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THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY IN THE SCENE
OF THE ANNUNCIATION IN *THE YORK CYCLE*

The aim of this study is to examine the presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the scene of the Annunciation in one of the four English mystery cycles, *The York Plays*. In the first part of the article Mary's qualities will be considered. Next her role as a mediatrix between the human world and the world of God will be discussed. Finally, the imagery associated with the Virgin employed throughout the play will be analyzed.

The Annunciation Play,¹ which takes place in Nazareth, falls into three distinct parts. Similarly to *The N-Town Cycle* and *The Towneley Cycle*, it opens with a lengthy speech, running for some 144 lines, given by Prologue.

¹ The source of the very act of the annunciation and Elizabeth's visit is found in the New Testament in Matthew's and Luke's gospels. Matthew concentrates first of all on the implications of Mary's pregnancy and Joseph's uncertainty as to the purity and moral behaviour of his young wife:

"Christi autem generatio sic erat: Cum esset desponsata mater ejus Maria Joseph, antequam convenirent, in venta est in utero habens de Spiritu sancto. Joseph autem vir ejus cum esset justus, et nollet eam traducere: voluit occulte dimittere eam. Haec autem eo cogitante, ecce angelus Domini apparuit in somnis ei, dicens: Joseph fili David, noli timere accipere Mariam conjugem tuam: quod enim in ea natum est, de Spritu Sancto est. Pariet autem filium: et vocabis nomen ejus Jesum; ipse enim salvum faciet populum suum a peccatis eorum. Hoc autem totum factum est, ut aadimpleretur quod dictum est a Domino per prophetam dicentem: Ecce virgo in utero habebit, et pariet fillium; et vacabunt nomen ejus Emmanuel, quod est interpretatum Nobiscum Deus." (Matthew, I: 18-23)

Luke goes to greater lengths and his description of the event is more comprehensive:

"In mense autem sexto, missus est Angelus Gabriel a Deo in civitatem Galiliaeae, cui nomen Nazareth. Ad Virginen deponsatam virgo, cui nomen erat Joseph, de domo David, et nomen virginis Maria. Et ingressus Angelus ad eam dixit: Ave, gratia plena: Dominur tecum: Benedicta tu in mulieribus. Quae cum audisset, turbata est in sermone suis, et cogitabat qualis esset ista salutatio. Et ait Angelus ei; Ne timeas, Maria, inventi enim gratiam apud Deum: Ecce concipies in utero, et paries filium, et vocabis nomen ejus JESUM, hic erit magnus et Filius Altissimi vacabitur, et dabit illi Dominus Deus sedem David patris ejus: et regnabit in domo Jacob in aeternum. Dixit autem Maria ad Angelum. Quomodo fiet istud, quoniam

The speech constitutes an introduction to the miraculous event presented in the play and serves, for a didactic purpose, as a kind of theological background to the scene. The second part comprises the appearance of the angel to the Blessed Virgin and the conversation between the two characters. Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth brings the play to an end.

It is Mary's purity that is stressed most frequently throughout the play. In the prologue, Mary is referred to as a "mayden, even and morne" (95, l. 82)² who will conceive a child despite "the chastite of her body" (98, l. 157). Her marriage, as stated in the scene, arranged to deceive the devil and protect the Virgin and her child, is undefiled. She was wedded to old Joseph to be able to retain the state of virginity:

And for the fende shuld so be fedd
 Be tyne, and to no treuth take tentt,
 God made tat mayden to be wedde,
 Or he his sone vn-to hir sentte.

(94, ll. 25–28)

Elizabeth remarks that Mary achieved her divinity "through chastite" (101, l. 225). The Virgin responds that "chastite . . . made me þus to ga / omange his [God's] maidens fele" (101, ll. 234–236). Thanks to her virginity, Mary preserves her bodily integrity and thus can appear perfect, both morally and physically.³

virum non cognosco? Et respondens Angelus dixit ei: Spiritus sanctus superveniet in te, et virtus Altissimi obumbrabit tibi. Ideoque et quod nascetur ex te Sanctum, vocabitur Filius Dei. Et ecce Elisabeth cognata tua et ipsa concepit filium in senectute sua: et his mensis sextus est illi, quae vocatur sterilis: Quia non erit impossibile apud Deum omne verbum. Dixit autem Maria: Ecce ancilla Domini, fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum. Et discessit ab illa Angelus. Exsurgens autem Maria in diebus illis abiit in montana cum festinatione in civitatem Judah; Et intravit in domum Zachariae, et salutavit Elisabeth. Et factum est, ut audivit salutationem Mariae Elisabeth, exultavit infans in utero ejus: et repleta est Spiritu sancto Elisabeth: Et exclamavit voce magna, et dixit: Benedicta tu inter mulieres, et benedictum fructus ventris tui et unde hoc mihi ut veniat mater Domini mei ad me? Ecce enim ut facta est vox salutationis tuae in auribus meis, exultavit in gaudio infans in utero meo. et beata, quae credidisti, quoniam perficientur ea, quae dicta sunt tibi a Domino. Et ait Maria: Magnificat anima mea Dominum: et exultavit spiritus meus in Deo salutari meo." (Luke, I: 26–47)

It is therefore apparent that Luke's gospel may have been the most extensive canonical source for the scene. *Novum Jesu Christi Testamentum, Vulgatae Editionis* (London: Samuel Bagster and Sons Ltd).

² *The Annunciation and visit of Elizabeth to Mary*, [in:] Lucy Toumlin Smith, ed., *The Plays Performed by the Crafts or Mysteries of York on the Day of Corpus Christi in the 14th, 15th and 16th Centuries* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1885). All references in the text will be to this edition.

³ Clarissa Atkinson, *The Oldest Vocation. Christian Motherhood in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 112. Bodily integrity and physical perfection

Her chastity constitutes a recurrent element of Mary's description in the scene as it symbolises her freedom from sin. Even though the Virgin chooses married life, she leads a pious life and devotes herself to service in God's name. She appears to be set as an example for other women: a paragon of virtue who should be aimed at and followed. As Mary Clayton aptly points out, Mary's life and devotion become a corrective.⁴

Moreover, the Virgin's innocence and purity are important for the playwright due to the role she has as *Theotokos*, the mother of God. As was believed in the Middle Ages, it was the mother who passed on the flesh to her offspring, and the father who passed on the spirit.⁵ The Blessed Virgin gave Jesus an element of human nature which plays a crucial role in Christ's crucifixion and the salvation of the world. Thus, from a theological point of view, it seemed necessary to stress Mary's incorrupt condition and her bodily integrity.

This state of wholeness and perfection grants the Virgin her position as God's bride and lets her enjoy his special grace, the most important sign of God's love that could be offered by him to any human being. Greeting the Virgin, Gabriel announces:

Ang. Oure lord god is with þe,
 And has chosen þe for his,
 Of all women blist mot þou be.
 (98, ll. 146-148)

Later on, the angel stresses again that Mary is full of grace (98, l. 145) and Elizabeth states that "swilke grace is for the layde" (101, l. 232). The Virgin herself rejoices because of "þe grace God has me lente" (100, l. 218). God's grace is given to Mary in return for her unsurpassed love and devotion.⁶ She adores God's wisdom and power, and frequently praises

were considered necessary prerequisites for achieving the state of holiness in the Middle Ages. Any wounds rendered the person vulnerable and thus susceptible to evil and early corruption. For a discussion of the significance of the theme see Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption. Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992).

⁴ Mary Clayton, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 54.

⁵ The idea, put forward by Aristotle in his writings ("the male provides the form and the principle of the movement; the female provides the body, in other words, the material"), was widely accepted in the Middle Ages. Aristotle, *The Generation of Animals*, Al Peck, ed. and trans. (Cambridge, Mass: Loeb Library 1943, p. 95).

⁶ Bonaventura's meditations on the life on Mary even quote the Madonna as having revealed during her lifetime to a devout woman that the graces she had were not won lightly but were the result of continual prayer and mortification. Paula Marie Lozar, *The Virgin Mary in the medieval drama of England: a psychoanalytic study*, Ph. D. thesis (Berkeley: University of California, 1974), p. 184.

God calling him, for instance, "þe kyngis of blysse" (p. 107, l. 159). She is his faithful follower:

Mar. Nowe grete God of his myght,
 þat all may dresse and dight,
 Mekely to þe I bowe!
 Rewe on tis wery wight,
 þat in his herte might light
 þe soth to ken and trowe.

(108, ll. 202-207)

In an unprecedented manner, the Virgin reconciles the Old Law – the tradition of childbirth and fertility, with the New Law – chastity and virginity.⁷ Unlike other women who either vow virginity or decide to get married, Mary can perform three functions: that of a virgin, a wife and a mother, at the same time. Her exceptional condition which is beyond worldly knowledge is stressed in the prologue of *The Annunciation*:

For in þis worlde was never slyke
 One to be mayden, modir, and wyffe.
 þis passed all worldly witte,
 How god had ordand paim panne,
 In hir one to knytte,
 Godhed, maydenhed, and manne.

(96-97, ll. 99-108)

Mary's holy nature is additionally accentuated by her union with the Holy Ghost. As indicated in the prologue:

þe hegh haly gaste,
 Come oure myscheffe to mende,
 In marie mayden chaste.

(96, ll. 93-95)

The reverence and esteem with which Mary is treated despite her young age, enhance the image of a holy person. Both Gabriel and Elizabeth call Madonna blessed and chosen among all women to be God's mother. The angel sings:

Ang. Hayle! Marie! full of grace and blysse,
 Our lord god is with þe,
 And has chosen þe for his,
 Of all women blist mot þou be.

(98, ll. 145-148)

⁷ Stephen Spector, "Anti-Semitism in the English Mystery Plays," in: Clifford Davidson, C. J. Gianakaris, John H. Stroupe eds, *The Drama in the Middle Ages: Comparative and Critical Essays* (New York: AMS, 1982), p. 334.

Elizabeth greets Mary in a strikingly similar manner:

Blissid be þou anely
Of all women in feere,
And þe frute of thy body
Be blissid ferre and nere.

(100, ll. 205-208)

The Virgin, raised above ordinary people thanks to the outstanding quality of her love for God, becomes a mediatrix who serves both God and humankind. She is described in the prologue as the one through whom "was many saved of syn" (l. 82) and the one who helps "our myschyffe to mende" (l. 94). She is also the first to be told about the miraculous pregnancy of Elizabeth, and repeating the pattern of her own annunciation, the Virgin visits her cousin to bring the good news. The astonishment that sounds in Mary's words when she welcomes the angel's "halsyng" is echoed, as if to stress the Virgin's function of God's messenger, in the final part of the scene, when Elizabeth praises "the voyce of þine halsing" (100, l. 213).

Mary's role as God's messenger is also stressed by the use of the adjective "mylde". The Virgin greets the angel:

Maria. þou goddis aungell, meke and mylde.
(99, l. 169)

The very same word is employed to describe Mary, this "maiden mylde." The repetition of the word emphasizes the similarity of Mary's and Gabriel's qualities. The Virgin is, as it were, equalled to an angel. They both become God's meek instruments who fulfil his orders.

The extraordinary humility and modesty with which Mary treats the glory she receives is unmatched. Any feeling of pride about her exceptional state is unknown to her. Mary's unique position as God's chosen bride and *Theotokos* only prompts her to follow God's will more ardently. In her prayer closing the scene of the annunciation, Mary expresses thanks for the miracle and puts herself at God's command:

Maria. I love my lord with herte dere,
þe grace þat he has for me layde.
Goddis handmayden, lo! me here,
To his wille all redy grayd.
(p. 99, ll. 187-190)

She places herself in a position of a modest handmaiden, humbly "recognizing her own imperfections."⁸ Her humility and meekness, so

⁸ Lozar, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

praised in medieval religious writings, are stressed yet again.⁹ She is free from the sin of vanity, in contrast to Eve, whose fall has to be redeemed through Mary – *mors per Evam, vita per Mariam*.¹⁰ The Blessed Virgin accepts God's orders and takes on her part in the scheme of salvation. She assumes the primary role of a woman and identifies as the submissive partner in her relationship with God and complies with the order established by God.¹¹

Mary's willingness to accept the role God ascribes to her and to fulfil his orders is also emphasized during Elizabeth's visit:

pou make me to thy paye,
To þe my wille is wentte.
(100, ll. 223–224)

Madonna's piety and love are reinforced by the enthusiasm and ardour with which she prays:

Lorde I lofe þe god verray,
þe sande pou hast me sente.
I tanke þe nyght and day
And prayes with goode entente.
(100, ll. 219–222)

It should also be stressed that despite her unique condition, the Virgin experiences a strong need for social interactions and communication on the interpersonal level. Unlike *The N-Town Cycle* and *The Towneley Cycle*, which follow the traditional order of the annunciation, Joseph's doubts and the visit to Elizabeth, found in *The Protoevangelium*, the author of *The York Cycle* decides to reverse the order of events. Upon the moment of the annunciation, Mary hastily sets off to visit her cousin to "speke with the." The playwright chooses to present the mother of God not only as a pious, reclusive saint, but also as a family member and a social being. She fully experiences her happiness when it is shared with others and it is in her presence that "the usual hierarchies and power-structures of medieval society give way to an ideal state."¹²

The dialogue which appears to be of special significance in this scene not only stresses the equality between the two women but also includes

⁹ Clayton, *op. cit.*, p. 224.

¹⁰ See Douglas Gray, *Themes and Images in the Medieval English Religious Lyrics* (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 82.

¹¹ The humility of the Annunciation scene is echoed in *The Purification* scene, where Mary, despite her immaculate conception and virginity *post partum*, decides to undergo purification in the temple.

¹² Jonathan Nauman, "The Role of Blessed Virgin Mary in the York Cycle," in: *Philological Quarterly* 4 (1991): 422.

the audience in the events presented. Relatively lively exchanges, rather than didactic monologues, such as, for example, in *The Chester Cycle*, let the audience get to know more about the characters and understand their motivation. Therefore, they seem more accessible, understandable and, hence, more interesting. It becomes easier for female viewers to identify with Mary – “a woman in the world being religious”¹³ – who earns her high position through her piety and devotion. Mary can be seen as more real and palpable, more of an ordinary woman who deeply experiences the love of God and devotes her life to his service, and less of a saint.

Yet another device the playwright employs to diminish the distance between Mary “þe modyr of my lord kyng” (100, l. 211) – as Elizabeth calls her in the play – and ordinary viewers, women in particular, whose everyday experience may differ from Mary’s idealized example, is fear.¹⁴ This element, taken directly from the biblical text – the angel’s words *ne timeas, Maria*, indicating Madonna’s emotionality, is introduced to bring the Virgin closer to the audience. When Gabriel appears to the Virgin, she withdraws in fear:

Maria. What maner of halsyng is þis?
þus preuely comes to me,
For in myn herte a thoght it is,
þe tokenyng þat I here see.

(98, ll. 149–152)

Her words are a sign of anxiety and become an expression of her human feelings. Despite her exceptional qualities, perfection and integrity, she can, like the audience, experience fear. Gabriel’s soothing can calm her down:

Ang. Ne drede þe noght, þou mylde marie,
For no-thing þat may be-falle,
For þou has fun soueranly
At god a grace ouer othir all.

(98, ll. 153–157)

It may have been easier for the audience to comprehend the nature of the Virgin whose relationship with God seemed to be more personal, and the meaning of the miracle may have become more accessible. It has to be emphasized, however, that the fear Mary experiences is the “positive

¹³ Mary C. Erler, “English Vowed Women at the End of the Middle Ages,” in: *Medieval Studies* 57 (1995): 155–203, 181.

¹⁴ Some authors claim that mariology became “a tool of ecclesiastical triumphalism” meant primarily for celibate males (Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk. Toward a Feminist Theology*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1983, p. 144). In order to bring the Virgin Mary closer to secular audiences, especially women, new elements such as fear may have been introduced by medieval playwrights.

fear" felt in the presence of God's messenger and not the "negative fear" felt by sinners and connected with the absence of God.¹⁵

The visual effect of the angel's appearance in the scene may have been achieved and/or enhanced by the costume worn by the angel.¹⁶ There are very little data telling us how the angel actually appeared on the stage, what was the design of his costume or the size of his wings. However, these extraliterary elements must have constituted an important factor in the staging of the play and had an impact on the audience's reactions. The more the audience could identify with Mary's fear, the more plausible the situation seemed to them and the more human and understandable Mary appeared.

The dramatic potential of Mary's fear was extensively used by medieval artists.¹⁷ Medieval iconography frequently presents Mary during the annunciation as she steps backwards as if frightened by the sudden appearance of the angel. Gabriel's hand is stretched out in a greeting gesture. The Virgin was also frequently depicted with a distaff in her hand to stress the contrast between the metaphysical appearance of Gabriel and the ordinariness of her everyday life in the midst of which the angel appeared.¹⁸

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The uniqueness and exceptional importance of the situation and the significance of the act of the annunciation is stressed by the use of music and singing, interwoven in the events, and constituting a framework for the scene. First the angel sings while greeting Mary and then to calm her down when she seems to be afraid. *The Magnificat*, which closes the scene, is sung after the annunciation and the visitation are completed.¹⁹

¹⁵ See: Francis Beer, *Kobiety i doświadczenie mistyczne w Średniowieczu*, A. Branny, trans. (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 1996).

¹⁶ J. Wesley Harris in his book *Medieval Theatre in Context* notices that great expenses were made on costumes and craftsmen frequently went to great effort to prepare splendid and surprising costumes. John Wesley Harris, *Medieval Theatre in Context* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).

¹⁷ Chapter 6 of Mary Clayton's *The Cult of the Virgin Mary* offers an analysis of the presentation of the scene of the annunciation in iconography.

¹⁸ For a discussion of some of the iconographic aspects of the annunciation scene see Theresa Colettis's article "Devotional Iconography in the N-Town Marian Plays," in: Davidson et al., *op. cit.* An exhaustive, though controversial, discussion of the traditional imagery associated with the annunciation is also provided by Ernst Jones in his study "The Madonna's conception through the ear," in: *Essays in Applied Psychoanalysis* (London: Hogarth Press, 1952), pp. 266-375.

¹⁹ The problem of music in cycle drama is discussed in Joanna Dutka's *Music in the English Mystery Plays*, EDAM, Reference Ser. 2 (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1980).

Images of flowers and light are frequently used to describe Mary in both this and other scenes. Comparisons of Mary to a lily which stem from *The Song of Songs* are employed throughout the scene:

Ero quasi ros et virgo Israell germinabit sicut lilium.

þe maiden of Israell al newe . . .
Als þe lilly foure full faire of hewe.
(96, ll. 89-92)

The image of purity associated with the lily, the symbol of innocence, which Douglas Gray calls "lily of virginity,"²⁰ is reinforced in the following part of the prologue:

þis lady is to lilly lyke,
þat is by-cause of hir clene liffe.
(96, ll. 97-98)

Additionally, the immaculate conception and birth of Jesus are expressed by a floral metaphor which calls upon the tradition of the rod of Jesse:

Vpponne þat wande sall springe a floure,
Wher-on þe haly gast sall be,
To governe it with grete honnoure.
(96, ll. 78-80)

It echoes images employed in some medieval religious lyrics in which Mary was frequently compared to a flower. For instance, a poem from the Corpus Christi College Manuscript calls her "Moder milde, flur of alle"²¹ and a poem from the manuscript from Trinity College says that:

Ther is no rose of swych vertu
As is the rose that bare Jesu.²²

Moreover, the image of light²³ is employed by the angel when he describes the Virgin and her son:

Ang. The Halygast in þe sall lighte,
Hegh vertue sall to þe holde,
The holy birthe of the so bright,
(99, ll. 177-179)

²⁰ Gray, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

²¹ C. Brown, ed., *English Lyrics of the XIIIth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), p. 118.

²² Douglas Gray, *A Selection of Religious Lyrics, Medieval and Tudor Series* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

²³ Light imagery is even more pronounced in the scene in the N-Town Cycle, where the Holy Ghost descends to the Virgin as three beams of light: "Here the Holy Gost discendit with iij bemys to our Lady." S. Spector, ed., *The N-Town Play*, EETS (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 122.

As has been shown, the playwright in *The Annunciation Play* makes an attempt to portray the Blessed Virgin Mary as a holy person, mother of Jesus Christ, *Theotokos*, devoted to God and ready to respectfully fulfil his orders. The image of a saint, however, is balanced by a less hieratic and pompous presentation. Mary also appears as a woman interrupted in her activities by the angel's arrival. She seems to be one of the audience who, through her devotion, love and piety, has earned God's grace. Being human and achieving great honours from God, the Virgin is set as an example which should be followed in everyday life.

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NAJŚWIĘTSZA MARIA PANNA W SCENIE ZWIASTOWANIA W *THE YORK CYCLE*

Tematem artykułu jest prezentacja postaci Najświętszej Marii Panny w scenie Zwiastowania i spotkania z Elżbietą w średniowiecznym angielskim dramacie misteryjnym *The York Cycle*. To właśnie w tej scenie, *The Annunciation, and Visit of Elizabeth to Mary*, Madonna jest ukazana po raz pierwszy i podobnie jak w scenie wniebowstąpienia (*The Assumption*) stanowi centralną postać, wokół której koncentruje się i rozgrywa akcja. Scena oparta jest na biblijnym przekazie pochodzącym z Ewangelii Św. Łukasza. Średniowieczny dramaturg przedstawia Marię z jednej strony jako wyidealizowany wzór miłości i pokory, do osiągnięcia którego należy dążyć w życiu codziennym, z drugiej zaś stara się przybliżyć jej postać widzom, nadając uczuciom Marii wymiar ludzki oraz ukazując jej strach i niepokój. Pobożność i skromność Madonny, dzięki którym Zbawiciel może przyjść na świat, przeciwstawione są próżności Ewy, która stała się przyczyną wygnania z raju. Artykuł zwraca również uwagę na funkcję dialogu w scenie Zwiastowania.