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Mrs Noah and Didactic Abuses

Exclusionary Premises

Plays of the Fall are largely uninterested in Eve's subjective responses to her change of state after the Fall, but several English plays of the Flood appear actively invested in the exploration of Mrs Noah's responses to the drowning of the world as she knows it. This article returns to the issue of female recalcitrance in the Noah plays from York, Chester, and (in particular) Towneley. Given that Mrs Noah is beaten or forced onto the Ark in all three plays, this article also addresses the question of whether and how violence against women in farce plays can ever be real or serious, and also of whether and how female resistance to this violence, or female violence, can be real or serious in its turn. In York and Chester, Mrs Noah raises her voice in mourning for friends and relatives, and in the Towneley play insists on remaining behind to work. The story of the Ark has its obvious cruelties; the inclusion of Mrs Noah's resisting voice is one way of making these cruelties present and real for the audience. The Noah plays from York, Chester, and Towneley have investments of various sorts in those who are left behind, and these investments are often filtered through the voice of Mrs Noah. This is not to say that Mrs Noah's recalcitrance is approved in any given play, but it is present and persistent even when it is disapproved and defeated. Significantly, given that her recalcitrance is an extra-biblical feature, this feature offers a voice not only for the dead but also for the living: all those women at the bottom of the hierarchy of discourse. All three plays place an emphasis on Mrs Noah's exclusion from God's and Noah's counsels alike; her anger and denial are shown to spring not merely from her flaws of faith and character, but also from her resentment at her late and mediated exposure to the realities of the situation.

Madeleine L'Engle has a displaced twentieth-century observer of the Flood point out in her novel *Many Waters* that 'Only the males have names... They're just women, so they don't matter. They don't care if Yalith gets drowned'.¹

But Mrs Noah cares about the drowned world. Rather than supporting a simple exegetical reading, in which Mrs Noah resists divine knowledge, or in which Noah's relationship with God is uncomplicatedly prior, Mrs Noah's trouble-making highlights the loss of life caused by the Flood, and hints at some painful exclusions – of wives from the inner lives of husbands, of persons from life itself and from salvation as well. Mrs Noah resists containment by doctrine in at least two ways: first, her sorrow about the exclusionary aspects of the salvation narrative cannot be entirely disregarded, and second, her bond with Noah is seen to be severely compromised.

The biblical narrative depicts a meek Mrs Noah who makes no protests about her role or about getting onto the Ark. The rebellious Mrs Noah of medieval drama is an English peculiarity and clearly one familiar to a contemporary audience. In Geoffrey Chaucer's *Miller's Tale*, Nicholas reminds John of Noah's troubles with his wife:

'Hastow nat herd hou saved was Noe,
Whan that oure Lord hadde warned hym biforn
That all the world with water sholde be lorn?
'Yis,' quod this Carpenter, 'ful yoore ago'.
'Hastou nat herd,' quod Nicholas, 'also
The sorwe of Noe with his felaweshipe,
Er that he myghte gete hys wyf to shipe?
Hym hadde be levere, I dar wel undertake,
At thilke tyme, than all his wetheres blake
That she hadde had a ship hirself allone'. (3534–43)²

The *Miller's Tale*, like the Noah plays, raises serious questions about marital hierarchy and female counsel within a comic format, most notably through Alison's deployment of her persuasive skills against her husband's interests. 'I am thy trewe, verray wedded wyf,' she assures him, adding, 'Go, deere spouse, and help to save oure lyf' (3609–10). Eve hangs around the edges of this text, as she so often does in renditions of the Noah story – both in versions that insist on a rebellious wife and in versions that represent a biddable Mrs Noah. The same continuity emphasized by N-Town's Noah – who describes himself as 'Afftyr Adam... The Secunde Fadyr' – enables Eve to make her presence known in all these plays of the Flood, in one way or another (16–17).³

Noah's troubles with his wife in York, Chester, and Towneley are striking both as seeming re-runs of the marital dynamics underlying the Fall and as confrontations that foreground issues such as female subjectivity, female

earning power, and domestic violence. Mrs Noah's exclusion from her husband's experiential life and counsels is a key element in all three plays. The York play develops a theme of female isolation within marriage and the family unit; in this play, we are left with the image of Mrs Noah sitting home alone, wondering. Noah sends his sons to fetch Mrs Noah once the Ark is ready, and invites her aboard; she refuses and tells her sons instead to come with her into town. She responds to Noah's warning that she will be drowned, and her sons with her, by calling him crazy: 'Pou arte nere woode, I am agaste,' she says (91).⁴ Noah calls her crazy in return. 'O woman, arte þou woode?' he asks, adding 'Of my werkis þou not wotte' (93–4). There is an emphasis on the separation of spheres, and on Noah's access to bodies of privileged knowledge. Alfred David asks: 'If we disregard Noah's insider information and hindsight, which one of this pair seems insane?'⁵ Noah's insider knowledge, despite its doctrinal correctness, has its cruel side, and Mrs Noah's resistance gives expression to a more human confusion.

Noah and his sons subdue Mrs Noah with force, dragging her onto the ark. Once on the Ark, Noah gets his sons to hold her there as she still 'takes no heede' of the danger she is in (102). As she continues to resist she cries that Noah should have told her what was going on:

Noye, þou myght haue leteyn me wete;
 Erly and late þou wente þeroutte,
 And ay at home þou lete me sytte
 To loke þat nowhere were wele aboutte. (113–6)

Noah's orthodox response does not address Mrs Noah's sense of exclusion: 'Dame, þou holde me excused of itt,/ It was Goddis wille withowten doutte' (117–8). This exchange evinces an interest on the dramatist's part in Mrs Noah's subjective experiences of isolation and rejection. Mrs Noah rejects Noah's excuse, saying 'Nay, be my trouthe, þou getis a clowte' (120). Her violence appears ineffectual, but her rejection of Noah's excuse implies that his answer is a mismatch to her question: she questions the need for exclusionary premises, and he reaffirms those premises without addressing her experience of them.

Mrs Noah continues to press the point that Noah should not have left her in the dark. 'Pou shuld haue tolde me' she cries (129). Her subsequent plea for her 'commodrys and ...cosynes' to be allowed to come along highlights the cruelties of the situation (143). As Shem points out in *Many Waters*, 'it's going to be a big boat, Father! Surely there's room for more than just the eight of

us.⁶ Mrs Noah is the one to voice this thought in the English Flood plays. The York Mrs Noah laments that ‘My frendis þat I fra yoode/ Are ouere flowen with floode’ (151–2). Hers is a voice not only of disorder but also of compassion, while Noah is unaffected by the deaths around him: ‘Dame, all ar drowned, late by thy dyne’ (271–2).

The Chester Mrs Noah initially appears biddable, as she brings timber for the construction of the Ark, observing:

And wee shall bringe tymber to,
for wee mon nothings ells doe –
women bynne weake to underfoe
any great travell. (65–8)⁷

Noah’s wife, together with the wives of the sons, contributes to the building of the Ark, while also making it clear that women are not suited for all forms of ‘gret travell’. The Chester Mrs Noah’s role appears to oscillate between obedience and disobedience; she helps to build the Ark, but shows resistance when Noah first tells her that ‘in this vessell wee shal be kepte;/ my children and thou, I would in ye lepte’ (97–8). She refuses, and Noah complains that ‘weomen bine crabbed aye,/ and non are meeke’ (105–6). But he returns to work on the Ark, with all his family, so the issue is dropped, and Mrs Noah does her part when the lists of animals are offered to the audience.

Her recalcitrance returns when all the animals have been listed, and she stands back from the Ark. Noah asks her ‘Why standes thou there?’ (193). She refuses to board:

I have my gossips everyechone,
one foote further I will not gone.
They shall not drowne, by sayncte John,
and I may save there life. (201–4)

The Chester play develops a remarkable episode in which Mrs Noah’s gossips, her female friends, gather together with her to sing a farewell song and drink a pot of ale: ‘And lett us drinke or wee departe,/ for oftetyes wee have done soe’ (229–30). Mrs Noah’s close bonds with her gossips have a humanizing effect on the narrative; she is the only one shown to have quotidian ties which are then severed. Her resistance makes a space in the play within which the abstract fictions of the situation are punctured by the reality of loss of life. In terms of comic subplot, the problem with Mrs Noah in the Chester play is that her reaction to global disaster cannot be perfectly contained by comedy. The

gossips, having drunk their ale and sung in front of the audience, are more noticeable in their silence and absence thereafter. Mrs Noah's cry that 'They loved me full well, by Christe' brings out some of the irresolvable tensions between human and divine mandates (205). Once again the sons drag her onto the Ark, and once again she clouts Noah: 'Have thou that for thy note!' (246). But her undignified entry onto the Ark cannot dispel the awareness of the drowned gossips, nor is Mrs Noah seen to submit.

The Towneley play develops the theme of marital discord particularly strongly, with several separate verbal and physical confrontations between husband and wife. Mrs Noah's exclusion from Noah's counsels is developed in tandem with an emphasis on her short temper. Noah rushes home from his conference with God to tell her about the coming Flood, worrying that his wife will be 'angré' and 'wroth' (271, 271).⁸ She does indeed greet his return with some hostility, accusing him of not looking after the family and asking him 'Where has thou thus long be?' (279). After Noah explains, Mrs Noah's understanding of the situation appears to waver, as does her faith in Noah, whom she regards as 'always adred/ Be it fals or trew' (291-2). When he finally describes God's instructions to her she reacts with uncertainty: 'I wote neuer whedir;/ I dase and I dedir/ For ferd of that tayll' (453-5). The hierarchy of discourse is being openly contested. Noah's word is not enough for her, but the trajectory of the story makes her dependent on secondary knowledge.

The Towneley Mrs Noah's refusal to board is perhaps the most distinctive within the cycle plays; she will not leave, she insists, 'Till I haue on this hill/ Spon a space/ On my rok' (488-91). Noah points out the obvious: that the heavens have opened. But Mrs Noah's resistance persists, and appears to embody an insistence on the value of her labour over the priorities of her husband. When the water rises so far that she sits 'not dry' she concedes that she will come aboard, but the conflict escalates into a physical confrontation between husband and wife (535). She wishes to be a widow:

Lord, I were at ese
 And hertely full hoylle,
 Might I onys haue a measse
 Of wedows coyll.
 For thi saull, without lese,
 Shuld I dele penny doyll;
 So wold me, no frese,
 That I se on this sole
 Of wifys that ar here,

For the life that thay leyd,
 Wold thare husbandys were dede;
 For, as euer ete I brede,
 So wold I oure syre were! (560–72)

Noah's response emphasizes the importance of a husband's duty to chastise his wife. As Adam does in so many plays of the Fall, Noah places an emphasis on discipline, thus re-entrenching a marital dynamic that would have been very familiar to the play's audience. Noah emphasizes the importance of controlling women's wayward tongues:

Yee men that has wifys,
 Whyls thay ar yong,
 If ye luf youre lifys,
 Chastice thare tong.
 Me thynk my hert ryfys,
 Both levyr and long,
 To se sich stryfys
 Wedmen emong;
 Bot I,
 As haue I blys,
 Shall chastyse this. (573–83)

A few more rounds of threats ensue before Mrs Noah is subdued by Noah's force. Both partners are the worse for wear; Noah's back, he says, is almost in two, and Mrs Noah says sadly: 'I am bet so blo./ That I may not thryfe' (597–8).

At this point the sons of Noah intervene with calming words. While Noah and Mrs Noah agree amiably enough not to fight any more, saying that they will 'no more be wrothe,' this conservative closure fails to resolve the issues brought up in the course of their confrontation (606). Nor is Mrs Noah's tendency to error truly corrected; it persists in the subsequent incident in which she sends the raven, a bird 'without any reson' to find land, while Noah sends the 'trew' dove; for which Noah must again verbally chastise her (725, 732). The play's violence appears to offer merely a temporary solution to a more serious problem.

Violence, Comedy, and Cross-dressing

NOAH: I shall make þe still as stone
Begynnar of blunder!
I shall bete the bak and bone
And breke all in sonder.
UXOR: Out, alas, I am gone!
Oute apon the, mans wonder!
NOAH: Se how she can grone
And I lig vnder!
Bot, wife,
In this hast let vs ho,
For my bak is nere in two.
UXOR: And I am bet so blo
That I may not thryfe.
PRIMUS FILIUS: A! whi fare ye thus,
Fader and moder both? (586–600)

(Play 3, The Towneley plays)

Francis Barker observes of the representation of violence in Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre that ‘even when violence is shown it is occluded, and that occlusion is more than a mere lack of ostentation’.⁹ His interest in the question of whether drama ‘underwrites the signifying practices of the dominant culture’ or ‘unsettles such structures’ is a suggestive one in relation to the Noah plays of York, Chester, and Towneley.¹⁰ If women’s ‘fear of violence and of sexual violence’ was a commonplace throughout the medieval period, as P.J.P. Goldberg claims, the fact remains that this commonplace is often obscured in dramatic treatments of domestic violence.¹¹ Such occlusions as humour and cross-dressing dispel or contain certain forms of seriousness and create difficulties for the critic interested in separating signal from noise. The most profound occlusion manifests as an inability to determine what violence is real and what violence is not, since real and un-real are not especially useful categories when brought to bear on performance. To what extent do artifice and quotidian reality interpenetrate? The violence of the Noah plays makes us wonder about the dialogues being carried out between violence in performance and violence in real life, about the means by which conflicts become funny, and about the problem of representing a battle of the sexes in a transvestite theatre.

The feminist perspective on male violence is that it is an exercise of control. All the Noahs and sons of York, Chester, and Towneley cooperate in efforts to control the various Mrs Noahs, using physical force to counter her impaired judgement: 'Helpe, my sonnes, to holde her here,' says the York Noah, 'For tille hir harmes she takes no heede' (101–2). Amy J. Marin and Nancy Felipe Russo observe that 'male-perpetrated violence against women is considered to be a form of social control used to maintain a subordinate social and political status for women'.¹² Can this practical-minded feminist perspective, rooted in domestic violence counselling, shed any light on what Meg Twycross has called the 'conjugal farce'?¹³ Mrs Noah is beaten or dragged onto the ark in York, Chester, and Towneley alike. Moreover, a feminist approach is valuable not just when wives are beaten, but also when they beat. The York, Chester, and Towneley Mrs Noahs all clout their husbands. In particular, the Towneley play's emphasis on Mrs Noah's own violence, initially successful, is just as important to the representational projects of the play as her ultimate defeat.

English plays of the Flood raise unanswerable questions about dramatic seriousness. The Towneley Mrs Noah's desire for her husband's death can never quite be eradicated by the motions of containment that characterize the final scenes of the play, just as the actual physical confrontation between husband and cross-dressed wife resists simple explications. Fight scenes between Noah and his wife are not straightforward representations of what one might imagine as a conventional scene of domestic violence, by which I mean one in which the husband beats his wife into submission and displays significantly superior force. Nor are they scenes in which violence is represented naturalistically. In Towneley in particular, both partners are actively violent; many modern productions choose to emphasize this by making Mrs Noah very large and strong, and Noah himself weak and/or elderly and/or smaller. Their confrontation involves a lot of name-calling and an exchange of lively buffets, in a context of comic exaggeration. Within the range of scenes of violence acted out in front of medieval audiences, it is worthwhile to consider how and why some particular types of male vs. female violence are represented. What is the point of setting up certain violent oppositions between men and women in ways meant to be funny? The basic outline of the conjugal farce is deceptively simple. At first it seems just like fun and games, amusement derived from reversals and impersonations: wives beating husbands, men dressed as women, the world upside down. But how does that humour work: does it underwrite or does it destabilize?

Scenes of extreme violence in medieval plays, often dependent on artificial props and aids, can appear to teeter on the brink of ludicrousness. Seth Lerer comments on a Host-mutilation scene, full of lopped limbs and elaborate acts of torture, in the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*, that it offers a problematic 'blend of sensationalism and risibility'.¹⁴

What is over the top and what is not? Many things that seem intended to be amusing, such as the playful torturers in the Wakefield *Buffeting* or *Scourging* plays, or the mothers of the Innocents in the Digby *Candlemas Day* and *the Killing of the Children of Israel* who fill Watkyn with terror, are funny in ways that can be interpretively problematic for the modern critic, and particularly so for the feminist critic. Buffeting scenes may seem to offer a simple kind of comedy, but it is a false simplicity. Should we feel sympathetic to Mrs Noah, or to her husband, or both, or neither? Should we bother with sympathy at all, and in that case, is that one of the deliberate – and sophisticated – aims of plays in which domestic violence is funny?

The masking function of comedy is readily recognizable from plays of the Massacre of the Innocents, where comic moments defuse some of the tensions caused by the need to represent the multiple murders of children. The masking function of cross-dressing is more complicated. In a transvestite theatre, the female body's pain in performance is occluded both by the practices of representation and by the absence of women from the stage. Cross-dressing, within the frame of the domestic farce, becomes a mask over real violence in the family, in society, and in the representational systems of the play, but the problem with cross-dressing is that it cannot be fixed in one meaning. It has destabilizing effects on ideas about the naturalness of gender roles, and it creates difficulties for myth-making projects invested in the representation of opposition between the sexes. Even while the English Noah plays' domestic spats appear designed to reflect and beget a culture of sexual polarization in which women are recalcitrant and men must discipline them, a transvestite theatre raises the issue of the extent to which gender is a matter of representation outside of performance. The message of sexual difference becomes harder to modulate: another message might be that violence has no natural objects, or that recalcitrant women are often the ones who act most like men.

Postmodernism's confrontation with humanist theatre has produced an intense critical interest in the idea of violence as a representational limit for theatrical production. With theatre studies increasingly invested in explorations of the representation of violence on the stage, the various scenes in which the several Mrs Noahs are subdued gain new interest. Suffering is always more

real off the stage or somewhere else – anywhere else. Violence is inevitably contained by representation and in some sense left behind. Anthony Kubiak argues that:

Violence is concealed *because* it exists as theatre, as representation, even when it *is* real. This is theatre's purpose, to seemingly conceal its violence as 'mere' representation, while referring its effects elsewhere, into culture.¹⁵

There is a limit on how closely a spectator can approach or perceive the pain of another human body – a limit both on what can be thought about another person's experiences of terror and pain, and on what can be represented or contained by or in the theatre. What is pain if not a manifestation of subjectivity, so how can there be female subjectivity in this sense in a transvestite theatre? This is an especially interesting question in relation to the beaten Mrs Noahs, as their subjective responses to the Flood are of interest to the York, Chester, and Towneley playwrights, even while their bodies are disciplined in comic ways.

Domestic violence is always more real outside the performance space, and there can be something offensive about some areas of critical work on terrorism as theatre, especially now. But given the commonplace that theatre not merely reflects but generates culture, it can be useful to consider ways in which the staging of domestic conflicts in particular generates culture. The notion of Noah as a wife beater continues to cause critical anxiety. Catherine Normington describes as 'alarming' the common typological reading of Mrs Noah's recalcitrance as a conflict between experience and doctrine, pointing out that 'nagging is presented as sufficient justification for physical violence'.¹⁶ She argues that a typological approach to the Towneley play at some level condones Noah's violence. Normington, in observing that it has 'proved hard to equate the servile, God-obeying Noah with the wife-beater', runs aground on the discord at the heart of that relationship.¹⁷ She comments that 'Of course canon law allowed wife-beating within medieval times, but it hardly speaks well of the man chosen by God to continue the race after the flood'.¹⁸ But the question of whether Noah's use of force reflects well or badly on the man chosen to continue the race might best be reformulated to express a curiosity about the degree of social control embedded in those scenes, and the degree of approval or disapproval manifested within the texts themselves. What evidence in the play(s) is there that Noah's violence does him a disservice?

Theresa Coletti points to the ways in which the rebellious women of the cycle plays, from Uxor Noah in the York, Chester and Towneley cycles to

Mak's wife Gyl in the *Secunda Pastorum*, are formed from a convergence of economic and cultural forces and 'informed by festive traditions of early modern Europe that foregrounded the unruly woman'.¹⁹ Comic exchanges of words, blows and gestures are theatrical attempts to represent conflicts between the sexes. Goldberg observes that:

What went on in the marital home was...regarded as an essentially private matter and not something that would normally impinge on the public record. The upside down world of marginalia and misericords, for example, regularly depicts wives beating their husbands, but since husbands were alone responsible for disciplining their wives – and such imagery may in fact have served to reinforce this notion – no husband had his wife presented within the borough or customary courts for assault. The existence of such a topos, however, which is also reflected in the so-called 'Ballad of a Tyrannical Husband'...may suggest that gender relations and specifically relations between husband and wife were a matter of debate, particularly by the fifteenth-century.²⁰

The transgressive Mrs Noahs, like the unruly wives of the misericords, serve as reminders to men that they are responsible for discipline in the home, but they also remind the audience of the reality of female resistance. What is underwritten and what is destabilized?

Natalie Zemon Davis observes that 'ceremonies of reversal are ultimately sources of order and stability in a hierarchical society' adding that they 'clarify the structure by the process of reversing it'.²¹ Ruth Evans writes about the ways in which the interactions of the Towneley play shape Mrs Noah into a 'comic warning' whose 'disobedience and garrulity affirmed the need for men to control rebellious women, and for women to control themselves'.²² V.A. Kolve emphasizes Mrs Noah's rebellion as an attack on the natural order: 'as the fallen man is rebellious to his master, God, so too is the wife rebellious to her husband'.²³ This is the world-upside-down that lies at the heart of carnivalesque moments. He goes on to observe that 'only when the proper human relationship is re-established does the universal order begin to construct itself'.²⁴

Mrs Noah's rebellion is a carnivalesque moment not only in that it gives expression to an energetic disorderliness but also in that it leads, seemingly inevitably, to violence. Carnival and violence go hand in hand. Perhaps an analogy may be made between Mrs Noah's small local rebellion which is quashed and some of the events that took place during the 1580 carnival in Romans discussed by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie. The leader of the populist

party, Jean Serve-Paumier, was assassinated and his supporters assaulted in the course of Mardi gras. The dynamics of this event highlight ways in which an acted-out rebellion is not entirely distinguishable from a real one, and also ways in which rebellion accrues repressive violence from the systems of power and knowledge – in that case, from the conservative supporters of Antoine Guerin – even while violent impulses inhere in rebellion itself.

An inversion of the proper order of things can be conservative in both purpose and effect. There is an element of this dynamic in the Noah plays, given that they all end the same way: with Mrs Noah on the Ark. As Le Roy Ladurie points out of the events organized by the town's bourgeois institutions in Romans in 1580, 'turning society temporarily upside down implied a knowledge of its normal vertical position, its hierarchy'.²⁵ Richard Axton compares Mrs Noah's rebelliousness to traditional practices established for the celebration of St. John's Day, or Midsummer Day, and describes her 'topsy-turvy' behaviour as licensed by such festive and carnivalesque associations.²⁶ Her rebellion is not only authorized by festive practices outside the theatre, but also sanctioned and delimited by the playwright in a way that makes deliberate use of the counterrevolutionary potential of inversion. Mrs Noah's behaviour is thus partly contained within a frame of symbolic relationships meant to shore up the social order; this frame does not permit her rebellion to be successful, even though it cannot prevent her from giving a voice to the dead or from raising troubling questions about the exclusionary premises of everyday life.

Mrs Noah's rebellion is made more opaque by the fact that she is a man, just as a great deal of the humour of the situation appears to hinge on this denaturalization of the sign. Judith Butler wonders, 'In what senses... is gender an act?'²⁷ In connection with the assertion that social action requires repeated performances, she argues that 'understood in pedagogic terms, the performance [of gender] renders social laws explicit'.²⁸ If Mrs Noah's rebellion is intended to render explicit social laws, these laws must have something to do with the regulation of the household. But since the theatrical context in which these social laws are being affirmed is so unnatural, the laws themselves seem as much destabilized as underwritten. If Mrs Noah's violent re-education is part of a larger project of public correction, the fact remains that the lessons about gender offered by the play are not easy to pin down.

When a recalcitrant woman on the stage is a man, and when the text she speaks is largely the product of men's endeavours, the parameters of her incorrect gender performance are always pre-planned and agreed upon among

a group of people invested in preserving particular correctnesses and incorrectnesses. The script of sexual difference is revealed as just that, a script. The benefit of the exclusion of women is that this script can be produced and repeated without, in theory, running up against completely uncontrollable discordant voices – though in practice even the ones created deliberately often prove somewhat uncontrollable. The disadvantage is that once the script is seen to be manufactured, it loses its status as natural order.

Violence can be a cultural acknowledgment of the constructedness of gender – proof that the playwright and audience alike are aware that they must supervise gender performance. One of the things that must be most closely disciplined in performance is the cross-dressed male body, introduced in order to keep the biological female body out. The person whose function it is to act out some proper and improper female behaviours – whose goal, in some degree, must be the reaffirmation of a culture of sexual difference within a largely male theatrical tradition – is also the person whose body on the stage is most destabilizing and problematic to watch and think about, and the one who does the most damage to the notion of gendered hegemony.

Twycross observes of her modern-day experimentation with male actors in female roles that when Mrs Noah is performed by a man, audience perceptions of the balance of power in performance are altered: 'Even a slight man makes an above-average woman. The result is a cast of Olympians'.²⁹ The visual effects of a cast of Olympians are particularly significant scenes of domestic conflict. A physical contest between actors intensifies the importance of physical characteristics. The key is that Mrs. Noah is able to take equal part in physical contests as a transvestite. She always loses. Though she is often an active beater rather than merely someone who is beaten, that does not mean that the Noah plays have less to say about subduing recalcitrant women with force. Laura Mulvey's work on female fantasies of masculinization is suggestive, as she points to a 'resistance, in which the power of masculinity can be used as a postponement against the power of patriarchy'.³⁰ Postponement is an apt word, as Mrs Noah still loses her fights. She is always defeated by some combination of her husband and sons. If power comes from masculinization, it further obscures the feminine. Women can be very good at defending themselves on stage, when they are men.

For a modern-day audience, one of the most significant effects of an all-male cast is a lack of sympathy for the beaten Mrs Noah. The audience discards the notion of the wife as victim. Peter Norton describes the effect: 'The male Mrs Noah came across as being capable of hammering Mr. Noah into the ground'.³¹

Her ability to fight back and to inflict injuries on her husband is seen by the audience to be a function of her in-between-ness. She may talk like a woman, but she fights like a man. And while, once again, we cannot know how a contemporary audience responded, it is certainly worth wondering whether Mrs Noah's active participation in physical violence might be a sophisticated feature of a larger project of legitimization of violence against women, through a reversal of norms of size and power. Violence with victors but without clear victims is ideally positioned for certain types of viewer pleasure and didacticism alike.

Literary texts that treat relations between the sexes with terms also used for combat often similarly play up physical opposition between the sexes, in a wide variety of contexts. Mavis E. Mate points to the persistent use of the language of jousting to describe marital relations in late medieval texts and aligns it with the language of a Sussex rape indictment, in which 'when a clerk attacked the female manager of a brothel, the scribe, instead of using the word *rapuit*, wrote that the man 'wounded her with his carnal lance' (*ipsam cum lancea sua carnali vulnerabat*).³² Mate comments that late medieval texts are 'full of attacks on women as quarrelsome, manipulative wives. Noah's wife, with her prattling tongue, was the literary counterweight to patient Griselda'.³³ Drama offers the chance to embody sexual difference and give it physical shape in front of an audience. Yet this is not a matter of monolithic oppositions, or merely of victors and victims. By far the greatest lingering difficulty in the Towneley play is that Mrs Noah's aside about widowhood is not repudiated or rescinded later in the play. Though husband and wife say they will 'no more be wroth' the fact of having said, more or less, 'I wish you were dead', remains. If this is an example of what a woman's loose tongue can produce, then no wonder such efforts are made to silence them. The degree to which it expresses the wish of Mrs Noah's heart remains opaque, even beyond the moment when her tongue is controlled, and beyond the moment when her physical body is disciplined. Like the image of Mrs Noah sitting home alone in the York play, or that of the drowned gossips in the Chester play, the Towneley Mrs Noah's desire for her husband's death lingers in the mind. Noah's own speech about controlling women's tongues is far less bitterly angry and far more ideologically oriented; Mrs Noah's error produces his orthodoxy. Mrs Noah's speech, on the other hand, falls outside any stock-in-trade of feminine chatter, and is thus more difficult to contain. Whether the containment can be complete is an issue that seems to have earned a series of negative answers from critics. Mrs Noah's grief for her drowned relatives and friends persists in York and Chester, and it must be

recognized even though Noah's voice is the more legitimate. The interrogative position Mrs Noah assumes at the end of the Towneley play, when she is last seen asking Noah whether the sinners in hell will ever free themselves, marks her return to verbal secondariness, and her legitimate place. But we learn from the dove incident that Mrs Noah has not been completely re-educated or re-positioned, nor are we sure she does not still want Noah to be dead. Horizontal conflicts are not fully transformed by an insistence on vertical hierarchy.

Money matters

Violence controls more than loose tongues. Mrs Noah's commentary about scant food and drink in her initial appearance provides the first instance of an enduring focus on economic and labour-related issues in this play, which reaches an apogee in her insistence on the importance of her spinning relative to Noah's project of building the ark. Normington looks at the recalcitrant Mrs Noah as a 'redundant worker,' following up on Evans' discussion of the Towneley Mrs Noah as a working woman whose economic power is threatening and thus suppressed.³⁴ In this section, I would like to draw these areas of discussion – violence and money/power – together by considering the domestic conflict of the Towneley play as a theatrical power-struggle in which the value of female labour is openly contested. Evans points out that:

Visually, *Uxor* represents weavers, the largest group of skilled women; on stage, as she wields her distaff, she embodies not simply the power of Eve, but also perhaps the power of the high-status working woman. We do not know how contemporary audiences responded to her figure on stage. The strong sense which she conveys of an emergent individual, and the knowledge we have of women's specific economic threat to the received sex-gender system, open up new interpretive horizons for this figure.³⁵

If Mrs Noah, in her insistence on spinning in the deluge, is seen to reach new heights of recalcitrance, perhaps this is because the moment of her rebellion encapsulates a dangerous sense that her work is just as important as Noah's. And perhaps Noah, already twitted once with his inability to keep food on the table, chastises that rebellion partly in order to defuse the threat of female economic power.

Though no doubt the violence of the Towneley play is meant to be funny, it expresses a real antagonism and performs real functions within the social

body. When does that become real violence? Deborah Hovland points to a connection between the ‘fiercest beatings of disobedient wives’ in medieval French trickster plays and a corresponding period of high male unemployment from 1470–1500, after the Black Death of 1348 had brought large numbers of women into the work force as a response to severe depopulation.³⁶ These beatings, too, are presented as funny within a funny genre. Yet the humour appears to be a veneer over something that is not mere representation and perhaps is not funny.

Martha C. Howell points to various ways in which male dominance within household space was compromised as women took on larger roles in market production.³⁷ Pressures on the male-dominated household included the separation of women’s finances from those of their husbands, an increase in freedoms granted to women by civil law, and fracture in the unity of the household – caused, for example, by a wife’s frequent absence at work or for training. All of these things ‘would have made their positions as mothers, as managers of household subsistence, and as subordinate partners in the family economy difficult to fill’.³⁸ Howell’s study, revolving around women involved in cloth-making in Leiden and Cologne in the 1400s and 1500s, takes issue with the assumption that capitalism itself diminished the role of women in economic production, as a sort of side-effect of a diminished role for the family as a unit of production. Her examination of the shifting relationships between gender and market production leads her to the more radical assertion of a deliberate suppression of female economic independence in the late medieval period. This suppression, as she sees it, was a conscious attempt to resist ‘the dismantling of the hierarchical structure of the household’, a dismantling inherent in the rise of certain types of female economic power.³⁹

Howell points out that ‘women who held high-status positions in market production did challenge male preserves’ and identifies an alignment between ‘male fears and hostilities’ and the ‘turmoil over gender relations’ in the play *Marijke van Nijmegen*, in which Marijke is sexually aggressive and overly interested in male learning.⁴⁰ Howell places the play *Marijke van Nijmegen* within a larger context of late medieval literature that displays a high and unusual degree of hostility towards aggressive women, ‘women whose aggressiveness in some measure attends their positions in market production’.⁴¹ The Towneley play participates in this hostility, though the connections cannot be simple or direct. The most obvious channel for the play’s disapproval and disallowal of female economic independence is the depiction of Mrs Noah’s ridiculous spinning before she is beaten onto the Ark and back into a properly

hierarchical relationship to Noah. Her attention is redirected from her labour to his.

Normington, looking through records from the fourteenth-century York Peace Sessions, points out that archival evidence strongly 'supports the idea that work was plentiful for women weavers prior to the mid-fifteenth century' but observes a marked change in the sixteenth century, when women's weaving was subject to ever-increasing legal sanctions and accrued lower pay and lower status.⁴² She sees an alignment between Mrs Noah's attempt to keep hold of her distaff and a decline in the status of women weavers in Wakefield, and comments that 'Perhaps her rebellion would be understood by fellow women weavers in the audience as an attempt to preserve her working rights'.⁴³ She describes Mrs Noah's actions as a 'stance against the flood of restriction upon women workers that the increased commercial pressures and recession of late fifteenth-century England brought about'.⁴⁴ This reading assumes a too-transparent relationship between Mrs Noah's actions and the economic situation of the period, though it is especially interesting to consider in relation to Goldberg's recent re-staking of the claim for Wakefield.⁴⁵ One of the biggest critical problems in approaching the Towneley play is that labour-related issues do inhere in Mrs Noah's rebellion, but at the same time they do not fully explain it.

Let me return to Mrs Noah's desire for her husband to die. Judith Bennett's work on women's labour in the middle ages indicates that the economic behaviours and experiences of women were most like those of men when the women in question were adolescent unmarried daughters or widows. Bennett observes that 'a wife was, at best, her husband's subordinate partner in the control of their household's moveable goods, landholdings, and labor resources'.⁴⁶ The only form of work which women dominated was reproductive work. Not-married women (a designation which acknowledges the difficulty of distinguishing between unmarried women and widows in many types of records) often had a higher degree and wider range of economic authority than married women. Widows in particular were distinguished by their ability to move more freely in the economic sphere. Bennett observes:

As a result of the forces exerted by locale, socioeconomic status and age, each new widow faced a unique situation. As long as she remained unmarried, however, she shared with all other widows the status of a female endowed with extensive public authority; thus widows fit awkwardly into the social hierarchy of the medieval world. In a society of male householders, they were female heads of household. In a legal system that so often distinguished clearly between the

public rights of males and females, they took on some of the public attributes of men. In an economy that most valued landholding, their peculiar land claims threatened the proper devolution of assets from father to son.⁴⁷

It is easy to see how the widow's potential escape from the frame of sexual hierarchy and from the male-dominated household is one that seems threatening to the social order. The figure of the cross-dressed Mrs Noah suggests a sense of female access to economic mobility. Perhaps she also suggests through liminal gender a threatening female access to male power.

This suggestion or representation of female access to power in front of an audience does not imply a direct tie-in with economic reality. Literary hostility directed at female economic power does not in fact need or depend on a solid economic basis – a possibility or state of potentiality is enough. Mrs Noah's depiction of an ideal state of widowhood is far from borne out in contemporary records of court proceedings dealing with the enforcement of legal provisions made for widows. While it is true that in the post-plague period inheritance laws became rather more flexible, the effects of these changes were mixed for women. The widow's great escape seems to have been more potential than real in many cases. Women often spent years trying to have the simplest provisions enforced, and often failed. There were many different types of widow's rights, all falling under different types of law: borough law, common law, customary law, canon law. Mate's work on women's economic situations in Sussex after the Black Death paints a complicated picture in which both the rights granted to widows and the enforcement of those rights varied enormously throughout the fifteenth century; she points out that 'the strongest legal claims could in practice be hard to enforce and widows frequently had to go to court to protect and maintain their rights'.⁴⁸

The high mortality rate throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries made it possible for women of all classes to acquire land; it also brought about 'new and more flexible forms of conveyancing,' among them the deathbed transfer, the use, and joint tenure.⁴⁹ These new devices did not guarantee any increase in women's status or holdings, and in fact could just as easily be used to cut women off from their traditional share in their husbands' property. The most significant effect of these new laws, while not about or invested in women's rights, was an increase in interpretive latitude vis à vis women's legal and economic situations. This new latitude also brought new anxieties, and I suggest that the Towneley play's take on widowhood displays a degree of unease connected to broader cultural anxieties about the place of no-longer-married women. Joel Rosenthal points out that two out of three aristocratic

men left a widow in fifteenth-century England.⁵⁰ Though there are no similar statistics available for women of other social classes, evidence indicates that widowhood was a common experience. One of the reasons that widowhood is so well documented (better than any other life phase for women) is the large number of court records available dealing with widows' legal battles to have their rights recognized. Many sons failed to carry out the terms of their fathers' wills; many women were pressured into giving up land in exchange for annuities – these, too, were not always paid on time, and sometimes not at all. It is often observed that the land granted to widows caused a strain in society, and caused problems for sons, but it must also be observed that 'not all sons or stepsons allowed their widowed mother or stepmother peacefully to enjoy what land had been granted to them'.⁵¹

A widow's economic status depended largely on the provision made for her, and as such was not necessarily under her control. Helena Graham's research on medieval bakers, butchers, and tranters in the fourteenth century (based on court rolls from Alrewas) broadly supports Bennett's assertions about the particular economic independence of unmarried women and widows. Graham concludes that 'it is primarily as single women, widows or the wives of small-holders that women's work patterns are represented in the court rolls as being more similar to those of men, that is more full time, more stable, and less intermittent'.⁵² But Mate observes rather dampeningly that 'it is doubtful whether many widows regarded the time of their widowhood as truly "liberating"'.⁵³ Even more dampening is Goldberg's dismissal of a great deal of critical literature about widowhood, much of it produced by feminist historians and critics:

A great deal of nonsense has been written about widowhood as a liberating experience for medieval women as if the circumstances of a privileged few were typical of most. In fact the experience of many widows would have been of increasing age going hand in hand with growing hardship.⁵⁴

Yet the evidential alignments on the subject of widowhood do support the assertion that it was a state in which a woman's economic potential was not fixed. Mrs Noah, in her desire to be a widow, is not speaking in a manner uninterested in the economic realm; her words address a whole range of issues to do with gender relations and economic power. What her words are most responsive to, however, may not be women's real or rising economic power but men's anxiety about women's unfixed economic power. Again, real and un-real are not always the most useful categories when thinking about drama:

ideas about the thing can be just as important as the thing itself. The common formulation of the widow's portion as a 'drain on the patrimony' is suggestive in relation to the Towneley play of Noah not because of what is true or real but because as an idea, or as a character, a woman of unfixed socio-economic status does not help to fix the male-dominated family as the ideal model.⁵⁵ If Mrs Noah is better off without Noah, the world really is upside down. It is a horrible possibility, that must be – and of course is – violently suppressed.

In the post-plague period, men did (re)gain privileged access to high labour-status after a brief period of female access to economic power; at the same time, the position of widowed women was not stable and the potential existed for women to benefit substantially from changes in inheritance laws. These facts, read backwards into the Towneley play, suggest that the violent begetting of culture that Noah and Mrs Noah enact functions to support a gendered economic hierarchy. Despite the clear sense that the suppression of Mrs Noah in the Towneley play is an important piece of a larger socio-economic puzzle, the relationship between undesirably aggressive women in literature or drama and the socio-economic status of real women is – like that between represented and real violence – not transparent or direct. As Howell wonders, 'how did the lessons expressed in this literature help to ease women's departure from market production, help to restrict their sexuality and shore up the patriarchy?'⁵⁶ While we can speculate about the broad culture-producing effects of a performance that quells a troublemaking, economically independent woman, the immediate effects of these lessons on the members of the audience remain unknowable.

Discipline and Punish: Eve and Mrs Noah

Loose tongues and money are both certainly at stake, but there is one more thing to be considered: when the Towneley Noah calls his wife 'Begynnar of blunder!' he makes explicit a hitherto-implicit association between the recalcitrant Mrs Noah and Eve, and thereby invokes a paradigm of originary difference (587). He attempts to turn the situation into a reprise of the Fall, and to explain his wife's rebellion by means of a prior narrative. The shadowy presence of Eve, subsumed into so many other female presences across Western Christian literature, need not be made so explicit as this to be understood. Revealingly, the moment of physical confrontation between husband and wife is the moment that brings this reference to Noah's lips. In tandem with the act of striking his wife, the Towneley Noah identifies his wife as Eve: 'Begynnar

of blunder!/ I shall bete the bak and bone,/ And breke all in sonder' (587–9). Eve is being punished through and in the figure of Mrs Noah just as Mrs Noah is being punished for an ineluctable feminine resemblance to Eve.

In terms of her biblical role, Mrs Noah's situation in drama does bear an important resemblance to Eve's: she is largely constructed from a biblical silence. Her voice is not, however, authorized in biblical terms in the same manner that Eve's dramatic excursions are legitimated by biblical and patristic commentaries alike, though Mrs Noah in her own way has roots. The range of possible models of recalcitrance for English dramatic renderings of Mrs Noah has attracted a fair amount of critical attention. Obviously one influence is that of analogy with the Eve legend; other possibilities range from iconography in Anglo-Saxon biblical poetry (for example, to the Noah illustrations in Caedmonian MS. Junius XI, which suggest an unwillingness on a woman's part – a woman who is assumed to be Noah's wife – to enter the Ark),⁵⁷ to folkloric motifs from 'later Mohammedan tradition' which emphasize Mrs Noah's 'truculence',⁵⁸ to models of garrulous wives from fabliaux and popular culture,⁵⁹ and to 'medieval carnivalesque practices' in a broad sense.⁶⁰

The issue I am interested in pursuing here is English drama's profound investment in an unbiblical Mrs Noah rather than an orthodox Mrs Noah like the one in the Old French *Mistere du Viel Testament* or in *N-Town*, where Mrs Noah warns the audience that 'Synne offendyth God in his face/ And agreveth oure Lorde full ylle' (31-2). In terms of larger discourses to do with women's counsels, a recalcitrant Mrs Noah is not nearly so useful across genres as Eve is; being a less authorized creation in many respects, she has a more limited repertoire. Still, the fact of her existence foregrounds an interesting phenomenon, which is the way in which Eve can be present, or presenced, in and through other women. That Mrs Noah is named 'begynnar of blunder', that she insists on the importance of her spinning (traditionally Eve's activity after the Fall) when she is at the height of her recalcitrance, shows up a superimposition powerful enough to shunt aside the biblical model of a meek Mrs Noah. The usefulness of Eve's model for feminine recalcitrance can be seen to take priority over even biblically authorized models for feminine meekness, when the cultural gain is seen to warrant it. Some of this gain appears to inhere in the representation of a culture of sexual difference – a culture in which women's dissenting voices are created in order to be suppressed, and moreover suppressed with physical force. The act of creation, however, easily goes awry. This is in fact the most important point of the Ark story, where almost all of God's creation is infected with evil and must be suppressed, but it is as true for

playwrights as for God. The reassuring message that L'Engle develops in *Many Waters* is lifted from the *Song of Songs 8:7* and given to Yalith, a woman rescued by El (God) from drowning, to utter: 'Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it'.⁶¹ The reassuring message of the English Noah plays is more elusive. The message may well be that many waters, if they cannot quench love, have other limitations as well. Created things retain the ability to go awry. Though the Noah plays from York, Chester, and Towneley continuously re-inscribe ideas about female recalcitrance and male discipline, they do not do so in a manner that convinces us that suppression solves the problems hinted at by the domestic conflicts of the plays.

The Ark story still has much to teach us about discipline and punishment. Within an overarching punitive narrative, the time is taken to punish at the microlevel of one man's marriage. Discipline in the Flood plays comes not just from God, but from Noah and his sons, who work together to bring Mrs Noah into line. The point of invoking the image of Eve is to superimpose a familiar model for female error onto potentially different rebellions: rebellions to do with love of relatives (York), or with female friendships (Chester), or with labour-related issues (Towneley). An effort is made to force different narratives into step with one another, to make them manifestations of the same old thing. What if these rebellions are really not the same, and each drowned voice is different? The feedback loop that makes it possible for female rebellions in themselves to justify displays of force is revealed for what it is. We cannot dismiss the artifice that produces female recalcitrance for the benefit of a transvestite theatre.

Notes

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- 2 Geoffrey Chaucer, 'The Miller's Tale', *The Riverside Chaucer*, Larry Benson (ed) (Boston, 1987). Line numbers appear in parentheses within the text.
- 3 Stephen Spector (ed), *The N-Town Play: Cotton MS Vespasian D. 8*, Early English Text Society SS 1 (Oxford, 1991). All quotations from N-Town are taken from this edition. Line numbers appear in parentheses within the text.
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- 5 Alfred David, 'Noah's Wife's Flood', *The Performance of Middle English Culture: Essays on Chaucer and the Drama*, James J. Paxson, Lawrence M. Clopper and Sylvia Tomasch (eds) (Cambridge, 1998), 109.
- 6 L'Engle, *Many Waters*, 249.
- 7 R.M. Lumiansky and David Mills (eds), *The Chester Mystery Cycle*, Early English Text Society SS3 (London, 1974). All quotations from Chester are taken from this edition. Line numbers appear in parentheses within the text.
- 8 Martin Stevens and A.C. Cawley (eds), 'Play 3: Noah', *The Towneley Plays*, Early English Text Society SS13 (Oxford, 1994). All quotations from Towneley are taken from this edition. Line numbers appear in parentheses within the text.
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- 10 Barker, *Culture of Violence*, 194.
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- 12 Amy J. Marin and Nancy Felipe Russo, 'Feminist Perspectives on Male Violence Against Women: Critiquing O'Neil and Harway's Model', *What Causes Men's Violence Against Women?*, Michele Harway and James O'Neill (eds) (Thousand Oaks, 1999), 19.
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- 16 Catherine Normington, 'Holy Women/ Vulgar Women: Women and the Corpus Christi Cycles', PhD thesis (University of Exeter, 1999), 168.
- 17 Normington, *Holy Women/ Vulgar Women*, 164.
- 18 Normington, *Holy Women/ Vulgar Women*, 168–9.
- 19 Theresa Coletti, 'A Feminist Approach to The Corpus Christi Cycles', *Approaches to Teaching Medieval English Drama*, Richard K. Emmerson (ed) (New York, 1990), 82.
- 20 Goldberg, *Women in England*, 14.

- 21 Natalie Zemon Davis, 'Women on Top: Symbolic Sexual Inversion and Political Disorder in Early Modern Europe' *The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society*, Barbara A. Babcock (ed) (Ithaca, 1978), 153.
- 22 Ruth Evans, 'Feminist Re-Enactments: Gender and the Towneley *Uxor Noë*, *A Wyf Ther Was: Essays in Honour of Paule Mertens-Fonck*, Juliette Dor (ed) (Liège, 1992), 147.
- 23 V.A. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (Stanford, 1966), 150.
- 24 Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi*, 150.
- 25 Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Carnival in Romans* (New York, 1979), 301.
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- 33 Mate, *Daughters, Wives and Widows*, 6.
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- 40 Howell, *Women, Production and Patriarchy*, 182.
- 41 Howell, *Women, Production and Patriarchy*, 183.
- 42 Normington, *Holy Women/ Vulgar Women*, 178.
- 43 Normington, *Holy Women/ Vulgar Women*, 179.
- 44 Normington, *Holy Women/ Vulgar Women*, 179–80.
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- 60 Evans, *Feminist Re-Enactments*, 147.
- 61 L’Engle, *Many Waters*, 242.