Throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance one of the most popular ideas in western culture concerned the reversal of the world — the world turned upside down — where the accepted medieval order or harmony was inverted in some way or other. This taste for topsy-turvydom, for example, included the topos of the woman on top. Sexual inversion, where men and women change their sexual roles, was a widespread phenomenon in literature, art, and popular festivals.¹ The idea of the virago who dominates her husband both mentally and physically, and who disturbs the natural order, became very popular and was favorably treated by writers and artists of the period.

The most popular comic example of such an unruly woman is Noah's wife in the Noah plays of the English mystery cycles. Of five extant plays on the subject of Noah and his Ark,² two from the Townley and York cycles (i.e. Processus Noe cum Filiis and The Flood) feature Uxor (Noah's wife) as a kind of virago — a termagant wife who seeks to rule over and even fights against her husband. Uxor in the Wakefield (i.e. Townley) is the most typical example of the woman out of place. The virago was so common to


² Four from the Chester, N-Town, Townley, and York cycles, and a very corrupt fragment from Newcastle.
all misogynistic literature, sermons, fabliaux, etc. throughout the Middle Ages that it is meaningless to try to identify which particular literary sources the Wakefield Master, an anonymous author of the play, used as the basis for his creation of Noah’s wife. However, it seems to be worthwhile to trace her roots by comparing her with the women carved on English misericords of the day.

Among the varied motifs to be found on those misericords, the reversed relations between man and woman, and husband and wife, was a much favored one. There are more than twenty scenes of domestic brawls which have come down to us, where a woman has usurped her husband’s place in the proper medieval order of things.

It is regrettable that for a long time the inter-related studies of both drama and folk art, particularly misericords, have been considered something less than respectable. However, misericords are really the traditional reservoir of folk motifs and are of considerable help for us in probing into Uxor’s character as a scold.

In the present paper I propose to discuss the Wakefield Uxor in comparison with those shrewish women on English misericords, and suggest that she is deeply rooted in such fields of folklore as the carnivals and festivals of those days, and her refusal to enter the Ark should be considered from this context rather than from the typological point of view, as has been suggested by past scholarship.

It is clear that in writing the Noah play the Wakefield Master intentionally merged comedy and biblical narrative to produce a unified effect. Therefore, the introduction of the strife scenes between Noah and his wife before entering the Ark, which I am going to discuss, aims at accentuating the main theme of disorder, punishment, and re-established harmony in this play. The Wakefield Noah play, and no other, has two comic strife scenes between the couple: the one before Noah’s building of the Ark, and the other on Uxor’s entering the ship.
The Battles between Noah and Uxor

In the opening soliloquy God says he will destroy the sinful world with floods and make an end of everything except Noah and his wife. He bids Noah build a ship and take his family aboard. Noah thanks Him for His blessing but says he will go and tell his wife as soon as possible, for what troubles him most is not so much fear of the wrath of God, or of the imminent flood, as what she will think and do:

My wife will I frast what she will say,  
And I am agast that we get som fray  
Betwixt us both,  
For she is full tethee,  
For litill oft angré;  
If any thyng wrang be,  
Soyne is she wroth.³

What awaits him on his return home is, as has been expected, Uxor's distemper and harsh complaints about his conduct. She wants to know where he has been and why he stayed so long. He is such a poor provider that however hard she may work, they live from hand to mouth. Noah says he has bad news, but Uxor curses him, saying he should be "cled in Stafford blew" (200), for he is always afraid of something, whether actual or not. Noah bids her hold her tongue, but she does not. Noah becomes enraged and angrily strikes her; Uxor cries out, but returns a heavier blow.

The point about this beating scene is, of course, that it allows Uxor a temporary dominance over him. Furthermore, it reveals her secret motives for treating him so harshly, which I have reserved for later discussion.

³ Processus Noe com Filiis 183-189. Further references to this play are taken from A.C. Cawley, ed The Wakefield Pageants in the Townley Cycle, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1958). All subsequent line references will be inserted after each quotation.
After the dialogue and battle with his wife, Noah goes out to work on the Ark. When it is built, he comes home again, tells her of the coming floods, and bids her flee and board the Ark with their family. However, she says she will not go in "Till I haue done on this hill spon a space / On my rok" (337-338). Noah threatens her with the whip, but she defies him and wishes she were a widow, as she leads such a bitter life with him. Noah is very much annoyed by her late entrance into the Ark. Another fighting scene between the couple follows; he beats her for the second time, and she fights back and even wins the round. It is not until after the rain begins that they stop fighting and enter the ship.

Traditionally, the theme and characterization of the Noah play have been considered as importing typology. The typological interpretations of Noah's battles against his wife and her refusal to enter the Ark have been made by such patriarchs as Jerome, Tertullian, Augustine, and a host of medieval commentators. According to Augustine, for example, Noah is a type of Christ who saves mankind by wood and water (by the Cross and by baptism); the Ark is a symbol of the City of God (i.e. the church); the Flood is the prefiguration of the Last Judgment. According to this symbolical interpretation, Noah's wife is the recalcitrant sinner who must be forced to come into the Ark (i.e. the church); her reluctance to enter represents her late repentance.

Almost all modern readings of the Noah plays have been explicitly rooted in such a typological scheme, and there can be no doubt about the validity of the argument itself. However, the comparison of these two scenes of the battling couple in the Wakefield play with those of man and wife in the English medieval carvings strongly suggest that the Uxor of Wakefield owes much of her character to medieval carnivalesque or festive traditions. Her figure as the shrewish wife who disturbs peace and order in the home can

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5 For a survey of the typological interpretations of the Noah story, see, for example, J. P. Lewis, A Study of the Interpretation of Noah and the Flood in Jewish and Christian Literature (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1968).
be closely paralleled by the many misericords of women beating their husbands.

**Domestic Brawls on English Misericords**

The following English misericords show battling scenes between husband and wife. We will discuss them in relation to the character of Uxor.

1. Beverley (Humberside): The Minster (1520)
   a) NUfW 17 (176:17)
   b) NUfW 18 (176:18)

2. Boston (Lincolnshire): Saint Botolph (1390)
   NufE 08 (87:8)

3. Bristol (Avon): The Cathedral (Late 15th century)
   a) SfW11 (47:11)
   b) SfW 02 (46:2)

4. Carlisle (Cumbria): The Cathedral (1400-1419) (Fig. 1)
   SfW08 (30:8)

5. Chester (Cheshire): The Cathedral (c. 1390)
   NfW13 (24:13)

6. Fairford (Gloucestershire): Saint Mary’s (late 15th century)
   a) SfE07 (48:7)
   b) SfE14 (49:14)

7. Great Malvern (Hereford and Worcester): The Priory (c. 1480)
   NufW05 (167:5)

8. Hereford (Hereford and Worcester): The Cathedral (1380 or earlier)
   SufE08 (62:8)

9. Lincoln (Lincolnshire): The Minster (late 14th century) (Fig. 2)
   SfE21 (91:21)

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6 The abbreviations refer to the placement of the misericords: N=North, S=South, E=East, W=West, f=from; U=Upper row, L=Lower row.

10. London (Westminster): The Abbey, Henry VII Chapel (c. 1509)
   a) SLfE06 (3rd bay) (98:6) (Fig. 3)
   b) SLfE07 (3rd bay) (98:7) (Fig. 4)
11. Manchester (Greater Manchester): The Cathedral (1506 or earlier)
    NfW05 (81:5)
12. Nantwich (Cheshire): Saint Mary’s (late 14th century) (Fig. 5)
    SfW07 (27:7)
13. Stratford-on-Avon (Warwickshire) Trinity Church (late 15th century)
    a) SfN09 (164:9)
    b) SfW12 (164:12) (Fig. 6) and (Fig. 7)
    c) SfW13 (164:13) (Fig. 8)
14. Tewkesbury (Gloucestershire): The Abbey (15th century) (Fig. 9)
    NfE02 (52:2)
15. Wells (Somerset): The Cathedral
    SfE64 (136:64)
16. Whalley (Lancashire): Saint Mary’s (early 15th century)
    NfE12 (84:12)

Fig. 1
Carlisle Cathedral
Fig. 2  
Lincoln Cathedral

Fig. 3  
Westminster Abbey

Fig. 4  
Westminster Abbey
Fig. 5  Nantwich: Saint Mary

Fig. 6  Stratford-on-Avon: Trinity Church
Fig. 7  Stratford-on-Avon: Trinity Church

Fig. 8  Stratford-on-Avon: Trinity Church
The symbolic meaning of beating varies according to sex. For a man, beating his wife is a corrective means of chastising her for her stubbornness, disorderliness and unruliness, and thus of submitting her to the law and order of the family and society. For a woman, on the other hand, beating her husband works as a "safety valve" to vent her pent up energy and frustration and thus maintain peace and order.

**Sexual Connotations and Domestic Brawls**

In the three Noah plays (except the N-Town and Newcastle Fragment) the beating scene is introduced, but it is only the Townley that features the couple fighting bitterly and Uxor abusive and full of contempt. It is Uxor, not Noah, who takes the offensive and wins; she promises three blows for two, resists and curses him, and knocks him out before she is finally subdued. Noah’s response to her blows varies from play to play. In the Chester scene, for example, Uxor strikes, but he does not return the blow. In the York play, he only coaxes her by saying, "I pray Ioe, dame, be stille" (121) and in Chester, "A ha! Mary, this is a hote / It is good to be still" (247-48). In Wakefield, we are more fully prepared for a more disobedient and shrewish wife and a husband quicker to respond to wild brawling. Uxor addresses the housewives that they may curse their bad husbands:

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We women may wary all ill husbandys;
I haue oone, bi Mary that lowsyd me of my bandys!
If he teyn, I must tary, howsoeuer it standys,
With seymland full sory, wryngand both my handys
for drede;
Bot yit otherwhile,
What with gam and with gyle,
I shall Smyte and smyle,
And qwite hym his mede. (208-16)
```

In the preceding lines Uxor abuses Noah for neglect and cowardice (191-207); here she says that when he is angry, she must tarry with a sad face, wringing her hands, but Uxor adds that at other times she "gets her licks in." On the surface, the phrase "qwite hym his mede" means that she will simply give Noah what he deserves, certainly, a sound beating; but at a deeper level, it serves some very different ends. In other words, beating, in this context, works as sexual punishment for the henpecked, passive Noah, which she easily believes he is. To Uxor he is a rather doddering old fool, fearful and cowardly, so that she will have to punish him at other times with her scheme and tricks ("otherwhile,/ What with gam and with gyle").

I believe this scene should be interpreted as importing sexual connotation. Uxor's secret reason for treating him ill and beating him hard is that he is now old, feeble, and impotent, something which Noah himself admits. Working on the Ark, he complains that it is too hard for his old bones, for he is "sich an old dote, / all dold" (265-66) that it is no wonder that his bones are so stiff and aching.

That beating works as a means of sexual punishment for a feeble husband can be clearly seen in some examples of the misericords. The carving of a woman beating a prone man (husband) with a birch in Henry VII Chapel of Westminster Abbey (10-a) symbolizes the woman's physical superiority over him.

Firstly, this prostrate posture of the man itself is a sign of his disgraceful inferiority and submissiveness. A famous classic example is Phyllis, who is reported to have made the old philosopher Aristotle get down on all fours and ridden him, saddled and bridled. Beating the prone man with his buttocks exposed, as in the example of Aristotle and the Westminster husband, means ruling and disgracing him physically. Secondly, breeches used to be

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9 As to the following discussion on the sexual imagery of domestic implements and utensils, I am particularly indebted to M. Jones, "Folklore Motifs in Late Medieval Art: Sexist Satire and Popular Punishments, Folklore, 101:1 (1990): 69-87.

10 All the subsequent references to the list of misericords on p. 222 will be given in the text.
a traditional costume, symbol of man's bodily sway over women, so that a woman beating a naked man without breeches, as at Westminster, shows that she is now physically ruling him.

It is worth noting that the Wakefield Uxor beats Noah with his leather belt, "langett" (224). Here, she intentionally refers to this belt as the one for keeping up his hose (225). Striking a man with a belt or a birch, as at Westminster [10-a] (Fig. 3) and Stratford-on-Avon [13-b] (Fig. 7) or with a distaff, as at Boston [2], Great Malvern [lost, 7], and Westminster [10-b] (Fig. 3) was and still now is considered as a type of sexual punishment for such tools are phallic symbols.

As for the distaff, it must have been a particularly convenient weapon with which medieval women could bludgeon their husbands, as spinning with distaffs was their common daily occupation. In carnivals and popular festivities throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, distaffs were often seen carried through the streets in processions as the symbol of fertility.

The distaff as an implement of punishment appears in the York *Noah*, where, irritated by Noah's passive manner, Uxor chastises him with the distaff she has been using. Therefore, it is not very surprising that the Wakefield Uxor equally beats him with this ubiquitous weapon, since she says she must keep spinning on with her distaff on the hill where she is (364-66), rather than enter the Ark.

Another famous example, the Digby *Killing of the Children*, centers upon a coward knight called Watkin, one of Herod's soldiers. Watkin is another henpecked husband, who is always afraid of being beaten with a distaff by his wife for his sexual impotence.  

The woman on the misericords who pulls a man by his hair, as at Carlisle [4] (Fig. 1) and Fairford [6-b], or tears his beard, as at

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Beverley [1-a, 1-b] and Lincoln [9] (Fig. 2) qualifies as a virago. Since both hair and beard symbolize fertility and rejuvenation, it means ridicule of a feeble husband for a woman to attack those parts of his body. Again, in ridicule of an impotent husband the wife hurl's a bowl at him [Bristol 3-a] or strikes him with a washing beetle, as at Carlisle [4] (Fig. 1) and Tewkesbury [14] (Fig. 9), with a stewing pan [Chester 5], or a frying pan [Whalley 16], or very often with a ladle or a wooden scoop, as at Fairford [6-a, 6-b] and Nantwich [12] (Fig. 5). Chastisement by such domestic utensils comes from the accepted idea that the man who undertakes the household chores is no doubt henpecked.

In the two knockout scenes in Wakefield, Uxor, like those shrewish women on the medieval carvings, may have revealed herself as a scold by grabbing Noah's beard, seizing his hair, or striking him with domestic implements. The York Uxor, incidentally, insists that she has to pack up her "tolis" (domestic tools, 110) as an apology for not entering the Ark early, so that striking Noah with one would be quite easy for her.

**Popular Motifs: Battles, Punishments and the Charivari**

In the Chester, Wakefield and York Noah plays, Uxor, refusing to come on board, strikes Noah. The general inclusion of the knockout scene in these three plays strongly suggests the importance that those playwrights attached to the scene and the popularity it had as a motif in the play. In fact, it was widespread in medieval literature and art. On closer examination, we come to realize that this beating is closely connected with "charivaris," folk customs of the day.

Charivaris, or rough music, originated in the fourteenth century, and could be observed in the English countryside until the eighteenth century. As with every branch of folklore, there are regional differences. Names vary from locality to locality, yet the common

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12 "Skimmington" or "skimmety" (Midlands); "riding the stang" (northern England and Scotland); "ceffyl pren" (Wales) (cf. David, op. cit., 168); "riding skimmington" (southwest England); "riding" (more general) (cf. Ingram, op. cit. P. 82).
feature of this particular custom is that it was intended for the public punishment or reform of offenders who violated social norms or rules. It did not take long until "unnatural" men and women, say, scolds and henpecked husbands, were included as victims, as persons to be punished or corrected. In skimmington or skimmety, for example, mainly observed in the west and south of England, there were processions and floats bearing a man with his face to his horse’s tail, and a woman beside him beating him with a "skimmety" (i.e. ladle), a distaff, or some such domestic utensil. They would ride through the streets, followed by "rough music." or noisy revelers.

The misericords at Bristol [3-b], Hereford [8], and Wells [15] depict a man riding face to tail on a horse as part of a great skimmington riding (Fig. 10). Sometimes the scene of a scold beating her feeble husband with a distaff was staged on one of the floats. One neighbor might play the wife’s role, and another the husband’s, and they enacted the whole story of family strife. Thus skimmington ridings were inseparably tied with dramatic activities in the sense that shows or performances were made before the "audience" by "amateur" players on floats for carnivals and festivities, as well as for social ridicule and punishment.

The Ducking Stool and the Ark

It should be noted here that another humiliating fate was promised for a termigant wife like Uxor. In a sense she was more severely tried and disgraced in public than her feeble husband. We know from a misericord at Beverley [1] that a medieval virago would be taken into a ship-shaped wheelbarrow and driven by her husband through the streets to a river or pond for ducking in water (Fig. 11).

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13 The term "skimmety" might come from "‘the big skimmington ladle,’ used by women to beat their husbands" (Davis op. cit).

14 It is a delightful coincidence that the Beverly virago is wheeled in a "ship-shaped" barrow to the ducking pond, since Uxor is also carried through the streets on the pageant wagon built like the Ark (ship).
Ducking in the Middle Ages, until the seventeenth century, was executed as a kind of public punishment for a shrewish wife. According to the research on variant forms of the term "cucking" (i.e. ducking) by J. W. Spargo,22 twenty-two of 110 references to ducking (stools) which span the twelfth to seventeenth centuries are of a medieval origin (1124-1500), their locations being widespread across England, from Yorkshire to Devonshire, from Hampshire and Sussex and Kent to Norfolk and Cheshire. Unfortunately only three of these 22 references: Kildare, Ireland, 1308; Beverley, Yorkshire, 1456; and Plymouth, 1486 show that actual ducking in water took place. Since few substantial records from the Middle Ages have survived, we know no precise descriptions of the ducking stool, or of the actual proceedings on occasions when it was used. However, considering the varied dates and locations of such instances, we can at least argue that ducking was a fairly common medieval practice.

Further, Spargo argues that toward the end of the sixteenth century, in which twenty-four cases of actual ducking were carried out, scolding women became more and more frequently the ones who were punished. From the sixteenth century onwards, we do have a good idea of what went on. With troops of spectators drummed up on a market day by the procession, the woman was ducked on a ducking or cucking stool. The punishment stool, moveable in most cases with two to four wheels, was employed, yet they had no definite form; some were chairs, others were pillories, and often "a moveable apparatus of unknown form, presumably chairlike, in which misdoers were carried or wheeled about from one place to another, again in public."16 These wheelbarrows, as, for example, the one at Beverley [1-a], where a shrewish wife was forced to get in, were paraded through the streets mainly for purposes of ridicule.

What should be emphasized here is the fact that this use of a ducking stool was a kind of social control rather than a criminal punishment. The aim was not to inflict physical pain on the domineering stubborn wife in question, but to display her shameless


behavior to the public — to her relations, her neighbors, and associates — and to lead her to correction. We might say that essentially it included dramatic elements because some kind of the audience participation was always needed. With the passage of time, the execution of ducking was incorporated into carnivals and local festivals, losing its function as public sentence, while gaining its function as entertainment.

In all the Noah plays except the N-Town, as mentioned above, Uxor flatly refused to get into the Ark, giving silly reasons for her refusal. In the Chester, for example, Uxor says she will not go in without her gossips (201-204), and in the York, she must go home and pack household utensils to bring them in (109-10), while in the Wakefield, she has to sit spinning with a distaff (337-38). In spite of Noah’s threats, she retires to a nearby hill to spin. It is not until she gets wet with water that she finally rushes onto the Ark.

Traditionally, all the reasons Uxor gives here before the Ark have been allegorically interpreted as symbolizing her secular desire and adherence to the world. Thus, she is a recalcitrant sinner, too late for repentance. But as far as the Wakefield Uxor is concerned, she apparently has some other good reasons for her flat refusal, for she insists that she will not come on board because she hates the ugly shape of the Ark Noah has built for her. She says:

\[
\textit{I was neuer band ere, as euer myght I the,}
\]
\[
\textit{In sich an oostré as this!}
\]
\[
\textit{Which is before, which is behynd.}
\]
\[
\textit{Bot shall we here be pynd,}
\]
\[
\textit{Noe, as haue thou blis? (328-33)}
\]

She is so terrified of this box-shaped ship that she cannot bear to think of being pent up (\textit{band, 328; pynd, 332}) there for months, sailing in the floods. Although she is speaking of the appearance of the Ark here, it somehow reflects her inner state of mind. This unreasonable fear of the Ark comes from her unconscious fear of being "cased" in this box shaped ship driven by Noah, and being "ducked," after all, in water (the floods), which is the destination of all viragos.
It was a common medieval belief that ducking a virago would correct her faults and induce her to be a better member of the community. Therefore, the virago was made to sit in a ducking-stool, or was shut up in a cage and paraded through the streets to a river or a pond to be ducked. Noah’s Uxor, like all those scolds on the medieval misericords, is to be shut up in the Ark and suffer from the tribulations of the floods for forty days and nights. The similar or parallel situations into which Uxor and the medieval scolds were put occasion coarse medieval laughter and humor.

Conclusion: The Virago in the Noah Plays and on Misericords

The conclusion to be drawn from the comparison of the Wakefield Uxor with the viragos on the English medieval misericords is that she is deeply rooted in folklore, a much-loved figure of carnivals and popular festivities. She is full of life and energy and her abundant vitality, coarse humor, and bitter abuse of Noah are all typical of festive motifs.

The slapstick comedy of the Noah-Uxor strife, as extant in the literature, serves to illuminate the typological significance of the theme of the Noah play. However, it should be remembered that even without any such consideration of her symbolic value, a new way to understand Noah’s Uxor might come through exploring treasures of medieval folk customs and popular festivities.

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17 If the scold will not take a thrashing, she must be either gagged and bridled, or wheeled to the ducking pond. On a misericord at Stratford-on-Avon [13-a], a gagged scold is depicted, and possibly another is in Ludlow parish church, Shropshire.