

Lecture 9: Medieval Mystery Plays

MYSTERY: a pun on two different meanings of the word.

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1. As the editors of your anthology point out, the term “mystery” refers to the fact that the plays were produced by the medieval craft guilds, or *mysteri*es, as they were also known.

2. But the word has a deeper meaning in reference to the life of Christ—even the pre-Christian life of the Divine Word as He is foreshadowed in the *sacramentum*, or mystery of the Old Testament.

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Two examples: The Crucifixion Play from the *York Cycle* and the Second Shepherd’s Plays in the *Wakefield Cycle*.

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Together they celebrate the end and the beginning of the central MYSTERY of the Christian Faith: The God Who Became Human in order to Die and be Reborn.

All of the plays in both cycles enact critical moments in Christian “Salvation” History (as told from the perspective of the Medieval [Roman] Catholic Church) from The Creation to the [Last] Judgment.

They all share certain characteristics:

1) a liberal use of anachronism
that often supports

What is anachronism?

deliberate anachronism often supports

2) broad irony, even farcical and bawdy humor,
often arising from

3) a jocular juxtaposition of sacred and profane,
which is yoked to the central mystery by

4) an incarnational typology—

What does incarnational mean?

What is typology?

Let's look at examples of these characteristics in the following passages from the York Crucifixion.

The foulest dead of all
Shall he die for his deeds. (A399: 21-22)

Why are these words ironic?

In the first speech of Christ, the irony is nailed down:

Here to dead I oblige me
Fro that sin for to save mankind. (53-54)

Christ's words are followed by a complex anachronism:

We, hark, sir knights, for Mahound's blood.
Of Adam's kind is all his thought!

For some members of the audience, the reference to Adam—the first human being—would be a reminder that Christ was the New Adam, of whom the Old Adam was a type. [4

Then the ironies multiply—as they do in the Gospels:

[S]en he claimeth kingdom with crown,
Even as a king here hang shall he. (79-80)

The Wakefield *Second Shepherds' Play* is even more powerful than the York Crucifixion because it combines in unusually intense ways the features common to both of the plays,

1) anachronism;

2) humor;

3) juxtaposition of sacred and profane;

which is yoked to the central mystery by

4) an incarnational typology—

to which it adds:

5) trenchant social criticism, reminiscent of, but lighter than, what we found in Langland's *Piers Plowman*.

Do you have any questions or suggestions?

Let's look at the play.

The First Shepherd, Coll, complains against the weather:

Lord, what these weders ar cold!

and I am yll happyd;

I am nere hande dold,

so long haue I nappyd;

My legys thay fold,

my fyngers ar chappyd,
It is not as I wold,
for I am al lappyd,
 In sorow.
In stormes and tempest, 10
Now in the eest, now in the west,
Woe is hym has neuer rest
 Mydday nor morow!
Bot we sely husbands
that walkys on the moore, 15
In fayth we are nere handys
outt of the doore;

Hard weather is compounded by oppressive over-lords:

No wonder as it standys
if we be poore,
ffor the tylthe of oure landys 20
lyys falow as the floore,
As ye ken.
We ar so hamyd,
ffor-taxed and ramyd,
We ar mayde hand tamyd, 25
with thyse gentlery men. . . .
Thus ar husbandys opprest
in po[i]nte to myscary. 34

In the topsy-turvy world of this play it is possible for *husbands* (farm laborers) to *miscarry* because they are so *oppressed* (33-34). The theme of giving birth is linked to another, domestic form of oppression. The Second Shepherd, Gib, complains:

These men that ar wed	105
haue not all thare wyll, when they ar full hard sted thay sygh full styll; God wayte thay ar led full hard and full yll;	110
In bower nor in bed thay say noight ther tyll. ffor, as euer red I pystyll	[5
I haue oone to my fere, As sharp as a thystyll as rugh as a brere; . . . She is as greatt as a whall, She has a galon of gall:	145
By hym that dyed for vs all, I wald I had ryn to I had lost hir.	155

What about that line in boldface?

Although the world of the play is obviously pre-Christian, its language is pervasively colored by references to Christian experience:

as, for example, the curse “our Lady them wary” (28) and “Christ’s cross me speed and Saint Nicholas! (119). Such expressions the product of a Christian imagination that is not accustomed to self-critical historical analysis, but which experiences the past as present.

Effective anachronism recreates the past in the present. It is a kind of incarnation, in fact, by which the Word becomes flesh in the experience of actors and audience.

Anachronism creates local ironies of great power.

The dry bread of which the Third Shepherd complains (stale, eaten without wine) becomes a metaphor for a maimed sacrament.

More generally, when common people are oppressed and starving, and have no way to press claims against their overlords, some of them will prey on the others, so

Mak steals a sheep while the shepherds sleep, and dream. He takes it home, worries about being found out.

Mak's wife, Gil, contrives a strategem:

A good bowrde haue I spied

syn thou can none.

here shall we hym hyde

to thay be gone;

480

In my credyll abyde

lett me alone,

And I shall lyg besyde

in chylbed, and grone.

The shepherds awake as if from death, *Resurrex a mortuis*, and go seeking their lost sheep. They know where to look right away.

Like the Wife of Bath, Gil tries to turn the tables by getting in first with her accusations of wrong-doing:

Outt, thefys, fro my wonys!

ye com to rob vs for the nonys.

760

And she swears:

Ah, my medyll!

I pray to god so mylde,

If euer I you begyld,,

That I ete this chylde

That lygys in this credyll.

775

Of course, that is exactly what they plan to do.

This grim irony becomes the basis of a sacramental irony that transforms the world of the play.

And such ironies multiply. Gib asks: “Is your child a knave?” (799)— that is, a boy?

Mak answers the implied slur, *rogue*, with a brilliant lie— brilliant only because of the dramatic irony that frames it.

Any lord myght hym haue 800

This chyld to his son.

The trick, hiding the sheep in Gil’s “childbed,” works— until the departing shepherds realize they have not given the child any gifts. When they return, the trick is exposed: the child is, of course, their lost sheep.

Gyf me lefe hym to kys

and lyft vp the clowtt.

what the dewill is this?

he has a long snowte. 844

Gib notices that “he is lyke to oure shepe” (850).

But instead of meting out the death that Mak and Gil have deserved for their crime, the shepherds simply toss Mak in a blanket. Then they go to sleep.

They are awakened by an Angel, proclaiming the birth of the savior:

Ryse, hyrd men heynd!
for now is he borne 920

That shall take fro the feynd
that adam had lorne:

That warloo to sheynd
this nyght is he borne.
God is made youre freynd 925
now at this morne.

He behestys,
At bedlem go se,
Ther lygys that fre
In a cryb full poorely, 930
Betwyx two bestys.

They awake to discover the truth of their dream:

We fynde by the prophecy—
let be youre dyn!—
Of dauid and Isay
and mo then I myn,
That prophecyed by clergy 975
that in a vyrgyn
shuld, he lyght and ly

to slokyn oure syn

And slake it,

Oure kynde from wo;

980

ffor Isay sayd so,

Ecce virgo

Concipiet a chylde that is nakyd.

All of the puns growing out of the substitution of a lamb for a (non-existent) child are realized by the birth of God's Son, the Lamb of God (Angus Dei), who is also the Host consumed in the sacrament that celebrates His sacrifice. The Word is made flesh and dwells among them.

And so the sacred (Word) and the profane (World) are united, as the stark, quasi-tragic lives of the shepherds are transformed into a divine comedy.

The conclusion of the play fuses ideal and the real, sacred and profane. The ideal of the Good Shepherd is, of course, scriptural:

I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep. But he that is an hireling, and not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, seeth the wolf coming, and leaveth the sheep, and fleeth: and the wolf catcheth them, and scattereth the sheep. The

hireling fleeth, because he is an hireling, and careth not for the sheep. I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine. As the Father knoweth me, even so I know the Father: and I lay down my life for the sheep. And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd. Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again.

(John 10:11-17) [6

The harshness of the dark reality makes the ideal light all the more precious:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not. (John 1:1-5)

These perspectives, real and ideal, are fused in the joyous comic ending of the play, in which the profane reality is transformed by the sacred into its own embodiment.

The Shepherds' dark world is momentarily transformed,
illuminated by the radiance of God become human,
as Mary, the Mother of God, proclaims:

The fader of heuen

god omnypotent.

That sett all on seuen,

his son has he sent.

1065

My name couth he neuen

and lyght or he went.

I conceyuyd hym full euen

thruh myght as he ment,

And now is he borne.

1070

he kepe you fro wo!

I shall pray hym so;

Tell furth as ye go,

And myn on this morne.

NOTES

1] Two different words, actually, according to the OED:

<http://dictionary.oed.com/entrance.dtl>.

One mystery—‘craft, art; a trade, profession, calling’— derives from post-classical Latin *misterium* duty, office, service (from 11th cent. in British sources), occupation, trade (from 13th cent. in British sources), guild (from 14th cent. in British sources), altered form of classical Latin *ministerium*.

The other, mystical meaning—‘an ordinance, rite, or sacrament of the Christian Church’; ‘an incident in the life of Christ’—derives from classical Latin *mysterium* secret, (plural) secret rites, in post-classical Latin also mystical or religious truth, (plural) Christian rites (late 2nd cent. in Tertullian), the Eucharist, the elements used in the Eucharist (4th cent.).

2] According to St. Augustine, in *The City of God (De Civitate Dei VII. 32*; trans. Marcus Dodds [New York, 1950], 31): the prefigurations [*figurae*] of the Word that are embodied in the Scripture constitute a “mystery [*sacramentum*] of the Old Testament, in which the New was hidden [*secretum*].”

3] The cycles were performed during the summer, on Whitsuntide, the week following the seventh Sunday after Easter, or a week later, on the Thursday after Trinity Sunday—generally in late May or early June, depending on when Easter falls.

4] According to St. Paul, “The first man Adam was made a living soul; the last Adam was made a quickening spirit” (I Corinthians 15:45).

5] One cannot say to which of St. Paul's Epistles the Second Shepherd might be alluding. Perhaps to 1 Corinthians 7:25-28 = "Now concerning virgins I have no commandment of the Lord: yet I give my judgment, as one that hath obtained mercy of the Lord to be faithful. I suppose therefore that this is good for the present distress, I say, that it is good for a man so to be. Art thou bound unto a wife? seek not to be loosed. Art thou loosed from a wife? seek not a wife. But and if thou marry, thou hast not sinned; and if a virgin marry, she hath not sinned. Nevertheless such shall have trouble in the flesh: but I spare you."

But perhaps also to 2 Corinthians 12:7 = "Lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted . . ."

6] The translation is according to the King James (Authorized) Version of 1611. A contemporary translation of the verses by the Proto-Protestant heretic and martyr, John Wycliffe, can be found on page 517 of the *Longman Anthology of British Literature, Volume I.A.*

The real life of shepherds in medieval England is something else again, as Sir Thomas More observed, in his satiric masterpiece, *Utopia*:

"There is another [situation in England especially that makes thieving necessary]. . . . Your sheep, . . . which are usually so tame and so cheaply fed, begin now, according to report, to be so greedy and wild that they devour human beings themselves and devastate and depopulate fields, houses, and towns. In all those parts of the realm where the finest and therefore costliest wool is produced, there are noblemen, gentlemen, and even some abbots, though otherwise holy men, who are not satisfied with the annual revenues and profits which their predecessors used to derive from their estates. They are not content, by leading an idle and sumptuous life, to do no good to their country; they must also do it positive harm. They leave no ground to be tilled; they enclose very bit of land for pasture; they pull down houses and destroy towns, leaving only the church to pen the sheep in. . . . (B 698)