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An Erasmian Pilgrimage to Walsingham

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In the summer of 2006, I undertook what I will explain was an ‘Erasmian’ pilgrimage to the Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham, in remote northern Norfolk. I did so partly for scholarly purposes, partly from nostalgia for peregrinations there in student days. What I discovered--as in the case of so many folk who longen “to go on pilgrimages”--was an unexpected measure of the uncanny and I think that fellow peregrinators, scholars and travelers alike, might be amused by sharing my discoveries.

Erasmus, who made pilgrimages to Walsingham in 1512 and 1524, traveling (as I did) from Cambridge, gave a detailed, though fictionalized, description in one of the dialogues of his *Colloquies*.¹ He went to Walsingham when it was England’s most important medieval Marian pilgrimage site, surpassed only by the shrine of St Thomas a Becket in Canterbury as the most popular place of pilgrimage in England,. His witty and genially tolerant comments on the charm, superstitions, and mild venality of the Shrine and its guardians were--unanticipated by him, I am sure-- influential a decade or so later, when Henry VIII’s civil and ecclesiastical administrators found reasons to abolish the

¹ Desiderius Erasmus, “Pilgrimage for Religion’s Sake,” *Pilgrimages to Saint Mary of Walsingham and Saint Thomas of Canterbury*, ed. J.G. Nichols (London, 1849), 1-75. The most reliable, though somewhat outdated, historical introduction to Walsingham is J. C. Dickinson, *The Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956). There is a helpful website for both the Catholic and Anglican shrines at www.walsingham.org.uk.

great religious houses and forbid pilgrimages, and used some of Erasmus's amusing satire for bureaucratic and ideological vindictiveness. Amidst the devastation of England's many medieval pilgrimage sites Walsingham, with its Holy House, its "image" of the Virgin, and its vial of the Virgin's milk, attracted special attacks from the Reformers. In 1536, one of Cromwell's agents reported that government agents had found "much superstition in feigned relics and miracles" there.² In 1538, the statue of Our Lady of Walsingham was removed to London and was burnt along with other 'idols'; the Abbey was wrecked, and the abbott and monks variously rewarded, imprisoned or executed, depending on their willingness to cooperate with Cromwell's agents and support the Royal Supremacy. The Shrine crumbled, pilgrimages were forbidden, and in the words of a ballad attributed to Philip Howard, Earl of Arundel, written around 1570: "Sinne is wher our Ladie sate, Heaven turned is to hell,/ Sathan sittes wher our Lord did swaye, Walsingham oh farewell."³ In fact, the ghost of Walsingham uncannily haunted the Elizabethan age in poems and folk songs, including the famous Walsingham Ballad (spectacularly set by Byrd, Bull and others), Ophelia's song in *Hamlet* 4.5, and the strange and extraordinarily haunting poem by Raleigh, "As you came from the Holy Land," and Robert Sidney's Sixth Song, "Yonder Comes a Sad Pilgrim."

Another ballad, dating from the fifteenth century--and found uniquely in the Pepys Library in my old College, Magdalene--tells in earnest doggerel the legend that in the eleventh century, a noble widow, Rychold de Faverches, prayed to the Virgin to ask how she should honor her. In a dream, she was taken to Nazareth to view the House of the Annunciation, and told to build a replica at Walsingham. The builders, however,

² *Letters and Papers Hen. VIII*, ix, p. 230.

³ Dickinson, p.68.

found Our Lady's instructions ambiguous--two pieces of land, 200 paces apart, seemed to fit the instructions. Rychold chose one, but as the house started to be built, it did not fit together. That night, she prayed for guidance and in the morning the builders found that their work had been miraculously transported to the other site, and moreover, assembled more perfectly than they could have achieved.⁴ The miracle was a modest, English equivalent to the transportation by angels of the 'real' Holy House, the Santa Casa di Loreto, from Palestine to Illyria in the Balkans and thence to Loreto, supposedly in the thirteenth century, though not written down until the fifteenth (and thus, in both cases, postdating the claims of Walsingham).



*Pilgrim Badge of the Monstrance Reliquary Containing the Milk of the Virgin Mary, Walsingham, (1450-1500). Collection: Museum of London.
Photo: Emile Radcliffe.*

Like Erasmus, I came partly to scoff and snigger: my son walked first into the gift shop, always a must for the arriving pilgrim, then came out and warned me very firmly that there was a nun in there and that I was to behave myself. And I did—and in fact, I have rarely been so impressed with a place of pilgrimage, and am now—in what its authorities and inhabitants would no doubt see as blasphemous and perverse, but nonetheless intense, way--a convert. Why? It's not the grandeur. Little Walsingham is a

⁴ Dickinson, pp. 124-30; Magdalene College, Cambridge, Pepys 1254.

tiny village. It has a bunch of cute cottages, a postbox, a weekly market, and a bus stop; in the minute village square, the “Common Place”-- where one can imagine mystery and miracle plays being performed by the local guilds in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries--there is a post-Dissolution water pump dedicated in 1538, no doubt after the desecration of a medieval cross. Across from it is a Shrine shop, full of mildly tacky Anglican and Catholic tinsel, Bibles and missals, statues, plaques, postcards, and medals; thin clergymen with Oscar Wilde’s Archdeacon Chasuble voices discussing whether they will be able to attend Mass next Wednesday; and signs on the plastic Holy Water bottles apologizing that because of the low level of the well spring, there was no holy water available--I bought one anyway, thinking it would be a nice desk-piece, and I could fill it from some other spring, perhaps less holy but more gushing, like Perrier or (if the illusion of holiness is comforting) San Pellegrino.

Also on the Common Place is the Black Bull pub (excellent beer), and a second hand bookshop named--somewhat incongruously for such a Catholic-minded place of pilgrimage--The Pilgrim’s Progress (and yes, there were a number of editions of the work by that low-born radical evangelist tinker of Bedford, eighty miles away across the fens and innumerable tributaries of the Ouse). Nearby there was an entrance to the Museum and Abbey grounds, plus notices directing visitors to the village’s Catholic reception office. The Catholics at Walsingham--to the part annoyance, part amusement, of my Italian-Irish wife who, given her upbringing, is really the one who should have been warned to behave in the presence of nuns--are relegated to former Slipper Chapel, in the nearby village of Houghton St Giles, which is not, alas, named after the slippers or bare feet that pilgrims are reputed to have donned (or shed) to walk the last mile to

Walsingham. The Catholic ‘national’ shrine there has a contemporary statue of the Virgin and Child and a hideous painting of the Descent of the Holy Ghost to Mary (oh yes, and the other disciples are there, too). Houghton St Giles is a mile from Little Walsingham, and is reached by a very narrow track. On our way there, we were almost overwhelmed by Satanic forces in the form of a huge truck that bore down on us, occupying at least nine eighths of the road; indeed--to adopt Erasmus’s tone in his description of how a fully armed knight was enabled by the Virgin to pass, fully armed and on horseback, through a narrow wicket gate into the Shrine--I think we were able to pass only with the intervention of Our Lady herself, though perhaps with the slight aid of a muddy grass verge that seemed to open itself miraculously as we gingerly inserted our car into it, getting wider and narrower at need, plus some helpfully empirical navigation by my passengers. In Shakespeare’s *All’s Well, That Ends Well*, Lafew tells us that “miracles are passed”; I must say I had cause to wonder after that escape. The Catholic shrine is a place of some quiet awe, much enhanced on a rainy day with no other pilgrims, real or fake, around, but a good Samaritan (not a nun) who helped us send a postcard by producing a stamp from her purse that miraculously exactly fitted the space on the corner of the postcard (which we had actually purchased at the rival shrine, a mile away, an instance perhaps of practical ecumenism). It is a rumor that when the Catholic shrine built toilets for the relief of pilgrims, it designed the urinals in the form of the Anglican shrine so that male visitors would vent their feelings upon the more ostentatious upstarts occupying the site closest to the original site. I myself did not check this, but it is vouchsafed by at least two printed sources of impeccable authenticity and so must be true (Erasmus’s tone *is* catching!).

Back to Little Walsingham. The Abbey ruins were sobering. Here was a huge twenty-two acre expanse of a place of pilgrimage that had offered itself for refuge, devotion, and (despite Erasmus's scorn) learning for 500 years, and now reduced—as it was very quickly after Henry VIII set Cromwell and his henchmen upon it—to a gatehouse, stripped and crumbling but still functional, a large and lonely arch at the east end of what would have been the abbey, a few pillars, the remains of one turned into a tasteful flower garden, some outcrops at the western end of the abbey, a bridge and several pieces of wall and a few other piles of rock. It had the melancholy of Rievaulx or Tintern, places where human emotion and devotion had been concentrated and destroyed in large part because of the intensity of those feelings.



Pilgrim Badge of the Knight's Gate: Ralph de Boutetort on horseback entering the low gate while praying (in star-shaped frame). (1320-1340). Collection: King's Lynn, Lynn Museum. Photo: Emile Radcliffe.

It is not unimportant that the one standing piece of ruin is the arch, since cultural critics and architectural historians have long speculated that the medieval church was shaped so that its entrance resembled the genital entrance into a woman's body, and the decorations often mandorla or almond shaped accordingly. For Walsingham today, as it must have overwhelmingly in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, is a place of

devotion to the female religious experience--that is experience not just by, but of, the female. Again, historically, we know that Erasmus's path of pilgrimage to Walsingham from Cambridge, Newmarket and Fakenham was called both the Pilgrim's Way and the Milky Way, since it led pilgrims to a vial of the Virgin's Milk and it passed through a number of lesser shrines and churches that emphasized the reproductive and nurturing aspects of women's bodies.⁵ But today's reconstruction of Walsingham as a place of pilgrimage, contemplated in the 1890s, fulfilled in the 1930s, and continuously added to since, is also--within an only moderately obsessive English and amusingly (at least to one who believes that the centre of the cultural universe hovers between Florence and Rome) mildly italianate aesthetic--a celebration of the female, arguably the oldest stratum of human spiritual experience, one which the Protestants accurately identified, and violently repudiated, within Catholicism. In medieval Walsingham, the condescending masculinism of Christian theology was quietly marginalized: God was largely relegated to an approving patron, surveying his spouse/daughter/sister/mother calmly embodying--or as Christian theology would have it, incarnating--peace, reconciliation, beauty, creativity, order, and passion. Sitting in the Holy House, I understood why St Bernard could devote himself to praising the Virgin in the most extravagantly erotic terms or why St Teresa found her own sexual ecstasies in imitating the pain of the Virgin embracing her son. And why the Protestant iconoclasts were made so uneasy about the power of what Cranmer and Latimer, like the Lollards before them, saw as the "wyche of Walsingham"⁶ and felt that they needed to vandalize, obliterate, and burn to rid themselves of its insistent power over them. The great crime of the Reformation was not

⁵ Nichols, p. 248; Susan Signe Morrison, *Women Pilgrims in Late Medieval England: Private Piety As Public Performance* (London: Routledge, 2000), ch.1.

⁶ Dickinson, p. 27.

that it pointed out how intellectually wrong or silly many of the aspects of medieval Catholicism may have been but that in its attempt to replace the religion of the visual and sensual by the idolatry of the word, the Reformers distorted and destroyed some of humanity's most creative and nurturing religious feelings—and worse, not just within their own threatened, anxious Reformist selves but for the generations that followed as well. Perhaps the English were always an emotionally repressed people, but the Reformation has much blame for reinforcing that tendency.



Walsingham Abbey Ruins. Photo: Arne Pettigrew.

The architecture and design of Walsingham's twentieth-century shrine, which now attracts thousands of pilgrims, reinforces the quiet but insistent focus on the female. The mandorla motif is explicit in the image of Our Lady over the altar in the Holy House: an almond shaped orifice surmounted by a semi-circular 'mons'; from the orifice formed

by the drapes proceeds the Virgin and child as if being born from the all-powerful vaginal canal, the lips spread by the emerging figures. Outside the church, the same symbolic ingredients, so appalling to the Protestants then and now, are evident: even if the gardens of Walsingham are not strictly laid out as a mandorla, nevertheless, entering them, with the weaving paths and interwoven fronds of flowers, shrubs and herbs, one encounters a myriad reminders of the female, with all the vital parts not precisely in the recognizable anatomical places, but re-arranged like a Picasso, highlighted, thrust forward, and above all to be entered, revered, even to be worshipped. There are the scents of the herb garden, the (unfortunately not flowing) spring of water near the shrine's center, and the very heart (though that is the wrong anatomical metaphor) of the shrine—the reproduction of the original Holy House, England's Nazareth, a small rectangular room at the west end of the church itself, with a flowing art deco reproduction of the Virgin, and surrounded by hundred of candles, most placed there by visitors and petitioners. This was the ecstatic center of the shrine, the clitoris as it were of the female anatomy upon which the shrine, dedicated so firmly to the female, is centered. Intriguingly, some architectural historians speculate that there is sufficient architectural and mystical evidence, scanty though it is, for a medieval cult of the Virgin's holy vagina. Or, to put in more 'new age' terms, of the Goddess. The Templars are often mentioned in these terms. Many medieval theologians' overwhelming obsession with the virgin birth, seen from the viewpoint of the body of Mary, suggests that would have indeed been a natural development, even if it would have been kept at the fringes of the culture. Part of the persecution of the Cathars, too, may also have involved their propensity for such devotions.⁷

⁷ For the mandorla, see Elizabeth Blackledge, *The Story of V: Opening Pandora's Box*

Quite aside from such speculation, the Holy House was ecstatic but also curiously domestic and nurturing. Outside this center of the shrine (shimmering and seemingly to pulsate with all the glowing candles), pilgrims are invited to write three objects of prayer on small slips of paper, for selection for the daily prayers for intercession from the Virgin. The statue (what the Protestants called and no doubt still call the “idol”) was surrounded by hundreds of typed and scribbled petitions on small rectangles of paper. There were no grandiose or apocalyptic petitions for victory over the Saracen or the Conversion of the Jews, but rather personal and domestic—my sister Agnes pray for her; in memory, mother; my son Alistair. In other words, the only visible difference from pre-Reformation times was the lack of tributes from the rich and powerful—ostentatious jewels or gold—though their modern equivalent showed in the tasteful elegance of the buildings and the immaculate upkeep of the grounds and (after signing up as a Friend of Walsingham) in the insistent series of letters which I have subsequently received asking for financial support. Too late I remembered that Erasmus had left a poem in Greek—and later mocked the keepers of the shrine for thinking it was in Hebrew. I could have at least knocked out a limerick or two, though in retrospect, I might have attempted to add another stanza or two of the ballad.

I stress the sexual and the domestic, and above all the sense of a religious experience centered on women’s core experiences. But right in the middle of the garden, on a slight mound, were thrust, as a reminder that this was not some benevolent pagan Goddess-centered religion but Christianity—masculine, patriarchal, misogynic—three

(London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2003), 52-54; for vulva-like representations in art and architecture, see e.g. Dan Cruickshank, *The Story of Britain’s Best Buildings* (Buffalo: Firefly Books, 2003), pp. 57-69; Karma Lochrie, “Mystical Acts, Queer Tendencies,” in *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken and James A. Schultz (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 180-200.

crosses, as if reminding pilgrims of the ultimate male control over the *mons veneris* and all that lay beneath it. They were sepulchrally white, stark in their threat, unmovingly masculinist in their hard humorless angles, peering down upon and disciplining the dignified but colorful and ever-changing female life beneath. The authorities, of course, of medieval (and contemporary) Walsingham would regard such an interpretation as blasphemous nonsense. Indeed, they did (and do) assert the theological orthodoxy that all mariological power and devotion are subservient to and expressions of the redemptive power of the God who hung on the central cross, and that the devotion to the Mother exists only for the glory of the Son and as expressions of the will of the Father. Yet, intriguingly, the Reformers in the 1530s (along with the Lollards before them and a handful of Evangelical Protestants who occasionally parade today in the street to protest the revival of such popery in the Church of England) said with violent, iconoclastic vehemence that medieval Catholicism did replace “domine” with “domina,” as the Protestant propagandist William Crashaw sneered in 1612 (yes, the father of the more famous son, the Catholic convert whose baroque praises of the Virgin were barely less extreme than the terms I have used).⁸ In the 1530s, as Cromwell and his henchmen robbed, dismantled and abolished the Abbey and shrine, the accusations were of paganism and blasphemy, of witchcraft based on the sexuality that Protestants saw all too clearly in medieval devotions to the Virgin. Thomas Bilney called Walsingham’s “sister,” Our Lady of Willesden, whose statue was also burnt in 1538, the “common paramour of baudry.” Contemplating the destruction by fire of a number of images of the Virgin seized from shrines, “our great sibyl” of Worcester, “hath been the devils instrument to many” along with “her old sister of Walsingham,” said King Henry’s iconoclastic bishop

⁸ William Crashaw, *A Sermon Preached at the Crosse* (London, 1608), p. 64.

Hugh Latimer. Statues of the Virgin were not only idolatrous, mere “sticks and stones,” but specifically designated as all the more deceptive because specifically female.⁹ In his anxious gynophobic anthropomorphism, Our Lady--or, behind her, the Goddess, if She exists--undoubtedly was haunting Latimer, perhaps to his death, burnt by Catholics under the reign of Mary.



Pilgrim Badge Showing the Miracle-working Statue within the Holy House, (14th century). Collection: Michael Mitchiner. Photo: Emile Radcliffe.

In one sense, of course, the Protestants were right--late medieval devotion to Mary did indeed focus obsessively on the physicality of the Incarnation, and specifically and fetishistically on Mary's body, especially on the sexual and maternal organs—however they may have been transformed, transfigured, transcended in theological orthodoxy. The physical fact of the Incarnation was at the center of medieval Christian devotion, and the womb, breasts, hymen, and sexual and birth canal of the Virgin—the forbidden vaginal entrance—became obsessive objects of attention. No less than in modern pornography, they were peered at, examined, praised, idealized. Eucharistic theology put Mary's body at its center: “the Christian,” comments the modern Anglo-Catholic theologian E L Mascall, “returning from his communion can repeat in a totally

⁹ Dickinson, p. 65. For a survey of such terms of abuse, see Margaret Aston, *England's Iconoclasts* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), pp. 162-73.

new sense the words of Adam, ‘The woman gave me and I did eat.’”¹⁰ Protestant attacks on Walsingham as superstitious, involving the blasphemous attribution of divine power to persons, places, objects, mere created objects, were based in part on the accurately perceived female aspect to its magic, derived from some deep sources and associated with the mysterious figure of the Goddess.

The specific bodily function especially fetishized in Walsingham was lactation: on the altar of the shrine, Erasmus reported, was a vial of Mary’s milk—one of many then and, at least in Catholic churches, now—across Europe and beyond. When pilgrims followed the “Milky Way,” in churches along the way, where pilgrims might rest, possessed other Marian relics, included one of many copies of the Virgin’s girdle—a fetish of particular power associated with what the Protestants perceived as blasphemous idolatry. The reverence of relics is of course one aspect of the human propensity to fetishization—where we cannot bear, or obtain, the full reality or power of the beloved, we substitute a reminder which, we hope, can be invested with sufficient power to accommodate or recall for us the original and its hold over us. Among the “idolatry, superstitions, and abuses” Latimer castigated, or as another Reformer, Thomas Bilney, put it, the “horrible impiety, idolatry, superstitious abuses,” which in Protestant eyes Walsingham represented and which were excoriated and destroyed, relics at pilgrimage shrines were particularly ridiculed and gathered for destruction—what Bilney termed the “stinking boots, mucky combs, ragged rockets, rotten girdles, pyld purses, great bullocks’ horns, locks of hair, and filthy rags, gobbets of wood, . . .and such pelfry, beyond estimation” were seen as “intolerable superstition and abominable idolatry.” As James

¹⁰ E. M. Mascall, “Theotokos: The Place of Mary in the Work of Salvation,” in E.L. Mascall and H. S. Box, *The Blessed Virgin Mary: Essays by Anglican Writers* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1963), p. 25.

Simpson comments, the Reformers' language regarding images of the Virgin blurs the feminine with the idolatrous and diabolic, "presaging the campaign of witch-hunting that began in the late sixteenth century," and the Catholic Church as female, "a corrupting, feminine force."¹¹ There are repeated Protestant gibes at the horrific rites associated with witchcraft, the black mass and the sexual level of such rites as part of the blasphemous idolatry of papistry. In his vitriolic attack on Catholicism and the cult of the Virgin, William Crashaw precisely identifies his reforming activities with the act of uncovering the diabolic source of papist perversion by revealing the threatening sexuality of a woman when he vows not to "spare to discover her skirts, and lay open her filthinesse to the world; that all men seeing her as shee is, may detest and forsake her."¹²



Slipper Chapel, (14th century), Walsingham. Photo: Sarah Blick.

¹¹ James Simpson, *The Oxford Literary History: Vol 2 1350-1547: Reform and Cultural Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 416.

¹² Crashaw, *Sermon*, p. 84.

My feelings about Walsingham and all it suggested to me show that it engenders just the opposite of detestation and forsaking. It is a place where the female asks to be adored by what medieval theologians termed hyperdulia, the highest kind of devotion to a human being--another doctrine also reviled by the iconoclastic Protestants. And, I suggest, such sentiments do not have to be explicitly 'religious' or even Christian. As we have learned from recent theorists of pilgrimages, the motives and experiences of peregrination are varied--and as I discovered at Walsingham, unpredictable. About the same time as Crashaw is delivering himself of his purgative sermon, Donne is begging that the true Church show herself like a woman, open to all men, and begging his profane mistress to show herself to him as to a midwife. Where Donne is celebrating the power of female sexuality (and secretly keeping a painting of the Virgin in his study) Crashaw's puritannical horror of the female is what Klaus Theweleit points to in his classic study of male fantasies, the realization "that (perhaps) lies in the hearts of all men"¹³ there is a dread of the female sexual organs and what they represent, as well as the potential (feared by William Crashaw, admired by Donne, ecstatically embraced by Richard Crashaw) to recognize and worship their salvific and holy nature. Walsingham suggests, then and now, that "salvation"—perhaps a strange word for a Goddess-obsessed pagan to use, but one that this magical place of pilgrimage produces in me—lies precisely where the Protestants feared, where medieval Catholic devotion (despite the euphemistic qualifications of its theologians) placed it--in and around what Donne termed what we

¹³ See Barbara Ehrenreich, Intro. to Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies: Vol 1 Women Floods Bodies History*, trans. Chris Turner et. al (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. xv.

love, and that is, the “centrique part,”¹⁴ where the Goddess has always told us it resides. As I stood up and left the Holy House, pausing to regret the dryness of the well—no ritual of sprinkling for me that day—I asked myself what so many pilgrims ask: Have we listened? Perhaps the Guardians of the shrine would have had me listening to a more orthodox lesson, but what I was hearing was: Have we nurtured in all of us, men and women, what Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline* terms the “woman’s part”? Not, I think, enough. Walsingham gently suggests, to this pilgrim at least, that doing so is where our salvation may most profoundly lie.

¹⁴ John Donne, “Loves Progress,” *The Collected Poems of John Donne*, ed. Roy Booth (London: Wordsworth, 1994), p. 84.