

LITERATURE

OF PEOPLE AND PLACES: URBAN GENDERING IN THE ENGLISH PLAYS

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines interconnections between gender and the civic landscape in the flood pageants in the English mystery plays (York, Towneley, N-Town and Chester). The marital conflict between Noah and his wife is discussed in the context of the urban physical and spiritual world that provides a double backdrop for the play. The geometry of human sin and divine insight is analysed and textile references are investigated to reveal the spatial and professional affiliation of the characters. The silent potential of the urban setting that enriches the theatrical power of the plays and transforms the events presented on stage into a medieval interactive game between the actors and the audience is discussed.

Medieval mystery plays are perhaps some of the most impressive products of the collective civic effort. Not only were they inscribed in the spirit of city life thus making the medieval metropolis the background of events but the progress of action also mapped the topography of the place of performance, thereby elevating the urban backdrop to the role of one of the characters. Firmly grounded in the traditions and practices of medieval city life, the cycles owed much to pageantry which fondly exploited the potential contained in the visual and verbal dialogue between ordinary citizens and figures of authority. On the other hand, the tragic as well as the comic power of the mysteries often relied on the nuances of everyday life, internal workings of contemporaneous hierarchies and the contrasts between what lay within the city walls and the expanse beyond them.

It is the context of the city, either directly invoked or latently acknowledged in the cycles, and its relationship with the construction of gendered organisation as presented in the English mystery plays (York, Towneley, N-Town and Chester) that will be examined in this paper. The story of Noah and his wife will be used to discuss gender roles and the mechanism of control projected onto the

urban landscape. Finally, it will be argued that gendering of the characters is also conditioned by medieval staging conventions where female roles were performed by male actors.

The story of the flood survives in four English mysteries, York, Towneley, Chester and N-Town.¹ The pageant dramatises the scriptural event recounted in the book of Genesis, chapters 6-9. Noah's wife is mentioned only in passing in chapter 7 as one of the persons who board the ark together with other creation:

In articulo diei illius ingressus est Noë, et Sem, et Cham, et Japheth filii ejus; uxor illius, et tres uxores filiorum ejus cum eis in arcam

(Genesis 7: 13)²

[In the selfsame day Noe, and Sem, and Cham, and Japheth, his sons: his wife, and the three wives of his sons with them, went into the ark].³

However, this brief and casual reference to the patriarch's wife is reshaped and developed into a full-length story in the cycles. The York, Towneley and Chester plays seem to have followed a popular medieval tradition, both oral and visual, of a ferocious and aggressive woman who rebels against her usually quiet and acquiescent husband only to be brought back into the fold upon learning a proper moral and spiritual lesson. The N-Town cycle, on the other hand, adheres to its typically more hieratic representation of women and avoids the issue of both individual disobedience and social control by leaving out the scene of marital discord altogether.

The eruption of the conflict between the spouses is in the cycles invariably triggered off by the wife's reluctance to board the ark that Noah has just erected on God's orders and according to his instructions. In the Chester plays, for instance, after the initial pledge to contribute towards its construction when she offers to bring some timber:

And wee shall bringe tyMBER to,
for wee mon nothinge ells doe

(3.65-66),⁴

¹ The biblical narrative of the patriarch is also dramatised in the Shipwrights' fragments from Newcastle and the Cornish Ordinalia. For the purposes of this essay, however, I will focus on the cycle plays that were prepared and performed by local guilds.

² The quotations from the book of Genesis will be taken from the Latin Vulgate available at <http://vulsearch.sf.net/html>.

³ The English quotations from the book of Genesis will be taken from the Douay-Rheims version of the Bible available at http://www.gutenberg.org/catalog/world/readfile?pageno=24&fk_files=37779.

⁴ The quotations from the Chester plays will be taken from Lumiansky and Mills' edition (1986) and numbers of the lines refer to this edition.

Mrs Noah suddenly changes her mind and refuses to obey her husband:

In fayth, Noe, I had as leeve thou slepte.
For all thy Frenyshe fare,
I will not doe after thy reade

(3.99-101).

Her surprising lack of co-operation slows down the boarding, provokes Noah's complaints and angers the impatient sons, who offer to bring their mother into the ark. The woman, however, persistently announces that she will not join her family unless her friends are saved from the flood:

They shall not drowne, by sayncte John,
And I may save there life

(3.203-204).

She is similarly protective of her friends in the York plays. When her hopes for a collective survival are dashed by Noah, who does not agree to take "commodrys" and "cosynes" (9.143)⁵ on board, *Uxor* sorrowfully laments:

My frendis þat I fra yoode
Are ouere flowen with floode

(9.151-152).

The actual conflict, however, is not that of either simple defiance to comply with the instructions or nostalgic resistance to leave one's circle of friends behind. It reveals the rift between the characters' insight into the event and punctuates the spiritual movement of the scene. The contention seems to rely on the opposition between the extent of Noah's divinely imparted knowledge and the myopic complacency of his wife. *Uxor* operates within the bounds of what is local and familiar, a bond that is strengthened by the wife's concern for her gossips whom she is unwilling to abandon. Noah's wife is rooted in the place she finds familiar and categorically reiterates her identity through a sense of belonging to an earthly place. The familiarity of what is known within the city and the value of immediately perceivable experience outweigh the fear of the flood while the importance of *Uxor*'s urban *gynaecium* of sorts exceeds that of the heavenly message received through her husband.

Mrs Noah's connection with other women in the town, however, is not based exclusively on sheer compassion. This ostensibly generous and selfless interest is permeated by her desire to engage in the worldly pleasures symbolised by

⁵ The quotations from the York plays will be taken from Beadle's (1982) edition and numbers of the lines refer to this edition.

city life. In the Chester cycle, she hesitates to leave what the town represents to her: revels, joy and entertainment as revealed by the gossip's song that is designed to encourage Mrs Noah to stay behind:

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

(3.229-232).

It is therefore not only their company that she will miss, or at least not primarily, but, as the song implies, their debaucheries. The gossips provide an example of those who, as God worries in the opening lines of the pageant,

... in deede and thought
Are sett fowle in sinne

(3.3-4),

while their activities represent the ubiquity and perseverance of vice that Noah hopes to escape from by leaving the town and which his wife seems to be attracted to and to embody.

Female greed and corruption is further emphasised in Chester in the pageant of the Harrowing of Hell. When Christ successfully completes his redemptive mission, Satan is allowed to keep the soul of an alewife. The woman, who,

... was a taverner,
a gentle gossippe and a tapster
of wyne and ale a trustie bruer

(17.285-287)

despairs of her perpetual damnation. As Elizabeth Fowler argues, the soul's gender is not immaterial (1999: 119). She is wooed by the devils in a seemingly courtly manner, and the "dere daughter" (17.325), "sweete ladye" (17.329) and "deare darlinge" (17.333) is proposed by one on them. The truly hellish matrimony symbolises the ultimate punishment for the alewife's wrongdoings. Uncontrolled and avaricious during her life, the brewer's soul will be made to feast in endless pain. Her sin, however, is not only that of personal or moral dimension; her financial machinations are also of public rank as they go against the grain of social organisation (Fowler 1999: 119). The woman's greed breaks the rules of public order and is construed as a sin against the harmony of the community. Mrs Noah appears to be similarly incontinent both in speech and action. The escape from the endangered town loses momentum because of her stubborn disobedience which jeopardises Noah's effort to save the world. She diverts her

husband's attention from the divine plan and acts like a tempting devil that confuses Noah, causing his doubts, and wishes to capture control over human souls. Her dogged defiance undermines the cornerstones of familial, urban and religious life. It is a sign of subversive violation of an organised system that relies on strict hierarchies of male authority and female submission.

Noah's wife's loyalty to a place and to other women establishes an imaginary borderline between what is in and what is out in this orderly arrangement of obedience. The women are, as the playwrights imply, outside the knowledge imparted by God. Noah, on the other hand, partakes of divine wisdom by having been given both insight and skills by the Lord. The urban area clearly defined by the city walls lulls its heedless residents into a false sense of security while, in fact, it signifies spiritual impotence. In keeping with the medieval belief in the enlightening power of peregrination, departure from the city in its current, earthly shape allows for a moment of reflection and encourages conversion.

In both the Chester cycle and the York plays, the division into the insider's and the outsider's sense of identification is emphasised by the insistence on the ark's enclosure that, like a temple or monastery, protects its occupants. In the York pageant, *Uxor* promises to march off "to towne" (9.81) and declares that she "will go home agayne" (9.92) when her husband announces his plan and her sons attempt to force her into the ark. She resolutely points out that she will not "leue þe harde lande" (9.77) and proceeds to fight her husband and her sons defiantly. This organisation of spatial attachment and displacement is strengthened by the use of prepositions of place, in and out. The wife scares away the sons, who attempt to seize her, and in doing so she exclaims "owte", accompanied by "herrowe!" (9.99). The interjection strengthens a sense of limits and limitations. Similarly, Mrs Noah repeats throughout the pageant in Chester that she is "withowten" while Noah and his sons insist that she should be brought "in" or led "into" the boat.

The ark and the city constitute contrary spaces. The vessel is safe in its simplest, physical sense as it provides shelter from the floodwaters. Its enclosed, finite space stands in opposition to the vulnerability of the city open from above and susceptible to the elements. However, the ark's protection is not only literal; it is mostly spiritual. It is a place of refuge from the sins of urban life and its temptations. Like a temple of modest purity and chaste devotion, it is here that original happiness structured along obedience, not violated by lapsarian transgression, prevails, and the ark becomes a spatial expression of the covenant with God thus safeguarding what is inside it from all sides. The precision of the instruction received by Noah for the construction of the ark reinforces the stability of the vessel and guarantees the success of the second act of creation. The task of making the world once again (Beckwith 1994: 258) will come to fruition when life is born again from the womb-like structure of Noah's boat.

While religious and social meanings in the pageant are constructed with reference to spatial relations and geometric axes of meaning, the interconnection between gender and the urban setting is also revealed through the activity in which *Uxor* is engaged in the dispute between Noah and his wife. Frequent references to spinning as well as clothes or clothing are important localising metaphors that linchpin meanings in the flood pageants in the cycles. In the Towneley plays, for instance, *Uxor* describes her husband as being dressed in “Stafford blew” (3.290),⁶ that is a blue cloth that also signifies bruises he will receive in their fight, and wishes to “tye up thi hose!” (3.325) when she kicks him. Equipped with a reel (3.430) and a distaff (3.490), she focuses on her spinning and ignores Noah’s commands to enter the ark.

Obviously, spinning features prominently in many time-honoured tropes that make a connection between women and textile processes or products from ancient myths to modern fairy tales. It is used in the cycles as a clear narrative and typological device that places Mrs Noah on the religious continuum between the post-lapsarian punishment of Eve and Mary’s salvific enrobing of her son’s body. However, it also reveals the economic and social context of women’s work in a medieval town. Professional activities of weaving and spinning seem to define the spatial affiliation of the characters and influence their gender positioning. Cloth-production was a common female occupation (McCarthy 2004: 132) and women became efficient producers of woven goods of all types in the later Middle Ages (Trigg 2002: 474). Late 15th-century records from Lincoln, for instance, specify that “if any woman that has a husband follow any craft within the city in which her husband is not involved, she shall be charged as a sole woman in respect of such matters as pertain to her craft” (Goldberg 1995: 196). Female weavers and spinners became taxpayers, economically and financially able to contribute to the urban community both in England and on the continent.

English women of the upper class involved in these trades, especially silk-weavers, an occupation reserved for higher social strata because of the uniqueness and fineness of the fabric, formed a group strong enough to petition the parliament and London authorities against foreign traders (Trigg 2002: 471). As Shulamith Shahar (1983: 193) reports, they asked

Parliament to pass a law forbidding the import of partly or fully processed silk goods into England. They stated in their request that this occupation had provided an honourable livelihood for many women who handed on their skills to others, and now some thousands of women were learning the trade.

⁶ The quotations from the Towneley plays will be taken from Stevens and Cawley’s edition (1994) and numbers of the lines refer to this edition.

Therefore spinning also becomes a topographic gender metaphor, one that is used to identify a woman not only typologically or symbolically but also through her professional interests, rights and obligations. However, great beauty and profitability associated with the fine art of weaving glorified by Christine de Pizan in *The book of the city of ladies* (1983: 83) is reversed in the dramatisation of the biblical episode in the cycles. God is honoured and served not by Mrs Noah's weaving and the products of it but by her husband's manual skills bestowed on him by the Lord. This reversal of skills and their effectiveness is ironically commented upon by Noah in the Towneley play when, enlightened by God, he tells his wife that "there is other yarn on the reel" (3.430).

The subversion of Mrs Noah's spinning and the battle between husband and wife may, however, be not only an expression of medieval misogyny but also a sign of professional tensions. While silk-weaving gentlewomen in London could afford to protect their trade against foreign influences, ordinary townswomen may have fallen victim to a declining market. For instance, mid-15th century ordinances from Shrewsbury try to respond to falling employment opportunities by laying down provisions limiting the period of professional occupation of recently widowed women:

Also that no woman shall occupy the craft of weaving after the death of her husband except for one quarter of the year, within which time it shall be lawful for her to work out her stuff that remains with her unworked, so that she be ruled and governed by the wardens and stewards of the said craft during the said terms as for the good rule of the said craft

(Goldberg 1995: 204).

Similarly, Bristol ordinances from 1461 bar new women from entering the trade of weaving:

No person of the said craft of weavers within the said town of Bristol from this day forward set, put, or engage his wife, daughter, or maid to any such occupation of weaving at the loom with himself or with any other person of the said craft

(1995: 205).

In her revision of wages received by women in agriculture in England after the Black Death, Sandy Bardsley notices that although gender was not the only factor important for the status of the payment, "it was a significant and enduring determinant" (1999: 23). Therefore, the contention in the flood pageant may be interpreted not only as a story of a gendered spiritual journey or a misogynist piece of comic relief but also as an insight into clashes between men and women in a transforming economy when social roles are being redefined.

The spinning metaphor additionally emphasises the spatial division between men and women and brings out the rebellious behaviour of *Uxor*. Weaving or

spinning are basically indoor activities. As Trigg points out, the usual association is that between women doing the needle work and an enclosed space (2002: 479) while architectural designs and physical boundaries of walls and gardens serve to hide the female body in the civic landscape (Gilchrist 1994: 58). This spatial organisation is challenged in the pageants. By venturing out and brazenly flaunting her spindle in the open, Mrs Noah transgresses the conventional division of space with its gendered allocations. She goes beyond the safe environs of the home and refuses to remain within the enclosure of the private while the ostentatious display of the attributes of the trade contradicts subjection to men.

This subversion of architectural designs is reinforced by *Uxor* in Towneley as she is encouraged by one of her daughters-in-law to continue spinning inside the ark:

3 *Mulier*. If ye like ye may spin,
Moder, in the ship

(3.521-2).

She persistently refuses to do so and guards the place of her choice. Determined in her actions, she promises to stay outside and to continue weaving:

I will not, for thi bydyng,
Go from doore to mydyng

(3.543-4).

This initiates a dynamic tug-of-war between the spouses. Mrs Noah protects her place with a spindle, brandishing it like an anachronistic Don Quixote, passionate but unsuccessful. By doing so she also becomes a fixed point in space that contradicts the idea of pilgrimage and, thus, spiritual cleansing and illumination. She is unable to move and becomes a comic travesty of a medieval knight who, although able to display his weapons efficiently, cannot set off on a voyage of discovery and enlightenment. Her spatial ineffectiveness opposes her husband's artful skills at carpentry and the successful completion of the boat. She is coaxed into submissiveness both by the physical fight that they engage in and the spiritual triumph over her earthly and human short-sightedness by divine providence represented by her husband. This is further symbolised by the dove that Noah releases into the skies while he himself opens his arms wide, very much like the crucified Christ, whose stretched body connects heaven and earth along the vertical line but who dies on the cross for the sins of the horizontal line, that is the world of human corruption. Noah's wife's attachment to her town disrupts the neat vertical organisation of the divine in the scene and confirms the sinful, corruptive influence of the physical world.

Mrs Noah's flamboyance and independence in the three mysteries contrast with her humble submission in the N-Town cycle. The riotous exchange be-

tween the spouses is eliminated from the N-Town cycle in keeping with the continental sources and exemplars of the play (Woolf 1972: 133). The pageant refuses to indulge in the stereotypical contention between a hen-pecked husband and his belligerent wife, and *Uxor* obediently states that she will gladly follow her husband into the ark. Her compliance is also based on her observance of the roles traditionally ascribed to individuals in an organised society:

I am ȝoure wyff, ȝoure childeryn þese be.
 Onto us tweyn it doth longe
 Hem to teche in all degré
 Synne to forsakyn, and werkys wronge

(4.40-43).⁷

Interestingly, specific instructions and the exact dimensions of the ark that are symbolic of God's creation are, in contrast to the other cycle plays, omitted in this pageant. Therefore they also function as a gender metaphor that sets apart Noah's divinely imparted skills and his wife's handiwork. Their absence brings the two spouses together and positions them on a similar level of spiritual insight, with the wife ready to please both the heavenly Lord and her earthly husband.

Obedience is in the cycle repeatedly dramatised through either kneeling or lying down in prayer as a visual sign of humility and subordination. In the pageant of Joachim and Anna, the Virgin's mother drops down on her knees and crawls to greet her husband, who returns from his self-imposed exile,

...myn husbond I se.
 I xalle on myn knes and to hymward crepe

(8.237-8).

The prostrate position contradicts the usual pictorial presentation of the clean kiss at the Golden Gate and emphasises the hierarchies of importance in the play. Subsequently, Anna admonishes her husband to go "homward" (8.250) and "ryth hom" (8.251) as if the presence in the undefined territory between the revelatory quality of the exile and the safety of home could result in contamination.

These female figures remain predictably monolithic and generic in the universality and exemplariness of their virtues. Their devout meekness and enthusiastic devotion are typical of the portrayal of women in the N-Town cycle. While it may be argued that by doing away with the humorous antics, Mrs Noah seems to be spared the additional humiliation of the taming when order is rein-

⁷ The quotations from the N-Town plays will be taken from Spector's edition (1991) and numbers of the lines refer to this edition.

stated (Andrew 1995: 118), her compliance reinforces the necessity for hierarchical obedience and gendered submission that reflects the supposed order of God's creation. Furthermore, the opposition between the solemn spirituality of male figures and either the docile subordination of pious female characters, as in the N-Town cycle, or their ferocious unruliness, as in the other cycles, exposes the impossibility of eschewing simple dichotomies by medieval authors and a persistent assignation of pre-defined roles to both men and women.

One more player requires consideration in the interpretation of the pageants discussed here: the audience. A fervent civic endeavour that was both an exercise in collective effort and inside rivalry, mystery plays happily exploited the presence of spectators and their immediacy. Therefore, the events presented before them were not only to be watched but their meaning relied on the interplay between the stage and the audience. It may thus be argued that the textile references fondly made by *Uxor* throughout the scene draw attention to the fact that Noah's wife is actually a male actor dressed up in woman's clothes for the purposes of the performance. The insistent disruption of the theatrical practice could just as well guide the audience's gaze to Noah and his "wife" and strengthen the comic force of cross-dressed actors playing the roles of a helpless husband and his recalcitrant wife. Both figures address the audience directly, seeking their support and understanding, and engage them in the interaction. For instance, the Towneley *Uxor* confronts women in the audience, warning them:

We women may wary
All ill husbandys;
I haue oone, bi Mary,
that lowsyd me of my bandys!

(3.300-303).

She attempts to secure interest from the audience and to appeal to their personal experience, be it in an attempt to find women's sympathy for an unhappy wife whose husband is good for nothing or men's contempt for a nagging hag who cannot leave her husband alone. It is the audience's reaction that conditions the interpretative potential of the conflict that unfolds on the multiple levels of meaning in the play.

The criticism directed at Mrs Noah, an unruly, aggressive woman, may be given additional force by the actors' conscious exploitation of the enactment of female roles by men. Depending on the staging, the marital fight may very well turn into a wrestling match between two men who parody a scene of domestic disagreement in an attempt to entertain the audience. This would strengthen a sense of tacit collusion between male actors in the roles of women who are stereotypical objects of male complaints. The perky, theatrical joke inscribed in

the city context could become a vehicle for articulating gender tensions, making the figure of Mrs Noah a means of the expression of a collective masculine sentiment and turning her character into a mirror in which her husband's spiritual grandeur is reflected. Female subordination would thus be enacted doubly on stage and through urban references that connect what is portrayed on stage with real life.

Spatial positioning appears to reveal the nuances of gender meanings in the flood pageants discussed in this paper. Opposing spaces of the city, protected by the walls but open from above and vulnerable, and the enclosed ark that provides comfort by unquestioning obedience are revealed by the language of inclusion and exclusion, of what is accepted and what remains outside. This juxtaposition also serves to highlight the difference between the urban corruptive influence, associated with women's unruly or subversive behaviour, and the spiritual freedom of the floodwaters that are overcome by masculine observance of traditional hierarchies. The two are separated by an open area in which marital and gender roles are fashioned and enacted through references to movement and professional work. By this, the open space of the street in which the play of genders is performed ingeniously becomes that of the play itself, thus transforming the pageant into a self-referential, urban joke whose gender meaning is thrashed out by the interaction between the actors and the audience, emphasising the performativity of drama and gender.

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