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Feminizing the Liturgy: The N-Town *Mary Play* and Fifteenth-Century Convent Drama

Olivia Robinson

This essay sets two fifteenth-century vernacular plays which each incorporate key Latin citations from the liturgy alongside one another: the N-Town *Mary Play* and a piece of convent drama from fifteenth-century Burgundy. The *Mary Play*'s incorporation of the Latin *Magnificat*, recited by Mary and translated into English by her cousin Elizabeth, dramatizes *female* "ownership" and transmission of the Word of God, and the power of the *female* voice to teach and transmit key theological concepts; recent critical approaches to N-Town have also emphasized the importance of seeking northern continental analogues in its features, given the play's likely East Anglian provenance. I respond to both of these critical strands by comparing the *Mary Play*'s "feminized" use of the Latin liturgy to the liturgical citations incorporated into a vernacular Nativity play composed and performed by nuns. I explore the ways in which each play makes careful use of the Latin liturgy as a dramatic tool, and I discuss how and why particular liturgical citations have been incorporated into the dramatic script. I argue that translation of the liturgy into the vernacular can be read as a self-conscious use of the on-stage female voice to comment on its significance as an act of worship.

This essay began as an attempt to think through ways in which a little-known and understudied convent play might help us to shed new light on certain aspects of one of the best-known plays of the medieval English dramatic canon, the N-Town *Mary Play*. The uniqueness of the *Mary Play*, in the context of the N-Town collection, has been long-established: the compiler of N-Town appears to have sourced his dramatic material from a variety of different places, and thus includes individual plays with

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a variety of formal features, implied staging and cast requirements, and effects (see, e.g., Spector, *N-Town*). Experiments using performance have confirmed that the *Mary Play* in particular stands out among the N-Town collection for its very small cast, the way it sets its action within particular enclosed spaces and moments, creating a particular "intimacy of tone" and its probable integration of sung liturgy alongside its dialogue (see Smout, Dutton and Cheung Salisbury 95).[1] A further aspect of the *Mary Play*'s uniqueness, of course, lies in its overwhelming and sustained focus on *female* protagonists: particularly St Anne, Mary herself, the Daughters of God, and Elizabeth.

When surveying possible analogues (dramatic and non-dramatic) for the *Mary Play*, Granger has noted that the continent, particularly the Low Countries, may have produced more appropriate material than elsewhere in England: the cultural links established through trade between East Anglia and parts of Burgundy in the late fifteenth century may well have been stronger than those between East Anglia and other, more geographically distant regions of England (150). Whilst Granger concludes that the particular Marian plays from Brussels which she examines alongside the *Mary Play* do not – at least at the level of their use of liturgy – bear a significant resemblance to the N-Town play (163-4, 171), the possibility of using surviving northern European drama as a fruitful counterpoint to the *Mary Play* may still allow for new insights into processes of composition and desired effects. The play which I propose to read alongside the *Mary Play* here also hails from the Low Countries, from a Carmelite convent in the town of Huy (in modern-day Belgium). This play dramatizes the narrative of the Nativity: it has, therefore, no narrative overlap with the contents of the *Mary Play* (nor am I attempting to suggest that it could be seen as a direct "source" for that play); but it shares with it a central focus on liturgical citation as a compositional and performative technique, and on specifically *female*-voiced devotion and performance.

There has been a large amount of scholarly work on the relationship of women to medieval drama throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, both in terms of the depiction of female characters in plays and in terms of evidence for women's involvement in dramatic production (see e.g. Normington, *Gender and Medieval Drama*; Twycross, "Transvestism"; Stokes, "Women and Mimesis"). However, Normington has

[1] I use the term "collection" rather than "cycle" to refer to the N-Town plays deliberately: it seem clear that the plays, although Biblical, were not composed or performed as a coherent "cycle" in the same way as those from, e.g., York.

nonetheless noted as recently as 2013 that this work is quite often inexplicably and routinely marginalized: "it remains usual for medieval theatre to be excluded from feminist theatre studies volumes. [. . .] *The Cambridge Companion to the Actress* manages to obliterate the whole of medieval drama" ("Faming of Shrews" 120). It is still, she implies, a common misconception among scholars of medieval literature more generally (if not among medieval theatre specialists) that theatre and performance in the Middle Ages was an exclusively male space (see Niebrzydowski). Part of my aim here, then, is to take two plays which feature contrasting explorations of the ways and the things that *women* could teach through drama, focusing particularly on Biblical narrative and the liturgy, in order to explore the impact which attention to a critically marginalized piece of convent drama might have on our reading of a well-known play.

Surviving in a single manuscript dated to the end of the fifteenth century as part of the N-Town collection of plays, the *Mary Play* is a unique English dramatization of the conception and early life of the Virgin Mary, including key moments such as her marriage to Joseph, the Annunciation and the Visitation. The *Mary Play* thus blends together seamlessly Biblical and apocryphal material comprising what was commonly known and thought about the life of the Virgin – it opens with a scene prior to Mary's birth centring on St Anne and Joachim, neither of whom appear in the canonical Gospels.[2] It culminates, however, in an extended and rhetorically intricate quotation of a long passage from the Gospel of Luke: Luke 1:46-55. It is this final scene that I want to focus on particularly – the Visitation, when the Virgin Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth whilst pregnant with Jesus. Elizabeth is at this point also pregnant with John the Baptist, and their meeting is given a privileged space at the close of the *Mary Play*, during which the two women join together to recite the *Magnificat*, Mary's speech of praise from Luke 1, in full. Their performance of the *Magnificat* alternates between Latin, recited by Mary, and vernacular paraphrase, recited by Elizabeth:

MARIA: For þis holy psalme I begynne here þis day:
Magnificat anima mea Dominum,
Et exultauit spiritus meus in Deo salutari meo

ELIZABETH: Be þe Holy Gost with joye Goddys son is in þe cum
Þat þi spyryte so injouyid þe helth of þi God so.

[2] For possible sources for the *Mary Play*, see Spector, *N-Town*, Commentary 436-467.

MARIA: Quia respexit humilitatem ancille sue.
Ecce enim ex hoc beatam me dicent omnes generaciones

ELIZABETH: For he beheld þe lowness of hese handmayde, ȝe.
[L]o, ferforth for þat, all generacyonys blysse yow in pes.

MARIA: Quia fecit mihi magna qui potens est,
Et sanctum nomen eius.

ELIZABETH: For grett thyngys he made, and also myghtyest
And ryght holy is þe name of hym in vs.
(Spector, *N-Town*, *Mary Play*: The Visit to Elizabeth, ll. 81-93).

It has been justly observed that this sequence, which proceeds for another eight stanzas after the first three cited above, is one of the "dramatic and emotional highlights of the play" (Granger 113), focusing the spotlight squarely on the two pregnant female characters and their intermingled voices. It serves a particular, and a particularly sophisticated dramatic purpose. Mary's introductory words before she begins her first line of Latin make this plain: "*þis* holy psalme *I begynne here þis* day" (l. 81, my emphasis). Her insistent use of proximal deixis – "*here þis* day" – and a present tense verb – "I *begynne*" – serves to superimpose her first and originary recitation of the *Magnificat*, as it is recounted in Luke's gospel – "þis holy psalme" – onto the spatial "here" and the temporal "now" or "today" of the audience, forcibly underlining and actively performing the relevance and ever-present-ness of the "past" Biblical moment in the *present* space and time. Barr has discussed the ways in which the poet of the so-called "Digby lyrics" insistently deploys "words such as 'now,' 'this,' 'here' and 'we' [in order to] situate [himself . . .] and his audience in a present world in which they are all co-participants" (316). The creator of the *Mary Play*, I suggest, turns Mary into a figure whose words, at this moment, create a similar co-participatory "world," a fusion of the past-ness of the events of Luke's Gospel with the present time and space.

Mary thus also specifically echoes and repeats a movement which is made by the Latin text of the *Magnificat* itself, for the very text of Mary's *Magnificat*, as she utters it in Luke 1, *already* insists upon the present-ness of past utterance in a slightly different way. As Granger notes, the *Magnificat* as presented by Luke deliberately lexically recalls and reworks a section of the Old Testament, I Samuel 2: 1-10 (112), Hannah's song of

triumph at her long-desired pregnancy: a peculiarly appropriate instance of typological connection between Old and New Testament, given that Mary very literally embodies the fulfilment of the Old Testament with the New, and the moment of transition between the two. This is an embodiment upon which the N-Town *Mary Play* lingers: at the moment of conception, Mary describes the "schapp of chyldly carnalyté" which Jesus immediately assumes in her womb (Spector, *N-Town*, *Mary Play*: Salutation and Conception l. 295). Her description of this process foregrounds her own role in providing outward, fleshly clothing or covering to God Himself, so that He may be born into the human world.[3] In N-Town, then, Mary's role as the figure who physically creates, or even *is* the hinge between the Old Testament and the New, as Jesus is held in her body, is made clear for an audience. Onstage, within the performance of the *Magnificat*, her utterance performs this hinge. It layers up Old Testament, New Testament, and the present-day time and place. The idea of sophisticated and intricate typological connections between Old Testament and New is thus mobilized by the play, and the impact and relevance of these connections in the present world of the audience is performed.

One of the two possible conclusions to the *Mary Play* alludes explicitly to the temporal shifts that the audience has experienced here. Contemplacio, a commentator-character who is clearly contemporary with the audience, and who has offered them a running commentary on the Biblical action throughout the *Mary Play* in a series of "asides" which introduce and close particular episodes, notes that "Magnificat and Benedictus / First in þat *place* þere made wern" (Spector, *N-Town*, *Mary Play*: The Visit to Elizabeth ll. 172A-73A). Contemplacio's particular use of the term "place" here implicates a further layer of spatio-temporal complexity, one which is peculiar to late-medieval theatrical techniques. As is well-known, the N-Town *Mary Play* makes use of *locus* and *platea* staging, in which, to quote Janette Dillon:

> a *locus* always represents, for a given stretch of time, a specific location [while] the *platea* is essentially fluid and frequently non-representational. It is not tied to the illusion, to the fictional places where the drama is set, but is often predominantly an actors' space, a space in which performance can be

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[3] McMurray Gibson discusses in detail the ways in which Mary is read and presented iconographically as "crafting the garment of flesh and human mortality for the still embryonic Word" (164). Granger suggests that Mary's Latin here renders her role as "physical channel . . . of God" particularly clear, in the context of places where Latin and English are used together elsewhere in the manuscript (114).

recognised as performance rather than as the fiction it intermittently seeks to represent. (4-5)

The N-Town *Mary Play* makes use of a series of fixed, Biblical *loci* (e.g. the temple, Mary and Joseph's house), which exist within a fluid *platea* or playing-space signifying a multitude of *different* times, places and spaces, as actors traverse it, and which includes the audience. As Dutton has noted of medieval Biblical drama, *locus* and *platea* staging can contain "heavy theological significance . . . The *locus* would keep a historical Christ remote in time and space from his audience . . . Christ in the *platea* is Christ in the same time and space as the audience, offering the audience contact with a present divinity" (393). Habitually, then, we might read a *locus* such as Elizabeth's house as securely separated from the audience: a past space and time existing within the Biblical narrative, played out in front of a watching audience existing in the medieval present. Contemplacio's voice speaks to the audience in their present from the *platea* or "place," a space and time which he shares with them. For the actors playing Mary and Joseph, the *platea* has signified (at this moment in the narrative) the journey between their house and Elizabeth's. Indeed, the appropriate stage direction notes "*et sic transient circa placeam,*" ("and they travel around the *place*"), prior to their arrival with Elizabeth, making specific use of the term "place" to denote the *platea* (Spector, *N-Town*: *Mary Play*, The Visit to Elizabeth ll. 22-23) (See Dillon 5). The *locus* and *platea* seem to be securely restricted to their respective functions here. But the ensuing utterance of the *Magnificat* – and the temporal fluidity that its introduction creates – potentially disturbs these boundaries: Mary and Elizabeth are no longer (or no longer *only*) in the fixed space and time of Elizabeth's house, within a re-played narrative of the events of Luke's gospel. They are simultaneously, as we have seen, in the space and time of the audience; for the duration of the *Magnificat*, the *locus* that was Elizabeth's house, almost becomes the *platea* – or, at least, it takes on some of its "fluid" qualities, as Biblical and present times and places are, in the onstage recitation of the *Magnificat*, momentarily collapsed.

Even as Contemplacio's use of the term "place" reminds us of this, however, his concluding words also serve to reassert the *difference* between then and now, *locus* and *platea*. For the *Magnificat* is located specifically by Contemplacio in a space whose physical *distance* from the audience is performed linguistically ("*þat* place . . . *þere*," rather than *this* place *here*), and whose temporal "past-ness," as unique originary moment, is also underlined by use of the adverb "first" and the past tense of the verb "to be" ("*first* . . . made *wern*"). This has the effect of firmly tempo-

rally reinstating the "here and now" at the close of the play, de-layering or disentangling the *past* narrative of the recitation of the *Magnificat* in Luke's gospel from the present time and place of the audience. Contemplacio's closing speech, with its pointed reference to "þat place . . . þere," reasserts the habitual role or function of the *platea*: he speaks directly to the audience from the *platea* and uses this space to locate them unambiguously at a distance from what they have seen and heard. His punning use of the word "place" to do so, however, simultaneously draws their attention to the way in which the word "place" is now, in this particular speech, being used to signify something more like *locus* – the past "place" within the play where the *Magnificat* was sung – while the *locus* of Elizabeth's house *then*, for the duration of the singing, almost became the "place."

The presence of the "first" *Magnificat* in contemporary, medieval England is, of course, made more pointed by its translation by Elizabeth into *English*. Not only does Mary recite the *Magnificat*: Elizabeth provides a running English gloss on her words, expounding their significance confidently and assuredly in a move which must surely have had some profound implications for a non-Latin literate audience. As is often noted, Elizabeth's interventions are not precise translations of the Latin – they are rather more loose paraphrases, sometimes conceptualized as awkward or tortuously unskilled translations. Their unusual and often counterintuitive structure and syntax is in part due to the dramatists' desire to rhyme the Latin and the English within each stanza (cf. Spector, *N-Town*, Commentary 465 and Wellesley on the manuscript scribe's use of braces to highlight these inter-lingual rhymes). However, this metrical constraint also allows Elizabeth to be imagined as engaging in interactive discussion *with* Mary rather than simply producing an exact parroting back or repetition of her words: "by the holy ghost with joye Goddys son is in *þe* come"; "for þat all generacyonys blyss *yow* in pes" (Spector, *Mary Play*: The Visit to Elizabeth ll. 84 and 89, my emphasis). It also calls into being a particular, and particularly idiosyncratic, English style and syntax, allowing us to read Elizabeth's gloss as something distinct from the usual style and structure of vernacular speech within the play, a kind of non-English English or a *particular* English which calls attention insistently to its own role *as* performed *Magnificat*-gloss.[4] In

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[4] For an alternative reading of Elizabeth's English gloss as "halting," "puzzling" and lacking in "semantic felicity" when compared to the Latin, to which it is subordinate, see Wellesley, whose reading foregrounds the insufficiency, as accurate translation, of Elizabeth's utterances. As will become clear, I here read her words from a slightly different perspective.

this reading, I view Elizabeth's words as something akin to a "foreignizing translation", as discussed by Venuti, which deliberately "deviate[s] from native norms to stage an alien reading experience [. . .] disrupting the codes which prevail in the target language" (Venuti 548). As such, Elizabeth performs a bridging role between Latin *Magnificat* and non-Latin-literate audience member: her words are comprehensible in English, but also intimately interwoven with Mary's Latin, through the intricate rhyme scheme and through a resultant, very particular structure and tone which bespeaks their *alterity*, linking them to the Latin. Elizabeth's English contributions to the *Magnificat,* then, are not just a replication but also (appropriately enough) a magnification, or an addition to the Latin text. Indeed, Mary specifically notes that the *Magnificat* is "seyd *betweyn us tweyn*" (Spector, *N-Town*, *Mary Play*: The Visit to Elizabeth l. 127, my emphasis), suggesting that Elizabeth's voice, and the vernacular gloss she provides, have an integral role to play in the transmission of the whole. Mary's words explicitly unify text and gloss into a *shared*, rather than a divided utterance, and neither part of that utterance is here figured by Mary as subordinate to the other.

Mary and Elizabeth's creation of a double-voiced and yet complete or unified *Magnificat* also, of course, has resonances with the antiphonal performance of liturgical worship. Penny Granger has described this scene brilliantly as "a macaronic double act which simultaneously transforms the [*Magnificat*] into a teaching aid, and, on page and stage, mirrors monastic antiphonal performance" (112-13). Female characters are here given the authority to speak the words of the Bible and to expound them in the vernacular in a format which bears a striking resemblance not only to the way in which transmitting scripture often involved copying text and gloss together, but also to the way in which male clergy would have routinely uttered the Latin liturgy – antiphonally, using a kind of call and response technique. As Granger notes (116), the manuscript presentation of this scene makes this plain through changes in script. The Latin and English move back and forth from a textura script for Mary's Latin to the more usual anglicana script for Elizabeth's English, creating visually different voices for each.[5] Recent commentators have stressed the extent to which N-Town in particular functions as a *reading* manuscript as well as a manuscript that could be used for performance, or provides a record of performance (see e.g. Granger 116,

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[5] On the ways in which textura script can be read as privileging Latin over the anglicana vernacular, reinforcing the difference in status between the two utterances, and for a detailed description of the changes in script, see Wellesley.

182-83) – and the enactment of the different languages on the page is a prime example of this.

This feminized *Magnificat* recalls more than only its Biblical moment, then – for the *Magnificat* is also a central part of the liturgy, the canticle sung daily at the office of Vespers. As Spector notes, the fact that Mary and Elizabeth continue after the end of the Biblical text with the *Gloria patri* clearly "shows the influence of the liturgical version of the Magnificat," and therefore also acts as a reminder to the audience that they must connect this song not just with its originary moment in Luke, but *also* with its daily repetition by the clergy as part of the liturgy (*N-Town*, Commentary 465). Again, Mary articulates this for the audience: after she and Elizabeth have finished, she notes that the *Magnificat* is "ever to be songe every day, amonge *us at oure evensong*" (Spector, *N-Town*, *Mary Play*: The Visit to Elizabeth ll. 129-30). This moment is extraordinary in that, briefly, Mary seems to step away from her role within the play and speak in a tone like that of Contemplacio, addressing the audience as one of them, perhaps even as the actor rather than the part ("us," "*oure* evensong"). Once again, it is deixis which performs this movement: the "us" and "oure" which Mary utters situate her spatially and temporally, for the duration of her words, *with* the audience. The *Mary Play*'s *Magnificat*, then, functions also as an educative tool for those in the audience who are non-Latin-literate about the rituals and processes of the Latin liturgy. Audience members are enabled to connect a key part of the liturgy to its source in the Biblical narrative, *and* provided with a vernacular gloss – this is new knowledge provided by the play which they can transport into their next encounter with the *Magnificat* in church. The connection to the church liturgy could have been facilitated by the use of music: most commentators suggest that Mary's Latin verses would probably have been performed as sung liturgy rather than spoken out loud. Elisabeth Dutton, in 2010, engaged in a performance of the *Mary Play* designed in part to test the ways in which using song as well as dialogue could work on stage, and suggests that song is an integral part of the design of this play (see Smout, Dutton and Cheung Salisbury). As Granger notes, the N-Town *Magnificat* provides a radical onstage moment – a liturgical chant paraphrased and "performed by women outside the confines of a male dominated Church," and a return of the song to its "scriptural context" (134).

How does this compare to the use of the liturgy in my second example – a short scene from a late fifteenth-century Nativity play found in Chantilly, Musée Condé MS 617? This manuscript, and the selection of vernacular plays it contains were copied and – I have argued elsewhere –

actively shaped and performed by the nuns within a Carmelite convent in the now-Belgian town of Huy (see Robinson). This scene makes a fascinating counterpoint for thinking about the Biblical and liturgical citation undertaken by the female characters in N-Town. The nuns who made this play manuscript and performed this play make sophisticated use of the liturgy throughout, but especially at the quite solemn and dramatic moment at which the Star appears to the Magi and they journey to offer gifts to the baby Jesus. This moment is marked by a rare stage direction clearly involving some kind of prop: "l'estoille se doit moustreir" ("the star must show itself," Cohen 18-21). The dialogue between the Magi which immediately follows the appearance of the star is then peppered with repeated quotations from the liturgy, in Latin, a feature which occurs nowhere else in this otherwise vernacular play:

L'estoille se doit moustreir.

JASPAR — Hoc signum magni regis est eamus et inquiramus
eum et offeramus ei munera aurum, thus et mirram.

[. . .]

JASPAR A II ROY — Puis mes signeur, que c'est vostre volenté
de mire luy offeraie asseis — Adorate Deum etc

[. . .]

MELCHIOR — Volentire, sire roy de Saba
d'enchens luy ferai offrande — Adorate Deum etc

BALTHASAR — Et puis que del enchanse l'offert ly aueis,
de mon or a grant planté
luy voraie de bon cuer presenteir
puis comencherons a retourneir.
Omnes de Saba etc

The use of Latin citation from the liturgy in this scene falls into two categories. The first, and most straightforward, is the addition of the incipit of a particular liturgical chant, followed by the abbreviation "etc." There are three of these additions, and the manuscript presents them clearly as in some senses additional to the vernacular verse speeches uttered by the characters in this scene: they are located in the right hand margin of the folio, one after each Magus has formally detailed the gift that he will give to Jesus (see Figure 1). The first two are the same –

"Adorate Deum etc," attached to Jaspar and Melchior's speeches – while the last, Balthasar's "Omnes de Saba etc," seems to serve both to conclude his declaration and to accompany the movement within the playing space which would symbolize the journey of the Magi to the Holy family – when one of the Magi next speaks, immediately after "Omnes de Saba etc," it is to Joseph, suggesting that by this time, they have moved to them. The second category of liturgical citation is more difficult to disentangle, however: Jaspar's words upon seeing the star appear. This utterance is represented differently from the three liturgical incipits in the manuscript: rather than being placed in the right hand margin, abbreviated and used to close a vernacular speech, it is written out in full, in Latin, in the writing column, where speech normally sits. However, it is not laid out exactly like the vernacular speech in the manuscript, as it is not in verse, and the copyist seems to have been aware of this, lineating it as prose within the space of the writing column (see Figure 2). Analysis and comparison of these two types of liturgical citation yields some fascinating evidence for the ways in which the liturgy was transformed by these playwrights into a potent dramatic tool.

The three liturgical citations which are inserted in abbreviated form at the end of each Magus's vernacular speech can be easily identified from their given incipits. The words "Adorate Deum" form the incipit to more than one liturgical chant, but by far the most likely in the context of the play is the chant that is used as an antiphon in the office of Matins on the feast of the Epiphany.[6] "Omnes de Saba" is easier still to identify: it is most often used as one of the responsories from the same office, Matins on the feast of Epiphany, "Omnes de Saba venient aurum et thus deferentes et laudem domino annuntiantes alleluia alleluia."[7] This chant is ultimately taken from Isiah 60:6: the prophecy made that the Magi would come and honour Jesus. Both of these liturgical borrowings, therefore, are absolutely accurate, or appropriate, in terms of the events being depicted on stage. As we saw in the *Mary Play*, they too serve both to move the liturgy outside the church office, embedding it into a different kind of event and a different context, and to underline very precisely the Biblical and temporal significance of liturgical worship. The choice of "Omnes de Saba" creates this effect in a particularly complex way, because of its Old Testament roots in Isaiah. By electing

[6] The CANTUS database provides the following as the master-chant for this antiphon: "Adorate dominum alleluia omnes angeli ejus alleluia." Several of the indexed manuscripts provide "deum" in the place of "dominum" for this chant. For the identification of this and other chants, see the CANTUS database.

[7] I cite the CANTUS database's master-version of the chant here.

to place this particular liturgical citation here, the nuns have created a precise and deliberate dramatic effect – the on-stage Magi are seen fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy and performing the appropriate liturgical worship simultaneously.

In the second category of liturgical citation, that which takes the form of Jaspar's speech to the other Magi in response to the star, the nuns move beyond embedding liturgical citation into their dramatic script. Rather, they show themselves to be capable of confidently *remodelling* the liturgy to suit their particular dramatic needs. I have already noted that Jasper's words are not presented in the same way as the chants I just discussed. They are copied out in full rather than abbreviated: "hoc signum magni regis est, eamus et inquiramus eum, et offeramus ei munera: aurum, thus et mirram" ("here is the sign of a great king, let us go and enquire after him, and offer him gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh"). This does, in fact, represent another very appropriate liturgical citation, once again from the Feast of the Epiphany – it is part of the antiphon sung either side of the *Magnificat* during the office of Vespers. However, it is extremely hard to track down as such – because it is actually only half of that antiphon, the *second* half – so the incipit with which it would begin in its complete, liturgical sense is missing. The full antiphon reads as follows: "Magi videntes stellam dixerunt ad invicem hoc signum magni regis est eamus et inquiramus eum et offeramus ei munera aurem thus et myrrham" ("the Magi, seeing the star, said to one another, here is the sign of a great king, let us go and enquire after him, and offer him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh").[8] What the nuns have done here is clearly to chop the chant in half so that only the appropriate "direct speech" – i.e. what the Magi actually said to one another – is part of their play. This makes sense – within the context of the play, Jaspar should be speaking *as* a Magus, not narrating as though he were outside the play what happened in the past tense, which is the function fulfilled by the first, deleted part of this antiphon. I would argue that the reason that the now-halved antiphon is written out in full in the manuscript in the unusual way that we have noted is the very same reason that it now takes a certain length of time to recover it for someone relying on a database. The individuals performing this play knew their liturgy very well indeed, and could instantly find the right chant just from the conventional incipit. If the opening words of a particular chant were absent, however, it would probably be considerably more difficult to recall. A new incipit could, in theory, be created for the trun-

[8] Again, I cite the CANTUS database's master-chant.

cated chant, so that it could be presented in line with the conventional incipits, in the right margin. However, doing this could potentially open up more confusion, for if a new incipit were created for the half-cited antiphon by using its opening words – "Hoc signum etc," for example – it would risk duplicating the incipits of chants which already exist, and which would inevitably be recalled by a performer steeped in this kind of liturgical shorthand. There *is* in fact a full liturgical chant whose incipit is "Hoc signum": "Hoc signum crucis erit in caelo cum dominus ad judicandum venerit," but this is an unrelated chant most usually sung during Matins on the feast of the *inventio crucis* – the finding of the true cross – so it would be liturgically inappropriate for the Epiphany narrative being played out on stage. This play, then, suggests a convent production milieu peopled by female playwrights, actors and scribes (on which see further Robinson) who are extremely liturgically adept, and also very confident about modifying and re-deploying the Latin text of the liturgy in order to create particular and designed dramatic effects, demonstrating their full ownership of the offices they celebrated on a daily basis. In this, it resembles the *Mary Play*, whose compositor(s) were also deeply interested in moving sections of the liturgy outside Church worship, embedding them in pieces of vernacular drama to create more complex and nuanced appreciation of what it might mean for individuals to perform Biblical narrative – particularly that relating to the life of Christ – in a present-day space and time.

Johnston, in 2010, suggested that we might look to monastic institutions potentially to provide us with the missing production or composition contexts for at least some of the N-Town collection's component parts, including the *Mary Play*. The brief comparisons that I have been able to draw here between the *Mary Play* and the Huy convent Nativity may support this assertion: they certainly reveal some intriguingly comparable approaches to embedding liturgical citation within vernacular drama. Like the N-Town *Mary Play*, the Huy Nativity employs Latin liturgy as a way of conveying and exploring complex ideas about Biblical temporalities, and the acute temporal significance of liturgical worship. In both plays, too, this temporal significance is articulated in a particularly *feminized* context, and is performed upon the manuscript page by copyists, as well as through the mouths of female actors and characters. Of course, this discussion does not prove that the *Mary Play* originated in a convent, nor did it set out to. It does, however, illustrate an intriguing overlap in compositional technique and potential performance effects between a little-studied convent play and "the most 'liturgical' of

the medieval scriptural dramas" (Smout, Dutton and Cheung Salisbury 95).

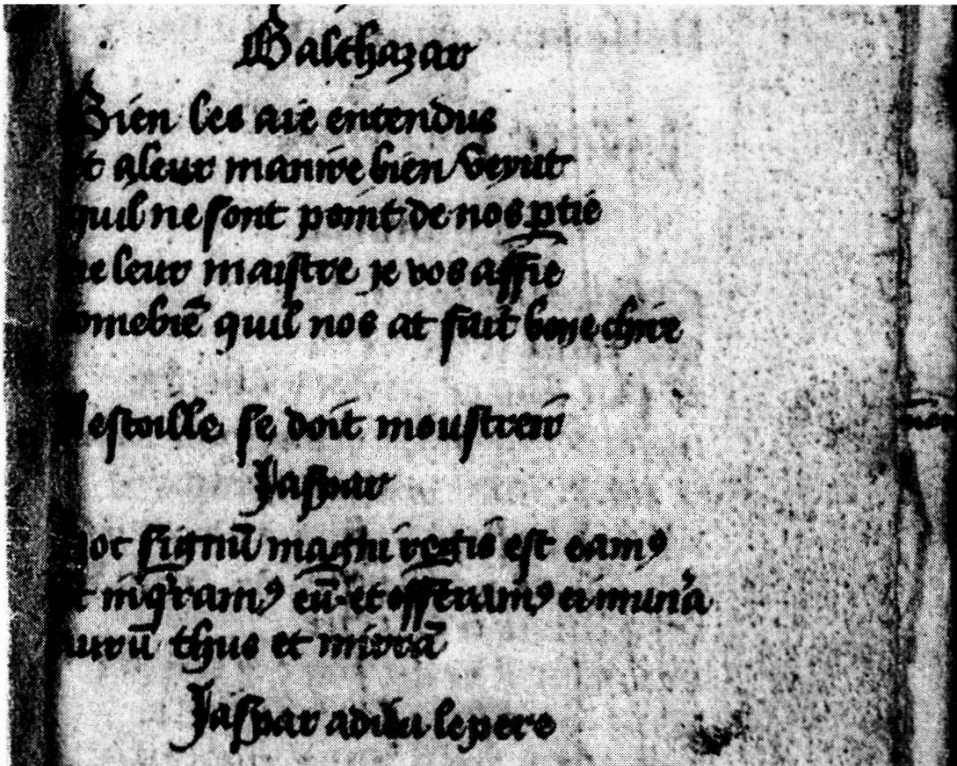

Figure 1: Chantilly, Musée Condé MS 617, fol. 6r
(Reproduced with the kind permission of the Musée Condé, Bibliothèque et archives du château de Chantilly)

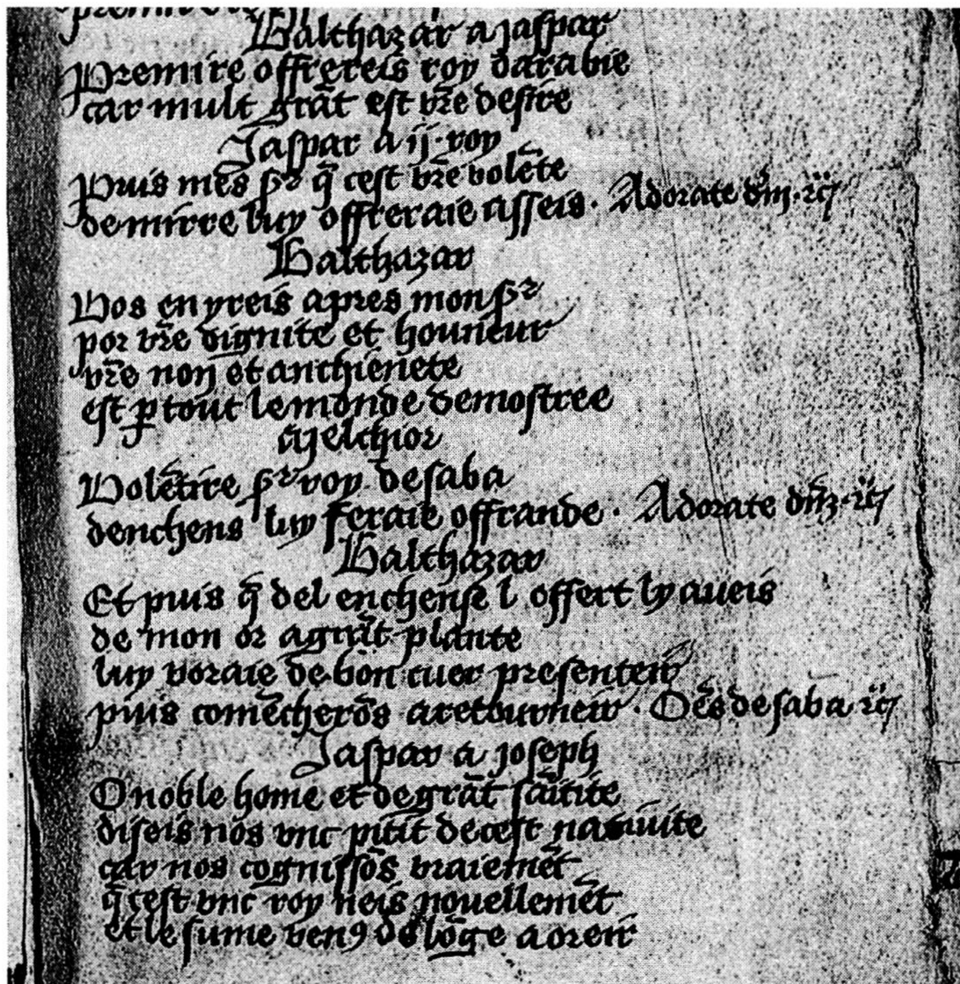
Balthazar a jaspar
Premire offereis roy darabie
car mult grat est vre desire
Jaspar a ij roy
Puis mes s q cest vre volete
de mirre luy offerrai asseis. Adorate dnm &c
Balthazar
Vos en vreis apres mon s
por vre dignite et houneur
vre non et anthieniete
est p tout le monde demostree
Melchior
Volentire s roy de saba
denchens luy ferai offrande. Adorate dnm &c
Balthazar
Et puis q del enchense l offert ly aueis
de mon or a grant plante
luy vorai de bon cuer presenter
puis come cheros a retourner. Des de saba &c
Jaspar a joseph
O noble home et de grat saintite
diseis nos vne petit de cest nativite
car nos cognissons vraiemet
q cest vne roy neis nouellemet
et le sume venus de loge a orent

Figure 2: Chantilly, Musée Condé MS 617, fol. 7r
(Reproduced with the kind permission of the Musée Condé, Bibliothèque et archives du château de Chantilly)

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