated with women and believes that the ale-wife in *The Harrowing of Hell*, and Langland's brewer, Rose, are 'representations which speak less to gender than to abiding suspicions of victualing as a profession' (Ralph Hanna, 'Brewing Trouble: On Literature and History – and Alewives', *Bodies and Disciplines: Interactions of Literature and History in Fifteenth Century England*, Medieval Cultures, no. 9, eds. Barbara Hanawalt and David Wallace [Minnesota and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996], p. 10).
[55] Susan Cahn, *Industry of Devotion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p. 52.
[56] For further details of women brewers see J.M. Bennett, *Ale, Beer, and Brewsters in England* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).
[57] Ibid., p. 9.
[58] Goldberg, *Women, Work and Life Cycle*, p. 383.
[59] Ibid., p. 347.

WOMEN'S EXCLUSION

I am suggesting that women in late medieval society experienced a temporary widening of opportunity, followed by greater exclusion. But was women's less active public role due to their commitments and attachments to the household, or to other limitations and exclusions that were made by men? In the late Middle Ages there does seem to have been an increasing anxiety felt by men with regard to women's sphere of influence. This can be seen through the examples of education and the changing responsibilities afforded the midwife.

From the evidence I have outlined it appears that women experienced a change in working conditions in late medieval England. The 1349 Ordinance of Labourers, and the statute that followed in 1351, made participation in the workforce compulsory for women. The case of female brewing demonstrates the way in which women suffered a gradual narrowing of opportunity. Similar fear of the widening opportunities available for women can be found in relation to women's education. Education was made available to girls through the 1405 education statute which laid down that:

> Every man or woman of whatever state or condition that he be, shall be free to set son or daughter to take learning in any school that pleases them within the realm.[60]

The introduction of education was, of course, to affect town ladies and some of the trading classes but unlikely to benefit peasant women or servants. The topic of education for women was to become a favourite with treatise writers. There is, I think, a sense of fear that underscores many of the treatises: they wanted to ensure that women's domain was not enlarged. As Joan Ferrante has remarked: 'Since women are given to deception and trickery anyway, the more education they have, the more dangerous they become.'[61] This sentiment underlies many of the attitudes held by men against any increasing opportunities afforded medieval women.

Whether the reduction of opportunities was a deliberate attempt to curb women's power or a response to changing economic conditions is hard to determine. Eileen Power believes that women were excluded because of male fear:

> The reason occasionally given for barring employment of women was that work of a particular craft was too hard for them, but the main reason was the same as that which animates hostility to female labour today. Women's wages were lower even for the same work, and men were afraid of being undercut by cheap labour.[62]

But the gradual change in working patterns of men and women demonstrate that a substantial shift occurred during this time.

From the evidence that I have provided, it is clear that men's occupations became increasingly specialised towards the end of the Middle Ages. On the other

[60] *Statutes of the Realm*, 1405–6, pp. 157–58; cited in Power, *Medieval Women*, p. 83.
[61] Joan Ferrante, 'Public Postures and Private Manoeuvres: Roles Medieval Women Play', *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, eds. Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1988), p. 218.
[62] Power, *Medieval Women*, p. 60.

hand, women's activities remained piecemeal and were often conducted within reach of the home. As Anderson and Zinsser point out:

> From as early as the fifteenth century, however, the commercial, capitalist towns became a world in which women also experienced a new kind of disability and vulnerability. At first some townswomen enjoyed access to craft associations, participation in new professions and new commercial enterprises. Gradually, however, the new opportunities offered by the changing and expanding economy were closed to them.[63]

The result of women's exclusion from the 'new opportunities' of late medieval England was that they were increasingly separated from the public world. If this theory of women's exclusion from high-status employment and the increasing lack of opportunity for employment is true, then it would be spinsters and widows who would have suffered most. If wages and public employment were increasingly limited, then the poverty of single women would rise. Without the framework of the family unit to support them, these single women would become destitute. As Goldberg notes, there is evidence of this:

> There does appear to be a pattern of feminisation of the inhabitants of a significant number of maisonsdieu during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries which almost certainly reflects a feminisation of poverty during the period as economic depression and increasing guild regulation to protect male jobs restricted the kind of work available to women.[64]

I am interested to see if any of the tensions that I have outlined above are present within the Corpus Christi cycles. For example, are references to women's lack of public authority or the increasing separation of male and female employment to be found within the dramas? How might such social tension be depicted or detected within the cycles? Jean Howard suggests that reading against the grain, searching for contradiction rather than unity, is a method of establishing social tensions within theatrical texts.[65] I believe that the figures of Mrs Noah, Gyll, A Woman Taken in Adultery, Mary Magdalene and the Ale-Wife from the Chester *Harrowing of Hell* amongst others, provide a social critique of, and for, women.

In the second section of this study I will examine how these characters articulate a concern for women's changing position in late medieval England. But first in the subsequent two chapters I will examine if women's position in society affected their participation in the production of the cycles, and why the playing of women by cross-dressed men is an appropriate device for examining gender construction in a shifting society. Far from offering a simple antithesis to male characters, the women captured in the Corpus Christi cycles offer complex models for the changing role of women.

[63] Bonnie Anderson and Judith Zinsser, *A History of Their Own*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper and Row, 1988; reprint, London: Penguin, 1990), pp. 392–93.

[64] Goldberg, *Woman is a Worthy Wight*, p. 200.

[65] Howard focuses on the contradictions of the text and suggests that a negotiation of women's place in early modern culture can be found in Renaissance texts. See Jean E. Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 10–18.

Part I

PERFORMING GENDER

Chapter 2

GENDER AND PERFORMANCE

> A feminist approach to anything means paying attention to women. It means paying attention when women appear as characters and noticing when they do not. It means making some 'invisible' mechanisms visible and pointing out, when necessary, that while the emperor has no clothes, the empress has no body. It means paying attention to women as writers and as readers or audience members. It means taking nothing for granted because the things we take for granted are usually those that were constructed from the most powerful point of view in the culture and that is not the point of view of women.[1]

Gayle Austin draws attention to many of the factors that are involved in assessing the place of women within any period of dramatic production. Her strategies have evolved in order to combat several methodological problems that exist when studying women's place in dramatic history. The largest of these is of course that theatre is a temporal form. Although surviving texts make mention of female characters, it is difficult to ascertain how active women were within medieval culture. Fragments of records show that they were present on the medieval 'stage', though these appearances are commonly in folk plays, local festive customs, itinerant performance, and in dances and parades held for parish or civic occasions. Because of the paucity of records the extent of women's performance remains open to speculation.

Austin identifies other issues which affect the analysis of women's involvement within dramatic activity. The most influential of these being that drama is a public event and that the means by which events were made public were controlled by male institutions.[2] In order to rescue women's activity from an 'invisible' position Austin suggests looking at play texts and evidence of female spectatorship. In the case of medieval theatre it is also important to examine the fragments of documentation that reveal women's participation.

The collection of Records of Early English Drama has enabled scholars to re-examine issues of gender and performance within the Middle Ages. The work of James Stokes has identified five types of dramatic activity in which women were involved in Medieval and Renaissance Somerset: guild drama, parish games and

[1] Gayle Austen, 'Feminist Theories: Paying attention to women', *The Routledge Reader in Gender and Performance*, ed. Lizbeth Goodman (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 136.

[2] I have suggested in the Introduction that masculine control over the production of medieval drama cannot be assumed to be total or stable.

dancing, liturgical drama, itinerant performance and as sponsors or entrepreneurs.[3] Stokes postulates that resistance to women's participation in parish drama began gradually after the Reformation and that women, like other participants, met with increasing hostility from local authorities.[4] In examining a whole range of dramatic activity within western England, Stokes is able to optimistically declare that:

> When the various elements of that dramatic culture are considered as a whole rather than in isolation, and when the mass of evidence concerning women's involvement is assembled, it becomes obvious that their contribution to that culture was not only significant but central and that a major rethinking of the tradition is needed.[5]

It is certainly true that a major re-examination of women's activity is necessary, however the scope of their involvement is still limited to such a degree that it is difficult to consider women 'central' to medieval drama. Clearly women's performance was rare in Britain, for an Englishman, Thomas Coryat, wrote from Venice in 1611 that he had seen 'women act, a thing I never saw before'.[6] Evidence of women's participation within the Corpus Christi cycles is scant, and it is commonly accepted that they played no part in this means of cultural reproduction.

The debate as to whether women specifically participated in the medieval mystery plays has been revisited through the recent work of Jeremy Goldberg. Goldberg argues that women might have performed during the early fourteenth century.[7] His argument is based on the fact that the first indications of men playing women's roles are from the latter parts of the fifteenth century. The earliest of these records reveal that Alan Taylor played Mrs Noah in Hull from 1485–87,[8] while the first mention of male cross-dressing at Coventry can be found in the Smiths' Accounts from 1496 that show that 'Ryngolds man Thomas' played the role of Pilate's wife.[9]

Goldberg argues that before the establishment of formalised trade guilds 'collectivities' – informal groups of like traders – may have existed. He postulates that these mixed gendered groups could have performed the early mystery plays that are known to have existed in York from around 1360.[10] Goldberg suggests that the development of these collectivities into formal guilds corresponded with the

[3] James Stokes, 'Women and Mimesis in Medieval and Renaissance Somerset (and Beyond)', *CD* 27.2 (1993), pp. 176–78.

[4] John Wasson suggests that women's involvement in medieval drama was subjected to large regional variation. He notes that Devon and Somerset reveal female actors and churchwardens but that, excepting the 1469 Wistow Summer Queen, there is no evidence of women's involvement in the West Riding. See John Wasson, 'A Parish Play in the West Riding of Yorkshire', *English Parish Drama*, Ludus: Medieval and Early Renaissance Theatre and Drama, no. 1, eds. Alexandra F. Johnston and Wim Husken (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1996), p. 156 n. 5.

[5] Stokes, 'Women and Mimesis', p. 180.

[6] Cited in Stokes, 'Women and Mimesis', p. 182.

[7] See Goldberg, *Women in England*, p. 45 and Goldberg, 'Craft Guilds, The Corpus Christi Play and Civic Government', *The Government of Medieval York: Essays in Commemoration of the 1396 Royal Charter* (York: Borthwick Institute of Historical Research, 1997), pp. 145–47.

[8] Anne Jean Mill, 'The Hull Noah Play', *MLR* XXXIII (Oct. 1938), p. 496.

[9] *Coventry*: REED, p. 86.

[10] Jeremy Goldberg, 'From Guild Drama to Civic Drama: Why women lose out and why they were there in the first place', paper given at *The Word on the Street* Conference, University of York, England, July 1998.

civic control of the mystery plays which is signalled by the establishment of the York register in 1470.[11] Goldberg argues that women 'lost out' and therefore ceased to perform when the mystery plays were placed under the control of the civic authorities and formalised craft guilds. Sadly, Goldberg's arguments are, by his own admission, built upon circumstantial evidence and do not form a watertight thesis. However, Goldberg's speculations provide a useful reminder that the debate about women's involvement in the mystery plays needs further examination.

As outlined in the Introduction, twentieth-century scholarship has tended to ignore women's involvement with the cycles. E.K. Chambers's omits any reference to women's participation within the mystery plays and this view has shaped much of the subsequent critical attention.[12] It is commonly accepted that there were a variety of reasons why women did not perform in the mystery plays. One of these is the supposed influence of Latinate drama.[13] However, recent research into the development of the mystery plays has challenged the link between early Church drama and the Corpus Christi cycles. Miri Rubin questions the influence of Latinate drama and the notion that Church drama moved to the streets to form the mystery plays.[14] This approach throws into dispute the idea that Latinate cross-gender playing practices set a precedent for the mystery plays.[15] Two other frequently cited factors for the non-performance by women are that they were not guild members and that their voices were not strong enough for open air performance. Glynne Wickham argues such a case:

> If women appeared rarely in the medieval theatre this was not because it was thought shameful: rather was this so because of factors that were particular to the theatre of the Middle Ages. In the first place responsibility for the organization of the Corpus Christi drama rested with bishops, canons and city fathers: this exclusively male hierarchy then delegated executive responsibility to the guilds, religious and commercial, that were only open to men. Liturgical music drama, moreover, having relied for generations on choir-boys and junior clergy to take treble roles, provided an example to be imitated in the Corpus Christi drama. The quality of these voices suggests another and more practical reason for continuing to employ them rather than recruit women – audibility in an open-air auditorium.[16]

However, these arguments are not satisfactory. As I have shown in Chapter One, women were not excluded from guilds. As widows and wives they formed about

[11] Richard Beadle dates the York Register as being assembled between 1463 and 1477. See Beadle, 'The York Cycle', p. 90.

[12] Chambers acknowledges the centrality of women's participation to parish entertainments and May games (E.K. Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage*, vol. 1, pp. 160–81).

[13] Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage*, vol. 2, p. 126.

[14] Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, p. 271.

[15] The use of men to portray female roles in the English cycle dramas has long been acknowledged. David Bevington traces the origins of male 'transvestism' within legitimate performance back to sacred dramas. He cites as his evidence the rubric of *Regularis Concordia* showing 'four brethren' who played the angels, and the assignation of the three Mary roles at Fleury to 'three brethren'. See David Bevington, 'Discontinuity in Medieval Acting Traditions', *The Elizabethan Theatre V: Papers given at the 5th International Conference on Elizabethan Theatre held at the University of Waterloo, Ontario, in July 1973*, ed. G.R. Hibberd (Ontario, Canada: Macmillan, 1975), p. 7.

[16] Wickham, *The Medieval Theatre*, pp. 93–94.

three per cent of the membership.[17] Although their membership was often through their husbands and they rarely reached a high-ranking position within the guild, women were not barred from the craft groups. It is true, however, as Gayle Austen noted in the opening quotation, that the composition of guild membership meant that the means of production was effectively in male control. But it might be that women's guild membership is something of a red herring. It is evident that women did participate in the mystery plays by undertaking tasks which related to the *production* of the plays. In 1568 the Chester Smiths, Cutlers and Plumbers' Records show that four pence was paid to 'griff Yeuans wife to pay for wessing the Curtens'.[18] The York City Chamberlains' Rolls of 1478 show that a seamstress, Margaret, was paid for mending the Corpus Christi banner.[19] This would seem to indicate that women could represent guilds through invisible, backstage tasks.[20] This evidence suggests that women's exclusion from the guilds is not sufficient reason for their exclusion from performing within the plays. Anyway, it is likely that other non-guild members performed in the Corpus Christi pageants. In fact it has been suggested that the records of payments made to actors indicate that male guild members did not perform in their own pageants, but served as producers and hired actors from outside their guild.[21] If this were the case, it further undermines Wickham's argument since an actor would not need to be a guild member to perform.

The argument that women's voices were not adequate for the open-air performance space of the street needs further addressing. It is helpful to look to forms of medieval entertainment beyond England to establish this point. European medieval drama provides substantial evidence of women's performance. Lynnette Muir's investigations into performance records from France reveal that the 1547 Passion play at Valenciennes included four girls, one of whom played the Virgin.[22] Further records show that girls performed speaking roles at Mons, and that adult women acted at Romans, Valence, Grenoble and Metz.[23] In fact the reports of performances by French women often emphasise the success of their vocal skills. In 1535 Francoise Buatier played the Mother of Christ at Grenoble and she 'excited general admiration by her gestures, voice, pronunciation and delivery which charmed all the spectators'.[24] While at Metz the eighteen year-old girl who played Catherine of Siena 'spoke in such a lively and pleading way that she made people

[17] Kowaleski and Bennett, 'Crafts, Gilds and Women', p. 15.

[18] *Chester*: REED, ed. L.M. Clopper (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1979), p. 85.

[19] See *York*: REED, p. 782. There is no evidence that Margaret is a guild member. She may have been professionally employed for this task. The Chester Smiths' entry uses a familiar tone to refer to 'griff Yeuans wife'; it is possible that she was a guild member, but there are no other records which pertain to the Yeuans.

[20] This argument is put by Richardson and Johnston who speculate that 'Women did not perform in the plays although they were admitted to the guilds. Their contributions remained typically domestic ones of washing the costumes and providing food, women's parts in the plays being taken by men or youths' (Richardson and Johnston, *Medieval Drama*, p. 21).

[21] Meg Twycross, paper given at *The Word on the Street* Conference, University of York, England, July 1998.

[22] Lynette Muir, 'Women on the Medieval Stage: The Evidence from France', *METh* 7.2 (1985), p. 107.

[23] See, in particular, Muir, 'Women', pp. 107–90, and Clifford Davidson, 'Women and the Medieval Stage', pp. 99–113.

[24] *Mystères*, vol. II, p. 127; cited in Tydeman, ed. *The Medieval European Stage*, p. 307.

cry, and delighted them all'.[25] If French women's voices were strong enough to perform outside there seems to be little truth in the argument that English women were too weak to be heard.[26]

In re-examining the evidence of women's involvement in the mystery cycles it is important to focus upon two issues. First, any assessment of women's participation in the dramas should extend beyond that of performance to the often invisible but highly important area of production work. It is essential that the question of women's participation does not rest solely on evidence of acting. Women's roles as stagehands and audience members must also be examined in order to fully appreciate their part in the public enactment of the mystery plays. Second, it is important to properly examine the cultural framework that surrounds medieval dramatic performance. In doing so it is apparent that there are several other reasons as to why women did not perform speaking roles in the medieval dramas, namely: issues of decorum; the history of performance aesthetics; and women's public status.

RECORDS OF FEMALE PERFORMANCE

Over the last twenty years, the REED project has systematically collected and edited records relating to medieval and renaissance performance. These are, of course, a valuable tool in assessing the level of female activity within medieval drama. However, there are certain difficulties that arise through the use of these records. First, there is a paucity of records which relate to female performance or participation. Second, as Theresa Coletti points out, there are dangers in using such records in isolation and out of context.[27] She notes that while scholars can attempt to re-read the records, there can be no certainty that speculation about medieval drama is anywhere near approaching the truth of the situation.[28]

There are other difficulties in reading the records for evidence of women's involvement. There are many times when a slip of the scribe's pen indicates incorrect information to the reader. Copying mistakes can easily change the spellings of names and insinuate false genders. For example, the 1567 Newcastle Chamberlain's Account Book shows payment for 'cowllinge of bartye Allyson the

[25] *Chroniques de Metz de Jacomin Husson*, ed. Heirich Michelant, 1870, p. 103; cited in Tydeman, ed. *The Medieval European Stage*, p. 347.

[26] The existence of such evidence from France raises the issue of why there are substantially more records of female performance than in England? Were there far more instances of female performance, or is it merely that records were better preserved? It leads to speculation that circumstances, particularly within Southern France, were more conducive to the acceptance of actresses. Evidence suggests that women were afforded greater working rights within some European towns. Perhaps civic identities were less strict, and more relaxed local laws and customs led to greater opportunities for women. Additionally, as I have outlined in Chapter One, powerful families dominated many European medieval towns. The membership of such a family may have granted women greater performance opportunities, or preserved their dignity and reputation despite public appearance. Overwhelmingly, the evidence from France suggests that in certain situations women's performance could be licensed.

[27] Theresa Coletti, 'Reading REED: History and the Records of Early English Drama', *Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain 1380–1530*, ed. Lee Patterson (Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford: University of California Press, 1990), p. 258.

[28] For a fuller discussion of Coletti's points, see 'Reading REED', pp. 248–84.

fool this year'.[29] However, subsequent payments in 1580 record 'Allayne the foull'.[30] If this is the same fool, then is this evidence of an early female fool, or has the scribe misspelled a male name?[31] Similarly, Barnstaple Receivers' Accounts 1474–75 show the following payment: 'Et de viijd a la Tumbeler domini principis'.[32] The use of 'la' indicates that the performer was female, but as John Wasson suggests:

> It is tempting to conclude that this tumbler was a woman, but it is unclear how much weight is to be put on the 'la' in a macaronic phrase like this. It may only serve to introduce the vernacular, although 'le' is more common.[33]

It is tempting to read more into the use of the female tense here than is reliably safe.

At Coventry the 1543 Corpus Christi Guild Account Book reveals another methodological ambiguity. The records show remuneration to 'the maisters and gentilwomen' and later specify a payment made 'to Marie for hir wages and gloves'.[34] Again, the latter reference could be seen as tenuous. Marie could be the name of the character rather than the actress. However, the use of 'hir' provides sufficient evidence for the case of female performance to be considered.

Similar confusion can arise through reading records that relate to costuming. For example, an inventory taken at the death of John Mere lists 'a players gowne for a woman', while Queen's College, and St John's College, Cambridge, list 'One frocke and ij cassokes for women' and 'an old cote for an old woman', respectively.[35] Given the lack of evidence of female performance (and that these are college records), it must be assumed that these female costumes were worn by men, and do not indicate that women acted on the late medieval stage.

The documentation of women's performance within the Corpus Christi cycles is rare. The best known of the evidence is that of the Chester wives. Their participation was first recorded in 1499: 'the wyfus of the town assumpcion beate Marie'.[36] The Chester Banns of 1539–40 elaborate on this entry:

> The wurshipfful wyffs of this towne
> ffynd of our lady thassumpcion
> It to bryng forth thy bebowne
> And mytere with all thyre might.[37]

Both of these entries are ambiguous. Rather than being evidence of performance, these records could demonstrate that women were producers or sponsors of the

[29] *Newcastle Upon Tyne*: REED, p. 52.
[30] Ibid., p. 68.
[31] There are similar errors to be found within the Bible. For centuries Junia was scribed as Junius.
[32] *Devon*: REED, ed. John Wasson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), p 34.
[33] Ibid., p. 440.
[34] *Coventry*: REED, p. 166. These payments are repeated until the year 1546.
[35] *Cambridge*: REED, vol. 1, ed. Alan H. Nelson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), p. 204. 1557–58 Inventory at Death of John Mere CUA: VCP f. (10) and p. 186. 1553–54 Queen's College Miscellany QVA: BOK 76 f. 44v and *Cambridge*: REED, vol. 1, p. 220. 1562 St John's College Register of Inventories ff. 69–9v.
[36] *Chester*: REED, p. 22. 1499–1500 List of Guilds f. 4.
[37] *Chester*: REED, p. 31. 1539–40 Early Banns ff. 85v–8v.

drama. The evidence points to the wives bringing forth the *Assumption of the Virgin Mary*, but does not show that they performed the pageant.[38] It is interesting to speculate about this record. The women involved are clearly of high status for they are 'worshipful wives', but are these high-ranking women members of a separate guild or fraternity?[39]

Though the extant cycle texts provide few helpful stage directions, there is one case where they indicate female performance. The surviving text of the Coventry Innocents play states that women sang the 'Coventry carol' as the Mothers of the Innocents before the slaughter of their children by Herod's soldiers. In addition to this, William Tydeman argues that a woman could have played Salome in the 1584 Coventry *Destruction of Jerusalem*. He admits though, that the 'Frauncys Coccks' who received 12d for playing the part could be of either sex.[40]

Records do though, confirm that men played women's roles in the mystery plays. The 1499 Smiths' Account from Coventry lists, 'Item payd to *Dame* Procula for *his* wages ijs viijd' (my italics), while the 1496 records for the same guild testify that payment was made to 'Ryngolds man Thomas that playff pylatts wyf'.[41] Unlike modern-day pantomimes, playing a woman's role held little status. Records reveal that the actors playing women frequently received less money than those enacting male characters.[42] The Coventry records also suggest that men of low social standing played women's roles. For example, a male apprentice or journeyman played Pilate's wife, 'Ryngolds man Thomas'. The low wages and the casting of apprentices or low-ranking men ensured that women's roles were afforded less status than that of the male characters.[43]

Records are, however, useful in re-evaluating women's participation in production aspects of medieval drama. The records reveal that women did serve as stagehands and as audience members. It is these records which should prompt us to re-examine the involvement which women had with shaping the production and reception of medieval dramatic activity.

Women's backstage duties included preparing the performance space, ensuring the welfare of actors, making props, costumes, banners and maintaining properties. Medieval records show that women received payment for a wide variety of tasks, although some of these entries are vague and without status, sometimes no

[38] There are further ambiguities in this record. The extant Chester text does not contain a separate Assumption pageant. Denise Ryan points out that ironically the absence of the Assumption play from the text emphasises women's absence from medieval drama. See Denise Ryan, 'Women, Sponsorship and the Early Civic Stage: Chester's Worshipful Wives and the Lost Assumption Play', *RORD* XL (2001), p. 149. The York cycle does contain a pageant that was originally assigned to the wool weavers, obviously a trade practised by many women workers.

[39] Denise Ryan examines the nature of women's activity within the Chester cycle. She concludes that the women who produced the Assumption are most likely wives of high-standing men who were part of a religious association. She argues that this implies 'that the spouses of men of influence in Chester, also enjoyed some degree of public, collective, recognition' (Ryan, 'Women', p. 153).

[40] Tydeman, *The Theatre in the Middle Ages*, p. 200.

[41] *Coventry*: REED, pp. 31 and 30 respectively.

[42] Anna Jean Mill has analysed the (1449–1552) Hull Bench Book 3/A and notes that the actor who performed Mrs Noah received higher wages than her husband. However this only occurred in 1513, the other years record Mr Noah as receiving a higher wage (Mill, 'The Hull Noah Play', p. 495).

[43] The correlation between apprentices and the playing of women's roles will be discussed in greater depth in the following chapter where I suggest that, unlike the Renaissance drama, there was not an established tradition which linked young boys to women's roles.

more than 'a woman to help in the kechyn'.[44] It is my argument that these tasks reflected both women's attachment to the home and their lack of public status. The tasks that they generally undertook needed minimal attendance at rehearsal and, simultaneously, afforded them little increased public visibility. The range of activities that women practised was piecemeal and mirrored their status within the medieval work place.

Unsurprisingly, women were frequently involved in the making of costumes and banners. The preponderance of women working as spinners and fabric makers has been commented upon within Chapter One, and women evidently utilised these skills within the production of medieval drama. Women were involved in selling and giving cloth and costumes, sewing, repairing and washing costumes and banners. At Chester, Widow Ellis was paid for supplying three yards of fringe for a banner and the 'wyfe of Thomas Poole' was reimbursed for sewing the fringe.[45] On occasions women lent the players costumes.[46] At Coventry 'maisturres Grymesby' lent the costume for the male actor playing Pilate's wife (presumably she was a woman large enough to costume a male apprentice and wealthy enough to provide the ornate robe demanded by the vain Procula).[47]

Records from a wider range of dramatic events beyond the mystery plays reveal the other roles which women undertook. Women provided social welfare for performers and were responsible for players during illness, sometimes they provided lodgings throughout the year. Newcastle records show instances when widows tended the town fool in his sickness. For example, in 1580 'wedowe belsaye' was paid sixteen pence for looking after the fool, John Watson. The payments continued on an *ad hoc* basis for the following two weeks and then became a regular quarterly payment.[48] Again, this aspect of women's participation is not surprising. The role of woman as comforter was established through various biblical figures: the mothering of the Virgin Mary, the piety of Mary of Bethany and Veronica, and the faith and devotion of Christ's female followers Joanna and Susanna. Women's

[44] *Coventry*: REED, p. 152. 1539 Corpus Christi Guild Account Book f. 322v.

[45] *Chester*: REED, p. 144. 1585–86 Innkeepers' Records f. 13. This record must relate to a time when the Chester plays were replaced by children's processions. There are no direct records which list Widow Ellis or Thomas Poole's wife as guild members. However, Mr and Mrs Poole were regular contributors to the festivities. The Innkeepers' Records of 1585–86 also show that a payment was made to Thomas Poole for 'workemanship' and that he and his wife received a beverage 'by promyse' for their labour. The 1573–74 Painters, Glaziers, Embroiders, and Stationers' Records f. 56 (*Chester*: REED, p. 100) show that 'Thomas Poole's child' played God, while the 1587–88 Treasurers Account Rolls mb 4d (*Chester*: REED, p. 151) show a payment to 'Poole for Triming of the mayor's mount', which may actually be a sewing task that Mrs Poole completed, an instance of women's work being hidden within the records.

[46] At other times wives donated fabric for performance occasions: 'Rec of mr bomvell of the gift of his wife a fyne maphyn of Calico cloth trlyd with silk to couer the Crosse in ye sepulcre' (*Chester*: REED, p. 30. 1534 Trinity Churchwardens Accounts f. 20v). To donate fabric for adorning the altar provided a tangible sign of the wealth of the donor; Mrs. Bomvell's 'charity' is perhaps questionable, and reflects a desire to be seen to be charitable (or to display her superfluous wealth). The Bomvells' charitable giving seems to have won them respect. The 1564–65 Treasurers Account Rolls mb 1 (*Chester*: REED, p. 74) list 'Mayor Bamvill', who could be from the same family.

[47] *Coventry*: REED, p. 69. 1487 Smiths' Accounts. The 1478 Coventry Smiths' Accounts record a payment for the mending of Dame Procula's costume (*Coventry*: REED, p. 61). Presumably it had fallen beyond repair and was replaced by Mistress Grymesby's garment?

[48] *Newcastle*: REED, p. 67. 1580 Chamberlains' Account Books f. 121 (1 week August). This record is repeated for the following two weeks then in 1581 it is shown as a standing quarterly payment.

role as a nurse or carer is also established through Widow Belsaye's charity towards the town fool; a position that is reinforced by the great number of female midwives during the Middle Ages.

Records show that mothers leased their children to pageants and parades for a fee or payment in-kind. The Coventry Weavers' Account Book of 1551 lists an 'Item payd to the Angelles and the womon for the chyld'.[49] The total sum is twelve pence and it is difficult to disentangle the child's fee from that of the angels. Records also reveal that women sometimes received payment in-kind rather than cash payments for the use of their children. Both the Coopers' and the Cordwainers and Shoemakers' records at Chester reveal in-kind payments to mothers: 'Item geven maytris hope a quatre of wyne when she brought her sonne iiijd.'[50] Mothers also increased the earning potential of their children by supplying costumes. One such mother partially costumed her child for the Chester Coopers' pageant: 'a perre of gloves to the chylde yat caryede the armes and a quarte of wyne to hys mother and for the makynge of his cloke xid.'[51]

Unsurprisingly, women were providers of food and drink at a variety of social gatherings. For example, James Aryey's wife received 28 shillings for providing thirty-six dinners on an election day in Kendal.[52] Refreshments provided by women included ale, bread, miscellaneous drinks and specialist foods such as haggis, bacon, livers and lights.[53] Not only did women supply food and drink but other records show them in the role of publican. At Chester records include payments made at 'mrs dauison taverne'.[54] Again, this aspect of women's involvement within medieval cultural life is to be expected: in the Introduction it is made clear that the supplying of victuals was an occupation often undertaken by women. Audrey Douglas and Peter Greenfield comment on the frequency of women as food preparers:

> More often wives of local men in good standing with the corporation are named as catering the victuals for the company. It was probable (and sometimes documented) that they ran taverns or eating-houses to supplement their husband's living.[55]

Women's involvement in this area did little to increase their status, instead it confirmed their role of servitude.

Records that pertain to drama performed at Cambridge University in the Middle Ages reflect a variety of dramatic endeavours, ranging from comedies influenced by Terence, to farces and moralities. Examples from Early Drama at Cambridge are also useful because of the wide-ranging tasks they reveal undertaken by women. Some

[49] *Coventry*: REED, p. 189.

[50] *Chester*: REED, p. 134. 1582 Cordwainers and Shoemakers' Records f. 85 (11 Nov). This record is after the last performance of the cycle plays in 1575 and probably refers to a procession.

[51] *Chester*: REED, p. 96. 1571 Coopers' Records f. 3–3v.

[52] *Cumberland, Westmoreland, Gloucs*: REED, p. 175. 1593–94 Kendal Chamberlain's Accounts 7 f. 23 (28 July).

[53] The Kendal Chamberlains' Accounts from 1585 show that William Foxes' wife served ale and bread (*Cumberland, Westmoreland, Gloucs*: REED, p. 172). The Chester Painters, Glaziers, Embroiderers and Stationers records ff. 35–7v show that Richard Halewoodes' wife provided haggis, bacon, cakes, bread and ale (*Chester*: REED, p. 83).

[54] *Chester*: REED, p. 53. 1553–54 Smiths, Cutlers and Plumbers Record ff. 14v–15 (July).

[55] *Cumberland, Westmoreland, Gloucs*: REED, p. 21.

of the evidence includes rather vague references to assistance during performances. For example, in 1547–48 Queen's College, Cambridge, shows a payment to Joan Prime 'for her labour when the comedies were put on'.[56] Although the nature of her work is not outlined, the word 'labour' suggests that she aided the production through a widespread series of tasks. This is typical of the piecemeal labour pattern which medieval women displayed.

Some of the tasks undertaken by women at the Cambridge dramas are more surprising since they involve stage construction. Records show that 'Martin Aresse, John Gayttes, and Margaret Vetule' were paid 'for the carriage of boards from Benet's and John's College and the return of them, for putting on the comedies'.[57] The use of the Latin 'vetula', or widow, here suggests that Margaret may have been running her deceased husband's business. The following year a woman was responsible for the loaning of a stage: 'Likewise for Catherine Hall for fifty-nine feet of planks, which had been cut from those which we received as a loan for the stage'.[58] Other women were involved in stage management tasks such as 'sweeping at the time of the plays' and the preparation of a Green Room.[59] Women's backstage chores extended to helping the actors into costume. A woman received eight pence for 'dressing ye players gere'.[60]

Many of the above roles which women undertook are unsurprising, since they are either domestic and could be performed by women from their own homes, or required little attendance at rehearsals. It is important to note that none of the activities that women performed, or were assigned, afforded them increased public standing or visibility within the social domain. In fact, it could be argued that the Corpus Christi cycles and the majority of medieval dramatic activity provided a prime opportunity for a display of hegemonic control by masculine institutions. While men sponsored the dramas and enacted them on the public stage, women provided invisible support through their piecemeal labours, and were spectators at the events.[61]

WOMEN AS AUDIENCE MEMBERS

The nature of live performance demands an interaction between the actors and spectators. Though it has long been recognised that communication flows from the actor to the spectator, more recent scholarship has investigated the ways in

[56] *Cambridge*: REED, vol. 1, p. 150. Joan Prime is also shown in 1559 making a settlement with Jerome the Piper to loan him pipes for a quarterly rent (*Cambridge*: REED, vol. 2, p. 206). The Cambridge Utinam f. 13v.

[57] *Cambridge*: REED, vol. 2, p. 149. 1546–47 Queen's College, Cambridge f. 144.

[58] *Cambridge*: REED, vol. 2, p. 150. 1547–48 Queen's College, Cambridge f. 156.

[59] *Cambridge*: REED, vol. 2, p. 170. 1550–51 Queen's College Magnum Journale f. 204 and *Cambridge*: REED, vol. 1, p. 155. 1548–49 King's College Memorandum Book f. 173 respectively. The King's College record shows a payment to 'Mother Lewyn for the furbishing of the chamber above the actors' room and of the store room below'.

[60] *Cambridge*: REED, vol. 1, p. 155. 1548–49 Christ's College Accounts f. 71.

[61] R.B. Dobson argues that the cycles demonstrate an exercising of the civic council's power. See R.B. Dobson, 'Craft Guilds and City: The Historical Origins of the York Mystery Plays Reassessed', *The Stage as Mirror: Civic Theatre in Late Medieval England*, ed. Alan E. Knight (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997), pp. 91–105.

which signals from the audience play a part in shaping the stage action.[62] This is a particularly important idea in relation to the Corpus Christi cycles. The cycles were community plays developed from the Corpus Christi procession: they reflected religious doctrine, and civic, communal and individual concerns. As stated in the Introduction, it has recently been acknowledged that the cycles were shaped by local factors, and were influenced by the demands and expectations of the spectators. Women comprised part of the audience and would have discreetly shaped the cycles through the two-way actor/audience response that drama utilises.

There is no evidence of women directly affecting the Corpus Christi performances through interjecting a commentary on the action or interrupting the performance to express their opinion. But there are many instances within the Corpus Christi cycles where the representation of women is deliberately emphasised for the spectator. David Bevington argues that in the N-Town Passion sequence, 'women in the audience were included in the satire by Satan's leering references to plunging necklines and luxurious furs'.[63] There are other examples when the stage action of the plays unavoidably places an emphasis on women's responses. Though the characters would be played by a man, how would female audience members react to Noah beating his wife, Gyll hiding the sheep, the blaming of Eve for the fall, and Procula's prophetic dream? It is possible to speculate that the presence of women within the audience provided an important context for such action.

Women were frequent spectators at a wide range of medieval entertainments. Proof of women's presence can be found in a range of contemporary illustrations. Early engravings capture women amongst the audience at entertainments within private houses, pageants, jousts, as well as the Corpus Christi cycles.[64] Contemporary female writers refer to women's presence at medieval festivities. Margery Kempe describes how she participated in a Corpus Christi procession at Bristol.[65] Christine de Pisan complains of the 'jostling of women trying to get in front of each other in processions at weddings and other gatherings'.[66] Documented records also substantiate women's presence at medieval entertainments. Evidence of female attendance at a Corpus Christi *feast* is contained within the 1546 Norwich Kirkpatrick Papers, folio 7.[67] This was perhaps a meal held by a confraternity to celebrate Corpus Christi. The rates for attendance at the feast are 8d for a man, 4d for his wife, a widow paid 6d for herself. These subscription rates provide a telling picture of the structure of power in late medieval society: individual

[62] For an account of the development of audience reception theory see Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 36–58.

[63] Bevington, 'Discontinuity', p. 412.

[64] Louise de Savoie's fifteenth century painting 'Les échecs amoureux' in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris shows women playing instruments and amongst the audience (reproduced in Sally Fox, ed. *The Medieval Woman: An Illuminated Book of Postcards* [London: Harper Collins, 1991], p. 30).

[65] This procession is most probably and ecclesiastical one rather than a dramatic one. Kempe describes the Corpus Christi procession: 'þe prestys born þe Sacrament a-bowte be town wyth solempne processyon, wyth meche lyth and gret solempnyte, as was worthy to be do, þe creatur folwyd ful of terys and deuocyon' (*The Book of Margery Kempe*, p. 107). It is thought that Kempe visited York in order to see the mystery plays performed.

[66] Christine de Pisan, *The Treasure of the City of Ladies*, p. 135.

[67] *Norwich*: REED, ed. David Galloway (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), p. 340.

public authority was composed of a descending hierarchy of men, then widows and finally wives.

It is important to recognise that the presence of women within the audience raises issues that stretch beyond notions of framing the action. The attendance of women at events could be used to emphasise social and gender divisions. It is essential that we do not assume that presence at a city event indicated full incorporation for women. Cambridge records draw attention to women's spectatorship at events. The 1563 Stoky's Book shows that for the visit of Elizabeth I a separate stand was built for women observers: 'In ye roode lofte an other stage for ladies and gentlewomen to stand on.'[68] The Queen's visit to Cambridge reveals that women were often isolated from men at social occasions, and it is a pattern that is frequently repeated. In 1474 in Coventry the mayoress and her 'sisters' dined separately when Queen Margaret visited, and there is evidence that at St Michael's Church, Coventry, members of the congregation were segregated from 1565 onwards.[69] For many women their attendance at social events did not affirm their place within society, but marked their marginality. The events were inevitably controlled by patriarchal institutions, for example, those of the civic Aldermen, the Church and the guilds. Public entertainments provided an opportunity to display hegemonic control. As Phythian-Adams remarks:

> To all those outside or on the edge of the community, therefore, ceremonies must have been a constant reminder of its discrete and predominantly masculine identity.[70]

It is therefore incorrect to assume that women's participation through their viewing marked their full incorporation into social and civic events. Through their spectatorship they took part in a complex public discourse on the nature of civic authority, but nevertheless, would often remain on the margins of this activity.

There were times when women's spectatorship at the Corpus Christi cycles held more authority. The York City Chamberlain's Rolls from 1475 show a woman controlling a pageant station: 'And of 14s 8d received from the wife of John Tollerer for the third station.'[71] Later records show that the 'lady mayoress and her sisters' leased the sixth station. The mayoress received the station rent-free, whereas other 'producers' that year paid twelve pence.[72] In 1522 two of the twelve stations were recorded as being leased to women.[73] At Chester, the widow Anne Webster successfully won a dispute which allowed her to watch the Whitsun plays from a room overlooking the pageant route.[74] There were occasions when women's control of the performance space extended further. Some wives were responsible for renting out spaces for performance. At York in 1454 John Pannall's wife received payment for allowing dramas to be performed in front of 'their' building in

[68] *Cambridge*: REED, vol. 1, p. 233.
[69] Charles Phythian-Adams raises this evidence in 'Ceremony and the Citizen', pp. 57–85.
[70] Ibid., p. 59.
[71] *York*: REED, vol. 1, trans. p. 775.
[72] *York*: REED, vol. 1, p. 820. 1521 City Chamberlain Rolls f. 58 shows the first such entry, although the Lady Mayoress leased the stations rent free in the years 1522–23 and 1526–28.
[73] The 1522 City Chamberlains Books show that the Mayoress had the twelfth station, while Dame Agnes Staveley, a widow, leased the sixth station for 12d. (*York*: REED, vol. 1, trans. p. 823).
[74] *Chester*: REED, pp. 80–81. The Corpus Christi plays are referred to as the Whitsun plays at this point since they had moved to that time.

Micklegate.[75] This evidence could be used to argue that women did assert some influence over the production of the cycle dramas. By controlling the leasing of seating, women dictated who viewed the pageants from this privileged position.

There are other ways in which women were involved within the production of the Corpus Christi cycles. The pageants were supported by 'pageant silver' collected from guild membership and fines. Women who achieved guild membership as *femmes soles* contributed directly to this fund. The 1420 York A/Y Memorandum Book entry that forbade Sunday trading specifically encompasses both genders:

> it was confined and ordered on the 5th day of February in the year of our Lord 1419 that no person of the aforesaid craft, man or woman, shall hereafter within the aforesaid city open his shops to place or show for sale anything proper to his craft on any Sunday.[76]

The punishment for disobeying the guild was a fine, half of which went towards the Corpus Christi play:

> any man or woman who henceforth shall have put up, or set up or joined a shop in the craft of ironmongery within the liberty of the city, unless he was previously an apprentice in the said craft and of good reputation, must pay at his beginning 13s 4d, that is, one half to the chamber and the other half to the aforesaid craft in support of the pageant.[77]

Women who falsely traded, as well as those who traded fairly under the guilds, directly supported the Corpus Christi cycles through contributing to the pageant silver.

In contributing to guild funds, women helped to financially support the pageants. However, it must be acknowledged that women's contribution displayed a limited degree of public power and patronage, and their support of the pageants did not increase their social standing. Similarly, their control of pageant stations afforded them a limited degree of authority. There is one record which is helpful in demonstrating the restraints which civic life placed upon women. At York in 1487, the death of the pageant master William Lambe meant that his widow might have been responsible for the Ironmongers' pageant. Instead, the House Books reveal the following minute:

> Also it was aggreed that my Lady Lambe Late wife to william lambe Aldreman and Co widowe During the tyme that she standes widowe shall not be chargid with the office of padgiant master in Irenmonger Craft.[78]

This ordinance indicates that medieval guild authorities did not expect women to participate directly in the production of the pageants. It appears to have been

[75] *York*: REED, vol. 1, trans. p. 761. 1454 City Chamberlain's Rolls mb 2. Presumably their building was close to one of the three possible stations on Micklegate, that near the sites of Holy Trinity, St Martins, or St John's Church.
[76] *York*: REED, vol. 1, p. 720.
[77] Ibid.
[78] *York*: REED, vol. 1, p. 153.

deemed a task beyond their public role. However this record contains further ambiguities. There is a hint that Lady Lambe would have been expected to serve as pageant master following the death of her husband. As a women she was expected to take on her husband's commitments. Furthermore, the edict suggests that Lady Lambe is only excused her role while she is a widow; though she surely cannot have been expected to take on the job if she remarried another man. This rather ambiguous record suggests that occasionally women were afforded more power than might be expected.

WOMEN'S PERFORMANCE

This chapter has primarily been concerned with identifying how medieval women participated in dramatic activity and what role they played within the staging of the mystery plays. What has been readily identified is that women very rarely performed in these civic dramas. It is curious to speculate as to why this is the case, because the majority of scholarship to date has dealt rather inadequately with this question. The influence of Latinate drama, the inaudibility of women's voices and their exclusion from guild membership are doubtful reasons for the exclusion of women from performance. In order to determine the real factors that prevented women from performing in the cycle dramas it is helpful to examine the circumstances in which they were permitted to perform. Through examining the wide scope of dramatic events where women did perform it should be possible to identify the circumstances that also prevented their participation.

The first records of legitimate female performance within Britain (that is excluding itinerant players) are from a Benedictine manuscript dating from the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries. It shows Barking women playing the three Marys in the *Visitatio*.[79] There is other evidence that points to female performance within convents. Lady Katherine of Sutton, the Abbess of Barking from 1363 to 1376, arranged dramatic episodes for Holy Week and Easter performances by 'sisters' at her convent.[80] Within Europe the work of Hildegard of Bingen and Hrotswitha indicates that female performance may have been more widespread.[81] If their texts were enacted rather than merely read, then female performance in European abbeys would not have been uncommon, and it is possible to speculate that there were further such practices in Britain beyond those of Barking. However, such performances are unhelpful in analysing women's participation in the medieval drama. Private performances by nuns were not genuine public displays: they took place in the closed world of the abbey. Unlike the performance of the Corpus Christi cycles, which occurred in the open streets, religious performances were played to a limited audience and one which was primarily female. Such performances were sanctioned because they took place within a controlled space. Likewise, lay medieval religious 'performances' in Britain, such as the Candlemas

[79] Rosemary Woolf, *The English Mystery Plays* (London: Routledge, 1972), p. 19.
[80] Karl Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933), p. 165.
[81] There is debate as to whether convent dramas such as those by Hildegard and Hrotswitha were performed or whether they were read out loud. Peter Dronke believes the plays were enacted (Peter Dronke, ed. *Women Writers of the Middle Ages* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984], p. 63).

celebrations and processions, often included women's 'performance', but these took place within a licenced time and space. Records from Beverley show that lay religious processions included 'all the brethren and sisteren' of the Guild of St Mary but occurred within a time and space that was carefully restricted.[82]

Analysis of other civic, social and cultural practices reveals that women's performance occurred within a similarly licenced and enclosed forum. Amongst the civic entertainments that women participated in were events such as the Lord Mayor's Show, or civic pageantry which marked the visit of a monarch to the city. Such civic performance frequently involved women taking part in processions or dances. Importantly, these forms of performance did not include women taking on a role or characterisation. However they did entail the putting on of a specific costume in order to enact a symbolic and artificial display in front of an audience. There are many examples of such events to be found amongst the Records of Early English Drama. A wide range of women from many ranks and of differing ages undertook these performances. For example, in 1523 women are listed as receiving payments for dancing at the London Lord Mayor's Show.[83] The Coventry Leet Book of 1457 records a visit by Queen Margaret in which women joined her procession in order of their rank: 'And then folowed oure seid soverayn Lady and the Duches of Bukyngham bere here Treyne and there folowed then mony moo ladyes yon her mantels surcotes and other appareyll.'[84] Lady Isabel Berkeley's 1516 funeral cortege included a lavish procession through Coventry, which was led by a torch-lit procession of thirty-five women from her livery dressed in black gowns and hooded. Thirty-three crafts carrying their Corpus Christi torches followed them.[85] This record is particularly interesting in that it is an occasion when rank was disrupted: middle-ranking women preceded the guild representatives. It is important to recognise that all the above 'performances' took place within a strictly controlled framework and did not involve women engaging in the representation of character roles or impersonation. There is however an example of women speaking within these civic events. In Norwich at the Lord Mayor's show in 1556 there appeared 'fower younge Maydes Richelie appareilled who represented the fower Carnell vertews' and each gave a lengthy speech.[86] The idea of women representing abstract characters such as virtues seems also to have been less threatening than portraying more identifiable roles such as Mrs Noah.

The performance by women at social events was licenced because displays took place within a closed society. These events were only performed in front of a limited group of members. Amongst such performances are dances by girls for the collection of church moneys, private divertissements and the role-playing by women at tournaments. The 1498–99 St Andrew's Churchwardens' Accounts from Plymouth show that Agnes Dowfter and Katheryn Hoker deposited eleven shillings

[82] Gail McMurray Gibson, 'Blessing from Sun and Moon: Churching as Women's Theatre', *Bodies and Disciplines: Intersections of Literature and History in Fifteenth Century England*, eds. Barbara Hanawalt and David Wallace (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 41.

[83] Bevington, 'Discontinuity', p. 12.

[84] *Coventry*: REED, p. 36. 1457 Leet Book f. 173.

[85] *Coventry*: REED, pp. 507–9. The record is taken from Bliss Burbidge's *Old Coventry*, where it appears wrongly dated as 1506.

[86] *Norwich*: REED, pp. 245.

raised as 'dawnsyng mony'. The records imply that the money was donated to help build a new church steeple. The charitable purpose of their performance validated their appearance in public.[87] In fact, public dancing by women was a frequent parish activity. Audrey Douglas has examined records of parish dances in Salisbury in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. She traces four distinct categories of dancers that participated in the Frick Friday dances (held on the Friday of Whitsun week): married women, young female servants, daughters and scholars or boys.[88] These dances were performed within a household context, but also sanctioned by the church. The dancers, or trepidantes, were paid according to their status: married women received 6s 8d, servants 3s 4d, girls 20d and boys 12d. In adhering to this status the customary dance seems to maintain tradition and rank. Although as Douglas points out the activity of dancing may have been a release from social constraints:

> For the female trepidantes, the dance meant perhaps escape from convention into a momentary freedom denied them in normal circumstances, more especially since dance was an activity often condemned by the very authority (the church) that was in this case overseeing it.[89]

Private divertissements by itinerant players also provide evidence of female performance. An important banquet could easily be accompanied by a performance, such as a dance, piece of acrobatics or rudimentary drama. Such is the case in which foreign actors in disguise are recorded as performing a type of enactment of Christ's passion. In 1520 Edward Stafford, Duke of Buckingham, played host to French men and two women 'playing afore the said Duc the passion of our lorde by a vise'. Included, perhaps as a prologue or interlude to the players, was a performance by 'a young maide a Tumbeller'.[90] A female dancer and acrobat, Matilda Makejoy, is recorded as entertaining Edward I in 1296 and 1306, and Edward II in 1311.[91] Women also participated in a whole range of freakish side-shows: these acts could accompany markets or be part of fairgrounds, though again they were often performed in private houses. In Plymouth in 1528 the Duke of Suffolk's company presented 'the daunsyng bere and the dansyng wyff'.[92] Such displays

[87] *Devon*: REED, p. 448.

[88] Audrey Douglas, ' "Oure Thansynge Day": Parish Dance and Procession in Salisbury', *English Parish Drama*. Ludus: Medieval and Early Renaissance Theatre and Drama, no. 1, eds. Alexandra F. Johnston and Wim Husken (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1996), p. 48. In fact Sally-Beth Maclean has found evidence that women were more successful fund-raisers than their male counterparts (Sally-Beth Maclean, 'Hocktide: A Reassessment of a Popular Pre-Formation Festival', *Festive Drama*, ed. Meg Twycross, Papers from the 6th Triennial Colloquium of the International Society for the Study of Medieval Theatre, Lancaster 1989 [Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1996], p. 233). In some parts of the country the wives of the Churchwardens were responsible for organising the event; evidence that women did take on an organisational role with the medieval cultural world. Sally-Beth Maclean points out that the Southwark Churchwardens' wives organised the hocking event (ibid., p. 236).

[89] Ibid., p. 49.

[90] *Cumberland, Westmoreland and Gloucs*: REED, p. 359. 1520–1 Household Accounts of Edward Stafford, Duke of Buckingham. Since this recording is forty-five years after Barnstaple's disputed female tumbler it can hardly be the same one.

[91] Stokes, 'Women and Mimesis', p. 181.

[92] *Devon*: REED, p. 223. 1528–29 Plymouth Receiver's Account f. 173.

were obviously made by itinerant players, women who already held a position of low regard. Public performance would not threaten their status.

For ladies of noble rank tournaments provided an avenue for social performance. The one-time battle enactments started to involve dramatic elements. These chivalrous displays began with the knight dedicating himself to protecting his lady's honour. The design of the fourteenth-century *Pas d'Armes* tournament placed women centrally within the dramatic spectacle. The knight was responsible for defending his lady who was sheltered in an 'obstacle'. Wickham explains: 'The obstacle was usually some tower, gateway or other artificially constructed object which was made to house a lady or ladies in whose service the knight or knights had pledged themselves to accomplish deeds of unprecedented valour.'[93] The highly artificial setting, costuming and jousting of the tournaments set very defined boundaries for this act of female performance. It is difficult to argue that such examples are evidence of direct female performance, but they do reveal that women were allowed to 'role-play' in public. The adoption of another persona is clearly one step towards dramatic activity.

The last area of women's performance that I will examine is that of festive enactment. The medieval world indulged in a large repertoire of celebratory entertainments, which included summer games, harvest and Christmas dances, and hocking. Early records provide evidence that women were appointed as May Queens and Ladies of Christmas, although the former later gave way to cross-dressed practices and men were appointed queens.[94] Hocktide, a game where men captured women at word-point and bound them before the women begged for their release, provided participatory sport for women, particularly in Coventry, where the practice seems to have developed into a two-day event, with women retaliating on the second day.[95]

Festive playing in Britain seems to have been open to married and unmarried women. The festive licence that such games held meant that women could perform in a manner that was removed from the concerns of 'real life'. The licence was afforded by the ritual and specific timing of the acts, and the use of dressing-up or disguise which prevented the participants from seeming to be their real selves. Records also reveal that the practice of such games raised money for the church, which indicates that such revelry was 'permitted'.[96]

Natalie Zemon Davies argues that although festive practices were licenced by male authorities they also provided a model of women's empowerment which could be used to reshape gender power within society.[97] Such a case could

[93] Wickham, *The Medieval Theatre*, p. 154.

[94] Ibid., pp. 139–40.

[95] Wickham states that men captured women on Monday, while on Tuesday they retaliated (Wickham, *The Medieval Theatre*, p. 139), while Axton believes the gaming occurred the other way around (Richard Axton, 'Festive Culture in Country and Town', *The Middle Ages*, The Cambridge Guide to the Arts in Britain, vol. 2, ed. Boris Ford [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988], p. 147). Either way the violence by women was licensed by the yearly festive tradition.

[96] Records from Cambridge show the receipt of hocktide moneys from women. 1517–18 St Mary's Churchwardens' Accounts f. 27v, show 'Item received of Mistress Sabyn Mistress butt Mistress halked and other wyfs of money gatherd by them on hock mondaye xxs' (*Cambridg*e: REED, vol. 1, p. 89).

[97] Natalie Zemon Davies, 'Women on Top: Symbolic Sexual Inversion and Political Disorder in Early Modern Europe', *The Reversible World*, ed. Barbara Babcock (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1978), pp. 147–90.

obviously be made for the hocktide games. There are other occasions when placing women on display meant 'the real twinge of the pinching shoe is felt'.[98] Evidence of the effectiveness of gaming at threatening social boundaries can be found in the complaints that such practices received. In 1244 the Bishop of Lincoln complained of the clergy members who supported the sado-masochistic game 'Colle to me the rysshys grene', a wooing game which entailed tying girls' hands with rush rings. The Bishop clearly felt that such openly sexual games were in danger of inciting indecency in everyday life. Robert Mannyng in *Handlyng Synne* protested that beauty pageants and the crowning of young maids promoted lechery.[99]

There were moments when festive celebration seemed to affect 'reality', but these types of entertainment do not provide a very useful comparison with women's participation in medieval drama. The dramatic context of the performance of plays is radically different from the event structuring of these festive occasions. But what is evident is that under particular circumstances women could perform and that medieval drama, and in particular the mystery plays, did not reproduce those circumstances.

WOMEN AND THE MYSTERY PLAYS

Examples of female performance in late medieval England occur when women displayed themselves within an enclosed social environment. The courtly dances, processions and festive gaming in which women participated were events which occurred within a fixed time and space. The only times that complaints about female performance can be found are when these boundaries are crossed. For example, the 1601–2 Gloucester Diocese Consistory Court Case Book for Littledean reveals a number of women, including a widow, excommunicated for 'dancing at prayer time'.[100] The act of their dancing occurred outside its appropriate time. There are similar complaints made against women's performance when it occurred in an unlicenced place. Records reveal an intolerance of travelling performers. For example, at Norwich banns were issued against the performance by individual male and female troubadours or travelling singers: 'William Nynges his wife was Commaunded that neyther he nor his wife shall singe nor sell any Ballettes within this Cytty after this day upon payne of whippynge.'[101] Anxiety over female performance is also present when gender boundaries were encroached. The earliest record of female 'performance' comes from the prohibition of cross-dressing. Early Devon records dating between 1150–70 state:

> From the Council of Rheims: If anyone has danced before the churches of the Saints, or if any (man) has changed his appearance (by dressing) in women's clothing, or

[98] Power, *Medieval Women*, p. 11.
[99] Richard Axton, *European Drama of the Early Middle Ages* (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1974), p. 148.
[100] *Cumberland, Westmoreland, Gloucs*: REED p. 332.
[101] *Norwich*: REED, p. 126. 1604–5 Chamberlain's Accounts XI f. 110v (15 Nov).

> (any) women (by dressing) in men's clothing, he or she would do penance for 3 years after promising amendment of life.[102]

It is clear that notions of ideal conduct affected women's performance. The insistence on decorum is in evidence from numerous conduct treatises of the late medieval times. The 1392 behaviour manual completed by The Householder of Paris for his wife advises that dancing is permitted 'so long as you neither seek nor try to go to feasts and dances of lords of too high rank, for that does not become you, nor is it compatible with your rank or mine'.[103] In fact *The Thewis of Gud Women*, the fifteenth-century Middle-Scots treatise, goes further and warns that women should not visit the 'clerk-playis'.[104] For the rising artisan population of the medieval town, such concerns may have prevented their involvement with the cycles.

I have highlighted the way in which social code and expectations of decorum shaped the unwritten performance regulations that mitigated against medieval women, but there are other issues which need to be discussed. Amongst these is the influence of the history of performance aesthetics. Sue-Ellen Case draws attention to this factor. Since Greek times, the stage appearance of women had been associated with sexual liberty and impropriety. It was beneath a woman's decorum to appear in such a light, and acting was held in parallel with prostitution. Behind such reactions there seems a fear that man's sexuality would be ignited by seeing women on stage, and social chaos would result. As Sue-Ellen Case points out:

> banning women from the stage would prevent the stage from becoming the site for immoral sexual conduct . . . If women performed in the public arena, the sexuality inscribed upon their bodies would elicit immoral sexual responses from the men, bringing disorder to the social body.[105]

Case suggests that women did not perform in the Corpus Christi cycles because the church associated public performance with sexual freedom, and it was feared that prostitution would become more widespread if women performed publicly. Certainly this attitude is to be borne out by an anecdote from Henry VI's fifteenth-century court. At Christmas time a courtier arranged for a bare-breasted woman to dance in front of the King. The King immediately spotted the 'trap' and turned his back on the company and went off to his room. The incident indicates that a public display of sexual freedom was seen to be intolerable.[106]

There is another factor which it is important to consider. There is little evidence which suggests that women in England spoke during their performances at social, civic and church events.[107] Their roles placed their bodies on display, but never

[102] *Devon*: REED, p. 317. 1150–70 Penitential of Bartholomew of Exeter f. 168, cols. 1–2.
[103] Emilie Amt, ed. *Women's Lives*, p. 318.
[104] *The Good Wife Taught Her Daughter and The Good Wife Wold a Pilgrimage and The Thewis of Gud Women*, ed. Tauno F. Mustanoja, Annale Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae B 61/2 (Helsinki: Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae, 1948), p. 83.
[105] Case, *Feminism*, p. 20.
[106] Tydeman, ed. *The Medieval European Stage*, p. 270.
[107] The only evidence I have come across is that of the Somerset women who participated in guild drama in 1607. The churchhouse play included two women whose roles were to satirise local opponents of festive games (cited in Stokes, 'Women and Mimesis', pp. 176–77).

their voices. The evidence of women's performance in France counteracts the notion that women's voices were not strong enough to be audible on open-air stages. The silence of women has more to do with the fact that they did not have a vocal public identity. As outlined in Chapter One, women were not afforded the rights of public speech, in fact they were often deliberately kept silent.

Of the performance records that have been examined, there has been no mention of the public display of the scold. The 1486 Hereford Borough Ordinance declares that any woman found to be breaking the quiet of the city is to stand barefoot, with loosened hair on the cucking stool.[108] The Ordinance goes on to ensure that the offending woman achieves the largest possible audience: she is placed at a cross-roads on the entrance to the city. As Edith Benkov points out, there existed within medieval times 'a fundamental belief that women are able manipulators of language and that their skill can only be constructed as threatening to established order'.[109] This public enactment of punishment, the castigation of the scold for talking, demonstrates the degree to which women's speech was considered subversive.

Perhaps women's exclusion from the stage was a design on behalf of the male producers. But it is an underestimation of the importance of women to medieval society to suggest that they played no part within the production of the Corpus Christi cycles. As I have shown, there is evidence to suggest that women were involved in drama in the late Middle Ages. Many of their duties, however, did little to enhance their social standing. The backstage tasks undertaken by women were menial. They were servers of food and drink, comforters or seamstresses: all duties which could be prepared for at home. Women's involvement in the Corpus Christi cycles mirrored the pattern of their working lives. Their tasks were piecemeal and of low status. Unfortunately, much of their activity did not reduce the social and gender divisions within medieval society. In fact, at times the social marginalisation of women was increasingly felt through their attendance at the cycles and other events where their status as unincorporated town members became apparent. Women's lack of performance within the cycle dramas needs to be fully assessed. In particular, it is time that issues such as women's exclusion from guild membership, weakened voices and the tradition of male church drama performance were re-evaluated. Instead, the impact of the aesthetic history of women on stage, controls of women's behaviour, ideals of decorum and, most importantly, the lack of public voice that women held need to be fully assessed. Women's involvement in the production of the cycles demonstrates that they played quietly. Their participation was often invisible, but it is incorrect to assume that they were absent from the cycles.

[108] Goldberg, *Women in England*, p. 234.
[109] Edith Benkov, 'Language and Women', p. 265

Chapter 3

CROSS-DRESSING AND PERFORMANCE

Simone de Beauvoir famously stated that one was not born a woman but became one. In privileging the importance of social and cultural influences over biological ones, de Beauvoir highlights issues which are pertinent to the stage representation of gender. One might argue, and Judith Butler is one of the most notable proponents of this idea, that any performance by women is merely the portrayal of a set of learned gestures: a fictitious act. In other words, women are never present upon the stage, instead the spectator views a representation of womanhood. Other contemporary feminist theory has complicated the study of female performance further. Sue-Ellen Case, drawing on Ann Kaplan's film theories, utilises the notion of 'the male gaze' in which fictional women are constructed in order to be viewed by men. In this way, Case suggests, 'women appear in order to be looked upon rather than do the looking'.[1] Case draws attention to the portrayal of women as 'cultural courtesans', invented by men, to serve the purpose of being looked at.[2] Drawing upon the work of Butler and Case it is possible to conclude that there are no women present upon the stage, but merely a cultural construction: the sign of woman is present but never woman herself.

The absence of women from the medieval stage complicates the issues of gender representation still further. As has been shown in the previous chapter, women rarely performed upon the stage and were more probably represented by male actors. This playing of gender, or gender mimicking, offers a new set of problems that must be overcome in order to 'read' the performance act. When men play women the distance between 'real' women and the culturally created imitations is increased. It is possible to argue that by having men play women the representation of woman is absent from the stage. Any 'voice' that may be assigned to women through the presence of a female character is lost. However, since Judith Butler argues that gender is 'an act that has been rehearsed' and there is no real or 'born' gender, and that all gender behaviour is created through 'a stylised repetition of acts', then the representation of both genders can be seen to be an act of play.[3] The

[1] Case, *Feminism*, p. 120.

[2] Peggy Phelan has argued this point further and believes that women's roles in Elizabethan theatre are present to validate male authority. Women's roles are fetishised images of men's desire; their embodiment as stage characters is a thin veil or disguise of male fantasy (Peggy Phelan, 'Cross Dressing Cultures', *Crossing the Stage*, ed. Lesley Ferris [London and New York: Routledge, 1993], p. 161).

[3] Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. 277 and p. 270.

distance between transvestism on stage and 'real' womanhood is irrelevant, since both genders are fictitious. As Garber suggests: 'Transvestite theater recognises that *all* of the figures on stage are impersonators.'[4] In other words, the artificiality of the premise of role play is highlighted through having men play women. Both women's and men's characters are shown to be fictitious.

This chapter will explore the implications of men playing women's roles within medieval drama. Beyond the work undertaken by Claire Sponsler, there has been little research into the use of 'female impersonators' on the medieval stage.[5] Sponsler argues that cross-dressing upon the medieval stage has somehow been taken for granted.[6] There is, however, an extensive study of Renaissance cross-dressing by scholars such as Juliet Dusinberre, Stephen Greenblatt, Jean Howard, Lisa Jardine and Kathleen McLuskie. The concepts raised by their studies are helpful in developing a critical discourse through which medieval gender play can be examined.

There are many reasons why critics of the Renaissance have paid greater attention to the notion of transvestism. First, the area of Renaissance studies is generally more established: there are more extant play texts, greater performance records, permanent theatre buildings and individual playwrights who offer an opportunity for study, which the anonymity of medieval authorship does not provide. Second, cross-dressing was at its most popular in society during Elizabethan and Jacobean times. It had begun to be prevalent in the 1570s and reached its height, despite James I's attempts to destroy the practice in 1606–7, by the 1620s.[7] Third, late twentieth-century interest in gender studies has provoked much curiosity about the figure of the boy actor. Documentary and textual evidence shows that boy actors were used within Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre, but there is no such evidence that this was always the case in medieval theatre. This interest in boy performers has led to hypotheses amongst Renaissance scholars of possible audience homoerotic interest in the prepubescent performers.

Since there is little research into cross-dressing on the medieval stage, I will draw upon Renaissance scholarship of these 'transvestite' practices and apply relevant analysis to medieval drama. In doing so, differences between medieval and Renaissance transvestite practice will be established. I will argue that the employment of cross-dressing within medieval drama and the Corpus Christi cycles provided a challenge for the audience members by highlighting the artifice of the dramas and emphasising certain gender issues. I will conclude that, somewhat ironically, cross-dressed men provided a greater voice for women's concerns than medieval society would have otherwise granted.

In using the term 'transvestism', I am, of course, applying a notion which is anachronistic to medieval times. (Peter Ackroyd believes Magnus Hirshfield first

[4] Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York and London: Penguin, 1993), p. 40.

[5] The term 'female impersonators' was used by Robertson Davies in his 1939 study *Shakespeare's Boy Actors* (cited in Garber, *Vested Interests*, p. 89). As I go on to argue, much of the terminology for this chapter is, of necessity, derived from Renaissance scholarship.

[6] Robert Clark and Claire Sponsler, 'Queer Play: The Cultural Work of Crossdressing in Medieval Drama', *New Literary History* 28 (1997), p. 319.

[7] Ann Hermann, 'Travesty and Transgression: Transvestism in Shakespeare, Brecht, and Churchill', *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. 295.

defined the term in 1925.)[8] There is a danger that I will be using modern perspectives on gender and sexuality through which to gaze upon the medieval stage. For this reason I will be looking at evidence of cross-dressing within society, as well as that obtained from theatre records and extant texts. As Vern and Bonnie Bullough point out, 'it should be obvious that cross dressing is influenced by cultural and social-structural variables'.[9]

Since Greek and Roman times anxiety about women appearing in public was prevalent. As I have suggested in Chapter Two, female performance was equated with prostitution and sexual liberty. Through banning women from performing, the authorities sought to defend the moral status of the stage. I will be arguing later in this chapter that the absence of women performers actually provided the medieval stage with considerable licence. Freedom of speech was greater since there was no concern that women characters were speaking out of turn. However, the resultant use of cross-dressed men to play women was far from an acceptable solution: there was unease attached to such masquerading. Medieval authorities disapproved of men masquerading as women.[10]

CULTURAL CROSS-DRESSING IN THE MIDDLE AGES

An awareness of the 'evils' of cross-dressing was established long before the Middle Ages. The much-cited edict from Deuteronomy 22.5 reads:

> The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment: for all that do so *are* abomination unto the LORD thy God.

However, the use of transvestism on stage had been established since Aristophanes' exposure of the hypocrisy of tragic poets, *Thesmophoriazusae*. Indeed, the practice of cross-dressing was evident in early medieval Europe. In 590 at Poitiers, Gregory of Tours noted a male transvestite at St Radegund's nunnery.[11] Perhaps he took advantage of his position amongst the women of the nunnery. Accounts reveal that St Jerome was tricked into wearing women's clothing as he hurriedly dressed to reach Matins. Doubtless the tricksters wanted to infer that he had spent the night with a woman and mistakenly donned her attire. The *vitae* of Saints reminded medieval clergy that cross-dressing was a frequent occurrence. However, much of the ecclesiastical gender reversal was from woman to man: Saints Pelagius, Anna and most famously, Joan of Arc, all dressed as men to secure their entrance to male domains.[12] This last case provides an illuminating window

[8] Peter Ackroyd, *Dressing Up* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979), p. 27.
[9] Vern and Bonnie Bullough, *Cross-Dressing, Sex and Gender* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), p. 45.
[10] Ibid.
[11] J. Frantzen, Allen, 'When Women Aren't Enough', *Studying Medieval Women: Sex, Gender, Feminism*, A Speculum Book, ed. Nancy Partner (Cambridge, Mass: Medieval Academy of America, 1993), p. 117.
[12] The most striking female was St Wilgefortis (also known as Uncumber) who completed a physical gender-crossing by growing a beard and moustache to avoid her marriage and devote herself to a contemplative life. (See Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, p. 36 for examples of other female

into medieval reactions to cross-dressing. Joan was criticised for betraying her natural gender, for failing to retain 'anything on your person which shows that you are a woman'.[13] This reaction demonstrates a fear of the frailty of natural gender distinctions. It is also apparent that while male to female cross-dressing tends to lower the status of the disguiser, women who dressed as men tried to increase their position.[14]

Festivals and rituals also included the practice of cross-dressing. The Faculty of Theology at Paris University noted the Feast of Fools in 1445 as having priests 'who danced in the choir as women'.[15] There are many examples of cross-dressing within rituals and ceremonies in England. Many of them are difficult to date as some draw upon old traditions, while others are more recent. In England, a cross-dressing festival thought to have occurred since the Middle Ages, Castleton's Oak Apple Day (May 29), included men dressed as the May Queen driving horse-drawn carts through the town.[16] In the Pennines on Old Year's Night men dressed as women, with their coats inside out, would visit and tidy houses in order to prepare for the New Year.[17] Hobby-horse festivals included transvestism, as did the Robin Hood games with a male Maid Marion.[18] Buffoonery and misrule are attached to such festivals – they allowed the opportunity for a release from accepted order; it is unlikely that cross-dressing in these circumstances caused much discomfort. Carnivalesque practices throughout Europe provide evidence of 'permitted' transvestism.[19]

Within England there are also more formal examples of both male to female and female to male cross-dressing practices. These examples exist within a large range of circumstances: at tournaments and civic divertissements, within Parish entertainments and dancing. What is notable about each of these occasions is that they are accompanied by a sense of unease about the effects of the transvestite act. One of the most striking examples of early cross-dressing is at a tournament held by Edward III in 1348, where fifty women were present 'almost as if they were taking part in the sport . . . dressed in various and amazing men's clothes . . . parti-coloured tunics, half one colour and half another colour, with short hoods . . . [and carrying] knives called daggers'.[20] The image of a chorus of women cross-dressed as male athletes is indeed a powerful one. It is not clear

saints who undertook gender changes, also the appendix to Valerie Hotchkiss, *Clothes Make the Man* [New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1996] contains a useful list of female transvestite saints).

[13] The criticism of Joan is taken from the condemnation of Joan by the University of Paris in 1431 (cited in Carolyne Larrington, ed. *Women and Writing in Medieval Europe* [London and New York: Routledge, 1995], p. 183). Natalie Zemon Davies argues that there are more examples of women cross-dressing in pre-Industrial England than there are of men. (See Davies, 'Women on Top', pp. 147–90).

[14] See Bullough, *Cross-Dressing*, p. 46.

[15] Ackroyd, *Dressing Up*, p. 52.

[16] Bob Pegg, *Rites and Riots: Folk Customs in Britain and Europe* (Poole, Dorset: Blandford Press, 1981), p. 40.

[17] Ibid., p. 73.

[18] Ibid., p. 75. As Vern and Bonnie Bullough observe there is mention made within a letter from John Paston of a male servant participating in the Robin Hood plays (Bullough, *Cross-Dressing*, p. 65).

[19] For further details of European transvestism see the Nurremberg carnivals as outlined in Bullough, *Cross-Dressing*, p. 66.

[20] Cited in Stokes, 'Women and Mimesis', p. 187.

whether the tunics were short and thus revealed the women's legs. The fact that they were armed with daggers is a metaphor for the danger that such cross-dressing implies. As Hotchkiss asks: 'Does the empowerment of the woman in disguise empower women in general or is there a residual uneasiness with the phenomenon?'[21] Certainly the evidence from some court records demonstrates that transvestism by both genders was considered to be inappropriate and should be curtailed. The crime was seen sufficient to take to court. The inappropriateness of cross-dressing is reflected in the tone of an entry in the 1603 Westbury consistory court where Thomas Houlder and Barbara Brown 'did play the mummers by night, and hee ware her clothes and shee ware his'.[22]

The Corporation of London Records Office reveals a court record from 1394 which provides some insight into medieval attitudes towards transvestism. Here a man John Rykener, cross-dressed as a woman and calling himself 'Eleanor', was arrested for having sex on the street with another man.[23] John/Eleanor had been trained to cross-dress by another woman and had even served an embroidery apprenticeship in Oxford. As Karras and Boyd note, it is unclear why this case is recorded. There is no punishment attached to the record and if Rykener was to be charged with prostitution or sodomy the case should have been sent to a church court.[24] But the case does give a sense of a medieval institution grappling with gender distinctions. As Carolyn Dinshaw observes, the recorder's language attempts to maintain a sense of gender assignation, and descriptions of Rykener's intercourse with men and women follows Thomas Aquinas's model of active/passive sexuality and gender.[25] But Rykener's case clearly disrupts what is expected of male behaviour, as Karras and Boyd note: 'Male cross-dressing undermined the male dominance and status that these practices created, exposing gender roles as performative and constructed.'[26] If cultural cross-dressing raised such uncertainty within medieval times, how might theatrical practice fare? As I have previously mentioned, there are few established critical practices which encompass the medieval stage, however the investigation into that of the Renaissance stage is well charted.

TRANSVESTISM ON THE RENAISSANCE STAGE

Fears of transvestism on the Renaissance stage were raised through the pamphlet writings of Elizabethan scholars. The pamphlet war, conducted between 1580 and 1600, debated the morality of men's cross-dressing on stage. Evidence of its effectiveness is revealed by an awareness of the dishonour that participating in transvestism brought. The 1598–99 memoirs of Hugh Cholmley discuss the case of his

[21] Hotchkiss, *Clothes Make the Man*, p. 9.
[22] Ibid., p. 178.
[23] Dinshaw notes that Rykener's name seems almost fictitious since it encompasses 'reckoner' or charger, reflecting his status as a prostitute, and a story-teller. Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, North Carolina and London: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 103.
[24] See Ruth Mazo Karras and David Lorenzo Boyd, ' "Ut cum muliere": A Male Transvestite Prostitute in Fourteenth-Century London', *Premodern Sexualities*, eds. Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), p. 102.
[25] Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, pp. 107–8.
[26] Karras and Boyd, 'Ut cum muliere', p. 109.

relative, Richard, who brought the family's name into disrepute by performing a woman's role at Cambridge:

> He was the tallest of stature and well-shaped. His mother was a very beautiful woman, contributing, as did his grandmother, to the whitening of those black shadows formerly incident to the family; for when he was very young, his hair was of a light colour, and his complexion fair; and acting the part of a woman in a comedy at Trinity College, in Cambridge, he did it with great applause, and was esteemed beautiful.[27]

The controversy of such cross-dressing affected Simonds D'Ewes as late as 1635–36. He 'purposelie avoided' a play at Trinity College, Cambridge, 'Because of womens apparell worne in it, by boyes and youths'.[28]

Central to the pamphleteers' argument was the notion that performing as a transvestite could corrupt the actor. Such fears are to be found in Stephen Gosson's 1579 treatise, *The School of Abuse*. Here he suggests that such practice would 'effeminate' the mind.[29] The dangers of imitating another person were highlighted in Gosson's *Playes Confuted*:

> to declare our selves by wordes or by gestures, to be otherwise than we are, is an act executed where it should not, therefore a lye.[30]

This notion of deceit was seen by Philip Stubbes in *Anatomy of Abuses* to lead to a lack of division within gender assignation. For Stubbes, the appearance of binary gender divisions was sullied by cross-dressing:

> Our Apparel was given us as a signe distinctive to discern betwixt sex and sex, and therfore one to weare the Apparel of another sex is to participate with the same, and to adulterate the veritie of his own kind.[31]

The pamphleteers' fear of transvestism reflects an uncertainty about gender identity within Elizabethan times. If it is possible to become like a woman through wearing women's attire in public then sexual identity must be unstable, since it is denoted through clothing rather than fixed gender differences. Unsurprisingly, the debate about cross-dressing began to centre on the emergence of new gender categories, for example, 'The Man-Woman' or 'The Womanish-Man'.[32] For anti-theatricalists, the implications of cross-dressing and the instability that it threatened, provided a reason to argue for the closure of the theatres.[33]

The focus of the Oxford debate on cross-dressing, led by John Rainolds, centred on whether actors were excluded from the Deuteronomy edict.[34] Did wearing female costume on stage for a few hours constitute the behaviour outlined in

[27] *Cambridge*: REED, vol. 1, p. 374.
[28] *Cambridge*: REED, vol. 2, p. 721.
[29] Laura Levine, 'Men in Women's Clothing: Anti-theatricality and Effeminization from 1579–1642', *Criticism* 28. 2 (Spring 1986), p. 121.
[30] Meg Twycross, 'Transvestism in the Mystery Plays', *METh* 5.2 (Dec. 1983), p. 139.
[31] Cited in Garber, *Vested Interests*, p. 29.
[32] Hermann, 'Travesty and Transgression', p. 296.
[33] Garber, *Vested Interests*, p. 232.
[34] Levine, 'Men in Women's Clothing', p. 239.

Deuteronomy? Fears of public cross-dressing were confirmed by the scandals at the 1565 Bridewell and 1605 Alderman court trials when male prostitutes were accused of transvestism.[35] The reaction to the trials proved that society was overwhelmed by the implications of *public* cross-dressing. The question of theatrical transvestism was revisited. Was theatre exempt from such abominations since it was only play-acting? Rainolds was aware that male actors taking on the gait, gestures and postures of women could be as dangerous as transvestite male prostitutes: 'the appareil of wemen is a great provocation of men to lust and leacherie' and 'the imagination of a thing desirable doth stirr up the desire'.[36] But despite these fears, there is no evidence that wearing female clothes upon the stage led to male transvestism. No case has been found of homosexual charges being brought against a boy actor. Instead, as Marjorie Garber declares in *Vested Interests*, the fears of the pamphleteers suggest an uncertainty about the fixity of identity:

> Renaissance anti-theatricalists, in their debates about gender, cross-dressing, and the stage, articulated deep-seated anxiety about the possibility that identity was not fixed, that there was no underlying 'self' at all, and that therefore identities had to be zealously and jealously safeguarded.[37]

Transvestism was considered to pose a threat to self-identity and to political stability. In medieval and Elizabethan England women were not legally accountable for their behaviour: this responsibility fell to their nearest male relative – husband or father. If someone dressed as a woman, they were absolved from the consequences of their action. To dress as a woman, therefore, provided a form of disguise and offered protection. During political demonstrations men cross-dressed to avoid censure and punishment. In the Kent and Essex enclosure riots of 1450–51 men cross-dressed as 'Queen of the Fairies'.[38] In 1531, supporters of Katherine of Aragon masqueraded as women in an attempt to kidnap Anne Boleyn.[39] By 1631, the use of transvestism at times of political protest was well established. The Wiltshire enclosure riots utilised the cross-dressed figure of Lady Skimmington, a carnivalesque, rebellious character.[40] Transvestism could, thus, provide men with protection without incurring legal responsibility. In this manner, 'transvestism has a central, anarchic purpose in the destruction of established order'.[41]

The monarchy was aware of the political dangers of cross-dressing. Elizabeth I strengthened sumptuary laws in 1597 to regulate male and female gender distinctions, maintain separate rank and classes, and protect the linen and wool trades.[42]

[35] The practice of male prostitutes cross-dressing is remarked upon by William Hanson in *Description of England* (1587), p. 147: 'Some of these trulls in London so disguised that it hath passed my skill to discern whether they were men or women . . . Thus it is now come to pass that women are become men and men transformed into monsters' (cited in Juliet Dusinberre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women* [London: Macmillan, 1975], p. 233).

[36] J. Rainoldes, *Th' Overthrow of Stage-Players* (Middleburgh, 1599), p. 97 (cited in Jardine, *Still Harping on Daughters*, p. 9).

[37] Garber, *Vested Interests*, p. 32.

[38] Davies, 'Women on Top', p. 173.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Ackroyd, *Dressing Up*, p. 54.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Garber, *Vested Interests*, p. 26.

Elizabeth's actions show a concern over the political and social instability caused by cross-dressing. By the time James I, a suspected bi-sexual, rescinded the sumptuary laws in 1603/4 the attempt to effectively regulate behaviour had visibly failed.[43] Marjorie Garber suggests that both monarchs were under scrutiny over their own gender identity, and that their concern with issues of dressing and maintaining stable male/female appearances was an attempt to suppress such suspicions.[44]

Theatrical and social transvestism were at their height during the 1620s, a time of great political unrest.[45] This correlation is significant. There is some historical evidence that cross-dressing in the street, as well as in the theatre, diminished when society was stabilised (after the Restoration of Charles II). Theatrical male-to-female cross-dressing disappeared soon after the advent of the female actor around 1662.[46]

Over the last two decades, transvestism within Renaissance theatre has been extensively researched. Many of the critical approaches span feminist, Marxist, gender, reception and anthropological theories. One of the dominant ideas present within research into Renaissance transvestism is that it was a form of social disturbance. For example, Jean Howard suggests that cross-dressing involved mechanisms of struggle, resistance and subversion. Howard utilises her application of Marxist-feminist ideas to examine the manner in which transvestism disrupts social order, as well as that of gender:

> As fact and as idea, crossdressing threatened a normative social order based upon strict principles of hierarchy and subordination, of which women's subordination to man was a chief instance.[47]

Seen in this light, transvestism challenges the structure of society and culture. Cross-dressing becomes part of the struggle to redistribute power, and demonstrates perpetual conflict over the balance of power held between genders.

Other Renaissance scholars have examined the manner in which transvestism on stage transcended issues of gender representation. Catherine Belsey argues that because drama is fictional, there is no demand that it present a real world or even imply an ideal one. She suggests that cross-dressing unsettled gender-divides without substituting a new definition. She posits that Renaissance transvestism:

> momentarily unfixed the existing system of differences, and in the gap thus produced we are able to glimpse a possible meaning, an image of a mode of being, which is not a-sexual, nor bisexual, but which disrupts the system of differences on which sexual stereotyping depends.[48]

Cross-dressing challenges the notion of the actor as male or female. The audience are able to witness another possible gender construction; that which is ambiguous, unrecognisable and unknown. In this light, transvestism offers the opportunity to mould and shape the construction of gender and, therefore, restructure or

[43] Hermann, 'Travesty and Transgression', p. 295.
[44] Garber, *Vested Interests*, p. 29.
[45] Hermann, 'Travesty and Transgression', p. 295.
[46] Levine, 'Men in Women's Clothing', p. 140.
[47] Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle*, p. 94.
[48] Catherine Belsey, 'Disrupting Sexual Difference: meaning and gender in the comedies', *Alternative Shakespeares*, ed. John Drakakis (London and New York: Routledge, 1985), p. 190.

'self-fashion' one's identity.[49] For Stephen Greenblatt cross-dressing provides, for the first time in culture, the ability to improvise and manipulate one's self-image. This manipulation of image is of paramount importance when theatrical representation is being discussed.

Transvestism increases the sense of gender as an artificial construction created through the repetition of culturally assigned gestures and movements. This sense of artificiality emphasises the status of theatre as a manipulated and created art. Through watching the Mothers of the Innocents being played by men, for instance, the audience is made more aware of the fictive status of the pageants. Shakespearean plays which deliberately utilise cross-dressing (for example, Rosalind/Ganymede, rather than men playing female characters such as Ophelia) do so in order to thematically develop issues of gender portrayal.[50]

Much research into Renaissance cross-dressing has centred upon the fact that women's roles were played by boy actors. The emergence of this separate category of actor responsible for portraying womanhood raises further implications.

Anthropological theory suggests that the existence of the boy actor on stage is a type of rite of passage.[51] The boy actor demonstrates femaleness as he passes through puberty in order to establish manhood. The display of such pubescence has been thought to incite an homoerotic response in the audience. Jardine acknowledges that 'the boy player is liable to be regarded with erotic interest which hovers somewhere between the heterosexual and the homosexual around his female attire'.[52] The boy player shares other similarities with the women he portrays, for he is a dependent character. Boy actors enacted roles which were subordinate to masculine characters on stage, and within the acting company, they were apprentices dependent upon the favour of the actor/manager.

Greenblatt and Belsey suggest that the boy actor traverses binary gender definitions and is actually part of a 'third sex'. Belsey sees this as a 'third, unified, androgynous identity which eliminates all distinctions'.[53] This notion of a separate gender is in keeping with some cultures, such as the Berdache American Indian tribe, in which transsexuals are seen to be part of an honorary third sex.[54] However, the figure of the boy impersonator is deceptive; the character does not exist beyond its stage appearance. The boy actor is a flimsy and fictitious figure. I will be asking whether medieval theatre, through its use of apprentices rather than boy actors, created a similar homoerotic response from the audience, and if a 'third sex' was created on stage.

CROSS-DRESSING IN THE CORPUS CHRISTI CYCLES

The practice of cross-dressing in medieval drama was established by the male clerical performances of liturgical drama. Bevington provides evidence of male

[49] Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 91.
[50] For a fuller discussion of the effects of cross-dressing on the dramatic conventions of Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine*, Brecht's *Good Person of Szechwan*, and *As You Like It*, see Hermann, 'Travesty and Transgression', pp. 294–315.
[51] Ackroyd, *Dressing Up*, p. 46.
[52] Jardine, *Still Harping on Daughters*, p. 11.
[53] Belsey, 'Disrupting Sexual Difference' p. 189. In Chapter Four I will examine how far the dramatic presentation of Christ and the Virgin places them as honorary members of a 'third sex'.
[54] Ackroyd, *Dressing Up*, p. 27.

cross-dressing by the 'four brethren' in the *Regularis Concordia* and the three Marys at Fleury.[55] Documents from the Corpus Christi cycles provide substantial evidence of male transvestite actors. The Coventry Smiths' 1496 records show Ryngold's man, Thomas, playing Dame Procula, while the later 1544 Weavers' records list 'rychard ye capper borsleys man that playth ane'.[56] It appears that Richard continued to play Anne for another four years after this date.[57] Both records show apprentices or journeymen representing women. Meg Twycross suggests that these players were probably teenagers, and not the boy actors of Elizabethan theatre.[58] Even as late teenagers, say seventeen or eighteen, it is possible that they displayed many pre-pubescent features, such as the higher pitched register in their voices that is associated with men portraying women.[59] The fact that Richard played Anne over such a length of time shows that the Corpus Christi cycles did not rely upon boy actors.[60] However, the male actors must have been physically small, since they were costumed in authentic women's dress.[61]

There remains the issue of how men played women's roles. In March 1983, the *Medieval English Theatre* conference held at Salford, England, experimented with the effects of cross-casting. The pageants selected were played once by women actors and then repeated with men playing the women's roles. The audience were presented with the experience of Mrs Noah and Mary being played by women, and then immediately by men cross-dressing. Many of the conference participants found the male representations of Mary and Elizabeth to be sensitive; they portrayed an 'essence' of womankind. In Mary's case, the demonstration of her femininity, rather than its actual embodiment on stage, allowed for an emphasis of her holiness rather than her gender (or the issue of her sexuality). On the whole, conference delegates found the enactment of holy women by men to be more effective than that by women, since direct representations of sexuality were avoided. The male performances of comic women met with a less favourable and homogeneous reception. Some spectators found the comic portrayals effective, evoking the air of drag queens or pantomime dames; others believed: 'The effect was an invitation to the audience to ridicule women, or a female stereotype.'[62]

Since there are no eye-witness accounts of performances of the cycle dramas it is difficult to ascertain *how* men played women. As I have already suggested, medieval cross-dressing actors were not the boy actors of the Renaissance period. They may have been in late puberty (as in the case of the apprentices cited in the

[55] Bevington, 'Discontinuity', p. 7.
[56] *Coventry*: REED, p. 86.
[57] Twycross, 'Transvestism', p. 144.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Richard Rastall has argued that puberty in medieval times occurred much later than in the twentieth century since it is largely connected with diet and inherited factors. Rastall believes puberty probably occurred at seventeen or eighteen years of age in the Middle Ages. See Richard Rastall, 'Female Roles in All-Male Casts', *METh* 7.1 (1985), pp. 25–50.
[60] There are other records which substantiate the idea that men played women's roles for a period of time. Alan Taylor played Mrs Noah at Hull for three consecutive years (1485–87). See Mill, 'The Hull Noah Play', p. 496.
[61] Records show that women lent their dresses for performances. The best known of these is Mistress Grimsby who lent her robes for the Smiths' 1487 Dame Procula (*Coventry*: REED, p. 69).
[62] Peter Happé and Others, 'Thoughts on "Transvestism" by Divers Hands', *METh* 5.2 (1983), p. 110. For a full response to the experiment see this and Meg Twycross, 'Transvestism', pp. 123–80.

Coventry records) but, since many played the same roles for at least five years, they cannot have relied on pre-pubescent voices. Although male actors in the university dramas were taught how to move and gesticulate like women, there are no records that show this was the case for community actors who participated in the largely amateur Corpus Christi cycles. Meg Twycross believes that male actors 'represented' women, and uses evidence from Beverley records to demonstrate her point. One entry discusses male actors 'arrayed and robbed in the manner of a Queen and in the likeness of St Helena'.[63] The use of 'in the manner' and 'in the likeness' suggests that male actors portrayed the essence of female behaviour, but neither delivered effeminate interpretations, nor attempted to take on a naturalistic recreation of the roles.

One of the important functions of cross-dressing within Renaissance drama is the way in which it was used to problematise gender construction. It is interesting to consider how far the Corpus Christi cycles raise the matter of gender and whether the findings of Renaissance scholarship may be applied to the practice of transvestism in medieval drama. Many Elizabethan plays knowingly foreground matters of gender through raising the issues thematically within the text. I will examine how far transvestism is used to explore gender identity by focusing on three issues within the staging of the Corpus Christi plays: the moment of creation; the use of costume; and the portrayal of marital relationships.

The Creation pageants offered a prime opportunity for the exploration of gender difference. The Chester and N-Town pageants, in particular, highlight some of the choices that the dramatists made. In the Creation pageants God first creates man and, subsequently, woman. In all the extant versions God explains to Adam that he is creating a partner for him. However, in the Chester pageant, the notion of gender difference is completely avoided. God firstly states he is making a 'fere' and then later a 'make' (mate) for Adam.[64] In the N-Town cycle, God provides a definite gender distinction when he declares 'Adam, here is þi wyf and make'.[65] Beyond this acknowledgement, gender distinctions are not drawn within the Creation pageants. Perhaps the Genesis myth was so ingrained in the public's imagination that it was not a viable forum for debate about gender differences. It is possible that sexual difference was raised through the performance rather than the text of the Fall pageant. The moment when Adam and Eve conceal themselves with fig leaves might have distinguished between male/female sexual differences.

This absence of gender distinction is also apparent in some of the stage costuming. Although Pilate's wife at Coventry wore Mrs Grimsby's clothes, some of the stage costuming seems genderless. The 1449–1585 Coventry Smiths' records show God, Adam and Eve all dressed in white leather skins.[66] The 1565 Norwich Grocers' records reveal that Adam and Eve's post-paradise costume was lacking in

[63] Twycross, 'Transvestism', p. 152.

[64] *Chester Plays*, pageant II, ll. 136 and 142. In fact it is notable that the later pageants within this cycle also avoid the issue of gender differentiation. For example, Joseph and Mary's relationship offers few references to sexual difference. He calls her 'suster', no doubt in order to emphasise their sexless relationship and reinforce Mary's purity, while Mary refers to Joseph as 'my leeffe fere' (*Chester Plays*, pageant VI, ll. 424 and 493).

[65] *The N-Town Play*, vol. 1, pageant II, l. 19.

[66] James Laver, *Costume in the Theatre* (London: Harrop, 1964), p. 48.

specific gender distinction: they both wore coats, 'hosen' and wigs.[67] These costumes appear to be unisex and gender does not seem to be highlighted. However, it is possible that cross-dressing automatically raised issues about gender matters, as Twycross observes:

> Borrowing a gown *of my lady poews for one of the Maryes* sounds like naturalism if we think of Mary Cleophasas as a woman: if we think of him as a man it moves into a quite different range of artifice.[68]

There are some areas in which the cycles seem to deliberately address gender issues. Matters of gender differentiation can be traced within the portrayal of marriage. Evans notes with regard to the Noah Plays:

> The Towneley play is interesting because it exceeds/disrupts its topological scheme by foregrounding issues of sexual difference – in this case the different *experiences* of men and women in marriage.[69]

The York pageant, *Joseph's Trouble about Mary* (XIII), highlights many issues regarding gender difference within marriage. The pageant, sponsored by the Pewterers and Founders, draws its inspiration from the apocryphal writings. As Beadle and King remark: 'The dramatist interpreted the legends he found there partly in terms of contemporary *mal Marié* and anti-feminist literature, particularly secular adultery farces and fabliaux.'[70] The pageant focuses upon the narrative of the elderly carpenter cuckolded by his younger wife.

The pageant highlights many of the differing experiences of men and women within marriage. Joseph is shown returning to his home. It is difficult to ascertain exactly what business has detained him but he is placed within the public, trading world. His experience contrasts with that of the Virgin. Joseph refers to her as a 'bird'.[71] She is constrained within the cage of the home. We learn that she is 'at her book full fast prayand'.[72] She is engaged in a contemplative life. Mary is guarded by her women attendants:

> For we have dwelt ay with her still
> And was never from her day nor night.
> Her keepers have we been
> And she ay in our sight,[73]

The attendants assure Joseph that Mary has obeyed a moral code during his absence.[74]

[67] Tydeman, *The Theatre in the Middle Ages*, p. 213.
[68] Twycross, 'Apparell Comlye', p. 48.
[69] Evans, 'Feminist Re-Enactments', p. 149.
[70] Richard Beadle and Pamela King, eds. *York Mystery Plays. A Selection in Modern Spelling* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 48.
[71] *The York Plays*, pageant XIII, l. 78.
[72] Ibid., l. 81.
[73] Ibid., ll. 117–20.
[74] Ibid., l. 132.

Meanwhile Joseph is concerned about how the outside world will regard their pregnancy. He worries that other men in the Temple, and elsewhere, will be scornful.[75] Joseph complains about women's deceit and secrecy:

> But woman-kind if them list help,
> Yet would they no man wint their woe.[76]

Joseph returns to the public world on an errand, leaving Mary to 'hide' her shame within the house.

The marital relationship between Joseph and Mary is used to foreground a number of issues regarding the different experiences that men and women faced within marriage. Joseph is concerned with external and public affairs and viewpoints. Mary is concealed within the home. She is shown as following a contemplative lifestyle and is supported by a cluster of women servants. The experience of gender difference is highlighted despite the fact that a man enacted Mary's role: an issue which will be examined further in Chapter Five.

There are other ways in which the Corpus Christi cycles use transvestism to deliberately raise questions of gender difference. The pageants frequently demonstrate a self-awareness that has hitherto been associated with developments in Elizabethan drama. The cycles do not draw direct reference to cross-dressing. There is no use of the innuendo and gender punning that is associated with, for example, *Twelfth Night* or *As You Like It*. However, sometimes the cycles openly acknowledge their artificiality. In the Chester cycles, the figure of the Expositor acts as a type of narrator or commentator, bridging the play world and that of the audience. He draws attention to the fact that the scenes have been rehearsed in order to be shown before an audience.[77] The Chester cycle is not alone in this practice. Narratorial characters also exist within the N-Town plays, for example the role of Contemplacio. In fact, Lerer detects within the cycles 'a growing self-consciousness about the theatricality of theater in the medieval drama itself'.[78] He cites, in particular, the manner in which the Towneley *Buffeting of Christ* includes the audience and places the spectator within the scene.

Is such self-consciousness to be found in relation to men cross-dressing in the cycles? At first glance it would appear not, unless of course the frequent reference to a character's gender forms such an effect. It is worth looking at some of the women characters. Pilate's wife, Dame Procula, embodies the archetype of a rich and vain middle class woman. In the York cycle, her first appearance is accompanied by an address to the audience in which she introduces herself: 'All welle of all womanhede I am, wittie and wise.'[79] It is difficult to ascertain whether her introduction serves to display her character traits, or whether the insistence on her female qualities and the subtext of her pride and vanity, are present in order for

[75] Ibid., ll. 150–51.
[76] Ibid., ll. 219–20.
[77] *Chester Plays*, pageant VI, l. 569.
[78] Seth Lerer, ' "Representyd now in yower syght": The Culture of Spectatorship in Late-Fifteenth-Century England', *Bodies and Disciplines: Interactions of Literature and History in Fifteenth Century England*, Medieval Cultures, vol. 9, eds. Barbara Hanawalt and David Wallace (Minnesota and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 34.
[79] *York Plays*, pageant XXX, l. 39.

a male actor to demonstrate and inform the audience that he is playing a female character. Similarly, when the Chester Ale-Wife from *The Harrowing of Hell* steps forward and declares she is a 'gentle gossippe and a tapster', is the disparity between her female attire and language, and her male realisation apparent?[80] If this is the case, then the Corpus Christi cycles demonstrate an awareness of the gender play at operation within cross-dressing.

There is another way in which the pageants may draw attention to gender difference through the device of transvestism. Within Shakespearean drama, the matter of cross-dressing, and therefore gender, was foregrounded by having the character step out of role (usually in the epilogue) for a short time. The audience saw the separate and oppositional gender of the actor and the character through the actor's acknowledgement of his own sexual state. How far do the Corpus Christi cycles allow for such an experience? Hans Diller's study of medieval drama identifies two differing types of aside that are used within the cycle pageants. He defines these as, firstly, 'edificational', by which he means that which stands out from the text and instructs the audience, which he finds in the Chester and N-Town cycles. Secondly, he identifies the 'histrionic' aside, which is closer to the later aside of Elizabethan theatre and is a moment between the character and the audience, which he finds in the York and Towneley cycles.[81] Diller maintains that in both forms of these asides the play world remains closed and that the audience does not see a break in the theatrical conventions. However, I believe that the appearance of male actors playing women (which Diller does not consider) would have the effect of showing the distance between the character and his part. When Mary addresses Elizabeth, 'How standys it with you, dame, of qwart?', the audience is made aware of the male actor engaged within a female relationship.[82]

Mrs Noah clearly steps beyond 'her' role to address the audience, and specifically to warn the women:

> Of wifys ar here,
> For the life that thay leyd
> Wold thare husbandys were dede;[83]

As Mrs Noah steps forward to address the women of the audience, her real gender, that of a man, becomes apparent. For a moment the audience glimpses the actor behind the character and witnesses the irony of cross-dressing. Ruth Evans has remarked that the playing of women's roles by men has: 'The potential for momentarily, and deliberately, holding the audience in a state of uncertainty about the voice that is speaking.'[84] And it is such a moment that Mrs Noah creates here.

Dame Procula's appearance on the stage of the York *Christ Before Pilate* pageant is worth a final reassessment. Let's imagine that Ryngold's man, wearing the loaned costume that still has the vestiges of Mistress Grimsby's presence, enacts

[80] *Chester Plays*, pageant XVII, l. 286.
[81] Hans-Jurgen Diller, *The Middle English Play*, trans. Frances Wessels (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 113.
[82] *Towneley plays*, pageant XI, l. 7.
[83] *Towneley* plays, pageant III, ll. 568–70.
[84] Evans, 'Feminist Re-enactments', p. 149.

this performance. Pilate first introduces his wife before she appears. Having acknowledged her husband and his counsellors, Procula proceeds to introduce herself:

> I am dame precious Procula, of prynces þe prise,
> Wiffe to ser Pilate here, prince withouten pere.
> All welle of all womanhede I am, wittie and wise,
> Consayue nowe my countenaunce so comly and clere.
> The coloure of my corse is full clere
> And in richesse of robis I am rayed,
> Ther is no lorde in þis londe as I lere,
> In faith, þat hath a frendlyer feere
> Than yhe my lord, myselffe þof I saye itt.[85]

Obviously the speech sets her up as vain, proud and pre-occupied by herself. But the effect of having a cross-dressed man play this character creates a further dimension. The use of an acting style that was based upon a presentational method would enhance the sense of this speech as belonging to Hans Diller's 'histrionic' asides. Though Procula addresses her husband's advisors, she (he) almost certainly also addresses the audience. All but two of the above lines contain a pronoun that is self-reflexive. These lines, spoken in Mistress Grimsby's dress, by Raingold's man, most surely have the effect of upsetting some of the notions of gender identity. Although women may have been absent from the stage, moments such as these demonstrate that vestiges of their presence were still in evidence. Moreover, the strange imprint of Mistress Grimsby's body played a part in unsettling gender assumptions on the medieval stage.

There is no evidence within the extant texts to suggest that the range of women characterisation was restricted because men played them. The representation of women was more affected by religious, cultural and social influences, than the shortcomings of the female impersonators. In fact, by having men play women, the dramas automatically raised the issue of gender experience. First, cross-dressing acknowledged that women had little public power within late medieval England. As I have outlined in the preceding two chapters, women had no public voice. The playing of women by men further highlights the limited public status afforded women. Second, the frequent use of gender-based pronouns drew attention to the disparity between the gender of the male performer and the female character. This, as Ferris notes, emphasises the artificiality of theatre, 'transvestite theater – cross-dressing in performance . . . forces the reader/spectator to see multiple meanings in the very act of reading itself, of listening, watching a performance'.[86] Cross-dressing also highlights the essential difference between the two genders. As Dusinberre points out, 'when the woman is played by a boy, she watches two people, herself disguised, and the boy who plays her'.[87]

It might be argued that having men play women extended the possible representations of women within the cycles. For example, cross-dressed men could

[85] *York Plays*, pageant XXX, ll. 37–45.
[86] Lesley Ferris, ed. *Crossing the Stage* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 9.
[87] Dusinberre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, p. 248.

demonstrate behaviour that the decorum of medieval England would not let women perform. As Helms notes, this issue can be viewed ambiguously:

> It could foreground the social construction of gender by imposing femininity on male bodies and at the same time trivialize women's social roles in puerile caricatures. It could celebrate female heroism while it excluded women from the economic and expressive opportunities of theatrical activity.[88]

It is evident that cross-dressing emphasised how the dominant gender represented the other on stage.

As I have argued in Chapter One, the late medieval period was a time of great economic change that, in turn, brought about social upheaval. It is no coincidence that transvestism was used within the theatre at a time when society was undergoing such an upheaval. Garber's analysis of the development of transvestism in theatre is extremely applicable to the Corpus Christi cycles: 'Transvestism was the specter that rose up – both in the theatre and in the streets – to mark and overdetermine this crisis of social and economic change.'[89] Transvestism traverses the normal societal rules and moral codes. In challenging these values, it demonstrates a threat to socio-economic norms and displays 'unrealized possibilites' upon the stage. Perhaps the Corpus Christi plays provided a site where gender identity could be tested or disrupted in the same way that the London street afforded the opportunity for John/Eleanor Rykener. In each case, fixed gender assumptions were tested and such practices formed part of the social and cultural matrix of medieval England. As Hotchkiss notes: 'the boundaries between genders blurred long before the "modern" era, if, in fact, they were ever clear'.[90]

The final aspect of cross-dressing that I wish to emphasise is the way in which the practice disrupts sexual conventions. Earlier in this chapter I drew upon the work of Belsey and Greenblatt who suggest that the actor-transvestite is neither male nor female, asexual nor bi-sexual. They suggest that cross-dressing allows for the creation of a type of 'third sex'. The act of transvestism places the body on display and emphasises the corpus itself. In the following chapter I will examine the centrality of the body to the Corpus Christi cycles, and will investigate the significance that this held for women. In particular, I will suggest that Christ's and the Virgin's bodies were used as a type of 'third sex'.

[88] Lorraine Helms, 'Playing the Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism and Shakespearean Performance', *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. 190.

[89] Garber, *Vested Interests*, p. 17.

[90] Hotchkiss, *Clothes Make the Man*, p. 9.

Chapter 4

SIGNIFYING WOMEN

The Norwich Grocers' inventory from their 1563 production of *The Fall of Man* lists 'A Rybbe colleryd Red'.[1] This record reveals something of the significance of the semiotics of medieval drama. On the most simplistic level the bone indicates Eve's construction from Adam's 'spare rib'. However, it is possible that the red rib served a number of complex symbolic functions. This piece of bone prefigures the fragmented body of Christ at the crucifixion. Salvation history is emphasised through reminding the audience of the resurrection. There are also a number of gender-specific signs embedded within this red rib. Eve's creation from Adam's rib is a type of gender-reversed 'birth'. The bloody red rib also symbolises Eve's guilt during the Fall. The existence of this red rib demonstrates some of the complex ways in which visual symbols may have operated within medieval drama. In particular this bloodied rib indicates how the body offers a site for the exploration of gender issues. This chapter will explore how the medieval 'stage' operated as a site for the enactment of a series of gender-based debates.

Brooks has argued that: 'stories cannot be told without making the body a prime vehicle of narrative significance'.[2] This is certainly the case with the Corpus Christi cycles. The symbol of the Eucharist is one of the strongest signifiers to be found within the pageants. Christ's sacrifice and the remembrance of his crucifixion, through the ritualised tasting of his body and blood, are central to the message of the cycle dramas. In fact, the importance of the body is increasingly evident within the procession of the cycle dramas. As Sarah Beckwith notes about the York cycle: 'The passion sequence gradually comes to subsume the theatrical and ritual energies of the city of York, as over the course of its production, it comes to account for half the cycle.'[3] Although the first parts of the cycles are devoted to Old Testament stories an overwhelming sense of Christ's Passion dominate the latter parts; the body becomes of paramount significance.

[1] *Norwich*: REED, p. 53.

[2] Peter Brooks, *Body Work* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. xii. Brooks's point refers to the body as subject. However, since I am discussing drama, his comments could as easily refer to the body of the performer.

[3] Sarah Beckwith, 'Ritual, Theater, and Social Space in the York Corpus Christi Cycle', *Bodies and Disciplines: Interactions of Literature and History in Fifteenth Century England*. Medieval Cultures, vol. 9, eds. Barbara Hanawalt and David Wallace (Minnesota and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 63.

The antecedents of the cycles reveal other issues regarding the body. The feast of Corpus Christi was celebrated by carrying the host through the streets of the city. This procession ensured that the figurehead, the 'body' of the Church, was exhibited throughout the city. Members of the legislative bodies of the town, the burgesses, religious officials and master guildsmen, accompanied the procession. The very route taken by the parade was through the body of the city. The route that the York cycles took, although open to some annual variation, stressed the importance of the passage through the heart of the city.[4] The notion of the body has further significance in the cycles. The body of the actor was central to the communication of meaning within the pageants.

The notion of the body as a site of festive enactment was also explored within the cycles. Corpus Christi day was in itself a festive occasion in which the values of the high, holy day and the low, holiday collided with each other. The clash of these values enabled the reconfiguration of the social body of medieval England. For example, the high values of the Passion are disrupted and realigned by the interjection of the lowly, comic tradesmen in the York Crucifixion pageant. Their brutish attempts to cover their botched workmanship results in Christ being stretched onto the cross. The religious ritual is renegotiated by this interference from the low medieval world.

The celebration of the crucifixion and eventual resurrection follows the festive pattern of death and rebirth. The Eucharist provides an important 'fusion between the sacred and the carnal'.[5] The holy and vulgar worlds collide within the image of the Eucharist. As the bloodied red rib of the Norwich Grocers' pageant reminds us, the 'blood and body' of the communion represents both the holy sacrament and the crucifying of Christ. The symbolic significance of the body within the cycles is complex. The presence of the red rib indicates some of the possible readings that the image of the body may have produced.

It is important to note that the red rib is not a gender-neutral signifier. It draws attention to the ritualised slaughter and resurrection of Christ, but also reminds the audience of the importance of women's bodies to the salvation narrative. The red rib signals the guilty, weak and easily tempted flesh of Eve. But the fragment of bone reminds us of the death and therefore the birth and rebirth of Christ. The bone also signifies birth and the importance of maternity. But the red rib is a very ambivalent signifier and it can be used to test some gender-blurring notions. This rib signals the possibility of male birth: a piece of Adam gives way to Eve. The red rib is a reminder of the possibilities that are ascribed to the body within the cycles. It is at once fragmented, whole, male, female, decaying, rejuvenating, guilty, redeeming, holy and vulgar.

The cycles texts themselves acknowledge the importance of the Eucharist. They are careful to spend time dramatising the Last Supper and establishing the ritual of Holy Communion. In the Chester *The Last Supper, The Betrayal of Christ* (XV), Christ conjures up the image of the transmuted body while he eats bread:

[4] Twycross, 'Theatricality', p. 40.

[5] Francoise Jaouen and Benjamin Semple, eds. *Corps Mystique, Corps Sacre*. Yale French Studies, no. 87 (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 3.

this is my bodye
that shall dye for all mankynde
in remission of there synne.[6]

The message is repeated in the *Resurrection* pageant: 'I am the very bread of life.'[7] Later in the same pageant Christ reinforces the importance of the Eucharist to Christian life:

Whoe eateth that bread, man or wiffe,
shall lyve with me withowt end.[8]

The symbolic functions of the Eucharist are multifarious. The reverberations of the image of body and blood can be felt in many ways within the pageants. For example, through the Eucharist the body becomes a metaphoric 'text' which is inscribed with a variety of meanings. The cycles exploit moments when we 'read' the text of the actors' bodies. For example, Herod orders the slaughtering of all male children in order to prevent himself from being usurped by the Christ-child. During the Chester infanticide, Herod's own son is brutally murdered. Herod's pain is expressed through the 'text' of his body. He becomes ill and feels 'dampned'; his body exposes its depravity:

My legges rotn and my armes;
That more I see feindes swarmes-[9]

There are other moments within the Chester cycle when the body is used as a text to demarcate boundaries. When the Third King offers myrrh in the Chester *Offering of the Three Kings*, he maps out Christ's body through language and, we can presume, stage action. He anoints Christ by covering:

The childes members – head and knee
and other lymnes all.[10]

In this manner the texts themselves are inscribed with an awareness of how the corporeal body might be delineated and described.

In this chapter I would like to investigate some of the ways in which the body is used to explore issues of gender. In particular, I would like to examine how women characters challenge the constitution of the social body. I will finally look at how the body of Christ and that of the Virgin are used to articulate complex ideas about gender.

WOMEN AND THE MEDIEVAL BODY

Medieval thought much influenced by Aristotle and Galen, commonly divided the body into a hierarchy in which the head and soul represented the male, and the

[6] *Chester Plays*, pageant XV, ll. 92–4.
[7] *Chester Plays*, pageant XVIII, l. 120.
[8] Ibid., ll. 172–73.
[9] *Chester Plays*, pageant X, ll. 422–23.
[10] Ibid., pageant IX, ll. 58–9.

lower body and limbs the female. Aristotle in the *Generation of Animals* established a binary opposition between men and women. He saw that within conception 'the physical part, the body, comes from the female, and the soul from the male'.[11] Aristotle set up a clear hierarchy in which the soul dominated the body. He saw women as physically inferior: 'The woman is as it were an infertile male.'[12] In the second century Galen, the court physician to Emperor Marcus Aurelius, developed Aristotle's ideas. *On The Usefulness of the Parts of the Body* maintained the hierarchy of the sexes: 'The Man is more perfect than the woman.'[13] He postulated views of the male body as warm and the female body as cold.[14] I would like to counter this tradition of the hierarchical body by examining the views held by a medieval woman.

The Book of Margery Kempe offers insight into the resonance that the body may have held for medieval women. The book opens with Margery recounting her pregnancy. There is immediately a sense that her body has abandoned her. Instead of possessing a healthy, mothering body Margery is left feeling betrayed and deserted by her body. She is severely ill and takes retribution on her body by starving it of anything but bread and water. She is inhabited by visions which physically attack her:

> And in þis tyme sche sey, as hir thowt, deuelys opyn her mowthys al inflaumyd wyth brenny[n]g lowys of fyr as þei schuld a swalwyd hyr in, sum-tyme rampyng at hyr, sum-tyme thretyng her, sum-tym pullyng hyr and halyng hir boþe nygth and day duryng þe forseyd tyme.[15]

Margery offers an interesting alternative discourse to the image of mothering provided by the Virgin. She is unwilling to give her body over to her child. Her vulnerable body has betrayed her. She tortures herself through physical starvation and self mutilation: 'sche bot hir owen hand so vyolently þat it was seen al hir lyfe aftyr. And also sche roof hir skyn on hir body a-ȝen hir hert wyth hir nayles spetowsly.'[16] She attempts to control her body by inscribing her own text upon it. She attacks her body with her body. Margery is bound and restrained, and locked in a room by her husband. She regains control of her body only when her soul is nourished. In a vision she sees Christ sitting by her bed 'clad in a mantyl of purpyl sylke', and is restored to sanity. Margery's experience is no different from that of many other religious women, the frailty of her body is an obstacle to overcome in order to achieve spiritual nourishment.[17] She provides a graphic example of how the mothering body may be rejected. Instead we are made aware of the body as a vulnerable and uncontrollable object, and are forced to consider the relationship between body and soul.

[11] Cited in Alan Blamires, ed. *Women Defamed and Women Defended* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 41.
[12] Ibid., p. 40.
[13] Ibid., p. 41.
[14] Ibid., p. 42.
[15] *The Book of Margery Kempe*, p. 7.
[16] Ibid., p. 8.
[17] Ibid. For examples of how certain female saints used their frailty to increase their devotion see Larrington, ed. *Women and Writing*, p. 123.

Margery's relationship with her own body undergoes a substantial change during her period of devotion. She highlights the way in which her body was used to attract the 'male gaze' and display her wealth and rank. As a burgess's wife she dressed with the trappings of wealth. She confesses: 'sche weryd gold pypys on hir hevyd, and hir hodys wyth þe typettys were daggyd. Hir clokys also wer daggyd and leyd wyth dyuers colowrs be-twen þe daggys þat it schuld be þe mor staryng to mennys sygth and hir-self þe mor ben worshepd . . . '[18] She then forsakes her wifely trappings. First she wears under-garments made from haircloth, and eventually dresses in sacking. Margery's body is gradually unsexed. From having sought the attention of men, Margery recounts how she would rather 'etyn or drynkyn þe wose, þe mukke in þe chanel, þan to consentyn to any fleschly comownyng' with her husband.[19] After four years her husband agrees to sexual abstinence.

Margery is able to utilise her body to identify with Christ's. On Christmas Eve in St Margaret's Church, Lynn, Margery experiences another vision of Christ in which he advises her to forsake eating meat and 'in-stede of þat flesch þou schalt etyn my flesch and my blod, þat is þe very body of Crist in þe Sacrament of þe Awter'.[20] Margery reveals her visions to the anchorite who informs her that she is 'sowkyn euyn on Crystys brest'.[21] In this moment Margery abandons her consumer body and is instead nourished by the transubstantiated body of Christ. The image of Christ's body here is one which confuses gender identity. He nourishes his 'child' Margery through breast milk. Christ takes on the feminised role of mothering.

When Margery visits Jerusalem she goes to the site of the crucifixion. She is accompanied by a candlelit procession, and she experiences a vision of Christ:

> Before hir in hyr sowle sche saw hym veryly be contemplacyon, and þat cawsyd hir to haue compassyon. and, whan þei cam vp on-to þe Mownt of Caluarye, sche fel down þat sche mygth not stondyn ne knelyn but walwyd and wrestyd wyth hir body, spredyng hir armys a-brode, and cryed wyth a lowde voys as þow hir hert xulde a brostyn a-sundyr, for in þe cite of hir sowle shce saw veryly and freschly how owyr Lord was crucifyed. Beforn hir face sche herd and saw in hir gostly sygth þe mornyng of owyr Lady, of Sen Iohn, and Mary Magdalene, and of many oþer þat loudy owyr Lord.[22]

Margery uses her body in a number of ways in order to experience this 'out of body' sensation. She 'sees' Christ in her mind, she 'feels' his suffering and she is physically struck down by her grief. She loses control of her bodily co-ordination and exudes excess bodily fluid through her tears. Through this process she reinscribes her sense of place. She is no longer at the top of the green hill; her 'city' is now her soul. It is interesting that through this bodily identification Margery is able to sympathise with the two most important holy women, the Virgin and the Magdalene.

[18] *The Book of Margery Kempe*, p. 9.
[19] Ibid., p. 12.
[20] Ibid., p. 17.
[21] Ibid., p. 18.
[22] Ibid., p. 68.

The Book of Margery Kempe reveals many complex ideas regarding the body and gender. Margery forsakes her displayed, consuming, sexual body in an attempt to reposition her soul as the architect of her life. But Margery's body-mind experiences are a far cry from the dichotomy of Aristotle and Galen's ideas. She doesn't forsake her female flesh to discover a manly soul. Instead she utilises her body as a means of identifying with Christ's pain and that of the Virgin and Magdalene. Margery's body continually betrays its vulnerability and uncontrollability. She frequently emits excessive body fluids (through her tears), and as she unbinds herself from 'respectability' her body becomes an increasingly dangerous site. Her arrest at Beverley demonstrates the threat that her body makes to social order. Her imprisonment is an attempt to control Margery by physically restraining her.[23] Margery Kempe's narrative draws attention to many differing uses of the body. I would like to examine the way that some of these notions of the body are used within the Corpus Christi cycles.

Margery Kempe's book draws attention to the way in which her body is used to display her gender. She recounts how in her early married life she dressed to catch men's attention.[24] In fact, throughout the book the reader is aware of Margery's body being placed on display. Margery's narrative is extremely theatrical. She takes pains to cast herself as the lead actress, performing her actions in front of an audience of onlookers. Margery's performance at Mount Calgary is such an example. She carefully sets the scene by detailing the time and place of the event. She identifies her audience: the friars and pilgrims. She then performs her script: an elaborate 'dance' in which she loses control of her limbs, and a text in which she sobs profusely.[25]

The female body has a paradoxical status within the performance of the cycle dramas. The plays are dependent upon the body of the actor for their performance. However, as I have debated in the previous chapter, women's bodies were absent from the medieval stage. Men's bodies disguised as women are important for the enactment of the dramas: the figures of the Virgin Mary and the Magdalene are central to the message of the cycles. Women's bodies are simultaneously absent and present on the public stage.

Many of the ideas that I have examined in the previous chapter are of importance here. As Sue-Ellen Case points out, there is a large distance between fictional women on stage and real women.[26] Case suggests that women characters are a type of 'cultural courtesan' constructed in order to satisfy the 'male gaze'.[27] It is difficult to find a satisfactory reading of the female physical body on the medieval stage. I have already outlined many of the problems in the previous chapter. Instead I would like to begin by focusing upon the relationship between women's bodies and space. Case points out that:

> Stage movement replicates the proxemics of the social order, capitalising upon the spatial relationships in the culture at large between women and the sites of power.[28]

[23] Ibid., p. 129.
[24] Ibid., p. 9.
[25] Ibid., p. 68.
[26] Case, *Feminism*, p. 120.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid., pp. 117–18.

The body of the women characters has a very particular relationship with the performance space. Physical space is important in defining society: it is one way in which status and group membership is settled. For example, the medieval guild affirmed the status of its members, while it excluded and invalidated those denied membership. As Shirley Ardener has remarked, space produces 'an interaction such that an appreciation of the *physical* world is in turn dependent on *social* perceptions of it'.[29] Space is very hierarchical. For example, in discussing physical space we are aware of the centre of that space, the periphery which lies beyond and the semi-excluded territory of the margins. Within the Corpus Christi cycles, space is metaphorically controlled on-stage by God's commands, and offstage by the producing guilds, and civic and church authorities. These male forces are the centre of the spatial world of the cycles. Women lie on the periphery. As Hanna Scolnicov states in her study on women and theatrical space: 'Seen from a feminist point of view, the articulation of the theatrical space is an expression of women's position in society.'[30] What, then, does the use of physical space in the Corpus Christi cycles say about medieval women?

Many of the cycle drama women seem to be located within an internal and, usually, domestic space. As Blair remarks, 'Women . . . are perceived as acquiring their social identity and personal individuality solely in the spheres of the private.'[31] In the Towneley *Second Shepherds' Pageant*, Gyll never steps beyond the 'door' which encloses her house; she is invisible to the exterior world, and instead, it (in the form of the shepherds) must visit her. Gyll tends her children within the frame of the *locus*, while her husband enters the public and communal world of the shepherds' fields.

Pilate's wife is also represented through enclosed and confined spaces. In the York version, she appears in public parts of the palace, but even then her behaviour is domestic and gender-specific. She toasts her husband with wine and kisses him. Her association with enclosed and framed spaces is further increased through comparison with her husband. Pilate bids her return to the domestic quarters, while he continues with state business, namely the sentencing of Christ. Dame Procula's enclosure is physically portrayed on stage: she retreats to the seclusion of her curtained bed. It is in this private, enclosed and vulnerable space that she experiences her Satan-induced vision.

Men have the ability to function in both the *locus* and *platea*.[32] They can move from internal to exterior places without being sullied, and can control *how* the space is utilised by others. For men the movement from the *locus* to *platea* is not an act of transgression, but a demonstration of their ubiquity of power. There are numerous examples of male characters who travel and work within the wider world. Cain, Abel, Abraham, Isaac and the shepherds are all portrayed working in the openness of the fields. Other characters such as the Three Kings, Herod's

[29] Shirley Ardener, ed. *Women and Space: Ground Rules and Social Maps*, 2nd rev. edn. Cross Cultural Perspectives on Women, vol. 5 (Oxford: Berg, 1993), p. 11.

[30] Hanna Scolnicov, *Woman's Theatrical Space* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 1.

[31] Juliet Blair, 'Private Parts in Public Places: The Case of Actresses', *Women and Space: Ground Rules and Social Maps*, 2nd rev. edn. Cross Cultural Perspectives on Women, vol. 5, ed. Shirley Ardener (Oxford: Berg, 1993), p. 207.

[32] Robert Weimann's use of the distinction between *locus* and *platea* is very useful. See Robert Weimann, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978).

soldiers and, of course, Christ, are able to freely traverse and move within the physical performance space. In fact, medieval performance records show that Herod probably did perform in the streets. A stage direction from the Coventry Shearman and Taylors' Play indicates that 'Here Erode ragis in the pagond and in the street also'.[33] The degree to which performers used off-waggon spaces is debatable, and modern restagings of medieval drama have continued to raise this issue.

Male characters, as well as travelling freely in the *platea*, are able to control how others use space. God, of course, has ultimate command of the *locus*. He is the 'designer' of the space, and organises characters around the stage. He can control Adam and Eve's residence in Eden, place Noah in the ark and is, in fact, the 'stage manager' of all biblically-related action. Pilate in the York cycle is able to banish his wife to her private space. Women do not have this command of the space, and this is an important gender difference which the Corpus Christi cycles highlight.

What happens when women transgress the confines of internal spaces and are shown within the wider world? There are moments when women test the boundaries of their enclosure within internal and domestic spaces. For example, Noah's wife is traditionally removed from the *locus*. In the Towneley play she sits on a hill and spins. In the Chester flood play the ark is on stage from the beginning, and consequently the wife is displaced to the margins: she sits at one side drinking with her gossip.[34] When Mrs Noah does break free from the enclosure of the internal domestic space, she is shown as a disrespectful rebel. Her gossiping, recalcitrant behaviour, shown through her preference for open space rather than the ark, is implicitly criticised by the dramatist and probably some of the audience (as I suggest elsewhere in this study, women in the audience probably viewed women on stage differently from male spectators).

Other women who manage to break free from domestic spaces are also equated with rebellion. The Mothers of the Innocents appear in the open world. It is probable that the retaliating mothers fought their combat with Herod's murdering soldiers in the *platea*. The women defend themselves verbally with threats and insults, and physically with distaffs, punches and kitchen pottery. Their rebellion is undignified and often read comically. Their appearance in public, like that of the other transgressive women I have cited, shows them to be sullied. As Mark Wigley has commented: 'If the woman goes outside the house she becomes more dangerously feminine rather than more masculine.'[35] Rather than finding public power outside of the house women become more threatening, and their behaviour *as women* seems magnified.

If the link between moral status and women's physical position within the performance and textual spaces of the cycles is correct, then the threshold between inner and outer spaces would be important. It is at the threshold that we could expect conflict between behavioural expectation and gender enactment.

[33] *Two Coventry Corpus Christi* Plays, Coventry, Shearman and Taylors' Play, l. 783.

[34] Gossiping is frequently presented in the medieval fabliaux as a transgressive female act. Carol Clover points out that the penis and tongue are corresponding male and female weapons (Carol J. Clover, 'Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe', *Studying Medieval Women: Sex, Gender, Feminism*. A Speculum Book, ed. Nancy Partner [Cambridge, Mass: Medieval Academy of America, 1993], p. 73).

[35] Mark Wigley, 'Untitled: The Housing of Gender', *Sexuality and Space*, ed. Beatrice Colomina, Princeton Papers on Architecture, vol. 1 (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), p. 385.

In the Towneley *Second Shepherds' Pageant*, Mak returns from the outside world with his stolen sheep. Gyll twice ignores his knocking at the door, it disturbs her as she prepares to spin. She eventually allows him to cross the threshold into the domestic space – her space.[36] Similarly, it is at the entrance to the ark that the Chester Noah and his wife physically fight; she boxes him upon the ears. Noah wants her to be safely enclosed in the ark during the flood, ordering her, 'Wyffe, come in. Why standes thou there?'[37] Mrs Noah prefers to remain drinking with her gossips in the public world. Despite Noah's instructions and her children's bidding, it is only when 'The fludd comes fleetinge in full faste' that the threshold battle subsides, and Mrs Noah gets on board.[38] Even Mary and Joseph have a threshold dispute. After the annunciation Joseph returns home to Mary and in the N-Town version he has to ask three times to be admitted to the domestic space.[39]

Space is clearly a gendered issue within the Middle Ages. In their treatment of women the cycles highlight many of these issues. It would appear, as Barbara Hanawalt argues, that:

> Medieval men consciously strove through a variety of mechanisms to keep women within their space and to regulate them within that designated area. Since they regarded women by their very nature as unruly, the best way to control them was to enclose them.[40]

To abscond from this enclosed space within the house is to allow women access to power.

The cycles, as a form of festive drama, are one of the mechanisms through which men regulated women's behaviour. Paradoxically, in allowing women to watch the cycles a more complex relationship was present. The performance of the cycles on the streets of the city allowed women into the public space of the medieval world.

THE CITY, WOMEN AND THE BODY

Margery Kempe's narrative raises the importance of the relationship between the body and the city. Margery refers to the 'cite of hir soule', which infers a connection between the corpus of the individual and that of the city. The city is of central significance to the cycle dramas.[41] The Corpus Christi cycles are integrally linked to the city through three aspects. On a literal level, the cycles were produced by the trade guilds who were legislative members of the city. Second, the scale of the Corpus Christi cycles meant that the dramas were dependent upon a city population for their production; the community made up the performers and spectators.

[36] *Towneley Plays*, pageant XXX, l. 590.
[37] *Chester Plays*, pageant III, l. 193.
[38] Ibid., l. 225.
[39] Gail McMurray Gibson reads the closed door as representing Mary's virginity (Gibson, *The Theater of* Devotion, p. 152).
[40] Barbara Hanawalt, 'At the Margins of Women's Space in Medieval Europe', *Matrons and Marginal Women in Medieval Society*, eds. Robert Edwards and Vickie Ziegler (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1995), p. 16.
[41] *The Book of Margery Kempe*, p. 68.

Last, the very boundaries of the city often mapped out the route for the pageant waggons. Such is the case of York. In processing through the city the cycles mapped out the boundary between the central, legitimate area, and the excluded, suburban outer limits. For example, the York Banns clearly established a meeting point for the pageant waggons at the edge of the city, and the last point of performance, according to Meg Twycross, was actually the centre of the city at All Saint's Church.[42] The procession of the pageants not only demarcated the city, but provided a religious allegory by mirroring the journey from the wilderness of the Old Testament, to the beginning of the New Testament in the city.

Because the cycles were performed outside, the city and its streets formed the stage. As Stevens remarks: 'All the streets – indeed the whole route of the play through the city of York – become the *platea* of a *theatrum mundi*.'[43] At York the procession encompassed up to twelve stations. It is difficult to surmise why such a complex and lengthy route evolved. Though it was financially profitable for the pageants to play at numerous stations (since they were leased to wealthy spectators), touring to many stations through numerous narrow streets would have been arduous. Miri Rubin has postulated that complex processions attempted to include a large number of the populace, and consequently developed a varied narrative and provided a greater sense of social interaction.[44]

However, a procession through the streets may not have provided harmonious 'social interaction'. The procession validated the city centre, but marginalised the places (and people) that it did not visit. The parade reflected the orderliness of the masculinised guilds, but the spaces that were avoided became dangerous, open, female places. The streets and squares where the performances were played became official spaces, whereas the excluded areas were unmarked and unsanctioned. This delineation of playing space created social hierarchies and emphasised physical boundaries.

In the medieval town the stigmatised resided outside the walls, which is beyond the boundary defined by the Corpus Christi cycles. For example, lepers and hospitals were placed on the outskirts of the city, beyond the walls. Many feminised spaces existed within this liminal space. Goldberg notes that the degree of female poverty in late medieval England led to the establishment of enclaves of poorly spinsters within the suburbs of York.[45] It was often beyond the city walls that prostitution was licensed. Official brothels were established in Southwark and other city suburbs from 1393 onwards.[46] Within Europe, official red-light districts with municipal or crown brothels were established beyond the city walls. For example, in 1425 Charles VI placed a Toulouse brothel under his control.[47] The female spaces within a city were not visited by the Corpus Christi procession. In this manner the processions excluded women but validated the masculine, municipal spaces of the city.

[42] Twycross, 'Theatricality', p. 40.
[43] Stevens, *Four Middle English Mystery Cycles*, p. 67.
[44] Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, p. 267.
[45] Goldberg, *Women, Work and Life Cycle*, p. 318.
[46] Amt, *Women's Lives*, pp. 212–13.
[47] Leah Lydia Otis, *Prostitution in Medieval Society* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 37. Communities that were too small to hide a brothel beyond their city walls found other ways of regulating the trade. In small French communities prostitution was limited to a specific day each week.

I have been focusing on the image of the city space as a concentric pattern. The epicentre of this space contains the validated masculine institutions, while the outer, liminal space conceals the areas beyond the city walls, areas that were often occupied by women. This spatial configuration serves as an interesting metaphor for the social body of medieval England. The edge of the permitted boundary, by the city walls or the margins of the body, are the most exposed and vulnerable parts. As Coletti sums up: 'The socially constructed body is particularly vulnerable at its margins, the boundary areas where distinct categories of meaning are open to ambiguity and ambivalence.'[48] The Corpus Christi cycles demarcated and validated the city, the central corpus, but they excluded the marginal limbs, and avoided the dangerous openings of medieval space and society.[49]

Long before Christine de Pisan penned *The City of the Ladies* as a defence against medieval misogyny, women were associated with the city. Through the Bible, the image of the Whore of Babylon made women synonymous with the evil city.[50] Women wandering freely within the metropolis was a fearful notion for the Church Fathers.[51] Bertail notes:

> In the value system of medieval Christianity, she is the sign of ancient evil, the Whore of Babylon, the woman/city seen in the vision of St John of the Apocalypse in Revelation, read by the medieval Church as sign incarnate of the corrupt City of Man.[52]

Women at liberty within the city escaped social and sexual control. The image of the Whore of Babylon shows the fear that the dominant patriarchy held of liberated women within the city. Margery Kempe's imprisonment at Beverley demonstrates this very same fear.

If the metaphor of the city is applied to a reading of the status of medieval women, they are clearly part of the dangerous outer and neglected (open) space, rather than the sanctioned, official, commercial city centre.

THE DISRUPTIVE BODY

Margery Kempe uses her body as a means of entering a liminal space. She forsakes her female ornamental body and instead utilises her physical self as a conduit through which to experience Christ's passion. She enters a 'no man's land', a place where gender identity is less fixed. Through this liminal experience she is able to

[48] Theresa Coletti, 'Purity and Danger', p. 69.

[49] Kristeva discusses the excess fluid of the abject body. She sees blood, pus, vomit and shit as belonging to 'the border of my condition as a living being' (Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon Roudiez [New York: Columbia University Press, 1982], p. 3). In this way, the open margins of the body are marginal, liminal places.

[50] Revelation 14. 8.

[51] Evidence of the fear of women's freedom can be seen in some of the regulations that were issued by the city fathers. For example, in London the following dress code existed: 'No woman of the town shall henceforth go to the market nor into the highway out of her house with a hood furred with budge, whether it be of lamb or conies, upon pain of forfeiting her hood to the use of the Sheriffs' (cited in Hanawalt, *Margins*, p. 7).

[52] Sarah Bryant-Bertail, 'Space/Time as Historical Sign: Essay on *La Celestine*, in Memory of Antoine Vitez', *JDTC* (Spring 1991), p. 115.

inscribe her body with the pain of Christ's (and that of the Virgin and the Magdalene). I am interested to see how the cycle plays construct the relationship between body and gender, and the degree to which they utilise liminal space to test out possible gender readings.

In *Carnival and Theatre* Michael Bristol examines the social function of festivity. He notes the way in which the festive is marked by the suspension of ordinary rules, role reversal, the transgression of social boundaries, and the juxtaposing of the formal and the informal.[53] Bristol surveys the critical approaches that have been used to analyse the function of festival.[54] For example, functional theory sees festival as a means of incorporating the dysfunctional into the social body.[55]

The metaphor of the body politic is important within the cycles.[56] It is used to identify tension in the cycles between social wholeness (expressed by the image of a city unified to produce the plays) and fragmentation (seen through those excluded from the production of the dramas).[57] I have already noted the fact that the producing bodies were primarily male institutions. Social wholeness is thus symbolised by male control. Women, on the other hand, are seen as fragmented, loose and marginal. They are marginalised within the production of the cycles.

Mervyn James believes that such tension has a positive effect:

> the theme of Corpus Christi is society seen in terms of body; and that the concept of body provided urban societies with a mythology and ritual in terms of which the opposites of social wholeness and social differentiation could be both affirmed, and also brought into a creative tension with one another.[58]

James argues that tension is caused through an 'ideal' order being placed in dialectic opposition with 'reality', and that this was a mechanism for maintaining social stability. But other readings of the importance of the social body in medieval drama are possible.

Bristol also debates Victor Turner's differentiation between 'social structure', a sanctioned position, and 'communitas', a shifting, spontaneous affiliation.[59] Turner argues that the festive may have a genuine role to play in testing out new modes of being. The liminal spaces, the position that I argue Kempe's body inhabits, is the place for such opportunities: 'Liminoid phenomena are not merely

[53] Michael Bristol, *Carnival and Theatre* (New York: Methuen, 1985), p. 27.

[54] Bristol also discusses festival as 'archaic survival', (an idea favoured by E.K. Chambers); the Durkheimian synthesis of functional and archaic theories; Arnold van Gennep's model of the rite of passage (a pattern which Christ's resurrection fulfils), and Rene Girard's 'scapegoat effect' in which sacrificial murder wards off difference because of economic necessity (ibid., pp. 28–33).

[55] Ibid., p. 27.

[56] Roberta Gilchrist attributes the identification of the body politic to John of Salisbury in his 1159 study *Policraticus* where he discusses the state as 'a sort of body' (See Roberta Gilchrist, 'Medieval Bodies in the Material World: Gender, Stigma and the Body', *Framing Medieval Bodies*, eds. Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin [Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1994], p. 60). The image is a particularly hierarchical and patriarchal one, in which the stability of the whole body is created by the support of the merchants (seen as the legs), and the labourers (the feet) for the head (the monarch).

[57] Lacan would argue that humankind exists within a state of fragmentation or *corps morcele* and that the notion of a whole body does not exist (See Elaine Aston, *An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre* [London: Routledge, 1995], pp. 35–8).

[58] Meryvn James, 'Ritual, Drama and Social Body in the Late Medieval English Town', *PP* 98 (1983), p. 4.

[59] Bristol, *Carnival and Theatre*, p. 36.

reversive, they are often subversive, representing radical critiques of the central structures and proposing alternative models.'[60] Within the marginal spaces that women frequently occupy it is possible to test new structures.

It is the ability of festival to subvert the social body that has formed the focus of an increasing body of scholarly investigation into the Corpus Christi cycles. Peter Travis notes that discrete members of the social body could form a 'potentially rivalrous' threat.[61] Kristina Simeonova utilises a Bakhtinian approach to argue that new modes of meaning are played out through the focus on the lower bodily strata.[62] Sarah Beckwith discusses the limitations of James's approach and draws upon the work of Bourdieu and Catherine Bell to suggest that the cycles construct a series of tensions rather than assert monolithic beliefs.[63] It is the last two approaches that I would like to investigate further, as they both offer considerable scope for a gendered reading of the representation of the body within the cycles.

Bakhtin reads medieval life symbolically. He believes that the head represented heaven/God/man and the lower regions hell/devil/woman.[64] It is the lower parts of the body that are seen as 'womanly' and are associated with the Fall and its accompanying shame. In this opposition of head/body, male qualities become supreme. The soul commands the body, as does the head. Moreover, in order for this fragmented body (one which is divided into soul/body or head/torso) to achieve wholeness, masculine identity must supplant the female aspects: the head must assert itself over the limbs.

The cycle dramas explore many of these issues. Women are frequently associated with the lower body. The vulgar women of the cycles are allied with fleshly dangers. For example, in the Chester *Slaughter of the Innocents* women are described using debased language. One of Pilate's soldiers speaks of a mother as 'a shitten-arsed shrowe'.[65] Predictably, Mary Magdalene is also used to express notions of the contaminated body. In the Chester cycle she speaks to Christ about her corrupted body:

> From thee, Lord, may I not concede
> my fylth and my faultes fayle.

[60] Ibid., p. 38.

[61] Peter Travis, 'The Semiotics of Christ's Body in the English Cycles', *Approaches to Teaching Medieval English Drama*, ed. Richard K. Emmerson (New York: MLAA, 1990), p. 72. Travis provides a reading of the Towneley *Second Shepherds' Pageant* in which he demonstrates the various notions of the body: 'In this pageant the world body appears to be suffering from a cosmic disease; the social body of England is in disarray; political corruption and favoritism have sharpened the shepherds' unrest; their consumer bodies are woefully undernourished; and the plight of the medical body is a constant complaint, epitomized by Gill's mock labour and Mak's burlesque punishment', p. 68.

[62] Kristina Simeonova, 'The Aesthetic Function of the Carnivalesque in Medieval English Drama', *Bakhtin: Carnival and Other Subjects*, ed. David Shepherd (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Editions Rodopi B.V., 1993), p. 79.

[63] Beckwith, 'Ritual, Theater, and Social Space', pp. 65–7. This essay is reproduced as Chapter Two of Beckwith's book, *Signifying God* (London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

[64] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Mass: Massachusetts Institute of Technology 1968); reprint (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 311. Kathleen Biddick also sees the Eucharist as a Bakhtinian symbol; it is a grotesque, broken, and bleeding body (Kathleen Biddick, 'Genders, Bodies, Borders: technologies of the Visible', *Studying Medieval Women: Sex, Gender, Feminism*, A Speculum Book, ed. Nancy Partner [Cambridge, Mass: Medieval Academy of America, 1993], pp. 87–116).

[65] *Chester Plays*, pageant X, l. 157.

> Forgive mee that my flesh so frayle
> to thee hath donne amysse.[66]

The N-Town pageant of *The Woman Taken in Adultery* utilises the opportunity to debase the sinful woman. She is described as a 'hore and stynkynge bych', a 'sloveyn' and 'slutte'.[67] Through identifying women with base elements and the lower regions of the corpus, the cycles perpetuate the image of the woman's body as a tarnished site.

However, the reading applied by Sarah Beckwith offers greater possibilities than the dichotomy of a Bakhtinian approach. Within the cycles it is possible to read the action of the disobedient women as a genuine challenge. The disbelieving women of the cycles articulate their objectives as a threat to social order. Their action does not necessarily provide a social palliative. For example, Noah's wife, in refusing to admit herself to the 'body' of the ark, becomes a loose member, set out on a limb. From this liminal space she is able to weaken the vertical hierarchy of the body. The women who ignore patriarchal advice and utilise their bodies to assert their demands are knowingly fragmented and detached from the social body. As Grosz acknowledges, the body as an image provides the opportunity for rebellion:

> As well as being the site of knowledge-power, the body is thus also a site of *resistance*, for it exerts a recalcitrance, and always entails the possibility of a counterstrategic reinscription . . .[68]

The figures of Mrs Noah, the Mothers of the Innocents, Gyll, Dame Procula and Mary Magdalene offer such a resistance. Although the cycle dramas offer this reading of the body as an instrument of female rebellion, there are other ways in which they provide a unique exploration of the gendered body. The dramatisations of the bodies of Christ and the Virgin offer complex sites for disrupting gender assumptions.

In the previous chapter I outlined some of the ways in which the use of male cross-dressing may have raised issues about the stability of gender. The presentation of the body is manipulated in order to foreground notions of the fluidity of gender. Such a moment occurs during the Chester cycle. The Second Mother in the *Slaughter of the Innocents* attempts to save her male child's life by 'discovering' female genitalia and switching his gender. 'Hit hath two hooles under the tayle' she exclaims, presumably while holding up her puppet child on stage.[69] It is also interesting to look at the kiss that marks Christ's betrayal. Judas's disclosure of Jesus is through a homosexual kiss, a further manipulation of traditional gender barriers.[70]

[66] Ibid., pageant XIV, ll. 45–8.
[67] *N-Town Plays*, pageant XXIV, ll. 147 and 150.
[68] Elizabeth Grosz, 'Inscriptions and Body-Maps: Representations and the Corporeal', *Feminine/Masculine and Representation*, eds. Terry Threadgold and Anne Cranny-Francis (Sydney, London, Boston, Wellington: Allen and Unwin, 1990), p. 64.
[69] *Chester Plays*, pageant X, l. 367.
[70] Jane Gilbert argues that in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* Gawain's 'kiss' is read by medieval society as homosexual and therefore a masquerade of female sexuality in which one man 'plays' the female role or both partners are feminised. Jane Gilbert, Sexuality and Gender Symposium. Centre for Medieval Studies, York University, November 1995. Gilbert clearly draws upon the work of Carolyn Dinshaw. Dinshaw notes the impact of 'two men kissing feelingly, solemnly, seriously', but perceives that this is used within *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to establish the notion of heterosexuality

Theresa Coletti and Caroline Bynum's studies suggest that Christ was frequently represented in ways that highlighted feminine qualities.[71] Coletti proposes that Christ's importance as a physical body provided a figure with which female audience members identified: 'whatever her role in the Christian story, woman is pre-eminently a physical body, an identity whose significance is shared by the cycles' major character, Jesus Christ.'[72] Christ's iconography contains other physical qualities which are normally attributed as feminine. The emphasis on the importance of the crucifixion in late medieval times increased the notion of Christ as a poor, naked, defenceless, suffering being. His open and fragmented body is demasculinised. These are all qualities which are more frequently assigned to women. Many other influences determine a partially female representation of Christ. He is born of a woman who conceives via the Holy Spirit. His conception has no paternal influence (beyond God) and he seems, therefore, more predisposed to inherit female qualities. Indeed at many points in his life he plays the role of 'mother'. His role is that of nurturer, healer and carer. Through the Eucharist he provides nourishment that can feed and nurse the Christian population; an experience which Margery Kempe realises.

Bynum points out that medieval art frequently showed Christ's wound on the cross as a type of lactating breast.[73] His loss of blood is like an act of cleansing and purging: a type of menstruation. Indeed, Camille suggests that Christ's body portrays:

> verbal and visual gender-bending, where parts of Christ's body, such as His wound, as depicted in fourteenth century Books of Hours, becomes a vast vagina-like object of desire, a transference of the dangerously open body of woman in all her horrifying 'difference'.[74]

Here Christ adopts the female sex and his wound imitates the open female body. Some scholars have taken the reading of Christ's feminisation to a further point. Travis sees the crucifixion as consolidating the notion of Christ's femininity; he reads it as a gang rape and believes that Christ, therefore, has a 'double-gender body'.[75] The advantage of this double-gendered body is that it provides a symbol with which both men and women can identify. Christ's body is vulnerable and penetrable, and this sense of humility is accessible to the whole spectrum of the audience.

Arguments for the femininity of Christ owe something to his silent behaviour, a feature which importantly he shares with the Virgin. Davidson notes in the York cycle that: 'Through all his anguish in Plays XXIX–XXXIII, the most striking

through the containment of the deviant. See Carolyn Dinshaw, 'A Kiss is Just a Kiss: Heterosexuality and its Consolations in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', *Diacritics* (Summer/Fall 1994), p. 223.

[71] See Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption* and Coletti 'A Feminist Approach'. Rosemary Radford Reuther argues that God is to be imagined as 'equally male and female' and that Christ can be viewed as a 'sister' (Rosemary Radford Reuther, 'The Liberation of Christology from Patriarchy', *Feminist Theology: A Reader*, ed. Anne Loades [London: SPCK, 1990], pp. 146 and 148).

[72] Coletti, 'A Feminist Approach', p. 88.

[73] Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, p. 93.

[74] Michael Camille, 'The Image and the Self: Unwriting Late Medieval Bodies', *Framing Medieval Bodies*, eds. Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1994), p. 77.

[75] Travis, 'The Semiotics of Christ's Body', p. 71.

element is perhaps Jesus' silence.'[76] Since silence is recorded as absence within play *texts*, it is likely that this would be more effective during *performance*. Indeed, the N-Town Passion, performed at Toronto in 1981, included long moments when Christ, like the grieving women, used 'the silent language of his body'.[77]

Christ's 'double-gendered' body has an ambiguous sexual role within the cycles. For example, the Chester *Buffeting of Christ* depicts Christ through the use of feminine language:

> Now he is bounden
> Be he never so wandon[78]

His 'wandon' behaviour is substantiated in the *Passion* when Christ is described as having 'wyles'.[79] This language has feminine connotations: the term 'wyles' is most usually associated with Eve. I have identified that late medieval art frequently feminised the representation of Christ. The cycle dramas seem to perpetuate this construction. Christ becomes double-gendered in order to be accessible to both male and female members of the audience.

The dramatisation of Mary offers another opportunity to articulate the semiotic relationship between the body and gender. Mary's central importance is as a body; a similarity which she shares with Christ. She is the body on which the Christ child is inscribed. The cycle plays emphasise her importance as a body. She, like Christ, is frequently silent when on stage. Her presence is emphasised by her gestures. For example, the N-Town Proclamation indicates that she swoons at the crucifixion:

> His modyr doth se þat syth, gret mornyng makyth she;
> For sorwe she gynnyth to swowne.[80]

At this moment Mary's text is her body. She is silenced but reveals her suffering through deed rather than word.

The Virgin as the mother of Christ is, of course, inextricably linked to him. She is his flesh and blood. Late medieval iconographic representations of Mary frequently show her suckling the Christ child.[81] She nourishes and feeds Christ. Their flesh is one. In the Chester *Resurrection* pageant, Mary comments on the connection between her body and Christ's:

> Think one, my fruyte, I fostred thee
> and gave thee sucke upon my brest.[82]

The Virgin's body, like that of Christ, is an ambiguous signifier. I have outlined the way in which Christ's body is double-gendered. The Virgin's body is at once

[76] Clifford Davidson, *From Creation to Doom* (New York: AMS Press, 1984), p. 110.
[77] Theresa Coletti and Kathleen Ashley, 'The N-Town Passion at Toronto and Late Medieval Passion Iconography', *RORD* 24 (1981), p. 185.
[78] *Chester Plays*, pageant XVI, ll. 315–16.
[79] Ibid., pageant XVIA, l. 11.
[80] *N-Town Plays*, ll. 393–94.
[81] Penny Schine Gold, *The Lady and the Virgin* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 54.
[82] *Chester Plays*, pageant XVI, ll. 245–46.

both feminine and androgynous. She displays a function which expresses the height of femininity, that of mothering and suckling her child. Mary's presentation paradoxically emphasises her androgynous presence. Radford Reuther draws upon Jungian ideas to suggest that Mary is present within Christianity as a model of the reintegration of body/spirit, masculine/feminine, earth/heaven. Mary 'reintegrates humanity as androgynous personhood and redeemed body'.[83] During the Chester Shepherds' pageant, the boy who accompanies the shepherds praises Mary for her pure body:

> his mother, that mayden clere,
> that of her body hasse (him) borne.[84]

She is shown to be 'clere', pure and neutral. Through this neutrality, and the emphasis on her virginity, her body is inscribed as androgynous.

There is a final way that Mary's body challenges some preconceptions about gender. Theresa Coletti has explored the en-gendering of Mary's body within the N-Town infancy plays.[85] She argues that Mary's body is used to achieve a violation of social norms in that she has authority over her husband, and shows the vulnerability of social institutions during the N-Town trial scene. Theresa Coletti has done much work on Mary's presentation and believes that the Marion pageants from the N-Town plays 'undercut traditional discourses of gender'.[86] Coletti believes that this image is developed through Joseph's doubtfulness about her faithfulness, his misplaced misogyny and her placement within a largely domestic environment in the N-Town plays. But Coletti sees in her presentation the basis for conflict. She believes that:

> cycle dramatists saw in the complex semiotics of Mary's pure yet dangerous female body the opportunity to read Christian myth as a text about the social order and to create versions of that story that examine gender meanings in relation to canon law, popular belief, and contemporary social mores and practices.[87]

The biblical stores are dramatised, Coletti suggests, to demonstrate how the female body, and in particular that of Mary, can be used to examine social and gender meanings.

Mary, like many women within the cycles, demonstrates ways in which gender issues can create tension within the text of the cycles. Mary, and the other women

[83] Reuther, *New Woman,* p. 36.

[84] Chester plays, pageant VII, ll. 603–4.

[85] Theresa Coletti, 'Purity and Danger'. Elizabeth Witt in *Contrary Marys* disputes Coletti's reading. She believes that Coletti's ideas do not reflect a clear enough understanding of the significance of Mary in a Catholic country. Witt believes that 'the divine as opposed to the human nature' of the Virgin is emphasised in the mystery cycles (Elizabeth Witt, *Contrary Marys in Medieval English and French Drama*. Studies in the Humanities, vol. 17 [New York: Peter Lang, 1995], p. 51).

[86] Theresa Coletti, 'Purity and Danger', p. 67. Marianne Briscoe agrees that the Virgin's presentation in the N-Town and Towneley plays is unusual: 'While these Marys never descend to coarse insults, neither are they the paragons of humility and compliance that we expect to find at the Crucifixion' (Marianne Briscoe, 'Preaching and Medieval English Drama', *Contexts for Early English Drama*, eds. M. Briscoe and J. Coldeway [Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989], p. 163).

[87] Coletti, 'Purity and Danger', p. 83.

of the cycle, can upset and stretch the boundaries of the social conventions at work within the dramas. As Coletti realises, disruption can occur:

> In the N-Town Trial play, Mary's paradoxical body is deployed in order to upset institutions that order society, showing them to be vulnerable precisely where the boundaries of her own sacred body are not.[88]

Through this, Mary and Christ become liminal bodies. They are neither male nor female. They are members of the 'third sex'. Their instability and uncontrollability is evident. Mary conceives despite her husband's watchfulness over her body. Christ is resurrected despite being murdered. These unstable, uncontrollable, uncategorisable bodies are yet another way in which the Corpus Christi cycles offer a site for the exploration of the gendered body.

The festive re-enactment of the crucifixion of Christ's body through the streets of the medieval city offered a complex site for the exploration of the gendered body. By placing the body on display a number of complex iterations of gender occurred. For example, the processions marginalised the vulgar outskirts and suburbs of the city. The processions validated male institutions and ignored female places. Similarly, the vulgar women of the cycles are hidden and confined in private, domestic spaces. This reflects the increasing confinement of women that I have outlined in Chapter One. Vulgar bodies are contained, while the holy Virgin can freely traverse the space.

[88] Ibid., p. 82.

Part II

REPRESENTING GENDER

Chapter 5

HOLY WOMEN

In the Chester Cappers' Corpus Christi pageant Balaack, fearing resurgence by the Israelites, orders that the townswomen be placed in front of their enemy to provide a distraction. Balaack instructs that these sirens be selected from the most beautiful women available:

> Spare thou neyther ryche ne poore,
> wyddowe, mayde, ne ylke whoore;
> yf shee bee fresh of coloure,
> bringe her with thee, I saye.[1]

The Doctor interrupts the action and, in a direct narration to the 'Lordes and ladyes' in the audience, explains that the women successfully tempted their enemies and, by later rejecting their love, confused God's people.[2] Such a moment provides an insight into the treatment of women in the Corpus Christi cycles. They are astute decoys, 'full of illusion' and adept at tempting and deceiving (the image of Eve had established this notion at the beginning of the theatrical event). But it is also significant that women are not treated as a homogeneous group. Balaack classifies them according to rank and wealth, marital status and finally, their moral standing.

The second section of this study will examine the textual representations that are made of holy and vulgar women within medieval drama. I argue that if one reads the women against a context of social, cultural and religious concerns it is possible to engage in a fruitful interpretation. When women characters are treated as subject rather than object, a different set of gender reading are apparent. Medieval drama contains many women who test the boundaries of their conventional roles. In this way the holy and vulgar women are used to try out a series of 'unrealised possibilities' through their actions.

There are a number of problems that one faces in interpreting the women within medieval drama. Despite the plethora of approaches available for interpreting female characters (which have been outlined in the Introduction), there

[1] *Chester Plays*, pageant V, ll. 380–83.

[2] This saved the Chester producers from having to physically portray this moment on stage – presumably aside from the practical problem of overcrowding the playing areas, there lay the greater fear that men in the audience would be distracted by the appearance of these widows, maids and, in particular, whores.

remains much opposition to foregrounding women. For example, Theresa Coletti notes of the cycle dramas that 'women play an extremely important role in the salvation history the cycles present', but that they are resistant to readings that focus upon gender.[3] Since Coletti penned this comment, several scholars have begun to establish a feminist critique of the cycles. In the Introduction I noted how the work of Coletti, Kathleen Ashley and Ruth Evans has explored some approaches to feminist readings. However, Coletti is right to think that the cycles offer some resistance to such interpretations.

It is difficult to pinpoint exactly where this resistance lies. It is possible to argue that the cycles are the product of masculine control and that they do not reveal any concern with women's interests. The plays were certainly produced by men (the limited influence that women had has been discussed in Chapter Two). Much of the terminology associated with the Corpus Christi cycles is male gendered, such as 'pageant master' or 'master text'. Stevens also notes that: 'The emphasis on a powerful God in the Chester cycle seems also to inspire the persistent elevation of man above woman.'[4] Indeed, this suggestion seems close to one of the main issues about misogyny within the cycles; God is placed in absolute authority.[5]

Given the patriarchal influences on the cycles it is of little surprise that critics find a 'recurrent note of anti-feminism' within the cycles.[6] At York, Adam and Joseph bemoan women, while within the Chester cycle Noah, Joseph and the Third Shepherd (cited below) all utter comments on wifely domination:

> For, good men, this is not unknowen
> to husbandes that benne here abowt:
> that eych man muste bowe his wife,
> and commonly for feare of a clowte.[7]

The cycles themselves sometimes emphasise the polarity between the virgin and whore dichotomy. For example, in the Towneley Judgement pageant Tutivellus cites female characteristics:

> If she be neuer so fowll a dowde,
> With hir kelless and hir pynnes,
> The shrew hirself can shrowde
> Both hir chekys and hir chynnes.
> She can make it full prowde
> With iapes and with gynnes,
> Hir hede as hy as a clowde,
> But no shame of hir synnes
> Thai fele.
> When she is thus paynt,
> She makys it so quaynte,

[3] Coletti, 'A Feminist Approach', p. 68.
[4] Stevens, *Four Middle English Mystery Cycles*, p. 277.
[5] Interestingly, the N-Town plays which focus to a greater degree on Mary than God contain less misogynistic remarks.
[6] Axton, *European Drama*, p. 186.
[7] *Chester Plays*, pageant VII, ll. 85–8.

She lookys like a saynt,
And wars then the deyle.
She is hornyd like a kowe.[8]

The passage focuses upon the deception that women practise with regard to their appearance. Tutivellus's language highlights the dichotomy of the virgin/whore polemic. The common 'shrew' disguises herself as a 'saint'. The vulgar parades as the holy.

Anti-feminist sentiments can be found in other secular medieval drama. The thirteenth-century French drama, *Le Jeu de la Feuillée*, bemoans women:

Adam: I know plenty of scolds myself:
Henri of Arjan's wife for one-
She spits and scratches like a cat
And then the wife of Master Thomas
Of Darnestal, who lives there.
Hane: They're both possessed by a hundred devils-
As I was ever my father's son.[9]

The method of character construction within the cycle dramas may have also increased misogyny within the pageants. In creating the cycle characters, the medieval playwright was constrained by the typological value of the biblical characters. In other words, the playwright read backwards into the life of a character and shaped their early life to mirror the eventual outcome. For example, because Eve sins in being tempted to eat the apple she is prone to sinful behaviour from the start. This is certainly true in the case of the York pageant. Adam unmercifully blames Eve, declaring as he bites into the apple 'A Eue, þou art to blame/ To þis entysed þou me', and later sneaks to God: 'Lorde, Eue garte me do wronge.'[10] In fact, from the moment of her creation Eve is depicted as vain and proud, declaring: 'þat tyll vs swylke a dyngnite/ Has gyffyne before all othyr thynge.'[11]

Other forms of medieval drama are not, of course, bound by some of the same restrictions that are placed upon the Corpus Christi cycles. Although Saints' plays, such as the Digby *Mary Magdalene*, draw upon biblical tradition they also integrate popular legend. Because such plays are not part of a cycle sequence there is no requirement to follow a typological pattern such has been outlined above. The presence of abstract characters, such as Lechery in Morality dramas, provides the dramatist with a greater deal of freedom than the cycle dramas. It is interesting to note that although the female characters within Saints', Miracle and Folk dramas are often more challenging than the cycle dramas, they have received very little critical attention.

As Coletti points out, women are extremely important to salvation history, and yet relatively few critical approaches take account of this. In fact, many critics have

[8] *Towneley Plays*, pageant XXX, ll. 378–89.
[9] *Medieval French Plays*, trans. Richard Axton and John Stevens (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971), p. 223.
[10] *York Plays*, pageant V, ll. 108–9 and l. 142.
[11] Ibid., ll. 55–6. Far from flattening out the character of Eve, this representation actually serves to diminish Adam, as Richard Beadle and Pamela King note: 'Adam is not of particularly impressive moral stature in this play: he accepts the fruit for the same selfish reasons as Eve, rather than out of love for her. Later when God confronts him with his crime, far from presenting an example of contrition, Adam peevishly blames his wife.' See Beadle and King, eds. *York Mystery Plays*, p. 8.

preferred to emphasise the misogyny of the cycles. Driven by a desire to find a unity of narrative events, scholars have seized upon the notion that incidents were selected for their foreshadowing of the Passion sequence. This concept of prefiguration has also been applied to the interpretation of character. For example, Taylor utilises prefiguring to analyse domestic relationships within the cycles:

> the ludicrous recalcitrance of Noah's wife, prefigured in Eve's conduct toward Adam, extended in the relationship of a Towneley Mak and Gyll, and contradicted in the docility of Mary toward Joseph, exemplifies the absurdity of disorder in the domestic sphere.[12]

Interpreting women's characterisation through the application of prefiguration holds two dangers. First, it tends to flatten out specific nuances of individual characters and forces them into fulfilling certain stereotypical roles. Second, it perpetuates the dichotomy of virgin/whore: characters are read as sinful or sin-free. Characters are interpreted as belonging to the lineage of Eve or showing the piety of Mary; they cease to be viewed for their own individuality.

It is also possible that a type of invisible misogyny was at work within the performance of medieval drama. Since men enacted the women's parts, there was a degree of latitude in *how* women were portrayed on stage. Perhaps at times male performers used the texts ironically. It is difficult to know how far the performance by men should be considered when approaching female characters. Some of the issues that surround male 'transvestism' have been discussed in Chapter Three, but Richard Rastall goes as far as suggesting that: 'We must reconsider all female roles in the light of the types of male actor originally available.'[13] Meg Twycross believes that because of the restrictions of cross-dressing, women's characters are emotionally restricted, and that male actors playing women interacted better in scenes with male characters than those with women.[14] Twycross suggests:

> most of the scenes from the mystery plays which involve female characters allow for this by showing them either interacting with men, or if with other women (I am thinking especially of the Three Maries) on a very fundamental level.[15]

I don't think that this is necessarily the case. There are occasions when women characters interact with each other, Mary and Elisabeth in the Visitation are the most obvious example. In fact, female characters display a full emotional range which matches that of the male characters.

There are ways in which simple misogynistic readings of the characters can be avoided. In the Introduction some of the critical approaches that have been developed in order to create a feminist interpretation of medieval drama were

[12] Jerome Taylor, 'The Dramatic Structure of the Middle English Corpus Christi, or Cycle, Plays', *Medieval English Drama*, eds. Jerome Taylor and Alan H. Nelson (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 155.

[13] Richard Rastall, 'Female Roles in All-Male Casts', p. 44.

[14] Juliet Dusinberre in contrast argues that the artificial stage convention of boys playing women in the Renaissance theatre led to a more naturalistic portrayal of individual women. She suggests that, through the use of masquerading, attention is paradoxically brought to the individual characteristics of women. See Dusinberre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, p. 271.

[15] Twycross, 'Transvestism in the Mystery Plays', p. 149.

noted. An important factor in reaching such a reading is the criteria that are used in approaching the women characters. As Bynum postulates, the assessment of women's roles is dependent on the position that we view them from:

> If one looks *with* women rather than *at* women, women's lives are not liminal *to* women – but neither except in a very partial way, are male roles or male experiences.[16]

Her statement contains two important points: first, women are not marginal for women (female spectators may have watched the 'women's' roles on stage with far greater interest than their male counterparts), and second, since daily discourse involves women interacting with men, male roles are often important for the reflections they offer on female experience.

It is immediately evident that characterisation in medieval drama cannot be considered according to modern expectations. The characters are not naturalistic portrayals motivated by psychological impulses. But the question of how they should be evaluated remains. Scholars have suggested a number of different ways of viewing the cycles' characters.[17] In the Introduction I defined the performance style as one that staged a dialectic between a character's biblical function and their relevance (or individuality) to a medieval audience. Twycross argues that the 'characters speak as guiding, instructing, authorial voices', but carefully asserts that they operate as something beyond mere mouthpieces.[18] She suggests that in using character types the cycles avoid the pitfall of letting them become one-dimensional and lifeless. It is this definition of character that I wish to follow. The characters are carefully crafted to contain individual nuances but they are also representative types, such as wife, mother, worker. In this manner the characters are able to act as attainable examples for the audience. And it is here that the women characters of the cycles are clearly worthy of greater investigation than their counterparts in most other medieval drama. The relationship between the mode of production and the spectator means that the distance between the character and viewer is lessened. The audience probably knew the man who performed a female character; the domesticity of the setting of many of the women characters made them more accessible. This chapter will examine the representation of the holy women: the Virgin and the Magdalene in medieval drama. It will show that far from being remote characters they are frequently shaped by the dramatists to provide a valuable insight into medieval life.

THE VIRGIN IN DRAMA

The iconography of the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene had a major influence on the representation of medieval women. Though both women receive little

[16] Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, pp. 47–8.

[17] Lesley Soule suggests that the power of women on stage within the cult of European drama is based on their ability to suffer rather than command (Soule, 'Demystifying the Mysteries', p. 111). In this light, it is possible to see why the Virgin Mary's *planctus* at the crucifixion is an empowering rather than a debilitating moment. However, other women in the cycles are notable for their refusal to suffer, for example the retaliating Mothers of the Innocents and the reluctant Mrs Noah. Whereas such a reading helps to empower the presentation of the Virgin, it would disregard the effects of the portrayal of other cycle play women.

[18] Twycross, 'Books for the Unlearned', p. 82.

attention within the Bible, by the Middle Ages a significant cult had developed around the image of these figures.[19] They were celebrated through illustrations, carvings, writings, song, and of course, drama.

Marina Warner in *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* outlines the many roles that Mary fulfilled: Virgin, Queen, Bride, Mother and Intercessor. Warner traces the development of the Mary myth from her scant appearance and largely silent role within the Bible to the climax of the cult in fourteenth-century France. Of the four dogmas attached to Mary, only that of her divine motherhood can be traced to biblical sources. The dogmas of her virginity, the immaculate conception and her assumption into heaven were subsequently developed. Warner charts how the early Romanesque images of Mary as Mother were replaced by the late twelfth-century depictions of the triumph of the Virgin. The thirteenth-century carvings at the cathedrals of Notre Dame, Chartres and Strasbourg marked the establishment of Mary as Queen of Heaven.[20] The cult of the Virgin is one which marks her increasing power; the passage from Mother of Christ to Intercessor in her own right is a substantial one. However, Warner notes that the shift from emphasis on the virgin birth to the issue of her virginity was accompanied by her transformation from religious sign to an embodiment of religious doctrine. At this point Mary was no longer portrayed as a type of mother goddess but an 'effective instrument of asceticism and female subjection'.[21]

Medieval literature played an important part in perpetuating the myth of the Virgin Mary. St Bonaventure's *Meditations* emphasised the innocence of Mary by presenting her as a rose, whilst Jerome's writings elevated virginity to equate it with the position afforded men, that is one associated with the soul or spirit (as opposed to woman's alliance with the flesh and the body).[22] The myth started to encourage the idea that self-denial for women could correct the legacy of Eve, 'through virginity and self-inflicted hardship, the faults of female nature could be corrected'.[23] Through the Virgin, Ave Maria, the sins of Eve can be reversed.[24]

For courtesy book writers the Virgin symbolised other qualities of ideal female conduct. In the 1372 *Livre du Chevalier de la Tour Landry*, the story of Patient Griselda was used to promote the qualities of obedience and servitude.[25] In the conduct manual *Le Menagier de Paris*, the elderly husband warns his young wife to be humble, and reminds her of the Patient Griselda fable.[26] The situation is, of course, reminiscent of that of Joseph and the young Mary. As Warner notes, the qualities of the Virgin were adopted to form a spiritual and moral code which women were encouraged to follow.[27]

[19] The infancy narratives, which depict the Virgin Mary in fuller detail, are a later addition.

[20] Fourteenth-century manuscripts in England also show Mary's ascension (See Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: the Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* [London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1976; reprint, with new Afterthought, Picador, 1990], p. 89).

[21] Ibid., p. 49.

[22] Cited in Warner, *Alone of All her Sex*, p. 45 and p. 73.

[23] Ibid., p. 69.

[24] The image of Mary as a second Eve, the 'Ave' who reverses the damage of 'Eva' is present in the cycle dramas. See the N-Town *The Parliament of Heaven: The Salvation and Conception* (pageant XI).

[25] See Larrington, ed. *Women and Writing*, p. 16.

[26] See Amt, ed. *Women's Lives*, p. 319.

[27] Warner, *Alone of All her Sex*, p. 185.

The image of Mary that was prevalent during the inception of the cycle dramas was one that emphasised her role as an example for ideal conduct. She was used to promote the virtues of purity of flesh, silence, obedience (particularly to one's husband) and humility. But many of the images of Mary that existed in fourteenth-century England also emphasised her humanness.[28] The cult of the *Planctus Mariae*, which depicted the Virgin weeping at the Cross, stressed the human pain that she endured. As Warner points out, 'All the Virgin's supernatural qualities co-exist with a human body that is real, not phantom. She is a living person, not a spirit, and her physical reality is of extreme importance to her devotees.'[29] The figure of the Virgin is a very ambivalent one. She was on the one hand used to represent an ideal of meek conduct for medieval womanhood, but the recognition of her independent ascension that was prevalent in the fourteenth century celebrated her power and achievement. Though many of her qualities may have seemed unattainable and remote for the medieval woman, often her very humanness was emphasised: 'The Virgin of the thirteenth and fourteenth century miracles was hearty and real and loveable.'[30]

The Virgin Mary is, of course, the ultimate icon of motherhood. It is evident that she was revered within late medieval England as a patron saint of childbirth. For example, the 1508 will of Robert Lascelles of Brakenburgh reveals: 'Also, one small girdle harnessed with silver and gilt, which is an heirloom, called Our Lady's girdle, for sick women with child, I will that it be delivered to my son Roger, to remain as an heirloom.'[31] The importance of her role within the mystery plays is as the mother of Christ but interestingly, the dramatists emphasise her human qualities. They attempt to make her into the mother of humanity. Mary is an antithesis of the other mothers in the cycle. Gyll is a deceitful mother, Mrs Noah is willing to abandon her offspring and the Mothers of the Innocents retaliate physically and swear.

Ruth Evans rightly draws attention to the multifarious and contradictory roles that are adopted by Mary. Evans notes that Mary's identities change during the course of the cycle dramas from virginal mother, Jewish woman, Christian intercessor for the Jews etc. But in carefully locating her analysis within the *performance* of the texts, Evans rightly points out that her role was played by a succession of male actors which added a sense of the 'shifting nature of her identities'.[32] In exploring the use of Mary within the absent York *Funeral of the Virgin* pageant, Evans concludes that Mary's body is a 'thoroughly contradictory sign, one capable of affirming metonymically the enclosed and uncontaminated borders of a Christian society . . . but one also dangerously capable, in so far as it is a signifier of female sexuality, of disturbing those borders'.[33] Evans's statement ties in with those explored in the previous chapter, where it has been noted that Mary's body is capable of disrupting various institutions. In the previous chapter the use of Mary's body has been explored and it is here that her *behaviour* will be investigated further.

[28] Gold, *The Lady and the Virgin*, p. 66.
[29] Warner, *Alone of All her Sex*, p. 95.
[30] Ibid., p. 158.
[31] Goldberg, *Women in England*, p. 58.
[32] Evans, 'When a body meets a body', p. 195.
[33] Ibid., p. 208.

The representation of Mary is astonishingly different in each cycle (it is difficult to ever discuss the cycles as if they are homogeneous works). It has been suggested that in the N-Town play, the Virgin steals the limelight from Christ during the crucifixion. She is contrasted with the motionless, lifeless Christ and is portrayed through 'a melodramatic series of swoons, weeping and laments with the Virgin clinging to the cross and refusing to be led away'.[34] The Virgin appears to be less important in other cycles. Stevens argues that the Chester God is so central to the cycle that Mary is neglected. Excepting the *planctus* she makes no memorable contribution to the cycle.[35] It is, of course, unsurprising that Mary should play such an important role within the N-Town plays. The pageants were probably taken from two play-series, one of which was dedicated to Mary.[36] The N-Town plays contain pageants depicting Mary's youth (which offer an interesting comparison to Christ's childhood) and, as in the York cycle, the focus of the final pageants is on her own ascension.[37] They also show the resurrected Christ appearing firstly to the Virgin, thus increasing her importance and placing her as the first key witness rather than the Magdalene.

Despite the lack of concurrence over Mary's role within the Corpus Christi cycles, it is still worth observing the similarities that they share, for the dramatists' interpretation of the Virgin is somewhat unexpected. In placing the Virgin on stage, the cycle dramatists faced a challenge almost as difficult as portraying God and Christ. She is an icon and possesses supernatural qualities. Mary must appear to be impregnated by the Holy Ghost, give birth as a virgin on stage and in some cases, ascend to heaven. All this must be achieved through a countenance of piety and in a meek and dignified silence. One might assume that these factors would conspire to make Mary a largely unattainable role model for medieval women.

Rather unexpectedly many of the dramatists emphasise the ordinariness of Mary's situation. For example, Mary's disbelief at the Annunciation emphasises her purity and stresses her ability to demonstrate ordinary, human reactions. She is shown to be vulnerable. She hurries to Elizabeth's house in the N-Town version, ashamed and embarrassed at being seen pregnant in public.[38] In Mary's case we witness the positive effects of having an extended family. She is the only woman within the cycles to take part in socialisation. Her visit to her cousin Elizabeth shows healthy social interaction. They address each other in a respectful and polite manner. Their visit endorses each other's pregnant state. Kathleen Ashley reads the Corpus Christi cycles as a type of conduct book for medieval audiences and sees this pageant as a good example:

> In the *Salutation of Elizabeth* the greetings, gossip and leave-taking between Mary and Elizabeth model behaviour for the medieval audience, especially its women members.[39]

[34] Richardson and Johnston, *Medieval Drama*, p. 77.
[35] Stevens, *Four Middle English Mystery Cycles*, p. 276.
[36] Meredith, *The Mary Play*, p. 2.
[37] Gail McMurray Gibson in *The Theater of Devotion* argues that Mary's childhood offers a connection between the Church and the community: 'Mary in her childlike humility and in her simple "dedys of mercy" performs as a recognizable and imitable model for lay piety, and the N-Town playwrights' scene of Mary's separation from her aged and tearful parents wilfully tugs on the heartstrings of a popular audience. But the play at the same time bridges, as the East Anglian towns did themselves, the lay and the monastic worlds' (Gibson, *Theatre of Devotion*, p. 135).
[38] *N-Town Plays*, pageant XII, ll. 13–16.
[39] Ashley, 'Medieval Courtesy Literature', p. 29.

Her relationship with Joseph plays on the fabliau theme of the old husband and young wife. But in all the cycles Joseph's disbelief of Mary's virginity is treated comically and serves to undermine his intelligence rather than her virtue.[40]

There are many positive aspects to be found in the portrayal of the relationship between Joseph and Mary. The cycles make sure that they emphasise equality within their marriage. In the Coventry *Annunciation* Joseph, believing he has been beguiled by Mary, directly addresses the audience warning:

> All olde men, insampull take be me-
> How I am begyllid here you may see!-
> To wed soo yong a child.[41]

These sentiments are to be found in all the cycle versions of the Annunciation, and have a basis within the fabliau. At the end of the York *Joseph's Trouble About Mary*, Joseph attempts to kneel in front of his wife, but she refuses his submission declaring:

> Forgiffnesse sir? Late be, for shame,
> Slike wordis suld all gud woman lakke.[42]

Of course this does not demonstrate Mary's refusal to forgive Joseph; instead it shows that begging for, and offering of, absolution are too hierarchical within their relationship. It is these moments that cause Woolf to note that, despite Joseph's folly, he is still essentially good and that: 'The picture therefore remains of an idealised marriage with its mutuality of affection and sharing of responsibility.'[43]

The cycles' depiction of the relationship between Joseph and Mary emphasises their lowliness and poverty. This portrayal of the couple in relation to the outer social world provides a point of interaction between the biblical figures and the medieval audience. As Flanigan notes:

> the plays dramatise domestic disputes over gender roles, the impact of a transgressed virginity on family and community, and the inevitable links between women's reproduction and the household economy.[44]

The N-Town plays include the *Trial of Mary and Joseph* in which Mary's immaculate conception is challenged. The trial has the ambience of a local town court. Before Mary and Joseph are heard a list of previous defendants is read, amongst them women who have committed some crime: Beatrys Bells, Kate Kelle, fayr Jane,

[40] Kathleen Ashley notes that Joseph's misogynistic remarks strike close to the bone for a medieval audience: 'In his comic confusion, Joseph expresses propositions which were normative for late medieval culture: that marriage between partners of unequal age was socially disruptive and that young women unless carefully chaperoned and instructed were liable to the seductions of handsome, glib young men' (Ashley, 'Medieval Courtesy Literature', p. 28).

[41] *Two Coventry Corpus Christi Plays*, Coventry, Shearman and Taylors' Pageant, ll. 133–35.

[42] *York Plays*, pageant XIII, ll. 296–97.

[43] Woolf, *The English Mystery Plays*, p. 202.

[44] Clifford C. Flanigan, 'Liminality, Carnival and Social Structure: The Case of Late Medieval Biblical Drama', *Victor Turner and the Construction of Cultural Criticism*, ed. Kathleen Ashley (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 86.

Luce Lyere and Bette þe Brewer. Again, the dramatist chooses to emphasise Mary and Joseph as an ordinary couple by placing them in humble and everyday company. Some scholars believe that Mary's position during this scene associates her with the experience of women in the late Middle Ages: 'In the medieval play, Mary's submission and silence have the potential to call into question the public institution of the church and its legal systems, both run by men.'[45]

The N-Town plays provide further opportunities for an accessible portrayal of her earthly life. J.A. Tasioulas finds the depiction of the Virgin's early life to be 'one of the most successful portrayals of a holy child throughout all medieval literature', and concludes that:

> There may not be many women in the mystery cycles but the role of the Virgin in the early N-Town plays of her life is a complicated blend of theology and domesticity which would have brought together the different elements of the female community for the great communal festival of drama.[46]

Meanwhile Alexandra Johnston discusses how performing the Virgin in the N-Town plays brought her to an understanding of how the role successfully depicted a mature life. Her performance experience reinforced her opinion that Mary precipitated most of the action in this cycle sequence. She believes that Mary's role as a widow 'exhibited characteristics of an East Anglian pious widow of the late fifteenth century'.[47] Indeed Johnston finds that this portrayal of Mary, that is one which exemplifies her earthliness, makes her an accessible icon for the audience:

> The portrayal of the Virgin in the N-Town Passion and Assumption plays as a mature woman whose life experiences paralleled that of many members of the audience is yet another way that women's spiritual needs found empathetic expression.[48]

The cycle dramatists strove to create Mary's piety through humanising her portrayal. It is this very humanity that establishes Mary as a mother to all. However, the Virgin is an incredibly complex icon. Her power on stage is mainly attributed to the symbolic value she held for the audience. She is, like the heirloom of Lady Mary's girdle which was left by Robert Lascelles, an object of contemplation. The dramatic character of the Virgin represented many differing qualities. For male clerics in the audience she may have been an icon of devotion, for others an example of perfect womanhood and motherhood, and for some, a way of testing women's private and social relationships. For other audience members, as I have outlined in the previous chapter, the portrayal of her body provoked a series of questions about gender identity. However, it is the figure of the other holy woman that I now wish to examine.

[45] Cindy Carlson, 'Mary's Obedience and Power in the Trial of Joseph and Mary', *CD* 29.3 (Fall 1995), p. 358.

[46] J.A Tasioulas, 'Between Doctrine and Domesticity: The Portrayal of Mary in the N-Town Plays', *Medieval Women and their Communities*, ed. Diane Watt (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997), p. 231 and p. 240.

[47] Alexandra Johnston, 'Acting Mary: The Emotional Realism of the Mature Virgin in the N-Town Plays', *From Page to Performance*, ed. John A. Alford (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1995), p. 96.

[48] Ibid., p. 97.

MARY MAGDALENE

The medieval figure of Mary Magdalene, often seen as the antithesis to the Virgin, is also an ambivalent character. The portrayal of Magdalene by the four gospels is contradictory and inconclusive. The only point of agreement is that Magdalene, along with two other women, was present at the resurrection. Beyond this, she is a somewhat intangible presence. Biblical readings substantiate Magdalene's role as a follower of Christ, and indeed, 'the most important woman follower'.[49] For example, Mark 15.41 shows Magdalene following Christ to Galilee where she 'ministered' to him. Most importantly, the role of Magdalene as the first key witness of the resurrection is highlighted by all but one of the gospels. Medieval art substantiated this 'priestly' image of the Magdalene: stained-glass windows in Chartres Cathedral dating from 1230 and Bourges in 1245 depict her preaching, while at Chalons-sur-Marne a later sixteenth-century image shows her performing a baptism.[50]

It is her role as the first key witness and the preacher of the resurrection that was suppressed by the Church Fathers. St Ambrose in his fourth-century *The Commentary on Luke*, believed that the women's visits to the sepulchre marked their wavering faith, and that Christ appeared firstly to Magdalene 'in the remedy for sin'.[51] Ambrose justified Christ's decision to appear to Magdalene rather than his disciples by interpreting the act as compensation for women's weaknesses which had been demonstrated by the Fall.[52]

However, the image of Magdalene as a preacher has been upstaged by those of her as a pious contemplator, and later, a penitent whore. As Warner points out:

> The witness of the risen Christ, who, veiled and carrying her jar of ointment, walks up silently to the empty sepulchre in so many early Christian representations of the Resurrection, was transformed in the Middle Ages into a hermitess, the perfect embodiment of Christian repentance.[53]

It is not as a follower of Christ, but through her other two biblical 'lives' that Magdalene has become associated with the contradictory images of contemplation and harlotry. Through John's gospel, Magdalene became identified with Mary of Bethany, Lazarus and Martha's sister. Martha's sister weeps for her brother and pleads with Christ to restore his life. This act of piety and faith has influenced the image of Magdalene.[54]

[49] Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalene* (London: Harper Collins, 1993), p. 11.

[50] Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *The Women Around Jesus*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM, 1982), p. 79.

[51] St Ambrose, *Expositio Evangelii Secundum Lucam*, pp. 388–89; cited in Blamires, *Women Defamed and Women Defended*, p. 62.

[52] Contemporary feminist theologians, such as Susan Haskins in *Mary Magdalene*, pp. 11–14, have argued that the women who follow Christ are presented within the Bible as being more tenacious and devoted than the male disciples, and they are rightly rewarded with the first sighting of the resurrection.

[53] Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, p. 229.

[54] Medieval art rarely illustrated the Magdalene in a contemplative mode, though this occurred widely in the sixteenth century. Guido Mazzoni's 1480s *Mourning Group* is an exception: 'The figures, like characters out of a sculpted mystery play, gather round the body, their faces and bodies emanating extraordinary grief, above all that of Mary Magdalene, who, together with St John, flanks the weeping Virgin' (Haskins, *Mary Magdalene*, p. 209).

The association with Mary of Bethany was not entirely positive. She is identified by John and Luke as the sinner who washes Christ's feet with her tears, dries them with her long hair and finally anoints them. The implication that Magdalene is an adulteress is reinforced by the image of her loosened long hair and the eroticism of the scented oil.[55]

Luke's gospel hints at one further event which discolours the presentation of Magdalene. She is described as having had seven devils exorcised from her by Christ.[56] These seven devils are equated with the seven sins (rather unfairly as nowhere else in the bible is demonic possession commensurate with sin).[57] Magdalene's association with sin was increased by the fact that the place, Magdalene, was widely known to be a licentious fishing village.[58]

Magdalene's two other lives, as Mary of Bethany and Luke's sinner, were emphasised by Pope Gregory the Great's sixth-century declaration that they were the same figure.[59] Despite Jacques Lèfevre d'Éstaples' late Medieval tract that separated the three characters, Magdalene has retained a sinful image.[60] As Moltmann-Wendel points out: 'Mary Magdalene has become like a monster, a prime example of sin and sexuality, because her exciting choice and unique story was available for corresponding fantasies.'[61]

The cult of the Virgin Mary peaked by the thirteenth century, and by the late Middle Ages (and particularly in France) interest had shifted to Magdalene. Haskins notes the prevalence of Magdalene as subject matter in late medieval art:

> In the thirteenth century she began to emerge in her own right, as the heroine of her own story. From which was depicted in stained-glass windows and frescoes, altarpieces, panel paintings and sculpture and in miniatures and goldsmiths' work, in lively, brightly coloured scenes.[62]

Whereas the Virgin Mary became an icon of devotion, gentleness and sin-free motherhood, Magdalene was to represent far broader images. For medieval society, Magdalene became all things for all people – she satisfied the needs of tradespeople, priests and civic authorities. For example, her visions of Christ as a gardener encouraged her adoption as the patron saint of horticulture; and her associations with ointment and fine clothes meant she was the chosen representative of guilds

[55] In London the 1393 Restriction of Prostitutes statute confined them to south of the river. If suspected prostitutes were found outside of this exclusion zone, they could forfeit their upper garments and hoods. The image of loosened hair can be seen to represent a whore (Ruth Mazo Karras, 'The Regulation of Brothels in Later Medieval England', *Sisters and Workers in the Middle Ages*, eds. Judith M. Bennett et al. [Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1989], p. 107).

[56] This is substantiated by Mark when he describes Jesus's reappearance to Magdalene, although this is thought to be a later addition to his gospel.

[57] In Michèle Roberts's fictitious account of Magdalene, *The Wild Girl*, her seven devils are a form of mental illness, experienced in her adolescence and brought on by the death of her mother (Michèle Roberts, *Wild Girl* [London: Methuen, 1984; reprint Minerva, 1994], p. 14).

[58] Haskins, *Mary Magdalene*, p. 15.

[59] Ibid., p. 16.

[60] Anderson and Zinsser. *A History of Their Own*, p. 387. Though this tract was published in 1517 which is too late to affect most of the cycle texts.

[61] Moltmann-Wendel, *The Women Around Jesus*, p. 81.

[62] Haskins, *Mary Magdalene*, p. 134.

which included scent makers, glove makers and seamstresses.[63] For medieval religious orders her contemplative, pious life provided a role model: 'The thirteenth century Dominicans and Franciscans rejoiced in her tears, her connection to Jesus, her vision, and saw her as the means of their own way to God.'[64] Magdalene also held a civic importance: her image was used as an emblem by towns, particularly linked to their courts and places of justice. For example, in the fifteenth century the Magistrato della Messetaria in S. Polo flew a banner from the building that represented Mary Magdalene.[65] Somewhat predictably, Magdalene became the patron saint for reformed prostitutes.

Magdalene, a far more accessible figure than the somewhat remote Virgin Mary, satisfied many medieval desires for a role model. In the late Middle Ages the mystic, Margery Kempe, declared that she identified with Magdalene and had constructed her spiritual life based on the piety shown by her.[66] The image of Mary Magdalene inspired many other medieval women. Isabella, Countess of Warwick, requested in her will that she appear on her tombstone, and it was Isabel Bourchier, Countess of Eu, who suggested that Osbern Bokenham write his *Lyf of Marye Maudelyn*.[67] The accessibility of Magdalene as a role model has led to her being seen as a type of 'everywoman':

> When Mary Magdalen [sic] first set foot on the stage, she emerged there as a worldly character, one who vaunted her sexuality, and adopted the language and fashions of her time to represent in her life the figure of Everywoman.[68]

Theatricality and obscurity surround the mystery of Magdalene's body. In 1265, Vezelay Abbey unearthed a rectangular bronze metal coffer containing relics wrapped up with 'every sign of veneration' in silk material, together with 'an extraordinary abundance of female hair'.[69] A letter accompanied them from King Charles declaring the authenticity of the relics. On 24 April 1267 Louis IX attended a celebration to transfer the relics to a new coffer. The body of Saint Mary Magdalene had been found. There were, of course, disputes as to why it lay in the distant resting place of Burgundy, but Magdalene's *Vita eremitica*, written between 37–100 by Flavius Josephus, concluded her life with a series of boat journeys, and suggested the holy theft of her body from its original resting place.[70] The *Vita* could, therefore, be used to substantiate Vezelay's claims. However, in 1280 at St Maximim Abbey in Provence, the body of Saint Mary Magdalene, complete except for one missing leg, was exhumed. This time the celebration was attended by Louis IX's nephew, Charles of Salermo.[71]

[63] Mimi Still Dixon, '"Thys Body of Mary": "Femynte" and "Inward Mythe" in the Digby Mary Magdalene', *Mediaevalia* 18 (1995), p. 221.
[64] Anderson and Zinsser, *A History of Their Own*, p. 387.
[65] Haskins, *Mary Magdalene*, p. 261.
[66] Dixon, 'Thys Body of Mary', p. 228.
[67] Ibid., pp. 239 and 221.
[68] Haskins, *Mary Magdalene*, p. 163.
[69] A. Cherest, *Vezelay Étude Historique*, vol. II (Auxerre, 1863–8), p. 142; cited in Haskins, *Mary Magdalene*, p. 124. Vezelay Abbey had significant connections with Britain. It was here in 1166 that Thomas à Becket denounced Henry II and later in 1190 that Richard the Lionheart met Philip Augustus for the commencement of the third crusade.
[70] Haskins, *Mary Magdalene*, p. 123.
[71] Ibid., p. 124.

The unveiling and reburial of the hairy remains at Vezelay, enacted with the spectatorship of Louis IX, was invalidated by the later discovery that Charles's letter was a forgery. The ceremony at Maximim included a limbless corpse; a mutilated symbol of the former 'sacred prostitute'. Moreover, the travesty of the Maximim celebration was increased by the fact that Vezelay had performed a similar ritual thirteen years earlier. If the 'historical' Magdalene is surrounded by such ambiguity, it would not be surprising if her theatrical representation was equally enigmatic.

I want to explore how far the Corpus Christi cycles support the tripartite image of Magdalene, that is, the amalgamation of Mary who witnessed the resurrection, Mary of Bethany and Luke's sinner. I will be assessing why Magdalene as a penitent sinner and reformed prostitute, received sympathetic treatment. In her dramatic representation, Magdalene, despite her association with whoredom, becomes a symbol of respect, an exemplification of strength in womanhood and a tangible icon for medieval audiences. In arguing this point I will be countering the significant ascetic background which regarded women as inherently sinful.

Many critics, such as Margaret Miles, have stressed the importance of analysing the Virgin and the Magdalene together. Disregarding either icon overemphasises one aspect of female sexuality:

> Mary Magdalene . . . provides a balancing symbolic image to that of the Virgin Mary. These two figures must be interpreted together, as their iconography consistently presents them together, juxtaposing their lives, their personalities, and their actions.[72]

The image of Magdalene as a former harlot, a pious contemplator, and as a key witness and preacher offers an alternative discourse to the symbolic roles assigned to the Virgin. I have argued that the Virgin's pure body is used in a very particular way in the Corpus Christi cycles. She is able to freely traverse the performance space while the vulgar women are confined to domestic settings. The Virgin is an androgynous or sexless body: a member of the 'third sex'. Mary Magdalene offers an alternative discourse. She is at once both holy and vulgar. She is a sexed body who enjoys public power. For these reasons she is of utmost importance to this study.

The complexity of Magdalene's image exceeds a mere illustration of the sinner-to-saint conversion narrative. The potential of her sexuality remains in evidence after her conversion is displayed through her close relationship with Christ. There is biblical evidence for this – Christ's affection for her is recorded in John 11.5 – but as Haskins points out: 'Much of the emphasis on the close relationship between Christ and Mary Magdalene arose from the absorption of the character of Mary of Bethany into that of Mary Magdalene.'[73]

The sexuality associated with Magdalene's image was increased by the legends which claim she was married to St John, and that it was their marriage at Cana which Christ attended. This idea was already popular by the time it appeared in

[72] Margaret Miles, *Image as Insight: Visual Understanding in Western Christianity and Secular Culture* (Boston, 1985), p. 81; cited in Dixon, 'Thys Body of Mary', p. 242.

[73] Haskins, *Mary Magdalene*, p. 197. The moment when Christ appears to Magdalene and refuses to let her touch him has been used as evidence of their physical relationship (see Dixon, 'Thys Body of Mary', pp. 228–30).

John Myre's fifteenth century, 'sermo de Hupcijs'.[74] This notion of the union of Magdalene and John is perhaps reinforced by some of the Corpus Christi cycles. The Towneley and N-Town pageants show Magdalene and John together comforting the Virgin at Christ's passion.

Contemporary feminist theologians point out that readings of Magdalene are based on 'the dialectic between betrayal and conversion', which is essentially a male construction.[75] Through this reading, Magdalene is seen as an attractive and popular figure because of the frailty of her sexual misdemeanours, her betrayal of virtue and the vulnerability shown through her redemption.[76] For feminist theologians, 'the portrait of Magdalene was constructed by men, and served to kindle male fantasies . . . sexual guilt complexes are projected onto Mary Magdalene.'[77] Moltmann-Wendel provokingly argues that Magdalene is, therefore, a scapegoat. She is the only disciple of Christ who is shown to have a sinful past, and is accordingly left to portray worldly guilt.[78] It is interesting that there are no male sinners amongst the disciples, as Moltmann-Wendel asks, 'What would our tradition look like if it had made Peter a converted pimp?'[79]

However, the complexity of Magdalene's cultural construction extends beyond her position as a reformed whore. Helen Garth argues that the Magdalene's symbolic functions were multifarious (and often contradictory): symbolically, she was connected with the image of the ointment she carried, which suggests both nurturing and sexuality; she was the patron saint for sinners (and flagellants); she was seen as Eve's true descendant; and through her associations with Mary of Bethany, she represented the embodiment of a Christian way of life, and thus, was seen in parallel with the Virgin Mary. Magdalene also symbolises a whole people, for example the Gentiles, or an institution, particularly the Church.[80] For, as Davidson suggests, Magdalene can be seen to parallel the Church's attempt to follow Christ, despite worldly constraints:

> In a sense she is the representative of the holy *eros* or desire which presses to break through to the mysteries of Being and to be united with him. Thus she is representative of the condition of the Church, illustrated from early times as a feminine figure.[81]

Davidson's comments emphasise the notion of Magdalene's love as being part of a spiritual desire, rather than a physical one. But if she is to be regarded as representative of the Church, it is a very powerful role that she holds.

[74] Haskins, *Mary Magdalene*, p. 159.

[75] Moltmann-Wendel, *The Women Around Jesus*, p. 72. Many of the male disciples undergo a conversion in order to follow Christ. They include a tax collector and fishermen; a mixed bag who are 'changed' by Jesus.

[76] Foucault has argued that confession and repentance are one of the 'main rituals we rely on for the production of truth' (Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1. An Introduction, trans. Robert Hurley. First Published as *La Volonte de Savoir* [Editions Gallimard, 1976; London: Penguin Books, 1979], p. 58).

[77] Moltmann-Wendel, *The Women Around Jesus*, p. 67.

[78] Judas is not sinful from the start like Magdalene. He becomes sinful.

[79] Moltmann-Wendel, *The Women Around Jesus*, p. 67.

[80] Helen Garth, *St Mary Magdalene in Medieval Literature*, The Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science, series LXVII, no. 3 (1950), p. 31.

[81] Davidson, *From Creation to Doom*, p. 156.

What is of interest for this study is that Magdalene operates as the embodiment of a holy woman (pious contemplator, reformed sinner) and a vulgar woman (former prostitute). She articulates a number of issues that concerned the public treatment of medieval women. Magdalene's holiness and her earthiness are continually juxtaposed in her dramatic construction. Through this method she was utilised to debate a number of issues central to the late medieval ages: public speaking/preaching for women, the treatment of women's sexuality with particular regard to prostitution and the development of a female pious aesthetic demonstrated through the establishment of communities of holy women. It is this intersection between holy icon and the trials of earthly life that the dramatisation of Mary Magdalene highlights. It is helpful to examine the dramatic construction of her within the Digby *Mary Magdalene* play as there are many similarities to be found with the cycle dramas.

The Digby *Mary Magdalene* is one of the most complete of the extant Saints' plays, and was probably performed in East Anglia in the late fifteenth century.[82] The play demonstrates the way in which medieval dramatists constructed Mary Magdalene as a spokeswoman for holy and vulgar values.

Like the majority of the cycles, the Digby play presents a tripartite image of the Magdalene. She is shown to be the harlot (Luke's sinner), the pious contemplator (Martha's sister) and the first key witness, a model disciple and preacher. In fact, the Digby version constructs a complete narrative for Magdalene's life. She is shown at the outset of the play in the role of virginal nobleman's daughter: 'ful fayr and ful of femynyte'.[83] The play reveals her possession by the sin of Lechery (personified as a female seductress, a 'aungelly delycyte'[84]) and her 'fall' as a 'womanly' temptress of the gallant Curiosity. The dramatisation of Magdalene interweaves ideas from the Romance tradition and the Golden Legend. In doing so, Magdalene is projected onto many roles: mock 'hero' in quest for holy grail, maiden tempted from the enclosure of her castle, and later, Bride of Christ and visionary hermitess.

Magdalene's conversion is shown through her meeting with Christ at Simon's house, and in her subsequent role as pious mourner for her brother Lazarus (the Digby play emphasises that she actively sought her own salvation: she instigates the meeting with Christ knowing that he can help her). From the outset, her relationship with Christ is portrayed as a close one: they both frequently refer to each other as 'pertener of my blysse'.[85]

It is in the second part of the Digby play that Magdalene is constructed as an independent disciple. After the resurrected Christ appears to her she is sent as his disciple to Marseilles. It is here that Magdalene is shown as a visionary holy woman with supernatural powers: she shatters false idols, sets the temple ablaze, appears as a vision to the King of Marseilles and resurrects the Queen from death. Her life is shown to be an imitation of Christ's; she later forsakes the city for life as a hermitess in the wilderness and receives ministry from a Priest before ascending to heaven.

[82] Darryl Grantley, 'Saints' Plays', *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. Richard Beadle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 272.
[83] *Non-Cycle Plays and Fragments*, Digby *Mary Magdalene*, l. 71.
[84] Ibid., l. 444.
[85] Ibid., l. 702.

The Digby Magdalene play engages in a number of interesting reversals of gender-assigned behaviour. Magdalene is the focus for the narrative against which Christ's life serves as a type of double-plot. In fact, many aspects of Christ's life are symbolically revealed through Magdalene's behaviour. She performs miracles, converts the King and Queen of Marseilles, endures the wilderness and ascends to heaven. In another gender reversal the male priest witnesses her ascension. Here Magdalene, the key witness of Christ's resurrection is herself resurrected under the gaze of the male Priest. There are other ways in which the play emphasises and celebrates Magdalene's femaleness. One of the miracles that she performs for the Queen of Marseilles is to reverse her sterility (it is a moment that parallels the experience of the Virgin Mary's sister Elizabeth, and to some degree the Virgin birth itself). The Magdalene is also shown in close relation to the Virgin. After her repentance it is to the Virgin that she prays. The display of womanliness is continually re-articulated within the play. Magdalene's sexuality is displayed; even after her conversion she remains physically close to Christ. In addition, her appearance as a vision to the King occurs in his bedroom; the use of this location suggests sexual undertones.

Mimi Still Dixon has demonstrated that the Digby *Mary Magdalene* play fulfilled a variety of complex interests. As well as operating as an object for male contemplation and devotion, the play provided 'a Church-sanctioned performance for a community in which women were a considerable presence'.[86] Dixon argues that Mary's 'femynyte' is deliberately emphasised as a way to analyse female socialisation and power.[87] She explores how Mary's body is used as a central paradox to embody the issues of sinner and saint, and to show the 'feminization of late medieval piety'.[88] Many of these devices are similar to those that appear within the Corpus Christi dramas. They demonstrate how the image of the Magdalene was used as a mediator between holy iconography and lay behaviour. Magdalene shows how issues such as public preaching/speaking for women, the treatment of a reformed harlot and the space assigned to holy women might be debated for earthly spectators.

MAGDALENE IN THE CORPUS CHRISTI CYCLES

In each of the four extant texts Magdalene receives different treatment, but I will be arguing that overall she is afforded a surprisingly positive and sympathetic portrayal, and that it is one which is a far cry from the early Church Fathers' views. The presentation of Magdalene in each cycle is dependent upon a number of interlinking factors. First, the centrality of the Virgin Mary to the action of the cycles affects the attention given to Magdalene. Too many iconographic women make a crowd; where the late pageants focus on the Virgin, it is usually at the expense of Magdalene. Second, the cycles which show greatest sympathy towards human frailty, demonstrated through their attitude to prostitution, appear to elevate Magdalene to a role of importance, that is, the 'first key witness' and preacher.

[86] Dixon, 'Thys Body of Mary', p. 222.
[87] Ibid., p. 235.
[88] Ibid., p. 223.

So, for example, the N-Town plays are supportive towards the Woman Taken in Adultery, and later emphasise the piety and faith of Magdalene through directly contrasting her with Doubting Thomas. Third, the cycles which link Magdalene to Mary of Bethany and Luke's sinner generally enhance both her role as a key witness and preacher, and her relationship with Christ.

Many of the observations that I have outlined above are dependent on reading the cycle dramas as having an artistic unity, rather than as a series of episodic pageants. My argument about the interdependency of the portrayal of Magdalene and that of the Virgin expects the spectator to make comparisons across various pageants within the cycles. Given the probable development of some of the cycles, there are some difficulties in arguing for such an interpretation. Since cycles were staged in a processional method (at York and Chester), probably with audiences who moved from one station to another, it is unlikely that the cycle was viewed in its entirety. Even if audiences did view the entire cycle, production records demonstrate that not every pageant was staged each year.[89]

I have argued from the beginning of this book that the Corpus Christi cycles were framed by a strong matrix of cultural and social references. Audiences watched the dramas with knowledge of other cultural references. Mills has drawn attention to the manner in which associated references from contemporary medieval culture unify the cycles:

> The attraction lay in extending the significance of the episodes through the historical network of images and references provided by the Bible and made current by Biblical commentaries, and through the contemporary images and associations provided by vernacular poetry.[90]

The cycles drew on contemporary images, verses as well as biblical knowledge. It is therefore appropriate to assume that an audience at York remembered the significance of the Virgin Mary, whether or not they had seen the pageant performed that year. Her image was reinforced by the constant cultural references to her.

The York cycle presents some problems of interpretation as far as Magdalene is concerned, because a large proportion of the relevant pageants are incomplete. *The Woman Taken in Adultery* is missing about sixty lines from the middle of the pageant. Consequently, it is difficult to ascertain how sympathetically the woman is portrayed. As the present text stands, she is objectified until the last frames of the play when she finally speaks. Emphasis is placed on the Jews' discovery of 'How we hir raysed all vnarayed', and their excitement at categorising her adulterous sins to Christ.[91] Prosser notes that the author of the pageant seems to get caught between two themes: Jesus forgives the woman *before* she has repented, and thus the messages of both repentance and mercy are clouded.[92] It is difficult, given this and the incomplete manuscript, to imagine the audience reaching a level of experience which, for example, the N-Town pageant provokes. Likewise, evidence of the possible connection between Mary of Bethany and Magdalene is absent from the York

[89] Richardson and Johnston, *Medieval Drama*, pp. 17–18.
[90] David Mills, 'Approaches to Medieval Drama', *English Medieval Drama*, ed. Peter Happé (London: Macmillan, 1984; reprint 1993), p. 43.
[91] *York Plays*, pageant XXIV, l. 6.
[92] Eleanor Prosser, *Drama and Religion in the English Mystery Plays* (Stanford, 1961), p. 104–5.

cycle. Both the moment where Jesus receives the message from Mary and Martha, and their subsequent arrival at Simon's house, are missing.

Magdalene's treatment at Christ's Passion is also scanty within the York cycle. She appears in the Shearman's pageant, where she threatens vengeance upon his crucifiers, but she is not present at the crucifixion. At the resurrection Magdalene is seen as the leader of other women who, with their ointment, visit the sepulchre. Her desperate grief keeps her at the tomb ('I sporne þer I was wonte to spede') and blinds her to Christ's identity.[93] Believing him to be a gardener, she is overcome with joy when she realises her mistake. Though Magdalene is sent to deliver the news to the disciples, her role still seems marginal. It is upon the Virgin that the final pageants focus: she is the presiding female icon of the York cycle.

The neighbouring Towneley plays also interpret Magdalene in a limited manner. There is no evidence that a pageant concerning The Woman Taken in Adultery ever existed. Indeed, the Towneley plays seem to avoid the overt portrayal of Magdalene's sexuality, though it is alluded to in later pageants. She is identified as Mary of Bethany, Lazarus's sister, but the pageant is included at the end of the Towneley manuscript and appears to be a later addition.[94] The cycles do not fully develop the portrayal of Magdalene as Mary of Bethany. She is shown weeping, contemplative and, consequently, full of piety; but it is not a fully drawn depiction. Here, unlike her role in the Chester and N-Town cycles, Magdalene is not identified with Luke's sinner. Magdalene does not attend the crucifixion (again, as in the York pageant, the scene is given over to the Virgin), but at the scourging she appears and, with John, comforts the Virgin. Her presence with John here, and in the N-Town plays, hints at the legend that she was married to him.

Magdalene is foregrounded in the Towneley *Resurrection*. She is shown to be the leader of the women, directing them to carry their ointment to the tomb. She is the first to sight the two angels, and delegates the Angel's instruction to Jacobi and Salome:

> As ye haue hard, where that ye go
> Loke that ye preche.[95]

It is the encounter with Christ, whom again Magdalene does not immediately recognise, that reveals more of her sexuality. From his 'disguised' position Jesus enquires of Mary what significance the dead man (himself) held. Her reply is guarded, but certainly ambiguous enough to hint at their relationship:

> A! he was to me . . .
> No longer dwell I may.[96]

Likewise, when Jesus refuses to allow Magdalene to touch him, there is a hint of their previous relationship.[97] Magdalene is more directly empowered within the

[93] *York Plays*, pageant XXXIX, l. 15.
[94] Meredith, 'The Towneley Cycle', p. 139.
[95] *Towneley Plays*, pageant XXVI, ll. 421–22.
[96] Ibid., ll. 603–4.
[97] Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel argues that such an interpretation is masculine and that Jesus's refusal to allow Magdalene to touch him should be read as him instructing her to accept his death (Moltmann-Wendel, *The Women Around Jesus*, p. 72).

Towneley pageant than in the York version. Christ assigns her the role as key-witness and preacher: 'Myn erand shall thou grathly go.'[98] In a dramatic contrast to the portrayal of Magdalene during the first three pageants where she appears weeping, she now describes herself:

> I am as light as leyfe on tre
> For ioyfull sight that I can se.[99]

The Towneley plays are unique in that they show Magdalene delivering the news of the resurrection to the doubting disciples. She first approaches Peter and receives short shrift: 'Do way, woman, thou carpys wast!'[100] Paul is equally disbelieving: 'Wherfor, woman, thou says wrang.'[101] What follows is a shocking diatribe from Paul against women, which is based upon Paul's biblical outburst. I quote at length from the scene because its misogyny is appalling. Not only do the disciples seem to betray the qualities that Christ has taught them, but they also display no faith in the notion of a resurrection:

> And it is wretyn in oure law,
> 'Ther is no trust in womans saw,
> No trust faith to belefe;
> For with thare quayntyse and thare gyle
> Can thay laghe and wepe somwhile,
> And yit nothyng theym grefe.'
>
> In oure bookes thus fynde we wretyn –
> All manere of men well it wyttyn –
> Of woman on this wyse:
> 'Till an appyll she is lyke;
> Withouetten faill ther is more slyke
> In horde ther it lyse
>
> Bot if a man assay it wittely,
> It is full roten inwardly
> At the colke within.'
> Wherfor in woman in no laghe,
> For she is withouetten aghe,
> As Crist me lowse of syn.[102]

Though there is biblical foundation for such a tract (Luke mentions that the disciples were disbelieving), it is unlike any other moment that appears in the Corpus Christi cycles.[103] The outburst is unmotivated and unlike other incidents (for example, Joseph's doubts about Mary, the shepherds and Noah's grumbling about married life), it is delivered by 'biblical' rather than vernacular characters.

[98] *Towneley Plays*, pageant XXVI, ll. 624.
[99] Ibid., ll. 648–49.
[100] *Towneley Plays*, pageant XXVIII, l. 7.
[101] Ibid., l. 17.
[102] *Towneley Plays*, pageant XXVIII, ll. 29–46.
[103] Theresa Coletti has pointed out that it is unlikely that the disciples held such viewpoints. See Coletti, 'A Feminist Approach', pp. 79–90.

The disciples (apart from Thomas) are convinced of the resurrection when they visit the tomb, but it remains an oddly misogynistic moment within the cycles. Magdalene is vindicated by the disciples' visit to the tomb, and the outburst might be read as more a condemnation of the disciples' lack of faith than of Magdalene's character.

The earlier Towneley plays show Magdalene weeping. It is this that increases the sense of her sanctity, for as Haskins points out: 'Weeping was an integral feature of medieval women's piety.'[104] Magdalene's sexuality is not directly confronted within the Towneley pageants, but is frequently suggested. For example, she is shown together with John at the scourging, and comforts the Virgin, thus hinting at the 'marriage' between the two. Her close relationship with Christ is revealed through his appearance to her. It is difficult to ascertain whether the misogynist outburst from the disciples, which I have already cited, impairs either the presentation of Magdalene or the piety of her image. I have already noted how incongruous and out of place the diatribe appears: it reads like a later addition and has the tone of a single authorial voice, rather than that of the character. Even if such an outburst were convincing, the lack of faith shown by the disbelieving disciples and the hostile treatment of Magdalene would seem only to increase sympathy for her. Indeed, the dramatist appears to place the audience on the side of Magdalene. The audience, like Magdalene, have witnessed the empty sepulchre and heard the delivery of the angel's message, and they had knowledge of the resurrection before they viewed the pageants since it is central to the Christian faith. Sympathy would, therefore, seem to lie with Magdalene during the confrontation with the disciples.

The Chester cycle identifies Magdalene with Luke's sinner. There is no connection established between Magdalene and Mary of Bethany during the raising of Lazarus. But when Christ visits Simon's house, Magdalene is verified as the sister of Martha and Lazarus. At the outset of the pageant, Christ makes it clear that he is fond of Magdalene and her siblings, and when the couple greet each other she reciprocates the affection: 'welcome, my harte; welcome, my heale'.[105] Magdalene confesses herself to be a sinner:

> From thee, lord, may I not conceale
> my fylth and my faultes frayle[106]

The disciples reveal their fear of prostitution (which is similar to that of the Pharisee in *The Woman Taken in Adultery*), and they attempt to dissuade Christ from receiving her advances:

> Methinke that hee should lett her goe,
> this woman full of synne and woe,
> for feare of worldes shame.[107]

Jesus, in accepting her offer of a foot-bath, points to the lack of hospitality that Simon has shown him. Magdalene's act of washing his feet with her tears, drying

[104] Haskins, *Mary Magdalene*, p. 187.
[105] *Chester Plays*, pageant XIV, l. 42.
[106] Ibid., ll. 45–6.
[107] Ibid., ll. 58–60.

them with her hair, rubbing them with ointment and, finally, embracing them (Jesus reports 'shee hath kyssed my feete eychon'), is imbued with piety and sexuality.[108] Tears demonstrate her piety, while loose hair, scented ointment and the act of kissing his feet are erotic. Magdalene's actions are more theatrically interesting than the verbal and static complaints of the disciples. This portrait of Magdalene paints her as a penitent sinner. Christ acknowledges that her faith has exorcised her sin – 'beleeffe hath saved thee' – and Magdalene simultaneously senses that the seven devils have been driven out.[109] Christ goes further than merely accepting her attention. He sets up Magdalene's action as an example:

> And all that preach the evangelye
> through the world by and by
> of thy deed shall make memorye
> that thou hasse donne to me.[110]

Part of the reason why Christ is able to demonstrate such physical and sexual closeness to Magdalene is because this cycle has already shown that fallen women can repent and be given mercy. The Chester version of *The Woman Taken in Adultery* serves as a moral exemplar partly because the figure of the Doctor is able to comment on the action and provide a Christian interpretation for the audience. The First Phariseus deliberately sets out to tempt Christ to contravene either Mosaic or Roman law, and is not satisfied by Christ's initial answer, which lets the man without sin cast the first stone.[111] However, the Phariseus soon tires of pressing the point and flees the scene, leaving the Woman alone with Christ. 'Kneelinge one my knee', the Woman pleads for mercy.[112] Prosser has argued that such a piece of stage action 'could serve as a sign to the audience of complete repentance'.[113] The Woman's pleading speech, Christ's forgiveness, and the Doctor's moral interpolation at the pageant's conclusion, all serve to emphasise the spiritual theme. In addition, the treatment of the adulterous woman sets a precedent that allows Christ to form a close relationship with Magdalene in the later parts of the cycle.

In the Chester cycle Magdalene is not overshadowed by the Virgin. She unusually appears at the crucifixion. She is, as in the other cycle versions, the leader at the visit to the sepulchre and delivers the message of the resurrection to Peter and John. The final tableau of the Chester *Resurrection* is that of Magdalene alone, weeping at the empty tomb. She is determined to sit and weep until she discovers Christ's body; the Chester pageant doesn't offer her such relief, but instead presents this image as the closing tableau of the *Resurrection*. The Chester pageant demonstrates that: 'Medieval writers delighted to emphasise the love between them (Jesus and Mary Magdalene) and to show that it was Mary Magdalene who suffered the bitterest pangs at the Crucifixion'.[114]

[108] Ibid., l. 107.
[109] Ibid., l. 124.
[110] Ibid., ll. 125–29.
[111] Ibid., XII, ll. 241–44.
[112] Ibid., XII, l. 279.
[113] Prosser, *Drama and Religion*, p. 140.
[114] Moltmann-Wendel, *The Women Around Jesus*, p. 105.

The N-Town plays provide the most challenging interpretation of Magdalene. It is here that she is portrayed in her most sexual light and, somewhat paradoxically, at her most reverent and pious. The representation of Magdalene is set up by *The Woman Taken in Adultery* in what Prosser calls 'an exciting and effective religious drama'.[115] The pageant, like the corresponding plays in the other cycles, immediately follows Satan's temptation of Christ, and is set up to test Christ's faith and wisdom. The N-Town pageant begins with an address by Christ: 'Man, for þi synne take repentaunce.'[116] The episode reads like an emblem book in which the speaking picture of Christ offers the motto: 'Eche man to othyr be mercyable'.[117]

While Christ preaches in one part of the performance space, the Accusator, brimming with the excitement of his voyeuristic activity, reports to the immoral and greedy Scribe and Phariseus:

> A fayr ȝonge qwene hereby doth dwelle,
> Both fresch and gay upon to loke
> And a tall man with here doth melle;[118]

It is a description which implicates the woman in the adulterous act to a greater extent than the 'tall man'. The Phariseus realises that this is an opportunity to 'begyle' Christ; by law the adultress should be killed, but will Christ offer mercy? Woolf remarks upon the contrast between the motivation of the characters:

> a distinction is made between an *accusator* who enjoys the 'ryght good sporte' of breaking in on the lovers, and the learned men, the scribe and the pharisee, who are more interested in the enterprise as a means of outwitting Christ . . . All three moreover take part in the scurrilous and obscene vilification of the woman, the scribe and pharisee in particular joining in the kind of antiphonal abusiveness which we have already noticed in the detractors and in the doctors in the Temple.[119]

Shockingly, the adulterous man is found with his trousers down; threatening the onlookers with a dagger, he escapes. Prosser argues that the inclusion of the undressed man, which is particular to this pageant, achieves four objectives. First, it proves the woman's guilt since intercourse is implied; second, the man's departure highlights the woman's guilt (I believe that conversely it is possible that sympathy for the woman is actually achieved by the man abandoning her); third, Christ is shown to be a coward because he too, allows the man to escape once threatened with a knife; and last, it is a 'grotesque device' which contrasts the filthy names the Jews use with the woman's call for pity.[120] Other commentators have argued that the use of the semi-dressed man symbolises a general spiritual disorder, or that the comedy of the situation increases the reality of the woman's portrayal.[121]

[115] Prosser, *Drama and Religion*, p. 105.
[116] *N-Town Plays*, pageant XXIV, l. 2.
[117] Ibid., l, 33.
[118] Ibid., ll. 69–71.
[119] Woolf, *The English Mystery Plays*, pp. 225–26.
[120] Prosser, *Drama and Religion*, p. 105.
[121] See Daniel Poteet, 'Condition, Contrast and Division in the Ludus Coventriae "Woman Taken in Adultery" ', *Mediaevalia* 1.1 (Spring 1975), pp. 78–92 and Peter Meredith, ' "Nolo Mortem" and the Ludus Coventriae Play of the *Woman Taken in Adultery*', *MÆ* 38.1 (1969), pp. 38–54 respectively.

The woman, no doubt hiding with fear and shame, is called out of an inner space by the spectators: 'Com forth, ȝu hore and stynkynge bych clowte!' and 'Com forth, ȝu sloveyn, com forth, ȝu slutte'.[122] The jaunty rhythm of their commands sits uneasily with the barbaric language. As Woolf remarks: 'the ugly speeches of the accusers throw into relief the dignity of the woman in her humility and contrition.'[123] Through this dignity the woman appears in a sympathetic light. The woman's reaction to her 'capture' is highly dramatic, as Prosser points out:

> She squirms, twists, frantic with hysteria: she offers to bribe them; she begs that, since she must die, she be executed immediately, not killed in public where she will shame her friends.[124]

Christ dismisses the onlookers by reminding them of their own sin. He is left alone with the woman, who again movingly pleads for mercy. Knowles, writing about a production of *A Woman Taken in Adultery* in the United States, notes that: 'the contrast in the script between the frenzied and prurient assault on the woman and the quiet authority of Christ was effectively presented.'[125] It is the relationship between Christ and the woman which is central to this pageant and, I believe, important in establishing a freedom in portraying sexual matters within the cycle. As Woolf points out, the pageant repeats the overall design of the Corpus Christi cycles: temptation, sin and finally, repentance.[126] The pageant also follows the Christian devotional scheme of moral introduction, exemplary narrative and resolution in Christian hope.[127] The dual image of woman as Mary/Eve or Virgin/whore is explored through this pageant. The woman is seen in opposition to the Virgin: she is sinful rather than sin-free, sexual rather than pure, a mistress rather than a mother. It is one moment where the cultural constructs of womanhood are explored.

The Woman Taken in Adultery is usually interpreted as a type of sermon given by Christ. Peter Meredith argues that the play exemplifies the meaning of the first line, 'Nolo mortem peccatoris'. He notes that the pageant is like a prayer delivered on behalf of the audience by a character.[128] Meredith sees Christ's introduction as the setting of the lesson, which includes himself as an example:

> The character becomes two-fold: Christ and preacher; the play is drawn clearly into the present, but it is a present in which Christ still lives, and so the ending becomes an echo of the most sacred of Christian mysteries: Christ did die, is dead, and yet lives for all time.[129]

[122] *N-Town Plays*, pageant XXIV, ll. 147 and 150 respectively.
[123] Woolf, *The English Mystery Plays*, p. 226.
[124] Prosser, *Drama and Religion*, p. 107.
[125] For a further discussion see Richard Knowles, 'The Woman Taken in Adultery', *RORD* 25 (1982), pp. 149–50.
[126] Woolf, *The English Mystery Plays*, p. 224.
[127] See Davenport, *Fifteenth Century Drama*, p. 12 for a further discussion of this structural pattern.
[128] Richard Knowles, commenting on the North American production, reflects that the audience were included in the final prayer by Christ addressing the line, 'all these pepyl' to include the spectators (see Knowles, 'The Woman Taken in Adultery', p. 150).
[129] Meredith, 'Nolo Mortem', p. 48.

This reading emphasises the centrality of Christ as a focal point in the pageant and treats the fallen woman in a functional manner. But the pageant traverses such narrow readings by including a secondary strand to the religious function. Not only are time scales of biblical past and medieval present interwoven within the play, but the pageant clearly integrates a more grotesque and raucous comedic style with the sense of a sermon. As Meredith notes, the pageant serves as an: 'ancient appeal to the emotions of its audience; no less well organised than a university sermon, and more calculated to move a holiday crowd.'[130]

The woman forms an important part of Christ's sermon. She is highlighted by much of the stage action. The Scribe, Accusator and Phariseus are all presented as types; it is difficult to distinguish any particular characteristics they may hold. As Poteet suggests: 'we seem to be confronting a static, almost spatial arrangement of symbolic figures and actions – not really a dynamic group of interacting humans.'[131] It is the woman who breaks through this stagnation with her frenzied outburst, and she, together with Christ, forms the central focus of the pageant. Through making the woman a pivotal figure and displaying her sexuality, the N-Town plays allow Magdalene to be more positively displayed in the later pageants.

Magdalene is clearly identified as Mary of Bethany in the *Raising of Lazarus*, and she is shown as Luke's sinner. Here she anoints Christ's feet and in return has the seven devils exorcised:

> Wychyd spyritys, I ȝow conjowre,
> Fleth out of hire bodyly bowre![132]

The most significant point of this anointing is that it takes place during the Last Supper and that Magdalene, like the disciples, is present for the dedication of Holy Communion. In placing this dramatic action at the Last Supper, the N-Town dramatist gives Magdalene an elevated position. The honouring of Magdalene continues within the Passion pageants. As in many of the other cycles, she is present at Christ's arrest and informs the Virgin of the incident. Rather unusually Magdalene is also present at the crucifixion. Magdalene, along with John, displays a close relationship with the Virgin through comforting her at the crucifixion. At the burial an unidentified 'Mary' appears with the Virgin and Joseph. She adopts a familiar tone with Joseph in particular; this could be Magdalene. If this is true (and certainly she is the central female character of the final pageants at N-Town), then a close relationship with Christ is implied. The concluding pageants emphasise Magdalene over the Virgin (although, as I have already noted, a sequence of early pageants within the N-Town plays depicts the Virgin's life more thoroughly than in any other cycle).

The N-Town Magdalene appears at the resurrection. Through Christ's appearance to her the suggestion of a relationship between the two is reinforced. Again, the indication of the closeness between Magdalene and Christ seems to increase her stature as a serious figure; a key witness and preacher. After Christ's appearance to her she delivers his message to Peter. It is through Doubting Thomas that

[130] Ibid., p. 43.
[131] Poteet, 'Condition, Contrast and Division', p. 84.
[132] *N-Town Plays*, pageant XXVII, ll. 176–77.

the audience glimpse the disciples' views of Magdalene. When Thomas finally accepts the resurrection, he compares his own lack of faith with the strength of belief that Magdalene has shown:

> Thow þat Mary Magdalyn in Cryst dede sone beleve
> And I was longe dowteful, ȝitt putt me in no blame.[133]

In this manner, she is held up as an exemplary follower of Christ and perhaps supersedes the disciples as a model of faith.

Though the York and Towneley cycles are reticent in portraying Magdalene's sexuality (something which Joseph Harris has noted about the sixty-nine versions of ballads dedicated to Magdalene which originate from Europe), the other extant cycles utilise her sexuality.[134] Paradoxically, where a relationship between Christ and Magdalene is implied, she is a more powerful advocate and witness of the resurrection. I am not accusing Magdalene of 'sleeping with the boss' for intentional self-profit, and nor do I think that medieval audiences were guided into this interpretation by the construction of the cycles. Rather, I believe that Magdalene's sexuality (even though it was portrayed by a male actor) is used to indicate her independence and strength. In a period of time when prostitution was protected and institutionalised, the associations made between Magdalene and Luke's sinner were seen in a less negative light. Ruth Karras points out that, 'medieval audiences were accustomed to hearing carnal metaphors applied to spiritual relationships like God's love for humankind, so her declaration of love in physical terms would not have been shocking'.[135]

Civic authorities in Europe, seeing the benefits of regulating prostitution, proceeded to institutionalise the practice between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In Britain, Henry II had licensed 'stews' in the twelfth century and, somewhat incongruously, placed their control under the auspices of the Bishop of Winchester.[136] Prostitution was limited to areas outside the city: in London this meant south of the river.[137] Official state brothels could be found beyond London; for example, in 1475 Sandwich was recorded as having a licensed whorehouse.[138]

Though prostitutes were regulated (the 1382 Regulation of Prostitutes' Clothes statute forbade them to wear fur and ordered them to wear 'hoods of ray', a striped cloth), they appeared to have a reasonable degree of legal status.[139] Whores are recorded as bringing legal suits against other people, and they often left wills. Indeed, Otis suggests that: 'From the end of the fourteenth century to the sixteenth century, prostitutes would seem to have enjoyed the same legal capacity as honest women.'[140] Although this position seems to have reflected that of Europe

[133] *N-Town Plays*, XXXVIII, ll. 385–86.
[134] See Joseph Harris, '"Maiden in Mor Lay" and the Medieval Magdalene Tradition', *JRMS* 1 (1971), pp. 59–87.
[135] Karras, *Common Women*, p. 121.
[136] Anderson and Zinsser, *A History of Their Own*, p. 143. The slang term for prostitutes, 'Winchester geese', was developed from the Bishop's role in overseeing brothels (Ruth Mazo Karras, 'The Regulation of Brothels', p. 113).
[137] Amt, *Women's Lives*, pp. 212–13.
[138] Karras, 'The Regulation of Brothels', p. 112.
[139] Karras, *Common Women*, p. 22.
[140] Otis, *Prostitution in Medieval Society*, p. 68.

rather than England, where Karras suggests that 'the regulations governing Southwark brothels indicate how central the issue of control over women was to the regulation of prostitution'.[141]

The tolerant attitude shown towards prostitution (and, to some extent, sexuality) in the late Middle Ages is perhaps one reason why Magdalene, even with the connotations of her harlotry, became an acceptable figure of piety. However, magnanimity towards prostitution was short-lived. Between 1520 and 1570 European clerical and regal authorities rejected the notion that such a practice was best granted licensed visibility. Fuelled by an epidemic of venereal disease and the heightened sexual morality of Protestant groups such as the Lutherans and Calvinists, Pope Leo X banished whores from Rome in 1520, while by 1546 Henry VIII had also begun to eradicate the practice in England.[142] But for a short time, at a point which coincided with the peak of the Corpus Christi cycles, prostitution was a tolerated social institution and whores were afforded some legal and civic rights.

The dramatisation of Mary Magdalene also highlights the issue of women's public voice. Her construction as first key witness and the preacher of the resurrection raises ideas about women's behaviour. The model for ideal conduct was constructed upon the graceful silence of the Virgin. As I will demonstrate through the example of Dame Procula, few women attained a public voice. The Magdalene transgresses these ideas and in doing so offers a differing model to that of the Virgin. The Virgin's silent meekness is contrasted by Magdalene's role as key witness to the resurrection and public preacher. Her public speaking raised issues that were pertinent to the late Middle Ages. In medieval times a debate raged as to whether women should be allowed to preach. St Paul in 1 Timothy 2, stipulated that women who preached were sinful and the issue was highlighted by the 1391 trial of Lollard, Walter Brut, which debated whether women should publicly instruct men.[143]

Through linking Magdalene with Mary of Bethany and Luke's sinner, the N-Town plays stress the acceptability and ordinariness of her character. Magdalene grieves, indulges in relationships, suffers from illness, demonstrates her feelings publicly (despite male arguments that it is inappropriate) and works for her living. Despite her ordinariness she is attested by Doubting Thomas to demonstrate the utmost faith and, therefore, becomes an attainable role model. Magdalene's repentance serves to heighten her respectability.

It is here that Magdalene intersects the dichotomy between holy and vulgar women. She is a holy icon, humanised in order to speak to her audience. Magdalene was an accessible model for the audience. Evidence of this can be found in the inspiration she provided for Margery Kempe, the Countess of Warwick, and Christine de Pisan, who saw Magdalene as God's approval of love.[144]

The Corpus Christi cycles use the tripartite image of Magdalene to create an interesting paradox. It has been noted that the Digby play uses Magdalene to

[141] Karras, *Common Women*, p. 135.
[142] Anderson and Zinsser, *A History of Their Own*, p. 143 and Karras, 'The Regulation of Brothels', p. 107.
[143] Blamires, ed. *Women Defamed and Women Defended*, p. 250.
[144] Christine de Pisan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, trans. Earl Jeffrey Richards (New York: Persea, 1982), p. 219.

embody the sinner-saint narrative and to raise issues of female socialisation and power.[145] The display of her vulgarity (her frail, sexual body) and her holiness (her piety and repentance) forms a complex dialogue with the audience. It is these images of women which present the 'unrealised possibilities' on stage. Through the portrayal of Mary Magdalene in particular, the audience are given a glimpse of the possibilities of women's behaviour.

[145] Dixon, 'Thys Body of Mary', pp. 221–44.

Chapter 6

VULGAR WOMEN

> The women who people the Corpus Christi cycles' texts and stages are helpmates and servants; they attest to events more often than they participate in them; they are, in many instances, marginal to the central action.[1]

The previous chapter spent much time analysing the impact of the 'holy' women of medieval drama. But as Coletti observes, many of the women within the cycle dramas are 'vulgar', they are the worldly helpers and servers. Coletti's observation on the role that women play raises the difficulty of how to interpret these women as their roles barely seem more than secondary. I have discussed some of the reasons that women characters seem so resistant to a 'feminist' reading: namely that they are frequently influenced by their biblical antecedents. In order to counter this tradition I want to foreground various aspects of the context that surrounds women characters. By placing them within historical and cultural frameworks it is possible to release them from the margins.

It is obvious that there must be a relationship between the fictional representation of women and their position in medieval society. I have detailed within the Introduction the ways in which much medieval drama, and in particular the mystery cycles, were formed through a dialogic relationship with their participants and thus were based upon a strong relationship with the social matrix. Nowhere is this clearer than in the case of the Chester ale-wife. Within the Chester cycle she is assigned to hell for serving false measures and blending ashes and herbs amongst her brew, she realises that her punishment provides a lesson:

> for breakinge statutes of this contrye,
> hurtinge the commonwealth,[2]

This dramatic representation can be contextualised by examining historical records where there are numerous Chester ale-wives to be found. Women had a strong-hold on brewing within medieval England. For example, evidence from Colchester shows that they formed the majority of the brewers in the town.[3] The Norwich Leet rolls from 1288–89 include the names of five hundred women who were fined; again an indication that a large number of women traded as brewers.[4]

[1] Theresa Coletti, 'A Feminist Approach', p. 80.
[2] *Chester Plays*, pageant XVII, ll. 303–4.
[3] Goldberg, *Women, Work and Life Cycle*, p. 113.
[4] Ibid., p. 112.

Not all women were successful as brewers. Margery Kempe describes how she began brewing out of sheer greed. For three or four years she was one of the leading brewers in Lynn. In the end she lost a great deal of money as 'whan þe ale was as fayr standyng vndyr berm as any man mygth se, sodenly þe berm wold fallyn down þat alle þe ale was lost euery brewyng'.[5]

I have outlined in Chapter One some of the threats that were made to women brewers through increased regulations and tax levies. It is probable that the number of women involved in brewing decreased from the late fourteenth century onwards. Goldberg notes, as evidence to this, the decline in women paying brewing fines and the increase in the number of male brewers admitted to the franchise of York in the fifteenth century.[6]

The case of the Chester cycle ale-wife is particularly interesting, and perhaps documents a specific time in history. It is possible that her punishment reflected local attempts to curb female brewing. Bennett argues that there is historical evidence of a struggle at Chester between the Cooks' and Innkeepers' guilds (the producers of the *Harrowing of Hell*) and the ale-wives.[7] By 1540, perhaps in an attempt to resolve the issue, the mayor ordered that no woman between fourteen and forty could keep an alehouse.[8] Perhaps then the punishment of the Chester ale-wife was intended to be a real warning to women traders. If this is the case, then the Chester ale-wife transcends the boundary of comedy, and her appearance shows a real fear of working women's threat to the market. Judith Bennett believes that this might be the case. The new orders produced at Chester were issued only four days prior to the performance of the plays at Whitsun. She suggests that the audience 'might have laughed and watched in different ways from before'.[9] She adds that had we been able to witness the audience's reactions we would have seen 'laughter, anger, disgust, boredom, perhaps even fear'.[10]

This glimpse of the possible underlying political dimension of the representation of the Chester ale-wife is just one example of how reading the women characters against their social, cultural and economic position can open up new meanings. In this chapter other vulgar women will be examined through this process. Two specific case studies will be examined: that of Mrs Noah and Dame Procula, Pilate's wife. The first of these readings will investigate the ways that Mrs Noah can be interpreted as a working woman. Through placing her within the context of the social and economic situation that faced medieval women, the first case study will seek to ascertain how Mrs Noah may reflect women's place within the work force. The second study, that of the high-ranking Dame Procula, will contextualise her portrayal through reading her against medieval literature, and specifically conduct treatises. Through using these strategies some alternative readings of women's characterisation will be released. As I have argued from the outset of this

[5] *The Book of Margery Kempe*, pp. 9–10.
[6] Goldberg, *Women, Work and Life Cycle*, p. 114.
[7] J.M. Bennett points out that ale-wives were singled out for ridicule because of their gender: 'Victuallers in pre-industrial England were often subjected to ridicule, dislike and suspicion, but ale-wives endured a particular opprobrium that reflected their sex as much as their trade' See J.M. Bennett, 'Misogyny, Popular Culture and Women's Work', *History Workshop* 31 (Spring 1991), p. 168.
[8] Ibid., p. 179.
[9] Bennett, *Ale, Beer, and Brewsters*, p. 143.
[10] Ibid., p. 142.

book, medieval theatre produced a multiplicity of meaning for its varied audiences. To read women characters against contemporary socio-economic and literary influences is to open up further interpretations. These readings aim, in the words of Caroline Bynum, to look *with* rather than *at* women.

MRS NOAH

Unlike many of the other women characters of the cycles, Mrs Noah has attracted a wealth of critical assessment. However, the continual reassessment of Noah's wife has, until recently, served more as a defence of Noah than an investigation into the interpretation of Uxor. The character of Mrs Noah frequently presents critics with a problem in interpreting Mr Noah. It has proved hard to equate the servile, God-obeying Noah with the wife-beater.[11] Mrs Noah's importance is seen in relation to the effect she has on her husband, rather than in her own right. Some critics have completely overlooked Mrs Noah. For example, Jeffrey Helterman believes that the tension between Noah and God 'underlies most of the dramatic action', and he overlooks the significant impact of Mrs Noah's rebellion in the pageant.[12]

Most critics limit their interpretation of Mrs Noah to a 'recalcitrant', 'shrewish' and 'malicious' wife.[13] I would like to re-examine some of the problems that surround this interpretation of the flood plays. I believe that Mrs Noah's significance extends beyond that of a 'shrew'. In fact, she documents some of the important economic transitions which faced working women in the late Middle Ages.

The extant Noah plays from the Towneley, Chester, York and N-Town cycles, and the fragment from the Newcastle cycle, offer a varied presentation of Mrs Noah. For example, in the Newcastle play she is tempted by Satan to forsake the ark, while at N-Town she offers little resistance to Noah and willingly boards the vessel. The varied presentations of Mrs Noah raise questions about the source material that the dramatists used. It might be supposed that the N-Town dramatist was influenced by the biblical characterisation of Mrs Noah. Within the Old Testament she boards the ark with her husband, and offers no resistance.[14] In fact, here Mrs Noah is the very model of an obedient wife.[15] It is notable that this tradition does not set the precedent for a shrewish Mrs Noah.[16] However within English culture the Caedmon Manuscript of Anglo-Saxon Biblical poetry, which dates from 1000–35, demonstrates an awareness of the reluctance of the wife to

[11] Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi*, p. 148.

[12] Jeffrey Helterman, *Symbolic Action in the Plays of the Wakefield Master* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1981), p. 53.

[13] Hardin Craig sees Mrs Noah as 'recalcitrant' (Craig, *English Religious Drama*, p. 9); V.A. Kolve believes her to be 'the root-form of the shrewish wife' (Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi*, p. 144); and Jeffrey Helterman reads her contrariness as a deliberately 'malicious' act (Helterman, *Symbolic Action*, p. 64).

[14] Genesis 7.13.

[15] Ironically, within the Bible it is Noah's behaviour after the flood which is disreputable: 'And Noah began to be an husbandman, and he planted a vineyard: And he drank of the wine and was drunken: and he was uncovered within his tent' (Genesis 9.20–21).

[16] Anna Jean Mill, though, has found antecedents for the stubborn wife in the Jewish and Islamic tradition. See Mill, 'Noah's Wife Again', pp. 613–26.

enter the ark.[17] It is possible that the Towneley dramatist drew upon this tradition, while the Newcastle flood pageant may have been influenced by iconography from the Queen Mary's Psalter which shows the devil using Mrs Noah as a means of preventing the ark from floating.[18] The presentation of Uxor was also influenced by popular culture. Many fabliaux denote a battle between the sexes. These popular tales tell of hen-pecked men struggling to keep command of the trousers. They offer the perfect model of the garrulous, shrewish wife.[19]

Popular images of women provided by the rhyming French medieval stories, the fabliaux, support the misogynistic views held by medieval writers towards women. Eileen Power believes these representations are 'genuine pictures drawn from real life, the real twinge of the pinching shoe'.[20] Women in the fabliaux are willing to trade their virginity, wives have enormous sexual appetites for many lovers or hen-peck their husbands, and ladies are quick-thinking, sensual and materialistic. Chastity and obedience are frequently advocated. Maureen Fries sees that:

> Popular images are both more diverse and more contradictory than the courtly ones. The fabliau woman is given a wit and resourcefulness usually denied by the exegetes to women; but she uses it to repeat Eve's sins of disobedience and especially cupiditas.[21]

As Fries points out, the cleverness of these comic figures is used to align them with the sinfulness of Eve. Far from providing lively role models, the humour is used to condemn women further.

I am interested in exploring the reasons why the cycle dramatists expanded the role of Mrs Noah from its biblical antecedent. Her dramatisation suggests that she answered some need within the audience of the cycles. Before I look at some possible interpretations of Mrs Noah I would like to examine the problems that surround the dramatisation of the deluge.

The flood sequence provides a challenge for the dramatist. The majority of the impressive moments within the deluge narrative are visual rather than dramatic.[22] The visual motif of the ark and the spectacle of the flood are two such examples.[23] Some scenic action is present within the scenario, for example, the assembling of the ark, the procession of the animals and the releasing of the raven and dove. Given the physical magnitude of the spectacle and the textual evidence of much mimed action, it is reasonable to assume that the success of the flood plays lay in

[17] Ibid., p. 614.
[18] Ibid., p. 620.
[19] John Hines argues that the Noahs' clashes are 'never presented in fabliau terms' (John Hines, *The Fabliau in English* [London and New York: Longman, 1993], p. 211). However, he does examine fabliaux versions of other stereotypical gender battles (ibid., p. 9).
[20] Power, *Medieval Women*, p. 11.
[21] Maureen Fries, 'Feminine Populi: Popular Images of Women in Medieval Literature', *JPL* 14.1 (Summer 1980), pp. 84–5.
[22] The flood sequence was perhaps better suited to visual rather than dramatic reinterpretation. Rosemary Woolf notes that the deluge inspired a proliferation of paintings during medieval times (Woolf, *The English Mystery Plays*, p. 132).
[23] The flood plays also provided a challenge in terms of staging. Most versions need three distinctive acting areas: God's space, the ark (and a location for the family scenes; this could be the same place) and Mrs Noah's 'hill'.

spectacular moments of staging, and the dramatic representation of the Noahs' reactions to their situation.

Given the difficulty of dramatising this incident, to what extent is Mrs Noah utilised as anything other than a dramatic device? Functionally, Mrs Noah provides a humorous interlude through her battle with her husband. Dramatically she sets up the conflict between Noah's attachment to worldly life and his obedience to God. However, it is possible that Uxor served a use beyond these functions. From the outset of this book I have argued that medieval drama, and in particular the cycles, were capable of being read in multiple ways. The audience of the pageant did not receive Mrs Noah in a homogeneous manner. I would like to explore some of the possible interpretations of her character.

Scholars have frequently interpreted the deluge play as a type of second fall.[24] The remaining fragment of the Newcastle pageant substantiates this through having Uxor goaded by Satan into disobeying Noah. The manner of her temptation by Satan is, of course, reminiscent of Eve's disobedience. The similarities between Eve and Mrs Noah do not stop there.[25] As Davidson points out, like Eve, Mrs Noah is 'mother of the entire race'.[26] The image of Mrs Noah is paradoxically both that of a fallen woman (a type of Magdalene) and of 'mother' (a second Eve and a parody of the Virgin). However, the reading of Mrs Noah as a second Eve is quite limiting. First, as I have already pointed out, Uxor's image not only corresponds to that of Eve, but it is influenced by the Virgin: 'Noah's recalcitrant wife on the one hand repeated the disobedience of Eve, but on the other was looked on as a type of Virgin in her eventual submission to God's will.'[27] Second, as I have already noted in Chapter Five, I am wary of over-emphasising the importance of typology within the cycles. This leads to one-sided interpretations of the female characters. In effect all the women characters are seen to repeat the behaviour of either Eve or Mary. They are reduced to the Virgin/Whore dichotomy.

There are other difficulties associated with interpreting Mrs Noah. Kolve perceives that the wife's disobedience is essential in establishing the hierarchy which extends from God, down to angels, Noah, his sons, their wives and finally the animals. Only through careful maintenance of this structure can harmony and balance be found:

> Just as fallen man is rebellious to his master, God, so too is the wife rebellious to her husband, and only when the proper human relationship is re-established does the universal order begin to construct itself.[28]

This hierarchical model provides difficulty in interpreting Noah and God. The violence that Noah shows towards his wife within the Towneley pageant forces uneasy implications onto God's treatment of humankind. Helterman sees the

[24] See A.C. Cawley's introduction to the Chester pageant in his anthology of medieval play texts. A.C. Cawley, *Everyman and Medieval Miracle Plays* (London: Everyman's Library, 1956; reprint, London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1990), p. 35.

[25] The flood pageant also recalls the Fall since Noah calls himself the 'second father' in the N-Town version, and thus draws a parallel between himself and Adam (*N-Town Plays*, pageant IV, l. 16).

[26] Davidson, *From Creation to Doom*, p. 51.

[27] Richard Beadle, 'The Shipwright's Craft', *Aspects of Early English Drama*, ed. Paula Neuss (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer and Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes and Noble, 1983), p. 51.

[28] Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi*, p. 150.

problem: 'reading Noah's beating of his wife only as prefiguration would upset the motif of disobedience by portraying God's anger in the wrong light.'[29]

The inconsistency between Noah's treatment of his wife and his behaviour towards God is problematic. As Mills notes: 'Noah is comically ineffectual in his dealings with his wife, in contrast to his dignified dialogues with God.'[30] Indeed, Noah's frequent laments over his age and frailty, despite increasing his humanity and making him an 'Everyman' character, set up an alternative dynamic. In the York pageant his continued reluctance to build the ark threatens to cast him as anti-hero. His complaints in the Towneley version conspire to engender pity within the audience:

> And now I wax old,
> Seke, sory, and cold,
> As muk apon mold
> I widder away.[31]

If Noah becomes the object of pity he is in danger of undermining God's authority. We might wonder at God's wisdom in placing such responsiblity upon weak shoulders.

Richard Daniels interprets Noah's conflict between his loyalty to his wife and God as providing a dialectic between 'experience and doctrine', which would be familiar to an audience.[32] The difficulty with this view is that it condones Noah's violence towards his wife. Arguably Uxor strikes the first blow in the Towneley version, but this is only after Noah has physically threatened her: 'We! hold thi tong, ram-skyt,/ Or I shall thee still.'[33] Indeed, Daniels argues an alarming point in defence of Noah's wife-beating: 'Noah is so frustrated by his wife's nagging that he strikes her first.'[34] Nagging is presented as sufficient justification for physical violence. Of course canon law allowed wife-beating within medieval times, but it hardly speaks well of the man chosen by God to continue the race after the flood.

Mrs Noah's rebellion has frequently been identified as providing a comic spirit within the deluge pageants. Her insurrection has been linked to folkloric practices which allowed women public domination over their husbands for a limited period of festival time. Richard Axton sees Mrs Noah's dominance 'as a state of topsy-turvy licensed by traditional practice on St John's Day, Midsummer Day'.[35] Similar battles of the sexes are to be found in the Spinners' St Distaff's Day. Held on 7 January when women returned to their spinning after Christmas, this festival involved men setting fire to women's flax, and the women then dousing both the flax and their husbands with water.[36] Obviously this rite has much relevance to the Noah pageants: the retaliation of a woman against her husband; a spinner commencing her work; and the throwing/flooding of water.

[29] Helterman, *Symbolic Action*, p. 52.
[30] Mills, 'Approaches to Medieval Drama', p. 47.
[31] *Towneley Plays*, pageant III, ll. 88–91.
[32] Richard Daniels, 'Uxor Noah: A Raven or a Dove', *CR* 14 (1979), p. 29.
[33] *Towneley Plays*, pageant III, ll. 313–14.
[34] Daniels, 'Uxor Noah', p. 27.
[35] Axton, *European Drama*, p. 186.
[36] Gibson, *The Theater of Devotion*, p. 43.

What, though, is the impact of the festive aspects of the Noah pageants? Is the carnivalesque used to promote a new order, or simply to exorcise familial tension? There is much critical disagreement. Schless argues that the comic tone provokes disorder, which gives way to chastisement, and culminates in balance and harmony. In other words, the comic, folkloric 'descant' provided by Uxor reflects a pattern of Christian regeneration. Schless proposes that: 'Noah's realistic chastisement of his wife will reassert order and bring them into a completely harmonious relationship.'[37] However, Schless's model of 'complete harmony' is unattainable in a world led by the patriarchal figure of Noah. Domestic harmony depends upon an equal meeting between two points: that of Noah and his wife. In the flood pageant the synthesis of these two conflicting narratives, the 'descant' of Mrs Noah's rebellion and the biblical theme reflected in Noah, is vastly unbalanced.

Natalie Zemon Davies offers an alternative interpretation of the deluge pageant. She contests that the inversion of marital status, the depiction of a hen-pecked husband by a dominant wife, 'both exhorted the hen-pecked husband to take command and invited the unruly woman to keep up the fight'.[38] In this manner the unruly Mrs Noah becomes a role model for medieval women spectators in rejecting subjugation.

Finally, Rosemary Woolf provides an allegorical reading of the flood plays. Woolf interprets the ark as representing the Cross. It is a place of resurrection, the old world is sacrificed and a new one promised. In this reading Noah is seen to symbolise Christ, while the dove represents the Holy Ghost. Woolf sees the ark as a symbol for the institution of the church:

> Noah's wife, therefore, who does not wish to be in the ark when the flood comes, represents the recalcitrant sinner, perhaps even the sinner on his deathbed, who refuses to repent and enter the church.[39]

These allegorical readings interpret Mrs Noah as fulfilling a didactic function. She is used to promote religious doctrine through showing the conversion from sinner to salvation. However, I believe that there are other responses to the character of Mrs Noah. I would like to examine the significance of Mrs Noah as a working woman in late medieval society.

THE EMERGENT INDIVIDUAL/REDUNDANT WORKER

As I mentioned earlier there is no homogeneous portrayal of Mrs Noah in the extant texts. Within the N-Town pageant Mrs Noah offers no resistance to entering the ark, and there is no marital violence. The pageant focuses upon the worthiness of the Noah family: their piety and obedience to God earns them

[37] Howard H. Schless, 'The Comic Element in the Wakefield Noah', *Studies in Medieval Literature in Honour of Professor Albert Croll Baugh*, ed. Mac Edward Leach (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1961), p. 238.

[38] Davies, 'Women on Top', p. 170.

[39] Woolf, *The English Mystery* Plays, p. 139. The ark has also been interpreted as reflecting a number of other images, for example, Christ, and the Virgin (See Melvin Storm, 'Uxor and Alison: Noah's Wife in the Flood Plays and Chaucer's Wife of Bath', *MLQ* 48, no. 4 [Dec 1987], p. 317).

salvation.[40] At the start of the pageant the Noahs, their children and their wives are seen meekly engaged in prayer. It is this sense of harmony and unity which permeates the rest of the dramatic action. Mrs Noah has no working identity within the N-Town pageant, instead she is shown as a carer, a mother and wife. Her concerns are directed towards serving her family:

> I am ȝoure wyff, ȝoure childeryn þese be
> Onto us tweyn it doth longe
> Hem to teche in all degree
> Synne to forsakyn, and werkys wronge.[41]

It is an idealised portrayal in which the role of the wife is shown to be one of obedience to her husband. In fact, the N-Town Uxor reflects other conduct-book values. The role of moral instruction within parenthood is emphasised through the Noahs' treatment of their children. The Noahs demonstrate many Christian values. In the N-Town version they are remorseful about the fate of their fellow citizens. Noah approaches the flood 'With doolful hert, syenge sad and sore', and is aware that 'In þis flood spylt is many a mannys blood'.[42] Once on board little time is wasted in despatching the dove. The arrival of the olive branch is used to intensify the family's religious faith. The final moments of the pageant focus upon boisterous worship and invigorating hymn singing.

Curiously a comic and crude interlude in which Lamech and his boy appear interrupts the N-Town deluge pageant. The blind Lamech blames his boy servant for pointing his bow in the wrong direction, thus causing the death of Cain. In a manner which echoes early Atellan and Plautine farce, the servant cruelly parodies his blind master. This interlude allowed for a change of scenery in which the ark could be brought forth. The reference to Cain also provided the audiences with an opportunity to link the Noah play to earlier pageants. The dramatist used this as a device to ensure the cohesion of the cycle while simultaneously maintaining the episodic structure. In glimpsing Lamech the audience are made aware of the old world that the Noahs are forsaking. We are prepared for the rite of passage via new birth into a post-deluge world.

In the Chester flood pageant Mrs Noah steps beyond the confines of family life. She is shown in the public world where she enjoys her friendship with the town gossip. Unusually Mrs Noah and the sons' wives are allowed to help with ark building (despite Mrs Noah's ironic cry, that 'women bynne weake to underfoe/ any great travell').[43] The women help assemble the building materials for the ark, though the actual construction is left to the men. However, women's importance in this task is undermined by the fact that the waggon representing the ark was in the playing space from the outset of the scene.[44] In other words, despite the wives'

[40] This pageant shows a similarity with the portrait of the Towneley family in the National Portrait Gallery. The family are at prayer with the men on one side and the women on the other. See Peter Thomson, *Shakespeare's Professional Career* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 17.

[41] *N-Town Plays*, pageant IV, ll. 40–4.

[42] Ibid., l. 198 and l. 204.

[43] *Chester Plays*, pageant III, ll. 67–8.

[44] Evidence from Lincoln shows that the ark was a separate structure from the pageant waggon. 1539 records show that a former schoolhouse was used to store the ark. See Peter Meredith and John Tailby, *The Staging of Religious Drama in Europe in the Later Middle Ages*. Early Drama, Art and

help the ark already exists.[45] They are redundant workers. It is possible that the women's help with construction was further undermined through stage action. The mimed action which the stage directions call for would have been undertaken by men playing women. The cross-dressed actors may not have resisted the opportunity for parody. There is comic potential in mimicking the weak and frail women in their attempts to help with heavy construction.

The Chester pageant found other moments of stage action to debate gender issues. Stage directions reveal that animals were 'paraded' onto the ark by having the actors carry boards decorated with various species. While Noah's sons carry lordly and powerful animals, the women are left to bring creatures which are either domestic, for example cats, mice, birds, or those which have sinister and sly associations, such as wolves, marmosets, bears, weasels, ferrets.[46]

In the Chester pageant Mrs Noah shows interest in the family economy. She initially questions Noah's wisdom in deciding to take on the ark commission without being paid a fee. She is also portrayed as having developed a sense of social responsibility. She is the only character in the Chester deluge pageant to show consideration for other human beings. She is concerned that her 'good gossippes' will drown, and prefers to stay drinking malmsey with her closest friend, rather than board the ark. But it is difficult to argue that Mrs Noah is used to advocate humanitarian principles. She is significantly undermined by the debauchery of her drinking and gossiping.

The Chester flood pageant foregrounds the battle between the sexes. When Mrs Noah starts to disobey Noah's orders, he complains about her behaviour:

> Lord, that weomen bine crabbed aye,
> and non are meeke, I dare well saye.[47]

The couple engage in a threshold battle. Uxor demonstrates her refusal to enter the ark by clouting her husband. Noah physically forces her on board. Once aboard the ark, Noah asserts control:

> Lord God in majestye
> that such grace hast granted mee
> wher all was borne, salfe to bee![48]

Mrs Noah never speaks for the rest of the pageant. In her enforced obedience she is a silenced woman. The shrew has been tamed. The unruly, moody woman is brought into domestic confinement and silence.

The York pageant defines Mrs Noah as a worker and mother. Uniquely the York flood sequence was produced in two parts. The latter pageant, produced by the Fishers and Mariners, depicts the family entering the already constructed ark. Noah's age is emphasised from the start of the pageant. He is six hundred years

Music. Monograph Series, no. 4 (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Western Michigan University; Medieval Institute Publications, 1983), p. 189.

[45] Of course the actors may have added a few final planks to the ark.

[46] *Chester Plays*, pageant III, ll. 173–76.

[47] Ibid., ll. 105–6.

[48] Ibid., ll. 261–63.

old, and has been building the ark for the last one hundred winters. This fact gives some substance to Mrs Noah's concerns over her husband. She questions Noah's suitability as a provider for the family, is dubious about the ark, objects to Noah's lack of consultation and believes that his state of mind is unstable since he 'in faythe þe fonnes full faste'.[49] Most importantly she insists that he has struck a bad bargain over the construction of the ark.

Mrs Noah's ill-temper is enhanced by the fact that Noah has constructed the ark in secret. At the beginning of the pageant Noah side-steps her by asking their son to act as a go-between. Mrs Noah confronts her husband about his absence from home. She interprets his claim that it is God's doing as a lame excuse, and hits him. As in the Chester version, Mrs Noah's focus during the rising flood is upon saving her friends:

> Nowe certis, and we shulde skape fro skathe
> And so be saffyd as ye saye here,
> My commodyrs and my cosynes bathe,
> þan wolde I wente with vs in feere.[50]

Mrs Noah's concerns as a working woman are also shown. Rather than board the ark she wants to go home, 'For I haue tolis to trusse'.[51]

The York pageant, when read from Mrs Noah's position rather than that of her husband, reveals a narrative about the disempowering of a woman. Her initial reservations about Noah's dependability and her concern for her family are gradually silenced. Rather than contributing to the identity and stability of the family, her passage onto the ark reflects her diminishing power. In the new world of the ark she has no voice. She appears to be 'tamed' and takes on a subservient role, which is reflected in calling her husband 'sir'.

It is within the Towneley pageant that the strongest sense of Mrs Noah as a working woman is achieved. She is initially seen as a woman concerned with the 'double burden' of raising her family and earning a living.[52] In fact, her remarks are reminiscent of the wife's role outlined in the 'Ballad of a Tyrannical Husband'. She is perturbed by Noah's absence from the home (when he meets God and agrees to undertake the task of ark building), and sees it as a reflection of his laziness.[53] Mrs Noah has little confidence in her husband's ability to support and provide for the family. She condemns Noah for doing as he pleases and not managing the family:

> When we swete or swynk,
> Thou dos what thou thynk;
> Yit of mete and of drynk
> Haue we veray skant.[54]

One of the most memorable tableaux within the pageant is of Mrs Noah as a devoted worker. During the storm she stays spinning at her wheel. The image of

[49] *York Plays*, pageant IX, ll. 89.
[50] Ibid., ll. 141–44.
[51] Ibid., l. 110.
[52] *Towneley Plays*, pageant III, l. 192.
[53] Ibid., ll. 279–86.
[54] Ibid., ll. 283–86.

Mrs Noah spinning upon her 'hill' is set up in contradiction to the spectacle of the ark. In a gender-reversed moment, Mr Noah has to wrench Uxor from her work in order to get her aboard the ark. It is Uxor who takes on the role of 'provider'. As Helterman points out, 'she insists, after the ark is finished, that her work is as important as his'.[55] Helterman reads this as a moment of unnecessary female stubbornness and attention-seeking. He sees Mrs Noah's spinning not as worthy and necessary work, but as 'a way to fill the time'.[56]

In fact, the battle between the Noahs is established from the start of the pageant. Noah worries about his wife's reaction to the ark building:

> For she is full tethee,
> For litill oft angre;
> If any thyng wrang be,
> Soyne is she wroth.[57]

Mrs Noah offers her advice to the audience: 'We women may wary/ All ill husbandys.'[58] Instead she turns her attention to her spinning: 'To spyn will I ders me.'[59] Noah, by comparison, is a pathetic worker. While his wife dedicates herself to spinning, he perpetually complains as he builds the ark:

> My bonys are so stark:
> No wonder if thay wark,
> For I am full old.[60]

When the ark is completed Mrs Noah laughs at her husband's handiwork, claiming that it is impossible to tell 'Which is before, which is behynd'.[61] The pageant dwells on the obstinacy of Mrs Noah to remain spinning despite her husband's protests:

> Sir, for Iak nor for Gill
> Will I turne my face,
> Till I haue on this hill
> Spon a space
> On my rok.[62]

Noah resorts to physical methods to coerce his wife into the ark. The physical violence which Noah uses is severe. But the beating does little to tame this Mrs Noah. After the assault, in an aside to the audience, Mrs Noah remarks that she can better provide for the family than Noah. She curses him, wishes him dead and reveals her desire for the status and independence that she held as a working woman. Noah's violent attack on his wife undermines his moral standing and throws into question God's choice of a person to save humankind. I also believe

[55] Helterman, *Symbolic Action*, p. 61.
[56] Ibid., p. 69.
[57] *Towneley Plays*, pageant III, ll. 270–73.
[58] Ibid., ll. 300–1.
[59] Ibid., l. 345.
[60] Ibid., ll. 388–90.
[61] Ibid., l. 479.
[62] Ibid., ll. 486–90.

that Noah's actions reflect a fear of the independence which his wife achieved as a worker. I agree with the suggestion made by Ruth Evans that his wife's trading success propels Noah's reaction. Noah's attack on his wife is a response to 'women's specific economic threat to the received sex-gender system'.[63]

Ruth Evans explores, 'the way in which Towneley Noah's wife challenges and not confirms a dominant patriarchal ideology'.[64] She sees in Uxor's address to the audience, despite the role being played by a man, the possibility of momentarily breaking from the frame of the play to present an 'emergent individual', free from societal and economic constraints. The 'emergent individual' is best embodied in the Towneley Mrs Noah. As I have commented in Chapter Four, Mrs Noah's aside provides an opportunity for the spectator to glimpse the male gender of the actor playing the unruly woman. Gash reads Mrs Noah as transcending the Virgin/Whore dichotomy through her independence:

> Rather than describing Noah's wife as a type of Eve, we might conjecture that one source of her appeal was that by rebelling but not being divinely punished, and by being both independent and a wife (like Chaucer's Wife of Bath), she eludes the polarised roles assigned to women in the Bible and in medieval patriarchy.[65]

Her rebellion connotes an appealing individuality. Her feistiness allows her to escape the typical roles that women are allocated. However, this sense of an 'emergent individual' is fleeting. In coercing Mrs Noah onto the ark, Noah ensures that she is domesticated and stripped of her personal power.

The passage of Mrs Noah onto the ark, in the light of changes that occurred in the late medieval period, can be read as signifying something other than the silencing of a garrulous wife. If, as I mentioned in Chapter Five, we look *with* the female characters of the pageants rather than *at* them, another series of meanings is available. As Mrs Noah steps onto the new world of the Christian ark, the old world disappears. The flooding waters claim the lives of the sinners and the independence of women tied to cottage industries. The hierarchical design of the ark silences women.[66] Mrs Noah abandons her distaff, her emblem of her working status, as she enters the domain of Noah and God. The emergence of the institutionalised and ordered ark, like that of the urban economy, limited women to the role of wife or mother. What we witness in the refusal of Mrs Noah to enter the ark is not sheer stubbornness, but her desire to maintain her status as a worker.

In Chapter One I outlined the working conditions that women faced in the late medieval period. The 1349 Ordinance of Labourers, written to counteract the effects of the plague, made work for women compulsory. This increase in working status for women was matched by the extension of their legal rights between 1300

[63] Evans, 'Feminist Re-Enactments', p. 154. Likewise, Deborah Hovland notes of the late medieval trickster plays from northern France: 'the fiercest beatings of disobedient wives were written during a period of high male unemployment (1470–1500) after record numbers of women had entered the labor force as a result of the depopulation of the century following the Black Death of 1348'. Deborah Hovland, 'Gender and Violence in the Northern French Farce', *MFN* 21 (Spring 1996), p. 25.

[64] Evans, 'Feminist Re-enactments', p. 141.

[65] Anthony Gash, 'Carnival Against Lent: The Ambivalence of Medieval Drama', *Medieval Literature*, ed. David Aers (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1986), p. 79.

[66] The Chester pageant includes specific instructions from God to Noah that the ark should be built in three distinctive levels (*Chester Plays*, pageant III, l. 34).

and 1500.[67] While it appears that women enjoyed increased freedom and status at this time, many of these allowances were rescinded after the late fifteenth century.[68] This is, of course, about the time when the manuscripts of the Corpus Christi cycles were thought to have been copied.

An examination of the specific case of women engaged within the wool trade serves to demonstrate the changing pattern of women's work. Evidence shows that large numbers of women were employed as spinners and weavers, and that Wakefield was a particular centre for these trades.[69] As Goldberg notes, records suggest that women enjoyed relative freedom to trade until the late fifteenth century: 'Restrictions on female employees follow much the same pattern, there being generally little restriction during the later fourteenth and earlier fifteenth centuries and most within the weaving industry from the later fifteenth century.'[70]

Evidence supports the idea that work was plentiful for women weavers prior to the mid-fifteenth century. For example, records from the fourteenth-century York Peace Sessions show that women weavers were able to attract a rate over the standard price for their work. Margaret Peperwhyte and Margaret de Carlel took wages of 1d more than the fixed price for their labour.[71] However, a very different pattern emerges by the sixteenth century. At this point spinsters and carders could no longer afford the cost of living in the city of York.[72]

An examination of Weavers' ordinances from the fifteenth century reveals a growing trend in excluding women from trading. One of the earliest records is from Shrewsbury. The 1448 Weavers' ordinance prevents widows from trading: 'no woman shall occupy the craft of weaving after the death of her husband except for one quarter of the year'.[73] From this point until the early sixteenth century, guilds from Bristol, Coventry, Hull and Norwich also excluded women from trading.[74]

That the Towneley-Wakefield Mrs Noah attempts to keep hold of her distaff despite the impending flood may be significant. Many members of the audience may see her as an obstinate, unruly and shrewish wife, or simply a diverting festive spirit. However, the demise of women weavers that doubtless occurred at Wakefield during this period suggests that her action is open to other possible meanings. Perhaps her rebellion would be understood by fellow women weavers in the audience as an attempt to preserve her working rights. Mrs Noah's action is a stance against the flood of restrictions upon women workers that the increased commercial pressures and recession of late fifteenth-century England brought about.

[67] Martha Howell, *Women, Production and Patriarchy in Late Medieval Cities* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 178.

[68] Rigby, *English Society in the Later Middle Ages*, p. 278.

[69] Goldberg, *Women, Work and Life Cycle*, p. 75. As Wakefield was a centre for the wool trade it is significant that the Towneley flood pageant focuses upon Uxor's trade. The *Second Shepherds' Pageant* from Wakefield shows Gyll spinning at night. This issue might have been a particular local concern.

[70] Goldberg, *Women in England*, p. 31.

[71] Ibid., p. 178.

[72] Goldberg, *Women, Work and Life Cycle*, p. 145. This evidence points to the feminisation of the suburbs of the city. I have outlined in Chapter Four the ways in which the procession of the Corpus Christi cycle at York sanctioned the legitimate city centre but avoided the marginal female spaces.

[73] Goldberg, *Women in England*, p. 204.

[74] At Bristol women were banned from weaving in 1461 (Goldberg, *Women in England*, p. 205). Coventry had already banned such practice in 1453, while Hull and Norwich issues similar ordinances in the early 1500s (Goldberg, *Women, Work and Life Cycle*, p. 201).

The growth of urban trading, the development of a pre-capitalist economy and a crowded work market, led to the reduction of opportunities for women. It is this reduction of working rights for women that Mrs Noah shows within the Towneley flood pageant. She is forced to give up her position as a spinner in the flooding old world as she enters the institutionalised and regulated ark. Once on board she is silenced and her only roles are those of wife and mother.

As Howell notes of the late medieval period: 'The roles of women and the definition of womanhood were changing at this time, and women's lives were increasingly centred in a newly constructed patriarchal household.'[75] Mrs Noah's rebellion is not that of a shrew, but as a woman attempting to find an identity and preserve her right to work in an increasingly structured man-made world. In the following section I will examine how Dame Procula's characterisation reveals the restraints experienced by women in late medieval England. Procula, the second case study in this chapter, is confined to domestic spaces and is not allowed the privilege of public speech.

PROCULA: A SILENCED WIFE SPEAKS

> Makyn a rewly noyse, comyng and rennyng of þe schaffald, and here shert and here kyrlyl in here hand. And sche xal come beforn Pylat leke a mad woman[76]

The N-town dramatist depicts Pilate's wife as a mad woman. She appears deranged, her night-clothes draped over her arms, shrieking with terror from a nightmarish dream. Procula, an early embodiment of the madwoman from the attic and precursor of Ophelia, is an unusual characterisation within the Corpus Christi cycles: she is an upper-class woman. Such women received little sympathy from the cycle dramatists. The other notable example is the rich and sinful 'bad soul' of the Chester *Judgement* pageant. In both cases the women are shown to be vain and proud, over-fond of rich jewellery and clothing, and requiring constant male attention and praise.

Procula is, like Mrs Noah, a character with non-biblical antecedents. In the extant texts she is only developed by the York and N-Town dramatists. It is believed that her origins lie in early drama from Montecassino, though her dream is based on the gospel of Nicodemus.[77] Procula's character is curious: she is overtly sexual, experiences a prophetic vision (which borders on an expression of insanity) and refuses to remain silent. Characters such as Mrs Noah transcend normative expectations of women through becoming dominating, working women. Procula never dirties her hands, but she transgresses her role as the governor's wife through her licentious behaviour and by speaking out of turn. She infringes the law, drinks alcohol, makes sexual advances on her husband, experiences wild visions and, perhaps most significantly for the cycles, attempts to influence her husband's public duties by speaking her mind.

I will examine how Procula breaks the silence that was imposed upon medieval women. Procula's character demonstrates the lack of authority held by noblewomen: she is undermined by her husband, his counsellors and their son. Dame Procula

[75] Howell, *Women, Production and Patriarchy*, p. 178.
[76] *N-Town Plays*, pageant XXXI, l. 58.
[77] Davidson, 'Women on the Medieval Stage', p. 106.

fights back and, through voicing her dreams, attempts to influence both her husband's conduct and state matters. Her refusal to remain silent and obey the rules of decorum is a transgressive act. Like Mrs Noah, she commits an act of rebellion against normative values.

Upper ranking medieval women were subjected to a different set of expectations from the lower ranks. In Chapter One I quoted the dying words of the Duchess of Brunswick, who declared that she had lived in her castle 'even as it were a cell'. Her life had been one of silence and invisibility. It was not uncommon for aristocratic women to be secluded in towers or separate wings. In order to maintain their respect they were forced to imitate cloistered nuns. As Case points out: 'public life is the property of men, and women are relegated to the invisible private sphere.'[78]

The portrayal of Dame Procula, as an upper-class woman in late medieval society, is a particularly interesting one. I have noted that Mrs Noah's rebellion reflects her position as a working woman in a world with narrowing opportunities. Dame Procula demonstrates the changes which occurred in the social world of late medieval England. She illustrates the increasing distance between public and private worlds, and the establishment of separate spheres for men and women. As Rackin notes, by the end of the 1500s opportunities for women had diminished:

> During the late sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, English women were increasingly excluded from work they had earlier performed; removed from participation in economic, political, and cultural life; relegated to a marginal and dependant economic status; excluded from the public arenas of political power and cultural authority; and confined within the rising barriers that marked off the house as a separate, private sphere.[79]

Procula's relegation to the home and her dismissal from the public sphere is an example of the narrowing opportunities for women at the close of the sixteenth century. Procula's desire to speak out against this, to register her objections at being confined, is a form of rebellion.

Not only does Procula try to escape the domestic confinement which is imposed upon her, but she also breaks the decorum of silence expected of women of her rank. In medieval times women's silence was held in esteem. As I have already noted, the image of silence was perpetuated by the Virgin; her holiness and purity were increased by her meek behaviour. Views on womanly attributes were also influenced by Paul's letter to Timothy, 'Let the women learn in silence, with all subjection.'[80] In addition, medieval conduct books argued that a good woman was prudent, contemplative and spiritual. The model wife was close to that of Chaucer's Patient Griselda – silent and uncomplaining. Silence was seen to be the most graceful and desirable of qualities.[81]

[78] Case, *Feminism*, p. 7.

[79] Phyllis Rackin, 'Androgyny, Mimesis and the Marriage of the Boy Heroine on the English Renaissance Stage', *PMLA* 102 (1987), p. 32.

[80] 1 Timothy 2.11.

[81] In order to maintain silence nunneries often developed a sophisticated sign language. For example a sister would 'wag her hands displaying sidelings in the manners of a fish tail' or 'draw her little finger in the manner of milking' (G.J. Augier, *History and Antiquities of Sign* [London, 1840], pp. 405–9; cited in Power, *Medieval Women*, p. 93).

On the other hand, speech was associated with corruption and danger. Edith Benkov notes that medieval society held the belief that women could manipulate language and thereby threaten established order.[82] The dangers of a free tongue were equated with the sin of a free body; the open orifices of a woman's body were perceived as perilous.[83] Women's talking was regarded as a threat to male authority. Consequently, as I have identified in Chapter Two, women were not encouraged to perform in public.

I would like to examine Dame Procula in terms of her relationship to the ideal conduct advocated for upper-ranking women. Through examining her in this light it is possible to see the specific nature of her rebellion.

In order to assess Dame Procula's behaviour I would like to focus upon three conduct manuals. Christine de Pisan's *The Treasure of the City of Ladies* offers advice to high ranking women and is appropriate for a woman like Procula. *What the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter* is a fourteenth-century poem, which seems to have received wide transmission within late medieval England.[84] It is possible that medieval audiences would have been familiar with the behaviour advocated in such a poem. *The Thewis of a Gud Woman*, a fifteenth-century, Middle Scots treatise, is less bourgeois than the *Good Wife* and 'does not seem to exclude women of higher social standing'.[85] The *Gud Woman* would, therefore, seem more applicable to a woman of Procula's standing. Indeed, the *Good Wife* needs to be treated with caution. It disguises itself as a lesson delivered by a woman for the use of other women. Of course men, probably clerics, penned it. Closer examination of the poem reveals something of its true intentions. The first stanza of the *Good Wife* advises regular church attendance and a love of God.[86] It is clear that these conduct poems may be marked by self-interest. Nevertheless, they offer an insight into the behaviour that men expected of women.

The *Good Wife* promotes values of Christian charity, as well as regular church attendance. Women should 'Bliþeli ȝif þine tiþes and þine offringe boþe', and look kindly upon the poor.[87] The poem emphasises women's behaviour with regard to appearance, public behaviour and speech. The predominant advice is that a woman should exhibit moderation and humility. These virtues are in particular evidence when discussing appearance, which should avoid artificiality ('Chonge þine contenaunce for noȝt') and over-indulgence in alcohol, which is shameful.[88]

Much of the advice in the *Good Wife* concerns women's public behaviour. A woman is advised to have a 'good tounge', 'Ne lauȝ þou noȝt to loude', and avoid chattering.[89] The 'mother' within the poem counsels her 'daughter' that:

[82] Benkov, 'Language and Women', p. 265.
[83] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 3.
[84] Felicity Riddy, 'Mother Knows Best. Reading Social Change in a Courtesy Text', *Speculum* 71 (1996), p. 70.
[85] *The Good Wife Taught Her Daughter*, p. 136.
[86] All quotations are taken from the earliest text held at Emmanuel College, Cambridge (c1350) and reproduced in Mustanoja's 1948 edition.
[87] *The Good Wife*, l. 8.
[88] Ibid., l. 35 and l. 55.
[89] Ibid., l. 24 and l. 37 and l. 36.

> Swet of speche schalt tou beo, glad, and milde of mod.
> Trewe in word and dede, in lif and soule god.
> Loke þe fram synne, uilenie, and blame;[90]

In other words, virtue is linked with a curbed tongue. Speaking too much is associated with sinfulness. The 'mother' also recommends that the woman's place is within the home: 'Wone at hom, douter, and kep þin oune wike.'[91] If a woman does appear in the street she should maintain her modesty and walk with a lowered head.[92]

The conduct poem is also concerned with domestic relationships. A wife is expected to be supportive and subservient to her husband. She is advised that, 'Mekeli him answere' and to 'slaken his mod'.[93] On the other hand, women were invested with authority over their children. It is made clear that women were responsible for their child's behaviour, and that disobedience should be corrected through beating.[94] The poem emphasises that a woman must take an active role within the management of the household and that, 'Pride and reste and idlelschipe, þo do hit al awai'.[95]

The Thewis of a Gud Woman advocates similar behaviour to that of the *Gud Wife*. For example, the poem recommends modesty and naturalness, and stresses that a woman's place is within her home. Again, much time is spent advising women on the decorum of speech. The *Thewis* goes as far to suggest that women should be 'lytill of langage'.[96] The poem advocates a modest appearance and an avoidance of alcohol.[97] Again, it is made clear that women should occupy their time and avoid accusations of indolence:

> Luf nocht slepinge na gret suernes
> Fore mekill ill cummys of ydilness.[98]

The advice within the *Thewis* is clearly aimed at a different rank of women from the implied readership of the *Good Wife*. More attention is given to the care needed in choosing one's company, and the maintenance of honour and status.

Christine de Pisan's conduct manual *The Treasure of the City of Ladies* addresses women of all ranks. The second part of the book is most relevant for a woman of Dame Procula's status. Many of the virtues that are commonplace in the conduct poems are also to be found in Pisan's writings. She emphasises that the soul and character of a woman is one of the most important attributes.[99] Pisan spends time discussing aspects of women's speech. She advises that one should avoid slander and gossip.[100] Modesty in matters of dress is advocated.[101] Like the conduct poems, Pisan emphasises an active role for wives. They are advised to rise early, and have a

[90] Ibid., ll. 28–30.
[91] Ibid., l. 61.
[92] Ibid., l. 41.
[93] Ibid., l. 25 and l. 26.
[94] Ibid., ll. 151–54.
[95] Ibid., l. 96.
[96] *The Thewis of a Gud Woman*, l. 14.
[97] Ibid., l. 29 and l. 73.
[98] Ibid., ll. 119–20.
[99] Christine de Pisan, *The Treasure of the City of Ladies*, p. 109.
[100] Ibid., pp. 122–23.
[101] Ibid., p. 133.

number of responsibilities.[102] *The Treasure of the City of Ladies* in fact promotes a more active role for women within marriage than the conduct poems offer. Pisan suggests that a woman should have a working knowledge of all aspects of her husband's affairs. She should know the household, understand legal issues, be able to use weapons and launch a defence of their property.[103] Pisan depicts women as serving an intercessory role. Wives should prevent disputes from occurring with other factions, particularly if the outcome may be war:

> She will urge the people, her husband and his council to consider this matter carefully. This lady will not hesitate for a moment, but will speak or have someone else speak (preserving her honour and that of her husband) to the one or ones who have committed the misdeed.[104]

The emphasis that Pisan places upon a wife's role is significantly different from that of the other conduct treatise writers. All the writers stress the importance of humility, moderation and caution. *The Treasure of the City of Ladies* presents the wife's role as one of deputy and adviser to her husband. She believes that a wife should have the skills and knowledge to fulfil the role of advocacy. I am interested to see how the behaviour which Dame Procula displays compares to these notions of ideal conduct.

The two extant pageants use a variety of devices to undermine Procula and demonstrate her lack of authority. In the York pageant the audience are introduced to Dame Procula through her husband. Pilate is educated, noble, refined and boastful. Through a highly alliterative speech he makes the audience aware of his noble ancestry: 'For Sesar was my sier', and flourishes his power and status: 'Loo, Pilate am I, proued a prince of grete pride'.[105] When Procula appears on stage she is self-assured and confident of her attributes.[106] She proudly introduces herself to the audience: 'All welle of all womanhede I am, wittie and wise.'[107] She demonstrates her vanity by commenting on the richness of her robes, which as I have discussed in Chapter Three were lent by Mistress Grymesby at Coventry.[108] Procula is self-congratulatory and vain:

> Consayue nowe my countenaunce so comly and clere.
> The coloure of my corse is full clere,
> And in richesse of robis I am rayed.[109]

Audience members would immediately equate Procula's privileges with those of high-ranking women. Noble women in medieval times could hold personal

[102] Ibid., p. 132.
[103] Ibid., p. 129.
[104] Ibid., p. 51.
[105] *York Plays*, pageant XXX, l. 10 and l. 19.
[106] Rosemary Woolf sees her as an embryonic Cleopatra or Wife of Bath. See Woolf, *The English Mystery Plays*, p. 245.
[107] *York Plays*, pageant XXX, l. 39.
[108] The description at Bourges of Herod's wife: 'wearing a velvet dress of crimson-violet, its sleeves slashed to reveal their cloth-of-gold linings and a purple satin mantle lined with silver; her black-velvet headdress was set with pearls, and a sapphire was set into the point of each shoe' reflects something of the sumptuous level of Procula's attire (Tydeman, *The Theatre in the Middle Ages*, p. 212).
[109] *York Plays*, pageant XXX, ll. 40–2.

possessions, own property and, in some cases, obtain guild membership. I suspect that the artisan and mercantile audience members would not sympathise with such obvious displays of rank, and would be alienated from her position.

The 'semely' Procula plays the role of a wealthy, flirtatious wife, no doubt a role much relished by the male cross-dressed player who performed her on stage. When Pilate kisses her she admits to enjoying his attention: 'All ladise we coveyte þan bothe to be kyssid and clappid.'[110] Pilate boastfully declares that his wife: 'In bedde is full buxhome and bayne', and that she is, 'þe fayrest figure þat euere did fode fede'.[111] Procula has authority as a sexual being (though she is a product of her husband's 'male gaze'), but the following scene demonstrates her lack of social or political authority.

The counsellor, Beadle, interrupts Procula and Pilate. Procula tries to usher him away so that she can enjoy her husband's company, but fails. It is in this moment that her status is revealed: she is subordinate to Pilate and the Beadle.[112] Moreover, she does not have the legal authority to stay overnight with her husband while he prepares to make a judgement:

> Tis not leeffull for my lady by the lawe of this lande
> In dome for the dwelle fro þe day waxe ought dymme,[113]

The remainder of the scene at Pilate's palace is concerned with putting Dame Procula in her (domestic) place. She is reluctant to return to their private quarters without her husband ('This lare I am not to lere').[114] Pilate advocates wifely obedience ('And what scho biddis you doo loke þat buxsome you be'), but acknowledges that private enclosure is against his wife's wishes: 'Nowe wente is my wiffe, yf it wer not hir will.'[115] As Jobling points out, this scene has the potential to establish good humour and affection between Pilate and his wife. More importantly 'It shows her, too, as a personality of some strength, defensive of what she sees as her rights.'[116] Procula is expected to be obedient to her husband and state law. Even though she is an upper class woman, she is afforded few rights and struggles to maintain an independent voice.

Procula's vanity is again demonstrated when she retires to her chamber. As Rose suggests, the opportunity would be taken to exhibit a change of costume for Procula: 'The Damned Souls are traditionally the best-dressed in any Cycle play, and for Pilate's wife nothing-but-the-best would be highly appropriate for a bed-chamber encounter with the Devil.'[117] The guild producers, the Tapiters and

[110] Ibid., l. 54.
[111] Ibid., l. 52 and l. 109.
[112] Lynn Squires analyses the way in which fifteenth-century legal conditions are reflected in the N-Town plays, but does not comment on the legal status of women. See Lynn Squires, 'Law and Disorder in *Ludus Coventraie*', *Drama in the Middle Ages*, eds. Clifford Davidson and John Stroupe (New York: AMS, 1982), pp. 272–82.
[113] *York Plays*, pageant XXX, ll. 83–4.
[114] Ibid., l. 103.
[115] Ibid., l. 114 and l. 124.
[116] Lee Jobling, 'The Pilate of the York Mystery Plays', *Words and Wordsmiths*, ed. Geraldine Barnes, (Sydney: The University of Sydney, 1989), p. 54.
[117] Martial Rose, 'The Staging of the Hegge Plays', *Medieval Drama*, ed. Neville Denny. Stratford-upon-Avon Studies, no. 16 (London: Edward Arnold, 1973), p. 198.

Couchers, also had an opportunity to show off their wares: the chamber contains 'a bedde arayed of þe best'.[118]

Satan's appearance to Procula throws her character into further disrepute, but ironically also provides her with the opportunity to challenge her husband's (and the state's) authority. The York dramatist seizes the opportunity to emphasise Procula's lewdness and vanity. While Procula sleeps, Satan visits her and attacks her greatest vice – her vanity.

> Youre striffe and youre strenghe schal be stroyed,
> Youre richesse schal be reft you þat is rude,
> With vengeaunce,[119]

Satan perceives in Procula a weakness comparable with Eve's: she can easily be influenced. As Woolf notes, 'The York dramatist obviously had in mind the parallelism between Eve and Procula.'[120] As Procula wakens she senses Satan's visitation:

> With tene and with trayne was I trapped,
> With a sweuene þat swiftely me swapped.[121]

Her encounter with Satan has sexual overtones. Procula experiences the dream while she is naked in bed and is 'swapped' or overcome by the vision: in other words she loses or abandons herself to him. In bed Procula is 'open' and vulnerable: she can easily be seduced into believing Satan's vision.

The dramatist uses the final moments of this scene to demonstrate that Procula's power is less than that of her male child. Procula asks her son to deliver the message of her dream to Pilate. Twice he objects that he must travel early in the morning, and he questions his mother's power.[122] The lack of authority which Procula commands reflects her earlier encounter with the Beadle. As a woman, she is unable to exert power over courtiers and, in this case, her son.

The N-Town version of this pageant utilises a different dramatic structure to present Procula. The preamble that serves to introduce the audience to the character of Dame Procula and establish the relationship with her husband is omitted. The first glimpse the audience receives is of Dame Procula lying in her nightclothes. From the start she is presented as debauched and vulnerable. The preface to the dream is the appearance of Satan. Disguised in a white sheet, he confesses to the audience that he is afraid Christ will undermine his power in Hell after the crucifixion.[123] According to Woolf, 'this episode is awkwardly treated'.[124] She finds it has insufficient dramatic motivation. Indeed, the playing of this moment on stage requires the audience to accept the device of Satan's disguise and silent counsel.

In the N-Town pageant Pilate also thinks better than to believe his wife's warning. He rather patronisingly declares:

[118] *York Plays*, pageant XXX, l. 155.
[119] Ibid., ll. 173–75.
[120] Woolf, *English Mystery Plays*, p. 245.
[121] *York*, pageant XXX, ll. 187–88.
[122] Ibid., ll. 180–95.
[123] *N-Town Plays*, pageant XXXI, ll. 33–7.
[124] Woolf, *English Mystery Plays*, p. 244.

> 3oure cowncel is good, and evyr hath be.
> Nowe to 3oure chawmer 3e do sewe.[125]

and dismisses her back to her private chamber. Of course salvation history acquits Procula, and an audience would be aware of this paradox.

Dame Procula reflects the demands made on medieval aristocratic women to be obedient, maintain a private rather than public role and not speak their minds. Procula's significance is in her rebellious attempt to affect state matters by influencing her husband. Procula is an unsympathetic character because of her status and lewdness. She flirts with her husband and is seduced by Satan. Procula's vanity and pride probably undermined audience sympathy for her.

It is clear that Dame Procula fails to behave in the manner that was advised by conduct manuals. From her first moment on stage in the York pageant, Procula brags about her 'countenaunce so comly and clere'.[126] She wears lavish clothing and displays vanity: 'All welle of all womanhede I am, wittie and wise.'[127] She drinks alcohol with her husband and flaunts her sexuality. Pilate admits that his wife 'In bedde is full buhome and bayne.'[128] Procula's behaviour falls short of that advised by the conduct manuals, which promote moderation and humility.

In the York pageant Procula is unwilling to return to her domestic quarters, and has poor standing with the Beadle and her son.[129] Again, her behaviour does not follow that advised by conduct books. The *Good Wife* stresses that women should play an active role in the household, and be willing to stay at home and enjoy their work, and that they meekly answer their husband.[130]

Procula's dream itself disobeys ideals of good behaviour. Her dream is experienced while she lies in bed, which hints at idleness; a quality of which the treatise writers disapprove. Although salvation history vindicates Procula, the public expression of her dream goes against the advice that women should be 'lytill of language'.[131]

It could be argued that Procula does undertake aspects of the wifely behaviour that Christine de Pisan advocated. She attempts to fulfil the role of the intercessory wife. Through her dream she finds a voice and tries to spare the life of Christ. But Procula's reverie leads her to attempt to save Christ's life for the wrong reasons. She is tempted by Satan's threat to her wealth and seduced by his flattery. Ultimately her dream is one of deception. As Clopper points out, the dream also reflects badly upon Pilate: '(it) presents Pilate's dependence on his wife in a bad light at the same time that it makes the ironic point that the dream revealed the truth.'[132] But was Procula's action in speaking out for herself and attempting to influence her husband one which the medieval women spectators could admire?

From the outset of the York pageant, the audience would have scant sympathy for Procula. Her pride, vanity and wealth provide little with which the largely artisan

[125] *N-Town Plays*, pageant XXXI, ll. 75–6.
[126] *York Plays*, pageant XXX, l. 40.
[127] Ibid., l. 30.
[128] Ibid., l. 52.
[129] Ibid., l. 124.
[130] *Good Wife*, l. 79 and l. 37.
[131] *Thewis of a Gud Woman*, l. 14.
[132] Lawrence Clopper, 'Tyrants and Villains: Characterisation in the Passion Sequence of the English Cycle Plays', *MLQ* 41 (1980), p. 14.

medieval audience could identify. That she is shown in disarrayed night-clothing in bed does little to grant her respect.

However, Procula's presentation demonstrates a number of rebellions. She is an unruly wife who refuses to accept her limited position. Dame Procula's actions do fit within the definition of feminism that I cited in the Introduction – that is, the refusal to accept insults and contempt in silence, and in speaking her dream Procula achieves a type of feminist rebellion.[133] Procula refuses to be silenced and confined to her chamber.

But despite these rebellious actions, Procula is not an attractive role model for transgressive behaviour. The Pilates represent 'the fallen world of the spectator' and we, therefore, laugh when we recognise it.[134] However, the audience would not have indiscriminately identified with every fallen and flawed character, and I doubt that the artisan audience would recognise much in the aristocratic behaviour of the Pilates. As Coote points out, when we see the pageant, 'We hear the proud, gluttonous and lascivious worldly prince, his arrogant wife and her obnoxious son.'[135] It is this behaviour which medieval audiences would find alienating and unattractive.

Despite Procula's breaking of silence and her portrait as a woman who is 'on top', she is an unsympathetic character. Vanity and greed motivate her action. I have argued that there may have been no concept of women as a separate and homogeneous group in medieval times. Dame Procula reminds us of this point. She shows that at times the distinction between social rank and moral behaviour mattered more than that of gender difference. As a silenced wife Procula is able to find a voice through her rebellion. But her words, despite their truth, fall upon deaf ears.

WOMEN AND SUBVERSION

The representation of the cycle women is one which subverts many of the expected values of women's behaviour. The Virgin is an ambivalent figure. She is shown as an influential holy icon, but is also humanised in order to test certain medieval values which I have outlined above, namely, gender experience within marriage and male-based institutions. Many of the other women, such as Mrs Noah, Gyll and the Mothers of the Innocents demonstrate rebellious behaviour, but are presented by the male dramatist as comic figures.

It is difficult to determine what impact the rebellious women, whose actions I have outlined above, had upon the Corpus Christi cycles' audiences. As Theresa Coletti surmises:

> The social aims of the festive inversions of the unruly women are often disputed: some evidence suggests both that they widened the options for women and critiqued existing familial and social orders and that they afforded only a temporary carnivalesque release from values already in place.[136]

[133] Gottlieb, 'The Problem of Feminism', p. 346.
[134] A.K. Nitecki, 'The Dramatic Impact of the Didactic Voice in the York Cycle of Mystery Plays', *Annuale Mediaevale* XXI (1981), p. 72.
[135] Coote, *English Literature of the Middle Ages*, p. 318.
[136] Coletti, 'A Feminist Approach', p. 82.

The comedy of the riotous women sometimes touches on sensitive issues; the treatment of the Chester ale-wife seems in keeping with the guild and town's fears about women brewers. Is the release that the unruly women offer only temporary and, therefore, confined within the margins of drama rather than expanded into 'reality'? Perhaps the unruly women are only important for what they reveal about medieval civic and church authority. As Coletti remarks: 'I question what medieval dramatic representations of women may indicate about the larger context of the institutional religion in which the drama was situated.'[137]

However, there is another interpretation that can be reached. Natalie Zemon Davies argues that the 'women on top' device was not only used to keep women down, but that it 'also helped change them into something different'.[138] To glimpse women in power outside the family and social unit provided a glimpse of 'unrealized possibilities' for the women spectators. Mrs Noah's rebellion offered a commentary on the closing economic and occupational options for medieval women and Dame Procula fought against the silence imposed upon medieval ladies.

The women of the cycle dramas demonstrate an important intersection between holy and vulgar values. The holy figures of the Virgin and Magdalene, and the vulgar 'rebellious' women form an important community within the cycles. It is a community that is further complicated by the issues that have been outlined in the first section of this book. Men always enacted the women characters.

The representation of gender within medieval drama is a complex issue. The emerging evidence is frequently contradictory. Women's participation within drama often encompassed invisible tasks and held little status. The performance of the mystery plays that processed around the masculine institutions of the city centre similarly negated women's involvement. In many aspects women's limited participation reflected the careful control of the hegemonic and masculine institutions responsible for the means of production. However, there were odd glimpses of women's involvement to be found, namely their support of the pageant silver, and records which indicate that Lady Lambe *might* have served as pageant master had she not requested otherwise.

In contrast, the representation of gender within the extant texts do lend themselves to an oppositional reading which can be fruitful. The dramatists worked carefully to make the women characters accessible. Although it is difficult to tell *how* the male actors performed the roles, there are many examples of how women characters might have tested the boundaries of expectations. The Virgin's portrayal is often very humanised; Magdalene is able to combine a role of sexuality and powerful oratory. Through placing the characters alongside social, historical and cultural sources it is apparent that these figures often performed a subversive role amongst the dramas. For women spectators, doubtless the portrayal of gender within medieval drama offered a complex model through which to view medieval gender relations.

[137] Ibid., p. 81.
[138] Davies, 'Women on Top', p. 183.

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