Noah's Uxor: A Shrew Worth Redeeming

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Abstract:
This essay seeks to explore how humor is used in the medieval biblical dramas concerning Noah's ark to present a wife who is truculent but worthy of being saved. The character refuses to follow a typical medieval view of husband-wife hierarchy and instead asserts herself in a way that would be unacceptable to most husbands. However, because her tyrannous behavior is slapstick rather than offensive, her role as an unruly woman becomes more acceptable. The comic trope of the shrew allows her to break the conventional role of the wife, but still be saved from the flood.

1 When Lucy Ricardo sabotaged her husband's show in an attempt to perform in the show, everyone, with the possible exception of Ricky, laughed. Likewise, when Roseanne Arnold verbally abused anyone who tried to exert any authority over her, the response was again laughter. The trope of the shrew as a humorous character stretches far back in literary history, even arguably as far back as Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, where the wives withheld sex until the men ended their war. While shrewish behavior was rarely condoned in everyday life, in literature it was usually tied to comedy, and therefore the shrew became fun. Along with making her a sympathetic character, humor also allowed the shrew to safely overthrow widely held conventions, particularly that of the husband's control over his wife.

2 In the Middle Ages, one popular depiction of the shrew was Noah's wife, known by the Latin term for wife, Uxor. In several plays during this time period, Uxor shows herself to be a shrew, refusing to board the ark, insulting Noah, and physically striking Noah. This truculence, however, is humorous, so instead of being forbidden to enter the ship, she becomes a popular character. Instead of a threat to the community, her rebellion becomes acceptable, at least within the drama.

3 Medieval communities of England worked, played and prayed together. Religious festivals were celebrated throughout the year, and often involved elaborate rituals and entertainments. These festivals also had a social impact, using humor to develop social commentary and criticism. Medieval drama had a large role in these festivities, presenting, among other things, stories from the Bible which could, at times, allow the playwright to subvert contemporary conventions by placing his concerns in ancient biblical times.

4 Corpus Christi cycles started in Europe in the second half of the fourteenth century as a combination of religious ritual, education, and festival celebration. These plays were largely run by guilds, who funded and performed them. Taking place over multiple days, these cycles

traced salvation history from Creation to Doomsday. While educating a largely illiterate audience, these cycles also entertained, working humor in amongst the biblical drama. These cycles proved so popular that they lasted over 200 years, despite the amount of funding and time that went into producing them. The plays were performed outdoors on stage wagons that stopped at various points throughout the city, making the performances available to the entire populace.

5 Of the medieval cycles, only four, in addition to several single plays and a list of plays belonging to the Beverly cycle, remain. The surviving cycles, Chester, York, Wakefield[1], and Coventry, and the Beverly list give a clear view of the plays thought most important to a medieval audience. The plays, or multi-play pageants, that appear in the four cycles and the list are The Fall of Lucifer The Creation and Fall of Man Cain and Abel Noah and the Flood Abraham and Isaac The Nativity The Raising of Lazarus The Passion The Resurrection Doomsday (Kolve 51) These plays form the core of salvation history for a medieval audience. The plays either directly portray the salvation attained, such as in the crucifixion sequence, or provide a figural type for salvation, a character such as Abraham who prefigures Christ.

6 The play of particular interest to this study is the play concerning Noah and the Flood. The biblical passage concerning this event is rather brief, barely mentioning Noah's wife. In the Coventry cycle, also known as the N-Town cycle, Noah's wife's role is largely to prefigure Mary, the mother of Jesus, an obedient devotional female (Fitzgerald 351). In the remaining three cycles, however, as well as in the Newcastle fragment, Noah's wife assumes a very prominent role, that of the shrew. Despite her role as a shrew, however, she is one of only eight humans saved from the Deluge. This study will look at the depiction of the shrewish wife, and how the playwrights used humor to present a shrew worth saving.

7 Natalie Zemon Davis characterizes unruly women in the medieval and early modern period as falling into three types: "Women who are happily given over to the sway of their bodily senses or who are using every ruse they can to prevail over men" such as the Wife of Bath; women who have "license to be a social critic" such as Erasmus's Folly; and women who have "a temporary period of dominion, which is ended only after she has said or done something to undermine authority" such as Shakespeare's Rosalind (134-6). In the Noah plays, Uxor takes on all three roles, physically beating her husband to gain control, criticizing the damage idle men do to their families, and, on occasion, returning to the role of quiet wife after overthrowing Noah's *maistrie*, his authority over her as a husband. In all cases, the use

[1] It should be noted that the unity of the Wakefield cycle, also known as the Towneley cycle, has been called into question. It is clear that the cycle was composed by different authors, but Barbara Palmer has argued that the cycle should be seen more as a mosaic of plays than a unified cycle, based on city records available.

of comedy allows her to do such things and still be one of the few humans saved from the flood.

Background on the Shrew[2]

8 The origins of the characterization of Noah's wife as a shrew have intrigued scholars for nearly a century. In 1930, Millicent Carey published a book on the Wakefield plays in which she tries to account for the presence of the shrew in the Noah tradition. She says that the character did not derive from Biblical or Jewish tradition, nor was it present in contemporary non-dramatic literature, with the exception of Chaucer's "Miller's Tale" which likely derived its shrew from the cycle plays. She posits a possible development that draws from the relatives who mock Noah in the *Cursor Mundi* and *Cornish Creation*[3] plays, the misogynistic tradition in ballads, French farces and fabliaux, and instructional materials for wives, as well as a parallel between Noah and his wife and Adam and Eve from the same cycles.

9 Katherine Garvin, however, argues that evidence of a shrewish Uxor before the dramas does exist in a manuscript illumination. Caedmonian MS Junius XI, a text of Genesis now in Oxford's Bodleian Library, contains an illustration which seems to present a scene not described in the biblical text. Garvin quotes the description given by Israel Gollancz, who edited an early text of the manuscript, "On the right hand, one of the women, whom we may assume to be Noah's wife, seems to be unwilling to mount the ladder, and is expostulating with one of the three sons" (89). As the illustration is usually dated from the eleventh century, Garvin argues that this provides evidence of the presence of the tradition of the shrewish wife in England several centuries before the dramas.

10 Anna Jean Mill continues the discussion by looking at possible shrew traditions from other parts of the world. Drawing on art and folklore, she found a tradition of a shrewish Uxor, particularly one tied to Satan. She looked at religious traditions, such as the Gnostic *Book of Noria* and the Koran and other Mohammedan traditions, non-Noah folk traditions of the Wogul (Australian aboriginal peoples) that influenced the Noah story of the "'late Russian' redaction of the *Revelations of Methodius*" (617), and the Weltchronik of Enikel from Vienna. She also explored artwork that references the shrewish tradition such as

[2] It is important to note that shrew is being used with its current meaning of an unruly woman, particularly a wife who exerts control over her husband through verbal or physical violence. In the Middle Ages, the term referred to any villainous person, male or female.

[3] Cursor Mundi is a Middle English poem, written about 1300, that presents the salvation history of the world. The Cornish plays are a cycle of plays that, while similar to the Corpus Christi plays, do not have the same scope and therefore are not considered Corpus Christi plays by Kolve.

the illustrations of Queen Mary's Psalter from the early 14th century and Swedish church art from the 14th and 15th centuries. These sources present various aspects of the shrew tradition, from alliances with Satan to simple truculence. While widespread and sometimes occurring after the plays were written, these varied references do indicate the existence of a folk legend from which the various works drew.

11 Though her origins may be unclear, one factor concerning Uxor is very clear. She is only one of eight people (the other seven being her husband, three sons, and three daughters-in-law) from all of humanity who are saved from the great Flood. The character develops over time, and through this development Uxor is made humorous so that she can be saved, despite her conflict with Noah.

Newcastle

12 Because "The Newcastle Play" only survives in fragmentary form, analyzing it presents many difficulties. There are no manuscript copies of the play, and, while records identify twelve plays that were part of the Newcastle cycle, there were an additional ten to fifteen plays, the names and subjects of which are unknown, in the cycle.

13 The background of this play is the least available of all the Noah plays; furthermore, the least developed of all of the shrewish Uxors is that of the Newcastle fragment. It is in this play that she is least humorous and therefore least sympathetic. Millicent Carey refers to this play as a fragment that offers the Uxor character no possibility for development (90). In this play, Uxor does not act alone, for she is a friend and ally of the devil.

14 "The Newcastle Play," like most of the other Noah plays, starts with God deciding to destroy all of humanity, except Noah's family, because of humanity's sinfulness. He sends an angel to tell Noah to build the ark, which he is hesitant to do because of his age, 600 years, and his inexperience in shipbuilding, but he does finally agree to do it. Immediately after this, Deabolus enters and has his own talk, this time with Uxor, claiming, "In faith she is my friend" (111). Despite this friendship, Deabolus must resort to deception to convince Uxor to do his bidding, telling her that following Noah's instructions will cost her and her children their lives. Uxor, believing Deabolus is telling the truth, drugs Noah to discover what he has been doing, and then points out that he is no shipwright and curses him. He returns to his ship to finish building it with the Angel's help, and the play ends abruptly, with no reconciliation, but with a final curse from Deabolus on humanity.

15 There are several problems that arise when analyzing "The Newcastle Play." First is the fact that the earliest surviving copy is from the eighteenth century—no manuscript copies

survive, so we do not know if any Reformation revisions are in the drama. Furthermore, the play is very short and ends abruptly; the other Noah plays depict the flood and a reconciliation between Noah and his wife.[4] Lastly, we have no context for this play. While Carey may suggest that the presence of a devil-tempter may be an attempt to create a parallel with the Adam and Eve play, without the actual play of Adam and Eve, it is difficult to see further significance of the parallel.

16 Despite these problems, Uxor is obviously a comical character. She has several ironic lines, such as referring to the devil as "*bewschere*" (good sir) because she doesn't recognize him and asking Noah, "Who devil made thee a wright?/God give him evil to fayre" ("What devil made you a shipwright?/God give him evil to do" 172-3) when, in fact, God made him a wright and the devil is trying to give them evil. However, because of her lack of development and the lack of any reconciliation scene, how she does eventually get aboard the ark, much less why she is allowed to, remains a mystery.

Chester

17 The Chester mystery cycle survives in four manuscripts, the earliest dating from the late 16th century. The cycle very likely ran during the late fourteenth century, although the earliest surviving reference to it is 1422. This cycle consists of twenty-four plays which would have run over three days. The Noah play, "Noah's Flood," is the third play of the cycle and was performed by the guilds of Waterleaders and Drawers in Dye.

18 This play differs considerably from the less developed Newcastle play. As in York and Wakefield, Noah's wife acts alone—there is no devil on stage to tempt her. As with the Newcastle play, "Noah's Flood" opens with God's monologue about the sinfulness of humanity and the need to punish the world. However, this speech is given to Noah and his family: "God speaketh unto Noe standing without the arke with all his familye (initial stage direction, p. 42). Therefore, in this play, Uxor is aware of the situation from the very beginning. Along with the rest of the family, Uxor helps with the building and provisioning of the ship, although she admits her help is limited because "women bynne weake" ("women are weak") (67). Suddenly, for no apparent reason, Uxor becomes obdurate, refusing to board the just finished ship: "In fayth, Noe, I had as leeve thou slepte./For all thy Frenyshe fare,/I will not doe after thy reade." (99-101 In faith, Noah, I would prefer you slept./For all your frantic activity/I will not do what you want.) She is reconciled with Noah only when he

[4] The York cycle does divide the Noah story into two plays. The first deals with the building of the ark, and the second, which includes the reconciliation, focuses on the flood. It is possible that Newcastle also had a second play that dealt with the flood.

declares, “thou arte mastere” (111). Norman Simms makes the argument that this rebellion was caused by Noah’s own mistake as God had not ordered them to board and the animals themselves are not aboard yet, but Uxor says nothing to this effect. Nonetheless, God does order the loading of the ship with the animals after this point, and the entire family, Uxor included, help with the process.

19 Once the animals are on board, Uxor rebels once again. Noah tells her to board, showing his impatience with her for delaying and indicating that such rebellion is not a new characteristic: “Wyffe, come in. Why standes thou there?/Thou arte ever frowarde; that dare I sweare” (“Wife, come in. Why do you stand there?/You are forever brazen, that I dare swear” 194-5). She refuses, but unlike her first refusal, this time she has a reason:

> But 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.
> The loved me full well, by Christe.
> But thou wilte let them into this chiste,
> elles rowe forthe, Noe, when thy liste,
> and gett thee a newe wyfe. (201-208)
> (Unless I have my every one of my friends,
> I will not go one foot further.
> They shall not drown, by St. John,
> If I can save their lives.
> They loved me very well, by Christ.
> Either you will let them into this ark,
> or row forth, Noah, when you like,
> And get yourself a new wife.)

While Noah’s concern is to get himself and his family aboard, Uxor is also concerned for her friends who will drown in the flood.

20 Uxor’s reasoning has sparked debate among scholars, some seeing it as a sign of worldliness, others as more caring and humane than Noah. Simms argues that the good friends, who then enter the play, lamenting their impending doom, represent local guilds and also all of humanity. He sees the wine they drink and share with Uxor as prefiguring communion wine as well as representing the *compotatio*, or ritual shared drink, of the guilds. Christina Fitzgerald, however, sees Uxor’s connection with her friends as representing the corruption of the town; the sale of drink was one occupation women were allowed, therefore the drink represents one source of power women had outside of the local patriarchy. Virginia Schaefer Carroll argues that the concern for her friends could give Uxor a kind of generous spirit not afforded Noah, but that the gossips’ speech/song, which involves their drinking, “reveals the motives of Noah’s wife, reducing her reluctance from magnanimity to petty

selfishness" (86). These arguments, however, ignore the action of the drama. The gossips would likely have entered from the audience. While Noah and his sons and daughters-in-law would be on the wagon/stage, Uxor and the gossips would be on the ground level with the audience. Thus, the townsfolk would have seen Uxor reluctant to leave them behind; the destruction of all of humanity would include the audience as well. Certainly Uxor's disobedience would have been seen as wrong, especially since she heard the command of God herself, but a medieval audience would likely have felt great sympathy for the woman who was arguing for mercy for them.

21 Uxor remains stubborn, refusing to board without her friends, so her sons physically carry her aboard. She then, in response to his welcome, strikes Noah. While the blow releases her aggression and adds humor to the play, we must note that her blow is still disobedient, and yet the playwright sees no need for her to be punished. The blow is directly in response to her being dragged on board against her will, but for the audience, it likely provided a "punishment" for not being concerned about their fate—it is easy to see a medieval audience cheering on such a blow.

22 The reconciliation in the play is not as clear as it is in York and Wakefield. In fact, Uxor's role in the play is over once she strikes Noah and he accepts the blow. The remainder of the play consists of Noah and God speaking, re-establishing the covenant between God and man and ignoring that between husband and wife.

York

23 The York cycle, which dates from the latter half of the fourteenth century, consists of fifty plays in one surviving manuscript. The earliest recorded performance occurred in 1376, and the cycle continued to be presented until 1572. This cycle is the only surviving cycle in which the Noah episode is divided into two plays, "The Shipwrights: The Building of the Ark" and "The Fishers and Mariners: The Flood."

24 Uxor does not appear in the first play, "The Shipwrights: The Building of the Ark," in which God again laments the sinfulness of humanity and decides to send a flood to destroy them. Uxor's absence does become significant in that, unlike the Chester play, she is kept in ignorance in this play—she is not present when God sends his commands. Furthermore, when the second play opens, Noah is in his ark, talking to his sons and daughters-in-law, and his wife is still not present, thus implying that even the children were better informed than she was of the oncoming flood. The second play opens with Noah reviewing the actions of the previous play and then sending his son to fetch his wife, whom he had previously referred to

as his "worthy wiffe" (5). At first, in typical Uxor fashion, she refuses to go, telling her son "And telle hym I wol come no narre…We bowrde al wrange, I wene" (And tell him I will not come near…We play idle games, I think 62,66). Eventually, she does decide to go, but only because she wants to know what Noah's been doing. When she reaches the ark, she not only refuses to board, but she declares she will return to town because she thinks "Þou [Noah] arte nere woode" (You are near mad 91) when Noah informs her of the impending flood. He continues to explain the situation to her, and eventually she does accept what he says, although unhappily: "Allas! þat I þis lare shuld lere" (Alas, that I should learn this information 105). When her children, along with Noah, attempt to force her on board, she fights them, arguing that she has "tolis to trusse" (household items to pack 110) in town. At this point, she does accept the news, but she criticizes Noah, telling him that he should have informed her of what was going on earlier:

> 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. (113-116)
> (Noah, you might have let me know;
> Early and late you went out,
> And always at home you let me sit
> To see that nowhere I knew what you were about.)

When he tries to excuse the secrecy by saying it was God's will, Uxor makes it very clear that this excuse is not acceptable, that he should have thought of her as well.

25 As in the Chester "Noah's Flood," York's Uxor is concerned for family and friends. She tells Noah that she wishes "My commodrys and my cosynes bathe" (My comrades and my cousins both 143) were with them, but when Noah tells her it is too late for them, she laments for the loss, apparently the only one on board concerned with those who are dying. She quiets down, allowing her family to praise God for saving them, but once they have landed, she once again asks where her family and friends are, only to be told by Noah that they are dead and she should "Late be thy dyne" (Stop your noise 271). Her only other line in the play is to lament, once again, when Noah informs his sons that the world will be stricken again in the future, but with fire instead of water.

26 The York Uxor seems the least shrewish of all of the Uxor characters. While her rebellion would still be quite humorous, particularly her anger at Noah for excusing his not telling her by saying it was God's will, her reasons for rebellion are perhaps the most sympathetic. Her concern for family and friends is not mitigated by a round of drinks, nor is it forgotten at the end of the play (in fact, Noah's "Dame, all ar drowned, late be thy dyne,/And

sone þei boughte þer synnes sore./Gud lewyn latte vs begynne" (Dame, all are drowned, stop your noise/And at once they paid for their sins dearly./Let us begin to live well 271-3) seems callous even though it is what God wants). It is also important to note that God does not appear at the end of this play. At the end of the Chester play, God has the final speech, promising to never again flood the world and to put the rainbow in the sky to remind him of his promise not to destroy the world. While God acknowledges his justice in destroying the world, there is certainly also the promise of future compassion for humanity. Such a speech does not appear in the York play—instead Noah promises that God will destroy humanity again. The only compassion seen in the York play comes from Uxor.

Towneley/Wakefield

27 The Towneley cycle is sometimes referred to as the Wakefield cycle, but in fact, the Wakefield Master wrote just five of the Towneley plays, although he did seem to revise others. The five he wrote are *Noah, The First Shepherd's Play, The Second Shepherd's Play, Herod the Great*, and *The Buffeting*, and he greatly revised *The Killing of Abel*. He is arguably the greatest playwright of the middle ages, incorporating great humor into his plays.

28 The Towneley cycle exists in only one manuscript, which is incomplete, missing twenty-eight leaves. The surviving cycle consists of thirty-two plays, but the Creation play, Abraham, Isaac, Purificacio Marie, and Pagina Doctorum, Ascencio Domini, Descent of the Holy Spirit, and Iudicium are all incomplete and it is likely that plays about the Assumption and Coronation are missing entirely. Again, references to the cycle indicate that it was staged as early as the first half of the 15th century. The name Wakefield adds confusion to analysis, however, because it appears twice in the cycle manuscript, introducing the Creation and Noah plays. Barbara Palmer successfully argues, however, that Wakefield was not the location of these performances, as its civic records show this town could not have supported a great cycle. Consequently, the cycle is often referred to as Towneley, after one of the families who owned the manuscript.

29 Unlike Chester and York, the Wakefield Noah begins with Noah lamenting the sinfulness of humanity. Richard Daniels argues that by beginning with Noah, the Wakefield Master opens a play that is "more human" than the other Noah plays. After Noah's soliloquy, God enters and warns Noah of the impending deluge. Noah says he must return home to tell his wife everything he has learned; however, he is afraid of her reaction:

> My [wife] will I frast
> What she will say,
> And I am agast

That we get som fray
Betwixt us both,
For she is full tethee,
For litill oft angré;
If any thing wrang be,
Soyne is she wroth. (265-73 change is in original)
(My wife will I ask
What she will say,
And I am afraid
That we will get into a fight
Between us both,
For she is full vicious,
Often angry over little things,
If anything is wrong
Soon she is wrathful.)

This tendency to fight does not reflect God's earlier comment, that he will spare Noah and his wife "For thay wold neuer stryfe/With me then me offend" (For they would never strive/With me to offend me 155-6). While they do not fight with God, they quite obviously do fight with each other.

30 As Noah predicts, Uxor is already cross and looking for a fight when he gets home. This aggressive behavior has brought criticism about her true nature from scholars. Jeffrey Helterman points out that this Uxor is malicious and the closest of the three full cycles to Newcastle. On the other hand, this wife presents arguments that would most clearly resonate with the medieval audience. She tells Noah

Do tell me belife
Where has thou thus long be?
To dede may we dryfe,
Or lif, for the,
For want.
When we swete or swynk,
Thou dos what thou think;
Yit of mete and of drynk
Haue we veray skant. (278-86)
(Tell me, by your life,
Where you have been this long?
We may be driven to death,
Of life, because of you,
For want.
While we labor or work,
You do what you want;
Yet of meat and drink
We have a great lack.)

Helterman argues that "the audience would be expected to sympathize with the wife's worry about having enough to eat, but it must also realize that man's purpose on earth is not to feed

only his body" (66). While this distinction is true, a medieval audience, for whom food becomes scarce in the winter and for whom a head of household who does not provide can destroy his family, should greatly appreciate her argument, especially as she has not been told of any greater purpose yet.

31 At this point in the drama, Uxor goes into a tirade against "ill husbandys" (301). She even generalizes this argument to "We women" (300) who must lament useless spouses. But she will not stop with just criticizing husbands; she also informs her husband that she intends to "smyte and smyle" (311); she will quite happily strike him. This threat leads to the first physical conflict of the play. While both spouses are striking and insulting the other, the result is more slapstick than upsetting. Finally, this first altercation ends when Noah announces, "Bot I will kepe charyté,/For I haue at do" (But I will keep peace/Because I have work to do 339-40). He does have more important things to do, but at the same time, the Wakefield Master has given the first victory to Uxor, who tells Noah upon his departure: "Here shall no man tary the;/I pray the go to!" (Here shall no one delay you;/I pray you go away 341-2).

32 While Noah leaves to complete his ark, which he still has not told Uxor about, Uxor sits down to spin. J. W. Robinson points out that spinning was the punishment assigned to Eve after the banishment from Eden, thus tying Uxor to Eve, but in this drama there are two significant differences: Uxor's spinning is self-assigned and, in the Middle Ages, the proper role of women. Noah may neglect his duties as a husband, but Uxor does not neglect hers as a wife.

33 Noah completes the ark and gathers his family to prepare to board, and he finally informs his wife about what God has told him. She is understandably shocked and confused, but regains her stubborn nature once she sees the ark. She tells Noah that she is greatly concerned about the ark; she cannot even tell which end is the front and which the back. She then informs him that she will not enter the ark until she has "Spon a space" (spun [wool] for a while 489) and threatens to strike anyone who tries to move her. Unlike the other cycle plays, Wakefield's Uxor's family fear her enough to not try to force her onto the ark. Her family try to convince her to board, but it is only when the water actually reaches her that she chooses to board the ark of her own volition. When Noah criticizes her for waiting until the last minute, she refuses to move further into the ark than the entryway.

34 A second conflict begins at this point. Noah threatens to whip Uxor if she doesn't move into the ship, but she taunts him, telling him, "Thise grete wordys shall not flay me" (These great words will not hurt me 549). The more he threatens, the more Uxor refuses to budge, This time, both spouses deliver a lecture on the evils of the opposite sex. Uxor informs

Noah that she wishes she had a "wedows coyll" (widow's apparel 563) and that many "Of wifys that ar here" (of the wives that are here 568) wish their husbands were dead. One must keep in mind that at this point in the story, the flood would have taken over their world, so the wives present likely refer to the audience. Noah, however, gets his own tirade in, also addressing the audience ("Yee men that has wifys" (You men who have wives 573)) and advising that they gain control over their wives while young. This leads to physical violence and insults once again.

35 This altercation ends when Noah suggests "In this hast let vs ho,/For my bak is nere in two (In haste let us stop/For my back is nearly broken in two 595-6). Uxor agrees, "And I am bet so blo/That I may not thryfe" (And I am beaten so blue/That I may not thrive 597-8). Even their sons get involved, recommending the couple end their dispute and pay attention to the flooding. This scene marks the changing point in the play; Noah and Uxor work together to maintain the ark and do not fight anymore. Noah has his wife take the "stere-tre" (625), or ship's wheel, while he plumbs the depth of the flood. The remainder of the play sends the audience a mixed message about the Wakefield Master's opinion of Uxor. When Noah releases the birds to see if any land is available yet, it is Uxor who suggests, at Noah's request, the raven, the bird that fails them. Noah chooses to release a dove as well. Kolve points out that the raven, in the Middle Ages, was often associated with worldliness (66). On the other hand, it is Uxor who first sees the end of the flood, telling her family, "Methynk, bi my wit,/The son shynes in the eest" (I think, by my senses/The sun shines in the east 654-5). Furthermore, she is the first to see the returning dove and bear the news to her family. The play ends with the family exploring the empty land and praising God for sparing them—there is no mention of a future judgment that will destroy the world.

Redeeming Uxor

36 Much discussion of these plays has looked at the character of Noah's wife from various perspectives. The criticisms of the wife range from labeling her as malicious (Helterman 64) or evil (Carroll 31) to being a Mary-figure (Simms 23) and fighting due to genuine concern for her family (Marx 118). The conflicts are seen as making the couple more human (Carroll 90), paralleling the disobedient relationship man has with God (Robinson 34-5), reflecting the corruption of medieval towns (Fitzgerald 365), and attempting to show the importance of persistence and charity on Noah's part (Daniels 29). These varied criticisms, whether positive or negative, tend to ignore the fact that ultimately, Uxor is one of the saved. Furthermore, even when humor is mentioned, it is not linked to mitigating her fault.

37 When discussing the use of humor in the cycle play, Kolve says, “The comic surfaces of these plays are, of course, valuable in their own right, and it is our first privilege as audience to respond to them” (146). He sees the humor as making Uxor popular among medieval audiences, although he clearly presents her shrewish behavior as unjustified. He says she was a very popular character in Middle English literature and “became a kind of paradigm of human character: she was the root-form of the shrewish wife and her relationship with Noah became the archetype of everyday marital felicity” (146). In his view, the comedy is present for the sake of entertaining the audience.

38 That Uxor was popular is indicated by the guild records of Hull. Mill points out that the payment records for the 1513 performance, unless there is a clerical error, show that the actor playing Noah’s wife received “substantial fees” (624), even more than the actor playing Noah received. Carroll also indicates that the Uxor is a popular character, despite her wicked ways, because Noah is weak and therefore less sympathetic than she is (31).

39 But while the Uxor can be popular with the audience, she also must be saved by God, and in a play where God is destroying all of humanity except for eight people because of humanity’s sinfulness, her truculence must be addressed. The signs of her stubbornness and aggression are generally tied to comedy. Her shrewish behavior is comic, and this mitigates her maliciousness. One of the purposes of humor is to “absorb and defuse emotions that threaten fertility and community” (Wilt 177). Uxor can be stubborn and even violent, but as long as it is presented humorously, it is not a threat to society, and therefore she need not be destroyed in the flood.

40 Kathleen Rowe, while concerned with how women have used humor to subvert male authority, does acknowledge that when women are the objects of humor, they are “vulnerable to ridicule and trivialization” (3). This trivialization acts to neutralize the threat they pose. Uxor, even while physically attacking her husband, is not a threatening character because these attacks are humorous. In Wakefield particularly, the fighting becomes slapstick and the anti-marriage speeches are addressed to the audiences, not to the other characters. This humor trivializes the attacks, therefore mitigating Uxor’s behavior, making it possible for her to be saved.

41 The comic disobedience can also, however, serves to subvert the husband-wife hierarchy and establish social power for the wife. Kolve may argue that Noah must establish authority over Uxor for the flood to recede (150), but, as Campbell counterargues, there’s really no evidence in the play, particularly Wakefield where they work together, that this occurs (80). Campbell claims “the theme of Noah is love and that the dramatic tension, very

comically worked out in the family arena of domesticity, revolves around man's mistaken notion 'maistre'"(76). She argues that the concept of *maistre* must be overcome before the couple can live peacefully. This new balance of power can be achieved through the subversive role of humor, particularly as it is tied to the concept of carnival and misrule.

42 Carnival was a popular tradition in the Middle Ages, and the overthrowing of hierarchy was a common practice. Natalie Zemon Davis lists the carnivals as occurring according to the "calendar of religion and season (the twelve days of Christmas, the days before Lent, early May, Pentecost, the feast of Saint Jean Baptiste in June, the Feast of Assumption in mid-August, All Saints) and timed also to domestic events, marriages, and other family affairs" (98). These occasions allowed the lower classes to celebrate in ways that overthrew common social conventions. Inversion of sexual roles was a common topos in such festivities (Davis 129). There is some debate about the purpose of this overthrowing of conventions however. Davis points out that anthropologists see these festivities as "ultimately sources of order and stability in a hierarchical society" (130). Ultimately, the festivity serves to allow negative emotions to be exorcised thus allowing the conventional hierarchy to continue. Davis points out, however, that the comic inversions can also undermine society, particulary in carnival and drama, by allowing the oppressed to see an example of someone overcoming oppression (131). The Corpus Christi plays were not the same as these carnival festivities; however, the upside-down view of marriage clearly parallels the overthrowing of social authority common to these festivals.

43 In addition, the humor in these plays allows Uxor to take control. Katie Normington points out the similarity between the conflict in the drama and a common carnivalesque practice. Uxor's stubbornness reflects similar practices that occurred after the Twelve Days of Christmas, a time well-known for carnival festivities. Similar battles of the sexes are to be found in the Spinner's St. Distaff's Day. Held on 7 January when women returned to their spinning after Christmas, this festival involved men setting fire to women's flax, and the women then dousing both the flax and their husbands with water. Obviously this rite has much relevance to the Noah pageants: the retaliation of a woman against her husband; a spinner commencing her work; and the throwing/flooding of water. (qtd. in Normington, 124) Normington sees this play as reflecting the desire of the time period to do away with women's cottage industries because these industries allowed women a certain autonomy. This desire is particularly relevant to the time period the dramas were developing as the plays were likely composed at the same time that rights established by the plague, which gave women more freedom in industry, were being recinded (130). The connection between the plays and the

ritual of St Distaff's Day may also reflect the subversion of the husband-wife hierarchy—while men are trying to stop women's industry, it is the men that are eventually doused and the women who symbolically have the last word.

44 Humor helps Uxor to gain and even maintain power in her relationship with Noah in several ways. First, rather than being meek and subservient, as she is in the Coventry cycle, Uxor is very outspoken in these plays. Newcastle presents difficulties in reconciling the character to her being saved, largely because we do not see her on the ark, but the fact that she does not recognize her "friend" Deabolus and that her misstatements indicate that her drugging her husband is done in ignorance helps to mitigate her guilt. In the Chester play, Uxor's arguments can be quite moving, as her concern for her friends is touching, but the drinking song the gossips break into as they are about to be drowned is clearly humorous. A general audience would likely find this entertaining. Because they could identify with the drinking, singing gossips, this scene would cause the audience to identify more with the Uxor, stubbornly refusing to desert her inebriated friends, rather than the perfect but serious Noah. The arguments themselves become more humorous in the York cycle. While Uxor is still very concerned about her friends, her accusation that Noah is mad and her concern for her household goods must have struck an audience as comic. More specifically, the argument between Noah and Uxor as to whether or not he should have told her would have seemed recognizable to a medieval audience familiar with the comic fabliaux trope of the shrew. Whether or not Noah was correct in hiding the truth from his wife, a shrew would not allow him to get away with such a deception. The fact that Noah is not humorous in these plays also makes Uxor more sympathetic to audiences. Carroll points out that "The discernible whining tone of the speaker [Noah] undermines his virtue and places the negative image of the old man at the center of the action" (72-3). Noah may be in the right, but because he is whining and not humorous, the audience is less likely to side with him. The Wakefield Master, as mentioned, excelled in adding humor to his dramas, and this play is no exception. The fact that Uxor is a shrew is apparent before she even appears, due to Noah's fear of his wife. Her verbal attacks, while inappropriate for a Biblical wife, are very funny, particularly in light of the reconciliation at the end of the play. Her comment that she wishes she were a widow may seem malicious, particularly since this follows her accusation that Noah's lack of responsibility starving their family, but their teamwork at the end of the play shows that this is simply an outburst, not genuine ill-feeling between the two of them. Furthermore, the insults are slung on both sides; in Wakefield the humor is expanded as Noah joins in the spatting and fighting, thus leaving them both on a more even field. What is significant in this humor,

however, is that because it makes her more sympathetic, and more popular, with audiences, it makes her subversion of her husband's authority more acceptable.

45 The physical violence in the plays also add to the humor. In all three full cycle plays, blows are struck. In Chester, Uxor is the only one to strike a blow, but she does this after she has been physically dragged away from her friends, who would have been scattered in the audience. Her being manhandled onboard would have been humorous to watch, and her blow, because it is tied to her loyalty to her gossips, would likely be received as popular and humorous rather than evil. Because she is sticking up for the audience, her subversive behavior would become acceptable. In York, Uxor, once again, is the only one to strike a blow, and again it is after she is forced on board the ship. This blow, however, comes in the midst of the argument over Noah's keeping the ark a secret. While in Chester the entire family is informed of the upcoming flood right away, in York, Uxor is the last to know, and her displeasure at this fact is both comic and justified. In Towneley, the fighting is greatly expanded, but made slapstick. In each case, the "skirmishes immediately follow misogamist speeches, from husband and wife alike" (Epp 229), but these speeches criticize idle men as much as they do upstart wives. Furthermore, in both cases, it is Noah who backs out of the conflict first. The Wakefield Master seems to go out of his way to give Uxor the upper hand in these battles. The fact that he ends the play with the two working together reinforces not so much her *maistre,* but the fact that neither Noah or his wife has *maistre*. In all three cases, the very inappropriate behavior of striking a spouse is either made sympathetic or humorous to justify the behavior. She is a truculent, shrewish wife, but the audience is made to see this as acceptable. There are times when it is acceptable, at least in comic drama, for a wife to not be subservient.

Conclusions

46 Noah's wife, according to Kolve, "was the root-form of the shrewish wife, and her relationship with Noah became the archetype of everyday marital infelicity" (146). However, because this is presented through humor, she is also a popular character whose subversion is acceptable rather than something that must be punished. Rowe says of such unruly behavior: "The tropes of unruliness are often coded with misogyny. However, they are also a source of potential power, especially when they are recoded or reframed to expose what that composure conceals" (31). By revealing herself to be compassionate to humanity, concerned about the well-being of her family, and justifiably angry over a husband who neglects his duty to his family, Uxor can be a shrew that the audience can accept. Alan Nelson points out that all

other rebellions in the cycle plays preceding Noah—Lucifer, Adam, mankind—were punished (396). He excuses Uxor as not rebelling against God but against Noah, but perhaps the real excuse is that she is simply too entertaining for us to really be offended.

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