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Mary—Fourth Person of the Deity?

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This essay deals with the character of the Virgin Mary as it appears in the Middle English dramatic cycles. I wish to explore by what means and to what extent these plays contributed, at a strategic time (fourteenth and fifteenth centuries) and in a privileged medium (religious drama), to the birth and construction of a quasi-divine character, the Virgin Mary.

I will take as a basis for this study the plays dealing with the life of the Virgin, mostly from the “N-Town” manuscript (formerly sometimes known as the *Ludus Coventriae*), not restricting myself to what Peter Meredith calls the “Mary play”, and with the occasional help of individual plays from other cycles, when necessary. I will address the plays staging the Virgin regardless of the construction of the cycle, my standpoint straddling the fields of religious concepts and, on the other hand, dramatic construction.

As a sort of introduction to the following interpretation, two remarks are necessary concerning the general background which presided over the conception of the texts under consideration. Although well known to modern criticism, they need to be mentioned again, as they bear directly on my argumentation.

It all starts in 1215. Indeed, the principles and tenets laid down in the edicts of the Fourth Lateran Council (and incarnated by the Peckham Constitutions of 1281 in the case of the English Church) constitute the core of the dogmas and practices of the European Catholic Church, still valid in Roman Catholic countries until fairly recently: definition of a ritual year, with regular confessions and communions, and the dogma of transubstantiation, among others. Those instructions were not radically new when published, but should rather be considered as an official reaction to the needs which were more and more urgent in a changing society. The Church, having become by 1215 an official institution, had to adopt a new attitude towards the faithful, as will be strikingly worded towards the end of the period by Knowlege [*sic*] in

Everyman: “Eueryman, I wyll go with the and be thy gyde, / In thy moost nede to go by thy syde” (ll. 522-23). The Church had to comply with the new notions of help, guidance and understanding to mitigate the rigour of a stern justice. In other words, a third type of destination for the souls of the dead was felt necessary, superseding the hard and fast binary choice between hell and paradise. Is it not interesting to remark that that period is also that in which the belief in the existence of purgatory became acceptable to most Christian thinkers, and to Christians in general?¹

My second point concerns the schism following the excommunication of the Patriarch of Constantinople by Leo IX (1054), which provoked an awareness of the differences (institutional and theological) between the Eastern and Western Churches (differences embodied in the “Filioque” controversy). The cult of the saints was probably more developed in the East, and particularly the veneration of the Virgin. Paradoxically, the break between the two churches coincides with an increased influence of eastern traditions.² Marian shrines and pilgrimages crop up all over Europe, and in such numbers in England that the country came to be known as “Mary’s dowry”.³

The Parliament of Heaven

In order to exemplify the method used in the late Medieval plays for the representation of divinity, I will select, as a first example, Play 11 of the N-Town cycle, *The Parliament of Heaven* (with *The Salutation and Conception*).⁴ This play is wedged in between two pseudo-historical episodes (in fact derived from the apocrypha), the play of Mary’s betrothal (Play 10, *The Marriage of Mary and Joseph*) and *Joseph’s Doubt* (Play 12), an episode of pure fiction, and showing some farcical features, but inserted in a realistic time sequence. Play 11 has an ambiguous relationship with time, situated as it is within neither chronological worldly time nor divine eternity. It is the only play among those introduced by Contemplacio’s Prologue⁵ that begins with a precise temporal landmark: “Fowre thowsand sex vndryd four” years (Pro., l. 1)—the length of time that the damned have suffered in hell since the Creation and the Fall of Man. The mention of a precise date creates an effect of urgency, since Contemplacio’s argument is that if they were kept longer, “thanne xulde perysche [God’s] grete mercye” (l. 5).

¹ See Le Goff, pp. 9-27 (“Le troisième lieu”). Le Goff suggests that Augustine is the true father of purgatory (pp. 92-94).

² For the influence of the Eastern Church, see Clayton, p. 269.

³ See Gibson, p. 138, and Saul, p. 208.

⁴ All references are to *The N-Town Play*, ed. Spector.

⁵ Contemplacio introduces Plays 8, 9 and 11 and provides a retrospective and anticipatory link at the end of Play 9. The importance of the Prologue to Play 11 is pointed out by Gauvin, p. 143, who notes the logical sequence which links the Fall of Man to the Incarnation.

The motif of the Parliament of Heaven, ultimately derived from Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*, was frequently used in the French Passions, the most famous example being Arnoul Gréban's *Mystère de la Passion*, where it is developed over 1000 lines at the beginning of the play.⁶ It is also known as the most impressive episode of a famous English morality play, *The Castle of Perseverance*, a solemn conclusion to the story of man's temptation, fall and final conversion to virtue. In the French passion, it belongs to the first Advent of Christ, immediately after the Fall of Man, and is used to show Christ deciding in favour of man's salvation through his own sacrifice on the cross; in *The Castle of Perseverance*, it acts as a summing up of Christ's mission after man's salvation has been completed. In both cases, it appears as a rather abstract theological pronouncement, whose consequences can be extended to the whole of mankind.

In Play 11 of the N-Town cycle, the argument is conducted along the traditional lines already used in Continental passions, but its topical use is particularly effective. The motif opens on a fervent prayer by Contemplacio, asking God to come down to earth "And levyn 3erys thre and threttye" (l. 11). The episode belongs both to time (4604 years after the Fall) and to an abstract duration, a moral or providential time which is neither today nor the end of the world. The success of Mercy allows Jesus to rescue the damned from hell. The ambiguous chronology allows the spectators to combine this episode with the more "historical" Harrowing of Hell, which is generally placed in the cycles between the Passion and Resurrection, and can be interpreted as belonging to the same compassionate plan in favour of mankind. Forgiveness should not worry about logic, but its nature is presented as a reconciliation of "contraries":⁷ only a God who would at the same time be a man can realise this sublimation of human contradictions.

Here, in the first part of the play, which consists of the debate between the so-called Four Daughters of God, the introduction of Jesus and the Holy Spirit results in what I would call a humanisation of the situation, as the sisters' presence is a prefiguration of the canonical episode of the Annunciation. Jesus exclaims, "It peyneth me þat man I mad, / Þat is to seyn, peyne I must suffre fore" (ll. 169-70). This human touch is to be found side by side with a reference to the Trinity: "A counsel of þe Trinité must be had (l. 171). The answer comes from God the Father ("Pater"), whose intervention restores the intimate character of the dialogue. The Holy Spirit finds emotive and poetical words to describe his (or its) active part in the realisation of the new unity brought into being by the kiss between the four daughters: "I, Love, to 3oure lover xal 3ow lede. / Þis is þe assent of oure Vnyté" (ll. 183-84). This action is inspired by the original kiss mentioned in Psalm 84:10 (85 in Protestant bibles).

6 See esp. Gréban, pp. 81-96.

7 "Twey contraryes mow not togedytr dwelle" (l. 64).

Immediately after that famous kiss, the Virgin is evoked, as Pater directs the angel Gabriel to descend

To a mayd, weddyd to a man is she,
 Of whom þe name is Joseph, se,
 Of þe hous of Davyd bore.
 The name of þe mayd fre
 Is Mary, þat xal al restore. (ll. 192-96)

The victory of Mercy is justified by the mission imparted to Mary, which constitutes the “historical” conclusion to the heavenly decision, and Gabriel finds himself by Mary’s side.

A familiar touch is used to prove that all this is “real” history and concerns every humble spectator. After this allusion to Elizabeth’s example, devised to convince Mary of the possibility of this divine conception, and the recourse to that rather abstract argument, the stage direction is quite down-to-earth:

Here, þe angel makyth a lytyl restynge and Mary beholdyþ hym, and þe aunge seyth
 (containing a surprisingly matter-of-fact import):

Mary, come of and haste the,
 And take hede in thyn entent.
 Whow þe Holy Gost, blyssyd he be,
 Abydyth þin answeare and þin assent. (ll. 261-64)

Such is Mary’s introduction into the cosmic controversy of the Four Daughters of God, which constitutes her as a central pivot of the spiritual history of mankind.

History/Fiction

A divine election is more credible if it is presented as a heritage of long standing and authority. Thus, following that principle, the poet behind Plays 8, 9 and 11 of the N-Town cycle borrowed some elements from Luke 1:5-25. In Luke, there is no mention of Mary’s parents but of a priest of the Temple named Zachariah, married to Elizabeth, who is sterile. The angel of God brings her the good news that their prayers have been heard by the Lord. In the play, the sterility is transferred to Anne; as a result of this divine intervention, Joachim’s wife is no longer sterile and will conceive.

In Luke, no allusion is made to the two famous sterile women in the Old Testament, Sarah and Rachel. In Play 8, Anne is explicitly included in that class of elect women (ll. 181-84) and, implicitly, so is Mary, who will be the object of a similar (and better known) Annunciation. (It was a favourite subject of iconography.)

The Holy Spirit of Play 11 is the first to draw a parallel between Mary and Elizabeth: the latter is pregnant in spite of her old age. To be sure, Mary is not old but bound by a

vow of virginity. In both cases, their husbands are old men, and both situations are meant to illustrate the principle stated (twice) by the Holy Spirit: “Sey here to vs is nothyng impossible”; “Nothyng is impossible to Goddys vsage” (ll. 210, 259).

Gabriel is the herald of what may be called a formal proposal, which Mary is free to accept or refuse, making use of her free will (ll. 261-64). The angel uses as an argument the anguished expectation of the damned souls in hell, when he refers to Adam, Abraham and David, all men of “good reputacyon” (l. 278). His pressing questioning and Mary’s delayed answer create a suspense, a dramatic tension, which is not present in Luke. Twenty-five lines stand between the question and Mary’s expected answer: “Se here þe handmayden of oure Lorde” (l. 287).

The visit paid to Elizabeth, the subject of Play 13, is drawn from a famous episode, although it appears in Luke only. Contrary to the situation described in the Gospel, however, in the play Joseph is part of the visiting party, together with Mary, thus creating an apocryphal parallelism between the two couples. The play uses and puts into relief the connection between Zacharias’s incredulity and his dumbness,⁸ which at the same time gives an excuse for Joseph’s “doubts”. In this encounter, Zacharias plays the part of a dumb partner in a sort of comic interlude, echoing the comic tone of Joseph’s return. They are both old men, thus disqualified in matters of fecundity, as is highlighted by Joseph’s greeting of Zacharias: “A, how do 3e, how do 3e, fadyr Zacharye? / We falle fast in age, withowte oth” (ll. 139-40). This sounds like a trite remark in this play devoted to a holy celebration, constituted as it is by the composition, under divine inspiration, of a psalm by the two cousins: “This psalme of prophesye seyde betwen vs tweyn, / In hefne it is wretyn with aungellys hond” (ll. 127-28).

Play 19, *The Purification*, is the last to be inspired by an episode from the Gospels. After the adoration of the Magi, the Purification appears as a sort of second Epiphany: the Magi bear witness to the whole world; the Purification is an event significant for the whole of the religious community (Simeon is a priest, Anna a Prophetess). They have come to greet the infant “þat is kynge of alle” (l. 83). They symbolise the supersession of an old religion by the birth of a new church. Mary is not only a witness to this change, but plays an active part in the celebration. She has to be purified according to the Old Law, which shows that she is the natural mother of a human child, and she is at the same time the celebrant, when she lays the child on the altar, and, later, offers the turtle-doves in sacrifice “in my sonys name”, as she says (l. 192), thus anticipating the active part she plays in the rite of her own burial and evincing a priestly attitude very similar to that assumed by Jesus during the Last Supper. This superposition of different roles is also exemplified

8 See Luke 1:20-22.

by Joseph's meaningful confusion when he calls the old religion "Holy Kyrke" (l. 196), thus drawing our attention to the symbolic meaning of this religious continuity.

In order to provide his plot and characters with a setting that was already religious, the author of these plays has had recourse to the only religious environment familiar to his spectators, the Jewish religion, in keeping with Christ's own words, as reported by Matthew: "Think not that I have come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy but to fulfil" (5:17). In using those "historical" elements, the poet biased the plots and characters in order to situate Mary in a central position and make her conform to a religious archetype already in existence.

Public/Private

The series of three N-Town plays concerned with the Virgin's life-story opens on the feast of Enceniae (or Dedication Festival), at which a great number of Jews convene three times a year (8, ll. 34-41). The setting is the Temple of Jerusalem. The first speaker is Ysakar, the High Priest. It is against such an official background that the dramatic situation of Joachim and Anna is revealed. Their presence at such a feast is declared unwelcome, and criticised by the High Priest, on the grounds of their having no offspring, thus revealing the private tragedy of a couple to the assembled community. It is difficult not to draw a parallel between the public function in the Temple of Jerusalem and the public theatre in which the play is being performed—a parallel which was announced in *Contemplacio's* Prologue (ll. 1-8).

Our first encounter with Mary also coincides with a public occasion within the walls of the Temple: Mary's Presentation (9, ll. 1-41). That scene appears like an anticipation of the Epiphany, that is, a publication of a personal quality. In order to prove that her behaviour is responsible, although aged only three, she talks like a woman of twenty, says her father Joachim: "3e answe and 3e were twenty 3ere olde!" (l. 43). What is original is that, as a sort of introit to the ceremony, in a scene strongly redolent of the taking of vows by a nun in a Christian convent, she acts not only as a young nun, but also as the celebrant in charge.

Another public ceremony, the scene meant to designate a husband, takes place when she has reached the age of fourteen. Now she has to declare publicly that she means to obey both her promise and the laws of the Jewish religion concerning the marriage of young virgins. This double obligation provokes a debate that the audience is called upon to join by singing all together the *Veni Creator Spiritus*. The rule that every candidate should hold a wand in his hand, which is supposed to bloom in case of success, is the occasion for a spectacular scene, symbolic of the presence of the deity in everyday life. The public character of that *mise en scène* is underlined by the use of a crier, who summons, and so solemnises, the meeting with a formal call to attention in answer to the Bishop's orders (10, ll. 138-45).

Side by side with those public sessions, some intimate exchanges occur in the midst of the more formal and “official” situations. At the opening Play 8, *Joachim and Anna*, the shame to which they will be submitted is anticipated by the couple, and draws tears from their eyes. Anne sympathises with her prospective husband’s anxiety—“For dred and for swem of 3oure wourdys I qwake; / Thryes I kysse 3ou with syghys ful sad” (ll. 78-79)—although she refrains from showing all her grief, and utters this delicate and intimate remark after Joachim’s departure, which she shares with the audience: “Now am I left alone, sore may I wepe. . . . / Tyl I se 3ow ageyn I cannot sees of wepynge (ll. 90-93).

From the same play, one could also quote the “realistic” dialogue between Joachim and his shepherds. As an inset within the main action (the sacrifice of Encaenia), the scene with the shepherds shows Joachim as a landowner, dealing with daily problems of management:

Shepherd. How do 3e, Mayster? 3e loke al hevly.
 How doth oure dame at hom? Sytt she and sowyht?
Joachim. To here 3e speke of here, it sleyth myn hert, veryly.
 How I and sche doth, God hymself knowyth (8, ll. 137-40)

Some time later, the same shepherds share his joy about the good news concerning Anne’s recovered fertility: “Haue 3e good tydyngys, maystyr? Pan be we glad” (l. 206). This familiar down-to-earth, even comic, tone becomes general in certain plays from this cycle, such as *Joseph’s Doubt*, which may appear as a piece of comic relief. Joseph unexpectedly turns up and knocks at the door; Susanna, the maid, replies:

Joseph. How, Dame, how! Vndo 3oure dore, vndo!
 Are 3e at hom? Why speke 3e noht?
Susanna. Who is there? Why cry 3e so?
 Tell us 3oure herand; wyl 3e ought? (12, ll. 1-4)

A third type of discourse, neither public nor private, is constituted by the messages brought by non-human envoys, heavenly messengers or angels, interpreters of the *vox Dei*, probably inspired by a biblical convention whereby the deity has a continued and intimate intercourse with the Jewish people. Evangelical instances are the message brought by the angel of the Annunciation and the voice of God heard during the Transfiguration.⁹ The number of such messages makes them appear as normal, and, conversely, the mortals to whom they are addressed become partakers of the supernatural.

9 For the Transfiguration, see Matt. 17:5, Mark 9:7 and Luke 9:35. In the N-Town play, Angels appear at Play 8, l. 175; Play 9, ll. 246, 262; Play 10, l. 120; Play 11, ll. 237, 251, 289, 312; Play 12, ll. 143, 151; and Play 19, l. 41. A very telling instance of intimacy with the divine is given by Gabriel’s manner of speaking in the Coventry Purification episode (*Pageant of the Weavers, Two Coventry Corpus Christi Plays*, ll. 367-82, 387-92).

Conclusion

It appears from these remarks that the Virgin Mary has historically been the beneficiary of a transfer of biblical and evangelical episodes and patterns. These include, among others, the sterility motif, the notion of an immaculate conception, the insistence on virginity, and her bodily ascent after death—this last being asseverated as recently as 1950 by Pius XII in his dogma stating that Mary went up to heaven “body and soul”, as indeed the angels in the York *Death of Mary* had affirmed: “Body and sawle we schall hir assende, / To regne in þis regally, be regentte full right” (45, ll. 189-90).

The time has come to give a clear answer to the question contained in my title: is Mary a fourth person of the deity? Purgatory was not presented as a third and final destination of souls in the Last Judgement plays, such as that of York (Play 48, *The Judgment Day*). It was presented as a place of temporary sojourn for purgation, with only salvation in view. To be sure, Catholic tradition had always given Mary a privileged rank among the saints and heavenly creatures. As is the case with the life of Christ, miracles pave her way as warrants for divine benevolence towards her—witness the appearance of the apostles at Mary’s death, according to her wish (York Play 45, ll. 28-91). She also received the title of “Queen of Heaven”, in echo of “King of Heaven”, applied to Christ. But that and other qualifiers can be held to have a purely metaphorical value. And so it seems that those in charge of the writing and staging of those cycle plays (clergy, bishops, members of the professional and municipal guilds) managed to keep away from a charge of heresy.

When dealing with the profound change in the doctrine of the Christian Church brought about at the time of the Fourth Lateran Council, I stated at the beginning of this essay: “It all began in 1215”. The question remains: “When did it end?”. The professed intention behind this new direction was certainly most commendable: the Church acknowledged the importance of the care of the souls, and sometimes also of the bodies, of her flock, and the new leading precept was Mercy, Misericordia, a new version and practical application of the fundamental Christian virtue of Love. In fact, we know today how it all ended: in the traffic of indulgences, money scandals, prevarication and maintenance¹⁰—a religious and moral *débâcle*.¹¹

It had to end, because the situation had reached a “Machiavellian moment”. I am no historian; it is only recently that I came across G. A. Pocock’s concept, coined in 1975. If I use that phrase here, it is not out of pedantry, but because it coincides with an intuition of mine, which prompted me to posit that at particularly critical and dangerous

¹⁰ “Maintenance” in the legal sense of “The action of wrongfully aiding and abetting litigation” (*OED*, def. I.i).

¹¹ See Waller, pp. 1-27 (chap. 1: “1538 and After”).

moments, the structure of a society reaches a state of crisis that cannot be solved by traditional means, intellectual or political, and a break is then the only solution possible.

Gradually, for several reasons, in the course of the fifteenth century, that soothing process known as Marian intercession was made to appear for what it actually was: an illusory construction, a sort of fairy tale, which called for a complete revision and reformation. In the particular case of England, this led to what has been called “the long summer of iconoclasm” (Waller, p. 1, citing Parish), that is, the summer of 1538, during which an astounding number of statues and images of the Virgin were burnt in public bonfires, justified by Bishop Hugh Latimer on the grounds that they had “been the instrument to bring many (I fear) to eternal fire” (cited in Waller, p. 1).

With both reformations—the Protestant Reformation, with its stern moral demands, and the Catholic Counter-Reformation, with its stiff formalism and outrageous display of luxury—*Misericordia* disappeared and, with it, the fragile emotional link between men and the Christian supernatural, and, consequently, room for consoling fiction. This was an inestimable loss, no doubt, and if we consider that we mortals are “such stuff / As dreams are made on” (Shakespeare, *Tmp.*, IV.i.156-57), and that Mercy is nothing but the “milk of human kindness” (Shakespeare, *Mac.*, I.v.17), shouldn’t we agree that illusions and fairy tales are the most precious present, or grace, that the gods have vouchsafed suffering mankind?

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