

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## The Wakefield Second Shepherd's Play (Mid-fifteenth century)

Author unknown

### *Backdrop and narrative*

We live in a cultural age in which the recovery of the pristine is an obsession, much sought after, treasured for what it still retains of the natural, of what has not been worked over by the human. Literature in pristine form is rare to find--to write is already to pay attention to what, how, and why you write. There are, however, pockets of historical time when writing comes as close as is possible to expressing yourself without art. I am about, but with strong reservations, to use that descriptor of non-artful to the piece before us, The Wakefield Master's Second Shepherd's Play .and will be speaking of that play as innocent.

The plot, the characterization, and ultimately the viewpoint of this play give little impression of hidden depths or subtle attitudes. (What does, obviously and before long, catch our attention, is the prosody, which is rich in a few plays belonging to the Townley ms. cycle--which includes the Second Shepherd's play. Aside from that prosody issue--which may seem to counter our general point-- we may seem to be dealing with fairly unvarnished country writing. Could it however be an instance, here, of writing that is skillful at hiding its skill? Could we be dealing with the kind of craftiness that led the ancient Romans to coin the adage that *ars est retem celare, art is to conceal art*.

### *The second shepherd's play*

Mystery plays, such as is the present, are folk plays, based on stories from the Bible, which were popular forms of amusement and instruction in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. To find our ways back to such folk-creative work, and still to remain in the complexities of the Middle Ages, we must put aside our sense of the high literature of the times--Dante, Boccaccio, Chaucer--and think of the mind of the guy or gal on the cobbled street or country lane, (We will find, even in the High Middle Ages, that roughly twenty percent of the population are illiterate, while it is not until the eighteenth century that this number increases to fifty percent.) We must put ourselves inside the attendance at outdoor festivals and celebrations.

We are discussing The kinds of plays that made up the mystical and mystery play cycles, and are addressing illiterate audiences, at performances sponsored by guilds--mercers, goldsmiths, tanners, candlemakers-- for whom the travelling platforms of mummers, amateur actors and merry-makers who accompanied the performances into town formed a visible and conspicuous advertisement. While this theme brings us back to the inevitably commercial basis of the guilds, there is no place for ignoring the deeply religious drives that put this entire festivity in place, centered as it is about biblical tales, and about the masses that brought holy days to a jubilant close.

The play before us is attributed to The Wakefield Master-- author of 32 scriptural plays and prodigious creator of mystery plays, creating and leaving his trademark prosodic signature throughout the mystery play creation ground of Wakefield, in Northern England. (That prosodic trademark played out as *aaaa bccb* in form, with internal rhymes in the first four lines, given an inter rhythmic texture to the lines spoken by rustics (or actors playing rustics. We are to imagine bumptious performers--check out U Tube for a video of the brilliant performance of the present play at The Cloisters at Christmas in 1954--speaking their ways into strict but eloquent lines.)

Having copiously expressed their complaints about life--rotten marriages, devastating taxes, terrible weather--the three shepherds disappear singing, offstage into the distance. Mak, a thief known to the shepherds, appears on scene, complaining to the three shepherds about his own marriage, as well as about the bitter cold of the night. The shepherds, though knowing better, invite Mak to spend the night in their shelter. In the middle of the night Mak wakes, and casts a spell on the shepherds who are sleeping

around him. While the shepherds are deeply slumbering, Mak grabs one of their sheep and takes it home with him. When Mak gets home, and shows his wife the sheep, he finds her distraught, terrified that the shepherds will come looking for their animal; so distraught she is that she uses a frying pan to beat up on his head. But then she comes up with an idea, to wrap up the sheep like a baby, concealing it that way, in case the shepherd come looking for it. Meanwhile the thief returns to the shepherds' sheepcote, pretending that nothing has happened.

When they wake up, the shepherds realize that one of their sheep is missing. They go in search of Mak's cottage, but are initially fooled, until they discover the sheep in the cradle. Their response to the situation is oddly pertinent. They decide to humiliate Mak by wrapping him in a blanket. Then tossing him up and down. Later, when the shepherds are resting, an angel appears to them announcing the birth of Jesus. With this provocation, the three shepherds take off for Bethlehem to meet Baby Jesus, to whom they take gifts--a ball, cherries, a bird. The play ends as the shepherds leave the scene singing merrily in unison.

### *Themes*

**Lightness and forgiveness** The three shepherds have hard lives. Their crops are failing, their marital lives are a wreck, and taxes are killing them. For all that, however, they appear convivial among themselves, dance and sing together more than once, and, the real kicker, agree to let Mak spend the bitterly cold night with them. While these guys are shepherds, rough and ready enough, they also have their charmingly gentle sides, as when they decide to punish Mak, for his theft, by tossing him upside down in a blanket- rather than killing him, for the very-serious crime of sheep stealing. We might say that the lightness, of these three shepherds, lies in the easiness with which they move into the 'area of grace' suddenly opened to them by the appearance of the Virgin Mary. They don't for a moment question her presence as a gateway to the Baby Jesus. Their 'forgiveness' of Mak plays right into the lightness with which they and their gifts are translated to the feet of the baby Jesus.

**Redemption** Mak, the offender in this play, shows no sign of rethinking his behavior. He has, after all, stolen the shepherds' sheep, concealed the stolen goods and proven willingness to drug those who offer him hospitality. Quite appropriately he receives none of the blessings in store for the deserving in this play. The shepherds, on the contrary, make all the felicitous moves. They are generous to Mak, although they know his bad reputation. They are abashed and modest when Mary appears to them, and because their spirits are clear they make their way directly to Jesus' birthplace.

**Grace** Grace is what, in touching the three shepherds, gives them the inner capacity to offer Mak shelter for the night, and thus to subject themselves to his magic potion, under whose influence they lose a precious sheep, in the pursuit of which they ultimately find themselves before the Baby Jesus. Grace, in other words, works along labyrinthine paths, and will only work if addressed with readiness and patience.

### *Characters*

First Shepherd, Coll, a farmer as well as a shepherd. Discusses his terrible harvest, the weather, and his poverty.

Second Shepherd. Gib, feels oppressed by the wealthy, and sees no way to break free. He also finds his wife unbearable, and urges young men not to marry.

Third Shepherd. The third shepherd, muttering about Noah and his flood, greet the other two, then vanishes with them into the distance.

Mak, the sheep stealer, appears on the horizon, heading toward the shepherds' sheepcote. He will spend the night with them, before enchanting them.

Mak's wife, Gill, flustered and irritable, beating up on Mak as he returns home with the stolen sheep. She is beset by the home problems that follow on marriage to a thief.

Mary. A sudden apparition, the touch of grace required by the tumultuous moment in Mak's cottage.

The child Christ in the manger. The source of peace toward which all the stress of the Second Shepherd's play is directed

An angel. The herald of holy matters.

NOTE on the characterization. We are in the mid -fifteenth century, and can expect the relatively simplistic characterization we might find in, say, the paintings of Memling, Breughel or Van Eyck. These colloquial scenes are not 'innocent' in the early painterly sense of Cimabue or Byzantine art, in which painterly design yields to religious-iconic formulae.

### *Events*

The present play is seemingly artless--deals with simple seeming characters and events. Yet many wrinkles interject themselves into the smooth texture of the easily recounted story. The bitterness of the three shepherds, as they lay their complaints before us, is stark. The first shepherd directs his hatred against the gentry:

No wonder if it stands, that we be poor  
For the tilth of our lands lies fallow as the floor  
We are so lamed  
So taxed and shamed  
We are made hand-tamed  
With these gentlerly men  
Thus they rieve us of rest, Our Lady them wary  
These men that are lord-fest, they cause the plough tarry.  
That men say it is for the best, we find it contrary

(The thick self-referencing of the prosody gives room for every intensity of bitterness; the first shepherd pours the bitterness out from his heart. The prosody, with its chant like repetitions, intensifies the sense of woe).

Bitterness is however not the only tone ruling the play's events. Mak comes onto the scene, a known sheep stealer. The three shepherds recognize Mak, and feel sorry for him, as like them he is half freezing there on the moor. They share their cottage with him, an act of grace given their knowledge of his reputation. It is this movement of the play into conditions of grace, malignity, and transcendence which so suddenly, and convincingly, keeps shifting the ontological horizons of the play. By the end of the play the transformed shepherds, having left their gifts for the baby Jesus, dance away in joyful sharing, having told their harsh personal tales, as at the onset of the play,

Retrospectively, there is a final set of thoughts to see this play out. The performers in such a play may or may not have been professionals--in some cases, surely, they were familiars from the cultural neighborhood. Sharing a faith with one another, actors and spectators, they can be imagined heading off together with their oxen and carts, on a Sunday morning, to the nearby market town. Some would be acting their parts, some present as celebratory co believers, but all would be inside or outside the spectacle. In the present case, as with many Shakespearean plays, the being outside, not in a theater, has to be included as an important part of the entire experience.