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History Senior Thesis

The Virgin Mary in High Medieval England:

A Divinely Malleable Woman:

Virgin, Intercessor, Protector, Mother, Role Model

Introduction

This thesis examines the significance of the Virgin Mary in England between the late fifteenth century and early sixteenth century. The primary sources selected indicate the variety of ideas circulating about her during this period. Strictly religious texts such as the Bible and early Christian writings ground Late Medieval¹ beliefs about Mary in their historical context. Artwork is investigated to see how high culture and the Church was representing Mary. Some of this art was displayed in public spaces such as outdoors or in churches, shaping the views of the lower classes as well. The bulk of the discussion focuses on three specific sources: Robin Hood tales, the Mystery Plays, and the *Mary Play* at N-Town. These works expressed religious views but were unaffiliated with formal Church doctrine or religious preaching. All three were enjoyed by a large percentage of the English. The Mystery Plays were intentionally performed outdoors so that everyone could view them. As well as being performed as plays, Robin Hood stories were passed down orally and written. From the peasants to the nobility, each class had its own Robin Hood tales. In this paper, Robin Hood, the Mystery Plays and the *Mary Play* are supplemented with historical accounts and advice manuals to explore the relationship between the expectations on women and the Marian ideal.²

In identifying what each source required from Mary, broader tensions in English society become apparent. From 1300 on, the English were becoming more urban with an

¹ In this paper, High Middle Ages refers to 1200-1600. Late Middle Ages refers to 1400-1600.

increasingly large percentage of people living in the city. While the Black Death had decimated populations everywhere (ca.1350), the cities recovered faster than the rural areas. Laborers flocked from devastated countrysides to cities in search of work.³ The commercial urban economy provided the funds for a new aristocracy to develop. Guilds and small businesses led to a burgeoning middle class.⁴ An urban laboring class also developed, working under the new aristocracy and middle class. By the fifteenth century, a population economically and politically independent from the landed aristocracy had developed in the cities.

Because the Black Death had decimated the work force, rural labor was in high demand and peasants received better wages. Faced with financial difficulty, some landlords rented land to serfs; others sold it to them. This meant that peasants also began to live more independently of lords.⁵

As early as the eleventh century, the royalty began asserting control over the feudal lords. During the fourteenth century, Parliament began to meet regularly. Parliament gave political voice to the interests of the lords and, by the fifteenth century, they had control over taxation.⁶ On the other hand, individual lords could no longer rule their lands independently. They had to work with the king and each other to manage their fiefdoms.

² “Marian” is the adjectival form of Mary

³ Warren C. Hollister, *Medieval Europe: A Short History: Eight Edition*. (Santa Barbara: University of California, 1998), p. 357.

⁴ I use this term to indicate the class who ran businesses or were merchants. I understand that it is technically anachronistic for the time period I discuss.

⁵ Hollister, 356-357

⁶ Ibid., 336

A more extensive legal system, developed under King Edward I in the fourteenth century, also restricted the lords.⁷ Written law guaranteed that no one person had absolute power because everyone was subject to a codified written authority. The traditional feudal hierarchy was developing into a centralized political system. While by in large the same aristocrats remained in power, the extent of their power was changing.

With the growth of a national political identity, unified Christendom lost some authority.⁸ Beginning with Edward I, power shifted from the Pope to the English kings.⁹ Reformers of the middle and upper classes also criticized Church officials for being corrupted by economic and political power. By 1500, literacy had increased, making more ideas accessible to the middle and upper classes. The larger literate population could read the Bible and form its own interpretations. Feudal and church authorities lost some of their power over the lives and the minds of the English people.

In the fifteenth century, England was also recovering from the Black Death that had decimated the population during the middle of the fourteenth century. Lesser plagues continued to haunt the English for the rest of the century.¹⁰ The Hundred Years' War (1337-1453) also took a huge toll on the population.¹¹ Crime was prevalent in towns and cities and outlaws sometimes violently took over as authorities.¹² The peasant revolt of 1381¹³ terrified the aristocracy and the gentry. The onslaught of death and violence made the English fearful and depressed.¹⁴

⁷ Ibid., 260-261

Ibid., 326

⁹ Ibid., 329

Ibid., 326

¹¹ Ibid., 337

¹² Ibid., 326

¹³ Ibid., 327

¹⁴ Ibid.

Fear manifested in the growth of Marian worship. By 1400, Mary's popularity soured. Her image was prevalent throughout art, chivalric literature and church writings. Marian shrines were the most popular shrines in England. Public shrines were accessible to everyone and their popularity was a measure of Mary's appeal to all classes.

Mary was the caretaking, protective force that the terrified British needed. She was revered as more than just the mother of Jesus. Almost as an autonomous divinity, she was prayed to and worshipped. For those who felt that human authority could not or would not protect them, Mary emerged as a protector. For those disenfranchised from the Catholic clergy, Mary was another route to God. The Catholic Church, losing power as an institution, employed popular Mary as an ideal with which to teach parishioners to be good Catholics. As the Reformation gained popularity, the Catholic Church employed Mary's role to defend Catholicism against reformist movements.

One trait that remained constant for Mary was a role in salvation. For Catholics, she was a direct connection to God and pleaded on behalf of their souls. For Protestants, she saved souls by serving as a model of faith. Though nominally Catholic, the texts discussed in this thesis incorporate both Catholic and Protestant ideas. English Catholics were struggling between whether they wanted to maintain the Catholic system of intermediaries or whether they preferred the Protestant's direct relationship to God. Mary's changing role as sometimes directly intercessory, sometimes not, reflected this ambivalence.

The Biblical Virgin Mary: Empty Vessel / Blank Slate

The Virgin Mary is mentioned a mere thirty times in the Bible, usually as a passive member of a group. Much of Matthew 1 is focused on Jesus' birth but Mary is only mentioned tangentially as Joseph's wife. Joseph discovers Mary is pregnant "before they came together"¹⁵ and wants a divorce. Mary has no voice to defend herself. Instead, an angel tells Joseph that Mary is pregnant with God's child and so Joseph relents and marries her. Joseph even names Jesus.¹⁶ Mary is merely a body for Jesus to pass through.

Luke is the only book of the New Testament in which Mary has personality and emotions. When Gabriel tells her that she is pregnant, Mary is shocked. Even within the Biblical context, the Virgin Birth is a miracle, an example of God's power. After Gabriel explains that her pregnancy is God's work, Mary soliloquizes about her love for the Lord, illustrating her personal piety. Then she acknowledges her own importance, declaring that "from now on generations will call me blessed."¹⁷

Mary is presented as a caretaker. In Luke 2:7, Mary, providing comfort and warmth to her infant, "wrapped him in clothes and placed him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn."¹⁸

In John 19, right before the crucifixion, Jesus takes his mother and a disciple aside and says, "'Dear woman, here is your son,' and to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' From that time on, this disciple took her into his home."¹⁹ According to R. Bernard, *The Mystery of Mary*, this interaction was the basis for the Catholic belief that Mary was the

¹⁵ The Holy Bible: New International Version: New Testament. Matthew 1: 21-22.

¹⁶ Mathew 1

¹⁷ Luke 1:48

¹⁸ Ibid., 2:7

spiritual mother of all Christians.²⁰ On the other hand, perhaps Christians misinterpreted the situation. Jesus' intention may be to ensure that his mother is taken care of. The disciple, after all, houses Mary, making him her protector.

Mary's other defining characteristic is her virginity. In both Matthew and Luke, Mary is a Virgin when pregnant with Jesus. Matthew 1 ends with Joseph having "had no union with her [Mary] until she gave birth to a son."²¹ This quote leaves Mary's continued virginity open to debate. The "until" suggests Mary had sex with Joseph eventually. However, the *New American Bible*, used by the United States Conference for Catholic Bishops, notes after this passage that "the Greek word translated 'until' does not imply normal marital conduct after Jesus' birth, nor does it exclude it."²²

When Jesus returns to his hometown, his neighbors ask, "Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother's name Mary, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? Aren't all his sisters with us?"²³ If these siblings are biological, Mary has not remained a virgin. Perhaps, the townspeople are wrong in these identifications just as they are "wrong" to reject Jesus a few passages later. On the other hand, they correctly identify his mother and father and, as people of his hometown, they should know his identity.

According to Geoffrey Ashe in *The Virgin*, Jewish relationship words²⁴ imply both familial and social connections. Further, when told, "your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you," Jesus responds, "'Who is my mother, and who

¹⁹ John 19:26-27

²⁰ R. Bernard, *The Mystery of Mary* (St Louis: O.P.B. Herder Book Co, 1954), p. 4.
Matthew 1:25

²² <http://www.nccbuscc.org/nab/bible/matthew/matthew1.htm>

²³ Matthew 13:55-56

²⁴ Geoffrey Ashe, *The Virgin*. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976), p. 65.

are my brothers?” Then he points to his disciples and says, “Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”²⁵ Jesus’ definition of family in this passage supports the argument that his “siblings” were not Mary’s biological children.

In the High Middle Ages, Biblical details were not always important because most medieval Christians could not read. Parishioners were taught an edited version of the Bible. Religious authorities concentrated on certain details and ignored others. The Mystery Plays, a popular source for religious ideas in the 1400s, emphasized Mary’s maternal aspect and her perpetual virginity. Details became significant during the Reformation because Protestants believed all religious doctrine must derive directly from the Bible.²⁶

Though Catholics did not always focus closely on the Bible, the vagueness of Mary’s Biblical personality is in itself significant. The first book of the New Testament, Matthew, begins with Joseph’s lineage, linking him to the Old Testament King David. Biblical lineage was important because it highlighted one’s place in religious history. Mary’s lack of lineage is striking in its absence. Lineage was, in fact, so significant that Catholics sometimes attributed Joseph’s lineage to Mary to indicate her importance.²⁷ In the second century, the *Protevangelium* supplied Mary parents.²⁸ These later additions do not change the fact that, with no lineage, no parents, no past, no unique personality, the Biblical Mary could have been anyone.

²⁵ Matthew 12:47-49

²⁶ Ashe, 114

²⁷ Ibid., 63.

²⁸ Peter Mullen, *Shrines of Our Lady: A Guide to Fifty of the World's Most Famous Marian Shrines* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), p. 76.

Mary's anonymity is further perpetuated in that there are multiple Marys in the New Testament: the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Lazarus' sister, and the wife of Clopas.²⁹ In contrast, there is only one Jesus. The Apostles also each have a different name. While there are two significant Johns, the second one is called Mark.

Each Marys is typically identified by an additional name, relationship, or character trait but often it is unclear which Mary is being discussed. In Matthew, "Mary" is often not further identified for much of a chapter. In Luke, it is unclear who Mary, mother of James, is.³⁰ Since, in Matthew, Jesus is said to have a brother named James, perhaps this is the Virgin Mary, although it is strange that Mary is not identified with Jesus.

Translations of the *New International Version* and the *King James' Bible* acknowledge confusion over the Marys, referring throughout to "this Mary" or "that Mary."³¹ These distinctions do not always clarify who is being discussed. In fact, eventually Protestants conflated the Marys, in particular arguing that the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene were the same woman.³²

In contrast, in the Old Testament most names are used once. Of the matriarchs, there is only one Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel. Christianity was less focused on earthly life than Judaism. Therefore, it follows that less attention was given to the individual person. Nevertheless, the Marys also set a Biblical precedent for a new religious approach in which "women" had become "Woman." The notion that Mary represented every woman

²⁹ This unidentifiable woman was present at the Crucifixion. She is assumed to be Mary's sister-in-law (Mullen 67).

³⁰ Luke 24:10

³² Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 172.

is consistent with the later medieval claim that in bearing Jesus, Mary redeemed her entire sex from Eve's sin.

The fragmentary Biblical information on the Virgin Mary led to her abstraction as an empty vessel. In fact, as early as the fourth century, Epiphanius, Bishop of Salamis, referred to Mary as the Holy Vessel.³³ This remained one of her nicknames. As a vessel, Mary could be filled with characteristics that served the various populations who believed in her.

It is established that Mary is the bearer of Jesus—who, in turn, saves mankind. Therefore, Mary is associated with mankind's redemption. Medieval Christians used Mary to address a variety of problems, embellishing the Biblical attributes of her role in salvation, her virginity and her maternity, creating a significant and complicated Mary.

³³ Hilda Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion*, 2 vols. (Westminster: Christian Classics, 1985), I: 71.

Mary and the Early Christians

In distinguishing itself from pagan religions, Christianity closely aligned itself with monotheistic Judaism. The second century *Protoevangelium* significantly influenced the arts, preaching and liturgy.³⁴ In it, Mary, like important characters in the Old Testament, is given parents and a personal history.³⁵ She is also depicted as a religious Jew.³⁶

In the same period, Justin Martyr linked Christianity to Judaism by comparing Eve and Mary.³⁷ Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons (d.202), in *Against the Heresies*, elaborated on this comparison, explicitly connecting Eve to man's destruction and Mary to his salvation.³⁸ Christianity was presented as the completed story: man first fell from God's grace and then returned to it. By connecting Eve and Mary, Justin and Irenaeus highlighted the crucial difference between Jews and Christians: only Christians believed Jesus delivered man's salvation.

The *Protoevangelium* also defends Christ's virgin birth.³⁹ One of the three fifth century Latin Doctors,⁴⁰ Jerome, the greatest Biblical scholar of antiquity, defended claims to Mary's perpetual virginity with Biblical quotes.⁴¹ Mary's virginity distinguished her from other female religious figures. The Old Testament mentions the sexuality of its female heroines and pagan female goddesses were often very sensual.⁴² In particular, in

³⁴Ibid., I:36

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 37

³⁸ Ibid., 39

³⁹ Ibid., 37

⁴⁰ The others were Ambrose and Augustine

⁴¹ Graef, I:89-90

⁴² Ibid., 32

appearance and character the pagan goddess Isis resembled the Virgin Mary save for Mary's virginity.

Virginity was also related to Christians being disconnected from the human world. Latin Church Doctor, Saint Augustine starts his autobiography, *Confessions*, "to love this world is to break troth with you [God]."⁴³ God was completely separate from the bodily world. Earthly pleasures,⁴⁴ particularly sexual, were distractions from God. Chastity was important for women and men. Because women, particularly in the Late Medieval period were seen as corrupters of men, their sexuality needed to be harnessed.

But, Catholics wanted converts. They tried to appeal to more universal desires for maternal, care-taking, female goddesses. To accomplish this, Mary's maternity was emphasized. In the 3rd Century, Origen of the Alexandrian School began referring to Mary as Theotokos, Mother of God.⁴⁵ This was the same name applied to Isis—perhaps a direct appeal to her followers. Later, the Latin Doctors rejected the use of Theotokos because of its association with Isis.⁴⁶

Origen also wanted to prove that Christ, born of a woman, was part human. The Latin Doctor Ambrose insisted that Jesus came from two parents—one divine and one human—and that he had characteristics from both. Jesus' spirit came from God and his body came from Mary.⁴⁷ Ambrose argued that "Jesus had no need of a helper for the redemption of all... So he accepted, indeed, the love of the Mother."⁴⁸ Mary mothered the human part of Jesus. She was a good mother, a nurturer not a divinity. Jesus' divine acts

⁴³ Augustine, *Confessions* (New York: Penguin Books, 1961), p. 34.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 44

⁴⁵ Graef, I:46

⁴⁶ Ibid., 94

⁴⁷ Ibid., 79

⁴⁸ Ibid., 84

were entirely independent of her. This supports later Protestant notion of Mary as a maternal role model, not a semi-divine helpmate.

Other early Christians believed that Mary had supernatural powers. In the *Protovangelium*, Mary was conceived without original sin in the Immaculate Conception.⁴⁹ Mary was so holy that until she was presented at the Temple at age three, her mother carried her to keep her feet from touching the ground. Mary did not eat real food but instead was fed by angels.⁵⁰ Irenaeus claimed that Mary was the "cause of salvation" and had the power to intercede with God on behalf of mankind.⁵¹ Another sign that Mary was more than human was her assumption to heaven, an idea developed by Epiphanius (d.403) because her death was not mentioned in the Scriptures.⁵² By the fifteenth century, many representatives of the Church and the laity treated Mary as divine. This became a major criticism of Reformers.⁵³

For most Marian assertions, there were dissenting views. Roman Church Father Tertullian claimed that the Virgin Mary did not remain a virgin and that Christ actually had biological siblings. He wanted to establish that Mary was neither divine nor flawless—he even linked her with Jews who rejected Christ's teaching.⁵⁴ Tertullian wanted to prevent Christians from worshipping Mary.

Many of the early Christian's debates about Mary's role reemerged during the Protestant Reformation. Central to those arguments was whether Mary had supernatural

⁴⁹ Donna Spivey Ellington, *From Sacred Body to Angelic Soul: Understanding Mary in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*. (Washington: The University of America Press, 2001), p., 52.

⁵⁰ Graef, I: 36

⁵¹ Ibid., 40

⁵² Ibid., 72

⁵³ Throughout this paper, reformers refers to the Catholics trying to change Catholicism. Reformers with a capital "R" refers to Protestant Reformers.

⁵⁴ Graef., I:43

powers or was just an exceptional woman, whether she should be worshipped or only respected.

Regardless of Mary's official role, she quickly became popular with early Catholics. Hilda Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion*, found documentation of a Marian vision and a prayer to Mary as early as the third Century. Graef believes that this indicates Mary was already widely revered.⁵⁵

The fourth century Church officially encouraged Christians to use Mary as a role model. As Graef notes, up until this period, martyrdom was a major part of Christian life, but by the fourth century new role models were needed.⁵⁶ The Church Council of Coptic in 325 presented Mary as chaste, uninterested in food, constantly praying and utterly removed from the outside world, the ideal fourth century Christian.⁵⁷ This characterization also resembled the life proposed in the Middle Ages for nuns and monks.

The early Church benefited from Mary's appeal to the lower classes.⁵⁸ Many of the poor did not have the time, the energy or the education to worry about complex doctrinal shifts such as the significance of one God versus many. Many also did not have the time or the desire to go to Church and learn Christian theology. But, many of the poor became loyal Christians because of Mary. As a maternal figure, she appealed to the same population who had previously worshipped Isis: both represented the fulfillment of subsistence needs for food and warmth. She was also a mother to this segment of the population in which mothers died particularly young.⁵⁹ Early lower class Christians

⁵⁵ Ibid., 47-48

⁵⁶ Ibid., 50

⁵⁷ Pelikan, 113-114.

⁵⁸ Michael P. Carroll *The Cult of the Virgin Mary: Psychological Origins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 83-84.

⁵⁹ Hollister, 86-87.

wanted someone to look after them. Mary, therefore, became the focus of much of their religious activity.⁶⁰

Revering Mary became inextricably linked to worship of Christ. According to Epiphanius, "he who honours the Lord honours also the holy [vessel]."⁶¹ Augustine believed that Mary was central to the Faith, comparing her to the Church. He emphasized the moral significance of Mary's qualities, writing that Mary "is both mother and virgin; mother through her charity, virgin through the integrity of her faith and piety."⁶² This encouraged a less literal interpretation of Marian characteristics. Thus, in defining Mary, early Christians were often addressing larger Church concerns.

Though influential throughout the Middle Ages, Augustine's interpretations were later seized upon by Protestants. He, like Protestants, believed that Mary's importance was the example she set not her supernatural powers. These early debates provided a framework for doctrinal arguments during the Protestant Reformation.

⁶⁰ Beverly Boyd. *The Middle English Miracles of the Virgin* (San Marino: The Huntington Library, 1964), p. 10.

⁶¹ Pelikan, 71

⁶² Ibid., 98

Mary's Semi-Divine Status in the High Middle Ages and its Implications on Women

Quoted in *Medieval Women: A Social History of Women in England 450-1500*, Jane Chance claims that, by the year 1000, there were so many different depictions of Mary that she could represent any medieval woman.⁶³ Fifteenth century Marian art in the Cloisters Museum in New York illustrates the breadth of Mary's roles. The Virgin is portrayed as mother, virgin, "rose without thorns,"⁶⁴ elegant court lady,⁶⁵ child, throne of knowledge,⁶⁶ perfect wife, quasi-divinity⁶⁷ and queen. In contrast, Christ has limited roles to fill. He is usually depicted as an infant or on the cross.

As mother and virgin, Mary's defining characteristics were in contradiction. In High Medieval art, women had protruding stomachs and very small breasts.⁶⁸ This body type is painted in 12th century depictions from the court of English king Henry VII.⁶⁹ It remained popular until the Renaissance, as seen in Lucas Cranach's *Judgement of Paris* (c.1530) where the women represented ideal beauty.⁷⁰ According to one interpretation, small breasts typically suggested virginity but a protruding stomach gave the impression

⁶³ Henrietta Leyser, *Medieval Women: A Social History of Women in England 450-1500* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), p. 53.

⁶⁴ Cloisters Museum, New York, Virgin, c. 1250 from the choir screen of Strasbourg Cathedral.

⁶⁵ Ibid., Kneeling Virgin, attributed to Paolo Aguilana, Italy, Umbro-Abruzzo, Aquila, c. 1475.

⁶⁶ Ibid., Virgin and Child, France, Burgundy or Autun, 1130-1140. Interestingly, the Virgin is the throne of wisdom and Christ is wisdom itself. Eve on the other hand, is punished for seeking wisdom. It would seem that women should only have a passive relationship to wisdom.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Madge Garland, *The Changing Face of Beauty: Four Thousand Years of Beautiful Women* (New York: M. Barrows and Company, Inc., 1957), p. 31.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 58

⁷⁰ Ibid., 36

of pregnancy.⁷¹ Like the Virgin, the ideal woman seems to be impossibly virginal but pregnant.

Women trying to follow the Marian model had the impossible task of imitating someone who was not completely human. Yet, her human elements meant that women were expected to be like her. When the Protestants decided to use Mary as role model, they claimed she did not remain a virgin.⁷² This made her easier to emulate.

Neither entirely human nor divine, Mary dwelled between heaven and earth. Since the ninth century, she had been referred to as the Mediatrix or Intercessor⁷³ because she was thought to speak for souls trying to enter heaven. In this role, Mary appealed to all classes.⁷⁴

As intercessor Mary was intimately connected to death, included in Last Wills and Testaments. Englishwoman Joan Ingrame wrote in 1519, "First I bequeath my soul to Almighty God, to our blessed Lady, and to all the company of heaven."⁷⁵ Placing Mary between God and the rest of heaven, was a common format in wills, symbolizing Mary's intermediary role between God and man.

By adopting Mary's position as intermediary, medieval women achieved a modicum of power. If perceived to have an independent voice, they were subject to ridicule and, particularly after 1400, risked being murdered as heretics.⁷⁶ As mystics, however, they were thought to be conduits for the voice of God and medieval Christians traveled significant distances for their advice. Some women achieved sainthood as

⁷¹ Ibid., 13

⁷² Ellington, 155

⁷³ Mullen, 7

⁷⁴ Garland, 40

⁷⁵ P.J.P. Goldberg, *Women in England: C. 1275-1525* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 282.

mystics. Others such as Julian of Norwich (c.1400) contributed to Church teachings.⁷⁷

Like, Mary, these women were vessels, bodies through which God and men communicated.

Saint Augustine's writings encouraged women to be thought of as intermediaries. Much of his memoirs, *Confessions*, focused on his mother, Monica. Augustine posits her as a model Christian, believing that she helped him to save his own soul. Yet, he attributed all of her good qualities to God. As he said to God, "Surely the words which rang in my ears, spoken by your faithful servant, my mother, could have come from none but you?"⁷⁸ God spoke through Monica. Having no free agency, Augustine's women had no individuality.

⁷⁶ Hollister, 332

⁷⁷ Elizabeth Spearing, ed., *Medieval Writings on Female Spirituality*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), p. xxxii.

⁷⁸ Augustine, 46

Robin Hood: Mary as Protector in High Medieval England

Many Robin Hood documents have survived from the Middle Ages. Stephen Knight and Thomas Ohlgren's extensive collection, *Robin Hood and other Outlaw Tales*, includes Robin Hood stories from the thirteenth century to the seventeenth century. Robin Hood mythology was well-circulated by the fourteenth century, even mentioned in the 1300s in another popular medieval literary source, *Piers Plowman*.⁷⁹ By the 1500s, Robin Hood was part of traditional folklore and celebrations throughout the English cities and countryside.⁸⁰ Unlike other Chivalric tales which traveled back and forth between England and the Continent, Robin Hood stories were purely English⁸¹ and thus contribute important insights into the medieval English psyche.

Robin Hood is the hero of plays, games, ballads, stories and pseudo-historical accounts.⁸² It is believed that many of these works came from oral tales.⁸³ Some of the transcribed stories are highly literary, whereas others used the vernacular. Robin's character drastically changes from source to source. Sometimes he is of noble birth, sometimes humble. Occasionally he is even part of the burgeoning middle class. This variety indicates his appeal to all social classes.

Some Robin Hood myths built on older ones. For example, in *Robin Hood and the Monk* (c.1450), the scene in which the monk identifies Robin as a thief is extremely

⁷⁹ Paul E. Szarmach, ed., *Medieval England: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1998, p., 98

⁸⁰ Ibid., 247

⁸¹ Ibid., 570

⁸² Stephen Knight and Thomas Ohlgren, ed. *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales* (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University, 2000).

⁸³ Ibid., xiii

similar to a scene in *A Gest of Robyn Hode* (c. 1500).⁸⁴ *Robin Hood and the Potter* and *A Gest of Robyn Hode* seem to have been written specifically to embellish *Robin Hood and the Monk*, a story which came fifty years earlier. This suggests that the older tale was still popular and indicates that the values of *Robin Hood and the Monk* remained important.

Robin Hood mythology spoke of English grievances. In it, Robin fights the Church, other outlaws and governmental officials. He is always an outlaw, adopted by various social groups to address their concerns. In the Middle Ages, an outlaw was a criminal "outside the protection of the laws of the realm."⁸⁵ Authorities did not actively punish outlaws but laws did not protect their persons or property. People—particularly of the lower class—who did not feel the law adequately protected them would have identified with the unprotected outlaw.

Disgust with the corrupted Church and judicial system led to the popularity of outlaw characters in medieval literature.⁸⁶ The popular literary outlaw suggests that the actual medieval outlaws⁸⁷ conflict with authority echoed the desires of the powerless. Robin Hood, in his battle against institutions, was a moral and religious hero and a defender of justice.

The fifteenth century texts focus on the tension between the Church, local government and the individual. In *Robin Hood and the Monk* (c.1450), Robin is a devout Christian, constantly praising and addressing God. Religion was such a major part of medieval culture that most language was infused with religious metaphors, images, and

⁸⁴ Ibid., 51

⁸⁵ Szarmach, 570

⁸⁶ Ibid., 570

⁸⁷ Hollister, 326

phrases. Yet, Robin expresses a genuine religious devotion and the plot is driven by his desire to attend mass.

Robin is a distinctly Catholic figure for whom Church is an important part of his relationship to God. At the beginning of the story, on an otherwise "mery mornynge,"⁸⁸ Robin says, "on thyng greves me... / And does my hert mych woo: / That I may not no solem day / To mas nor matyns goo."⁸⁹ Even though it is a beautiful day, Robin is depressed because he cannot go to mass. He is further concerned that "hit is a fourtnet and more...Syn I my Savyour see."⁹⁰ In the Late Middle Ages, a fortnight was a typical amount of time between trips to mass.⁹¹ Robin's concern over this length shows religious commitment.

As the tale develops, it becomes clear that Robin has not attended mass because it is dangerous for him to do so. While at church, a monk sees Robin praying and alerts the Sheriff that Robin "robbyt [him] onys of a hundred pound/ Hit shalle never out of my mynde."⁹² As a monk, his grudge is particularly heinous. Obsession with revenge contradicts the Christian doctrine to turn the other cheek and focusing on material wealth went against the Biblical precept that "it is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything that will cause your brother to fall."⁹³ The vengeful monk values money more than the wellbeing of a fellow Christian.

By 1350,⁹⁴ the English began to distrust Church authorities because many clerics were focused on money and enjoyed worldly pleasures.⁹⁵ Corrupt priests and monks were

⁸⁸ Knight, 37

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Sue Stuard, private interview held at Haverford College, Haverford, PA, April, 2003.

⁹² Knight, 49

⁹³ Corinthians 14:21-24

popular characters in medieval chivalric stories. Lee C. Ramsey wrote in *Chivalric Romances: Popular Literature in Medieval England* that in the 1300s most medieval literature and reform movements blamed their religious frustrations on corrupt Catholic individuals but usually remained faithful to the Pope and the Church.⁹⁶ In many of the romances discussed in Ramsey's book, the hero defended the Church by murdering clerics. These reformers believed that if more devout Christians were put into Church positions, the corruption would disappear.

Yet, corrupt individuals also created institutional problems. In *Robin Hood and the Monk* corruption disrupted the medieval hierarchy. In the tale, lack of respect towards superiors, specifically the monk and the sheriff, was an expression of disenchantment with the power structure. Without fear of offending man or God, Robin's sidekick, Little John, murders the monk.⁹⁷

Within Robin's band, however, Little John adheres to the hierarchy. Robin Hood and Little John are bound together in friendship as well as in a master/servant relationship. Little John refers to Robin as his "maister"⁹⁸ when he rallies men to save Robin and when he kills the monk.⁹⁹ When Robin cheats Little John of money, Little John says, "Were thou not my maister... / Thou shuldis by hit ful sore."¹⁰⁰ Little John's loyalty to Robin comes before his sense of personal justice. In fact, Little John's loyalty is so strong that when Robin later offers to "make the [him] maister,"¹⁰¹ Little John refuses

⁹⁴ Herlihy, David, ed. *Medieval Culture and Society* (Illinois: Waveland Press, Inc., 1993), p. 343

⁹⁵ Graef, 2:1

⁹⁶ Lee C Ramsey, *Chivalric Romances: Popular Literature in Medieval England* (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 1983), p. 93.

⁹⁷ Knight, 43

⁹⁸ Ibid., 41

⁹⁹ Ibid., 43

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 39

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 47

and pledges to remain a "felow."¹⁰² Little John as well as Robin's other men are also willing to risk their lives to save Robin's. They are invested in the hierarchy of their own band. *Robin Hood and the Monk* criticizes church hierarchy but does not advocate for the end of hierarchical systems.

During the Late Middle Ages hierarchical loyalty remained valued, although with the development of urban artisan and merchant classes the definition of hierarchy was broadening beyond feudal bonds. By the fifteenth century, the urban aristocracy had both money and status. The guilds had become powerful and rigid.¹⁰³ One had to work through an established hierarchy to enter a given field. The hierarchical system was changing, not dissolving.

In this unstable environment, Mary is called on for protection. As Robin embarks on his journey to mass, he says, "To day wil I to Notyngham . . . / with the myght of mylde Marye."¹⁰⁴ Robin relies on Mary alone. Even after he is warned to take more men, he only requests Little John's company.

Little John echoes Robin's faith in Mary. When Robin is caught by the Sheriff, Little John says, "He has servyd Oure Lady many a day, / And yet wil, securly; / Therfor I trust in hir specialty / No wyckud deth shal he dye."¹⁰⁵ A vassal/lord relationship has been established: because Robin serves Mary, he expects her protection. By the latter part of the Middle Ages, stories tell of Mary inhabiting the body of a midwife, mother and

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Hollister, 357

¹⁰⁴ Knight, 38

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 41

even a knight.¹⁰⁶ In these cases, Mary literally fills human positions. Unlike masters on earth, Mary could be always be relied on.

Protecting Robin's body on earth hearkens back to Ambrose's claim that Mary took care of Jesus' body not his soul. This depiction diverges from Mary's more traditional medieval role as intercessor for souls. In *Memoirs of a Medieval Woman: The Life and Times of Margery Kempe*, Mary was also called upon to keep her followers alive. Specifically, she was prayed to before the pilgrims embarked on journeys, particularly over water.¹⁰⁷

The earthly protective role represents a growing focus on earthly matters. This shift is apparent in literature where some stories focused more on Christian people than on God. Fourteenth century Geoffrey Chaucer's popular *Canterbury Tales* gives detailed descriptions of the individuals on a pilgrimage.¹⁰⁸ A more human focus is also manifested in High medieval art. For most of the Middle Ages, humans had been portrayed as divine. Late 1300s altarpieces depicted Richard II and his court in scenes with the Virgin Mary.¹⁰⁹ Yet, from the fourteenth century, even the nativity began to resemble ordinary birth scenes with midwives doing mundane acts like fixing the Virgin's pillow.¹¹⁰ High Middle Ages paintings and statues of the Virgin and Jesus were increasingly lifelike¹¹¹

As an advocate for souls, Mary's help was needed throughout a person's life. On the other hand, called on to protect Robin's body, Mary's role is limited to helping him deal with specific problems. At the beginning of *Robin Hood and the Monk*, Robin fights

¹⁰⁶ Leyser, 223

¹⁰⁷ Louise Collis, *Memoirs of a Medieval Woman: The Life and Times of Margery Kempe* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1964), p. 54.

¹⁰⁸ Hollister, 372

¹⁰⁹ Garland, 41

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 25

¹¹¹ Cloisters Museum

with little John and is displeased with his men. Then church and secular authorities conspire to jail Robin—rendering his men leaderless. Vassal/master relationships are upset both in Robin's band and in society at large. Robin and little John pray to Mary throughout the first half of the story. After Little John's final plea to Mary, he kills the ignoble monk and helps Robin escape from prison. Then, the King of England absolves Robin of blame, restoring his position as a "yemen of the crowne."¹¹² Robin is no longer an outlaw. The monarchy is unblemished since the king believes Robin, instead of the sheriff and the monk. This reaffirms the notion that fundamentally the hierarchical system works. This positive depiction of the King sheds light on why England was so easily converted from Catholicism to the monarchical Anglicanism.

Unlike many medieval chivalric stories in which Mary is re-invoked at the resolution, Mary disappears from the second half of *Robin Hood and the Monk*. Her purpose was to restore order. When Robin is no longer an outlaw and a legitimate hierarchy is in place, Mary is unnecessary. This happy conclusion suggests that removing the corrupt monk and sheriff is all that is necessary to set Robin's world right.

Yet, Catholicism is also subtly criticized in *Robin Hood and the Monk*. It was in church that the monk "spyed the false felon [Robin Hood], / As he stondis at his masse."¹¹³ The monk then alerts the sheriff and Robin is captured in the very church that he had fled to for safety.

By the fourteenth century, Church reformers were sprouting up throughout Europe. One popular groups was the "Brethren of the Common Life" who wanted the

¹¹² Knight, 47

¹¹³ Ibid., 39

Church to encourage priests to devote their lives to preaching, teaching, and charity.¹¹⁴

The Lollards, following the teachings of John Wycliffe (d.1383), were infuriated with ecclesiastical corruption and also wanted doctrinal changes. They focused on the individual's relationship with God and used the Bible to direct their faith.¹¹⁵

In Memoirs of a Medieval Woman: The Life and Times of Margery Kempe, Kempe's fellow travelers demonstrated their commitment to cultural and traditional elements of Catholicism by making a pilgrimage. Yet, they chose to show devotion in new quiet ways such as through individual silent prayer. Kent, however, demonstrated her faith in a more traditional Catholic manner: she altered her dress (at times she only wore white) and experienced God in noisy, dramatic, mystical encounters. Her fellow travelers were disgusted with Kent's form of religious devotion, believing she was unrefined and, worse, insincere.¹¹⁶ English Catholic expressions of devotion were changing.

Responding to dissension, the English began putting to death those suspected of heresy—essentially any opinion or act that challenged Church tradition.¹¹⁷ In 1401, Parliament enacted "The Statute on the Burning of the Heretics," which particularly targeted Lollards.¹¹⁸ The Church also identified many of the very religious as dangerous because of their more extreme faith. Devout Catholics who wanted to improve Catholicism were not able to do so within this system.¹¹⁹ This increased the numbers of those disenchanted with the Church.

¹¹⁴ Hollister, 331

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 332

¹¹⁶ Collis, 22

¹¹⁷ Graef, 2:6

¹¹⁸ Hollister, 332

¹¹⁹ Graef, 2:6

In *Robin Hood and the Monk*, only Mary stood out as an entirely helpful, loyal, and just force. The mid-sixteenth century, *A Gest of Robyn Hode* emphasized trust in Mary. In this tale, it is said of Robin that "thre messis woulde he here. / The one in worship of the Fader. / And another of the Holy Gost, / The thride of Oure dere Lady, / That he loved allther moste,"¹²⁰ Emphasis on three recalls the Trinity but Mary replaces her son as the third member. Robin also "loved" Mary "moste," elevating her status above the Father and the Holy Ghost. In *A Gest of Robyn Hode*, the one uncorrupted authority, a Knight, is referred to as Mary's messenger. Robin associates the Virgin with goodness and, trusts her more than God. This is a feature of medieval English Catholicism.¹²¹

Mary's popularity surged in the High Middle Ages¹²² when traditional medieval structures were losing power, prestige, and respect.¹²³ For Catholics she was a means of speaking to God without relying on church officials. Early Protestants also wanted to avoid the Church in their relationship with God. Because Protestants believed only a Bible was necessary to connect with God, they had no need for Mary.

In the Robin Hood tales, Robin drew on the Biblical idea that Mary was Mother to all men. Robin had a vassal-like relationship with Mary, he served her and she protected him. Robin wanted Mary to protect him from other people as opposed to looking after his soul. This reflects a growing focus on life on earth. It also reflects Robin's sense that he could no longer rely on secular authority, the church hierarchy, the Church itself, and perhaps even God. Mary substituted for those powers and was, therefore, the focus of prayer and devotion.

¹²⁰ Knight, 91

¹²¹ Ellington, 156

¹²² Boyd, 10

¹²³ Herlihy, 342

Mary's connection to women became more evident after the Reformation. The Protestants did not want to draw attention to the Virgin Mary although they continued to idealize women. In the later Robin Hood Tales, the Virgin Mary disappeared and was replaced with Maid Marian. This was an effortless switch—"maid" means "virgin" in the vernacular. Maid Marian, like Mary, was the ideal female. She personified "beauty most rare / Queen Hellen shee did excell" and, like Mary, she was the most "praised [woman] of all men."¹²⁴ Late Medieval chivalric tales also shifted from the Virgin Mary to virginal women.

In some cases, with the switch from Mary to Woman, the female love object became more passive. Mary aided Robin whereas most women in chivalric tales inspired their men and cared for them after battle. On the other hand, in some cases, the switch to a real woman allowed for male/female partnership. In *Robin Hood and Maid Marian*, Robin and Marian are presented as equals with the same positive attributes and noble birth. Further emphasizing the equal relationship, Marian refers to Robin as her "friend." In this tale, Marian, dressed as a page, goes in search of Robin. They end up not recognizing each other and fighting as equals. Robin no longer has divine protection but he gains a human ally.

Human relationships placed value on earthly pleasure. In *Robin Hood and Maid Marian* their physical relationship is an expression of their love.¹²⁵ It is the source of Robin's happiness.¹²⁶ Although Mary, at times, was a problematic role model, in Robin Hood tales, she established the importance of a female presence and, as a powerful woman herself, Mary paved the way for the also powerful and respected Maid Marian.

¹²⁴ Knight, 494

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 496

Mary as the Virgin Mother in the Mystery Plays

In the late fifteenth century, the English wrote and performed plays that depicted mankind's fall from Eden, Christ's story and the Last Judgment. Called Mystery Plays, they were performed throughout England. Plays associated with a given region were called Cycles, such as the Chester Cycle, the York Cycle, the N-Town Cycle. Different Cycles had only slight variations from each other.

Performed outdoors, Mystery Plays were accessible to the rich and the poor.¹²⁷ They were often performed during the Catholic holiday, Corpus Christi, in major English towns and cities.¹²⁸ From 1400 to 1700, Mystery Plays were the most popular dramatic performances in England.¹²⁹ They were such a significant part of English culture that in the 1700s, Shakespeare's Hamlet advises his actors not to "out-Herod Herod."¹³⁰ Shakespeare's viewers were still familiar enough with the Mystery Plays to recognize the allusion.

The Mystery Plays supplemented church services. They made religion more accessible and reached people who were not attending Church. An old man interviewed in 1600 said he knew nothing of religion except for Jesus as depicted in the Mystery Plays.¹³¹

In teaching creation and Christ's story, the Mystery Plays claimed to tell mankind's history.¹³² This connected the Biblical experience to the medieval audience as

¹²⁷ Greg Walker, ed., *Medieval Drama: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), p. 3.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid, 4

part of a shared history. Divine and Biblical characters acted human and, according to Greg Walker in *Medieval Drama: An Anthology*, the plays were grounded in a realistic world.¹³³ The creators of the plays, some of whom were Church officials, hoped to make the Bible real, credible and personal. In the Mystery Plays, surreal experiences happened to very real characters. In the earlier medieval period, the supernatural had been accepted. By the 1400s, the belief that truth was based on ideas proven with tangible facts was emerging.

To increase townspeople's interaction with religion, local guilds were assigned a given act to perform and to provide with costumes and props. Therefore, the audience knew most of the actors and recognized the scenery. The presence of the guilds in the reenactment of the Biblical story reminded everyone that no work was disconnected from God and that religion was inextricably part of daily life.¹³⁴

The Mystery Plays¹³⁵ begin with Adam and Eve. In them, the female snake promises Eve if she eats from the forbidden tree, she will become a goddess and receive knowledge. Eve is conniving and defies God. She causes the fall of Adam and represents sin. Adam says, "now all my kinde by me is kent [advised] / To flee women's inticement; / that trustes them in anye intent / Truly he is decayved."¹³⁶ In this passage, Adam links Eve's sin to all women, imploring future men to distrust women.

Later in the play, Joseph discovers Mary is pregnant. He is furious, aware that Jesus is not his child. He only believes in Mary's innocence after the archangel Gabriel explains the situation. This contrasts with the Biblical version in which, finding Mary

¹³³ Ibid., 167

¹³⁴ Ibid., 3

¹³⁵ The sources I used provided an amalgamation of the Mystery Plays from various Cycles. I am therefore representing the plays as they did, as one unit.

pregnant, as a "a righteous man" Joseph "did not want to expose her to public disgrace."¹³⁷ Instead, he planned "to divorce her quietly."¹³⁸ In the Mystery Plays, Joseph's distrust of Mary and his anger echoes Adam's advice—that all men should distrust their wives. This harsher response suggests a general hostility toward women in the 1400s.

Interestingly, in the Mystery Plays Woman is also connected to redemption. Isaiah said, "For Adam, that no lyis in sorrois full sade, / Hir glorseous birth schall reydeme hym ageyn / from bondage and thrall."¹³⁹ In giving birth to Jesus, Mary helps to save Adam's soul. God planted Jesus in Mary and Jesus redeemed man. Eve takes all the blame for man's downfall but Mary, as the vessel that temporarily housed Jesus, is only partially credited with his redemption

Medieval Catholicism focused on man's fall from Heaven and his glorious return. Fall and return were portrayed in artwork, written form and religious services. Woman, embodied by the Virgin and Eve, provided explanations for life's great mysteries, life and death. In the Old Testament, Eve bears responsibility for the introduction of death. One can look at the offering of the apple as the first sex act—after eating the apple, Adam and Eve become aware of their nakedness. In the Mystery Plays, God curses Eve with pregnancy, further equating the eating of the apple with sexual intercourse.¹⁴⁰ Adam and Eve's exit from Eden was the birth of life on earth and also the beginning of mortality.

As early as the second century, the Virgin Mary was called the second Eve because the birth of Jesus gave mankind a second chance at Eden. Unlike Eve, due to the

¹³⁶ Peter Happe, *English Mystery Plays* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1975), p. 75.

¹³⁷ Matthew 1:19

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Happe, 345.

Immaculate Conception, Mary is the only human free from Original Sin. Mankind's soul becomes immortal with Jesus' death. The Virgin, being the greatest of all women, could bear a child and remain chaste and good. Eve, however, remained the inferior to all humans, sexualized and evil. Thus, sexuality was linked to evil and death.

Christa Grossinger, *Picturing Women in Late Medieval and Renaissance Art*, explains that since the expulsion from Eden, all women save the Virgin Mary were blamed for the fall from paradise.¹⁴¹ In the Mystery Plays, when God punishes Eve, he refers to her as "woman." His punishments are

Thy mischief I shall multeply; / with pennuance, sorrow
and great anoye [grief] / Thy children shalt tho beare.
/ And for thou has done so to-doaye, / The man shall
mayster thee alwaye, / And under his power thou shalt be
aye, / Thee for to drive [go] and deere [suffer].¹⁴²

Therefore, because of Eve's mistake women are cursed with pregnancy and subservience to man. Only Mary was differentiated from other women and was able to "bare hym [Christ] here with-outen payne / where women are wonte to be pyned."¹⁴³

On the other hand, Mary's maternity is a positive focus of the Mystery Plays. A loving and caring mother, Mary treats Jesus like an ordinary child, rejoicing in "my chyld so bright of ble [face]"¹⁴⁴ and greatly grieving at his death. In the same time period, the popularity of Pietas, images of a grieving Mary holding Jesus, indicates that Late Medieval society was focused on motherhood. The Pieta from the German Valley of the Rhine, c. 1375-1400, now in the Cloisters Museum in New York City, depicts a real

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 74

¹⁴¹ Christa Grossinger, *Picturing Women in Late Medieval and Renaissance Art*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p. 1.

¹⁴² Happe, 74

¹⁴³ Ibid., 315

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

mother's pain in the loss of her child. She holds the dead Christ in her arms as if he were still an infant.¹⁴⁵

Like the good and loving mother Mary, women were encouraged to mother humanity. In the fourteenth century, in *The Book of the Knight of La Tour Landry*,¹⁴⁶ Geoffroy de la Tour-Landry¹⁴⁷ wrote to his daughters:

The pleasure of all good women ought to be to visit and feed the poor and fatherless children and to nourish and clothe young little children, as did a holy woman who was countess of Mans, who always fed thirty fatherless children and said it was her recreation. Therefore she was loved by God and had a goodlife and death; at her death was seen a great light which shone clearly and was full of small children, Innocents, around her.¹⁴⁸

Like Jesus, who had no earthly father, the children are "fatherless." There is no mention of these children's mothers. Instead, like Mary, the women who are asked to mother are not biological mothers but maternal virgins. It is also interesting that for women heaven included children. Women's salvation was directly linked to childcare.

According to Jennifer Ward in *Women of the English Nobility and Gentry: 1066-1500*, typically nurses took care of a child's physical needs among the upper classes. Mothers, however, were encouraged to take responsibility for their children's moral and educational upbringing.¹⁴⁹ As it was for Mary, a woman's worth was measured in the morality of her children.

¹⁴⁵ Cloisters Museum, Pieta, German, Valley of the Rhine, ca. 1375-1400

¹⁴⁶ This book was popular in England in the fifteenth century.

¹⁴⁷ <http://icg.harvard.edu/~chaucer/special/authors/latour/>

¹⁴⁸ Jennifer Ward, *Women of the English Nobility and Gentry: 1066-1500* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 209.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 48

By the fifteenth century, motherhood was one of the only options for women. For most of the Middle Ages, wives helped run their husband's businesses or manors and widows could take over property. But, in the Late Middle Ages, particularly in urban environments, the codification of guilds had pushed women out of business.¹⁵⁰ By the end of the 1400s, only able to be mothers or nuns, women's lives increasingly resembled Mary's.

Perhaps the particular focus on maternity was because during the High Middle Ages there was a shortage of women,¹⁵¹ making mothers a valued limited commodity. High percentages of menstruating women died of diseases related to iron deficiencies.¹⁵² Women also died in childbirth.¹⁵³ Out of the four who bore children, two of Henry VIII's wives died from disease related to childbirth.¹⁵⁴ If even the King's wives who received the best medical attention and food died bearing children, death during childbirth must have been extremely common. The motherless clung to Mary, gaining comfort from a perfect mother who took care of everyone.

The selfless mother has also historically been a major trope in Catholicism. In *Confessions*, Monica provided an example of the ideal female. She is completely altruistic,¹⁵⁵ devoting her life to Augustine even though he is not a particularly attentive son.¹⁵⁶ When Augustine's soul is finally saved, Monica said, "God has granted my wish and more besides, for I now see you as his servant...What is left for me to do in this

¹⁵⁰ Leyser, 160-161

¹⁵¹ Hollister, 186

¹⁵² Ibid., 187

¹⁵⁴ David Starkey, *Elizabeth: The Struggle for the Throne*. (New York: HarperCollins Publisher, Inc., 2001), pp. 25, 70-71.

¹⁵⁵ Augustine, 311

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 101

world."¹⁵⁷ With no more reason to live, she dies soon after. She existed only to be his mother, referred to by Augustine as "your good servant in whose womb you created me."¹⁵⁸

In the Mystery Plays, Mary and Eve were diametric opposites. Mary was completely good and Eve completely sinful. Mary was associated with man's redemption while Eve was blamed for his death. Because women could not be chaste and mothers at the same time, they were linked to Eve. Yet, women's chance at salvation came from emulating Mary as nuns or mothers. Interestingly, the Mystery Plays focus particularly on Mary's maternity. This emphasis reflects Late Medieval society where mothers were highly valued. It presages Protestant beliefs that women found their salvation in motherhood.¹⁵⁹

The N-Town Mary Play

The N-Town Cycle¹⁶⁰ has a different focus from earlier Mystery Plays. As discussed throughout this paper, by 1500, Catholicism was criticized by a variety of segments of the English population. Besides general frustration with ecclesiastical corruption, some devout Christians¹⁶¹ also believed Catholicism had abandoned the essentials of Christianity. These reformers maintained that Catholics had strayed too far from the Bible and God. Particularly, reformers condemned the Catholic focus on Saints and the Virgin Mary. This criticism culminated in Luther's Theses in Wittenburg and the

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 199

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 196

¹⁵⁹ Lyndal Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil*. (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 40.

¹⁶⁰ This play probably came from East Anglia (Walker 6).

subsequent Protestant Reformation. Though written before the actual Protestant Reformation, the *Mary Play* developed in an increasingly anti-clerical environment. Most of the plays were performed after the Reformation had gained popularity on the Continent. Thus, the *Mary Play* in defending Catholicism addressed reformist sentiment. At the end of the century, even though the Protestant English establishment did not suppress most of the Mystery Plays, Anglicans banned the N-Town Cycle because it was so closely linked with the defense of the Catholic Church.¹⁶²

As a reaction to reformers, the *Mary Play* uses Mary to prove that every detail of Catholicism has a purpose. In the play, even Mary's name has a special significance. An angel explains that each letter stands for one of Mary's attributes:¹⁶³ "M" is for "meryfull, and mekist in mende;" "A" is for "averte of the anguysche that Adam began"; "R" is for "Regina" eternal; "I" is for "innocent"; "A" is for "advocat" of "ancestry of Anna."¹⁶⁴ In other words, Mary is responsible for man's salvation, both as a merciful intercessor and in giving birth to Jesus. She is the semi-divine Queen of Heaven and the daughter of Anna. Her virginity is also acknowledged. This Mary is distinctly Catholic.

The *Mary Play* also offers an etymology of "Ave" from the "Ave Maria" prayer.¹⁶⁵ The literal translation of Ave is "hail."¹⁶⁶ In the play, the angel Gabriel adds to this translation, saying, "Ave gracia plena Dominus tecum! / Heyl, ful of grace, God is with the[e]! / Among all women blyssyd art thu. / Here is [th]is name, *Eva*, is turnyd *Ave*;

¹⁶¹ Graef, 2:2

¹⁶² Walker, 4

¹⁶³ The Angel uses the name Maria, a common medieval name for Mary.

¹⁶⁴ Walker, 178

¹⁶⁵ This popular prayer to the Virgin comes from Luke (http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00015395?single=1&query_type=word&queryword=ave+maria&editon=2e&first=1&max_to_show=10).

¹⁶⁶ <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00015395>

/ That is to say: withowte sorwe ar [the]e now."¹⁶⁷ Gabriel argues that "Ave" means more than merely "hail." It signifies Mary's connection to Eve. He points out that "Ave" and "Eve" are spelled similarly. Yet, just as "A" makes "Ave" critically different from "Eve," Mary's goodness placed her in diametric opposition to Eve. Gabriel draws attention to this contrast by explaining that "withowte sorwe ar [the]e now," identifying Eve's responsibility for man's pain and Mary's role in man's redemption. Every element of Catholicism, even spelling, had doctrinal significance.

The redefinition of "hail" also addressed fifteenth and sixteenth century reformer criticism that the "Ave Maria" was not a prayer but a greeting. Likewise, they believed Mary should not be prayed to but only acknowledged. Some Catholics addressed this by adding a plea for Mary's help at the end of the "Ave Maria."¹⁶⁸ By linking Mary's role in salvation to the word "Ave," the *Mary Play* codified Mary's connection to salvation. Mary as a Catholic intercessor, actively helped save souls and therefore warranted prayers.

The *Mary Play* responded to reformer's complaint that Catholicism was too fantastical. Protestantism did not have the more "magical" elements of Catholic faith such as transubstantiation and the worship of relics and Saints. Instead, reformers advocated that only God had supernatural powers. This corresponded with a world-view that was increasingly focused on the earth. In the Late Middle Ages, the English began to try to understand the body. In the fifteenth century, the authority on women's medical knowledge, the *English Trotula*, associated menstruation with an absence of heat in the

¹⁶⁷ Walker, 190

¹⁶⁸ <http://www.canticanova.com/articles/hymns/artd32.htm>.

female body¹⁶⁹ rather than with Eve's punishment. The *Mary Play* acknowledged an increased understanding of pregnancy: Mary asks Gabriel how she could give birth but remain a virgin. Mary's question reassured audiences that skepticism about a virgin birth was warranted. Gabriel likewise acknowledges that a virgin birth is unnatural but tells Mary "nothyng is impossyble to Goddys usage."¹⁷⁰ God's inexplicable work in an otherwise logical world made him more powerful.

Mary also provided a role model for the ideal Catholic woman. The *Mary Play* begins with Mary's parents, Anne and Joachim, lamenting that they do not have a child. Mary's pious mother promises, "If God send frute and it be a mayd childe, / With all reverens I vow to His Mageste, / Sche xal be here foot-mayd to mynyster here most / mylde."¹⁷¹ The Oxford English Dictionary defines "mylde" as "gentleness, pity" in the fifteenth century.¹⁷² The word was usually associated with God, Christ and the Virgin Mary.¹⁷³ As a Christian word, it did not show up in England until 725 after the country became Christian.¹⁷⁴ Anne's promise to raise her daughter "most mild" is a vow to raise Mary in accordance with Catholic religious traditions.

Emphasis on the "mild" mannered woman was important to High Medieval society. "How the Goodwife Taught her Daughter" was a popular instructive poem written in the 1300s and widely read through the end of the 1400s. It was used to educate women, particularly those in urban environments, on appropriate behavior.¹⁷⁵ In it, the

¹⁶⁹ Goldberg, 57

¹⁷⁰ Walker, 191

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 169

¹⁷² http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00146625?query_type=word&queryword=mild&edition=2e&first=1&max_to_show=10&sort_type=alpha&search_id=Npwl-Kk3GzA-930&hlite=00146625.

¹⁷³ http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00146627?query_type=word&queryword=mild&edition=2e&first=1&max_to_show=10&sort_type=alpha&search_id=Npwl-Kk3GzA-930.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Goldberg, 97

medieval mother is told to encourage her daughter to be "of mild mood."¹⁷⁶ By this she means, being "true in word and in deed, and in conscience good."¹⁷⁷ Religious devotion is linked to good behavior on earth. Mild behavior protects a woman "from sin, from villainy, and from blame"¹⁷⁸ and will save her in the eyes of God and man. Being mild was equated with being a pious Christian woman concerned with her place in heaven and on earth.

In the *Mary Play*, Episcopus instructs Mary to focus her life on "Meditacyon; / Contryssyon, Compassyon, and Clennes [purity and communion]."¹⁷⁹ This behavior exemplifies a good Catholic, particularly a nun. In fact, in the *Mary Play*, Mary takes vows similar to a nun's. Anne asks her "wole ye be pure maydn, and also Goddys wyff?"¹⁸⁰ Mary responds:

Ye han made youre avow, so ssothly wole I, / To be
Goddys chast servaunt whil lyff is in me. / But to be
Goddy's wife wyff, / I was nevyr wurthy. / I am the
sympelest that evyr was born of body. / I have herd
yow seyde, God xulde have a modyr swete.¹⁸¹

Mary, in her humility, will not call herself God's wife although she bears His child. She does accept the role of God's mother. Thus, like a nun, Mary pledges herself to chastity for God and Jesus' sake and devotes her life to God's purposes.

Mary's vows could encourage women to be nuns. This encouragement seems needed since most of the primary sources in *Women in England c. 1275-1525* recommend women to marriage instead of the nunnery. The goal of "How the Goodwife Taught her

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 98

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 98

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 98

¹⁷⁹ Walker, 177

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 173

Daughter" was to raise a good wife. The instructions end: "From the very moment that they [your daughters] are of you born, / Busy you, and quickly collect towards their marriage, / And give them to espousing as soon as they are of age."¹⁸² By encouraging marriage, this text leans towards Protestantism. The *Mary Play* combats focus on marriage. In this way it bolsters the nunnery, a Christian institution unique to Catholicism.

Interestingly, the *Mary Play* used Protestant tools to promote Catholicism. Like Ambrose, Protestants believed that Mary was important as a role model. They typically argued that the Biblical Mary had a sexual relationship with Joseph that produced children.¹⁸³ The Protestant Mary was an exceptional mother of a large family. This fit with the Protestant view that women contributed to religion as caretakers and mothers.¹⁸⁴ The *Mary Play* used close Biblical analysis to support Catholic tenets and to make Mary a role model of the Catholic faith. Even in defending Catholicism, a Protestant way of thinking was taking hold. This helps to explain why so many of the English chose the monarchy over Catholicism after the English Reformation. By 1500, even English Catholics had begun to develop a Protestant worldview.

During the reformation, Mary's role began a focus of debate. Catholics worshiped and prayed to Mary, wedded to her position as intercessor. Catholic reformers and later, Protestants believed Marian worship was counter to monotheism. They only recognized her as a model of good Christian behavior. After England's conversion to Anglicanism,

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 173

¹⁸² Goldberg, 102

¹⁸³ Ellington, 155

¹⁸⁴ Roper, 40

Mary was one of the only characters written out of the Mystery Plays by Reformers.¹⁸⁵

Likewise, under Henry VIII's orders, shrines to Mary were looted and destroyed. The most popular shrine, "Our Lady of Walsingham," was renamed "The Witch of Walsingham" and then destroyed.¹⁸⁶ Of the Lady at Coversham's destruction, Thomas Cromwell's commissioner, Dr. London, reported:

I have pulled down the image of Your Lady at
Coversham, with all its trinkets, shrouds, candles, wax
images, crutches and brooches and I have thouroughly
defaced the chapel. The image is altogether plated with
silver. I have put her in a box, fast locked and nailed.
By the next barge it shall be brought to my lord, with
her coats, cap and hair and divers relics."¹⁸⁷

The wealth and attention previously lavished on the shrine shows how important Mary had been to the English people. Dr. London's use of "her" suggests London saw the Marian image as a female figure. The violent destruction indicates that Mary had come to exemplify everything repugnant about Catholicism.

¹⁸⁵ Walker, 5

¹⁸⁶ Carroll, 221.

¹⁸⁷ Mullen, 47

Mary's Legacy

The characteristics that Mary was assigned at a given historical moment illustrate societal concerns. In the Late Medieval period, English society was going through great upheaval. The hierarchical system was changing with the development of more economically independent classes and a centralized political government. The corrupt Church hierarchy had lost much of its prestige. Reformers believed that Catholicism, laden with tradition, had moved away from the essentials of Christianity. The unsettled English looked to Mary to address all these concerns. Specific to this paper, in Robin Hood mythology, Mary spoke to frustrations with medieval hierarchy. In the Mystery Plays, she and Eve provided explanations for the great mysteries of life and death. In the *Mary Play*, facing reforming opposition, she was used to defend Catholicism. An increased focus on life on also earth meant that Mary was expected to look after people's bodies as well as souls. The means in which Mary was employed suggest that though nominally Catholic, the Late Medieval English were beginning to adapt Protestant ways of looking at the world.

Medieval women were held to the Marian ideal. Because they could not achieve it, they were often linked to Eve and blamed for society's problems. At other times, drawing upon characteristics associated with Mary such as motherhood, women were expected to improve society. Political theorist Linda Zerilli, *Signifying Woman: Culture and Chaos in Rousseau, Burke, and Mill*, notes that using women to address or explain society's problems continues to this day.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁸ Linda Zerilli, *Signifying Woman: Culture and Chaos in Rousseau, Burke, and Mill* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 1.

Regardless of whether Woman is responsible for good or evil, linking women to a concept is problematic. Such thinking makes women, "Woman"—a representation not an individual.

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