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MONASTICISM AND PLEASURE IN *THE MARY PLAY* FROM THE N-TOWN CYCLE

Summary

In *The Mary Play*, a late medieval English mystery play, young Virgin Mary is sent to the Temple in order to live her life in accordance to monastic values of humility and piety. However, on the very threshold she is visited by an angel who presents her with gifts of heavenly sustenance, which form and taste evoke in her sensual pleasures of great volume. This appears to not only contradict her previous pious statements, but also suggests sinful excess and overindulgence. The aim of this paper is to analyze the reasons why Mary's response to the heavenly gifts can be perceived as sinful in the context of the medieval approach towards food and excess in consumption, as well as prove that Mary's behaviour is actually a part of a valuable moral lesson in restraint and monastic values of charity and piety. The analysis of the play is supported by works of historians of medieval drama such as Peter Meredith and Stephen Spector, social historians of the Middle Ages, such as Roy Strong and James G. Clark, focusing on monastic life, food and attitude towards food, as well as the ideas, rules and realities governing life in a cloistered society as described in the *Benedicti regula monachorum*.

Key words: English literature, theatre, miracle plays, Middle Ages, monasticism, food, Christianity, Mary of Nazareth, virtues, sin, gluttony.

The Mary Play, which is a part of the English fifteenth-century N-town cycle of mystery plays, describes a series of biblical and apocryphal episodes from the Virgin Mary's life before the birth of Jesus (Meredith 1997)¹. One of the events receiving dramatic presentation is the acceptance of young Mary to the Temple and her life behind its walls, which have strong medieval monastic undertones, promoting virtues of humility, charity, and piety. Surprisingly, though, at the very same Temple Mary receives heavenly food and experiences ambiguous pleasures of taste – more associated with sinful incontinence than chaste humility – which puts Mary in a morally questionable position and endanger her of being accused of a borderline sinful conduct. The aim of this article is to analyze the possible purpose for putting Mary in such an uncomfortable situation of seemingly immoral excess, especially while considering the late fifteenth-century social and religious approach to food, and to prove that such staging carries a didactic purpose, ultimately showing Mary's actions, despite their morally questionable overtones, as a lesson in Christian virtues.

¹ The play is based on the events described in *Legenda Aurana* and *Meditationes Vitae Christi* and such additional works as the gospels of *Pseudo-Matthew* and *Protoevangelium* (Meredith 1997).

The play begins with Joachim and Anna who are unable to have children, but after praying to God, they are informed by an angel that God will grant their wish and allow them to conceive a child, who in return will be sent to live in the Temple and later herself will give miraculous birth (Meredith 1997). When young Mary is brought to the Temple, before entering she must climb fifteen steps, with each reciting first lines of Gradual Psalms to express her piety and symbolically mark her entrance to monastic life (Meredith 1997, Spector 1991). The very same words from Gradual Psalms resonate in the principles described in the Rule of St Benedict and a process of accepting an oblate to a cloistered community (Clark 2011; Lawrence 2001).² The seriousness of such commitment demanded a sincere proof that the individual desired to change his life permanently, and only then he was accepted and taught the realities and practicalities of monastic life (Wölfflin 1895; Clark 2011).

Mary's entrance into the Temple echoes such commitment, and reciting parts of the Gradual Psalms shows "the amendment of life as a way to salvation, or steps to the perfect love of God" (Meredith 1997, p. 94). In her first steps she declares her "holy desyre with God to be" and continues with a wish to "stody with meke inquysissyon... / How [she] xal haue knowynge of Godys wylle" (Meredith 1997, p. 43). Mary refers to such spiritual aspects of monastic life as the rejection of the outside world, selflessness, "contempt of veyn-glory", prayer and contemplation for "the ultimate expression of a personal impulse for the service of God (Clark 2011, p. 62; Meredith 1997, p.44). She also expresses her desire for "brothyrlly concorde" with other members of the monastic community and compliance when declaring her "meke obedience," referring to the *Benedicti regula monachorum*, (Part V, *De oboedientia*), which stated that monks, for the sake of their vows and salvation ("gloriam vitae aeternae"), must immediately follow any orders as if they were issued by God himself ("ac si divinitus imperetur") (Meredith 1997, p. 44; Wölfflin 1895, p. 15).

The sincere eagerness to live for God allows Mary to complete the steps and enter the time of probation under a senior, to learn the realities of monastic life, and understand the gravity of her decision (Clark 2011). This is represented in the play by the exchange between Mary and the Episcopus, who, as a senior, explains her that in the Temple she must follow the commandments, hate sin, love her enemies, as well as "serve and wurchep God ... dayly, / ... haue a resonable tyme to fede" and "haue a labour bodyly, / Pat þerin þe gostly and bodely mede," to which Mary eagerly states that "this lyff [she] lyketh as [her] lyve" and enters the temple as a newly professed member of the monastic community (Meredith 1997, p. 47).

This life of prayer, contemplation, and work had no place for any indulgence, excess, or pleasure of a sensual kind, as the *Regula* clearly mentions that pleasure is to be avoided ("delicias non amplecti") since death is located at the pleasure's entrance ("mors secus introitum dilectationis posita est")(Wölfflin 1895, pp. 13, 19). Every free moment in a mon-

² "A person is made a monk either by his own profession or by his father's piety" (Lawrence 2001, p. 34); an oblate was "an agent of the patron among the professed" who would benefit the institution (Clark 2011, p. 64).

astery had to be devoted to either spiritual, *opus dei*, or physical work, *opus manuum* (Clark 2011). Sensual pleasure would disturb the balance between the two and interfere with the harmony of the order, and the only pleasure in a monk's or nun's life should come from the virtue of the love of God (Wölfflin 1895). Therefore, it is quite surprising that after establishing the play's monastic surrounding, an angel appears who "bryngyth manna in a cowpe of gold, lyke to confeccyons" for Mary and says:

... With aungelys mete for 3oure sustentacyon,
 3e to receyve it for natural myght.
 ... Now fede 3ow þerwith, in Goddys name.
 We xal lerne 3ow be lyberary of oure Lordys lawe lyght,
 For my sawys in 3ow shewyth sygnes of shame. (Meredith 1997, p. 49)

The stage directions identify the food Mary receives as manna, the biblical sustenance sent from the heavens to the Jews, provided in a rather simple form of bread or angelic food (Rytel-Adrianik 2012). In *The Mary Play*, however, it is no longer presented as raw and simple, but an apparent source of sensual pleasures in a form similar to "confeccyons," previously prepared dishes "containing fruit and spices," and served in a cup of gold (Spector 1991, p. 445; Meredith 1997, p. 49). To further suggest a better quality of food, manna was "commonly referred to as angel's meat" (Spector 1991, p. 445). Additionally, the way in which the food was presented in the late Middle Ages was of a great importance, especially on the high tables during grand feasts, and the more spectacular the form, the greater effect it had on both those who consumed the dish and those sitting at the lower tables, underlining the social status of the eater and adding to the "pride of the table," and in the play the delicacies presented to Mary are elegantly served in a dish of gold, a material associated in medieval Europe with splendour and regality (Cosman, Jones 2008, p. 137; Strong 2002, pp. 85-86). Such extravagance seems to stand in a blatant opposition to Mary's earlier declarations of meekness and humility. Moreover, to further complicate the matter, Mary comments on its taste that "all maner of savowrys in þis mete [she] fynde" and she "felt nevyr non so swete ner so redolent", clearly pointing to her delight and experiencing sensual pleasure, which she was supposed to avoid (Meredith 1997, p. 49).

For medieval Christianity "food became ... a matter of ethical conduct" since Gluttony was "the first sin, the cardinal sin, the deadliest sin", one that caused Adam to eat the forbidden fruit and robbed humanity of Eden (Cosman, Jones 2008, p. 137; Strong 2002, p. 50). It encompassed numerous aspects of incontinence, lead straight towards other cardinal sins, and the mouth was believed to be like an open gate, ever threatened by evil since it was there where words were created and food landed (Quellier 2013). The "cursed superfluitee" turns the Glutton's throat into a "privee", says the Pardoner in *Canterbury Tales*, and forces

the sinner to search the world and use any means “to gete a gloton deintee mete and drinke” (Chaucer 2000, pp. 286-287). The Pardoner lists murder, lechery, incest, betrayal, injustice and other “maladies / [that] Folwen of excesse and of glotonies” and befell biblical and historical figures (Chaucer 2000, pp. 286). His colourful examples represent a common belief that excess in consumption lead to obscenities, facetious behaviour, inspired gossiping, garrulity, vulgarity, blasphemy, and lechery; “gluttony is the devils hoard, wherein the satanic fiend rests and hides” (Cosman, Jones 2008, p. 137; Quellier 2013).

Particularly associated with gluttony was the use of spices. The hotter the spice, the greater influence it had on one’s behaviour, and supposedly forced men to commit acts, which they would not have done if they had more humble diet (Quellier 2013). For example, in Langland’s *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, the Glutton is turned from his way to the church by the promise of being served various condiments in a suggestive company:

... Betty the brewer bade him good morning
 ... “I’ve got good ale, old friend,” she said. “Glutton, will you try it?”
 “Have you,” he asked, “any hot spices?”
 “I have pepper and peony and a pound of garlic,
 A farthingworth of fennel seed for fasting days”. (Langland 2000, p. 323)

Gluttony was also deemed to have serious socio-economical consequences as incontinence was believed to be responsible for spreading hunger and suffering among the poor by taking away their food (Quellier 2013). The Glutton from *The Vision of Piers Plowman* states in his confession that while he “over-stuffed” himself “at supper and sometimes at midday” he “spoiled what might have been saved and dispensed to the hungry” (Langland 2000, p. 325). In this regard, is the pleasure of taste that Mary experiences sinful and does she, while consuming dishes that appear to be superior to anything served at a nobleman’s table, violate monastic doctrines, which promoted life in moderation and humility? The answer lies in the actual character of monastic food and the events that follow its reception.

The quantity and quality of medieval food depended on the social status, wealth, geographical location, and while the fear of famine was common, monasteries, as economically self-sufficient and well-organized institutions that owned land, estates, and farm animals, hardly ever suffered from food shortages (Clark 2011). It did not mean, however, that monks and nuns enjoyed delicacies served regularly in excessive amounts; the production of food and its consumption, similarly to other aspects of monastic life, followed proper rules of piety, therefore meals were expected to be humble, yet nourishing (Clark 2011). Food should sustain the body and give strength necessary for hard work, but nothing beyond that since, according to St Thomas Aquinas, the excess and conspicuous consumption lead to sin, and

nothing is more in contrast to Christian values than overindulgence (“quia nihil sic contrarium est omni christiano quomodo crapula”) (Aquinas 1947; Wölfflin 1895, p. 42).

The *Regula* ordained that only two cooked dishes (“duo pulmentaria cocta”) could be served during the day, so that if a monk missed one, he could still have his single hot meal at a different time (“ut forte qui ex illo non potuerit edere, ex alio reficiatur”) (Clark 2011; Wölfflin 1895, p. 42). An additional meal could consist of fruit (“fuerit”) and fresh vegetables (“nascencia leguminum”), accompanied by a daily ration of bread (“panis libra”) (Wölfflin 1895, p. 42). The Rule forbade eating the flesh of the four-legged animals (“carnium vero quadrupedum”), except for the medicinal reasons (Wölfflin 1895, p. 42), since its consumption was associated with the higher social classes, dominated the tables of lords and knights, and, due to its price and taste, was in direct conflict with the virtue of humility (Strong 2002). Monks were *oratores*, who needed spiritual strength that came from fasting, and the dangers of overindulgence could jeopardize that effort (Oexle 2001). Therefore, in humble monastic surroundings mostly grain, dairy products, vegetables, poultry, and fish were consumed (Clark 2011).³ In this case the manna that Mary received seem to fall into this category as, while still seasoned for flavour, it tasted like meatless “wafers made with honey” and devoid of sinful hot spices (Spector 1991, p. 445).

Furthermore, Mary’s pleasures of taste are accompanied by proper conduct to further nullify the possible accusations of her supposed overindulgence. In *The Mary Play*, the angel informs her that during meals they “xal lerne 3ow be lyberary of oure Lordys lawe light” (Meredith 1997, p. 49). Members of monastic orders were not to be preoccupied by the food on their tables during mealtimes, but to dwell in spiritual and religious contemplation of the word of God, and listen to the readings of religious texts while ingesting (Clark 2011; Moulin 1986; Quellier 2013).

To finally underline the uniqueness of Mary’s chaste pleasure, the play introduces a contrast to the splendour of additional provisions that Mary receives during her stay in the Temple. The Episcopus, through the Minister, also sends Mary a gift of food in the form the dishes from his own table: “Prynce of oure prestes, Ysakare / ... hath sent 3ow hymself his serveyce ... / And bad 3e xulde fede 3ow” (Meredith 1997, p. 50). As the “prince of priests”, the Episcopus is a prominent Church official, with whom a certain level of luxury is associated; during mealtimes or feasts cardinals, archbishops, and bishops could be served from nine dishes to seven dishes (Kuropatnicki 2012). The food sent by Ysakar might have been one of those extravagant, colourful dishes from his high table, signifying his status, but also showing his incontinence and vanity (Cosman, Jones 2008). To make the matters worse, the Episcopus wants Mary to become an accomplice in his sinful conduct and tries to convince her to “in pis tyme of mete no longer ... rede”, which would result in her breaking one of her

³ This restriction did not prevent monastic cooks from being creative. For example, *pulmentum* was a type of oatmeal prepared in a variety of ways and spiced for flavour (Moulin 1986).

vows and neglecting her monastic duties (Meredith 1997, p. 50). Thankfully, Mary does not succumb to the temptation, but reacts appropriately by stating that she:

... xal bere [this food] my systerys--I trowe þei haue more nede;
 ... Fede 3ow þerof hertyly, I pray 3ow nat spare.
 And if owght beleve, specyaly I pray 3ow
 That þe pore men þe relevys þerof haue now.
 Fayn, and I myth, I wolde do þe dedys of mercy.
 Pore folk faryn God knowyth how.
 On hem evyr I haue grett pety. (Meredith 1997, p. 50)

God provides his true servants with everything they need either by means of a miracle, or through the kindness of others, and any excess should be redistributed among the needy as the “dedys of mercy” (Meredith 1997, p. 50).⁴ A properly managed monastery always created surpluses, distributed food, objects of daily use and provided shelter to pilgrims and the poor (Clark 2011; Wölfflin 1895). Following this principle, Mary distributes the not needed earthly gifts among her fellow sisters and among the poor, as it was expected of someone who wished to care for brotherly concord. In doing so, she not only follows the *Regula*, but also shows Episcopus, and the audience, a proper moral contrast to his own excess. Her actions identify his sin and correct it through “exemplary teaching” (Meredith 1997, p. 13). Most importantly, however, Mary is contrasting her pious pleasure from consuming manna with the sinful incontinence of Ysakar’s earthly dishes, which ultimately ensures the audience that her pleasure is of a different kind – it’s a reward for her piety.

There did exist great discrepancies between the theory and reality of monastic life. The *Regula* and other codes “offer insights into precept not practice,” and the access to numerous food products in well supplied medieval monasteries encouraged abuses (Clark 2011, p. 61). For example, Giraldus, a twelve-century monk, describes a case where king Henry II was petitioned by the monks from Winchester with a complaint that their abbot had reduced the number of dishes served in the refectory by three, leaving them with only ten, which surprised the king who at his own court was served only three dishes (Strong 2002). Medieval theatre and *The Mary Play*, however, presented an idealized version of reality, with Mary as the symbol of a perfect human condition, an embodiment of Christian virtues for everyone to follow (Meredith 1997). As such, Mary shows the audience a proper Christian attitude towards acts of conspicuous consumption and delivers a lesson in humility for those lost in the “cursed superfluitee” (Chaucer 2000, p.287), charity towards those in need, and piety, which guaranteed the very same pleasures as Mary had in the hereafter.

⁴ As Rytel-Andrianik states, based on the Book of Wisdom, “the righteous people received their food not from the earth, but from heaven”, thus providing an additional reason why Mary accepts manna but rejects the Episcopus’ dishes (2012, p. 32).

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Monastycyzm i zmysłowość w sztuce *The Mary Play* z cyklu N-town

Streszczenie

W późnośredniowiecznym angielskim misterium pt. *The Mary Play*, młoda Maryja zostaje wysłana do Świątyni, aby rozpocząć życie zgodne ze średniowiecznymi monastycznymi ideami pokory i pobożności. Po przekroczeniu progu Świątyni odwiedza ją anioł z darem w postaci manny, której wygląd jak i smak wywołują u Maryi uczucie zmysłowej, nie zaś duchowej przyjemności, co nie tylko zdaje się zaprzeczać jej wcześniejszym pobożnym deklaracjom, ale też sugeruje grzeszne nieumiarkowanie. Artykuł ma na celu ukazać przyczyny, dla których reakcja Maryi na niebiańskie podarunki może zostać uznana za grzeszną w kontekście średniowiecznych reguł monastycznych, jak i ogólnego stosunku do jedzenia oraz nieumiarkowanej konsumpcji w średniowiecznej Europie, oraz

udowodnić, że mimo tych wątpliwości późniejsze zachowanie Maryi jest w rzeczywistości częścią moralnej lekcji na temat monastycznych cnót, takich jak powściągliwość, dobroczynność i pobożność. Analiza tekstu sztuki oraz argumentacja wspierana jest opracowaniami krytycznymi z historii dramatu średniowiecznego, pracami z zakresu badań nad historią średniowiecznego społeczeństwa, głównie Roya Stronga i Jamesa G. Clarka, oraz reguł związanych z realiami monastycznego życia opisanych w *Benedicti regula monachorum*.

Słowa kluczowe: literatura angielska, teatr, misteria, średniowiecze, monastycyzm, jedzenie, chrześcijaństwo, Maria z Nazaretu, cnoty, grzech, łakomstwo.

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