

The Figure of the (disbelieving) Woman in Fourteenth- and Fifteenth-century Middle English Sermons

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Abstract:

This paper investigates the figure of the disbelieving woman in fourteenth and fifteenth-century Middle English sermons, showing how Latin exempla – drawn from sources such as the *Legenda Aurea*, the *Speculum Laicorum* or authors such as Caesarius, Étienne de Bourbon or Jacque de Vitry, and so on – reworked to serve ecclesiastical and didactic purposes. Particular attention is given to how these sermons depict women as morally flawed and prone to diabolic deception, thereby reinforcing stereotypes of female weakness, but also subtly constructing a bad allure around the female human being. At the same time, the narrative choices transform individual episodes into universal moral lessons on faith, repentance, and transubstantiation.

Keywords: Disbelieving Woman, Eucharist, Exempla, Gender, Middle English Sermons

The figure of women in Middle English homiletic literature occupied a central and multifaceted role, reflecting medieval theology's ambivalence towards women and the cultural anxieties surrounding gender, morality, and power. In sermons, Saints' lives, and other didactic texts, women were frequently depicted through the polarizing archetypes of the Virgin Mary and Eve, that is, the contrasting images of sanctity and sin, as moral exemplars and cautionary icons, in that Mary represented the epitome of obedience, chastity, and humility, reinforcing the virtues expected of women, while Eve was associated with disobedience, temptation, and the Fall, a model that often underpinned the stereotype of women as morally frail or prone to sin. Thus "Mary and Eve often served as the essential polarities through which the moral status of all women could be measured" (McAvoy 2004, 34). This duality was further explored in works like *Ancrene Wisse*, which, although (or maybe because) it was directed at women pursuing spiritual lives, repeatedly emphasizes the need to guard against traits deemed "feminine" weaknesses, such as gossip, vanity, and desire. In doing so, these works nourished an entrenched suspicion of women's potential to deviate from the prescribed path of virtue (Savage, Watson 1991).

Accordingly, medieval homiletic literature often employed women's figures to reinforce moral lessons for mixed-gender audiences, framing feminine quali-

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ties as both central to societal order and as potential sources of moral disorder. A very typical example of this is how the very same body of a woman could be constructed “as both a source of redemption through childbirth and a source of fallibility and sin through sexuality” (Bynum 1987, 128). In the later medieval period, this moral duality of the female figure contributed to the conceptual foundation for the “evil woman”. The imagery associated with Eve – curiosity, temptation, and defiance – fed directly into fears of women possessing dangerous, subversive knowledge, making them susceptible to association with the supernatural.

In this very period, that is from the end of fourteenth century, significantly in coincidence with this change of perspective towards the female figure, the two systems of magic, which had been systematised since Aquinas’ *Summa Theologiae* into *superstitio* (often mild, unlearned forms, rooted in ignorance or misplaced devotion)¹ and *magica daemonum invocation* (formal demonic pacts, i.e. necromancy), began to be associated by the ecclesiastical authorities and thus merge: common magic practices, which were regarded as suspicious, but also tolerated as simple errors by late-antique and early medieval Christian authorities (Flint 1991), and learned necromancy, operated through invocations of demons by educated people, even clerics (Bailey 2001), which had always been strongly condemned as an act of heresy and at the same time feared² since it implied invoking and involving demons, which was *per se* an act of adoration (*latría*), that is heresy (Kors, Peters 2001, 118). This tight connection between some magic³ system and heresy is further and more exhaustively stated in the works of the Dominican Nicholas Eymerich:

Ex hiis patet quod sola demonis inuocacio, etiam sine sacrificio, apostata est a fide, et per consequens heresis (1578 [1376], fol. 143r)

¹ This term indicates the system of common spells, charms, blessings, potions, powders, and talismans employed by many people at all levels of medieval society, including, it should be noted, many clerics, about whose exact nature clerics could be caught in uncertainty and ambivalent judgement (Kieckhefer 1989, 186).

² In this respect, the decree *Super illius specula*, by Pope John in 1326 is insightful: he explicitly condemned (and excommunicated *ipso facto*) all sorcerers who “cum morte foedus ineunt et pactum faciunt cum infrno, daemonibus namque immolant, hos adorant, fabricant ac fabricari procurant imagines, annulum vel speculum vel phialam vel rem quamcunque aliam magice ad daemones inibi allegandos ab his petunt, responsa ab his recipiunt et pro implendis pravis suis desideriiis auxilia postulant” (Hansen 1901, 5). The tools mentioned in this decree belonged to complex ritual magic, different from the herbs, stones, and simple charms of the common tradition. Therefore, it is undoubtful that the magic the Pope feared and referred to was learned necromancy.

³ We should not forget that the terms *magia*, *magica*, and *ars magica* were standard in educated language throughout the Middle Ages, as Saint Augustine and Isidore of Seville had discussed the concept of magic at some length but it was mainly used as a polemical term: thus heretics’ miracles were called “magical” by the Church as well as Lollards defined Catholic practices as magical (Ward 1982, 12), in the sense that orthodox rituals were “false belief” and thus belongs to the “devil’s craft” (Thomas 1971, 62).

As a matter of fact, common or popular magic practitioners, the sorcerers, were often regarded not as powerful agents of evil in their own right, but as unfortunate victims of the deceits and temptations of the devil (Brown 1972), and their practices themselves rather as harmful and illusionary than morally negative (Kieckhefer 1989). This is evident in Bernard Gui's *Practica inquisitionis heretice pravitatis* (early fourteenth century) – a summation of his experience and the first truly comprehensive instructional manual for inquisitors – and Nicholas Eymerich's vast inquisitorial manual *Directorium inquisitorum* (1376), which both addressed issues of superstition, sorcery, and necromancy, differentiating, although not constantly⁴, between more “ignorant” forms of superstition and the deliberate invocation of demons. Following their statements, superstitious practices involved deception (*decipiunt*) rather than conscious demonic pacts (*minus evidens pactum cum diabolo*). Those who practiced such “popular magic” (*carminibus, phylacteriis, vel aliis superstitionibus*) did it out of ignorance (*nescientes*), believing that it had healing power (*remedium*).

Item inquirat [inquisitor] diligenter de sortilegiis, ariolis, incantatoribus, et aliis huiusmodi superstitionibus, qui simplicem populum decipiunt, facientes eos intendere remediis illicitis potius quam divinis [...] (Gui 1886, 306)

[...] plures reperiuntur tam viri quam mulieres qui carminibus, phylacteriis, vel aliis superstitionibus intendunt quasi pro remedio, nescientes se laqueum diaboli incurrere [...] (Ivi, 307)

Circa superstitiones autem dicendum est quod quaedam sunt minus evidens pactum cum diabolo habentes, quando scilicet simplices mulierculae vel rustici quibusdam carminibus vel inanibus ceremoniis utuntur, credituri in eis esse remedium: ... aliae vero sunt apertissime pactum cum malignis spiritibus contrahentes. (*De superstitionibus* in Eymerich 1578 [1378], f. 264r-v)

Contrarily, the necromancer had always been conceived as a powerful figure, who knowingly and purposefully engaged in rituals to summon and command demons. They acted out of learned deliberate necromancy, reclaiming much of the human agency in magic, and thus incurring considerable human culpabil-

⁴ As a matter of fact, it is sometimes difficult to draw a precise line, as in many cases, “simple” sorcery or superstitious practices are discussed in general terms in medieval authors, rather than providing a single short passage cleanly contrasting “common magic” vs. “learned necromancy”. It will be highly helpful to keep in mind that “the people in medieval Europe who used, feared, promoted, or condemned magic, and who identified magic as such, not only assumed it worked but could give (or assumed that authorities could give for them) reasonably specific explanations of how it worked. Not all those who shared these assumptions were rational in the sense of being bookish, given to abstraction, or even particularly deliberative, yet they normally used words in ways that had reasonably specific meaning, and their language reflected the way the world made cognitive sense to them” (Kieckhefer 1994, 814).

ity⁵, through his deliberate invocations of demons (*expresse invocant daemonia*) and his power on them (*putant se imperare eis*). They were not tricked into falling into the devil's traps, but deliberately and consciously entered into pacts with the devil and involved of demoniac forces through invocation, adoration or reverence or with homage done or to be done to them, or with any sort of sacrifice or offering (Gui 1886, 292).

[...] magia quae dicitur 'nigromantia', in qua non simpliciter utuntur incantationibus aut observantiis vanis, sed expresse invocant daemonia, iis sacrificant, et putant se imperare eis [...] (*De superstitionibus* in Eymerich 1578 [1378], f. 264r-v)

Although Eymerich distinguished in many passages between "simple" or "rustic" uses of spells or incantations – misguided by the demon, hidden or unrecognized – and "openly" demonic pacts or wilful necromantic conjurations, nevertheless he classified nearly all such magic as demonically inspired, thus building a solid conceptual framework into which to fit the practices and the practitioners of common sorcery, as increasing attention came to focus on them. During the fifteenth century, the unwitting confusion between elite necromancy and common or popular magical practices ended into a conflation visible in the letter of 1437 from Pope Eugenius IV to all papal inquisitors and in such works as the Dominican theologian and ecclesiastical reformer Johannes Nider's *Formicarius* (1437-1438), which according to Bailey (2003) could have functioned as a kind of preacher's manual, with stories tailor-made for use in sermons, and *Preceptorium divine legis* (1438)⁶: indeed the performance of common sorcery, involving only a few words or simple gestures and aimed at curing or causing illness or affecting the weather, was equated with hidden yet necessary acts of worship and postulated a pre-existing pact between the sorcerer and the demons that made such magic possible, much alike necromancy.

Demonibus immolant, eos adorant, ab ipsis responsa prestolantur et acceptant, illis homagium faciunt et in signum desuper chartam scriptam vel quid aliud tradunt cum ipsis obligatoria, ut solo verbu, tactu vel signo maleficia, quibus velint, ilis inferant sive tollant, infirmitates sanent, aeris intemperiem provocent et super aliis nefandis pacta firmant seu quod talia conceperint praesumptores extant, imagines vel alia constituunt fierique procurant, ut ipsi daemones inde constringantur. (1437 Letter from Pope Eugenius IV in Hansen 1901, 17)

⁵ In particular, in the formula for abjuration that Gui proposed for sorcerers, he explicitly included in the list of acts to be forsworn "all divination or invocation of demons, especially with adoration or reverence exhibited to them, or which will be exhibited, or with homage done or to be done to them, or with any sort of sacrifice or burnt offering" (1886, 5).

⁶ It is worth remembering that Nider's works served as a major source of information for the infamous *Malleus maleficarum* written in 1486 (Tschacher 2000).

De hoc etiam infra dicitur non autem faciunt ista immediate maleficorum opera actione propria et immediata, sed talia fiunt per demones qui visis maleficiis immediate ex pacto dudum cum maleficis a principio mundi et tempore veteris idolatrie habito sciunt qualem effectum debent ad intentionem maleficorum procurare. (Nider 1476 [1438], 1.11.v)

While since antiquity there had always been a distinction between “magic” operated through the wondrous powers, i.e. *mirabilia*⁷, and “magic” linked to forces of supernatural order, at this point of time, both systems of magic face the same theological stance that the involvement of demons is not just a sin, but a direct betrayal of the Christian faith⁸.

This change of perspective on common magic practice had a serious side-effect on the conception of the woman, fostering further the idea of the evil woman as a witch. As a matter of fact, it is well known and no issue of debate that women had long been active in the common tradition of medieval magic as village healers, wise women, and soothsayers, in other words they had had relevant roles in common or popular magic practices (Harley 1990). On the contrary, as examples of human weakness and “simplicity”, they were not considered to have the competence to engage in demoniac magic or necromancy, from which simple uneducated people were also excluded, since they were incapable of accessing to literacy, training and command of complex rituals unlike learned educated (male) necromancers. Accordingly, they were mentioned in Gui’s and Eymerich’s treatises as those simple uneducated (*simplices mulierculae vel rustici*) engaging with common magic practices such as the use of healing charms and potions (*plures reperiuntur tam viri quam mulieres qui carminibus, phylacteriis, vel aliis superstitionibus intendunt quasi pro remedio*). For the same reason, Nider in his works listed exempla of great male necromancers such as Stedelen or Scavius or Hoppo, who through complex rites and invocations could compel an essentially unwilling and dangerous demonic agent to come and serve them, but no female powerful necromancers. When the idea that magic, any system of magic, operated thanks to the intervention of demoniac forces, women practitioners of common magic began to be in limelight, not because in the view of most clerical authorities they had such a special training or the capacity for such knowledge to gain terrible power over demons (Opitz 1995, 151-152) nor because they were more susceptible to evil as a result of women’s mental and spiritual weakness

⁷ I refer to the so-called natural magic, as already educated writers from the thirteenth century used to name these phenomena, thus reclaiming a classical sense of the term “magic”, but also reaffirming the notion of this kind of practices as “part of natural science”: “in ea parte naturalis scientiae, quae vocatur magica naturalis” (Alvernus 1674, i. 1.46). See Le Goff (1988 [1985], 27-44) for the discussion on the relationship between the categories *mirabilis*, *magicus*, and *miraculosus* and Thorndike (1915) for the general development of views on magic in the high Middle Ages.

⁸ This was not new. Already in Augustine’s *De civitate Dei* and in Isidore of Seville’s *Etymologiae* every operation through demons was to be considered magical, although Augustine and his early medieval successors did not give the term “magia” explicit definition.

and heightened carnality as long theorised in Christian doctrines, but because they must have sealed a binding pact with the devil as proved by the success of their magic practices.

This is visible in the figures for those accused of witchcraft. Prior to 1350, as notions of common sorcery and necromancy were only beginning to collide, men constituted over 70% of the accused. In the second half of the fourteenth century the percentage of men accused fell to 42%, while women took over the majority with 58%, and during the fifteenth century the percentage of women continued to rise to 70% to reach over 80% during the era of the great witch-hunts in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Kieckhefer 1976, 106-147), when even the men being accused were mostly associated with female witches in some way, often as their husbands or sons (Levack 2016 [1987], 133-134). Later treatises from the end of the fifteenth century went on to give several explanations for why women were more inclined to witchcraft than were men, all focusing on women's inferior physical, mental, and moral capacity and thus definitively sanctioned the proclivity of women toward witchcraft, among them *in primis* the profoundly misogynist *Malleus maleficarum* (1487) or, a century later, *De magorum daemonomania* by Jean Bodin (1581), which created and defined the stereotype of the female witch⁹.

The ecclesiastical and theological debate as well as the treatises and manuals were not accessible to everyone and exclusive domain of those who at least had competence of Latin, in other words they were addressed to the educated élite and mainly to the ecclesiastical authorities themselves. How to let such philosophical-theoretical speculation arrive to everyone and guide their judgment and their behaviour in relation to magical practices. Preaching from the pulpit could serve as an effective means of reaching the widest possible audience in the transmission and dissemination of the theological principles and the moral precepts and behavioural instructions established by the Church (Bailey 2003), inasmuch as it could be regarded as “the most influential and pervasive mass medium of religious and moral instruction in late medieval society” (Delcorino 2017)¹⁰. In this particular case, sermons could be the vehicle through which theological learning influenced and informed people's thought and conception of common magic as a suspicious practice firstly, as a spiritual crime and an act of apostasy later, and then as a definite and persecuted crime (Bailey 2001) to the extent that it was a challenge to the established society and also government (Young 2017). At the same time, sermons could also mould the image of women practising magic differently – from soothsayers, healers and wiser to evil witch – as the conception of magic gradually changed.

⁹ For a detailed list, see Bullitta (this volume) and Baratta, Montori (this volume).

¹⁰ Sermons are traditionally defined as “an oral discourse spoken in the voice of a preacher who addresses an audience to instruct and exhort them on a topic concerned with faith and morals and based on a sacred text” (Kienzle 2000, 151).

To have an idea of how females were pictured in homilies, I looked through the catalogue of homilies collected in the *A Repertorium of Middle English Prose Sermons* by O'Mara and Paul (REP 2007), which contains details of over one thousand Middle English prose sermons in more than one hundred and fifty (both edited and unedited) manuscripts, mainly from the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, each of which is described according to their authorship, occasion, summary of content, exempla, and biblical citations. As one could expect, the most relevant sections are the exempla, which are meant to strengthen the comment of theological dogma or issues introduced through passages from the Holy Scripts or Psalms or connected to the occasion of the homily. These were not *ad hoc* fabricated stories but, rather, mostly reworkings of narratives already present in collections of exempla and moral tales in Latin circulating at the time, such as the *Gesta Romanorum*, the *Speculum Laicorum*, *Alphabetum Narrationum*, *Vitae Patrum*, *Dialogues of Gregory*, Caesarius of Heisterbach's *Dialogus Miraculorum*, Jacques de Vitry's *Exempla*, William of Waddington's *Manuel des Péchés*, Robert Mannyng of Brunne's *Handlyng Synne*, Thomas de Cantimpré's *Bonum Universale de Apibus*, Odo de Cheriton's *Fables and Exempla*, just to mention some of them. What is particularly interesting is the very selection made by the authors of Middle English sermons, which betrays an ulterior purpose beyond the merely edifying project.

The first interesting fact concerns how often and why women were the protagonists of the exempla. First of all, they were on the whole rarer than men (less than 200 mentions of women in more than one thousand sermons), and if Saints and the Virgin Mary were set aside, namely the stereotype of female sanctity, usually mentioned in the main corpus of the homily, only 86 mentions of women remained for the exempla and were predominantly negative unlike men, who showed a broader range of representations in sermons. In this respect, it is quite striking that, as negative example, they far exceed the male negative examples (67 vs. 21). Not only were they sinners, but unlike most male sinners, sinful women were rarely portrayed in the act of confessing or contrite in their repentance (only 9 instances): usually, unlike their male counterparts, they did not repent through confession and were therefore excluded from salvation. To my knowledge, there is one example where the opposite happens: MS Salisbury 103 n. 27, containing an episode in which a brother and sister were condemned to be burned for having killed a blacksmith, but he was reduced to ashes, while she repented and remained unharmed.

Women's sins were also of a special kind. According to the prevailing order of frequency, sinful women were described as lecherous, disbelieving, given to idle or quarrelsome chatter, and gossipy; they were also labelled as prostitutes, incestuous, prone to infanticide, adulterous, seductresses of pure men (i.e. clergy), murderous, cannibalistic, vain, and either possessed by the devil or submissive to his will. On the other hand, men were culprit of covetousness, swearing, pride, but more often associated with unspecified sins mentioned just to highlight their confession and repentance. When they succumbed to the sins of lust, adultery, or incest, they were typically portrayed as victims of female se-

duction, and thus not as active agents of their own damnation, except insofar as their weakness was concerned. Indeed, there were narratives in which both a man and a woman, often guilty of the same sin, were featured, but only the man repented and attained salvation, while the woman refused to confess and was left to perdition. An exemplar of this phenomenon is provided by MS Salisbury 103 n. 059, which records two exempla of the sin of lechery – one following the other – where a woman and a man commit the sin but with markedly different outcomes. In the first exemplum, a nun from the diocese of Cologne, having engaged in lechery, conceived and bore a child, which she then killed. After her death, she appeared to a kinswoman bearing the child and declared that praying for her would be futile because she was damned; she asserted that had she confessed, forgiveness would have been granted. In the subsequent exemplum, a man who had engaged in lechery for seventy years repented through the intercession of St. Andrew and fasted for six months on bread and water; ultimately, he died and was saved.

There were also recurring situations where the man takes on and atones for the woman's guilt, usually that of his mother. One good example is the shortened and incomplete version of an episode present in the "Commemoration of All Souls" in Jacopo da Varagine's *Legenda Aurea*. There are two versions, BL/Add 36791/061 and BL/Lans 379/003, containing mainly the same text: A widow, despairing of her poverty, agreed to carry out the devil's commands: 1) to seduce clerics who came to her home, 2) to invite poor men into her house by day but drive them out at night, 3) to disrupt prayers in church by laughing, and 4) to avoid confessing any of these sins; in return, the devil promised to make her rich; as she lay dying, she revealed the pact to her son, who urged her to confess and vowed to perform her penance on her behalf, but, since she died before the priest could arrive, her son confessed her sins and completed seven years of penance for her, after which he was rewarded with a vision of her in a state of salvation. The archetypal model for sinful women was undoubtedly Eve. Indeed, women were frequently associated with deception, deviation from righteousness, and disobedience, and men were often their victims, as evidenced in sermons where men of faith – whether they are monks, churchmen, or even the women's own relatives – are led astray onto the path of sin by sinful women.

Very often, female figures are tarnished by sins that, though seemingly trivial in our eyes, ultimately lead to severe punishments. At times, the gravity of these sins became apparent when they were associated with diabolic figures; at other times, they simply served to confirm the inherent weakness of women. Thus, sermons concerning idle gossip, such as MS Salisbury 103 n. 23 and n. 62, where a girl and a nun were punished because of "idle words" and quarrelsome talk respectively. However, if any sin – or a cluster of sins – was chiefly associated with women, it was clearly the sin of the flesh. This is remarkable, not last because it encompassed witchcraft when it was explicitly mentioned among sins: for instance, the sermon Bodleian Library eMus 180/055 *Dominica xiiiija Post Festum Sancte Trinitatis* listed all the sins of the flesh, among which witchcraft was mentioned together with lechery and faith in false gods (ff. 119-126).

The number of sermons portraying the sinful woman as engaging in lascivious, incestuous, or similar transgressions far exceeds that of any other sin.

These representations of female figures seem not merely to serve as examples of the wicked woman and warnings against the dangers they pose, but rather to foreshadow the characteristics of that wicked woman whose evil lies precisely in being an ally or collaborator of the devil, characteristics that later became stereotyped in the figure of the witch at the end of the fifteenth century throughout the sixteenth century, although sermons seldom mentioned the word “witch” directly, unlike their sources.¹¹ That every magical occurrence concealed the devil became increasingly explicit in the case of “marvellous” events, where the devil’s deceptive strategies were clearly articulated. Unsurprisingly, he was said to disguise himself as a beautiful woman when he intends to lead a righteous man astray, especially ecclesiastics (cf. MS Salisbury 103 n. 036, and MS Harley 2247 n. 049).

Further evidence comes from exempla concerning the disbelieving woman, whose signature act was host desecration: that is, the theft and misuse of consecrated hosts. The sin of disbelief was invariably linked to the mystery of the Eucharist; in particular, two occasions – Easter and the Feast of Corpus Christi – served as the focus of sermons featuring exempla of women who did not fully believe in the mystery of the host’s consecration and who regarded the administration of the Eucharist with scepticism. A small group of sermons has been identified: Bodleian Library e Musaeo (Bodl eMus) 180/022, Bodleian Library e Musaeo 180/029, Bodleian Library e Musaeo 180/031, Bodleian Library, Graves (Gr) 54/028, Bodleian Library, Graves 54/034, British Library, Claudius A.ii./041 (C), British Library Harley (H) 2247/035, Gloucester, Cathedral Library (Gl) 22/004, and Shrewsbury School (Sh) III/004¹². These collections of sermons date from the beginning (Bodl eMus 180, Gl 22,) to the end of the fifteenth century (Gr 54, H 2247, Sh3).

Among these sermons, three could be grouped as they all represent a version of the famous exemplum well known as Saint Gregory’s miracle of the mess, to which Ælfric referred to in his sermon *De Sacrificio in die Pascae* (CHom ii, 155/167-73): eMus 180/31, C 041 and Gr 54/028. The episode was narrated in *Vita Beati Gregorii Papae* by Paul the Deacon and retold in the *Golden Legend*: it was the story of a “doubting woman” who brought to church the bread she had

¹¹ Among Middle English sermons, I found very few examples mentioning directly a witch. MS Salisbury 103, no. 029, is one such case: its exemplum – taken from Caesarius – recounts the story of a witch who refused to confess before her death. Consequently, her coffin was sealed with three iron chains and a lid made of lead and iron, and it had to be kept in a church for three days, guarded by her children (a monk and a nun), to prevent the devil from taking her to hell – a fate that ultimately befell her. In contrast, their sources often mention both male and female practitioners of magic, following a common pattern in which women are simply labeled as witches, while men are depicted as engaging in magical acts or defined as performers of magic (Herbert 1910 [1883]; Tubach 1969).

¹² Other sermons are related to this group: for instance, British Library Harley 2247/048 resembles closely C/041, except for the episode of the woman Lasyna o Lasma which occurs in both C/041 and Gr 54/028.

baked herself to be used for Mass. When she came up to receive Communion, Gregory noticed her smiling incredulously, and upon inquiry, the woman told him that she could not believe that bread she had baked herself could become the Body and Blood of Christ simply through the words of consecration. Hearing this, he prayed urgently that her unbelief might be healed, and suddenly a host changed to the appearance of actual flesh and blood approximating a human finger. Seeing this, the woman's faith in the Real Presence was restored, and she knelt down, weeping in repentance.

In all three versions, the episode was essentially reported essentially in the same way, with only minor variations regarding the inclusion or omission of the woman's name (present as *Lasyna* in C and *Lasma* in Gr 54, but not in Bodl eMus 180), the title or occasion of the sermon (in Gr, *Ad secundam missam*), the context in which the exemplum was used¹³ and the restoration of the host in the form of bread (in Bodl eMus it is Gregory's praying, while in C and Gr 54 the woman's act of faith). It is worth noticing that the theme of the woman laughing when receiving the consecrated Host because of her disbelief in it also occurred in exempla from the *Speculum Laicorum* and British Library Harley 2851 f. 106b, which could have well played a role. Here is the passage from eMus 180/031, which shows the typical structure of the exemplum, articulated in three parts: first, a reference to its source (often introduced with evidentials, encoding whether knowledge comes from direct perception, inference, hearsay, etc.: *We rede in þe lyffe of seynt Gregory*); second, the development of its narrative; and third, a concluding formula that reinforces the value or function of the account (*echon of 3ow schall do at þis holy tyme*):

We rede in þe lyffe of seynt Gregory þat þer was onys a 'good' woman in Rome that, azenst every Sonday, sche made a certen of [215] obleys and browzte hem to seynt Gregori in maner of an offeryng, of the whiche seynt Gregori made Goddis body on the awtur. Then it befell on a day þis woman I wolde be howselyd after masse among oper pepill. So when seynt Gregory cam to hyr withe Goddis body and seyde þese wordis, 'Goddis body myzte kepe þi body and þi sowle into þe lyfe þat ever schall last', sodenly this woman lowze þat all þe pepyll herde. Anon seynt Gregori toke þe sacrament frome hyr mowþe and leyde it azene on þe awtur, and askyd þe woman whi sche lowzte þat tyme. 'For 3e callyd Goddis body þe same brede þat I made withe myne hondis.' Then seynt Gregori, for hir mysbeleve, made a prayer to almyzti God to schewe some myrakyll. And anon, þe ost, as it ley on þe paten, turnyd into the likenes of a crucefix, all bloody. And so he turned þis woman into þe ryzt beleve, and moche other pepyll. Seyng all þe pepyll þat, seynt Gregori prayed azene and it turned azene into the likenes

¹³ In C, it appeared within a series of exempla concerning the host, including the miracle of Odo of Canterbury – which also appeared in H 2247/048, though that version omitted the very episode of the woman *Lasma*.

of brede as it was before. And then þis woman withe grete reuerence reseyyvid this blissed body into hyr sowle, as echon of ʒow schall do at þis holy tyme¹⁴.

The sermons on the host found in Sh 3/004 and Gr 54/034 partly reworked, in an original manner, independent from each other, themes circulating in medieval exempla collections, specifically Tubach #2644 and #2689, focussing on the woman's disbelief: a woman clandestinely took the host home, concealing it in a larder; the following day, she discovered, in its place, a bleeding child; when the fraud was uncovered, a priest was summoned, and the woman confessed that she took the consecrated host because she did not believe in the mystery of the Eucharist. A more complex reworking of the misbeliever-theme was represented by sermons H 2247/035 and Gl 22/004, which essentially revisit one of the recurring narrative motifs found in numerous exempla circulating in the Middle Ages from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries onward: the theme of the theft and concealment of the host, here embedded in a narrative framework (*I rede in a Cronycle þat þere was a lady*) reminiscent of the incipit of St. Gregory's miracle, such as in Bodl eMus 180/031 (*We rede in þe lyffe of seynt Gregory þat þer was onys a 'good' woman*). The exemplum, attributed to a chronicle (*I rede in a Cronycle*), introduces the protagonist and her key triggering trait using a fairy-tale formula: þere was a lady on a tyme þat was not perfitte in þe faith (there was a woman in a time who was not perfect in the faith). She secretly took the consecrated host home and buried it beneath a pear tree near the window of her hall. The following Christmas, her husband hosted a dinner attended by the bishop and other dignitaries. One gentleman observed that the tree was in bloom and laden with pears and was astonished by the marvel (*whereof he marvelid grete-ly*), a wonder (*þat marveil*) which he wanted to show the others. Therefore, he broke one branch but, upon breaking it, blood flowed from it. When the woman confessed to the bishop, he excavated beneath the tree and recovered the host, which remarkably resembled *a faire manchild* bearing five wounds. The bishop then carried the host to church and delivered a sermon urging its restoration.

¹⁴ Trans.: We read in the life of Saint Gregory that there was once a good woman in Rome who, every Sunday, made a certain number of [215] oblays (wafers) and brought them to Saint Gregory as a kind of offering, from which Saint Gregory made God's body on the altar. Then it happened one day that this woman wanted to be houselled (receive communion) after Mass among other people. So when Saint Gregory came to her with God's body and said these words, "God's body might keep your body and your soul unto the life that shall ever last," suddenly this woman laughed, so that all the people heard. At once Saint Gregory took the sacrament from her mouth and laid it again on the altar, and asked the woman why she laughed at that time. "Because," she said, "you called God's body the same bread that I made with my own hands." Then Saint Gregory, for her disbelief, made a prayer to Almighty God to show some miracle. And immediately, the Host, as it lay on the paten, turned into the likeness of a crucifix, all bloody. And so he turned this woman to the right belief—and many other people also. Seeing all that, Saint Gregory prayed again, and it turned again into the likeness of bread, as it was before. And then this woman, with great reverence, received this blessed body into her soul—as each one of you shall do at this holy time.

Subsequently, the woman confessed, and the next day she received the same host, after which she ascended to heaven.

It is undeniable that the sermon echoes the exemplum found in no. 33 of H 2316 – a theological miscellany primarily based on the *Legenda Aurea* (folios 16b-24b, 28b-32, 37-52) – which, in turn, is attributed to Aesop (“Narrat Eso-pus quod dux Peyters duxit uxorem”). This exemplum reports how a duchess, harboring hatred in her heart, dared not swallow the Host at Easter but instead took it home and concealed it in a hollow tree. On Low Sunday, her husband’s brother, an archbishop, observed the tree brimming with leaves, blossoms, and fruit, and was struck by a wondrous fragrance – a perception later shared by his companions upon receiving absolution. Eventually, the duchess was compelled to confess, and a bleeding child was discovered at the site where she had hidden the Host (Herbert 1910 [1883], 576-577).

However, the deviations from this model are highly significant, notably the apparent downgrading of the protagonist’s social status from duchess to an unspecified woman, which ultimately broadened the scope of the moral instruction by transforming the event from an exceptional, individual occurrence into one of universal relevance. Furthermore, the blooming of the tree echoes another highly circulating motif, i.e. the power of the Host of enhancing the quality of the place that hosts it, as a metaphor for the effect on the spiritual virtues of the believer who receives the Eucharist. This motif attains its fullest expression in the *exempla* of the beehive, in which the host was cast aside to demonstrate its mortality, yet, paradoxically, an explosion of productivity ensued. One cannot help but note that in the Latin collections, which undoubtedly served as inspiration for these sermons, the protagonists are predominantly men – typically depicted as *rustices* or peasants¹⁵ – with only one narrative-type featuring a female protagonist¹⁶. Particularly noteworthy is the exemplum n. 55 in British Library, Burney 361 f. 156b, maybe taken from the writings of Petrus Damianus, in which a man was shown throwing the host into a beehive on the suggestion

¹⁵ Cf. British Library Additional 11284 f. 35 (first half of the fourteenth century version of the *Speculum Laicorum*), British Library Additional 339556 f. 28 (a fourteenth century collection of 762 exempla, compiled from various sources for the use of preachers, and arranged in groups according to subject) and British Library Sloane 2478 f. 34 (a thirteenth and fourteenth collection of miracles of the Virgin, extracts from the lives of Saints), each containing a version of the same narrative: 1) a rustic or farmer lays the Host in a bee-hive; bees make a shrine of honeycombs for it, with the attribution to “Eefert Odo de Seriton”; 2) A farmer retains the Host, and is about to put it in his beehive, when the bees fly out and sting him, and bearing the Host back with them enshrine it with honeycombs, with the specification that “Audiui aliquando referri in publico sermone” bees enshrine the Host, hidden in a hollow tree by a man in Germany.

¹⁶ It is the exemplum taken from Jacques de Vitry in British Library Harley 463 f. 22, which is echoed in the version of Caesarius’s *Dialogus Miraculorum* in British Library Additional 18364 f. 40 (fourteenth century) and in that of Étienne de Bourbon’s *Anecdotes* (exemplum 317). The core of the narrative is: a woman hides the Host in a hollow tree; she forgets it for a year, and then finds that bees have built a shrine of honeycombs round it.

of a witch. The transformation of these narrative elements in the Middle English versions appears to be anything but accidental: on the one hand, it seems to reflect a form of censorship of elements considered potentially dangerous – such as the figure of the witch, whose malign exceptionality was substituted by the marvellous, as the blooming due to the presence of the Host was described – and, on the other hand, it emphasizes the focus on women as execrators of the sacrament. This hypothesis appears further substantiated when one considers the motif of bleeding provoked by breakage, such as the breaking of a branch, which clearly symbolizes the host in this sermon. The bleeding of the host was found in a narrative model already well established in early fourteenth-century collections of *exempla*, in which the protagonist is defined as a sorceress, as attested in Burney 361 f. 149¹⁷. Here below the excerpt from H 2247/035:

I rede in a Cronycle þat þere was a lady on a ty|me þat was not perfite in þe faith
 · So it fortmed whan | she was houselid prevely she toke þe sacrament & bare it
 | home · And whan she had oportunte & leyser she beryed it | vndir a pere tree
 rote not ferr from þe hall window | Than at Cristemas folowyng The husbond
 of þis | vngracious lady desired þe bysshop of þe Cytee & opir | gentylles of þe
 cuntrei to dyne with hym on a day assig= | ned · And when þei were at mete A
 gentyll man | þat wa þere se þe pere tree full of blossommes & floures | floressed
 · whereof he marvelid gretely · A-non he ca|me to þe tree · & it was full of feir
 lusty & ripe peres | Then þe getyll man went to þe tree & brake a bra= | anche
 with þe ripe frute to schewe þe bisshop & þe gentilles | [f. 103r] of þat marveil
 · And whan þe bogh was broke fro þe tree | all was on blode and all blodly with
 þe frute · þe braunche | was brought vn-to þe lordes & gentilles · Thi perceyved
 | þat synfull lady · Sche rose from þe borde & fell down | on hir knees biforn þe
 bisshop be-sekyng hym of counsell | and grace and þere openly tolde hym what
 she had do · | Then þe bisshop with grete Reuerence delvid in þat place · | where
 þat synfull lady had beried þe sacred hoste & As | god wolde þe bysshop founde
 it vndir a rote of þe pere tre | in symylitude of a faire manchildde blodly with · v ·
 woundes | The bysshop with grete Reuerence toke it vp & bare it to þe | chirch
 · The lorde þe lady & all opir folowyng & weping | Where þe bysshop made a
 sermon praying all þe pepl | with hym devoutely þat þei wolde beseke god enterely
 | þat it myght be turnyd a-geyn vndir þe forme of brede · | and so it did · Then
 was þis lady clene confessed of | hir horrible syn & with grete Repentaunce she
 was how= | selid þe next day with þe same sacrid oste · & after went | to blisse ·
 So therfore oweth no man to mistrust of þe | power & myght of god · ffor with-
 oute ffeith & perfite lo= | ve may no man fully plese god¹⁸.

¹⁷ Here the story is about a sorceress who breaks the Host into four parts, meaning to use it for incantations; however, when it starts bleeding, she wraps it in linen, then in wool, and finally hides it in a hole in the church-wall, but blood still flows; therefore, in terror she confesses to the priest.

¹⁸ Trans.: I read in a chronicle that there was a lady at one time that was not perfect in the faith. So it happened that when she was houselled, she secretly took the sacrament and bore

Two sermons, eMus 180/029 and Gl 54/004, both for the same occasion – *Sermo in die Pasche* – have the same example, likely derived from the same source of British Library Harley 206, about a woman prompted by the devil to test the Eucharist, who brought it home in a napkin (*in eius manforam*, glossed as *napkyn* in Harley 206 f. 98b) from Easter communion. The version in British Library Harley 206 differs from the others because here the woman put the Host first in boiling water, then tried to bake it in the oven, when she heard a boy's voice calling his mother and saw the Virgin taking the Child-Christ out of the oven. In Bodl eMus 180/029 and Gl 54/004 the woman hid the Host together with a precious stone and did not test the Host, but found a child at its place. The narrative frame is the miracle of the Host by Gregory the Great, but then the narration is moulded around other motifs. The *exemplum* begins by setting the stage for the event – that is, by presenting the social status of the woman (*þis marchaunte had a wife*), the social standing of her husband (*a worthi and a nobyll marchaunte*), and the location where the host will be hidden (*in þe whiche iewell þere was a precius stone callyd a serpentine*). Yet, as it is typical, the woman is portrayed in her imperfect state as a Christian (*a wyfe þe whiche had not very stedfaste beleve in the blessyd sacrament*), with only a brief allusion to the cause of her disbelief – namely, the devil's deception (*by þe temptacion of the devyll*) – and a similarly cursory mention of how she stole the Host by hiding it in her mouth at Easter mass. This seemingly trivial detail gains a different significance when compared with other Latin *exempla* in which the Host is likewise concealed in the mouth: in all such cases there were mainly men who stole the Host keeping

it home. And when she had opportunity and leisure, she buried it under a pear tree root not far from the hall window. Then, at Christmas following, the husband of this ungracious lady invited the bishop of the city and other nobles of the country to dine with him on an appointed day. And when they were at meal, a gentleman that was there saw the pear tree full of blossoms and flowers in bloom, whereof he marvelled greatly. At once he came to the tree, and it was full of fair, lush, and ripe pears. Then the gentleman went to the tree and broke a branch with the ripe fruit to show the bishop and the nobles [f. 103r] of that marvel. And when the bough was broken from the tree, all was full of blood and all bloody with the fruit. The branch was brought to the lords and nobles. That sinful lady perceived this. She rose from the table and fell down on her knees before the bishop, beseeching him for counsel and grace, and there openly told him what she had done.

Then the bishop, with great reverence, dug in that place where that sinful lady had buried the sacred Host, and as God willed, the bishop found it under a root of the pear tree in the likeness of a fair male child, bloody with five wounds. The bishop, with great reverence, took it up and bore it to the church, the lord, the lady, and all others following and weeping. There the bishop gave a sermon, praying all the people with him devoutly that they would beseech God earnestly that it might be turned again into the form of bread — and so it did. Then was this lady fully confessed of her horrible sin, and with great repentance she was houselled the next day with the same sacred Host, and afterward went to bliss. So therefore ought no man to mistrust the power and might of God, for without faith and perfect love, no man may fully please God.

it in the mouth¹⁹, and the theft was usually done to employ it in love charms²⁰; moreover, in case of the Host theft, the more widely circulated version sees a priest committing the crime²¹. The long *exemplum* focussed on what follows the transformation of the Host into a one-year old child with bleeding wounds (*a grete mervell*), for which only authoritative people (Thomas of Aquinas and Pope Umbertus) could only give advice. It ends with a religious procession and the woman's full confession after which the Host appears instead of the child. Here follows the excerpt from eMus 180/029:

A glorijs exsamyll we haue hereof in the sermons of | seynt [p. 261] Gregory, the whiche ensamyll was [one] of þe cawsys þat þe feste of Corpus Christi was firste ordend and fownde. Pere was some tyme in þe cite of Alquyne a worthi and a nobyll marchaunte that had a [60] worthy iewell, in þe whiche iewell þere was a precius stone callyd a serpentyne. And þis marchaunte vsyd every zere, after Wit Sondag weke was done, for to make to his frendys a grete feste. And at þe principall tyme of þe feste, for a grete ryalte he wold schewe this [65] iewell. And it was so þat þis marchaunte had a wyfe þe whiche had not very stedfaste beleve in the blessyd sacrament on þe awtyr, þat it scholde not be þe very body of Criste by þe temptation of the devyll, but evermore dowtid therein. And on Ester Day when sche had resceyvid þis blessid sacrament, sche kepte it styll al hole and sownde [p. 262] in hyr mowþe. And so prevely when þe preste was gone, | sche toke it [71] owte of hyr mowþe [and put it] into a feyre kercheffe, and so browzte it home and put it into þe cofyr there as þis ryall iewell was withe þe serpentyne. So it befell vpon þe day before rehersyd þat þis marchaunte at þe [75] princypall tyme of þe feste bad his wyffe go fetche hym þis iewell. And when sche came to þe cofyr and had openyd þe lydd, þen sche fonde there a feyre chylde sprawlyng in hyr kerchyfe. And so þat soden syzte cawsyd hyr for to be in grete feere, and so sche made a grete crye and a grete noyse. And þe chylde semyd to be a zere of age withe a [80] grete wounde on his ryzte syde, and in every honde and fote a grete wounde. And so by þe noyse þat sche made þe marchaunte withe moche oþer pepyll carne vp and sawe þis syzte. And so pereof þei had grete mervell, and

¹⁹ For instance, MS Royal D I f.66b (n. 27) MS Royal D I, which could be one of the sources used by the author of *Speculum Laicorum* and contains what appear to be the Latin texts used by William of Waddington for five of the tales in his *Manuel des Pêchés* (Herbert 1910 [1883]) and MS Harley 2851 f. 105b: they contain an example of a rustic bee-keeper who retained the Host in his mouth for magical purposes, the feminine versions of which is Harley 463 f. 22 (n. 190), where a woman keeps the Host in her mouth, meaning to use it in divinations, but it grows into her palate and stops her speech, and MS Harley 463 f. 22 (n. 191).

²⁰ In British Library Sloane 2478 f. 15 it is reported that a woman at "Brugelac" in Gascony tries to retain the Host in her mouth, meaning to use it as a love charm; but it leaps through her cheek to the altar.

²¹ This episode is found in Caesarius's *Dialogus Miraculorum* (cf. the fourteenth century manuscript British Library, Additional 18346 f. 38, col. 2.). In this regard, one should recall exempla in which a woman receives a Host from a priest's hands to put it in the fields with the intention of protecting her crops (cf. British Library Additional 18346).

þei wyste not what was beste for to doo. And at þe [p. 263] laste þei rememberyd þem | of an holy man callyd mayster Thomas of [85] Alquyne, a notabyll and a famus doctur of diuinite. And he was an holy lyver. [And they desyred hym gretly to com theder]; and when he saw this syzte he had grete mervell þereof. And þen he inquiryd of þe woman how it was. And when sche had confessyd þe trowþe, he ioyned hyr þat 'sche' schold take þe streyzte wey vnto Rome, and the [90] chylde in hyr armys lappyd in þe same kercheffe, and þat sche scholde schewe it to þe pope Vrbane þe fowrte þat was pope at þat tyme, and þere of hym and of his cowncell to seke a remedye.

And so they toke þe wey to Rome, bothe sche and hyr husbonde, and ever as þei went by the wey þe chylde waxed more and more. And [95] when þei came before þe pope, he had grete mervell of þe infydelyte and incrudelyte of þe woman; and also he mervelyd moche of þe grete myrakyll þat God schewyd þere. Þen þe pope, |withe þe cowncell of [f. 264] his cardynalls, remisyd and remyttid þe examynacion and þe endyng of þis matter to þis for-seyde famus doctur, and so delyvered þem a comyscion. [100]

And so þei turned home aȝene and ever þe childe incresyd more and more. And when þei came home þis holy man resceyvyd þe popis comiscion þe whiche was directe vnto hym. And on þe morowȝe he commawndyd al þe cite to com and go in procession, and the woman withe þe childe in hir armys, [lappyd in þe kercheffe], schewing hym [105] vnto all pepill. And when þe procession was done, þis holy man made a sermon to al þe pepyll of þis same myrakyll. And when þe sermon was done, he remisyd hym to the hyȝe awtyr and toke þe chylde with þe kerchyfe owte of þe womans hondys and leyde him vpon þe awtyr, and made þis woman openly to confesse hyr in every degre, withe all [110] the hole cyrcumstance lyke as sche had done, as it is before rehersyd. And þen þis holy man seyde vnto the woman: | 'I mervell gretly how [p. 265] þu durste be so bolde to serche þe prevetyse of God. And sen þu wolde not resceyve hym at þat tyme as he was in þe forme of brede, þerfore þu schalt resceyve hym in soche a forme as he is in now.' And [115] þerevpon he toke vp þe chylde and offerid him to þe woman. And as sone as it towchid hyr lypis, þe good Lorde turned himselffe into þe forme of brede aȝene.

The final sermon provides an even more striking instance of the adaptation and fusion of the Latin *exempla* that served as both reference and inspiration, all framed within a specific argumentative and didactic focus on disbelief or false belief. The motifs interwoven in this sermon are manifold: the female personification of unfaith, the intervention of the devil and the false idea that the Host was simple bread, the theft of the Host – which, rather than being swallowed, was held in the mouth and thus taken away from the church, much alike the previous sermon – and the cutting of the host, first by the devil to prove it was just bread, and later by the woman to whom a one-year old child appeared with bleeding wounds at his feet, hands and chest. The *exemplum* concludes with the unveiling of the devil's deception, demonstrated both by the bleeding of the host, and by the intervention of the Child Christ, who restrained the woman's hand as she, incited by the devil, was about to commit suicide and thereby dammed her own soul.

Set within the same narrative framework that underscores the credibility of the account through the authority of its protagonist – Gregory the Great – the narrative begins with the customary introduction of the protagonist, who, contrary to the norm, is initially portrayed as a devout believer. Indeed, the event is described as glorious²² (*glorius exsampil*) both because it was credited with the establishment of the Corpus Domini feast and (perhaps) because it expressed the author's stance who wanted to present as well-known the reason that led the woman to become a disbeliever – namely, the devil's intervention, who, envious of her steadfast faith and disguised as a priest, instilled in her the doubt that the Host was merely ordinary bread, urging her to take it home to verify it. The author of the sermon drew on the same sources as the preceding one, reworking them further and completely changing perspective. A substantial portion is devoted to describing the devil's actions – his disguise and his twisted, insidious rhetoric aimed at capturing the soul of the believing woman. In fact, one might argue that the devil emerges as a central figure – if not the main co-protagonist – executing two deceptions: first, leading the woman to desecrate the Host, and then inducing her to succumb to guilt and contemplate suicide. In contrast, the woman is portrayed as a helpless victim of the devil's deceptive arts, which only Christ in the form of the Child – the true protagonist – managed to thwart. The connection among these sermons on the mystery of transubstantiation is confirmed by recurring narrative elements, such as the Christ Child's age, the wounds, and the narrative framework (including the presentation formulas), undoubtedly reflecting the reciprocal influence of Latin sources. It is equally evident that some of the sources for the "miraculous" event were different. There is one Latin *exemplum* recounting an episode in which the Host was not broken²³ but cut with a knife, a deed attributed solely to the Jew: it is recorded in British Library Additional 11284 of the first half of the fourteenth century containing the example of the *Speculum Laicorum*, where it is said that a Jew in Germany stroke the Host with his knife and blood streamed forth (f. 35). Here below the passage containing the exemplum from Bodl eMus 180/022²⁴.

And þat I may preve by a gloriu exsampil in the sermons of seynt Gregory þe whiche he made in grete worchyp of þe blessid sacrament on the awtȳr (and it was also one of the cawses why þat the holy feste [160] of Corpus Christi was firste ordende and fownde), and seyde þus. There was some tyme a woman, and sche was ever in perfit beleve on the blessid sacrament on þe awter, and ever sche

²² The adjective 'glorious' was first attested in religious text, precisely in 1382 in Wycliff's Bible, with the meaning of "ostentatious, fond of splendour". Its usage continued to be connected with religious vocabulary up to 1400 when it started to occur in romances with the connotation of "illustrious, renowned". OED *s.v.* glorious and MED *s.v.* glorious.

²³ See note 22.

²⁴ In this regard, it is worth mentioning the episode of Sternberger Hostienschänderprozess about five Jews – five like the wounds of Christ – who were accused of piercing the host with nails and knives ("mit nodeln gestochen / mit messern gestochen") (Chiara De Bastiani, personal communication).

had in hyr prayers to the blessid sacrament þis maner of sayng: 'O þu blessid Lorde Ihesu I [f. 125v] Crist, very flessche and bloode in forme of brede.' Þen consideryng þe [165] fende how stedfastly þat sche was sett in þe feiþe of Criste, and also of the sayng of hyr gracijs wordis to þe sacrament, wherefore he had grete envy to þis woman.

And so it befell in þe begynnyng of Lent þat þis woman went to þe chyrche to be schreven. And as sche enterid at þe chyrche stile þe [170] devill came to hyr in the lykenes of the holy-watyr clerke of þe chirche and seyde to hyr, 'Woman, whydyr goiste þu?' And sche seyde: 'I go to þe chyrche to be schreven of my synnys þat I may be abyll and worþi to resceyve at Ester my saviowre Ihesu Criste his flessche and his blode in forme of brede.' But then the devill was woode and angry [175] and seyde: 'Þu arte but a foole, for | knowe more þen þu. Am not I the parnessche clerke of the chirche? For to sey that it is as þu sayste, it is [f. 126r] not so, and þat I wyll make a | large preve before the. Loke when þu haste take þat brede of þe preste on Ester Day þat þu bring it home, and þen schalt þu see verely that it is but brede and noþer flessche ne [180] blode, as þu sayste.' Wherevpon þe woman gafe grete credens to þe fende and þowzte it scholde be so as he withe his falsenes had informyd hyr. Notwithstandyng zit sche went into þe chyrche [to hyr gostly fadur] and made a cowntenaunce of holynes; but sche thowzt oþerwyse, and so contenewyd till Ester Day was come.

[185] And when sche had resceyvid þat blessid sacrament, sche kepte it prevely and browzt it home to hir place hole and sownde. And then to hyrselfe sche seyde: 'Now sothely I wolde þat þe clerke were here þat I myzte see þis prevyd þat it is not so as holy chyrche haþe tawzt me.' But in certeyne, anon as sche had seyde these wordis, þe fende cam to [f. 126v] hyr in þe lykenes afore-sayde. I Þen anone seyde sche: 'Let me se [191] what pefe þat þu canste make þat þis is not þe very flessche and blood of Crist.' And þerewythe þe devyll toke hyr a knyfe and bad hyr smyte it or cut it in two, 'And þen schalte þu see that it is but brede.' 'Nay', seyd sche, 'cut it þiselffe.' Þen seyde þe devyll: 'If I scholde do þat dede myselfe, þu wilt sey þat þere is some wylis or some sotelteis in [195] me, if it com not to þe conclucion as we spake of before.' The intent of his wordis was for þis cawse: he had no powere to make so large a profyr, and therfore he bad þe woman not spare but cut it atwo. And þen sche dyd acordyng as þe fende bad hyr. And withe the stroke þat sche stroke, sodenly there stode vp a lytyll childe as it had ben a zere [200] of age. And in every honde and foote and [in] his syde he had a grete wounde, and ever þe woundis blede. And þe childe lokyd as pituously vpon hyr I as who seythe: 'þu haste hurt me sore.' Wherefore þe [f. 127ar] woman cryed lowde, and withe grete lamentacion sche seyde to þe fende: 'Alas, þu cursyd creature! What haste þu made me to do? For [205] ever I haue had my feythefull beleve in þe blessyd Lorde Ihesu Criste his flessche and his bloode in forme of brede. And for þis dede that I haue done, now schall I be dampnyd.' 'Nay! Certen', seyde þe fende, 'and þu wilt take þe same knyfe and smyte þiselffe to the herte, þen schalt þu be saffe, or els þu arte but dampnyd.' 'Why! Trowyste þu', [210] seyde sche, 'if I do so that I may be sayd?' 'zee, certain', seyde he. 'Now forsoþe', seyde sche, 'I had lever styke myselfe to the herte withe þis knyfe rapen þen my

sowle scholde peressche for þis myschevos dede.' And therewithe sche purposyd to smyte hyrselfe to þe herte withe þat knyfe. And sodenly þat blessyd Lorde in þe [215] lickenes of a chylde withe a lawzyng I chere toke the woman by the [f. 127av] honde and helde hyr so fast þat sche myzt not bryng hyr purpose abowte. And then þe good Lorde commawndyd the fende to passe to þe peynes of hell. And anone þe devyl voyded frome thens and bare away [220] an ende of þe howse withe hym. And then came in moche pepyll and saw this same syzte, and ever þe good Lorde stode styll in þe same symylytude afore-seyde. And þen cam in the curate of þe chyrche, and by a sovereyne commawndement he cawsid moche pepyll for to [225] come thedyr. And withe grete reverence he toke vp þis giorius Lorde in a solempne procession and so browzte þe good Lorde to the chirche. And þe woman folowyd aftyr withe grete contriscion, cryyng to God for mercy. And anone in the syzte of all pepil, þe blessid Lorde turned into þe forme of brede azene, and withe þe same glorius oste [G, p. 208] sche was howselyd and so sche resceyvyd hym to hyr everlastyng [231] saluacion²⁵.

²⁵ Trans.: And that I may prove by a glorious example from the sermons of Saint Gregory, which he made in great honor of the Blessed Sacrament on the altar (and it was also one of the reasons why the holy feast [160] of Corpus Christi was first instituted and founded), and he said thus: There was once a woman who always held perfect belief in the Blessed Sacrament upon the altar, and she always had this saying in her prayers to the Sacrament: "O you blessed Lord Jesus Christ, true flesh and blood in the form of bread." Then, when [165] the devil saw how steadfastly she was rooted in the faith of Christ, and heard her gracious words spoken to the Sacrament, he became greatly envious of this woman.

And so it happened that at the beginning of Lent this woman went to church to be shriven (confessed). And as she entered at the church gate, the [170] devil came to her in the likeness of the holy water clerk of the church and said to her: "Woman, where are you going?" And she said: "I go to church to be shriven of my sins so that I may be able and worthy to receive at Easter my Savior Jesus Christ—his flesh and his blood in the form of bread." But then the devil was furious [175] and said: "You are a fool, for I know more than you. Am I not the parish clerk of the church? And I say that what you believe is not true, and I will prove it to you clearly. When you have received that bread from the priest on Easter Day, take it home with you, and then you shall see plainly that it is nothing but bread, and neither flesh nor [180] blood, as you say." Whereupon the woman gave great credence to the fiend and thought it might be as he, with his deceit, had led her to believe. Nevertheless, she went into the church [to her spiritual father] and made a show of holiness; but in her heart she thought otherwise, and so she continued until Easter Day came.

[185] And when she had received the Blessed Sacrament, she kept it secretly and brought it home whole and unharmed. And then she said to herself: "Now truly I wish the clerk were here so I might see this proven, that it is not as Holy Church has taught me." But surely, as soon as she had spoken these words, the devil came to her again in the same likeness as before. And then she said: "Let me see [191] what proof you can offer that this is not truly the flesh and blood of Christ." And with that, the devil gave her a knife and told her to strike it or cut it in two: "Then you shall see that it is nothing but bread." "No," she said, "you cut it yourself." Then said the devil: "If I do it myself, you will say that there is some trick or cunning in [195] me if it does not come to the conclusion as we spoke of before." (The meaning of his words was this: he had no power to carry out such a great act, and therefore he bade the woman not to hold back but to cut it in two herself.) And so she did according as the fiend told her. And with the stroke that she struck, suddenly there stood up a small child, as if it were about a year [200] old. And on each hand and foot, and in his side, he had

In conclusion, Middle English sermons served not only as tools for disseminating theological and moral principles to a broad audience but also as reflections of the theological debates of their time. Examples of the theft of the host are paradigmatic of this process: in fact, this very crime was one of the actions most frequently attributed to witches. The softening – or even complete omission – of certain elements present in the corresponding Latin *exempla* can readily be explained by their didactic function: to concentrate attention on the salvific power of faith and on the deception of the devil lurking behind every act of desecration, while simultaneously avoiding any reference to the magical powers ascribed to the Host, so as not to reinforce the popular beliefs prevalent at the time. At the same time, although their primary aim was to reinforce moral lessons, the treatment of some themes circulating in well-known Latin collections took to extremes some features, that anticipated characteristics later solidified in the image of the witch: not only women are mostly represented as sinful, but the figure of the sinful woman – lecherous, irredeemable, and linked to diabolical relationships – prefigured the traits that would define a woman as a witch in the treatises of the late fifteenth and sixteenth century. It is not surprising that only women stole the Host in sermons: the theft of the Host was indeed one of the most frequent accusation in Inquisitors' treatises:

Quinque Magarum quæsitores narrant interalia se quæstionem de Maga habuisse, quæ fatebatur se consecratam hostiam quam oportuerat deglutuisse, sudario exceptam in poculo vbi bufone m alebat condidisse, puluerésque sibi à diabolo datos adiecisse vt certis vocibus (quas reticeri præstat) enuntiatis ad enecandas pecudes limini ouilis substerneret. Deprehensa itaue & euicta viua concremata eft. (Bodin 1590, 385).

a great wound, and the wounds bled continually. And the child looked upon her with such a sorrowful gaze, as if to say: "You have wounded me sorely." Wherefore the woman cried out loudly, and with great lamentation she said to the devil: "Alas, cursed creature! What have you made me do? For [205] I have always held faithful belief in the blessed Lord Jesus Christ, his flesh and his blood in the form of bread. And for this deed I have done, now I shall be damned!" "No indeed," said the fiend, "if you will take that same knife and strike yourself to the heart, then you shall be saved; otherwise, you are damned." "What? Do you believe," [210] said she, "that if I do so I may be saved?" "Yes, certainly," said he. "Well then, truly," she said, "I would rather stab myself to the heart with this knife than let my soul perish for this wicked deed." And with that, she intended to strike herself to the heart with the knife. But suddenly the blessed Lord, in the [215] likeness of a child with a joyful expression, took the woman by the hand and held her so tightly that she could not carry out her intention. Then the good Lord commanded the fiend to depart to the torments of hell. And at once the devil fled from there, carrying away [220] with him part of the house. Then many people came in and saw this sight, and the good Lord still stood there in the same form as before. And then came the curate of the church, and by a special command he summoned many people to [225] gather there. And with great reverence he lifted up the glorious Lord in a solemn procession and thus brought him to the church. And the woman followed behind with great contrition, crying to God for mercy. And immediately, in the sight of all the people, the Blessed Lord returned to the form of bread again. And with that same glorious Host, she was given communion, and so she received him unto her everlasting [231] salvation.

Verum longè grauior eorum est superstitio qui chartaceos orbiculos de collo pendentes, aut consecratam hostiam in pera circumferunt (vt penes gentilem Præsidentem deprehendit hostiam carnifex, qui in patibulo montis falconis suspendit eum). (Ivi, 665)

The *exempla* depicting the disbelieving woman serves a dual purpose: they both reinforce ecclesiastical authority and underscore the sacred mysteries of the Eucharist, while also emphasizing a gendered model of sin (and redemption). Notably, the censored versions of these exempla heighten the association between misbelief, the theft of the host, and the female figure. Thus, while they offer a didactic lesson on faith and repentance, they also reinforce traditional gender stereotypes upon which later the image of the witch will hinge.

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