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“Of all creatures women be best,  
/ Cuius contrarium verum est”:  
Gendered Power in Selected Late  
Medieval and Early Modern Texts

## ABSTRACT

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The aim of this paper is to examine images of the relationship between men and women in selected late medieval and early modern English texts. I will identify prevalent ideology of representation of women as well as typical imagery associated with them. I will in particular argue that men whose homosocial laughter performs a solidifying function of their community seek to reiterate their superiority over women through seemingly playful and inclusive humour. I will attempt to show that what appears to be good-natured entertainment is actually a weapon used against women who, often accused of no sense of humour, are ridiculed and commanded to succumb to male authority. I will also discuss the triumphant tone of both poems and dramatic writings whose cheerful tone functions to marginalize women and to reinforce the misogynistic foundations of public life.

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## ABSTRACT

Courtship in medieval and early modern Europe was to a great extent celebrated as part of communal life. Intimate encounters between men and women, both on the individual and social levels, became an organized ceremony in which the lovers were assigned pre-scripted roles and an elaborate public ritual was expected of the suitor and the beloved. The structure of

wooing was a neatly organized movement that had more to do with a process of negotiation than a spontaneous outburst of affection and hoped to establish authority in the relationship. The orchestrated progression of courting subsequently led to marriage in which the bride was transferred from her father to her husband. The moment of passage from the pre-nuptial state to marital life was similarly ritualized and observed with appropriate ceremonies, especially in royal families whose weddings often signified a political agreement.

The tension between the rigidity of public celebration and the privacy of personal feeling is reflected in late medieval and early modern carols of courtship and marriage with special force. Their strict form provides fine contrast to the festive setting for which they were usually intended and the clash of the two creates an adequate framework of expression that reveals the conflict between the focused organisation of the ritual and the interactive spirit underlying it.

It is the aim of this paper to analyse prevalent ideology of gender representation in selected secular late Middle English and early modern carols. I will argue that the game of courtship serves to reinforce the strength of the community of men, while husbands' relational complaints in carols of marriage reiterate men's authority over women. I will also attempt to show that the apparent humour or elegance of some poems functions as an instrument of control that consolidates gender imbalances. The analysis of poetic forms will be supported with an examination of images of secular marriage in the mystery cycles.

The play of courtship in which the partners contend for power is enacted in a fifteenth-century carol of the holly and the ivy (MS Harley 5396). The plants which stand for the masculine and feminine principles compete against each other in a game of alternate praise and scorn in which “maystry” is the final reward. The outcome of the conflict, however, is announced as early as in the burden in which the vine is encouraged to surrender to the holly:

Nay, Iuy, nay, hyt shal not be, iwys;  
Let Holy hafe the maystry, as the maner ys. (Greene 82)

The chorus proclaims the rule of the shrub. The imperative “let” requests that the ivy should give in to her competitor<sup>1</sup> while the speaker/

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, the carol survives in a later sixteenth-century version (Balliol College, MS 354). The conditional “let” of the earlier poem is replaced by the modal “must” which obliges the ivy to submit: “Nay, nay, Ive, it may bot be, iwys, / For Holy must haue the mastry, as the maner is” (Greene 82). For a discussion of the carol-like movement between the two poems see Chaganti.

singer asserts that it is customary for men to have control over women. The invocation of social tradition and practice legitimizes the holly's right to power and endorses his desire for higher status. Short, monosyllabic words used in the first line of the burden make the demand specific, and the symmetrical alliteration of the second line foregrounds the priority of the holly. The opening negative particle, "nay," reveals the definiteness of the speaker's tone and imposes obedience on the ivy. The refusal to let the vine enjoy privileges is forceful in its directness and brusqueness, and bears dramatic qualities, often exploited on the medieval stage.<sup>2</sup> The dramatic and relational conviction of a forceful opening phrase is then used in the carol as a rhetorically effective figure which emphasizes the strength of the denial.

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The holly's claim to power is supported by a list of his qualities that surpass the ivy's monochrome poverty of looks and expression. The vine is attended by the owl while

Holy hath byrdys, a ful fayre flok,  
The nyghtyngale, the poppynguy, the gayntyl lauyrok. (Greene 82)

The asymmetrical arrangement of the plants' retinues serves to advance the shrub. Bird symbolism allows the carol to stress the excellence and finesse of the holly which not only is fair to behold, as announced in the first stanza, but also enjoys the company of cheerful birds that outnumber the ivy's court. The nightingale and the lark in particular imply charm, perfection and singularity of the holly. The song of the latter is melodious and impresses by the power of the bird's voice as it rises high in the sky. The former is described in medieval and early modern texts with special affection: it compels by the sweetness of its song and the generosity of its spirit while it stays alert in the early hours of the morning to announce the beginning of a new day (Barber 159). The "poppynguy," as Greene suggests, should be interpreted not as the jay, but as the slender barb-tipped-tongued green woodpecker who "drums for his lady-love and yaffles or laughs out glassy and clear, in the sunny green tops of the woods" (382). The uniqueness and beauty of their company, poetically described by Greene, stands in sharp contrast to the gloom and taciturnity of the solitary owl which scares others with its screeching voice. Associated

<sup>2</sup> In early sixteenth-century *Magnyfycence*, Felicity interrupts Liberty in mid-sentence, reminding him that "Nay, suffer me yet ferther to say" (Skelton 219) while the chief vice in mid-sixteenth century *Like Will to Like*, Nicol Newfangle, begins the opening monologue, very much like Richard III in Shakespeare's tragedy, with a vigorous "now" when he enters the stage laughing: "Ha, ha ha, ha! now like unto like: it will be none other, / Stoop gentle knave, and take up your brother" (Fulwell 2: 309).

with the night and death, it is lazy, excessive and loathsome as “its roost is filthy from its droppings” (Barber 149). The repulsive nature of the bird symbolizes the ugliness of its mistress and recalls the lack of control that is associated with unruly women.

Chaganti notices that the internal imagery in the carol expresses a distaste for excess and anarchy, from the appetite of the owl which eats the ivy’s black berries to the uncoordinated dance “with no control” (94). The ivy’s inability to dance, implied in the reference to weeping and wringing:

Holy and hys mery men, they dawnsyn and they syng;  
Iuy and hur maydenys, they wepyn and they wryng, (Greene 82)

further exposes its shortcomings as a woman. John Stevens points out in his examination of courtly love and the courtly lyric that “there is a nobility proper to each sex, and in the dance a man shows his manliness and a woman her womanliness in ‘gentyll behaving’, the one to the other” (168). Thus the vine’s lack of dancierly skills diminishes her femininity and indicates both her individual inferiority and the inferiority of her gender represented by the attending train.

The contrasting habitats of the plants are used to argue the superiority of the tree, placed inside a warm, festive hall where his splendour finds a befitting context. The vine, on the other hand, is pictured outside where she is exposed to the cold weather:

Holy stond in the hall, fayre to behold;  
Iuy stond without the dore; she ys ful sore a-cold. (Greene 82)

The holly enjoys the attention of the revellers and seduces them by his pleasing appearance, but the ivy, banished from the collective merriment, suffers frost bite. Her exclusion from the round dance of the carol undermines the inclusive nature of carol-singing. The verb “stond” can be either description or command and gives particular lexical and semantic power of control to the speaker since, as Chaganti observes, “articulating the situation might mean accomplishing it” (94). The word “dore” additionally creates a physical barrier between the two worlds. By being relegated outside the communal sphere, women are placed in a position which makes them symbolically invisible and unable to respond. Through the figure of the door, women are made liminal, while the threshold established by the physical borderline removes them from the direct vision of men.

Paradoxically, however, the removal of the ivy and her court outside the hall exposes them to observation by others and aligns women with the impurity of external space. The expulsion reflects the spatial arrangement of gendered morality which is constructed along “The opposition

between the good woman in the household and the bad woman in the street” (Salih 125). A similar use of space can be noticed in a fifteenth-century carol praising holly (MS Eng. poet. e. I) where the shrub is associated with a jubilant hall in the first line of stanza two. The plant’s detractors are silenced by being forced into a basket and possibly taken out into the street and to the nearest public house (Greene 383):

Whosoeuer ageynst Holly do crye,  
In a lepe shall he hang full hye. (Greene 83)

Lists of women’s faults are aggregated in another fifteenth-century carol (MS Eng. poet e. I) to generate a cumulative effect of female inadequacy, malevolence and mischief. This short riddlic poem offers a series of brief quizzical descriptions of three figures or animals that share a certain wearisome feature:

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Ther wer iii wyly; 3 wyly ther wer:  
A fox, a fryyr, and a woman.

Ther wer 3 angry; 3 angry ther wer:  
A wasp, a wesyll, and a woman.

There wer 3 cheteryng; iii  
Cheteryn ther wer:  
A peye, a jaye, and a woman. (Greene 239)

The animal metaphors that conclude the descriptions in the first line of each stanza carry critical implications: women are accused of crafty deception, malice and excessive speech. Additional interpretative connotations of these vices reinforce the misogynistic tone of the carol and link the sins of the tongue or the soul with those of the flesh. The weasel is not only a symbol of cunning but also of sexuality and thus imperfect humanity, inherited from Eve as a result of original sin. The animal, for instance, appears in Chaucer’s “The Miller’s Tale” in the sexualized description of the jealous carpenter’s wife, Alison, whose body was “As any wezele . . . gent and small” (Robinson 3234). Similarly, friars’ corrupt morals are ironically alluded to in “The Wife’s of Bath’s Tale,” which describes a land patrolled by “lymytours and othere hooly freres” (Robinson 866) who guarantee that

Wommen may go saufly up and doun.  
In every bussh or under every tree  
Ther is noon oother incubus but he,  
And he ne wol doon hem but dishonour. (Robinson 878–81)

No more flattering is the association between women and the jay’s characteristic harsh cries and the prolonged mewling notes that Greene refuses to attribute to the holly in the previous poem, or in the vocal chattering of magpies. The poem makes a connection between raucous birds and women’s verbal experience. Like the birds, women are thought to be talkative, loud and unable to control their speech which is perceived as invasive and tiresome. It is construed as garrulousness and, associated with the craving to indulge, is believed to represent fallen morals: thought to be a typically female trait, it symbolizes incontinence, either spiritual or sexual. As a sin of both the soul and the flesh, talkativeness in women was criticized in contemporaneous literature. Following the tradition of conduct books, Christine de Pizan warns women of different ranks and social positions against loquaciousness. The elite class are advised by her that only foolish wives engage in violent and noisy housewifery as these things “are most unseemly in a woman” and that “There can be no sensible behaviour without moderation, which does not require malice or anger or shouting” (148–49). She also reminds maidens wishing to ensure their respectability and good reputation that they “must not be in any way forward, outspoken or loose,” should maintain a humble manner and avoid gratuitous speech as “It is a very ugly thing in a girl to be argumentative,” especially in the presence of men whoever they may be (161). Similarly in the early modern period, women’s speech “was liable to be negatively constructed by men” and was often restricted or linked to places and situations traditionally equated with women, such as household chores, child bearing and rearing and market matters (Mendelson and Crawford 212–13).

The progression through a series of vices in the poem objectifies women by linking specifically irksome features of notoriously difficult animals with women and, eventually, by advocating violence in the final stanza. The exposure to female excessive nature, as perceived by men in the carol, is countered with male physical aggression which subjugates the female persona and colonizes her body. Corporal disciplinary prescriptions in the final stanza:

Ther we 3 wold be betyn; 3 wold be betyn ther wer:  
A myll, a stokefysche, and a woman. (Greene 239)

appear to provide a suitable punishment for female deficiencies depicted in the strophes and are a reward for men’s implied patience with women. Grinding or pressing are inherent in the work of a mill and in the curing of fish. They also seem similarly intrinsic in the taming of women who have to be broken down to be of service to men. Their authority is thus not only ensured through tradition or spiritual control but is also imposed by force.

In the poem, women's irritating behaviour sanctions male aggression that is premeditated, organized and incorporated into the framework of social organization. It also legitimizes abuse which aims at reintroducing supervision over the potentially dangerous female body. At the same time, it indirectly expresses a latent belief in the masochistic desires of women who secretly dream of being possessed and controlled.

The poem additionally objectifies women not only through the treatment suggested in the lines but also by its very form. Women are perceived as puzzles that have to be deciphered. They are seen as a problem that requires active decoding in an act of comic misogyny (Johnson 145). The wish for semantic control over subversively illusive women reveals the need to thrash out their meaning and, by this, to gain mastery over them.

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While conjugal love was encouraged by the medieval Church (McCarthy 94), chastising women by their husbands was commonly practised in the late medieval and early modern periods. Women, guilty "of sin and temptation, of forbidden pleasures and lusts, of needful fears and repressions, haunted by the same old shadow of Original Sin, the same ascetical ideals as their ancestors" (Owst 377), seemed to deserve punishment for their trespasses, actual and potential, including within marriage. Domestic violence is documented relatively well in legal and didactic literature (McCarthy 1410–11; Amussen, "Being Stirred" 74–75). As a corrective measure, it was used regularly, also to obtain sexual services (Amussen, "Punishment" 13), and enjoyed such popularity that a sixteenth-century London by-law had to introduce an evening time limit after which wife-beating should stop to avoid disruptive or excessive noise (Mendelson and Crawford 128). Cruelty constituted grounds for medieval divorce *a mensa et thoro* 'divorce from bed and board' and was one of the most common reasons cited in legal suits (McCarthy 141; Elliott 47). However, applications for separation or annulment of marriage were rare. Divorce was granted or marriage was declared invalid only infrequently, and the practice of domestic abuse continued in the Middle Ages and into the early modern period, with the wife sometimes silenced by the ineffectiveness of the legal process (Elliott 47–48).

Not surprisingly then, physical aggression against women is celebrated and encouraged in the carol as socially and legally accepted while it is women's predilection for violence that is criticized. This approach to violence is consistent with common practices of the time as "The focus of greatest popular concern (at least until 1640) was not the abusive husband, but the violent disorderly wife" (Amussen, "Being Stirred" 75). Physical abuse by women is seen in literary writings as shameful as it challenges the husband's power and jeopardizes his position, and their belligerence incapacitates men, both in the literal and figurative senses. In a fifteenth-century carol

“Of all creatures women be best...”

(MS Sloane 2593), a young married man warns his peers against marrying older women because of the control they exercise over men. The husband complains that:

If I aske our dame bred,  
Che tayk a staf and brekit myn hed  
And doth me rennyn under the led;  
.....

If I aske our dame fleych,  
Che brekit myn hed with a dych. (Greene 240)

The staff and the dish become symbols of female desire to control men. The grotesque staff offers an iconic and ironic representation of misconceived status while the crowning of the man's head with a dish parodies this inversion of power. Another fifteenth-century husband sorrowfully complains of the maltreatment that he receives from his wife (MS Eng. poet e. I, 15<sup>th</sup> c.). Not only is she voraciously greedy and eats the food that he brings home or drinks all the good ale but she also readily strikes him when displeased:

If I sey ovght of hyr but good,  
She loke on me as she war wod  
And wyll me clovght abovght the hod;  
Carfull [ys my hart therfor]. (Greene 240)

The violation of the rules of good house-keeping and her rough manner are perceived as madness of which the sorrowful man complains.

Such representations of the relationship between men and women are consistent with the overall perception of marital life in the late Middle Ages and early modern times. While from the point of view of the Church, matrimony helped keep the weaknesses of the flesh in check, men believed it was a harrowing experience imposed on them by women. As Shulamith Shahar points out, in bourgeois literature “the husband is described as having been caught in a trap,” and “the married woman is pictured as domineering, deliberately disobeying her husband, quarrelsome, demanding, interested in other men, straying, jealous” (77). The descriptive excess of female ill-temper is used to encourage sympathy for the misery of innocent husbands. Their martyrdom is validated through his domestic suffering.

The theme of the overshadowed husband who despairs because of the domineering wife derives from a common and well-established tradition of husband's complaint which forms a subgenre of Middle English lyric



(Epstein) and is suitably reflected in dramatic writings of the period.<sup>3</sup> It is rendered with particular dramatic stamina in the flood pageants in the mystery cycles which stage the contention between Noah and his wife as well as in the pageant of the shepherds in the Towneley cycle where a group of shepherds weep over their unfortunate lives.

The second shepherd in the *Secunda Pastorum* pageant in Towneley comments on married life. He dejectedly complains of his wife, who is:

As sharp as thystyll,  
 As rugh as a brere;  
 She is browyd lyke a brystyll,  
 With a sowre-loten chere;  
 .....  
 She is as great as a whall,

She has a gallon of gall, (13.146–54)

The plant and animal similes serve to expose the wife's physical unseemliness and the ugliness of her character. Unkempt, loud and voracious, she is likened to a whale which is perpetually hungry, with its stomach "so great that it could be mistaken for hell" (Barber 205). The whale is adept at deception as it "gives out a sweet scent" that attracts fish or tricks sailors into believing its back is an island before diving into the water and dragging "the ship down with it into the depths" (Barber 205).

The description of the monstrous wife who seems able to swallow her husband alive provides an *exemplum* that completes and illustrates the shepherd's mock homily. The speech directed to the audience is firmly placed in the reality of pastoral life in the pageant. The shepherds bewail the cold weather and poor wages earned by hard work "When mastermen wynkys" (13.227). The interlinking position of the husband's lament in between professional grievances positions it rhetorically in the public sphere of social and political evils, which is further strengthened by the structural harmony of the piece. The complaints of the shepherds unfold with precision typical of the Wakefield Master:

<sup>3</sup> The theme of the boisterous wife was also frequently exploited in the fine arts and was fondly used in medieval misericords (Janicka 103). A misericord dating back to about 1300 in the church of St. Mary in Fairford, Gloucestershire, depicts a woman pulling her prone husband by his hair, his legs waving in the air (Janicka 103; "Fairford Church"). A violent fight between husband and wife, with the woman visibly getting the upper hand, is also depicted on one of the late fifteenth-century misericords in the chancel of the Holy Trinity Church in Stratford-upon-Avon. The woman ferociously pulls the man's beard and stretches out her leg, as if getting ready to kick him.

Each complaint is contained within six stanzas. The first and second shepherds have six stanzas each of soliloquy, the third, for variation, has three stanzas, then one of dialogue, and then another two to himself. They also have a less obvious similarity in the movement from complaint to resolution. (Meredith 154–55)

However, the comparison of the wife’s tyranny to natural phenomena or the oppressive power of the lord is not merely a form of comic relief that facilitates the dissolution of the complaint into laughter (Meredith 155), but it also legitimizes the misery men experience in married life and is validated by the seriousness of other laments. The interweaving of the antiuxorial complaint into an outpouring of rustic misfortune adds expressive power to the shepherd’s marital plight. The oppression of husbands placed in the context of social exploitation and the hardship of rural life encourages the reader/spectator to empathize with the abused husband.

The initial disobedience of Noah’s wife and her subsequent acquiescence when the prophecy conveyed to her husband comes true are used in the flood pageants of the Chester, York and Towneley cycles as particularly flamboyant illustrations of the male conquest over female unruly spirit. The biblical event is expanded in the mysteries and transformed into a domestic scene where a momentary inversion of power hierarchies serves to reinforce normative control over women as being spiritually deficient and failing to appreciate divine knowledge.

In the Chester pageant, Noah’s wife announces that “I will not come therin todaye” (3.218). She is unwilling to leave the town as she is too concerned about her friends who entice her to stay behind and enjoy food and drink. The wife, who according to Noah “is wraowe; / by God, such another I doe not knowe” (3.209–10), ignores the pleas of both her husband and their sons, and the men decide to bring her in by force. She is distracted by Japheth while Shem snatches her and carries into the boat: “In faith, mother, yett thow shall, / whether thou will or nought” (243–44), while the gossips, who ask to be let onboard, are left behind to drown.

In the York cycle, Mrs Noah refuses to accept her husband’s explanations and is unwilling to board the ark fearing its imperfect construction:

Trowes þou þat I wol leue þe harde lande  
And tourne vp here on toure deraye?  
Nay, Noye, I am nou3t bowne  
To fonde nowe ouer þere fellis. (9.77–80)

Angered by her husband’s inexplicable revelations, she strikes him with a distaff:

What, wenys þou so for to go qwitte?  
Nay, be my trouthe, þou gettis a clowte. (9.119–20)

However, she is made to change her mind once the downpour begins. When she realises the extent of the destruction and the loss of those who stayed behind:

My frendis that I fra yoode  
Are ouere flowen with floode, (9.151–52)

Noah's wife prays with her family to thank God for the miraculous survival ensured by her husband.

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Finally in the Towneley pageant of the flood, the couple engage in a vigorous and raucous fight. Threatened and struck by Noah, weary of his wife's continued carping and lack of cooperation, Mrs Noah suggests that her husband should be beaten until he turns blue all over his body (3.290) and heartily promises to reciprocate any blow she receives: "By my thryft, if thou smyte, / I shal turne the vntil" (3.315). She conveniently uses her distaff to fight back and strikes back so hard that Noah finds it difficult to move:

I may full ill gang,  
The soth for the know;  
Bot if God help amang,  
I may sit downe daw  
To ken. (3. 356–60)

Although initially afraid of the rain, Mrs Noah is still unwilling to board the ark as she is concerned about her spinning:

Sir, for Iak nor for Gill  
Will I turne my face,  
Till I haue on this hill  
Spon a space  
On my rok. (3.486–90)

When waters rise high, *Uxor* rushes into the ark "For drede that I drone here" (3.538). Although the couple continue fighting, the wife changes her mind, helps Noah and observes the horizon for signs of safe land.

The inclusion of extrabiblical narratives reinforces popular chauvinistic sentiments of the hen-pecked husband tradition. The conclusion of the event is known prior to its beginning and the comic potential of the incident relies on the tacit understanding of the uxorial short-sightedness, stubbornness and rebelliousness. It derides women by locating them in

a no-win situation whose result has already been decided and which they cannot overcome. At the same time, the denial of power and the attribution of numerous faults to women which appear “universal and a priori” (Bloch 3) are indicative of a fear of women as potential threats to the integrity of individual men as well as men as a group. Male anxiety about female unruliness results not only from a disturbance of domestic life but is also fuelled by a fear of the collapse of male authority as a wife’s disobedience challenges the husband’s individual position and endangers the social perception of his status. As Perfetti argues: “The private power exercised by the wife is authorized as long as it does not slip through the cracks of the household into the public arena” (189). The success of familial and social roles is then dependent on a performance enacted by both spouses to uphold the organization of marital life. The transgression of the established order, such as the odd hen-pecked husband or a passing moment of uxorial disobedience, offers a release of tension that hopes to acknowledge men’s dominant status.

What makes the critical attitude towards women in the carols and pageants of marriage vitriolic is the good-natured humour interwoven into them. In a sixteenth-century satirical carol (MS 354), the stanzas compliment women while the burden reverses the meaning of the strophes. Successive stanzas exalt feminine restraint in expression, steadfastness, patience, discretion, meekness, temperance, abstinence, and, finally, humility and humbleness. The attribution of these virtues to women is challenged by the burden which, repeated after each stanza, reminds the reader/listener that:

Of all creatures women be best,  
Cuius contrarium verum est. (Greene 235)

The use of the chorus transposes the celebration of femininity into its critique. Language mixing creates deceptive flattery but the mock use of the Latin strengthens the misogynistic texture. The lexical transposition privileges men and excludes women from the joke.

A similarly ostensible tongue-in-cheek burden is found in the fifteenth-century riddlic carol of three unruly things discussed above. Interpolated between the puzzles that repetitively deprecate women is their glorification and, in particular, the glorification of female beauty:

Herfor and therfor and therfor I came,  
And for to prayse this prety woman. (Greene 239)

While the chorus promises to praise women, the body of the carol meticulously itemises their faults. The conflict between the burden and the

stanzas is also played along the tension between weaknesses of the character and the visual pleasure derived from female physical allure and attractiveness. A connection is made between women's appearance and their usability to men while the enthusiastically friendly opening establishes the controlling position of men.

The celebratory tone of the burden resembles an address in honour of women. It thus implies a social gathering of people who listen to and partake of the joke. The puzzles become a consolidating factor which permits one gender to ally against the other. This strengthens homosocial bonds, while laughter at women's weaknesses offers freedom from the fear of them. Laughter at the explicit and implicit joke serves as a political tool that dispels status-related anxiety and helps men regain social authority.

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Similarly, a sense of togetherness permeates the presentation of the holly and his company in the carol of the plants discussed above. "Holy and hys mery men" who dance and sing (Greene 82) form a strong group which symbolically renders the structural organisation of society dominated by men where, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick notices, "there is a special relationship between male homosocial (*including* homosexual) desire and the structures for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power" (25). The organisation of the dance reveals the inner workings of the popular courtly ideal of wooing in which women are thought to enjoy the privilege of decision and freedom from subjugation.

Medieval and early modern stage practices additionally reinforce hostile stereotyping of women. Although it is impossible to ascertain the comic effectiveness of individual stage productions, theatrical cross dressing provided ample opportunities for parody and ridicule. Men in female roles, such as Noah's wife, may have been used to further antifeminist criticism displayed on stage. In her analysis of medieval comic literature in Europe, Lisa Perfetti notices that:

the image of a male on stage dressed as a woman could also have been exploited for burlesque purposes, particularly if the actor was a man rather than a boy. The male actor dressed as the farce wife might have used exaggerated tones and gestures to parody femininity and bring attention to the male body of the actor on stage. (173)

The additional subversive power of men in female roles is visible in the Towneley pageant where Mrs Noah directly addresses the audience to complain of her husband:

We women may wary  
All ill husbandys.  
I have oone, bi Mary,

That lowsyd me of my bandys!  
If he teyn, I must tary,  
Howsoever it standys,  
With seymland full sory,  
Wringand both my handys  
For drede; (3.300–08)

The lines undermine Mrs Noah’s attempt to win the audience’s sympathy as she reveals her wily trick to deceive her husband with sorry semblance. Her vengeful nature is exposed in the speech as she confesses:

Bot if otherwhile,  
What with gam and with gyle,  
I shall smyte and smyle,  
And qwite hum his mede. (3.309–12)

The play of genders is then enacted between the actor and the audience, and is dependent on the mutual understanding of the joke performed on stage. While the text seemingly bemoans Mrs Noah’s sorry fate, the theatrical enactment of it may actually exploit women turning them into the object of a performative trick.

Additionally, as public spectacles, the mystery cycles were staged in the open with unrestricted access by both men and women. The potential parodic excess of this theatrical transvestism possibly indicates women’s internalization of the norm of the male rule implicated in the presented events. Public, seemingly all-inclusive laughter at the inversion of normative relations reinforces the standard of male domination and positions women in a liminal role. As the high status of the humiliated husband is proven by divine intervention and his superior role prevails, the position of the woman is undermined.

Authority exercised by men and women in the late medieval and early modern texts dealing with courtship and marriage discussed above is used to uphold binary oppositions of gender division. They reproduce stereotypical representations of women in the context of relationships with men and assign rigid roles in which power cannot be negotiated. The imagery of inadequacy, achieved through the accumulation of feminine shortcomings, aims at making women insignificant. Perceived as a subversive threat to the brotherhood of men, they are confined to the margins of the collective experience to prevent transgression implicit in the fear of them. What makes the texts antagonistic is the use of deceptively friendly humour that prohibits gender negotiation and/or reconciliation. Laughter is used to defeat women and to unite the jubilant community of men whose ostensibly jocular attitude conceals ill-meant sentiments. Through latently hostile humour, women are laughed at and not with.


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