

“L’enfer, c’est les autres”: En-gendering Sin in Middle
English Religious Drama. The Case of Chester

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Abstract

This article investigates the relationship between sin and its retribution as depicted in three Middle English biblical plays concerned with retribution, *Noah’s Flood*, the *Harrowing of Hell* and the *Last Judgement*, in the Chester biblical drama collection. The plays’ general tenor is, to modern sensibilities, conservative and disciplinarian with respect to social mores. Yet, studying the portrayal of sin against the plays’ social background may uncover secular mutations of the Christian conceptualisation of sin as a function of gender as well as estate. Chester’s *Last Judgement* dramatises sin in accordance with fifteenth-century ecclesiastical and secular developments which criminalise people along gender-specific, not just trade-specific, lines. In showing Mulier as the only human being whom Christ leaves behind in hell after his redemptive *descensus*, the *Harrowing* dooms not just the brewers’ and alehouse-keepers’ dishonesty, as imputed to brewsters in late medieval England, but women themselves, if under the guise of their trade-related dishonesty. The underside of the Chester Noahs’ cleansing voyage is women’s ideological and social suppression. Whether or not we regard the Good Gossips’ wine-drinking – for fear of the surging waters – or Mrs Noah’s defiant resistance to her husband as a performance of the sin of humankind calling for the punitive deluge, the script gives female characters a voice not only to show their sinfulness. Rather, like the *Harrowing of Hell* and less so the *Last Judgement*, *Noah’s Flood*, I argue, participates in a hegemonic game which appropriates one sin of the tongue, gossip, to make it backfire against those incriminated for using it in the first place: women.

Keywords: Chester biblical drama, *Noah’s Flood*, *Harrowing of Hell*, *Last Judgement*, Christian imaginary, sin *en-gendering*, retribution, hegemonic “gossiping discourse”

In 1540, the city of Chester issued three ordinances that expressly concerned women rather than a very general, if actually gender-specific, mankind. Over(t)ly apprehensive about the fate of both city and its womenfolk, the city fathers wisely decreed on 12 May that women were in the wrong both as alehouse keepers and as participants in traditional gatherings occasioned by women's lying-in and churching. Slightly later, a third ordinance, which curbed headgear excesses, reinforced the view of women's overarching fault and vexing visibility. The early ordinance prohibited women aged between fourteen and forty – roughly, the age of sexual activity – from keeping alehouses, lest they encourage “wantonness, brawls, frays and other inconveniences” and thereby hurt the city's reputation (Chester City Record Office, First Assembly Book, AB/I, fol. 70^r, qtd. in Bennett 142).ⁱ Were *male*-kept alehouses trouble-free establishments? Hardly (see Hanawalt chap. 7). Not ostensible tavern brawl suppression was at stake in the other Cestrian ordinance of 12 May, but women's waste of food and drink (Chester City Record Office, First Assembly Book, AB/I, fol. 70^v, qtd. in Bennett 230, n. 79); the ordinance actually aimed to forestall female companionship and alliance-forging (Bodden 34-5). The later ordinance condemned women's sartorial self-presentation beyond patriarchy's social pigeonholing of women, but not of men too, as single, married or widowed (Chester City Record Office, First Assembly Book, AB/I, fol. 72^v, in Bennett 230, n. 79; cf. 1 Cor. 11:7-10).

There is nothing special about 12 May 1540 in Chester; however, in four days' time Chester's biblical plays were to be performed. Yet, strangely (or is it?), much of the antifeminist content of these ordinances covers some of the sore issues in Chester's plays about retribution, which this article examines. At the time, the plays' Proclamation (composed 1531-32) was being amended and copied (1539-40), as were their pre-Reformation Banns (*c.* 1539-40), whilst the post-Reformation Banns would wait roughly another eight years to be penned (*c.* 1548).ⁱⁱ The very performance time of the plays had been shifted sometime between 1472 and 1521 from Corpus Christi day to Whitsuntide, with the text expanded for a three-day staging by the 1530s, hence its name – “Whitsun play” – in many a sixteenth-century civic record (Mills 112-16).ⁱⁱⁱ For sure, with text

expansion also came an expansion of secular concerns which the overall biblical frame highlighted – allegorically – all the better.

This article investigates the depiction of the retribution of sin in three Chester plays, *Noah’s Flood*, the *Harrowing of Hell* and the *Last Judgement*, with brief parallels, where possible, to their Middle English counterparts. I examine the three Chester scripts for their potential to indicate secular mutations, if any, of Christian construals of self and other in relation to sin. My working hypothesis concerns the gendering of heterological apprehensions – a “*L’enfer, c’est les autres*” centuries before Jean-Paul Sartre’s time – at the heart of the Christian imaginary of sinfulness. Hell may be the (afterlife) abode of those deemed iniquitous, yet what has alienated them from the society of the righteous and who has decreed it thus?

All three Chester plays are test cases of implicit or explicit trials with profound spiritual implications: the Noahs voyage to save themselves from the punitive deluge and regenerate humanity (also) spiritually, yet spousal relationships are sorely put on trial; Christ descends to hell to vanquish Satan and redeem the righteous dead from limbo, yet not everyone is found righteous enough; and the dead rise on Doomsday to face judgement by Christ, before being assigned to their eternal resting place, yet, saved or doomed, they share many sins in common. These scripts’ plots are always already recursive, teleology-wise: the motive for the God-decreed trial conducive to redemption or everlasting doom lies in the past – most often in a past of iniquity. Notwithstanding, in the Chester Whitsun plays the retribution suggests the consistent association of women with certain sins. Is such association aligned with, or even inspired by, the late medieval Christian *en-gendering*^{iv} of sin, or not?

I start from the teleological terminus ad quem, the Websters’ *Last Judgement*, to proceed backwards to the Cooks’ *Harrowing of Hell* and the Waterleaders and Drawers of Dee’s *Noah’s Flood*.^v My recursive approach affords an examination of the Christian imaginary of sin by investigating specific hamartiological categories against gender-related societal developments indicated by both pastoral discourse and the proceedings of ecclesiastical and secular courts.

Disenfranchisement and the Im-/Complicit En-gendering of
Deadly Sins: The *Last Judgement*

Chester's *Last Judgement* (C24) dramatises the "retributive logic" (in Timothy J. Gorringer's terms) which undergirds Christianity's redemptive theology. The dead march onstage in a dance-of-death procession headed by the saved souls to face Christ the Judge. The crucial difference between the would-be blessed and the doomed^{vi} concerns not so much their actual deeds – for both cohorts confess having performed the works of the flesh, not of mercy^{vii} – as their contrition *in articulo mortis* (C24/95-6, 133-4, 155) and purgatorial expiation (C24/69-70, 77; 87-92, 97-100; 129; 157-8, 165-72; 437-52). Divine grace may be redemptive, but it takes the catalysing force of church intervention through the rite of confession-absolution, as well as the dogmatic affirmation of purgatorial expiation, for redemption to be earned. Chester's *Last Judgement* ultimately dramatises ecclesiastical (self-)exaltation.

All the resurrected dead couch their exploits in terms of breaches of the social body and/or transgressions against the body of Christ codified as the seven deadly sins. Quite tellingly, both the saved and the damned *men* abused their power, which the former mention rather perfunctorily. However, the *damned* men not only wallowed in privileges wrested from their office, but most of them offended the church too; the latter sin more than the former appears to warrant their differential otherworldly treatment. Emperor Damnatus mourns his manifold transgressions – manslaughter, covetousness, injustice and money counterfeiting (C24/221-34) –, as does Papa Damnatus his simony and covetousness (C24/182-6, 189-90). Not paying one's tithes to the church doomed both Mercator Damnatus (C24/351-2)^{viii} and Justiciarius Damnatus (C24/301-8); like Rex Damnatus, the latter also expropriated church property (C24/321). Inappropriate money handling – from both secular and ecclesiastical perspectives – as abuse of power, which these men share in common, spells damnation, civic drama such as Chester's avers.

How does Chester's Doomsday classification of sin tally with contemporary ecclesiastical and secular pronouncements and practice? Unsurprisingly, medieval Christian hamartiology evolved and adjusted its

system so as to respond to social developments. Whether eight (originally), seven^{ix} or more, the deadly sins reflect an understanding of bodily desires and spiritual temptations as intertwined and, moreover, as requiring control and defeat (Dietz; Capps and Cole, Jr. 518-19). In the wake of the ecumenical Fourth Lateran Council (1215), the *sermones vulgares*, or *sermones ad status*, associated *peccata mortalia* with particular estates and trades, with their dynamic reconfiguration (Newhauser, *Garden of Evil* x, xv). Chester's dance-of-death approach appears to hark back to such *sermones ad status*.

What doomed Regina Damnata, the only woman amongst the damned? In her confession, she laments her vainglory – her “prydee” (C24/277) in sporting fine clothes and pearls (C24/277-8) – and also her “lecherye” (C24/273), a “synne” (C24/274) abjected as “filth in deede and thought” (C24/275). As it happens, Regina Salvata confesses the very same sins: her earthly delight in precious stones (C24/162) and *lechery-inducing* (C24/161) silk and velvet clothes (C24/150-1), alongside her failure to pray and fast (C24/153). Rex Salvatus is no stranger to what the two queens bewail, for he confesses his fondness for rich clothes (C24/118). Likewise, Rex Damnatus shares with Regina Damnata – his dance-of-death consort – an inclination for “lecherye” (C24/257). However, the prosecution speech of Primus Demon charges Regina Damnata, but *not* Rex Damnatus too, with sinful conduct (C24/597-602) aimed dually to “excite her lecherye” (C24/600) and “mans harte to styrrre” (C24/601). Saved or doomed characters, Chester's allotment of sin appears gender lopsided: lechery dooms a woman, but not a man; vainglory is not associated with lechery consistently, nor always doomed. Ever since Tertullian's *De cultu feminarum*, even the humblest woman had been suspected of and exhorted against the conjoined sins of vanity and lust, or “meretricious allurement” (qtd. in Bloch 12).^x This is so “since embellishment of the body, a prideful attempt ‘to show to advantage,’ recreates an original act of pride that is the source of potential concupiscence” (Bloch 12). Howard R. Bloch's sympathetic interpretation of Tertullian echoes the association of *concupiscentia carnis*, *concupiscentia oculorum* and *superbia vitae*, in 1 John 2:16, as the intertwined causes of spiritual perdition.^{xi}

Applying to the Chester characters' sins recent redefinitions of the hamartiological concepts may yield a broader picture, though. Both individually and as a series, the deadly sins are now regarded as nuanced and differentiated *cultural* constructs (Newhauser, *The Seven Deadly Sins* 3-6); accordingly, virtues denote "ideals of the socialization of desire" and vices context-flexible "differentiated articulations of ... discrete forms of an interrupted actualization of socially accepted forms of desire" (Newhauser, *The Seven Deadly Sins* 6). Such socialisation of desire served the imperative of maintaining the status quo as pigeonholed in the *sermones ad status*, as well as suggesting, I argue, what the hegemony feared: that not only the other, but also the self, might desire what the latter had proscribed.

My view of Chester's en-gendering of sinfulness is corroborated by research on sexual mores and offences mentioned in *praedicabilia* as well as in church and secular court records.^{xii} Not only do fifteenth-century English sources indicate the existence of a double standard, but they also intimate women's lack of agency and inurement to double-standard societal values. Though competing, the ecclesiastical and lay models of sexual acceptability nevertheless worked in tandem to en-gender sexual offences and thus differential patterns of judging them in court. Defamation cases, related as they were to gossip networks, indicate clearly gendered patterns, namely a significantly larger number of women than of men defamed – most often by other women – and punished for adultery (Karras, "Two Models" 130-2). Conversely, defamations concerning dishonesty in business, but not sexual errancy too, damaged men's reputations (Karras, "Two Models" 132). Unsurprisingly, then, Chester's *Last Judgement* makes seductiveness women's ticket to hell, and abuse of office and/or *against* the church, men's. Whether saved or doomed, Chester's male characters are socially evil agents. Royal status notwithstanding, the two queens *lack* social agency; with its Eve-like ring familiar to Christian ears, their (self-)imputed lecherous drive, which can lure men to perdition, displays but a modicum of spiritual agency, for the 'victim' still has his free will to ward off temptation. Societal en-gendering of sin overrides theological gender neutrality of sinfulness, or rather its universality; nonetheless, the latter comes at odds with the

traditional Christian propensity to read Eve – and thus, since Augustine, sexual concupiscence – into all women. Gender, it appears, overrides all other variables in the secular and theologico-ecclesiastical discursive practices regarding sin.

How do sinfulness and agency get associated in the other Middle English Doomsday plays? Does such association verify Chester's gendered view of the deadly sins? The York Mercers' *Last Judgement*^{xiii} features only two pairs of Good and Evil Souls, the latter portrayed by Christ as morally “vnclene” (Y47/238; cf. Rom. 1:28-31). Unfortunately, the perfunctory description of their sins serves little to either validate or invalidate my reading of Chester. In the Towneley *Iudicium*,^{xiv} the demons invoke their “brefes”/*writs* (T30/143) – akin to the late medieval summons and presentments – against the perpetrators of ecclesiastical and civic criminal deeds. Their prosecution speeches enumerate a large assortment of sins: transgressions of the biblical commandments, deadly sins, simony, church desecration, vow breaking and sins of the tongue, namely verbal transgressions that jeopardised the secular and ecclesiastical status quo such as slander, gossip, hostile disputation, swearing, and chattering during the liturgy (T30/143-4, 145-6, 276-87, 290-2, 299-303, 310-21, 326-8, 335-6, 344-50; cf. Rom. 1:30).^{xv} Towneley, however, resorts to displaced abjection to incriminate particularly women (T30/161-9, 256-74), which corroborates my view of Chester's en-gendering of criminality.

The N-Town *Judgement Day*^{xvi} begs special attention for its somewhat equivocal portrayal, gender-wise, of certain social transgressions. Amongst the Anime Dampnandum (Damned Souls) summoned by social estates (NT42/14-18), the lecher is abjected in gendered terms: “Sybile Sclutte, thu salte sewe [*filthy sow*]^{xvii} / All youre lyff was leccherous lay” (NT42/118-19). In Middle English, both the gender-specific *sow* and the gender-neutral *swine* connoted lechery, conceivably tainted by gluttony, as well as “laziness, dirtiness, fatness, or excesses of fleshly appetites” (*Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. “sōue,” n.2, “swīn(e”); hereafter cited as *MED*). The lecher, moreover, was a “shrewe” to her neighbours (NT42/120): *shrew* named a “wicked person, an evildoer,” even “an unruly or ill-disciplined child,” in seemingly gender-neutral terms (*MED*, s.v. “shreue,” sense 1a). Nonetheless, both in

theory and in practice the notion described unruly women: “[a]n overbearing woman; a malicious wife, scold” (sense 3a). Thus testify, for instance, both Andreas Capellanus, for whom the shrew was a “slanderer of other women, ... inconstant, fickle in her speech ... a liar, a drunkard, a babbler, no keeper of secrets,” who “will boldly contradict [men]” (qtd. in Bloch 18), and Pope Innocent III, in *De miseria humane conditionis*: “three things ... keep a man from staying home: smoke, a leaky roof, and a shrewish wife” (qtd. in Bloch 6). From men’s maligning of women as shrews – and in N-Town also as lechers – up to their demonisation,^{xviii} it takes only a step, as Chester’s *Harrowing of Hell* suggests.

Woman’s Fare in Society’s Hell: The *Harrowing of Hell*

Unlike the other Middle English plays on the apocryphal topic, Chester’s *Harrowing of Hell* (C17) does not end with Christ’s successful storming of *limbus patrum* to redeem the Old Testament patriarchs. Rather, in showing one unremittable human sin, it foreshadows both the Doomsday trial, and, in Chester’s *Last Judgement*, the pre-scripted/prescribed fate of sinners to be doomed to hell already on dying.^{xix}

Mulier, the *Harrowing*’s unpardonable offender, confesses her “deceavinge” (C17/291) of customers: as “a taverner, / a gentle gossippe and a tapster, / of wyne and ale a trustie bruer” (C17/285-7),^{xx} she cheated the assize, namely the standards of measure and quality (C17/285-96). Three details beg attention. First, Chester’s Christ does pardon Adam’s transgression against God (as in the *descensus ad inferos* apocrypha), but not also the brewster’s against her community. Can one’s community be exalted to (or rather above) God’s position without committing blasphemy? Conceivably not, unless more is at stake than the notion of God.^{xxi} Second, unlike in Chester’s (and N-Town’s) dance-of-death Doomsday, here the manuscript speech-heading *stereotypes* the sinner by gender, not by office, which tallies with the text’s punitive double standard. Third, can we take Mulier’s confession and contrition (C17/277-324) at its own word? Mulier warns fellow brewers, tavern-keepers and tapsters about their doom (C17/301-20). Formerly devastated (C17/277), the sinner who now proscribes dishonest trade nevertheless fawns on her

“sweete mayster, syr Sathanas” (C17/322) – to ingratiate herself with him and thus mitigate her pains? Satan welcomes Mulier as “dere daughtere” (C17/325), for sinners who dabble in deceit are proverbially the devil’s kin.^{xxii}

Mulier’s breach of civic statutes regulating the assize (C17/289-90, 303) and her sponsorship of vice (C17/334) may have harmed the secular body politic (C17/304). Yet, is her guilt a *deadly* sin? Furthermore, how do Mulier’s offences compare to Satan’s, when Satan (with his legions) is hell’s only other denizen in Chester? Had he succeeded to usurp God’s prerogatives and incite all the angels to shift their fealty, Lucifer/Satan would have harmed the celestial body politic. Mulier’s punishment is therefore not incommensurate with her guilt as a woman emulating Satan (if unawares), Chester implies. (Never mind Adam disobeyed God hardly unawares; yet, under patriarchy, Mulier’s guilt is ‘worsened’ by her gender.) Chester furthers this dogmatic aporia when Mulier names her infernal jailer “syr Sathanas, sargeant of hell” (C17/282). Chester’s Satan is but a *serjeant of assise* (*MED*, s.v. “assise”), a civil servant charged with supervising the correct assize and with chastising offenders. He no longer *leads* to perdition (as Christianity stresses), but ensures that perdition *is forestalled* or at least forewarned. Lucifer as the secular polity’s lackey has lost even his demonic lustre.

On the other hand, the Cestrian guild producing the *Harrowing*, the Cooks, had its vested interest in defaming women who plied the drink trade (Bennett 125), and Chester’s treatment of Mulier echoes the declining fortunes of English brewsters after 1300. Archival, artistic and literary evidence indicates that “public anxieties about the drink trade – its resistance to effective regulation, its encouragement of vice ... – were displaced from *all* brewers onto *female* brewers alone” (Bennett 12, original emphasis).^{xxiii} Women were ousted from trade both through civic measures and in ideological terms as soon as malt beer was brewed and took off as hydrating beverage, instead of ale (Bennett 3-11).

Clergymen too attacked the alehouse, which by the late 1500s had replaced the church as the venue for community events and beneficiary of associated revenues. The alehouse, moreover, enticed women by providing post-liturgical enjoyment (Bodden 31-2). Yet, neither ale-

sponsored sloth and debauchery, nor cheating the assize, doomed brewsters and female tavern-keepers as much as the spectre of side effects did: undermining patriarchy through speech – deemed gossip – and mutual female assistance.

Under the circumstances, I would argue that Chester's *Harrowing* dooms forever, if dogmatically inaccurately, neither old nor new deadly sins, but women themselves, as the character's collective gender name indicates. Chester's *Mulier* episode shows women denied salvation through their wholesale incrimination *cum* exclusion "from the city's public economic life" (Wack 42). Ironically, not even Christ could – would? – save *Mulier* from the judgemental gaze of the city fathers of Chester and of generations of fathers of Christianity. Like the *Last Judgement*, the *Harrowing of Hell* features a social transgression whose very *en-gendering* within a *redemptive* frame makes it ipso facto paradigmatic and mystifies its social recrimination as divine punishment.

Women's Position as Inside-Outsider: *Noah's Flood*

Unlike the previous two Chester plays, *Noah's Flood* (C3) hardly scripts a *hell*-related experience. The Genesis story pictures the Noahs' physical voyage, metaphorical for humanity's spiritual cleansing journey – and reinterpreted by Augustine as adumbrating baptism – in the wake of God's decision to punish postlapsarian sinfulness. The Middle English flood plays further allegorise this postlapsarian lapse (*sic*) as a domestic fall: like York and especially Towneley, Chester relishes staging the unruliness and final subduing^{xxiv} of Noah's wife.^{xxv} She is the archetypal woman (albeit cross-played) as anonymous wife, a *Mulier* figure overshadowed by her lord and master and subdued jointly by Noah and sons.^{xxvi} (I use the corporatist phrase advisedly.) Like its Middle English cognates, except N-Town, the Chester *Flood* dramatises the patriarchal repression of women's voice about domestic issues and self (Tolmie 12-13; Cawsey 443-4), which outlines women's hellish experience of patriarchy as the underside of the spiritually redemptive Noachic voyage.

As in York and Towneley, so in Chester: the recalcitrance of Noah's wife could delay the salvation of her family (C3/195-6, 222-4),

since she refuses to board the ark without all her gossips (C3/200-8, 241-2), her female friends.^{xxvii} Strive as she may, she cannot save them from drowning: the Good Gossips are ultimately drowned in textual silence. The flood plays, Jane Tolmie argues, “have investments of various sorts in those who are left behind, and these investments are often filtered through the voice of Mrs. Noah” (11). In Chester, I would add, her voice – or rather its subduing – is complemented by the Good Gossips’.

The Good Gossips invite Noah’s wife to “rejoyse both harte and tonge” (C3/234) with strong “malnesaye”/sweet wine (C3/233) as usual: “lett us drinke or wee departe [*die*] / for *oftetymes wee have done soe*” (C3/229-30). Unsurprisingly, the Gossips should *sing*, according to the BL Add. MS 10305 version (dated 1592). The character’s twelve-line speech (C3/225-36) pictures a humanity forever inebriated, neglectful of God-related duties, and, in Deus’s generic terms, “sett fowle in sinne” (C3/4), in “mallice that doth now multiplie” (C3/14).

Do we watch here a (post-conviction) *performance*^{xxviii} of the “sinne” which “fill[s] full” the world (C3/135) – indeed, the only such instance in the Middle English flood plays? To ecclesiastical and secular patriarchy, drunkenness – whether subsumed under the sin of gluttony (and incriminated alongside the associated sin of lust), sloth or any other – is most reprehensible in women.^{xxix} Yet the Gossips’ is not mindless merry-making inebriation. Seeing the surging waters (C3/225-6), the Gossips seek company (C3/228) and solace to quench their all-too-human “fere of drowning” (C3/227) – and the figure of Chester’s *Harrowing*’s Mulier looms large as the sponsor of such wine-sprinkled companionship.

Or, rather, is the wife’s active resistance to Noah – her sin of the tongue – the ur-sin forever *performed* by humanity/womankind in Chester, York and Towneley, as I believe it is? Kathy Cawsey views Uxor’s lament as “an implicit criticism of an unmerciful God – an unorthodox, female commentary on the Flood story” (444). The woman’s verbal challenge to her husband is, under the circumstances, nothing short of blasphemy. Tolmie notes the “humanizing effect” which Mrs Noah’s camaraderie with her gossips has on the narrative; the woman’s concern with “the reality of loss of life” *punctures* “the abstract fictions” of the punitive context (Tolmie 14). Chester, however, dissolves the female

community of friends whose counter-hegemonic discourse has resisted God-sponsored patriarchy: “the [female] audience members are shown that their sympathy for the drowned women is wrong” and, moreover, symptomatic of “their own fallen natures” (Cawsey 444).

Fallen nature indeed. Noah’s wife is branded transgressive for *speaking*, let alone for having briefly challenged the discourse of divine/masculine righteousness. Speech is power (Bodden 8-9), whether as God’s creative fiat (Gen. 1:3ff.) or as the ruler’s power of life and death. Speech is also unreliable (Bodden 9-17), and language can generate confusion, as in the Babel Tower story (Gen. 11:1-9). The “elusive nature” of speech (Bodden 19) threatens speech uncontrollability and therefore transgressiveness, hence patriarchal obsessions with controlling – and eventually criminalising – speech, soon exclusively women’s (Bodden 21-30). Twelfth-century hamartiology devised a new category, the sins of the tongue (*pecatta linguae*),^{xxx} in response to the threat of heresy and blasphemy; the century’s “explosion of treatises on verbal behaviour” (Bodden 23) may appear either men-aimed or gender-neutral. By the fourteenth century, the laicised sins of the tongue were popularised and deemed to be universal, social estate notwithstanding (Mongan 29; Bodden 22). Women’s speech became a separate object of the moral and legal criminalisation of speech violations,^{xxxi} purportedly due to the “destabilizing national, social, and domestic effects” of women’s verbal disorder; it actually aimed “to control every conceivable aspect of women’s speech by deconstructing and fantasizing its powers, interrelationships, and mobility” (Bodden 29). Such control of speech testifies to patriarchal fears of a female community whose subaltern discourse could disrupt the male (and clerical) prerogative of authoritative, agentive speech (Cawsey 441-3).

St Paul had proscribed female religious teaching and generally authoritative speaking (1 Tim. 2:12-14). Nevertheless, the patriarchal silencing of women acquired a new edge when (male and female) individual interactive verbal behaviour was generalised, incriminated and then rendered gender-specific: women’s flaw/flow. Subsequently the newly en-gendered sin of the tongue was both punishable in civil courts and vilified in pastoral discourse. To signal out the nefariousness of

gossip, pastoral discourse entrusted this sin of the tongue to a particular demon, Tutivillus, charged, ironically, to record both (women's) chattering in church during liturgy and the clergymen's faulty discursive performance thereof (Jennings 25-30).^{xxxii}

If Chester's Gossips' wine-drinking *performs* (post hoc) the sin punishable diluvially on a global scale, does the *female* collective character stand for sinful women *and* men? On the face of it, the Good Gossips might conceivably represent both women and men in their fallen state; yet, unlike men, women lacked any power of global representativeness, gender-wise, in the Christian and patriarchal polity. The character appears to be primarily the female scapegoat of a patriarchal world which, in an age when people hydrated themselves mostly on alcoholic beverages (Martin, “Role of Drinking” 98-112), criminalises as sinful women's wine-drinking (as well as enjoying themselves) in the company of other women.^{xxxiii} To adopt A. Lynn Martin's metaphor of inversion (“Role of Drinking” 103), such women were worshippers in a demonic church served by the tavern-keeper qua anti-priest – Chester's Mulier in the *Harrowing of Hell*. Chester's Gossips are briefly given a voice, though (dis)placed away from the ark of patriarchal righteousness, during the repeated endeavours by the male Noahs to persuade the nameless woman to climb aboard the ark.^{xxxiv} Marred by imputed inebriation, the Gossips' voice is muted through textual fiat – elided with God's punishment of sinners. Only by disbanding and silencing this ‘demonic’ female church could a self-styled righteous patriarchy affirm and consolidate its supremacy within and without the ark/church.

A Provisional Conclusion

We have seen that most Middle English Doomsday plays portray guilt not as primarily an individual's, but as earmarking one's social estate and/or one's gender. In the Chester *Last Judgement*, not only does the souls' otherworldly fate retrace their this-worldly social transgressiveness, but it reinforces Christianity's patriarchal stakes in disempowering women, yet regarding them as active – and actively guilty – with respect to private,

and necessarily heterosexual, interactions. By contrast, Chester's *Harrowing of Hell* and *Noah's Flood* vent fears of women's presence and active involvement in the would-be public sphere, hence the recrimination against Mulier, the self-styled "gentle gossippe," and against the Good Gossips.

Whilst associations of sins are rampant in medieval exempla, once gossip was en-gendered as a major sin of the tongue, it would cluster with drunkenness and debauchery under the nefarious patronage of the brewster/tapster. Drunkenness is the only sin ever performed in a Middle English flood play – in Chester's *Noah's Flood* – by the collective figure of the Good Gossips, rightly aghast at the imminent deluge, and sponsored by the generic figure of Mulier, the only human not spared eternal punishment before Doomsday – in Chester's *Harrowing of Hell*. In the Bible, postdiluvial developments indicate a less than righteous Noah, whose drunkenness causes family tensions and puts a curse on his son Ham (Gen. 9:20-27). However, neither the Ham curse (Gen. 9:25-27) nor its context ever inspired a play showing Noah's drunken conduct, let alone his irrational punishment of Ham to displace guilt from self to other.^{xxxv} Chester's two queens awaiting final doom or reprieve for their lust and pride, in the *Last Judgement*, enjoy a cavalier treatment thanks to their high rank: sinful though they may be, they do not belong with the gossips; nor does the script gossip about *wine*-driven sexual enticements.

The women already confined (or confinable) to hell, Mulier and Regina Damnata, bewail their transgressions: they act as the puppets of patriarchy. Not so Noah's wife and her Good Gossips. Dispelling male apprehensions about women works, paradoxically, by featuring, in *Noah's Flood*, a resistant woman and a collective female character who attempt to speak truth to power in a male-authored script and through male cross-playing of female parts. As a devotional play within Chester's biblical framework, *Noah's Flood* walks a tightrope between the alpha and omega of patriarchally circumscribed righteousness (namely observance of rigid hierarchy and strict obedience), shaken by the demons of unruliness. Yet these demons are *licensed*, in this hegemonic game, to demonstrate the grievous fate of offenders. Furthermore, unlike in the carnivalesque games of reversal, in *Noah's Flood* such licensing is not a cat-and-mouse game

to prove who the master is. Rather, through their *backbiting* of women (for socially women cannot *legitimately* refute such libel), *Noah’s Flood* and the *Harrowing of Hell*, if less so the *Last Judgement*, participate – to take my cue from Susan E. Phillips – in the “gossiping discourse” whereby the clergy appropriated the denounced discourse to exhort against its deployment against the community by women.^{xxxvi} The plays voyage perilously through the waters of jangling to remonstrate with unauthorised speakers, the feared gossips.

In the three Chester plays studied, the portrayal of female characters indicates women’s dual deprivation of agency and respectability under patriarchy. As queens, they have to confess frivolity and lust – containable in the palace and additionally in hell. As commoners, they are shown prone to cheating, drunkenness, defiance and unruliness – containable by civic regulations, but securely only in hell. By the 1530s, Chester’s twenty-five plays spanned three performance days at Whitsuntide, according to the post-Reformation Banns (qtd. in Mills 116). Thus, on Monday female Cestrians learnt not to follow the example of *Noah’s Flood’s* gossips; on Tuesday not to transgress their ever-diminishing allotted place in the polity, or else share Mulier’s infernal fate for dishonesty; and on Wednesday not to indulge their fleshly appetites and vanity, wine-aided or not, lest they be taken by the devil, as Regina Damnata was. Newly inoculated Protestants still believed hell a fearfully real place. It was never deemed a Catholic legacy ‘embodied’ as a custom-made set on a wagon stage wheeled along the Chester streets to the five performance sites, under the surveillance of the clergy at the Abbey gates (the first station) and of the civic authorities at the Pentice (the second station). As to the plays’ all-male cast, the players could, on other occasions, be themselves spectators of the Cestrian politics of containing women’s public agency, visibility and dignity. The cross-fertilisation of pulpit, common law and theatre in the period augured women’s ill fortunes on- as offstage.

Notes:

ⁱ McIntosh (117, n. 52, fig. 2) has documented England’s increased concern with policing sexuality and rowdy establishments such as the alehouse since the mid-

fifteenth century; by the end of the century alehouse-related food, drink and linguistic excesses constituted a major type of economic offence – as “waste and loss of economic substance” – presented to the leet courts (McIntosh 101). On the association of alehouses with drunkenness and illicit sexual activity before and after 1500, see also Martin (*Alcohol, Sex, and Gender* 58-78), Hanawalt (107-10) and Bodden (31).

ⁱⁱ These dates are conjectured by Clopper (183).

ⁱⁱⁱ The Banns and the “List of Companies and Their Pageants” suggest that the Chester cycle was continually in revision (Clopper n. 35), although the content of the plays did not materially change until the reign of Edward VI.

Only the compilation of the extant eight manuscripts lagged behind, for the earliest is dated 1591 (MS 91108 in Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California) and the latest 1607 (BL Harley MS 2124, the last of the five quasi-complete versions). As such, the five cyclic manuscripts postdate the final complete performance of the Chester plays in 1575.

^{iv} Violence is not only engendered in the lopsided representation of subject positions (i.e., violence of representation), but is specifically created along gender lines, *en-gendered*, in Teresa de Lauretis’s terms (240).

^v In the manuscript, the scripts are identified as *Pagina vicessima quarta et omnium postrema: de iudicio extremo*, *Pagina decima septima de descensu Christi ad inferos* and *Pagina tertia de deluvio Noe*, respectively. Chester text references are to Lumiansky and Mills’s edition, *The Chester Mystery Cycle*. Quotations from the four Middle English cycle plays identify the collection by abbreviation, followed by the play’s number and the line range.

^{vi} The manuscript speech-headings unavoidably “freeze” the characters in a seemingly predetermined spiritual condition. Numerical and social asymmetries offset the symmetrical stock-in-trade names for and dance-of-death pairing of the dead (with the further gender pairing, Rex Salvatus/Damnatus and Regina Salvata/Damnata).

^{vii} Only the saved king and queen mention alms-giving (C24/135, 154); their damned counterparts failed to perform charitable acts (C24/541–46).

^{viii} The Merchant also dabbled in falsehood (C24/329-48).

^{ix} Lust (*luxuria*), gluttony (*gula*), greed (*avaritia*), envy (*invidia*), anger (*ira*), sloth or rather apathy (*acedia*) and pride (*superbia*).

^x See Daniel-Hughes (esp. 72-82) on the association between women’s flesh and shame.

^{xi} All biblical references are to *Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatam versionem*, ed. B. Fischer et al.

^{xii} Sexuality has always been a vexing issue in Christianity, which views the Adamic sin as perpetuated sexually. St Paul, a dedicated celibate, accepted sex acts but grudgingly, couching them in terms of spousal procreation duty which wards off demonic excess (1 Cor. 7:1-11). The early church fathers forged a hierarchy of sexual life, with virginity and/or celibacy extolled as supreme virtue. Religious constructs of sexuality heaped pre- and non-marital sex with opprobrium; the perpetrators courted hellfire (Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval*

Europe; Bullough and Brundage; Rist 374-6). Unlike the church, the laity tended to be earthy: not a deadly sin, premarital sex was deemed acceptable, if exclusively in men’s case; women’s sex life, however, was just as strictly policed by the lay society as by the church (Karras, “Two Models” 123-38).

^{xiii} Text references are to Beadle’s edition, *The York Plays*.

^{xiv} Text references are to England and Pollard’s edition, *The Towneley Plays*.

^{xv} I address the sins of the tongue in a subsequent section.

^{xvi} Text references are to Sugano’s edition, *The N-Town Plays*.

^{xvii} Sugano, in *The N-Town Plays* (NT42/118n), translates “*salte sewe*” by dual recourse to editor Steven Spector’s gloss as “lecherous sowe” and the *Middle English Dictionary*’s explanation of “*salte*” as “filthy.”

^{xviii} The first sense of “shrew” (rascal, villain), attested in early thirteenth-century texts, became proverbial; by 1259 the common noun was also used as a *male* surname or nickname; the association with the devil likely appeared around 1300 and evolved to describe demonically evil persons, whether women – proverbially, as in *Five Puzzles* (c. 1475): “Take iij schrewys: A waspe, A wesill, A woman” – or men, e.g. Pilate (*MED*, s.v. “shreue”).

^{xix} Most *Last Judgement* speeches stress the *continuity* of pre- and post-Doomsday *hell* torment (C24/175-80, 187, 191-6; 212, 219-20, 231-4; 241-2; 280; 331-2, 337-40, 355). However, the Damned Judge indicates that he *expects* post-Doomsday damnation (C24/299-300, 309-12, 323-4).

^{xx} *Gentle* (C17/286) might suggest Mulier’s association with the genteel ladies. Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* describes Harry Bailly’s Tabard Inn (where the pilgrims gather) as a “gentyle tavern” rather than a sordid one (Hanawalt 104).

^{xxi} Such self-exaltation in the civic theatre recalls the church’s self-exaltation in the creeds through the grammatical formula “I believe in God ... *and* in the Church.”

^{xxii} On the medieval discourse of misogyny as a rhetorical ruse whereby highly educated men elided “woman” – the ontologically secondary creature (Gen. 2:7, 18-23) – with artifice and rhetoric, hence with deception, see Bloch (9-18).

^{xxiii} See also Normington (30, 119-20).

^{xxiv} Towneley’s Noah explicitly identifies his wife with Eve as “begynnar of blunder” (T3/587). Critics traditionally interpret Mrs Noah’s unruliness as symptomatic of the postlapsarian condition; see Kolve (150) and, for a critique of this abiding conservative position, Tolmie (30-1).

^{xxv} Speech-headings in both Chester and the other Middle English flood plays identify the nameless woman as merely Uxor, i.e., wife, and modern criticism often names her – in nineteenth-century proprietary terms – Mrs Noah.

^{xxvi} Shem and Ham volunteer to fetch their mother aboard the ark, and Shem coerces her thereto (C3/211-12, 221, 243-4, respectively).

^{xxvii} In York, Noah’s wife decides to rescue her “*commodrys*” and “*cosynes*” (Y9/143), her intimate friends and kin; after the flood she laments their loss (Y9/269-70). The Middle English *gossippe* (or *god-sibbe*) names one’s godparent (*MED*, s.v. “god-sib(be)”). See Phillips (6-8 and chap. 1) on the transformation of *gossip* from pastoral office (with its associated “spiritual responsibility”) to trivial

speech (*jangling*), recriminated by ecclesiastical and civil authorities alike as “unproductive speech with an unlimited capacity for sin,” including for “contaminating the pastoral discourse levied against it” (Phillips 7).

^{xxviii} I apply Judith Butler’s notion of *performance* (xiv-xv, 30-3, 163-80) to offset the traditional view of an *essence* of sinful identity and aligned with recent revaluations of the deadly sins.

^{xxix} In the *Speculum vitae*, a pastoral poem widely disseminated in the fourteenth and especially fifteenth centuries, gluttony belongs with the sins of the tongue (Mongan 29-31). The Latin text was translated into Middle English in the fifteenth century as *A Myroure to Lewde Men and Wymmen* and survives in four fifteenth-century manuscripts (Mongan n13).

^{xxx} Blasphemy – which includes swearing by God’s body parts – is one such sin. However, a comprehensive category within *pecatta linguae* is that of gossip – “ydel talke” (*ociosa verba*) or “jangling” – comprised of “excessive chatter, impudent and unproductive speech, tale-telling, news, disturbing reports, bawdy jokes, lies, and scorning one’s neighbor” (Phillips 6).

^{xxxi} The early sixteenth-century peak of prosecutions for crimes already defined as exclusively female – scolding, witchcraft and whoring – shows punishments, according to Lynda Boose, “much more frequently targeted at suppressing women’s speech” than “at controlling their sexual transgressions” (qtd. in Bodden 27). Unsurprisingly, the century witnessed “an intensification of treatises, popular literature, and court cases targeting women’s speech and women’s tongues” (Bodden 27).

^{xxxii} On the “workings of power and discourse” in the monastic and feminine strands of the Tutivillus tale, with the effeminisation of the audience to establish the authority of the male speaker, see Cawsey (436-8). On the language deployed in fifteenth-century English leet courts to condemn verbal misconduct, symptomatic of the criminalisation of female (or feminised) linguistic behaviour regarded as disruptive of patriarchal order, see McIntosh (88-9).

^{xxxiii} See Martin (“Role of Drinking” 99-101) on late medieval cases of women’s disorderly drinking behaviour as a male construct shared by English and continental misogynistic writings. In so far as drinking behaviour and drunken comportment are socially mediated and learnt, the late medieval imaginary of drunken women’s imitation of drunken men’s self-assertive behaviour instituted a breach in societal patterns of gendered hierarchical subordination and taught women resistance (“Role of Drinking” 108). Chester pictures a case of female bonding which defies male views (C3/235-6) and thus challenges the patriarchal order.

^{xxxiv} The script does not specify the onstage location of the Good Gossips. If positioned next to Mrs Noah (and conceivably away from the ark), her wine-drinking female friends form with her a group that the sons have to disband by removing their mother, in a physical tug-of-war with spiritual connotations which mystify the social stakes.

^{xxxv} Not drama but painting shows, however infrequently, Noah’s drunkenness, if moralised typologically as anticipating Christ’s self-sacrifice. Such are

Michelangelo's fresco on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, Vatican, and Paolo Uccello's *Sacrifice and Drunkenness of Noah*, from the *Stories of Noah* series in the Green Cloisters of Santa Maria Novella, Florence.

^{xxxvi} Phillips (2-63 and passim) argues that to regard gossip as exclusively women's – broadly the subalterns' – and as inherently a mode of resistance replicates the Latin Church's attempts to obscure the pastoral and penitential appropriation of this powerful discourse as a tool for teaching *against* gossip.

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