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INCARNATION THEOLOGY AND ITS OTHERS: FEMALE EMBODIMENT IN
FOURTEENTH AND FIFTEENTH CENTURY ENGLISH LITERATURE

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Incarnation Theology and Its Others: Female Embodiment in Fourteenth and Fifteenth

Century English Literature

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This dissertation examines the complex interrelations between incarnation theology and notions of the female body across a representative group of later Middle English literary texts. These texts include two dream visions, one Chaucer's *House of Fame*, the product of a London author associated with the royal court, the other, the more provincial *Pearl*; and two dramas, the Marian pageants of the *N-Town* cycle play, and the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*. A number of feminist scholars, including Caroline Bynum and Barbara Newman, have argued that the category of the feminine was crucial to late medieval conceptions of Christ, that the late medieval Christ was often represented as an androgynous or feminized figure, and that such representations created opportunities for particular women to imitate Christ by means of, rather than despite, their female bodies. My dissertation takes this work as its starting point, but my work differs from it by framing the problem as one of poetic representation. The dispersive representational strategies of the drama on the one hand and the intensely visual elaborations of the dream poems on the other consistently complicate any straightforward

theological doctrine. This dissertation argues that even when Christ's body is feminized in these texts, that feminization is usually complicated by other elements of the representation, so that no simple affirmation of female bodies or female authority takes place. Also, Christ's fleshliness and Mary's body are not always presented as meek, nurturant and protective; in my chapter on the *Play of the Sacrament* I argue that these sacred bodies depart from traditional iconography and behave in aggressive and indecorous ways.

In this study, I have drawn upon recent scholarly analyses of the late medieval incarnational aesthetic, anthropological theories of ritual and performance, feminist theories of gender and embodiment, and studies of medieval literary genres, particularly of the dream vision and the Old French fabliau.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----|
| ABSTRACT..... | ii |
| ACKNOWLEDGMENTS..... | iv |
| INTRODUCTION | 1 |
| CHAPTER ONE POWERS OF THE UNMANLY: FEMINIZING CHRISTIAN EPIC IN <i>THE HOUSE OF FAME</i> | 10 |
| CHAPTER TWO CONSUMABLE AUTHORITIES AND PENETRATING VISIONS: CHRIST AND THE MAIDEN IN <i>PEARL</i> | 64 |
| CHAPTER THREE GETTING CONSUBSTANTIAL IN THE <i>CROXTON PLAY OF THE SACRAMENT</i> : DRAMATIZING THE HUNGER AND VOLATILITY OF SACRED CHRISTIAN BODIES.... | 98 |
| CHAPTER FOUR MARY IN THE N-TOWN CYCLE: PERFORMING FEMALE COMMUNITY..... | 132 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY | 176 |
| CURRICULUM VITAE | 185 |

INCARNATION THEOLOGY AND ITS OTHERS: FEMALE EMBODIMENT IN FOURTEENTH AND FIFTEENTH CENTURY ENGLISH LITERATURE

In this dissertation I investigate the ways that incarnation theology is transformed under the pressures of poetic and dramatic representation, and by being articulated in vernacular contexts, in two fourteenth-century English dream-visions, Chaucer's *House of Fame* and the Gawain-poet's *Pearl*, and two fifteenth-century English plays, the *Croxton Play of the Sacrament* and *The N-Town Cycle*. I also examine the complex interactions among various late medieval conceptualizations of Christ's body and of female embodiment.

There is a scholarly consensus that late medieval Christianity foregrounded Christ's fleshliness and vulnerability, focusing upon Christ's infancy and especially upon the Crucifixion. However, debate continues about the extent to which the central symbol of Christ's body actually reflected or encouraged a unified Christian social body. In a highly influential essay, Mervyn James suggests that the Corpus Christi processions in late medieval England provided a myth of social wholeness in the face of deep divisions created by social and occupational hierarchies. Miri Rubin, Sarah Beckwith, and David Aers, among others, have also emphasized more heterogeneity and conflict than social cohesion in late medieval English culture.

Scholars continue to debate the extent to which Christ's increasing fleshliness undermined Augustinian (and Aristotelian) gender binaries which associated the spirit with man and the flesh with woman. While Caroline Walker Bynum has argued that late medieval Eucharistic piety often invoked a feminized Christ, and thus enabled pious women to identify with Christ as nurturers and sufferers, scholars such as David Aers,

Lynn Staley and Ruth Evans have contended that late medieval “feminizations” of Christ may have served the interests of the clergy more than those of lay female mystics. Aers notes, “the dominant figurations of Christ’s body, including its alleged ‘feminization,’ were *made* dominant, *constituted* as dominant, *maintained* as dominant... we will both be encouraged and enabled to ask whether ‘feminizing’ the tortured body of Christ as material, for instance, may not actually reinforce some basic premises and fantasies in traditional patriarchal constitutions of ‘women.’ ” In my first three chapters, I argue that even when Christ is feminized in these texts, that feminization is usually complicated by other codes so that no simple valorization of the female body takes place; conversely, in my final chapter on N-Town, my findings overlap more with Bynum’s claims.

Although the presence of the Virgin Mary, of female saints and mystics, and of numerous female allegorical figures (Sapientia, Natura, Lady Philosophy, etc.) complicate the notion of a purely masculinist medieval religious imagination, there is no denying the persistence of a richly elaborated antifeminist tradition, stretching back beyond the early church fathers to Aristotle, which associates the feminine not only with the flesh, the bodily appetites and with artifice, but also with verbal transgressions of all kinds: with garrulity, complaints, quarrels, gossip, and deceit. Elizabeth Robertson, in discussing the *Ancrene Wisse*, a manual intended for religious women, notes that even anchoresses were perceived as daughters of Eve, “inescapably rooted in their bodies,” bodies which were permeable, susceptible to demonic influences, and which thus required enclosure. In my chapter on Chaucer’s *House of Fame*, I found that Chaucer was able to make a mischievous affirmation of vernacular literature and of female bodies, fashioned from what would seem to be the most insultingly antifeminist cultural

resources. In contrast, *Pearl* reverses many of these antifeminist stereotypes, and yet, I argue, the Maiden's dazzling embodiment ultimately detracts from her influence as a celestial guide.

As will be seen in the chapters that follow, female embodiment could take the form of the carnivalesque body, the body-in-process (even sacred female bodies could be presented in this way) or else symbolic efforts were made to present a transparent, pure female body whose permeability was safely contained or sealed off. In the two plays that I examine, the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* and the *N-Town* cycle, female bodies, or props that metaphorically represent female bodies, tend toward the carnivalesque, and are convulsively in-process; in the *House of Fame*, I argue that the allegorical buildings of the poem often behave like carnivalesque female bodies, but they are also metaphorically linked to the most revered cultural symbols—to Christ's crucified body and to the New Jerusalem. In *Pearl*, the Maiden's body conforms more to the sealed and impermeable ideal of female purity, while the bodies and demeanors of the Lamb and of the Jeweller are presented respectively as sacred and profane versions of masculine flow.

In my first chapter, **"Powers of the Unmanly: Feminizing Christian Epic in *The House of Fame*,"** I examine the range of representations of women in Chaucer's *House of Fame*, and I also demonstrate that Chaucer displaces female incarnation and putative "feminine" attributes onto the allegorical buildings and topographies of the poem. I then argue that the topography of the House of Rumor, in its unruliness and its perforatedness, its disorderly permeability, even its "jangles" (garrulity), is allied with misogynist constructions of the feminine body, particularly the peasant female body. 'Domus

Dedaly' is but one of several places in the poem that presents medieval constructs of the feminine: there is also the bizarre hybrid figure of Lady Fame, partly derived from the beast of the Apocalypse and partly from Boethius' lady Philosophy; and there is the embedded story of Dido. In particular, I look at the ways that Chaucer's use of misogynist commonplaces deflates and inverts the paideic epic tradition and Dante. While incarnation theology plays no direct role in the *House of Fame*, the steady parody of Dante's *Divine Comedy* implies a juxtaposition of feminized disorder in Chaucer's poem with Dante's movement toward order, luminosity and hierarchy.

I argue that while *The House of Fame* is not explicitly concerned with incarnation theology, it plays with the notion of "the Word made flesh" by connecting language with female embodiment and with the unstable concreteness of architectures that behave like female bodies, as understood within the late medieval imaginary, and especially within fabliau discourse. Finally, I suggest that in Book III, the poem itself takes on the attributes of the fabliau female body—the poem's rhetorical strategies increasingly mime disorderliness and a literal lack of subordination among its elements.

In the second chapter of my dissertation, "**Consumable Authorities and Penetrating Visions: Christ and the Maiden in *Pearl*,**" I begin by discussing the multiplicity of roles at play between the dreamer and his guide, a multiplicity that becomes impossibly layered as the poem progresses, and which has tantalized many readers with a desire to decode the exact nature of the Jeweller's relationship to the pearl and thus to define the nature of his loss. I propose that in *Pearl*, the Jeweller's ocular ravishment and ocular hunger can best be understood in terms of the medieval theory of

intromission, that is, the notion that the image, not the eye, sent forth rays to create vision—the idea that the image penetrates the receiving eye.

I argue that although the Maiden does have a privileged contact with Christ, and although her eloquence, counsel and knowledge of Scripture are endorsed by the poem, her iconic power ultimately works against her verbal authority, and the logic of intromission suggests that the Maiden's power as a sight is partly responsible for the Jeweller's fixation upon her and his distraction from Christ at the conclusion of the poem.

I also explore the ways that, at the level of imagery and symbolism, *Pearl* inverts the misogynist topos of women as porous, susceptible, and liquid. The seamless, armored body of the Pearl counters this tradition, while both Christ and the Jeweller are represented as different forms of masculine flow. Figured as the Lamb, *Pearl's* Christ is paradoxically a body-in-process, His wound perpetually flowing, yet also completed and tranquil. While Christ's Eucharistic flowing is presented as a generous gushing forth, the Jeweller's masculine flow is unruly and self-centered. The Jeweller's pain and emotional excess is likened to an overflowing well. The Jeweller is alternately inundated by the sights he sees, losing his internal boundaries, or driven by his wild desires to transgress the boundary that separates him from the perfected souls in heaven.

In my third chapter, **“Getting Consubstantial in the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*: Dramatizing the Hunger and Volatility of Sacred Christian Bodies,”** I argue that the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* weaves its anti-Judaism together with the paradox of Eucharistic consumption: in swallowing the body of Christ, the body of Christ swallows its consumer. While the wafer's form was often understood as yet

another sign of Christ's humility, in making Himself small and allowing Himself to be consumed, the wafer in Croxton becomes aggressive. In Croxton, the containment and conversion of the Jews becomes a spectacle for consumption by the Christian audience. The awful "joke" of the Croxton play is that while no one can finally swallow or contain Christ, Christ (and the Christian social body) remains implacably incorporative, swallowing, containing and digesting all dissenters. In contrast to more optimistic readings, I see the play as emphasizing the aggressive appetite of the Christian merchant Aristorius, of Christ Himself as the militant, sticky wafer, and of the Christian social body.

One of the issues I explore in Croxton is the motif of punitive incorporation, or what Jeffrey Jerome Cohen has described as "the narrative arc of punished flesh melded to sacred objects." I discuss the Croxton *Play* in the context of other instances of punitive melding to the sacred, including Gerald of Wales' *Journey Through Wales*, Robert Mannyng's "The Dancers of Colbek," and the sinners frozen in the ice in the lowest realms of *Dante's Inferno*.

I hope to demonstrate that Mary's body also appears in this seemingly womanless play, and that her presence is as strangely domineering as that of the Host. In addition to demonstrating the power of the Eucharist, the exploding bloody oven in the Croxton play evokes misogynist medieval understandings of the female body as disorderly and grotesque. Croxton's climactic, sanguinary moment of conversion draws not only upon host-desecration lore but upon the tradition of Marian miracles; I argue that Mary is permitted a subordinated but explosive role in this play, since her womb was popularly understood as the oven that baked the eucharistic bread of Christ. This miracle

exaggerates all of the goriest elements of childbirth, those elements that are denied by representations of the Nativity and of Mary's perpetually clean and virginal body. If we "read" Croxton's oven as Mary, this particular version of Mary is not enacting the purity and gracious, protective maternity that depends upon notions of Jewish pollution or dirt for its articulation. Instead, here Mary's indecorous carnality counters Jewish unruly carnality. The fact that Mary never appears explicitly in the play's blood-and-thunder climax also means that she does not compete, dramatically or politically, with either Christ or with the figure of the Bishop, in appropriating the energies stirred up by the miracle.

In my fourth chapter, **"Mary in the N-Town Cycle: Performing Female Community,"** I look at N-Town's representation of Mary supported by a community of pious women. In this chapter I argue that N-Town dramatizes and critiques the social anxiety, mostly male and clerical, surrounding female sexuality and fecundity. I also suggest that several of N-Town's pageants, particularly the "Visit to Elizabeth" and the "Crucifixion", rely upon the staging of female community as the main means of insisting upon the audience's emotional involvement in the dramatic action. In the "Crucifixion" pageant, Christ reproaches Mary for her attachment to his physical being. In this moment, the negative medieval association of women with materiality comes into play, but Christ's reproach does not necessarily negate the dramaturgical force and emotional impact of Mary's laments, supported by the laments of other women.

There are two basic positions on cultural and political functions of representations of the Virgin Mary. On the one hand, Mary is regarded as a repressive token, reinforcing conservative values of purity, meekness and silence, and on the other,

recent interpretations of the Virgin Mary have shown her to be a disorderly, even carnivalesque figure. Theresa Coletti has challenged earlier arguments about Mary, suggesting that the Virgin Mary's body does not simply affirm dominant ideologies, but instead functions as a complex sign which exposes contradictions within the sex and gender system. While my discussion notes some of the more conservative elements in N-Town's gender representations, particularly its invocation of the motif of transparent wombs, my interpretation of Mary's various roles in N-Town mostly supports Coletti's perspective.

In this chapter, I investigate the trope of transparency in relation to sacred female embodiment. One manifestation of the late medieval incarnational aesthetic in fifteenth century sculptures and paintings of the Visitation lay in the revelation of the fetal Christ and fetal John the Baptist in their mothers' wombs. N-Town's "Visit to Elizabeth" pageant speaks of Mary's body as a transparent vessel housing Christ, in language that echoes popular visual representations of Mary with a yet-unborn Christ visible in her womb. Here I examine the ways that this pageant balances the patriarchal fantasy of transparent female generativity against more feminist attention to Mary as part of a matrilineal genealogy. I discuss this evocation of the fetal Christ in the context of medieval medical understandings of women's reproductive role and also in the context of late twentieth-century feminist analyses of the cultural work performed by fetal imagery. One of my conclusions in this section is that late medieval metaphors for the womb and for gestation present reproduction dynamically as active work that women's bodies do. The late medieval metaphors of baking, weaving, and clothing suggest active maternal industry in a way that complicates Mary and Elizabeth's reduction to mere containers for

their illustrious sons. Also, Mary and Elizabeth, in praising God together and celebrating one another's miraculous pregnancies, establish a society that draws attention to women's instrumental role in humankind's salvation.

POWERS OF THE UNMANLY: FEMINIZING CHRISTIAN EPIC

IN *THE HOUSE OF FAME*

.... Leave it as a sign to mark the false
trail, the way you didn't go. Be like the
fox who makes more tracks than
necessary, some in the wrong
direction. Practice resurrection.

--Wendell Berry, "Manifesto: the Mad Farmer Liberation Front"

Many critics have spoken of Chaucer's *House of Fame* as labyrinthine in its poetics; here, as in his later works, Chaucer "makes more tracks than necessary, some in the wrong direction." In contrast to the more orderly guided tours offered by the Dante's *Divina Commedia* or by a dream vision such as *Pearl*, Chaucer multiplies his "tracks" to the point of disorienting his readers, especially in Book III. One of my aims in this chapter is to show how Chaucer uses familiar medieval gender constructs to ironize the genre of the celestial journey, and Dante's *Commedia* in particular. While Dante, in deciding to write a theological epic, takes on the task of commanding our belief, Chaucer first demolishes the notion of any absolute truth or unqualified authority in the sublunary realm, and then creates a complex, humorous affirmation of postlapsarian language, despite its unreliability.¹ Helen Cooper has recently argued that *The House of Fame* mounts a sustained challenge to Dante's truth-claims and eschatological judgments; in

¹ See Teodolinda Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), who says of Dante criticism, "Our tendency has been to listen to what Dante says, accepting it as true" (19) and who proposes "detheologizing [as] a way of reading that attempts to break out of the hermeneutic guidelines that Dante has structured into his poem, hermeneutic guidelines whose outcomes have been overdetermined by the author" (17). See also Helen Cooper, "The Four Last Things in Dante and Chaucer: Ugolino in the House of Rumour," in *New Medieval Literatures*, Vol. III, eds. David Lawton, Wendy Scase, and Rita Copeland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 39-66.

my reading of this poem, I hope to show that feminized spaces are a crucial element of Chaucer's challenge to Dante's model of *auctoritas*.² I argue that medieval gender constructs, especially those of the fabliaux, are an integral part of Chaucer's questioning of authoritative traditions and of his affirmation of fallen human language. I will demonstrate that Chaucer displaces female incarnation and putative "feminine" attributes onto the allegorical buildings and topographies of the poem. In *The House of Fame*, if one keeps Chaucer's parody of Dante in mind, one can then interpret Chaucer's displacement of female incarnation onto architecture as his means of rendering the *Commedia* truly comic, by making ironic connections among the classical tradition of the labyrinth, the vulgar peasant female body, Christ's crucified body and the heavenly city of the New Jerusalem. Chaucer uses female incarnation for humorous purposes but also to signal, quite pointedly, his own humility in relation to God's Word.

In this poem, as the dreamer-narrator ascends, he does not witness greater order and harmony, as he would in a traditional paideic journey, but instead increased chaos and a relentless proliferation of literary authorities, of sounds and of "tidings." Within this proliferation, Chaucer also presents a range of female characters and feminized architectures, from the pathos of wronged women such as Dido and Ariadne, to the lavish excess (both material and physiological) of Lady Fame, to the grotesque peasant female body as represented by the House of Rumor. In Book I, Chaucer presents the fragile, opulent temple of Venus, and the stories of loyal women who in many instances are the

² Helen Cooper, "The Four Last Things," 44-46.

betrayed rescuers of men, but who are held culpable for their susceptibility and “misdeeming” of male intentions; in Book II, the poem shifts from a visual to an increasingly auditory mode, signaled by the eagle’s discussion of the physics of sound; in Book III, Chaucer counterbalances the wronged women of Book I. In Book III, he energizes the more obviously misogynist pole of the debate about women by allying the feminized architectures of the Palace of Fame and the House of Rumor, and Lady Fame herself, with the best and worst potentials of spoken language: instability, unreliability, energy and generativity. Book I presents the reader not with female bodies, but with thwarted female desires and muted, ineffectual female speech; in contrast, Book III blasts the reader with the energetic if capricious judgments of Lady Fame and with an abundance of unruly speech whistling in and out of the feminized House of Rumor. The beginning of the poem presents examples of women who offer life-saving counsel and assistance to male lovers, but who are tragic misreaders of male intentions; the end of the poem metaphorically presents the female body as “man’s confusion”—as verbally excessive, obscenely permeable, but still indispensable in its production of “tidings,” the raw material for literature, community, and possible meaning.

In this chapter, I examine *The House of Fame* in terms of its participation in discourses of gender and social class, especially fabliau discourses.³ I will argue that

³ Recent gender-oriented criticism replicates the poem’s staging of utterly conflicting readings. For example, Britton J. Harwood argues that the poem’s ultimate ideological project is to reaffirm feminine dependency and peasant cooperation in the face of late fourteenth-century gender and class contests; Ruth Evans sees Chaucer as “representing vernacular memory in its own distinctive gendered terms” (67), and deploying this feminized vernacular memory to distance himself from “the authoritative, Latin, male and masculinist tradition” (55); and Lesley Kordecki asserts even more forcefully than Evans that Chaucer includes disenfranchised voices and perspectives, those of silenced women and even of animals. See respectively Britton J. Harwood, “Building Class and

while this poem is not overtly concerned with incarnation theology, it plays with the notion of “the Word made flesh” by connecting language with female embodiment and with the fragile concreteness of architectures that behave like female bodies, as understood within the late medieval imaginary. The female characters and feminized buildings of Books I and III can be allegorized as different aspects of Eve: Book I emphasizes feminine frailty and susceptibility to “the tempter’s voice,” in both the story of Dido and the structure of the temple itself; the Palace of Fame and Lady Fame suggest the seductive aspect of Eve, and the House of Rumor embodies the medieval notion of “cackling,” insubordinate Eve. At the conclusion of the poem, the authoritative, legible text of Christ’s crucified body is replaced with the obscene, surreal, multiply-orificed body of the peasant female as it is represented within several Old French and Anglo-Norman fabliaux. This shift into a fabliau-inflected domain simultaneously creates an impression of populism and naturalism at the poem’s inconclusive conclusion, and substitutes the peasant female body for the obtuse male narrator as the target of ironic humor. I will also argue that, in Book III, the poem itself takes on the attributes of the fabliau female body-- the poem’s rhetorical strategies increasingly mime disorderliness and a literal lack of subordination among its elements. The increasing role of dissonance and noise is another signal of either domestic or social discord. Although late medieval

Gender into Chaucer’s *Hous*,” in *Class and Gender in Early English Literature*, eds. Britton J. Harwood and Gillian R. Overing (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994) 95-111; Ruth Evans, “Chaucer in Cyberspace: Medieval Technologies and *The House of Fame*,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 23, 2001, 43-70; Lesley Kordecki, “Subversive Voices in Chaucer’s *House of Fame*,” *Exemplaria*, 11.1, 1999, 53-77, 53. As this small sampling of recent criticism suggests, lively debates continue about the poem’s level of imaginative identification with the male, authoritative tradition, with oral traditions and the vernacular, and with female subject positions.

discourses concerning both the status of women and of peasants were ambivalent rather than purely negative, the fabliau genre's representation of the peasant female body presents that body as the most vulgar and debased substitute for Christ's—both are full of holes. Chaucer associates the House of Rumor with an imperfect, contaminated, seductive vernacular; nevertheless, by the end of the poem *Domus Dedaly's* dynamism, chaos and heterogeneity still suggest that the vernacular is indispensable as the medium for generating meaning, however unstable; for reinvigorating, if not preserving, cultural memory; and for creating literature.⁴

Chaucer uses disorderly and excessive female figures and feminized spaces to sidestep the necessity of locating himself in the masculinist process of *translatio studii*, and more specifically as a way of playfully affiliating himself with, and distinguishing himself from, his literary forefather Dante. Dante loomed large for Chaucer as the first author to elevate the vernacular by making it the vehicle for *translatio studii*, that is, for the transmission of literary culture from the classical past to the present. One preoccupation of Book II of the poem is “the anxiety of influence”—the narrator’s concern about how his celestial journey compares to those of the famous dreamers of antiquity, and about how to position himself within the male literary tradition. While several critics perceive no unifying element that binds the three books of Chaucer’s poem together, I argue that constructions of femininity

⁴ The feminine and the vernacular were often linked through the topos of women’s ignorance of Latin and the topos of the “mother tongue.” See *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280-1520* eds. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Nicholas Watson, Andrew Taylor, and Ruth Evans (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), especially 120-23.

are important even in resolving the issues raised by the dreamer's womanless celestial journey.⁵ Chaucer displaces female incarnation onto buildings as part of his earthbound, anti-transcendent response to the *Commedia*. *The House of Fame's* feminized architectures, along with the poem's reliance upon sound rather than light as an organizing trope, serve to distinguish Chaucer's sense of the poet's vocation from Dante's, and Chaucer's voluble, unruly, contaminated vernacular from Dante's aspiration to a *vulgare illustris*—a luminous, purified vernacular.⁶ A reader of the poem who recalls the conclusion of Dante's *Paradiso* will find that the orderly, blindingly bright image of the celestial rose containing the Virgin Mary and the Trinity has been replaced by the creaking, porous, voluble and worldly structure of the House of Rumor. Both Lady Fame's excess and arbitrariness and the uncontainable proliferating speech of the House of Rumor prove to be enabling for 'Geffrey,' the dreamer-narrator; once he sees how partisan and untrustworthy the authority of his literary predecessors is, Geoffrey seems content to assert his own provisional authority.

Chaucer constantly alludes to the *Commedia* in the *House of Fame*, incorporating the tripartite structure, an eagle guide, an invocation to Apollo, the presence of Virgil (in the form of the *Aeneid*), among other parallels. *The House of Fame's* sustained parody of Dante's *Commedia* and of the Apocalypse of St. John

⁵ For example, Wolfgang Clemen, *Chaucer's Early Poetry* (London: Methuen, 1963) suggests that *The House of Fame* has resisted repeated efforts to find a conceptual or thematic unity to the poem (see especially 72-3); Elaine Tuttle Hansen in *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992) declares that at the end of Book I "The narrator...appears to abandon the topic of Woman and the representation of women as suddenly and completely as Aeneas sets sail for Italy" (98).

⁶ Dante Alighieri, *De Vulgari Eloquentia* ed. and trans. by Steven Botterill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

leads us to expect a Christian telos, or at least a parody of a Christian telos. Unlike dream-visions such as *Pearl*, in which Christ's body is the organizing center of the poem and of the poem's very topography, Christ's body in the *House of Fame* is present mostly implicitly in the poem, through Chaucer's parody of Dante's *Commedia*. Irony is generated by the tension between what is said and what is unspoken; both Christ and Dante in this poem are frequently implied but rarely mentioned.

While elements that parody Dante's *Commedia* and the Apocalypse of St. John run throughout the poem, setting up expectations of a celestial journey and of the dreamer's eventual arrival at a privileged understanding of cosmic order, allusions to the *Roman de la Rose* are also interspersed throughout, which could set up expectations of a prurient-yet-courtly conclusion to the poem. Russell has characterized the *Roman* as "possible only because courtly love was a mock-religion, and the 'higher truths' buried in its labyrinths are parodic truths."⁷ But at the end of *The House of Fame*, the reader arrives somewhere neither holy nor courtly, but in the House of Rumor, a structure erupting with fabliau energies. Courtly love relies on the language of religious devotion, and fabliau's pleasure consists in "the parodic reutilization of stock elements from courtly romance," hence *The House of Fame*'s structure mimics the poem's nested circles of sound, with parodies nesting within parodies.⁸

⁷ J. Stephen Russell, *The English Dream Vision: Anatomy of a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1988), 109.

⁸ Laurence de Looze, "Sex, Lies, and Fabliaux: Gender, Scribal Practice, and Old/New Philology in 'Du Cheualier Qui Fist les Cons Parler,'" *The Romanic Review* 85.4 (1994), 496.

Just as Christ's overt presence in the *House of Fame* is often fleeting, literal female embodiment is largely suppressed (apart from descriptions of Venus and Lady Fame), and when female incarnation does appear, it is metaphorically displaced onto buildings and landscapes. The allegorical building in medieval literature is a flexible, multivalent metaphor. Such buildings metaphorically represented bodies; because medieval cities were surrounded by walls, buildings could synecdochically represent the city; buildings metaphorically alluded to memory, since architecture was used as a mnemonic device; buildings could represent monuments to statecraft or to the wealth and power of a particular patron; Biblical buildings such as Ezekiel's temple were interpreted by medieval exegetes as allegories of the Incarnation; and buildings could more generally represent collective cultural and religious aspirations (as in the iconography of Ecclesia and Synagoga, which also conjoins female embodiment with architecture).⁹ The metaphor of the building in medieval art and literature is so pervasive and so broad in its range of associations that Chaucer's decision to displace female incarnation onto architecture could be read as a feminization of any of the associations mentioned; however, in Book III, the feminization of architecture seems more narrowly to articulate ideas about the tenuousness of collective memory, the seductiveness of language as enchantment, and the simultaneous generativity, energy and unreliability of vernacular language.¹⁰

⁹ For an overview of many of these associations, see Jill Mann, "Allegorical Buildings in Medieval Literature," *Medium Aevum* 63:2 (1994), 191-202.

¹⁰ See Evans, "Chaucer in Cyberspace," especially 58-61 and 66.

The demands of dynamic narrative and certain antifeminist gender constructs converge in medieval allegorical buildings. Jill Mann has observed that the use of allegorical buildings in medieval literature poses a problem of narrative inertia and static imagery, since "buildings don't normally *do* anything." She suggests that

one way of dealing with the problem of the static quality of the image is to invent fantastic buildings which defy the notion of stability in every possible way-- buildings which threaten to slide down mountain slopes or collapse in on themselves, which are built on foundations of ice or are suspended in mid-air, which have no walls or a thousand doorways, all open, or which constantly whirl round and round. ...In such descriptions, the static quality of the buildings, so far from creating boredom and claustrophobia, becomes something desirable precisely because it is withheld; their anarchic instability creates an impulse towards stasis and closure as a necessary counterweight.¹¹

Of course, *The House of Fame* ultimately denies the reader such stasis and closure.

The fragility and visual lusciousness of the glass Temple of Venus, the precarious position of the Palace of Fame on "a roche of yse, and not of stel," and the whirling, voluble, frail House of Rumor all conform to the "anarchic instability" that Mann describes. These attributes that rescue poems from narrative stasis also converge with misogynist notions of the feminine as fragile, unstable, garrulous, deceptive, and seductively ornamental.

The metaphor of building as woman is further reinforced by the late medieval fascination with women's bodies as bodies that can enclose a fetus and that themselves require enclosure to preserve their chastity; the popular interest in Mary's womb which "housed" Christ is one example that appears persistently in the cycle drama, in

¹¹ Mann, 191.

vernacular theology and in visual art. Both in representations of allegorical buildings and in writings on female physiology and female spirituality, the liminal spaces of entrances and exits command anxious attention. One extreme expression of this anxiety, conflating architectural and female bodily susceptibility to sinful influences through liminal spaces, is expressed in *The Ancrene Wisse*, a manual of spiritual instruction for anchoresses. Not only were anchoresses protected from the frailty of their permeable bodies by being bricked into the anchorhold for life, but Elizabeth Robertson notes that even then they were exhorted to remain vigilant against the temptations of the windows of the anchorhold which "afforded the anchoress distracting and potentially dangerous contact with the outside world."¹² Robertson further observes that women were held culpable not only for the sin of looking at men but also for the sin they might inspire in men by being seen; women were blameworthy not only as subjects but as objects of action.¹³ This culpability of women as the objects of a male gaze is an issue that reappears in my chapter on *Pearl*, where I argue that the Pearl-Maiden's power as a sight distracts the narrator from her eloquence and erudition, and also from Christ Himself. Chaucer's representations of the architectures of the Palace of Fame and the House of Rumor can be said to participate in the discourses of female embodiment as disturbingly permeable and of female incarnation as an distraction from male transcendental understanding, but Chaucer's handling of these spaces in Book III renders them playful, charismatic and dynamic, and

¹² Elizabeth Robertson, "The Rule of the Body: The Feminine Spirituality of the *Ancrene Wisse*," in Sheila Fisher and Janet E. Halley, eds., *Seeking the Woman in Late Medieval and Renaissance Writings: Essays in Feminist Contextual Criticism* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989), 111.

¹³ Robertson, 118.

surprisingly, his narrator-dreamer achieves a measure of confidence as a poet after visiting these chaotic and arbitrary spaces.

Barbara Newman sees a more affirming function in the symbolic feminizing of buildings (and the social institutions they represent), arguing that the use of maternal and bridal symbolism makes the Christian Godhead seem more approachable to the laity. In her discussion of goddess figures as "participated beings," she presents the example of Mater Ecclesia, or Mother Church:

Hildegard of Bingen's famous *Scivias* illuminations depict Ecclesia's children occupying the maternal spaces of her breast and womb, visibly participating in her body Langland atypically reverses the allegorical figure of one god with many brides by presenting one goddess with many bridegrooms: his Lady Holy Church is married to Mercy, which is to say, "any man who is merciful" (B 11. 31-33). But his figure of the Church is, no less than Hildegard's a participated goddess-- even if the remainder of *Piers Plowman* demonstrates how imperfectly her members participate in her transcendent essence.¹⁴

Newman's reading of the feminization of buildings emphasizes notions of the female body as nurturant, protective, and inclusive, rather than as dangerously permeable to "the world, the flesh, and the devil." However, there is little that is welcomingly maternal or bridal in the temple of Venus, in Fame's Palace or in the House of Rumor; these unruly structures signal that the narrator's ascent has not taken him beyond the sublunary realm.

While versions of female incarnation appear in both Books I and III, only in Book I does Chaucer invoke Christ's incarnation explicitly. "God turne us every drem to goode!" can be interpreted as a plea for the epistemological clarity and stable

¹⁴ Barbara Newman, *God and the Goddesses: Vision, Poetry and Belief in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 41.

signification associated with the Logos, God's word. The second line, "For hyt is wonder, by the roode" introduces the crucifixion, God's word made into suffering flesh. These two lines are closely echoed near the conclusion of the Proem (I, 57-58), after the bewildering discussion of dream categories, and only a few lines after Chaucer mentions the futility of the physical senses for arriving at knowledge about the causes and import of dreams: "But that our flessch hath no myght/ To understand it aryght" (I, 49-50). The Proem juxtaposes the omniscience of God's word made flesh with the limitation flesh imposes on fallen human beings; this statement also prepares us for the Dido episode as an exemplum of human judgment clouded by passion. God is next called upon by the narrator to bless those who receive Chaucer's dream-vision kindly, and to visit every misfortune upon those who "mysdeme hyt" (97). The narrator's fear of a distorted, uncharitable reception prefigures Dido's similar fear later in Book I, and the repeated verb "mysdeme" (92, 97) likewise anticipates Dido's fatal misinterpretation of Aeneas' words and behavior. The final direct mention of Christ comes near the conclusion of Book I, when the narrator panics in the desert: "O Crist," thoughte I, "that art in blysse, Fro fantome and illusion /Me save!" This silent appeal returns the reader to the desire for epistemological certainty represented by the legible text of Christ's body.

The Temple of Venus: Fragile Women in a Glass House

The first space that the dreamer encounters is Venus' "temple, ymad of glas" (I. 120). Venus' temple is presented as an intensely visual, image-saturated space, compared to the edifices in Book III, where the auditory elements gradually overpower the visual ones. Like the palace of Fame, it is dense with elaborately crafted niches rendered in gold and precious jewels. At the most obvious level, the temple's construction suggests the fragility of love -- its construction from glass immediately suggests its fragility, as does the fact that it is built upon a field of sand (flouting Matthew 7:26-27, which warns that only a fool builds a house upon the sand). In the stories of Dido and Ariadne that follow, the narrator presents women as reliable helpmates to men, but eliminates much of the complexity and resourcefulness that they possessed in the Greek and Roman source texts. In addition, the backdrop of Genesis 3 undercuts the pathos of Dido and the other wronged women by associating their susceptibility to insincere male lovers with Eve's susceptibility to "the tempter's voice."

Book I characterizes the dreamer as a viewer/reader of images, and the first image he confronts is the mildly erotic depiction of Venus herself, "Naked fletynge in a see" (I. 133).¹⁵ The dreamer does not exploit the voyeuristic potential of this moment at any length, but moves on swiftly to ekphrastic description of the *Aeneid*. However, as befits an inept but diligent servant of love, the narrator reveals his partiality toward Venus in his redaction of the *Aeneid*: he credits her with saving Aeneas' ship (Virgil credits Neptune) and he omits her role in instigating Dido's fatal passion for Aeneas.

¹⁵ Marilynn Desmond, *Reading Dido: Gender, Textuality, and the Medieval Aeneid* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 132. Desmond notes that the narrator is first constructed as a specular "reader" of images, in Book I.

Chaucer's selection of Dido as the central figure in Book I reinforces the poem's preoccupation with contradictory lore, as seen in the poem's opening lines about dream theories and in the dissension among Book II's *auctores*. Even before emerging from classical antiquity, the figure of Dido had already become freighted with conflicting associations. Marilyn Desmond points out that the "historical" Dido, first mentioned in a short fragment attributed to Timaeus of Tauromenium (356-260 B.C.), launched a tradition in which the Dido story could be read as an exemplum of chaste widowhood. In Timaeus' account, Dido killed herself rather than remarry.¹⁶ Desmond further notes that several medieval authors were aware of this version of Dido's story. She cites Petrarch's question of Virgil: "Why did he choose one... whom he knew died out of zeal for chastity and widowhood and make her yield to a wanton love?"¹⁷ While Virgil's *Aeneid* initially includes elements of the "historical" Dido as a resourceful political leader and founder of a prosperous city, he transforms her into a sexualized figure who succumbs to erotic desire and who loses her ability to govern. In the *Aeneid*, as in the *House of Fame*, female figures are conflated with particular feminized spaces: as Dido deteriorates, so does the city of Carthage.

Within the *Aeneid* alone, Dido can be read as an extraordinarily complex amalgam of Homer's female archetypes. Roger Savage has argued that Virgil's Dido draws upon several of the women that Odysseus encounters, as well as upon Phaedra, Medea and Ariadne from Greek tragedy.¹⁸ Of Odyssean women, Savage writes,

¹⁶ Desmond, 24.

¹⁷ Desmond, 23.

¹⁸ Roger Savage, "Dido Dies Again," in *A Woman Scorn'd: Responses to the Dido Myth* ed. Michael Burden (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1998), 6: "in some versions of her myth she seems like a combination... of the latter three: like Phaedra, burning with a dangerous, divinely inflicted passion...; swept off her feet like Medea by a questing hero; finding herself abandoned and inconsolable like Ariadne."

They can all be seen,,, as contributing to Queen Dido, making her the poem's 'other' in several senses, and making her a richly complex character too: an emblem of fine, high civilization (like Nausicaa), an offerer of happy love and a good place to be (like Calypso), a sensualist and something of a sorceress (like Circe) and, Siren-like, a tempter to self-betrayal. ...Faced with an antagonist like this, Virgil's Aeneas can be judged right for staying with Dido, and right for leaving her...¹⁹

In addition to these influences from *The Odyssey*, near the end of Book IV Virgil has Dido contemplate, but not enact, Medea-like savagery. She considers ways she could have killed Aeneas, Ascanius, or Aeneas' men, but as James Davidson observes, "although she may entertain Colchian horrors, she carries out none of them. This is an important distinction. It serves to measure her actual distance from Medea as well as hinting at their potential similarities."²⁰ Davidson further notes that Virgil's contemporaries, having read "their Ennius, their Cato, their Cicero," would already associate Carthage with savagery; thus Virgil's depiction of Dido could afford to emphasize her initial civility, responsibility, and loyalty to her dead husband.

One aspect of the Dido legend that Homer would have appreciated, but that Virgil minimizes, is her cunning, her ability as a trickster. Justin's account (2nd-3rd century C.E.) reports that Dido deceives her brother Pygmalion by throwing packages of sand from her ship into the sea, and pretending that she is divesting herself of her wealth. Later when she arrives in Africa, she strikes a bargain whereby she can purchase the amount of land that can be covered by one ox's hide; she instructs her followers to cut the hide into thin strips, and thus gains enough land to found Carthage. This trickster-fabricator attribute is

¹⁹ Savage, 9.

²⁰ James Davidson, "Domesticating Dido: History and Historicity," in *A Woman Scorn'd: Responses to the Dido Myth* ed. Michael Burden (London: Faber and Faber, Limited, 1998), 79.

lacking in Chaucer's Dido as well, but surfaces later in his characterizations of Lady Fame and the House of Rumor in Book III.

After Timaeus' and Virgil's, the third version of the Dido story that inflects subsequent medieval treatments is Ovid's *Heroides*. It is Ovid who makes Dido an omniscient commentator on the events of the *Aeneid* and on her own story, and Ovid who provides the phrase *stultus amans* ("foolish lover") which Chaucer's narration will translate as "nyce lust".²¹ While Ovid's account allows Dido extended direct speech, a privileged retrospective view of her own story, and a critique of Aeneas' motives, she also condemns herself as *stulta*. Chaucer, quite in keeping with many other medieval vernacular versions of the Dido story, merges the Ovidian and the Virgilian Dido in the *House of Fame*. Both Ovid's and Chaucer's representations of Dido emphasize the pathos of her betrayed trust, at the expense of both Dido's achievements as a leader and of her capacity for menace; Chaucer's Dido gains a measure of readerly sympathy while losing a great deal of the complexity she possesses in *The Aeneid*.

Chaucer makes a significant change to Ovid's Dido by having Dido speak in the first person plural, as "we wymmen" upbraiding "ye men," which as Elaine Hansen notes, constructs Dido as "a typical, foolish, seductible Woman—a woman, any woman, every woman".²² (Of course, "ye men" implies a monolithic 'every man' also). Hansen demonstrates the poem's insistence on Dido's non-exemplarity. However, while Hansen sees the poem as "abandoning the topic of Woman and the representation of women as suddenly and completely as Aeneas sets sail for Italy," I see the poem as returning to a range of constructions of gender in Book III, constructions which

²¹ See Desmond, 47.

²² Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*, 94.

undermine Dido's assertion that "we wretched wymmen konne noon art" (I. 335).²³

While the representations of Lady Fame, the palace of Fame and the House of Rumor also rely upon misogynist constructs, they challenge Book I's representation of feminine artlessness-- of women as lacking the ability to generate seductive artifice and dynamic language themselves. Another aspect of Book I that complicates Hansen's argument is that its two most prominent female figures, Dido and Ariadne, successfully save men's lives through their intervention.

Many critics have noted that Book I further develops the problem of conflicting lore that was introduced in the Proem's discussion of dream theory, by offering the reader a hybrid account of the *Aeneid* that critiques Virgil's version of the story by adding Ovid's perspective. Chaucer's incorporation of Ovid has profitably been read as a critique of Virgil's silencing of female characters in order to glorify masculine projects of statecraft, of empire-building.²⁴ Rosemary McGerr makes an additional observation about the function of Dido in Book I. She notes that Dido, in her lament,

goes on to urge women--perhaps representative of all readers who 'konne noon art' (335) to adopt a form of end-oriented reading:

Wayte upon the conclusyon,
And eke how that ye [i.e., men] determynen,
And for the more part diffynen. (I. 340-44)

This use of three words in quick succession that play on the meaning of 'end'-- *conclusyon*, *determynen*, and *diffynen*-- points to the importance of 'ends' in understanding the significance of someone's words. Just as Dido's advice suggests patience as a solution to the problem of interpretation, the poem emphasizes the inconclusive nature of the search for meaning in texts...²⁵

²³ Hansen, 98.

²⁴ For discussions of Chaucer's juxtaposition of Ovidian and Virgilian elements in the Dido episode, see Desmond, 128-162, and also Hansen, 87-97.

²⁵ Rosemary P. McGerr, *Chaucer's Open Books: Resistance to Closure in Medieval Discourse* (Tallahassee: University of Florida Press, 1998), 66.

I would add to McGerr's discussion that the narrator-dreamer, though sympathetic enough to include Dido's Ovidian lament, judges Dido for interpreting Aeneas' words too hastily, and for her "nyce lest,/ That loved al to sone a gest" (287-88). In addition, the non-ending of the poem confounds Dido's recommended strategy of deferred interpretation. The uncontainability of the House of Rumor, which I will argue resembles the lust-driven, garrulous female body of fabliau, also reduces our confidence in end-oriented reading.

The narrator's seeming sympathy for Dido is mitigated by the fact that Chaucer omits Dido's qualms in the *Aeneid* before the affair, omits Venus' and Cupid's thorough engineering of Dido's love for Aeneas, and postpones knowledge of Dido's deliberations with her sister about whether to get involved with Aeneas until just before her death. In short, Chaucer omits most of those elements of the *Aeneid* that work against the idea of Dido as an impulsive misreader of male behavior.

The second-most prominent story in Book I, in the catalog of wronged women drawn from the *Heroides*, is the tale of Theseus and Ariadne, which reappears in Book III through the naming of the House of Rumor as "Domus Dedaly," or Daedalus' labyrinth. Chaucer's 22-line rendition of the tale twice mentions that Ariadne saved Theseus' life, and that Theseus "Made hir a ful fals jape" in return, reinforcing the theme of women as betrayed rescuers of men. The tale suggests the life-saving potential of female ingenuity and of women's counsel to men—themes that Chaucer develops more fully in his later work. Ariadne comes up with the strategem of the string, which enables Theseus to successfully return

from the heart of the labyrinth. Implicit in the myth is the literally monstrous potential of female desire: the Minotaur lurking in the labyrinth is the monster born of Pasiphae's lust for the bull from the sea, a bull sent by Poseidon as proof of Minos' kingship. It is the birth of the Minotaur which prompts Daedalus' creation of the labyrinth in the first place. The tale of Ariadne and Theseus juxtaposes the value of women's counsel and women's loyalty with the disastrous results of women's indiscriminate desire (though divinely inflicted by Poseidon in this case) and women's sexual infidelity. Also implicit in this myth is that male technical ingenuity (Daedalus') is required to contain the monstrous result of unchecked female desire. Ariadne's and Theseus' story resurfaces in Book III, in the naming of the House of Rumor as "Domus Dedaly"—ironically, a structure bursting with unchecked female forces.

Book I reflects Chaucer's abiding interest in both conjuring up female subject positions and in having male narrators disparage these subject positions. Geoffrey's Dido is permitted to voice worries similar to Geoffrey's own, about her place in posterity; yet there is some justice in saying that Geoffrey gains a narrating voice through his association with Dido, but then abandons her as Aeneas does.²⁶ Geoffrey compresses Dido's courtship with Aeneas and then blames her for her haste and foolishness in trusting. Such a rendition of Dido's poor judgment connects readily to Serpent-Eve typology, which likewise could be glossed, "Allas! What harm doth apparence/ When hit is fals in existence!" (I. 265-266).

But ultimately, Geoffrey seems oblivious to all possible *sentence* that could be derived from the stories of Book I. The naive dreamer's reaction to all he has witnessed at

²⁶ See Hansen, 98-107.

Venus' temple could be read as feminine lusciousness leading male consciousness away from higher awareness. The dreamer remains fixated on the material, “embodied” aspects of the temple –its dazzling physical beauty. Rather than reporting any emotional or philosophical reaction to the tales of Dido, Ariadne and those of all the other wronged women, the dreamer simply remarks upon the opulence of the images he has seen:

When I had seen al this syghte
 In this noble temple thus,
 "A Lord," thoughte I, "that madest us,
 Yet sawgh I never such noblesse
 Of ymages, ne such richesse,
 As I saugh graven in this chirche;"
 (I. 468-473)

The "richesse" of the medium has distracted the dreamer from the disturbing import of the message. The dreamer is an “anti-Aeneas” in that he is readily seduced and distracted from his quest (if, at this point, readers can even discern the nature of his quest). The narrator’s abiding preoccupation with the lavish visual and material aspects of Venus’ temple is all the more ironic, given that the stories of Dido and of Ariadne he has just encountered involve women who further the understanding of questing men--women who enable men to navigate life-threatening circumstances and disorienting architectures.

In The Desert: The Dreamer as Anti-Ascetic

If the goal of the dream-journey is to enlighten the male dreamer, the trip to

Venus' temple is unsuccessful. His "reading" of the retold *Aeneid* has not helped him to define himself or even to orient himself within his dream. He marvels at the "noblesse" and "richesse" of the "ymages" he has seen, but does not report the emotional impact of these images, or the meaning he has derived from the long list of betrayed women.

Instead he states, " But not wot I who did hem wirche,/ Ne where I am, ne in what contree" (474-75), and decides to seek "any stiryng man/ That may me telle where I am" (478-79). 'Geffrey' refrains from anchoring Dido, Ariadne and the other women firmly to an allegory or a generalized moral; his growing concern is about his own need for guidance.

At this juncture, the dreamer finds himself in a desert:

Then sawgh I but a large feld,
 As fer as that I myghte see,
 Withouten toun, or hous, or tree,
 Or bush, or grass, or eryd lond;
 For al the feld was nas but of sond
 As smal as man may se yet lye
 In the desert of Libye.
 Ne no maner creature
 That ys yformed by Nature
 Ne sawgh I, me to rede or wisse.
 "O Crist," thought I, "that art in blysse,
 Fro fantome and illusion
 Me save!" (1.482-95)

This desert and the reference to Libya link Geffrey to both Dante's pilgrim in *Inferno* (in 1.64, Virgil comes to Dante in a desert) and to Aeneas, since Libya is mentioned throughout the *Aeneid* as the place where Aeneas meets Venus, who directs his attention to an eagle, as a place where Fama spreads the rumor of Dido and Aeneas' affair, and as the place where Mercury tells Aeneas to depart. These intertextual associations lead the

reader to expect a masterful guide to appear, and they also carry a hint of the desert as the site where Fama begins to erode Dido's reputation.

Once one has read the entire poem, this "feld... of sond" appears to be a foil for the noisiness, chaos, and fecundity of Book III. The silent desert appears to be Chaucer's closest personal analogue to hell. Cacophony traditionally signals the infernal realm, but for Chaucer, though fallen language is polluted, partisan and incomplete, it remains humanity's best hope for creating meaning and community in the secular domain. The only alternative the poem offers us is the sterility of the empty field.

The desert is an especially apt place for the dreamer to find himself after a visit to Venus' temple, and after the dreamer has witnessed so many stories of love gone sour; in the late medieval imagination, the desert would be associated with ascetic Christian male retreat from sexual temptation and from women in particular, as well as from "the world" in general.²⁷ The desert calls forth associations with the Life of Anthony, and with Anthony's struggle with the Devil to refuse sexual desires.²⁸ Peter Brown observes of the early Christian context that

The myth of the desert was one of the most abiding creations of late antiquity. ... It identified the process of disengagement from the world with a move from one ecological zone to another, from the settled land of Egypt to the desert. It was a brutally clear boundary, already heavy with immemorial associations. (216) ... The desert was a counter-world, a place where an alternative 'city' could grow.²⁹

In *The House of Fame*, the desert does not seem to function for the dreamer as a harsh but clear boundary, or a counter-world, but more as a terrifyingly empty place,

²⁷ As with so many details in *The House of Fame*, this desert may derive in part from Dante (*Inferno* 1.64 or 14.8-13).

²⁸ See Peter Brown's discussion of the Desert Fathers in *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 213-14.

²⁹ Brown, *The Body and Society*, 216, 217.

although ironically it does lead the dreamer to make a silent appeal to Christ to save him "fro fantome and illusion." The dreamer's appeal foregrounds the desert more as a space of danger, delusion and temptation; his fear of "fantome" also returns the reader to the dream-categories that opened Book I, creating a sense of circularity within this first section of the poem. Comedy inheres in the fact that the tubby, self-deprecating dreamer is far from being an ascetic "athlete of Christ." He panics promptly upon arrival there. As a place that throws its inhabitants back upon their inner resources, perhaps the desert here serves to dramatize the dreamer's seeming lack of internal resources in Book I. This desert seems to function as the liminal space described by Michael Uebel, who argues that

.... the desert operates in the social imaginary of early Christian and medieval cultures: namely, as a space where meaning comes undone, before it wanders into the imagination, eventually to be put to ideological use. ...Recognizing its fundamental power to deform and reform identificatory relations, the ancients, particularly the Old Testament authors, marked the desert as a space of plenitude and potentiality, into and out of which there is incessant movement.³⁰

If this desert's function is to "deform and reform" Geoffrey's identificatory relations with the tradition of male literary *auctoritas*, a further irony inheres in the fact that in early Christianity in Egypt, the desert was an arena of intense homosocial competition among male ascetics.³¹ This theme of homosocial competition is further developed in Book II,

³⁰ Michael Uebel, "Medieval Desert Utopia," *Exemplaria* 14.1, 2002, 1, 3.

³¹ See Uebel, "Medieval Desert Utopia," 10. Uebel cites a passage from Rufinus' *Lives of the Desert Fathers: The Historia Monachorum in Aegypto*, trans. Norman Russell (Oxford: A. R. Mowbray, 1981), 50; the passage reports strenuous competition among monks to outdo one another in their ascetic practices.

when the narrator explicitly compares himself with other celestial pilgrims. It is in Book III, among the noisy and unruly structures there, rather than in the silent desert, that Geoffrey detaches himself from identification with the male literary tradition.

Uebel complicates Brown's formulation of the desert as a space that provided a clear boundary for ascetic Christians, emphasizing instead the desert's physical malleability and instability, due to its shifting sands. Uebel notes,

The desert is the space par excellence of variable or nomadic thought, a space that both stands for and invites a deep refusal to analyze the world into discrete components. In the desert, multiplicities are arranged only by relative position, and are never distilled into the singularity of self-reflection. The desert holds out the possibility that any multiplicity of elements will somehow later be arranged, according to a logic whose ideological value depends upon the possibility of continuous rearrangement The therapeutic dimension of the desert is one tied to its function as a space of radical potentiality, a place whose ultimate meaning is unfixable, unstillable.³²

This aspect of the desert prefigures the sprawling, contingent, proliferating and dissolving poetics that follow in Books II and III.

A final aspect of the desert that is significant to issues of peasant and female identity is that sand provides the raw material that constitutes the glass walls of Venus' temple, and also the temple's unstable foundation.³³ As I will discuss later, women and peasants were both represented in the late Middle Ages as the producers of raw material in need of further shaping and refinement. The dreamer's entry into the desert sets up a pattern that will be repeated in Books II and III, of the dreamer venturing out of an

³² Uebel, "Medieval Desert Utopia," 35-36.

³³ See Rosemary P. McGerr, *Chaucer's Open Books*, 67. McGerr also notes that the temple's base upon the sand warns the reader that it has an unstable foundation: "...as the Gospel parable in Matthew 7:24-27 tells us, it is a foolish person who builds a house upon sand."

elegant, artistry-saturated architectural structure and then discovering its humble and amorphous raw material. The idea of raw material becomes more explicitly connected to discourses surrounding peasant production and female reproduction in Book III.

In *The House of Fame*, the desert, the empty field, is the topography that most terrifies the narrator—it is empty of sound and of anything that might make sound. When readers, together with the narrator, are confronted by the field, the poem demonstrates how immersed we were, moments before, in the peopled world of the *Aeneid*; this moment demonstrates that art, and language, can conjure up a crowd, a virtual world. While the bustle, noise, ambiguity and impurity of human tidings in Book III are certainly no counterpart to Dante's *Paradiso* (the cacophony would traditionally signal the infernal realm) the narrator prefers them to the isolation and silence of the field.

Book I concludes in a circular manner, echoing the narrator's opening cry in lines 1-2, "God turne us every drem to goode/ For hyt is wonder, by the roode....". Near the end of Book I, the narrator pleads to Christ to save him "fro fantome and illusion" (l. 492-94); his gaze heavenward is rewarded with the appearance of the eagle guide.

Book II: Knowing One's "Kynde Place"

When the golden eagle descends at the end of Book I, the narrator's initial description suggests that it may be a Dantean emblem of triumphant Christianity or of the Roman empire, a fearsome and authoritative guide. Curiously, Dante, the towering vernacular *auctor*, is not mentioned explicitly in the competitive Proem of Book II, in which Chaucer begins by calling attention to his status as a vernacular poet:

Now herkeneth every maner man
That Englissh understonde kan

And listeth of my drem to lere,
 For now at erste shul ye here
 So sely an avisyon
 That Isaye, ne Scipion,
 Ne kyng Nabugodonosor,
 Pharoo, Turnus, ne Elcanor,
 Ne mette such a drem as this.
 (II. 509-517)

Here ‘Geffrey’ is overtly competitive with the renowned dreamers of antiquity, but avoids direct mention of his closest literary forefather, though the Proem concludes immediately after this boast with a close parody of *Inferno* 2.7-9. Geffrey’s fear of “fantome and illusion” at the end of Book I has been replaced with the certainty that his dream is an “avisyon,” a dream of prophetic import. But instead of an “avisyon,” we are given a dream that reduces the raw material of language to broken air, reduces literary history to partisan squabbling among authors, and reiterates the commonplace that Fame is fickle and capricious. The narrator’s boastful confidence in the Proem is soon deflated in the course of his heavenward journey, both by the disparagement he receives from his eagle guide and by the sobering examples the eagle gives of foolish sons who perish as a result of overestimating their own powers.

The shining golden eagle seems at first a dazzling and terrifying guide straight out of Dante; this impression is dispelled as soon as it begins to speak. Instead of offering a Ciceronian discourse on *contemptus mundi*, or revealing itself to be an ambassador of the Christian God, the eagle complains about Geffrey’s weight and then reveals that he was sent by Jupiter, with the task of giving the narrator “tydynges/ of Loves folk” (II, 644-45). When the eagle scolds the narrator out of his swoon, its voice is exactly like one from Geffrey’s daily life (his wife, or servant?). The eagle proceeds from prosaic complaints about Geffrey’s weight to the fullest and most unflattering characterization of

the narrator as a loser at the “old daunce” of love, oblivious even to the doings of his own neighbors, and living “as an heremyte/ Although thyn abstinence is lyte” (II. 659-660). The eagle’s description implies that “Geffrey” is not the most virile of narrators, unlikely to engender heirs or perform feats of chivalric heroism.³⁴ When Geffrey echoes Dante’s pilgrim, protesting “I neyther am Ennok, ne Elye,” (II. 588), and worries about possible stellification, the eagle witheringly assures him he’s not at risk. These exchanges demolish any sense of nobility or lofty purpose in either the eagle guide or the narrator.

The eagle is clearly a spoof on the tradition of the celestial guide (most specifically on Virgil in the *Commedia*). In his explanation of the physics of sound and of the mechanics of fame, two concepts are emphasized: proliferation and the idea of what is natural or proper. When the eagle describes the range of “tydynges” to be heard near the House of Fame, the word “more” (or “moo”) recurs 15 times in 23 lines (II. 674-697): “Mo discords, moo jelousies, /Mo murmures and moo novelries,/ And mo dissimulacions...” (II. 685-87). The eagle’s emphasis accurately foretells the mad proliferation of noises, spectacles and topics that will follow in Book III.

The second concept that recurs in the eagle’s disquisition on the physics of sound is “kynde,” or nature. Some variant of the word “kynde” occurs 8 times in 30 lines (II. 824-52), with the phrase “kynde place” or “kyndely place” repeated three times. The eagle is making some effort to provide the assertion of cosmic order that traditionally accompanies a journey to the heavens. He suggests that every sound rises to its natural or proper place, finally reaching Fame’s house. However, in Book III, rather than

³⁴ See Vern L. Bullough, “On Being Male in the Middle Ages,” in Clare A. Lees, ed., *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis, : University of Minnesota Press, 1994) 31-46. Bullough emphasizes the ability to engender heirs as one of the main criteria for achieving the masculine ideal in the middle ages.

encountering the orderliness of every sound moving to its “kynde place,” Geoffrey is confronted with the violence of dissonance, of a chaos of tidings whistling through the air. As will be discussed, medieval writers often used the motif of dissonant noise to represent precisely those who do not accept their “kynde place.”³⁵ Also counter to the eagle’s emphasis on the natural is the glorious artifice of Lady Fame herself, “A femynyne creature/ That never formed by Nature,/ Nas such another thing yseye” (III.1365-67) and of all the artifice-wielders outside of Fame’s palace – the jugglers, musicians, magicians, and so on.

This physics lesson is followed up by the cautionary tales of Icarus and Phaeton, two sons who moved beyond their natural place, beyond their fathers’ authority, and who were burnt by the sun. Icarus and Phaeton are at the other extreme in their insubordination from the humility of the humble Son who showed the ultimate submission to Fatherly authority. Chaucer may have included Icarus and Phaeton as another implicit critique of Dante, who moves beyond God’s authority by “playing God,” by claiming to know which of his characters will be saved or damned in the afterlife.³⁶ Alternatively, these overweening sons could be interpreted as Chaucer’s meta-commentary on the anxiety of influence, to suggest why his dream vision will not vie with Dante’s by going up to paradise, and to suggest why he will shift away from Dante’s trope of increasing light to a guiding trope of increasing sound.

³⁵ See Susan Crane’s “The Writing Lesson of 1381,” in *Chaucer’s England: Literature in Historical Context*, ed. Barbara Hanawalt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 201-21, for a nuanced and influential discussion of the ways that fourteenth-century writers and chroniclers of the Rising of 1381 attributed incoherence, ignorance, and senseless noisiness to the rebels. See also Stephen Justice, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), especially the final chapter, “Insurgency Remembered,” 193-254.

³⁶ See Cooper, “The Four Last Things”: “Chaucer, by contrast [with Dante] refuses to invent for the characters of his own poetry an ultimate fate beyond death. This may not be a mark of secularity so much as a committed belief that he cannot and should not arrogate God’s judgements to himself. ...Chaucer’s reluctance to play God in this respect is both characteristic and overt” (45).

Chaucerian Resonance Versus Dantean Enlightenment

One of the most significant parallels between *The House of Fame* and the *Divina Commedia* lies in the fact that the poetic universe of each poem is structured around a theory of physics; Chaucer answers Dante's physics of light with a physics of sound. This choice, of light versus sound, reveals a great deal of each poet's ideology and sense of poetic vocation. The trope of light is almost inseparable from the ideas of knowledge and truth, since light makes vision possible, and carries a secondary connotation of spiritual illumination. The trope of sound is somewhat more enigmatic. Of course, sound does have theological resonances: it is the Word, which was there before light, even before Creation. Sound is also prior to light in human experience: we develop hearing before we are born, while light and vision are a new experience to us upon birth. Dante's choice of light as an organizing principle instantly signals his pilgrim's experience of a rebirth, as well as his intention to "illuminate" the reader, while Chaucer's choice of sound leaves his poetic vocation relatively unclear.

Both light and sound are forms of mechanical radiant energy, literally radiating outward in nested circles; Dante uses this image to affirm an ordered cosmic hierarchy, while Chaucer depicts an endless outward reverberation of broken air that never arrives at a resting point. Dante's hell is bereft of light and, except for the "mute sun" and sinister silence in Canto I, it is full of cacophonous sound. As mentioned earlier, the topography that most demoralizes Chaucer's narrator is the silent, empty desert, while the messy, chaotic, dissonant locales of Book III are the places that assist his self-definition.

Light is an apt vehicle for Dante's "poetics of conversion" not only because of its association with truth; Walter Ong has persuasively linked the trope of light and visual space with sequentiality, and, by extension, with hierarchy, while arguing that the trope of sound creates simultaneity and a greater sense of immersion and embeddedness in one's surroundings:

Sound situates man in the middle of actuality and in simultaneity, whereas vision situates man in front of things and in sequentiality....To view the world around me, I must turn my eyes, taking in one section after another, establishing a sequence. There is no way to view all that is visible around me at once. Sound is quite different....At a given instant I hear not merely what is in front of me or behind me, but all of these things simultaneously, and what is above or below as well....caught in the actuality of the present, which is rich, manifold, full of diverse action.

Being *in* is what we experience in a world of sound....But visual space appears to be a special symbol of order and control. Voice, for man the paradigm of all sound, manifests the use of actual power by the most interior of interiors, a person. In a universe conceived of in terms of auditory synthesis, the sense of personal activity is overwhelming.... Sound, as has been seen, can be apprehended from any direction, so that the hearer is situated in the center of an acoustic field, not in front of it....Being situated in the midst of reality is curiously personalizing in implication.³⁷

Ong's description of auditory synthesis, in which one is surrounded by "the actuality of the present, which is rich, manifold, full of diverse action," aptly describes the reader's experience of both the Palace of Fame and the House of Rumor in Book III. Ong seems to favor auditory synthesis over visual synthesis: he does not mention the frightening or chaotic aspect of simultaneity and its potential disorientation of the listener. Likewise, Ong's association of the visual domain with cool, removed spectatorship does not do justice to the relationship between the Dante the pilgrim and his surroundings: the pilgrim gets emotionally involved with the souls he meets,

³⁷ Walter J. Ong, S.J., *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1981; copyright Yale University, 1967) 128-30, 163-64.

swoons with pity for Francesca in hell and is overwhelmed with rapture in paradise. Dante is too skillful a poet to limit his pilgrim to an icily evaluative posture; nevertheless, the task of discriminating between virtuous and sinful empathy is implicit in the pilgrim's movement toward increasing intensities of light, and the duty to make salvific distinctions eventually pulls the pilgrim back from his involvement with the souls in hell and purgatory.

Ong's argument about the different worlds created by light and by sound correlates closely to some of the differences between *The House of Fame* and the *Commedia*. Dante's optic orientation buttresses the *Commedia*'s argument that there is a proper sequential order to the universe; the *Paradiso* begins, "The glory of the All-Mover penetrates the universe and reglows in one part more, and in another less."³⁸ A little later in *Paradiso I*, Beatrice explains to the pilgrim that

All things have order among themselves, and this is the form that makes the universe like God. Herein the high creatures behold the imprint of Eternal Worth, which is the end wherefore the aforesaid ordinance is made. In the order whereof I speak all natures are inclined by different lots, nearer and less near unto their principle; wherefore they move to different ports over the great sea of being, each with an instinct given to bear it on:... this is the motive force in mortal creatures; this binds together and unites the earth.... The Providence which ordains all this, with Its light makes ever quiet that heaven within which revolves the sphere that has the greatest speed...
(I, 103-23)

In contrast to the *Paradiso*'s insistence upon order, Chaucer's use of sound in *The House of Fame* creates the sense of overwhelming, chaotic activity that Ong has described, especially once we reach the House of Rumor in Book III. The narrator

³⁸ This and all subsequent quotations of Dante are from Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy, Paradiso* ed. and trans. Charles S. Singleton, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 3.

describes the house as a kind of porous gossip machine, with thousands of holes and entrances:

Ne never rest is in that place
 That nys fild ful of tydynges,
 Other loude or of whisprynges;
 And over alle the houses angles
 Ys ful of rounynges and of jangles
 Of werre, of pes, of marriages,
 Of reste, of labour, of viages,
 Of abood, of deeth, of lyf,
 Of love, of hate, accord, of stryf,
 Of loos, of lore, and of wynnynge,
 Of hele, of seknesse, of bildynges,
 Of faire wyndes, and of tempests,
 Of qwalm of folk, and eke of bestes;
 Of dyvers transmutacions
 Of estats, and eke of regions....
 (III. 1956-1970)

Chaucer's use of anaphora in this passage increases our sense of the breathlessness of the narrator, of his going on and on, and of the heterogeneity of the items in the list.

It is also important to note that the topography of the House of Rumor, in its unruliness and perforatedness, its disorderly permeability, even its "jangles," is allied with often misogynist fabliau constructions of the female body, while in the *Paradiso* passage above we are offered an ordered, luminous seamlessness, especially evident in the "sea of being," that could be a figure for the masculine ideal of all that is abstract, rational, and formed. I will further discuss Chaucer's use of lists and the poem's eventual miming of the fabliau feminine body in subsequent sections. For the moment, I wish to suggest that in *The House of Fame*, sound itself is made to embody many of the most insulting attributes of the "feminine." Here, sound is promiscuous, intermingling freely with other sounds and producing the monstrous offspring of dissonance; it is unruly, untrustworthy, and it is the medium that produces "jangling."

Although sound is a significant element in the *Commedia*, it is subordinate to light as an organizing principle in Dante's architectonic. Sound is also disciplined by the narrative. In the *Inferno*, the sounds are carefully calibrated in intensity, going from sighs in the earlier circles of hell to more violent groans and screams in the deeper circles of hell. In the *Paradiso*, sound is organized into harmony, into the music of the spheres. Chaucer counters this celestial symphony with the insubordinate noise of the sublunary world, where sound creates a kind of landscape that defies, rather than assists, interpretation and understanding.³⁹

Valerie Allen speaks of medieval dissonance and noise as a metaphor for violated harmony. Just as grace is tangible in medieval Catholicism, so is disgrace:

It requires some imaginative effort to appreciate how medieval grammar and music were perceived as intrinsically ethical. Noise possess a moral force quite lost on modern ears; it is a kind of audible violence; corruption is something one can hear. Within the acoustical cosmos, noise inhabits sound less as *audibilia* of some precise pitch or decibel-count than relationally, as a principle of violence, which effects its damage by contrariety or intensification....⁴⁰

Chaucer emphasizes this sense of noise as violence and as impurity, especially in Books II and III. The eagle's famous formulation "Soun ys noght but eyr ybroken" (765) immediately suggests both violence and flatulence, and the lines that follow develop the idea of sound as aggression:

.... For whan a pipe is blowen sharpe
The air ys twyst with violence
And rent—loo, thy sys my sentence.
Eke whan men harpe-strynges smyte... (II. 774-77)

³⁹ See Peter W. Travis, "Thirteen Ways of Listening to a Fart: Noise in Chaucer's *Summoner's Tale*," in *Exemplaria* 16.2 (Fall 2004), 323-48.

⁴⁰ Valerie J. Allen, "Broken Air," *Exemplaria* 16.2 (Fall 2004), 305-22, 305.

The trumpet of slander, which I will discuss further in relation to the poem's shift toward fabliau sensibility, is similarly presented as an obscene instrument of violence, an "odiferous cannon."⁴¹ This flatulent violence is often used to suggest disharmony between the estates, or discord between the sexes—domestic disharmony. Both estate and gender disharmony will be most fully expressed in the House of Rumor, as I will demonstrate.

The Palace of Fame as Seductive Feminine Artifice

The first landscape that the dreamer describes in Book III is the rock of ice upon which the Palace of Fame stands. While Chaucer has borrowed and adapted this image, the cliff of ice can be seen as a sly joke about female mutability and unreliability, in that humoral theory held women to be cold and moist in their physiology.⁴² The melting names in the ice conjoin this cold, moist topography with notions of impermanence and of the proverbial fickleness of both fame and females.

The palace of Fame is presented as an opulent castle, elaborately ornamented, surrounded by minstrels, storytellers, and musicians, particularly the players of wind instruments:

But many subtil compassinges,
 Babewynnes and pynacles,
 Ymageries and tabernacles,
 I say; and ful eke of windowes
 As Rakes fall in grete snowes.
 And eke in ech of the pynacles
 Weren sondry habitacles,
 In which stonden, all withoute...

⁴¹ Travis, "Thirteen Ways of Listening to a Fart," 331.

⁴² See Ruth Evans, "Chaucer in Cyberspace," 65: "The 'congeled matere' (3.1126) of the ice conjures up the humoral female body as Galen understood it—cold and moist."

Of all manner of minstralles
 And gestiours...
 (III.1188-1198)

The palace's ornaments, especially the "babewynnes," symbolize vanity and the human "aping of God." The elaborate decorations also suggest the misogynist notion of femininity as artifice and seductiveness. The great number of windows suggests not only luxury, but a permeability to outside influences. The clusters of minstrels and storytellers, who later are joined by enchantresses and "Phitonesses," likewise associate the Palace with the pleasures of art, artifice, and magic--with human endeavors that are pleasurable but unreliable. *The House of Fame* is described in courtly terms, as an aristocratic, though unstable, environment. In Book III, Chaucer not only implies a connection between his own poetic art and Orpheus-- a familiar conceit used by prior writers-- but also with a whole cluster of "artists" extremely broadly defined, who stand outside Fame's palace. He lists pipers, jugglers, witches, magicians, minstrels, clerks, and mixes in literary figures such as Marsyas, Messenus, Circe, Calypso, Medea, and Pseustis. Not only does this list shatter the boundaries between "high" and "low" art, and between classical and contemporary artists, but it juxtaposes the more sinister forms of sorcery with more benign modes of enchantment. This leads us to question still further where our narrator means to position himself, and what kind of enchantment we ourselves are in the middle of reading. The inclusion of Medea, Circe, Calypso, "And phitonesses, charmeresses, /Olde wicches, sorceresses" (III. 1261-61) in itself brings a noticeable feminization of enchantment to the list, and

also (through Medea, Circe, and Calypso) associations with forms of enchantment that delay or undo masculine projects. But even if these female personae were not included in the list, the more benign forms of entertainment listed are those that delight, and seduce, but do not instruct; and this pleasureable but amoral aspect of artifice was itself associated with the feminine. Among the forms of misogyny that R. Howard Bloch discerns in the writings of early church fathers is "the estheticization of femininity, that is, the association of woman with the cosmetic, the supervenient, or the decorative, which includes not only the arts but what Saint Jerome calls 'life's idle little shows....'" ⁴³ This suspicion of the decorative as a treacherous aspect of femininity can be linked to the opulent artifice of both the temple of Venus and the palace of Fame, both of which dazzle the dreamer, but do not assist him in attaining a transcendent awareness.

Lady Fame, The Queenly Monster

While Book I gives voice to pitiable women from classical antiquity whose resourcefulness, cunning, and potential for menace have been removed, in Book III, the menace lacking in Dido is reallocated to Lady Fame, who decides petitioners' literary fate. Chaucer presents Lady Fame as a hybrid creature in several senses, a veritable free-for-all of codes, mingling the aristocratic with the peasant, the heavenly with the infernal, the human with the animal. In the lengthy exposition of the Palace of

⁴³ R. Howard Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 9.

Fame's surroundings and of the details of its construction, the narrator creates a sense of material splendor and artistry. When he encounters Lady Fame herself, he describes her as stunning in certain respects: her shining, golden hair, her ornamentation with jewels, her imperial throne made from a single ruby, her huge entourage of petitioners.

Lady Fame's depiction borrows from several awe-inspiring personae: she is queenly like the Virgin Mary, with her golden hair, her throne, and "the hevenyssh melodye/ Of songs ful of armonye/...about her trone ysonge" (III. 1395-97). She changes in size from small to colossal like Boethius' Lady Philosophy. She passes amoral judgments upon her petitioners in a parody of the Last Judgment, and her numerous eyes are compared to the beasts of the Apocalypse surrounding God's throne, although this attribute is also drawn from Virgil's representation of Fama.

At the same time, although Lady Fame is majestic like Mary, she is also wild in speech like "cackling Eve," who brought down humankind. She resembles the ambivalent and far more familiar portrait of Fortune: queenly in dispensing worldly prestige, but blind and arbitrary in apportioning fame without regard to merit. The narrator explicitly describes her as unnatural, artificial, "...never formed by Nature" (III.1366), which contrasts with his eagle guide's emphasis upon how "kyndely" the mechanisms of fame are in their operation. Though derived from Virgil's Fama, her excessive sensory apparatus—her thousands of ears, eyes and tongues---dovetails with medieval misogynist notions of women as hyper-sensual, as mired in physicality. At

the most visceral level, her appearance suggests a clash between the courtly and the monstrous.

The House of Rumor as Debased Peasant Female Physiology

Chaucer begins to shift away from the courtly register and toward the lower-body humor of fabliau when he introduces the trumpet of Slander (II. 1625-1669).

Aeolus, presented as a fearsome destroyer “Of al the Troian nacion” in Book I (l.207), is here shown to be obscenely comical: “And such a smoke gan out wende / Out of his foul trumpes ende / ...Lo al on high from the tuel” (III. 1645-46, 161649). This is followed by the House of Rumor, “Domus Dedaly, ” a structure that, though named to evoke the classical tradition, is coded as both peasant and female:

Under the castel, faste by,
 An hous, that Domus Dedaly
 That Laboryntus cleped ys...
 And ever mo, as swyft as thought,
 This queynte hous about wente
 That never mo hytr stille stente.
 And therout com so gret a noyse...
 And al thys hous of which y rede
 Was mad of twigges, falwe, rede
 And grene eke, and somme weren white,
 Swich as men to these cages thwite,
 Or maken of these panyers,
 Or else hottes or dossers;
 That, for the swough and the twygges,
 This hous was also ful of gygges,
 And also ftil eke of chirkynges....
 And eke this hous hath of entrees
 As fele as leves been in trees,
 In somer... (III. 1919-1921, 1924-1927, 1935-1946)

The House of Rumor's position below the castle and its twig construction mark it as a peasant hut, an association further emphasized by the mention of "panyers," "hottes," and "dossers," wicker baskets carried on the back.⁴⁴ The house's whirling, its deafening noisiness, its squeaks and its many openings, all associate the House of Rumor with notions of unruly peasant femininity. Domus Dedaly's perforated structure and its production of ceaseless gossip, "tidynges," and "jangles" reinforces the traditional association of female permeability with verbal excess and deceit.

Further, the "thousand holes" (3. 1949) in the roof, the "entrees/ As fele as of leves in trees" (III.1945-46), and "the dores opened wide" (III. 1952) day and night could also conjure up the most obscene and surreal fabliau images of the female body. Chaucer's work shows extensive engagement with the fabliau tradition later on, in *The Canterbury Tales*. Available evidence suggests that the ultimate sources for Chaucer's Miller's, Reeve's, and Shipman's Tales were continental French fabliaux.⁴⁵

The Old French fabliau that most closely represents a female body with the extreme, ongoing permeability of the House of Rumor appears in "Les Quatre Souhais Saint Martin," or "The Four Wishes of Saint Martin." A domineering wife has been scolding her hapless husband for not working hard enough to provide for the family;

⁴⁴ See Britton J. Harwood, 103; see also J.A.W. Bennett, *Chaucer's Book of Fame: An Exposition of 'The House of Fame'* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 169. Citing Stephen Knight's *Geoffrey Chaucer* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 4, Harwood notes, "When wood became scarce in the fourteenth century and was generally used in peasant construction only for framing, walls between the studs consisted of wattle and daub—a screen woven of twigs and small branches covered with mud."

⁴⁵ Helen Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales: Oxford Guides to Chaucer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 96, says of *The Miller's Tale* that "Chaucer is generally assumed to have found the story in a French fabliau, now lost...". Laura Kendrick cites the French fabliau of *The Miller and Two Clerks* and the French story of *The Priest's Bladder* as sources for *The Reeve's Tale*, in her chapter "Comedy," in *A Companion to Chaucer*, ed. Peter Brown (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2000), 93.

when her husband tells her of Saint Martin offering to grant him four wishes, the wife instantly changes her demeanor and wheedles her husband into giving her the first of the wishes. Her wish reveals that her sexual dissatisfaction with her husband even exceeds her economic dissatisfaction: she asks Saint Martin to cover her husband's body with penises, and that they all be erect and hard. Her embarrassed husband retaliates by having the wife's body covered with vaginas ("cons"). The couple formulates their third wish too hastily, causing even their original genitalia to be removed, and so they are forced to waste their final wish simply recovering their original genitals. The husband's intention had been to use one of the wishes to ask for more money. E. Jane Burns aptly sums up the moral of the story: "Because of the woman, her unreasonable demands, her cajoling, her wild desires, her uncontrollable speech, this couple has lost all promise of profit or improvement."⁴⁶ The story reduces the wife to an amorphous surface covered with vaginas, "making her physical state reflect the exaggerated libido that her body is supposed to have contained and concealed."⁴⁷ When she is thus transformed, the narrator declares, "Adonc fu ele bien connue Thus was she well-known/well-cunted."⁴⁸ The pun on "well known" suggests that this transformation reveals the underlying truth about female character.

A number of Old French fabliaux also conflate the vagina with both the female mouth and with the anus, a conflation that has implications for our

⁴⁶ E. Jane Burns, *Bodytalk: When Women Speak in Old French Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 51.

⁴⁷ Burns, *Bodytalk*, 50.

⁴⁸ Burns' translation.

understanding of the House of Rumor's windiness and noisiness. In the fabliau "Cheualier qui fist les cons parler" ("The knight who made cunts speak") a knight is given three gifts by three fairy maidens: the gift of being well received everywhere, the gift of being able to make vaginas tell the truth, and the gift of being able to make the anus speak if the vagina will not. In this way, when a countess, hearing of the knight's power to make vaginas speak, stuffs herself with cotton to win a wager with the knight, she is then defeated when her anus answers the knight in the vagina's place. A series of substitutions is set in motion in this story: first, vaginal speech is presented as more truthful than women's oral speech, then anal speech replaces vaginal speech.⁴⁹

If these fabliau connections with both "Les Quatre Souhais Saint Martin" and "Cheualier qui fist les cons parler" are kept in mind, then the tidings flying out of the House of Rumor can be understood simultaneously as the products of parturition, of flatulence, and of speech all at once. The many holes and doors, according to fabliau logic, can be mouths, vaginas, and anuses. Miranda Griffin's summation of "Le Chevalier qui fist les cons parler" lends itself also to the House of Rumor: "The site of language is thus pluralized: instead of being fixed in the mouth, speech can issue from a series of orifices, ranging all over the unreliable and impossible female body."⁵⁰ One last feature of the fabliau, according to E. Jane Burns, is to constitute

⁴⁹ See Laurence de Looze, "Sex, Lies and Fabliaux," 4-7.

⁵⁰ Miranda Griffin, "Dirty Stories: Abjection in the Fabliaux" in David Lawton, Wendy Scase, and Rita Copeland, eds., *New Medieval Literatures*, Vol. III (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 240.

the fabliau female as all body and no head; unless we count the unnamed "man of grete auctorite," the House of Rumor is "headless" compared to the temple of Venus and the palace of Fame, both of which at least have guiding figures, even if they, too, are figured as capricious females.

In French, "con" or vagina, lends itself to many either humorous or threatening puns: it is close to the word "conte" --story or fable (with a connotation of lying speech), and also "count," an aristocratic male. It is also etymologically linked to the English "queynte," which appears twice within three lines when Chaucer is introducing the House of Rumor:

Under the castel, faste by,
 An Hous, that Domus Dedaly,
 That Laboryntus cleped ys,
 Nas made so wonderlych, ywis,
 Ne half so *queyntlych* ywrought,
 And ever mo, as swyft as thought,
 This *queynte* hous aboute went...
 (III. 1919-1925, emphasis mine)

Though "queynte" and "queyntlych" here suggest elegance, the repetition perhaps suggests some puckish humor on Chaucer's part.

At the same time, the words "queynte" and "queyntlich," conjoin risque fabliau connotations with the idea of the House of Rumor as an intricately crafted artifact; these adjectives remind us that Chaucer is also connecting this structure to the classical tradition, by calling it "Domus Dedaly," a labyrinth. While there is little, beyond its many entrances, to confirm that it actually is a labyrinth, the allusion to Daedalus returns us to Book I's compressed reference to Theseus and Ariadne, to Book II's

mention of Icarus, and to their attendant themes of betrayed female loyalty and of overreaching sons. The reference to classical antiquity also perversely strengthens our sense of how contemporary and how English the House of Rumor seems to be.

The likening of the House of Rumor to a labyrinth connects the traditional project of the dream vision—enlarging the awareness of the dreamer-narrator—with life-and-death stakes: gaining an overview of a maze increases the odds of finding one's way out. Further, the image of a labyrinth implies a structure that is perceived and experienced as chaotic, but which possesses an underlying order; this tension between outward appearance and hidden structure invites the reader to attempt to link the House of Rumor to some sort of symbolic meaning.

While the House of Rumor's structure corresponds to fabliau images of the peasant female body, it also functions as a parody of Christ's body-full-of-holes, almost as Chaucer's irreverent precursor to arguments such as Caroline Bynum's, about the ways that women's fissured bodies could identify with Christ on the cross in uniquely female forms of *imitatio Christi*.⁵¹ Both Christ's crucified body and women's maternal bodies were seen as providing nourishment; both Christ's body and women's bodies were characterized in terms of "breaches in boundaries... with openings and exudings and spillings forth."⁵² Female bodies represented both pollution, in their inability to reliably contain inner fluids and the sacred, due to their resemblance to the

⁵¹ See Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

⁵² Caroline Walker Bynum, "The Body of Christ in the Later Middle Ages," in *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 109.

mystery of Christ's crucified body.⁵³ The House of Rumor is clearly fecund with the tidings that nourish literature, but it contrasts with Christ's crucified body due to its noisiness and its mingling of "fals and soth compounded" (III. 2108). The crucified Christ was often (though not always) represented as a man of few words—the Crucifixion pageant of the York cycle play epitomizes this tendency.⁵⁴ As the divine Logos made flesh, the crucified Christ returned a stable truth-value to fallen human signification: in the tradition of the Charter of Christ, Christ's wounded body was likened to a legal document promising redemption in exchange for Christ's self-sacrifice. In the terms of this Eucharistic metaphor, "Christ's skin is the parchment, the wounds, its letters, the blood, the sealing wax..."⁵⁵ In contrast to the mixture of truth and falsehood exploding forth from the House of Rumor, Christ's wounded body is represented as quiet, unequivocal, salvific, and authoritative, although it remained vulnerable to divergent interpretations.⁵⁶

Similarly, the House of Rumor parodies visions of the celestial city, the New Jerusalem (itself exegetically interpreted as an allegory of Christ's incarnation). As Jill Mann observes, "City gates [in medieval towns] were closed at dark, to keep out

⁵³ For a discussion of medieval pollution taboos pertaining to the female body and also of clerical anxieties and efforts to distance themselves from their own potential impurities, see Dyan Elliott, *Fallen Bodies: Pollution, Sexuality and Demonology in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

⁵⁴ For a more long-winded and reproachful Christ on the cross, see the Towneley Crucifixion pageant.

⁵⁵ Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 307.

⁵⁶ See "Symbols in Motion: The Many Readings of the Eucharist" in Rubin's *Corpus Christi*; see also "Violated Bodies: The Spectacle of Suffering in Corpus Christi Pageants" in Claire Sponsler's *Drama and Resistance: Bodies, Goods, and Theatricality in Late Medieval England* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997). Sponsler argues that the image of Christ's violated body functioned as an ambivalent cultural sign that countered the ideal of healthy wholeness in the Christian social body.

undesirable characters; so in the city perpetually bathed in the light of the Lamb, they stand forever open.”⁵⁷ Perhaps the House of Rumor’s blasphemous resemblance to the celestial city suggests that if Christ were to appear anywhere in *The House of Fame*, it would be in the humble structure of the House of Rumor, among ordinary people.

The House of Rumor as the Site of Peasant Production and Female Reproduction

The House of Rumor provides the tidings that are subsequently fashioned by male *auctores* into literary monuments, which in turn are fashioned into enduring reputation, enduring infamy, or obscurity by Lady Fame in her palace. Britton J. Harwood, in an intricate argument, has suggested that the palace of Fame, though headed by a female, functions like a traditional fourteenth-century patriarch in giving the "children" of Aventure (“the moder” of tidings) their names.⁵⁸ Harwood reads the palace of Fame’s processing of the raw material of tidings both as an allegory of the patriarchal appropriation and naming of the mother’s children, and as the manor’s appropriation of the raw materials produced by peasant labor. While I view *The House of Fame* as resisting tidy allegorization of any kind, I agree with Harwood’s suggestion that in Book

⁵⁷ Mann, “Allegorical Buildings,” 197.

⁵⁸ Harwood connects the relationship of the House of Rumor and the palace of Fame to the advent of cognate inheritance: “Since the rise of feudal institutions, the control of reproduction signified by the imposition of a name is massively accomplished by the substitution of agnate for cognate inheritance. The practice from about 1300 of entailing estates usually meant that a rule of primogeniture would be applied through subsequent generations. ...In a society in which nine-tenths of all the wealth rested upon agriculture and in which the political sphere had not yet been separated from the economic, the economic disabling of the woman that is both reflected and partially accomplished by imposition of the paternal name is inseparable from political disabilities.” Harwood, “Building Class and Gender into Chaucer’s *Hous*,” 99-100.

III, the poem associates notions of raw material and crude generativity with the feminine and with the peasantry.

Women and peasants were both associated with crude production in the late medieval social imaginary. Aristotelian notions of female physiology suggested that in reproduction, women provided the raw matter of the fetus, while men provided the animating spirit and also shaped the matter provided by women.⁵⁹ Peasant production was recognized as sustaining the whole of the Christian body, through the ideology of the mutuality of the three estates, yet the peasant was also viewed as being "surrounded by excrement and dirt, symbols of unpleasant natural productivity and of the uncontrollable body".⁶⁰ The effortful labor of both peasants and women was understood as divine punishment: women's painful labor was punishment for Eve's transgression, and the necessity of tilling the soil was Adam's punishment for the expulsion from Eden. The other Biblical origins that justified peasant oppression were found in exegetical writings that treated either Ham (who laughed at his father Noah's nakedness) or Cain (often represented as the ur-peasant) as the progenitor of serfs.⁶¹ For both women and peasants, these biblical origins also suggest that the descendants of these insubordinate figures share in the wickedness of their progenitors.

Paul Freedman discusses women and peasants in the late middle ages as "proximate others" who could not be fully repudiated because they were recognized as indispensable contributors to the temporal world, "because of their physical closeness

⁵⁹ See Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 22-24. Cadden's thorough and nuanced study also notes that Aristotelian theories of sex difference and reproduction coexisted with several other theories, including Hippocratic and Galenic works, many of which did not promote devaluation of the female.

⁶⁰ Paul Freedman, *Images of the Medieval Peasant* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 153.

⁶¹ Freedman, 86-95.

to those who dominated society," and because they were fellow Christians.⁶² Freedman notes that peasants, in their lowliness, were seen as having a privileged position in relation to God--but only if they meekly accepted their lowly status. He further notes that as peasant resistance to their lowly status increased in the years between 1350 and 1525, the range and subtlety of discourses about peasants flattened into urgent, more simplistic binaries : "After 1350 the peasants tended to be depicted *either* as sanctified *or* as bestial; as unjustly oppressed or as amenable only to coercion (or even as useless)".⁶³ Chaucer's depiction of the House of Rumor can be seen as dramatizing the bestial aspects of both women and peasants, but the House of Rumor is certainly not presented as useless. The tidings produced by the House of Rumor are indispensable to the workings of the palace of Fame, although the sheer volume and velocity of the tidings lend a frighteningly dynamic aspect to the House of Rumor's generativity.

Miming Female Unruliness: Book III's Insubordinate Syntax

As the landscapes of the poem grow ever more chaotic, the dreamer's narration grows more breathless and unstructured. Chaucer's use of anaphora and of long lists increases as the poem progresses, adding to the sense of endless proliferation of information and "tidynges." The catalog is a feature of epic—for example, in Dante's *Paradiso* 16, lists and catalogs are used for the epic function of memorializing the names of Florentines who should not be forgotten; in contrast, in Book III of *The House of Fame*, lists suggest disorderly proliferation and simultaneity.⁶⁴ Chaucer's own text

⁶² Freedman, 302.

⁶³ Freedman, 292.

⁶⁴ See Barolini, *Detheologizing Dante*, 122-142, for a discussion of epic lists in *Paradiso*.

takes on the attributes of the fabliau female body. Like the unruly woman of antifeminist and antimatrimonial lore, the poem mimes a lack of self-regulation, a lack of self-control. Carolyn Dinshaw has noted that in the late middle ages, "literary activity has a gendered structure, a structure that associates acts of writing and related acts of signifying--allegorizing, interpreting, glossing, translating--with the masculine and that identifies the surfaces on which these acts are performed, or from which these acts depart, or which these acts reveal-- the page, the text, the literal sense or even the hidden meaning--with the feminine."⁶⁵ By Book III, Chaucer introduces a number of elements to his text that associate it first with general misogynist constructs of femininity and finally, in the House of Rumor, with the stereotype of the fabliau woman: a disorderly, verbally excessive, physically permeable (rather than chastely enclosed) textual body.

Whereas a source text such as Dante's *Commedia* exerts tight control over the reader's interpretation of events, and dramatizes Dante's disciplining of his narrative, Chaucer's text dramatizes a literal lack of subordination among its elements. Many readers have commented upon how forcefully Dante guides the reader throughout the *Commedia's* narrative journey, subtly dictating what the reader should be noticing, and the corrective inferences the reader should be making. Dante even deliberately guides us, and the pilgrim, down occasional dead ends that only later reveal themselves as interpretive errors, that we may become more alert interpreters. In

⁶⁵ Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 9.

contrast, in *The House of Fame's* catalogs, we are barraged with heaps of increasingly disparate information, to the point where some may yearn for authorial guidance in threading our way through it all.

Chaucer's use of *repetitio*, or anaphora, is insistent throughout the poem. The longest example of anaphora, with "Of," repeated at the beginning of each line, occurs when the dreamer is reporting the range of tidings that are in the House of Rumor. The simple conjunction "and" is the opening word in the majority of the instances anaphora that occur throughout the poem, and is the opening word in a fifth of all the lines in the poem, in and out of anaphoric constructions. "And" simply links but does not order the items linked; it does not put what is linked into a hierarchical relationship.

Nevertheless, one can still demonstrate that the poem moves from lists that have some organizing theme to lists that have no obvious organizing theme. Lara Ruffolo has observed that "the *House of Fame* moves from organized lists of material received in books to lists of disorganized matter, in a way that corresponds to the increasingly uncertain nature of literary authority."⁶⁶ The list of dream classifications at the beginning of the poem is relatively coherent, if inconclusive; the list of decorations in Venus' temple is grouped around a single theme; the list of treacherous literary lovers is in support of a single argument, one that sullies the foundation myth of the *Aeneid*. In Book II some of the lists begin to get looser and more all-encompassing. When Geoffrey looks down during his flight, he sees all manner of created things, but he does not use

⁶⁶ Lara Ruffolo, "Literary Authority and the Lists of Chaucer's *House of Fame*: Destruction and Definition Through proliferation," *Chaucer Review* 27.4, 1993, 327.

any form of grammatical subordination to put them in some kind of order-- they all occur "Now":

And ydoun gan looken thoo,
 And beheld felde and playnes,
 And now hilles, and now mountaynes,
 Now valeyes, now forestes,
 And now unnethes grete bestes,
 Now riveres, now citees,
 Now tounes, and now grete trees,
 Now shippes seyllynge in the see.

(II. 896-903)

Here Chaucer provides no clues about the overarching relationship among the items he lists. In contrast to the scrupulously guided tour that Dante offers the reader, even in the putatively chaotic (though still carefully crafted) realm of hell, Chaucer here leaves his readers to link the unorganized sights he offers as they please, or not to link them at all.

Chaucerian Irony and Interpretive Communities Addressed in *The House of Fame*

An irony that inheres in nearly all late medieval dream-visions is the discrepancy between the dreamer's limited understanding of the dream events and the reader's superior understanding of the import of those events. The dreamer in *The House of Fame* is no exception to this rule; readers are invited to smile at the dreamer's refusal to gain direct experience of the constellations during his airborne experience with his eagle guide, at the eagle's withering remarks about the dreamer's bookish obliviousness to human goings-on all around him, and at the self-deprecating

apostrophes throughout the poem, which make naive requests and promises to the guiding deities. In Books I and II, it is easy for the reader to feel superior to the dreamer's choices and interpretations of dream events.

But after the dreamer's refusal to step forward and receive the judgment of Lady Fame, and after the dreamer's declaration, "I wot myself best how y stonde," (III. 1878) he is no longer so clearly the object of the poem's irony. I argue that at this point, readerly superiority is displaced onto the House of Rumor as the debased substitute for what readers know "should" be the destination of a celestial journey: some vision of Christ's body or of heaven. Earlier, Lady Fame has also been a humorous substitute for the true Judge administering the last Judgment, but at least her representation borrows from elevated personifications such as Lady Philosophy, and even from the fear-inspiring Beast of the Apocalypse. Further, until the dreamer removes himself from her judgment, he still vies with Lady Fame as a primary butt of the irony.

The fabliau figure of the House of Rumor is nearly as inclusive an object of irony as the figure of the dreamer, in terms of maximizing the variety of readers that can locate themselves in a superior position to it. There are several critical models for understanding the structure of ironic utterance. Linda Hutcheon discerns both a "depth" model and an elevation model in Wayne Booth's theories of irony:

... there is a depth model where a deeper ironic meaning has been placed below the surface, and lies waiting to be perceived by the knowing audience (Booth 1974: 85-6); another is the image of the "building" of irony, of its reconstruction so the interpreter too can live "at a higher and firmer location" from whence to look down on those who "dwell in error" (Booth 1974: 35-7). What these metaphors share is a sense of hierarchy: deeper and higher =better. Irony may force us into "hierarchical participation" (Booth 1974: 41), but the hierarchy of *meanings* (deep vs. surface) inherited from the

German articulation of romantic irony... seems to have become all too easily a hierarchy of *participants*.⁶⁷

It's worth noting that in Chaucer's *House of Fame*, higher locations are certainly not presented as firmer locations. However, if we accept Booth's hierarchical metaphors, we could construct a reading of Book III as one that flatters an aristocratic audience. Critics have revised nineteenth-century notions of fabliau as a folk genre, finding it instead to be a humorous aristocratic fantasy of the mores of mercantile and peasant behaviors and ontology.⁶⁸

But Hutcheon advances another conception of irony in preference to Booth's hierarchical models, one where "the discursive community *precedes* and *makes possible* the comprehension of irony," and in which there would still be two potential audiences, "but instead of initiate and uninitiated, they might more accurately be called 'addressees' and 'hearers' ".⁶⁹ Instead of a binary between readers who "get it" and those who do not, this model would afford the imagining of a range of kinds and degrees of participation relative to irony's "participation framework". Within this conception of irony, while an aristocratic audience would most likely be the addressees of the poem, other hearers could still perceive and enjoy numerous tensions between what *The House of Fame* says and what it implies.

The most exclusionary, elitist ironies in the poem might be those that ironize the didacticism of the guide, that deflate the foundation myth of the *Aeneid*, that hold conflicting authorities in tension—those ironies that depend upon intimate

⁶⁷ Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London: Routledge Press, 1994), 94.

⁶⁸ For a useful synopsis of scholarship on the status of the fabliau genre through 1968, see D.S. Brewer's "The Fabliaux" in the *Companion to Chaucer Studies*, ed. Beryl Rowland (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1968), 247-262.

⁶⁹ Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, 94.

knowledge of the many source-texts that Chaucer includes. The most inclusionary ironies (those that create “amiable communities,” in Hutcheon’s words), would be 1) the cosmic irony of the disparity between the House of Rumor and the more conventional heavenly destination of visionary dreams; 2) the irony generated by the disparity between the fearful, bookish, obtuse narrator-dreamer and epic heroes like Aeneas, classical *auctores*, and Dante’s pilgrim; and 3) the ironies of misogynist fabliau humor.

Book III hints at Chaucer’s growing interest in the artistic latitude gained through unmanly trickster figures, such as Lady Fame in her open capriciousness or the House of Rumor’s blending of truth and falsehood, an interest which reappears in the most critically celebrated of the *Canterbury Tales*, the tales of the Wife of Bath and the Pardoner. In these two tales, Chaucer endows female and non-virile abusers of rhetoric with a special vigor, charisma, and dimensionality, while in the *House of Fame*, Chaucer reserves a particular dynamism and generativity for the House of Rumor, despite its distortion/pollution of the truth-value of language. Chaucer’s interest in wily feminine fabrication (much more explicitly developed later in the *Wife of Bath’s Prologue*) runs through the *House of Fame*, mostly implicit in its source-texts: Dido wove a lattice from strips of leather to gain sufficient land for Carthage, Ariadne unwound a ball of thread to save Theseus, and the House of Rumor is a whirling woven wicker structure that spouts gossip. Just as Book I takes away the specificity of Dido and makes her speak as “everywoman,” the House of Rumor is also the generalized Feminine, instrumental in substituting the synchronic, late 14th century England, for the diachronic, the “long view” of

literary history. This generalized fabliau feminine is also integral to Chaucer's "leveling" strategy of self-authorization: Chaucer asserts a provisional authority after razing the authority of his literary predecessors to the ground.

In some respects, Chaucer here has energized the rather elite and misogynist genre of the fabliau to suggest a kind of competitive humility in relation to Dante and to typological, supercessionist models of *auctoritas*. However, as with the two most critically pondered Canterbury Tales mentioned above, he also gives the unreliable structures of Book III much more commanding presences than the wan women of Book I.

CONSUMABLE AUTHORITIES AND PENETRATING VISIONS: CHRIST AND THE MAIDEN IN *PEARL*

The Pearl-Maiden's key connection to Christ's body is as an authoritative, visually aristocratic presence who can also take the form of a tiny, round signifier, an item of consumption and exchange that creates social bonds. Rather than imitating Christ by undergoing an ordeal, as in the "heroics of virginity," the Maiden resembles Christ in possessing this dual form. *Pearl* comes close to notions of both the "traffic in women" and "the traffic in Christ"—both aristocratic daughters and Christ—as-eucharist can be represented as highly valued tokens of exchange used to create affiliation.⁷⁰

Because Christ does not speak in the poem, the Maiden's visual affiliation with Him is foregrounded. In *Pearl*, in contrast to the medieval gender binaries seen in the fabliaux, or in medieval medical theories, male bodies (Christ's and the Jeweller's) flow and are permeable, and the female form (the Maiden's) is impervious and well-defined, although not as well-disciplined as it first appears. At first glance, a reader might be tempted to read *Pearl*'s representations of masculine flow and permeability solely as images of feminization, in the manner of Barbara Newman's WomanChrist paradigm or Caroline Bynum's model of women's affective piety. However, notions of the Lamb's feminization are counterbalanced by the Pearl-poet's reworking of Revelation, especially his handling of the nuptial procession in the New Jerusalem. Despite the fact that the Lamb is a eucharistic image, and despite mention of the eucharistic bread and wine at the end of *Pearl*, the bulk of the poem associates Christ's blood with baptism and cleansing,

⁷⁰ The term "traffic in women" was coined by Gayle Rubin in "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, Rayna Reiter, ed., (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 157-210.

rather than with nourishment; “Jesus as Mother” does not make an appearance here.⁷¹ In addition, the Maiden’s *imitatio Christi* in *Pearl* is not achieved through an emulation of Christ’s suffering, perforated body. In certain respects, the Jeweller is feminized by being flooded, penetrated, and emotionally overwhelmed by the sights in his dream, and also by gushing forth with his explosive affect; the Jeweller’s emotional excess also links him to the stock tyrant figure of hagiography. The poetics of intromission, in which seeing is a dynamic act, akin to ingestion or inundation, governs the poem and empowers the objects of the dreamer’s gaze.

The Pearl-Maiden is in several respects a conventional guide for a dream-vision: luminous, eloquent, authoritative in her capacity as a mediatrix between the Jeweller and God. However, the Maiden’s loaded relationship with the dreamer is unusual. Much of the poem’s narrative grip upon its readers comes from the disturbing multiplicity of roles at play between the dreamer and his guide—a multiplicity that shapes the narrative until the poem’s final section. Although the Maiden devotes her erudition and eloquence to helping the Jeweller to understand grace, at a subtle level the poem also presents the Maiden’s dazzling heavenly “embodiment” (metaphor though it may be) as a visual distraction from the Jeweller’s devotion to Christ. While it is common in dream-visions for the guide to be eclipsed eventually by the dreamer’s ecstatic direct communion with the divine, the final sections of *Pearl* manage to diminish the Maiden’s previous verbal authority, yet without increasing Christ’s impact upon the Jeweller. The Pearl-Maiden’s eloquence and “spiritual fecundity” are impeded by the jeweller’s fetishizing gaze and discourse; unlike many other celestial guides, she must contend with being ogled

⁷¹ See Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

throughout the poem by her dreamer/pupil.⁷² The maiden's iconic power works against her verbal authority, and the logic of intromission suggests that the Maiden's power as a sight is partly responsible for the Jeweller's distraction from Christ at the conclusion of the poem.

The Jeweller, like "Geffrey," is readily distracted by the tangible opulence of female bodies or feminized edifices. Like most dream-visions, both the *House of Fame* and *Pearl* call attention to the limited and contingent nature of human understanding, and both poems are narrated by dazzled, somewhat naïve male dreamers. While Chaucer's narrator makes the occasional frenzied appeal to Christ to save him "Fro fantome and illusion," and to God to "turne us every drem to goode!" the bulk of the poem is focused upon human unruliness in the world below heaven. Much of Chaucer's theology in the *House of Fame* is presented obliquely, through parodic stand-ins for the Last Judgment or for Christ's crucified body. In *Pearl*, Christ's self-sacrifice is at the center of the poem, organizing the poem's very landscape; *Pearl*'s didactic and theological intentions are everywhere present. While Chaucer rarely invokes the Bible directly, *Pearl* incorporates Scripture throughout, often quite forthrightly.

In the *House of Fame*, Chaucer piles up numerous examples in the service of one idea, giving us several causes of dreams, several wronged women following the central Dido story, whole crowds of musicians and magicians outside the Palace of Fame, numerous squabbling authors within the Palace of Fame, a sprawling catalog of sights below as the dreamer is carried by his guide, and an explosion of tidings at the non-conclusion of the poem. While the *House of Fame*'s poetics could be described as a

⁷² The term "spiritual fecundity" is drawn from Monica Brzezinski Potkay, "*Cleanness's* Fecund and Barren Speech Acts," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, Vol.17, 1995, 99-109.

poetics of proliferation (and perhaps degeneration), *Pearl*'s poetics, miming the process by which pearls are created, could be termed a poetics of accretion. *Pearl* keeps its focus on the three main characters of the dreamer, the Pearl-Maiden, and Christ, and gradually imbues each of these three with layer upon layer of fresh associations, connotations and roles.

Pearl's Reception History

In contrast to the daunting six hundred years of Chaucer criticism, *Pearl*'s reception history is relatively brief. Since the poem was first published in 1864, there are less than one hundred and fifty years of reception to consider. Two critical tendencies have been pronounced from the beginning: first, a desire to decode the identity of the Pearl-Maiden (either symbolically or literally) and second, a predominance of theologically oriented interpretations.

Pearl has enticed many commentators to seek one primary role or identity for the Pearl-Maiden, whether a literal-historical identity or a symbolic meaning. Some fifty years ago, Charles Moorman noted the overwhelming critical interest in the figure of the maiden:

The disputed question in *Pearl* is, of course, "What is the pearl-maiden?" So far it has been suggested that she is the poet's daughter, clean maidenhood, the Eucharist, innocence, the lost sweetness of God, the Blessed Virgin, heaven itself, and a literary fiction functioning only as an introduction to theological debate.⁷³

Moorman recommended that critics turn their attention instead to the narrator, arguing that the poem has constructed the girl to be understood "entirely in terms of her relation

⁷³ Charles Moorman, "The Role of the Narrator in *Pearl*," in *Modern Philology*, 1955, 73-81, and reprinted in *The Middle English Pearl: Critical Essays*, ed. John Conley (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Indiana Press, 1970), 103-121, 103.

to the narrator.”⁷⁴ Moorman’s suggestion, although problematic in failing to distinguish between the narrator and the poet, highlights what distinguishes the Maiden from most other celestial guides. The Pearl-poet opens the poem with what seems to be the actual loss of a child, but presents this loss figuratively in the form of a pearl that escapes him. Several critics have noted that Dante’s Beatrice most closely resembles the Pearl-Maiden, as a literal-historical figure who had a relationship with the poet in life, and is then endowed with a spiritual allegorical role in the poem.⁷⁵ While Dante manages to turn his love for Beatrice into an avenue to God, the Pearl-poet represents the Jeweller’s attachment to the Maiden as disturbingly ambiguous throughout, and ultimately as an impediment to his reorientation toward Christ.⁷⁶

From early on, critics often remained preoccupied with interpreting *Pearl*’s theology; in 1933, Rene Wellek argued that “All these debates... about dialect, authorship, elegy versus allegory, theology, symbolism, etc., though they have been almost the only occupation of scholarship, say very little about the Pearl as a work of art.”⁷⁷ On the other hand, some sixty years later, J. A. Burrow cautions against dismissing the theological truth-claims of *Pearl* as irritating digressions from the poem’s artistry, in a lecture entitled “Thinking in Poetry: Three Medieval Examples”.⁷⁸ Barbara Newman coins the term “imaginative theology” in an effort similar to Burrow’s aspiration to “think [theology] in poetry”:

⁷⁴ Moorman, 105.

⁷⁵ See Ian Bishop, *Pearl in Its Setting* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968) 58-62; P. M. Kean, *The Pearl* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967), 120-132.

⁷⁶ Barbara Newman argues that “Dante alone, among medieval poets, makes the transit from courtly to mystical love by heightening, not renouncing, his devotion to a lady”. See her *God and the Goddesses: Vision, Poetry and Belief in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 182.

⁷⁷ Rene Wellek, “The Pearl: An Interpretation of the Middle English Poem,” *Studies in English* (Prague: Charles University, 1933), IV, 28.

⁷⁸ J. A. Burrow, “Thinking in Poetry: Three Medieval Examples,” (May 1993) published in *The New Compass: A Critical Review*.

...the hallmark of imaginative theology is that it “thinks with” images, rather than propositions or scriptural texts or rarefied inner experiences—although none of these need be excluded. The devices of literature—metaphor, symbolism, prosopoeia, allegory, dialogue, and narrative—are its working tools.⁷⁹

Newman’s proposed category of imaginative theology does create more room to examine the literary aspects of a wider range of texts, and to see new kinships among these texts, but because her study *God and the Goddesses* discusses a great number of texts, she does not get into close readings of the fluctuations in female power within a single text. *God and the Goddesses* illuminates the changes in a particular figure’s –say, Natura’s–voice and authority across texts and across time, but the scope of Newman’s study does not lend itself to addressing such things as the way in which the Pearl-Maiden’s authority waxes and wanes over the course of *Pearl*. *Pearl* confirms some of Newman’s general observations about female personifications and guide-figures, in that the maiden does have a privileged contact with Christ, and her eloquence, counsel, and knowledge of Scripture are presented as trustworthy within the poem; however, in many ways the relationship between the Maiden and the male dreamer is so ambiguous, so murky and so perverse that it exceeds Newman’s thesis and, I argue, ultimately undercuts the efficacy of female authority in the poem.

For the bulk of *Pearl*’s reception history, most scholars have interpreted the ending of *Pearl* optimistically, as a successful work of consolation in which the narrator turns to the sacraments of the church and comes to terms with his loss. Over the last two decades, however, more critics have found the narrator’s acceptance of his “Prynce3 paye” to be grudging and incomplete. In addition, several recent essays have identified an irresolvable tension between the poet’s skill with the literal and the visual, and the

⁷⁹ Newman, 298.

doctrinal messages purveyed by the Maiden to trust faith and Scripture more than sensory experience. Sarah Stanbury notes that despite the Maiden's early urging of "ocular skepticism," the poet, through the narrator, subverts her exhortation by continuing to provide intensely detailed visuals throughout the narrative.⁸⁰ Similarly, in a discussion of *Cleanness*, David Wallace observes, "Such shifts [from the literal to the allegorical] are always disorientating because the poet is such a master of the literal level: like the unfortunate guest at the banquet we become captivated by surface detail and oblivious to all else, until the literal is abruptly interrupted or discarded."⁸¹ Ad Putter has likewise suggested that "accommodation in *Pearl* is never truly accommodating": when the Maiden uses earthly analogies, whether of class hierarchies to describe the social structure of heaven, or of the city of Jerusalem to describe heaven, her seeming concessions to the Jeweller's modes of understanding only add to his alienation and confusion.⁸² In contrast to, say, Dante's ecstatic merging with his celestial vision in *Paradiso*, throughout *Pearl* there is a sense of ongoing discomfort in the struggle of both reader and narrator to detach from the exquisitely rendered tangible details of the vision and to embrace the doctrinal messages.

⁸⁰ Sarah Stanbury, *Seeing the Gawain-Poet: Description and the Act of Perception* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 16-17.

⁸¹ David Wallace, "Cleanness and the Terms of Terror" in *Text and Matter: New Critical Perspectives of the Pearl-Poet*, eds. Robert J. Blanch, Miriam Youngerman Miller and Julian Wasserman (Troy, NY: Whitston, 1991), 99-100.

⁸² Ad Putter, *An Introduction to the Gawain-Poet* (London: Longman Press, 1996), 162.

The Jeweller's Role Confusions and Genre Confusions

With a density and economy characteristic of the whole poem, the opening stanza manages to conjure up several genres and potential contexts at once. The first eight lines suggest a merchant narrator and an implied aristocratic audience almost immediately, since these lines contain several stock phrases drawn from verse lapidaries⁸³:

Perle, pleasaunte to prynces paye
 To clanly clos in golde so clere,
 Oute of oryent, I hardyly saye,
 Ne proued I neuer her precios pere.
 So rounde, so reken in vche araye,
 So smal, so smoþe her syde • were,
 Quere-so-euer I jugged gemme • gaye,
 I sette hyr sengeley in synglere.
 Allas! I leste hyr in on erbere;
 Pur • gresse to grounde hit fro me yot.
 I dewyne, fordolked of luf-daungere
 Of þat pryuy perle wythouten spot. (1-12)⁸⁴

The first stanza uses imagery that belongs to both a secular courtly context and a sacred context, narrated by a mercantile, appraising voice. The description of the pearl as “oute of Oryent” suggests the pearl’s worldly rarity, but also suggests Paradise, which was deemed to be in the Orient. As numerous critics have observed, the “erbere” of line 9 belongs both to courtly love and to such sacred contexts as the Song of Songs. The gendering of the lost gem fluctuates between “hyr” and “hit,” but the mention of “luf-daungere” steers the reader (for the moment) toward the assumption that the speaker is pining for a lost beloved.

A reader of *Pearl* is beguiled not only by the visual attractions of the text, but also by a tantalizing desire to figure out the precise nature of the Jeweller’s attachment to the

⁸³ See Bishop, 82. Bishop sees three stock elements within the first two lines.

⁸⁴ All quotations of the poem are from *Pearl*, ed. E.V. Gordon (1953; rpt. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974).

Pearl and the nature of his loss. Many scholars have been tempted to attribute a particular identity for the Pearl-Maiden and to assign a single symbolic meaning to the image of the pearl. *Pearl*'s accretion of multiple associations and meanings for a single word or image also leads to a disturbing multiplicity of possible roles structuring the relationship between the dreamer and the Pearl-Maiden. "So smal, so smope her syde • were," (6) conjoins mercantile appraisal of a gem with a courtly lover's sensual appreciation—and both of these modes of appreciation subsequently inflect the Jeweller's fatherly loss (once his fatherliness is implied in line 233) in ways that are not wholly savory. The mention of "þat pryuy perle" adds to a sense of possessiveness on the Jeweller's part. The convergence of mercantile, fatherly and courtly love language conveys a sense that something about the Jeweller's attachment to the pearl is unwholesome, as well as spiritually immature.

The poem delays definition of the dreamer's loss until line 233, and even then avoids complete precision, leaving room for the meaning of 'sister,' although 'daughter' is the likeliest meaning: "Ho wat • me nerre þen aunte or nece." The Jeweller's attribution of multiple roles to the Pearl-Maiden as his lost gem, lover, and daughter, creates a readerly unease: his attachment is of too many kinds. Because the Jeweller is the narrator of the poem, and because this dream-vision does not immediately give the reader an understanding of the dream events that is superior to the Jeweller's, his ongoing perversity is to some extent the poem's ongoing perversity, especially in the first five sections of the poem. Of course, if the Jeweller had promptly recognized his own perversity and commended the Maiden's soul to God's care, the poem would not exist.

The Jeweller suffers from genre confusion as well as role confusion. Like many a celestial pilgrim, the Jeweller does not seem to realize the nature of the narrative that he inhabits. In this case, the Jeweller does not know he is in a Christian *consolatio* until the very end of the poem. Like the protagonist of a courtly romance, he persists in his pursuit of the Maiden and refuses to accept her distancing of him. He also reproaches her for causing his torment in a manner befitting a courtly lover:

'In blysse I se þe blyþely blent,
And I a man al mornyf mate;
 •e take þeron ful lyttel tente,
Pa • I hente ofte harme • hate. (385-88)

Like a courtly lover, he proclaims his suffering and chides her for appearing unmoved by his state. The Jeweller's refusal to be discouraged by the Maiden's separation from him and his persistence might be praised in a chivalric romance, but the Maiden condemns these qualities as sinful attachment to the mutable that prevents devotion to the eternal.

From the beginning, the poem both establishes and critiques a troubling, yet titillating, ambiguity and multiplicity of roles in the relationship between the Jeweller and his lost pearl. The many possible meanings of "jeweller" in the late fourteenth century create a range of possible relationships between the Jeweller and the Maiden.⁸⁵ "Jeweller" most commonly meant a merchant or trader of precious stones, or an appraiser of jewels, though it could also mean a craftsman who worked or set the gems. Jewellers served aristocrats, but were not of the aristocratic class.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ For two thorough recent discussions of the various meanings of "jeweler" and "jewel," see Felicity Riddy, "Jewels in Pearl," in *A Companion to The Gawain-Poet*, eds. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997), 143-155; see also Helen Barr, "Pearl—Or 'The Jeweller's Tale,'" *Medium Aevum*, Vol. 69 (2000), 59-78.

⁸⁶ See Barr, 59, and Riddy, 149.

A reader can thus discern opposing hierarchies in the Jeweller-Pearl relationship; the Pearl can be seen either as the luxury object of exchange shaped and traded by the Jeweller, or as the aristocratic patron who employs him. At the beginning of his grief-fueled fantasy, the Jeweller refers to the Pearl alternately as “hyr” and “hit”, as both girl and object. He speaks of appraising gems and of setting her apart as unique: “Quere-so-euer I jugged gemme • gaye, /I sette hyr sengeley in synglere.” (7-8). These early lines show the dreamer imagining his own power to appraise and to place the pearl in a setting of his choice. The metaphors of “a father is a jeweller” and “a daughter is a jewel” initially suggest that death has cheated the Jeweller-father of his imagined fatherly prerogative (by the late fourteenth century, a prerogative no longer secure) to “place his daughter in a favorable setting” by arranging her marriage.⁸⁷ Conversely, the heavenly Maiden, figured as an aristocrat, exerts power over the Jeweller, if one considers that jewellers were merchants employed by aristocratic patrons. Critics have often explained the Pearl-Maiden’s authoritative gaze and words as spiritual authority, as teacherly or even as motherly authority, but the Jeweller’s own focus upon the Maiden’s aristocratic demeanor and apparel certainly suggests her aristocratic authority as well.⁸⁸ Although the Maiden’s aristocratic apparel and jewels are clearly metaphors for spiritual riches, the Jeweller’s continued focus upon his “lyttel quene” keeps the literal and courtly aspects of the imagery in tension with its spiritual meanings.

By the end of the poem, the number of roles structuring the Jeweller-Maiden dyad has become impossibly layered; the Jeweller can be seen as pining courtly

⁸⁷ See Riddy, “Jewels in Pearl,” 152.

⁸⁸ Sarah Stanbury, in her introduction to the TEAMS edition of *Pearl*, sees the Maiden’s authority over the dreamer as a motherly one; recent readings by David Aers and Nicholas Watson foreground the courtliness of both the Maiden and of Christ in *Pearl*.

lover/father/merchant /pupil/ Mary Magdalene (fallen mankind) and the Pearl-Maiden as courtly beloved/ daughter/patron/luxury commodity/teacher/perfected soul. Part of the narrative danger and pleasure of this poem is sorting out which of these roles are in play at any given moment; part of the narrative resolution provided by the poem is the eventual simplification of the Maiden's roles. At the end of the poem, the Jeweller accepts, very grudgingly, that the Maiden is no longer part of this murky, ill-defined earthly economy, but is instead one of Christ's brides in heaven's paradoxical economy (an egalitarian aristocracy!) and one of the blessed.

Pearl makes a frequent double gesture of visual seduction followed by reproach. As a text, *Pearl* is visually luscious, nearly cinematic.⁸⁹ The poem's language and imagery work to stimulate the same pleasure, amazement and acquisitiveness in the reader as is experienced by the Jeweller-mourner, yet both the Jeweller and the reader are chided and corrected by the Pearl-Maiden for such attachment to the tangible and the visible. The poem at once ironizes and endorses the reliability of the visual domain. On the one hand, the Maiden affirms the trustworthiness of appearances and of sensory data. Near the beginning of the debate, the Maiden chides the Jeweller for his grief, and she argues that the beauty of the garden demonstrates that she is not lost at all:

'Sir, •e haf your tale mysetente,
To say your perle is al awaye,
Pat is in cofer so comly clente
As in þis gardyn gracios gaye,
Her were a forser for þe, in faye,
If pou were a gentyl jueler. (257-60, 263-64)

⁸⁹ See Sarah Stanbury, "Gazing Toward Jerusalem: Space and Perception in *Pearl*," in her *Seeing the Gawain Poet: Description and the Act of Perception* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991). In a later essay, Stanbury discusses the ways that feminist film theory and notions of a normative male gaze illuminate and fail to illuminate the visual dynamics structuring *Pearl*; see her "Feminist Masterplots: The Gaze on the Body of Pearl's Dead Girl," in *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature*, eds. Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 96-115.

The Maiden uses the visual beauty of her new “cofer” to prove that in all the important ways, she endures. On the one hand, as is common in hagiography and in late medieval incarnation theology more generally, grace is tangible, as it is in the Earthly Paradise of the Jeweller’s dream, with its sweet fragrances and luminosity. Yet at the beginning of the following section, the Maiden declares, “I halde þat iueler lyttel to prayse /þat leue • wel þat he se • wyth y • e,” (301-02). The poem oscillates between invoking the fantasy of heaven as a realm where beauty reliably signifies inner virtue (much as language before Adam’s Fall was held to possess perfect truth-value), and critiquing the dreamer’s reliance upon visual confirmation and his literal-mindedness in interpreting what he sees.

Armored Femininity and Liquid Masculinities

At the level of imagery and symbolism, *Pearl* inverts the misogynist topos of women as porous, susceptible, and liquid. The idea of “woman as flood” has persisted through the centuries, from the familiar Aristotelian identifications of the female body “with breaches in boundaries, with lack of shape or definition, with openings and exudings and spillings forth” that Bynum has described, through the early modern “leaky vessel” discourse that Gail Paster has identified, and on to Elizabeth Grosz’s discussion of late-twentieth-century tendencies toward “the elision of fluids in the male body and the derogation of the female body in terms of the various forms of uncontrollable flow.”

⁹⁰ The seamless, armored body of the Pearl counters this tradition. The symbol of the

⁹⁰ Caroline Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 109; Gail Paster, “Leaky Vessels” in *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993) 23-51; Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), xiii. The phrase “woman as flood” is derived from Klaus Theweleit’s *Male Fantasies*, concerning the Nazi Freikorps fantasies of armored masculinities destroying the potential contaminant of female flow.

pearl transcends even the idea of armor—a pearl is hard and solid to the core, and through accretion it consists entirely of armor. This extreme solidity is mitigated solely by the medieval notion that pearls formed around dew from heaven; this origin links the Pearl-Maiden in a subtle way with the river of the New Jerusalem, with the waters of baptism, and with the blood of the Lamb. But the metaphor of the pearl, linking the literal gem to a female body, suggests that the Maiden's body is itself an unbreachable enclosure, an ideal anchorhold. *Pearl's* metaphor of the pearl-as-female-body also resonates curiously with late-twentieth- and twenty-first-century preoccupations with cyborg machine-bodies and armored bodies, both male and female.⁹¹

Many critics have noted that the Pearl-Maiden resembles the guides of several prior dream-visions—among them Boethius' Lady Philosophy, Guillaume's Lady Reason, Alain de Lille's Dame Nature, Dante's Beatrice and Langland's Holy Church. Like many of these female allegorical figures, the Maiden is both visually and verbally authoritative. She speaks as a voice of reason rather than passion. As mentioned above, what makes the Pearl-Maiden unusual as a guide in a dream-vision is the extraordinary complexity of her relationship to the dreamer. Her relationship to the male dreamer is loaded with a far greater range of possible meanings and conflicting roles than is the case with dreamer-guide pairings in other dream-visions.

Because the Pearl-Maiden is not represented as permeable, fluid, or as suffering an ordeal in imitation of Christ, the text must find other ways of connecting her to Christ. The Maiden at first resembles the aloof, resurrected Christ in the *noli me tangere* episode, with the mourning dreamer behaving like a far more obtuse and intractable version of

⁹¹ See *Fantasy Girls: Gender in the New Universe of Science Fiction and Fantasy Television*, ed. Elyce Rae Helford (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2000), which contains essays on armored or cyborg femininities.

Mary Magdalene. As Lynn Staley has demonstrated, “the lessons Mary was thought to have learned from Christ on Easter morning are the lessons the narrator of *Pearl* learns from the Maiden.”⁹² Staley notes several parallels between *Pearl* and the *noli me tangere* episode: both works answer the problem of death with Christian resurrection; both mourners want to “prove” the fact of resurrection through sensory confirmation (Mary by touching Christ, the Jeweller by crossing the river); both mourners are distressed by being unable to locate the lost person (the Jeweller’s Pearl is lost in the grass, Mary cannot find Christ’s body); both mourners are compelled to respect a boundary between themselves and the resurrected love; both mourners receive spiritual counsel that directs them back to the world—Mary must go and tell the other disciples the news, and the Jeweller must return to the sacraments of the church.⁹³ Though *Pearl* often represents the unbridgeable distance between the Jeweller and the Maiden in terms of courtly love, the *noli me tangere* episode is also invoked.

The Maiden resembles the virgin saints in her emotional remoteness from the Jeweller and her indifference to the earthly family ties that she has transcended. Just as the heavenly Jerusalem is represented as a city of jewels, light, and “hard permanence,” as A. C. Spearing put it, the Maiden’s connection to a literal pearl imbues her persona with a cool hardness as well. If the Maiden were the abstract personification of Reason or Philosophy, her stern rebukes of the Jeweller’s grief might seem less harsh. In fact, Boethius’ Lady Philosophy seems empathic compared to the Pearl-Maiden, since Lady Philosophy occasionally expresses great warmth and concern about Boethius’ emotional distress, wipes the tears from his eyes with the fold of her dress, and

⁹² Lynn Staley, *The Voice of the Gawain Poet*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), 147.

⁹³ Staley, 147.

acknowledges his grief. P. M. Kean, writing some thirty-five years before Barbara Newman's proposed category of "imaginative theology" and proposed term "allegorical goddesses," has argued that the Maiden has more in common with the virgin saints, and with the blessed Virgin as mediatrix, than with "those shadowy figures which belong to metaphysics rather than to poetry."⁹⁴ The Maiden does resemble Mary in her role as advocate for humankind, since she uses her intimacy with the Lamb to mediate on behalf of the Jeweller, and to obtain for him the right to witness the glory of the New Jerusalem. The poem also identifies the Maiden as one of 144,000 queens of heaven, while preserving Mary's status as supreme queen by having the Maiden fall to her knees in praise:

'Cortayse Quen', þenne sayde þat gaye,
 Knelande to grounde, folde vp hyr face,
 'Makele • Moder and myrrest May,
 Blessed bygynner of vch a grace!' (433-436)

The Maiden does possess the authority of a heavenly queen, but as in Dante's *Paradiso*, hierarchy is, impossibly, at once abolished and maintained.

Though the Pearl-Maiden is later presented as one of the Lamb's 144,000 brides, early on in the poem she is made to resemble Christ himself. But the Maiden's *imitatio Christi* is not of the suffering Christ on the cross, but of the more remote, resurrected Christ. The representation of the Pearl-Maiden does follow a certain eucharistic logic: like Christ, she can assume both a visually authoritative human form and a tiny, round, consumable form. As the narrator first describes her, the Maiden appears to be an actual gem, a small luxury item of exchange; once she begins to instruct the dreamer, the Maiden possesses a paradoxical presence like Christ's. She is simultaneously an

⁹⁴ Kean, 132.

eloquent, authoritative guide and an item of consumption, albeit perfect and rare. Over the course of the poem, the Pearl comes to represent the eucharist itself: in the first section of the poem, the Pearl is likened to a seed whose death occasions new life. Still more specifically, “the round pearl enclosed in gold denotes a round, white, eucharistic wafer, displayed in a monstrance.”⁹⁵ Both the pearl and the wafer have often been glossed as humble in their small size; one evidence of Christ’s humility was His willingness to take the form of a tiny wafer.

In *Pearl* it is male bodies that are susceptible, fluid, permeable; the male dreamer is penetrated, overwhelmed, physically affected, ravished by both the sight of the Pearl-Maiden and by the sight of Christ. This sense of the dreamer’s susceptibility to marvelous spectacle begins early on in the poem. For example, the poem presents the “adubbement” (variously translated as ‘adornment’ or ‘wonderment’) of the landscape as an active force that flows into the dreamer:

The dubbement dere of doun and dale •,
 Of wod and water and wlonk playne •,
Bylde in me blys, *abated* my bale •,
Fordidden my stresse, *dystried* my payne •.
 Doun after a strem þat dry •ly hale •
 I bowed in blys, *bredful* my brayne •;
 (121-126, emphases mine)

The beauty of this crafted landscape lifts the spirits of the dreamer in an *expolitio*, a series of four emphatic, nearly synonymous verbs. The phrase “bredful my braynes,” (‘my brains brimful’) suggests that the visuals are a kind of liquid pouring into the dreamer through his eyes, nearly overwhelming him.

⁹⁵ Sarah Stanbury, “Introduction,” in Stanbury’s TEAMS edition of *Pearl* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2001), 10.

Later on, in Section VII and thereafter, the Jeweller is associated with unruly masculine flow. At the beginning of Section VII, the Jeweller apologizes for his uncontainable emotions:

'Ne worþe no wrathþe vnto my Lorde,
If rapely I raue, spornande in spelle.
My herte wat • al wyth mysse remorde,
As wallande water got • out of welle. (361-364)

He apologizes for his stumbling speech, and describes his heart as gushing forth with loss and grief. The Jeweller's overflowing pain both parallels and inverts the gushing-forth of Christ's Crucifixion; his "mysse" is a self-centered rather than a self-sacrificing pain. This image of the Jeweller's outflow is also contrasted later with God's abundant outflow: "He laue • hys gyfte • as water of dyche, /Oþer gote • of golf þat neuer charde" (607-08). The images used to convey the Jeweller's verbal and emotional incontinence closely resemble those used to describe God's boundless generosity.

Though he is mindful of his emotional excess, the Jeweller remains unable to control it until the final section of the poem. His mention of his own "rash ravings" connects him to the ultimate figure of male unruliness, the stock tyrant-figure of hagiography. The Maiden strengthens this connection by repeatedly calling him mad: "Me þynk þe put in a mad porpose," (267) and, "Wy borde • e men? So madde • e be!" (290). His similarity to the madness and emotional excess of the tyrant archetype persists until his defeat/enlightenment at the poem's conclusion. While it is true that *Pearl* as a whole sidesteps the "heroics of virginity," the Jeweller does resemble the tyrants from earlier saints' lives in the sense of being obviously victimized by his own desire.

⁹⁶Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, speaking of the virgin *passio*, observes of the hagiographic tyrant that “his ability to gaze rationally, wholly and commandingly becomes dishevelled and fractured on the body of the virgin.”⁹⁷ *Pearl* XX dramatizes the Jeweller’s helplessness before his own desire and echoes the concerns of the passage from section VII. While in section VII he is unable to contain his affect, in section XX he is unable to keep “delyt” outside his boundaries:

Delyt me drof in y•e and ere,
My mane• mynde to maddyng malte; (1153-1154)

Hit payed hym not þat I so flonc
Ouer meruelous mere•, so mad arayde.
Of raas þa• I were rasch and ronk,
•et rapely þerinne I wat• restrayed.
For, ry•t as I sparred vnto þe bonc (1165-1169)

The Jeweller cannot prevent his inundation, with “delyt” streaming into his eyes and ears; his loss of internal boundaries is suggested by the alliteration of his ‘mind melting into madness.’ His behavior blends the volatility of the hagiographic tyrant with the longing of the bereaved lover. He is aggressive and transgressive, rushing to cross the river, yet he is feminized by the syntax of “delight drove into my eye and ear.” This syntax also recalls the means by which Christ was conceived: the divine Logos entered Mary through her ear. In this moment, the Jeweller is both penetrated by “delyt,” and he makes an impetuous attempt to violate the boundary of the heavenly river. He is swiftly checked by being awakened from his dream.

Pearl’s other form of “masculine flow” is Christ’s. Long before the Jeweller actually witnesses Christ as the Lamb, the Pearl-Maiden describes the flowing of blood

⁹⁶ Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, “The Virgin’s Tale,” in *Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature: The Wife of Bath and All her Sect*, eds. Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson (London: Routledge, 1994), 165-94.

⁹⁷ Wogan-Browne, 178.

and water from Christ's side-wound. The Maiden interprets the Crucifixion, the ordeal of her "lemman," for the Jeweller in successive iterations. She emphasizes Christ's blood as a cleansing remedy for Adam's sin, as the water of baptism, and as the source of her own innocence:

'Innoghe þer wax out of þat welle,
Blod and water of brode wounde. ...
þe water is baptem, þe soþe to telle,
þat fol•ed þe glayue so grymly grounde,
þat wasche• away þe gylte• felle
þat Adam wyth inne deth vus drounde...(649-50, 653-56)

The Maiden makes the traditional comparison of Christ's wound to the well or fountain of grace, and emphasizes the purifying qualities of Christ's blood rather than its nourishing role as eucharistic wine. The sacrament of baptism, more than devout works, is the guarantee of the innocence that is always saved.

The blood and water from Christ's side-wound is a *limen*, a boundary marker, like the two rivers of the dream-world. P.M. Kean has observed that the river that separates the Jeweller from the Earthly Paradise and the river that separates him from the Kingdom of Heaven are both described with the word "mere•," (141, 1166), and she also notes that it is easy to confuse the two rivers.⁹⁸ Since the rivers provide a firm boundary between earthly beings and perfected Christian souls, they are subtly connected to the waters of baptism, which themselves have a liminal function, separating the saved from the unsaved. Christ's blood, both as cleansing baptism and as eucharistic food, serves to distinguish insiders from outsiders in the Christian social body. This subtle link to the rivers, which have been steady presences in the poem, suggests that Christ's presence is

⁹⁸ P.M. Kean, 205.

close at hand in the very landscape, long before readers or the Jeweller recognize this proximity.

While the Jeweller's witnessing of the Lamb's wound is privileged by delay, occurring at line 1135, only 77 lines from the end of the poem, some critics have noted that the Jeweller's response to the sight of Christ's side-wound seems rather mild compared to his obsessive and intense responses to the sight of the Maiden:

So worply whyt wern wede • hys,
His loke • symple, hymself so gent.
Bot a wounde ful wyde and weete con wyse
Anende hys hert, þur • hyde torente.
Of his quyte syde his blod outsprent.
Alas, þo • t I, who did þat spyt?
Ani breste for bale a • t haf forbrent
Er he þerto hade had delyt. (1133-40)

The Jeweller's exclamation and question "Alas, who did that spite?" does sound anticlimactic and naïve. The line that follows, "any breast should have burned in torment" conveys a tone of obligatory piety rather than reporting what the Jeweller himself felt while gazing at the Lamb's wound.

The Poetics of Intromission: The Celestial Pilgrim's Gaze, The Courtly Lover's Gaze and the Eucharistic Gaze

In *Pearl*, the dreamer's seeing often resembles either eating or inundation, sight flooding the dreamer through his eyes. The ocular hunger and ocular ravishment experienced by the dreamer can readily be understood in terms of the medieval theory of intromission. In *Pearl*, the dreamer's seeing is almost like touching or ingesting the sights that he sees. Michael Camille notes that

...During the Middle Ages there were two quite different theories of how the eye grasps an object—extromission and intromission. Extromission viewed the eye as a lamp that sent out fiery visual rays, which literally lighted upon an object and made it visible....The alternative theory, called intromission, reversed the argument: the image, not the eye, sent forth rays. ...The eye's receptive status was often made evident in images of people experiencing visions, where rays were depicted as flowing from the divine object to the experiencing subject.⁹⁹

The Jeweller's gaze is inflected by various forms of intromission: by the sacred visionary tradition, by the scopic economy of courtly love and by the late medieval eucharistic practice of gazing upon the elevated host. In all three of these contexts, sights enter and profoundly transform the beholder. I wish to focus primarily on the influence of the latter two contexts, the courtly and the eucharistic.

I will discuss the celestial pilgrim's gaze (of the sacred visionary tradition) only briefly here, since I explore this form of intromission in *Pearl* in the section on masculine flow and permeability. *Pearl* is scarcely unique in describing the inundation of the celestial pilgrim by sacred sights and by sacred light. As just one example, in *Paradiso* XXX, 58-90, Beatrice urges Dante the pilgrim to "drink in" a river of light in the Empyrean with his eyes; once his eyes have "drunk," the pilgrim begins to see the formation of the souls of the Elect into the celestial rose. As in *Pearl*, seeing for Dante's pilgrim is often a kind of consumption of or inundation by the sacred.

While the pilgrim's gaze upon the sacred often involves a blissful-yet-fearful ravishment through the viewer's eyes, the courtly gaze is often signaled by the internal anguish of the beholder. Before the Jeweller even encounters the Maiden, his extreme torment tempts the reader to view him as a courtly lover: "I dewyne, fordolke of luf-daungere/ Of þat pryuy perle wythouten spot" (11-12). Line 11, an *expolitio*, twice

⁹⁹ Michael Camille, *Gothic Art: Glorious Visions* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996), 22.

expresses the Jeweller's pining away and desolation. The rhetorical figure of *expolitio*, the repetition of the same idea in different terms, is used constantly throughout Pearl.¹⁰⁰ The syntactic redundancy of *expolitio* works beautifully to convey the Jeweller's obsessive fixation. In the second stanza, the Jeweller again emphasizes his pain in repeated synonyms. His watching for and longing for the Pearl "dot • bot þrych my hert þrange, /My breste in bale bot bolne and bele" ("does but pierce my heart grievously/ My breast in pain but swells and burns," 17-18). The Jeweller's excruciating awareness of and imprisonment in his own anguish, along with his expansive expression of his "luf-longynge," strengthen the impression that a courtly beloved is what he has lost. (At the same time, the images of the garden, the flowers and spices, connect this "luf-daungere" to the Song of Songs just as plausibly).

The Jeweller describes and gazes upon the Maiden in the manner of a courtly lover, but with a mercantile attention to her accessories as well. In section IV, the Jeweller begins by reporting his "drede" and silence as he approaches the Maiden. His description of the Maiden is not precisely the head-to-toe *effictio* recommended by Geoffrey of Vinsauf. His description focuses even more upon the Maiden's fine white clothing and adornment in pearls than upon her complexion and her solemn countenance. In conventional fashion, and like most aristocratic ladies, the Maiden physically resembles the Virgin Mary with her gray eyes, white complexion, golden hair, and serious demeanor.

Not surprisingly, given section IV's link-word "py • t," meaning "set, placed, fastened, arrayed, dressed, decorated," this section emphasizes the Maiden's clothing,

¹⁰⁰ See Sylvia Tomasch, "A Pearl Punnology," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 88 (1989), 1-20.

crown and jewelry. Just as the Green Knight and his horse in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* appear to be a microcosm of green and gold in every detail and every accessory, so the Pearl-Maiden is a presence covered with pearls. On one level, as in *Patience* and *Cleanness*, the Maiden's clothing represents the spotless state of her soul. On another level, this purity is expressed in terms of luxurious aristocratic adornment, and this detailed focus upon the Maiden's accessories also conveys the dazzled, acquisitive, fetishizing gaze of the Jeweller. The past-tense verb "py • t" suggests not only adornment but more subtly a sense of enclosure and of fixity of place. The sense of enclosure is clearest in the image of the "py • t coroune" (205) encircling her head. Similarly, a great pearl, later linked to the Pearl of Price, is set firmly in the middle of her bosom: "Bot a wonder perle wythouten wemme /Inmydde • hyr breste wat • sette so sure" (221-22). The Maiden's enclosure in "hir araye ryalle" (191) and the sense of her fixity, her staunch placement, contrasts with the Jeweller's explosive, messy affect and his efforts to transgress the boundary separating him from the saved souls in heaven. These connotations of "py • t" also prepare the reader for the Maiden's subsequent reference in section V to the earthly paradise as a comely coffer that would be properly appreciated by a "gentyl" Jeweller.

In addition to the visual ravishment of a pilgrim dreamer, or the anguished-yet-fetishizing gaze of the courtly lover, the third form of intromission that operates in *Pearl* can be called "the eucharistic gaze." By the late Middle Ages, the elevation of the consecrated host had become the climactic moment of the mass, and gazing upon the host was widely considered to be a potent form of consuming and assimilating Christ. Caroline Bynum describes the excitement of the moment of consecration: "Whether or

not one held or tasted the wafer, one could meet Christ at the moment of his descent into the elements—a descent that paralleled and recapitulated the Incarnation.”¹⁰¹ While the clergy sought to retain control over Christ’s bodily presence by insisting that only actual eating of the eucharist could generate grace, Miri Rubin points out that there was “a growing notion of ‘spiritual communion’ which could be experienced through a fervent viewing, even without tasting, of Christ.”¹⁰² Rubin dryly reports that from the late thirteenth century through the fourteenth century, there are numerous clerical documents attesting to the difficulty of getting the laity to stay for the entire mass, after the high point of consecration and elevation.¹⁰³ In the context of *Pearl*, the Jeweller’s seeing partakes of eucharistic gazing in that the sights he sees enter him in powerful, boundary-dissolving ways, and yet, his persistent incorrigibility suggests that the sight of Christ in his dream has not been efficacious in transforming him spiritually. A familiar paradox of communion is that in swallowing Christ, Christ swallows the celebrant into the Christian social body; the celebrant assimilates into Christ’s body upon consuming Him. But in *Pearl*, even *after* witnessing Christ’s wound, the Jeweller’s hungriest, most ecstatic gaze remains fixed upon the Maiden. It is with a certain resignation that the Jeweller redirects his devotion to the sacraments, in the final lines of the poem. He finally commits his pearl to the care of God:

...In Kryste • dere blessyng and myn,
 Pat in þe forme of bred and wyn
 Þe preste vus schewe • vch a daye.
 He gef vus to be His homly hyne

¹⁰¹ Caroline Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 53.

¹⁰² Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1991), 64.

¹⁰³ Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 151-54.

Ande precious perle • vnto his pay.
Amen. (1208-12)

The very conclusion of the poem foregrounds the necessity of priestly mediation in order to become a pearl that pleases God, one of “His homly hyne,” humble servants.

Christ as the Ultimate Aristocrat

Heavenliness is figured in terms of courtliness in a great many late medieval works, perhaps most famously in Dante’s *Paradiso*, but the merging of celestial and aristocratic attributes in *Pearl* goes beyond mere convention in its persistence. Courtly language is both the ironic medium that conveys the dreamer-narrator’s attachment to the material, tangible world and his comically limited understanding of the spiritual world, and the trustworthy medium used by the Pearl-Maiden for explaining the principles and dynamics governing the heavenly realm.¹⁰⁴ While some critics see an ambivalence in *Pearl*’s use of courtly imagery and language, others see a vigorous, indeed excessive, accommodation of the heavenly world to the values of England’s 14th-century lay aristocracy.¹⁰⁵ I am most interested in the gender implications of Christ’s representation as an aristocratic bridegroom in sections XVIII and XIX. The Lamb’s possession of a huge “meyny” dressed in his livery, along with the change of the chaste men of Revelation into brides, make it impossible to view Christ as a thoroughly feminized figure here, despite his whiteness and his flowing side-wound.

Although the opening and closing allusions to a “Prince’s paye” obviously connects Christ to a courtly context, the Lamb’s huge, white, blindingly bright entourage

¹⁰⁴ Charlotte Gross, “Courtly Language in Pearl,” in R. Blanch, M. Miller, and J. Wasserman, *Text and Matter: New Critical Perspectives of the Pearl-Poet* (Troy, NY: Whitston Press, 1991), 79-91.

¹⁰⁵ See Nicholas Watson, “The Gawain Poet as Vernacular Theologian,” in *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, eds. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 1997), 293-313.

in sections XVIII and XIX is the central image that constructs Christ as the ultimate aristocrat. The pun on “lamb” and lamp” allows the poet to emphasize Christ’s role as the divine light illuminating “þe bor • ” (the ‘city/castle/estate’) of heaven:

Of sunne ne mone had þay no nede;
 Þe self God wat • her lombe-ly • t,
 Þe Lombe her lantyrne, wythouten drede;
 Pur • hym blysned þe bor • al bry • t. (1045-48)

Both God and the Lamb provide “lombe-ly • t.” The notion of Christ as a light-source gradually takes on aristocratic associations. While the Book of Revelation includes the mention of the white robes of the blessed surrounding the Lamb, the language of *Pearl* suggests a fourteenth-century aristocratic context. The Jeweller becomes aware of a “prosessyoun” (1096) of virgins dressed just like the Pearl-Maiden, whose dazzling, luxurious garb was described in every detail in Section IV. He goes on to describe the “vergyne • ” as wearing matching livery: “And alle in sute her liuré • wasse” (1108). He twice refers to the Lamb’s “meyny,” (1127,1145) which can be translated specifically as “retinue,” as well as more broadly as “company” or “household.” Section XIX presents the Lamb as possessing a “meyny schene” (1145), a bright, shining retinue, all sharing his “liuré • , ” thus projecting the awe-inspiring social presence and self-display to which fourteenth-century aristocrats aspired.

The heavenly procession is a key instance of what Nicholas Watson terms the Pearl-poet’s “aristocratised theology”; the aristocratic markings of the procession are crafted to reinforce the spiritual meanings of whiteness and luminosity in *Pearl*. The trope of light is almost inseparable from the ideas of vision, knowledge, and spiritual illumination; light has long been used as a metaphor for spiritual understanding. And as

Ian Bishop has demonstrated, the white robes of the maidens closely resemble the ceremonial clothing of the newly baptized.¹⁰⁶ The Maiden has spoken of Christ's blood as the waters of baptism, and has also described how "In Hys blod He wesch my wede on dese" (766). The procession suggests baptized innocence and opulent aristocratic pageantry simultaneously.

Sarah Grace Heller, writing of a "luminescent ideal" within the *Roman de la Rose*, describes a class conflict over the possession of light. Heller's analyses lend themselves readily to *Pearl's* depiction of the Lamb's "meyny". Heller notes that in the late Middle Ages "Whether for priest, artisan, noble, or bourgeois, whether male or female, group or individual, beauty required the possession of light."¹⁰⁷ She then describes not only late medieval consumption of luminescence in its varied forms (candles, torches, cosmetics, precious stones, light-reflecting fabrics) but even attempts by the powerful to monopolize luminescence through sumptuary laws. Heller observes that luxurious, reflective fabrics could increase the wearer's luminosity, and that livery could symbolically increase one's social presence and augment one's prestige: "Dressing companions was a way of increasing one's personal visual surface-area."¹⁰⁸ As the Light of the World, one would imagine that Christ would need no further augmentation of his personal luminosity. But the Jeweller takes pains to describe the Lamb's "wedes" as prized pearls, and His 144,000 brides dressed in matching livery, reflecting and extending his "lombe-ly • t" throughout the New Jerusalem.

¹⁰⁶ Ian Bishop, *Pearl in Its Setting*, 114.

¹⁰⁷ Sarah Grace Heller, "Light as Glamour: The Luminescent ideal of Beauty in the *Roman de la Rose*," *Speculum*, Vol. 76, No. 4, 2001, 934-59, 934.

¹⁰⁸ Heller, 948.

The Pearl-poet makes a significant alteration of Revelation by changing the 144,000 chaste men of the Apocalypse into maidens. While “maydennez” (869) in Middle English could refer to both men and women, the term “vyue• ” conjures up the image of Christ with 144,000 brides. The Maiden says “Pe Lambes vyue• in blysse we bene, / A hondred and forty fowre powsande flot” (785-86). The gendering of the Lamb’s “meyny” as wives creates an effect of sudden proliferation, an impression that the Jeweller’s “lyttel quene” (1147) has abruptly been multiplied. The Jeweller’s object of obsession, unique in his eyes, “set singly in synglere,” is suddenly revealed to be one of 144,000. While *Pearl* does have moments of the proliferation that appears throughout the *House of Fame*, proliferation and abundance in *Pearl* do not signal disorder -- the poem contains everything within firm numerological and metrical patterns.

The aristocratic visual codes assume all the more importance given that certain available contemporary depictions of Christ are absent. Since the New Jerusalem, despite the steady citation of *Revelation*, is set after the terrors of the Apocalypse, the stern, judging aspect of Christ –Christ as warrior-- is minimized, and his potential teacherly aspect is also omitted. Figured as the Lamb, *Pearl*’s Christ is paradoxically a body-in-process, His wound perpetually flowing, yet also completed and tranquil. Christ’s silence foregrounds His visual presence, His authority as a spectacle, both aristocratic and eucharistic.

The Illusion of Discipline: Pearl’s Textual Body and the Maiden’s Body

While *The House of Fame* dramatizes an increasing lack of self-regulation in its textual body, *Pearl* calls constant attention to the intricacies of its seeming self-

regulation. *The House of Fame* creates the appearance, and sound, of chaos, whereas *Pearl* is metrically strict and conscious of itself as meticulously crafted object. While the imagery in Book III of *The House of Fame* invokes the topos of “Woman as Riot,” *Pearl*’s formal structure, like the Pearl-Maiden herself, affirms the seamless, luminosity, chastity, and armored purity of the sacred female body. *Pearl*’s textual body is governed by demanding rules that are only rarely broken. In its numerological exactitude of its 1212 lines, its circularity and symmetry, its twenty sets of five stanzas linked by concatenation, *Pearl* appears to exalt labor, craftsmanship, and intense textual self-regulation.

Likewise, the maiden’s body and demeanor again and again are described in terms of her brightness, purity, spotlessness, fixedness, and enclosure. All of these markers would normally imply an exemplary vigilance over her own purity, exemplary self-regulation. Her idealized depiction as an aristocratic female in itself would imply self-vigilance, since aristocratic patterns of inheritance depended upon disciplined female bodies and desires. And yet, as Nicholas Watson makes clear, the poem goes to great lengths, using the Parable of the Vineyard, to argue that the Maiden’s heavenly status is not earned through strenuous self-discipline, not earned through saint-like suffering. Watson argues persuasively that the Parable of the Vineyard, the fact that the Maiden died as an infant, and the emphasis upon the sacraments, and upon sacerdotal efficacy, all undercut the idea that the Maiden’s—or any Christian’s—virtue and innocence require suffering or labor. Watson is apt in identifying the poem’s accommodations of doctrine to a lay aristocracy, yet the poem does affirm the value of suffering and labor in its textual body, in its tortuous craftedness.

The Failure of Female Eloquence and Authority in *Pearl*

The “debate” between the Maiden and the dreamer is not properly a debate at all, since the poem makes clear that the transfigured Maiden now possesses perfect and complete knowledge of how God grants grace and of the principles governing heaven. The Maiden herself declares: “We þur•outly hauen cnawyng” (859). So the dialogue between the Jeweller and the Maiden is not a horizontal exchange such as *Wynnour and Waster* or other late medieval debates.¹⁰⁹

As mentioned earlier, a key question that draws the reader in at the beginning of the poem is the question of the nature of the Jeweller’s loss and of the nature of his relationship to the Maiden. Much of the ambiguity within the relationship between the Jeweller and the Maiden is an ambiguity created by the Jeweller’s limited understanding and by his wishful thinking. Two of the three roles or identities that the Jeweller ascribes to the Maiden --daughter, lost jewel, “daungerous” female beloved – are clearly subordinate roles. Several critics have noted all of the reversals of authority that occur in *Pearl*; in the earthly domain, the Jeweller would have parental and masculine authority over his daughter. Since she is now a perfected soul in heaven, she is beyond grief and attachment, and can speak authoritatively to him about the nature of heaven and about the means of attaining grace.

Certain gender roles are nearly universal within dream-visions as a genre: the dreamer-narrator is always male, and the dreamer’s celestial guide is most often a female character whose rationality and knowledge of divine workings are far greater than the dreamer’s. Apart from Sarah Stanbury’s work, and prior to the publication of *God and*

¹⁰⁹ See Ad Putter, *An Introduction to the Gawain-Poet* (London: Longman Press, 1996) 161.

the Goddesses, few studies of the dream-vision had raised or addressed questions about the possible implications of a male dreamer receiving spiritual advice from a female guide.

In *God and the Goddesses*, Barbara Newman argues that late medieval Catholicism was a highly inclusive monotheism which surrounded its God with three pantheons: the saints, the pagan gods, and a pantheon of allegorical goddesses. Newman chooses the provocative term “goddesses” deliberately, suggesting that the terms “allegorical figures” or “personifications” trivialize their theological importance. Newman suggests that, “As emanations of the Divine, mediators between God and cosmos, embodied universals, and not least, ravishing objects of identification and desire, the goddesses substantially transformed and deepened Christendom’s concept of God, introducing religious possibilities beyond the ambit of scholastic theology and bringing them to vibrant imaginative life.”¹¹⁰ While the Pearl-Maiden certainly acts as a mediatrix, her status as the “ravishing object” of the Jeweller’s desire does not necessarily enhance her authority.

As the poem progresses, always mediated by the hungry gaze of the Jeweller upon the Pearl-Maiden, her power as a spectacle at first reinforces the eloquent authority of her speech, but near the end of the poem, her visual presence seems to compete with the content of her speeches to the Jeweller, and to distract the Jeweller from a proper connection to Christ. While the Pearl-Maiden’s use of Biblical lore and her reproofs of the Jeweller are eloquent and well-reasoned, her authority is undermined in the penultimate section of the poem by her failure to reduce the Jeweller’s fixation upon her and her failure to redirect the Jeweller’s devotion toward Christ. It must be noted that

¹¹⁰ Newman, *God and the Goddesses*, 3.

even the direct contemplation of the Lamb has failed to spiritually awaken the Jeweller, which lessens the inadequacy of Maiden's eloquence. But in contrast to Beatrice's role in Dante's *Paradiso*, where the dreamer's love for Beatrice becomes an avenue to God, the sight of the Maiden leads the Jeweller to transgress against God's rules and to be ejected from his own dream-vision. In *Pearl*, the Maiden's impact as a sight interferes with the Jeweller's absorption of her counsel and with his focus upon the Lamb. Though virtuous as a subject, the plot resolution, together with the logic of intromission, holds her culpable as an object of the Jeweller's gaze.

Monica Brzezinski Potkay's ingenious argument concerning the role eloquence in *Cleanness* may be useful to a consideration of the Maiden's eloquence in *Pearl*. Potkay notes that fecundity was often used as a metaphor for virtuous speech or preaching in the Middle Ages. A virtuous sermon would sow the seed of God's word in a congregation and produce spiritual children for the kingdom of heaven. In her essay, Potkay argues that "While *Cleanness* uses fertility as a metaphor for clean speech, it also uses sterility to symbolize the abuse of speech."¹¹¹ In *Pearl*, although the Maiden's speech is presented as exemplary, she fails to produce a spiritual change in the Jeweller; her speech is not fecund. Her attempts to accommodate the Jeweller's limited understanding, though tireless, do not succeed.

In a conventional dream-vision, the dream-guide may properly be eclipsed when the dreamer's attention shifts to the direct contemplation of Christ, God, or heaven. In *Pearl*, the Maiden's authoritative presence wanes in the final sections of the poem, yet her reduced presence does not augment Christ's presence, at least in the eyes of the Jeweller. Charles Moorman has noted that the Maiden only gets to speak in the poem for

¹¹¹ Monica Brzezinski Potkay, "*Cleanness's* Fecund and Barren Speech Acts," 105.

about half of its length, and that she is given a single appearance within the vision of the heavenly city.¹¹² The Maiden recedes into the crowd of 144,000 brides surrounding the Lamb, but the Jeweller does not have his most powerful epiphany while gazing upon the Lamb, and it is the sight of his “lyttel quene” (1147) that prompts him to try to cross the river. The conclusion satisfies neither the Jeweller’s earthly desires nor the theological expectations that readers might bring to the text. While it is true that the Jeweller’s obstinacy and perversity are necessary to justify the narrative, their persistence until the final section makes the Jeweller’s embrace of the sacraments appear reluctant and ambivalent. But this ambivalence perhaps allows the poem to speak more to current understandings of grief and mourning as work that remains incomplete.

¹¹² Charles Moorman, “The Role of the Narrator in *Pearl*,” in John Conley, ed., *The Middle English Pearl: Critical Essays* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1970), 103-121, 105.

GETTING CONSUBSTANTIAL IN THE *CROXTON PLAY OF THE SACRAMENT*: DRAMATIZING THE HUNGER AND VOLATILITY OF SACRED CHRISTIAN BODIES

The shift from *Pearl* to the *Croxton Play of the Sacrament* is a shift of several kinds.¹¹³ At the most obvious levels, it is a shift from a late-fourteenth-century context to a mid-fifteenth-century context, and from the genre of the dream-vision poem to that of drama. The transition from *Pearl* to *Croxton* takes the reader from a courtly heaven crowded with pearl-bedecked brides to a brutal, seemingly womanless, mercantile world, and from the dream-vision's individualistic focus upon the dreamer's struggle to comprehend grace to the drama's more collective and institutional emphasis. In *Pearl*, though the sacrament of baptism is emphasized throughout, the clergy is invoked only in the poem's final lines, while in *Croxton*, the miraculous spectacle of Christ's body is vigorously and repeatedly associated with the power of the clergy.

In different ways, both *Pearl* and *Croxton* manage to exploit the duality of Christ as vulnerable yet authoritative. While *Pearl* offers us Christ as a silent but dazzling bridegroom, as an aristocrat, and in His eucharistic form as a Lamb, *Croxton* presents us first with Christ as a seemingly vulnerable but ultimately aggressive wafer, then in the central miracle, as a wounded child, a preacher, and a healer. While *Pearl* allows a sustained but vexed role for female eloquence, in *Croxton* the only presence that can possibly be read as female is the mute, explosive stage prop of the oven from which the image of the Christ-child emerges. Christ's wound and status as salvific Eucharistic food

¹¹³ All citations of *The Play of the Sacrament* (Croxtton) will be from David Bevington, ed., *Medieval Drama* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1975), 754-788.

are emphasized in both *Pearl* and *Croxtan*, but despite this emphasis on Christ as sufferer and nourisher, both texts complicate the idea that Christ is feminized. In *Pearl*'s case, Christ's role as the courtly polygamous bridegroom counterbalances his flowing sidewound, Lamb-like meekness, and perhaps even his eucharistic status as food; in *Croxtan*, Christ is not feminized at all, though his miraculous appearance as a wounded child calls attention to Mary's role in clothing God's Word in human flesh.

Many scholars have remarked on the generic slipperiness of the *Croxtan Play of the Sacrament*. The play is usually called a miracle play or a conversion play; although it does not readily fit into the more familiar genres of English medieval drama, its storyline belongs unmistakably to the pervasive late medieval Christian narrative of host desecration. In the host desecration narrative, male Jews are represented as violating Christ in His most generous and self-sacrificing form, that of the consecrated eucharistic wafer.¹¹⁴ This narrative often culminated with the Jews being killed after their violation of the host is discovered by the Christian community. As Miri Rubin has shown, this narrative often resulted in real-life massacres of Jews as well.

Perhaps because the Jews in the *Croxtan* play convert rather than being killed for their transgression, there are scholars who see the play as relatively benign in its emphasis, who summarize the conclusion of the play along these lines: "The Jews have had a direct experience of Christ's mercy and are now convinced of his divinity," or who declare, "The *Croxtan Play of the Sacrament* is not a play about judgment and

¹¹⁴ For a thorough and complex discussion of the medieval host desecration story, including its evolution and the range of its historical consequences, see Miri Rubin, *Gentile Tales: The Narrative Assault on Late Medieval Jews* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

punishment, but about penance and healing acceptance.”¹¹⁵ I argue instead that, whatever one’s interpretation of the conversion at the end of the play, the play’s charge against the Jews as abusive “misconsumers” of Christ’s body disguises their status as items of consumption within its economy. The play dramatizes *Christian* appetite and acquisitiveness along with the violence inherent in a proselytizing religion. In contrast to more optimistic readings, I see the play as emphasizing the implacable, aggressive appetite of the Christian merchant Aristorius, of Christ himself as the militant, sticky wafer, and of the Christian social body. The play weaves its anti-Judaism together with the paradox of eucharistic consumption: in swallowing the body of Christ, the body of Christ swallows its consumer. In *Croxton*, the containment and conversion of the Jews becomes a spectacle for consumption by the Christian audience. The awful “joke” of the play is that while no one can finally subdue or contain Christ, Christ (and the Christian social body) remains relentlessly incorporative, swallowing, containing and digesting all dissenters.

I hope to demonstrate that Mary’s body also appears in this play, and that her presence is as strangely domineering as that of the Host. *Croxton*’s climactic, sanguinary moment of conversion draws not only upon host-desecration lore but upon the tradition of Marian miracles; I argue that Mary is permitted a subordinated but explosive role in this play. While Christ appears throughout the play, as wafer, and as the image of “a child appering with wondys bloody” (l.804), the play is utterly womanless, unless we read the exploding bloody oven as a grotesque stand-in for Mary, whose womb was popularly

¹¹⁵ Respectively, David M. Zesmer, *A Guide to English Literature: From Beowulf Through Chaucer and Medieval Drama* (Barnes and Noble: New York, 1961), 274; and Gail McMurray Gibson, *The Theater of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 38.

understood as the oven that baked the eucharistic bread of Christ. This miracle exaggerates all of the goriest elements of childbirth, those elements that are denied by representations of the Nativity and of Mary's perpetually clean and virginal body. The oven represents both an indecorous version of Mary's womb and the tomb from which the resurrected Christ rises. Surprisingly, given that the *Croxton Play of the Sacrament* is the product of an intensely Mariolatrous period (late fifteenth century) and region (East Anglia), the play minimizes the role of Mary. This suppression of Mary is doubly surprising given Mary's frequent association with anti-Judaic narratives and images. While the Croxton play is from the roughly the same time period and region that gave us the *N-Town* cycle drama, it does not share *N-Town*'s elaboration of Mary's role in salvation history nor *N-Town*'s interest in female voices.

In this play, Aristorius, a Christian merchant, steals and sells a consecrated eucharist to Jonathas, a Jewish merchant. Jonathas then takes the host to four other Jews that they may test it for Christ's presence. In their dialogue, the Jews paradoxically doubt Christ's presence yet are sure of it; in their dialogue they state explicitly their plan to re-enact the Crucifixion: "we shall fray him as he was on the rood" (455). Jonathas and four other Jews then subject the host to a series of ordeals, the first of which is stabbing it with the five wounds of the Crucifixion. The host sticks fast to Jonathas' hand, so the Jews nail the eucharist to a post and try to pry Jonathas' hand free. Instead, they only succeed in severing his arm from his hand, which remains stuck to the host. They then throw both hand and host into a cauldron full of oil which overflows with blood, and then into a hot oven. In the climactic miracle, the oven bursts open and bleeds, and an "image" of the wounded Christ child appears out of the oven, reproving the Jews for their sinful actions.

The Jews convert on the spot, and Christ miraculously restores Jonathas' hand. The conclusion of the play emphasizes penance: "Episcopus," the bishop, describes the other characters' sins and dispenses punishments to each of them. The play's ending requires the audience to move in procession to the church and to behave as a congregation.

Of the four texts that I examine in my dissertation, *Croxton* seeks to exert the strictest control over its audience's interpretive process. The play begins with the Banns, an announcement that summarizes the entire plot of the play, and recapitulates the reprehensible selling of, doubting of, and torturing of Christ's body. The two "Vexillators" making this announcement describe in great detail how the Jews "grevid our Lord gretly on grownd, /And put him to a new Passion" (37-8). They connect the miracle performed by Christ to the might of the clergy: "Thus by maracle of the King of hevyn, And by might and power govyn to the prestys mowthe/ In an howshold wer con[v]ertyd, iwys, elevyn" (53-5). The Banns conclude with explicit moral instructions to the audience not to doubt the Lord in any manner, since the Jews' doubt led them to put the sacrament "to suche distresse" (72). The Vexillators' summarizing and moralizing of the play in advance suggests a lack of trust in the audience's power or willingness to draw the appropriate devotional conclusions about the play's meaning. Although I do not endorse the idea that the play's Jews are mere stand-ins for Lollards, the play's repeated exhortations to revere the eucharist and to avoid doubt are most readily explained by the continuing presence of Lollard-like challenges to the doctrine of transubstantiation in East Anglia.

Christian Appetite and Consumable Jews

The play commences its simultaneous construction of Jews and Gentiles with the boastful catalogues with which the two merchants, Aristorius and Jonathas, introduce themselves. What is most interesting is that, from the beginning, *both* merchants are presented as proud and materialistic; materialism is not assigned to Jews alone. Also, the Jewish characters do not appear menacing from the outset. In these speeches, the Christian merchant presents himself as dynamic and acquisitive, while the Jewish merchant presents himself as the inert possessor of a long list of tempting goods already acquired. Both merchants are given introductory rants that rhetorically link them to the familiar overweening tyrants of the cycle dramas. Aristorius' boast concerns not his military, but his trading prowess; he has bought and sold merchandise internationally:

In all maner of londys, without ony naye,
 My merchaundise renneth, the soothe for to tell:
 In Gene, and in Jenyse, and in Genewaye,
 In Surrey, and in Saby, and in Salern I sell;
 ... In Alisander I have abundaw[n]se in the wide world.
 In France and in Farre fresshe be my flower [ys],
 In Gildre and in Galys have I boughte and solde,
 In Hamborowh and in Holond moch merchantdise is owrys;...
(93-96, 101-104)

Aristorius describes his merchandise as running or flowing all over the known world, a fine image of expansive, untrammelled Christian economic/geographic desire and conquest. He includes the audience in this desire and in an implied collective affluence when he says, "...moch merchantdise is owrys" (104). In the twenty-three line alliterative catalog of countries and cities, the very naming and recognition of all these places implies the fantasized scope of Christian Europe's economic "reach." (Despite its

tone, the list's inclusion of such places as Turkey or Syria could conversely remind the audience of the limits of the Christian empire). Though Aristorius exults over his wealth and his pleasure ("gle," "liking") in his boast, like an exemplary modern-day resume, his catalog is full of "action-words" – he buys, sells, reigns, wields, and prospers, just as his dynamic merchandise "renneth" far and wide.¹¹⁶ At the play's end, Aristorius will be severely punished for selling Christ's body, but at this point, the Suffolk audience would likely enjoy him as a representative of Christian mercantile power, especially since Bury St. Edmunds was one of the most profitable trade cities in all of England at this time.

Jonathas' opening vaunt is rhetorically inert by comparison; he addresses "almighty Machomet," and then the audience:

For I thanke the[e] hayly, that hast me sent
 Gold, silver, and presious stonys;
 And abu[n]ddaunce of spicys thou hast me lent,
 A[s] I shall reherse before you onys:
 I have amatystys riche for the nonys,
 And baryllys that be bright of ble,
 And saphire seemly I may show yow attonys,
 And cristalys clere for to se;...

(157-164)

The actions of having, showing, and reciting his catalog of delectable products are all the dynamism that the play permits Jonathas in his introductory speech. Certainly this could suggest that Jonathas relishes his possession of all these items—a familiar anti-Jewish notion. But Jonathas also seems to disappear behind or into the list of precious jewels, spices, nuts and fruits that he describes in such alluring terms. Jonathas' introduction is as an amalgam of luscious items of consumption intended "to plesse yow to paye" (176), i.e.,

¹¹⁶ L. O. Aranye Fradenburg notes that "Violence against the Jews begins, in the middle ages, when Christians undertake economic expansion at home and territorial and religious expansion abroad." See her "Criticism, Anti-Semitism and the Prioress's Tale," in *Exemplaria* 1.1, March 1989, 87.

for the pleasure of the audience. This early passage presents Jonathas more as a potential item of consumption than as a menacing enemy of the Christian social body.

Jonathas claims a much more constricted radius of influence than Aristorius., though he boasts at the end that

Jew Jonathas is my name;
 Jazon and Jazdon they waityn on my will,
 Masfat and Malchus they do the same,
 As ye may knowe—it is both richt and skill.
 I telle yow all, by dal[e] and by hille,
 In Eraclea is noon so moche of mighte.
 W[h]erfor, ye owe tenderly to tende me till,
 For I am chefe merchaunte of the Jewes, I tell yow, by right.
 (189-196)

While Aristorius claims to reign in Calabria and Cologne, and that his arrival is known among the Chaldees and Catalans, that “In tarise and Turkey, there told is my tale” (114), in short, that “Ful wide in this worlde springith my fame” (91), Jonathas claims to command four men who are the sole representatives of the Jewish community throughout the play.

The *Play of the Sacrament* is hardly unusual in its focus upon the alleged misdeeds of male Jews. Several scholars investigating medieval anti-Judaism have noted a particular gender dynamic to host desecration narratives and their precursors: male Jews are the host desecrators, while Jewish women and children are usually presented as either neutral or receptive towards Christian doctrine, or else, as in *Croxton*, they are entirely absent. Christian women often appeared as accomplices to Jewish host desecrators, but they could also figure as virtuous identifiers of abuse.¹¹⁷ Miri Rubin speculates that the host desecrator “had to be a man in order to act as a fully moral person, as capable of

¹¹⁷ Rubin, *Gentile Tales*, 73-77.

(evil) choice and guilt. Female Jews were, like other women, seen as pliant and impressionable, lacking in reason and moral faculties.”¹¹⁸ In certain medieval texts, such as the *Benediktbeuern Christmas Play*, a credible argument can be made that male Jews are feminized through association with ostensibly “feminine” attributes such as frenzied physicality, garrulity and irrationality; such is not the case in the *Croxton* play.

Not only are Jewish women and children absent from the *Croxton* play, but Jewish faith is not represented here, even in caricature. As Anna Sapir Abulafia has observed, “Unlike heretics, Jews formed a self-perpetuating social group that defined itself not in opposition to the established Church, but without reference to the Church at all” (134).¹¹⁹ In contrast, the Jews of the *Croxton* play are extraordinarily conversant with the details of Christian doctrine (perhaps, in the play’s imaginary, as ripe for conversion?) and devote the preponderance of their time to testing and interrogating Christian belief, an issue I will return to in discussing the attempted violation of the host.

As mentioned above, the Jewish characters of *Croxton* are not identified as menacing, hysterical, or clownish “Others” at the beginning of the play. *Croxton*’s anti-Judaism is distinct from that of earlier plays in that it does not rely as heavily on the notion that Jews are racially different from Christians, possessing bodies fundamentally different from Christian bodies. At first in *Croxton*, both merchants are presented as materialistic, but Aristorius is presented as bustling Christian mercantile dynamism, animating the exchange of products, making them “run,” while Jonathas is made to present himself largely *as* his products. Jonathas’ catalog subtly links Jewishness to passive materiality—a familiar feature in medieval anti-Judaic rhetoric. A Marxist

¹¹⁸ Rubin, 71.

¹¹⁹ Anna Sapir Abulafia, “Bodies in the Jewish Christian Debate,” in *Framing Medieval Bodies*, eds. Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 134.

reading, which I do not intend to pursue here, could easily interpret Jonathas as the reified and fetishized capital, and Aristorius as the energy of capital.¹²⁰ For my purposes, what is significant is that the Jews are subtly marked as pleasing potential items of consumption early in the play, and also that *Croxton* refrains from the extreme anti-Jewish caricature that we see in much earlier plays. Unlike the *Benediktbeuern Christmas Play*, which presents Archisynagogus, archetype of all Jewishness, as raucous and physically excessive from the beginning, the *Croxton* play does not hystericize its Jewish characters or portray them as violent, clownish or irrational until the host begins to bleed and “fight back.” At that point, quite understandably, the Jews panic and attempt to contain the feisty host. When Jonathas loses his hand, he responds with stoicism: “Ther is no more; I must enduer!” (520), and even in such dire straits, he can recognize Master Brundiche, the Flemish doctor, as a quack.

The Commodification of Christ

In the early part of the play, when the eucharist is still a motionless prop, an onlooker could feel anxiety and protectiveness on its behalf. The wafer appears small and vulnerable, in need of institutional safeguards to protect it, and the play shows these safeguards failing in their duty to protect Christ’s body. Near the play’s conclusion, as the Bishop scolds Aristorius’ chaplain, he enumerates these safeguards in an aside to other “curatys” :

Also, thou preste, for thy necligens,
 ...Thou art worthy inpresu[n]ment for thin[e] offence;
And all yow creaturys and curatys that here be,

¹²⁰ I am indebted to Christine Chism for pointing out how readily the play lends itself to such a reading, and for her insights concerning Christian fantasies of economic and political expansion in the *Croxton* play and in other late medieval English texts.

Of this dede yow may take example
 How that your pyxis lockyd ye shuld see,
 And beware of the key of Goddys temple.

The consecrated eucharist should have been in a locked vessel, within a secured church, and kept under the eye of a vigilant priest. The medieval audience would already be thoroughly familiar with the general trajectory of a host desecration narrative, and in any case, the Banns has already told the audience of the entire plot. Despite this foreknowledge, an audience could possibly feel a delicious apprehension about the host abuse to come, and an equally delectable indignation at the theft and sale of the host.

As Sarah Beckwith has so aptly noted, “the invasion of the sacred body of Christ works through the combined powers of doubt and money,” also noting that this commodification is itself the first form of violence done to the host.¹²¹ Further, the Church, especially in fifteenth century Bury St. Edmunds, was completely implicated in its own economic exploitation of Christ’s body, and deeply involved all aspects of the borough’s political and economic activity. Beckwith argues persuasively that the Church displaces its own worldliness and commercial orientation entirely onto the figure of Aristorius: “By making the merchant the sole vehicle of commercial transaction in the play, the Church can be expunged from its own thorough-going immersion in the world of the mercantile economy.”¹²² The figure of Aristorius can also, as mentioned above, allow the audience to first enjoy vicariously his claims of economic prowess, and later to be chastened by his penance.

¹²¹ Sarah Beckwith, “Ritual, Church and Theatre: Medieval Dramas of the Sacramental Body,” in *Culture and History, 1350-1600*, ed. David Aers (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1992), 65-89, 68.

¹²² Beckwith, “Ritual, Church and Theatre,” 70.

The play's language bluntly presents the scandalous nature of the "bargen" that Jonathas wishes to make. When Aristorius asks, "Sir Jonathas, sey me for my sake: /What man[er] of marchandis[e] is that ye mene?" Jonathas responds, "Yowr God, that is full mythety, in a cake!" (283-85) While expressing fear of selling "that dere" (loved one), including the fear that a witness might "apeche me of [h]eresye," Aristorius continues to haggle with Jonathas until the price of one hundred pounds is reached, and then he abruptly consents once Jonathas counts out the money. The play's conclusion punishes Aristorius harshly, although he is not deemed a heretic—in addition to the usual elements of penance, fasting and prayer, the Bishop forbids him ever to practice as a merchant again.

Jonathas addresses the stolen host as soon as he receives it from Aristorius: "Now in this clothe I shall the[e] covere/ That no wight shall the[e] see" (383-84). The Jews then proceed to parody the Mass, spreading a cloth on a table to serve as an altar, laying the host upon it, and quoting Matthew 26:26, "*Comedite, [hoc est] corpus meum.*" Beckwith has pointed out that the play disrupts its own affirmation of orthodox doctrine "by placing the very words of consecration into the mouth of a Jew," thus allowing Jonathas to impersonate and parody both a priest and Christ himself.¹²³ In support of this observation, David Lawton, who has noticed how often medieval Christians connected blasphemy to Judaism, observes that blasphemy can be created simply by shifting the context of an utterance:

...blasphemy may be inherent not in the words used but in the nature of the user or the context in which they are used. Medieval parodies of the Mass routinely function in this way: the words are the right words, but the use and context are wrong. This is also the field of Chaucer's Pardoner: in certain

¹²³ Beckwith, "Ritual, Church and Theatre," 74.

circumstances, I can do most harm to something by repeating it. It follows that blasphemy, much more than heresy, is extraordinarily context-specific.¹²⁴

After Jonathas' blasphemous recontextualization of the Mass, the other Jews reiterate key moments in salvation history, swiftly summing up the Annunciation and Mary's conception of the Word, Christ's resurrection, and Judgment Day; further, Malchus attributes unanimity to the Christians: "And thus they hold, all at on[e] consent" (437).

Having "rehersyd the substaunce of their [i.e., Christian] lawe" (441), the Jews proceed to stab the host. A contradiction inheres in the Jews' assault upon the host: they are stabbing it ostensibly to test it, but also to wreak vengeance upon it. They doubt Christ's presence in the wafer, yet they are already sure of it, for otherwise their explicit plan of re-enacting the Crucifixion—"with owr strokys we shall fray him as he was on the rood" (455)—makes no sense, nor does their meticulous smiting of the five wounds. The Jews alternately refer to the host as "him" or as "it," occasionally addressing Christ directly—another reflection of this instability within the play. As each one stabs the host, they describe their own violence and imagine Christ's pained response:

JASON: Have at it! Have at it, with all my might!

This side I hope for to sese!

JASDON: And I shall with this blade so bright

This other side freshely afeze!

MASPHAT: And I yow plight I shall him not please,

For with this punche I shall him prike!

MALCHUS: And with this augur I shall him not ease... (469-475)

With Jonathas' stab to the center of the wafer, the host begins to bleed, in Christ's first symbolic "speech" in answer to the Jews. The Jews immediately begin to panic and

¹²⁴ David Lawton, *Blasphemy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 86.

prepare to physically seal off Christ's presence by enclosing the wafer in a hot cauldron, in a parody of Christ's descent from the cross, entombment, and descent into hell.

But the host sticks fast to Jonathas' hand, and Jonathas reports being seized with madness, like a cycle-play tyrant in his final moments:

JONATHAS: Out, out, it werketh me wrake!
 I may not avoid it owt of my hond!
 I will go drenche me in a lake.
 And in woodnesse I ginne to wake!
 I rene, I lepe over this lond!
Her[e] he renneth wood, with the [h]ost in his hond.

Just as the ranting tyrant-figures were known for their entertainment value, one can imagine that this moment possessed slapstick appeal for the Christian audience. From this point until their conversion, the Jews are presented as hapless figures scrambling to hold the implacable escalation of divine "special effects" at bay. The play's plot also suggests Jewish obduracy: rather than converting to Christianity as soon as the host begins to bleed, they wait until Jonathas has lost his hand, the oven has burst with blood, and the apparition of the Christ-child has reproached them. Jonathas' loss of his hand also allows the play to demonstrate that Christ is the true physician, "the soul's physician," who can restore wholeness, even to the most sinful, if they embrace penance.

Adhering the Non-Adherents: The Wafer Fights Back

In this section, I seek to put the Croxton play's central miracle into context by connecting it to a general medieval interest in a trope of supernatural, punitive melding or glueing of bodies, either to sacred objects or to sinful activity. In such miracles, two or more things almost become one, for a period of time. The prevalence of this motif makes

sense in light of the general late medieval fascination with Eucharistic devotion, in which the celebrant aspires to become one with Christ, and also because of late medieval tensions between the church doctrine of transubstantiation and Lollard notions of consubstantiation, in which both the body and the blood of Christ *and* the bread and wine are present in the substance of the consecrated Eucharist. As will be discussed, scholars have interpreted these miraculous meldings in terms of hybridity, in terms of the public revelation of hitherto hidden sin and in terms of the frozenness or stasis prolonging the moment of choice or decision on the part of the immobilized transgressors; all of these interpretations can help us to understand the cultural work being performed by the sticky wafer in *Croxton*.

The broader category of punitive melding to which *Croxton* belongs is the category of sinners stuck or frozen in the act of their sin—condemned to extend their sin through time. The example of this form of divine punishment most familiar to medievalists and non-medievalists alike would be that of the immobilized sinners in the lowest realms of Dante's *Inferno*. In the Ninth Circle, First Ring of hell, traitors to their kin are immersed in the ice. In the Ninth Circle, Second Ring, Count Ugolino is frozen in the act of gnawing on his betrayer, the Archbishop Ruggieri, and in the final ring of hell, we find Satan similarly frozen in the act of devouring Judas Iscariot, Brutus, and Cassius. Significantly for my purposes here, the final ring of hell, with its immobilized bodies in enforced proximity to one another, is replete with unacknowledged references to Jewishness; as Sylvia Tomasch has argued, "In naming the center of hell 'Judecca,' he [Dante] thereby generalizes Judas' betrayal onto all Jews."¹²⁵ Both *Croxton* and Dante's Ninth Circle of hell articulate Christian/Jewish difference by means of this motif of

¹²⁵ Tomasch, "Judecca," 253.

immobilization and through parodies of Eucharistic devotion. *Croxton* stages a blasphemous parody of the Mass by having Jonathas speak the words of consecration over the eucharist; likewise, Satan's devouring of the traitors has often been interpreted as a parody of the eucharist.¹²⁶

A second, fourteenth-century English example of sinners stuck in the repetition of their sin can be seen in Robert Mannyng's exemplum "The Dancers of Colbek" in his *Handlyng Synne*. In this story, carolers on Christmas night are singing and dancing near the church as the priest, Robert, is about to begin the Mass; unbeknownst to him, the carolers have persuaded the priest's daughter Ave to join them. After the dancers ignore the priest's warning "that ye no lenger do swych dede" (79) and his request that they come in to attend the Mass, the priest curses them. The exemplum at first appears to wholly endorse the fearsome power of the priest's speech:

He cursed hem there alsäume
As they karoled on here gaume.
As sone as the preste hadded so spoke
Every hand yn outhur so fast was loke
That no man my3t with no wundyr
That tweluemonth parte hem asundyr.
(99-103)¹²⁷

Very quickly it becomes evident that the exemplum offers a warning to the clergy as well, for an instant later Robert discovers that his curse extends to his own daughter: "But al to late that wurde was seyde/ For on hem alle was the veniaunce leyde" (108-09).

When Robert's son attempts to pull his sister free from the ring of dancers, her arm

¹²⁶ See Sylvia Tomasch, "Judecca, Dante's Satan, and the Dis-placed Jew," in *Text and Territory: Geographical Imagination in the European Middle Ages*, eds. Sylvia Tomasch and Sealy Gilles (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 247-67, 259. Tomasch further notes that Satan's parody of the eucharist also evokes the Passover: "It is not just that the devil's ingestive activities invert the actions of God; they also displace and pervert those of the Jews."

¹²⁷ This edition of "The Dancers of Colbek" is anthologized in *Fourteenth Century Verse and Prose*, ed. Kenneth Sisam (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975) 4-12, 7.

comes off, bloodlessly. Despite Robert's repeated attempts to bury the arm, it resurfaces to lie above its grave; finally, he brings the arm into the church, "for drede and doute of more harme,/ He ordeyned hyt for to be/ That euery man my3t with ye hyt se" (147-49). Her arm is eventually hung in a vessel in the church as a kind of relic. All of the dancers continue to dance and sing in a state of trance, oblivious to the weather, needing no sleep, food or drink, until a year has passed. The news of the miracle reaches Emperor Henry who comes from Rome "For to see thys hard dome" (173). The dancers run into the church, collapse as if dead, and, in an evocation of Christ's resurrection, "at the thre days ende/ To lyfe God graunted hem to wende" (198-99). When the dancers are finally freed from the curse, Ave alone lies dead, her father and brother are left to mourn, and the rest of the community is awed and fearful: "Grete sorowe had here fadyr, here brother; merueyle and drede had all outhur" (210-11). The exemplum concludes with two explicit morals, against cursing and against unseemly behaviors in holy areas:

A tale hyt ys of feyre shewyng,
 Ensample and drede a3ens cursing,
 This tale y tolde 3ow to make 3ow aferde
 Yn cherche to karolle, or yn cherche3erde,
 Namely a3ens the prestys wylle;
 Leueth whan he byddeth 3ow be styлле. (260-65)

Although Robert's cursing is harshly punished by the plot and reproached in this conclusion, the final lines still emphasize the importance of obedience to clerical authority. In this exemplum, the dancers' adhesion to one another and enforced continuation of their sin does not prolong any moment of choice or decision, since they are trapped in obliviousness the whole time. Also, they speak bitterly to the priest once they revive and show little penitence for their caroling. They blame Robert for "oure long confusion," and call him "maker...of oure trauayle,/ That ys to many grete meruayle"

(204-05). The emphasis in this story is not upon the dancers' spiritual amendment so much as upon the enduring impact of the marvel upon the community: "Though that they were than asunder/3yt all the worlde spake of hem wunder" (224-25).

My final example of sinners being glued to one another in a prolongation of their sin is one that has been investigated by Dyan Elliott for what it reveals about medieval pollution anxieties:

A rather startling story enjoyed popularity across all genres of medieval didactic literature in the high and later Middle Ages. A man and a woman have intercourse in a holy precinct: be it a church, a monastery, a cemetery, or near a saint's shrine. As punishment for this inappropriate act, the couple is miraculously stuck together, only to be discovered in this humiliating predicament by a wondering populace, whose reaction ranges from high hilarity to deep disgust. They are eventually released by the united prayers of the community.¹²⁸

Even more than in "The Dancers of Colbek," the community's witnessing of the spectacle is an integral part of this story, since the communal prayers are what release the couple. As Elliott observes, in this story, the communal gaze is aligned with the divine gaze: "The community is seeing what, under ordinary circumstances, only God sees—the hidden sin. Moreover it judges and punishes this offense as God does."¹²⁹ While in "The Dancers of Colbek," divine will alone releases the dancers, in Elliott's example and in the *Croxton* play, earthly authorities and the devout community can align themselves with the power of the miracle.

The more specific category of miracle to which *Croxton* belongs is the motif of a sacred item gluing itself to an unbeliever -- a popular motif in late medieval eucharistic miracle stories and in other late medieval narratives as well. Late medieval stories abound of Jews or impious Christians being glued to the very object whose power they mock or

¹²⁸ Dyan Elliott, *Fallen Bodies: Pollution, Sexuality and Demonology in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 61.

¹²⁹ Elliott, *Fallen Bodies*, 79.

doubt. One example, transmitted the most widely through the *Legenda Aurea*, but also rendered in N-Town's "Assumption of Mary," is the story of a Jew, identified in N-Town only as "First Prince," who strikes Mary's funeral bier and is divinely punished by having his arms stick to it. He begs Peter for help "...helpe me ageyne,/ Sum medycyn me lere,"(430) and Peter advises him to believe in Christ as Savior and in Mary as Christ's mother.¹³⁰ As in *Croxton*, the Jew converts promptly to Christianity once he experiences the miracle. Peter then gives the convert a holy palm with which to effect miracle healings (and more converts) among the "thi nacyon," the Jews. In both *Croxton* and the N-Town "Assumption," the stick-fast motif also permits a staging of Christ's magnanimity and healing powers, as the transgressors are released and healed once they convert.

Several instances of impious Christians becoming glued to sacred objects appear in Gerald of Wales' *Itinerarium Kambriae*. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen succinctly summarizes several of these instances:

A boy steals pigeons from a church in Llanfaes and his hand adheres to the ecclesiastical stone in punishment, triggering an extended account of sinners who suffered similar fates: A woman of Bury St Edmunds attempted to take coins in her mouth as she kissed a saint's shrine, and her lips adhered to the altar for a day; in Howden church, a parson's *concubina* irreverently sat upon the tomb of St. Osana, and her buttocks became fastened to the wood; in Winchcombe, a monk was divinely rebuked for having had intercourse the previous night when the psalter he carried attached itself to his unclean hands... (I.2 84-86).¹³¹

¹³⁰ *The N-Town Play: Cotton MS Vespasian D.8*, Vol.I ed. Stephen Spector (Oxford: Oxford University Press for The Early English text Society, 1991), Pageant 41, 387-409.

¹³¹ This is Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's synopsis of Gerald of Wales, from his "Hybrids, Monsters, Borderlands: The Bodies of Gerald of Wales," 85-104 in *The Postcolonial Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 90.; See Gerald of Wales, *Itinerarium Kambriae*, I.10; v.6 in J.S. Brewer, J.F. Dimock, and G.F. Warner (eds.) *Giraldi Cambrensis Opera*, 8 vols., *Rerum Britannicum Medii Aevi Scriptores* ["Rolls Series"] 21 (London: Longmans, 1861-91); *The Journey Through Wales and the Description of Wales*, trans. Lewis Thorpe (London: Penguin Books, 1978). The citation of the *Itinerarium* shows the book and chapter numbers of the Latin followed by the page numbers for Thorpe's translation.

Cohen interprets these miracles by looking at them in terms of postcolonial theories of hybridity: “Gerald’s narrative disciplines these bodies by hybridizing them with a material fragment of the ecclesiastical institution whose regulatory power over themselves they must now recognize.”¹³² Cohen first proposes Bhabha’s concept of hybridity to explain the punitive gluings in *The Journey Through Wales*, but ultimately he argues that Gloria’s Anzaldua’s concepts of the “borderland” and of “mestizaje” are closest to Gerald’s hybrids, since Anzalduan hybridity describes “a body that spectacularly displays its constitutive histories of difference, colonialism and violent struggle without pretending they can be synthesized into some coherent, homogenous, domesticated form.” Cohen’s brief essay brings a host of postcolonial and postmodern constructs to bear upon *The Journey Through Wales*—Anzalduan *mestizaje*, Spivak’s subaltern, Bhabha’s “hybridity,” “sly civility” and “mimicry,” Deleuze and Guattari’s “schizophrenic, limitless couplings of desiring machines”—thus all of these constructs are presented in a fluent but highly compressed form. In addition, Cohen expresses a debt throughout his discussion of hybridity to Robert Young’s *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, a work that reveals how extraordinarily layered and ideologically freighted the term “hybridity” is.¹³³ For this reason I would like to backtrack and consider a couple of basic ideas within Bhabha’s and Bakhtin’s notions of

¹³² Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Hybrids, Monsters, Borderlands,” 91. Cohen’s argument builds upon Homi K. Bhabha’s essays of postcolonial theory in his *Locations of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994). Cohen’s essay is part of his broader, ambitious project as the editor of *The Postcolonial Middle Ages*. In his introduction to the anthology, Cohen proposes several ways that “postcolonial theory [might] encourage an opening up of what medieval signifies,” and ways that medieval studies could in turn “suggest possible futures for postcolonial theory.” These bold proposals include: reconsidering the keywords of postcolonial theory’s collective discourse, especially those involving time and periodization; decentering Europe; displacing the domination of Christianity; destabilizing hegemonic identities.

¹³³ Robert J. C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995).

hybridity to see if they can provide a helpful lens for understanding Croxton's forced conjoining of Jew to eucharist.

Bakhtin's model of an "intentional hybrid" involves "a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor."¹³⁴ In the *Croxton* play, this double-voicedness within a single utterance is best seen in the moment when Jonathas speaks the words of consecration over the eucharist. As discussed earlier, David Lawton has interpreted this as a moment of blasphemous recontextualization. Robert Young succinctly presents Bakhtin's idea of intentional hybridization as the "ability of one voice to ironize or unmask the other within the same utterance."¹³⁵ I will propose that, in addition to the ironies of the Jews parodying the Mass, the play's central miracle unmasks the domineering potential of Christ's and Mary's bodies—bodies which were usually revered for their nurturant, protective, and self-sacrificing behaviors.

Bhabha builds upon Bakhtin's "intentional hybrid" by using it to articulate "the ambivalence at the source of discourses of authority."¹³⁶ Bhabha's description of the demand at the heart of colonialist power can be cautiously applied to *Croxton*'s fantasy of a unanimous Christian community:

It is the demand that the space it occupies be unbounded, its reality *coincident* with the emergence of an imperialist narrative and history, its discourse *non-dialogic*, its enunciation *unitary*, unmarked by the trace of difference.¹³⁷

¹³⁴ Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 358.

¹³⁵ Robert J.C. Young, *Colonial Desire*, 20.

¹³⁶ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 112.

¹³⁷ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 115.

Of course, medieval Catholic discourses were inherently dialogic due to Christian indebtedness and dependence upon the Old Testament. As Sylvia Tomasch has observed,

Although Judaism provided the foundations for Christianity, Jews threatened the definitions of Christian society. Jews were expelled not merely because they first possessed (English) lands and goods from which they needed to be displaced, but because they first possessed the (Christian) book—from which they needed to be displaced.¹³⁸

In the moment when Jonathas is glued to the eucharist, the *Croxton* play literalizes the inescapable interconnectedness of Judaism and medieval Christianity; the play figures the Jew as struggling to escape from Christ's body, when perhaps it is Christianity that is twisting this way and that to escape textual and ritual indebtedness to Judaism.¹³⁹

A central idea in Bhabha's further development of Bakhtin's "intentional hybrid" is that of challenging colonial discourse so that the dominant cultural power speaks against itself:

It is traditional academic wisdom that the presence of authority is properly established through the non-exercise of private judgement and the exclusion of reasons in conflict with the authoritative reason. The recognition of authority, however, requires a validation of its source that must be immediately, even intuitively, apparent – 'You have that in your countenance which I would fain call master'—and held in common (rules of recognition). (112)

Hybridity is a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal so that other 'denied' knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority—its rules of recognition. (114)

¹³⁸ Sylvia Tomasch, "Postcolonial Chaucer and the Virtual Jew," in Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, ed., *The Postcolonial Middle Ages* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 243-60; 251-52.

¹³⁹ In a presentation entitled "Dependence and Devotion: The Performance of Antisemitism in the Chester Mystery Cycle" at the Sixth Annual Columbia Medieval Guild Conference, "Performance, Ritual, and Spectacle in the Middle Ages," October 14, 1995, Mary Sokolowski first proposed dispensing with a binary between materiality and textuality, between "the historical presence of the Jew" and "the 'merely' symbolic Jew." Citing Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's refusal of any distinction between linguistic and social practice, Sokolowski remarked that in the later middle ages there was so much interplay between historical reality and textual anti-Judaism that she did not want to preserve the distinction. Finally, during the discussion after her presentation, she suggested that "the Christian textual dependence upon the Old Testament becomes a ritual dependence... someone has to kill the Christ that the audience is going to go out and eat."

I am not certain that this version of hybridity is manifested in Cohen's examples drawn from *The Journey Through Wales*, or in the struggle with the sticky eucharist in the *Croxton* play. If the basis of Christian authority is estranged in this moment, it is because the sacred Christian bodies of the play have been impelled to exert themselves in non-iconographic and indecorous ways.

The other way in which Christian hegemonic discourse in *Croxton* betrays an anxiety about the "rules of recognition" which structure its authority is in its redundant repetitions of the act of host desecration. Sylvia Tomasch has discussed Jewish virtuality and medieval allosemantic constructions of the Jew in terms of Bhabha's reiteration of the stereotype in colonialist discourse: "which requires, for its successful signification, a continual and repetitive chain of other stereotypes...the same old stories of the Negro's animality, the Coolie's inscrutability or the stupidity of the Irish must be told (compulsively) again and afresh, and are differently gratifying each time".¹⁴⁰ The whole story of Aristorius' and Jonathas' offenses against the Host is told five times by different speakers: first in a preliminary account by the Vexillator, then by the Jews as they stab the Host, a third time as they are reproached by the Host itself, and finally they reiterate their misdeeds, *twice*, the second time in every detail, in confession before the Bishop. The play's obsessive reiteration of the details of the Host's commodification, its stabbing, its boiling, etc., fits very well with Bhabha's notion of the stereotype's instability.

While this motif of being mysteriously stuck to a sacred object appears in early folklore, it hardly ever appears in European literature after the Middle Ages. An anthropologist might see a love of what Frazer termed "contagious magic" saturating

¹⁴⁰ The quotation is from Homi Bhabha's essay "The Other Question," in *The Location of Culture*, 77. It is cited in Sylvia Tomasch's "Postcolonial Chaucer and the Virtual Jew," 254.

late medieval piety. The central principle of contagious magic is “once in contact, always in contact”; that is, any object once connected to a sacred being is forever imbued with the sacred qualities of that being.¹⁴¹ This is the logic behind the power of relics.

Eucharistic communion could almost be seen as the extreme manifestation of contagious magic, except for the fact that eucharistic consumption must be repeated to have efficacy.

The punitive miracle of the host adhering to Jonathas’s hand makes a joke about contagious magic, and brings out the more sinister dimensions of “once in contact, always in contact.” If anything can be deemed “refreshing” about *Croxton* to a modern reader, it is that the aggression within late medieval Christianity is so overt here: the aggressive behavior of the wafer complicates the idea of the late medieval Christ’s fleshliness as necessarily a vulnerable, nurturant, feminized fleshliness. The aggressive behaviors of both the the eucharist and the oven also complicate recent scholarly appreciations of Christ’s body and Mary’s body as “participated beings,” since inclusion/participation in Christ’s body in this play is forcible rather than welcoming or protective.¹⁴²

In folklore, the closest terminology that describes the behavior of the host in the *Croxton Play* would be the “stick-fast motif.” Academic discourse usually aspires to terminology that is neutral, inoffensive, and without “baggage.” The phrase “tar-baby

¹⁴¹ Sir James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (New York: Macmillan, 1922). See also Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 52-58.

¹⁴² For a discussion of Mary and of allegorical goddesses as participated beings, see Barbara Newman, *God and the Goddesses*, 40-43. Newman observes, “The relational terms “daughter” and “bride” proved useful because they implied not only a likeness to God and a nearness to him, but also a hierarchical subordination and thus a mediating role between God and humans. What allegory preferred to express through the filial relationship could also be asserted in the abstract philosophical language of participation. In identifying Lady Philosophy as “properly God,” Christine de Pizan quoted Boethius’ platonic maxim that “although by nature there is only one God, by participation there are many”(40), and “The somewhat unfamiliar idea of goddesses as participated beings may be clarified by a look at their iconography. For instance, the beloved late medieval icon of the Virgin as mater misericordiae, sheltering a crowd of believers beneath her cloak..., represents her under a particular aspect as the embodiment of Mercy, a divine attribute. Those who participate in her mercy are visually incorporated into her image” (41).

discourse,” though inelegant and troubling, conveys far more of the dynamic at work in the *Croxtan Play* than “punitive incorporation,” or “punitive gluing.” For one thing, “tar-baby discourse” instantly conveys the idea of a bullying, persistent, hegemonic embrace of a dissenting party, an embrace that grows stronger the more energetically the dissenter struggles against it. The notion of the “tar-baby” is apt in the very nature of its troubling “baggage” for describing the anti-Judaism of *Croxtan*; it suggests both discrimination against a minority group rendered nostalgic by a dominant group’s collective memory, and it creates a vivid mental image of escalating minority resistance to a mute hegemonic symbol which only increases that symbol’s power. Before Joel Chandler Harris appropriated the tar-baby story from African-American slaves, African-American audiences identified with the rule-breaking trickster figure of Br’er Rabbit. They regarded Br’er Fox, Br’er rabbit’s opponent, as a representative of the white man. In the folktale, Br’er Fox fashions the tar-baby as a snare for Br’er Rabbit. Br’er Rabbit has a one-sided “dialogue” with the mute tar-baby, whose silence he interprets as insult. The more Br’er Rabbit strikes the tar-baby, the more thoroughly he is stuck to it. In *Croxtan*, the more the Jews assault and resist the eucharistic wafer, the more tenaciously it clings to them, and the more gruesome grow the play’s “special effects.” One of the most brilliant and pernicious suggestions of the play is the idea that the Jews do violence to themselves by refusing to accept Christ’s presence in the host. Jonathas loses his hand when they nail the host to a post and attempt to pry Jonathas loose. When the Christ-child appears as an “image” above the bleeding oven, he emphasizes this point, that Jonathas brought his injury upon himself:

JHESUS: ...Jonathas, on thin[e] hand thow art but lame,

And this thorow[gh] thin[e] own cruelnesse.
 For thin{e} hurt thou mayest thyselfe blame:
 Thow woldist preve thy power me to oppresse.
 (ll.770-73)

Both the dramatic action and then these words of the apparitional Christ displace Christian persecution of the Jews onto the Jews themselves, presenting the Jews as mutilating *themselves* through their violent repudiation of the host.

The Oven in *Croxton*: A Site of Birth, Sacrifice, Death, Nourishment, and Explosive Protest

The oven in the *Croxton* play is a complex symbol, encompassing the three central moments of Christ's life: His birth, death and resurrection. The play's stage directions call attention to the Jews wrapping the host in a cloth before throwing it into the oven and sealing it off; the cloth suggests the shroud used before the sealing of Christ in the tomb. When the "image" miraculously rises from the oven, Jonathas' exclamation tells us it is the image of a wounded child. Thus, this moment manages to suggest Christ just born, Christ just crucified, and Christ freshly resurrected all at the same time.

It is tempting to speculate about a medieval audience's reception of the central miracle. The audience could have been boisterous in its enjoyment of the slapstick elements of the stagecraft, and of the terror and confusion of the Jewish characters as the host sprang to life and the oven burst. But perhaps the referencing of Christ's death and resurrection could have inspired a more subdued awe in onlookers, since it would remind them of the solemnity of the *visitatio sepulchri*, the visit to the sepulcher of the three Marys on Easter morning. At the core of Christianity is the trope of Christ's death and

resurrection, with its promise to believers of a chance to imitate His resurrection and have eternal life.

Along with the oven's metaphoric resemblance to Christ's tomb, there is an iconographic tradition of Mary's womb as the oven that baked the Eucharistic bread of Christ. Christ's appearance as a child implicitly acknowledges Mary's pivotal role as the nourisher of the Eucharistic flesh that nourishes the whole Christian community. Miri Rubin cites the example of Franciscan John Ryman's carol, composed near the time of the *Croxton* play:

This brede geveth eternall lyfe
Both unto man, to childe, and wife...
In virgyne Mary this brede was bake
When criste of her manhoode did take,
For of alle synne mankynde to make,
Ete ye it so ye be [not dede].¹⁴³

Here, instead of the familiar metaphors of Mary as the enclosed garden, or Mary as the window through which the celestial light of God's word shines, we have Mary as the oven that baked Christ. This image also derives from Galenic understandings of the womb as an oven in which the fetus cooked.¹⁴⁴

In order to argue both for the Virgin Mary's presence in the *Croxton* play and that *Croxton* minimizes her role, one must examine Mary's importance in other anti-Jewish narratives, and especially in the precursor to host desecration stories, the story of "the little Jewish boy." Along with the general profusion of ground-breaking research on medieval Jews and medieval anti-Judaism since the 1980s, several analyses of the

¹⁴³ Cited in Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 145.

¹⁴⁴ Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 145; see also Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 100.

connections between Marian piety and anti-Judaism have also been recently been published. L. O. Aranye Fradenburg's "Criticism, Anti-Semitism and the *Prioress's Tale*" was one of the earliest scholarly essays to theorize that the Prioress's tale is "a text of torture" and to explain how the tale's sentimentality and pathos toward Mary is connected to violence against the Jews.¹⁴⁵ Using Mary Douglas's anthropological analyses of purity and pollution in *Purity and Danger*, along with psychoanalytic theory, Fradenburg argues that the *Prioress's Tale* "finally makes all too visible the dependence of clean, proper, self-coincident space, upon abjection."¹⁴⁶ Denise Despres, pursuing similar lines of inquiry, discusses how Mary became a potent symbol of Ecclesia, both as the Church Militant and as the Church Triumphant, in the later middle ages. Despres argues,

Despite the actual purging of the Jews from England, fifteenth-century Christians clearly found these Marian stories depicting the defeat of the carnal Jews by the purified Church Triumphant, represented by Mary, to be powerful and purposeful meditative fare. ... While Mary's own bodily assumption into heaven prefigured the bodily resurrection of all Christians, her role in the *mariales*, compilations of Marian miracles, hinted at the possibility of social purity not at the end of time, but miraculously in the struggling Church Militant.¹⁴⁷

Despres' analysis of the illustrations as well as the text of the *Carew-Poyntz Hours* reveals a "consistent and coherent anti-Judaic iconology."¹⁴⁸ Despres joins Fradenburg in interpreting Mary as a symbol of the inviolable wholeness of the *corpus mysticum*, "defender of the Church's bodily boundaries," juxtaposed against polluting Jewish

¹⁴⁵ L.O. Aranye Fradenburg "Criticism, Anti-Semitism, and the *Prioress's Tale*," *Exemplaria* 1.1, March 1989, 69-115; 84.

¹⁴⁶ Fradenburg, 107.

¹⁴⁷ Denise L. Despres, "Immaculate Flesh and the Social Body: Mary and the Jews," *Jewish History*, Vol.12, No.1 (Spring 1998), 47-69; 56.

¹⁴⁸ Despres, "Immaculate Flesh," 48.

carnality. As with the “Prioress’ Tale”, the *Carew-Poyntz Hours* juxtapose images of Mary’s pure body with *bas de page* images of Jewish host desecration. Despres argues that “Jewish carnality, connected to a reductive literalism, is symbolized by bodily waste—feces, spittle, or by festering sores and physical ailments—in medieval representation.”¹⁴⁹ In *Croxton*, the Jews are certainly shown to be literalists in their assault upon the Host, and Jonathas’ loss of his hand is a physical ailment that is supposed to mark his spiritual blindness and lack of wholeness; but I will argue that the *Croxton* play does not rely on the pervasive late medieval juxtaposition of Jewish abjection and Marian purity.

The story of the Jewish Boy, first written in the sixth century, then giving rise to several other versions by the twelfth century, links Mary’s power to protect and console with the violent punishment of a wicked Jewish father. Miri Rubin recounts the sixth-century version written by Gregory of Tours:

This early Latin version had as its protagonist a Jewish glazier of Constantinople, whose son went to school with Christian boys. Once the son accompanied his school-mates to a local basilica and partook there of ‘the Lord’s body and blood.’ The child then returned home and told his father what he had done. The Jewish father declared that he would avenge this offense to the law of Moses, and threw his son into an oven. The boy’s mother rushed to his rescue, but seeing the heat of the fire she despaired and began wailing and shouting so that the city filled with her cries. When the Christians inquired and were told of her calamity they approached the fire, only to see it subside, and find the Jewish boy in it, unscathed, with the following explanation of his felicitous state: ‘The woman who was sitting on the throne in that church where I received the bread from the table, and who was cradling a young boy in her lap, covered me with her cloak, so that the fire did not devour me.’ The Jewish boy then converted with his mother, and his example led many other Jews to do so, while his father was thrown into the oven.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁹ Despres, “Immaculate Flesh,” 58.

¹⁵⁰ Rubin, *Gentile Tales*, 8.

In this witness tale, where the Jewish child witnesses a Christian miracle and effects the conversion of other Jews, Mary is the powerful mother who saves the child, while his own mother is ineffectual. Over time, this story became more closely tied to a witnessing of the eucharist, of the Christ-child's presence within the host, and the wicked father is cast as the enemy of the eucharist. By the early thirteenth century, the tale of the Jewish Boy was translated into various vernaculars and also into visual art. As the sentimental emphasis upon the vulnerability of the Jewish child and the Christ child in the host increased, so did the sense of male Jewish menace.¹⁵¹

The story of the Jewish Boy adds complexity and ambivalence to the image of the oven, now associated with both womb and annihilation. Rubin eloquently describes how the oven became an apt eucharistic image in the late Middle Ages:

The oven is rich in connotations: it often represented the womb, the place where children were 'cooked,' a secret place. It could be familiar, domestic, warm and vibrant, as well as a destructive place where children were destroyed. This duality also lent itself to a specifically late medieval connotation, one which made of the oven or hearth a token of eucharistic meaning. In this meaning the dual aspect of the oven's work is realized: Christ's body was made as bread or paschal meat in an oven, but it was also destroyed as a sacrifice. Ovens were thus both food-giving and life-denying, dark and dangerous places for children, while remaining useful spaces for adults.¹⁵²

The oven in *Croxton*, like both the wounded body of Christ and the pregnant body of the Virgin Mary, can be read as a carnivalesque body, a body encompassing the threshold states of birth, death, and resurrection.

Of course, *Croxton's* oven does not suggest Mary as the *virgo intacta*, miraculously sealed and impermeable, who is celebrated in such works as the *N-Town*

¹⁵¹ Rubin, *Gentile Tales*, 15-24.

¹⁵² Rubin, *Gentile Tales*, 25.

Nativity pageant. In the *N-Town Nativity*, the midwife Salomee, like Jonathas in *Croxtan*, is divinely punished with an afflicted hand for testing Mary's miraculous intactness after the birth.¹⁵³ The other midwife also expresses her disbelief:

ZELOMY: A fayr chylde of a maydon is born,
And nedyth no waschyng as other don:
Ful clene and pure forsoth is he,
Withouten spott or ony polucyon,
His modyr nott hurte of virgynite! (229-33)¹⁵⁴

In the *N-Town Nativity*, the complete absence of blood on both Mary and the "glorious chylde" is repeatedly mentioned by both midwives; Mary and Jesus are repeatedly said to be "clene," "nowth fowle arayd," "Natt fowle polutyd," and "undefiled." The *Nativity* pageant, right down to its *verbatim* denial of "polucyon," supports Fradenburg's claim that the Virgin Mary "defends against the pollution brought on by change, against the threat to "structure" posed by those, like the clergeon, who are changing."¹⁵⁵ In the *Nativity*, Mary's body is at once a "body-in-process" and a completed, impermeable, timeless, "classical" body.

Bursting with blood and convulsively "in-process," *Croxtan's* oven expresses the intense eucharistic piety of the late fifteenth century. While the blood's primary association is with the host, there is room to consider it as the blood of birth--as Mary's blood also. If we "read" *Croxtan's* oven as Mary, this particular version of Mary is not

¹⁵³ For a discussion of "the topos of the stricken hand" connecting Jewish male doubters and Christian female doubters, see Lisa Lampert, *Gender and Jewish Difference from Paul to Shakespeare* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2004), 101-122.

¹⁵⁴ "The Nativity" in *The N-Town Play, Vol. I.*, ed. Stephen Spector (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the Early English Text Society, 1991), 160.

¹⁵⁵ Fradenburg "Criticism, Anti-Semitism, and the *Prioress's Tale*," 88. Fradenburg in turn cites Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1984; reprint London: Ark Paperbacks, 1985), 96: "Danger lies in transitional states, simply because transition is neither one state nor the next, it is undefinable. The person who must pass from one to another is himself in danger and emanates danger to others."

enacting Fradenburg's model of "the sanitization of sadism"-- the purity and gracious, protective maternity that depends upon notions of Jewish pollution or dirt for its articulation.¹⁵⁶ Instead, here Mary's indecorous carnality counters Jewish unruly carnality.

The fierce and volatile behavior of both the oven and the wafer is most uncharacteristic conduct for both Mary and for Christ, particularly the infant Christ or the crucified Christ; both Mary and Christ are traditionally celebrated for their meek endurance of suffering. The easiest way to explain away this bizarreness would be to suggest that the oven and the wafer in *Croxtan* become vehicles for the wrath of God the Father, who then dynamically express God's fury at the Jews' transgression. But Mary's and Christ's anomalous behavior could also be interpreted as their own, especially if these uncharacteristically aggressive behaviors remain mediated by theatrical props rather than by speaking characters. The fact that Mary never appears explicitly can increase the latitude for seemingly un-Marian behavior.

Another possible way of looking at the Mary/oven's explosion of blood is in a manner proposed by Pamela Sheingorn and Kathleen Ashley in their reading of Saint Foy as a "trickster saint," whose miracles are sometimes referred to in Bernard of Angers' primary text "as *joca*—tricks or jokes."¹⁵⁷ Ashley and Sheingorn borrow the semiotic paradigm of the trickster, "the sacred clown who is both the transgressor and policer of boundaries," from ethnographic sources to account for Saint Foy's aggressive, capricious, mischievous and even murderous behaviors:

¹⁵⁶ Fradenburg, 84.

¹⁵⁷ See Kathleen Ashley and Pamela Sheingorn, eds., *Writing Faith: Text, Sign, and History in the Miracles of Saint Foy* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1999), 33.

...This astonishing portrait of Foy as serial killer is difficult to reconcile with any expectation that a saint must exemplify good behavior....Paradoxically, this holy figure [the trickster] can perform acts which by human norms would be unacceptable, violating these norms of human behavior in order to protect the monastic community.

Readings of Mary as disorderly have usually focused upon the indiscriminate or excessive nature of her mercy upon sinners; conversely, the example of Saint Foy opens up the possibility of reading *Croxton*'s oven as nearly merciless in its protectiveness of the Christ child. The bursting oven can be read as a kind of alarm system signaling the violation of the Eucharist, or as an explosive protest against its violation, which is then continued by the wounded Christ Child himself.

The explosion of blood may also signal the impending restoration of Jonathas' severed hand. In Saint Foy's hagiography, several miracles occur in which "deafness, muteness, or blindness is healed by 'a sudden and violent discharge of blood' that both signals and effects the cure."¹⁵⁸ In one of these miracles, the text speaks of the spouts of blood as breaking through the obstacles that were blocking a boy's voice and hearing; in the *Croxton* play, the succession of supernatural events needed—the Host bleeding, the Host sticking fast to Jonathas' hand, the cauldron boiling with blood, the oven finally bursting—suggests the layers of supernatural effort needed to break through the perceived blindness and obduracy of the Jews.

The fact that Mary never appears explicitly in the play's blood-and-thunder spectacle also means that she does not compete, dramatically or politically, with either Christ or with the figure of the Bishop, in appropriating the energies stirred up by the miracle. I agree with Donnalee Dox that "The link between the play's visual imagery and

¹⁵⁸ Ashley and Sheingorn, *Writing Faith*, 31. These miraculous blood-gushings appear in Book I of the *Liber miraculorum sancte Fidis*, a section written by Bernard of Angers.

East Anglian cultural practices supports a reading of the play as didactic and orthodox.”¹⁵⁹ The play’s emphasis upon church hierarchy also implies a certain masculinism. Despite East Anglia’s clear investment in the cult of the Virgin Mary, as revealed in the *N-Town Play* and by cult statues, shrines, and chapels, and despite common figurings of Mary as *Ecclesia*, the Croxton play’s focus upon “the power govyn to the prestys mowthe” precludes a more explicit role for Mary. The impact of the miracle is first moralized by the wounded Christ child, who also restores Jonathas’ maimed hand, and then elaborated into acts of penance by the Bishop. Christ and the priest claim all the powers of healing and correction.

¹⁵⁹ Donnalee Dox, “Theatrical Space, Mutable Space, and the Space of the Imagination: Three Readings of the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*,” in Barbara A. Hanawalt and Michal Kobińska, eds., *Medieval Practices of Space* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 167-198; 170.

MARY IN THE N-TOWN CYCLE: PERFORMING FEMALE COMMUNITY

One of the unique aspects of the N-Town cycle play is the amount of attention, and the number of pageants, that it devotes to dramatizing Mary's life from childhood on; coinciding with the play's interest in Mary is its reliance upon the language of affective piety, and upon Christian women as witnesses and interpreters of Christ's self-sacrifice--a theme I explore in my section on N-Town's "Crucifixion" pageant.¹⁶⁰ Of the four texts that I am examining in this dissertation, the N-Town cycle best supports Caroline Bynum's and Barbara Newman's arguments that late medieval figurations of Christ allowed women to imitate Christ by means of, rather than in spite of, their fleshliness and femaleness. In this chapter, I argue that in several N-Town pageants, the episodes critique the social anxiety and punitive impulses, mostly male and clerical, surrounding female sexuality and fecundity. At the same time, N-Town presents a counterbalance to the harsh agents of social control that Mary and other women must contend with, in that several pageants represent Mary as part of a dynamic community of devout women. This chapter builds upon the work of Pamela Sheingorn and Kathleen Ashley to suggest that Mary's bonds to other women, both familial and spiritual, are emphasized in N-Town, and that, particularly in the "Crucifixion" pageant, the staging of collective female mourning and outrage is the pageant's primary means of interpellating the audience. Although Christ criticizes Mary in the pageant for her attachment to His materiality, his

¹⁶⁰ All citations of the N-Town Play will be from Stephen Spector, ed., *The N-Town Play*, EETS, s.s.11 and 12, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

physical being, Mary's inconsolability, and the laments of the other women, are essential to the power of the performance.

In my analysis of N-Town's "Visit to Elizabeth," I attempt to contextualize that pageant's verbal evocation of Mary's and Elizabeth's transparent wombs, that is, the iconographic tradition in which the as-yet-unborn John the Baptist kneels before the unborn Christ. I conclude that, while recent feminist analyses of fetal imagery have argued that such imagery is capable of displacing and diminishing maternal presence and agency, and although medieval medical theory often similarly erased the mother's body and represented women's wombs as decontextualized vessels holding a fetus, in N-Town, the loving kinship tie between Elizabeth and Mary dramatized by the pageant, together with late medieval metaphors of gestation as active industry (baking, weaving, clothing) complicate the reduction of both women to mere conduits for the arrival of their holy offspring.

Scholarly debates continue about the extent to which Christ's increasing fleshliness destabilized Augustinian (and Aristotelian) gender binaries which associated the spirit with man and the flesh with woman. Bynum contends that late medieval "religious women derived their basic symbols from such ordinary biological and social experiences as giving birth, lactating, suffering, and preparing and distributing food," and that these symbols were effective because they were also present in the iconography of the crucified Christ.¹⁶¹ While Bynum has argued that late medieval Eucharistic piety often invoked a feminized Christ, and thus enabled pious women to identify with Christ as nurturers and sufferers, scholars such as David Aers, Lynn Staley and Ruth Evans have

¹⁶¹ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 6.

contended that late medieval “feminizations” of Christ may have served the interests of the clergy more than those of lay female mystics.¹⁶² While Aers has extended more of a materialist analysis and critique of Bynum’s “empowerment thesis,” and suggests that dominant constructions of a suffering, tortured Christ as feminine serve as a kind of mystification by the Church that encouraged women and the laity to accept their marginal position in relation to Church hierarchy, other critiques such as Kathleen Biddick’s, assail Bynum’s tendency, in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, to conflate the category of “women” with a maternal essence.¹⁶³

Bynum and Newman each anticipated criticisms that view Christ’s feminization and medieval religious writings’ reliance upon allegorical goddesses as strategic deployments of feminization by the Church—that is, as mystifications that serve dominant clerical gender hierarchies. In *God and the Goddesses*, Newman remarks, “...the same goddesses, appearing in the work of male writers, may lead the postmodern reader to suspect precisely what Gordon Teskey has theorized—an attempt to mask patriarchal authority in a beneficent female guise.”¹⁶⁴ Later in the book, she also concedes that “An imagination anchored in the concrete would never forget that, although the Church might be symbolically a mother, the priests who actually baptized, preached, taught, and administered the Eucharist were all men.”¹⁶⁵ Bynum, in her early book *Jesus as Mother*, does not raise the issue of feminization in terms of possible

¹⁶²David Aers, “The Humanity of Christ: Reflections on Orthodox Late Medieval Representations,” in David Aers and Lynn Staley, *The Powers of the Holy: Religion, Politics, and Gender in Late Medieval Culture* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State Press, 1996), 34-35.

¹⁶³ Kathleen Biddick, “Genders, Bodies, Borders: Technologies of the Visible,” *Speculum* 68 (1993). 389-418.

¹⁶⁴ Newman, *God and the Goddesses*, 47.

¹⁶⁵ Newman, *God and the Goddesses*, 325.

mystification, but she does note that maternal imagery is used in connection with authority figures, male as well as female:

Mothering imagery was, of course, popular with Cistercians to describe both the Virgin and the church. But more relevant to the idea of God as mother is the fact that many *male* figures are referred to as mother, or described as nursing, conceiving, or giving birth. Male figures so described are invariably figures whom both medieval and modern readers would recognize to be authority figures. Thus Cistercians refer to prelates—that is, abbots and bishops—as mothers.¹⁶⁶

Later in her discussion, Bynum interprets male clerical use of maternal imagery as an effort to temper their authority. In the beginning of *Fragmentation and Redemption*, Bynum briefly acknowledges the debates arising from the publication of *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* by remarking that “None of [these] essays denies the asymmetrical power relations between men and women or between clergy and laity.”¹⁶⁷ She also reiterates her belief that the Eucharist “was not merely a mechanism of social control, a way of requiring yearly confession and therefore submission to the supervision of local clergy”.¹⁶⁸

Both Bynum and Newman are actually quite careful to qualify any suggestions that the late medieval, fleshly and vulnerable Christ was generally empowering to actual women, noting that the more human representations of Christ opened avenues for *particular* women to imitate Christ as women, without the use of masculinizing metaphors and practices. In *Fragmentation and Redemption*, Bynum contends that

Women occasionally—although only very occasionally—feel empowered to act in a priestly capacity by their reception of the Eucharist, or see themselves (or other women) in vision as priests. Gertrude of Helfta, Angela of Foligno, and

¹⁶⁶ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1982) 147.

¹⁶⁷ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 16.

¹⁶⁸ Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 44.

Lukardis of Oberweimar, among others receive from Christ in the Eucharist the power to preach, teach and criticize, to hear confessions and pronounce absolutions, to administer the Eucharist to others. More frequently, women's visions criticize clerical incompetence or immorality. But the women, released into another role in vision and image, never, of course, actually become priests.¹⁶⁹

Bynum here acknowledges that some of the female agency she describes is only possible in the fantasized remove of a vision (although *The Book of Margery Kempe* suggests both the possibilities and the dangers that attend taking women's anticlerical critique out of the realm of vision and into the street). Newman likewise concedes that only particular women succeeded in wresting agency from their identifications with a feminized divine, be it with a feminized Christ, with Mary, or with allegorical goddess-figures. In her concluding chapter of *God and the Goddesses*, Newman asserts,

...if the prevalence and tolerance of goddess-language does not allow us to qualify it as subversive, neither should we leap to the opposite conclusion. In Chapter 1 we considered the possibility that women writers in particular found goddess figures spiritually and psychologically empowering, and close readings tend to bear this out.¹⁷⁰

Here Newman's emphasis is upon internal empowerment--spiritual and psychological--rather than social agency. Certainly spiritual and psychological empowerment would have been important in assisting women writers to write down their visions, or, as in the case of Margery Kempe, to enlist a sympathetic priest's assistance. As in the examples cited above, both Bynum and Newman also tend to delimit their empowerment claims by locating the empowerment in spiritual, psychological and imaginative realms.

Since the performative aspects of drama often trouble this boundary between private vision or imagination and "real life," the N-Town cycle, though clearly relevant

¹⁶⁹ Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 45.

¹⁷⁰ Newman, *God and the Goddesses*, 312.

to Bynum's empowerment thesis, cannot help but complicate it. Not the least of our difficulties is the fact that the Virgin Mary and the other exemplary Christian women were all performed by male actors.¹⁷¹ But even without considering this aspect of the N-Town cycle, the space that both Bynum and Newman carve out for protected, private imaginative production is space that can be contested, derailed or even curtailed in the act of public performance. For example, we can consider the unintended hilarity that greeted the York "Funeral of the Virgin" or "Fergus" pageant. Though a text of the play itself no longer exists, the dissatisfaction of its sponsoring guild, the Masons, is on record, stating "the subject of this pageant is not contained in the sacred scripture and used to produce more noise and laughter than devotion."¹⁷² This complaint suggests that the Masons had hoped for a devout response to the spectacle of the Virgin's pure body resisting desecration even after death, but that in performance, the slapstick element of the would-be assailant becoming stuck to the Virgin's dead body distracted from the pageant's theological purpose of asserting the Virgin's continued inviolability.

N-Town complicates the empowerment thesis not only due to the complexities of performance, but thematically as well. Of the four texts under consideration here, the N-Town Cycle appears to best support the "empowerment thesis," in that Mary's presence in the play is enlarged, and her status elevated, because of her role in creating the incarnate Christ. A closer reading reveals that Mary's empowerment in the play is

¹⁷¹ For one of the few efforts to explore at length the possible effects or implications of this routine late medieval crossdressing in the cycle drama, see Robert Clark and Claire Sponsler, "Queer Play: The Cultural Work of Crossdressing in Medieval Drama," *New Literary History* 28 (1997): 319-44. —

¹⁷² This quote is from Alexandra F. Johnston and Margaret Rogerson, eds. *York*, 2 vols., Records of Early English Drama (REED), 2 (Toronto and Manchester, 1979), i. 47-48. For a discussion of the "Fergus" pageant, see Ruth Evans, "When a Body Meets a Body: Fergus and Mary in the York Cycle," in *New Medieval Literatures* I, eds. Wendy Scase, Rita Copeland and David Lawton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 193-212.

qualified in certain respects: although N-Town gives Mary more opportunities to speak than the other cycle plays, it does not endow her with an individualizing eloquence; further, N-Town both celebrates and critiques Mary's privileged connection to Christ's body. Nevertheless, in N-Town, Mary is allowed a speaking role in a greater number of pageants than in the other cycle dramas, and her story is represented from before her own beginning, with a pageant centered on her parents, Joachim and Anna. There are certainly several unpatriarchal, if not feminist, formal choices made in the N-Town cycle. Mary is represented throughout her life, and not just at those moments strictly related to Christ's conception and birth: as the learned three-year-old child at the temple; as an outspoken fourteen-year-old girl who dares to oppose, at least initially, the bishop's decree that she must marry; as the much more traditional meek and obedient maiden of the Annunciation; as a "bold bysmare" and strumpet in the eyes of the villagers; as a grieving mother co-suffering physically with her son at the Crucifixion; and finally, as a soul rejoined with her body and with her Son up in heaven. Before Christ is born, Mary performs a Christ-like role in N-Town, enduring the repeated tests and the doubts of others while her own virtue and faith remain unshaken.

The N-Town cycle gives Mary a sustained speaking role, but Mary's power in the plays derives less from eloquence than from her exemplarity and from her ties to other women. While the Pearl Maiden teaches both through her behavior and her instructive speech, N-Town's Mary teaches primarily through her exemplary behavior. While the *House of Fame* offers us a blasphemous version of "Jesus as Mother," dealing in misogynist humor about the uncontainable, garrulous, fecund female body, and *Pearl* shows us the perfected female body and soul, mourned by a perverse and possessive

father, and *Croxton* gives us Mary's exploding womb as a kind of alarm system signaling social transgression, N-Town most explicitly demonstrates the social anxiety, mostly male and clerical, surrounding female sexuality and fecundity, and the social pressures that Mary (and implicitly other women) must navigate. Before Christ's birth, Mary is shown being doubted and tested repeatedly, by Joseph, by her community, and by her midwife. *The Crucifixion* pageant allows Mary and other lamenting Christian women to model exemplary co-suffering with Christ and to interpret Christ's sacrifice for the audience; but the pageant also critiques Mary's attachment to her Son's physical being. *The Visit to Elizabeth* balances the patriarchal fantasy of transparent female generativity against more feminist attention to Mary as part of a matrilineal genealogy.

There is a scholarly consensus that, as attention to Christ's fleshliness and humanity increased, popular devotion to Mary and to her mother Anne increased; the cults of Anne and Mary began to grow in the twelfth century and continued to increase through the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Joachim and Joseph did not receive the same popular attention; both the Immaculate Conception and Christ's conception minimize the role of the earthly fathers. Noting this discrepancy, Kathleen Ashley and Pamela Sheingorn claim that "Due chiefly to the *Legenda aurea*, the late medieval Jesus is most significantly a product of a matrilineal descent system, rather than the patrilineal one of the Gospels".¹⁷³ However, scholars disagree about what the focus on Anne and Mary means in the late middle ages: crudely, some scholars interpret this focus as mystification by the Church, the strategic appropriation of the feminine by a

¹⁷³ See "Introduction: Locating Saint Anne in Cultural and Gender Studies," in Kathleen Ashley and Pamela Sheingorn, eds., *Interpreting Cultural Symbols: Saint Anne in Late Medieval Society* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 17.

masculine institution, while other scholars connect the popular focus on Mary and Anne to an increase in lay female piety and to increased opportunities for women's religious participation as women.

There are also two broad scholarly stances concerning the figure of Mary in particular. Marina Warner and Julia Kristeva argued that Mary functions as a repressive token, reinforcing conservative values of purity, meekness and silence.¹⁷⁴ The very title of Warner's 1976 study, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* suggests her argument: that Mary's virgin motherhood ultimately served as a demoralizing model that was impossible for real women to emulate. Theresa Coletti, in a highly influential essay, has complicated Warner's argument by pointing out instabilities and contradictions within "medico-theological" notions of Mary, arguing that "the spectacle of the pregnant virgin enabled cycle dramatists simultaneously to deploy and undercut traditional discourses of gender."¹⁷⁵ Coletti also notes that

...in symbolic and social practice medieval people seem not to have been terribly troubled by Mary's impossible difference. Rarely do we find them bewailing their distance from the pure and rarified Madonna. Rather, we see them intent on honoring Mary's incarnating mother-flesh and its continual mediation of the distance between body and spirit.¹⁷⁶

In support of this claim, Coletti cites Margery Kempe's and Saint Bridget's enthusiastic and unintimidated visions of Mary.

¹⁷⁴ Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976) and Julia Kristeva, "Stabat Mater," *Poetics Today*, Vol. 6:1-2 (1985), first English translation by Arthur Goldhammer. Kristeva's essay first appeared under the title "Herethique de l'amour," in *Tel Quel*, No.74 (Winter 1977).

¹⁷⁵ Theresa Coletti, "Purity and Danger: the Paradox of Mary's Body and the En-gendering of the Infancy Narrative in the English Mystery Cycles," in *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature*, eds. Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 65-95, 67.

¹⁷⁶ Coletti, "Purity and Danger," 85.

Since the publication of Coletti's essay, scholars seem to have focused more upon what Mary "meant" in specific historical moments and places, rather than further theorizing of the late medieval Mary. Coletti is apt in noticing how the cycle dramas invite the audience to dwell on the weirdness, the improbability, and the moments of transgression in the sacred narrative of Christ's incarnation. While Coletti's nuanced reading of Mary astutely describes the way that the cycle dramas dwell on the moments of transgression in Mary's life story, Marina Warner's thesis, that Mary's exceptional nature supports conservative and antifeminist ideologies, remains relevant to several pageants in N-Town. "The Visit to Elizabeth" raises such questions as whether Mary's enclosure of the Trinity in her womb suggests her supremacy, or whether it renders her a container, a mere instrument for divine will? In my reading here, the pageant affirms the expected doctrinal aspects of Mary's role, but also celebrates Mary further by staging the two women praising God together and calling attention to one another as essential participants in salvation history. "The Parliament of Heaven/ Salutation and Conception" pageant endows Mary with a far more expansive role than her brief appearances in the Bible, and the lavish praises of Mary spoken by God, by the Son and by Gabriel contrast sharply with the distrust and interference that Mary encounters on the earthly plane, from ecclesiastical authority figures as well as stock doubters and detractors. In "Joseph's Doubt" and "The Trial of Mary and Joseph," the pageants dramatize the social sanctions, both informal and ecclesiastical, that can be exercised upon women suspected of adultery, or upon married couples who challenge the social norms (in Joseph and Mary's case, both by their chaste marriage and by their drastic difference in age.) I conclude this chapter with an analysis of female community in N-Town's "Crucifixion" pageant.

N-Town's Critique of Earthly Gender Politics Through Angelic Praise: "The Salutation and Conception," "Joseph's Doubt," and "The Trial of Mary and Joseph"

The N-Town Play increases the tension between the doctrinal meanings of Mary's pregnant body and the earthly social meanings of her body by alternating between pageants where Mary is exalted in the loftiest terms and pageants where Mary's body – and sometimes Joseph's—are subjected to the lowliest, crudest, most prolonged slander. One interesting aspect that becomes evident only after reading the entirety of N-Town—or at least all of the Marian pageants—is that although the verbal abuse of Mary in "The Trial of Mary and Joseph" is certainly critiqued by the text, the slander is punished relatively lightly compared to the physical afflictions that befall those who dare to physically test or assault Mary's body. The difference in consequences may have to do with the distinction between verbal and physical abuse, or perhaps the verbal abuse of "The Trial" may be excused because Christ has not yet been born, and thus the communal doubt is still more forgivable.

The community's ignorance and potential cruelty are repeatedly anticipated in Play 10, "The Marriage of Mary and Joseph." First, the pageant dramatizes Joseph's reluctance to go and offer a wand in the temple: Joseph first pleads feebleness of age, and must be urged repeatedly to go to the temple. Then Joseph anticipates that he will be viewed as the fabliau figure of the *senex amans*, although his extreme apprehension demonstrates that he is far from being a lecherous old man:

I haue be maydon evyr and evvyrmore wele ben,
I chaungyd not 3et of all my long lyff!
And now to be maryed? Sum man wold wen

It is a straunge thyng an old man to take a 3onge wyff! (179-82)

Joseph continues to tarry behind as the other men bring their wands up to the bishop, and waits until the bishop chides him and commands him to join in. Even once his wand has flowered, Joseph continues to protest; he protests even after the bishop has told him that the marriage is God's will. He proposes a chaste marriage to Mary:

A3ens my God not do I may.
 ...But fayr maydon, I the pray,
 Keep the clene as I xal me—
 I am a man of age!
 Therefore, sere busshop, I wyl that 3e wete
 That in bedde we xul nevyr mete,
 For, iwys, mayden suete,
 An old man may not rage. (291-97)

Even after all of this is arranged and the wedding is solemnized, the bishop insists that Mary have three chaperones always around her, to fend off evil gossip:

Joseph, thiselph art old of age
 And thi wyff of age is 3onge;
 And as we redyn in old sage,
 Many a man is sclepyr of tonge,
 Therefore, euyl langage for to swage,
 That 3oure good fame may leste longe,
 Iij damsellys xul dwelle with yow in stage,
 With thi wyff to be evyrmore amonge. (344-51)

The marriage of Mary and Joseph could arouse public animosity both as a “January-May” marriage and as a chaste marriage. The bishop joins Joseph in his apprehension about “sclepyr” (“slippery, deceitful”) tongues wagging and “euyl langage”; near the very end of the pageant, Joseph again beseeches Mary and her three attending maidens to “kepe clene...that evyl langage I here not rowse” (470-72). This pageant repeatedly voices the need to protect Mary and Joseph from malicious gossip, and shows the couple's efforts to remain beyond reproach.

Of course, despite the couple's, and the Bishop's, efforts to avoid inspiring "euyll langage," Mary's miraculous pregnancy soon prompts domestic and then communal turmoil. But before the N-Town cycle compels Mary to endure first Joseph's and then the community's doubt and derision, Play 11, "The Parliament of Heaven; The Salutation and Conception" reminds the audience of Mary's role in salvation history. The first half of the eleventh pageant, "The Parliament of Heaven," moves the audience abruptly from the preceding pageant's more local and sociopolitical concerns about Joseph and Mary's marriage to the broadest eschatological concerns. An expositor, Contemplacio, opens the pageant by beseeching God to take pity on the souls languishing in hell, to come down to earth in human form and to offer redemption. The debate amongst God's daughters Truth, Mercy, Justice ("Ryghtwysnes") and Peace concerning humankind's worthiness of redemption concludes with the triumph of Peace; "The pes of God ovyrcomyth all wytt" (115). "The Parliament of Heaven" dramatizes the suffering of fallen humanity, the need for Filius to descend and take human form, and Filius' eagerness to be born of Mary: "I have so grett hast to be man thore/ in that meekest and purest virgyne" (201-02). God the Father ("Pater") gives Mary a most expansive role in humanity's salvation: "The name of the mayd fre/ Is Mary, that xal al restore" (195-96).

It is in the second half of Play 11, "The Salutation and Conception," that the angel Gabriel bestows the most extravagant praises upon Mary. Gabriel follows the famous greeting, "Ave, gracia plena, Dominus tecum" with the popular typological juxtaposition of Mary as the reversal of the sorrow brought by Eve's sin: "Here this name Eva is turnyd Aue;/ That is to say, withowte sorrow ar 3e now" (219-20). He then describes all of the noble Hebrews, "that are in helle and byde rescu" (276) that are

waiting to hear Mary's assent to the Incarnation. Gabriel proceeds to use all of the most iconographically potent titles to address Mary. "Trone of the Trinite," (333) although a contested image, as I will discuss, suggests a Mary powerful enough to encompass the Trinity. "Modyr of Mercy"(338) would bring to mind the many popular images available of a towering, powerful Mary sheltering crowds of the faithful within her cloak, protecting them from plague and calamity. "Qwen of Hefne, Lady of Erth, and Empres of Helle" (335) would remind the audience of both images and stories of Mary in imperial triumph along with the Trinity up in heaven, or else trampling the serpent, and saving even the most unworthy of her petitioners from the devil's grasp.¹⁷⁷

N-Town's "Salutation" uses a staggering number of metaphors for Mary within the space of a few lines. In parting, Gabriel tells Mary,

Farewyl, turtyl, Goddys dowtere dere.
 Farewel, Goddys modyr. I the honowre.
 Farewel, Goddys sustyr and his pleyng fere;
 Farewel, Goddys chawmere and his bowre. (313-16)

This is one moment where N-Town supports Barbara Newman's thesis that "the Virgin's multiple and labile roles within the celestial family expressed a whole panoply of relationships to the divine and offered each in turn as a paradigm for imitation."¹⁷⁸

Gabriel's description of Mary as turtledove, as god's mother/daughter/sister/"playing

¹⁷⁷ See Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, particularly 321-31, for examples of miracle stories in which the Virgin manages to save sinners from the devil. Warner humorously observes that "In the folktales and miracle stories... [the Virgin] undeniably usurps the unique privileges of Christ" (323) and also that "The more raffish the Virgin's suppliant, the better she likes him. The miracles' heroes are liars, thieves, adulterers, and fornicators, footloose students, pregnant nuns, unruly and lazy clerics and eloping monks. On the single condition that they sing her praises, usually by reciting the *Ave Maria*, and show due respect for the miracle of the Incarnation wrought in her, they can do no wrong" (325).

¹⁷⁸ Newman, *God and the Goddesses*, 253.

companion”/chamber reveals this celestial incest, and Mary’s transcendence of any single role, in the space of four lines of dialogue.

But this acknowledgment of Mary’s powers is then followed by the fabliau humor of “Joseph’s Doubt,” in which Mary’s explanations of her pregnancy are met with Joseph’s scorn: “Goddys childe! Thu lyst, in fay! /God dede never jape so with may!” (43-44). Joseph then proceeds to warn the men in the audience,

Ya, 3a, all olde men to me take tent,
And weddyth no wyff in no kynnys wyse
That is a 3onge wench, by myn assent,
For doute and drede and swych serveyse.
Alas, alas, my name is shent! (49-53)

N-Town’s Joseph bewails his lost reputation, believing himself to be an “olde cokwold,” and even briefly entertains murderous thoughts of having Mary stoned to death: “To the busshop I wole it telle/ That he the lawe may here do,/ With stonys here to qwelle” (95-97). Though Joseph immediately shows remorse for this bloodthirsty outburst, it still requires an angel’s descent and defense of Mary as “a ful clene may,” to persuade him to accept Mary’s explanation. When Joseph first sees Mary in this pageant, her face is so bright that he is temporarily blinded, and he compares it to “the sonne with his bemys quan he is most bryth” (16). Of course Joseph’s words are a pun on the Son, and the three “bemys” of light, that have alighted within Mary during the Salutation pageant. But neither this miraculous physical sign nor Mary’s own words are sufficient to command his belief.

I shall reserve my discussion of “The Visit to Elizabeth” for the next section, and move to Pageant 14, “The Trial of Mary and Joseph,” since it elaborates the issues raised by “Joseph’s Doubt”. The ultimate message of “The Trial” pageant seems

equivocal, and ambivalent. On the one hand, the pageant criticizes gossip, slander, and charivari, or “rough music”—the social controls that were used to chasten couples that transgressed social norms; on the other hand, the slanderers and backbiters are not so severely punished for their prolonged and graphic verbal abuse of the holy couple, and the energy and quantity of slander in the pageant suggests the entertainment value of crass dialogue that shows a prurient enjoyment of Mary’s beauty.

“The Trial” pageant opens with the character of the “Den,” or Dean, summoning a crowd to assemble at the court:

...I somown 3ow, all the rowte!

.....Both Johan Jurdon and Geffrey Gyle,
Malkyn Milkedoke and fayr Mabyle,
Stevyn Sturdy and Jak-at-the-Style,
And Sawdyr Sadelere. (6, 9-12)

The Den continues to call another twenty-seven such names. While some of alliterative names that the summoner calls sound nonsensical, Richard Moll has shown that the majority of the names called suggest the craftsmen who would participate in a riding (a loud demonstration that mocks and protests a marriage that falls outside of social norms).¹⁷⁹ If Moll is correct, then Joseph and Mary are being assailed by humiliating informal social sanctions as well as legal/ecclesiastical ones.

The Den’s speech is followed by two swiftly self-discrediting characters, the First Detractor, “Reysesclaundyr,” and the Second Detractor, “Bakbytere”. Reysesclaunder immediately mentions the harm he does to communities: “I walke wyde and many way,/ But 3et ther I come I do no good”(38-39). Alison Hunt has made a persuasive case for

¹⁷⁹ Richard J. Moll, “Staging Disorder: Charivari in the N-Town Cycle,” *Comparative Drama* 35.2, Summer 2001, 145-161.

interpreting Reysesclaundyr and Bakbytere not simply as stock characters drawn from sermons, but also as stock figures drawn from romance narratives and from anti-Lollard writings.¹⁸⁰ Hunt observes,

Within...the genre of romance, detractors help the hero make his true worth known: they register the envy greatness inspires, supply contrastive narratives articulating the “what is not” so crucial to perceiving the “what is,” and force the hero to re-establish publicly his claim to honor. Within a loose assortment of anti-Lollard writings, Church defenders vilify and repress Church dissenters as backbiters who threaten communal peace and safety by sowing discord.... In denying Mary’s virginity, [the detractors] deny a basic religious tenet and in this way undermine shared beliefs that also hold communities together.¹⁸¹

The detractors in “The Trial of Mary and Joseph” fulfill these romance and anti-Lollard conventions, creating the pretext needed for Mary and Joseph to demonstrate publicly their purity and honesty.

While the detractors’ false oaths, lewdness, and malice certainly do supply a contrastive narrative that accentuates Mary’s and Joseph’s guilelessness and chastity, a much greater number of lines in this pageant are given to defamation than to the holy couple’s virtue and triumph. In a pageant of 405 lines, 75 lines are devoted to the introductory roll-call and the detractors’ introducing themselves, roughly 250 lines are devoted to slander, and 80 lines, mostly at the end, are devoted to Mary’s and Joseph’s triumphant virtue and Mary’s exemplary willingness to forgive her “hynderawnce and maculacion”(377). It is a commonplace in dramaturgy that depictions of conflict and perversity offer greater dynamism to the plot than depictions of peaceful virtue, which can become static. However, in this case, Mary and Joseph each actively perform their

¹⁸⁰ Alison M. Hunt, “Maculating Mary: The Detractors of the N-Town Cycle’s ‘Trial of Joseph and Mary,’ ” *Philological Quarterly*, Vol.73, 1994, 11-29.

¹⁸¹ Hunt, “Maculating Mary,” 11.

virtue by drinking the purgation and by pacing around the altar seven times. Because Mary is visibly pregnant and Joseph is elderly and infirm, the spectacle their bodies effortfully pacing around the altar might invite audience sympathy (or perhaps hilarity). The brief, dignified speeches of Mary and Joseph are dramatically privileged by suspense and delay, for Mary, the first to respond, speaks for the first time nearly halfway into the pageant. It is also true that the pageant's lengthy, vivid slander of Joseph and Mary bespeaks a confidence in the ultimate invulnerability of their reputations.

Near the beginning of the slander, the pageant permits the two detractors to express completely crass and lascivious objectification of the Virgin Mary:

Secundus Detractor: Be my trewth, al may wel be,
 For fresch and fayr she is to syght.
 And such a mursel, as semyth me,
 Wolde cause a 3onge man to haue delight.
 Primus Detractor: Such a 3onge damsel of bewte bright,
 And of schap so comely also,
 Of hire tayle ofte-tyme be light
 And rygh tekyl vndyr the too. (90-97)

The audience members could laugh at the detractors, as fabliau-register clowns who do not know better than to drool over Mary as a delectable "mursel," whose "schap" is "so comely," but perhaps there was also some scandalous enjoyment at hearing Mary described as "comely and gay and a fayr wench" (127) and Joseph as an "olde cokolde" (98), particularly given fifteenth-century public tension about the idea of chaste marriages.¹⁸²

As the Trial continues, the other characters join the detractors in mocking and insulting Mary and Joseph. The Den/Summoner, although he discredits himself and all

¹⁸² For fifteenth-century concern about chaste marriage, see Moll, "Staging Disorder," 145-46, 149-51.

summoners (“Gold or sylvyr I wyl not forsake,/ But [do] evyn as all somnorys doth” [160-61]), joins in the vivid and lewd speculations, telling Joseph “in thin house/ A cockoldeis bowe is ech nyght bent. /He that shett the bolt is lyke to be schent” (164-66) and asking Mary, “Dede not the archere plesse 3ow right well?” (169). As the summoner delivers them before the bishop, he sarcastically calls Mary “A clene huswyff, as I suppose!” (189) and then tells the bishop “Here haue I brought/This goodly copyl at 3oure byddyng”(194-95).

The bishop, who at first chided the detractors, saying “3e be acursyd so hire for to defame,/ She that is of lyff so good and holy” (108-09), loses faith when confronted with the spectacle of Mary’s swelling womb. Joseph is the first to take the drink of purgation and walk seven times around the altar, and the mocking dialogue of the detractors makes clear that Joseph is limping and staggering:

Primus Detractor: I pray to God gyf hym myschawns!
 Hese legges here do folde for age.
 But with this damysel whan he dede dawns,
 The olde charle had right gret corage! (266-69)

As Mary prepares to undergo the same ordeal, the two Doctors of Law, who began by expressing more measured concern, now condemn her fiercely:

Primus Doctor Legis: Se, this bolde bysmare wolde presume
 Ageyn God to preve his might!
 Thow Goddys vengeauns hyre xuld consume,
 Sche wyl not telle hyre fals delight. (298-301)

Stephen Spector’s glossary translates “bysmare,” as “wretch, contemptible creature.”

At this point Mary is surrounded by derisive men; the two detractors mockingly compare her pregnancy to the fabliau story of the Snow-Child, just before Mary drinks.

Once Mary's purgation demonstrates that "Sche is clene mayde, both modyr and wyff" (353), the Bishop finally accepts her innocence. The First Detractor, upon drinking the potion, is punished with the sensation that his head is on fire, swiftly repents (all of this is established within four lines) and within the next two lines is forgiven by Mary. While this punishment could inspire fear, it is not exploited dramatically compared to the treatment of those who physically test or disrespect Mary's body in other N-Town pageants. When Salomee of the Nativity pageant is punished with a withered hand for doubting Mary's post-partum virginity, she describes her affliction, laments her "fals untrost" (257) and asserts her pious "dred" of God for 25 lines before the angel instructs her to restore her hand by touching the infant Christ. Similarly, when the First Prince sticks fast to Mary bier in the Assumption, the pageant lingers somewhat on the details of his affliction and upon his miraculous cure when he professes belief in Jesus. The Assumption reserves its most dramatic punishment for the Third Prince, who will not repent or convert, who is dragged to hell by two demons. Compared to the plot resolutions of N-Town's Nativity and Assumption pageants, the punishment for the prolonged verbal "maculacion" of Mary seems almost anticlimactic. Nevertheless, at the "Trial" pageant's conclusion, the vindication of Mary and Joseph and the humiliation of the two Detractors is clear.

Mary's Transparent Generativity: Wombs With a View in "The Visit to Elizabeth"

Gail Gibson has identified the ways in which N-Town's "Visit to Elizabeth" references the familiar iconography of the fetal Christ and fetal John the Baptist greeting one another while still in their mother's wombs. I wish to examine this pageant's

evocation of transparent wombs and fetal imagery in light of feminist critiques of the ways that fetal imagery has been deployed over the last thirty years. I argue that in the “Visit to Elizabeth,” patriarchal panoptic desires and more feminist elements of the women’s social agency and their embodied knowledge all coexist within the pageant’s evocation of transparent generativity.

Donna Haraway’s remarks about vision as a sinister sensory system in feminist discourse are pertinent to many of the recent feminist analyses of ultrasound, and of fetal imagery:

I would like to proceed by placing metaphorical reliance on a much maligned sensory system in feminist discourse: vision. ...The eyes have been used to signify a perverse capacity—honed to perfection in the history of science tied to militarism, capitalism, colonialism, and male supremacy—to distance the knowing subject from everybody and everything in the interests of unfettered power. The instruments of visualization in multinationalist, postmodernist culture have compounded these meanings of disembodiment. The visualizing technologies are without apparent limit. The eye of any ordinary primate like us can be endlessly enhanced by sonography systems, magnetic resonance imaging, artificial intelligence-linked graphic manipulation systems, scanning electron microscopes, computed tomography scanners, color-enhancement techniques, satellite surveillance systems...cameras for every purpose from filming the mucous membrane lining the gut cavity of a marine worm living in the vent gases on a fault between continental plates to mapping a planetary hemisphere elsewhere in the solar system. Vision in this technological feast becomes unregulated gluttony; all seems not not just mythically about the god trick of seeing everything from nowhere, but to have put the myth into ordinary practice.¹⁸³

¹⁸³ Donna Haraway, “The Persistence of Vision,” in *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, eds. Kate Conboy, Nadia Medina, and Sarah Stanbury (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 283-95; this essay is an excerpt from “Situated Knowledges: the Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” which appeared in *Feminist Studies*, 14, no.3 (Fall 1988):579-99. For a critique of Haraway’s feminism as “technomaniac”, see Carole Stabile’s *Feminism and the Technological Fix* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1994), especially Chapter 5. Stabile seeks to thread a middle way between those she characterizes as “technophobic” feminists (who take an anti-modern stance and privilege the woman/nature half of the binary that opposes man/culture) and “technomaniac” feminists who place faith in technology to “dismantle the terms of the woman/nature binarism” (135).

This passage's depiction of technologically enhanced vision as voracious, unrestricted, aggressive, and potentially colonizing inflects many of the recent analyses of ultrasound. Late-twentieth-century feminist critiques of fetal imagery have presented ultrasound as a kind of "panoptics of the womb" that increases the possibilities of surveillance of and intervention in women's reproductive lives, and as a technology that represents "the fetus as primary and autonomous, the woman as absent or peripheral."¹⁸⁴ Rosalind Petchesky notes, in passing, that the ultrasound technology originated "in sonar detectors for submarine warfare"—that it arose in a surveillance context.¹⁸⁵ Petchesky also cites Evelyn Fox Keller and Christine R. Grontowski in a way that provides an excellent example of Haraway's point about the wariness with which some feminists approach scientific vision and epistemology: "Vision connects us to the truth as it distances us from the corporeal."¹⁸⁶ Petchesky's article originally appeared in 1987, and builds upon much feminist theorizing of cinema from the late 1970s and early 1980s, about visualization and objectification; at that time, groundbreaking theorists such as Laura Mulvey and E. Ann Kaplan argued that the camera's gaze coincided with that of a male spectator in constructing woman as the object of the gaze, the spectacle. These arguments have continued to be elaborated, challenged and complicated by subsequent scholarship. However, in feminist analyses of late-twentieth-century deployments of fetal imagery, much of the scholarship argues that this visual knowledge has displaced the pregnant

¹⁸⁴ Rosalind Pollack Petchesky, "Fetal Images: The Power of Visual Culture in the Politics of Reproduction" in *The Gender/Sexuality Reader*, eds., Roger N. Lancaster and Micaela di Leonardo (New York: Routledge Press, 1997), 134-150, 137. Originally published in *Feminist Studies*, Vol.13, No.2 (Summer 1987).

¹⁸⁵ Petchesky, "Fetal Images," 139.

¹⁸⁶ Evelyn Fox Keller and Christine R. Grontowski, "The Mind's Eye," in *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science*, eds. Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1983), 107-24. Cited in Petchesky, 140.

woman's bodily knowledge of the pregnancy as the primary source of information, reduced the pregnant woman's special relationship to the fetus, and increased both opportunities and rationales for medical interventions in the course of the pregnancy.

Peggy Phelan approaches the issue of fetal imagery from the vantage point of performance studies, and performance's mobilization of marked and unmarked cultural categories. In her book *Unmarked*, Phelan questions the notion that "greater visibility of the hitherto under-represented leads to enhanced political power."¹⁸⁷ Phelan sees a dangerous potential for fetal imagery to be used to extend the ways that the female body can be marked for surveillance and control. Phelan has looked at the use of fetal imagery in anti-abortion activism, which she analyzes as a violent theatrical performance:

The members of Operation Rescue pretend to believe that by staging demonstrations outside abortion clinics they will rescue the unborn. ...The rescues, theatrical performances of extraordinary boldness and violence, are largely sex-segregatedWhen a pregnant woman attempts to enter the clinic, a male rescuer will yell out in a strange falsetto, 'Mother, please don't murder me.' ...Fetal imagery...is important because it upsets the psychic terrain which formerly located all reproductive visibility exclusively with the body of the pregnant woman. ...Erasing the woman from the image has allowed the fetal form to become a token in a discourse of and about men. Cropped out of the picture, the pregnant woman's life and reasoning are rendered both invisible and irrelevant.

Operation Rescue attempts to remove the skin of the pregnant woman to reveal the eyes of her internal other, the "independent" fetus. ...While operation Rescue is extreme in its methods, its members merely make manifest a persistent and pervasive fascination to see and thus to control the woman's body. Increasingly, that means both the inside and outside image of her body. In excessively marking the boundaries of the woman's body, precisely in order to make it thoroughly visible, patriarchal culture seeks to make her subject to legal, artistic, and psychic surveillance.

While the male psychic subject uses the woman's body as the focus of the erotic/medical/social spectacle, his own, once again, goes unmarked.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁷ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), 2.

¹⁸⁸ Phelan, *Unmarked*, 131-32.

Phelan's analysis of this performance demonstrates the most coercive potentials of "x-ray vision" and of fetal imagery. She also emphasizes men's gendered identification with the fetus, pointing out more than once that it is the men who speak on behalf of the unborn in Operation Rescue's performances, and that "the fetus is always already gendered—and not surprisingly, gendered male."¹⁸⁹ Phelan's analysis presents one of the more forceful arguments that fetal imagery can be used to displace and erase the maternal body completely.

In contrast to the dire scenario described by Phelan, N-Town's late medieval performance both invokes the patriarchal fantasy of transparent wombs carrying insistently visible male fetuses, but also celebrates maternal presence and agency. While Mary's and Elizabeth's unborn Sons were also surely the object of intense collective identifications, what we may call "x-ray vision" in the pageant is not so thoroughly disenfranchising as it is in the Operation Rescue performances. In the case of N-Town's "Visit to Elizabeth," x-ray vision does not simply distance the audience from the corporeal, because the women report their embodied knowledge of their pregnancies, and because late medieval metaphors for the womb and for gestation present reproduction more dynamically and vividly as active work that women's bodies do. As Joan Cadden has concluded, "reproduction was conceptualized as work that women did: it was a major socioeconomic function, and, in spite of theories of male activity and female passivity, could be viewed as an active and affirmative responsibility."¹⁹⁰ The metaphor of the womb as an oven, and of gestation as baking, has already been discussed in the *Croxton*

¹⁸⁹ Phelan, *Unmarked*, 134.

¹⁹⁰ Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 249.

chapter—this metaphor still exists in the twenty-first century in the expression “a bun in the oven,” but it no longer resonates with actual medical understandings of gestation, nor does it have universal salvific resonance with the idea of Christ, as the bread that Mary “baked,” furnishing the precious Eucharist. The other prevalent medieval metaphors for gestation that appears in N-Town are those of spinning, weaving, and clothing, which I will also touch upon later in relation to the N-Town “Crucifixion.” Gail McMurray Gibson points out how the garment or robe as a figure for Christ’s Incarnation permeated the broader culture, including sermons, and then demonstrates the prevalence of clothing and weaving metaphors throughout the entire N-Town cycle play, a metaphor with added familiarity for East Anglia as a wealthy textile-weaving region. Gibson observes,

Mary’s clothing of Christ in her womb is thus celebrated in the N-Town cycle in a regular verbal pattern of public affirmation and recognition. But it is important to realize that the cycle would not have depended only upon repeated words like “clad,” “cloth,” and “clothing” to establish the theme. The resonant implication of the Christ’s garment of Incarnation is also revealed visually and iconographically in the N-Town pageants, beginning with “The Fall of Man.”¹⁹¹

The domestic metaphors of baking, weaving, and clothing suggest active maternal industry in a way that complicates Mary and Elizabeth’s reduction to mere containers for their illustrious unborn sons.

And yet, there are also sobering continuities between medieval and modern representations of fetuses and female reproductive organs. Ancient Latin and medieval medical manuscripts reveal that the medical erasure of the mother housing the womb cannot be attributed solely to ultrasound technology or to anti-abortion activists’

¹⁹¹ Gail McMurray Gibson, *The Theater of Devotion : East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1989), 159.

deployments of fetal imagery. Petchesky argues that, due to the combined authority of photographic images and technology,

‘The fetal form’ itself has, within the larger culture, acquired a symbolic import that condenses within it a series of losses—from sexual innocence to compliant women to American imperial might. It is not the image of a baby at all but of a tiny man, a homunculus.

Petchesky makes a persuasive case for the fetal form as a condensation of a variety of losses in the late-twentieth-century United States. However, the depiction of the fetus as a tiny man in a disembodied womb goes back much further, as 13th, 14th, and 15th-century medical text illustrations, derived from 6th-century manuscripts, show.¹⁹² Joan Cadden shows an illustration from an English obstetrical manual dating from about 1400, derived from Muscio’s sixth-century Latin version of Soranus, of a series of disembodied wombs containing fetuses that resemble little men. Cadden prefaces this illustration by observing that

On the one hand, the emphasis upon the womb as the central female organ was in harmony with the view of women as essentially passive vessels. The word “vas” in the sense of “jar” or “vessel” occurs in medieval texts as a synonym for woman, and the image of the womb as an upside-down jar (dissociated from any person) is repeated in frequently copied illustrations of fetal positions.¹⁹³

These medical illustrations suggest that the impulse to represent the womb in isolation, apart from the female body, and the habit of representing the fetus as “always already gendered male,” precede the technologically enhanced gaze by at least 1300 years. Just as “vas” appeared frequently in medieval medical texts as a synonym for “woman,” so Latin hymns to Mary likewise allude to her as a sacred, chosen vessel, full of

¹⁹² Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference*, 178-179.

¹⁹³ Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference*, 178.

heavenly grace: “Salve Mater Salvatoris! /Vas electum! Vas honoris! /Vas coelestis Gratiae!”¹⁹⁴

I have made this excursus into medieval obstretrical manuals to illustrate that there were enduring medieval conceptualizations of the female body that could reduce that body to a container for a fetus, and thus to highlight the ways that N-Town complicates such conceptualizations. Certainly in the N-Town “Visit to Elizabeth,” both women are aware of themselves and of each other as vessels for holy infants. Yet the fetal imagery of Mary’s and Elizabeth’s transparent wombs is counterbalanced by attention to both women’s embeddedness in a social context, and particularly, in a female kinship network.¹⁹⁵ Further, in the N-Town pageant, the evocation of both women’s transparent wombs coexists with the women’s bodily knowledge of their pregnancies, rather than supplanting their direct experience.

The pageant begins with Mary telling Joseph of Elizabeth’s miraculous pregnancy. Joseph responds with incredulity: “A, Godys sake! Is sche with childe? Sche? /Than wole here husbond, Zakarye, be mery.” (5-6). Once Mary and Joseph set off on their journey, the figure Contemplacio further impresses upon the audience the miracle of Elizabeth, “an old woman...of holy conversacyon,” (29) conceiving despite her old age, reinforcing the theme of fertility as the reward of faith. The idea of fertility as virtue rewarded has its shadow side, one that is articulated in other pageants of N-Town—the idea that sterility is a consequence of sin, or at the very least of insufficient virtue. In Pageant 8, “Joachim

¹⁹⁴ Adam de Saint-Victor’s hymn on the Assumption of the Virgin.

¹⁹⁵ See Pamela Sheingorn’s “Appropriating the Holy Kinship: Gender and Family History,” in *Interpreting Cultural Symbols*, eds., Kathleen Ashley and Pamela Sheingorn, 169-98. Pamela Sheingorn argues that “Beginning in the twelfth century as an image through which Christ’s matrilineal ancestry could be asserted, by 1400 the Holy Kinship focused on motherhood and on positive relationships among women, though never obscuring the importance of their sacred progeny.”

and Anna,” the couple is shown struggling with their personal sense of shame about their childless state and anticipating communal censure. Their fears are confirmed when Ysakar rejects Joachim’s sacrificial offering at the temple:

Abyde a qwyle sere; whedyr wytte thu?
 Thu and thi wyff arn barrany and bare;
 Neyther of yow fruteful never 3ett ware.
 Whow durste thu amonge fruteful presume and abuse?
 It is a token thu art cursyd bare.
 Whereffore with grett indignacyon thin offering I refuse! (100-105)

While the communal rejection of Joachim and Anna is not divinely endorsed, and serves as an opportunity for the couple to demonstrate their unswerving meekness and piety, the fact that their vindication by the plot comes through their joining the “fruteful” reveals the cultural pressures on late medieval men and women to reproduce. Of course, such communal shaming of the barren is also alluded to in both the Old and New Testament, and in the biblical passage concerning Elizabeth’s miraculous conception, she is grateful to the Lord for removing “the disgrace I have endured among my people” (Luke 1:24).

Both Mary and Elizabeth, despite their humility and piety, speak with great confidence and foreknowledge about the holy beings in their wombs. As Mary approaches Elizabeth, she declares “Now the blyssyd Trynite be in this hous” (48).

Elizabeth responds,

Anon as I herd of yow this holy gretynge,
 Mekest mayden and the Modyr of God, Mary,
 Be youre breth the Holy Gost us was inspyrynge;
 That the childe in my body enjoyd gretly
 And turned down on his knes to oure God reverently.
 Whom ye bere in youre body, this verily I ken. (51-56)

Unlike N-Town's stage directions for the "Salutation and Conception," where the Holy Ghost descends "with iij bemys to oure Lady," followed by the Son and the father, here there are no stage directions to suggest that the fetal John the Baptist is visually represented. However, Elizabeth's description of her unborn baby kneeling in reverence to the unborn Christ invokes a common motif in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century visual art. As mentioned earlier, Gail McMurray Gibson has done valuable interdisciplinary work that connects N-Town's dialogue concerning Mary's miraculous pregnancy with prevalent visual art representations of Mary's and Elizabeth's transparent wombs, in which the fetal John the Baptist kneels before the fetal Christ.¹⁹⁶

The image of the Virgin's transparent womb becomes associated with other notions of the Virgin's self-effacement, luminosity and purity because of the related metaphor of the Virgin as the "window of heaven," the *fenestra coeli*, which appeared often in late medieval lyric poetry and visual art, as well as in the cycle dramas. Rosemary Woolf regards this image in the lyric poetry rather pragmatically:

Imagery is ...usually found only in those medieval lyrics that are farthest from the lyric norm, in that they make use at least of implicit—and sometimes explicit—argument; in these the imagery is traditional and its function is logical persuasion. Thus...in the poems addressed to the Virgin the image of the sun passing through glass is used to assuage disbelief in the doctrine of *virginitas in partu*.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁶ See Gail McMurray Gibson, *The Theater of Devotion*, 7, 144-165). Gibson notes, "It is the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries which first produced images of the Annunciation with the conceived Lord already visibly present to the human worshipper on fecundating beams of light sent from God's hands, or, less problematic theologically, images of the homunculus Christ visible within the windowed reliquary of Mary's womb" (7). For art historical background on the iconography of the Christ Child of the Annunciation, Gibson cites David M. Robb, "The Iconography of the Annunciation in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries," *Art Bulletin* 18 (1936):523-26.

¹⁹⁷ Rosemary Woolf, *English Religious Lyric in The Middle Ages* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 12.

Woolf's explanation for this trope is certainly sensible, if unlyrical, since other art forms, like N-Town's *Nativity* pageant also expend considerable energy in confirming Mary's virginal and unsoiled condition following the birth of Christ. However, recent scholarship also suggests that the image of sunlight through glass also did important work in establishing Mary's selfless character. Analyzing Middle English Marian lyrics, Monica Brzezinski Potkay and Regula Meyer Evitt observe,

We look into the poem to see Mary, but then we look through her to the Jesus she views. The Virgin's most important characteristic is her transparency, the way she disappears in front of our eyes. Like a clear pane of glass, her purity allows the light of God's grace to reach humankind. "Alighting in her, one... shone through her seemly side... As the sun does through the glass," says one lyric punningly. Another prays, "O thou blest virgin clear, be ready always to mediate fully between God and man." The clear virgin here allows speaker and God to see each other: "Pray your Son... to have my soul in His lovely eye," he asks (15th, 11:41-43,60).

Mary's transparency figures her selflessness, the submission of her will to her Son's. She is a model for readers, who too must empty out their own desires in favor of the will of Jesus.¹⁹⁸

Potkay and Evitt emphasize the trope of transparency as an indication of Mary's self-emptying exemplarity; they interpret the lyric poems as affirming Mary's, and women's role in helping the reader to overcome self-absorption: "The Marian lyrics share the view that the self reaches its full potential only when it looks outside itself; and they agree that the self must look first toward women, and then along with them if it is ever to escape the trap of narcissism."¹⁹⁹ Although the Christian concepts of kenosis, powerlessness, and selflessness often create formidable challenges for feminist and materialist analyses, Potkay and Evitt manage to recuperate Mary's selflessness and her imitation of her Son's

¹⁹⁸ Monica Brzezinski Potkay and Regula Meyer Evitt, *Minding the Body: Women and Literature in the Middle Ages* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997), 61.

¹⁹⁹ Potkay and Evitt, *Minding the Body*, 62.

kenotic self-emptying as an exemplarity that symbolically affirms all women as mediators of Christ's sacrifice. Something like the transparency/selflessness that Potkay and Evitt see in Marian lyrics is also present in "The Visit to Elizabeth," and the "Crucifixion" pageant, where in a sense the viewers are invited to look toward, and then along with, Mary and other female characters. N-Town's Mary does not entirely fit this model of transparency/selflessness in a number of N-Town's pageants, most notably in the "Crucifixion" pageant, where she protests and laments Christ's Passion forcefully, as will be discussed, but also at the beginning of the "Marriage of Mary and Joseph," when, at the age of fourteen, in the manner of a virgin saint, she counters the bishop's demand that she marry with a spirited, "I with man wyll never mell!" (76).

But in "The Visit to Elizabeth," there is greater emphasis upon Mary's joyous and humble instrumentality in clothing God's Word in flesh. Both Mary and Elizabeth are thoroughly at ease with the idea of Mary as the *theotokos*, or God-bearer; Mary refers to carrying the entire Trinity in her womb, as mentioned above, and Elizabeth twice calls Mary the "Modyr of God." The pageant's comfort in using this extravagant title can partly be explained by England's long history of Marian piety, along with the early date at which describing the Virgin as *Theotokos* became the orthodox position, in the Third Council of Ephesus, in 431.²⁰⁰

While the notion of Mary as *theotokos* was established early on in the history of the church, the idea of Mary as the tabernacle of the Trinity was not universally

²⁰⁰ See Rosemary Woolf, *English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 114-15. Woolf, in analyzing thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Middle English lyrics to the Virgin, observes, "Though a consequence of this decree was the glorification of the Virgin, its intention was primarily to refute the Christological heresy of the Nestorians. ...Of all the startling paradoxes...there was none perhaps more dazzling than that of the Blessed Virgin's title of Mother of God."

embraced, as the example of Jean Gerson indicates. On his sermon of Christmas Day, 1402, Jean Gerson, chancellor of the University of Paris, fiercely criticized the type of statuette known as the “Vierge Ouvrant,” a statuette which opened up to reveal the father holding the Son on the Cross, with the Holy Spirit. Gerson decried

images like this one which have the Trinity in their abdomen as if the entire Trinity assumed flesh in the Virgin Mary.... I do not see why one should admire such a thing and in my humble opinion there is no beauty or devotion in such works, and they may well be the cause of error and indevotion.²⁰¹

Michael Camille sees Gerson’s criticism as unjust, because it treats the statuette as a “static theological statement... it is only when the representation was activated in the context of the Durham ritual and the crucifix taken out of Mary for veneration that we can understand its logic—to teach people the basis of the incarnation of Christ in the Virgin.”²⁰² Though Gerson’s objection may have been overly literalist, he might well have continued to object to the way in which the statuette emphasizes Mary’s womb as the instrument of all redemption.

The N-Town “Visit to Elizabeth” shows no such qualms. Near the conclusion of the pageant, Elizabeth praises Mary even more lavishly than before:

A, 3e Modyr of God, 3e shewe us here how
We xulde be meke that wrecchis here be.
All hefne and herthe wurchepp yow mow
That are trone and tabernakyl of the hy3 Trinite.

Elizabeth’s words echo the profusion of praises for Mary voiced two pageants earlier, in “The Parliament of Heaven; The Salutation and Conception,” especially the praises from Gabriel.

²⁰¹ Cited in Michael Camille, *The Gothic Idol: Ideology and Image-Making in Medieval Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 231-32. See Louis Mourin, *Les Lettres Romanes* 3 (1949):31-43, for the text in French; for the Latin, see Gerson’s *Opera Omnia*, ed. L.E. DuPin (Antwerp, 1706) 3: 947.

²⁰² Camille, *The Gothic Idol*, 232.

Apart from the dialogue between Mary and Joseph at the beginning of “The Visit to Elizabeth,” and an opening announcement by “Contemplacio,” the dialogue between Elizabeth and Mary is not interrupted by other characters, since Joseph enters this scene later, and Elizabeth’s husband Zacharye has been struck dumb by his wife’s miraculous pregnancy. Despite their position as the central focus of this play, most of their “dialogue” is Mary’s recitation, and Elizabeth’s somewhat loose translation of, the *Magnificat*. Here what the pageant offers is not so much individualized female characterization or eloquence as female exemplarity, as both women “magnify,” declare the greatness of, the Lord. Their self-effacement is in keeping with the *Magnificat*’s emphasis upon God’s dethroning of the powerful and uplifting of the lowly.

At first glance, Mary and Elizabeth’s dialogue seems to be yet another form of their transparency, as we look “through” them to focus upon the Lord whom they praise. And yet, the onstage appearance of these two holy kinswomen praising God and congratulating one another also serves to draw audience attention to the women’s key role in humanity’s salvation. In “magnifying” God together, they also magnify one another. In addition, as Kathleen Ashley has pointed out, Mary and Elizabeth are exemplary not only because of their piety, but because of their love and concern for one another: “...the greetings, gossip, and leave-takings between Mary and Elizabeth model behavior for the medieval audience, especially its women members.”²⁰³ Ashley reads this pageant in the context of late medieval conduct literature, citing Geoffrey de la Tour Landry’s devotion of a full chapter in his conduct manual to the praise of Mary’s

²⁰³ Kathleen Ashley, “Medieval Courtesy Literature and Dramatic Mirrors of Female Conduct,” in *The Ideology of Conduct: Essays on Literature and the History of Sexuality*, eds. Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse (New York: Methuen, 1987), 25-38, 29.

humility, courtesy and kindness in the Annunciation and Visitation episodes.²⁰⁴ For my purposes here, what is most important in Elizabeth and Mary's mutual praise and celebration is the attention they call to the importance of women's bodies in manifesting God's will.

In "The Visit to Elizabeth," the dialogue alludes to iconography that depicts Mary and Elizabeth as transparent vessels for their unborn sons, and the pageant depicts both women as clear vehicles for praise of God, but there are factors that work against reading these women purely as vessels and purely as body. Among these mitigating factors are: the women's kinship ties to one another; the medieval metaphors of gestation that present the women's reproductive role as dynamic and constructive, as active industry; and the representations of Mary as learned and studious from the earlier pageants in N-Town, especially "The Presentation of Mary in the Temple." While pageants such as "Joachim and Anna" dramatize the significant social pressures to be "fruteful," the motif of fetal imagery in N-Town is not mobilized as the coercive, panoptic force that it appears as in late-twentieth-century discourse.

Female Mediation of Christ's Passion in The N-Town "Crucifixion"

Recent analyses of medieval drama have fruitfully employed anthropological, sociohistorical and psychoanalytical methods of inquiry to deepen our understanding of

²⁰⁴ Geoffroy de la Tour Landry, *Le Livre du Chevalier de la Tour Landry pour l'enseignement de ses filles*. Ed. Anatole de Montaiglon, 1870. (New York: Kraus, 1977). Ashley cites William Caxton's English translation, *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*, ed. M. Y. Offord (London: Early English Text Society, 1971) : [Mary is to be] "preysed of the holy scrypture for her good kynde and nature of her curtosye whanne she wente and vysyted her cosyn saynte Elysabeth. ...And than bothe Cosyns humbled them self one toward the other/ Wherefore good exemplary is here/ how that parentes [relatives] and Frenedes ought to see and vysyte eche other in theyr childbedde/ and thayr disease and sekenesse/ And humble them self one ageynst the other/ as dyd these two holy and blessyd ladies/ as ye have herd."

how these plays both articulated and satisfied the needs of their communities.

Accompanying this interest in the use of such modes of inquiry is a renewed interest in ritual aspects of medieval drama. Sarah Beckwith observes,

...medieval drama criticism has generally been all too content to see an absolute dividing line between ritual and theatre. ...Such critical categories are a hangover from early criticism of the drama, which was severely evolutionary in its approach....More recent criticism has sought to use a much more pliable and nuanced version of ritual in its reading of the drama. The enormous advantage of the modern introduction of the category of ritual in the interpretation of the drama lies in its affirmation of the central relevance of drama and its symbolism to social life.²⁰⁵

If ritual embodies belief while drama represents it, in the cycle plays we can see moments where embodiment and representation fuse together and become hard to distinguish from one another. The Crucifixion pageants, which confront the audience with the ritually potent symbol of Christ's body, and often with the equally potent symbol of the Virgin Mary's co-suffering body, confound the traditional distinctions between rite and drama. These symbols were used, as Caroline Bynum has suggested, to both articulate and allay anxieties about partition and decay, both of the individual human body and the metaphoric social body of the Christian community.²⁰⁶

In the N-Town Crucifixion pageant, women play a distinctive role as a lamenting community that foregrounds a particular reading, both flawed and privileged, of Christ's body. In contrast to the minimalist approach of the York Crucifixion, in which only Christ and His torturers elucidate the significance of the action, in N-Town the audience's

²⁰⁵ Sarah Beckwith, "Ritual, Church, and Theatre: Medieval Dramas of the Sacramental Body," in *Culture and History 1350-1600: Essays on English Communities, Identities, and Writing*, ed. David Aers, (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), 79.

²⁰⁶ Caroline Walker Bynum, "In Praise of Fragments: History in the Comic Mode," in *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 12-26.

experience of the Crucifixion is thoroughly mediated by other characters. In N-Town, the dramatic action of Christ's Crucifixion is framed and also interrupted by the laments of women. The N-Town "Procession to Calvary; Crucifixion" pageant opens with the laments and reproaches of two anonymous women; we are offered witnesses and interpretation of the event immediately:

| | |
|-------------------|---|
| Prim[a] Mulier: | Allas, Jesus! Allas, Jesus! Wo is me! That thu art thus dyspoylyd, allas! And yet never defawth was fownd in the, But evyr thu hast be fole of grace. |
| Secund[a] Mulier: | A, here is a rewfyl syth of Jesu so good, That he xal thus dye agens the ryth A wykkyd men, ye be more than wood To do that good Lord so gret dyspyte! (1-8) |

The first speaker's choice of the past participle "dyspoylyd" is a loaded one; each of its possible meanings works with Christ's ordeal. The past participle of "despoilen," derived from the Old French "despoillier" can mean "to strip, undress, disrobe"—Christ's flesh was commonly regarded as the clothing that Mary gave to God's Word. In addition, "dyspoylyd" carries the meanings "ruined, ransacked, devastated," and "deprived" (of honor, security, beauty). The combined meanings of stripping/ransacking/dishonoring suggest an act akin to sexual assault, adding a gendered dimension to the women's pity and their protest. The women's lament gives Christ the opportunity to respond with the "Daughters of Jerusalem" speech, urging the audience members to weep for their own sinful state, but the women also act as stand-ins for the audience, voicing the grief and outrage that pious Christians would feel at this moment. After a short exchange in which

the Jews (so named, in N-Town) compel Symon to carry the cross, another female character, Saint Veronica, steps in to resume and intensify the indignant opening lamentation:

A, ye sinful pepyl, why fare ye thus?
For swet and blood he may not se.
Allas, holy prophete, Cryst Jhesus,
Careful is myn hert for the.

(41-44)

Veronica then punctuates this lament by wiping Christ's face with her handkerchief, modeling exemplary compassion for his suffering. Here Veronica (a figure borrowed from the French Passions, who also appears in the *Legenda Aurea*) calls attention to the familiar iconographic elements of Christ's sweat and blood; by the fifteenth century, Christ's blood was firmly linked to Eucharistic practice, and thus to associations of salvation, cleansing, and nourishment.²⁰⁷

Veronica's outburst is swiftly followed by the Jews torturing and brutally stretching Christ's body, and dancing about the cross, acting as a demonic anti-community, a sharp contrast to the sorrowful group of women. When they have finished their job and are casting dice for Christ's clothes, the Virgin Mary appears, accompanied by the three other Maries, and brings the female lamentation to its peak.

In the tradition of affective piety, N-town's Mary feels Christ's suffering as if it were her own, emphasizing that he is flesh of her flesh. Mary begs for death to relieve her suffering: "A deth, deth, deth! Why wilt thou not me kille?" (l.100). Her sorrow is so great that she is outside herself, deranged, discursively split in two, for she addresses

²⁰⁷ See Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge, New York, and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 302-309.

herself in the second person: “And thou art maydyn and modyr, and seyst thus thi childe spille!” (l. 98). This could also be directed to the audience, as an added invitation to empathy.

Christ does not answer her at first, instead begging his Father to forgive his torturers, and then speaking to the thief Dysmas, who has recognized him as “the Sone of God.” At this, Mary reproaches him for ignoring her:

O my sone, my sone, my derlyng dere!
 What! Have I defendyd the?
 Thou hast spoke to alle tho that ben here,
 And not o word thu spekyst to me.

To the Jewys thu art ful kende:
 Thu hast forgove al here mysdede
 And the thyf thu hast in mende:
 For onys haskyng mercy, hefne is his mede.

A, my sovereyn Lord, why whylt thou not speke
 To me that am thi modyr, in peyn for thi wrong?
 A hert, hert, why whylt thou not breke,
 That I wore out of this sorwe so stronge!
 (ll. 133-144)

At this juncture, it is worth remembering Theresa Coletti’s assertion that “The English cycle plays illustrate that there is no one Virgin Mary; there are only Virgin Marys....The representation of Mary varies not only between cycles, but also with a single cycle.”²⁰⁸ The Virgin Mary of N-Town’s “Crucifixion” certainly departs from the common image of Mary as the epitome of meek compliance. N-Town’s Mary (and Towneley’s as well) is at times reproachful, nearly argumentative—and competitive with others for her Son’s

²⁰⁸ Theresa Coletti, “A Feminist Approach to the Corpus Christi Cycles,” in Richard Emmerson, ed. *Approaches to Teaching Medieval English Drama* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1990), 86.

attention. Marianne Briscoe, in her discussion of the drama's debt to the hortative rhetoric of medieval preaching, notes that

There is no scriptural authority for any speech by Mary at the crucifixion. Indeed, of the Evangelists, only John notes that Mary was even there (John 19. 25-27)... Nevertheless, commentators and devotional writers developed a considerable tradition about Mary at Calvary and by the thirteenth century the *planctus mariae* was firmly established in liturgy, liturgical drama, and lyric.²⁰⁹

Given that Mary was nearly absent from the Crucifixion in Biblical accounts, her presence and volubility here must serve late-fifteenth-century social and dramatic needs. Mary's presence ensconces Christ in a family drama, which emphasizes Christ's status as a son, as human. Mary's strong presence and that of the other women creates a community that counters the anti-community of torturers. Christ's torturers are perforating the wholeness of Christ's body, which is also to metaphorically dismember the Christian community. But of course, since the Crucifixion is what saves humankind, Christ's seeming dissolution paradoxically is what recuperates the wholeness of the Christian community.²¹⁰ It is significant that, apart from Dysmas and John, it is women who protest Christ's torture in this play.

The N-Town "Crucifixion" begins by foregrounding the feminine body's positive associations with nourishment and nurture, but then proceeds to dramatize its negative associations with unruliness and the material. The nurturing and compassionate function of the women in the N-Town pageant is fairly obvious. Their compassion at first appears to represent the exemplary response to Christ's pain. As each of the women bewails

²⁰⁹ Marianne G. Briscoe, "Preaching and Medieval Drama," in Marianne Briscoe and John Coldewey, eds. *Contexts for Early English Drama* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 163.

²¹⁰ John D. Cox, "The Devil and Society in the English Mystery Plays," *Comparative Drama*, Winter 1994-95, Vol. 28, No. 4, 407-438.

Christ's suffering, one might expect that the audience, too, would be drawn into deeper and deeper identification with the outraged witnesses onstage. But here is where the ostensible alliance of the feminine with materiality comes into play—the pageant first encourages the audience to empathize with Christ and to “co-suffer” as the women do, but then Christ reproves Mary (and the audience) for her empathy, since to focus too much on his physical pain is to lose sight of its greater purpose. Christ responds to Mary's reproach with a counter-reproach, reminding her that this moment was the ultimate purpose of his birth:

A, woman, woman, beheld ther thi sone,
 And thu, Jon, take her for thi modyr.
 ...Now syn it is the wyl of my fadyr, it xuld thus be.
 Why xuld it dysplese the, modyr, now my deth so sore?
 And for to suffer al this for man was I born of the,
 To the blys that man had lost, man ayen to restore.
 (ll.153-156)

Mary's grief gives Christ the occasion to redirect her (and the audience's) attention to the issue of redemption. Marianne Briscoe notes the element of rebuke in his words, however, summarizing its gist as “stop grieving, Mary, I was born to you to save mankind, not to comfort you.”²¹¹ What Briscoe sees in the Towneley pageant is almost as true for N-Town:

...Mary serves as the exemplar of horrified, affective fascination with the Crucifixion and also as the rhetorical pivot of the play's argument. By giving her grief full play and then rebuking it, the playwright uses Mary to focus instructively on the larger issue, the salvation history, that is the overriding theme of the whole cycle.²¹²

²¹¹ Briscoe, “Preaching and Medieval Drama,” 166.

²¹² Briscoe, 166.

While Briscoe is primarily concerned with the use of preaching rhetoric within the cycles, her reading fits well with what feminist scholars have discussed about the medieval association of femininity with corporeality/materiality. For it is women who respond with a surfeit of emotion, and often with their bodies, to the spectacle of Christ's crucified body. In N-Town, even after Christ's reproof and his elucidation of his purpose, Mary responds by running and embracing the cross. Mary Magdalene must further reprove the Virgin for adding to Christ's torment, and she and John must physically take Mary away from the cross.

Mary continues to lament in the familiar mode of the *planctus mariae*, that her heart shall burst in two, that she longs for death, while the Apostle John keeps reiterating Christ's triumph. Finally, after a stage direction in Latin that describes Mary as "half dead with grief," John leads her away. The pageant closes with Mary's prayer for solace "When my childe riseth on the iij day" (l.291). The N-Town pageant both begins and ends with the perspectives of women, and almost a third of the play is devoted to their lamentation. Though their grief is not privileged as a complete reading of Christ's body, it encompasses the action and is the most insistent motif in the pageant. N-Town's Crucifixion is unique in offering a community of female witnesses; while Towneley's strategy resembles N-Town's in its incorporation of lengthy complaints by the Virgin, there Mary is the only woman in the pageant, and although she has lengthy and significant speeches, her voice is not supported by others like it. In Towneley, the crucifixion pageant opens with Pilate boasting and threatening the audience, nearly half of the whole play is devoted to dialogue among the torturers, and it concludes with Joseph and Nicodemus attending to the burial. In the Towneley pageant, Mary's

beautiful alliterative monologues offer a profusion of resonant metaphors for her Son that counter the metaphors proposed by the mocking torturers.

A subtle difference between Towneley's Mary and N-Town's is that in the Towneley pageant, Mary's monologues elaborate upon her maternal role in greater detail, and so the *reasons* for her suffering are more thoroughly established. In Towneley, Mary calls Christ "my foode, that I have fed" (l.319), reminding the audience of the infant Jesus (and of her role in their salvation, nourishing he who saves them), and also of Christ's Eucharistic significance, his status as food which unites all who partake of his body. Towneley's Mary also reminds the audience of her role in clothing Christ with flesh in another part of her monologue: "His robe is all to-ryffen/ That of me was hym gyffen/ And shapen with my sydys" (ll.405-408). She speaks in metaphors that demonstrate her own instrumentality in salvation history. Towneley's Mary also laments "Thi face with blode is red, /Was fare as flour in feylde." Towneley's Mary counters the torturer's mocking references to Christ as a warrior-king by tenderly reading the book of her son's tortured body. In contrast, N-Town's Mary does not offer these details or beautiful images. She protests the indignity of her innocent Son dying among thieves, but her maternal role is embodied more than spoken; the stage directions have Mary swooning three times. N-Town's Mary also speaks of her bodily response to Christ's Passion, exclaiming, "'A, myn herte with peyn is pressyd--/For sorwe myn herte doth twynne!" (ll.228-29), and later, near the conclusion of the Crucifixion, "in peyn myn herte is pyghte" (ll.268). Her references to her heart splitting or being pierced alludes to Simeon's prophecy that a sword would pierce her soul (Luke.2:35), and her bodily suffering reminds the audience that she and Christ shared the same flesh.

N-Town's "Crucifixion" offers a community of female witnesses to provide a context for Christ's sacrifice and for Mary's sorrow. Ruth Evans contrasts the unsettling starkness of the York Crucifixion with N-Town's use of female witnesses:

The text [York] refuses to call on female bodies to naturalise physical pain for the audience in socially and aesthetically acceptable ways. It does not use female figures of suffering and pathos to legitimate and ennoble, to place and define, male suffering.²¹³

Evans suggests that the presence of female witnesses comforts audience and offers a stable vantage point from which to interpret Christ's suffering. Certainly, York's strategies of minimalism and disorientation are more congenial to modern and postmodern sensibilities, since the audience must thread its way between the grotesque humor of the bumbling torturers and the solemn presence of Christ's body, and are thrown upon their own resources to fashion a deep reading of the dramatic action. N-Town's aesthetic is much more difficult for modern readers to appreciate, given the play's reliance upon affective piety, and especially upon the body language of affective piety—the tears, the repeated swooning, and the clinging to the cross. Such a language communicated powerfully in the late Middle Ages, even occasionally producing a perceived threat to clerical authority, as the *Book of Margery Kempe*, among other works, can attest. Although N-Town's Christ upon the cross voices a critique of Mary's attachment to his physical being, N-Town's staging of female communal lamentation is essential to the power of the "Crucifixion" pageant as a performance.

²¹³ Ruth Evans, "Body Politics: Engendering Medieval Cycle Drama," in Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson, *Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature: The Wife of Bath and All Her Sect* (London & New York, Routledge, 1994), 127.

In conclusion, N-Town presents Mary throughout her life, and in a range of roles. A crucial dramatic resource in the cycle is that Mary is so often presented in community with other virtuous women, and that the social bonds she gathers around her serve to counter some of the pejorative traditional associations of the female body with materiality and emotional excess, although these associations are also evoked within N-Town.

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