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Cover Page Footnote

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The Burgos Tapestry: Medieval Theatre and Visual Experience

Nathalie Rochel, FCRH '11

In the field of art history, the medium of tapestry has only recently begun to gain attention as its own significant art form. This paper examines the possible relationship between the Burgos Tapestry, recently on view at The Cloisters after a thirty-year conservation, and medieval theatre. The compositional and stylistic forms of the tapestry may have been influenced by productions of medieval mystery plays, which through analysis can help provide a greater understanding of the medieval cultural mindset, the possible artistic decisions behind maintaining medieval pictorial traditions into the early sixteenth century, and the medieval viewer's experience when looking at a tapestry demonstrating those traditions. Looking at the tapestry in consideration of other aspects of medieval culture helps to re-examine the dismissal of medieval pictorial tradition as simply a precursor to Renaissance naturalism.

One of the great surviving figurative tapestry sets from the Late Gothic period of tapestry is *The Redemption of Man* series, believed to consist of ten compositions.¹ Many duplicates have been made of the tapestries in the series, but the tapestry at The Cloisters, known as *The Nativity or Christ is Born as Man's Redeemer*, is distinctive in that it is the only existing composition from the group to have no duplicates (Fig. 1).² The tapestry is twenty-seven feet long by thirteen feet high, its approximate date is between 1500 and 1520, and it is identified as South Netherlandish.³ Any artists associated with the tapestry, as well as the reasons for its manufacture and how it got into the possession of Bishop Juan Rodríguez de Fonseca of the Burgos Cathedral in Spain, are currently unknown. This lack of information contributes to the appeal and mystery of the tapestry, which is enhanced by its complex subject matter regarding the Fall and Salvation of Man. Many scholars have connected the subject matter to themes seen in popular mystery and morality plays of the time period.⁴ An analysis of *The Nativity* in relation to medieval productions of mystery plays suggests that the compositional and stylistic forms of the tapestry may have been directly influenced by the experience of these productions. Considering the influence of the theatrical aspect of medieval culture on tapestry production can also help us to understand the viewing experience of the tapestry within the larger cultural mindset of the time.

The medium of tapestry has suffered from its location outside of the three main art forms most commonly praised and studied in art history, namely painting, sculpture, and architecture.⁵ Scholars such as Thomas Campbell and Laura Weigert have noted common problems of various approaches in the field. Tapestry study is limited by poor documentation on the complex contributions of the makers of a tapestry and a lack of surviving works in excellent condition.⁶ *The Nativity* is one such case where suggested approaches like patronage study or an analysis of the specifics of the tapestry's production and use cannot be pursued due to a lack of information.⁷ Instead, an analysis of the tapestry would benefit from a discussion related to its compositional style, another subject of issue within tapestry study. In general, tapestries are often organized into a linear progression of style that advances from the flatness of medieval tapestries to the Renaissance creations of naturalistic space in later examples.⁸ *The Nativity* is one of the types of tapestries that defies this narrative; it is an example that is labeled medieval by the Metropolitan Museum of Art but that dates very late in the period, to the early sixteenth century, when some tapestries are considered to belong to the Renaissance. It is evident that there must be more to the elements of style seen in *The Nativity*, since they have persisted from the early Middle Ages and may indicate a conscious decision on the part of the artist to continue using the style when other artists were beginning to

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use naturalistic depictions of space. Michael Baxandall, in his chapter “The Period Eye,” introduces the concept of visuality, which defines viewing and comprehension as varying from culture to culture.⁹ Relating this notion to *The Nativity*, the pictorial organization of the tapestry can be understood both through an attempt to understand the medieval experience of viewing as well as looking at how the experiences of the culture may have informed the artwork. In the case of *The Redemption of*

the Virtues and Vices. Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection ultimately save Man and Nature and the Vices are defeated.¹¹ *The Nativity* presents the midpoint, possibly even the climax, of the story in the birth of the Redeemer who will bring about the salvation of mankind.

The narrative begins in the upper left corner of *The Nativity* but does not read from left to right, as it is



Figure 1
Episode from *The Story of the Redemption of Man: Christ Is Born as Man's Redeemer*, ca. 1500-1520. Wool warp; wool and silk wefts, 166 1/4 x 315 1/8 in. (422.3 x 800.4 cm), South Netherlandish, The Cloisters Collection, New York, 38.28.
The Cloisters Collection, 1938.

Man series, the compositional and stylistic forms may have been directly influenced by the theatrical experience of mystery plays.

First, it is important to understand the narrative of *The Redemption of Man* series. The story within *The Nativity* is only a small section of a long, complex narrative that interweaves biblical figures with personifications and allegorical figures. Scholars have pinpointed three main themes intertwined in the narrative of the whole ten-tapestry series: “the human conflict” of Man’s moral struggle; “the divine conflict,” or God’s struggle to decide the fate of Man; and the life of Christ, “the Redeemer.”¹⁰ Told throughout each of the ten tapestries, the narrative follows an “everyman” as he succumbs to the Vices while the Virtues plead his case for salvation with the Holy Trinity. Man and the allegorical figure Nature gain salvation in the form of Christ, whose story is outlined alongside images of the battle between

arranged in a complex composition. While the tapestry is divided into two main registers composed of compact scenes, the story could continue in either the scene below or the scene to the right. This first scene shows reconciliation in a field between Christ and the personifications of the Virtues: Justice, Peace, Mercy, and Truth, along with Humility and Charity. Most of the important figures, like the Virtues, are labeled or identifiable by an attribute, such as a sword for Justice. Continuing to the right, a group of figures is assembled beneath a canopy on a grassy hill. Mercy and an enthroned God prepare the angel Gabriel for the Annunciation as Humility and Justice look on, and Truth holds a small image of Mary and the Christ Child. In a small scene taking place further in the background and to the right, Joseph and Mary pay taxes in Jerusalem, which is depicted as a medieval city with battlements. Directly in front of this is a large octagonal temple; the marriage of Mary and Joseph is shown on

a platform in front of the temple. The Annunciation is shown within a large rectangular pavilion behind and to the right of this scene. Humility, God the Father, and the Holy Spirit are present as well, and there is a stream in front of them. In the upper right corner are scenes of three astrologers and the three Magi looking up into the sky at a vision of the nude Christ Child. The image of the Magi washing their feet is an unusual but not unknown detail.¹² The Nativity takes place in the bottom right corner and is set in a meadow in front of a manger; Humility, Chastity, and Devotion are part of the crowd. Opposite this in the bottom left corner is a scene of Man shackled to the Earth next to the allegorical figure of Nature, with Old Testament figures, including Abraham, coming out of a cave. While it is unclear when this scene occurs within the narrative of the Incarnation, it reveals the allegorical significance of the Nativity, which will free Man and Nature from their imprisonment.¹³ At the bottom corners in this and most of the other tapestries are two men representative of prophets or other figures from the Old Testament who have scrolls quoting the Bible.¹⁴ All of the images of meadows and hills are created with intricate pattern-like flowers, with a similar flowery border around the entire piece.

The presence of the personifications and allegorical figures in the tapestry has a theological basis and actually reflects common allegorical ideas that had been present for some time in popular and theological discourse.¹⁵ The particular storyline of the personified Vices and Virtues' conflict is thought to derive from a fourth century poem by Prudentius titled *Psychomachia*.¹⁶ According to Barbara Newman, the use of the Vices and Virtues may have been a way to analyze and visualize God's inner conflict regarding the fate of Man, as well as a way to create a narrative without employing the Trinity in a blasphemous or heretical manner.¹⁷ Like the personifications or goddess-like Virtues, allegorical figures are also a way to "dramatize human conflicts."¹⁸ The Virtues function at a level above humans but below God, acting like mediators within the story; the virtues aid Man while the Vices hinder him. The figure of Man refers to humankind as a whole. Nature, on the other hand, is more difficult to define. While most scholars agree that she does not represent Mother Earth and vegetation as we think of Nature today, interpretations range from her representing Human Nature to the part of Man which suffers from his actions.¹⁹

The other significant aspects of *The Nativity*, and those most crucial to this analysis of the tapestry, are the or-

ganization of the narrative and its representation of space. In order to understand the significance of its composition, it is necessary to consider the norm from which it deviates. Art historians have traditionally extolled the use of one-point perspective, a practice in which an artist utilizes linear perspective in order to create an illusionistic effect. The resulting images are considered to be more naturalistic; this has been customarily associated with two-dimensional artworks, especially painting, in which achieving the illusion of space is celebrated. Popularized during the Renaissance by Leon Battista Alberti in his treatise *De pictura*, one-point perspective was considered a manifestation of Renaissance ideals.

The Nativity, in contrast to the rational and naturalistic depictions of space in typical Renaissance artworks, has a non-naturalistic depiction of space. The tapestry combines nine separate scenes into a single composition. Space within the tapestry is flat; the only sense of spatial recession and volume comes from the use of smaller figures to indicate the background and the overlapping of the figures and scenes to create depth. Even these methods are not completely systematic because figures presented as if in the same foreground are sometimes different sizes. This approach results in a landscape that is difficult to read as coherent and unified. There is also no pattern to reading the tapestry; while the story starts in the upper left hand corner, the narrative does not follow a strict left-to-right or even diagonal pattern. For instance, if the story is read straight across the top, the Annunciation comes before the marriage of Mary and Joseph. In addition, the tapestry also uses a simultaneous narrative, a type of narrative in which the artist creates a concurrent depiction of successive moments from a story in a single scene. This lack of clear narrative direction within the scenes as a whole creates the sense of all the scenes happening at the same time. There is also no clear central focus to the tapestry, which adds to this effect. While the marriage of Mary and Joseph appears to be in the center, it is located slightly off-center, to the right. Each one of the individual scenes is shown as if it is the central image, resulting in the effect of having multiple viewpoints instead of having all the scenes taking place from a single perspective. In addition to having no central focal point, the scenes are all presented in different sizes. The largest scene with the biggest figures is the one in the bottom left with the shackled Man, which unbalances the composition. The rectangular pavilion with the Annunciation also cre-

ates a sense of imbalance because its large size is only tempered with three smaller scenes on the other side. Even the slight off-centered position of the marriage disrupts the composition. As a result of this lack of balance, the viewer's eye constantly moves around the tapestry. The composition avoids becoming too chaotic with the use of strict divisions between each scene, all of which are either enclosed within a structure or located outside, defined by a natural barrier.

Many of these visual characteristics can be located within a style typical of the Brussels school of tapestry weaving around the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.²⁰ While the style is most indicative of its date and origin, it should be noted that there is no conclusive proof that the tapestry was created in Brussels.²¹ Designs typical of the Brussels school often emphasized “ornament, line, and pattern over perspectival effects.”²² This emphasis on pattern suggests the late medieval viewer's desire for an engaging design instead of one that imitated reality. In *The Nativity* there is a large amount of detail—for instance, in the eye-catching folds in the costumes as well as other decorative elements, like the intricate structures and pattern-like flora. *The Nativity* also represents some staples of tapestry composition that were prominent in the fifteenth century and continued into the sixteenth, such as an “avoidance of blank space,” the use of framing devices to link narrative episodes, the use of magnificent costumes, and an “overall emphasis on narrative and anecdotal detail at the expense of coherent visual structure.”²³ These characteristics cannot simply be explained by the limitations of the medium. While it is difficult to recreate the illusionistic effects seen in paintings with tapestries, some tapestries as early as 1476, predating our tapestry, attempted to imitate panel paintings.²⁴ This indicates that the stylistic formula seen in *The Nativity* continued to be used despite advances in weaving techniques and some weavers' desires to imitate paintings. In order to gain a better understanding of this stylistic issue and the visual composition of the tapestry, it is imperative to analyze *The Nativity* with an understanding of the problems in the art-historical field regarding tapestries as outlined at the beginning of this article. Keeping in mind the concept of visuality, the continued use of the medieval style of pictorial organization seen in *The Nativity* may be the result of influences from a completely different medium, that of medieval theatre and its mystery plays.

The name “mystery play” comes from the Latin *ministerium*, meaning “service,” because the plays originated as part of church services particularly around Easter and Christmas.²⁵ They were based on stories from the Bible, with the most popular dealing with the birth and resurrection of Christ. The plays were staged in their own special setting within the church known as a “mansion”; it is not known exactly how the mansions were arranged inside churches, but supposedly the interiors resembled outdoor markets.²⁶ Eventually the clergy stopped acting in the plays and guilds took over, taking the plays outside into the churchyard, streets, or

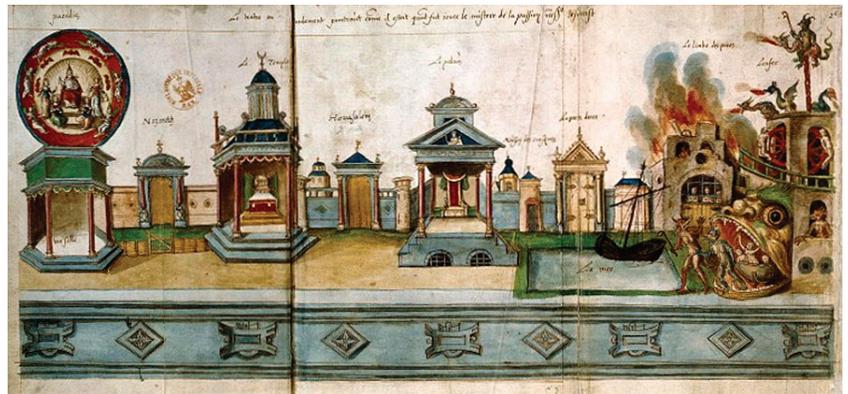


Figure 2
Scenery for the Valenciennes Mystery Play, 1547 (Paris: BnF MS fr. 12536, fol. 1v-2)

fields and lawns. According to Alexander Franklin, the plays were either stationary, with small stages known as “pageants,” or performed in a procession, where the pageants were put on wagons and the medieval viewer would wait at a specific station to watch the play go by.²⁷ Each pageant represented a single scene and allowed different settings to be seen side-by-side.²⁸ The construction of these miniature stages varied, from having drapery for walls to being open on all sides; most productions favored elaborate sets and costumes with labels to help identify characters.²⁹ The plays were in vogue in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries but soon afterwards lessened in popularity.³⁰ A new type of medieval drama, the morality play, became the new fashion. Morality plays developed from the mystery plays but differed in that they moved away from the biblical stories, focusing instead on conflicts of humankind.³¹

In most of the scholarship on *The Nativity* and its related tapestries, scholars suggest that the narrative of the story may have originally been based on a mystery or morality play.³² Many elements of the story in *The Redemption of Man* can be found in countless different dramas, but no single source on which the tapes-

tries may have been based is known.³³ The story of the allegories and the contest between Vices and Virtues is noted as being a common idea at the time that was “imprinted on the popular mind by mystery plays.”³⁴ Scholars and poets were known to help guide tapestry artists with more elaborate compositions during the preliminary stages of the tapestry production process.³⁵ It is possible that in the course of designing the tapestry an artist used an actual play as a text, but it is also just as likely that a scholar simply created a new text from commonly known plays. More important than identifying an elusive, unknown play as the source of the story is the fact that the lessons and conventions of narratives in mystery plays were pervasive throughout medieval society.

Elements of actual productions of mystery plays most likely influenced the designs of the tapestries, which contain many stage-like elements. In the scenes of God in the canopy and the Annunciation, the figures are placed within a structure that has drapery for walls and is open on three sides, resembling both the mobile pageants and the stationary pavilion stages used in productions of mystery plays. In addition, the marriage of Mary and Joseph is located on a platform, as if the figures are arranged on a stage. The distinct division of the scenes also relates to the way the plays would have each scene on its own stage. Even the scenes which are not within a structure are clearly defined within a compact space, like the line of the ground in the section with Man and Nature. The presence of meadows may also have been influenced by the presentation of plays in fields. Furthermore, the shallow depiction of space and the presence of the figures close to the picture plane enhance the stage-like quality in the tapestry. Another element seen in mystery plays is the use of labels for the figures, which derives from a common practice in some productions.³⁶ Even the use of the elaborate costumes and settings may have been influenced by the productions of mystery plays.

The possibility that the compositional forms of the tapestry were derived from conventions in medieval theatre also informs the subject of viewer experience with the tapestry. This tapestry was not meant to be seen simply as a decorative piece or a painting. *The Nativity* had a theatrical function, bringing to life the story and stimulating the viewer just like actors in a play would engage the audience. The simultaneous narrative mimics the ambulatory productions of mystery plays, where all of the scenes happen at once and there is no single viewpoint or central focal point from which to see the

events unfold. Laura Weigert discusses this as analogous to a three-ring circus in which a single location would be highlighted while the others would remain within the viewers’ visual fields.³⁷ For a viewer during the procession, space was further distorted because the pageants presented different locations side-by-side. Furthermore, in such a large tapestry many of the figures are almost more than life-size, mimicking the closeness between the audience of a play and the stage. A common element described in many of the plays is their requirement of imaginative participation on the part of the audience.³⁸ *The Nativity* encourages participation through its use of pattern, the use of an unbalanced composition that encourages the eye to move around, and the inclusion of a multitude of detailed figures. This theatrical and interactive experience would have allowed the viewer to also further connect with the religious significance of the story, which reminds viewers of the sacrifice made by Christ on behalf of the sinful nature of man. *The Nativity* provides a visually rich landscape and theologically significant allegorical figures for the viewer to contemplate and interpret. The viewer would have had to visually negotiate the presentation of space and narrative in the tapestry just like in mystery plays.

Considering the fact that *The Nativity* is typical of many late medieval tapestries, it is possible that these pictorial conventions of the time, which encourage viewer interaction and present a lively space, are a result of the general outlook of people in regards to theatricality. Weigert has noted that the increase in quantity and popularity of mystery plays from the fourteenth to sixteenth century corresponds to the expansion of the tapestry industry.³⁹ The compositional forms that persisted until the early sixteenth century may have continued due to the medieval viewers’ preference for a similar theatrical experience with tapestries. There are very rare but noted occasions that strengthen the argument for a cultural influence by medieval drama; plays were staged based on tapestries and at least one pageant designer was commissioned to design tapestries.⁴⁰ This small hint at the exchanges between the world of medieval theatre and tapestry production suggests an encompassing cultural attitude that on some level equated both artistic and theatrical production as well as the importance of viewer activation of a work.

For the modern person with preconceived Albertian notions about art and tapestries, it may be impossible to fully appreciate and comprehend the experience of the medieval viewer when looking at a tapestry like *The*

Nativity. Still, the connection between *The Redemption of Man* series and mystery plays suggests one new method of understanding medieval tapestry, not as a lesser art form but as a sophisticated medium meant as more than just decoration. *The Nativity*, in its similarities to mystery play productions, moves towards becoming a performative art with the interaction of a viewer. What might be interpreted as a precursor to the more realistic depictions of space is in reality an engaging composition at a high point of tapestry production. This also indicates the need to look at tapestry not as an art form produced in a vacuum, but to acknowledge the “ways in which tapestry overlaps with other media,” such as theatre.⁴¹ Modern viewers must strive to avoid applying contemporary standards for art, like painting, to tapestries such as *The Nativity*, and work instead towards understanding the values of the artwork in terms of the medieval cultural mindset. The tapestry of *The Nativity* (and *The Redemption of Man* series as a whole) and its connection to the influences of medieval theatre is only one of many examples that demonstrates the relationship between culture, experience, and artwork.

Notes

¹ William H. Forsyth, “A Tapestry from Burgos Cathedral,” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 33, no. 6 (1938): 148; and Adolfo S. Cavallo, *Medieval Tapestries in The Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1993), 428.

² Anna G. Bennet, *Five Centuries of Tapestries from the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco* (San Francisco: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1976), 60; and Adolph S. Cavallo, *Tapestries of Europe and of Colonial Peru in the Museum of Fine Arts*, Boston (Boston, MA: Museum of Fine Arts, 1967), 94.

³ James J. Rorimer, “New Acquisitions for the Cloisters,” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 33, no. 5 (1938): 19; and Forsyth, “A Tapestry from Burgos Cathedral,” 148.

⁴ D.T.B. Wood, “Tapestries of The Seven Deadly Sins-II,” *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 20, no. 107 (1912): 227; Cavallo, *Medieval Tapestries*, 428; Bennet, *Five Centuries*, 56; and Forsyth, “A Tapestry from Burgos Cathedral,” 150.

⁵ Weigert, Laura. “Tapestry Exposed,” *The Art Bulletin* 85 (2003): 785.

⁶ Thomas P. Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance: Art and Magnificence* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2002), 9.

⁷ Suggested by Weigert in “Tapestry Exposed,” 794.

⁸ Weigert, “Tapestry Exposed,” 789.

⁹ See Michael Baxandall, “The Period Eye,” in *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style*, 22-108 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972).

¹⁰ Bennet, *Five Centuries*, 55. Similar themes outlined in D.T.B. Wood, “Tapestries of The Seven Deadly Sins-I,” *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 20, no. 106 (1912): 215.

¹¹ Storyline and iconography outlined in: Cavallo, *Medieval Tapestries*, 440-442.

¹² Cavallo, *Medieval Tapestries*, 427.

¹³ Cavallo, *Medieval Tapestries*, 433

¹⁴ Cavallo, *Medieval Tapestries*, 436.

¹⁵ Forsyth, “A Tapestry from Burgos Cathedral,” 150; and Wood, “Seven Deadly Sins-I,” 215.

¹⁶ Wood, “Seven Deadly Sins-II,” 283; Cavallo, *Medieval Tapestries*, 428; Aurelius Prudentius Clemens, *Psychomachia*, ed. and trans. H.J. Thomson, Vol. 1, Loeb Classical Library, vol. 387 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1949; repr. 1969).

¹⁷ Barbara Newman, *God and the Goddesses: Vision, Poetry, and Belief in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2003), 39, 40.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁹ Adolph S. Cavallo, “The Redemption of Man: A Christian Allegory in Tapestry,” *Bulletin of the Museum of Fine Arts* 56, no. 306 (1958): 154; and Cavallo, *Medieval Tapestries*, 431.

²⁰ Rorimer, “New Acquisitions,” 19; Forsyth, “A Tapestry from Burgos Cathedral,” 150; and Cavallo, *Medieval Tapestries*, 438.

²¹ Cavallo, *Medieval Tapestries*, 439.

²² Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance*, 48.

²³ Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance*, 49.

²⁴ Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance*, 135.

²⁵ Alexander Franklin, *Seven Miracle Plays* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 11.

²⁶ Franklin, *Miracle Plays*, 12.

²⁷ Franklin, *Miracle Plays*, 12-14.

²⁸ Laura Weigert, “Medieval Theatricality in Tapestry and its Afterlife in Painting,” *Art History* 32, no. 3 (2010): 225.

²⁹ Franklin, *Miracle Plays*, 16.

³⁰ Forsyth, “A Tapestry from Burgos Cathedral,” 148; and Franklin, *Seven Miracle Plays*, 12.

³¹ Wood, “Seven Deadly Sins-II,” 278; and Forsyth, “A Tapestry from Burgos Cathedral,” 150.

³² Forsyth, “A Tapestry from Burgos Cathedral,” 150; Wood, “Seven Deadly Sins-II,” 227; Cavallo, *Medieval Tapestries*, 428; and Bennet, *Five Centuries*, 56.

³³ Cavallo, *Medieval Tapestries*, 428; and Bennet, *Five Centuries*, 56.

³⁴ Wood, “Seven Deadly Sins-II,” 278.

³⁵ Cavallo, *Tapestries of Europe*, 26.

³⁶ Cavallo, *Medieval Tapestries*, 34.

³⁷ Weigert, “Medieval Theatricality,” 228.

³⁸ Robert S. Sturges, “Spectacle and Self-Knowledge: The Authority of the Audience in the Mystery Plays,” *South Central Review* 9, no.2 (1992): 28.

³⁹ Weigert, “Medieval Theatricality,” 226.

⁴⁰ Weigert, “Medieval Theatricality,” 226; and Cavallo, *Medieval Tapestries*, 34.

⁴¹ Weigert, “Tapestry Exposed,” 794.