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Medieval images of womanhood: the construction of Mary of Nemmegen

The late-medieval English prose text *Mary of Nemmegen* (c 1518) relates the tale of a girl who spends seven years with the devil but is ultimately miraculously saved. In the context of Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's* textualisation of female experience versus male authority, this feminist study problematises the orthodox interpretation of the *exemplum* as a quintessentially medieval tale of the triumph of Good over Evil by offering a "resisting" reading of the text's constructions of Good/Evil, the church, and female identity. It does so by means of an investigation into the "authoritative" textual and iconographical sources of medieval images of womanhood — their nature and their coercive power in the construction of female identity, both generally and in the specific context of the operation of their discourse in *Mary of Nemmegen*. The text's culminating dream is also read "resistingly" as unmasking the falsity of these images of womanhood by liberating the text to interrogate and deconstruct its own key terms, notably the binary Good/Evil and the medieval church's construction of God.

Middeleeuse beelde van die vrou: die konstruksie van Mary in *Mary of Nemmegen*

Die Laat-Middelengelse prosateks *Mary of Nemmegen* (c 1518) vertel die verhaal van 'n meisie wat sewe jaar lank met die duivel verkeer maar uiteindelik deur middel van 'n wonderwerk verlos word. Binne die kader van die tekstualisering van vroulike ondervinding teenoor manlike outoriteit in Chaucer se *Wife of Bath*, problematiseer hierdie feministiese analise die tradisionele siening van die *exemplum* as 'n tipies-middeleeuse storie oor die sege van die Goeie oor die Bose; dit bied 'n herwaardering wat sig teen die teks se konstruksies van die Goeie en die Bose, die kerk, en vroulike identiteit "verset". Hierdie herwaardering geskied op grond van 'n ondersoek na die gesaghebbende tekstuele en ikonografiese bronne vir vroulike identiteit in die middeleeue: die aard en die konstruktiewe dwangmag daarvan, so algemeen gesien, sowel as in die spesifieke konteks van die werking van sodanige diskoerse in *Mary of Nemmegen*. Die droom waarmee die teks sy klimaks bereik, word ook "met verset" gelees. Op hierdie manier ontmasker dit as't ware die valsheid van die teks se beelde van die vrou. Sodoende word die teks uiteindelik vrygestel om self-refleksief al sy sleutel terme, vernaamlik die binêre opposisie Goed/Kwaad en die middeleeuse kerk se konstruksie van God, te bevraagteken en te dekonstrueer.

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For trusteth well, it is an impossible
That any clerk wol speke good of wives,
But if it be of hooly seintes lives,
Ne of noon oother womman never the mo.
Who peyntede the leon, tel me who?
By God, if wommen hadde writen stories,
As clerkes han withinne hir oratories,
They wolde han writen of men moore wikkednesse
Than all the mark of Adam may redresse.

Geoffrey Chaucer (c 1340 – 1400)
The *Wife of Bath's* Prologue (lines 688-696)

The English prose text *Mary of Nemmegen*¹ (c 1518) is a translation of a famous late medieval Dutch work, *Mariken van Nieumeghen*,² the earliest extant edition (c 1516) of which is a mixed text of prose and dramatic verse, including the oldest known occurrence in Dutch literature of a play-within-a-play, the “Play of Masscheroen”.³ The English text would appear to have been translated from an earlier and simpler Dutch version since it lacks the sophisticated rhetorical features present in *Mariken van Nieumeghen*. The relationship between the two texts is as interesting as that of *Everyman* and *Elkerlijc*, although less controversial. Thus, while the focus of this study is on the English *Mary of Nemmegen*, certain elucidating references will also be made to the Dutch *rederijker* drama, *Mariken van Nieumeghen*.

1. The text

Mary of Nemmegen's story begins (like that of the whole of humanity in the Judeo-Christian tradition) with temptation by the devil and a fall into sin. It ends with salvation through penance, prayer and a Marian miracle, thus becoming an exemplary tale (a popular genre in the late Middle Ages). Mary is the focus of influences exerted by all the other major characters, who have been described as “constellations” of good and evil forces surrounding her (Krispyn 1976: 364).

1 Huntington Library, San Marino, California, No 54046; STC [2] 17557.

2 NK 1089 (Nijhoff-Kronenberg: Nederlandsche Bibliografie 1500-1540).

3 See Raftery 1993.

Most of these influential characters are male. Her uncle (a priest) and the pope, both representatives of the church, are presented as the instruments of Good, fashioning Mary in their authoritative “images”⁴ of female virtue at the beginning and the end of the text. The influence of Evil is exerted by two characters, the first being Mary’s aunt, who represents the sins of the World and the Flesh, and treats Mary in such a way as to propel her towards Evil. But it is the second evil character, the Devil (identified as Satan himself)⁵ who plays the main role in Mary’s metamorphosis from virgin to sexual being to whore to witch and finally to wonder.

2. Perspective

Although the field of medieval literary studies was slow to adopt modern literary-critical theories and methodologies, the last couple of decades have seen tremendous progress, particularly in terms of feminist scholarship, which is the context of this study.

In attempting to analyse the various stages of Mary of Nemmegen’s “progress” through womanhood, this feminist study applies a “resisting reading”⁶ (to use the term coined by Judith Fetterley [1978]) of the text’s constructions relating to the church, to religion, and to womanhood. These are generally binary oppositions, supporting the concepts — or constructs — of Good and Evil. They are derived from texts which were viewed at the time as possessing divine or at least sanctified authority, such as the Bible and the writings of

- 4 The inverted commas utilised in conjunction with words such as “image”, “identity”, and “progress”, are intended to emphasise the constructedness — and hence the falsity — of these concepts in their application to Mary and to medieval womanhood in general. Similar use will be made of inverted commas in respect of the constructs of “good” and “evil”.
- 5 In this respect *Mary of Nemmegen* differs from *Mariken van Nieumeghen*, where the devil is given the ambiguous name of Moenen, and Mariken may thus remain ignorant of his true nature for some time.
- 6 Judith Fetterley’s term correlates well with Paul Ricoeur’s “hermeneutics of suspicion”, a phrase describing modes of reading which approach a text as a set of representations whose “manifest meanings” merely disguise a subtext of meanings which must be deciphered by the knowing (and, in this case, “resisting”) reader.

the Church Fathers. In an earlier paper focusing on the topic of identity (Raftery 2002) I have attempted to show that Mary progresses through what is merely a series of imposed “images” reflecting current authoritative constructions of womanhood towards an “identity” which is in fact false. The present study develops this research, focusing in detail on the images (both “good” and “evil”), investigating their sources, their nature and their influence in the construction of the concept of medieval womanhood, in the context of their operation in *Mary of Nemmegen*. I shall suggest that Mary’s dream, which concludes the text and heralds her death and the passing of her soul to heaven, may be read resistingly as unmasking the falsity of the images of womanhood by liberating the text to deconstruct its own key terms, including the binary Good/Evil. The imagery of angels and doves plays a key role in this reading.

As my epigraph implies, my reading is informed by the *Wife of Bath*’s textualisation of (female) experience versus (male) authority.⁷ Whether a “feminist”⁸ or not, Chaucer’s Wife anticipates several of the key themes of modern literary criticism. Her awareness of the potentially manipulative power of authoritative/authorial/authorised

7 The galling irony of having to choose a male author’s words as the best epigraph to a feminist study is typical of the problematic nature of medieval literary studies: despite feminist progress, medieval authorship (with certain exceptions, such as Hrosvitha, Christine de Pisan, Margery Kempe, and the female mystics) remains, for historical and cultural reasons relating primarily to literacy, a predominantly male terrain.

8 The debate on whether the *Wife of Bath* can be regarded as “some type of feminist”, summarised by Carruthers (1994: 39-40) in her *Afterword* and by Hansen (1996: 273-6), is less relevant here than the simple fact that she recognises the constructedness of the subject: of the Aesopian lion-as-trophy in the painting to which Chaucer has her refer, and of herself as the incarnation (or “retexualisation”) of the worst nightmares of the Church Fathers’ most misogynistic writings. See in particular Carruthers (1994: 22) and Hansen (1996: 283): “Words are powerful and determine reality”. It is highly significant that the *Wife*’s diatribe (235-378) includes as many as 22 occurrences of the phrase “thou seyest”, always in prominent syntactic positions, not to mention several equivalent utterances such as “prechestow” or “thou chidest”. Chaucer thus explicitly structures her discourse in a way which, to us, reflects an awareness of the Foucauldian idea of the power of language/discourse/texts to construct “identity” and to shape reality.

discourse (whether verbal or visual) to create (falsify) images which may be used coercively in the construction of “identity” is particularly relevant to this study.

3. The images of the female “progress”

3.1 Woman as virgin : the image of the Virgin Mary

The text⁹ initially presents Mary as a “yonge mayde” (7) who “dyd all yt was to do in hyr uncles howse” (8) and who is about to set off from her village¹⁰ to visit the town of Nimmegen to purchase groceries. In this first stage, as the product of her priestly uncle’s upbringing, this late-medieval young woman is thus characterised by two features, virginity and dutiful household service.

Virginity was typified in medieval times primarily by the image of the Virgin Mary at her Annunciation (Luke 1: 26-38), a theme so popular in Christian art that it is rivalled only by images of the crucifixion and the Madonna and Child (Apostolos-Cappadona 1994: 28). Early Christian depictions are simple, but by the medieval period the iconography has developed to include the lily and the rose without thorns¹¹ (from the Song of Songs) as well as symbols of purity such as water jars. Many later medieval paintings show the Virgin Mary holding a book, representing foreknowledge of the crucifixion, which makes her “fiat” all the more significant. The Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove, is also prominent, often depicted radiating light towards her through a clear glass window — a visual representation of the vexed question of her perpetual virginity (Apostolos-Cappadona 1994: 29-30).

The concept of dutiful household service was typified in particular by the image of Martha of Bethany (Luke 10). Other influential texts include Proverbs 31: 10-31 (on the worthy wife) and the epistles which enjoin submission on wives and other women (in parti-

9 All quotations from *Mary of Nimmegen* are from Raftery (ed) 1991.

10 Mariken van Nieumeghen identifies the village as Venlo (652). (References to the Dutch text are from Jonckheere & Conradie (eds) 1992/4. Translations of the Dutch text are my own, and follow the colloquial idiom of the original.)

11 A symbol of the lost perfection of the Garden of Eden.

cular Colossians 3: 18; 1 Timothy 2: 11-12; 1 Peter 3: 1-4). The Bible characterises Martha of Bethany solely by admirable (if somewhat volubly self-righteous) domesticity. (She appears to be intended mainly as a foil to her sister Mary, who is described as having chosen the better part by sitting at Christ's feet and listening to him.)¹² Christian art depicts Martha as a mature, plainly dressed woman generally identified by a kitchen utensil, often a ladle (Apostolos-Capadona 1994: 229-30).

This, then, is the medieval (male) religious construction of the good young woman: virginal and yet domesticated, and it is based on images originally drawn from the text revered by Christianity as the most authoritative: the Bible.

However, it should be borne in mind that the Christian interpretation of these Biblical images differed radically from their original sense, and that the Biblical stories were elaborated sometimes almost beyond recognition in other texts, many of which were, in the early centuries, considered just as authoritative as those later to be declared canonical. The emphasis on the virginity of Mary, the Mother of Christ, is probably the most extreme case in point, with the minimal Biblical references having been embellished in the gospels now described as apocryphal (notably the *Protoevangelium* of James), in legendary texts such as the thirteenth-century *Golden Legend* (written by Jacobus de Voragine as appropriate reading for nuns), and in devotional and meditative writings. As Heffernan (1988/92: 232) notes, in Jewish tradition virginity, far from being revered, was a cause for mourning (Judges 11: 37), whereas the Christian tradition venerates Mary's virginity as a sign of her divine election as the mother of God.¹³

There were also a great number of exemplary texts on the lives of virgins (some highly problematic in their focus on torture) in circulation in the late Middle Ages,¹⁴ but the single most important and

12 See Mycoff (1989: 1-3) for a discussion of Martha and Mary as examples of the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*.

13 The title Theotokos was conferred, after much controversy, by the Council of Ephesus in 431.

14 See in particular Wogan-Browne 1994.

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normative image of virginity in the medieval construction of (young) womanhood was that of the Virgin Mary. Despite the fact that the Old Testament prophecies do not identify the mother of the Messiah as a virgin,¹⁵ Mary's perpetual virginity was heatedly maintained by the church authorities, first on the grounds of her response to the angel that she "knew no man" (Luke 1: 34), but mainly because of its perceived "appropriateness" for God's chosen vessel (see Warner 1976/83: 54-5).

As Millett & Wogan-Browne (1990/92: xvi) explain, Christ's incarnation in a virgin was then held to show that "purity [was] the only complete indication of the presence of God". Virginity became a general moral doctrine, with strong support being found in the writings of St Paul (eg 1 Corinthians 7) and consistent endorsement being provided by the Church Fathers, in particular Augustine, Ambrose and Jerome. As Warner (1976/83: 67) demonstrates, the concept of the Mother of Christ as a virgin is inextricably interwoven with Christian ideas about the association of women with the flesh and their consequent threat to the male spirit. Virginity, initially an aspect of the veneration of one woman, thus becomes, ironically enough, an instrument for the subjection of womankind.

The image of Martha provides a further example of medieval Christian reinterpretation. According to the very popular and influential *Golden Legend*, Martha accompanied her brother and sister to Marseilles, helped to evangelize Provence, and rescued the people of Aix from a terrible dragon by sprinkling holy water over it (Apostolos-Capadona 1994: 229). As in the case of the image of the Virgin Mary, however, the medieval elaboration of such Biblical images of womanhood extends far further than mere narrative. It is the qualities of character and personality, particularly the moral qualities, imagined by Christian writers over the centuries which exerted the most formative influence. The following description of St Martha, taken from the *Speculum historiale* by Vincent of Beauvais (Mycoff 1989: 117-8), provides a typical example:

15 In Isaiah 7: 14, which is quoted in Matthew 1: 23, the Hebrew word '*almah*', unlike the Greek *parthenos*, means not "virgin" but merely a young girl of marriageable age.

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From her childhood, she loved God greatly, was learned in Hebrew letters, obedient to the precepts of the Law, beautiful in body, attractive in face, brilliant in eloquence, and skilled in all tasks appertaining to women. Excelling all other women in piety, overflowing with charity, thriving in chastity, she avoided all contact with men. Nowhere do we read that she had a husband [...] Possessed of an abundance of wealth and full of good service and probity, she distributed to her household and family their necessities with a free hand, and was famous for her hospitality, and greatly skilled in the preparation of feasts.

As can be seen, St Martha is characterised here as chaste, if not explicitly virginal, simply on the basis of a lack of evidence to the contrary. Conversely, however, the lack of any authoritative evidence of her wealth, learning, beauty, or other gifts presented no impediment to the imaginative claims of church writers over the centuries. It is in this manner that the “lives” of (mainly virginal) female saints (the only women, according to the Wife of Bath, of whom church writers “speke good”) were constructed. Such elaborated (ie, falsified) images of “good” women, created by men, were the templates according to which medieval patriarchal authority imposed its own externally-designed construct of womanhood, as exemplified in *Mary of Nennegen*.

It is also instructive to note, incidentally, that the discourse of the opening section of *Mary of Nennegen* is no less patriarchally dominated for being domestic. In patriarchal culture, as Fetterley (1978: ix) claims, a woman such as Mary is

never really child because never allowed to be fully self-indulgent;
never really adult because never permitted to be fully responsible.

In the Dutch text the uncle goes so far as to recite the shopping-list to Mary, though he admits that she is well aware of what groceries they require!¹⁶ This scene provides a clear example of the way in which women were taught to internalise the patriarchal ideology of their own inferiority and thus to co-operate in, or even actually desire their own subjugation.

16 “Wi hebbens ghebreck / Van keersen, van olie in die lampe te doene, / Van azine, van soute ende van enzoene / Ende van solferpriemen soe ghi selve ont-cnoopt” (4-7). (“We need candles, lamp oil, vinegar, salt, onions and sulphur sticks, as you yourself have said.”)

3.2 Woman as a sexual being: the image of Eve

The need for the mother of God to be a virgin was, as has been shown, an overriding one for the early theologians. Pre-Christian belief and classical metaphysics played a role in the construct, but the need for it was grounded in the Church Fathers' definition of evil, that force which exiled humankind from the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3: 1-24) and which, in medieval times, was seen to centre in the woman: Eve. Eve was a popular topic in Christian art from the early centuries of the church, and is depicted on the sarcophagi and in the frescoes of the catacombs as a beautiful nude young woman with long hair, holding an apple as the symbol of her disobedience and its potentially disastrous consequences for humanity (Apostolos-Cappadono 1994: 125). As Warner (1976/83: 58), with a fine awareness of irony, puts it,

For the Fathers of the Church after Augustine, woman is the cause of the Fall, the wicked temptress, the accomplice of Satan, and the destroyer of mankind. The fury unleashed against Eve and all her kind is almost flattering, so exaggerated is the picture of women's fatal and all-powerful charms and men's incapacity to resist.

Just as St Paul proclaims Christ to be the "second Adam", redeeming humankind from the consequences of the first Adam's Fall (1 Corinthians 15: 22; 2 Corinthians 5: 17; Romans 5: 14), the Virgin Mary's conception of Christ was hailed as reversing the curse of Eve's sin. Jerome, for instance, rejoices that "though Death came through Eve, life has come through Mary".¹⁷ The backgrounds of several medieval paintings of the annunciation and of the Madonna and Child¹⁸ include depictions of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden, emphasising this dichotomous relationship. Many medieval texts celebrate it too,¹⁹ some making specific use of the "Eva/Ave" theme, a palindrome of Evil-versus-Good which neatly encapsulates

17 Letter 22, quoted in Warner 1976/83: 54.

18 For example, Giovanni di Paolo di Grazia's *The Annunciation* (c 1445) in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC (see Apostolos-Cappadono 1994: 29).

19 The most famous of the medieval lyrics to do so is "Adam lay ybowndyn", which exemplifies the understanding of Mary's "fiat" as having rendered the sin of the Fall a fortunate one — the "*felix culpa*".

the binary nature of so much of religious thought and imagery in the period.

Mary of Nemmegen's "progress" reverses the order of this traditional binary opposition between the fallen Eve, who was held responsible for original sin, for death, and for damnation, and Mary, whose role in humbly accepting God's will was seen as crucial to the salvation of humanity. The second stage of Mary of Nemmegen's metamorphosis, her construction as a sexual being, is catalysed by her aunt's angry refusal to offer her accommodation for the night, despite the fact that it would be courting disaster for her to travel home so late. The reason given for the aunt's lack of hospitality is that she has been enraged by a quarrel with her neighbours about a political issue and that "they all semed madde & semed more to be dyuyllles [devils] then women" (16-17) — an explicit connection with Evil.

The role played by certain types of discourse in this scene is important. Firstly, in traditional medieval terms, the discourse of politics (like that of theology, discussed above in connection with virginity) is an area of male power, which the aunt and her female neighbours have "invaded". Female engagement in political discourse is clearly connected here with the demonic, and the warning is repeated: the text indicates that the aunt will eventually commit suicide over the same political issue. In that later scene it is explicitly the devil who "tempted hyr to cut hyr owne throte" (189) and ultimately "toke the sowle and bare it to hell to euerlastyng payne" (191-1). As Bromberg (1978) points out, the transgressive aunt's fate is intended as a prefiguring of her niece Mary's own potentially tragic end: not just death, but damnation.

The second type of discourse which the aunt employs is that of sexuality, and here too her power operates along traditionally male lines, for she attacks Mary with all manner of charges of misconduct:

Alas, pore mayde! Ye nede nat to fere [...] for ye knowe well
anoughe howe that ye shulde lye! [...] I knowe well that ye haue
daunsed many a daunse where there was no mynstrell! [a reference
to sexual intercourse] And ye be a mayde styll to [until] your belly
were great! (31-3; 38-40).

Despite their bourgeois register, these insulting allegations are reminiscent of the writings of the more virulently misogynist Church

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Fathers. Tertullian,²⁰ for example, in his epistle *De pudicitia* (I.1), writes that modesty in dress is becoming to women in view of their responsibility for introducing sin into the world, and that they should go about

as Eve, mourning and repentant, in order that by every garb of penitence [they] might the more fully expiate that which [they derive] from Eve — the ignominy [...] of the first sin, and the odium (attaching to her as the first cause) of human perdition [... Women] are the devil's gateway [...] the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree [...] the first deserter of the divine law [...] she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. [Woman] destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of [woman's] desert — that is, death — even the Son of God had to die.

As may be seen from this quotation, the opprobrium heaped upon Eve served in part as an exculpation of Adam, who could thus be constructed more as a victim than as a co-offender: original sin was blamed on womankind, and Adam became, indeed, not only her victim but her first accuser. Lest it be thought that Tertullian was unrepresentative in being exceptionally misogynistic, it should be noted that a greater and more influential Father, Jerome,²¹ cites him approving-

20 See for example *De exhortatione castitatis*, and *De monogamia* as well as *De pudicitia*. Tertullian (c 150-c 230), who converted to Christianity before 197, eventually joined an ascetic Montanist sect. His thought and language powerfully influenced Christianity, preparing the way for the pessimistic doctrine of the fall and original sin which came, through Augustine, to dominate Latin theology (Cross & Livingstone 1977: 1353). In the present context, his epistle on women's apparel is a telling example of his attitude to women.

21 Despite his exalted status as a doctor of the church, Jerome (c 341-420) is, to us, a somewhat paradoxical figure: a highly cultured advocate of extreme asceticism. His writings reveal an appreciation of classical literature, including the erotic texts, and include many letters in which he acts as an approving mentor to various worthy Roman virgins and widows (personal communication — Dr J F G Cilliers). Yet in the epistle cited above, he quotes the Epistle of Jude, and concludes dogmatically that “all who have not preserved their virginity, in comparison of pure and angelic chastity and of our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, are defiled” (I.40) (Cross & Livingstone 1977: 731). It is also interesting to note, in view of the Wife of Bath's specifically leonine challenge to the Church Fathers, and particularly to Jerome, that he is often iconographically depicted in a monastic cave with a lion at his feet (Farmer 1978: 210).

ly in his epistle *Adversus Jovinianum* (I.13), a text which, significantly, provides a defence of the superiority of virginity to any other state.

In the second major scene of *Mary of Nemmegen*, thus, despite Mary's aunt's biologically female gender, the image in which she reconstructs the hitherto virtuous Mary is of fundamentally male, patriarchal derivation, with its authority proceeding, again, from the Bible. It is the image of the sexually aware and active being, or the temptress: the fallen Eve. The sin of humankind's disobedience in the Garden of Eden brought death into the world, and from the earliest times Christian exegesis associated sexuality²² with sin and death, and blamed womankind for all three.

What is more, the aunt's allegations of sexual misconduct, though false at the time, are all too soon to come true, for the construction of woman as a sexual being by means of authoritative images leads on to her construction as a whore, by the same means. Hence the text reveals that — as the Wife of Bath is well aware — the constructive power of discourse is more than suggestive; it is determining.²³

3.3 Woman as whore: the image of Mary Magdalene

The image of Eve as the (sexual) temptress of Adam leads on to the image of the whore: in medieval times typified by Mary Magdalene. If Eve and the Virgin Mary were seen as a diptych — one virgin's disobedient sin bringing death to the world while the other's obedience brought life — the relation between the virginal Mother and the repentant harlot Magdalene, whose later sanctification emphasised the possibility of forgiveness for all penitents, was viewed as similarly dichotomous. Together, as Warner (1976/83: 225; 235) points out, they

22 Or concupiscence, the involuntary impulse of desire which cannot be quelled by the will.

23 Indeed, the possible consequences of Mary's odyssey, warningly hinted at by her uncle: "for it is yll for a mayd for to goo alone in the nyght" (12), and fearfully described by herself: "often tymes by nyght is a mayde espyed and tane & rauysshed, & therfore am I afrayde" (29-31), are now virtually prescribed as her "just deserts" by her aunt: "I had leuer that ye lay in the ryuer than in my howse!" (44). The aunt is equally callous when responding to enquiries from Mary's uncle in a later scene: "If that she hath be broched she shall be the esyar for a nother & she shall neuer halte therof" (174-5).

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typify medieval Christianity's attitudes to women and to sex: "The Church venerate[d] two ideals of the feminine — consecrated chastity in the Virgin Mary and regenerate sexuality in the Magdalene."

As in the cases of the Virgin Mary and Martha of Bethany, the medieval figure of Mary Magdalene, washing Christ's feet with her tears and wiping them with her hair, and later being the first witness to his resurrection, represents a significant re-interpretation. She is actually a conflation of three or even four Biblical figures which the Church in the West owed to Pope Gregory the Great (590-604): the unnamed repentant "sinner" in Luke 7: 36-50, the exorcised Mary of Magdala in Mark 16: 9 and Luke 8: 2-7, Martha's sister Mary of Bethany in Luke 10: 38-42 and John 11: 1-12: 8, and the woman taken in adultery in John 8: 1-11 (who serves as a reminder to us that Biblical whores were stoned to death).²⁴ The Magdalene followed in the Judaic tradition of the redeemed harlot (such as Rahab in Joshua 2) and was to become the prototype of other penitent whores such as the courtesan Thaïs, the actress Pelagia, and the fifth-century hermit saint Mary of Egypt, with whom she was later confused and conflated (see Warner 1976/83: 232-5). As a result of this conflation, medieval art represents the Magdalene both as a beautiful young woman with flowing red hair and an unguent jar, either elegantly dressed (before her conversion) or simply attired (after her conversion), and as a haggard, naked, elderly woman with a sunken face and a wasted body covered by her long disheveled hair (Apostolos-Cappadona 1994: 236). The association of female beauty, sexuality and sin is constantly stressed in medieval drama and art.²⁵

At the point we have reached in *Mary of Nimmegen* it is the image of the Magdalene as a whore which is constructive; her repentance and sanctification will be relevant later. The immediate agent of Mary of Nimmegen's actual construction as whore is Satan, the sedu-

24 She also figures prominently in the apocryphal Gospel of Mary and in Gnostic writings, where she is an initiate of Christ's mysteries.

25 Cf. Piero della Francesca's *Madonna della Misericordia* (c 1445-48), which demonstrates the dichotomous view of the Virgin and the Magdalene, as well as the Digby Play of Mary Magdalene, where seven devils (concealed beneath the player's skirts, with ingenious use of a trapdoor) are exorcised from her.

cer who initially assumes the identity of a gentleman-scholar, telling her: "I am a master of many scyances" (78). This temptation-scene is the most crucial and complex in the whole text.

Satan's "incarnation" is not flawless, for he has a deformity in one eye, in keeping with the medieval belief that a devil's disguise was always imperfect. (The cloven hoof is a common example, as are horns or a tail.)²⁶ In return for the many gifts he offers, Satan ostensibly asks Mary only to be his "love" (71), or his "paramour" (79). But his gifts, including knowledge,²⁷ languages, costly jewels, money, power and pleasure, amount to an offer to make her "a woman about all other women" (72-3): a phrase resonating with blasphemy in its echo of the status of the Virgin Mary. This suggests a *hubris* for Mary not unlike Lucifer's against God (or the interpretation of Eve's eating the apple in an attempt to gain knowledge and power which would surpass Adam's, as in Milton's *Paradise Lost*). However, since it is clear that Mary's action in ultimately becoming Satan's protégé is motivated by despair at having been refused lodging by her aunt rather than by any desire for self-aggrandisement, the suggestion of *hubris* is very much part of the process whereby constructs of identity are imposed upon her. Satan's real aim, of course, goes much further than mere seduction; he wishes to damn Mary's soul. Indeed, at his first appearance, he is described as "at all tymes reddy for to hauke after dampned sowles" (58-9),²⁸ and it will be in this context that he will employ Mary as an instrument of his power: using her beauty, eloquence and learning to draw crowds among which he can sow

26 Incidentally, the illustrator has added the more recognisable demonic sign of horns, protruding through Satan's academic cap, to the woodcut of Mary's meeting with him. The text, however, indicates that Satan has only one good eye, "for the dyuell can neuer turne hym in the lykenes of a man but he hathe some faute" (60-1). The belief in the flaw in demonic disguises persisted for some time; Shakespeare, for instance, writes of "proper deformity" in the devil (*King Lear* IV.ii.60).

27 Satan specifies that he is offering academic learning, knowledge of the "seven free scyences" or liberal arts (143).

28 McKinnell (1993: 3) correctly notes the prevalence of hunting metaphors in association with Satan (cf lines 55-6, 237-8, and 273). His suggestion that these may have been introduced by the English translator (1993: 4) is not, however, borne out by comparison with the extant Dutch text.

division, death and damnation. His re-construction of Mary will also result in her further transformation into a witch — the fourth female “image” in which she is to be inscribed.²⁹

3.4 Woman as witch: the imagery of the *Malleus Maleficarum*

In the late Middle Ages, the witch was a very current and powerful construct, with a complex discourse valorised by authoritative texts. The Biblical image of the Witch of Endor, the necromancer consulted by Saul before his final battle against the Philistines (1 Samuel 28), would have been familiar, as would the condemnations of witchcraft in both the Old Testament (eg Exodus 22: 18 and Deuteronomy 18: 10) and the New (Galatians 5: 20). But for the contemporary readers of *Mary of Nijmegen* (and even more so for the continental audience of *Mariken van Nieumeghen*) the most vital and compelling source of the image would have been the handbooks on witchcraft and descriptions of witch trials, with the *Malleus Maleficarum* (“Hammer of the Witches”) being the foremost of these.³⁰ First published c.1486, it had seen an unprecedented fourteen editions by the end of the second decade of the sixteenth century when *Mary of Nijmegen* and the earliest extant text of *Mariken van Nieumeghen* were published, and was to remain in great demand for another century and a half (Summers 1928/48: xiii-xiv).

The *Malleus* was the handbook of the inquisitors Henricus (Heinrich) Kramer and Jacobus (James) Sprenger, who were appointed in terms of pope Innocent VIII’s Bull of 1484, *Summis desiderantes*. Its effect was to give official sanction to age-old superstition by confirming the possibility of explicit or implicit “pacts” with the devil, in

29 Interestingly, the Riverside Chaucer editors (Benson 1988: 818) note a study which attempts to identify the Wife of Bath with Alice Kyteler, an Irish woman tried for witchcraft, hence identifying an even closer textual link constructed between Chaucer’s fictional character and Mary of Nijmegen.

30 Summers (1928/48: xiii-xiv) describes it as “the most prominent, the most important, the most authoritative volume [...] in the whole vast literature of witchcraft” and describes its authority as “ultimate, irrefutable [and] unarguable”. It was to exert this influence over European jurisprudence for almost three centuries.

terms of which the human partner was branded a witch and a heretic (terms which, though distinct by definition, were in practice virtually synonymous). This topic is discussed in early Church literature; however, most influential prelates appear to have dismissed rumours of covens, demonic possessions, pacts and *maleficium* as mere fabrication until well into the thirteenth century (cf Cross & Livingstone 1977: 1494). From the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) onwards the topic becomes more prominent, popular superstition having been reinforced by crusader tales of Arabic and Jewish magic (cf Cohn 1976: 224). Nevertheless, mass persecutions of alleged witches began only in the later fifteenth century.

In order for witchcraft to be equated with heresy (a much more serious and potentially capital offence), the pact's consecration of the self to the devil had to be interpreted as implying the rejection of God and the Christian faith: yet another instance of the all-pervasive operation of binary thought in the medieval church. Indeed, the entry into such a pact was often portrayed as a systematic perversion, or indeed inversion, of the entry into the life of the church by means of the seven sacraments (cf Raftery 1990: 82). In medieval art, witches were generally depicted as naked elderly women with sagging breasts and bellies and straggly hair, although they could also be beautiful temptresses. They are depicted flying to covens on broomsticks and performing obscene acts with devils (sometimes in the form of animals such as goats). Female witches, always considered lascivious, were often shown copulating in the superior position, as a sign of their ability to "turn the world upside down" (Apostolos-Cappadono 1994: 344).

Although the word "witch" is not used in *Mary of Nemmegen*, the discourse of witchcraft is consistently employed to construct Mary in that image (cf Raftery 2002) and Satan speedily makes use of her beauty and her diabolically-conferred learning³¹ to achieve his ends. Satan's demands, which reveal his fear of the Holy Names, amount to an implicit "pact", including her renaming as "Emmekyn" (a diminutive form of the initial M). An orthodox interpretation of *Mary of*

31 It is suggested that such learning can only be evil because, like Mary's aunt's political discourse, it represents an authority or power unnatural to women, which must therefore be derived from the devil by a witch.

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Nemmegen would see this perversion of baptism as the turning-point of Mary's life, seducing her from the world of good and initiating her into the devil's power and the world of evil (cf Raftery 1990: 87-8). But, as Mary Daly (1973: 8) makes clear, it is not only when named or renamed by specifically diabolical powers that women's identity is falsified:

[W]omen have had the power of naming stolen from us. We have not been free to use our own power to name ourselves, the world, or God. [...] Women are now realizing that the universal imposing of names by men has been false because partial.

In a "resisting", feminist reading, thus, Mary's diabolical re-baptism is merely one more stage in the ongoing construction of her "identity" by the imposition of a series of images from the discourse of authoritative patriarchal texts. The orthodox reading's key distinction between "good" and "evil" (as defined by the church) falls away, since all the images of women are false.³²

Mary is thus consistently denied any authentic selfhood, subject status or autonomous identity; she is perpetually the "other" and the object. Having undergone construction as virgin, a sexual being, a whore and a witch by a patriarchal society which derives its repressively circumscribed images of womanhood from the (male) discourse of religion and the authority of the Bible, the Church Fathers, and the Inquisition, and which marginalises women for fear of the potential power of autonomous female identity (particularly sexual identity), Mary of *Nemmegen* is described as spending seven years as the instrument of Satan in what the church viewed as the constant cosmic battle between Good and Evil — God and the Devil — before embarking on the final stage of her construction, involving miracles, religious profession and, ultimately, a form of sanctity.

32 Claire Sponsler (1997: 95), one of few modern commentators to view Mary of *Nemmegen* as a "female Faust", considers Mary in the context of the social phenomenon of the "unruly girl" (1997: 97) and claims that she is actually empowered by Satan to "escape the female condition in which subjugation is the norm" (1997: 98). However, the text makes it clear that her power is as circumscribed in her construction as a witch as it was as a virgin: "and Satan will nat also suffer me that I shulde do it" (279-80).

3.5 Woman as wonder : the imagery of the miraculous

3.5.1 The miraculous survival: the role of Our Lady

Miracles were a major feature of medieval life and thought, with the creation and the incarnation being the two outstanding examples, and there are a great many accounts of miracles in the literature of the period. The medieval understanding of the omnipresence of miracles is well expressed by Augustine in *De Civitate Dei*:³³

God himself has created all that is wonderful in this world, the great miracles as well as the minor marvels [...], and he has included them all in that unique wonder, that miracle of miracles, the world itself.

In this context, the “imagery” of the miraculous in *Mary of Nemmegen* is understandably somewhat less specific than that of the other constructs of identity.

After seven years as Satan’s instrument in the temptation and damnation of thousands of souls, a gradual repentance signals the onset of the last stage of Emmeken’s metamorphosis, her miraculous redemption. This commences in Nemmegen (to which Satan has, against his better judgement, allowed her to return to visit the relatives whom she has been missing) at the performance of a morality play which confronts her with her own sinful life.³⁴ Mary’s repentance is signalled to Satan as well as to the reader by the tears to which she is moved as she watches the play, and he resorts to violent means in an effort to retain her soul for damnation. Despite Satan’s power over her as witch and whore, which enables him to carry her up into the air with the aim of letting her fall to her death, the Virgin Mary, with whom Emmeken still retains a link (albeit a tenuous and abbreviated one) *via* her name, protects her from Satan’s worst designs and ensures that the fall is not fatal. It is also explained that Mary’s priestly uncle has been

³³ *De Civitate Dei* 21.9 (PL 41. 724), quoted in Ward (1982/87: 2).

³⁴ At this point the Dutch text contains an interpolated play, the “Play of Masscheroen”. It is actually not a morality play, or “playe of synfull luynghe”, but an eschatological courtroom drama in which Masscheroen, the advocate of Lucifer, Prince of Hell, appears before God in the Court of Heaven to claim the souls of sinful humanity. Our Lady is the advocate for the defence who pleads (with ultimate success) on humankind’s behalf for a period of grace in which to amend.

unceasing in his prayers to the Virgin for his niece.³⁵ Emmeken thus miraculously survives her diabolical constructor's attempt to damn her soul by murdering her in her sins, and she renounces him.

In thus rejecting Satan while sustained by the true forces of Good, God³⁶ and His Mother — as distinct from those defined by the Church — Emmeken can for the first time assert herself as a person with a right to an autonomous identity. However, since she has already been so multiply constructed by the authoritative discourses of religion, she must first rid herself of their images, both “good” and “evil”, and in dismissing Satan she takes the first step, reversing her construction as a whore: “Go fro me, thou false fynde! [...] I repente me that euer I chose the for my paramour” (341-3). The text's emphasis on her tears also signals the reversal of her construction as a witch (340): according to the *Malleus Maleficarum* witches were unable to weep (Summers 1928/48: 227). This is another visible sign of the miraculous.

Textually, thus, under the protection of the true forces of Good, Emmeken has cast off two of the patriarchally-imposed negative “images” of womanhood and asserted her right to an autonomous identity as a child of God — “Emmekyn sayd she trusted to be saued” (402-3). Her survival confirms God's mercy, and its miraculous means marks her as blessed by God and protected by Our Lady (hence, it could be argued, already a wonder). However, this is ignored by the official human representatives of Good — the church — in terms of whose authoritative texts she must still be formally released from the power of Satan by means of the discourse and practice of Penance.³⁷ Her uncle the priest accordingly accompanies her on a long and difficult pilgrimage in search of absolution, culminating in

35 The specific method employed by Satan is a popular one in the literature, and may relate to the Biblical temptation of Christ by the Devil in Matthew 4, Mark 1 and Luke 4 (and intertextually to Psalm 90: 11).

36 As was common in the Middle Ages, the Father and the Son are conflated. This is particularly noticeable in the Dutch text's “Play of Masscheroen”.

37 The sacrament of penance is fundamentally based on two texts. The first is Christ's commissioning of Peter: “Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever thou shalt bind on

their visit to the pope in Rome. The lengthy search for an appropriate penance emphasises the grievousness of Mary/Emmeken's sin and hence the boundlessness of God's mercy in ultimately pardoning her.

4. The imposition of penance and an altered life: the role of the Church

In Rome Emmeken is given one of the strangest of medieval penances: she is to wear three heavy iron rings about her neck and arms until they fall away — a manifest impossibility, even if she were to live 200 years, as her uncle indicates (483-5). In this context, however, one should remember the severity of the penalties for witchcraft at the time: a repentant witch could receive absolution, but should still, according to the *Malleus Maleficarum*, be put to death as a heretic and an apostate (Summers 1928/48: 77). (Indeed, McKinnell (1993: 22) suggests that the rings imposed as penance are a symbol of the chains of lifelong imprisonment to which some heretics and the “most fortunate” of convicted witches would be subjected).

Wearing her penitential rings, and under her priestly uncle's direction, she then enters a convent of “myssewomen” (504) or “converted sinners [...] that returne fro theyr vycyouse lyuynges” (508-9). The convent is “of the ordere of Saynte Mary Magdalene” (503-4), the repentant sinner (indeed, whore) who yet became a saint, a key example of what Warner (1976/83: 235) describes as the female ideal of “regenerate sexuality”. (Indeed, it is significant that, in England, houses for the reclamation of prostitutes were referred to as “Magdalenes”.)

In entering the convent, Emmeken renounces yet another of the constructs of her identity: that of woman as a sexual being. In spiritual (or metaphorical) terms, she must return to the virginal state in order to satisfy the demands of the church for forgiveness of sin. Along with the focus on punitive penance at this stage, her identification with Mary Magdalene (an image constructed, yet again, from

earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matt 16: 18-19). The second is more explicit, and occurs after the Resurrection: “Receive the Holy Spirit; whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them; and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained” (John 20: 22-23).

the most authoritative text of patriarchal religion) emphasises that, despite the demonstration of the mercy of God and Our Lady in her miraculous survival, and Emmeken's genuine attempt to reverse her "evil" construction in her rejection of her role as Satan's instrument, her "identity" as a woman remains a construct defined and imposed by others: by the rigidly less-than-merciful discourse and practice of the church's earthly representatives.³⁸

5. Official recognition as a "wonder": the second miracle: the role of God

Emmeken spends twenty-four years of exemplary service, penance and prayer in the convent before a second miracle occurs when an angel frees her from the penitential rings as she sleeps, incontrovertibly characterising her as a wonder. (Such releases from penitential bonds occur frequently in the literature of the miraculous.³⁹) Significantly, she dreams of an angel rescuing her from the pains of Hell and bringing her into the joys of Heaven, where "a great many doues" (528) smite off the rings with their wings. The imagery of doves (symbols of peace and love, as well as of the Holy Spirit) as the agency of liberation in the dream forms a significant contrast with the hunting imagery consistently associated with Satan (most of which refers to the snaring of birds).⁴⁰

38 One may recall a parallel reluctance to welcome the sinner back into the fold among Jesus' own companions (Matt. 26: 6-9; Mark 14: 3-5; Luke 7: 36-39; John 12:3-8). Though the apostles in some of the gospels object to the expense rather than to the person, the woman who anoints Christ's feet was traditionally identified with Mary Magdalen, and in Luke 7: 47-50 Christ explicitly forgives her "many" sins.

39 Ward (1982/87: 257) writes: "The breaking of metal bonds at shrines is a commonplace; often they were fetters bound on as a penance, which broke at the touch of a relic".

40 Cf lines 55-6, 237-8, 273. The development of imagery may also be traced in this instance. Birds were an ancient symbol of the spirit, and doves in particular were sacred to Venus/Aphrodite in the Graeco-Roman world. The dove was Christianised in the symbol of the Holy Spirit (eg at Christ's baptism), and also became an image for salvation by the Virgin (Warner 1976/83: 38).

On awaking, Emmeken discovers the dream to have been a true sign: a final mark of forgiveness and God's favour, even in the eyes of the Church which subjected her to the hellish penance. She lives two more years before actually passing into the "blysse euerlastyng" (549) of which her dream gave a foretaste. Ultimately, her gravestone, with the rings hanging over it like the holy relics of a saint, records the wondrous and exemplary story of "hyr lyuyng and also hyr pennaunce" (547) for the edification and salvation of all.

6. The "resisting reading"

6.1 The context of the "resisting" reading

In defining her "resisting" feminist reading, Fetterley (1978: viii) hopes to see it have the effect of "stimulat[ing] dialogue, discussion, debate, re-reading, and finally re-vision". Adrienne Rich (1971: 50) describes such a re-vision or "entering an old text from a new critical direction" as, for women,

more than a chapter in cultural history [...] more than a search for identity: it is an act of survival [...] until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves.

In this spirit, the present reading has utilised some of the insights and methods of feminist criticism, identity criticism and deconstruction to arrive at a resisting re-vision which exposes and critiques the assumptions underlying the medieval images of womanhood operational in *Mary of Nemmegen*. It has shown Mary to be "constructed" — by her uncle, her aunt, Satan, and the pope (representatives of "good" and "evil") — in various images from the discourse of the authoritative texts of patriarchal medieval religion: virgin (Mary), sexual being (Eve), whore (Mary Magdalene), witch (as in the *Malleus Maleficarum*), and wonder (the "regenerated" Magdalene). It is, of course, not surprising that the images imposed as a female "identity" all involve aspects of sexuality, whether as a presence or an absence; not only was sexuality a major concern of the medieval religious writers responsible for the "images" of womanhood but, as Bruce Smith (2000: 319) reminds us, as one of the most natural and universal of

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human traits, sexuality demonstrates that identity itself is in fact a function of cultural history.

At times the text has shown Mary herself to be not unaware of the process of her own cultural “construction” and the church’s underlying understanding of reality as composed of binary oppositions. It has even allowed her implicitly to critique the fundamental falsity of the distinction drawn by the church between its constructions of “good” and “evil”, in the words she speaks as she leaves Nijmegen, weeping in despair and contemplating suicide: “nowe care I nat [...] whether the dyuell or god come to me and helpe me! I kare nat whether of them two it be!” (52-5)

For a woman constructed, marginalised and abandoned by discourses derived from the authoritative texts of a patriarchal religion, there is little to choose between the binary extremes of that religion’s power structures. The church in effect denies her access to a loving, merciful God and to the true Good, allowing her to know only a limiting, condemning, vengeful “God” who is as inauspicious a prospect of “helpe” as the devil himself. The church’s construct of “God” is, for the female believer at least, in essence thus merely an extension of the construct of Evil.⁴¹ Hence the distinction between “good” and “evil” becomes virtually meaningless to her. The awareness implicit in Mary’s words lends particular credence to a “resisting” reading in which the text is allowed to deconstruct its own key terms of “good” and “evil” as officially defined, embodied and imposed by the church.

If texts of repression and subjugation can also be sites of resistance — as Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath* so ably demonstrates — *Mary of Nijmegen* appears to lend itself to functioning in just this way: not simply after Mary’s miraculous survival, in her momentary assertion of her identity (or, more accurately, of her non-identity with the imposed constructs of witch and whore), but more permanently and more tellingly by means of the imagery associated with her dream.

41 The compositor’s error in using a lower-case “g” for “god” is merely fortuitous, but may well strike the modern reader as presciently significant.

6.2 The focus of the “resisting” reading: Emmeken’s dream and the image of the penitential rings

In the context described above, Emmeken’s dream may be seen as operating as a corrective on the practices of the medieval church.

Within the quotidian world of the text, “good” (as defined by a patriarchal church in terms of images derived from its authoritative discourse) is revealed as negative, restrictive, cruel and imprisoning. This is confirmed by the dream. In a “resisting” reading the penitential rings imposed on Emmeken by the pope and ultimately removed during the dream are signs, not merely of male authority, possession and dominance over female subjugation, nor simply of the denial that female sexuality can be anything other than sinful (as in the insistence on the virginity of Mary’s initial construction and the regenerated virginity of her celibate life when she is “reconstructed” as a nun), but essentially of the unremitting repression of women by the church’s refusal to validate as “good” any aspect of female existence or identity whatsoever other than the imposed images of subservience, sexlessness and self-denial which comprise those constructs, as well as by its insistence that all alternative images and constructs of the female are “evil”.

In this reading the dream does not overstate Mary/Emmeken’s suffering at the hands of the church (which, it should be borne in mind, is in orthodox terms supposed to provide her means of salvation and access to Heaven) when it depicts her life of penitence as a “hell”:

on a tyme as she was a prayinge in hyr selfe, she fell on slepe, and in hyr slepe apered a aungell and vndyd the yron rynges fro hyr, & she thought in hyr slepe [dreame]d] howe that she was in hell and howe that there cam a aungell and browght hyr into heuen, and that there were a great many doues cam to hyr and with theyr wynges smote of [off] hyr yron rynges (524-9).

Thus the penance imposed by the church, although ostensibly designed to liberate Emmeken’s soul from the “snares” and “talons” of the Devil-as-hunter and from consequent damnation, is in fact a re-fettering, a reimprisonment defined by the imagery of the dream as the earthly equivalent of that very damnation. The church may thus be seen as creating a hell-on-earth. Similarly, the final miraculous release from the torturing rings may be read as indicating that the

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church which imposes them (with the understanding that they will never wear away) is NOT (as it may think) restoring the image of the Creator in Mary of Nemmegen, but in fact simply continuing its own earlier process (capably emulated in the interim by her diabolical “reconstructor”, Satan) of imposing fabricated images of womanhood to construct a false female “identity”.

This reading of what has been seen as a quintessentially medieval exemplum of the triumph of Good over Evil therefore problematises the orthodox interpretation. Because of the church’s use of authoritative texts and discourse to provide such images for the construction of identities of subjugation for women, God (along with Our Lady) may be read as “compelled” to redeem Mary/Emmeken not once but twice. Her miraculous survival of the fall from on high releases her from the power of Satan and demonstrates God’s mercy, but this divine intervention proves insufficient, as the church representatives’ only response to it is to use their coercive (and supposedly God-given) power to impose another (and most cruel) form of punitive subjugation on the female body. With the second miracle, thus, in which, significantly, no functionaries of the church are involved, the dichotomously named and variously constructed Mary/Emmeken must still be redeemed from those self-same church representatives and their tyranny by an angel sent from the God of whose Love their repressive Law is an agonising travesty.

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