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# UXOR NOAH: A RAVEN OR A DOVE?

by Richard J. Daniels

The Noah plays of the English mystery cycles are best known as the fullest literary expressions of the old legend of Noah's shrewish or recalcitrant wife who refuses to enter the ark as the flood begins.<sup>1</sup> Of course, not all of the English Deluge plays use the shrewish wife motif. In the N-Town version, *Uxor* is a model of obedient Christian womanhood, which, no doubt, accounts for the play's relative dullness.<sup>2</sup> The Noah plays of the Chester, York, and Towneley cycles, however, do contain the shrewish wife,<sup>3</sup> and her presence further differentiates these plays from the biblical narrative and so increases their merely human relevance and meaning.<sup>4</sup> But, rather than the simple presence of the motif, it is the dramatist's skill in using it to develop character, to add humor, and to find a more human meaning in the biblical story, that must determine the worth of each play.<sup>5</sup>

The Noah plays of the Chester, York, and Towneley cycles share a large controlling pattern, the major events of which are as follows:<sup>6</sup>

- I. God and Noah alone: Chester, ll. 1-48; York, ll. 1-88 (play VIII); Towneley, ll. 1-189.
- II. The building of the ark: Chester, 49-97; York, 89-119 (play VIII); Towneley, 244-88.
- III. The entrance into the ark, of the animals, of Noah's sons and their wives, and finally of Noah's recalcitrant, shrewish wife: Chester, 98-242; York, 148-51 of play VIII, 1-150 of play IX; Towneley, 289-419.
- IV. The voyage: Chester, 205-80; York, 155-266 (play IX); Towneley, 420-531. (Scene of the release of the raven and dove: Chester, 257-80; York, 205-60; Towneley, 469-522.)
- V. The end of the voyage and after: Chester, 281-372; York, 261-322 (play IX); Towneley, 531-58.

To demonstrate both the superiority of the Towneley play and the increase of meaning caused in all three plays by inclusion of the shrewish wife motif, I shall deal with three elements of this pattern: the first speech of each play, the large middle sections which contain

the shrewish wife motif, and the common scene in which the raven and dove are released.

In both the Chester and York Deluge plays, God speaks first: He laments the sins of man, announces the coming of the flood, and states that the righteous Noah and his family alone will be saved. In Chester, God gives least justification for his action: He notes that He can destroy what He has made from nothing, and that men are sinful in word and deed and breed malice. Little detail is given; the Chester dramatist makes little attempt to evoke horror at the enormity of man's sins against God. The York dramatist is more thorough.<sup>7</sup> As in Chester, God speaks first; but, in the York Deluge, God gives fuller justification for His destruction of the world. Furthermore, the cause of the deluge is explicit: Adam and Eve were created to live in eternal bliss as long as they followed God's Law. However, they broke the law, and their descendants have been breaking it ever since.

In the Wakefield Playwright's Noah play, unlike those of the Chester and York cycles, Noah speaks first; and this simple change gives the Wakefield play at once a more human relevance and meaning. At the beginning, instead of the impressive dignity of God, we find the simple humility of Noah; instead of God's general pronouncements that the world is sinful and man must thus perish, we find the gentle Noah's detailed observations of the world's sinfulness and his logical fear that it will bring divine vengeance upon itself. Noah says that God ordered Adam and Eve not to touch the "tre of life" (34), but that the false fiend enticed man to sins of gluttony and pride, a sin of the flesh combined with a sin of the spirit.<sup>8</sup> This double sin, which could be committed only by man, caused his expulsion from paradise. The Towneley Noah further states that, as he has heard read, God once promised the oil of mercy to all men who would love and fear Him (46-50), but that now, in God's sight, most men sin boldly in word and deed:

Som in pride, ire, and enuy,  
Som in couetous and glotyny,  
Som in sloth and lechery,  
And other wise manyfold.

(51-54)

Noah accumulates much evidence against Creation, justifying God's approaching, although as yet unannounced, vengeance. Lucifer and the rebellious angels committed a sin of the spirit, pride; Adam and Eve were guilty of gluttony in eating the apple, a sin of the flesh, and of pride in aspiring to be like God; men of the present time, says the righteous Noah, busily commit all of the seven deadly sins,

and several other unnamed ones. This evidence leads Noah to one conclusion:

Therfor I drede lest God on vs will take veniance,  
For syn is now alod, without any repentance.

(55-56)

Also, it leads him to bitter awareness of his own weak mortality:

And now I wax old,  
Seke, sory, and cold;  
As muk apon mold  
I widder away.

(60-63)

And finally this evidence leads Noah to his only recourse, to call upon God for mercy and to ask that his prayer be heard (64-72).<sup>9</sup> At this point, God does answer him, giving a speech similar to, though longer than, those which begin both the York and Chester Deluge plays (73-162). Noah has been portrayed as a common and humble man, in some respects probably not unlike many members of the Towneley play's audience. It must have been much more dramatically effective for the audience to be led to see the justice of God's will through Noah's detailed account of men's sins against God, than for God simply to announce His will in general terms as He does in the Chester and York plays.

Turning to the large middle sections which contain the shrewish wife motif, we see that each of *Uxor's* rebellions in the Chester and York plays occurs when Noah asks her to enter the ark. Twice in Chester she refuses to board at his bidding. The first refusal (97-101) is apparently unmotivated, and preceding and following it she has freely helped Noah construct the ark and then load it with animals. But when Noah asks her a second time to enter the ark, and she again refuses, her motivation is clear; she wants her "gossips" to be saved as well (193-208). Noah welcomes her aboard, and she returns his greeting by giving him a "lively box on the ears" (s.d., 242). Significantly, the Patriarch does not strike her, and the voyage proceeds smoothly.

*Uxor* Noah does not appear in the first of the two York plays, and thus the ark has been commanded, built, and loaded with animals by the time she does appear in the second play, ignorant of her husband's labors. When Noah sends one of his sons to bring her to the ark, she at first refuses but then decides to go and see what her venerable spouse is doing (49-70). He welcomes her to the ark, but she refuses to leave dry land and decides that her husband is "nere woode" (91).

When *Uxor* seems sure to return home, Noah reveals his secret to her in general terms:

Of my werkis þou not wotte,  
 All þat has ban or bloode  
 Salle be ouere flowed with þe floode.

(94-96)

Her reaction to this news shows more of fear than disdain: "Allas! þat I þis lare shuld lere" (105). Later, when she finally does enter the ark, she says: "Allas! my lyff me is full lath, / I lyffe ouere lange þis lare to lere" (147-48). Her motivation for not entering the ark is more complex than that of the Chester *Uxor*. Not only is she afraid to learn the news of the flood, but she is also angered by Noah's secrecy while building the ark: He went out early and late, she says, and let his wife sit at home, when he should have let her know his business (113-26). His innocent answer, that he was only doing God's will, draws from *Uxor* a snort of disgust and "a clowte" (120); and this "clowte" makes Noah's difficulties in reconciling his relationship with God to that with his wife painfully obvious.<sup>10</sup> As in Chester, however, Noah does not strike back; and like the Chester *Uxor*, the York *Uxor* wishes to save "my commodrys and my cosyne bathe" (143).

Each of *Uxor's* rebellions in the York and Chester plays occurs when Noah asks her to enter the ark. Also, in both plays her rebellions seem to result from her stubborn refusal to accept the fact that Noah is the instrument of God's will. In the first instance of discord between Noah and his wife in the Towneley play, however, this is not the case: rather, their strife seems simply the common state of affairs in their marriage. In Towneley, Noah deals with nothing unusual when his wife chides or fights with him; it is part of their daily life together. At this point, then, we meet the central problem (to which I will shortly address myself) of "relating the 'just man and perfect' to the all-too-human husband of Gill."<sup>11</sup>

Once the Towneley Noah has received God's instructions for building and loading the ark, he turns homeward to tell his wife all that has happened. On the way home, he admits to certain trepidations concerning his wife's reaction to his news, and the fearful tone of this speech contrasts sharply with the humble yet dignified and manly tone of his first long speech which began the play. The moment eternal God leaves him,<sup>12</sup> Noah soliloquizes about his fears of his wife's changeableness (183-89). Upon reaching home, he greets his wife quite simply: "God spede, dere wifel How fayre ye?" (190); but this simple salutation brings him nothing but a stream of abuse (191-98).

Noah then attempts to tell her the news (199), but the effort results only in another abusive speech (200-16). Finally, to quiet her, Noah resorts to profanity and a threat of violence: "We! hold thi tong, ram-skyt, or I shall the still" (217). But both profanity and threat fail; for she immediately dares him to strike her, and he does (219-20). In Chester and York, Noah was either too weak and humble, or too grave and reserved, to return the blow which *Uxor* delivered first; in Towneley, however, Noah is so frustrated by his wife's nagging that he strikes her first. And she, of course, returns the blow (221-25).<sup>13</sup> They continue to argue, but Noah gets no chance to tell her his news. Finally, he decides that he must keep "charyté" (235) with his wife because he has God's work yet to do; and so he goes off, in involuntary secrecy, to build the ark (244-88).

*Uxor's* second rebellion in the Towneley play occurs, as do the first in Chester and the only one in York, when Noah has finished the ark and asks his wife to come aboard (289-97). Even though she refuses, he is finally able to tell her of the ark and the coming flood (300-12); but his tale makes her, like the York *Uxor*, afraid:

I wote neuer whedir;  
I dase and I dedir  
For ferd of that tayll.

(313-15)

Moreover, she does not trust Noah's ark, for she cannot tell the front from the back (330-31). As a result of her fear, she decides to sit on a hill and spin (an image reminiscent of Eve after the Fall), and not to leave the spot until her work is done (336-42). Noah tries for a while to coax her in, but she continues to refuse him. Then, frustrated, Noah threatens to lash her with a whip if she will not enter, but she again defies him and so he beats her (378-87). Finally, Noah calls her "begynnar of blunder" (406), an insult comparing her disobedience with that of Eve, and once more threatens to beat her; and, again, they come to blows with each other. Evidently, however, their bruises this time give them something in common; for they are reconciled, and *Uxor* at last enters the ark (409-14).<sup>14</sup> Their sons, somewhat belatedly, reproach them for fighting, and Noah promises that he and their mother will contend no more. Noah then goes to the helm, and *Uxor* helps him navigate (415-23). After this, the voyage proceeds without incident.

It might seem that the Wakefield Playwright has made Noah almost too human, at least in the *Uxor* incidents, for the deep religious convictions he displays in the first one-third of the play to be quite believable. Rosemary Woolf argues that the Wakefield Master "has

developed the character pattern of Noah's wife at the cost of obscuring the allegorical significance of Noah. In order to display both verbal and physical cut and thrust between husband and wife he has dispensed with the patience of Noah . . . : the pattern of Christ summoning the sinner into the church is therefore obscured" (*English Mystery Plays*, p. 143). This may be so, but the harmony attained in Towneley, through struggle and Noah's persistence, is more dramatically effective than the harmony merely posited in the Chester and York plays.

The Towneley Noah's very humanity makes more complete, and thus more real, the bifurcation between Noah the man of God, the prophet; and Noah the man of the world, the irate husband. Noah, in attempting to do God's will, has to contest, quite literally, with his wife and with her willfulness. Obviously, this strife results in much low comedy. But Noah does, finally, keep his purpose in mind, and he does attempt to act charitably toward his wife, as he himself says. Moreover, it becomes apparent that Noah and his wife attain to fuller harmony and accord as God's will is realized through Noah's persistence; this is indicated by Noah's request that his wife steer the ship while he tests the water's depth (433-34). But their new harmony is also illustrated, at least in Towneley, by the scene in which the raven and the dove are released to seek out dry land. The Wakefield Playwright uses this scene to develop further the characters of Noah and his wife and the relationship between them. The Chester and York dramatists, however, do not take such full advantage of it.

In the raven and dove scene in Chester (257-80), Noah first sends off the raven and, when it fails to return, he sends off the dove. The dove eventually reappears with the olive branch in its mouth, and Noah states that this is a sign of God's grace. The corresponding scene in York (play IX, 205-60) is somewhat more complex, mainly because the York Noah dwells at length upon the raven's bad faith and the good faith of the dove. The raven and the dove scene in the Towneley Deluge, however, illustrates the charity and restraint which Noah and his wife display toward one another since *Uxor* has learned to submit her will to Noah's, just as Noah had earlier submitted his own to God's. They now endeavor in common to realize God's will in the world. As soon as Noah decides to send forth a fowl, he turns to ask his wife's counsel: what fowl, he asks her, will soonest bring back a token of mercy (469-77)? She suggests that he send the raven (479-82), but Noah, gently enough, decides to send out "dowfys oone or two" as well (l. 484). When the raven does not return, Noah explains that it is always hungry and without reason, and that if it

finds "any caryon" it will not return; the dove, on the other hand, is always gentle and true (499-506). Such a disparaging contrast of her choice with his might once have enraged the Patriarch's wife, but now she remains quiet. In fact, when the dove returns, a joyful *Uxor* is the first to see it (507-11).

We have now looked closely at three important elements of the common pattern shared by the Chester, York, and Towneley Deluge plays. I have shown that, by having Noah give the play's opening speech, the Wakefield Master begins his play with a human rather than a divine perspective. Further, the Wakefield *Uxor's* first disobedience to Noah is apparently unmotivated and, as has been seen, Noah strikes her first, which is the reverse of the other plays. Thus, the simply human predicament of both Noah and his wife is emphasized. Noah must work out God's will in terms of his shrewish wife: he must work through the problems of this world, as represented by his marriage, in order to transcend them. Third, in the Towneley scene where the raven and the dove are released, we see that Noah and his wife have attained harmony in the working out of God's will, a harmony made possible by Noah's persistence and, finally, his charity. *Uxor's* and Noah's harmony is greater in the Towneley play than in Chester or York because the Wakefield Master has forced his Noah to engage in a far more rigorous dialectic between the divine and the human. Harmony comes to human society, the Master would show us, to the extent that humans aspire to do the will of God on earth. That he resolves the conflict in this way clearly establishes the Wakefield Master as a late medieval dramatist of the first rank — one who by means of his art closes the historically widening gulf between the worlds of experience and sacred doctrine. This spirited perception of the dialectical conflict between experience and doctrine and a vigorous effort to resolve this conflict into hierarchical form are characteristic of the plays attributed to him.

In closing, I should try to answer the question posed by my title: is Noah's wife on the side of the raven or the dove? I cannot escape the intuition that *Uxor* does understand, once Noah tells her of the coming flood, all the reality and danger of it. She does not doubt him, although she does not want to believe him. Her disobedience arises from her very human fear of the events to come, and from her very human sympathy with her "gossips." She is, in other words, albeit briefly, a spokesman for fallen humanity, for those who are excluded from the ark: she permits the audience a last, perhaps wistful, look backwards, before the absolute step is taken into the brave, new post-Deluge world. Thus, she is never really on the raven's side — so much is dramatic, fleeting illusion. She is fundamentally on



the side of the dove, but Noah must assume his proper role in the scheme of things in order to allow her to assume her proper role. Once this is done, harmony and grace prevail.

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1. A. C. Cawley notes that the legend is "at least as old as the picture of Noah's ark in the Junius manuscript (A.D. 1000)," which shows a woman, assumed to be Noah's wife, who seems unwilling to climb the ladder into the ark (*The Wakefield Pageants in the Towneley Cycle* [Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1958], p. 96). Anna Jean Mill would move the date for the legend's beginning to the fourth century ("Noah's Wife Again," *PMLA*, 56 [1941], 615).

2. The standard edition of the N-town cycle is *Ludus Coventriae or the Plaie called Corpus Christi*, ed. K. S. Block, EETS, ES 120 (1922; rpt., London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1960). Because the Noah play of this cycle does not have the shrewish wife, I do not use it in this paper. Neither is the Newcastle Deluge play (*Non-Cycle Plays and Fragments*, ed. Norman Davis, EETS, SS 1 [London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970], pp. 19-31) considered here, for two reasons: only the first one-half of the play is extant (up to the entrance into the ark), and the 206 lines which do exist are greatly corrupted.

3. Editions used for this paper are: *The Wakefield Pageants in the Towneley Cycle*, ed. A. C. Cawley, pp. 14-28; *York Plays*, ed. Lucy Toulmin Smith (1885; rpt. New York: Russell & Russell, 1963), pp. 40-55. I use the older edition of the Chester cycle (Hermann Deimling, ed. *The Chester Plays*, Part I, EETS, ES 62 [1892; rpt., London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1968], pp. 48-63) and check that against the newer one (R. M. Lumiansky and David Mills, eds. *The Chester Mystery Cycle*, EETS, SS 3 [London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1974], pp. 42-56). In the new edition the essential scene of the raven and the dove does not appear in the play proper but is relegated to an appendix.

4. Rosemary Woolf points out the traditional typological interpretation of the Noah plays, in which Noah is a type of Christ, the ark of the Cross and the Church, and Noah's wife (sometimes) of the Virgin. The medieval Deluge plays "divide into the Continental branch which follows this typological pattern exactly and which appears in English in the *Ludus Coventriae*, and the characteristically English branch, which, whilst preserving the main typological outlines . . . , sees in Noah's wife not a figure harmoniously in the scheme of salvation but one who initially repeats the pattern of the Fall" (*The English Mystery Plays* [Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1972], p. 133). The plays I treat here are the "characteristically English" ones.

5. This has been observed by other students of the plays. Howard H. Schless notes that "the *Processus Noe* and the *Secunda Pastorum* are constructed on surprisingly similar patterns. In both, biblical material . . . furnishes the main plot and the main themes; in both, folkloric material . . . provides the comic element and a descant upon the main themes" ("The Comic Element in the Wakefield Noah," in *Studies in Medieval Literature in Honor of Professor Albert Croll Baugh*, ed. MacEdward Leach [Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1961], p. 240). Alan H. Nelson finds that the biblical and folkloric elements effectively complement each other and that the idea of obedience unifies the play ("Sacred' and 'Secular' Currents in *The Towneley Play of Noah*," *Drama Survey*, 3 [1964], 393). Rosemary Woolf emphasizes disobedience as a central theme of the "characteristically English" Noah plays when she says that "the dramatists understood the doctrine that Noah's wife signified the Virgin in an idiosyncratic way, for

in her the redemption is adumbrated, but the relationship is not that of Noah to Christ but of Eve to the Virgin" (*English Mystery Plays*, pp. 144-45). *Uxor*, however, is obedient by the plays' ends, thus suggesting that, as a type, she looks both backward to Eve and forward to the Virgin.

6. Other scholars have found more or less similar structural likenesses in the three plays. See, for instance, Charles Mills Gayley, *Plays of Our Forefathers* (New York: Duffield, 1907), pp. 166-73; Marie C. Lyle, *The Original Identity of the York and Towneley Cycles* (Minneapolis, 1919), pp. 87-89; and Millicent Carey, *The Wakefield Group in the Towneley Cycle* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1930), pp. 71-75. Howard H. Schless, in "The Comic Element in the Wakefield Noah," uses Carey's outline of the three plays and compares selected parts of them to show that the Wakefield Master has successfully integrated the folkloric and biblical elements. It is not Schless's purpose, however, to show that the Wakefield play, by means of its integrated structure, comments upon the character of Noah or upon how the nature and difficulties of marriage complicate Noah's duty to God. My own analysis, more explicit than Schless's, concentrates on these points.

7. The two York Noah plays (plays VIII and IX) are clearly distinguished from each other in the manuscript and by the use of two different stanza forms. But because of obvious continuity of subject matter and theme, I usually consider them a single dramatic unit.

8. The "tre of life" (l. 34) and the "Oyle of mercy" (l. 46) are allusions to the legend of the "Oil of Mercy promised by God to Adam" (Cawley, *The Wakefield Pageants*, p. 95). In the Towneley cycle, explicit references to the tree of life or the Oil of Mercy, or both, occur in the plays of the Creation (1/243), Noah (3/34, 46), Abraham (4/6), the Prophets (7/151-56), and the Annunciation (10/9, 26), (*The Towneley Plays*, eds. G. England and A. W. Pollard, EETS, ES 71 [1897; rpt., London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966]). A full introduction to the legend of the Oil of Mercy is found in Esther Casier Quinn's *The Quest of Seth for the Oil of Life* (Chicago: Univ of Chicago Press, 1962).

9. Arieh Sachs, in "*The Raven and the Dove: An Iconographic Comparison between the Holkham and Towneley Noahs*" (*Studies in the Drama*, ed. Arieh Sachs [Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1967], p. 200), comments that ll. 60-63 show that Noah's "sorrowful old age is the expression of fallenness, the epitome of Old Testament man, the Old Adam." Sachs then points out that the next line (l. 64, which begins st. 8), "bot yit will I cry for mercy and call," is "Noah the new Adam, Noah-Christophorus, gleaming divine grace precisely because he knows so well the earlier side of the equation."

10. Étienne Gilson, discussing Héloïse's reasons for not wishing to marry Abélard, refers to St. Paul (I Cor. 7:32-33): "He who is unmarried is concerned with God's claim, asking how he is to please God; whereas the married man is concerned with the world's claim, asking how he is to please his wife; and thus he is at issue with himself" (*Heloise and Abelard*, trans. L. K. Shook [Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1960], p. 27).

11. Alan H. Nelson, "'Sacred' and 'Secular' Currents in *The Towneley Play of Noah*," p. 396. Nelson also claims that "we must be willing to accept the idea that Noah's domestic troubles do not significantly alter his relationship to God. He is willing and obedient, but not above human conflicts. We need not expect him to divest himself of the limitations implicit in his humanity" (p. 398).

12. It seems logical that God should exit at this point. A. C. Cawley (*The Wakefield Pageants*) adds the stage direction "Exit Deus" at l. 181.

13. The clouts exchanged by Noah and his wife may be intended, humorously, as signs of the mutual bodily servitude understood to be a condition of marriage. Gilson (*Heloise and Abelard*, p. 27), discussing the teaching of St. Paul on the

subject, states that "the husband does not belong to himself, nor the wife to herself; they belong to each other in the very strict sense that each of the parties possesses rights to the very body of the other which cannot be refused."

14. Cawley (*The Wakefield Pageants*) would have *Uxor* enter the ark at l. 372, where his stage direction tells us that she "rushes into the ship." This, however, means that the last exchange of blows would occur on board the ark after Noah and his wife have entered. As Rosemary Woolf points out, if such is the case, then the Wakefield Master has "missed the significance of the sharp change that Noah's wife should undergo on entering the ark." Woolf conjectures that *Uxor's* speech in ll. 375-76 ("I will not, for thi bydyng, / Go from doore to mydyng") "is just an abusive way of saying that she will not go one step beyond the entrance" (*English Mystery Plays*, p. 143). It follows that the appropriate point for their entrance into the ark is during or just after the speeches in ll. 409-14.