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The Only Good Wife is a Mad Wife: Antifeminism in *Nu noch*

Antifeminism dominates medieval literature, just as it did medieval life. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the Middle Dutch play *Nu noch* is filled with a male fear of and loathing for women. The antifeminism in this play is represented by two traditional types of woman, manifested in the same person. The first of these types is the unattractive woman who browbeats her husband, rules the household, and is a terror to all who encounter her. The second is the submissive woman who meekly kowtows to her husband. This second type may seem to be an attractive alternative to the first, but actually she is equally unattractive, for she suffers from a temporary madness. I intend to illustrate first that the wife in the play represents an image of Mary Magdalene superimposed on an image of Eve. Then I will discuss how and why I say that the wife suffers from temporary madness. Finally, I will demonstrate that although the wife in both her guises might appear to have some positive characteristics in a first reading of this play, when examined in more depth and performed as we performed *Nu noch*, the wife becomes an exemplar of antifeminist thought.

The play opens with the husband, a man who appears incapable of handling his wife, admitting in his opening speech that he perhaps deserves some of the abuse he takes: "But, to tell the truth, it serves me right. And sometimes I have to laugh until I cry at the way she tries to knock my head off" (9-11). Readers initially can interpret the wife, therefore, as someone who merely maintains control of a household that is not well managed by her husband. This interpretation leads to the conclusion that the wife is of strong character, a woman who will not allow her ineffective husband to ruin her way of life. If viewed in this light, the wife comes across in a favorable manner. While a strong wife may appear favorable to a twentieth-century reader, however, she would probably have been viewed negatively by a medieval audience. Granted, this play is a farce, but the wife is comic because she is so far removed from the ideal of womanhood.

According to medieval beliefs, there are two dominant traditional models of woman: Eve and the Virgin Mary. (I am indebted to Jacques Dalarun, "The Clerical Gaze," in *A History of Women in the West* [Boston, 1992], for background information on the medieval ideal of women.) Mary was the absolute ideal to which women theoretically were to attempt to strive. It was, of course, impossible for women to reach the same level of purity as Mary, especially since it was necessary for most women to marry and since marriage tended to preclude virginity. Eve, on the other hand, was the woman whose disobedience and gluttony caused the fall of man. I contend, however, that the antifeminist author of *Nu noch* called up images of Eve, yes, but he superimposed on her not the image of Mary, but the image of Mary Magdalene. That superimposition drives her temporarily mad.

The first image of the wife is the image of an evil woman who has a knowledge of sexuality. She is an Eve-type who will bring about the downfall of a man. Wives are of this type, because once a woman has gained carnal knowledge, she cannot go back to innocence. The initial image of the wife in *Nu noch* is the image of the Eve-woman: bold, dominant, controlling of her man. The second model, based on Mary Magdalene, represents a salvation for which all women are able to strive. Mary Magdalene was the prostitute who reformed after she met Jesus. He spoke to her about the evil acts she committed, and she accepted him as the son of God. She demonstrated her devotion to him by washing his feet and drying them with her hair. Through her belief in Jesus she was redeemed, and her redemption demonstrates the possibility of redemption for all women.

The wife at her initial appearance in this play is modeled on Eve. She clearly establishes herself as more powerful than Jack. She meets him with sarcasm, threatening him both verbally and physically. This wife beats her husband, belittles him, and curses

him, never giving him a minute's peace. We observe that the behavior she displays is not merely that of a woman attempting to keep order in her home, but of someone obsessed with power. Control over her husband seems to be what gives this wife joy. She demonstrates to a medieval audience the dangers of women having even a modicum of control; they become power-hungry demons who destroy their men's happiness, just as Eve destroyed Adam's. They do not even provide proper food for a starving husband.

Despite the slapstick, the message for husbands is clear: don't let your woman get out of hand. Control her before it's too late. Do what you can to make your Eve over into a Mary Magdalene. Jack does do what he can to suggest the great disparity between the reality of his wife and what he would desire her to be. He wishes her to be the ideal: a woman who would wash his feet, or at least feed him. He wishes that she were a Mary Magdalene.

Jack's attempts at control indicate that he has allowed his wife's behavior to continue for too long. As he carries out the neighbor's instructions, he pushes his wife to the edge of madness. To understand what I mean we must recall that madness, according to medieval belief, is characterized not merely by behavior that is out of the ordinary, or that is threatening to others or to one's self. People who were considered mad were thought to be possessed by demons. (I am indebted to George Rosen, *Madness in Society: Chapters in the Historical Sociology of Mental Illness* [New York, 1969], for information about medieval views of madness.) Demon possession, then, is not simply the cause of madness; rather, madness is demon possession. Once the demon has been exorcised, the possessed victim is cured. The wife in *Nu noch* repeatedly alludes to madness - seen as a kind of possession in medieval times: "This is the work of the devil himself" (88) - that is, the devil controlling your actions. She also tells Jack, "You'll be scared out of your wits" (99) - that is, your wits will be replaced by those of another. And she says, "I've never heard anything so weird in all my life" (109) - that is, you are acting so strangely that this is surely not *you*. These lines appear innocent enough, but they suggest that Jack's strangeness is almost like madness, his body being occupied by and directed by something other than himself.

As the balance of power switches, we see the wife transformed from being a terror to being terrified. This switch plunges *her* into madness. Her fear that Jack has gone mad undermines the energy and control that she has maintained up to this point, triggering the onset of the next phase of the playwright's antifeminist program.

Even before the wife runs out of the house, a transformation has begun to take place in her character. No longer the powerful, dominating woman, she knows true fear for the first time. She not only forfeits control to her husband, but she seeks the aid of anyone who will offer it. At the suggestion of the neighbor, the wife seeks the aid of a priest whom she wants to exorcise the demon that she believes has taken control of her husband. The transformation in the wife's character becomes complete with the realization that an actual exorcism is necessary to help her husband, for this leads her unequivocally to the conclusion that Jack is mad.

The wife has been told that because of her beatings and nagging, she has facilitated the possession of her husband. The implication is that she is an agent of the devil - an implication that pushes the wife to switch personalities. In a time of weakness, she radically changes her character from that of an Eve figure to that of a Mary Magdalene figure. This radical change in temperament makes her mad. Instead of the anger she has expressed moments before with "I hope God punishes you for this!" (81), she now expresses concern to both the neighbor, "Dear neighbor, come and help me!" (112), and the priest, "Dear sir, please come and look at my husband. See what's wrong with him" (134-35). Her madness is neither the frenetic raving of a lunatic, nor the senseless rambling characteristic of the madness she believes her husband to have. Rather, her madness is the madness of a woman whose naturally aggressive Eve-self is replaced, or driven out, by a contrite and submissive Mary Magdalene-self.

The wife is not possessed by a demon. According to medieval belief, then, she is not mad. I would argue, however, that she *is* mad because she is possessed, not by a demon, but by an alternate aspect of herself, one that is not true to her nature. By expanding the definition of possession, and in speaking this way about her madness, I am using a modern, not a medieval view of the self, but it does

seem that the wife's mental disruption begins when she replaces her true Eve-self with Jack's desired Magdalene-self. Because this new model runs contrary to her true nature, and because she enacts this change against her will, she is possessed by Jack's Magdalene. The Magdalene becomes her own personal demon.

In the scene after the priest and the food seem to have cured Jack, the wife's behavior may appear at first to be attractive. This wife is much closer to the medieval ideal of womanhood than she was at first - assuming that the Magdalene figure is the ideal. She is sorry for what she has done, she promises never to nag her husband again, and she relinquishes all power and control to him. This portrait is that of the "good" wife, the redeemed wife, the one that her husband has desired from the outset.

Why is this "good" wife as much a portrait of antifeminism as the first? The answer is threefold. First, she is brought to this state of contrition through trickery and deceit, by a husband and a neighbor who make her out to be a fool. Second, this "good" wife is the complete antithesis of the first. The pendulum of her character has swung in the opposite direction. Whereas the first wife was all-powerful and completely dominating, this new wife has no power and is completely dominated. Neither portrait of a woman is particularly attractive. Third, this "good" wife has gone mad. She believes that she has driven her husband mad with her behavior. Her guilt and his wishes have pushed her over the edge into madness. She submits to his will, relinquishing her own will. This complete reversal is symptomatic of her irrational fear of madness, both of her husband's and her own.

This new "good" wife is held up then as a model. She is shown to the medieval audience as an example of ideal womanhood, worthy of redemption. This ideal, however is made to look like a buffoon and a mockery of womanhood. That the Mary Magdalene woman should be touted as the epitome of a "good" wife demonstrates an even greater loathing of women than the portrayal of the first Eve-wife did. If she is the closest the husband can come to having the ideal woman, then the implication is that good women should not assert themselves, that they must be meek and contrite, that they must cater to the whims of their husbands, and that they should be quiet and invisible. No writer who respected woman, no writer who did not loathe real women, would imply that such behavior is appropriate.

Our wife does not remain in her mad state of dispossession permanently. The object of this play is comedy, and a meek wife does not remain comedic for long. With the discovery of the men's plot, the wife returns to her brash, sadistic self, threatening and terrifying both her husband and her neighbor. This state of energy and force is her natural state, a far cry from the meek mouse she had become. Again, this complete and radical change from the contrite Magdalene figure demonstrates how the wife had slipped into a state of madness, a state so far removed from her true self. She had to exorcise the Mary Magdalene who had possessed her, again illustrating how this figure correlates to a demon. The Eve-wife is again in control, turned back into a symbol suggesting that power in a woman is a dangerous thing. Once again, the wife demonstrates in a clear and bold manner the playwright's fear and loathing of women.