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# Staging Childbirth: Medical and Popular Discourses of Delivery and Midwifery in the Medieval English Mystery Plays<sup>1</sup>

Tamás Karáth

Gynaecological sources of the late Middle Ages attest to two major changes in the practices of delivery: first, the (re)appearance of the professional midwife, increasingly operating under corporate control, and second, a growing presence of male medical practitioners at natural deliveries. I argue that the Nativity pageants of the English mystery plays can be used to reconstruct the transformations of contemporary professional and lay discourses of childbirth. Staging Christ's birth in the English cycle plays confronted playwrights with the challenge of disclosing to the public what was considered to be an exclusively female experience. An analysis of the discursive and dramaturgical strategies of the Nativity episodes of the cycle plays and the Coventry fragment reveals that the plays were concerned with the development of a new professional midwifery. At the same time, plays staging conflicts between the female participants of the birth and the male witnesses reflect on male claims of involvement, and thus join discourses of shame and blame. Similarly to the "gendered" prologues of gynaecological texts, the medieval pageants of the Nativity also maintain a dichotomy of the ideal presence of certain people at birth and the non-desired intrusion of others. But unlike those prologues, the stage plays do not impose shame on the public gaze intruding into the revelation of the secrets of the birth

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to my wife, Judit Gombás, psychologist, and to Ágnes Dékány, obstetrician-gynaecologist, for their theoretical and intuitive knowledge through which they led me to a deeper insight into the mysteries of life and to the recognition that, in lack of experimental knowledge, I will always remain an outsider in the field of this paper.

chamber. Playwrights of the most elaborate Nativity pageants are sympathetic towards the idea of empowering women in the birthing process; on stage, at least one mother (the Virgin Mary) remained in full control of her delivery.

In this essay, I consider the medieval English Nativity pageants as a valuable contribution to the medieval discourse of delivery and midwifery. I will argue that these texts can also be used to advance our knowledge of late medieval conceptions of birth in England. Literary sources may never answer with certainty if their discourses were conceived to corroborate “unquestionable” assumptions of the community, or if they intended to instruct people on the protocols of childbirth. Also, my method may question the validity of conclusions pertaining to social attitudes. However, I wish to show that the reading of the Nativity plays in the context of sources documenting contemporary experiences and practices of birth reveal late medieval changes affecting childbirth.

Common to all medieval discourses of delivery is the overt or covert acceptance of the spiritual and transcendental dimension of this event. The spiritual aspect of birth is touched upon in different ways, in a range of medieval discourses. Birth in the Middle Ages was thought to reveal something mysterious about the relationship of the human and the divine, because all births were prefigured by the Nativity of Christ. For example, Margery Kempe, who herself experienced childbirth fourteen times, saw every birth as an incarnation:

Sche was so meche affectyd to the manhode of Crist that whan sche sey women in Rome beryn children in her arms, yf sche myth wetyn that thei wer ony men children, sche schuld cryin, roryn and wepyn as thei sche had seyn Crist in hys childhode. And yf sche myth an had hir wille, oftyntymes sche wolde a takyn the childeryn owt of the moderys arms and a kyssed hem in the stede of Cryste. (Windeatt 190-1)

In the late Middle Ages, the lay discourse of childbirth was more and more affected by the themes of gynaecological and obstetrical literature. Lay discourses and presentations of delivery became inseparable from the medical and (semi-)professional treatments of the subject. Mary C. Flannery's contribution to this volume very convincingly and sensitively illustrates the ways in which strategies of affective reading were incorporated in the prologues of gynaecological literature for the purposes of distinguishing ideal readers from the undesired intruders into women's

“secrets.”<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, literary texts attest to an undeniable indebtedness to some essential themes of gynaecological literature. This interaction between the two textual traditions and the blurring of the discursive strategies pertaining to the medical/professional and the lay conceptualizations of birth are expressions of a shared need to face the dilemmas and consequences of making parturition both men’s and women’s “business.”

My analysis of the Nativity plays will discuss questions of control and authority. The English Nativity pageants witness the late medieval and early modern transformation of conceptualizing delivery. Gynaecological and obstetrical sources of this period attest to two major changes: the (re)appearance of the professional, although not yet systematically trained, midwife who is gradually drawn under corporate control (Aveling 3-7; Donnison 5-7; Green, *Making Women’s Medicine Masculine* 134-6; McKinney 230-6), and the growing demand of male medical practitioners to assist and control natural deliveries. By their public display of women’s private experience, and their concern with the professionalization of midwifery, the Nativity pageants seem to react to a growing lay, particularly lay male, interest in the heretofore private, female sphere of the birth chamber.

Middle English gynaecological and obstetrical literature constitutes a small corpus of texts. Monica H. Green has compiled a list of thirty manuscripts containing eleven gynaecological and obstetrical texts or collections of recipes (Green, “Obstetrical and Gynaecological Texts”). Green divides this corpus into three groups: (1) translations made from the Latin *Trotula* texts, (2) translations of Gilbertus Anglicus’s “The Sekenesse of Wymmen,” and (3) texts from other sources (Green, “Obstetrical and Gynaecological Texts” 54-55). Two manuscripts of the two versions of “The Sekenesse of Wymmen” have each been transcribed by Beryl Rowland and M.-R. Hallaert. Alexandra Barratt has edited one of the five independent versions of the most popular Middle English *Trotula*. Finally, Green has transcribed “The Nature of Wymmen” in the Appendix of “Obstetrical and Gynaecological Texts” (84-8).

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<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Mary C. Flannery for providing me with the manuscript of her presentation at the SAMEMES conference, “Emotion and the Ideal Reader in Middle English Gynaecological Texts.” Her findings substantially nuance my conclusions drawn from the analysis of the Nativity episodes of the English mystery plays. I believe that my discussion of the N-Town Nativity episode also elaborates and continues her discussion of the interrelations of shame, affective reading and gynaecological discourse with proposing alternative uses or the role of the theme of shame.



Medieval gynaecological and obstetrical literature of ancient heritage does not treat childbirth as a medical event. Soranus's *Gynaecology*, its Greek and Latin revisions and abridgments, as well as the twelfth-century Salernitan *Trotula* texts only discuss difficult deliveries of particular medical interest (Green, *Trotula*). The typical topics of this literature were: menstrual disorders, sterility, pruritus, signs of pregnancy, difficult parturition, infant feeding, the choice of a nurse, and "problems of women after childbirth" (Rowland 22-23). As Rowland writes, "instruction on the delivery of the child is often omitted by encyclopaedists and medieval writers." (22) The same applies to the "decidedly impoverished imagery" of gynaecological texts (Green, *Making Women's Medicine Masculine* 151). Although the discussion of delivery is not more elaborate in treatises of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the reason for their silence is profoundly different. The 1508 Venetian print of *De Secretis Mulierum* explains: "Now it is time to bring up the topic of how to assist a mother in childbirth, but this topic is a medical one, and so is omitted here." (Lemay 143) Technicalities of the delivery have no place in a popular edition for a predominantly male audience with especial interest in issues of conception, the signs of pregnancy and lineage.

Yet the medieval discourse of childbirth was not only shaped by the gynaecological and obstetrical texts. The English Nativity plays were embedded in the biblical and apocryphal tradition of conceptualizing birth. The legacy of this tradition was inculcated into people's mental imagery by a plethora of texts elaborating on the theme of the Nativity: the *Legenda Aurea* (Jacobus de Voragine 37-39), *The South English Nativity* (Pickering 77-79), John Mirk's "De Nativitate" sermon (Powell 24-25), *A Stanzaic Life of Christ* (Foster 15), the *Meditationes Vitae Christi* (Ragusa and Green 31-42) and its Middle English rendering by Nicholas Love (Sargent 38-39). Mystics' assistance at Christ's birth as quasi-midwives in their visions was a popular theme of female revelatory writing.

These non-dramatic representations of birth show a deep awareness of the gender-based division of labour surrounding delivery and of the exclusion of men from the birth experience. "The view that childbirth was an area of indisputable female jurisdiction seems to have been generally well accepted to the end of the period when the plays were being performed" (Ryan 443). But it was also uncontested that the medieval theatre was a male world. Plays were authored, authorized, organized, staged and performed by males. By contrast, the Nativity pageants unveiled the secluded female space of the birth chamber to the eyes of a large and mixed public. In these pageants, we find a range of strategies

being explored to negotiate between the staged world of the public and the domestic privacy of childbirth.

Eventually, the lack of such a negotiation is also indicative of a strategy in which the playwright decided not to show what was not supposed to be seen by the public gaze. For example, the Wakefield Shepherd's Pageants bar any intrusion into the intimacy of birth. The Second Shepherd's Pageant focuses on post-partum events, when the mother and the newborn have already become accessible to the broader community of visitors. The intimate moment of the shepherds' gift-giving at the crib reinstates communal peace and mirth, and emphasizes forgiveness after the theft and mock-birth scene of the first part of the play. The pageant celebrates the real Nativity with the habitual gesture of presenting gifts after birth in a homely reunion. It advocates a humble model of post-natal festivities where drinking, eating and joy went much beyond the frames of decent family assemblies, and therefore often irritated the authorities vigilantly keeping the peace of the community (Ryan 439-40).

Claude Chidamian suggests that another enigmatic episode of the play, the sheep-stealing and plotting of Mak's tossing in the blanket by his fellow shepherds, is also reminiscent of childbirth practices. Chidamian interprets this episode as a humiliating punishment (186-8), which imitates the rocking and rolling of women in difficult labour, as the *Trotula* instructs midwives to conduct:

Those who labor excessively in giving birth to a dead fetus we assist thus. Let us place the patient on a linen sheet and let us have it held by four strong men at the four corners, the head of the patient a little bit elevated. We will make the sheet be pulled strongly this way and that at the opposite corners, and immediately she will give birth. (Green, *Trotula* 122-3)

Chidamian's interpretation is rich in allusions that uncover the complexity of the enigmatic scene of Mak's tossing up in the blanket. Mak, who stole a sheep from his destitute fellow shepherds, is reaccepted by his own community and reinstated in his moral integrity. Mak's weakness is symbolically deleted by an act that Chidamian interprets as an imitation of birth labour. The pageant describes the reintegration of the lapsed Mak into the community and his willingness to compensate for the lost trust of his fellows with an image evoking difficult birth. The visual and gestural language of the episode ultimately suggests that rebuilding bridges of trust is as difficult an initiation as a birth may possibly be. Chidamian's reading of the scene is also suggestive in another respect: the representation of the very birth of Christ is missing from the Wakefield Nativity, though it may deliberately be hidden in the enigmatic ges-

ture of tossing up Mak in the blanket. But the play's structure would rather suggest forgiveness and not humiliation as its central message. The ritual of tossing also evokes a gesture of celebration which implies confidence: the person tossed up in the air has to trust the others that he will not be allowed to fall.<sup>3</sup>

The York Nativity pageant also excludes the intruding eye from the birth chamber and substitutes the display of women's birth chamber privacy with the Virgin's intimate prayer to the newborn Jesus. Joseph's absence from the birth is necessitated by his quest for light, and not for midwives, as in some other plays:

JOSEPH:

Þan wolde I fayne we had sum light,  
What so befall.  
It waxis right myrke vnto my sight,  
And colde withall.

I will go gete vs light forthy,  
And fewell fandē with me to bryng. (Beadle, 2009, ll. 39-44)

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MARY:

3e ar welcum sirre.

JOSEPH:

Say Marie, doghtir, what chere with the?

MARY:

Right goode Joseph, as has ben ay.

JOSEPH:

O Marie, what swete thyng is that on thy kne?

MARY:

It is my sone, the soth to saye,  
Þat is so gud.

JOSEPH:

Wele is me I bade this day  
To se this foode.

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<sup>3</sup> I am grateful to my late colleague Professor Kathleen E. Dubs for sharing her ideas with me, which made me reconsider my understanding of this episode of the Second Shepherd's Play.

Me merueles mekill of this light  
 Pat thus-gates shynes in this place,  
 Forsuth it is a selcouth sight. (ll. 84-94)

Joseph's departure and return frame the birth scene, which is not itself shown on stage. The secrets of birth are sublimed in Mary's prayer, a four-stanza meditation. In the first two, Mary turns inward in contemplation and concludes with the simple announcement of the birth of her son: "Now born is he" (l. 56). In the next two stanzas, she turns to Jesus with hail lyrics as a recognition of the divine nature of the newborn. Her monologue ends with the recognition of the human nature and needs of Jesus: "Vowchesaffe, swete sone I pray the / That I myght the take in the armyes of myne / And in this poure wede to arraie the" (ll. 65-7).

The revelatory character of the York pageant makes it most closely akin to revelatory writings on the Nativity. J. W. Robinson and Clifford Davidson propose York's indebtedness to the visuality of St. Bridget's revelation of the Nativity:

[W]hile [the Virgin] was engaged thus in prayer, I saw the child in her womb, and suddenly in a moment she gave birth to her son. [. . .] And so sudden and instantaneous was this way of bringing forth that I could neither discover nor discern how . . . she gave birth. Verily, though, all of a sudden I saw the glorious infant lying on the ground naked and shining. [. . .] When the virgin felt that she had already borne her child, she immediately worshipped him. [. . .] Then as the child was whining and trembling from the cold and from the harshness of the floor where he was lying, he stretched out his arms, imploring her to raise him to the warmth and to her motherly love. The mother took him in her arms and pressed him to her breast, and with her cheek and her breast she warmed him with great joy and tender maternal compassion. She then sat down to the floor and laid the child in her lap, and at once she began to cover his small body.

(Davidson 17-8)

Although Robinson sees in the similarity of the two Nativity scenes proof of the Bridgettine inspiration of the York playwright (Davidson 18), he ignores the striking silences in the York pageant. Firstly, the playwright does not mention Christ's delivery on the floor, as is inevitable when a woman has to give birth alone. Secondly, he replaces Mary's lifting the child to her breast by her wish of taking Jesus into her arms. Bridget's revelation discloses the first-hand experience of a mother, in which the most instinctive gestures of the birthing woman are not left unnoticed. The two very similar narratives display the differences of

gendered narratives: the one discloses a motherly involvement in the experience of birth, while the other uses elements of this narrative from second-hand experience.

Not considering the earlier lost version of the York Nativity play (Beadle, 1982 426), three of the five English Nativity pageants stage midwives: Chester, N-Town and the Shearmen and Tailors' fragment from the lost Coventry mystery cycle. "Midwives negotiated the divide between the external, masculine domain of civic power and the 'bustling female community of domestic space'" (Ryan 440). The presence of midwives also guaranteed an old-established and reliable testimony to the authenticity of the Incarnation, confirmed partly by the longevity of biblical, apocryphal and patristic discourse, and partly by the social recognition of their position of trust.

Strictly speaking, midwives are not related to the Nativity accounts of the Gospels, but the earliest records of midwives are biblical. Two midwives, Shiprah and Puah, appear in the Book of Exodus (1:15); they are "rewarded by God for their part in outwitting Pharaoh" (Donnison 1). Two further passages of the Book of Genesis (35:16 and 38:27-30) mention midwives with much esteem (Towler and Bramall 6-7). The apocryphal tradition of the midwives assisting at Christ's birth was based on two texts: the *Protoevangelium Jacobi* and *The Book of Pseudo-Matthew on the Infancy of Christ*.

Liturgical plays also dramatized the apocryphal scene of the midwives in the "Quem queritis in presepe" dialogue with the shepherds at the crib (Ryan 435-48; Young II. 5-105). Most plays of the "Three Magi" and some of the "Killing of the Innocent" also employ midwives even if their presence was not justified by the Nativity narratives of the New Testament. The role of the midwives remained unaltered throughout the twelfth to fourteenth centuries in the surviving liturgical plays of Italy, Germany, France and the Low Countries (Young II. 5-105). The midwives fulfilled an active role of demonstration; they pointed first at the child, and then at the mother, in testimony of the Incarnation and the virgin birth.

The Coventry Nativity pageant preserves the reminiscences of a midwife scene, but due to later revisions of the play, the midwives do not appear on stage. The obvious revision of the original plot and the insertion of the Nativity pageant in a composite play are indicative of the restructuring of the Coventry cycle in order to adapt it to the shrinking number of guilds in an economically declining town.

A history of redactions, at least after 1491, may largely be explained as efforts at accommodation to changing guild resources. Especially



with the decline of many of the guilds responsible for individual pageants, the cycle itself could hardly be expected to remain stable in its organization or in financial support from contributory guilds (King and Davidson 3).<sup>4</sup>

In the Shearmen and Taylors' pageant, the embedded stage directions indicate that Joseph is supposed to go away on a quest for midwives, but after the ensuing shepherds' scene, he returns without them. Joseph's absence has a dual dramaturgical function: firstly, "to clear the way for the next scene, which initially focuses on the shepherds and the heavenly song they hear" (King and Davidson 224), and secondly, to anticipate the assistance of the midwives at the Nativity.

MARE	God haue marce, Josoff, my huse-bond soo meke! And hartely I pra you, goo now fro me.
JOSOFF	Thatt shalbe done in hast, mare soo swete! The comford of the Wholle Gost leyve I with the.
	 Now to Bedlem streyght woll I wynd To gett som helpe for Mare soo free. Sum helpe of wemen God may me send, Thatt Mare, full of grace, pleyssid ma be.

[Shepherds' scene is inserted here]

MARE	Josoff, husebond, cum heddur anon; My chylde ys borne that ys Kyng of blys.
JOSOFF	Now welcum to me, the Maker of mon, with all the omage thatt I con; Thy swete mothe here woll I hys.

MARE	Josoff, husebond, my chyld waxith cold, And we haue noo fyre to warme hym with.
JOSOFF	Now in my narmys I schall hym fold, Kyng of all kyngys be fyld and be fryth.

(Craig ll. 196-204 and 282-92)

Pamela King and Clifford Davidson explain the inconsistency of the extant pageant with the reviser's indebtedness to the iconography of St. Bridget's vision of the nativity:

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<sup>4</sup> The critical edition of the two extant Coventry fragments, by Pamela King and Clifford Davidson, also distinguishes several strata of composition in the Shearmen and Taylors' Nativity pageant according to formal and linguistic criteria (14-20).

Because no midwives are present, the presentation of the birth seems to imply dependence on St. Birgitta's account, in which the mandorla-encircled Child appears miraculously and painlessly before her; this iconography, influenced by the *Meditations of the Life of Christ*, was popular in England after c. 1420. [. . .] In the Shearmen and Taylors' play, the birth of the Child most likely took place as the audience's attention was directed elsewhere. The Child is already born by the time that the angels sing the *Gloria* at l. 250. In fact, the moment of birth probably coincided with the appearance of the star to the shepherds at l. 229 *s.d.* – a cunning device to distract the audience from the event in the stable. (224-5)

While the simultaneous staging of Joseph's quest for midwives, the appearance of the angel to the shepherds and the "invisible" birth of Christ add an intricate density to the pageant, the contradiction between the original and the new design of the Nativity is in no way resolved by the reviser. Moreover, attempts at an interpretation of the play are challenged precisely by the details that were obviously deleted and supposed to be left unnoticed by a "distracted" audience. Why does Joseph fail to find midwives; or eventually, why do the midwives not appear on the stage? Is Joseph's assistance in the birth chamber a spontaneous and inevitable arrangement for want of the midwives, or does he become a substitute for the midwives in order to provide and promote a pattern of an intruding male birth assistant who appears in female conventional roles?

The Coventry Nativity episode presents a careful balance in the division of labour and control: Mary sends Joseph away to be distant from delivery. Joseph knows very well that his task is to seek for women helpers from the town. As Green observes, midwifery was inherently an urban profession, which also explains Joseph's know-how in the preparations for the birth (Green, *Making Women's Medicine Masculine* 134). After Joseph's return, he claims a very active role for himself in the birth chamber; he takes the infant Christ in his hands to warm him up. The scene reverses the traditional roles and presents a tableau, very familiar from modern birth chamber scenes but practically unknown in medieval representations of the immediate post-partum moments. The father stands next to the mother, and keeps the newborn baby in his arms. If there is anyone holding the baby after the birth in medieval images, it is the midwife or a female relative (MacKinney 234).

The Coventry pageant perplexes the modern reader by substituting the midwives whom Joseph was supposed to call to help Mary for the father. The otherwise shocking presence of a male person in the birth chamber in the immediate moments after birth, however, dissolves into



the harmonious familial union and the reassuring assistance of Joseph. The extant pageant and its stage directions are silent on the reasons for the absence of midwives who were originally intended to help Mary; nor does the play provide any explanation for the obvious revision of the original plot. Be this as it may, the play's concern does not seem to be the presence or intrusion of a male assistant into the female privacy of the birth chamber. Joseph's entry into the secluded space of birth does not impose on him a sense of shame. Whether the point of the reviser and, consequently of the extant play, is to make a claim for male birth assistants as full-right substitutes for midwives cannot be argued or contested on the grounds of the text. It is, however, clear that Joseph's presence is treated as an alternative to midwife-assisted deliveries.

The Chester Nativity shifts its focus from the intimate family circle to the miracle of the unbelieving midwife, Salome. The wonderful cure of her withered hand provides the occasion for the staging of the actual work the midwife was supposed to carry out in the birth chamber, i.e. to intervene in the process of parturition by the use of her hands. The very presence of these women also empowered them by virtue of the confident role that only their testimony could be used to protect the mother from suspicions (if the child was still born) or to prevent the substitution of children (Donnison 3-4). The presentation of Chester's midwives highlights and perverts the two major functions the midwives were generally expected to assume: the physical touch with the mother's private parts and the declaration of evidence-based testimony, which in the case of the Nativity of Christ is the confirmation of Mary's virginity. While the first midwife's declaration of Mary's virginity tactfully remains silent on the way in which she ascertained the miraculous birth, Salome demands her part in the verification of virginity in a more direct way: "But never the latter, *I will assaye / whether shee bee cleane mayde*" (Lumiansky and Mills 117, ll. 537-8).

What part the midwives of Chester pageant might actually have played in the delivery is very obscure, due to the playwright's enigmatic arrangement of the birth scene. Only in Chester are all characters of the Nativity pageant simultaneously present on stage at the moment of birth. The stage direction requiring brief silence does not enable us to reconstruct the scene fully. As Mary seems to take full control of her delivery, we can assume that the stage was divided between her solitary figure, perhaps behind a veil, and the three other characters grouped together:

JOSEPH        Loe, Marye, harte, brought I have here  
                  too middwives for the mannere  
                  to bee with thee, my darlinge deare,  
                  tyll that hit bee daye.

MARY         Syr, the be welcome withowt were.  
                  But God will worke of his power  
                  full sonne for mee, my lefe fere,  
                  as best is nowe and aye.

*Tunc paululum acquiescunt.*

(Lumiansky and Mills ll. 493-500+SD)

A clue to the staging of the scene may be Joseph's prior arrangement of an *ad hoc* birth chamber between an ox and an ass, where he was instructed to leave Mary in standing position: "Tunc Joseph accipiet Mariam in brachia sua [. . .] Tunc statuet Mariam inter bovem et asinam" (Lumiansky and Mills ll. 464+SD and 468+SD). Denise Ryan observes:

Joseph, having settled Mary in what must pass for her birthing room or childbed chamber, is immediately alert to customary practice and his conventional role in the imminent event, and declares his intention to go in search of two midwives. [. . .] The reference to "this citty" reminds the audience, as it often does in the Chester cycle, of the topicality of the subject being addressed and of the conflation of historical time with the present in which the play is performed in a way that emphasizes timeless relevance.

(444)

The discourse of the midwives is aligned with the dominant discourse of civic authority, which was inherently supportive of the midwives' good reputation for professionalism and reliability.

The N-Town Nativity episode is the most complex medieval dramatic text with its double focus on parental relations at birth and the birthing mother's positioning vis-à-vis a new type of midwifery. The play reflects both shifts in obstetrical practice which can be reconstructed from late medieval and early modern medical texts: the professionalization and institutionalization of midwifery on the one hand, and a growing male lay and professional interest in learning more about, and seeing more of, the birth chamber events. The focus of the N-Town Nativity pageant and the late medieval gynaecological and obstetrical discourse have many commonalities. None of the other extant English Nativity pageants display such affinity with the strategies of inclusion and exclusion pursued by contemporary gynaecological medical treatises





(Gibson 17). Nevertheless, the play carefully establishes a symbolic and social boundary that vigilantly controls access to the birth zone. Astonishingly, this control is given to a male attendant, Joseph.

Contrary to medieval social practices and norms, the midwives of N-Town stay out of the birth chamber in fear of the light they see above the place, while Joseph alone transgresses the zone he is not supposed to enter: "[JOSEPH] Than wyl myself gon in alon / And chere my wyff, if that I may. / All heyl, maydon and wyff, I say!" (ll. 168-70). In the presence of female birth attendants, Joseph's intrusion into the female space of birth could have been decoded as a shocking breach of norms, similar to the embarrassing experience of the parturient wife in the French *Roman de Silence*:

The count rushed into the bed chamber  
To find out how things really stood.  
He locked the door of the bed chamber behind him.  
His desire to know the truth  
Took away any feeling of shame  
Which would have kept him from seeing a woman in childbed.  
He took [his wife's] hand in his:  
She was very embarrassed at this,  
But the count did not go away. (Gibson 9)

But shame, whose ultimate function was to suppress the curiosity and to bar the presence of a male intruder in the birth chamber, does not restrain Joseph from entering. Obviously, the lack of shame in Joseph is inherently associated in the play with the idea of an irresistible drive to be present. But does his empathic curiosity justify the transgression of social borders, or does his shamelessness indicate that his behaviour is unacceptable? If the pageant is read in the context of gynaecological discourses invoking the notion of shame as a corrective tool, we find that the N-Town playwright was more ambitious and audacious in pursuing the strategies of those discourses. He does not simply borrow elements of gynaecological discourses to make them resonate in his play, but he engages himself with an experiment that envisions the consequences of the intrusion of undesired witnesses in the birth chamber. While a major concern of the late medieval gynaecological texts and of their prologues was to maintain the boundaries between certain types of readers and to reaffirm correct ways of reading those texts, as is shown by Mary C. Flannery in this volume, the N-Town playwright provides a unique fiction that actually imagines such transgressions and dramatizes their consequences. While the N-Town episode dissociates Joseph's



intrusive behaviour from any sense of shame, it also shows that his incompetence, both in terms of empathy and professional erudition, disputes his claim to the control of parturition in his hands. The play translates this struggle and failure into the language of gendered power relations.

Joseph is a self-promoted mediator between Mary's secluded space and the outer world. He brings in messages and ushers in the midwives. As we could see, the play does not present this mediation as shocking. On the contrary, his entry into the birthing room is presented as quite a natural step. Yet, his presence within the private space eventually becomes an annoying nuisance to Mary. Joseph's insistence on an assumed code of behaviour and his anxieties over satisfying social expectations metaphorically devour what remains from the intimate "zone of birth" and entirely incorporate it into the outer sphere of social order. The manifestations of Joseph's care turn into a display of his insensitivity as his pretended control of the events is undermined by the fact that he misses the childbirth unawares. He comically urges Mary to receive the midwives. When Mary suppresses an enigmatic laugh, Joseph becomes again overanxious and corrects Mary by reminding her of an implicitly agreed code of behaviour that binds women in birth:

JOSEPH                   Thee for to helpe that art in harde bonde  
Zelomye and Salomee be com with me.  
For dowte of drede withowte thei do stond  
And dare not come in for lyght that they se.

[*Hic Maria subridendo, dicat:*]

MARIA                   The myght of the Godhede in his magesté  
Wyl not be hyd now at this whyle.  
The chylde that is born wyl preve his modyr fre,  
A very clene mayde, and therfore I smyle.

JOSEPH                   Why do ye lawghe, wyff? Ye be to blame!  
I pray yow, spowse, do no more so!  
In happ the mydwyvys wyl take it to grame,  
And at your nede helpe wele non do.  
Iff ye have nede of mydwyvys, lo,  
Peraventure thei wyl gon hens!  
Therfor be sad and ye may so  
And wynnyth all the mydwyvis good diligens.  
(ll. 174-89)

For a second time in the play, Mary has to mitigate Joseph's "displeasure"; he, in turn, humiliates himself. The midwives are called in to the routine of post-partum examination only after Mary's control over the birth attendants and the birth zone has been restored.

What Gibson calls "a stunning transgression of social order" (Gibson 17) in the play, that is, the midwives' shameless display of touching Mary's private parts, could be applied much more appropriately to Joseph's imposition on his parturient wife and on the consensual social norms of delivery. When Gibson states that for Salome there is no shame but grace in the place of birthing (19), her understanding is conditioned by one of the most important *topoi* of medieval gynaecological literature: readers and hearers of such texts were supposed to be ashamed of the very exposition of women's bodies. In the light of these texts, the lack of shame that should clearly stigmatize Joseph's behaviour as rude is perplexing.

But, as I have suggested, the concern of the playwright is not any more to see the potentials of shame in suppressing the intrusion and control of undesired birth assistants, but to create a situation in which shame is no longer a sufficient deterrent to suppress curiosity. Moreover, the play seems to advocate the idea that the female secrets of the birth chamber hidden from the (largely male) public are matters of public concern. After all, the N-Town Nativity episode does not pursue the strategy of Coventry or York in distracting the audience's attention from the scenes and moments that were not supposed to be witnessed by anyone. The N-Town playwright might then be just as anyone of the ideal readers or users addressed by the prologue of *The Knowing of Women's Kind*, a Middle English version of medical material derived from the *Trotula* and other sources:

And yf hit fall any man to rede hit, I pray hym & scharge hym in ovre Lady  
be-halue þat he rede hit not in no dyspyte ne sclavndure of no woman ne  
for no cause but for þe hele & helpe of hem, dredynge þat vengavns myht  
fall to hym as hit hath do to oþer þat have schevyd here preuytees in  
sclauvndyr of hem, vndyrstondynge in certeyne þat þey have no oþer euylys  
þat nov be a-lyue than thoo women hade þat nov be seyntys in hevyn.

(Barratt 42)

The rejection of Joseph's blames and the "sclauvndyr" of the midwives by Mary is also in line with Green's observation of the late medieval transformation of gynaecological discourse. The newly emerging motif of "slander" marks a new concern which asks not what the texts con-



tain, but how they are read and seen (Green, *Making Women's Medicine Masculine* 201).

The medieval English Nativity pageants represent a spectrum of attitudes to childbirth. The plays, less intent to elaborate the secrecies of the birth chamber and the midwives' parts, do not challenge dominant public discourses of ancient heritage. Chester and especially N-Town explore the dramatic potentials of a less intimate Nativity scene and reflect on the transforming gynaecological and obstetrical discourse, which apparently echoed some emerging themes of the medical texts, such as blame, curiosity and claims on the access to such texts as well as to the birth chamber. But while the English compiler of the mid-fifteenth century *Sickness of Women* felt uneasy about men abusing knowledge of women's diseases and laid out "an unflattering depiction" of the unwelcome reader for such a work (Green, *Making Women's Medicine Masculine* 201), the N-Town playwright's bolder rhetoric and dramaturgy openly challenged this attitude on the public stage.

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