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'Here may we se a merveyl one': Miracles and the Psalter in the N-Town 'Marriage of Mary and Joseph'

A major theme of the N-Town 'Marriage of Mary and Joseph' is its characters' ability to interpret religious truths by interacting with scripture or witnessing miracles. Mary's reading of her psalter at the play's ending comments upon the episode in which the miraculous 'flowering wand' identifies Joseph as Mary's future husband. The play privileges scripture reading as a method of attaining knowledge as the psalter's salvific power supplants the miracle of the flowering branch as a source of virtue and mercy; yet the play also affirms images like the wand flowering and Mary reading as devotional icons.

The N-Town 'Marriage of Mary and Joseph' depicts a lively account of the apocryphal yet popular story of how the two characters came to be suitable marriage partners.[1] When the Virgin Mary, who has dedicated herself to a life of prayer in the temple, refuses to take a husband, the temple authorities led by the character Episcopus decide to pray for God's guidance and, after doing so, hear from an angel that God will send them a sign identifying Mary's intended. This sign, the flowering of a dead branch held by a member of the house of David, has a rich biblical and devotional history.[2] Scholars of medieval biblical drama have differed in their interpretations of Joseph's flowering branch with more recent work recognizing its wonderfully comic potential.[3] Critics have not, however, explored the flowering wand's relationship to the play's final scene, in which Mary reads her psalter and extols the virtues of her audience doing the same.[4] Though critics have provided several explanations for Mary's treatment of the psalter, most of which focus on the text's applicability to personal devotion,[5] I propose that we should also recognize the similarities between the virtues associated with reading or singing the psalms and those inherent in the miracle of the flowering wand.

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Both of these scenes focus on what I propose to be a major theme of the play: its characters' ability to correctly interpret religious truths through interaction with scripture or by witnessing a miraculous 'sygne' (229).[6] Mary unambiguously praises the psalter's ability to inform and benefit humanity, but the miracle of the flowering wand, while humorous in the play's suggestive depiction of it, presents significant interpretive problems. While the sign supposedly resolves the problem of identifying Mary's future spouse, the play's staging of this miracle is problematic because its dialogue has already conveyed the same information and rendered the miracle unnecessary. Despite making the selection process entertaining theatre, the image of a man holding his 'wand', which Emma Lipton has called a 'graphic image of phallic sexuality', brings the priests' interpretive dilemma to a humorous but unresolved end.[7] Reading or singing the psalter, in contrast, provides the faithful with knowledge, instructs them in virtue, removes sin, and — most importantly — elicits the grace of God. Humanity's salvation, the greatest miracle discussed in the play, first arises not from God's intervention in the world but through humanity's interaction with the word of God. The wonders of the psalter, in short, supplant those of the flowering branch in every way. While reaffirming the psalms' place as the preeminent devotional texts of the Middle Ages, Mary's encomium provides a fitting end to a play concerned with properly understanding God's will.[8]

The catalyst for the play's action is Mary's refusal to adhere to the law dictating that all fourteen-year-old virgins marry for the increase of the community.[9] Mary's response shows her to be a loyal servant of God, yet a willful opponent of the high priest's plan. She declares, 'Aȝens þe lawe wyl I nevyr be, / But mannys felachep xal nevyr folwe me' (36–7). This argument, which illustrates the differences between the laws of God and man, leads the temple priests to a logical impasse, one that shows the mutual exclusivity of two honourable paths in life: marriage and virginity. After failing to decide on the proper course of action, the priests decide to pray for God's intercession, and Episcopus hopes 'That it may plese his fynyte deyté / Knowleche in þis to sendyn vs' (112–13). He then declares, 'we xal begynne "Veni Creator Spiritus"' (115), a hymn that Peter Meredith notes 'is associated with a request for guidance in deliberations'.[10] It is important to recognize, though, the priestly deliberations have already ended in failure, with neither Episcopus nor his priests able to discern the proper course of action. Instead of asking for God's assistance in their ongoing counsel, Episcopus begs God to 'enforme' him with 'Knowleche' (119, 113). I agree with Penny Granger

that 'this invocatory hymn stands at a pivotal point' in the 'Marriage' play but not because it marks the moment when Episcopus 'considers whether to ask Mary to break either her vow of chastity or the law that says all girls over 14 years old must be married', nor because is it sung for 'inspiration to the bishop in his dilemma over Mary.[11] The play instead incorporates the hymn precisely when the priestly council recognizes that its own efforts have proven ineffective, so they must rely on some form of divine revelation.[12]

That revelation arrives in the form of an angel, who does not guide the deliberations as much as put a stop to them. The Angel informs the priests that God has answered their prayers and has sent him

> To telle þe what þat þu do xalle,
> And how þu xalt be rewlyd in iche degré.
> Take tent and vndyrstond: (122–4)

The Angel's speech is less counsel or advice than it is an order, one to which the men must pay attention — 'take tent' — and understand what they 'shall do' and 'be ruled by'. In this case, a decree of God's will trumps counsel, deliberation, or any other efforts to discern the best course of action. The Angel tells the priests that 'Goddys owyn byddyng' (125) stipulates that all of the house of David arrive at the temple 'With whyte ȝardys in þer honde' (128). After taking the branches, the priests must observe which one blooms and then grant the flowering branch's owner the right to wed Mary (130–2). Apparently because of the priests' confusion up to this point, the Angel wants to leave no doubt regarding the hoped-for sign and how to interpret it. Despite these instructions, however, the process surrounding the miracle ends up being a less than straightforward affair.

Examining a dramatic account of the sequence that presents the miracle without ambivalence before exploring the ways in which the N-Town play problematizes the marvel of the wand will be fruitful. The Towneley 'Annunciation', for example, relies on the sign itself to convey Joseph's selection. According to the bewildered Joseph of the Towneley play, the blossoming wand was the only reason why the priests had chosen him. They say:

> For God of heuen thus ordans he,
> Thi wand shewys openly.
> It florishes so, withouten nay,
> That the behovys wed Mary the may.   (258–61)[13]

Towneley presents the sight of the flowering wand as proof of Joseph's selection, for the spectacle conveys this truth 'openly', in a manner easily seen and 'readily understood'.[14] The miracle is the centrepiece of the scene, and in view of this incontrovertible sign Joseph has no choice but to take Mary as a wife.

Unlike the Towneley play, York Play 13, 'Joseph's Troubles about Mary', betrays some uncertainty about the episode. In the York play, Joseph himself claims that at the time of the selection process he did not understand the significance of the men's wands flowering. He recalls:

> For tharein was ordande
> Unwedded men sulde stande
> Al sembled at asent,
> And ilke ane a drye wande
> On heght helde in his hand,
> And I ne wist what it ment.   (25–30)[15]

The York cycle's account of the episode depicts Joseph as completely ignorant of the relationship between sign and signified. No one briefed him beforehand on the terms of the situation, so he was not fully aware of the implications of the 'bargain' that has caused him so much sorrow (35–6). His description of the miracle itself does not indicate that witnessing it made it any more understandable:

> In mange al othir ane bare I,
> Itt florisshed faire and floures on sprede,
> And thay saide to me forthy
> That with a wiffe I sulde be wedde.   (31–4)

Even after being the most immediate witness to his flowering wand, Joseph needs to have the sign interpreted for him. The declaration 'forthy' (therefore) is ironic because Joseph clearly does not understand the logical connection between the sign and its meaning. At the time of the rod's flowering, he was as passive as any audience member, ostensibly lacking either the ability to interpret the sign correctly or the power to assert any control over what was happening to him. Joseph, as the quintessential everyman, displays humanity's inability to discern the meaning of miraculous signs without detailed instructions from a religious authority.[16]

Echoing Joseph's lack of understanding in the York cycle, N-Town's Joseph does not comprehend the relationship between the sign of the flowering

wands and the meaning to be imparted on them. Upon hearing the summons to the temple, Joseph cannot reconcile the relationship between the branch and the concept of marriage. He declares:

> Benedicité! I cannot vndyrstande
> What oure prince of prestys doth men,
> Þat every man xuld come and brynge with hym a whande.
> Abyl to be maryed, þat is not I, so mote I then!
> I haue be maydon evyr and evyrmore wele ben,
> I chaungyd not ȝet of all my long lyff!
> And now to be maryed? Sum man wold wen
> It is a straunge thynge an old man to take a ȝonge wyff! (10.175–82)

The shift in focus from the first three lines of the octave to the last five delineates what Joseph 'cannot vndyrstande' (175) and what he can. The opening lines address the inscrutable relationship between bringing a wand to the temple and marrying someone, and Joseph is at pains to unravel how Episcopus puts these incommensurate concepts in relation to each other. In contrast, Joseph seems to understand quite well why he cannot be married (178). At his advanced age, he knows that he cannot change his course of life now and that gossips surely will ridicule his marriage to Mary.[17] Joseph's humorous fretting about the incongruity of an old man taking a young wife should not distract from a greater incongruity: the tenuous relationship between bringing a branch to the temple and making oneself eligible for marriage.

    This indeterminate connection between the sign and its meaning continues to develop when Joseph first enters the temple with four other kinsmen of David and balks at presenting his wand for inspection. Unlike his younger companions, who proudly speak of their 'fayr white ȝarde(s)' (205, 208; see also 211, 218), Joseph hesitates to step forward, reiterating the motif of the *senex amans*'s feebleness (226–8). None of the younger men's branches flowers, of course, and the lack of a definitive sign leads Episcopus to lament, 'A, mercy, Lord, I kan no sygne aspy. / It is best we go ageyn to prayr' (229–30). Just as it seems that Joseph's hesitation will force the council to renew their prayers for guidance, a 'Vox' intervenes, declaring 'He brought not up his rodde ȝet, trewly, / To whom þe mayd howyth to be maryed her' (231–2).[18] While a production could possibly include more than the four kinsmen of David who speak in the play, the manuscript does not indicate their presence, leaving little question as to the identity of Mary's intended spouse. The play's singling out of Joseph from a limited number of characters differs from

the account in the *Legenda Aurea,* which does not mention the number of suitors present.[19] While the play's limited number of suitors could very well result from the practical necessities of staging and casting, the visual effect on the audience would be unchanged: based on the limited number of potential suitors, the miracle of the flowering wand is entirely superfluous, for it is immediately evident that Joseph is the only one who has not presented his wand.

Despite the wand's greatly diminished narrative function, Episcopus celebrates the spectacle, proclaiming:

> A, Mercy! Mercy! Mercy, Lord, we crye!
> Þe blyssyd of God we se art thou.
> *Et clamant omnes 'Mercy! Mercy!'*
> A, gracyous God in hevyn trone,
> Ryht wundyrful þi werkys be!
> Here may we se a merveyl one:
> A ded stok beryth flourys fre!
> Joseph, in hert withoutyn mone,
> Þu mayst be blyth with game and gle.
> A mayd to wedde þu must gone
> Be þis meracle I do wel se.   (257–66)

The first six lines of Episcopus's speech exhibit the 'behold and see' conventions that David Mills observes in much of medieval drama. Medieval theatre employs these conventions, Mills states, when 'speeches…are directed out to the audience, being intended only secondarily if at all for figures within the dramatic action. They are formal, structured, self-consciously rhetorical or allusive. And above all they point a verbal finger at the visual scene and urge a particular attitude or response upon the audience'.[20] Before he addresses Joseph by name and with the pronoun 'þu', Episcopus speaks to the audience, drawing their attention to an object of veneration. The very sight of the marvel launches him into panegyric mode, for the wand seems to outweigh, in both rhetorical and devotional respects, the Vox's pronouncement. Even though Episcopus and the audience already have learned of Joseph's selection, they needed to 'wel se' the proof of it. Only 'Be þis meracle' (266) does the priest recognize Joseph's selection before subsequently praising God for the wonderful nature of his works. The episode focuses less on the true husband's identity than on how the characters identify him through the visual

and physical sign of the flowering wand.[21] Joseph must carry out his obligations without complaint primarily because of the miracle itself.

Despite the apparent success of the miracle, though, I propose that the play establishes the sight of the flowering wand as an object of veneration partly to highlight its inefficacies, for now that it has become the focus of the audience's praise, its capacity as a transmitter of knowledge or comfort becomes subject to pressure. When Joseph sees the wand beginning to flower, he exclaims, 'Lo. Lo. Lo! What se ȝe now?' (256). Joseph sees what is happening to his wand, but he has no idea how to interpret the sight. By asking Episcopus what *he* sees, Joseph does not simply betray his own ignorance; rather, he indicates that there is no clear interpretive link between the flowering wand and God's plan for him.

The play diminishes the miracle's effectiveness long before the wand's flowering by emphasizing the humorous image of David's descendants bearing such overtly phallic symbols.[22] N-Town's well-known emphasis on Joseph's sexuality and his hesitation at marrying such a young wife also contribute to the 'Marriage' play's farcical depiction of the miracle. Invoking the stereotypical *senex amans*'s fear of impotence, Joseph complains, 'Age and febylnesse doth me enbrase, / That I may nother well goo ne stond' (161–2). Compounding his performance anxiety of not being able to 'stand' is the fear of complete emasculation: 'Sere, I kannot my rodde fynde. / To come þer, in trowth, methynkyht shame' (235–6). Despite his worries, Joseph relents, stating 'I xal take a wand in my hand and cast of my gowne' (185). The humour and suggestiveness of Joseph without a gown and only his 'wand' in his hand are considerable. The effects of the image are equally significant: by imbuing the forthcoming miracle with ribaldry, the scene attenuates — at least in the play — its devotional value.[23] The farcical manner in which the play dramatizes the selection process indicates unease about gaining knowledge of God's will by means of miraculous signs.

Despite the tension surrounding the miracle, the characters wed in a manner that late-medieval readers and audiences would have found familiar.[24] Following the ceremony, the Virgin reads her psalter while Joseph leaves to prepare a home for the couple. In addition to reading the text, Mary praises it, elaborating on its prodigious virtues. All of these virtues tellingly equal or surpass those achieved through the sight of the flowering wand. Employing Augustine's concept of the 'intermediate' style of rhetoric, which uses ornament 'when censuring or praising something',[25] Mary says of the psalter:

> It makyht sowles fayr þat doth it say;
> Angelys be steryd to help us þerwith;
> It lytenyth therkeness and puttyth develys away.   (434–6)

The psalms, like the priests' prayers for aid, can incite an angel's help and lighten the darkness, a metaphorical representation of humanity's ignorance of God's will.[26] The psalter also 'puttyth develys away' (436), which parallels Episcopus's appointing of three maidens to attend to Mary so that no one 'sclepyr of tonge' can impugn with 'euyl langage' (347, 348) the dignity of this May-December marriage. As Mary continues, she enumerates the psalms' virtues, using what Augustine calls a 'most attractive' feature of the mixed style, where 'there is a graceful flow of phrases each duly balanced by other phrases'.[27] She proclaims:

> Þe song of psalmus is Goddys deté,
> Synne is put awey þerby.
> It lernyth a man vertuysful to be,
> It feryth mannys herte gostly.
> Who þat it vsyth custommably,
> It claryfieth þe herte and charyté makyth cowthe.
> He may not faylen of Goddys mercy
> Þat hath þe preysenge of God evyr in his mowthe.   (437–44)

Exhibiting the 'behold and see' conventions discussed above, Mary's speech points to her own reading of the psalms as an example of the proper course of action for those in search of mercy, knowledge, or comfort, all of which were benefits of the earlier flowering wand episode.

Mary's enumeration of the psalter's virtues becomes practically encyclopedic. Dutiful recitation removes sin, instills virtue, cleanses the heart, and makes charity known. Reading the psalter, in short, provides the devout with more certainty — and much more certain benefits — than any form of proof presented in the play. More importantly, by addressing the theme of 'Goddy's mercy' (443), Mary echoes the crowd's repeated chants of 'Mercy!' upon seeing the flowering wand (257, 8 sd).[28] Illustrating what Mills calls the 'inferential pressures' ascribed to repeated uses of a word,[29] Mary's use of 'mercy' compels the audience to compare the perspectives of its speakers and the contexts in which they utter the word. When the Virgin models psalmody in her appeal to God's mercy, she presents the audience with a more familiar and fruitful way of communicating with the divine. Just as Michael P. Kuczynski

sees the psalter as 'the ideal form of Christian conversation',[30] I see Mary's psalmody as the ideal method of gaining knowledge within this play.

Mary's encomium of the psalter also incorporates more and varied rhetorical appeals than those made at the wand's flowering. Mary's appeals to logos are evident in her catalogue of the benefits of reading the psalter.[31] She appeals to ethos in her attribution of the psalms to David and by the fact that she herself finds value in reading them.[32] The encomium culminates with appeals to pathos through the climactic 'O holy psalmys, O holy book' (445), an apostrophe undoubtedly meant to delight the audience and heighten their passion for reading or singing the psalter.[33] In the ultimate appeal to pathos, Mary addresses God directly to advocate for humanity's salvation:

> With these halwyd psalmys, Lord, I pray the specyaly
> For all þe creatures qwyke and dede,
> Þat þu wylt shewe to hem þi mercy,
> And to me specyaly þat do it rede.   (449–52)[34]

Mary's repeated requests for God's mercy on her and others reaffirm Mary's roles as 'intercessor and exegete', Marian roles so effectively explored by Ruth Nisse.[35] By referring to themes already addressed in the play and by combining multiple rhetorical appeals, the speech encapsulates and surpasses in scope and in rhetorical effect anything the audience has encountered thus far. This monologue deserves Granger's assessment as 'a dramatic meditation as only Mary can do it'.[36] More importantly, as Granger acknowledges, Mary's speech extols a collection of texts that were already at the heart of late-medieval devotion. The Virgin here models a type of behaviour and engagement with scripture that anyone can perform, privately or otherwise, and one that fourteenth- and fifteenth-century writings commended.[37]

The speech might even have carried more popular resonances than scholars have previously noticed. Mary concludes by quoting Psalm 84:2, 'Benedixisti, Domine, terram tuam' (455), a fitting blessing given the upcoming 'Parliament of Heaven'.[38] Since this quotation is, to my knowledge, the only citation of the psalter identified in Mary's speech, I find it curious that Mary states only two lines before: 'I haue seyd sum of my Sawtere'(453).[39] While the line appears to bookend rhetorically Mary's initial statement of purpose, that she will 'sey þe holy psalmes of Dauyth' (430), scholars have not identified any specific text to verify Mary's claim.[40] When Mary declares that the psalter 'claryfieth þe herte and charyté makyth cowthe' (442), she possibly alludes to Vulgate Psalm 50:12: 'Cor mundum crea in me, Deus, / Et

spiritum rectum innova in visceribus meis', 'Create a clean heart in me, O God: and renew a right spirit within my bowels'.[41] The assertion that the psalter cleanses the heart likely brought to the audience's minds a text quite familiar to them. Not only was Psalm 50 (the *Miserere*) 'sung in church more frequently than the other Penitential Psalms',[42] it was often excerpted and paraphrased in Middle English lyrics because 'reading or reciting [it], in Latin or in English, was thought to confer special spiritual benefits on the soul', including an understanding of (and protection against) sin.[43] Books of hours and primers included the *Miserere* in Latin and in English, so the literate portion of the audience would have found it a familiar component of their private devotions.[44]

Even more intriguing is the fact that the Middle English *A Reuelacyon Schewed to Ane Holy Woman Now One Late Tyme* advocates reading the psalm in conjunction with the Latin hymn *Veni Creator Spiritus*.[45] Mary's possible allusion to Psalm 50, along with the priests' singing of *Veni Creator* (115 sd), may provide another example of these two popular texts being associated with each other in late-medieval texts associated with women's piety. Both pray for God's direct intervention in the lives of the singer, and one — the *Miserere* — implores God for knowledge and virtue, two concepts explored throughout the 'Marriage' play.

Despite all of this emphasis on the psalms, it would be a mistake to dismiss the play's depiction of the flowering wand as vulgar sensationalism. Though the N-Town 'Marriage' might share with the Digby 'Conversion of St Paul' what Scoville calls an 'uneasiness with visual display, despite the play's spectacle',[46] it would be wrong to say that the play uses humorous images to deprecate the visual and elevate the verbal or textual. We should rather recognize the miracle of the wand — with all its humorous appeal — as performing several different but related devotional functions. First, by using such suggestive imagery, the play highlights the differences between the carnal world of the audience and the spiritual world of the divine. The land of flowering wands, for all its entertaining theatre, is far from the choirs of angels.[47] Second, the image plays a role similar to that of the miracle story in a medieval sermon. Such stories, Miri Rubin notes, served as 'the main tool for popular instruction' used to attract and sustain the audience's attention.[48] Ranulph Higden (d. 1364), for example, declares:

> It is expedient for the preacher, as long as this is inoffensive to God, that from the start he render his audience willing and attentive listeners and concerned about

following the argument. This can be done in many ways. In the first one, let something unusual, subtle, and curious be proposed — possibly [the narrative] of some authentic miracle — which is able to be applied to the topic and attract the audience.[49]

The play treats the flowering wand far from subtly, but such are the differences between the overtly didactic purpose of the sermon and the heteroglossic nature of popular drama. Freed from the limitations of liturgical decorum, the play can present the flowering wand as both a source of humour and an object of veneration, for the play's humorous treatment of the image would not negate its devotional significance outside of the play's influence.[50]

Even though the wand's flowering reveals nothing new in terms of the play's plot, the scene calls to mind devotional images that would have been familiar to the audience. In this way, the play's use of the wand exemplifies Gregorian notions of the didactic function of images. As Rosemary Muir Wright observes, Gregory held that images could only function to build upon knowledge that people already possessed: 'There was no question of pictures being able to teach their audience something new; rather they were to address an audience which was already visually literate to some degree, aware of the forms of representation and able to align these forms to the texts which they heard expounded to them in sermons'.[51] The visual of Joseph holding the wand draws upon the rich devotional tradition with which an audience would have been familiar, and it is a scene that Victor I. Scherb lists as one of the compilation's 'significant devotional moments'.[52] While I would not argue that the play presents a more orthodox or doctrinally accurate image to be revered, the same resonance would clearly have been true — to a much greater extent — for the image of Mary reading her psalter.[53] Laura Saetveit Miles contends that the image of Mary reading at the Annunciation, 'After the Crucifixion … may be the most frequently portrayed scene in pre-modern art of the West'.[54] By blending verbal and logical elements with emotional appeals and visual images that the audience would have encountered in their daily lives, both scenes to varying degrees achieve the Augustinian goals of teaching, pleasing, and moving.[55] These techniques, moreover, would have appealed to audience members regardless of social class. Even though Granger argues persuasively that Mary models a degree of learnedness reminiscent of the type attained by wealthy women, she also shows that Mary's displays of literacy would have been welcome to an increasingly literate lay audience.[56]

The play reminds all members of the audience that they already live in a world abundant in powerful, if unspectacular, miracles, where the private reading or public recitation of a familiar text can provide them with certainty, solace, and, most importantly, eternal salvation. Angelic visitations and dead branches springing to life pale in comparison to the familiar but poignant image of a woman reading a text already at the heart of medieval devotion. As Stella Panayotova observes of the psalter, 'There was hardly a text more widely used and better known to medieval audiences, be they religious or lay, learned or barely literate'.[57] The text and the image of Mary reading it lead the audience from uncertainty to certainty, providing what Grover A. Zinn calls 'a sure guide for an upright life'.[58] The audience already possesses, in the form of the psalter, all of the revelation it needs to inform their spiritual lives. Of the 'merveyls' presented in the N-Town 'Marriage', Mary's reading of the psalms appears to be the greatest.

Notes

1   All quotations from the 'Marriage' play reference Stephen Spector (ed.), *The N-Town Play: Cotton ms Vespasian D.8,* eets ss 11 and 12 (Oxford, 1991). The manuscript is a late-fifteenth- or early sixteenth-century *compilatio* from various sources (5–12). See also the 'Proclamation' (118–56), which is part of the scribe's incomplete interpolation of the Marian material into the pre-existing play descriptions (355). Scholars agree that while the manuscript suggests use as a 'performance' text, the compilation probably was never played as a whole (2). When I refer to 'the audience' in this essay, I am referring to either a reader of the compilation or a viewer of the performance.

2   Peter Meredith notes the biblical source for the motif is Num 17:1–9, in which Aaron's flowering branch constitutes evidence of his being chosen for priesthood (*The Mary Play from the N. Town Manuscript,* 2nd edn [Exeter, 1997], 100–11 n 713). The *Biblia Pauperum* presents the flowering of the dead branch as a prefiguration of Jesus's birth from Mary, 'who, without male seed, brought forth a son' (*Biblia Pauperum,* pl. b.5; qtd in Douglas Sugano [ed.], *The N-Town Plays* [Kalamazoo, MI,

2007], 365 n131). The most immediate source for the N-Town playwright, though, is *The Golden Legend,* which borrows from the *Nativity of Mary* (Meredith, *The Mary Play,* 17). See Jacobi A. Voragine, *Legenda Aurea, Vulgo Historia Lombardica Dicta,* 2nd edn, Theodor Graesse (ed.) (Lipsiae, 1850), 589. See also 'The Gospel of the Nativity of Mary', in *Apocryphal Gospels, Acts, and Revelations,* trans. Alexander Walker (Edinburgh, 1870), 53–61, esp. 57–8. In these texts, the flowering branch is interpreted in pious, typological ways.

3   Steven Spector observes, 'This miraculous flowering seems to be a dramatic tradition, since it occurs in the York and Towneley plays' (*The N-Town Play,* 449n10). Chester does not depict the scene. Martin Stevens establishes the flowering rod in the N-Town plays as a typological figure elucidating 'the capacity of the barren tree to be fruitful' in *Four Middle English Mystery Cycles: Textual, Contextual, and Critical Interpretations* (Princeton, 1987), 242–4, 242, doi: x.doi.org/10.1515/9781400858729. For explorations of the humorous treatment of the scene in the drama, see, for example, Emma Lipton, *Affections of the Mind: The Politics of Sacramental Marriage in Late Medieval English Literature* (Notre Dame, 2007), 103–4, Louise O. Vasvari, 'Joseph on the Margin: The Mérode Triptych and Medieval Spectacle', *Mediaevalia* 18 (1995), 163–89, and Garry Waller, *The Virgin Mary in Late Medieval and Early Modern English Literature and Popular Culture* (Cambridge, 2011), 75, doi: 10.1017/ CBO9780511974335. I do not wish to imbrue an entire tradition with comic undertones. I am instead arguing that the N-Town 'Marriage', given its mixture of serious and playful themes, emphasizes the ribaldry of the flowering branch to highlight the problematic nature of a selection process based upon miraculous signs.

4   Meredith notes that Mary's encomium of the psalms 'seems to be original, or rather perhaps draws together material from a wide range of current teaching (*Mary Play,* 105 n1002–25). He also cites *The Myroure of Oure Ladye* (36–7) as the most germane text. See John Henry Blount (ed.), *The Myroure of Oure Ladye,* EETS ES 19 (London, 1873). See also Spector, *The N-Town Play,* 450 n10. For more information discussing similarities among Mary's treatment of the psalms, Richard Rolle's *Psalter,* and the broader Augustinian tradition that applies the study of the psalms to private and public life, see Penny Granger, 'Reading Her Psalter: The Virgin Mary in the N-Town Play', Linda Phyllis Austern, Kari Boyd McBride, and David L. Orvis (eds), *Psalms in the Early Modern World,* (Burlington VT, 2011), 299–314, esp. 305–6. For a list of instances in which the psalms were incorporated in ancient and medieval feasts of the Virgin, see Susan Boynton, 'The Bible and the Liturgy', Susan Boynton and Diane J. Reilly (eds), *The Practice of the Bible in the Middle Ages: Production, Reception, and Performance in Western Christianity* (New York, 2011), 10–33, 20–1.

5   See Meredith, *The Mary Play,* 105 n1002–25, Sugano, *The N-Town Plays,* 368
     nn421–56, and Granger, *The N-Town Play: Drama and Liturgy in Medieval East
     Anglia* (Cambridge, 2009), 128–9, and 'Reading Her Psalter', passim. Granger also
     observes the distinct contrast between Mary's quiet study and Joseph's offstage ef-
     forts to secure the new couple a home, and she notes that the contrast enacts the
     principles of the 'mixed life' described by Walter Hilton (*The N-Town Play: Drama
     and Liturgy,* 128). For Mary's association with the psalms in the devotional lit-
     erature and imagery of the late Middle Ages, see Granger, 'Reading Her Psalter',
     300–2. Granger also suggests that the 'holy labore' noted by Mary at 456 anticipates
     her physical labour at the birth of Christ (*The N-Town Play, Drama and Liturgy,*
     128–9).

6   Throughout this paper, I rely upon Miri Rubin's definition of a miracle as 'God's
     willed and deliberate intervention for the just' (*Corpus Christi: The Eucharist
     in Late Medieval Culture* [Cambridge, UK, 1991], 114), and I use 'sign', 'mar-
     vel', and 'miracle' interchangeably. See sĭgne *n.* 2(a): 'A marvelous preternatural
     act or event; a miracle, marvel', Frances McSparran, et al (eds) *The Middle Eng-
     lish Compendium* (Ann Arbor, 2001), http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-
     idx?type=id&id=MED40259. Benedicta Ward notes that 'signa' is one of the terms
     used in scripture for the modern concept of a miracle (*Miracles and the Medieval Mind:
     Theory, Record and Event, 1000–1215* [Philadelphia, 1982], 221 n4). Episcopus also
     refers to the wand's flowering as a 'merveyl' and a 'meracle' (261, 266). See also
     'merveille' *n.* 1(b), *Middle English Compendium,* http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/
     mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED27476; and 'mĭrăcle' *n.* 1(a), *Middle English Com-
     pendium,* http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED27879.
     Michelle Karnes, in an article published after the present essay was accepted for
     publication, explores medieval conceptions of the relationship between imagina-
     tion and marvels in 'Marvels in the Medieval Imagination', *Speculum* 90.2 (2015),
     327–65, doi:10.1017/S0038713415000627.

7   Lipton, *Affections of the Mind,* 104. Lipton proposes that the playwright accentuates
     Joseph's preoccupations with sexuality as a means of drawing attention to, and then
     undercutting, the idea that sexual intimacy is a necessary component of marriage.
     In this way, says Lipton, the phallic imagery 'is invoked only to be denied' in order
     to appeal to the Christian exegetical tradition in which marriage 'is not sexual but
     spiritual' (104). Contrary to Lipton, Waller argues that the humour surrounding
     Joseph's impotence 'enables, without forcing, the audience to take a critical stance
     toward the theology [of Mary's perpetual virginity]' (*The Virgin Mary,* 75).

8   Stevens contends that the N-Town compilation focuses keenly on efforts to under-
     stand 'God's intent' (*Four Middle English Mystery Cycles,* 220). While I hesitate to

claim a unified theme for such an eclectic text, I do believe that Stevens's ideas apply to the 'Marriage' play.

9 Lipton notes that the law, like the story itself, is apocryphal (*Affections of the Mind,* 102 n46). She argues persuasively that Episcopus's dilemma stems from the patristic and late-medieval debates concerning the 'relative merits of virginity and marriage' and the effects of that debate on clerical authority (101).

10 Meredith, *Mary Play,* 100 n708 sd. *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* observes that the song is used 'at such solemn functions as the election of popes, the consecration of bishops, the ordination of priests, the dedication of churches, the celebration of synods or councils, the coronation of kings, etc'. (qtd in Sugano, *The N-Town Plays,* 364 n115 sd).

11 Granger, *The N-Town Play: Drama and Liturgy,* 92, 79. For other occurrences of this hymn in Middle English biblical drama, see 79 n149.

12 In this way the play depicts another instance of the familiar argument exploring the limits of logic, 'when human reason is insufficient to solve the conundrum' at hand (Lipton, *Affections of the Mind,* 103).

13 References to the Towneley plays are from Martin Stevens and A.C. Cawley (eds), *The Towneley Plays,* EETS ss 13 and 14 (Oxford, 1994), 1.92–103.

14 ōpenlī *adv.* 2(b), *Middle English Compendium,* http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=byte&byte=130742031&egdisplay=compact&egs=130758464.

15 References to the York Cycle are from Clifford Davidson (ed.), *The York Corpus Christi Plays,* TEAMS Middle English Text Series (Kalamazoo, 2011), 86–94.

16 The foundational study of Joseph as 'natural man' is V.A. Kolve's *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (Stanford, 1966), esp. 247–53. Chester N. Scoville notes that the cult of Joseph 'was just coming into its own when the Middle English drama was developing' (*Saints and the Audience in Middle English Biblical Drama* [Toronto, 2004], 55). Veneration began in the twelfth century, but a feast day was only established in 1481, and Joseph was accorded a holy day of obligation in 1621 (57). Vasvari observes that Joseph often was portrayed as a laughable figure: 'In popular consciousness he is clearly that omnipresent farcical butt of jokes … metaphorically miming his impotence for the audience's amusement' ('Joseph on the Margin', 167). For an exploration of the comical implications of Mary and Joseph's marriage as 'a classic case of suggestive cuckoldry', see Miri Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (New Haven, 2009), 325.

17 The N-Town 'Trial of Mary and Joseph' explores the suspicions accompanying such a 'May-December' marriage.

18 For performative possibilities for the Vox, see Sugano, *The N-Town Plays,* 366 n231 sn. Both the *Nativity of Mary* and the *Golden Legend* include the intervening voice,

presumably of God, at this point. See *Legenda Aurea,* 589, and 'The Gospel of the Nativity of Mary', 57–8.

19 *Legenda Aurea,* 589. York depicts Joseph presenting his wand 'In mange al othir ane' (31). In Towneley, Joseph recounts that the bishops themselves, and not a divinely authoritative voice, notice that he had not included his wand in the initial offering (251–3).

20 David Mills, '"Look at Me When I'm Speaking to You": The "Behold and See" Convention in Medieval Drama', *Medieval English Theatre* 7 (1985), 4–12, 5.

21 The play's dilation on the miracle's visual nature stands in sharp contrast to the *Legenda Aurea,* which says only that the flowering branch made it plainly clear to all — 'liquido omnibus patuit' — that Joseph should wed Mary (589). See also the flowering staff's brief mention in de Voragine's account of the Annunciation (217).

22 On the uses of 'yerd' to refer to a penis, or for the 'phallic implications' of 'staff', and 'wond', see Sugano*, The N-Town Plays,* 365 n128. Sugano notes here that 'rod' does not carry the meaning of 'penis' until 1902, but see OED n.1, III 10, which records its first appearance in 1641 http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/166795?rskey=9jV28R&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid. Even though there is no clear etymological linking of the word 'rod' to 'penis' in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the play uses the term interchangeably with the other commonly recognized phallic terms.

23 In a similar way, Vasvari posits that the N-Town 'Marriage', along with the plays 'Joseph's Doubt' and 'The Trial of Mary and Joseph', contributes to a tradition presenting Mary's husband as a bumbling cuckold in order to forestall 'sacrilegious confusion' about his role in Jesus's paternity ('Joseph on the Margin', 169). Just as Vasvari sees the 'culturally diglossic' (183) potential of the sacred and profane in the Mérode Triptych, I see the N-Town 'Marriage' incorporating innuendo both to amuse its audience and to allude to the epistemological uncertainty of the sign.

24 For a comparison of the play's depiction of the marriage ritual with the *Sarum Ordo ad Faciendam Sponsalia,* see Sue Niebrzydowski, 'Encouraging Marriage *in Facie Ecclesiae:* The Mary Play "Betrothal" and the *Sarum Ordo ad faciendum Sponsalia*', *Medieval English Theatre* 24 (2002), 44–61. See also Lipton, *Affections of the Mind,* 89–128, esp. 101–17, and Sue Niebrzydowski, *Bonoure and Buxum: A Study of Wives in Late Medieval English Literature* (New York, 2006), 70–81.

25 Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana,* ed. and trans. R.P.H. Green (Oxford, 1995), 4.19.38.104. Of the two other levels of style, a speaker would 'use the restrained style when teaching' and the grand when 'antagonistic minds are being driven to change their attitude'.

26 derk *adj.* 3(a), *The Middle English Compendium,* http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=byte&byte=40470431&egdisplay=compact&egs=40495677&e

gs=40501359. *The Middle English Compendium* cites the 'Psalterium Beate Mariae' (c 1390), attributed to Albertus Magnus, as an example of this usage: 'Ȝiuynge to vre derke þouht / Verrey liht and clere' (*The Minor Poems of the Vernon ᴍѕ,* Part 1, Carl Horstmann [ed.] [London, 1892], 70, ll 479–80.

27 Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana,* 4.20.40.11.

28 David Mills argues that Mary's plea for mercy in her exposition of the psalm is the catalyst for the opening speech of Play 11: 'The Parliament of Heaven; the Salutation and Conception', in which Contemplacio pleads on the audience's behalf for God's grace ('Religious Drama and Civic Ceremonial', in A.C. Cawley [ed.], *The Revels History of Drama in English 1: Medieval Drama,* [New York, 1983], 152–206, 198). Sugano proposes that the psalms, as prophetic works thought to bridge the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, may appear at this point in the N-Town compilation because it is the point at which the 'Old and New Laws' meet (*The N-Town Plays,* 368 n 421–56). Ruth Nisse argues that, through her interpretive work with the psalm, 'Mary takes an active and prophetic role in the Incarnation' (*Defining Acts: Drama and the Politics of Interpretation in Late Medieval England* [Notre Dame, 2005], 71).

29 Mills, '"Look at Me When I'm Speaking to You"', 9.

30 Kuzcynski, 'The Psalms and Social Action in Late Medieval England', Nancy Van Deusen (ed.), *The Place of the Psalms in the Intellectual Culture of the Middle Ages* (Albany, 1999), 191–214, 193.

31 James J. Murphy notes that Judeo-Christian rhetors would consider appeals to scripture to be 'absolute, apodeictic proof' (*Rhetoric in the Middle Ages: A History of Rhetorical Theory from St. Augustine to the Renaissance* [Berkeley, 1981]), 277. For Augustine, an unskilled rhetor should use scripture 'to confirm what he says in his own words' (*De Doctrina Christiana,* 4.5.8.21).

32 I refer here to the audience's knowledge of 'the life of the speaker' which is '[m]ore important than any amount of grandeur of style to those of us who seek to be listened to with obedience' (*De Doctrina Christiana,* 4.27.59.151).

33 Concerning a speaker's use of pathos to stir an audience to action, Augustine advises that 'A hearer must be delighted, so that he can be gripped and made to listen, and moved so that he can be impelled to action' (*De Doctrina Christiana,* 4.12.27.75).

34 For the psalms' characterization as being 'instrumental to the sinner's request for God's mercy' in the high Middle Ages, see Susan Boynton, 'Prayer as Liturgical Performance in Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Monastic Psalters', *Speculum* 82.4 (2007), 896–931, 907, doi: 10.1017/S0038713400011337.

35 Nisse, *Defining Acts,* 67. Nisse also says that, 'in the *Mary Play,* the psalms become the Virgin's direct vehicle of intercession with God' (70).

36   Granger, 'Reading Her Psalter', 305.

37   Ibid, 306.

38   Both Meredith and Spector describe Mary's quoting as 'the basis' for debate among the 'Four Daughters of God and the Parliament of Heaven' of play 11 (Meredith, *The Mary Play,* 105 n1028; Spector, *The N-Town Play,* 451 n10).

39   For an alternative explanation, which argues that Mary has, to this point, been 'following either her own systematic daily program or a set lectionary', see Granger, 'Reading Her Psalter', 307.

40   Granger, however, notes that there are several references to honey in the psalter, which complement Mary's declaration that the psalms are 'Swetter to say than any ony' (446; *Reading Her Psalter,* 305).

41   *Biblia Sacra Iuxta Vulgatam Clementinam,* eds Alberto Colunga and Laurentio Turrado (Madrid, 1977). See also the Douay-Rheims translation (*The Holy Bible,* Douay-Rheims 1899 American Edition, *Bible Gateway* https://www.biblegateway. com/passage/?search=psalms+50&version=DRA). I am grateful to Kuczynski's 'The Psalms and Social Action' (194) for calling my attention to this particular passage.

42   John J. Thompson, 'Literary Associations of an Anonymous Middle English Paraphrase of Vulgate Psalm 50', *Medium Aevum* 57 (1988), 38–55, esp. 38.

43   Kuczynski, *Prophetic Song: The Psalms as Moral Discourse in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia, 1995), 37.

44   Thompson, 'Literary Associations', 39.

45   Ibid, 39–40.

46   Scoville, *Saints and the Audience,* 88.

47   See Christopher Crane, 'Superior Incongruity: Derisive and Sympathetic Comedy in Middle English Drama and Homiletic Exempla', Paul Hardwick and Sandra Hordis (eds), *Medieval English Comedy* (Turnhout, 2007), 31–60, 36, doi: 10.1484/M.PAMA-EB.3.865. Laura Kendrick also employs incongruity theory in 'Comedy', in *A Companion to Chaucer,* ed. Peter Brown (Malden, MA, 2002), *Blackwell Reference Online,* doi: 10.1002/9780470693469.ch6. For a discussion of medieval writers' uses of parody to highlight the differences between the human and the divine realms, see Edmund Reiss, 'Chaucer's Parodies of Love', in *Chaucer the Love Poet,* ed. Jerome Mitchell and William Provost (Athens, GA, 1973), 27–44, esp. 28–30.

48   Rubin, *Corpus Christi,* 114. See also Robert of Basevorn, 'The Form of Preaching (Forma Praedicandi)', Leopold Krul (trans.), James J. Murphy (ed.), *Three Medieval Rhetorical Arts,* (Tempe, AZ, 2001), 114–215, esp. 145–7.

49   Higden, *Ars componendi sermones,* trans. Margaret Jennings and Sally A Wilson (Paris, 2003), 49.

50 On the use of humour to instruct the audience, see Crane, 'Superior Incongruity', 36. Crane notes that, while there is no articulated medieval rhetoric of humour, the scarce classical material available to medieval writers was from Cicero's *De Inventione* and the *Rhetorica ad Herennium.* Both works argue that a primary function of humour is to 'keep the audience listening' ('Superior Incongruity', 35). See especially the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*'s treatment of the humor of puns and innuendo (1.6.10).

51 Wright, *Sacred Distance: Representing the Virgin* (Manchester, 2006), 3.

52 Scherb, *Staging Faith: East Anglian Drama in the Later Middle Ages* (Madison, 2001), 195. Though the N-Town 'Trial of Mary and Joseph' includes many of the concepts that I have discussed in this paper, including miracles, humour, and the obtaining of knowledge, I have omitted any discussion of it here because that play's dynamic of humour, spectacle, and veneration differs considerably from that of the 'Marriage' play. In the trial, Episcopus briefly praises Mary at the end of the truth test (14.370–3), but there is no prolonged encomium like those concerning the flowering wand or the Psalter. Nor does the trial scene invoke popular devotional iconography in the way that the 'Marriage' play does.

53 For an exploration of the ways in which the church 'carefully monitored' religious images for doctrinal accuracy, see Wright, *Sacred Distance,* 2.

54 Miles, 'The Origins and Development of the Virgin Mary's Book at the Annunciation', *Speculum* 89.3 (2014), 632–69, 32, doi:10.1017/S0038713414000748. Miles makes an important contribution to the scholarly record of images depicting Mary reading at the Annunciation, showing persuasively that 'pictorial and textual references … emerge from male monastic and clerical contexts in the ninth and tenth centuries' (634). See also Granger, 'Reading Her Psalter', passim.

55 Situating himself firmly in the Ciceronian rhetorical tradition, Augustine recalls: 'It has been said by a man of eloquence, and quite rightly, that the eloquent should speak in such a way as to instruct, delight, and move their listeners' (*De Doctrina Christiana* 4.12.27.74). On the relationship between pathos and spectacle, see Scoville, *Saints and the Audience,* 28. Eamon Duffy provides a helpful analysis of late-medieval devotion to Eucharistic miracles and their artistic representations, especially the 'Imago pietatis', in *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400–1580* (New Haven, 2005), 102–9.

56 Granger, 'Reading Her Psalter', 306–8. Duffy notes that literate members of all social classes are known to have possessed primers, which included the penitential psalms, (*The Stripping of the Altars,* 209–32). It should be noted, though, that Duffy presents the evidence about the primer's ubiquity partly to justify his argument for 'the social homogeneity of late medieval religion' (265). On the contrary, William

Fitzhenry argues that the N-Town plays prompt their audiences to evaluate notions of orthodoxy and heterodoxy ('The N-Town Plays and the Politics of Metatheater', *Studies in Philology* 100 [2003], 22–43, esp. 23, doi:10.1353/sip.2003.0003. See also Lipton, *Affections of the Mind,* 192 n21).

57 Panayotova, 'The Illustrated Psalter: Luxury and Practical Use', *The Practice of the Bible in the Middle Ages,* 247–71, 247. Panayatova adds that Psalters were given as wedding gifts (248–9), so the presence of one at the end of the N-Town 'Marriage' is particularly apt.

58 Zinn, 'Introduction', in *The Place of the Psalms in the Intellectual Culture in the Middle Ages,* xi–xv, xii. On Mary's preaching and glossing of the psalms in the N-Town 'Presentation of Mary at the Temple', see Ruth Nisse, *Defining Acts,* 68–70, and Frank M. Napolitano, 'The N-Town "Presentation of Mary in the Temple" and the Production of Rhetorical Knowledge', *Studies in Philology* 110.1 (2013), 1–17, doi: 10.1353/sip.2013.0006.