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Asperges me, Domine, hyssopo: male voices, female interpretation and the medieval English purification of women after childbirth ceremony

THROUGHOUT the Middle Ages, women who had recently given birth might attend a ritual of purification, now termed the 'Churching of Women' after its early modern incarnation in the 1552 *Book of Common Prayer*, where it is described as *The Thankes Geving of Women after Childe Birth, commonly called The Churchying of Women*.¹ Unmarried mothers might also be 'churched', but only after they had done penance for their sexual sin before the congregation, and preferably on a Sunday.² The ceremony was conducted by a priest and took place in the new mother's parish church, in the presence of her female friends, the midwives who attended the birth, and her husband. Although not obligatory, undergoing churching was considered a pious and praiseworthy custom that a woman should undergo, after each of her confinements.

The Christian 'Churching of Women' ceremony has its roots in the Jewish ritual of purification, as described in Leviticus xii.4–6:

ipsa vero triginta tribus diebus manebit in sanguine purificationis suae omne sanctum non tanget nec ingreditur sanctuarium donec impleantur dies purificationis eius sin autem feminam pepererit immunda erit duabus ebdomadibus iuxta ritum fluxus menstrui et sexaginta ac sex diebus manebit in sanguine purificationis suae cumque expleti fuerint dies purificationis eius pro filio sive pro filia deferet agnum anniculum in holocaustum et pullum columbae sive turturem pro peccato ad ostium tabernaculi testimonii et tradet sacerdoti qui offeret illa coram Domino et rogabit pro ea et sic mundabitur a profluvio sanguinis sui ista est lex parientis masculum ac feminam

But she shall remain three and thirty days in the blood of her purification. She shall touch no holy thing: neither shall she enter into the sanctuary, until the days of her

purification be fulfilled. But if she shall bear a maid child, she shall be unclean two weeks, according to the custom of her monthly courses. And she shall remain in the blood of her purification 66 days. And when the days of her purification are expired, for a son, or for a daughter, she shall bring to the door of the tabernacle of the testimony, a lamb of a year old for a holocaust, and a young pigeon or a turtle for sin: and shall deliver them to the priest. Who shall offer them before the Lord, and shall pray for her: and so she shall be cleansed from the issue of her blood. This is the law for her that beareth a man child or a maid child.

Through undergoing this ritual, a new Jewish mother was reintegrated into the synagogue 33 days after the birth of a son, and 66 after that of a daughter. Although uniquely untainted by the pollution of childbirth, Luke ii.22–4 states that the Virgin Mary too followed this custom. In England, from the Anglo-Saxon period onwards, the Feast of the Purification of Mary (2 February) was commemorated—Bede composed a homily for its celebration—and became commonly known as Candlemas.³

With the exception of the Mother of God, a clear association between the post-partum body and uncleanliness is made in the Old Testament Purification ceremony. Evidence of the Christian adoption of the purification of women ceremony is found in a letter from Pope Gregory to St Augustine of Canterbury in 601, as quoted by Bede:

As to the interval that must elapse after childbirth before a woman may enter church, you are familiar with the Old Testament rule: that is, for a male child thirty-three days and for a female, sixty-six. But this is to be understood as an allegory, for were a woman to enter church and

return thanks in the very hour of her delivery, she would do nothing wrong. The fault lies in the bodily pleasure, not in the pain; the pleasure is in the bodily union, the pain is in the birth . . .⁴

Pope Gregory's letter indicates that, in his view, a post-partum woman is immediately welcome in the church but his comments about the sinfulness of the bodily pleasure enjoyed at the conception indicate, as suggested by Joanne Pierce, that

clearly, something about the need for purification after childbirth in Judaism struck a chord with early church authorities, whether it be the defiling nature of blood or the slight whiff of sin which surrounded sexual intercourse (with its loss of control of the will and exchange of bodily fluids) in general.⁵

Ambivalence characterized early ecclesiastical attitudes towards the significance of the purification of new mothers. This article explores the ritual in its late medieval iteration, examining the words sung and spoken by the male clergy in attendance, alongside what can be reconstructed of the gestures of the new mother and her female attendants. Scrutiny of the male voices and female actions within the predominantly male-directed architectural- and soundscape of the parish church during a purification ritual suggests that the private significance attributed to her purification by the new mother, and its meaning shared by her closest female friends who accompanied her, was at variance with the official male meaning attributed to the ritual. While male clerics sang one narrative concerning the somatic experience unique to women, women chose to hear another.

Medieval English churching rituals: form and content

Versions of the medieval purification of women ritual are found in both the liturgies of Sarum and York.⁶ The Sarum rite, used throughout much of England in the later Middle Ages,⁷ is called the *Benedictio mulieris post partum, ante ostium ecclesiae* (The blessing of women after childbirth, before the door of the church), a blessing found at the close of the *Ordo Sponsalium* (Regulation of marriage). In the York rite (the Use of York Minster and common in the north of England), the ritual is termed the *Ordo ad purificandum mulierem* (Regulation for the purification of women). Their titles indicate that both Sarum and York are rites of purification,

and both conclude with a closing note to that effect 'nota quod mulieres post prolem emissam, quando-cunque Ecclesiam intrare voluerint acturae gratias purificari possunt' (note that women after childbirth can be purified whenever they wish to enter the church to give thanks).⁸

In medieval England, a new mother was confined after childbirth for a month or so.⁹ At the end of this period, the midwives and gossips (the 'god-sibs' or appointed godmothers who assisted at the birth and who would have presented the baby for baptism on behalf of the mother) along with female relatives and neighbours, accompanied the new mother to the church to participate in her 'churching'. Gail McMurray Gibson describes how the new mother

was brought veiled to the church to present the chrisom cloth of her baptized child . . . and a lighted candle that when blessed by the priest symbolized the woman's own restored and purified body. She then processed into the church to be ritually readmitted by the priesthood into the Mass and to the community of the faithful . . .¹⁰

What McMurray Gibson summarizes here are the directions for the Sarum purification ritual which indicate that, as in the York ritual, the ceremony began before the church door. An annotation made to a 1610 Douai edition indicates that it was an ancient English custom for the new mother to wear a white veil, carry a lighted candle and be flanked by two married women.¹¹ McMurray Gibson interprets the lighted candle as a symbol of the woman's own restored and purified body.¹²

The purification ritual began at the church door: 'Primo sacerdos et ministri ejus dicant Psalmos' (first the priest and his ministers shall sing psalms). The stage direction, if you will, for this section of the ceremony directs two or more male voices (the priest and his ministers) to recite, or most probably sing, the psalms since 'dicant' was regularly used to mean 'chant' (as in vocal music) in an ecclesiastical context by 1293.¹³ Both Sarum and York begin with gradual psalms.¹⁴ Sarum commences with Psalm 120 (Douai-Rheims version), followed by Psalm 127, a declaration of the fertility of the righteous. Psalm 120 acknowledges the efficacy of God's protection of the individual:

*Dominus custodiet te Dominus protectio tua super manum dexteram tuam
per diem sol non percutiet te neque luna per noctem*

*Dominus custodiet te ab omni malo custodiat animam tuam
Dominus custodiat exitum tuum et introitum*

The Lord is thy keeper, the Lord is thy protection upon thy right hand.

The sun shall not burn thee by day: nor the moon by night. The Lord keepeth thee from all evil, may the Lord keep thy soul.

May the Lord keep thy coming in and thy going out, from henceforth now and for ever.

(120.5–8)

This was a welcome thought for a mother coming to terms with the demands of a newborn baby. Psalm 127 promises a husband who fears the Lord, that his wife shall be fertile ‘uxor sicut vitis fructifera . . . Filii tui ut surculi olivarum circa mensam tuam’ (your wife shall be as a fruitful vine . . . your children around your table like the fresh shoots of the olive) (127.3–4) and concludes with the blessing for continued fertility ‘Ut videas filios filiorum tuorum’ (may you see your children’s children) (127.6).

In Sarum usage, the psalms were followed by the *Kyrie eleison*, the Lord’s Prayer and a series of versicles and responses, performed antiphonally by the celebrant and his attendant(s).

V. O Lord, my God, save this woman Thy servant.

R. And defend her out of Zion.

V. Be Thou to her, O Lord, a strong tower.

R. From the face of her enemy.

V. Lord, hear my prayer.

R. And let my cry come unto Thee.

V. The Lord be with you.

R. And with thy spirit.

A second prayer or collect was explicitly one of thanksgiving for the mother having survived the perils of childbirth:

Deus, qui hanc famulam tuam de pariendi periculo liberasti, et eam in servitio tuo devotam esse fecisti; concede, ut temporali cursu fideliter peracto, sub alis misericordiae tuae vitam perpetuam et quietam consequatur.

O God, who has delivered this woman thy servant from the peril of childbirth, and hast made her to be devoted to thy service; grant that when the course of this life hath been faithfully finished, she may obtain eternal life and rest under the wings of thy mercy.

This part of the ceremony is concluded by asperging the new mother with holy water, *Asperges me, Domine, hyssopo* (Sprinkle me, Lord, with hyssop). The words that accompany her asperging are taken from Psalm 50, in which the psalmist requests God’s mercy, and that God

Penitus lava me a culpa mea, et a peccato meo munda me . . . Ecce, in culpa natus sum, et in peccato concepit me mater mea . . . Asperge me hyssopo, et mundabor, lava me, et super nivem dealbabor.

Wash my wickedness from me and cleanse me from my sin . . . For behold I was conceived in wickedness and my mother conceived me in sin . . . You shall sprinkle me with hyssop and I shall be cleansed. You shall wash me and I shall be made whiter than snow.

(Psalm 50.4, 7, 9)

Only after these words had been spoken did the woman enter the church:

Deinde inducat eam sacerdos per manum dexteram in ecclesiam dicendo, ‘Ingredire in templum Dei; ut habeas vitam aeternam et uiuas in saecula saeculorum’.

Enter into the temple of God and pray to the son of the Virgin Mary, who granted you the fruitful production of offspring so that you might be granted eternal life and live forever and ever. Amen.

The York rite too commences with Psalm 120 but follows this with Psalm 122, *Canticum graduum ad te levavi oculos meos qui habitas in caelis* (To thee have I lifted up my eyes, who dwells in heaven), a psalm of hope in God in affliction. The *Kyrie* is then sung, followed by a prayer of thanksgiving for having survived childbirth, similar in content to that of Sarum, and the woman is asperged with *aqua benedicta* (blessed water), in the name of the Holy Trinity. The woman is then led by the right hand, by the priest, into the church. The priest, ministers and the new mother then move to the altar where Mass will be celebrated once the priest has prayed specifically for the woman’s purification after childbirth, *ita mulierem istam post partum purificatam*. Having celebrated Mass, the priest blesses unconsecrated bread which he gives to the new mother, a sign which Joanne Pierce interprets thus:

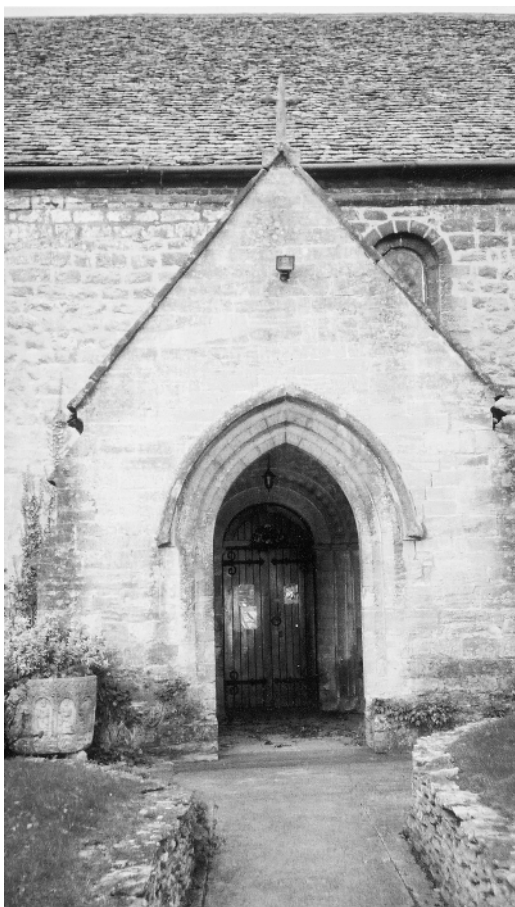
Clearly, the official meaning here is a penitential one, and the implied public meaning one of separation from and connection to the community, with the new mother in a kind of liminal state after childbirth.¹⁵

Having undergone this ritual of purification, the new mother would then be able to take Holy Communion on the next occasion that presented itself.

Male voices, female interpretation of the purification ritual

The male-directed soundscape of the purification ritual emphasized the new mother’s post-partum, sinful state, tainted by sexual activity. Initially, the

woman is barred entry into the body of her church until her own body had been purified. In larger parish churches, the ceremony may have begun inside the church porch that covered the public entrance to the nave (the south porch) (illus.1). This location was associated with marriage ceremonies, and also the public performance of penance. Bridget, the servant of Thomas Bryghte of Walthamstow, was required to ‘stand in the church dore of Wawlcamstow the next sonday all the service tyme in a white sheit bare fott with a white rod in hir hand & to Desier all the people going into the church to pray for hir’, for her sexual incontinence.¹⁶ The penitent was readmitted to the church only after his or her penance had



1 The porch of the Norman Priory Church of St Swithun, Leonard Stanley, Gloucestershire (photo: the author)

been performed.¹⁷ Dave Postles’s suggestion that the church porch be interpreted as representing ‘a liminal or transitional space, between the “profane” (secular world) and the (putative) “sacred” (holy)’¹⁸ is most apposite in relation to the ritual of post-partum purification. For the woman about to be purified, it functioned as a gateway between the profane and sacred; between those moments in her life-cycle (her marriage and childbirth) intimately associated with the bodily pollution arising from sex, and the sacred purity of the church itself. Once inside the church, the woman’s ‘transitional’ status might be further emphasised by her being seated on ‘the chirchyng pewe’, such as that which could be found in St Andrew Hubbard, Eastcheap in the mid-1450s, during Mass.¹⁹

The purification ritual itself reverberated with male voices that proclaimed the new mother’s need for God’s protection (Psalm 120 and the versicles and responses); the perils of each confinement that she will have (the *hanc famulam tuam* prayer); the necessity for repeated childbirth since her role was that of producer of her husband’s heirs (Psalm 127); and her need to be sprinkled with hyssop in order to wash away the sin in which she conceived every child that she bore.

Yet church records attest to the frequency of purification ceremonies. In the 1450s at Bicton, near Shrewsbury, women ‘fought their way through “the mud and snow and floods”, allegedly at risk of drowning, in order to be churched’.²⁰ The 1482–3 accounts of the parish church of Hornsea (East Riding of Yorkshire) reveal the popularity of the ritual that, at Hornsea, cost 1½d:

Item, for the purification of William Hall’s wife, 1½d.
 Item, for the purification of William Pellow’s wife, 1½d.
 Item, on the day of the purification of John Watson’s wife, 1½d.
 ...
 Item, for the purification of six different women, 9d.
 ...
 Item, for the purification of Thomas Whetley’s [wife], 1½d.
 Item, for the purification of Henry Schomaker’s wife, 1½d.
 Item, for the purification of John Maior’s wife, 1½d.
 Item, for the purification of six different women, 9d.²¹

Unfortunately the amount is too small for it to be clear for what it actually paid but it is possible that 1½d. may have been reimbursement for the priest and his attendant in smaller parish churches such as Hornsea where the lengthier wedding ceremony

cost 4d.²² While a purification ceremony may have been readily paid for by a husband grateful for his wife's survival, evidence suggests that women also enjoyed this ritual.

The ceremony of purification was neither a clandestine event nor an occasion for shame. It was quite the contrary, as is suggested by a comment made by Osbern of Bokenham in his life of St Elizabeth of Hungary. Osbern of Bokenham praises St Elizabeth of Hungary for dressing without jewels or costly clothes simply for her own churching and for carrying her own child, suggesting that it was the fashion for many wealthy women to dress splendidly and for someone else to carry their child.²³

As one might anticipate, royal purification ceremonies were extravagant affairs. The *Liber Regie Capelle* (c.1449) stipulated that the queen, dressed in the most elaborate and costly garments, should be led and followed by her female attendants in procession from her state bed to the church door and to the altar, and that a duke should carry a golden candelabrum representing the queen's purified body.²⁴ In 1466, 60 female attendants, many priests carrying relics, and scholars singing and carrying lights accompanied Queen Elizabeth Woodville at her churching.²⁵ The event was described by the German patrician, Gabriel Tetzels of Gräfenberg and Nuremberg, who recounts how 42 singers of the chapel choir accompanied Queen Elizabeth to listen to a 'lyrical Mass' at her churching.²⁶

Ellen de Rouclif, wife of Gervase de Rouclif from Rawcliffe (to the north-west of York), was accompanied at her purification, some three weeks after the birth of her son, by her friend Cecily Shipton (who had been present at the birth), Ellen's sister-in-law, the baby's godmother, Margery de Rouclif, and another local woman, Isabel de Strensall, who was pregnant at the time.²⁷ At her purification after the birth of her daughter, Alice, Ellen was accompanied, once more, by Cecily Shipton, by a local woman Agnes de Frithe and Robert Thewed of Rawcliffe (a friend of her husband, Gervase).

Rather than dwelling upon the cleansing of the defiled, post-partum female body upon which the male-produced ritual focuses, women of all classes celebrated its power in bringing life into the world.²⁸ The women present appreciated the purification

ritual as a woman-centred event at which the voices of the celibate male clergy were marginal.²⁹

Women chose to identify their successful childbearing with that of the Virgin Mary and her mother, St Anne,³⁰ and celebrated this connection in the sacred space of their parish church, surrounded by the women, many of them mothers themselves, who had helped during their confinement. Margery Kempe (c.1373–post 1439), from King's Lynn in Norfolk, leaves us evidence of the connection that she made between Mary's purification and the private churching of the ordinary women in her locality. In what commences as her recollection of a meditation in which she stands alongside Mary at the Virgin's Purification, Margery reveals the connection that she made between Mary's Purification and the private ceremonies of the women that she knew:

whan sche saw women ben purifyd of her childeryn. Sche thowt in hir sowle that sche saw owr Lady ben purifiid, and had hy contemplacyon in the beheldyng of the women wheche comyn to offeryn wyth the women that weryn purifiid. (*Book*, Chapter 82, 6687–90)³¹

Margery calls the ceremony by the term 'purification' but, in the mind of this woman, herself a mother of 14, it is reclaimed as women's time for celebration of the power of the female body to reproduce, the apogee of which was Mary's own childbearing.

In participating in a purification ritual, the one who had recently brought another Christian soul into the world overtly linked her childbearing and her female companions' motherhood with that of their most celebrated figurehead, the Mother of God. This perceived connection was neither tainted by male voices recalling the sinfulness of the post-partum body, nor marked solely by the patriarchal exchange of money between the father and the church. It was symbolized also by a matriarchal exchange: a candle given from one mother to another, placed either before an image of the Virgin Mary or on her altar in the Lady Chapel. Eamon Duffy suggests that the altar of the Lady Chapel of Ranworth Church, in Norfolk, was used in precisely this way, to mark the connection that real women made between their childbearing and purification with that of Mary:

It was the custom for women when they came to be churched to offer a candle in thanksgiving of their delivery before the main image of the Blessed Virgin, or at

the Lady altar. At Ranworth this south altar [behind which were located the images of the Holy kindred] was the Lady altar, and it was here in all probability that women would have brought their babies and their offerings.³²

What medieval women took from the Virgin was not only protection in their hour of greatest need, while in labour, but also power by association.

Conclusion

In the Middle Ages men understood the purification of women ritual as stemming from necessity to cleanse the pollution of the female body after

childbirth. This belief was indeed underscored by the soundscape of the ritual itself. As a hearing community, the women chose to interpret the ritual differently, in a manner that celebrated their physicality and sexuality. Basking in the success of bringing a new life into the world, the new mother and her gossips were able to filter the sound of the male voices that confirmed the impurity and pollution of the post-partum female body, and imbue both the ritual, and by extension the new mother and the women who helped her in her childbearing, with a power to be celebrated.

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1 The text of the 1552 *Book of Common Prayer*, 'Churching of Women', can be found at http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/1552/Churching_Women_1552.htm.

2 N. Knödel, 'The thanksgiving of women after childbirth, commonly called the churching of women', <http://users.ox.ac.uk/~mikef/church.html>.

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4 Bede, *A history of the English Church and the people*, ed. and trans. L. Sherley-Price (Harmondsworth, 1955; r/1983), p.77.

5 J. M. Pierce, "'Green women" and blood pollution: some medieval rituals for the churching of women after childbirth', *Studia Liturgica*, xxix/2 (1999), pp.191–215, at p.197.

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Sponsalium, col.849, and William Maskell, *Monumenta Ritualia Ecclesiae Anglicanae* (London, 1846), i, pp.38–9. The York *Ordo ad purificandum mulierum* is quoted fully in Knödel, 'The thanksgiving of women after childbirth'.

7 J. Harper, *The forms and orders of Western liturgy from the tenth to the eighteenth century* (Oxford, 1991), p.14.

8 Maskell, *Monumenta Ritualia*, i, p.214.

9 Pierce, "'Green women" and blood pollution', p.210.

10 G. McMurray Gibson, 'Blessing from sun and moon: churching as women's theater', in *Bodies and disciplines: intersections of literature and history in fifteenth-century England*, ed. B. Hanawalt and D. Wallace (Minneapolis, 1996), pp.139–54, at pp.144–5.

11 Maskell quotes the Latin note, 'Mulier ad purificationem accedens, caput habeat secundum antiquam Angliae consuetudinem, coopertum velo albo, in manu portet candelam accensam, et sit media inter duas matronas', *Monumenta Ritualia*, i, p.38.

12 McMurray Gibson, 'Blessing from sun and moon', pp.144–5.

13 *Revised medieval Latin word-list*, ed. R. E. Latham (Oxford, 1965, rpt. 1983), 'dico'.

14 One of psalms 124–34, recited (often privately) as an act of prayer. Harper, *Forms and orders*, p.300.

15 Pierce, "'Green women" and blood pollution', p.203.

16 C. Brooke, *The medieval idea of marriage* (Oxford, 1989), p.253.

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18 Postles, 'Micro-spaces', p.750.

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21 *Women in England, c.1275–1525*, trans. and ed. J. Goldberg (Manchester, 1995), p.81.

22 Goldberg, *Women in England*, p.81. Colin Platt notes that weddings and funerals attracted a fee for the officiating priest, *The Parish Churches of Medieval England* (London, 1995), p.57

23 Osborn of Bokenham, *Legendys of Hooly Wummen*, ed. M. Sarjeantson, EETS OS 206 (Oxford, 1938; R/1971), p.266, ll.9793–800.

24 Gibson, 'Blessing from sun and moon', p.148.

25 Gibson, 'Blessing from sun and moon', p.147.

26 Gabriel Tetzl kept a travel diary, as discussed by I. Misterova, 'A comparative analysis of the first depictions of London in Czech literature', <http://arts.brunel.ac.uk/gate/entertext/8/pdfs/ET8MisterovaED>. See also the English annotated translation of Tetzl's diary by M. Letts, *The travels of Leo of Rozmítal 1465–1467* (Cambridge, 1957).

27 Goldberg, *Women in England*, pp.71–2.

28 This has been argued by Gibson, 'Blessing from sun and moon', p.149, and B. R. Lee, 'The purification of women after childbirth: a window onto medieval perceptions of women', *Florilegium*, xiv (1995–6), pp.43–55.

29 Gibson, 'Blessing from sun and moon', p.149. That this same gendered struggle between apparent ownership of the ceremony and its unofficial interpretation lasted into the early modern period is detected by D. Cressy in 'Purification, thanksgiving and the churching of women in post-Reformation England', *Past and Present*, cxli (1993), pp.106–46, at p.110.

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