Marital Virtue and Sexual Satire: 
The Disorderly Marriage on English Misericords 

Elizabeth B. Moore

From the mid-fourteenth to the early sixteenth century, one of the most popular subjects on English misericord carvings was the disorderly marriage. In a farcical maneuver, the women in these scenes reverse the "natural" hierarchy of the sexes and dominate a powerless husband with physical violence. Placed underneath the seats of the clergy's choir stalls, these mad housewives join the ranks of hybrid beasts, contortionists, common laborers, and romance heroes who infiltrate the sacred space with secular amusement. The shrewish wife was a stock joke of matrimonial comedy in medieval plays, fabliaux, and sermon exempla, all of which are commonly cited for the motif's iconography. However, the violent scenes of husband-beating on misericords were designed specifically for the clergy who, unlike their secular neighbors, practiced sexual continence. This study accounts for the secular and religious significance of the "turned upside down" marriage as a visual jest of gender roles in the choir's context of celibate order. Furthermore, I argue that this fiction of gendered rebellion, which overturns a most basic hierarchy, reveals a common sense of humor between the clergy and their parishioners.

Development of the Image of the Disorderly Marriage

The earliest scenes of marital disorder survive from the first half of the fourteenth century, and in total the theme decorates twenty

1 My uses of "sex," "sexual," and "gender" are distinguished by the former as a biological, or natural, condition, and the latter as a constructed role in social identities. In the medieval view, women were governed by the lower wet humors and the "wandering womb," making their place in marriage a natural condition that confined them to the domestic realm and dictated their roles in society.
misericords in eighteen churches throughout England. It is during this period in medieval art, particularly in manuscript illumination and choir-stall decoration, that the repertoire of secular subjects was expanding in the spaces considered marginal to central, religious imagery. Recent analyses on the physical margins of medieval art have emphasized the reciprocity, rather than the antithesis, of the sacred and profane. In his article “Iconography and Ideology,” for example, Jonathan J. G. Alexander suggests that as the secular margins “frame,” or define, the religious center, and likewise as the center defines the margins, a “dynamic interaction of meanings” in medieval art discloses the overlapping of ecclesiastical and secular values. The physical proximity of secular subjects on misericords to their sitters, he adds, attests to this ideological inseparability.

Consistent with the anti-feminist anxieties expressed in Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath*, subjects like the disorderly marriage developed out of

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2 The earliest carvings with scenes of marital disorder are located in Hereford Cathedral (c. 1340-55), Ely Cathedral (c. 1340), and Tewkesbury Abbey (c. 1340-44). In addition to earlier examples from the fourteenth century, more scenes of marital disorder survive on English misericords than those of other European countries. G. L. Remnant’s *Catalogue of Misericords in Great Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969) is currently the most thorough inventory for misericord carvings, and although there is a paucity of continental inventories, Elaine Block is currently preparing a catalog of misericords on the Continent entitled *Corpus of Medieval Misericords, 1350-1560* (forthcoming). I am grateful to Dr. Block for sharing her records on continental versions of the theme.

3 Lilian M. C. Randall, *Images in the Margins of Gothic Manuscripts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 10. Christa Grössinger, “English Misericords of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries and their Relationship to Manuscript Illuminations,” *JWCI* 38 (1975): 100-1. Randall observed that the embellishment of manuscript borders reached a particularly creative height at the turn of the century in East Anglia, which is the site of the Luttrell Psalter’s scriptorium discussed below.

the interaction between religious teaching and secular amusement. Mikhail Bakhtin situated secular comedy in the carnivalesque, the concept of which reversed the agreed precepts of social hierarchies, e.g. male over female or bishop over novice, but later authors have pointed out that carnival laughter was nonetheless sanctioned by religious authority rather than diametrically opposed to it. Expanding upon Bakhtin’s concept of dialogue between the carnival and ecclesiastical, Aron Gurevich argues for the vernacular, comic elements in ‘official’ Latin sources during the early and central Middle Ages: “Carnival negates the culture of the official hierarchy by including it in itself, just as the ‘serious’ culture, in turn, includes the principle of laughter within it.” Also arguing against viewing medieval secular subjects as solely carnivalesque, Michael Camille emphasizes that the reversals of carnival in fact occurred on center stage, momentarily reversing, then reinstating social standards. On the one hand, the physical violence of these unruly women was a source of humor in the imaginary “world upside down,” where hares roasted the huntsman and the novice replaced the bishop. On the other hand, the very absurdity of female power over males served to reassert the logical distribution of authority established by God and entrusted to the Church. This interaction of anti-feminist humor and assent manifested itself in the margins of orthodox art from the first half of the thirteenth

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century to the early fifteenth century, after which the influence of print media modifies the theme’s interpretive contexts.  

The Church and the Image of the Disorderly Marriage

The Church’s didactic use of secular material gained particular force in the early thirteenth century, when the Fourth Lateran Council mandated that cathedrals and monastic orders address the spiritual needs of their parishioners more directly. More vernacular translations of the Scriptures and a growth of the mendicant orders, among other things, were elements of this movement. According to Lilian Randall, the increase in vernacular preaching during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries contributed to the rapid development of a stock of marginal motifs in illuminated manuscripts, which also influenced many themes on misericord carvings. One of these stock motifs was marital strife caused by an insubordinate wife.

The initial use of the disorderly marriage visually communicated social morals in the church building’s sculptural decoration, like the imagery Gregory the Great had defended as a “Bible for the Poor.” Fictional warnings about unruly women also appeared in thirteenth and fourteenth century English collections of sermon exempla, which are tales using contemporary situations to illustrate the practical points of Church doctrine, and echoed the moral points displayed on the portal programs. Finally, visual puns of


10 It is difficult for modern scholars to pin down the origins and sources for the “events” of many exempla, for the anecdotes were borrowed, translated, and retranscribed in numerous collections and compendia. For example, Étienne de Bourbon’s Treatise on Various Subjects for Preaching (Tractatus de diversis materiis predicabilibus), the earliest collection of exempla for mendicant use (Dominican), was copied for Vincent de
fourteenth century secular imagery reinforced the misericord image as stereotypical follies of the female sex and the carnal predicament of marriage. Moral overtones of expected feminine behavior were always implicit in the motif, and bawdy humor about gender relations on misericords contrasted the fleshly interests of the world with the celibacy of the clerical sitters.

Virtues and Vices... and the Disorderly Marriage

The visual representation of marital disorder first appeared in the cycles of Virtues and Vices decorating the portals of French Gothic cathedrals, built soon after the Fourth Lateran, first at Notre Dame, Paris, and soon after at Chartres and Amiens. The typology of the Virtues and Vices had served as a model of morality since the fifth century Psychomachia of Prudentius and was included in compilations of sermon exempla as one effective method of teaching doctrine in simple terms. From its beginning, the pictorial tradition depended on the female body to personify the diametric forces of Virtue and Vice in the battle between good and evil. Only in the thirteenth century, however, does an organized program appear in which the Vices are placed in a register underneath the Virtue personifications and are demonstrated by Beauvais' Speculum morale, in which we also find the Psychomachia cycle discussed below. Jacques Berlioz, "Exempla as a Source for the History of Women," in Medieval Women and the Sources of Medieval History, ed. Joel T. Rosenthal (Athens, Ga. and London: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 40-41. Berlioz stresses that sermons and their exempla sometimes address specific categories of female listeners and that female representations described in exempla should be understood as "daily referents" for actual women, 42-43. My use of the marriage treatise by the Dominican John Bromyard and exempla listed in modern indexes serve as suggestions for common sentiments that were manifest in the popularity of marital strife as a topic for preaching and the consistent popularity of images of the disorderly marriage. In other words, I by no means suggest that the moralizations quoted below were direct inspirations for misericord carvings.

11 ibid.
narrative scenes with members of contemporary society. Placed on the sides of the portals, practical morals were thus displayed to the visitors and townspeople who viewed these panels at street level.

Figure 1

On the north side of the central west portals at the cathedrals of Paris and Amiens, for example, the scene of a brawl between a man and woman represents Discordia, or strife, underneath the serene personification of Peace (Figs. 1 and 2). Discordia is placed in the center to the right of Malignitas, or malice, which is represented by a seated noblewoman kicking a kneeling male servant. To the left of Malignitas, the panel representing Ira, or anger, depicts a woman with long tendrils of hair and a sword threatening a hooded monk. To the right of Discordia, the panel representing Contumacia, or

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12 Adolf Katzenellenbogen, * Allegories of the Virtues and Vices in Mediaeval Art from Early Christian Times to the Thirteenth Century* (London: The Warburg Institute, University of London, 1939; reprint, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1964), 77. The precedents for narrative Vices occupied the historied initials of the *Decretum Gratiani* (c. 1170), but these are not juxtaposed to the Virtues and are loosely arranged. The *Decretum Gratiani* are listed in Katzenellenbogen (p. 79, n. 8) as Berlin, Preussische Staatsbibliothek, MS. lat. Fol. I.
disobedience, shows a layman striking a bishop at Amiens and brushing him away at Paris. Outside of this formulaic context, several of these Vices served as mockeries for manuscript marginalia and misericords in the thirteenth and fourteenth century. For example, a layman fleeing from a hare in the lower left relief represented Cowardice, which reappeared in the common marginal motif of a brave, armored knight running from a snail.¹³

Figure 2

In his classic study on the allegory’s history, Adolf Katzenellenbogen revealed a symmetrical hierarchy of the cycles’ organization around the most offensive Vices in the center, but he did not concentrate on the presence of gender on the most violently rendered sins. Though Discordia is represented here by an equal

¹³ For a summary discussion of the possible meanings for the knight fleeing the snail, see Camille, Image on the Edge, 35-36. In “Iconography and Ideology,” Alexander argues that, in the early fourteenth century, the idealization of the knight no longer carried the ideological weight of the Crusades, and thus the moral messages of Pride and Cowardice images were understood instead with satirical humor, especially in the margins, in which the snail or hare was literally the weaker entity to exaggerate knight’s lack of courage and power, 32-33.
struggle between two figures, the irrational violence of the two females against males in Malice and Anger to the left and the disobedience to one’s superior in the scene to the right, reinforce the implications of an unruly woman’s violence in scenes of marital strife. According to the iconographic analysis of Emile Mâle, the clerics in the panels of Anger and Disobedience are perceived as “the true spiritual lords,” and they are the victims of sinners, who are “in conflict with reason and law.”

It is no surprise that, as we will see, preachers used sermon *exempla* to assert that wives are biologically prone to act in disobedience and to attack their husbands with anger and malice, sentiments which are conveyed more clearly in the *Discordia* relief at Amiens (Fig. 3). The husband and wife seize each other by the hair, as a pot and distaff fall to either side. The husband’s turned head, free arm, and swaying stance imply that the disorderly female, who grabs his face with her free hand, is at fault for the most violent of vices, like the spiteful woman in the neighboring relief of Malice.

![Figure 3](image)

While the abstract Virtues and Vices had always been cast in the linguistic feminine gender (e.g. Malignitas), the use of lay women in particular as personifications of the Vices became more common during the thirteenth century. The latest manuscript illumination of the Psychomachia, from Saint-Victor, Paris, c. 1289, shows the Virtues as nimbed nuns and the Vices as townswomen. On the façade of Strasbourg Cathedral, c. 1280, elegantly classicized Virtues trample on compact Vices and pierce them with lances, as they would with demons; but the Vices are instead burghers’ wives. Already typical in thirteenth century cycles, figures of lay women could embody the antithesis to order, reason, and law signified by the ideal ladies of Virtue. In the literal use of “vice versa,” the lay woman’s position is reversed in the domestic scenes of marital combat; like the Virtues, she victoriously slays her antipode, who is also her superior, and thus she actually represents vice.

In her essay on “Women and Art in England,” Veronica Sekules explains that, separated from the didactic context of cathedral decoration, images of the lay “woman on top” satirize the convention of female virtues and turn the “allegory on its head as a warning against false virtue and misplaced trust.” Because the female sex descended from the legacy of Eve, including Delilah, Jezebel, and Salome, the notion of spiritual virtue for lay women was viewed with suspicion, and as Sekules states, “those virtues which were deemed particularly desirable for women, obedience, chastity, temperance or prudence, were precisely those which were

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15 Katzenellenbogen, Allegories of the Virtues and Vices, 7.

16 ibid., 20. Male members of the laity also personify vices. The wall murals formerly in the Painted Chamber in the medieval Palace of Westminster, ca.1260, depict the Vices as common male and female citizens, while the Virtues wear the dress and crowns of the royal family members who slept there. See Paul Binski, The Painted Chamber at Westminster (London: The Society of Antiquaries, 1986), 41-42.

most often ridiculed or mocked."18 Popular humor about women's acquiescence to social proprieties, as well as that about men's position in the domestic hierarchy, provided religious teaching with material that could be easily understood by parishioners, and in turn, enabled humorous subjects to flourish alongside more serious matters of Christian virtue and moral standards.

Disorderly Marriage and Exempla

Concurrent with the descriptive scenes of the Vices, images of the disorderly marriage have often been noted to reflect the content of sermon exempla. Preachers sought to assist their audience by equipping them with the proper sorts of virtues, such as obedience, chastity, and temperance, but more often than not this was accomplished with negative representations rather than with ideal models of virtue, such as biblical heroines like Judith and Esther or female saints.19 Since the ideal type was not possible for all women, exempla that featured contemporary wives tended to emphasize the "natural" disobedience, infidelity, and insubordination of the sex. In a treatise on marriage by the Dominican John Bromyard, for example, obedience of a wife to her husband was praised as the...

18 ibid. In the Prologue to the Wife of Bath, her fifth husband Jankyn's "Book of Wilked Wyves" contained the biblical and pagan historical lineage of feminine wiles over men, which was reinstated in the physical conflict with Alison that resulted in the book's burning. Several episodes from the biblical lineage can be found on English misericords. A carving of a miniature Delilah severing Samson's locks with oversized shears can be found in Gloucester Cathedral, ca. 1350. Ely Cathedral has a narrative carving extending into the supporters which depicts Salome's dance before Herod. The story of Jezebel, I propose, is depicted on a previously 'mysterious' carving at Holy Trinity in Stratford-on-Avon, ca. 1480. The left supporter shows a struggle between a man wearing a helmet and a woman with long hair, the central carving shows a male figure, perhaps representing Jehu, arriving on a crowned, hybrid beast, and the right supporter shows the queen with styled hair simultaneously being beaten by a man and eaten by a dog. Its neighbor is a misericord with a scene of marital disorder.

19 Berlioz, "Exempla and Women," 44.
highest womanly virtue. The favorite sort of tale from surviving collections that affirmed this hierarchy with humor allegorized the Garden of Eden in order to prove woman's capacity for disobedience. In such a tale, the husband would set up a broken ladder, fill a hole with nails, or provide some poisoned sweets, then he would tell his wife not to climb the first, put her finger in the second, or eat the third when he left town. He would return to find that his wife had done exactly the opposite. Such anecdotes simultaneously entertained the audience and moralized the qualities of virtuous living.

**Language and Puns**

Sermons, at least those available to modern readers, rarely denounce wives for physically beating their husbands; however, verbal slander is quite common, and references to verbal abuse offer a rich source for feminist critique. Women were characterized as garrulous, quarrelsome, and demanding in sermon anecdotes, as well as street plays, involving the troubles of marriage; their illicit use of speech was more threatening than any potential physical harm. Yet the distinction between physical and verbal abuse might not have been as great for a medieval audience as it is for a modern audience. For example, Gurevich describes the relation of

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21 Frederic C. Tubach, _Index exemplorum: A Handbook of Medieval Religious Tales_, Folklore Fellows Communications 86, no. 204 (Helsinki, 1969), cat. nos. 5277-5279. Neither Owst nor Tubach list any examples in which a preacher denounces a wife for beating her husband, though there are several where the husband beats her for greediness. See Tubach, _Index exemplorum_, cat. no. 969.


immaterial speech to material bodies and notes that "there was a tendency deeply inherent in medieval popular perception to translate the spiritual into the concretely sensible and the material." This, plus the fact that "prayers and psalms [words] were conceived of as material bodies", might indicate that the physical abuse depicted in a visual image represented verbal abuse as well. In the limited space of misericord corbels and manuscript margins, spiteful challenge to one's 'natural' authority was most effectively conveyed by the pictorial equivalent of the Vice itself, using the physical violence of insubordination found in the gendered, descriptive scenes of the Virtue and Vice cycles.

The physical nature of language can also be found in secular literature, and visual devices can reflect similar double entendres of its decidedly non-religious content. As Lucy F. Sandler has observed in her analysis of a "bawdy betrothal" in a bas-de-page of the Ormesby Psalter, the words for swords and male genitalia were often interchangeable in fabliaux. Similarly, the Ormesby image shows a young man handing a large ring to a lady, but the ring would more appropriately fit his dagger, which juts horizontally from his side. In the margins of the Luttrell Psalter, illuminated in 1335 in Lincolnshire, an image of marital disorder also uses the sexual pun (Fig. 4). The woman hoists an enormous distaff and presses her hand on the forehead of the male figure begging for mercy on his knees below her feet. Her domestic weapon overpowers the dagger that juts out of the man's slightly open

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24 Medieval Popular Culture, 194.

25 ibid., 195.


fichet, a sexual innuendo that makes his masculine "strength" subordinate to the non-virtuous woman. The moralizing opposition of virtue and vice is thus maintained by this scene's appearance on the folio opposite the solitary figure of an ideal woman in the lower margin — a virgin saint with a halo. The usurpation of male authority in the Luttrell scene emphasizes the wife as the "sexually rapacious" antithesis to the ideals embodied in the demure, quiet saint.

Figure 4
Although these marginal subjects were appropriate parallels to the moralizing anecdotes of the pulpit, their humor was further secularized in fourteenth century renderings with emblematic puns on sexual difference, emphasizing the biological vice of the female sex and the vulnerability of worldly men. Camille explains that visual puns on sexuality in the margins of manuscripts can usually be understood in reference to something else, e.g. text, main images, other marginal motifs.\textsuperscript{28} The intended viewers of such images, if we are fortunate enough to know who they were, also provide a context for interpreting gendered puns. For example, Madeline Caviness has argued for the marginal scenes of games between men and women as erotically encoded to intimidate the sexual virtue of the young bride viewing \textit{The Hours of Jeanne d'Evreaux}.\textsuperscript{29}

\textbf{Marital Disorder on Misericords}

As for misericords, which are isolated from one another by stall standards and rarely include text, the reference can be directed to none other than the monk or canon who occupied the same stall for a number of years.\textsuperscript{30} If we conceptualize the sitter as virtue suppressing the carvings of vice beneath, comic images about the laicized troubles between the sexes counteract in a humorous vein the serious pursuit of clerical celibacy by emphasizing sexual difference and gender roles. It is in visual devices enhancing the dress and emblems of masculinity and femininity that the comic relief works to underscore the carnal location of the cleric’s repose, i.e., physical humor between the sexes juxtaposes the sexual content to the scatological context. The physical and social impossibility of female power over males, or any inferior over their superior in social hierarchies, in turn, is reaffirmed by the cleric’s physical suppression. Thus, the satirization of female aggression appears as

\textsuperscript{28} \textit{Image on the Edge}, 41-42.


\textsuperscript{30} Carvings in the same choir, however, are not immune to thematic relationships; e.g. several carvings with Reynard the Fox can appear in one choir though they may be separated by two or more other types of carvings.
a common source of laughter, which resolves tension caused by such contradictory notions as the elevation of celibacy over marriage as a spiritual ideal and the institution of marriage as a necessary pursuit of the laity.

As Christa Grössinger has shown, the scriptorium of the Luttrell Psalter influenced the subjects and style of the misericords in the choir of Lincoln Minster, carved around 1370. The carving reverses the manuscript’s vertical composition of marital disorder, and the position of the victimized husband is raised to conform to the ledge of the seat (Fig. 5). Though the woman’s weapon has broken from the carving — which has made it difficult to determine the validity of G. L. Remnant’s suggestion that the scene depicts Judith and Holofernes — her wavy hair, lowered head, and scoop-necked cotehardie are nonetheless similar to those in the manuscript. The elongated proportions and graceful action were also preserved.

Figure 5

The male figure’s long, curled beard and the wrinkles on his forehead make him older than his precedent, and, in addition to his prostrate position, surely allude to depictions of the foolish Aristotle (Fig. 6). A favorite theme from secular romance, the wise Aristotle was subdued by the sexual enticements of Phyllis, the

31 Grössinger, “English Misericords and Illuminations,” 100-1.

32 Remnant, Catalogue, 90.
lover of Aristotle's pupil, Alexander the Great. After Alexander was forced to focus on his studies, she vengefully used her sexual beauty to fool the philosopher into being ridden like a horse. Here, a visual trope from romance humor perhaps influenced the rendering of the moralized vice on the misericord, thereby emphasizes that even the wisest men, unless they were tonsured, were susceptible to the wiles of women.  

Figure 6

33 See Susan L. Smith, *The Power of Women: A Topos in Medieval Art and Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995). Smith argues against the religious interpretation of carnal danger because the sequence was most popular for secular luxury arts, such as ivories and embroideries. The sequential placement of *topos* scenes in these contexts deliberately legitimized the power of women “to inspire love and desire in the worthiest of men” when it was followed by the Capture of the Unicorn, which unified the sequence with a Christian marriage.
Indeed, many of the husband figures in scenes of marital disorder are prostrate under the dynamic force of the abusive wife. A scene of marital disorder in the choir of Sherborne Abbey, constructed in 1437, satirizes the elegantly posed compositions of Phyllis and Aristotle. The wife, wearing a horned hennin, sits squarely on her husband’s backside, causing him to arch beneath her weight (Fig. 7). Appearing also in the choir is a misericord carving of a schoolmaster thrashing a pupil, which was another humorous image commenting on the proper lines of authority. It is interesting to note that the choir was built with the funds of parishioners, who had the year before contested the monks’ impositions on the parish’s portion of the church building and subsequently destroyed the church furnishings. The interaction of the clergy and their parishioners in this instance was surely confrontational, while the later humorous images on the misericords perhaps reaffirmed the general necessity of social authority through visual tropes mocking disobedience and hierarchical reversal.

Figure 7

34 The parish church was located at the western extreme of the abbey’s nave. The monks complained that the townsmen had set up a new font in the parish church and rang the bells for matins at unreasonable hours. On the other hand, the parishioners complained that the monks had moved the old font and narrowed the doorway on the wall between the parish portion and the church’s main body, which prevented baptismal processions. A riot ensued when the bishop sided with the monks in an official hearing, and the townsmen set the roof and east end of the building on fire. The archbishop decreed the parishioners to fund the church’s rebuilding, including the choir. Victoria History of the Counties of England, vol. 2 of Dorsetshire, ed. William Page, (London: Archibald Constable, 1908), 67.
Misericord carvings of marital disorder executed in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries exhibit flexible ability to satirize the spouses’ gender identities. The workshop of Lincoln’s choir executed the stalls at Chester Cathedral in 1380,35 where the scene of marital disorder complies with Lincoln’s composition, including the flaring skirt and scooped neck of the wife’s dress, as well as a prostrate husband who begs for mercy under the ledge of the seat (Fig. 8). Chester’s wife brandishes a cudgel and grasps the hood of his decorated armor with the same forceful action in both pieces. The worldly men of these compositions were characterized in various guises of masculinity, which, as in representations of Aristotle or a cowardly knight, drew attention to their not so masculine vulnerability when faced with the vicarious force of the virago.

Figure 8

For many scenes of marital disorder, the use of domestic weapons, versus those of men and war, recall the active and passive emblems of Adam and Eve, the shovel and the distaff, which signified gender

35 Charles Tracy, English Gothic Choir Stalls, 1200-1400 (Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1987), 70. Many of Lincoln’s carvings were repeated in the choirs of Chester Cathedral, which was St. Werburg’s Benedictine Abbey before the Dissolution (ca. 1370-80), and St. Mary’s, Nantwich (ca. 1400), 59-60. Nantwich’s carving of marital disorder is damaged, but the male figure, holding a dagger pointed downward, is significantly smaller than the female; her skirt alone is larger than he.
roles in the Christian order of marriage. A contemporary misericord in Boston shows a wife wielding a distaff against her husband, who, with a bow and arrows under his arm, has returned home from hunting empty-handed (Fig. 9). We also see a misericord in Carlisle Cathedral that is contemporary with Boston and Chester’s; here, the wife also wears a hennin and brandishes another domestic weapon, a washing paddle, against her husband. Framing the diagonal of the composition, his sword lies inert underneath his arm; its phallic form also underlines the predicament of laymen who must marry rather than practice celibacy. Bromyard perhaps echoes the sentiments of other moralists when he warned any man intending to marry of the “bitter wife who always quarrels with her spouse on his return.” The wives in these carvings grab their husbands by the beard, further insulting through physical means the husbands’ lack of power once they enter the private realm from the public world, though in actuality wives actively participated in the family economy.

Two misericords, one at Ely Cathedral and one at Worcester Cathedral illustrate the saying, “When Adam delved and Eve span.” Ely’s Adam and Eve, however, are dressed in modern fourteenth century clothing on each supporter, while the central carving of the Expulsion depicts them nude.

Boston’s choir (ca. 1390) has little stylistic or constructional relationship to its neighbor in Lincoln, and its misericord carvings have a chunky, cramped quality compared to Lincoln’s. While Lincoln’s choir was directed under a London master, an entirely different East Anglian workshop executed Boston’s. Tracy, English Gothic Choir Stalls, 55.

The specific dating of Carlisle’s choir is uncertain. Remnant states that Bishop Strickland erected Carlisle’s stalls in 1399-1413, Catalogue, 30. Yet, Tracy believes they were built in c. 1433, English Gothic Choir Stalls, 60.

Owst, Literature and Pulpit, 389.

Though I deal here only with conventional beliefs about gender roles, the research on actual activities of medieval women is increasingly productive and extensive. For two examples, see Judith M. Bennett, “Public Power and Authority in the Medieval English Countryside,” in Women and Power in the Middle Ages, eds. Mary Erhler and Maryanne Kowaleski, 18-36 (Athens, Ga. and London: University of Georgia Press, 1988) and Martha
Another truism of Bromyard's that is echoed in misericords is, "Daily experience suffices to show that those who wed for beauty, for sensual pleasure or for riches swiftly lose peace of heart and rest of body, and are changed into states of the greatest hatreds, blows, discords, and adulteries." \(^{41}\) Two misericords in Hereford Cathedral, dating to circa 1340, seem to illustrate the opposition of the bliss of courtship and the pains of marriage. \(^{42}\) In one carving, a young couple with their heads close together plays a board game (Fig. 10). The board sits on the maiden's lap, and their bare feet touch underneath to taper the composition. The intimacy of this sensual game, which was often attacked by moralists and preachers, serves to contrast with the image of the less compatible couple on another misericord (Fig. 11). The husband kneels to his seated wife and holds one foot in his hand. Not only does the composition echo the Vice reliefs of Malice, but the woman's foot and the shoe which the

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\(^{41}\) Owst, Literature and Pulpit, 379.

\(^{42}\) The misericords have been moved from their original positions in the choir and were reduced in number by Sir Giles Scott in the nineteenth century; Tracy, English Gothic Choir Stalls, 30. Tracy believes the choir's style of decoration place its construction between 1340-55, 70. This is a bit later than Remnant's attribution for the early fourteenth century, Catalogue, 62.
man holds also serve as inverted sexual metaphors for male and female genitalia.\textsuperscript{43} The sexual symbolism of this action is most familiar today in the fairy tale of Cinderella, whose conjugal union with the prince was implied by fitting her foot into the glass slipper.

Figure 10

Figure 11

\textsuperscript{43} Lutz Röhrich, \textit{Lexikon der sprichwörtlichen Redensarten}, vol. 3 (Freiburg, Basel, Wien: Herder, 1973), s.v. Schuh, 892-96. I am grateful to Elaine Block for this reference. A similar composition of marital disorder can be found in the marginal sequence illustrating the courtship and pains of marriage in the Decretals of Gregory IX, called the Smithfield Decretals, c. 1330-40, which is the only other surviving manuscript illuminated in England with depictions of domestic discord in its margins. The Decretals were written in Italy, glossed by Bernard of Parma, and illuminated in England. The manuscript is listed in Sandler’s \textit{Gothic Manuscripts} as London, British Library, MS Royal 10. E. IV (111, cat. no. 101). This sequence on folios 137-48v form one quire, and it appears in Book II on the judge and litigants rather than Book IV on the sacrament of marriage.
Furthermore, the angular drapery over the woman’s parted knees was a common rendering in secular ivories of courtship scenes, in which a betrothed couple plays chess (Fig. 12). In her article on the *Hours of Jeanne d'Evreaux*, Caviness notes that, in secular poetry, scenes of chess and backgammon carried implications of sexual compatibility between an aristocratic couple, and she sees the folds of the drapery as a bawdy reference to genital labia. Thus, in the misericord at Hereford, the bearded husband is overpowered by his ignoble lady’s sexuality in addition to her malicious attack. The positions of their bodies, the female in recoil and the male in retraction, contrast with the intimacy and relative equality of courtship scenes, showing the dangerous results of wedding for the passions of the flesh.

Figure 12

Misericord carvings of marital disorder from the later fifteenth and early sixteenth century maintain the occupational emblems of gender roles, and those of sexual power take on new formulae from continental prints. Prints are also influential in that choirs from this period include more misericords with more than one version of gender conflict and associative themes about the disorderliness of women. Scenes of marital disorder also take on a more “rustic” quality, abandoning the humor’s application to the noble or the burgher, which several authors have suggested reflect a shift of values in which profane humor resides in the conduct of the

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44 “Patron or Matron?,” 342.
economically poor as opposed to the rising standards of burgher townspeople during the early modern period. This shift was reinforced by the inherent misogyny involved in the pains of marriage where, as Howard Bloch notes, "woman is conceived as a perpetually over determined signifier to which man is always at risk."

From the initial use of the scene of marital disorder as Discordia and the use of lay women as vices in the context of moralizing programs, we see that the perception of lay women as problematic to spiritual virtue in the visual arts parallels the development of vernacular preaching with fictional anecdotes about the lay audience. As they repeatedly reproached women, sermon exempla both influenced and reflected the shared values of medieval society, their sense of morals and their sense of humor. Pictures of marital disorder effectively summarized the clerical suspicions about the female sex's capacity for quarreling, disobedience, and strife, which pervaded the female body as opposed to that of abstract personifications of virtues. While the moralizing content was certainly stereotyped by the fourteenth century, artists displayed flexible approaches to signify the sexual identity of males and females in the struggles for power, which made the traditional motif continually fresh with laughter. With moral underpinnings, such humorous subjects were not completely blasphemous to the sacred space of the sanctuary but 'base' enough in their follies, underlined by sexual references and gendered emblems, to be subjugated by the clergy's bottoms. Thus, the contradiction of ideal celibacy and moral marriage could be visually reconciled with the comic reversal of hierarchical authority.

Department of Art History
University of Missouri
Columbia, MO
