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James H. Forse  
*Bowling Green State University, Emeritus*

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**Love and Marriage on the Medieval English Stage:  
Using the English Cycle Plays as Sources for Social History**

*James H. Forse*

*Bowling Green State University, Emeritus*

*Much scholarship concerning the concept of “companionate” marriage traces its origins to the early modern period as clergymen, especially Protestant ones, began to publish “guides” to the relationships and respective duties of husbands and wives in the 1500s and 1600s. Studies of marriage in the Middle ages concentrate on marriage among the nobility, since there is more documentary evidence about the medieval elites. Examinations of sermons reveal that the Church, especially after the twelfth century, stressed the sanctity of marriage as an institution created by God and blessed by Christ at the marriage at Cana, but sermons say little about the day-by-day relationship of husband and wife. Yet there are clues in the play scripts of the English cycle plays that some notion of marriage as a “companionate” relationship may have existed among the common classes during the Middle Ages.*

Much scholarship about concepts of “companionate” marriage traces the origins of those concepts to the early modern period, when clergymen, especially Protestant ones, began to publish “guides” to the respective duties of husbands and wives.<sup>1</sup> Printing records demonstrate the interests and concerns of the Commons in early modern England about the nature of marriage. Several “conduct books,” as we now call them, discussed, argued, and moralized about the marital bond and the respective roles and duties of husbands and wives towards one another. Some were reprinted several times, suggesting a wide circulation. Translations of Erasmus’ *Encomium matrimonii* were printed six times between 1525 and 1585, eight printings of Miles Coverdale’s translation of Heinrich Bullinger’s *The Christen state of Matrimonye* appeared between 1541 and 1575,

1 Steven Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled. Family Life in Reformation Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1983), 31-49; Lyndal Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality, and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (London: Routledge, 1994), 79-98; Carter Linberg, *Love: A Brief History through Western Christianity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 125; Rosemary O’Day, *The Family and Family Relationships 1500-1900* (New York: St. Martin, 1994), 41-5; Alan Macfarlane, *Marriage and Love in England. Modes of Reproduction 1300-1840* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 150-4, 157-9, 175-84.

and Edmund Tilney's *Flower of Friendship* was printed seven times between 1568 and 1587.<sup>2</sup> It is this sort of evidence that leads many scholars to assume that the notion of a loving and companionate marriage only began to become fixed in the popular mind-set in the early modern era.

However, not much has been written about concepts of marriage among the Commons in the Middle Ages. Until recently, studies of medieval marriage centered on marriage among the elite, especially its contractual nature, since there is more documentary evidence about elites. Even that evidence is sparse before the 1500s. Christopher Brooke notes that most family records before then relate only to royalty and the nobility, or prosperous urban merchants. For instance, we only know the birth date (31 May 1443) of Lady Margaret Beaufort (1443-1509), mother to King Henry VII, by a chance mention of her birth in Margaret's Book of Hours. Details concerning the life of St. Catherine of Sienna growing up in a prosperous family are recorded in her biography written by her confessor Raymond of Capua, but the main emphasis of the biography is Catherine's saintliness. There is little detail about the

2 To list several of these conduct books: Desiderius Erasmus, *A right frutefull epistle, deuysed by the moste excellent clerke Erasmns [sic] in laude and prayse of matrimony, translated in to Englyshe, by Richard Tauermour* (London: Robert Redman, 1525, and reproduced in Thomas Wilson's *The arte of rhetorique* in 1553, 1560, 1562, 1584, 1585); Heinrich Bullinger, *The Christen state of Matrimonye*, tr. Miles Coverdale in 1541, 1542 (twice), 1543 (or 1546), 1548, 1552 (with five variants), 1575; Edmund Tilney (1568 in three printings, reprinted in 1571, 1577, 1587), *A Briefe and Pleasant Discourse of Duties in Mariage, Called the Flower of Friendship*, ed. Valerie Wayne (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1992); Stefano Guazzo, *The euile conuersation of M. Steuen Buazzo* (London: Thomas East, 1586); Henrie Smith, *A Preparatiue to Mariage* (London: by Thomas Orwin for Thomas Man, 1591, printed thrice more in that year); John Dod and Richard Cleaver, *A godlie forme of householde gouernment* (London: Thomas Creede, 1598, reprinted again that year by Felix Kingston, and reprinted 1600 and 1612); William Whately (1617), *A Bride-Bush: or, A Wedding Sermon* (Amsterdam: Theatrum Orbis Terrarum: W. J. Johnson, 1975, rpt. 1617 ed. which was reprinted in 1619 and 1623); William Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties* (Amsterdam: Theatrum Orbis Terrarum: W. J. Johnson, 1976, rpt. 1622 ed. which was reprinted twice in 1627, and again in 1634). We will refer largely to Gouge in this essay because his treatise incorporates most of the thoughts expressed in earlier works, and is the most detailed and specific. For Bullinger's influence see Carrie Euler, "Heinrich Bullinger, Marriage, and the English Reformation: *The Christen state of Matrimonye in England, 1540-53*," *Sixteenth Century Journal*, XXXIV (2003), 367-73.

relationship between her father and mother.<sup>3</sup> So, as Beatrice Gottlieb puts it, “For historians the relationship between husband and wife is a mystery. . . .”<sup>4</sup> Medieval legal texts tend to treat marriage in terms akin to a business contract, and social historians note that aristocratic marriages often were means by which one or more families enriched themselves. Some scholars attribute much the same motives and attitudes towards marriage to the common classes as well. Studies of dowry contracts drawn up by non-noble families may seem to confirm that assessment, but, of course, by their very nature these written contracts also mostly pertain to the wealthiest classes.<sup>5</sup>

To determine medieval notions of love and marriage, some scholars turn to literary sources such as the *Roman de la Rose* and Chaucer’s works, but these sources tend to emphasize romantic love, and/or courtly love—which, according to Andreas Capellanus’ *The Art of Courtly Love*, posited that “love can have no place between husband and wife”<sup>6</sup>—or they focus on changes in marital law resulting from the growth of commercial wealth during the late medieval period.<sup>7</sup> Again the focus tends towards love and marriage among the elite, the intended audience of the authors.

Ecclesiastical sources offer glimpses into what the clergy presented to the Commons as underpinnings of marriage. Medieval sermons and diocesan statutes, especially after the 1100s, stress

3 Christopher N. Brooke, *The Medieval Idea of Marriage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 11-15, 23, 34-6; Georges Duby, *Medieval Marriage: Two Models from Twelfth-century France*, tr. Elborg Forster (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978), passim.

4 Beatrice Gottlieb, *The Family in the Western World from the Black Death to the Industrial Age* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993), 89.

5 Kathryn Jacobs, *Marriage Contracts from Chaucer to the Renaissance Drama* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), 4; Brooke, 15; Denis de Rougement, *Love in the Western World*, tr. Montgomery Belgion (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983), 33-4; Marilyn Yalom, *A History of the Wife* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 47; Linberg, 94.

6 Linberg, 98.

7 Martha Howell, “The Properties of Marriage in Late Medieval Europe: Commercial Wealth and the Creation of Modern Marriage,” in *Love, Marriage, and Family Ties in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. Isabel Davis, Miriam Muller, and Sarah Rees Jones (Belgium: Brepols, 2003) 17; Helen Cooney, ed. *Writings on Love in the English Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), passim; Jacobs, passim.

marriage as an institution created by God, a sacrament blessed by Christ at the marriage at Cana. Much of the evidence in ecclesiastical sources centers around issues concerning what constituted legal marriage.<sup>8</sup> Canon law stresses the husband's superiority, but from the 1200s on, canonists granted a kind of equality between husband and wife concerning sexual rights and obligations. Canonists and Scholastics, like Richard of St. Victor and St. Thomas Aquinas, began to stress friendship, mutual affection, and companionship as essential components of marriage; therefore, canonists viewed sex within marriage as strengthening and maintaining marital bonds.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, much of this evidence has caused historians, as Rosemary O'Day puts it, "to treat prescriptive sources as though they were descriptive."<sup>10</sup>

There are, however, hints in the scripts for "Adam and Eve" and "Noah" within the English cycle plays (from York, Chester, Wakefield, and N-town) that some notion of marriage as a "companionate" relationship existed among the Commons during the late Middle Ages. Kathryn Jacobs asserts those scripts are: "the one species of literature most committed to the social relations of men and women . . . ."<sup>11</sup> Yet using play scripts as historical sources presents an interesting paradox when attempting to study the nature of marriage among commoners. Many historians are loath to use play scripts as source material, viewing them as "stereotypical" depictions meant for didactic and entertainment purposes. Nonetheless there is a

8 Rüdiger Schnell and Andrew Shields, "The Discourse on Marriage in the Middle Ages," *Speculum*, 73 (1998), 771-86. Schnell and Shields discuss the differences between discourse on women and discourse on marriage, noting that discourse on marriage stresses mutual responsibilities and faults between women and men as opposed to discourse on women, which generally presents a misogynistic picture of women. See also, for example, David d'Avray, *Medieval Marriage: Symbolism and Society* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), 66-73, and Brooke, 26, 130-42.

9 Brundage, James A. *Sex, Law and Marriage in the Middle Ages* (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 1993), 67-8, 71. The book collects several of his articles published between 1995-1991 dealing with canon law and its treatment of sexual norms and sexuality; also see Linberg, 110.

10 O'Day, 29.

11 Jacobs, 96.

paucity of other materials historians can consider “reliable,” primary sources. A few, extant, medieval conduct books, household manuals, poems, and peasant wills offer clues for what were considered the “proper” relationships and roles of husband and wife,<sup>12</sup> but these may not necessarily portray what may have been the day-by-day marital conditions under which commoners lived and worked. On the other hand, community-oriented, performance documents of medieval townsmen and villagers—such as the English cycle plays—may (as I hope to illustrate) be able at least to flesh-out a picture of medieval commoners’ perceptions about marriage.

William Tydeman<sup>13</sup> asserts the English cycle plays:

had to declare both openly and tacitly their affinities with the life of the market place, the backstreet, the farmyard, and the language, both verbal and visual, had to convince onlookers that the men and women of the Bible looked, and even more importantly, spoke as they did themselves.

Mervyn James maintains that those plays present a simultaneous reflection of the relationships between what he calls “the spiritual body,” meaning the connection between humankind and God, and “the social body,” meaning the connections between guilds and city.<sup>14</sup> If we expand this view to include not only the relationships presented between guild and city and humankind and God, but also the ordinary relationships among ordinary humans (as Tydeman maintains), we see that one primary human-to-human relationship as presented in the Adam and Eve and Noah plays is the relationship between husband and wife.

Plays in the vernacular dramatizing Biblical stories date back to at least the 1100s. Those, and the later cycle plays obviously were meant to present Biblical stories and characters in a form recognizable

<sup>12</sup> Joseph and Frances Gies, *Marriage and Family in the Middle Ages* (New York: Harper, 1987), passim.

<sup>13</sup> William Tydeman, “A Introduction to Medieval English Theatre,” *Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), 26-7.

<sup>14</sup> Mervyn James, *Society, Politics and Culture: Studies in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986) 11.

to audiences made up largely of commoners.<sup>15</sup> Except for Pharaoh and King Herod (integral to Exodus and the Nativity), there are no extant cycle plays dramatizing aristocrats and kings. The stories of David and Bathsheba, Ahab, Jezebel, and Elijah have been, in modern times, juicy plotlines for stage, cinema, and television, but in the English cycle plays characters in Old Testament stories are, for the most part, limited to the common classes. As evidenced in a proclamation from Chester in 1532, city authorities viewed the plays as important “for the augmentation & increased faith in our [Lord] Jesus Christ & to exhort the minds of the common people” and “also for the commonwealth & prosperity of this City.”<sup>16</sup>

J. W. Robinson notes that the authors of the York and Wakefield (or Towneley) cycles make frequent references or allusions to various occupations of audience members, seek to engage the feelings of audience members, and over all display sympathy and “interest in contemporary rural life.”<sup>17</sup> The provenances of the Chester and N-town manuscripts (as described below) make it difficult to ascribe their compositions to a single author, though antiquarians in the Tudor and Stuart eras averred that the Chester plays were devised sometime in the last quarter of the 1300s by Henry Frances, a monk from St. Werburgh’s Monastery.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, the similarities of characterization and dialogue in these scripts to those of York and Wakefield indicate the Chester scripts also were meant to appeal to an audience of common folk.

Since designed so that commoners could identify with their characters, what (if any) portrayal do the plays give of the “reality” of marriage among commoners in late medieval England? What conclusions (if any) about the perceived nature of marital relationships can be drawn from the portrayal of what was conceived

15 J. W. Robinson, *Studies in Fifteenth-century Stagecraft* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1991), 19; Glynne Wickham, *The Medieval Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), 62-5.

16 *Records of Early English Drama. Chester*, ed. Lawrence M. Clopper (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), 27.

17 Robinson, 17, 31, 53, 56-8.

18 *Records. Chester*, 28.

in the Middle Ages as the archetypal married couple, Adam and Eve, as these two are portrayed in the York, Chester, Wakefield (or Towneley), and N-town (or Coventry) cycles? Are Adam and Eve and Noah and Mrs. Noah, as portrayed in these plays, a reflection of how a “normal” late medieval couple may have functioned, or are they simply hackneyed and (at times) comedic depictions of love and marriage in the Middle Ages?

There is one extant manuscript of the York cycle, definitively dated to the second and third quarters of the 1400s. Dating the five extant manuscripts of the complete Chester cycle presents problems, but scholarly consensus suggests about 1519. The accepted dating of the single extant Wakefield manuscript is from the late 1400s to the very early 1500s, and consensus dates the extant N-town manuscript to the third quarter of the 1400s. However, scholars agree that scripts within all four sets of manuscripts show evidence of compilations and revisions from earlier forms, suggesting that all the scripts probably have origins as least as early as the late 1300s or early 1400s.<sup>19</sup> I believe the majority of the textual revisions reflected of shifts in the religious emphases or concerns of the church hierarchy, such as a desire by to purge them of what was considered superstition. Though I cannot assert depictions of medieval marriage in the York, Chester, Wakefield, and N-town texts are exactly the same from the mid-1300s to mid-1500s, I believe they do present the gist of what commoners believed about marriage throughout that time frame.

We should bear in mind the variations in type and quality of the extant manuscripts. An official copy of the York manuscript, probably compiled from performance scripts of individual plays at the orders of the city corporation, lends its text a degree of “certainty” that neither the Chester nor the Wakefield nor the N-town

19 R. T. Davies, ed., *The Corpus Christi Play of the English Middle Ages* (Towata, NJ: Rowan and Littlefield, 1972), 52-4, 58, 59; James H. Forse, “Pleasing the Queen but Preserving Our Past: Cheshire and Lincolnshire Attempt to Continue Their Cycle Plays and Satisfy Elizabeth’s Injunctions,” *Popular Culture Review*, 18 (2007), 103-08.

manuscripts possess.<sup>20</sup> There are eight extant Chester manuscripts, five containing full versions of the cycle. The five full versions probably were copied from a single, base text, creating “a synthetic text” or “a judicious conflation of the extant versions.”<sup>21</sup> We are not certain whether or not the Chester scripts were performance texts. The Wakefield manuscript also is referred to as the “Towneley” cycle, because it once belonged to the Towneley family of Lancashire, but most scholars agree its origins were in Wakefield, Yorkshire.<sup>22</sup> The manuscript contains 68 stage directions, which led Peter Meredith to assert, “this is a manuscript connected to performance.”<sup>23</sup>

Sir James Cotton acquired the N-town manuscript from one Robert Hegge of Durham in 1629. Though the provenance of the document is murky, scholars concur that it probably was compiled in the third quarter of the 1400s. Cotton’s librarian, Richard James, entitled the manuscript “*Ludus Coventriae*,” but modern scholars dismiss the connections to Coventry, noting its dialect is that of the East Midlands or Norfolk. The banns, included in the document, were written for bann criers to advertise the plays. These simply state performances will be “Sunday next in N. town.” Perhaps “N town” refers to Northampton or Norwich; perhaps “N” simply means “*nomen*,” a direction to the bann criers to insert the name of the appropriate town. In short, we cannot know whence the manuscript derives, nor where the cycle was performed. Yet the Latin stage directions suggest the original scripts were performance texts.<sup>24</sup>

The Adam and Eve plays in these cycles dramatize episodes from *Genesis* 1-3, describing humankind’s creation and fall from grace. In *Genesis* 1: 27, God creates Adam and Eve virtually simultaneously (“male and female created he them”). In *Genesis* 2:

20 Martin Stevens, *Four Middle English Mystery Cycles* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1987), 17; Davies, *Corpus Christi*, 52.

21 Ronald W. Vince, *Ancient and Medieval Theatre* (Westport: Greenwood, 1984), 143.

22 Davies, *Corpus Christi*, 53.

23 Peter Meredith, “The Towneley Cycle,” *Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), 141, 144.

24 Davies, *Corpus Christi*, 54-8.

15-25, God first creates Adam, places him in the Garden of Eden, and warns Adam, before the creation of Eve, not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. Variations in the dramatizations of the Adam and Eve story among the four cycles most likely reflect individual emphases that clerical authors drew from the several gospel harmonies and exegetical commentaries available to the medieval clergy.<sup>25</sup>

Each cycle presents the story in different format. In the York manuscript the story is spread out over four short plays (“The Creation of Adam,” “Adam and Eve in Eden,” “The Fall of Man,” and “The Expulsion from Eden”). The Chester, Wakefield, and N-town cycles incorporate the Adam and Eve story within a single, longer play. In the Chester cycle Adam and Eve appear in the second play, depicting their creation through the account of the murder of their son Abel by his brother Cain. In the Wakefield and N-town cycles the story of Adam and Eve is presented as a part of the first play, labeled “The Creation,” and a second play portrays the murder of Abel by his brother Cain.

The York play follows *Genesis* 1:27—the simultaneous creation of Adam and Eve—and expands on the Biblical account. In the York text God tells Adam to take Eve as his wife; Adam and Eve praise God and ask him what they should do; and God then delivers the couple into the Garden of Eden and grants Adam lordship over the Earth. God then warns Adam and Eve together not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge. Adam replies: “Alas lorde, that we shudd do so yll, / Thy blyssed bydding we shall fulfill.” Eve reiterates Adam’s reply, and God again warns Adam about the Tree of Knowledge, specifically mentioning Eve’s name.<sup>26</sup>

*Genesis* 2: 15-25 is dramatized in the Chester text. God breathes life into Adam, transports him to the Garden of Eden, and prohibits him from eating of the Tree of Knowledge. God then lays Adam down, puts him to sleep, and removes his rib to create Eve.<sup>27</sup>

25 Davies, *Corpus Christi*, 29.

26 Richard Beadle, ed. *The York Plays* (London: Edward Arnold, 1982), IV.

27 David Mills, ed., *The Chester Mystery Cycle* (East Lansing: Colleagues Press, 1992), 26-31.

The N-town play conflates *Revelations* 12:7-9 and *Genesis* 1 and *Genesis* 2. Describing Adam and Eve's creation, God proclaims:

The sixth day my work I do  
 And make thee, man, Adam by name:  
 In earthly paradise withouten woe  
 I grant thee bidding less thou do blame.  
 Flesh of thy flesh and bone of thy bone,  
 Adam, here is thy wife and make.

Eve, though created from Adam's rib (*Genesis* 2), is created immediately after Adam (*Genesis* 1), and both are then transported to Eden: "Now come forth, Adam, to paradise." It is somewhat unclear if both Adam and Eve are warned of the forbidden fruit. God says, "Eat not this fruit nor me displease, / For then thou diest—thou scapest not." The use of the singular "thou" might suggest God is speaking to Adam alone, but Eve later tells God: "We may both be blithe and glad / Our Lordes commandment to fulfil." Those lines, and Adam's thanks to God that "All this weal is given to me / And to my wife that on me laugh," indicates that God bestowed possession of the Garden of Eden jointly on him he and Eve.<sup>28</sup>

Finally, in the Wakefield cycle, immediately after the fall of Lucifer (like the N-town script a conflation of *Revelations* 12:7-9 with *Genesis*), God creates Adam, then Eve. Adam and Eve stand and admire the world around them and *each other*, and then are led by an angel to the Garden of Eden<sup>29</sup> This stage direction ("Adam and Eve standing admire each other") is the fullest indication in any of the manuscripts that Adam and Eve feel affection and admiration for one another. Perhaps we may read the scene as clearly reflecting late medieval motions that marriages should be built upon an affectionate and companionate relationship. According to Joseph and Frances Gies, though sparse in number: "Peasant wills testify to the affectionate regard of husbands for their wives."<sup>30</sup>

28 Davies, *Corpus Christi*, 76-8.

29 Martial Rose, ed., *Wakefield Mystery Plays* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1962), 64-5.

30 Gies, 246.

As for the temptation of Eve, *Genesis* 3:6 gives no literal statement that Eve was the “weaker vessel,” or that she was singled out by the serpent because of that, or even that she was separated from Adam at the time of the temptation. It simply states:

And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave unto her husband *with her* [italics mine]; and he did eat.

All the cycle plays, however, present Eve *as alone* when tempted by the serpent, and all have variations in that part of the story.

In the York and Wakefield, and probably the N-town plays, Eve is present when the Lord forbids eating of the Tree of Knowledge. Rosemary Woolf points out: “in Chester Satan in his opening monologue explains his decision to approach Eve,” and Eve’s sin “is reduced to sheer obstinate perversity.”<sup>31</sup> But also in the Chester version Eve is created *after* God’s warning to Adam, and Adam never tells her of the forbidden fruit.<sup>32</sup> The York text is similar to Chester’s in that the serpent notices: “he has made him a mate, / and harder to her wol me hye / That redy way.”<sup>33</sup> However, unlike the Chester text, where Eve immediately succumbs to the serpent’s blandishments, York’s Eve resists, giving in only when he upbraids her for not trusting him.

The Wakefield and N-town texts expand on Eve’s resistance, and reiterate a theme of mutual affection between husband and wife. Both scripts portray Eve alone when meeting the serpent. Wakefield’s Adam tells Eve to stay while he “goes and visits far and near to see what trees have been planted.” Eve replies, “Here gladly sir will I remain.”<sup>34</sup> N-town’s script suggests Eve leaves Adam alone: “In this garden I will go see / All the flowers of fair beauty.”

31 Rosemary Woolf, *The English Mystery Play* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 123.

32 Mills, *Chester Cycle*, 30-31.

33 Beadle, *York Plays*, 15-16.

34 Rose, *Wakefield Mystery*, 66.

Both scripts suggest the two have joint husbandry over Eden. Only in the Wakefield manuscript does Adam warn Eve not to look on the Tree, and she promises not to go near it. Here we see another instance of affection and mutual concern between Adam and Eve. The Wakefield manuscript clearly reflects marital ideals professed by late medieval clergy as expressed in *Corinthians* 7:3 “Let the husband render unto the wife due benevolence: and likewise also the wife unto the husband.”

Unlike the Chester and York cycles, the serpent of the Wakefield and N-town plays makes no speech in which it chooses to tempt Eve because she is the “weaker helpmate.” The serpent tells Eve to eat of the forbidden fruit and she and Adam will be worshipped. In both plays Eve refuses to eat because of fears of losing “our lordship,”<sup>35</sup> meaning the lordship that she and Adam *jointly* hold over the Garden—another indication of a “companionate” marriage, a partnership. Both scripts contain extended dialogue consisting of the serpent’s wheedling and Eve’s refusals until eventually she does eat the forbidden fruit.

*Genesis* 3:6 also gives no indication that Eve tricks or tempts Adam into eating the forbidden fruit, nor that the couple were separated when the forbidden fruit was picked from the tree. To reprise a part of that text: “she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave unto her husband with her.” The authors of the cycles, however, add the implication that Eve was alone when tempted by the serpent, and then tempted or tricked Adam to eat, drawing upon a time-honored scriptural interpretation dating back to St. Augustine.<sup>36</sup> In the York and Chester plays Adam continues, through the expulsion from Eden, to blame Eve for their misery. In the Chester version he even declares that his wife and the devil are like brother and sister.<sup>37</sup>

In the York version as the two are being expelled from the

35 Rose, *Wakefield Mystery*, 67-8; Davies, *Corpus Christi*, 78.

36 Woolf, 116.

37 Mills, *Chester Cycle*, 38.

garden, while Eve admits her guilt, she reproaches Adam for *not giving her the guidance* to avoid her sin.<sup>38</sup> Here the text echoes a staple of sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century conduct books that hold husbands responsible for their wives' education.<sup>39</sup>

The Wakefield manuscript portrays Adam coming upon Eve as she is eating the forbidden fruit, and reproaching her. When coaxed by Eve to eat, he refuses once, and after eating proclaims: "Alas! What have I done for shame! /Ill counsel came from thee! / Ah Eve, thou art to blame."<sup>40</sup> Unlike the Adams of Chester and York, Wakefield's Adam recognizes he has sinned before the couple are confronted by God.

*Adam:* This work, Eve, thou has wrought,  
and made this bad bargain.

*Eve:* Nay Adam, chide me naught.

*Adam:* Alas, dear Eve, whom then?<sup>41</sup>

Notice, even in reproach in the Wakefield text Adam calls his wife "dear Eve." And when Eve blames the serpent, Adam acknowledges that his own pride was his undoing, taking his sin upon himself.

The N-town manuscript depicts a similar episode, with lines that suggest Eve was herself duped into thinking the serpent was a good angel. When offering Adam the fruit, she tells him a "fair angel" told her "To eat that apple take never no dread." When both realize their sin she calls the serpent a "false angel," and when explaining her actions to God she admits she followed the bidding of "A worm with an angeles face."<sup>42</sup> Like the Wakefield version, Adam and Eve recognize and acknowledge their sin before God appears before them.

38 Beadle, *York Plays*, 15-16.

39 William Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties* (Amsterdam: Theatrum Orbis Terrarum, 1976, rpt. London: John Haviland for William Bladen, 1622), 369.

40 Rose, *Wakefield Mystery*, 70.

41 Rose, *Wakefield Mystery*, 70.

42 Davies, *Corpus Christi*, 80-2.

Yet, while it is only in the Wakefield and N-town manuscripts that Adam admits equal guilt before God's appearance, ultimately in the Chester and York plays Adam does admit that his guilt is equal to Eve's—that *theirs is a joint transgression*. In the York script Adam's admission of equal guilt is made during the expulsion from Eden. In the Chester version it comes later when Cain visits his parents after he has killed his brother Abel. Adam finally accepts blame for his sin and exclaims: "no more joy to me is led [given], save only Eve my wife."<sup>43</sup> It may be an afterthought, but we should note that Adam is saying that "Eve my wife" is a "joy to me."

The story of Adam and Eve as presented in these cycle plays may, in fact, reveal something about the attitudes of the Commons as well as the teaching of the Bible through plays. Social historians suggest that the High Middle Ages was a period of transition for the families of commoners. Even before the Tudor religious reformations, notions about marriage in late medieval England were giving greater emphasis to its social and spiritual status. Given the earlier concerns of the late fourteenth century with involving the laity more in matters of liturgy and spirituality, and the later concerns in the sixteenth century of clergymen with definitions of marital relationships, it may be that the cycle plays are reflecting these issues, and at the same time presenting a window on the commoners' perspectives about the nature of marriage for a time from which we have precious few sources.

One thing seems clear, whether we view the more antagonistic version of Adam's and Eve's relationship as presented in the Chester and York manuscripts, or the more loving and companionate one presented in the Wakefield and N-town texts, all four versions still are stressing the importance of the marital relationship and its nature as a mutual (if slightly unequal) partnership. For instance, in the N-town text Adam seems to accept equal blame for their sin, and Eve laments: "Alas! That ever *we* (my emphasis) wrought this sin."<sup>44</sup>

43 Mills, *Chester Cycle*, 47-8.

44 Davies, *Corpus Christi*, 86.

In all four texts Adam and Eve, regardless of blame or consent, are responsible not only to God, but to each other, or as *Genesis* 2:24 proclaims: “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.”

The Noah plays in the four cycles also suggest the Commons believed that the marital relationship is a partnership. Just as Eve reproaches Adam for *not giving her the guidance* to avoid her sin, in the Noah plays from the York and Wakefield cycles, Mrs. Noah ascribes her resistance to entering the Ark to the same rationale. Neither God nor Noah revealed to Mrs. Noah God’s instructions to build an ark, and His intentions to flood the whole earth. So Mrs. Noah complains to her husband that he has left her alone for long periods of time, neglected to provide for the family, never told her of his doings, never included her in his plans, never told her the flood would cover the earth.<sup>45</sup> Given that situation, it would seem perfectly natural to audiences in York that Mrs. Noah believes Noah has lost his mind when he warns her that the earth will be flooded: “Now, Noah, in faith thou fons full fast [you are acting extremely foolishly].”<sup>46</sup> A few lines later she states: “Thou art near wood, I am aghast [you are mad, I fear].” After Noah and his sons have dragged her onto the ark, she complains:

Noah, thou might haue let me wit [know].  
Early and late thou went thereout,  
And ay at home thou let me sit<sup>47</sup>

A few lines later she insists he never sought her thoughts: “Thou should have wit [found out] my will, / If I would assent theretill,” and goes on to say that this is the first time she was told of all this, and that she should have been consulted on a matter so important to their survival:

45 Beadle, *York Plays*, 84-5.

46 *York Mystery Plays. A Selection in Modern Spelling*, eds. Richard Beadle and Pamela A. King (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999), 24-5.

47 *York. Modern Spelling*, 25.

Now at first I find and feel  
 Where thou hast to the forest sought,  
 Thou should have told me for our sele [well-being]  
 When we were to such bargain brought.<sup>48</sup>

She then laments that while her immediate family will escape the flood, her friends and cousins “Are overflowed with flood.”<sup>49</sup>

Like York’s Mrs. Noah, Wakefield’s Mrs. Noah also complains she has never been informed of Noah’s activities nor the reasons behind those activities:

Tell me, on your life, where thus long could thou be?  
 To death may we drive, because of thee, Alack.  
 When work weary we sink,  
 Thou dost what thou think,<sup>50</sup>

She doubts the immediacy of Noah’s warnings because, she says:

For thou art always depressed, be it false or true . . .  
 All I hear is thy crow,  
 From even till morrow,  
 Screeching ever of sorrow<sup>51</sup>

Thus, when it comes time to board the ark, Mrs. Noah insists on remaining behind to continue her spinning, seeming to doubt all the signs that a great rain is coming.<sup>52</sup> When Noah attempts to force her onto the ship, a comic brawl breaks out between them, in which the dialogue indicates that Mrs. Noah gains the upper hand:

**Wife:** Out, alas, I am overthrown! Out upon thee man’s wonder!

**Noah:** See how she can groan, and I lie under:<sup>53</sup>

48 York. *Modern Spelling*, 26.

49 York. *Modern Spelling*, 26-7.

50 Rose, *Wakefield Mystery*, 94.

51 Rose, *Wakefield Mystery*, 95.

52 Jane Tolmie, “Mrs Noah and Didactic Abuses,” *Early Theatre*, 5 (2002), 11.

53 Rose, *Wakefield Mystery*, 100-01.

At the fight's conclusion, Mrs. Noah agrees to end their strife and enters the ark of her own volition.<sup>54</sup>

Chester's Mrs. Noah, along with her sons and daughters-in-law, participate in building the ark and gathering pairs of animals, but as in the York and Wakefield plays, Chester's Mrs. Noah is not privy to God's commandments. Noah, it seems, makes little effort to convince her of the impending doom, as revealed in Mrs. Noah's lines when bidden to enter the ark: "By Christ, no or I see more need, / though thou stand all day and stare." Later, in a perfectly understandable human concern, she refuses to get into the ark if her friends ("gossips") are left behind to drown. Her refusal sets up comic stage action; Noah's and his sons' spoken lines indicate that over her protests Mrs. Noah is dragged forcibly into the ship.<sup>55</sup>

All three plays present a Mrs. Noah who, uninformed by her husband about the impending world-flood, refuses to embark (figuratively and literally) on what she perceives to be a foolish action. All three plays resolve Mrs. Noah's reluctance to enter the ark with comic violence. Perhaps there are darker meanings behind the seeming clownish humor; perhaps the episodes are meant to demonstrate, and warn against, female rebellion.<sup>56</sup> Yet, whether taken as mere slapstick humor or as examples of women's lack of meaningful voice in a patriarchal society, it is clear that in all three plays Mrs. Noah was scripted "to convince onlookers that the men and women of the Bible looked, and even more importantly, spoke as they did themselves."<sup>57</sup> And it is clear that the three different Mrs. Noahs represent "wives [excluded] from the inner lives of

54 Rose, *Wakefield Mystery*, 101-02.

55 Mills, *Chester Cycle*, 52-7.

56 Tomlie, 11-31.

57 Tydeman, 26-7.

husbands,”<sup>58</sup> and believe that as spouses they should be treated as near-equals, informed of their husbands’ activities and included in their husbands’ plans and decisions—in other words treated as “yokemates” and companions, not servants or children.

The N-town version of the story of Noah is shorter than the other cycle plays, and lacks their comic relief. It is closest to the Biblical account, and its Mrs. Noah is compliant with her husband’s wishes. The play opens with Noah, Mrs. Noah, and their sons and daughters-in-law professing their faith in God and their awareness of the sinfulness of humankind. In line with what was a theme of all the later conduct books published around the turn of 1600s,<sup>59</sup> Mrs. Noah asserts their partnership, and states it is her and Noah’s duty to teach their children: “Unto us twain it doth long/ Them to teach in all degree/ Sin to forsaken and workes wrong.” When informed by an angel the great flood is coming and Noah must build an ark, Noah states his willingness to obey God’s will, and Mrs. Noah and the rest of the family follow his lead. The Latin stage directions depict Noah and all his family crossing the playing area to get to the ship.<sup>60</sup> Katheryn Jacobs maintains the York, Chester, and the Wakefield Noah plays depict a Mrs. Noah who “expected a companionable marriage,” and that “she has not received this.”<sup>61</sup> Instead of the lack of communication between husband and wife portrayed in those scripts, the N-town “Noah” depicts what probably was considered “ideal” family behavior—an husband and wife acting in agreement and concert to preserve their progeny and teach and lead their family in a godly manner.

In the cycles’ Nativity plays, Joseph, in a sense, takes on the role of Mrs. Noah, with Mary as the dominant partner. Like in the Noah plays, God only informs Mary of His intentions, and, like

58 Tomlie, 12, 13.

59 O’Day, 41-5; Macfarlane, 150-4.

60 *Davies, Corpus Christi*, 92-5; quotation on page 93.

61 Jacobs, 102.

Noah, Mary does not inform Joseph of her visitation by the angel, nor her pregnancy through the Holy Spirit. In York's "Joseph's Troubles about Mary" Joseph laments: "I am beguiled—how, wot [know] I not, / My young wife is with child full great," and as his monologue continues it is clear he knows he is not the father.<sup>62</sup> When Joseph asks Mary "Whose is't Mary?" her response to most would sound ambiguous, if not equivocal: "Sir, God's and yours." Her handmaiden tells Joseph no man has seen Mary, but an angel came to her once. Joseph's response to that story seems perfectly natural: "Nay, some man in angel's likeness / With somekin guad [trick] has her beguiled."<sup>63</sup> He repeats his question to Mary six more times, and each time she gives the same answer, an answer the uninformed Joseph cannot understand nor accept.<sup>64</sup> The Wakefield play presents a similar scenario;<sup>65</sup> Joseph recounts second-hand information he has received about Mary's pregnancy: "I asked those women who had that done, / They told me an angel had come."<sup>66</sup> Under those circumstances his statement:

Should an angel this deed have wrought?  
Such excuses help me nought,  
Nor no cunning that they can;  
A heavenly thing, forsooth, is he,  
And she is earthly; this may not be;  
It is some other man.<sup>67</sup>

reflects a skepticism that would seem natural to his audience.

Chester's and N-town's plays present a similar picture. Joseph is surprised to find his young spouse pregnant; he asks who

<sup>62</sup> York, *Modern Spelling*, 50.

<sup>63</sup> York, *Modern Spelling*, 52-3.

<sup>64</sup> York, *Modern Spelling*, 52-6.

<sup>65</sup> Rose, *Wakefield Mystery*, 179-83.

<sup>66</sup> Rose, *Wakefield Mystery*, 182.

<sup>67</sup> Rose, *Wakefield Mystery*, 182.

is the father. He is told Mary has been with no man, but was visited by an angel, and just as in York's and Wakefield's plays, his reaction is that the story of an angelic visitation is a "cover story."<sup>68</sup>

Joseph, like Mrs. Noah, has been left "out of the loop," so to speak. He only learns the truth of Mary's pregnancy when an angel tells him. Like Mrs. Noah, Joseph is not "educated" by his spouse, not informed of God's plan, and like Mrs. Noah, he reacts as a spouse complaining about a not being treated as a partner. In the York nativity plays, for instance, Joseph is portrayed as an old man who, because of his uncertainties about the paternity of Mary's child sometimes is "churlish and grumbling," and other times "contrite and solicitous."<sup>69</sup> Joseph warns old men to beware of marrying a young wife, a message reflecting contemporary sermons suggesting men seek women who are compatible to their age and status.<sup>70</sup> Clearly the clerical authors of cycle plays believed audiences expected to see something like a companionate marriage even when they dramatized the marital relationship of the Virgin Mary and St. Joseph.

What is interesting is that dramatizing marriage as a "partnership" is older than the English cycle plays. It also appears in the Anglo-Norman play *Jeu d'Adam*, dated circa 1120. After their creation, God presents Eve to Adam as:

I have given you a worthy companion:  
Your wife, Eve by name.  
She is your wife and partner;  
You ought to be entirely faithful to her.  
Love her, and let her love you<sup>71</sup>

68 Mills, *Chester Cycle*, 105-06; Davies, *Corpus Christi*, 134-8.

69 Jacobs, 103, 111-12; Robinson, 62.

70 Brooke, 31.

71 David Bevington, ed., "Service for Representing Adam," *Medieval Drama* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975), 81.

God admonishes Eve;

Love Adam, and hold him dear.  
He is your husband, and you his wife . . .  
If you do well as his *helpmeet* [emphasis mine],  
I will place you with him in glory.

To which Eve responds, “I will acknowledge you as sovereign, / Him as my partner and stronger than I.”<sup>72</sup> Later, after unsuccessfully tempting Adam to eat of the forbidden fruit, the Devil approaches Eve, who according to Patristic tradition succumbs to his temptations. Adam, seeing his wife converse with the Devil, warns her of the Devil’s treachery, stating: “I do not want a scoundrel who has done such things / To have access to you.”<sup>73</sup>

Here, our twelfth-century Adam voices a consistent theme found in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century conduct books—to wit, husbands must keep their wives from contact with unsavory individuals. For instance, William Gouge (1622) wrote: “Husbands an wiues ought to be carefull to keepe one another from the temptations of Satan” and avoid “what occasions are offered to draw either of them into sinne.” In *Basilikon Doron* King James I advised his son and heir, Prince Henry, that a husband should: “keepe carefully good and chaste companie about” his wife, and assure that “lasciuious, or riotous persons . . . come not at her.”<sup>74</sup>

Nonetheless, Adam succumbs to Eve’s wheedling, but just before he eats of the forbidden fruit, he says: “I’ll trust you in this/ You are my partner.”<sup>75</sup> The word in Old French is “*per*,” literally “equal.”<sup>76</sup> Immediately after eating, Adam blames Eve, but even in his lamentations he speaks of her as his partner:

72 Bevington, 82.

73 Bevington, 90-4.

74 William Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties* (Amsterdam: Theatrum Orbis Terrarum: W. J. Johnson, 1976, rpt. 1622 ed.), 241, 409; King James I, *Basilikon Doron*, in *The Political Works of James I*, ed. Charles Howard MacIlwain (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1918), 36-7.

75 Bevington, 95.

76 *Oxford English Dictionary Oxford* (www.oed.com), “peer, n. and adj.” [www.oed.com/maurice.bgsu.edu/view/Entry/139725?rkey=T2p0Cr&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid](http://www.oed.com/maurice.bgsu.edu/view/Entry/139725?rkey=T2p0Cr&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid) (accessed 14 September 2011); *Second College Edition. The American Heritage Dictionary*, “peer” (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982), 915:

And whom shall I beseech to aid me,  
 When my own wife has betrayed me,  
 She whom God gave me as partner?<sup>77</sup>

And when confronted by God, Adam admits his guilt, but again ascribes his transgression to Eve's urging. Yet God holds him equally responsible, telling Adam, "You trusted your wife more than me, / You ate the fruit without my permission."<sup>78</sup> God then berates Eve, but not for leading Adam into sin, for *her own* disobedience. Eve admits her personal responsibility when she answers, "I have sinned, it was by my folly."<sup>79</sup> Adam berates Eve yet again in his grief over the expulsion from Eden, and Eve takes the blame upon herself for their mutual transgression:

I have sinned greatly toward God and you . . . .  
 I gave it to you; I thought it for the best,  
 And I led you into sin, for which I can't reproach you.<sup>80</sup>

God, as portrayed in each of these Adam and Eve texts, makes no distinction between blame placed on Adam and blame placed on Eve. God treats Adam and Eve as partners, even refers to them as partners, "helpmeets," sharing joy and sorrow in the time of blessing and in the time of woe. And in each text, despite the patriarchal bent to the relationship of Adam and Eve, there are times when Eve is holding up Adam—admonishing him to admit his fault, or taking blame on herself when Adam is in despair.

To conclude, just as the Adam and Eve texts portray spouses that expect to be partners in the marital relationship, so too do the Noah and Mrs. Noah and the Joseph and Mary texts. Since, as Tydeman maintains, the clerical authors of these texts sought to show the common people that "the men and women of the Bible looked, and more importantly, spoke as they did themselves,"<sup>81</sup> it seems evident the cycle texts do provide us with another source for social history. The texts obviously reflect an underlying assumption among the Commons of the Middle Ages that marriage should be a compainionate relationship of "almost" equal partners.

77 Bevington, 96-7.

78 Bevington, 99.

79 Bevington, 100.

80 Bevington, 103-05

81 Tydemann, 26-7., .

*James H. Forse is Professor of History and Theatre, Emeritus, Bowling Green State University, and editor of this journal. His research centers on the history of medieval and early modern theatre. His recent publications include: "Religious Drama and Ecclesiastical Reform in the Tenth Century," Early Theatre, 5 (2002)., "Some Show Must Go On: Elizabethan York as a Case Study in the Demise of Locally Based Theatre in Tudor England," Journal of the Wooden O Symposium, 8 (2008), "Romeo and Juliet: A Post-modern Play?" Popular Culture Review, 20 (2009), and, jointly written with Erin Miller, "The Failure to be a 'Goode Husbande' in Thomas Heywood's Edward IV (Parts I/II) and A Woman Killed with Kindness," Ben Jonson Journal, 18 (2011).*

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*The Marriage at Cana*

*Giotto (1304-1306)*

*Fresco: Scrovegni Chapel, Padua*