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THE IDEA OF ORDER IN THE WAKEFIELD *NOAH*

by Josie P. Campbell

On the surface, the Wakefield *Noah* seems to be simply a working out of its biblical counterpart. Noah's opening prayer states that the world suffers from a malaise. The prayer is a recapitulation of the history of mankind, beginning with the creation, moving to his lifetime, and looking toward doomsday; and Noah's story is that of a second creation following the destruction by flood of a sinful world. Yet the dramatization of what appears to be some of the traditional themes[1] of the Noah story has misled some critics into confused, if not erroneous, readings of the drama. They fail to see that the theme of *Noah* is love and that the dramatic tension, very comically worked out in the family arena of domesticity, revolves around man's mistaken notion of "mastre."

Nearly all criticism of *Noah* begins with the premise that God created an ordered world that has since fallen into decay and disorder because of disobedience. If obedience could be restored, then the world would be saved.[2] Noah is called on as a man of destiny because he is obedient to God, he is His trusted servant. Unfortunately, when Noah tries to exact obedience from his wife according to his understanding of what befits the "hierarchy" of things, he discovers how difficult it is to maintain order in his own home. Once Noah reasserts his "rightful" authority over his wife, however, the stars move into place, the flood recedes, and the microcosm harmoniously reflects the macrocosm once more. This critical view, generally accepted, although more eruditely stated, is marvelous romance, but it is a world apart from the Wakefield Master's play. The critics seem to have accepted at face value the conventions the dramatist included in the play, instead of realizing that he may have been attempting to explore their significance.

John Gardner is correct when he points out that Noah has only half the story when he emphasizes God's power and man's debt of obedience in his opening prayer: "Whereas Noah's emphasis has been on the creature's debt to power, God's emphasis is on the creature's debt to divine love. Accord is thus not simply obedience, a negative quality, but also the positive quality, love."[3] Gardner seems to suggest that the playwright is examining the very definition of obedience as a principle of accord. Yet Gardner fails to pursue this

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idea far enough to realize that, within the context of the play, Noah has to come to an understanding of the meaning of obedience, too. Noah sorely fears God's power of vengeance over a world that has fallen into moral decay:

> Bot now before his sight / euery liffyng leyde,
> Most party day and nyght / syn in word and dede
>   ffull bold;
> Som in pride, Ire, and enuy,
> Som in Couet[yse] & glotyny,
> Som in sloth and lechery,
>   And other wise many fold.[4]
> (III. 48-54)

He sees the world deteriorating morally, a condition that is mirrored in his own physical deterioration:

> And now I wax old,
> seke, sory, and cold,
> As muk apon mold
>   I widder away. . . .
> (III. 60-63)

His human response to his condition is twofold: a cry for mercy for himself and his family to be saved, both physically and morally. The prayer is from Noah, the "seruant," to his "lord" for protection; that is, it is a prayer to power in the name of obedience.

If God's soliloquy, however, stresses obedience in the name of His power, the strength of that power rests in love, an energizing force that permeates the universe:

> Me thoght I shewed man luf / when I made hym to be
> All angels abuf / like to the trynyte. . . .
> (III. 82-83)

Love is what ought to bind man to God: "Man must luf me paramoure" (80), but love has been forgotten. As a result, sin pervades the earth, and therefore God will work "thaym wo, / That will not repent." Only Noah, the "seruand," and his family will be saved. Implicit in the fact that God repeatedly calls Noah His servant and that He refers to Himself as Noah's "freend" is the bond of love that underlies the type of obedience that can save the world. And it is this idea that Noah must come to terms with on the human level if the world is to be created anew. He may not intellectualize this idea, but, more importantly, he enacts it.

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When God speaks to Noah, He not only gives him the blueprints for the ark, but He suggests how to build the relationships between man and God, man and community, man and family, and man and nature that are essential to perpetuate the life of the earth. God's opening speech to Noah quite clearly establishes the first relationship:

> Noe, my freend, I thee commaund / from cares the to
>   keyle,
> A ship that thou ordand / of nayle and bord ful wele.
> Thou was alway well wirkand / to me trew as stele,
> To my bydyng obediand / frendship shal thou fele
>   To mede. . . .
>   (III. 118-22)

There are two conditions of this relationship that need to be noted, as well as the order in which they are stated. First of all, Noah is His friend, and that explains why the command is given to him. The idea of friendship is explicitly stated again in line 120, where Noah is referred to as "trew as stele." Moreover, God will return the friendship as a result of Noah's service. The order of service (or obedience, if one likes) and friendship is reversed in line 121 from that of line 117. They appear to be interchangeable; at least friendship and service go together.

After God gives Noah the instructions for building the ark, He proceeds to develop a guide for man's relationship with his community and with his family:

> With the shal no man fyght / nor do the no kyn wrake.
> When all is doyne thus right / thi wife, that is
>   thi make,
>   Take in to the;
> Thi sonnes of good fame,
> Sem, Iaphet, and Came,
> Take in also hame,
>   Thare wifis also thre.
>   (III. 138-44)

The emphasis is on accord, explicitly in the first two lines, and implicitly in the last lines. In addition, God implies that Noah should take care of his family; an essential part of man's relationship with his family, then, is the commitment to care for them. It is an important enough point for God specifically to include Noah's wife, his sons, and their wives. And Noah's relationship with nature also carries a commitment to care for the beasts brought on board the ark:

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Of beestis, foull, and catayll / ffor thaym haue
thou in thoght,
ffor thaym is my counsayll / that som socour be
soght,
In hast. . . .
(III. 156-58)

Out of some forty-three lines of instructions to Noah on building the ark, at least twenty are devoted to man and his personal relationship with his God and the world.

The strength of that relationship rests on commitment,[5] on whether or not man cares enough beyond himself. Undergirding the concept of commitment is love, God's love for man, which, if returned, vitalizes the earth. Noah instinctively recognizes the power of this kind of love when he says:

I thank the, lord, so dere / that wold vowch sayf
Thus low to appere / to a symple knafe;
Blis vs, lord, here / for charite I hit crafe,
The better may we stere / the ship that we shall
hafe,
Certayn.
(III. 172-76)

It is this power of love that Noah will eventually take with him on that fragile ark so that they "shall wax and multiply, / And fill the erth agane. . . ."

The key to the play of *Noah,* then, is not merely obedience, in the sense of submission to control, but love and its resulting commitment to act upon that love. The whole middle section of the play dealing with Noah's relationship with his family works out this theme through the plot and its action.[6] Just as there is a danger in ignoring the medieval cultural and social milieu and looking at the drama through twentieth-century eyes, there is equally a danger of imposing a cultural construction on the drama and ignoring its text. In some respects this has occurred in the criticism of *Noah,* and as a result the criticism fails to account for what actually takes place in the dialogue and action in the play.

The medieval belief in a hierarchical order in the world, beginning with God and moving down in a chain to angels, man, woman, child, and beast, has obscured most of the criticism of *Noah.* When this conception is applied to the play, it produces a conflation that has little to do with the Wakefield Master's dramatic effort. For example, V. A. Kolve is misled into superimposing a definition of "mastre" on the

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Wakefield *Noah* that is contrary to the meaning of the play.[7] Kolve's definition has to do with the assertion of "rightful" authority over what properly should be subject. Thus, only when Noah asserts his dominance over Uxor will the world be righted, the ark sail, and God be pleased.

But there is no evidence in the play that Noah ever succeeds in dominating Uxor by getting, so to speak, the upper hand. It is obvious, however, that she needs some sort of control, but it does not necessarily follow that Noah imposes it. Uxor herself is an interesting character, testy, quick to anger (in itself comic, since she is elected to be the mother of the new world).[8] Noah recognizes that she is "full tethee," and she does not disappoint him or us when we first meet her. Her initial greeting to Noah is surely reminiscent of some wives the world over, not just medieval wives: she wants to know where he has been and why he stayed so long. Uxor is a materialist, although we are not quite sure how valid her complaint is that Noah is a poor provider:

> To dede may we dryfe / or lif for the,
> ffor want.
> When we swete or swynk,
> thou dos what thou thynk,
> Yit of mete and of drynk
> haue we veray skant.
> (III. 193-98)

There is, at least, some indication that her complaint is well-founded, since Noah replies, "Wife, we ar hard sted / with tythyngis new."[9] The implication is that their old problems may have included poverty, but now they face additional trouble in the form of flood.

Uxor is very much like the Wife of Bath, who must have had her in mind when she said:

> Wommen desiren to have sovereynetee
> As wel over hir housbond as hir love,
> And for to been in maistrie hym above.[10]

Like the Wife of Bath, Uxor delights in asserting herself over Noah "with gam & with gyle," to "smyte and smyle." In her opinion, she simply gives Noah what he deserves—and a little more: "Thou shal thre for two / I swere bi godis pyne." To her, Noah is a rather doddering old fool, easily fearful, and certainly not the best husband in the world. Uxor, like her sister, the Wife of Bath, is interested in

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material comfort, and Noah's tale of an ark is bothersome if it means she has to leave what she knows for what is unknown.

And in his domestic life, Noah could hardly be held up as a paragon of virtue. While it is true that we may sympathize with him because he has an overbearing wife, he is too quick to respond to Uxor's dare to strike her. He immediately forgets his commitment to build the ark and becomes embroiled in a battle with his wife. We do not think either Noah or Uxor malicious in their knockabout fight, but they are frivolous at a time when they can ill afford it. What stops their first fight is Noah's sudden remembrance of his task, triggered by his involuntary near-repetition of almost the same words God used in speaking to him: He would "fordo / All this medill-erd," a phrase that echoes in Noah's words to Uxor, "In fayth I hold none slyke / In all medill-erd." It is as if he is suddenly reminded of the doom hovering over "medill-erd" and realizes he should get to what is important. "Bot I will kepe charyte / ffor I haue at do." There is an almost unconscious acknowledgment that "charyte" is the binding force that will "kepe" the world. The first battle between Noah and Uxor simply dissipates with no one the winner because of what appears to be an innate recognition in man that the rivalry for domination (or "mastre" in this sense of the word) is hardly worth the winning.

When Noah explains to Uxor that God intends to destroy the world, her fear is real enough to make her forget her querulousness:

> I wote neuer whedir,
> I dase and I dedir
> ffor ferd of that tayll.
> (III. 313-15)

And Noah spontaneously and immediately comforts her, "Be not aferd," and urges haste in getting their goods on the ark. Their three sons respond generously with their service, but Uxor's moment of fear is forgotten as she attempts to assert her role in the family and her parental authority: "Yit for drede of a skelp / help well thi dam" (323-24). The order she would like established is based on obedience, the sort of obedience which rests on the fear of physical retaliation. It is a wrong-headed notion of "mastre," and her sons presumably ignore her as they continue their work.

The final battle between Uxor and Noah occurs because of her stubborn refusal to leave her old home, what she is most familiar with, for a new. Even Noah's weather report of macrocosmic disorder, "And the planettis seuen / left has thare stall," fails to move her.

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Uxor's daughters-in-law also fail in their attempt to reason with her because her obstinate assertion of self can see no other logic than her own. It is only the reality of getting wet that forces her to board the ark; materialist that she is, seeing, or in this case, soaking, is believing. Again, it is not so much maliciousness on Uxor's part that prompts her obduracy as frivolity, a denial of commitment at a time when she should most care. There is no denying the danger she puts her family in, although she is seemingly unaware of it. She reveals more about herself than she realizes when she says: "In fath I can not fynd / which is before, which is behynd . . ." (330-31). Although she is speaking of the ark, it applies to her confusion of character as well. It is, of course, her very lack of faith, her lack of caring, that prevents her from entering the ship.

The crisis of the play occurs when Uxor rejects Noah's plea to act on his "frenship":

> Wheder I lose or I wyn / In fayth, thi felowship,
> set I not at a pyn. . . .
> (III. 363-64)

The reversal comes about only through the final battle between husband and wife, a battle in which neither is the loser, and both are the winners. Kolve is right in the sense that "mastre" is the key to the brawling; it shapes the farce that contains the dramatic action between Noah and his wife. But "mastre" does not mean that Noah restores (or gains) domination over Uxor, despite what may be the "standard" medieval idea that a wife owes submission to her husband, analogous to the Church's submission to her Head.[11] What does occur in the play as a result of the final battle is the disappearance of this notion of "mastre"; it simply drops out of the play as an irrelevancy as a new spirit of accord takes over.

In the final battle, Noah vainly attempts to assert masculine authority over Uxor, to beat her into submission until she cries "mercy." Uxor is just as determined not to submit, and they fight to a draw:

> *Vxor*. Out, alas, I am gone! / oute apon the, mans wonder!
> *Noe*. Se how she can grone / and I lig vnder;
> Bot, wife,
> In this hast let vs ho,
> ffor my bak is nere in two.
> *Vxor*. And I am bet so blo
> That I may not thryfe.
> (III. 408-14)

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Neither loses to the other in this fight; it is the absolute physical exhaustion of both that forces them to relinquish the battle for authority.[12] Both husband and wife are chastised, and order is restored through a physical experience that makes them consider looking at their relationship in a different light.

It is their three sons who articulate the norm of the marital state, which has nothing in it of the tone of "mastre" or male sovereignty. Their words are to "ffader and moder both," and their advice is to learn to live together in a new spirit. Of course, it is really not a *new* spirit after all, if one recalls the words of God in *The Creation,* when He fashioned Eve from Adam's rib:

> therof shall be maide thi make,
> And be to thi helpyng.
> Ye *both to gouerne* that here is, [my italics]
> and euer more to be in blis,
> ye wax in my blissyng.
> (I. 187-91)

God's blessing emphasizes that true family order is based on accord, and "mastre" is irrelevant.

Noah, father and "head" of his household, accepts the advice from his sons; he suggests a different sort of relationship by saying, "we will do as ye bid vs / we will no more be wroth." Both Noah and Uxor turn to the task ahead of them with similar prayers to God for His help. Husband and wife now work together, and neither could be considered master of the other. Uxor freely tends the helm, while Noah takes soundings of the depths of water. Noah asks his wife for counsel when the birds are released to find land, and when she makes a mistake and suggests the raven, Noah merely substitutes the dove. It can be argued that the raven is an appropriate choice for Uxor to make; it suits her sensual character.[13] But the point the dramatist intends is finally that it does not matter. If the audience laughs, thinking this is one more bit of evidence that Uxor lacks reason, the joke recoils on them, because of its unimportance. Although Uxor erroneously suggested the raven be released, she does, nevertheless, correctly interpret the meaning of the dove—"A trew tokyn ist / we shall be sauyd all."

The comic structure of *Noah* follows a pattern that Shakespeare was to use later in many of his comedies. It involves a movement from an old order to a new, and frequently the voice of the new order belongs to youth. In the play of *Noah,* the old order is corrupt and rotten because man has ceased to care. He is no longer committed enough

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to "luf" God "paramoure." As a result, man sins, thoughtlessly and carelessly, "in word and dede / ffull bold," and this leads to the chaos that must be purged with the flood. Noah and his wife show how dangerous noncommitment can be. Yet, Noah is selected to bring to the new world the best out of the old; before he can do that, however, he and his wife need to learn what makes for true order. After the ark is completed, Noah grasps intuitively something of the force that preserves life:

> This will euer endure / therof am I paide;
> ffor why?
> It is better wroght
> Then I coude haif thoght;
> hym that maide all of noght
> I thank oonly.
> (III. 283-88)

But it takes several very human skirmishes for Noah and his wife to see concretely in their own domestic life what comes from caring enough. None of the above discussion is intended to suggest that the Wakefield Master was an ardent supporter of women's liberation or that he suddenly ripped asunder the hierarchical order of the medieval world. Order is maintained, but the bond of order is love, not "mastre" in the sense of authoritative domination.

God has "luf" for man, and so speaks to a "symple knafe," who out of love responds willingly. Noah seeks God's blessing out of "charite," and in turn, at least once, spontaneously, keeps charity at home with Uxor. But Noah and Uxor have their failings: they are all too human in forgetting that as they should care for the beasts on the ark, they should also give some care out of "felowship" for each other. Unfortunately, it is also perhaps too human that they must beat each other to a standstill in order to realize, from the quiet voices of their children, that in losing their individual struggle for domination, they literally win a battle for mankind.

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1. For a discussion of the use of traditional and nontraditional elements in the Wakefield plays, see Millicent Carey, *The Wakefield Group in the Towneley Cycle: A Study to Determine the Conventional and Original Elements in Four Plays Commonly Ascribed to the Wakefield Author* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1930). Anna Jean Mill, "Noah's Wife Again," *PMLA*, 56 (Sept. 1941), 613-26, gives a detailed examination of the traditions surrounding Noah's wife, although the reader should be warned that most of the conventions she cites are to be found in art and folk-tales difficult to link directly to English cycle drama. See also Don Cameron Allen, *The Legend of Noah: Renaissance Rationalism in Art, Science and Letters* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1963; first published in *Illinois Studies in Language and Literature*, Vol. 33, nos. 3-4 [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1949], pp. 1-121) for his thorough study of the Noah story.

2. For two fairly recent examples of criticism representing this view, see Alan H. Nelson, " 'Sacred' and 'Secular' Currents in *The Towneley Play of Noah*," *Drama Survey*, 3 (Feb. 1964), 393-401, and David Lyle Jeffrey, "Stewardship in the Wakefield *Mactacio Abel* and *Noe* Plays," *American Benedictine Review*, 22 (March 1971), 64-76.

3. "Imagery and Allusion in the Wakefield Noah Play," *Papers on Language and Literature*, 4 (Winter 1968), 6-7.

4. All quotations from the Wakefield *Noah* are from *The Towneley Plays*, ed. George England, EETS, ES 71 (London: Oxford University Press, 1897); pageant and line numbers, where necessary, will be given in the text.

5. I am using the term "commitment" throughout in the sense of Middle English *committen* from Latin *committere*, to entrust. The term implies more than obedience or obligation out of fear of punishment or retaliation; it suggests a willingness to give service voluntarily.

6. For a different view of the structural use of Noah's quarrel with Uxor, see Nelson, " 'Sacred' and 'Secular' Currents in *The Towneley Play of Noah*," especially pp. 399-400.

7. *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966), p. 147.

8. In addition to A. J. Mill's study of Noah's wife, the tradition of her shrewishness is discussed in Katherine Garvin, "A Note on Noah's Wife," *MLN*, 49 (Feb. 1934), 88-90; see also Francis Lee Utley, "The One Hundred and Three Names of Noah's Wife," *Speculum*, 16 (Oct. 1941), 426-52, and particularly 450-52. G. R. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England: A Neglected Chapter in the History of English Letters and of the English People*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Engl.: Cambridge University Press, 1961), also examines the tradition of Uxor's testiness, pp. 368, 479, and 492-93.

9. Gardner, "Imagery and Allusion in The Wakefield Noah Play," interprets this line as a pun to mean not only the flood, but the New Tidings or the Gospel (p. 9). I am not so convinced that many of the puns he finds in the play would have been comprehended by the audience. What the dramatist intends the audience to grasp in the manner of typology is always clearly represented in dramatic action and dialogue. When Noah says, for example, "To begyn of this tree / my bonys will I bend, / I traw from the trynyte / socoure will be send" (253-54), there would probably be little doubt in the audience that the lines look forward to another "tree" which will be more definitively the saving grace of the world.

10. "The Wife of Bath's Tale," *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1957), 1038-40. A. C. Cawley also notes the similarity between these two wives; see *The Wakefield Pageants in the Towneley Cycle* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1958), p. 97, n.229.

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11. Sister Emma Therese Healy, *Woman According to Saint Bonaventure* (New York: The Georgian Press, 1956), pp. 79-115. Owst points out in *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England* that the view of woman's role was not merely a submissive one to husband, that women could be and were, at times, considered equal to men (p. 385, n. 3). However, Owst is not concerned with this "kindlier, fairer attitude" expressed "now and then," but with the complaint or satire. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the "fairer" attitude toward women did exist during this period.

12. See Howard H. Schless, "The Comic Element in the Wakefield Noah," *Studies in Medieval Literature in Honor of Professor Albert Croll Baugh*, ed MacEdward Leach (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1961), for the generally accepted, and, I think, erroneous, interpretation of these lines (pp. 237-38).

13. See Mill, "Noah's Wife Again," for a discussion of the common medieval tradition of the raven and the dove (pp. 621-22).

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