

Research Article

Managing Marital Expectations: Marian Speech Practices and the Domestic Sphere in the *Corpus Christi* Cycles

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Although the Virgin Mary only spoke on four occasions in the New Testament (Luke 1:26–38, 1:46–56, 2:41–52, and John 2:1–11), medieval devotional and dramatic sources imagined the Mother of God to speak eloquently and powerfully. This article explores examples of Mary in conflicted dialogue with her husband Joseph. Analysis of their manufactured dialogues demonstrates how their discussions reflected concerns within the medieval household. The *Corpus Christi* plays, a form of English liturgical dramas, reflected prevailing thoughts on women's speech within the domestic sphere. This article argues that the depictions of Mary within the *Corpus Christi* dramas served as a mouthpiece to encourage proper behavior in the household.

The pageants “Marriage of Mary and Joseph,” “Joseph’s Troubles of Mary,” and “The Trial of Joseph and Mary,” supply examples where Marian legends were creatively portrayed in these public performances. The ways in which Mary’s voice was manipulated reflects key issues concerning women’s speech in medieval society. This article grounds pageant analysis in medieval writings on marital expectations, illuminating a complex socio-religious tradition. Evaluating these sources in tandem also illustrates how the wife’s speech was a central concern throughout these sources, and how Mary’s voice provided a suitable model for imitation.

WHEN DESCRIBING THE HOLY Family, medieval devotional sources used idyllic language to shape them as a model family, one in which the marriage of the Virgin Mary and Joseph was emblematic of matrimonial harmony. Medieval theologians and writers of conduct literature often touted Mary as the ideal wife and mother. With that in mind, it is jarring to consider the couple using argumentative language such as “young wench” and “diseased” against one another during a quarrel over Mary’s seemingly inexplicable pregnancy. Analyzing these insults and other examples of heated dialogue within the English *Corpus Christi* cycles shows a strong Mary using speech as weapon; such analysis also serves as commentary on gendered issues within marriage in the late Middle Ages. These vernacular liturgical dramas performed in late medieval England on the feast day of *Corpus Christi*—which celebrates the real presence of the body and blood of Jesus in the Eucharist—provide a commentary on gendered relationships in the later Middle Ages (c.1200–1450). Although Mary only spoke in the Bible four times (Luke 1:26–38, 1:46–56, 2:41–52, and John 2:1–11), medieval dramatic sources fashioned a much more powerful and authoritative voice for Mary. By challenging her husband, Mary upset traditional gender expectations and occupied the dominant role in the household.¹

This article examines pertinent examples of Mary’s voice in dialogue with Joseph. Analysis of their crafted dialogues will provide a clearer sense of significant domestic relationships, as well as how their dialogues may

have pointed to issues regarding power within the medieval household.² The *Corpus Christi* dramas offer an avenue to analyze social relationships as depicted in a performative setting. I argue that the depictions of Mary speaking within the plays served as a mouthpiece to encourage proper domestic roles in the medieval household.

The examples in this articles highlight the development of Mary’s voice as she transitioned into her role as a married but chaste woman. The pageants include “Marriage of Mary and Joseph,” “Joseph’s Troubles of Mary,” “The Trial of Joseph and Mary,” and “Christ and the Doctors.” These represent some of the most prominent examples where Marian legends were enhanced and portrayed creatively. Examining these pageants provides an opportunity to reflect on issues concerning the regulation of women’s speech and behavior in medieval society, particularly in late medieval urban England. Furthermore, this study demonstrates that women were not constrained to one particular role—there were opportunities for them to subvert patriarchal authority. Was Mary’s voice in these dramas meant to subvert the desire for control over women that pervaded medieval society? Or, was it to provide an example of proper speech in contrast to the women whose garrulous tongues sometimes landed them in municipal court?³ Examining the dramas offers a means to understand the depiction of Mary’s voice as an instrument of her power and provide a very public reimagining of the familial dynamics of Mary and Joseph.⁴

I ground my examination of the pageants in medieval writings on

marital expectations. I propose that integrating theological commentary, conduct literature, and mystery plays together in analysis illuminates a socio-religious tradition rife with complex expectations.⁵ Evaluating these sources together also illustrates how the wife's speech was a central concern throughout these sources, and how Mary's voice provided a suitable model for imitation, to the extent that her speech often adheres to the expectations delineated in the conduct manuals. Before examining the *Corpus Christi* plays, I address the socio-cultural concerns of women's speech, particularly within the domestic context, as expressed in conduct literature in late medieval England. These views signal widespread unease about women's speech, which was viewed as a threat to the stability of medieval society.⁶ Such prolific writing on speech management makes the eloquence of Mary's vocal role in the cycles all the more substantial.

Defining Normative Behavior in Medieval Marriage

THE CHRISTIAN INSTITUTION OF marriage inherited by the Middle Ages was shaped by the remnants of early expectations and debates contained in a host of theological tracts. Medieval theologians and canonists sought to define this practice carefully, which was rife with complexities and conflicting views on the precise definition of marriage.⁷ The marriage of Mary and Joseph—which to some represented marriage in its perfect form—did not fit neatly into traditional theological definitions and theologians struggled to

define their union in the absence of any traditional conjugal behavior.⁸ Besides defining the parameters of marriage, theologians also advised husbands on how to manage their wives, specifically in terms of speech practices. For example, Thomas Chobham, an English thirteenth-century theologian and subdean at Salisbury, advised husbands how to properly address their wives: "If she is foolish, moderately and decently correct her, and if necessary castigate her."⁹ The expansion of clerical outreach to the laity from the thirteenth century onward also meant vast discussions on religious expectations for moral behavior, particularly within the home.¹⁰

The concern for regulating female speech permeated many aspects of medieval society. In one civic effort to limit female speech, two fourteenth-century English towns even attempted to regulate female silence, one stating that "all the women of the township control their tongues," and the other "enjoined upon all the women in the township that they should restrain their tongues and not scold nor curse any man."¹¹ Beyond clerical and civic attempts to regulate how wives spoke, popular conduct manuals also underscored the need for husbands to correct and manage their wives' speech.¹²

Medieval conduct literature sought to articulate prescriptions for women on how to speak and behave. The author often took on the persona of the husband, who was responsible for his wife's actions and had to account for any illicit behavior.¹³ For example, *Le Ménagier de Paris* (The Good Wife's Guide), was a popular medieval conduct manual and largely focused on

how the husband regulated his wife's behavior and speech.¹⁴ Written in 1393, the husband-narrator allegedly wrote this guide to ensure the salvation of his young wife's soul, and focused on attributes of humility, obedience, and succinctly eloquent speech, as estimable qualities:

I urge and advise you (his wife), whether in society or at table, to restrain yourself from too much conversation. For if one speaks freely, it is not possible to avoid some ill-chosen terms, and sometimes one speaks spirited words in jest, which afterward are taken and remembered out of context, to the derision and mockery of the speaker.¹⁵

The narrator encouraged women to avoid gossip, so as not to damage their husbands' reputations, adding: "Be silent or at least to speak sparingly and wisely to protect and conceal your husband's secrets."¹⁶ Husbands carefully sought to regulate their wives' speech both in private and in public. Conduct literature largely focused on regulating women to prevent social transgressions that would disgrace the family. It is worth noting that these sources were read by literate urban populations, and urban wives had different experiences than either peasant or noble women.

Wives were advised to weigh their words carefully and to show complete deference to their husbands: "Do not be arrogant or answer back to your future husband or to his words and do not contradict him, especially in front of others."¹⁷ Not only was obedience the virtuous path, but disobedience also threatened to destroy the stability of marriage. This manual also establishes that the matter of regulating women's

speech was represented in popular literature, not just civic or ecclesiastical regulations.¹⁸ Wives were expected to speak deferentially to their husbands. To do otherwise was sinful behavior. Accordingly, the husband-narrator addressed concerns about religious implications from a woman's verbal transgressions, known as sins of the mouth: "The other part of the sin of the mouth consists of speaking wantonly in many ways: idle words, boasts, flattery, perjury, quarrels, grumbling, rebellion, and accusations. No word is so insignificant that you are not accountable for it before God."¹⁹ Wives were viewed as particularly susceptible to these verbal transgressions. Wives were expected to demonstrate restraint with their words to avoid sin.

Not all manuals adopted the male persona as the narrator: others featured a mother in the role of the guide. In the fourteenth-century poem *How the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter*, women were instructed to be moderate in their speech, especially in church:

When you are in the church, my child,
Seek that you be both meek and mild,
Do not laugh or scorn at those old nor young;
Be of good bearing and of good tongue.²⁰

The mother warns against any behavior that would lead the community to call her daughter a strumpet or a fool. Moreover, young women were encouraged to be meek and mild like the Virgin Mary.²¹ Although the mother continues to give advice on other moral concerns, infused throughout the guide for young women was the emphasis on proper speech management.

The fact that the regulation of women's speech was a popular theme

within conduct literature demonstrates that the late medieval period was an “era obsessed with codified and externalized behaviors” in both the religious and temporal spheres.²² These themes resonated in other sources, including the *Corpus Christi* dramas. Conduct literature needs to be considered more closely alongside analysis of the English religious dramas, as there is a performative aspect to both sets of sources. The conduct literature was intended to help wives “perform” as better spouses and the plays were public performances that offered a dynamic commentary on an integral social practice.

Performing Prescribed Roles: The Structure of the *Corpus Christi* Dramas

THE *CORPUS CHRISTI* DRAMA represented a rich expression of lay piety in response to the relatively new feast day celebrating the Eucharist (i.e. *Corpus Christi*).²³ Each cycle contained a series of distinct pageants that illuminated the stories of salvation history that were reshaped to suit a medieval audience.²⁴ Of course, it is worth noting that male clerics often wrote these texts, and their views were not always compatible with those of the audience during *Corpus Christi* celebrations. There are four extant cycles, each varying in its degree of Marian-centric pageants: York, Chester, Wakefield, and N-Town. I primarily examine the N-Town cycle. The “N” stood for *nomen*, and signified that the place of the performance could be filled in. The N-Town cycle contained an independent Mary play.²⁵ This

miniature cycle indicates an intentional interest in promoting Mary’s story.²⁶

I conduct my inquiry by evaluating the manner in which Mary’s voice changes during her life cycle as evidenced in several distinct pageants.²⁷ The N-Town cycle merits heightened scrutiny because it includes the largest number of Marian pageants, the widest range of Mary’s voice, and features Mary in dialogue with many male interlocutors. This version gives her the greatest agency, both in her behavior and her voice. According to Emma Solberg—whose work is part of a recent upsurge in scholarship centered on the N-Town persona of Mary—“the extent to which its drama domesticates the marriage of Mary and Joseph has not been fully appreciated.”²⁸ I view my work together with scholars who call for a consideration of this cycle alongside socio-cultural sources to observe changes in Mary’s persona.

Defining and Defying Marital Expectations in “The Marriage of Mary and Joseph”

IN THE GOSPEL OF LUKE, WE LEARN of Mary’s life *in medias res* (she is betrothed to Joseph as a young virgin when Gabriel appears in the Annunciation). However, early Christian apocryphal works such as the second-century *Protoevangelium of James* sketch out some of the early details of the Virgin Mary’s life that ultimately shaped and defined Marian tradition throughout the Christian world.²⁹ In an effort to incorporate Mary’s complete story into the narrative of salvation history, her life story became fused into some of the *Corpus Christi*

Marriage would not allow her to live in the service of God

cycles.³⁰ The “Marriage of Mary and Joseph” mixes apocryphal legend with medieval marital ceremonial practices. Examining this scene connects this early Christian legend with the medieval sacrament of marriage and functions as a commentary on medieval marital expectations.

In analyzing this pageant in light of the theological debates on the medieval definition of marriage, it is important to consider Mary’s hesitation to enter marriage. Recalling the vow she made as a child, Mary asserts:

*Against the law will I never be,
But man’s fellowship shall never follow me;
I will live ever in chastity
By the grace of God’s will.*³¹

Mary’s hesitancy to marry Joseph may reflect medieval concern about a woman’s consent and general understanding of the terms within marriage and a trope in hagiography about female saints.

In this pageant, Mary tries to demonstrate how her pledge of virginity ought to supersede any marriage vow. Mary recounts her upbringing at length, including her time in the temple, and her firm obedience to her vow of “cleanness and chastity.”³² She eloquently argues with Ysakar, who presides over the ceremony, that marriage would not

allow her to live in the service of God. In response, Ysakar praises Mary for her “wise words,” and understanding of her vow, and emphasized that in this marriage, she would be able to remain a virgin:

*Her wit is great and that is seen.
In cleanness to live in God’s service,
No man blames her, none here will
disdain.*³³

Ysakar praises Mary’s carefully articulated defense of her vow of chastity. As the patriarchal authority, he recognizes Mary’s concern and then articulates the possibility for Mary to enter into marriage without breaking her previous vow. Her unique capacity as a chaste wife muddled the demarcations that theologians tried to place on definitions of marriage.

Mary is not the only one uncomfortable with this arrangement. Joseph openly expresses his hesitation for taking on a wife. He cites his old age, and that it looks strange for an old man to marry a young maiden. Furthermore, Joseph vocalizes his concern about how to manage Mary, just like the conduct literature that emphasized the importance of control over one’s wife:

*Should I now in age begin to dote?
If I her chide she would clout my coat,
Blur my vision and chide about a trifle,
And thus oftentimes it is seen.*³⁴

Joseph is afraid to scold her, fearing that she will beat him. He is torn between his obedience to God’s will and both the personal and social repercussions he could face, as he speaks throughout this pageant about his fear of public defamation and humiliation. The N-Town compiler transformed Joseph

into a medieval man who would have been familiar with conduct literature and understood the “omnipresent danger of handsome youths and their fine words.”³⁵ Joseph ultimately concedes, promising to be her “warden and keeper.”³⁶ Still, Joseph expresses his anxiety about his old age and haggard appearance in comparison to Mary’s youth, but Ysakar assures him that Mary is “the holiest virgin that you shall marry.”³⁷ Subsequently, Mary repeats her dedication to living a chaste life and begs Joseph to respect her vow.

Beyond revealing the concerns of the bride and groom, the pageant also highlights the rituals of the marriage ceremony. In this social context, these performative utterances were carefully constructed.³⁸ In the public ceremony, as Mary and Joseph take their respective vows, in response, Ysakar praises the marriage as “the holiest matrimony in the world.”³⁹ Ysakar, as the High Priest, framed the marriage ceremony with clear instructions to prepare them. He delineates the necessary requirements for this marriage, and what the couple needed to do (and avoid) to be successful, in the public eye and the eyes of God. While both Mary and Joseph express uncertainty, they receive guidance from respected members of the community, both in domestic and religious matters.

Mary identifies herself as the “simplest creature” in an expression of humility. Mary assures Joseph of her obedience and chides him for worrying about any potential transgressions.⁴⁰ She also states that she will use her psalter as a prayer book to increase her piety. Similarly, she notes that daily prayer helps one lead a virtuous, moral life and

drives away temptations of sin. Ysakar and her parents reiterate that obedience is instrumental to Mary’s success as a wife. He also warns them that their age discrepancy may cause speculation in their community:

*As we read in old adage
Many a man is slippery of tongue
Therefore evil language for to assuage
That your good fame may last long.*⁴¹

In addressing malicious speech, the bishop hints at the concerns Joseph will have concerning Mary’s pregnancy, and possibly speaking to the medieval audience about the dangers of slander and salacious gossip, especially that of women.

At this time, Mary also seeks prayers from her parents. Anne, who served as one of Mary’s first teachers, delineates the role Mary must take as a wife. Before leaving the ceremony, Anne reminds Mary of the characteristics she must embody as a wife:

*I pray thee, Mary, my sweet child
Be lowly and obedient, meek and mild,
Sad and sober and nothing wild,
And God’s blessing thou have.*⁴²

Mary must be submissive, and according Anne, obedience will yield her God’s favor. This directive to curb any subversive speaking or behavior harkens back to the sentiments of *How the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter*.

As the ceremony concludes, Joseph prepares for his imminent departure: he will live abroad during her pregnancy. Before he leaves, Joseph advises her:

*Keep thee clean, my gentle spouse,
And all thy maidens in thy house,
That evil rumors come not out,
For his love that all has wrought.*⁴³

Joseph asks Mary to make sure the maidens will behave chastely. He is afraid they might not do so and gossip will ensue. As Mary and Joseph leave the temple, they depart in mutual affection, and Mary vows once again to remain perpetually chaste.⁴⁴ There is mixed joy and concern as they separate. The warnings loom over the end of the pageant, with the use of proper speech as a central area of concern to both the story and audience. This example bridges the apocryphal story with the medieval husband’s concerns about a wife’s potentially promiscuous behavior damaging his reputation in the public sphere.

Within “The Marriage of Mary and Joseph,” the other characters’ concerns about Mary’s speech and behavior mirror the medieval concerns for regulating women’s speech and its possible ill effects. Joseph continued to express his doubts about becoming completely submissive. While the ceremonial pageant foreshadows potential conflict between Mary and Joseph, the conflict would later erupt in a dispute that mirrored a very real familial argument.

Marital Troubles: The Doubts of Mary’s Virginit

THE GOSPELS ONLY PROVIDE scattered references to the Holy Family as a unit. Even so, late medieval art depicted the Holy Family as the model for the medieval family.⁴⁵ But the *Corpus Christi* pageants demonstrate that the Holy Family was believed to be not without problems and perhaps even faced some of the same domestic challenges prevalent within the medieval

home. The Gospel of Matthew (1:18–25) stated that Joseph feared that scandal would inevitably emerge following the evidence of Mary’s pregnancy: “not willing publicly to expose her, [Joseph] was minded to put her away privately.” He only changed his mind when an angel appeared to him to assure him that this was a miraculous conception. The elaborate glosses of this scene within the plays provide a compelling lens into the male response to this scandal, referred to frequently as Joseph’s “troubles” or “doubts” of Mary’s miraculous pregnancy. The “Joseph’s Troubles” pageants offer insight into the medieval depiction of verbal conflict within what was supposed to be the model marriage. Scholars have already examined these pageants to illuminate medieval theological concerns about sacramental marriage, as well as ecclesiastical court proceedings on marriage.⁴⁶ Examining the heated debates between Mary and Joseph regarding her pregnancy also sheds light on representations of the differing gendered roles between the couple during a dispute.

Some versions indicate that Joseph had already been informed that Mary was with child. In other cycles, Joseph discovers it when he sees Mary’s body in the latter stages of her pregnancy. Joseph’s complaint often includes a general statement about the untrustworthiness of women, which served as a warning to the audience of women’s misuse of speech, potentially false speech, as well as issues of promiscuity.⁴⁷ The focus of Joseph’s outcry is centered on harmful speech, particularly around Mary’s alleged lies. Joseph not only expresses his anger and embarrassment with this perplexing situation, but also repeatedly

tries to silence Mary. Joseph fears the label of a cuckold and addresses his old age as cause for mockery.⁴⁸ This episode represents a dynamic conflict that challenges the idea that the medieval wife acts in complete obedience to the husband.

The York version of “Joseph’s Troubles about Mary” addresses several concerns regarding the regulation of women in the private sphere. Joseph initiates the pageant with a 75-line lament full of “great mourning” over his inexplicably pregnant wife.⁴⁹ Among other issues, Joseph “bitterly bemoans” and curses the contract that they made in the temple; he worries about the public disgrace that will befall him as a cuckolded husband. In the York version, the maidens who have been living with Mary and caring for her are also present. They function as her advocates, assuring Joseph that she has been sitting in prayer while he has been away. Here, Mary is presented as a model for single women, who were often viewed in the Middle Ages as the most potentially subversive, as they lived neither under the control of a father nor a husband.⁵⁰ Joseph does not believe the maidens when they assure him that the angel Gabriel was the only male visitor, and exhorts them to tell him the truth about Mary’s pregnancy:

*Therefore, you need no words so wild
To carp at me deceivably!
Why, why lie to me so
And feign such fantasy?
Alas, I am full woe!
For sorrow, why might I not die?*⁵¹

Joseph’s fear of rumor points to the medieval concern of women gathering in any forum to talk without male

supervision.

In the York version, Joseph exclaims that his grief is so great that it has almost killed him. This play shows Mary in a *disputatio* role, as Joseph, fearing cuckoldry, questions Mary about the paternity of her unborn child. Here, Mary’s voice functions as a chief source of conflict. This new representation of Mary is more vocal and powerful—a wife engaged in intense dialogue with her husband. Joseph is quick to suppress Mary’s speech; her repeated defenses of her innocence (“Sir, it is yours, and God’s own will”) are punctuated by Joseph’s long accusations.⁵² In this instance, Mary stands her ground. She insists that she is a virgin and uses her voice to assert her innocence to Joseph. There is a shift in power: Joseph expresses his weakness and helplessness in this situation, while Mary uses controlled speech. She assures him that she has only been sitting and reading since his departure. He lambasts her, but Mary remains steadfast in maintaining her innocence, and her maidens support this. Joseph calls her pregnancy a “foul trick,” demonstrating his fear of being labeled a cuckold.⁵³

It is possible that Joseph also views Mary’s short answers to be “exasperating,” thus causing further fury.⁵⁴ Yet, Mary explains that Joseph is the one who has been tricked. When repeatedly attempting to assure Joseph that her pregnancy was not out of wedlock, he tells her that she “speaks against nature.”⁵⁵ As he grows frustrated with Mary’s insistence of her innocence, he utters, “Ah Mary, draw thy hand”—a plea for her to stop talking.⁵⁶ Joseph invalidates her testimony, pointing to the broader issue that medieval husbands

often viewed their wives’ speech as contested and subversive. It is only after Gabriel visits Joseph in a dream that he recognizes that he is the one at fault. Mary’s words were not enough to persuade him to change his mind. As part of his apology, Joseph says he would bow to her in humiliation if he was not so old, and then asks for forgiveness. Mary acquiesces, “Forgiveness, sir? Let be, for shame—Such words should all good women lack,” commenting on an aspect of marriage that would have resonated with the audience by referring to the fluctuating dynamic between husband and wife.⁵⁷

I contend that the eventual resolution and reconciliation between the couple after the debate offers a formula for resolution of marital conflict. There is the admittance of wrongdoing, a sincere apology, and eventually the husband shows his wife deference after the argument. Ultimately, the York version of Joseph’s troubles reveals more about Joseph’s concern about public gossip and the possible slander that would arise. Mary quietly maintains that she is in the right, instead of providing an extensive vocal defense. Although her brevity is frustrating to Joseph, she is quick to forgive his accusations.

The N-Town cycle also features this marital dispute, but divides it into two parts. The first, “Joseph’s Doubt,” is a similar iteration to York: Joseph returns home after “sore labor” to provide for the household. When he sees Mary pregnant, he does not know that the Incarnation has occurred and grows visibly upset as he demands to know the paternity of the child. He is not just alarmed at the prospect of Mary’s infidelity and broken vow of virginity,

but at the physical evidence. In N-Town, Joseph’s doubts can be classified as the most “misogynistically garrulous” of all the cycles.⁵⁸ Joseph takes a moment to speak to all the old men in the audience and advises them never to marry a young woman. Joseph accuses Mary of sinning, “blaming” an angel for this deed. The angel must appear to calm Joseph and assure him that Mary upheld her solemn vow.

The repetition of Joseph and Mary’s debate is reminiscent of any couple’s argument—they repeat themselves (Joseph asks about the paternity nine times). Joseph’s stunned reaction becomes normalized when one considers that Mary’s pregnant body violates many norms because of her professed vow of virginity. Her insistence of innocence only angers Joseph even more. There is a clear juxtaposition between Mary’s body and her claim to virginal status. The audience would have felt this tension, viewing a visibly pregnant who pledged to be a virgin.⁵⁹ In the N-Town version, Joseph also says his name is “shent” and that he will now be a cuckold for such a scandal. Mary assures him that this is all part of the will of God: “Surely, sir, be not dismayed, Right after the will of God’s ordinance.”⁶⁰ Joseph refers to Mary’s pregnant glow as “evil,” along with her growing belly.⁶¹ Like the York cycle, Joseph goes so far as to call her “a young wench.” Multiple times Mary tries to assuage him, ordering him to “amend his moan.”⁶² Yet, Joseph lashes out repeatedly; Mary’s words do not provide any comfort.

Recognizing the limitation of her voice in this argument, Mary asks for God’s help to comfort Joseph, knowing

that her words fail to mitigate his concerns. She calls Joseph “diseased” for lack of knowledge and his inability to understand the nature of Jesus’ conception:

*For lack of knowledge he is diseased,
And therefore, help, that he were eased.*⁶³

Mary ultimately convinces God to send the angel Gabriel to Joseph. Once Gabriel enlightens Joseph about her pregnancy, Joseph begs for forgiveness. He also wishes to kiss her feet as part of the apology, but Mary suggests that he kiss her on the mouth instead.⁶⁴ This is an important moment concerning the issue of authority and the shifting power dynamic between them. He promises “to serve thee at foot and hand” and asks for her to describe the holy conception:

*And therefore, tell me with halting none,
The holy matter of your conception.*⁶⁵

He recognizes that it was his words that were foolish: the pageant concludes with reconciliation. Joseph admits his wrongdoing and ultimately dotes upon Mary. He is grateful to have her as a wife, and this reconciliation shows that marriage, despite the conflicts, is a loving practice.

Joseph’s outbursts reflect the concerns about women’s speech in the late Middle Ages—his words are unfounded, slanderous accusations. He requires an authority figure to chastise him. Joseph is feminized for his reaction—the angel refers to his weeping as “shrill,” a distinctly feminine quality.⁶⁶ Joseph is wrong not to listen to her voice; peace is obtained only when the angel speaks. This gendered reversal of roles runs counter to the medieval conduct literature that sought to regulate

the speech of wives. Moreover, this role reversal frames Mary as the one whose speech is both measured and effective, whereas Joseph is uncontrollable and often ineffective. Nonetheless, this dispute is resolved within the domestic sphere. But, perhaps signaling the power of rumor and slander, this problem does not stay private, as indicated in the subsequent pageant “The Trial of Mary and Joseph.”

Speech on Trial: Speech on Defense in “The Trial of Mary and Joseph”

THIS SECOND SEGMENT OF THE Mary Play in N-Town regarding Mary’s pregnancy is different, because unlike “Joseph’s Return”—in which the audience has a window into a private conversation within their home—“The Trial of Mary and Joseph” is staged in a public setting. Given the N-Town scribe-compiler’s employment of *compilatio*, the blending of theological issues and socio-political commentary, the author can connect and augment the religious concerns about marriage with the very real social worries about gendered spousal roles.⁶⁷ This story has its origins in the Pseudo-Matthew Gospel, when rumors of Mary’s pregnancy led to a public hearing before the High Priest Abizachar.⁶⁸ The purpose of this trial was to test whether Joseph broke his vow and if Mary committed adultery. This pageant has not received extensive scrutiny. As such, it offers an opportunity to consider the reception of Mary’s voice in a public legal forum, showing how the couple operated as a marital unit.

Joseph and Mary are united, jointly facing slanderous accusations

from two detractors called Back Biter and Raise Slander.⁶⁹ These are male slanderers, demonstrating that it was not only women who fell into the temptations of gossip and engaged in public defamation of character. In their lengthy accusations, the accusers stated, “He ceased not till he had her laid!” and “Even worse she has him paid!”⁷⁰ Bishop Abizachar intervenes at this point, saying that they should be “cursed” for their defamation and to speak of such a pure woman with “such villainy.”⁷¹ But even with the intervention of a clerical authority, the jest continues. The detractors turn this into a farce, poking fun at Mary and Joseph individually, as others join in. The summoner refers to Joseph as an “old shrew.”⁷² They imagine Mary taking on younger lovers, tricking Joseph and acting in lewd and adulterous ways. The crude language ridicules both Mary and Joseph, as they are called a “wench” (three times) and “cuckold,” respectively.⁷³ The detractors also mock the story of the Annunciation, sneering and saying that not the Holy Spirit, but a snowflake, crept into Mary’s mouth and impregnated her.⁷⁴ Even the concept of marital chastity provoked unease and suspicion in the medieval world: couples often hid their vows to avoid public slander and derision.⁷⁵

We should also look at the “Trial of Mary and Joseph” to see how the couple operates as a marital unit—they defended their innocence together. Joseph, now understanding his wife’s pregnancy, defends her honor, asserting that “She is, for me, a true clean maid.”⁷⁶ Even though Joseph is also brought to trial, his testimony is not treated with the same ridicule and spectacle that Mary faced. Instead of Joseph continuing

to question Mary’s virginity, they are unified against the detractors of the law, who are so vulgar that they refer to her as a “bold bitch.”⁷⁷ Such slanderous language underscores the severity of the accusations levied against Mary.⁷⁸

Reputation was often more important than one’s actions, specifically for women, whose status was shaped by public knowledge of sexual behavior.⁷⁹ Rumors and gossip were often tied to medieval couples that professed a vow of marital chastity, as neighbors spied on and harassed them.⁸⁰ The disorderly behavior and rough language from the slanderers reflects the medieval communities that wrongfully persecuted deviant women. Despite the calmness in Mary’s voice, it is only a final verdict from the bishop that will calm the crowd, perhaps an allusion to the importance of episcopal authority.

Mary chooses to be silent and obedient during segments of their trial. Just like in her initial silence at the Annunciation, she still demonstrates agency in her selective speech. Mary also maintains a sense of dignity through her calm presence. She is neither shrill nor spontaneous in her defense. Cindy Carlson sees Mary’s humility during this trial as an enabling force allowing her to triumph over those who abuse their power, in this case, their vocal power.⁸¹ The foul detractors regard her voice as illegitimate testimony. They insist that the only sound evidence will come from trial by ordeal via the use of a truth serum. Although the quest to establish the truth includes Mary and Joseph’s statements, it is ultimately the drinking of a truth potion, called here “a bottle of vengeance” that validates Mary’s insistence on her innocence.⁸²

As she prepares to take the potion, Mary maintains her innocence yet again:

*I trespassed never with earthly wight
Thereof I hope through God's bond
Here to be purged before your sight
From all sin clean, just as my husband.
Give me the bottle out of your hand.
Here shall I drink before your face.
About this altar I shall pace round
Seven times to go by God's grace.⁸³*

She then ingests the potion and walks around the altar. The belief was that if the person who drank the potion were lying, the defendant's face would change color. Mary prays for God to provide a sign to demonstrate to the detractors that the conception of Christ was pure:

*God, as I never knew man's ministraton,
But ever have lived in true virginity,
Send me this day thy holy consolation
That all these fair people my cleanness may see.
O gracious God as thou didst choose me
To be thy mother, of me to be born,
Save thy tabernacle that is kept clean for thee
That now is put to reproof and scorn.⁸⁴*

Mary reaffirms her vow of chastity and maintains her purity. Moreover, her prayer to God shows that she was selected to bear the Son of God—she did not actively seek this out.

The court only views Mary's testimony as legitimate after the truth serum validates her initial statement. At the sight of Mary's unchanging color, the detractors have a change of heart, verbalizing their apologies and lamenting their slanderous words. One of the detractors falls down, clutching his skull in pain, which is a punishment for his slander. This sends a clear message about defamation of character and its connection to general transgressions.

Mary's voice functions as a stabilizing force: she restores the disorder of the public scandal back to equilibrium. The restoration of Mary and Joseph's reputations demonstrates the power of the spoken word in medieval society. It enables them to restore their names and reputation in a public forum. Mary also refers to the slanderers' lies as a sickness (just like she earlier referred to Joseph's accusation as diseased), suggesting that like a contagious illness, it has spread and corrupted the community. Another sign of Mary's dominance over the accusers is their silence—they fall silent because of Mary's truthful words.⁸⁵ This is a compelling gender reversal: Mary's statement results in male silence. Cursed language and rumor are connected here as two grievous sins, and it is Mary's voice that has the power to forgive such wicked speech:

*Now God forgive you all your trespass
And also forgive you all defamation
That you have said both more and less
To my hindrance and accusation.⁸⁶*

Mary's departing words remind both the accusers and the medieval audience of her ability to forgive transgression, and that defamation was one of the most egregious. The bishop instructs the detractors and other characters to “lowly incline” (bow) in deference to her, as part of their apology for such a grievous accusation.⁸⁷ The accusers are properly rebuked for their slander and the couple returns home in anticipation of the birth of Christ. She is not relegated to being a topic of discussion among others, but brought into the foreground as an active subject in the debate surrounding her virginity and pregnancy.

The “Trial of Mary and Joseph” reflects both the value of the power of Mary's voice and raises the question of its legitimacy. While she insists on the truth, the physical evidence suggests otherwise. Mary's testimony is not accepted as truthful evidence. The public reaction to her speech points to the weakness of women's words and oaths in a medieval court of law, as it was only after the truth serum was administered that Mary's word was viewed as credible.⁸⁸ The trial shows the severity of slander and the community's concern with regulating improper speech. Despite her exemplary status, Mary's voice was met with the same scrutiny that medieval women faced in court proceedings.

The Persistence of Marital Conflict After the Birth of Christ

THE BIRTH OF JESUS AND HIS auspicious childhood did not signify an end to conflict between Mary and Joseph.⁸⁹ Parenting Jesus through adolescence would engender strife once more between Mary and Joseph. “Christ and the Doctors” depicts Mary and Joseph yet again in marital strife when it re-imagines Mary and Joseph searching in Jerusalem to find their lost son, only to discover him in the Temple with the Doctors. This expansion upon Luke 2:41–52 is a key example of Mary using her voice to demonstrate agency, at times exhibiting a more masculine, dominant personality in comparison to Joseph's. The dialogue that emerges between them depicts a struggle for authority as they search for their lost 12-year old. Particularly in the York cycle, Joseph fears the label of a cuckold, a recurring

*Reputation was often
more important
than one's actions...
for women, whose
status was shaped
by public knowledge
of sexual behavior*

concern from Mary's pregnancy earlier in the cycle. This episode represents an inversion of gender roles: Mary's assertiveness dominates over Joseph's ineffective and submissive behavior.⁹⁰

Joseph quashes Mary's voice as it grows in alarm and concern over their lost child. Joseph does not reassure her, but tries to silence her. He views Mary's voice as over-reacting, and tries to limit her participation. Realizing that their son is missing, Mary seeks Joseph's advice and encourages them to search together. She even tries to encourage Joseph to take the dominant role as head of the household,

*Go forth, Joseph, upon your way
and fetch our son—and let us go.⁹¹*

She simply implores him to take an active role, and does so without any hint of humiliating him. Due to Joseph's reluctance, Mary must take control of the search operation. She does so while speaking of his “blabbering.” Joseph continues to reveal insecurities about his status as a cuckold. Despite her pleas, Mary is unable to convince Joseph

to take an active role in looking for Jesus. Joseph protests and is ashamed to converse with the Doctors:

*With men of might I cannot speak,
that sit so gay in fine furs.⁹²*

Joseph is embarrassed by his age and appearance, for it only slows down his ability to search. Not only is he self-conscious of his age, he also fears he will not be eloquent when speaking to them. Joseph asks Mary, "What shall I say?" hoping that Mary can instruct him how to speak in front of such esteemed and wealthy men.⁹³ Instead of the husband advising the wife on proper speech, akin to medieval conduct literature, Joseph requires guidance from Mary.

Joseph puts Mary in charge; she proceeds first and speaks on their behalf. She subverts his authority, which contradicts the advice of conduct manuals that prohibited wives from opposing their husbands. Joseph's fear of appearing foolish, old, weak, even feminized, resonates throughout the pageant. Neither Joseph nor Mary is firmly planted in a gendered role. Mary is able to subvert and occupy a leading role, but as a dominant woman, she feminizes Joseph and causes him to fear public shame and ridicule.⁹⁴ Joseph is more comfortable in a secondary, auxiliary role than the position of the central, dominant parent. Scholars have yet to consider these subversive and gender-bending aspects of the English pageants. They have failed to appreciate the unique ways that Mary was positioned to function as a wife who sometimes acted outside the bounds of what was deemed acceptable subservient behavior.

After lengthy searching, they find

Jesus in the temple amidst the doctors. There are limited opportunities for mobility within the patriarchal family, yet Mary's character offers an example of women gaining power in the domestic sphere. Mary did not intentionally seek to subvert her husband's authority or destabilize the familial power structure. She did so only because Joseph failed to take the initiative in searching for their son. Medieval women could learn from this episode by explaining how their increased role in the domestic sphere benefitted the family, in this case, finding a lost child. It is another illustration of Mary using her voice to demonstrate agency, and at times exhibiting a more dominant personality than Joseph. The dialogue that emerges between Mary and Joseph depicts a struggle for authority. This episode highlights another instance where Mary and Joseph are in heated debate; Mary subverts his authority and inverts the gendered roles.

Throughout the cycles, Mary's speech is a source of aggravation to Joseph and a threat to his position as the head of the household. Joseph does not consistently have effective control over Mary. This realistic depiction of their marriage ran counter to Marina Warner's claim that "in that very celebration of the perfect human woman, both humanity and women were subtly denigrated."⁹⁵ But, perhaps the performed conflicts in the cycles created a connection to the audience, by not portraying the marriage of Mary and Joseph as perfect, and without strife.⁹⁶

AT ANY GIVEN TIME IN THE HISTORY of Christianity, it is difficult to

Mary's vocal performance normalized the problems of a marriage

assert whether Mary as a vocal woman helps liberate women from restrictive gender constructions, or whether her voice reinforces the constrictive system implemented in a patriarchal society.⁹⁷ Medieval authors of social and dramatic texts manipulated the subject of marriage to emphasize gendered expectations of spouses. To some extent, this manufactured voice of Mary follows the prescribed advice of the conduct literature. In other cases, her speech supplies an alternative way to challenge male authority. The analysis of a constructed voice of Mary, as depicted in a set of religious dramas may seem more like an exercise in attempting to recover the voices of dramatic *personae* than offering insight into reality of medieval wives.⁹⁸ There is not a concrete way to measure the impact of these sources on women's actual speech, particularly through the voice of Mary. However, working through layers of mediated voices, while vexing, shows the widespread attempt to manipulate and regulate a woman's voice in a diverse body of sources.

Marriage was a medieval institution that blended social and theological expectations. There was not a singular definition of this institution, nor did Mary not fulfill one singular role. As evidenced in the dramas, Mary's voice could be either dominant or submissive.

She sometimes submitted to the will of the male patriarchy, and other times overcame it. Similarly, medieval wives were not solely confined to a secondary role and faced varying expectations in the private and public sphere.⁹⁹ Still, they held a restricted role in their community, living according to societal expectations and regulations.

Part of the reason we can see the dramas as having created a template for marriage is that they were public texts, performed widely while literally animating the conversations between Mary and Joseph. These cultural scripts illuminated domestic issues and literally scripted marital dialogue. Mary's vocal performance normalized the problems of a marriage, even via a voice and persona widely viewed as obedient and taciturn. Mary's speech offers subtle methods of subversion and her voice serves to stabilize and provide resolution after episodes of conflict. In these medieval dramatic episodes, Mary's voice functions as a pivot of social and religious practices and provides a window into medieval domestic roles. Ultimately, the resonance of Mary's voice should not be ignored as we attempt to understand communication in medieval society. The sources are a prism representing not only medieval reality, but a glimpse into constructed societal expectations of a wife.

ENDNOTES

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² Joan W. Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *The American Historical Review*, 91.5 (Dec., 1986): 1053–75; Joan W. Scott, “Millennial Fantasies: The Future of ‘Gender’ in the 21st Century,” in *Gender: Die Tücken einer Kategorie. Joan W. Scott, Geschichte und Politik—Beiträge zum Symposium anlässlich der Verleihung des Hans-Sigrist-Preises 1999 der Universität Bern an Joan W. Scott*, ed. Claudia Honegger and Caroline Arni (Zurich: Chronos Verlag, 2001), 39–64.

³ Sandy Bardsley, “Sin, Speech, and Scolding in Late Medieval England,” in *Fama: The Politics of Talk and Reputation in Medieval Europe*, eds. Thelma Fenster and Daniel Lord Smail (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 145–164; Sandy Bardsley, *Venomous Tongues: Speech and Gender in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); Sara M. Butler, *The Language of Abuse: Marital Violence in Later Medieval England* (Boston: Brill Press, 2007). In examining the relationship between speech and gender in the Middle Ages Bardsley argues “views of female speech mattered because those whose speech was disparaged lost social and cultural power as a result.” Bardsley, *Venomous Tongues*, 2.

⁴ Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” 1069.

⁵ For the more information on social components of marriage and the civic regulations regarding the practice, see David d’Avray, *Medieval Marriage: Symbolism and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Charles Donahue, Jr., *Law, Marriage and Society in the later Middle Ages: Arguments about Marriage in Five Courts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Frederick Pederson, *Marriage Disputes in Medieval England* (London: A&C Black, 2000); Shannon McSheffrey, *Marriage, Sex, and Civic Culture in Late Medieval London* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

⁶ Margaret Hallissey, *Clean Maids, True Wives, Steadfast Widows: Chaucer’s Women and Medieval Codes of Conduct* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993).

⁷ For extensive analysis of the various medieval theological debates on the sacrament of marriage, see Seamus P. Heaney, *The Development of the Sacramentality of Marriage from Anselm of Laon to Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1963). For an indispensable reference regarding canon law and Christian society, see James A. Brundage, *Law, Sex and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988). For a series of case studies on how courts applied the medieval canon law of marriage, see Charles Donahue Jr., *Law, Marriage, and Society in the later Middle Ages: Arguments about Marriage in Five Courts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). For a discussion on twelfth-century legal and religious changes in the definition of

marriage, see Dyan Elliott, *The Bride of Christ Goes to Hell*, Chapters 4 and 5.

⁸ Marriage was first officially declared a sacrament in 1184 at the Council of Verona as part of the condemnation of the Cathars. Ruth Mazo Karras, “The Christianization of Medieval Marriage,” in *Christianity and Culture in the Middle Ages: Essays to Honor John Van Engen*, eds. David C. Mengel, and Lisa Wolverton (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014), 3–24. Penny S. Gold, “The Marriage of Mary and Joseph in the Twelfth-century Ideology of Marriage,” in *Sexual Practices and the Medieval Church*, eds. Vern L. Bullough and James Brundage (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1982), 102–117; Irven M. Resnick, “Marriage in Medieval Culture: Consent Theory and the Case of Joseph and Mary,” *Church History* 69.2 (Jun., 2000): 350–371.

⁹ Thomas Chobham, *Summa Confessorum*, 375. See also Carla Casagrande, “The Protected Woman,” trans. Clarissa Botsford, in *A History of Women in the West II: Silences of the Middle Ages*, ed. Christiane Klapisch-Zuber (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992), 70–104.

¹⁰ One example of a clerical source that offered such guidelines was *Robert of Brunne’s “Handlyng Synne,”* ed. Frederick J. Furnivall, part 1, EETS, o.s. 119 (London: Oxford University Press, 1901), 58. Derek Neal views medieval speech and gender as mutually essential to understanding each other, and that the gendering of speech was a pervasive element of late medieval England. Derek Neal, “Husbands and Priests: Masculinity, Sexuality, and Defamation in Late Medieval England,” in *The Hands of the Tongue*, ed. Edwin D. Craun (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007), 185–208. Edwin Craun addresses clerical efforts to manage speech. See Edwin D. Craun, *Lies, Slander and Obscenity in Medieval English Literature: Pastoral Rhetoric and the Deviant Speaker* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Richard Helmholz, *Marriage Litigation in Medieval England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974); L.R. Poos, “The Heavy-Handed Marriage Counsellor: Regulating Marriage in Some Later-Medieval English Local Ecclesiastical-Court Jurisdiction,” *American Journal of Legal History* 39 (1995): 291–309.

¹¹ G.G. Coulton, *The Medieval Scene: An Informal Introduction to the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 35–36.

¹² Butler, *The Language of Abuse*, 259.

¹³ The fourteenth-century *Book of the Knight of the Tower* also provided similar advice, and expressed concerns for women’s behavior in the home and expressions of vanity. The author, Geoffroy de la Tour Landry IV (1320–1391), was a widow and authored the manual for his daughters. This moral treatise was in part to provide the advice that would have come from his late wife, as well as to register his own concerns about his daughters’ welfare and appearance in French society when receiving suitors. See Rebecca Barnhouse, *The Book of the Knight of the Tower: Manners for Young Medieval Women* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

¹⁴ Some of the most popular examples of French conduct literature, including *The Good Wife of Paris*, made their way to England in the late fifteenth century, when the prolific printer William Caxton made these texts more accessible to a larger audience. Therefore, we can also anticipate more overlap from those who read conduct literature and saw the *Corpus Christi* cycles: Gina L. Greco and Christine M. Rose, *Good Wife’s Guide (Le Ménagier de Paris): A Medieval Household Book* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 45.

¹⁵ Ibid., 142.

¹⁶ *The Good Wife's Guide*, 142.

¹⁷ *The Good Wife's Guide*, 104.

¹⁸ Felicity Riddy, "Mother Knows Best: Reading Social Change in a Courtesy Text," *Speculum* 71 (1996): 66–86.

¹⁹ *The Good Wife's Guide*, 77. On medieval punishments for different speech violations see Bettina Lindorfer, "Peccatum Linguae and the Punishment of Speech Violations in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times," in *Speaking in the Medieval World*, ed. Jean E. Godsall-Myers (Boston: Brill, 2003), 23–42.

²⁰ *How the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter*, in *The Babees Book: Medieval Manners for the Young Now First Done into Modern English from the Texts of Dr. F. J. Furnivall*, ed. Edith Rickert (London: Chatto and Windus, 1923), 31–42; Christine M. Rose, "What Every Goodwoman Wants: The Parameters of Desire in *Le Menagier de Paris/The Goodman of Paris*," *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia: an International Review of English Studies* 38 (2002): 393–410.

²¹ Bardsley, "Sin, Speech, and Scolding in Late Medieval England," 146.

²² Kathleen Ashley, "Medieval Courtesy Literature and Dramatic Mirrors of Conduct," in *The Ideology of Culture*, eds. Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse (New York: Methuen, 1987), 25.

²³ In 1264, Pope Urban IV sanctioned *Corpus Christi* as a post-Pentecost feast in the papal bull *Transiturus de hoc mundo*. The papal bull was reaffirmed at the Council of Vienne in 1311 by Pope Clement V. For more on the development of this feast day and its cultural implications, see Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

²⁴ Clerics assisted the scribe-compilers, but they did not explicitly author the texts. Andrea Buboc, "Lay Performances of Work and Salvation in the York Cycle," *Comparative Drama* 43.2 (Summer 2009): 247–271. Kate Normington addresses the "exclusive male hierarchy" who authorized and produced the plays, as well as the impact of understanding medieval women in light of this in "Giving Voice to Women: Teaching Feminist Approaches to the Mystery Plays," *College Literature* 28.2 (Spring, 2001): 130–154. For more on the production and staging of the plays, see Meg Twycross, "The theatricality of medieval English plays," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre, Second Edition*, eds. Richard Beadle and Alan J. Fletcher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 26–74.

²⁵ This moveable cycle was most likely rooted in East Anglia, near the popular shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham. Peter Meredith, "Introduction," in *The Mary Play: from the N. Town Manuscript*, ed. Peter Meredith (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997); *The N-Town Plays*, ed. Douglas Sugano (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007).

²⁶ Penny Granger, *The N-Town Play: Drama and Liturgy in Medieval East Anglia* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2009), 30.

²⁷ Hallissey, *Clean Maids*, 3.

²⁸ Solberg, "Madonna, Whore," 203.

²⁹ *The Protoevangelium of James* sections 4, 7, 8–9, 15, in *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation*, ed. and trans. J.K. Elliott (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 58–63.

³⁰ Sherry Reames, "Legends of St. Anne, Mother of the Virgin Mary: Introduction," in *Middle English Legends of Women Saints* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2003), 249.

³¹ "Agens the lawe wyl I nevyr be,
But mannys felachep shal nevyr folwe me!
I wyl levyn evyr in chastyté
Be the grace of Goddys wylle!"

N-Town, "The Marriage of Mary and Joseph," lines 36–39. N-Town translation comes from Alexandra F. Johnston, "N-Town: A Modernization," accessed May 30, 2016, <http://homes.chass.utoronto.ca/~ajohnsto/frntmt.html>.

³² "Clenesse and chastyté myn hert owth." Ibid., line 70.

³³ "Her wytt is grett, and that is sene
In clenness to levyn in Godys servise.
No man her blame non her tene."
Ibid., lines 82–84.

³⁴ "Shuld I now in age begynne to dote?
If I her chyde, she wolde clowte my cote,
Blere myn ey and pyke out a mote.
And thus oftyntymes, it is sene."

Ibid., lines 281–284.

³⁵ Ashley, "Medieval Courtesy Literature," 27.

³⁶ "Her wardeyn and kepere wyl I evyr be." N-Town, "The Marriage of Mary and Joseph," line 290.

³⁷ "This holyst virgyn shalt thou maryn now." N-Town, "The Marriage of Mary and Joseph," line 298.

³⁸ Emma Lipton, *Affections of the Mind: The Politics of Sacramental Marriage in Late Medieval English Literature*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 116.

³⁹ "Here is the holyst matremony that evyr was in this werd!" N-Town, "The Marriage of Mary and Joseph," line 331.

⁴⁰ "Lete me levyn as a clene mayd.

I shal be trewe, be not dysmayd,
Both terme, tyme, and tyde."
Ibid., lines 328–330.

⁴¹ "And as we redyn in old sage
Many man is sclepyr of tonge.
Therefore evyl langage for to swage,
That youre good fame may lest longe."
Ibid., lines 346–349.

⁴² "I pray thee, Mary, my swete chylde:
Be lowe and buxhum, meke and mylde,
Sad and sobyr and nothyng wylde,
And Goddys blyssyng thou have."
Ibid., lines 392–395.

⁴³ "Kepe thee clene, my jentyl spowse

And all thin maydenys in thin howse,
That evyl langage I here not rowse,
For hese love that all hath wrought.”
Ibid., lines 470–474.

⁴⁴ “Gracyous God, my maydenhed save,
Evyr clene in chastyté.”
Ibid., lines 485–486.

⁴⁵ Cynthia Hahn, “Joseph Will Perfect, Mary Enlighten And Jesus Save Thee’: The Holy Family as Marriage Model in the Médrode Triptych,” *The Art Bulletin* 68.1 (Mar., 1986): 54–66; Barbara Newman, “Intimate Pieties: Holy Trinity and Holy Family in the Late Middle Ages,” *Religion & Literature*, 31.1 (Spring, 1999): 77–101.

⁴⁶ Lipton, *Affections of the Mind*, 118–128.

⁴⁷ Rosemary Woolf, *The English Mystery Plays* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1972), 171.

⁴⁸ This is a trope in the French fabliaux tradition. Joseph L. Baird and Lorraine Y. Baird, “Fabliau Form and the Hegge ‘Joseph’s Return,’” *The Chaucer Review* 8.2 (1973): 159–169; John DuVal and Raymond Eichmann, *Cuckolds, Clerics, & Countrymen: Medieval French Fabliaux* (Fayetteville, AK: University of Arkansas Press, 1982); Katherine Adams Brown, *Boccaccio’s Fabliaux: Medieval Short Stories and the Function of Reversal* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2014).

⁴⁹ “Of grete mornynge may I me mene.” York, “Joseph’s Troubles about Mary,” line 1. All translations of the York Cycle are my own.

⁵⁰ Sandy Bardsley, *Women’s Roles in the Middle Ages* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007), 100–102.

⁵¹ “Forthy nedes noght swilke wordis wilde
At carpe to me dissayvandy.
We, why gab ye me swa
And feynes swilk fantassy?
Allas, me is full wa,
For dule why ne myght I dy?”

York, “Joseph’s Troubles about Mary,” lines 140–144.

⁵² “Sir, it is youres and Goddis will.” Ibid., line 168.

⁵³ “With somkyn gawde has hir beguiled.” Ibid., line 137.

⁵⁴ Tom Flanigan, “Everyman or Saint? Doubting Joseph in the *Corpus Christi* Cycles,” *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England*, Vol.8 (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996), 33.

⁵⁵ “Nay, thou spekis now agayne kynde.” York, “Joseph’s Troubles about Mary,” line 209.

⁵⁶ “Yha, Marie, drawe thyn hande.” Ibid., line 223.

⁵⁷ “Forgiffnesse, sir, late be for shame;
Slike wordis suld all gud women lakke.”
Ibid., lines 296–297.

⁵⁸ Theresa Coletti, “Purity and Danger: The Paradox of Mary’s Body and the En-gendering of the Infancy Narrative in the English Mystery Cycles,” in *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature*, eds. Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury (Philadelphia: University

of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 73.

⁵⁹ William Fitzhenry, “The N-Town Plays and the Politics of Metatheater,” *Studies in Philology* 100.1 (2003): 33.

⁶⁰ “Sekyr, sere, beth nowth dysmayde,
Ryth aftyr the wyl of Goddys sonde.”
N-Town, “Joseph’s Doubt,” lines 23–24.

⁶¹ “That semyth evyl, I am afrayd.” N-Town, “Joseph’s Doubt,” line 25.

⁶² Ibid., line 41.

⁶³ Ibid., line 130–131.

⁶⁴ Joseph says to Mary, “Youre swete fete, now lete me kys!” Mary responds: “Nay, lett be my fete, not tho ye take!

My mowthe, ye may kys, iwys,
And welcom onto me!”

Ibid., lines 186–188. It is possible that this gesture represents the kiss of peace, the performative gesture that had become ritualized and widely utilized in both religious and legal customs during the high and late Middle Ages. Kiril Petkov, *The kiss of peace: Ritual, self, and society in the high and late medieval west* (Boston: Brill, 2003); Katherine L. Jansen, “*Pro bono pacis*. Crime and Dispute Resolution in Late Medieval Florence: the Evidence of Notarial Peace Contracts,” *Speculum* 88.2 (April 2013): 427–456.

⁶⁵ “Wherfore I pray yow, amende youre mon

...

For unknowlage, he is desesyd.

That he myght knowe thee ful perfyght.”

N-Town, “Joseph’s Return,” lines 208, 211–212.

⁶⁶ In Middle English, the angel chastises Joseph, “Joseph, Joseph, thu wepyst shyrlle!” N-Town, “Joseph’s Return,” line 147. Bardsley’s “Sin, Speech, and Scolding in Late Medieval England,” points to both ecclesiastical and secular texts in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries that reflect increasing concern about the power of speech, drawing attention to gendered terms like “shrill” and “scold.”

⁶⁷ Fitzhenry, “Politics of Metatheater,” 27.

⁶⁸ Cindy K. Carlson, “Like a Virgin: Mary and Her Doubters in the N-Town Cycle,” in *Constructions of Widowhood and Virginity in the Middle Ages*, eds. Cindy L. Carlson and Angela Jane Weisl (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 199–217; Alison M. Hunt, “Maculating Mary: The Detractors of the N-Town Cycle’s ‘Trial of Joseph and Mary.’” *Philological Quarterly* 73.1 (1994): 11–29.

⁶⁹ The term “backbiter” materialized in the thirteenth century to describe those who circulated false or cruel rumors. Bardsley, “Sin, Speech, and Scolding in Late Medieval England,” 149.

⁷⁰ “He sesyd nat tyll he had her asayd!

A, nay, nay, wel wers she hath hym payd!”

N-Town, “The Trial of Mary and Joseph,” lines 52–53.

⁷¹ “Ye be acursyd, so hir for to defame!

...

Of hir to speke suche velany!”

Ibid., lines 75, 77.

⁷² “Ya, that old shrewe Joseph.”

Ibid., line 225.

⁷³ Mary is referred to as a “wench” in lines 99, 103, 127. Joseph is called a “cokolde” in line 98 and then a “kokewolde” in line 105 (alternative spellings). N-Town, “The Trial of Mary and Joseph.”

⁷⁴ “In feyth, I suppose that this woman slepte

Withowtyn all coverte whyll that it ded snowe

And a flake therof into hyr mowthe crepte,

And therof the chylde in hyr wombe doth growe!”

N-Town, “The Trial of Mary and Joseph,” lines 273–276. The French fabliaux, *L’Enfant qui fu remis au soleil*, tells a familiar story of a woman who became impregnated by a snowflake, and was also retold in Middle English. See Nicole Nolan Sidhu, *Indecent Exposure: Gender, Politics, and Obscene Comedy in Middle English Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

⁷⁵ Dyan Elliott, *Spiritual Marriage: Sexual Abstinence in Medieval Wedlock* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 272.

⁷⁶ “Sche is, for me, a trewe clene mayde.” N-Town, “The Trial of Mary and Joseph,” line 226.

⁷⁷ “Se, this bolde bysmare wolde presume.” N-Town, “The Trial of Mary and Joseph,” line 265.

⁷⁸ Greg Walker, “The Cultural Work of Early Drama,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre, Second Edition*, eds. Richard Beadle and Alan J. Fletcher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 81.

⁷⁹ McSheffrey, *Marriage, Sex, and Civic Culture in Late Medieval London*, 175.

⁸⁰ The communal behavior in the pageant is like a medieval *charivari*, a ritual defined by “its boisterous mixture of playfulness and cruelty,” where communal social pressure is inflicted on a chaste household. Elliott, *Spiritual Marriage*, 60, 272–273; Natalie Zemon Davis, “Charivari, Honor, and Community in Seventeenth-Century Lyon and Geneva,” in *Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle: Rehearsals Toward a Theory of Cultural Performance*, ed. John J. MacAloon (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1984), 42; Natalie Zemon Davis, “The Rites of Violence,” in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), 152–187; Natalie Zemon Davis, “The Reason of Misrule,” in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), 97–123; Richard J. Moll, “Staging Disorder: Charivari in the N-Town Cycle,” *Comparative Drama* 35.2 (Summer 2001): 145–161.

⁸¹ Carlson, “Mary’s obedience and power in the Trial of Mary and Joseph,” 351.

⁸² The Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 eliminated the necessity of this form of trial. Canon 18: “Neither shall anyone in judicial tests or ordeals by hot or cold water or hot iron bestow any blessing; the earlier prohibitions in regard to dueling remain in force.” From H. J. Schroeder, *Disciplinary Decrees of the General Councils: Text, Translation and Commentary*, (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1937), 250.

⁸³ “I trespacyd nevyr with erthely wyght;

Therof I hope thurowe Goddys sonde

Here to be purgyd before youre syght,

From all synne clene, lyke as myn husbonde.

Take me the botel out of youre honde.

Here shal I drynke beforn youre face

Abowth this awtere than shal I fonde,

Sefne tymes to go, by Godys grace!”

N-Town, “The Trial of Mary and Joseph,” lines 257–264.

⁸⁴ “God, as I nevyr knew of mannys maculacyon

But evyr have lyved in trew virginité,

Send me this day thin holy consolacyon

That all this fayr peple my clenness may se!

O gracyous God, as thu hast chose me

For to be thi modyr of me to be born,

Save thi tabernacle that clene is kepte for thee,

Which now am put at repref and skorn.”

Ibid., lines 301–308.

⁸⁵ Carlson, “Like a Virgin,” 213.

⁸⁶ “Now God forgeve yow all yowre trespace

And also forgeve yow all defamacyon

That ye have sayd, both more and lesse,

To myn hynderawnce and maculacyon.”

N-Town, “The Trial of Mary and Joseph,” lines 341–344.

⁸⁷ “We all to yow lowly incline.” Ibid., line 355.

⁸⁸ Carlson, “Mary’s obedience and power in the Trial of Mary and Joseph,” 348.

⁸⁹ While the pageants featured the marriage of Mary and Joseph as one sometimes steeped in conflict, it should be noted that the *Corpus Christi* dramas did highlight elements of love and compassion between Mary and Joseph, particularly in the pageants surrounding the birth of Christ, such as “The Nativity,” and “The Flight into Egypt.” Old issues of contention are pushed to the side, and love is the predominant emotion expressed. Clarissa W. Atkinson, *The Oldest Vocation: Christian Motherhood in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 101–143.

⁹⁰ Coletti, “Purity and Danger,” 65–95.

⁹¹ Chester, “Christ and the Doctors,” lines 307–308.

⁹² Ibid., lines 313–314.

⁹³ “Christ and the Doctors,” in *The Wakefield Pageants in the Towneley cycle*, ed. Arthur C. Cawley (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1958), line 289.

⁹⁴ Natalie Zemon Davis, “Women On Top,” in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), 124–151.

⁹⁵ Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York: Knopf, 1976), xxi.

⁹⁶ Early modern images and devotional materials on the Holy Family emphasized Joseph and Mary’s companionship, part of the broader early modern trend of highlighting increased emphasis on the family. See Lawrence Stone, *Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500–1800* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977); Steven Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled: Family Life in Reformation Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983).

⁹⁷ Elliott, *Spiritual Marriage*, 165.

⁹⁸ Kim Phillips, *Medieval Maidens: Young Women and Gender in England, 1270–1540* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 196.

⁹⁹ Such opportunities for economic power and occupational leadership were present in some economic situations, see Judith Bennett, *Ale, Beer and Brewsters in England: Women's Work in a Changing World, 1300–1600* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); P.J.P. Goldberg, *Women, Work, and Life Cycle in a Medieval Economy: Women in York and Yorkshire c.1300–1520* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

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Book Reviews

JOANNA BOURKE. *The Story of Pain: From Prayer to Painkillers.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

We all think we know what pain is, but has humanity continually experienced it in the same way? Joanna Bourke addresses this question in *The Story of Pain* (2014), revealing the diverse and changing manner in which sufferers have articulated, recorded, and felt pain within the Anglophone world since the eighteenth century. Building on Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* (1985), Bourke distinguishes herself by considering how to define pain as a category of analysis.¹ Whereas Scarry's approach portrayed historical actors as *in pain* when they claimed as much themselves, Bourke suggests this older framework reified "Pain" with a problematic ontological presence (4). Rather than seeing pain as an independent agent—something that is "done to" the individual—the book calls for a perception of pain as a "type of event" (5). For Bourke, pain is

a recurring phenomenon made public through language or gesture and shaped by social conditions. One can only be *in pain* through the process of articulation and naming. Class, gender, race, age, and other factors besides, fracture these pain events and their responses.

Though synthesising her approach with the history of the body and broader social, medical, and scientific trends, Bourke is indebted to the methodology of linguistic analysis. The initial three chapters focus on the language of pain, showing how devices such as metaphor and simile circumvent difficulties in description. Whereas historical actors draw on a large spectrum of expressions for love or pleasure, talking about pain, as Virginia Woolf and others lamented, proved much harder. Bourke details the dominant metaphors used to address this problem, including portraying pain as a "weapon" or a "temperature" (65), showing how they changed over time in relation to shifting conceptualisations of the body. If the sick often spoke in terms of "ebbs and flows" when articulating pain in the eighteenth century, reflecting the dominant humoral physiological model, these descriptions were replaced as the nineteenth century progressed.

¹ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).