





Hacettepe University Graduate School of Social Sciences

Department of English Language and Literature

English Language and Literature Programme

**A READING OF MEDIEVAL ENGLISH SOCIETY IN THE  
WAKEFIELD CYCLE AND THE CHESTER CYCLE**

İlknur Büşra ÇAKIR

Master's Thesis

Ankara, 2023



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## KABUL VE ONAY

İlknur Būşra ÇAKIR tarafından hazırlanan “A Reading of Medieval English Society in the Wakefield and the Chester Cycle” başlıklı bu çalışma, 15.09.2023 tarihinde yapılan savunma sınavı sonucunda başarılı bulunarak jürimiz tarafından Yüksek Lisans tezi olarak kabul edilmiştir.

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**İlknur Büşra ÇAKIR**

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## ETİK BEYAN

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## ABSTRACT

ÇAKIR, İlknur Büşra. “A Reading of Medieval English Society in the Wakefield Cycle and the Chester Cycle.” MA Thesis, Ankara, 2023.

In the Middle Ages, mystery plays were performed by the clergy in the Church on the Corpus Christi Day to teach the biblical stories to the illiterate people; however, later these stories developed to include earthly elements and moved out from the Church to the towns where the city guilds began to perform these plays on the pageant wagons in cycles. As the medieval period is characterised with religious, political, economic, and social controversies especially in relation to feudalism, these cycles began to touch upon these issues with some entertaining elements. In this regard, this thesis is concerned with a reading of the Wakefield and Chester cycle plays to display the social criticism of society and the portrayal and criticism of women. The Wakefield Master’s plays, namely *The First Shepherds’ Play*, *The Second Shepherds’ Play*, and *Noah* deal especially with the criticism of society regarding the inequality between the feudal lords, serfs, and villeins with a more direct style when compared with the Chester cycle plays, namely *The Creation*, and *Adam and Eve* and *Noah*. Both cycles also reflect women’s condition in feudal society in relation to Eve and Virgin Mary. Although in both the Wakefield and Chester cycles the didactic purpose is intermingled with entertaining elements, the Wakefield Master brings in many elements in these plays reflecting women’s representation and status in the Middle Ages. Thus, different from the Chester cycle, the Wakefield Master’s women characters carry medieval stereotypical traits as well as innovative features, for instance, being individuals who stand against male oppression.

**Keywords:** Wakefield cycle, Chester cycle, mystery plays, *The First Shepherds’ Play*, *The Second Shepherds’ Play*, *Noah*, *The Creation*, and *Adam and Eve*

## ÖZET

ÇAKIR, İlknur Büşra. “Wakefield ve Chester Döngüsel Gizem Oyunlarında Orta Çağ İngiliz Toplumunun bir İncelemesi.” Yüksek Lisans Tezi, Ankara, 2023.

Orta Çağ’da döngüsel gizem oyunları, okuma yazma bilmeyen insanlara İncil’deki hikayeleri öğretmek için Katolik Yortusunda ruhban sınıfı tarafından kilisede sergilenmişlerdir, ancak daha sonra bu hikayeler dünyevi öğeler içerecek şekilde gelişmişlerdir ve kiliseden çıkarılıp lonca teşkilatları tarafından vagonlarda döngüsel olarak şehirlerin belli mekanlarında sergilenmeye başlanmışlardır. Orta Çağ özellikle feodalite ile ilişkili olarak dini, politik, ekonomik ve sosyal uyumsuzluklarla tanımlandığı için bu döngüsel gizem oyunları nükteli ve eğlendirici öğelerle bu konulara değinmeye başlamışlardır. Bu bağlamda, bu tez Wakefield ve Chester dizi oyunlarının okumasını sunarak bu oyunlardaki toplumsal eleştiri ve kadınların konumu ve eleştirisini ele almaktadır. Wakefield Üstadı’nın oyunları olan *Birinci Çobanlar Oyunu*, *İkinci Çobanlar Oyunu*, *Nuh*, Chester döngüsel gizem oyunları olan *Nuh*, *Yaratılış ve Adem ve Havva* oyunları ile karşılaştırıldığında özellikle feodal beyler, toprağa bağlı köleler ve kısmen özgür olan serfler arasındaki eşitsizliğe bağlı olarak toplumsal eleştiriye daha hicivli ve nükteli olarak ele alır. Bu döngüsel gizem oyunları kadınların feodal toplumdaki konumunu Havva Ana ve Meryem Ana ile ilişkilendirmektedir. Hem Wakefield hem Chester döngülerinde öğretici amacın eğlenceli unsurlarla bir arada olmasına rağmen, Wakefield Üstadı kadınların Orta Çağ’daki tasvir ve konumunu yansıtan birçok unsuru bu oyunlara kazandırmıştır. Böylelikle Chester döngüsünden farklı olarak Wakefield Üstadı’nın kadın karakterleri Orta Çağ’a özgü tipik özelliklerin yanı sıra erkek egemenliğine karşı koyan bireyler olmak gibi yenilikçi özellikler taşımaktadırlar.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Wakefield gizem oyunları, Chester gizem oyunları, *Birinci Çobanlar Oyunu*, *İkinci Çobanlar Oyunu*, *Nuh*, *Yaratılış ve Adem ve Havva*

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## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this thesis is to analyse the Chester cycle plays namely *The Creation, and Adam and Eve* and *Noah*, and the Wakefield Master's three plays, that is, *The First Shepherds' Play*, *The Second Shepherds' Play*, and *Noah* as medieval mystery plays from the aspect of the critical depiction of society and women, the living conditions of peasant-producers, and the relationship between men and women as well as to shed light on the Wakefield Master's innovations regarding the critical and satirical approach of the plays towards the mentioned aspects. These two cycles reflect the contemporary developments and conflicts of the time when compared to the other cycles, York and Coventry, which makes them the main subject matter of this thesis. In this regard, this thesis discusses social, economic, and religious changes in England in the twelfth century. The mentioned cycle plays depict the social, economic, and political life in medieval England; however, the Wakefield cycle differs from the Chester cycle in its more critical approach towards these topics. At this point, although both cycles have didactic purpose, it is important to emphasise the critical, ironic, and humorous style of the Wakefield cycle plays compared to the Chester cycle plays.

Even though, at first, the cycle plays aimed to teach biblical stories to the illiterate population of medieval England through the enactment by amateur actors like the guildsmen (Wiles 56), in time, some secular topics such as the criticism of society regarding the relationship between feudal lords and serfs, males and females were included in the plays. However, the Wakefield Master intermingles this critical approach with humour by focusing on the hardships and sufferings of Noah in *Noah* and the shepherds in *The First Shepherds' Play* and *The Second Shepherds' Play* that differs his plays from the Chester cycle plays. In his three plays, namely *The First Shepherds' Play*, *The Second Shepherds' Play*, and *Noah* the Wakefield Master mainly presents the medieval English society and the problems of the age with satirical elements whilst the Chester cycle plays, namely *The Creation, and Adam and Eve* and *Noah*, are more didactic and less critical. Also, the Wakefield cycle plays are more concerned with the elements of sustainability and deformity of the feudal system, and the hierarchical

relations in that system while the Chester cycle plays reflect the representation and the perception of women's roles in medieval feudal English society through the enactment of the biblical stories. In the light of these, the first chapter of this thesis focuses on the peasantry, feudalism in medieval England, and how they were affected and shaped by the changing conditions especially in the Wakefield cycle plays whereas the second chapter is mostly concerned with the condition of women within the feudal social hierarchy as represented in *The First Shepherds' Play*, *The Second Shepherds' Play*, *Noah* of the Wakefield cycle and *Noah* of the Chester cycle.

It is important to understand how medieval English theatre emerged and developed in medieval political, economic, religious, and social conditions. The dramatic productions of the time were affected by the changes and developments in society. Thus, interrelation of medieval drama and conditions in society cannot be evaluated separately from each other. Medieval English theatre is composed of mystery plays also known as cyclical biblical stories, morality plays, and the miracle plays. Considering how these theatrical plays came into being, there are different theories. For instance, the most common theory is that medieval drama in Britain had its origin in "liturgical mimetic ceremonies" and "the entertainment patterns of classical antiquity" (Johnston 1). The first example of liturgical drama was the *Quem quaeritis* which means "Whom do you seek?" Murat Tuncay explains that in the ninth century, as the Church became richer, the Church Fathers tried to show the glory of God through enactment of the *Quem quaeritis* (45-46). The play was composed of a short dialogue of an angel who addressed the Marys at Christ's empty tomb. However, the scene was not played by women or secular men; as Johnston suggests, the roles were acted by the monks with the aim to "strengthen and stimulate faith among those already initiated into mysteries" (3-4). Thus, liturgical drama, as suggested by Peter Happé, appeared as "the Church services" carrying the aim of educating the people of the time on biblical stories (*English Drama Before Shakespeare* 3).

In this respect, Happé argues that there were two different categories in classifying the plot of medieval drama as: "[T]hose which take on a narrative based upon the Bible or

upon a legend which can be taken to be broadly ‘true’, and those which have a plot which is especially constructed or adapted to bring out a special point of doctrine, usually a moral or political theme” (*English Drama Before Shakespeare* 28). Thus, the two main types of medieval drama appeared as mystery and morality plays formed around the two different kinds of plots and themes.

Beginning in the twelfth century, the Church aimed the salvation of people through the performance of sacraments. Especially, the Eucharist was performed through the rite of anointment that was represented by bread and wine substituting the body and blood of Christ. In time, this led to the formation of a new kind of feast of Corpus Christi in 1311. It was celebrated on the first Thursday following the Trinity Sunday. This began to be performed annually developing into cycles in some English cities like York and Coventry (Johnston 5). However, these religious performances were at first in Latin since it was the language of the Church and learning. Over the years, these plays turned into rituals and began to be performed in churchyards. At first, those plays did not carry the modern theatrical elements of today’s modern theatre, but as John Wesley Harris argues that they were “free of influence from the street and the market-place” (46). Harris points out that the performers of those plays made use of gestures symbolising the message of the Biblical stories (46). Later, they evolved into cycles. The four of these cycles survived, and they were performed in York, Chester, Wakefield, and Coventry, and they were named after the cities they were performed in (Tuncay 55). These cycle plays were carried out of the Church to be performed by guildsmen in the streets of these cities. Thus, the stories of these plays began to be drawn away from the original biblical stories and became more secular in time. Also, the language of the plays began to change with the addition of colloquial words (Kızılgöl 1031).

As mentioned, the plays of the time were designed to be performed in the Churchyards, streets, and then on pageant wagons. So, to grasp the scope of the performance of those plays, it is necessary to understand how the cycle and pageant functioned in relation to the plot. Meg Twycross depicts the cyclical performance of the mystery plays as beginning on the Corpus Christi Day with the sunrise when the performance began on a

station and was carried out to different stations on a route for each cycle (27-29). Thus, York, Coventry, Chester, and Towneley (Wakefield) cycles had different routes specific to each. These cycles shared the cyclical structure which began before the creation of the universe and man ending with the Judgement Day. Each story was performed on a different station on the cycles' routes till the end of the day (Twycross 29).

The language of the clergy was Latin, the common people of the era could not read or write in Latin. Thus, for didactic aims of teaching Christianity to common people, the clergy chose to perform those stories in English. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, those stories were no longer under the control of the clergy, rather they were performed by the guildsmen on the pageant wagons in cycles, however; these plays began to include entertaining elements such as imitations of real events, props, and humorous and satirical dialogues while still having a didactic purpose. This was mostly because of the formation of a new powerful group of merchants and landowners. The transformation of agricultural societies into commercial cities reduced the political, religious, and economic influence of the Church because people began to explore the world through especially trade relations and travel. They also understood that they could earn money and live free from religious and economic restrictions. The formation of cities required safety and regulation of commerce, trade, trade routes, and traders. Thus, eventually the guilds were formed by the thirteenth century and became one of the most functional units in the society protecting the traders against the feudal lords (Kızılgöl 1032).

The feudal hierarchical system was structured according to power relations of the different groups. Feudal power was based on the authority over the arable land instead of being solely based on the political authority. Especially, beginning with the early formation of cities in the twelfth century, and with an increase in agricultural production during the thirteenth century, feudal English society faced many conflicts resulting in oppositions between different groups of society. However, oppositions existed even during the early Middle Ages. Within this context, Jacques Le Goff suggests that medieval society was characterised with many binary oppositions (10). The most



controversial opposition was between clergy and laymen. This was followed by the dominance of power, “*potens/pauper* (powerful/poor), replaced, after the thirteenth century, by the opposition rich/poor, which reflected the progress of a monetary economy and the promotion of wealth as the source or consequence of power” (Le Goff 10). Although the power balance changed in the late Middle Ages, the most powerful unit was the Christian Catholic Church until then. Consequently, society was divided into groups according to their power status, and the relationships based on mutual interest among these groups divided by the bishop of Laon, Adalberon: “[T]hose who pray, those who fight, and those who work” (qtd. in Le Goff 11). Among these groups, those who prayed, that is, the clergy, functioned as a bridge between divinity and the ephemeral world. Thus, not only clerics of the time believed that they had the “highest spiritual power on earth” but also other groups followed this belief from the eleventh century onward (Le Goff 11). Considering that the majority of the medieval people were illiterate, H. S. Bennett argues that they had faith in every word uttered by the clergy (vii). This situation granted the clergy the power to rule even over the kings of the time, making them the most powerful group in the social, political, and economic hierarchy.

On the other hand, those who fought were composed of military forces that became the nobility of the time, and “the chivalric knighthood that protected the other two orders with its arms” (Le Goff 11). Thus, the fighter group provided protection for peasants in return for labour power while serving for the well-being of those who prayed at the top of the feudal hierarchy. Hence, it can be said that the fighter group did little or no manorial work, they “existed because of the manual labour of the peasantry” (Carter 133). In this respect, although fighters were aware of their supremacy over peasants, the idea of work; thus, people who worked could not be disdained according to Christian teaching. As John Marshall Carter suggests, “Christianity ... emphasized the duty of manual labour and tolerance for those who performed it” (133). Thus, it can be deduced that the production in the manorial land was imposed on the peasants as a Christian duty which was in favour of the feudal lords.

Furthermore, peasantry came into being when free farmers sought safety from invasions of different tribes and wars between them. The search for safety resulted in collective living. Eventually the farmers collaborated and made labour division. Additionally, at times of danger, they asked for the protection of the local lord. In time, this caused the loss of freedom and autonomy of the farmers in return for protection by the lord. On the condition that the farmers would work for the lord on his land, they became bound to that land and were no longer free peasants. As John Marshall Carter claims, the manorial work was an imposed Christian duty by Christian teachings on the farmers, it later turned into a relationship based on mutual interests (133). Consequently, as Clifford R. Backman points out, this kind of bondage and negotiation between the farmers and the lords formed the beginning of peasantry later to be known as serfdom (197). The shared interests of the farmers and the lords formed a bondage between both parts known as feudalism.

Since the land was considered as the source of political, economic, and social power in the Middle Ages, lords had political power. That is why, the arable land was also accepted as the way to have a part in the administration and the court of England. Hence, the desire for land remained strong especially among the younger sons who had no chance of becoming a fief owner and inheriting the medieval manor because of primogeniture<sup>1</sup>. Heer explains the ways the land-hungry sons tried to establish their power as such: “Wars, civil wars, incessant feuds and rebellions, even the Crusades, all must be seen in the context of this land-hunger of the aristocracy, an aristocracy seeking a livelihood” (18). In the light of this, it can be deduced that the Norman Conquest (1066) was also the result of the effort to gain lands. Yet, while changing the power balance in England, the Norman Conquest helped establish the feudal system firmly in these lands as well as feeding upon feudalism.

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<sup>1</sup> In the *OED* “primogeniture” is defined as: “The right of succession or inheritance belonging to the first-born; the principle, custom, or law by which the property or title descends to the eldest son (or eldest child); the feudal rule of inheritance by which the whole of the real estate of an intestate passes to the eldest son. (Introduced into England at Norman Conquest)” (1367).

Following the Norman Conquest in 1066, William the Conqueror claimed to be the greatest landlord of England and appointed some of his followers as the tenants-in-chief to control the land for him. Later, those tenants-in-chiefs mandated their own followers to the lands they were mandated by a higher rank of lord, William the Conqueror. Thus, the land was parcelled up to small pieces granted to the vassals as the land management was divided. As a result of such an administrative mentality, the Norman Conquest caused the formation of new hierarchical relations among those deputised followers resulting in “a variety of lordships ... with a pyramid of military obligations” (Gies and Gies, *Life in a Medieval Village* 32). However, those obligations were not one-sided; both the lords and the vassals had duties to one another. Within such a mutual obligatory agreement, in return for service, serfs were granted gifts called “*beneficium*” (Heer 18). Yet, the lack of the exact rules of military tenure encouraged knights to act illegally to capture more lands.

Marilyn French points out that in medieval feudal system, the land was divided because more territory was conquered than could be ruled. For this reason, the land was divided into fiefs. This division developed a system where “(fiefs) and the income from this land were granted to vassals, male military aides who managed the fief (maintaining peace, justice, and public works), collected taxes, and offered deferential hospitality and advice to the grantor” (French, vol. 2: 19). Under such a bonding condition, each lord had duties towards the greater lord while peasants and serf had duties to the lord of the land and the manor, while the lords had duties to lower-ranking lords and peasants and serfs. According to French, the greater lord provided the lower-ranking lords with land, and “[i]n return, he [lower-ranking lord] would ‘pay court’ to his overlord (or overlords) at least once a year, attend ceremonies, hold trials, and offer counsel” (vol. 2: 19-20). As French suggests, in such an order, a “contractual exchange” existed in two kinds, “voluntary and hereditary” (vol. 2: 20). Within feudal bonds, all lords and vassals were bound to each other and to the land with such obligations as it provides the vassals with protection, shelter, and payment in kind in return for the military and agrarian service of vassals. Furthermore, all lords were also bound to the greatest lord, the king. Those lords had vassals bound to them through some relations of service and obligations.

Although vassals worked and lived under the protection and service of the lords, the land that they cultivated could not be taken from them, and they could not be separated from the land. Not only could they not leave the land, but also, they were obliged to work for the lord on that land. On the other hand, both sides had responsibilities to each other. The lord had to provide the serf, vassals, and villeins with protection, shelter, and land to cultivate. The lord also had to guarantee the justice in any case of dispute between the vassals concerning the land. If a vassal died young, the lord had to take care of his wife and children. There was no payment as a salary to the vassals. In return for the protection and land granted by the lord, the vassals had to serve as the military forces (Ülgen 7). The main distinction lay between dignified service, entered by voluntary oaths of fealty to a lord, and hereditary service, being born into bondage. In addition to the static landed community, other large segments of the population—clergy, merchants, and Jews—lived under special laws in a system called “personality of law,” which was tied to the feudal system (French, vol. 2: 20).

Under these circumstances, problems of how medieval English society can be evaluated and analysed regarding the social, economic, and political aspects come into question. There are different approaches to and opinions about the ways of analysis and evaluation of medieval English society. To analyse medieval English society, a lot of questions about the structure and the social relations of the society are being asked. Yet, the main problem about the structure of society is if medieval English society can be analysed according to the class system as understood in today’s modern societies or if it can be about the structure and the social relations of the society defined in line with some feudal orders. In the same vein, these questions bring about some problems concerning whether the society should be evaluated and classified according to the individuals that make up the society and their lifestyles or it should be explained in relation to the modern understanding of social theory that divides society into three main groups as upper class, middle class, and lower class. As an answer to these questions, S. H. Rigby suggests that there are different layers and levels of inequality; thus, medieval English society needs to be studied based on social differences instead of being divided into definite social classes (1). Although one cannot speak solely of an exact class distinction in the sense that a modern critique understands, the social

difference that a medieval English individual faces varies from social order, status, and gender to his/her title defined by economic, religious, or occupational situations. Hence, these differences form the hierarchical social structure of medieval England, and they cause a constant change in the types of relations in the levels of that hierarchical order.

The social hierarchy of medieval England was made the subject of “dichotomic social analysis” through the principles of modern social theory by Marxist historians such as Hilton, Brenner, and Dyer (Rigby 2). According to these historians influenced by Marxism, the social hierarchy is created through several binary oppositions between those who own properties and those who do not, who are landlords and peasants/serfs, employers and employees, exploiters, and labourers/producers. Even though some historians such as Hilton accept the fact that there are different social groups defined by inequalities in society, they claim that the main determinant of the feudal medieval English society is the interrelation of the lords and the peasants/serfs (Rigby 2). In the feudal English society, there are not definite groups of social classes, rather there are different groups of people who share common interests. Under these circumstances, although medieval English society includes a group of people who work for the lord, a group of people who fight for the lord and the king, and a group of people who pray, that is the clergy, one cannot observe a class system consisting of working class, middle class, and upper class. In the same vein, Hilton supports this by saying that medieval English society consists of different groups whose “underlying assumption fundamentally determined by the relations between a landowning class on the one hand and a class of peasant-producers on the other” (qtd. in Rigby 2). Although he refers to those groups as classes, the hierarchical structure of medieval England cannot be restricted to a class system as it is explained above. In this hierarchy, the interrelation between the binary oppositions stems from the conflicts of interests between the opposing parts as lords, lower lords, and peasants, serf, or vassals.

Marxists such as Hilton, Brenner, and Dyer claim that this conflict is the result of the exploitation of the surplus from the peasants/serfs by the lords in such different ways as

rent and labour in the lords' demesne<sup>2</sup> without anything in return. However, when it comes to the rent, it should be noted that there is the dominance of the production for only the household/manor over the mass production during the early Middle Ages. The idea of producing for the mass market is not relatable to a peasant-producer or lords during the early Middle Ages. Although the lords, especially the Church, gained money through the surplus, they did not know how and where to use and invest this money except keeping it locked in chests until a new class of merchants emerged in the late Middle Ages. Thus, as Leo Huberman states, the rent was expected to be paid in kind as grain or livestock instead of money, since the economy of the time is generally based on the exchange of things rather than exchange of money in return for goods (12). As the operation of the economic system rested on the exchange of goods and services, arable land was more important than money. The service was carried out on the feudal land and the manor in return for protection, shelter, and payment in kind mostly as food.

Hilton, Brenner, and Dyer assume that the social and economic conditions accelerated the emergence of a new class and eventually the formation of a new social structure in the late medieval period which made it closer to the social class division as upper, middle, and lower class with the emergence and formation of the middle class which consisted of mostly merchants of the time. On the one hand, there was a mutual gain in this conflict of interests of the lords and the serfs through the production of means of support, on the other hand the lords tried to maximise their gain while minimising the earnings of the serfs and peasant-producers. However, with the increasing restrictions and sanctions applied by the lords and the Church, the peasant-producers demanded to be paid higher wages and to pay lower rents in the late Middle Ages. As a result, the clash of interests of these groups caused social conflict among the members of the feudal hierarchical system. The social conflict occurred because of the unmet demands of the peasants and serfs about wages and rents (Rigby 3-7). Since the feudal hierarchy was structured as a chain, the start of conflicts at the bottom of the chain spread to higher groups. When the needs and demands of the serfs were not fulfilled, the serfs began to ignore their responsibilities. This caused the deterioration of the lords'

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<sup>2</sup> In the *OED* "demesne" is defined as: "land possessed or occupied by the owner himself" (178).

responsibilities to the serfs. As the feudal responsibilities were not performed properly by both the serfs and the lords, the feudal system deteriorated. Eventually this caused conflicts between the lords and the serfs. This kind of conflict is observed in the Wakefield Master's *The First Shepherds' Play* and *The Second Shepherds' Play*.

However, according to some scholars as A. R. DeWindt and Britton, there was a compromise between the lords and the serfs/peasant-producers considering their shared interests as opposed to the Marxist view that emphasises the eventual conflict and clash of feudal interests (Rigby 7). In this sense, the lords provided shelter and protection for their serfs/peasant-producers in return for the latter's labour in the lords' property. However, as Rigby argues, this does not mean that the social structure of medieval England can only be defined by the economic relations and inequalities; instead, the unequal order of power and social status was determined by the ways of acquisition of wealth and eminence; and by the ways of distribution of these (7). Thus, the clergy and the ecclesiastical lords used their power and status for their own benefit and gain even after the Black Death since they had almost half of the arable land in England making them the greatest landlords in medieval England.

In the light of all these, when the social structure of the Middle Ages is examined, it is observed that there is no class division in the modern sense, rather there are groups of people defined by their social status and power. In the same vein, as there is no monetary economy, people's social status is not simply the result of their economic conditions but their function in the established system, that is, feudalism. The emergence of feudalism dates back to the late sixth century when the noble families began to expand their lands by capturing the peasants' lands. Those nobles also started to act like a king by renting their lands to serfs in return for military service. Furthermore, those peasants were forced to fight for the lord or leave their lands which was used as an advantage by the richer peasants and landowners to expand their arable land. As the peasants kept fighting wars, the arable land was left unattended, and agricultural production decreased. Some peasants benefited from this situation and later

those peasants became landowners which eventually caused other peasants to become dependent on those new landowners (Agibalova and Donskoy 19-20).

As explained above, the feudal society was composed of groups of prayers, fighters, and workers. Within this social structure, the group of workers did the manorial and farming duties for those who prayed and who fought. Thus, peasants/serfs worked not only on the land that was rented to them but also on lords' demesne without being paid in return. In such a social and economic system, it is necessary to remember that these peasants were not slaves but serfs which meant they were not to be bought or sold independently of the land they were bound to. In this sense, when the lord of the manor changed, the serfs would have a new lord because they were bound to the land and not to the lord. On this topic, Huberman points out that

[a] manor consisted simply of a village and the several hundred acres of arable land around it on which the people in the village worked. At the edge of the arable land there was usually a stretch of meadow, waste, woods, and pasture. Manors varied in different places in size, organisation, and relationships between the people on them, but their main features were somewhat similar. (2)

Also, farmlands were not in one piece but rather divided into strips every one of which would belong to a different tenant. In the long run, this would cause a great waste of the arable land. For this reason, a few hundred years later, those pieces of lands were compounded to be one piece of a big land (Huberman 2).

After having examined the manorial system, it is necessary to analyse the concept of serfdom in the feudal system. The serfs can be grouped according to their living and working conditions in the sense that some of them had more freedom compared to the rest. For instance, "demesne serfs" worked on the lord's demesne all the time unlike other serfs who worked a few days in a week for the lord (Huberman 4). Another group of serfs called "bordars" owned small holdings bordering on the villages while "cotters" owned nothing but a small cottage. On the other hand, "villeins" had the most economic



and personal liberties among the other groups of serfs in that they had much fewer commissions and obligations to the lords. Also, the villeins could rent some parts of the lord's demesne which brought them closer to the freemen. Similar to these serfs, the lords were also the tenants of a greater lord, the king (Huberman 8). Since the land was the source of richness, feudal times were characterised with combats and wars over arable lands. Thus, the lords tried to collect more peasant-soldiers on their side in return for providing the serfs with shelter, protection, and lands to cultivate. Huberman suggests that the tenant of the land had to grant the lord with equipped military human source for certain number of days which was generally forty days in medieval England and France (8).

In order to increase their military power, the lords would force the peasants to fight for them. Eventually, the peasants felt obliged to go to wars so that the lord would still provide them with shelter and protection. However, peasants began to lose their lands as they had to leave the land to the possession of the lord. As Ye Agibalova and G. Donskoy underline, the wars caused the waste of the land and "crop failure" which ultimately caused most of the peasants to become poorer while some peasants to become landowners (20). Thus, these peasants were now dependent on the landowners, in that, they still cultivated the land but had to share the product with the new lord. Similar to these dependant peasants, some peasants not only lost their lands but also lost their freedom. In Agibalova and Donskoy's words, this means "personal bondage" as well as "land bondage" (20). Within this context, they were obliged to work for the land which is why they are called "serfs" (Agibalova and Donskoy 20). However, Jerome Blum argues that the idea of a serf being only bound to the land is not always correct by saying:

Often the serf is thought to have been a person who was bound to the soil, but this, too, is an inadequate, and for many times and places, even a mistaken concept. For the deepest and most complete form of serfdom was precisely when the lord was able (as he often was) to move his peasants about as he wished, transferring them from one holding to another, converting them into landless field hands or into household servants, or even selling, giving, or gambling them away without land. On the other

hand, there were periods in serfdom's history when the bondsman had the right to leave his holding, after giving notice to his lord, whereupon he became a free man. (808)

Additionally, the serfs were not only bound to the feudal lord personally, but also, they were charged with some duties and burdens. They had to cultivate the lord's land even when they did not have time or means to cultivate their own field crops. Furthermore, the feudal lord would expect them to serve in various ways such as constructing and reconstructing the lord's house, doing household chores, and bringing food for him without being paid anything in return (Agibalova and Donskoy 27).

On the other hand, this kind of a social system not only granted the feudal lords economic supremacy, but also political domination over the peasants. Thus, the condition of the serfs could not be fully defined without taking the number of impositions they had to pay to the feudal lords into consideration such as *corvée*<sup>3</sup> and rent in kind. To put it simply, *corvée* means "quitrent or labour services" in Stanziani's words (127). In *corvée* economic structure, the serfs were expected to work for the lord on the lord's land as well as on the land they rented (Aydemir and Genç 232). Apart from that, the *corvée* serfs had to work for the lord in building and repairing barns, roads, manors etc. Thus, in this economic structure, the production was not for the market but for the simple feudal manor so that the needs of the lord and the serfs were met. In time, the feudal lords began to come up with new kinds of obligations and impositions so that the serfs would have no choice other than to bow to "the coercive political authority ... constituted by the seigneurie" (Wickham 6).

When it comes to the rent in kind, it is important to remember that the serfs had to pay the feudal lord a definite amount of the products such as poultry, butter, cattle, linen, wool, and grain. Hence, not only the serfs' labour was exploited but also their staple products were exploited by the feudal lords. As a result, the feudal serfs accommodated

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<sup>3</sup> In the *OED* "*corvée*" is defined as: "A day's work of unpaid labour due by a vassal to his feudal lord; the whole forced labour thus exacted; in France extended to statute labour upon the public roads which was exacted of the French peasants 1776" (1028).

the feudal lords with the surplus of their products and labour. In this respect, the feudal lords became rich by exploiting the serfs in any possible way. When the feudal lord was not satisfied with the serfs' *corvée* or rent in kind, he could bring the serfs to justice and punish them (Agibalova and Donskoy 29).

Until the end of the eleventh century, medieval European society was occupied with agriculture, shepherding, or foresting. Most of the medieval European population remained bound to the land somehow. Yet, the medieval peasants started to live under much better conditions beginning with the eleventh century and a few hundred years following this century (Backman 196). Thus, the population growth accelerated, and this caused a great demand in production and consumption. Eventually, this gave way to increase in production and the formation of trade at weekly marketplaces. These weekly markets remained small and local since it was expensive and not safe to travel long distances with the products. Another obstacle was that every country and even the cities of the same country used to have different units of measure which made it hard to merchandise (Huberman 12-13).

Moreover, the Crusades between the eleventh and the thirteenth centuries made way for cultural, economic, and social changes during this period. The Christian world formed a religious union under the name of the Crusades to take the holy sites from the Muslim hegemony (Heer 96-104). As Leo Huberman highlights, the Crusades were accepted as a big chance by many Europeans, in that, the nobility wanted to enlarge their wealth and lands by conquering new places while the younger heirs of the nobles desired to acquire their own authority since they could not inherit their father's land because of primogeniture (14). During these years, the crusaders caused great changes in trade routes, acculturation, and the socio-economic structure of Europe in general. Although the Crusades seemed to be only a religious and political activity, it was the cornerstone of moving from the feudal system to central authority and from land-based economy to monetary economy. The production for only the feudal manor was replaced by the surplus production which caused the markets to extend. On the one hand, the cities began to enlarge as a result of economic growth, on the other hand, the feudal peasants

began to break free from the restricted sphere of the feudal manor by experiencing trade and the comparatively lively atmosphere of the commercial cities. The dwellers of these cities were mostly the merchants who invested their money in trade. Consequently, as the trading volume increased, they began to get richer. Considering the fact that wealth grants people with social and political supremacy, the newly rising middle class began to get a voice in politics and government (Agibalova and Donskoy 96-98).

The fourteenth century was marked by catastrophic events such as climactic and ecological disasters, famine, plague, and death of food animals after the warm period between 1000-1300 (Aberth 26). John Aberth points out that between 1066 and 1300, there were several animal diseases five of which specifically targeted sheep. The Great Famine of 1315-1322 was the most devastating ecological disaster of the fourteenth century. At first there was heavy rain during 1315-1316 which “triggered an explosion in the pasture parasite population” (207). These parasites were digested by the food animals such as sheep and cattle. Because of the parasites, these animals died in great numbers at once, almost 70 percent of the sheep died. This was followed by the great cattle plague continuing from 1319 to 1321. During those years, the wool production was also affected and decreased (Aberth 207-208).

William Chester Jordan argues that the effect of the Great Famine lasted almost a hundred years in different parts of the world (7). Jordan emphasises that beginning in 1314, summer was followed by harsh winter, heavy rains, and flood. From 1315 to 1318, the ecological disaster became worse, summer was short, and winter and rainy days became harsher every year (18). Thus, harvest and plantation were not possible. Under these conditions, crop failures began, and productivity decreased which caused famine. Because of this, death rates increased, and population began to decrease. Decline in planting and harvesting caused increase in “pasture farming which required less labor and hands-on management, and villages shrank or were deserted of inhabitants, trends that were greatly accelerated by the far graver demographic crisis of the Black Death” (Aberth 51-52).

In the first half of the fourteenth century, all of Europe was heavily affected by the plague, the Black Death also known as the *bubonic plague*. The disease “was ... only the pneumonic stage of a lung infection. The disease could also cause septicemic poisoning of the bloodstream and enteric infection of the bowels. The name Black Death refers to the large black sores and bruises left on the bodies of those killed” (Backman 466). At that time the disease remained a mystery, but

[the p]lague is now recognized as a well-marked disease caused by a specific organism (*Bacillus pestis*). It is known in three forms, all highly fatal: pneumonic (attacking primarily the lungs), bubonic (producing buboes, or swellings, of the lymph glands) and septicemic (killing the victim rapidly by poisoning of the blood). (Langer 114)

The Black Death was first seen in Italy in the first half of the fourteenth century and was brought by rats in the merchant ships coming from the East. Following Italy, France, and then the whole of Europe was affected. The disease killed approximately one-third of Europe’s population (Nikiforuk 77). The main cause of the disease was a bacterium carried by the fleas found on the bodies of those rats. Even though, the rats were immune to this disease, most people died in three days after the bacterium entered their bodies (Backman 468). As suggested by Michele da Piazza, the Black Death was so dreadful that parents would refuse to take care of their children and people would be infected even through touching the belongings of a sick person (qtd. in Backman 468).

Not only people but also animals were affected by the disease indirectly. According to Henry Knighton, who wrote a chronicle covering the fourteenth century, in England the sheep and cattle began to die in the thousands as no human being was left alive to take care of them. On the other hand, buildings also began to collapse since they were not inhabited. Thus, the Black Death caused the death of not only humans but also animals, and it damaged villages, towns, and cities since it ended the economic and social interaction. People tried prayers, serums, herbs, medicines, and quarantines to cure the illness (Backman 470). Yet, all attempts to cure the disease were futile. So, some people tried to explain the Black Death by considering it as a punishment by God in return for

their sins “but there were arguments whether the Deity was sending retribution through the poisoned arrows of evil angels, ‘venomous molculae’ or earthquake-induced or comet-borne miasmas” (Langer 115). On the other hand, Jews were blamed for intoxicating the wells because they were thought to be acolytes of Satan. Many people migrated to escape from the disease. Thus, to prevent any further infection and population movements, many towns and cities were isolated (Langer 115-16).

However, the most prominent outcome of the Black Death was economic. It caused immense decrease in population which meant that there was also a great decrease in agrarian production. Furthermore, less production would mean famine in the long run and weakening of commercial affairs. After the death wave caused by the bubonic plague was gone, deprivation of sheep and cattle made it hard to re-establish the old order of production and consumption. Thus, both inflationary and recessionary period of economy emerged (Backman 472-73). Andrew Nikiforuk argues that since the working population was almost wiped out by the plague, there emerged a scarcity of labour. Hence, surviving workers in towns and cities could demand higher wages. Just as the demand for higher wages increased, the rapid increase in prices was inevitable (68). On the other hand, the noble lords and kings had difficulty in keeping the public peace and order. On this matter, Backman emphasises the emergence of two major problems: taxation and factionalization. Despite the higher wages, people had to pay more taxes. Those institutive actions caused uprisings throughout Europe beginning in Italy with the revolt of textile workers (472-73).

Until the 1370s, the rise in the agricultural prices kept serving the purpose of the landlords of the time. However, the feudal landlords of the pre-Black Death were replaced by new landlords. Thus, the demand for arable land, therefore, the need for grain and crops remained unchanged. Considering the population decrease and its result, the shortage of labour power, the demand for higher wages by the peasants and the insistence of the lords on paying less to the working peasants caused a clash of interests between the two parts of the feudal economy. Halil Yavaş claims that the peasants complained about lack of proper clothing as opposed to the lords, they lacked food

except for bread and water, and complained about having to work in lords' land in rainy and windy weather (14). Consequently, the English Parliament imposed new poll taxes during the 1370s as the ongoing wars with France needed to be financed. On the other hand, this meant that every adult would pay the same amount of tax which was felt the most heavily by peasants earning the least amount of money (Backman 476). As a result, heavy tax burdens and harsh laws caused more and more exploitation of the peasants by the feudal lords eventually leading to the Peasants' Revolt.

Furthermore, W. M. Ormrod claims that the uprising of the peasants is also the result of bad government policies since the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 was not only a revolt against economic conditions but also a direct revolt against the English crown of the time because King Richard II's reign was open to abuse by his ministers and agents (1). Thus, the uprising began with a fight against the tax collectors by destroying the tax and payment documents and the records of duties. Wat Tyler, a military figure, claimed the leadership of the movement with the hope that the king would act moderately. When the revolt reached London, the peasants began to destroy the houses of the rich nobles, palaces of the court members and judicial buildings. Therefore, as W. M. Ormrod suggests, the Black Death marked the beginning of criminal and violent actions throughout England which reached the peak with the Peasants' Revolt (1). Meanwhile, the king and his counsellors fled to the Tower. King Richard II, feeling trapped, accepted to listen to the demands of the peasants. These developments indicate that the peasants were not content with the current feudal conditions. For this reason, they tried to gain power against the lords, and voiced their demands which weakened the feudal authority of the lords. This showed that the feudal lords did not fulfil their responsibilities in the feudal system.

So far, only the male-related issues of feudal England have been discussed. Yet, the misogynistic treatment of women is to be analysed through a critical reading of the selected cyclical plays. Since this thesis concentrates on the treatment of woman figures in the selected plays, how the feudal system and other medieval conditions and institutions affected the lives of women in the period need to be mentioned. Therefore, it

is necessary to give a brief overview of the social, religious, economic, and political condition of women in medieval England.

After the Norman Conquest in 1066, the male courage, ambition, and rivalry were made a tale through the Bayeux Tapestry which visualises this event (Leyser 69). Thus, Leyser associates the glorification of these qualities only with men causing women to be obedient to men. In a society where men were classified as lords, merchants, knights, and crusaders, women were expected to be virgins, mothers, loyal wives and obedient daughters (Leyser 93). In the feudal social structure, women were taken into consideration only when they adopted behaviours considered as manly by the patriarchal society like leading an army “with a man’s courage” and a queen ruling “as if she were a man” (Gies and Gies, *Women in the Middle Ages* 3). Therefore, women had to obey the norms of the male-dominated feudal society.

Especially during the early Middle Ages, the documentation about women and their place and role in society were limited to the writings of Church Fathers. According to these writings, women were prevented from entering male dominated spheres of politics, religion, and business. Even in marriage, women did not have the right to make their decision. They were not allowed to decide to marry or not, they were chosen by men as wives, and they did not have the right to ask for a divorce, either. According to the real-life sources between the eleventh and the sixteenth centuries such as tax rolls, manorial records, diaries, letters, and chronicles, work life of feudal society was divided into two as outdoor jobs and indoor jobs. With technological and economic developments during those years, the basic survival needs such as housing, food, clothing, and work affected both men and women. However, the indoor jobs were considered of less importance and thus worthy of women. Women’s work consisted mainly of food cultivation and cooking along with textile manufacturing while men’s work involved working in the mines and fields (Gies and Gies, *Women in the Middle Ages* 4-7). Furthermore, during the Middle Ages, clothmaking evolved from home industry into commercial textile industry organised for profit. Men mostly took over the control of the industry, however; some women continued doing the craft. Eventually, the



familial labour turned into “putting-out system” which resulted in familial division of labour. The system functioned as the members of family or guilds contributed to a part of the production of goods. At the end of the process, each of the parts were brought together to compose the product in full form. In this system, even children could work in the process of production. Then, the process of production and the labour division in the process formed this system (Gies and Gies, *Women in the Middle Ages* 168). According to Gies and Gies, a working woman in the clothing industry had no advantage or disadvantage. A wife could work in her husband’s trade craft, but she could not have her own trade. Also, the sons and daughters of a family were trained as apprentices contributing to the putting-out system. So as not to cause any labour loss, these family apprentices took an oath not to marry. On the other hand, single women were also accepted as equals at the craft they worked just as married women were. Moreover, women participated in food and beverage production. In manors, women controlled the quality and price of ale sold to the public (Gies and Gies, *Life in a Medieval Village* 59). Not only village women but also city women brewed beer and ales as a profession. For instance, in the fourteenth century, a brewer in London granted his daughter with some amount of malt and a brewhouse rented for eight years so that she could set her business. In the same vein, in England, women produced and sold charcoal, and they worked as innkeepers and food providers. However, they inherited these from their husbands (Gies and Gies, *Women in the Middle Ages* 165-177).

With the formation of guilds in the twelfth century, women could not be excluded from this sphere as they held trade business as well as men. However, they were accepted mostly because they were wives or widows of the masters. Few single women were accepted to guilds. Other than that, a widow could inherit her husband’s mastery to train apprentices for guilds. In the fourteenth century, discrimination against single women began since the masters did not employ any women other than their wives and daughters. Thus, the wife would naturally learn the craft of the man she married (Gies and Gies, *Life in a Medieval Village* 137).

Moreover, discrimination appeared in women's payment. Before the monetary economy became dominant, the women who had worked on the manorial lands were paid less than men. The payment was either food or two pence for men or one penny for women (Gies and Gies, *Life in a Medieval Village* 137). With the beginning of the development of the class system in England, the monetary economy began to be dominant in the society instead of payment in kind and exchange of services. However, the change in the economy did not affect the inequality of the payment for men and women who did the same work. Since the women were paid much less, it caused an increase in prostitution and theft (Gies and Gies, *Women in the Middle Ages* 178-81).

In a masculine society systematised mainly for war, noble women could be heirs only in the absence of a male heir. Otherwise, women were regarded as a burden to the father or the guardian figure because they had little contribution to work, and the guardian had to provide them with dowry as land or property when they married. As a result of this mentality, women were seen as mostly an economic burden. However, as mentioned, with the rapid growth of commercial cities and formation of the merchant class, women could now be part of the commercial life especially through their husbands (Shahar 132). Thus, as observed, women had different places and roles in medieval English society. In other words, women's place in the Middle Ages differed according to their social status.

In case of marriage during the Middle Ages, both young men and women were subject to their parents' wishes as marriage was an agreement between families, noble or not, for mostly economic reasons. Women were suppressed because they were under the protection of a male figure, either a father or a substitute guardian until a husband took the role of guardianship. The male guardian of a woman before marriage was the feudal lord in the absence of the father. Thus, till the late Middle Ages, peasant women had to have the permission of the lord to get married while a widow had to pay for her right to choose in marriage. With Magna Carta (1215), the king's power to sell the right of remarriage was limited (Gies and Gies, *Women in the Middle Ages* 27-28).

In England, marriage was like a market where a woman was exchanged in return for the gifts of the husband. Yet, these gifts were not received by the wife-to-be but received by her guardian. The gifts could be land or money for merchants and aristocrats while it was clothing or furniture for peasants (Gies and Gies, *Women in the Middle Ages* 31). As Angela Lucas puts it, the medieval marriage was an agreement of the two male figures that required the woman to be given from one to the other (62). According to the norms of the early Middle Ages, the will to choose a husband did not fit into modesty of a virgin woman (Lucas 66), so the parental wish was suitable. Thus, feudal interests favoured the linking of two families through marriage. Through marriage the protected virgin could be sold to the eldest son of another family serving for the benefit of two households (Lucas 85).

The patriarchal oppression of a woman for being a virgin for the husband found its roots in the emphasis of the Church on the binary opposition of Virgin Mary and Eve. Lucas suggests that while Eve was pointed out as the source of sin and cause of misfortune for mankind, Virgin Mary was accepted as the source of blessing and good things (15). In this respect, the Church manifested that Virgin Mary was to heal the sin and damage caused by Eve. Lucas further claims that Virgin Mary represents the perfection of women that a man must seek, and a woman must try to reach, yet Virgin Mary remains unattainable (18). According to some clerics of the time, a man must not expect a woman to be more virtuous than she could ever be (Lucas 7). For them, women had to try to be virtuous like Virgin Mary even though at the same time they were aware that they could never be as virtuous as Virgin Mary. In this sense, a man was advised not to expect a woman to be more virtuous than she could be because women were prone to commit sins and be tempted by earthly pleasures. This perspective began to be dominant as the Church became a powerful institution. French argues that, according to its patriarchal ideology, women, their labour, and their existence independent of a male protector figure was ignored (vol 1: 242). This kind of misogynistic approach not only required women to be submissive to men but also considered women as inferior to men. For instance, some misogynist Church Fathers of the time such as St. Paul and St. Peter, thought women had to be silent, “submissive, modest and unadorned” (qtd. in French, vol 1: 249) in a way that men would not be tempted. On this subject, Tertullian said that

[t]he judgement of God upon this sex lives on in this age; therefore, necessarily the guilt should live on also. You are the gateway of devil, you are the one who unseals the curse of that tree, and you are the first one to turn your back on the divine law; you are the one who persuaded him whom the devil was not capable of corrupting; you easily destroyed the image of God, Adam. Because of what you deserve, that is death, even the Son of God had to die. And you still think of adorning yourself above and beyond your tunics of animal skin? (qtd. in Blamires 51)

Within this scope, the Church idealised virginity through Virgin Mary and condemned all ephemeral thoughts through Eve. By adopting such an approach, it did not leave any room for a more realistic and in-between representation of women. Furthermore, the women were held responsible for the fall of man. For this reason, the patriarchal ideology of medieval England depicted women either in the image of Virgin Mary or Eve.

Moreover, the problematic issue in relation to medieval English society was gender inequality. Problematic status and depiction of women were rooted in the economic and social structure, too. Considering that the medieval feudal society mainly consisted of prayers, warriors, and serfs, women were excluded from the first two groups. Furthermore, Büşra Şahin argues that the women included in the third group were regarded as the rabble (3). In this vein, they were even perceived as witches and misleaders, that is, they were blamed to be the source of all the worldly, fleshly, and devilish acts. This perception was accelerated by the Norman Conquest (1066), which brought military commitments preventing women from owning land (Whitlock 125). This approach towards women is nomenclatured as misogyny since “[m]edieval women were classified according to their sexual status: men might be thought of collectively as knights, merchants, crusaders; women were virgins, wives or widows. They were also, of course, mothers” in Leyser’s words (93). Thus, in the Middle Ages, women were misogynistically defined according to their relationships with men. Under these conditions, medieval women existed by their sexuality and thus, they were domesticised by male authority while men existed with their religious, economic, and political power and audacity. Furthermore, in this social hierarchy, decision makers were the males because women were subject to their male protectors’ decisions.

Additionally, in the Middle Ages woman was defined as opposed to man. Huriye Reis argues that medieval woman was attributed unfavourable and undesirable features as opposed to man's depiction. This was based on the principle of superiority of man over woman (21). In the same vein, Shahar argues that in the thirteenth century, the understanding that woman "was created within the Garden of Eden, not from the dust of the earth but from man's rib" was the prevailing idea (70). This understanding was mainly used to justify man's superiority over woman.

During the twelfth century, many writers portrayed women as the source of disdain, evil, wickedness, and temptation. In the same manner, medieval women were stereotypically defined as "dangerous to the physical and spiritual well-being of men" (Pepin 659). First of all, the fall of Adam was ascribed to Eve who was tempted by Satan in the form of a serpent, committing the Original Sin. Beginning with the interpretation of Genesis, women were depicted as figures leading men astray; thus, women were not only blamed for their own faults but also for men's. On the other hand, there was another woman figure contradicting the image of Eve as seducer: Virgin Mary who was idealised for her dignity and virginity. Yet, the Church accentuated that Eve was the reason for the fall of Adam, and thus, women were responsible for the evil in the world (Whitlock 125).

According to the medieval Church and the Christian teaching, as pointed out by Leyser, women had to protect their virginity so as not to offend their fathers' honour before marriage, and they owed sex to their husband after marriage. Although, in Christian teaching sexual intercourse was ordered by God to "increase and multiply" (Leyser 94), it was not expected to be in a lustful way. The sexual intercourse of husband and wife had to prioritise domesticity and motherhood, instead of being made because of lust. Hence, women were reduced to inhumanity to serve the needs of patriarchal religious and social order as virgin daughters, dutiful wives, and mothers.

Furthermore, when medieval women got married, their rights of property would be transferred to the husband. Thus, not only their personal lives but also their property rights were ruled by the male as long as they lived. On the other hand, marriage meant that a husband could beat his wife if he believed that she was disobedient to him. Yet, Canon Law did not give this permission unconditionally; if a husband severely beat his wife, the neighbours could intervene. Moreover, a man's adultery in a marriage was much less of an issue compared to woman's infidelity. Under these conditions, as pointed out by Whittock, "effeminate," "womanish," and "feminine" were the words to insult men (126).

Within the context mentioned so far, this thesis aims to analyse the plays chosen from the Wakefield and Chester cycles in relation to medieval English society. Considering that the medieval period was marked with political, religious, economic, and social conflicts as well as the natural disasters and the plague, it was inevitable for these plays to touch upon these issues. However, they combined the didactic messages with humorous and entertaining elements. Although both the Wakefield and the Chester cycles have didactic purpose, they include elements criticising various aspects of medieval and feudal society. The Wakefield Master's plays namely *The First Shepherds' Play*, *The Second Shepherds' Play*, and *Noah* deal especially with the criticism of society regarding the injustice between the feudal lords and serfs/villeins with a more satirical and humorous style when compared to the Chester cycle.

Within this scope, the first chapter of this thesis focuses on the economic, religious, political, and social structure of the feudal society by the analysis of the plays of mainly the Wakefield cycle. Even though the two cycles deal with the biblical stories and religious messages, compared to the Chester cycle, the Wakefield cycle includes more critical elements. Thus, the Wakefield cycle illustrates the difficult lives of the serfs/shepherds in *The First Shepherds' Play* and *The Second Shepherds' Play* with a more entertaining tone. In this thesis, these plays are analysed in relation to the complaint of the shepherds about many issues related to the injustice in society. Also, the criticism directed to the lords for exploiting their labour is discussed within the

feudal context. Furthermore, the Wakefield Master also creates a conflict between what he calls the corrupt human beings and the trustworthy human beings. In order to highlight these issues, the Wakefield Master criticises the social and economic structure.

In the second chapter, the focus is on the criticism and the portrayal of women in the Wakefield and the Chester cycles. In the Wakefield cycle plays *The First Shepherds' Play*, *The Second Shepherds' Play*, and *Noah*, and in the Chester cycle plays, *Noah*, *The Creation*, and *Adam and Eve*, women are drawn as the temptresses of men because of their greedy, devilish, and rebellious attitudes. In this chapter the representations of medieval women are analysed in relation to the social and economic conditions of the time. It is clear that women are depicted as unruly and disobedient in both cycles. However, as opposed to Eve's representation, Virgin Mary is portrayed as the pure holy mother. Women in the Middle Ages are described either as Eve or Virgin Mary. In this respect, the Church Fathers stereotyped women in two opposing representations.

This thesis concludes that although the Wakefield cycle plays and the Chester cycle plays are both about biblical stories, they differ in tone and perspectives. The Wakefield cycle plays have a critical approach towards the social and economic structure. This thesis shows that the Wakefield Master employs a new approach towards women and depicts them as tricksters and unruly figures with misogynistic features within the biblical story frame. The Chester cycle plays do not employ a critical perspective on the mentioned subjects while performing the biblical stories. The Wakefield Master deals with contemporary problems in the years that these plays were performed such as the bad weather conditions, plagues, changing economic conditions, and the deterioration of the feudal system. Hence, he includes novelties in his plays. This differentiates his plays from the other cycle plays.

## CHAPTER I

### SOCIAL CRITICISM OF THE FEUDAL SOCIETY IN THE WAKEFIELD CYCLE

In this chapter, the economic and religious conditions of medieval English society are focused on in relation to the social criticism presented in the Wakefield cycle. This chapter discusses the representation of the feudal relations in the Wakefield cycle plays, in *The First Shepherds' Play* and *The Second Shepherds' Play*. In this sense, the social criticism is analysed in these plays. Within this scope, the relationship between the serfs and the lords needs to be analysed in relation to the feudal system by giving examples from the plays. Furthermore, the relationship between the different groups of the working population of medieval England are illustrated from the critical perspective the Wakefield Master adopts. In the Wakefield cycle, the social injustice is presented within the didactic biblical story. However, the Chester cycle does not have satirical perspective and the conflicts between the lords and the serfs are not reflected as much as the Wakefield cycle. For this reason, the main concern of this chapter is *The First Shepherds' Play* and *The Second Shepherds' Play* of the Wakefield cycle. These plays include more conflicts concerning the relationship between serfs, and feudal lords as the Wakefield Master adopts a critical stance. The Wakefield Master's criticism is not only directed at the lords but also at the serfs in their feudal relationship with each other. In other words, the Wakefield Master's plays depict the feudal relationships by presenting the irresponsibility of both the shepherds and the feudal lords.

The name "Wakefield" refers to the industrial town in what used to be known as the West Riding of Yorkshire" (Meredith 152). However, the industrialisation of the town does not refer to today's mechanisation, mass production, or manufacturing. It implies that the town was more developed in terms of local production of goods such as wool and clothing thanks to sheep breeding. In the Middle Ages, "Wakefield was the centre of the extensive manor of Wakefield, and it later became the county town of the West



Riding” (Meredith 152). As stated, the town was known as an industrial town at the time, and it explains why the Wakefield Master adopted a critical discourse in depicting the injustice between the serfs and the lords in relation to the wool industry that made sheep a means of livelihood (Richardson and Johnston 50). In this respect, the Wakefield Master’s plays illustrate the difficult lives of the serfs/shepherds in *The First Shepherds’ Play* and *The Second Shepherds’ Play* in relation to their economic struggles. In these two plays, the shepherds complain about many things in relation to economic and social injustice in society, and they criticise their lords for exploiting their labour. Thus, there is social injustice in the workload of the serfs and villeins.

As stated above, Frederick B. Artz suggests, by the fifteenth century, “the rapid growth and then the slow decline of papal power, the beginning of representative government in the towns and in the national assemblies of England as well as in France, Germany, and the Spanish states” (447) caused economic and social changes in society. During the tenth and eleventh centuries, the serfs were bound to their lords in many ways. A serf was bound to his lord through an act of paying homage. Although this type of a bondage through paying homage secured the service of the serf to the lord, the bond was not one-sided (Eco 182). If at some point the lord broke the bond, the serf was freed from his obligations to the lord. The mutual responsibility functioned as a contract between the ruler and the ruled (Heer 18). In return for his service, the serf was paid in kind. The contract of bondage was the key provision of feudal continuity. In this way, both parts had to fulfil their responsibilities to each other so that the feudal manor which was ruled and controlled by powerful lords who were granted the right to rule by the king could function. In time, the most powerful of those lords began to have their own courts in the manors (Whitlock 42).

As the lords could have their own manorial courts, they could punish the serfs easily if the serfs did not obey the lords’ rules. On this matter, Agibalova and Donskoy suggest that if any serf or peasant failed to pay the rent in kind or the lord had the impression that they were not working enough, he had the right to bring them to his court. Because the lord of the manor owned the court, made accusations, and judged the serfs, he could

punish them by imprisoning, beating, whipping, or enchaining (29). Although the serfs and peasants had to work for the lord and carry out their duties in the lord's manor and land, the lord could make use of his authoritarian power on them. This kind of controlling power and influence of the feudal lords on the serfs and peasants caused the serfs and peasants to be oppressed and exploited as the situation is observed in *The First Shepherds' Play* and *The Second Shepherds' Play*. The shepherds in these two plays claim that they are overworked by their lords and not paid enough. It is understood that the lords in the plays impose their power on the serfs while not paying them with enough food, clothing, and proper shelter from the bad weather conditions. The shepherds do nothing but complain about their poverty because they are powerless against the lords.

Since the serfs had to work for the lord in return for protection and shelter, they were bound to the land of that lord. For this reason, they had to obey their lords' demands. This relationship between the ruler lord and the obedient serf furthered the inequality between the groups of prayers, fighters, and workers. The group of prayers were the most powerful unit in medieval England because medieval society was dominated by religious ideas "whether by way of assent or of dissent" (Coulton 3). The Church's political, social, and economic power secured its place at the top of the social hierarchy as the most powerful unit in society. Every person in medieval society whether male or female, serf or lord had to be obedient to the doctrines of the Church Fathers. The dominance of the Church and its ideals helped the Church profit from the labour of the serfs. In this way, the injustice between the groups increased.

Under these conditions, it was inevitable that the serfs were exploited by the Church in terms of payment in kind and labour force. On this topic, Henri Seé comments as follows:

[T]he Church landlords were essentially attached to the manorial system; and they exploited their peasants no less harshly than the laity. The fact that the medieval Church exercised an undisputed sway over men's souls

affords no proof whatever that the economic condition of the peasants was satisfactory. (qtd. in Coulton 143)

Thus, the serfs were expected to work not only for the lord of the manor but also for the greatest landlord which was the Church.

As Coulton claims, “[t]he medieval clergy, as a whole, was a definitely capitalistic body” (284). In order to keep the serfs working for the Church, the clergy made use of religion for their own benefit. With the power gained thanks to this benefit, the Church secured its place as a powerful institution. The Church not only had religious authority, but also had political and economic power in society. Hence, the Church began to act as a feudal lord. For this purpose, the Church Fathers made use of religious doctrines to exploit the serfs for their own benefit. As stated by Frederick Artz, the Church Fathers defended that superior beings reign over inferior beings just as God reigns over the earth and the spirit (222-23). In other words, they paralleled the relationship between God and human beings with the relationship between the lords and the serfs. In this way, they justified exploiting the serfs as feudal lords did.

Within this context, especially the Wakefield cycle plays reflect these social conditions affected by the economic and religious turmoil of the time. The Chester cycle plays do not reflect the relationship between the lords and the serfs as much as the Wakefield cycle plays do. For this reason, the Chester cycle is not thoroughly analysed regarding social conflicts of feudal English society. Correspondingly, these two cycles differ in their perspective they adopt towards the mentioned issues. In both the Wakefield and the Chester cycles, the didactic religious purpose is intermingled with entertaining elements even though the Chester cycle does not dwell upon the feudal dynamics of medieval England. On the other hand, the Chester cycle is much more didactic in terms of religious messages compared to the Wakefield cycle. The Wakefield cycle plays analysed in this thesis include worldly and entertaining elements as well as religious didactic messages.

The Wakefield town developed thanks to the emerging trade and merchants. The production and trade of wool and clothing expedited the industrialisation of the town and formation of guilds. Members of the guilds were the laity, and they began to get rich in time. As explained above, they supported the enactment of mystery and morality plays. Concordantly, the inclusion of the entertaining elements is the result of the support given by the wealthy guildsmen and local organisations to the actors who took part and acted in the performance of the cycle plays as the town was wealthy enough to support and finance organisations of the cycle plays (Richardson and Johnston 45). With the help of this financial support and actors being members of the guilds instead of the clergy, the biblical didacticism of the plays was intermingled with entertaining and satirical elements such as the mockery of the birth of Christ through the stolen sheep, Mak's pretentiousness as a yeoman while he complains about his lord's treatment of him (Epp, *The Second Shepherds' Play* 291). In addition, Petter Happé points out that the Wakefield Master observes people in a realistic way and criticises the exploitation of the shepherds (*English Drama Before Shakespeare* 13). Happé claims that "[s]uch apparent realism is very entertaining in its recognition of contemporary detail" (*English Drama Before Shakespeare* 13). Therefore, especially the imitation and pretentious behaviours of the shepherds entertain the audience but at the same time these details are realistic in that they represent the contemporary social relations. As shepherds, they have to show reverence to their lords because according to the feudal bondage, the serfs were subject to their lords. The hierarchical social order is presented in *The Second Shepherds' Play*. Even though this scene is humorous, it represents the reality of the medieval feudal society.

*The First Shepherds' Play* and *The Second Shepherds' Play* of the Wakefield cycle have a similar story line. Both plays begin with the complaints of the shepherds about their contemporary problems and end with the birth of Christ, but *The Second Shepherds' Play* is more detailed compared to *The First Shepherds' Play*. *Noah* is concerned with Noah's Flood. It begins with a conversation between God and Noah. In this play, the focus is on the flood and women's representation. The play ends when the waters recede, and all beings disembark.

In the Wakefield cycle plays, *The First Shepherds' Play* and *The Second Shepherds' Play*, the problems in the feudal system are examined through the relationship among the shepherds and the relationship between the shepherds and the lords. The Wakefield Master's satirical and critical approach about lack of shelter and protection under bad weather conditions, underpayment of food and clothing while the shepherds are overworked, and thus poverty of the shepherds is observed in the first shepherd, Coll's speech in *The Second Shepherds' Play*. The play opens with the speech of the first shepherd Coll. He begins his speech by complaining about the cold weather and the storms: "I am nerehande dold" (Epp 4) which means Coll is nearly inert. At the beginning of the fourteenth century, there was a climactic disaster caused by long winter and cold (Jordan 37). As John Aberth claims, this marked the beginning of an ecological catastrophe. He points out that the weather became harsher as the winds blew wilder. This resulted in crop failures that later led to famine (Aberth 2). Under these conditions, the shepherds in the Wakefield cycle plays have difficulty in surviving. In *The Second Shepherds' Play*, Coll complains about the problems caused by the weather conditions. He says: "For I am al lappyd/In sorow" (Epp 8-9). This shows that he is full of sorrow because of his living conditions.

Shepherd 1: In stormes and tempest,  
 Now in the eest now in the west,  
 Wo is hym has never rest  
 Mydday nor morow. (Epp 10-13)

His ineptness and sorrow are the result of being overworked day and night, not getting enough rest, and being exposed to the extreme weather conditions. Thus, through Coll's complaints, the Wakefield Master highlights that the shepherds are overworked and overtaxed by the feudal lords. That is, the shepherds are tired, deprived of their rest, and neglected by their lords. This situation indicates that the feudal lords are exploiting the labour of the shepherds without providing them with the required responsibilities of a feudal lord. The harsh weather conditions in the fourteenth century affected the lords as well as the shepherds. The lords could not make profit of the arable lands because rains were very heavy, and harvests failed. Along with crop failures, food animals began to

face problems such as parasitic diseases and murrain and died (Jordan 35). Because of these conditions, the lords neglected the shepherds, and they could not provide them with the necessary provisions and clothing. Even though the relationship of the exchange of goods and services required the serfs to be obedient to the rules of the feudal manor and the feudal lord to provide them with payment in kind, these serfs claim that they are in poverty and misery, Coll claims that he is wrapped in sorrow (Epp, *The Second Shepherds' Play* 8-9). The shepherds also suggest that the reason for their poverty is the lords' indifference to the living conditions of the serfs, as the lords can reduce their payments and pay them late (Epp, *The Second Shepherds' Play* 233-34). In this respect, the shepherds assert that they are left on their own to deal with their poverty; whereas, as mentioned, the lords were expected to provide them with payment in kind with better clothing and protection against the weather. The Wakefield Master depicts the conditions of the age and shows that the lords have difficulty in providing the shepherds with enough payment in kind, because they also have difficulties.

Similarly, the Wakefield Master's *The First Shepherds' Play* begins with the shepherds' complaints about the misery and poverty they endure. The play opens with the speech of the first shepherd regarding the inequity of the responsibilities between the lords and the serfs.

Shepherd 1: Here is mekyll unceyll  
 And long has it last:  
 Now in hart, now in heyll,  
 Now in weytt, now in blast,  
 ...  
 Now is fayre, now is rane,  
 Now in hart full fane  
 And after full sare. (Epp 5-13)

His complaint encapsulates the ephemeral problems concerning the poor weather conditions, and misery and poverty of the serfs and shepherds.

In the same vein, *The Second Shepherds' Play* begins with a similar complaint of the first shepherd, Coll. However, *The Second Shepherds' Play* is much more direct in its criticism even though both shepherds talk about the same things. Coll continues his speech by saying:

Shepherd 1: If we be poore,  
 For the tylthe of oure landys  
 Lyys falow as the floore  
 As ye ken.  
 We ar so hamyd,  
 Fortaxed and ramyd,  
 We ar mayde hand-tamyd  
 With thyse gentlery men. (Epp 19-26)<sup>4</sup>

These lines assert that the shepherds were forced to be shepherds because their arable land was turned into meadows by the wealthy landowners. Coll's discontent with being oppressed by the feudal lords is voiced in a critical language regarding over taxation, as the first shepherd suggests. Additionally, he claims that the shepherds were restrained, beaten down, and suppressed by the gentry of the time. Lastly, he alleges that because of these reasons, they are deprived of rest as they overwork. For him, through this kind of oppression, "[t]hese men that ar lord-fest" (Epp 29) which means the shepherds, the serfs, and the villeins became bound to the lord. In this regard, David Herlihy puts forward that

[t]he cultivators mounted little concerted effort to push back the wilderness which hemmed them. Constraints of various sorts-insecurity, fear of the wilds, strong manorial discipline, kinship ties, lack of capital kept the peasants huddled together in packed communities, in which signs of overpopulation and land crowding frequently appear. The imbalance between such factors of production as land and labor imposed poverty on the people and frequently subjected them to famine and starvation. (634)

Because of such conditions faced by the shepherds of the two plays, it can be said that the Wakefield Master reflects the social and economic problems of medieval England

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<sup>4</sup> Because this is an online resource, it is not possible to cite page numbers.

where he presents the situation that the feudal lords ignore their responsibility of providing the serfs with shelter and food, while the shepherds are overworked and exhausted, and do not get enough payment in return for their labour. As mentioned above, their arable land was turned into meadows to provide pasture to sheep, and they lost food producing land. At this point, it should be kept in mind that in Wakefield, wool was an important income source, thanks to these meadows the wool industry was supplied with wool from the sheep grazing on these meadows. This meant that there was less food production as there was less arable land and farming, and the shepherds were not paid in return for their labour as also mentioned in the plays. This led to the deterioration of the mutual interests of the feudal system because feudalism was based on the continuation of the bondage between the serfs and the lords. This bondage required the serfs to be bound to the land and work on that land. While the serfs cultivated the land and took care of the manor and animals of the lords, the lords had to pay for their labour.

As observed in the plays, the shepherds claim that the lords are indifferent to their needs. For this reason, they lack enough necessities such as protection from rain, storm, and wind. The shepherds complain that the lords do not provide them with enough food. In the same vein, the third shepherd, Daw summarises what the other shepherds have complained about so far. Thus, having three shepherds complain about the same issues in medieval English society, the Wakefield Master suggests that these problems were widespread in society. In *The Second Shepherds' Play*, Daw talks about the weather as follows:

Shepherd 3: Was never syn Noe floode  
 Sich floodys seyn,  
 Wyndys and ranys so rude  
 And stormes so keyn. (Epp 183-86)

In other words, he points out that they are struggling because of storms, wind, and rain. Daw summarises the situation and says that they are in poverty, and they do not have proper shelter to protect themselves from the harsh weather conditions.



John Aberth points out the existence of the “Little Ice Age” beginning from 1300s and lasting until 1850 (49). According to Aberth, beginning from the mid-thirteenth century till the sixteenth century, the weather was not only getting cold and windy, but it was also getting “wilder and unpredictable, swinging from one extreme to the next” (49). The first half of the fourteenth century was characterised with “varying degrees of frost, snow, rain, fog, wind, cold, heat, and occasionally storms, thunder, and hail” (Aberth 50) while the second half of the fourteenth century was heavily rainy and was marked by famine years (Aberth 49). The harsh weather conditions and famine years coincide with the development of cycle plays in the fourteenth century. In Happé’s words, the narrative of the biblical episodes was “shaped by doctrine derived from the writings of the Church Fathers” (*English Drama Before Shakespeare* 8). These narratives were developed to be cycle plays and were enacted by guildsmen as explained above. These cycle plays fed upon and included the changes, developments, and conflicts during those years. Evidently, the Little Ice Age experienced in the Middle Ages is presented in the Wakefield shepherds’ plays. By referring to the historical facts, the Wakefield Master reflects the reality of the fourteenth century in these plays. Thus, this appears as a novelty brought by the Wakefield Master which differentiates his plays from other cycle plays.

Moreover, as Axton points out, the Wakefield Master depicts the shepherds as “the English shepherds [who] do not have sweethearts nor any youthful, courtly daintiness; they are salty proverb-mongers, men who talk of winter and rough weather” (189). Thus, the Wakefield Master’s shepherds are not the typical shepherds of the pastoral tradition who are represented in an ideal happy environment. The shepherds of these plays are aware of their poor condition, and they criticise this. In contrast to the male characters in the Chester cycle plays, namely, *The Creation*, and *Adam and Eve* and *Noah*, and the Wakefield Master’s other play, that is, *Noah* and even *The First Shepherds’ Play*, the male characters in *The Second Shepherds’ Play* are presented as “genuinely suffering from oppression” (Woolf 92). This indicates that their lives are full of suffering and hardships, and these hardships are delivered through satire and humour. As Martin Stevens explains, the Wakefield Master uses “the common man – such types as tyrants, soldiers, shepherds, shrewish wives, the humble and the unregenerate in all

their guises” (102) while the subject of his plays is biblical. For instance, in both of the shepherds’ plays, the Wakefield Master includes an angelic song. The existence of a divine messenger to sing a song and announce the birth of Christ contradicts the existence of shepherds who are the “earthy listeners” and the subjects of “parodic humour” (Stevens 111-12). It can be concluded that different from the other cycle plays, the Wakefield Master brings contemporary events, environmental problems, and the problems straining the relationship between the lords and the serfs/villeins into these plays that were at first designed to convey didactic biblical messages to illiterate people.

Accordingly, Daw continues his speech by comparing the current conditions to Noah’s Flood to emphasize their problems in the following lines:

Shepherd 3: These floodys so thay drowne  
 Both in feyldys and in towne  
 And berys all downe,  
 And that is a wonder. (Epp 192-95)

He thinks that the weather is worse than it was during Noah’s Flood. He exaggerates their condition to draw attention to the poverty and hardships they endure because of the weather conditions by comparing them to Noah’s Flood. Yet, this comparison is the result of the critical approach employed by the Wakefield Master as well as the secularisation of the mystery plays by the guildsmen. As mentioned above, even though the subject matter of the cycle plays remained biblical, they encapsulated contemporary worldly issues such as the ongoing rainy days from 1315-1317. During these years, there were floods on pastures, crops rotted, and rains devastated meadows (Jordan 24). Because of these climactic conditions, both the lords and serfs/villeins suffered but the serfs and villeins suffered more as they were at the bottom of the feudal hierarchy.

Likewise, at the very beginning of *The First Shepherds’ Play*, the first shepherd, Gib, talks about the injustice suffered by the poor. Yet, he continues his speech by thanking God in the following lines: “I thank it God./Hark ye what I mene” (Epp 27-28). In these

lines, the first shepherd informs the audience that his sheep are all dead because of a parasitic disease, and he does not have any sheep left. However, he is still thankful to God in an ironic tone even though he is now in poverty. In the thirteenth century, the peasants/serfs were allowed to keep a few food animals such as sheep, pigs, or cows for their own use as an addition to their diet (Aberth 156). Yet, as mentioned, these sheep died because of murrain caused by ecological disaster related to the extremely rainy seasons. During these seasons there was a great loss in livestock which provided both the work force on the land and on the amount of food available to all. Thus, the lords were negatively affected by the ecological disaster. For this reason, they could not help the serfs as much as the feudal bond requires. This indicates that the condition of the shepherds is not the result of just exploitation. Yet, in both plays, the Wakefield Master exemplifies that the lords of these shepherds do not support them in case of poverty and dearth, even though the feudal codes of exchange of goods and services make both sides bound to this code. After losing all their sheep, both in *The First Shepherds' Play* and in *The Second Shepherds' Play*, the shepherds say that they do not own any sheep or piece of land, and they only take care of the sheep of the lords.

Shepherd 1: All my shepe ar gone;  
 I am not left oone.  
 The rott has theym slone.  
 Now beg I and borow. (Epp, *The First Shepherds' Play* 36-39)

Even though the lords are also affected by the harsh conditions, these lines show that they are not in poverty as much as the shepherds are.

In this respect, in these two shepherds' plays of the Wakefield cycle, the shepherds complain about the things that cause injustice in society, and they criticise their lords for exploiting their labour, and not supporting them in times of difficulty. Within this scope, the shepherds in both plays, complain about how much they are overworked by the feudal lords. Beginning with the complaint of the shepherds in *The First Shepherds' Play* about heavy taxation while they have nothing to cover the cost, wet and windy weather conditions, and how they live a miserable life with bad health problems, the

complaints about the same issues continue in *The Second Shepherds' Play* but with a more satirical attitude in that this play includes a direct complaint about the exploitation of the shepherds by their lords. The shepherds in this play imitate their lords by adopting their accent and wearing clothes similar to their lords'. Their imitation is satirical because the shepherds become what they criticise by trying to achieve superiority over each other. In fact, their complaints include realistic details as described by Rosemary Woolf: "[T]he shepherds complain that their feet are numb in their boots, their eyes water, and their hands are chapped" (92). By representing them as sufferers, the Wakefield Master draws attention to the feudal lords' unfair exploitation of the serfs while they live in better conditions. The first shepherd justifies their unfair position by saying "For the tylthe of oure landys/Lyys falow as the floore/As ye ken" (Epp, *The Second Shepherds' Play* 20-22). As he claims, they were farmers, but their arable land was turned into meadows for the lords' sheep which eventually forced them to be shepherds. They are also "hamyd/For taxed and ramyd" (Epp 23-24). His words signal that the shepherds are restrained, overtaxed, and made submissive to the lords. By depicting them as sufferers, the Wakefield Master criticises the unjust treatment of the shepherds by their lords.

In *The First Shepherds' Play*, the third shepherd, Slowpace, offers to share the meal he brought: "Hold ye my mare;/This sek thou thrawe/On my bak" (Epp 237-39). Later, it is revealed that the meal is imaginary: "And ye look well abowte/Nawther more nor myn" (Epp 248-49). Following that the shepherds talk about selling non-existent sheep. The Boy refers to the shepherds as fools and resembles them to the fools of Gotham where there is a similar argument scene over a non-existent sheep: "Sagh I never none so fare/Bot the foles of Gotham (Epp 259-60). The Wakefield Master uses this kind of a resemblance to illustrate the ironic situation that all the shepherds experience in the play. The ironic situation continues when the shepherds dine with imaginary feast of food and drinks. Even though they lack food and drink, they pretend to have them. The existence of an empty sack in the play, as argued by Axton, functions as a method to reverse the existence of the meal only in the imagination of the first shepherd, Gib, and the second shepherd, John Horn (191). The feast is an instance of wishfulfilment. In this respect, the third shepherd (Slowpace) claims that he is no more a servant thanks to this

feast: “Me thynk it good skylle/My servyse I tyne” (Epp 288-89). Ironically, the third shepherd in *The First Shepherds’ Play* says that “[t]hen may we go dyne/Oure bellys to fyll” (Epp 283-84). In these lines, they claim to eat until they are full which contradicts their current situation where they are starving because of poverty. Gib claims that “[t]his is boyste of oure bayll” (Epp 357) indicating that this is the remedy of their misery. The Wakefield Master uses language in an ironic way to emphasise and to criticise the condition of the shepherds in society. The changing ecological and economic conditions have made it worse. They are in poverty and misery while their lords dine and feast with the food the shepherds can only imagine. As mentioned above, the lords had to provide their serfs with food and at times with feast. The imaginary feasts of both plays indicate that the lords are indifferent to the poverty of the serfs, and they do not care about the shepherds’ true condition. Thus, the Wakefield Master directs his satirical commentary at the feudal lords.

In this respect, the Wakefield Master’s satire operates through the use of binary oppositions as observed in the following lines through the words uttered by the first shepherd: “When ryche is he/Then comys poverté” (Epp 23-24) in *The First Shepherds’ Play*. The comparison of the rich and the poor indicates that the shepherd is aware of their poverty in the feudal system as well as he is aware that the wheel of fortune spins. Thus, his thankfulness to God includes an expectation for a change of fate. Similar to the situation in *The Second Shepherds’ Play*, *The First Shepherds’ Play* also focuses on the indifference of the lords to the serfs’ poverty as well as the unjust outcomes of the negligence of the responsibilities shared in the feudal system. Furthermore, the complaint of the first shepherd in *The First Shepherds’ Play* suggests that those who went away are luckier and richer than them because they do not experience what the shepherds go through. Thus, those shepherds who went away are accepted as luckier by the shepherds in the plays because the shepherds in the plays think that other shepherds do not experience the harsh conditions that the ones who still work on the manor do (Epp, *The First Shepherds’ Play* 1-4).

Kroll suggests that the shepherds in *The First Shepherds Play* are stuck in the reality of their poverty, hence, they pretend to be the rich landlords. While pretending, they imagine having a rich meal, as stated above. The shepherds act as if they were lords because they want to escape from their hardships. However, they cannot achieve this in their lives. For this purpose, “[t]hey imagine consuming the delicacies enjoyed by the rich as well as owning the land and flocks of their superiors” (326). When Slawpase (Slowpace), also referred to as the third shepherd, enters the scene with the meal, he asks what they are doing and where the sheep of Gib are (Epp 181). In this scene, Slowpace pretends to be a lord, and he provides the others with food and feast. In such a manner, unrealistically he fulfils the lords’ duty in the feudal system. In this way, the Wakefield Master criticises the lords as they do not fulfil their feudal duty. In this sense, the shepherds seem to create a scene where the ideal relationships between them and the lords are in order because the shepherds are aware of the real duties of the lords. As the shepherds are left alone to deal with their problems, they create an imaginary atmosphere where they criticise the lords through humorous imitations. Also, this functions as a scene where the ideal feudal relations are in order.

In the following lines, the third shepherd, Slowpace, implies that the other two shepherds are fools to argue over the non-existent sheep. This shows that Slowpace is aware of their condition, and he does not take part in the imaginary feast:

Shepherd 3: Ye fysh before the nett,  
 And stryfe on this bett.  
 Sich folys never I mett  
 Evyn or at morow. (Epp, *The First Shepherds’ Play* 201-204)

In these lines, he implies that the other shepherds are not mature since they argue over something they do not have. This is ironic because he continues his speech by saying that if he sold those two non-existent sheep, he would be well-paid: “He were well qwytt/Had sold for a pownde/Sich two” (Epp 211-13). In the third shepherd’s speech, the Wakefield Master adopts a humorous approach in depicting the hardships and suffering of the shepherds. Moreover, the Wakefield Master makes the third shepherd

wish that the other two shepherds experience worse conditions: “Tytter want ye sowll/Then sorow, I pray” (Epp 218-19). The third shepherd wishes that things would be bad for the other shepherds. Later, he even offers to teach them “wisdom to knawe” (Epp 232). Kroll asserts that “The Wakefield Master emphasizes that the rustics [shepherds] are as lacking in virtue as they are in wisdom and wealth” (326). Yet, this hints that the third shepherd is more naïve than the others (Kroll 326). Even though the third shepherd claims to be wiser than the other shepherds, he lacks wisdom and virtue. Thus, the shepherds’ wit becomes useless through an ironic turn of events. The ironic situation stems from the pretention of the shepherds of being rich while they lack food, clothing, and animals. This depiction is deliberate in purpose and creates a humorous effect in both shepherds’ plays. Although Slowpace thinks that the other shepherds are fools because they “fysh before the nett,/And stryfe on this bett” (Epp 201-202), he brings imaginary food. This situation is both humorous and ironic in that the shepherds are aware of the lords’ duties towards them, but the lords ignore the shepherds’ needs.

Furthermore, the Wakefield Master uses double entendre as observed in Gib’s speech in *The Second Shepherds’ Play*. Gib refers to the third shepherd, David, as “Daw” (Epp 161). Epp comments on this as follows: “The name of Shepherd 3 is a diminutive of ‘David,’ but also means ‘fool’” (Footnote 161). Considering the biblical connotation of the name David, the Wakefield Master implicitly brings a satirical approach towards the sanctity of religious figures even though the Church was the most powerful feudal lord as stated earlier. Such representation of a religious figure as impersonated by a shepherd who acts as a fool in the play is satirical, and the Wakefield Master criticises the religious figures. Francis Douce explains the innovativeness of the Wakefield Master with the following words:

It [the Towneley manuscript] contains several mysteries, or theatrical pageants, constructed from incidents in the Old and New Testaments, differing entirely in language from the celebrated Chester and Coventry Plays, though agreeing, with some few exceptions, in the subjects. (qtd. in Palmer 319)

Hence, the Wakefield Master uses language as a way to bring a new perspective through irony, satire, and humour. This distinction of the Wakefield cycle plays is partly based on the fact that Towneley was an industrial town where there were bustling streets, festive processions, and hearty guilds (Palmer 341) which contributed to the inclusion of the secular elements in the plays.

As suggested above, the industrial aspect of the town indicates the use of wool for cloth production but not as mass production. The importance of wool highlights the importance of sheep breeding. As observed in both the shepherds' plays, the sheep were the main source of livelihood for the shepherds even though they did not own the sheep. However, in both *The First Shepherds' Play* and *The Second Shepherds' Play*, the shepherds complain about how they are left in poverty by their lords when they ought to be protected and helped by the lord in times of need. While they are almost starving and feeding on imaginary food and watch the lords' sheep day and night, the lords do not carry out their duty of payment in kind or through additional aid to the serfs, and this is what is criticised in these two plays.

As mentioned, the shepherds imitate their lords by adopting their lords' behaviours to criticise them. However, while directing their criticism at the lords, the shepherds try to assert superiority over each other. While Daw watches out for the lords' flock as required, he talks about how tired the shepherds get when they stay awake to keep watching their sheep at night, and the lords are sleeping. When he notices the other shepherds, Gib and Mak, ironically, Daw says: "I wyll gyf my shepe/A turne" (Epp, *The Second Shepherds' Play* 203-204). Daw says that he will drive the sheep away from the other shepherds as he thinks the shepherds are rascals. However, he notices them and greets Mak by referring to him as "master myne" (Epp 211). On the other hand, Mak refers to Daw as "my knave" (Epp 213) and "ledyr hyne" (Epp 214) implying that he is a lazy servant. Likewise, Gib refers to Daw as "boy," indirectly asserting superiority over Daw. Thus, the relationship between a feudal lord and his servants is mimicked through the relationship between Daw and the other shepherds. Thus, having imaginary



roles as masters or servants in *The Second Shepherds' Play* parallels the imaginary feast in *The First Shepherds' Play*.

In both plays, use of imaginary dialogues and feasts creates an ironic and satirical tone. As a servant in this imaginary relationship, in *The Second Shepherds' Play*, Daw says: "I shall do thereafter,/Wyrk as I take" (Epp 237-38) indicating that he decided to work according to his wage. Afterwards he says:

Shepherd 3: I shall do a lytyll, syr,  
And emang ever lake,  
For yit lay my soper  
Never on my stomake  
In feyldys. (Epp 239-43)

In these lines Daw explains that he decided to work little as he receives a small wage. He means that eating does not hinder him from working because he never has that much food to eat. This also shows that all people were experiencing the famine. The shepherds refer to this famine while pretending to have a rich meal. In this speech, Daw emphasises that the shepherds try to deal with their problems without receiving proper payment in kind from the lords. That is, he criticises the indifference of the lords.

The shepherds' interaction during the imaginary feast is significant also in reflecting the relation of the shepherds to each other. Their conversation and address in a pretentious way implies that these shepherds try to assert dominance over each other. Even at the slightest chance of holding more dominance over the other shepherds, Mak refers to himself as lord and the other shepherds as if they were his serfs in *The Second Shepherds' Play*. Mak wears a cloak over his tunic and says:

Mak: What? Ich be a yoman,  
I tell you, of the kyng,  
The self and the same,  
Sond from a greatt lording

And sich. (Epp 291-95)

His lines show that he claims to be a yeoman. For this purpose, Mak tries to adopt the southern dialect using “ich” (Epp 291). He attempts to be a yeoman by disguising himself and requires reverence from the other shepherds: “Out of my presence;/I must have reverence” (Epp 297-98). Considering the previous complaints of Mak about the bad conditions of living and working for the feudal lord, overtaxation and overworking, Mak becomes what he criticises by adopting the behaviours of the lords. As a result, it can be asserted that the Wakefield Master not only criticises the attitude of the lords towards the shepherds but also criticises the attitude of the shepherds towards each other. In this respect, his criticism appears to be multi-layered in that criticism is not restricted to the landlords. In this way, the Wakefield Master tries to show that even though the shepherds criticise the lords’ attitude, they try to be like their lords. On the other hand, this is a representation of the feudal system. Hence, it is a criticism of the feudal system through parody.

Mak’s cloak indicates that he tries to appear as a lord and desires to be treated like one. Hence, Mak ironically claims a higher place in the social hierarchy although he is a shepherd just like the other shepherds. When his cloak is taken away from him, Mak is offended by this action. He wears that cloak over his tunic to disguise his appearance. His attempt to disguise is to support his claim to be a yeoman. With the help of the cloak and the southern dialect, he tries to distinguish himself from the other shepherds. His pretentiousness goes on with his demand of reverence from the other shepherds as if he was their lord. To make them believe that he is a yeoman or a lord, Mak makes everything seem strange by exaggerating his speech and manners. As a yeoman, Mak threatens the other shepherds: “Ich shall make complaint/And make you all to thwang/At a worde” (Epp 306-308). With this scene, the Wakefield Master mocks the manners of the feudal lords. In the character of Mak, the Wakefield Master shows that in the feudal system, people try to be on the powerful side. Mak tries to achieve this by pretending to be a yeoman. After the theft of the sheep, Mak complains about the same

problems as the other shepherds, however; he does not hesitate to act like a lord and oppress the others in the same manner.

Additionally, in *The Second Shepherds' Play*, the second shepherd asks Mak if he wants to be a saint. However, after this question he calls Mak a rascal and tells him that he has a reputation of stealing sheep:

Shepherd 2: Shrew, pepe!  
 Thus late as thou goys,  
 What wyll men suppos?  
 And thou has an yll noys  
 Of stelyng of shepe. (Epp 321-25)

The second shepherd asks Mak if he wants to be a saint, and then the second shepherd implies that Mak is a thief which is ironic. Also, these lines foreshadow Mak's actual theft of the sheep later in the play. To avoid the accusation of stealing the sheep, Mak says that he is ill so that he can gain the sympathy of the other shepherds. However, the third shepherd, by drawing a parallelism between the Devil and Mak says that "Seldom lyyes the dewyll/Dede by the gate" (Epp 332-33). These words mean that the Devil does not suffer from wrongdoings, so, the Devil can never gain the trust of others. The third shepherd implies that Mak is a devil, and he cannot gain their trust. As Jeffrey Helterman argues, Mak and the Devil resemble each other "in his claims of mastery, in his role as magician ... and as a deceiver" although "he [Mak] undercuts the terror of Satan through his own ineptitude" (107). Thus, Mak diminishes the devilish and satanic representation through the comic and almost ridiculous actions or words. For instance, Daw wants Mak to sleep between them as they do not trust him: "Bot Mak, com heder; between/Shall thou lyg downe" (Epp 378-79). Mak sinisterly tries to deceive the other shepherds by getting up while they are asleep: "Yit shall I nyp nere./How, drawes hederward!" (Epp 418-19). However, eventually he gets caught. Following this, he tries to appear as a magician, yet the result of the necromancy he tries to perform by making a circle around the sleeping shepherds creates a comic effect because of its failure as a black magic (Helterman 109). The parallelism between Mak and Satan shows that the

Wakefield Master does not represent the serfs and shepherds as the only the victims of the feudal system. Instead, they appear as committing one of the greatest crimes in medieval England by stealing sheep. As mentioned, Mak is notorious for stealing sheep, and he steals sheep again. Gill and Mak want to hide the stolen sheep from the other shepherds as they are aware that they will be punished severely.

Ironically, Mak claims that he does not steal the sheep, but he just borrows it: “Eft whyte when I may/Bot this will I borrow” (Epp, *The Second Shepherds’ Play* 424-25). The sinister plan to steal a sheep is camouflaged when he says he borrows it, and he is going to pay for it later. Thus, this line breaks the devilish representation of Mak and makes it humorous instead. The humorous effect of the stealing, as argued by Beresford, lies in the fact that sheep stealing was considered as “a major sin in rural society” but performed in a comic atmosphere (qdt. in Gies and Gies, *Life in a Medieval Village* 129).

The Wakefield Master criticises society in different ways in his plays. In the shepherds’ plays, the Wakefield Master criticised both shepherds and the lords for neglecting their responsibilities and theft of a sheep. In *Noah*, the Wakefield Master shows that the society has problems through the biblical narration of Noah’s Flood. In this respect, in *Noah*, the Wakefield Master touches upon the other problems in society when he describes society in these lines:

Noah: Som in pride, ire, and envy,  
Som in covetous and glotyny,  
Som in sloth and lechery,  
And otherwise manyfold. (Epp 75-78)

Even though this criticism is not directed at anyone specifically, similar to the one in the shepherds’ plays, medieval English society is shown as corrupt committing the Seven Deadly Sins. If these sins are not avoided, it causes the downfall of humans. So, these sins listed by Noah cause the flood and thus the downfall of human beings. However, in

*The Second Shepherds' Play*, the Wakefield Master emphasises the poverty of the shepherds. While doing that, instead of presenting the theft as purely evil, he makes the audience adopt a critical perspective towards the feudal lords' responsibility in providing the serfs with food. Therefore, the Wakefield Master implicitly asserts that the deterioration of the responsibilities and the interests of the feudal lords and serfs disrupts the order of feudalism.

After stealing the sheep, Mak takes it to his house. His wife, Gyll, and he decide to hide the sheep in the disguise of a newborn baby. This scene mocks the birth of Christ with which the play ends. According to the biblical Nativity, Christ was born from a sinless woman through immaculate conception, while this sheep is stolen. Even though it is not the sin of the sheep, it represents a severe crime in medieval England. Furthermore, as Josie Campbell suggests, Mak "tries to steal mercy and grace which seem absent from his life" (*Popular Culture* 112). As the sheep in the cradle stands for Christ, "he steals the Lamb of God Who takes away the sins of the world and Who grants us mercy and peace" (Campbell, *Popular Culture* 112). As argued above, the act of stealing the sheep contradicts the representation of baby Christ in the play. Thus, this is the point where the farcical features attributed to Mak create irony and humour at the same time. In addition, the biblical didacticism of the birth of Christ is paralleled with the swaddled sheep which is described as ill-looking like their sheep (Epp 851). While baby Christ is depicted as pure and beautiful, the sheep Mak steals is the subject of theft and ill looking in the swaddling cloth. This parallelism indicates the inclusion of the humorous and satirical in the cycle plays which were produced to teach the biblical doctrines to illiterate people. The parallelism between a divine person and an earthly animal creates an ironic and humorous atmosphere in the play because the effort to steal and disguise the sheep has comic effect in the play as well as being ironically in contrast with the pure image of Christ.

After the shepherds wake up, they complain about their mood and then comment on the notoriety of Mak as a thief, the third shepherd talks about his dream in which Mak steals a sheep without making any noise: "A fatt shepe he trapt/Bot he mayde no dyn" (Epp

536-37). This dream functions as a tool for the Wakefield Master to indicate the rising tension in that this dream foreshadows the theft of the sheep. However, the tension does not lead to chaos, but it creates the comic effect and brings about the resolution of events. After stealing the sheep, taking it to his house, and disguising it as a newborn baby, Mak comes back to his place where he has slept between the other shepherds. He wakes up the last in the group and he acts as if he is surprised at the fuss of the other shepherds: “Now Crystys holy name/Be us emang./What is this? For Sant Jame” (Epp 545-47). He complains that he has got neck ache which is reminiscent of the hanging punishment mentioned by Gyll earlier in the play: “By the nakyd nek/Art thou lyke for to hyng” (Epp 445-46). Mak continues his speech by saying that he had a dream about Gyll going into labour and adding a new member to their flock. Before he departs, he asks the others to search him for any evidence of the theft. When he goes back to his house, since Mak and Gyll know that the other shepherds will come and search for the stolen sheep, Gyll plans to swaddle the sheep in the cradle as if it were a baby. Gyll furthers this trickster plan and accuses the other shepherds of coming to their house for theft while she and Mak are the thieves: “Outt, thefys, fro my wonys./Ye com to rob us for the nonys” (Epp 760-61). So, the trick and the sinister plans continue to create the farcical, ironic, and satirical effect. Their sinister plan of disguising the sheep ridicules and criticises the other shepherds’ stupidity in the play. Although the audience is aware of the theft and the reality about the stolen sheep, Gib and Daw try to figure out if the sheep is at Mak’s house.

On the other hand, Mak steals the sheep as he and his wife are suffering from poverty. The notoriety of Mak for stealing sheep indicates that Mak and Gyll are in poverty, and this is not the first time they have committed the crime of theft. At this point, the Wakefield Master emphasises the fact that the sheep of the shepherds died which brought them misery. Besides, even if the lords failed to help the shepherds, the shepherds had no right to steal a sheep that belonged to their lord; nevertheless, it is clear that it is Mak’s poverty that caused him to commit this crime. So, the Wakefield Master’s shows the flaws and irresponsibilities of both the lords and the shepherds.

However hard Mak and Gill try to disguise the stolen sheep, the other shepherds notice something is wrong with the newborn, they claim that it is the sheep stolen from them, and the ear mark proves that. However, Mak interrupts and says: “Hys noyse was brokyn./Sythen told me a clerk/That he was forspokyn” (Epp 884-86). His effort to dissemble the truth implies that his trickster nature is still on the foreground. Even though he is reminded of the severe punishment for sheep stealing by his wife, Mak continues denying the accusation. However, after a while, Mak begs for mercy of the other shepherds because of the theft. Instead of sentencing him to death, the shepherds decide to “cast hym in canvas” (Epp 906). As Taşdelen points out, “Mak is not sentenced severely as Lucifer who has been expelled from heaven; rather, his desire for being treated with reverence is punished humorously, since the shepherds wrap him up in a blanket” (156). Although, according to medieval laws, he was expected to be punished by death, his sentence turns out to be humorous and satirical. Because of the satirical effect of the punishment, the devilish perception of Mak is replaced (Taşdelen 157).

After the punishment of Mak, the scene continues with the entrance of the Angel to announce the birth of Christ in Bethlehem. Campbell points out that “[u]nlike the Coventry, York, and Chester cycles, which present the nativity and then the adoration of the shepherds in their proper sequence, the Wakefield cycle displaces Christ’s birth, using it in a more effectively dramatic way as the climax and denouement of the shepherds’ plays” (“Farce” 337). Thus, the birth of Christ is foreshadowed through the story of the theft. To gift the newborn Christ, the first shepherd has “a bob of cherries” (Epp, *The Second Shepherds’ Play* 1036), the second shepherd brings a bird, and the third shepherd gifts him a ball. Lastly, the play ends with a song sung by the shepherds. It is like the Magi giving gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to the newborn Christ. Thus, the scene of gift-giving of the shepherds appears as a scene of parody of the Magi.

Meredith suggests that the Wakefield Master was naturally talented in the use of language in his plays (156). His revisions of the biblical characters, symbols, and stories

made the characters in the plays more individualised when compared to the typical illustration of the biblical characters in the Chester cycle plays. Thus, the alteration in the Wakefield cycle plays' characterisation stems from "dramatic skill in dialogue ... a lively use of colloquial idiom and proverbial phrases, a readiness to use roughness of language and action" (Richardson and Johnston 46). His use of language makes the characters closer to real individuals, which creates the comic and the satirical effect in the play. As suggested by Martin Stevens, his use of the southern dialect through Mak's lines functions as a way of deception when Mak disguises himself as the master of the other shepherds (105). Thus, the dialect of the dominant rulers is used to illustrate that the shepherds mimic the lords and the lords' lives. In addition, Axton observes that the Wakefield shepherd characters function as "role-players; they embody a concept of acting as improvised buffoonery, a fantasized version of real life" (192). Through this imaginary role modelling, the shepherds imply their wish to live like the lords of the time. This kind of pretentiousness is a way of showing the unjust treatment of the shepherds through satirical and indirect criticism made by the Wakefield Master.

As stated above, the Wakefield Master makes use of irony to direct criticism at the social and economic conditions in the society in *The Second Shepherds' Play*. When compared to *The First Shepherds Play*, he is more direct and explicit in his criticism of the mentioned issues. However, he does not mention any specific names, but the lords in general. Thus, it is more accurate to say that he criticises the social and economic problems considering the serfs, villeins, and the feudal lords by making use of the shepherds. It can be suggested that he does not aim to lead to a revolt. On the other hand, the Chester cycle plays do not include ironic or satirical elements so much as the Wakefield cycle plays do. The biblical didacticism of the Chester cycle plays remains in the foreground compared to the Wakefield cycle plays.

Moreover, the Wakefield Master's characters carry individualised features, and they complain about their problems as separate individuals. However, their complaints represent the common problems between the feudal lords and serfs. For instance, the first shepherd, Gib, complains about his dead sheep because of murrain. In fact, his



complaint is common to every shepherd of the time since during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, this disease, as pointed out by Richardson and Johnston, was very common all over Britain (50). On this subject, Jordan states that “[a]mong draft animals the murrains affected bovines and among food animals, sheep and cows” (35). It is stated, with the death of the animals and with the harsh rains and storms famine put the shepherds, serfs, and peasants into a state of poverty and misery. The Wakefield Master reflects the situation in his plays through Gib’s words.

Moreover, as mentioned above, wool was important for the Wakefield town, and the sheep had economic importance. For this reason, the problems mentioned in the play were familiar to the audience. Hence, the audience could associate themselves with the shepherds which made it easier for the Wakefield Master to convey both didactic biblical messages and critical approach towards the economic and social injustice (Richardson and Johnston 50).

Taking these points into consideration, it can be said that the Wakefield Master’s characters in the shepherds’ plays highlight the problems in their daily lives in the speeches. Even though the Wakefield Master seems to present the daily lives of the serfs exploited by demands of the lords, he intermingles these problems with religious messages through satire as well as presenting the hardships also faced by the lords. Thus, while using the birth of Christ as a biblical plot, the Wakefield Master employs it “as a means of exploiting the plays for social criticism” (Richardson and Johnston 51). In this respect, the complaints in his plays highlight to what extent the serfs were oppressed and exploited by the wealthy lords. When it comes to the Chester cycle plays, it would be much more accurate to talk about the existence of sins committed in the society rather than the existence of satirical or humorous criticism directed at feudal inequalities. For instance, Noah of the Chester cycle, talks about the Seven Deadly Sins but he does not attribute these to specific individuals in the play. Yet, in the shepherds’ plays, the characters talk about their own problems without generalising them to whole society.

As seen, in the Chester cycle plays, *The Creation*, and *Adam and Eve* and *Noah*, social conditions and didactic messages are not intermingled with criticism related to social problems of the feudal society unlike the Wakefield cycle plays. In the Wakefield Master's *The First Shepherds' Play*, *The Second Shepherds' Play*, and *Noah*, society is presented from the male perspective as in the Chester cycle. However, different from the Chester cycle plays, society is criticised through several characters who complain about the plague, the weather, lords, low wages, social inequalities, and marriage in general. At the beginning of each play, the Wakefield Master informs the reader about what is going to be criticised and how it is going to be done. In this respect, when compared to the Chester cycle, the Wakefield Master employs a satirical mode by focusing on the hardships and sufferings of Noah in relation to his marriage and his responsibility to God to purify the world from all sins in *Noah* and shepherds in *The First Shepherds' Play* and *The Second Shepherds' Play*. In the Wakefield cycle, the medieval society is set in a land-based social structure where the lords and serfs are in conflict. However, instead of only stating the conflicts, the Wakefield Master depicts the conflicts through the shepherds' interactions.

Although the criticism of the injustice between the living conditions of the serfs and the lords is on the foreground in the first parts of the shepherds' plays, their misery, suffering, and misfortune are paralleled with those of newborn Christ in the two plays (Woolf 92-93). In the shepherds' plays, the birth of Christ serves as a way of representing the biblical message where all Christians regardless of their wealth, become equal. However, this equality turns out to be invalid in the feudal society in which the shepherds have problems. Furthermore, Richardson and Johnston argue that despite the didactic biblical main story, the shepherds appear as comic characters free from religious restraints (49).

The shepherds are attributed responsibilities such as watching the flock day and night. Woolf suggests that the shepherds neglect their duties by having arguments and pretentious feasts while they are expected to herd sheep or cultivate the land as they are known farmers historically (93). However, their quarrels and pretentious feasts illustrate

the social and economic injustice and oppression of the feudal lords. English society is not idealised either in the Wakefield cycle plays or in the Chester cycle plays, although the religious message is clear in each cycle.

In conclusion, the Wakefield and the Chester cycle plays base their plot and subject matter on the biblical stories. Nevertheless, they differ from each other in that the Wakefield cycle includes irony, satire, and humour intermingled with didactic religious messages, the Chester cycle remains bound to the didactic purpose of the mystery cycle plays. Although both cycles have their origins in the biblical stories, the Wakefield cycle has more earthly concerns when compared to the Chester cycle plays. In this respect, the conflict resulting from the injustice between the lords and the serfs is illustrated through the critical perspective in the Wakefield Master's plays. The Wakefield Master criticises both the serfs and the lords. In this sense, the Wakefield Master refers to social, economic, and climactic problems in relation to the living conditions of the serfs and the lords.

## CHAPTER 2

### REPRESENTATION AND CRITICISM OF WOMEN IN THE WAKEFIELD AND THE CHESTER CYCLES

The second chapter of this thesis presents a comparative study of the portrayal of women and their criticism in the Wakefield and the Chester cycles. In this respect, this chapter aims to illustrate that women characters in the Wakefield Cycle plays are portrayed as having individualistic features along with misogynistic traits whereas the Chester cycle plays portray women characters in keeping with medieval misogynistic attitudes. Misogyny in the Middle Ages was shaped by the Church Fathers. According to the misogynistic ideas in the Middle Ages, it was believed that women were weak and open to temptation, and they should be kept under control and authority of male figures because according to the patriarchal ideology, women were considered to be temptresses like Eve who was held responsible for the Original Sin. On the other hand, the misogynistic approach offered the idealised image of Virgin Mary as opposed to the image of Eve leaving no space for women between these two images. In the light of these, this chapter analyses how women's conditions and misogyny are represented in the Wakefield (Towneley) cycle plays *The First Shepherds' Play*, *The Second Shepherds' Play*, and *Noah*, and the Chester cycle plays *The Creation*, and *Adam and Eve and Noah*.

In order to comment on the portrayal of women during the Middle Ages in England, the misogynistic and patriarchal approach to women needs to be analysed. The perception of women and ideological approaches towards them were mostly conducted through the patriarchal ideology and by the Church Fathers in the Middle Ages. J. Huizinga defines the Middle Ages by the words "estate" and "order," and these words encapsulate "the estates of the realm, but there are also the trades, the state of matrimony and that of virginity, the state of sin" (55). He says that these estates were believed to be created by God's will, and they form a medieval harmonious hierarchy. Within this medieval

hierarchical order, these groupings are everlasting because they are created by God and considered to be unchangeable (Huizinga 55). The hierarchical supremacy of the Church secured the authority of the Church Fathers which helped them to have dominance in the social, economic, and political spheres.

The Church was an important institution in people's lives because people in the Middle Ages were affected and educated by the gospels and sermons of the Church Fathers as well as by the stories of Saints and Fathers (Bennet 30-32). Thus, the position of women in the medieval social and the economic hierarchy was decided mostly by the Church Fathers. Also, after the Norman Conquest (1066), the formation of a military-based society put a setback to women in owning land whereas they could own land in Anglo-Saxon society.

The changes brought by the Norman Conquest affected canonical laws, too. As Martyn Whittock argues, the perception of the role of women in society also began to change, and according to medieval Canon Law, women were defined as infants even in marriage, which indicates that they had very few rights as they were under the control of a male figure who could be a father, son, or husband (125). When a woman got married, her possessions would be controlled by her husband. Furthermore, according to canonical laws, a husband could beat his wife if he thought that she was apathetic or defiant. The Church Fathers justified this because they thought that women were prone to corruption and temptation. For this reason, they claimed that women should be prevented from being tempted by earthly pleasures and from tempting men. Also, the Church Fathers believed that men were the guardians of women, and men could beat their wives and daughters when they were not obedient. In this respect, the patriarchal ideology conditioned women to be docile and submissive because they were considered to be weaker than men (Whittock 125).

As stated, the influence of the Church Fathers on the public perception of women was dominant in the Middle Ages. Their perception and understanding of the role and

representation of women were shaped by the interpretation of the religious doctrines. This perception influenced people and created a complex portrayal of women. The complexity stemmed from the two opposite representation of women in the figures of Eve and Virgin Mary. In this regard, Eve was depicted as the temptress who was responsible for the fall of man, Adam, because of the Original Sin. When Eve was tempted by Satan to eat the forbidden fruit, and tempted Adam to eat it, she committed the Original Sin which caused them to be expelled from paradise. Thus, the religious doctrines blamed her for the fall of man. On the other hand, Virgin Mary was presented as the representative of purity and motherhood who was dignified to be Christ's mother (Holland 21), and through whose sacrifice mankind could be saved. Within this context, in the Catholic world, women were humiliated outside the Church, but they were revered and idolised inside the Church. This kind of contradictory perception of women was the result of hatred towards them. As Jack Holland states, the misogynistic hatred has been prevalent from ancient Greek philosophers to recent years (19), and throughout the centuries, women's misogynistic perception was observed in different spheres.

In different centuries, the misogynistic approach showed itself as different ideologies in political, economic, religious, and social spheres. In this respect, Sheila Margaret Pelizzon claims that women's restriction in the domestic sphere was traditional in the sense that they were kept out of work life which was dominated by patriarchal institutions and ideologies. These ideologies were turned from familial patriarchy into patriarchal government policy in time (10-11). In this regard, the way misogyny is performed can change and vary. In other words, the misogynistic approach could be named differently, yet the main purpose of the restriction and hatred of women remained the same. Similarly, in the Middle Ages, the misogynistic approach shows itself not only as the oppression of women by males, but also in the stereotypical representation of women in two opposing images as Eve and Virgin Mary. These attitudes are also seen in the depiction of women in the Wakefield and Chester cycles.

Holland claims that the underlying reason for men's hatred of women was men's sexual desire for women and women's desire for men. Within such a complicated relationship,

the hatred for women also becomes complicated (20). As an outcome of this complicated hatred, Le Goff states that the Christian society had no place for women in the feudal hierarchical order which included “knights, clerics, and villeins” (285). Thus, till the last period of the Middle Ages, women were excluded from this feudal hierarchy and were othered. Before becoming lady, saint, or peasant, woman was defined by her body and her relationship with men (Le Goff 285). Hence, she was described as daughter, wife, and mother which restricted her to the domestic sphere. Women existed by their bodies and were recognised by men because of men’s earthly desires. Thus, women’s individuality was ignored by men. As a result, misogynistic perception of women confined women to domestic and controlled areas.

The most powerful institution of the time, the Church, ignored women’s existence outside the domestic sphere due to male domination in all institutions and orders. Marilyn French argues that this was because they held women responsible for sexual temptation which they were afraid of (241). As Christian Augustine puts it, this misogynistic approach was rooted in the Original Sin (qtd. in French 249). According to Shulamith Shahar, women were kept out of Christian institutions in the New Testament because of the Original Sin, whereas the Old Testament did not require such restriction for women (22), which indicates the acceptance of women in the secondary place in society while men claimed superiority over women. Some Church Fathers claimed that women were naturally inferior to men since they were bound to men in order to reproduce (Pelizzon 13). On the other hand, most of them carried the idea of inferiority of women to the point where they identified “woman as the daughter and heiress of Eve, burdened by the yoke of Original Sin, and as the gateway to Satan” (Shahar 23). Eve was accused of seducing Adam even when Satan could not achieve this (Shahar 23). The identification of women with Eve caused them to be perceived as temptresses and as the source of sin. Because the patriarchal system supported the misogynistic depiction of women, they were othered and ignored to the extent that they were expected to be submissive.

The portrayal of Eve as the source of evil and temptation functioned as a way for men to claim superiority over women and to blame them for other sins. In this respect, women were not only held responsible for their own sins but also for men's. Moreover, as suggested by Holland, apart from the Original Sin, women were held responsible for the Seven Deadly Sins (86). Concordantly, lust was committed because of the female body. This imposed responsibility on women about their bodies and made them feel ashamed of their own bodies which was also a natural outcome of the Original Sin. Consequently, sexuality was reduced to the level of reproduction, and it was not for female pleasure (Holland 86-88).

According to the Church Fathers, Eve deceived Adam through use of words. As she chose to talk to the Serpent, she persuaded Adam to sin against the will of God. She was blamed for the fall of man; she was also considered to be a threat to male authority (Normington, *Gender in the Middle Ages* 25). Thus, the Seven Deadly Sins, gluttony, greed, wrath, sloth, envy, lechery, and pride were the result of Eve's Original Sin. To prevent men from committing sins, women should cover their bodies in a modest way as expected from them by the Church. Also, they should not be greedy and should not try to tempt men. Women were believed to be weaker than men, and that made them prone to commit the Seven Deadly Sins. Shahar points out that submissiveness of women to men was justified with the claim of men naturally being more logical than women (24).

The image and representation of women changed throughout the Middle Ages. Especially during the late eleventh century, the image of Virgin Mary became prevalent in religious doctrines, practices, and thought. Penny Schine Gold points out that the interest in Virgin Mary's representation began at that time and grew during the following centuries, and she was an important religious figure since the fifth century (43). Virgin Mary's image as the revered holy mother figure and virgin began to be promoted as opposed to the temptress Eve. Virgin Mary was idealised as the virgin mother figure and many women devoted themselves to her to be virgins like her. According to Saint Bernard's description of the cult of the Virgin, Virgin Mary was



referred to as “the valiant woman” (qtd. in McGuire 92). In this representation, Virgin Mary was the symbol of purity and virtue as opposed to the representation of Eve as the temptress and deceiver.

Virgin Mary’s body was depicted as pure and sinless. Thus, the body of God’s mother, Virgin Mary appeared as purified from sins. Since the human body was accepted as the gate of devil, Virgin Mary could not be defined with bodily pleasures. Thus, she could not be associated with physical features, desires, and union. These desires were attributed to Eve, and Virgin Mary was represented as opposed to this image. She was pictured with respectable titles and definitions, and she could not represent the bodily desires of women. For this reason, Christ was not born as a result of sexual desire, but it was an immaculate conception. Because Virgin Mary lacked sexual desire, she was distanced from other women. She was idealised as a figure that other women ought to yearn to be like. The Church Fathers idolised and apotheosised Virgin Mary which was not because of her effort. Her image as submissive, obedient, virgin, and holy mother caused her to be represented as a divine figure (Holland 119-21). On this subject, Le Goff argues that Virgin Mary was revered to the level that she was believed to be the most powerful of intercessors to receive any kind of miracle from God (29). The image of the holiness of Virgin Mary disembodied carnal desires and feelings of women who were categorised as the daughters or followers of Virgin Mary.

When considered from this point of view, as Holland argues, the Church used this categorisation to degrade other women who did not associate their lives with Virgin Mary’s (121). Thus, women were associated either with Eve or Virgin Mary, and they were equally dehumanised as Holland puts it (127). This means that, even though Virgin Mary was idealised according to the Church’s ideology, she was also dominated by the ideals of male authority. The representation of women as Eve and as temptresses is in contrast with their representation as Virgin Mary and thus as the holy mother figure. As mentioned above, even though the Church Fathers seemed to aggrandise women by attributing them the responsibility to become like Virgin Mary, in fact, they were stereotyping women by comparing Eve’s “loose tongue” to Mary’s silent appearance

(Normington, *Gender in the Middle Ages* 25). Either way, medieval women did not have any representation in between these two opposite stereotypes.

On the other hand, the Church Fathers promoted the idea that the sin of Eve was cleared with the purity of Virgin Mary. On this matter, Le Goff suggests that “[o]rder in the world, upset by original sin, would be restored by miracle” (335-36). According to the Church Fathers, the Original Sin committed by Eve was to be restored by the birth of Christ. Eve’s representation was in contrast with the representation of Virgin Mary. In this sense, the contrasting image of women appears to be either as “Devil’s gateway” which is associated with Eve, or “Bride of Christ” associated with Virgin Mary (Bloch 91). However, R. Howard Bloch claims that women were neither evil nor pure, but they were both at once. According to Bloch’s argument, woman “is, in a sense, as powerfully entangled as the story of the Fall itself, entrapped by the logic of a cultural ideal that, internalized, makes her always already in a state of weakness, lack, guilt, inadequacy, vulnerability” (91). For him, the idea of woman being temptress and saviour was a tool to oppress them by the patriarchal ideology of the time (91), because neither Eve nor Virgin Mary chose their own representation in society. All characteristics were attributed to them by the patriarchal authority.

Apart from being othered and regarded as temptresses and source of evil, women had few rights concerning property ownership and dowry. In the feudal, medieval, and patriarchal society, women could not buy or sell land without being under the protection of a male figure, either a father, a brother, or a husband. If women were not married or did not have any brothers, after their father passed away, they had to marry the eldest member of the family. Through this practise, women were seen as an agent in keeping the property undivided and in the family (Holland 37). Christine Peters points out that marriage was a way to transfer property as well as functioning as religious, social, and economic alliance (64). This was because, the daughter of the family was granted land as dowry. Le Goff comments on the issue as follows: “Beginning in the twelfth century, the dowry brought by the wife increased and gradually surpassed the marital dowry or the gifts and contributions of the husband” (290). Thus, the land which was the source

of richness at the time would belong to the husband as the dowry. Since the dowry was under male control, women were regarded economically valuable.

The misogynistic representation and the respectful idealisation of women are observed and reflected in the medieval mystery plays which aimed to teach the biblical stories to the illiterate people. However, the representation of women is not included in all mystery plays. For this reason, the plays *The Creation, and Adam and Eve* and *Noah* in the Chester cycle and *The First Shepherds' Play, The Second Shepherds' Play, and Noah* in the Wakefield cycle are chosen to analyse the representation of women.

*The Creation, and Adam and Eve* begins with Deus' description of the creation of the world, light, darkness, sun, moon, and eventually man in his likeness. After the creation of Adam, God creates woman from Adam's rib so that she can accompany him, and man is made the master of everything by God. In paradise, God gives them everything but forbids the fruit of the apple tree. However, Demon deceives Eve and Eve eats the apple. Then, Eve tempts Adam to eat the apple committing the Original Sin which causes them to be banned from paradise.

In *Noah* of the Chester cycle, Deus says that He will bring flood because of the sins of humanity. He orders Noah to build an ark and take one male and one female of every animal into this ark and sail away till the waters recede. Noah's wife rejects to get onto the ark at first because she wants to save other people as well, but then accepts to do what Noah bids and gets on the ark. After the waters recede, the animals and humans will multiply again.

In the mentioned plays, women are depicted as greedy and prone to temptation. As claimed by the shepherds in the plays of the Wakefield cycle, the women characters are tricksters and deceivers as well as being ill tempered and unmanageable. In this regard, *The First Shepherds' Play* does not contain much criticism and commentary related to

the misogynistic representation of women. However, in *The Second Shepherds' Play*, the first shepherd says that it is frequently advised that a man should not marry because through marriage, women bring misery and unhappiness for men.

Shepherd 2: We sely wedmen  
Dre mekyll wo.

...

These men that ar wed  
Have not all thare wyll  
When they ar full hard sted  
Thay sygh full styl. (Epp 94-108)

Gib says that men are henpecked, and they must submit to their wives which makes them miserable. The ill-treatment of the husband by the wife in the household is likened to their position in their relationship with the feudal lord; the shepherds are oppressed by the feudal laws. Although he is aware of their situation, he follows the orders set by the feudal lords. Hence, they have to be bound to the feudal rules. He accepts this situation in these lines: "I know my lesson./Wo is hym that is bun/For he must abyde" (Epp, *The Second Shepherds' Play* 115-17). Even though, in the play there is no direct conflict between the husbands and wives, there are complaints about marriage along with other problems. The second shepherd, Gib, says that the married men sigh quietly because they are ill-served by their wives, and for this reason they endure much. This indicates that men as the patriarchal authority figures in the household want to be treated well and respected by their wives. Their complaint about marriage is because of the fact that the husbands cannot dominate their wives as they wish. As the patriarchal figures in the household, men expect their wives to be docile and submissive to them. In this sense, the shepherds complain because they do not have authority over their wives. In keeping with the misogynistic and patriarchal attitude, the second shepherd in *The Second Shepherds' Play* adds:

Shepherd 2: Som men wyll have two wyfys,  
And som men thre  
In store;

Som ar wo that has any.  
 Bot so far can I:  
 Wo is hym that has many  
 For he felys sore. (Epp 124-30)

In these lines, Gib implies “[w]hat that destany dryfys” (Epp 122) is that some men can marry even more than once, and some of them can have mistresses who were to be seen “[i]n store” (Epp 126). Even though they complain about being married, it is observed that some men remarry. This contradicts with their complaint about marriage. Yet, in these lines, it is suggested that being married or remarrying is men’s decision. The second shepherd says that some men can have mistresses. Thus, in either of these situations, women are presented as passive and submissive wives, and men’s desire for other women and adultery is normalised. This supports the idea that women were regarded as inferior and submissive to men. Furthermore, the second shepherd claims that married men endure and suffer much in marriage:

Shepherd 2: We sely wedmen  
 Dre mekyll wo.  
 We have sorow then and then;  
 It fallys oft so. (Epp 94-97)

The second shepherd claims that because of women, married men endure many hardships. These men claim that women are not submissive or silent, instead they stand against the bidding of their husbands. Women are greedy and cannot be pleased because of their avarice. For instance, Mak complains about his wife, he says that his wife is well-fed, but she is still not content with what she has, suggesting that she is greedy and unsatisfied. However, Mak says: “Yit is she a fowll dowse,/If ye com nar” (Epp 356-57). He says that she is a sweetheart, but later, he also expresses his wish to give all he has in order to see his wife dead:

Mak: Now wyll ye se what I profer:  
 To gyf all in my cofer  
 To-morne at next to offer  
 Hyr hed mas penny. (Epp 361-64)

At first, he claims that his wife is a sweetheart but then wishes that his wife is dead. These contradictory expressions function as the comic effect in the play which is one of the novelties that the Wakefield Master brings into the mystery plays. Thus, the Wakefield cycle plays carry entertaining elements as well as the biblical messages.

In the Wakefield *Noah*, Noah's wife Gill is depicted as inferior to her husband in the sense that women are to be overruled by the male authority. However, Wife is rebellious and does not readily accept Noah's orders; she also is very vocal and expresses her own opinions. In the play, God says that He created Wife so that Noah could have a mate and would not be alone: "Thi wife that is thi make" (Epp 203) but his wife thinks that their relationship is worthless: "In fayth, thi fellowship/Set I not at a pyn" (Epp 526-27). With these words, she means that she does not value their marriage even as much as a pin. In this sense, the Wakefield Master draws women as trapped in the misogynistic and patriarchal society while giving them a voice at the same time. In keeping with the misogynistic attitude of the time, the Wakefield Master creates Wife as a woman character who is aware that she is dominated by her husband. Although Noah claims that he is afraid, the Wife says that "God knowes I am led" (Epp 293). This line is opposed to Noah's claim that he is afraid of his wife because his wife says that Noah leads her and commands her to do things such as ordering her to get on the ark. However, she tries to change the fact that she is controlled by her husband by rejecting her husband's demand to get on the ark and sailing away by saying: "I will not for thi bydyng/Go from doore to mydyng" (Epp 543-44). She chooses to stay in the town and refuses to take a step when Noah asks her. As Jane Tolmie argues,

[t]his is not to say that Mrs Noah's recalcitrance is approved in any given play, but it is present and persistent even when it is disapproved and defeated. Significantly, given that her recalcitrance is an extra-biblical feature, this feature offers a voice not only for the dead but also for the living: all those women at the bottom of the hierarchy of discourse. (11)

In the same vein, Noah's wife stands for those who are going to be left behind during the flood. In her rejection to obey Noah's command, her insubordination stands for

women in general. Since she voices her own decision to stay in the town, the Wakefield Master attributes her an individualised voice which differentiates her from Mrs Noah of the Chester cycle. This rejection and disobedience to male authority is an addition of the Wakefield Master while narrating the biblical story. The Wife is illustrated as bad-tempered and inferior to Noah, and she is excluded from God's direct guidance, she tries to break this patriarchal oppression. However, eventually she gets on the ark, and does what her husband demands. This resistance is also misogynistic in the sense that she refuses to do as Noah asks. The biblical representation of Noah's wife does not contain signs of resistance to Noah's bidding. On the other hand, this resistance to the patriarchal authority is another novelty that the Wakefield Master brings. Therefore, it can be said that the Wakefield Master attributes to Gill both misogynistic traits and individualised insubordination. In this way, Gill becomes the dominant figure in the play as she is represented as a demanding wife. Thus, the Wakefield Master's Mrs. Noah appears as an individual carrying dominant characteristics in the misogynistic society. As mentioned above, in the Wakefield cycle plays, women characters carry new characteristics such as being vocal, dominant, and resistant as well as misogynistic image. In this respect, the Wakefield Mrs. Noah tries to break the oppression of male authority, however; she is presented within the misogynistic perception as a defier woman.

In the Chester cycle play, *Noah*, in contrast to the Wife in the Wakefield *Noah*, Mother Noah accepts Noah's orders:

Uxor Noe: And we shall bring tymbre to,  
 For wee mon nothing else doe;  
 Women be weake to underfoe  
 Any great travayle. (Happé, *English Mystery Plays* 65-68)

Mother Noah seems to accept the patriarchal ideology's rule over women by agreeing with the prevailing misogynistic idea of the patriarchal order that women are physically weaker than men, but she also accepts weakness of character, too. The accepted physical weakness of women compared to men causes her to be submissive. Being an obedient

wife, she is in compliance with the biblical representation of the wife of Noah “who makes no protests about her role or about getting onto the Ark” (Tolmie 12). Likewise, the other female characters in the play, namely Ham’s Wife and Japhet’s Wife, undertake anointment and cooking. Even though they seem to be eager to work with their husbands, they volunteer to do the work that is considered as female work because Japhet’s Wife says that she cooks “in feere,/And for to dight your dynner,/Against yow come in” (Happé, *English Mystery Plays* 78-80). Thus, according to misogynistic and patriarchal ideals of the Middle Ages, anointment, cooking, and helping with the work that does not require much physical strength are in the domestic sphere which belongs to women. This situation is accepted by the women characters in *Noah* without any resistance.

In the Chester play, Mother Noah asks Noah to stop “frankish fare” (Happé, *English Mystery Plays* 100) meaning stupid fussing because she is not going to do what Noah says. Yet, this rejection is not out of personal disobedience to patriarchy as seen in *Noah* of the Wakefield cycle where Gill “insists on remaining behind to work,” but rather it is an opposition because Mother Noah “raises her voice in mourning for friends and relatives” who are to be left behind during the flood (Tolmie 11). As Tolmie suggests,

Mrs Noah resists containment by doctrine in at least two ways: first, her sorrow about the exclusionary aspects of the salvation narrative cannot be entirely disregarded, and second, her bond with Noah is seen to be severely compromised. The biblical narrative depicts a meek Mrs Noah who makes no protests about her role or about getting onto the ark. (12)

In the biblical story, Noah’s wife does not resist. In the Chester cycle *Noah*, she stands against Noah’s will. Although they differ in motivation in standing against Noah’s demand, both characters in the Wakefield and the Chester cycles are excluded from God’s admonition. In the end, Mrs. Noah is forced to get onto the ark, and God says to Noah that every being shall live in fear of him (Happé, *English Mystery Plays* 328).



In the same vein, as Noah is granted the patriarchal authority to save and multiply the species on the earth by God, Adam is made the master of every being in *The Creation, and Adam and Eve* in the Chester cycle. In this play, Adam is made the master of “[f]ishe, foule, beasts, more, and lesse” and “[t]o maister he shall have might” (Happé, *English Mystery Plays* 83-84). The play opens with Deus’ (God’s) long speech where He talks about the creation of the world and everything on it indicating that He is the master and the creator. God continues talking about the creation of all kinds of beasts and adds: “To helpe thee, thou shalt have here/Hearbes, trees, sede, fruite in feare;/All shalbe put in thy [Adam’s] power” (Happé, *English Mystery Plays* 89-91). Through this power, Adam becomes the patriarchal authority figure to rule over every other being on earth. Even though the patriarchal motives of Noah and Adam are different, the main idea remains the same: the power to control and dominate is granted to the males by God, and women are excluded from this authority. After that, God invites Adam paradise and says “[h]ere, Adam, I geve thee this place./Thee to comforte and solace” (Happé, *English Mystery Plays* 113-14) on condition that

Deus: Of all the trees that be here in  
 Thou shalt eate and nothing synne,  
 But of this tree for wayle or wyne  
 Thou eate not by no waye. (Happé, *English Mystery Plays* 117-20)

Thus, God creates paradise to give Adam comfort and sustenance. For Adam’s comfort, God created a companion for him: a woman. God says to Adam: “Therefore a bone I take of thee/And fleshe also with heart free,/To make thee a feere” (Happé, *English Mystery Plays* 134-36). God creates woman so that she accompanies Adam. In this respect, the creation of woman and how she is named is given in Genesis as follows: “And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man” (*The Holy Bible*, Gen. 2:23). Thus, woman is created from Adam’s rib. According to the misogynistic patriarchal perspective, woman’s creation does not have any other aim than being a good companion for man. This indicates the supremacy of man over woman. In this way, Adam’s authority over Eve and other beings is justified by divine power.

The patriarchal discourse and ideology can be deduced from the names given to the women characters in the plays. In *Noah* in the Wakefield cycle, Noah's wife's name is not disclosed until Noah gets angry with her. This implies that Noah does not consider Mrs Noah worthy enough as an individual until she makes him angry. In *Noah* of the Wakefield cycle, God speaks only to Noah, and addresses them as "Noe, and his wife" (Epp 154). Hence, as a woman she is excluded from the conversation between God and Noah, and she is not considered as an individual as she is deprived of a name. Just like Eve was created to be Adam's companion, in this play, God says to Noah that "[t]hi wife that is thi make" (Epp 203) meaning that she exists as Noah's mate not as an individual. Epp argues that "Noah's wife is unnamed and barely mentioned in the biblical account but is often treated in medieval sources (including Chaucer's Miller's Tale) as the archetypal shrewish wife" (Footnote 273). Thus, it can be deduced that her struggle to give voice to herself is associated with her shrewishness. Noah calls his wife "sheepshit" and says: "Wé, hold thi tong, ramskyt,/Or I shall thee still" (Epp 313-14). He threatens his wife with physical violence to make her quiet if she does not stop talking. Upon this, she says that if he ever strikes him, she will also strike him (Epp 316).

After this, Noah addresses her with her name "Gill": "We shall assay as tye./Have at thee, Gill!" (Epp 317-18). Mak's wife has the same name in *The Second Shepherds' Play* and *The First Shepherds' Play* in the Wakefield cycle. On the choice of the name given to the wives, Epp comments as follows: "Gill (or Jill) may be the wife's name (see also the second Shepherds play, where it is the name of Mak's wife), but is also a contemptuous nickname for a woman, and homonymous with the word for guile or deceit" (Footnote 318). This displays the misogynistic approach that defines women as temptresses who mislead men through trickery.

The depiction of the archetypal shrewish wife is observed in the depiction of the Wife of Bath in Chaucer's *The General Prologue* and *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* in *The Canterbury Tales*. In *The General Prologue*, the Wife of Bath is described as "a worthy womman al hir lyve:/Housbondes at chirche dore she hadde five" (Benson, "General Prologue" 459-60). These lines mean that she was a worthy woman and she

married five times in her lifetime. The Wife of Bath is depicted as wearing “[a] foot-mantel aboute hir hipes large,/And on hir feet a paire of spores sharpe” (Benson, “General Prologue” 472-73). She is a woman in control and practical. She wears a foot mantle for practical purposes, but spurs were worn only by men. Yet, she wears them, and this shows that she is claiming authority (Erol 113-14). She knows how to “laughe and carpe” (Benson, “General Prologue” 474). These features attributed to the Wife of Bath were unusual for a woman during the late fourteenth century when *The Canterbury Tales* was composed. Hence, the Wife of Bath’s description is in the same line as Noah’s wife’s in the Wakefield cycle; both characters stand against male authority.

The Wife of Bath begins her prologue by talking about “wo that is in marriage” (Benson, “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale” 3). She claims that she married five times the first of them was when she was twelve years old. Since she had five husbands, she starts her speech by talking about woe in marriage. She complains that there are double standards considering males and females on the marriage issue; when a man marries more than once, this is not a problem, but when a woman marries more than once this creates problems. However, she does not hesitate to voice how many times she married. The Wife of Bath says that she picked the best men to marry. She chose her husbands as opposed to what was expected from women in the Middle Ages. She says that she legally married five times at the church, she is attributed sexual appetite for her husbands. In the thirteenth century, the Church Fathers agreed that marital sexual relationship had to be for procreation. Hence, if sexual relationship did not aim procreations, it was lust which stemmed from the Original Sin (Shahar 70-71). Within this context, the Wife of Bath is presented as committing one of the Seven Deadly Sins as she admits: “As help me God, I was a lusty one” (Benson, “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale” 605). As opposed to the Christian understanding of a married virtuous woman, she voices her earthly desires. Additionally, the Wife of Bath asks questions to justify and prove that misogynistic oppression on women is invalid in that according to her, there was no definite number regarding how many times a woman could marry: “... no nombre mencion made he,/Of bigamy, or of octogamy;/Why sholde men thanne speke of it vileynye? (Benson, “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale” 32-34).

Moreover, she complains about husbands on behalf of all women: “What helpith it of me to enquire or spyen?/I trowe thou woldest loke me in thy chiste!” (Benson, “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale” 316-17). She asks why a husband would need to inquire a wife about where she goes and does. She says that husbands would lock wives into boxes if they could. After that she voices women’s demands that husbands should trust their wives. In this way, she demands to be free from male domination. She criticises the patriarchal and misogynistic norms of the Middle Ages. In demanding freedom, the Wife of Bath and Noah’s Wife are similar to each other. However, the Wife of Bath directly criticises the misogynistic religious restrictions imposed on women, while Noah’s wife aims to stand against her husband without carrying a critical aim of breaking free from male oppression. Her rejection of Noah’s authority is personal as opposed to the Wife of Bath’s disobedience to the patriarchal ideas. For the same purpose, the Wife of Bath claims that women should dress as they wish. She stands against the idea that if women wore nice clothes and jewellery, they are threats to chastity.

Her insistence on dressing as she wishes stems from her desire to earn her freedom. “Hir coverchiefs ful fyne weren of ground” (Benson, “General Prologue” 453) and she wore scarlet red stockings and new shoes. Erol argues that “[t]he Wife of Bath’s headdress is very fashionable by the standards of the late fourteenth century” (112). To keep up with the fashions of the fourteenth century, she disregards the misogynistic requirements and dresses assertively (Erol 112). The Wife of Bath insists on doing as she pleases, and Noah’s wife insists on not getting onto the ark. Hence, their common trait is their struggle to break free from oppression.

The Wife of Bath raises her voice against her clerk husband who reads from a book of misogynistic tales. She says that she could not put up with him as he always tried to correct her behaviours according to religious ideas. For this reason, the Wife of Bath says: “... I rente out of his book a leef,/For which he smoot me so that I was deaf” (Benson, “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale” 667-68). She confronts her husband physically as he talks about how her behaviours do not comply with what is expected

from her. Thus, her husband's misogynistic expectation from her makes the Wife of Bath show physical resistance and also tear a page from a misogynistic book of her husband. In this aspect, there is a similarity between the Wife of Bath and Noah's wife in the Wakefield *Noah* as she also threatens to strike her husband if he beats her.

In *The Creation, and Adam and Eve* of the Chester cycle, patriarchal oppression is observed in Adam and Eve's relationship with each other and with God in the Chester cycle. When Adam rises and comes to paradise, God authorises Adam to name every being, and beasts there. He is also given the duty and privilege to name "her":

Deus: Rise up, Adam, and awake!  
Here have I formed thee a make.  
Here to the thou shalt take,  
And name her as thy list. (Happé, *English Mystery Plays* 144-47)

To give a name to someone or something is a way to assert dominance and possession over them. Adam decides that "shall she be called, i-wis,/Virago, nothing amisse" (Happé, *English Mystery Plays* 149-50). Furthermore, Adam justifies calling Eve "virago" which means shrew "[f]or out of man taken she is/And to man shall she draw" (Happé, *English Mystery Plays* 151-52). When Eve and Adam noticed that they were naked after eating the forbidden fruit, Adam says that he knew she would be man's woe the moment his rib was taken: "Yea, soothe said I in prophesie,/When thou wast taken of my body,/Mans woe thou woldest be witlie" (Happé, *English Mystery Plays* 269-71). Then, he justifies the name he gave to her: "Therefore thou wast so named" (Happé, *English Mystery Plays* 272).

In *The First Shepherds' Play* and *The Second Shepherds' Play* of the Wakefield cycle, there is the biblical narrative about the Nativity. In both plays, the stealing of the sheep functions as an allusion to the sins before Christ was born. In this sense, the birth of Christ functions as hope for salvation for all the sinners in the world, and the mother of Christ, Virgin Mary is represented as the life-bringer, symbol of purity, and the holy

mother figure. The stealing of the sheep by Mak and its disguise as a baby by his wife, Gill functions as the ironic presentation of the false Nativity (Jambeck 53). As the mother of the false Christ, Gill, and as the mother of Christ, Virgin Mary are contrasted. Thus, Gill is depicted as pre-occupied with her spindle which is associated with Eve, and in this sense, Gill is considered as a temptress and held responsible for the fall of Mak just like Eve was held responsible for the fall of Adam. Gill's temptress image stems from her role as a collaborator in stealing and disguising the sheep with Mak. Thus, Gill's role in stealing and disguise of the sheep is paralleled with the role of Eve in committing the Original Sin. This results from the traditional definition of duties attributed to both sexes after Adam and Eve were thrown out of paradise because all women in the name of Eve were held responsible for the fall of man. During the Peasants' Revolt (1382), peasants shouted: "When Adam delved and Eve span,/Who was then the gentleman?" (Morris 25). As understood from these words, Adam is traditionally associated with working and digging, or "delving" while Eve is associated with spinning, differing the tasks of man and woman. Thus, as digging requires more physical strength than spinning, it is attributed to men, while spinning is associated with women. There is gender role stereotyping where the roles attributed to the sexes after Adam and Eve's fall was used to justify the misogynistic ideas as seen in the slogan of the Peasants' Revolt. In this sense, the slogan the continuation of the misogynistic understanding that women are temptresses like Eve, and Adam is a man who works hard and suffers because of Eve's weakness. Hence, Adam is depicted as doing the duties that require physical strength while Eve is associated with spinning.

Gill and Mary in *The Second Shepherds' Play* are contradictory figures as in the biblical image of Eve and Virgin Mary. As Katie Normington points out,

two major approaches to the study of women's roles in theatre have traditionally been followed – either a "positive roles" focus, which assesses women for their independence, or a "misogynistic roles" study, which notes that women were assigned certain roles by men, for example witch, vamp, bitch, virgin/goddess (1988, 6 7). The dichotomous roles of the Virgin and Eve within the mystery plays lend themselves to such a response. ("Giving Voice to Women" 138)

As stated, the representation of women in the Middle Ages in these plays is limited to two opposed depictions as Eve the temptress or as Virgin Mary. In this sense, since Virgin Mary gave birth to Christ, sinful actions in the play come to an end. She is pictured as the peacemaker and the opposite of Gill. In *The Second Shepherds' Play*, the third shepherd offers to put Mak and his wife to death because of theft: "Let do thaym to dede" (Epp 897), but then Mak is cast in a canvas as punishment. After the punishment, Angel announces the birth of Christ:

Angel: For now is he borne  
That shall take fro the feynd  
That Adam had lorne,  
That waarloo to sheynd. (Epp 921-24)

In these lines, Angel says that Christ has come to save those who were doomed to sin because of the Original Sin. According to Angel, they were destroyed by Satan, and now they will be saved by Christ. Hence, these lines indicate the end of the bad things in the play and the beginning of the good things with the birth of Christ and existence of Virgin Mary. In this sense, Virgin Mary's existence in the play ends the chaotic chain of events caused by the theft of the sheep and the disguise of the sheep by Mak and Gill. This shows that Virgin Mary is the woman who gives birth to Christ to save humankind from the sins caused by Eve.

In the Wakefield *Noah*, the story begins with a reference to the Creation of the world and Adam and Eve. Noah talks about the Original Sin and claims that Eve as a "false fiend" (Epp 51) "[m]ade hym [Adam] with man wroth" (Epp 52). Noah claims that she "enticed man to gluttony" and "[s]tyrd him to syn in pride" (Epp 53-54). Thus, Noah associates Eve with two of the Seven Deadly Sins and eventually the Original Sin. Noah's wife is observed while spinning yarn just like Gill in *The Second Shepherds' Play*. Both women are associated with Eve as the disobedient and unruly women in that Gill is depicted as a trickster figure who helps hide the stolen sheep, and Mrs Noah appears as a refractory figure. Both of these women cause trouble for their husbands in these plays just as Eve caused trouble by tempting Adam to eat the forbidden apple.

In *The Creation, and Adam and Eve* of the Chester cycle, Eve was held responsible for the fall of man because when Adam eats the forbidden fruit and becomes aware of their nakedness, and they have just committed sin, he blames and curses Eve. For this sin, Eve was punished with childbearing pain. She was to suffer under Adam's power and follow his bidding. As a punishment, Adam shall always master her. The relationship between Adam and Eve in the play exemplifies the Creation in the Bible in the sense that Adam is granted to master every creature (*The Holy Bible*, Gen. 1:26) and name them as he wishes (*The Holy Bible*, Gen. 2:19).

Additionally, in these mystery plays, women's stereotypical representation as either Eve or Virgin Mary is contrasted. As stated, in *The First Shepherds' Play* and *The Second Shepherds' Play*, the shepherds complain about being married and their wives. They claim that they are married to unruly and deceitful wives. Especially in *The Second Shepherds' Play*, Gill is presented as a cunning figure. She offers to hide the sheep that Mak stole by disguising it as a baby in the cradle. In a way, as Rosemary Woolf notes, Gill "to some extent casts herself as the second Eve" (qtd. in Normington, "Giving Voice to Women" 140). Through Gill, in these plays, women are typified as cunning tricksters. Even though the Wakefield Master gives women voice in his plays, by presenting them as cunning planners he stereotypes them as tricksters.

Correspondently, Noah's wife in *Noah* in the Wakefield cycle is the stereotypical representation of a bad-tempered woman. At first, she is disobedient and unruly, and she rejects her husband's request to get onto the ark and sail away during the flood. Noah says that he is going to ask his wife but there will be a quarrel between them because she is bad-tempered and angry:

Noah: My wife will I frast  
 What she will say,  
 And I am agast  
 That we get som fray  
 Betwixt us both,  
 For she is full tethee,



For litill oft angré;  
 If anythyng wrang be  
 Soyne is she wroth. (Epp 265-73)

Noah attributes to her such misogynistic traits as being bad-tempered and angry. However, the Wakefield Master allows her to speak on behalf of all women as well as attributing her some misogynistic traits. She says: “We women may wary/All ill husbandys” (Epp 300-301). So, she not only speaks on behalf of all women, but also calls men as bad husbands. Thus, the Wakefield Master’s Mrs Noah is a strong-willed woman as well as an incompatible woman in the patriarchal order because she stands against her husband’s orders. Furthermore, she says to Noah: “Yei, Noe, go cloute thi shone” (Epp 510). In this way she tells him to mind his business after Noah tells her how the flood will destroy everything. She gets more argumentative and says that “[i]n fayth, thi fellowship/Set I not at a pyn” (Epp 526-27) expressing that she has no gain from Noah’s friendship. This means that their relationship is worthless for her. Her words in a misogynistic society show that she is a strong-willed woman character who can voice her own wishes and opinions. After voicing her demands and thoughts, she adds: “This spyndill will I slip” (Epp 528). Although, she is drawn as a demanding and strong-willed woman, she prefers spinning. This brings her closer to the misogynistic representation of Eve since spinning is associated with Eve as stated above. Furthermore, when she stands against Noah’s bidding, she says that Noah’s words do not frighten her. Upon this, Noah says “For betyn shall thou be” (Epp 551). Jane Tolmie resembles Noah’s wife’s punishment by beating to Eve’s punishment: “Mrs Noah is being punished for an ineluctable feminine resemblance to Eve” (31). Since Noah’s wife is represented as the bad-tempered, unruly, and disobedient wife, Noah resembles their relationship to that of Adam and Eve, and then all the other couples, and gives advice to them:

Noah: Yee men that has wifys,  
 Whyls they ar yong,  
 If ye luf youre lifys,  
 Chastice thare tong. (Epp 573-76)

Through this advice, Noah assumes that marriage is not peaceful because of wives' disobedience to husbands. Additionally, Noah advises men to chastise their wives' tongues if they love their lives. This advice shows that men think that women cause trouble in men's lives by talking. In these lines, Noah depicts married men as victims of their wives, whereas women are stereotyped as chatterers who scold their husbands.

*The Creation, and Adam and Eve* depicts a different kind of disobedience which results from not a rebellion but from gluttony. Because of the gluttony of Eve, Adam says that “[m]y licorous wife hath bene my foe,/The devilles envye shent me also” (Happé, *English Mystery Plays* 353-54). Because of Adam's words to Eve, women are stereotyped as temptresses especially by the Church Fathers with the claims that women's gluttony harmed men. In this respect, Eve appears as the gluttonous wife because she ate the forbidden fruit and committed the Original Sin causing Adam to sin, too. For this reason, patriarchy assumes that all women are the same and gluttonous wives cause their husbands to suffer in the same way as Adam was punished because of Eve's sin. Thus, as the patriarchal figure, Adam thinks that all women should be kept under male control. As a male he has the duty of disciplining his wife. For the same purpose of disciplining women, Adam advises men, if necessary, to beat their wives. As a result of this misogynistic treatment, Adam advises men:

Adam: Now all my kinde by me is kent  
To flee womans intisement;  
That trustes them in anye intent  
Truly he is decayved. (Happé, *English Mystery Plays* 349-52)

Adam warns men so that they will not be allured and seduced by women. He thinks that men commit sins because of women. Thus, for him all women are temptresses like Eve. As the patriarchal authority figure, he warns other men against the temptation of women.

In *Noah* of the Chester cycle, it is noticeable that even women define themselves by accepting the patriarchal discourse and accept that women are weaker than men. In this sense, Mother Noah says that all she can do is bringing timber to men to help build the ark since she thinks that as a woman, she is not capable of doing what men do. After Noah's wife rejects doing what Noah asks, Noah says: "Lord that women be crabbed aye,/And never are meke, that dare I say" (Happé, *English Mystery Plays* 105-106). Thus, Noah's wife appears as the embodiment of disobedient and bad-tempered women resisting male authority. According to Noah, his wife is always "froward" (Happé, *English Mystery Plays* 194). He typifies women as troublemakers who have a devilish side. Different from the wife in the Wakefield cycle, Noah's wife in the Chester cycle stands against her husband to save her "gossips" and neighbours. In the Wakefield cycle, Gill raises her voice to stand against Noah's will. As a result, in the Wakefield Master's representation of women the misogynistic traits and individualistic features attributed to women are intermingled. In this respect, Martin Stevens argues that "the 'Wakefield Master' (who may or may not have had a hand in the Abraham play) consistently blurred the common, everyday, and often ugly with the divine" (qtd. in Jackson 22) whereas the Chester cycle plays seem more interested in the societal well-being.

In the Wakefield cycle plays, a critical perspective towards the representation and stereotyping of women is adopted. As stated, the Wakefield Master's women characters are individuals who stand against male oppression and voice their demands. Women are represented as strong-willed, rebellious, and shrewish figures. This representation can also be seen in some female characters like the Wife of Bath in *The Canterbury Tales* which was roughly contemporaneous with these plays. However, in these plays, there are misogynistic traits attributed to women such as their being temptresses because of their being associated with Eve who caused the fall of man because of the Original Sin. The misogynistic patriarchal ideology requires women to be submissive to the male authority. When compared to the Chester cycle plays, the women characters in the Wakefield cycle raise their voices for personal reasons while the women of the Chester cycle plays do not have such aim when standing against male authority.

## CONCLUSION

The medieval mystery plays came into being with the intention to teach the Christian ideals to the illiterate population in England. These plays were performed first by the clergymen inside the churches beginning with the *Quem quaeritis* in the ninth century. Later the performance was carried into the churchyards, they also began to include secular elements and images such as comic dialogues and actions and included references to contemporary issues. Furthermore, these plays dealt with the injustice applied by the feudal lords upon the serfs as well as the misogynistic representation of women.

In the Middle Ages, arable land was the source of political, economic, and religious power in the feudal society. The feudal lord held the power over the serfs and villeins thanks to his control over the arable land. The feudal society was divided into three hierarchical structures as prayers, fighters, and workers. This hierarchical structure was not in the form of a social structure in the modern sense grouped according to income as working class, middle class, and upper class but rather it was formed around the division of authority to control the arable lands. In this respect, the feudal system was formed as a result of the control of the arable land and manor, and the greatest lord of feudalism was the king. However, the Church was also politically dominant during the Middle Ages.

In feudal England, women were at the bottom of the social hierarchy because after the Norman Conquest, society was shaped according to military male power. Women were excluded from the feudal hierarchy, and they were stereotyped as either Eve or Virgin Mary. The misogynistic and patriarchal authority of the Church did not allow an in-between representation. As a result, women were acknowledged either as temptresses, tricksters, cunning figures, or as pure, domestic, meek, virgin, and holy mothers. These two opposing images of women and their relation to the feudal society were included in

the performances of the plays analysed in this thesis as well as how the feudal relationship between the serfs and the lords functioned in the Middle Ages.

Although both the Wakefield and the Chester cycles deal with the same biblical stories, the Chester cycle is more didactic while the Wakefield cycle includes entertaining and secular elements such as the contemporary problems in medieval English society. In the plays, the Wakefield Master manages to converge the aggressive tone of the contemporary issues with comic episodes. In this sense, the Wakefield Master's plays illustrate the difficult lives of the serfs/shepherds in *The First Shepherds' Play* and *The Second Shepherds' Play*. These two plays show that the shepherds complain about the weather conditions, their bad health conditions, their workload, and overtaxation in relation to injustice in society, and they criticise their lords for exploiting their labour. Although there is not any land-owning character in the play, there is a conflict between lords and those who work in the fields. This conflict is presented through the stolen lamb in *The Second Shepherds' Play*. Mak's theft of the sheep shows that the shepherds are in poverty and not provided with enough food. Their complaints indicate that they are in constant conflict with their lords as the shepherds' needs were neglected by the lords. Thus, the lords are criticised for not fulfilling their duties to provide the serfs with shelter, protection, and food when in need. Furthermore, the Wakefield Master also creates a conflict between the corrupt human beings and the trustworthy human beings through the stolen lamb, which conveys that under harsh conditions all human beings can be prone to act immorally. However, the Wakefield Master does not justify the theft of sheep. He criticises the shepherds for acting immorally, while criticising the lords for not fulfilling their feudal duties.

On the other hand, there is the criticism of social and moral decline. Thus, the Wakefield Master does not present the shepherds as the victims of feudalism, Mak steals the lords' sheep even though he is aware that the consequence of theft is punishment by death in the Middle Ages. In this regard, he criticises the shepherds for committing theft and acting immorally. The shepherds are also criticised for imitating the oppressor lords through Mak who acts like a yeoman trying to deceive other shepherds. Mak tries to

imitate their language and tries to dress like them. Consequently, not only the lords but also the serfs are criticised in these plays. The lords are criticised because they exploit the serfs without providing them with enough food and payment. Mak pretends to be a yeoman, and this indicates that the shepherds try to act like lords when they have a chance and try to assert dominance over each other. The Wakefield Master criticises them for imitating the oppressor lords while being oppressed by the lords.

The reading of the Chester and the Wakefield cycles shows that they employ similar religious didacticism, but the Wakefield cycle is more concerned with the representation of contemporary social problems while the Chester cycle is more bound to the biblical stories. By means of the biblical narratives, both cycles embody misogynistic representation of women and create a binary opposition by depicting women as Eve the temptress or Virgin Mary. In *The Creation*, women are drawn as the temptresses of men with greedy and devilish attitudes represented by Eve who is created to be Adam's mate, not an independent individual. After eating the forbidden apple, Adam says that he knew that Eve would be man's woe. This suggests that Eve is held responsible for man's sufferings and fall. In the character of Eve, women are categorised to be temptresses and they are depicted as characters who are easily deceived in *The Creation, and Adam and Eve*. Wife Noah in *Noah* in the Chester cycle is presented as the source of trouble for Noah. Thus, she rejects male authority, and is rebellious and a temptress. In these plays, both Eve and Wife Noah are unruly and disobedient characters who are weak.

Although Wife Noah stands against Noah's orders, she eventually has to obey his will. Different from the Chester cycle, in the Wakefield cycle, women have new characteristics such as voicing their own demands and rejecting to be ruled by male authority along with some medieval misogynistic traits. In keeping with the medieval attitude, women are depicted as the source and the biggest cause for the fall and suffering of the male characters. Especially in *Noah* in the Wakefield cycle, Noah's wife is not as obedient as Noah is. In this sense, Noah is more faithful in God's will but Noah's wife rejects getting onto the ark. Although she rejects boarding the ark during

the flood, she eventually obeys Noah as the rest of the characters. This means that she accepts to obey the patriarchal authority.

Furthermore, in *Noah* of the Wakefield cycle, Noah's wife is strong-willed; she speaks on behalf of all women and even strikes her husband. While Noah has faith in the ark, his wife questions the reliability of it. Not only does Noah's wife reject embarking the ship, but also, she refuses to ask for forgiveness from Noah for not obeying him. She finds a solution for survival after the flood. In this respect, Noah's wife's suggestion of setting the raven free to find a place to settle down indicates her boldness to speak for the well-being of the community, which is not observed in *Noah* in the Chester cycle in which Wife Noah does not come up with any ideas. Unlike the Wife Noah and Noah in *Noah*, there is a conflict between Noah and his wife in *Noah* considering the decisions on the new life after the flood. These conflicts challenge not only Noah's faith in the ark and God but also his patriarchal authority over his wife.

In the plays *Noah*, *The First Shepherds' Play*, *The Second Shepherds' Play* of the Wakefield cycle, and *Noah, The Creation, and Adam and Eve* of the Chester cycle, both the serfs and the women are represented as greedy, selfish, and prone to corruption and temptation. In the Wakefield cycle, the medieval society is set in a land-based social structure where the lords and serfs are in conflict. However, instead of only stating the conflicts, the Wakefield Master intermingles these conflicts with satirical and humorous elements created by the imitation and pretentiousness of the shepherds. Moreover, the Wakefield Master also makes use of the religious assumptions and social expectations related to women by the patriarchal authority. Not only does he criticise women but also he attributes them new such characteristics as being demanding and unruly unlike the Chester cycle where women are portrayed within medieval misogynistic attitude. In both the Chester and the Wakefield cycle plays, women's actions are the result of their weakness and devilish side. According to their husbands, these women are created to be troublemakers and held responsible for the obstacles their husbands face. Since these women are greedy and liable to temptation, they cause suffering of the males. Despite the common points, the Wakefield cycle is more humorous and includes social criticism

on the explained points of the feudal patriarchal society. So, this cycle gives a more detailed portrayal of medieval women as seen in these plays. For instance, in *Noah*, Noah's wife challenges Noah's obedience to God's order. The way she tries to stand against Noah's oppression implies that she is portrayed as a troublemaker. She objects to her husband by making her own decision.

Mak's wife in *The Second Shepherd's Play* of the Wakefield cycle is another example of the portrayal of women as tricksters in the Middle Ages. Mak's wife is the embodiment of both medieval misogynistic traits and the new characteristics attributed to women by the Wakefield Master. Although the Wakefield Master does not attribute a name to Noah's wife, in this play Mak's wife is given a name, Gill. In *the Second Shepherd's Play*, Gill is prone to corruption and temptation. When Mak steals a lamb, it is Gill who plans how to disguise it as a newborn baby in case the other shepherds come to interrogate the issue. In this play, the woman character is depicted as a greedy and a deceptive person. In this respect, Gill replicates the role of Eve.

However, Noah of the Chester cycle claims that all women are weak and ill-tempered. His claim reflects the misogynistic ideas of the Middle Ages. Similarly, in *The Creation, and Adam and Eve* of the Chester cycle, Eve is presented as devilish, and she is expected to be submissive to Adam. Likewise, in *The First Shepherds' Play* and in *The Second Shepherds' Play*, Gill is depicted as a trickster and ill-tempered character.

In conclusion, in the Middle Ages, the mystery plays were first formed and performed by the clergy in the churches to teach illiterate people the biblical stories. In time, these plays were carried out of churches to streets, and they were staged on the pageant wagons on the Corpus Christi Day as cycle plays with the same didactic religious purpose. However, along with religious didacticism, they began to include secular elements as they began to be performed by the guildsmen. In both cycles, the changing feudal relations between the lords and the serfs in the Middle Ages are reflected. Due to various calamities such as wars, ecological disasters, and the plague, feudal roles and



duties could not be performed as defined in the earlier centuries of the Middle Ages. Both cycles reflect the negative effects of the calamities on society and bring to attention the circumstances. Similarly, there are also changes in the development of depiction of women. Women are depicted as temptresses who inherited the Original Sin of Eve. In both cycles, women appear as tricksters and troublemakers. In the plays analysed in this thesis, they reject male authority and stand against God's will. These women tend to voice their demands and try to break the male oppression, but they are still represented within misogynistic perception. In this sense, the Wakefield Master's plays carry not only religious messages, but they also have social criticism in relation to the feudal manorial life in the Middle Ages and representation of women according to medieval misogynist and patriarchal ideals of the Church Fathers while the Chester cycle plays give a more didactic representation of the society and representation of women in the medieval period. Thus, the critical perspective of the Wakefield Master introduces secular novelties to the mystery plays, which differs his plays from those of the Chester cycle.

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