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Mediation in the Towneley Second Shepherds' Play

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What exactly does mediation involve in the context of medieval religious drama? "Intervene to produce agreement or reconciliation"; "be the medium for bringing about (a result) or for conveying (something)"; "form a connecting link between". The definitions of the verb "mediate" in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* underline the dynamism of the process and its resulting state of harmony, both of which would seem to characterise mediation in a religious context. Yet the nature and the modalities of the phenomenon remain to be specified.

The theatrical transaction relies on a set of conventions and is based on a relationship between the performance and the audience which alternates between empathy and critical distance.[1] As an aesthetic device, mediation aims at creating a link between the two worlds, but the nature of this link is more complex in the context of religious drama, since mediation also serves a didactic mission which is directed both at performers and audience. Furthermore, as entertainment and as a founding myth, religious drama also aims at binding the Christian community together both on a social and on a metaphysical plane. Thus it seems that the modalities of

1. Elam, pp. 87-97, gives a detailed analysis of theatrical systems.

mediation are determined by the nature of the represented reality. In this particular context, the threshold is not located at the frontier between the dramatic world and that of the audience, but between the religious reality which the dramatic world stands for and the natural world. The represented world, far from being an illusion or a mere reflection of reality, constitutes a ladder to a religious reality which the audience shares and generally aspires to, whereas the material world is but an illusion.

Mediation occurs directly when the characters address the audience, but it can also function obliquely. Thus, the presence of an onstage audience within the dramatic world provides the extra-dramatic audience with an interesting mirror image and creates a link between the two worlds. The former kind of mediation is the most noticeable occurrence of the phenomenon in performance. It assumes the form of a punctual breach or a general flexibility of the boundaries between the dramatic world and that of the audience, generated by an oblique or direct address from a protagonist to the public,[2] or impersonated by a specific category of characters known as mediators,[3] who do not necessarily belong to the *diegesis*. The representation of numinous episodes such as the Annunciation, the Nativity or the Passion reveals the iconic quality of these highly symbolic scenes. The fascination they exert on the audience's mind rests mainly on the immediacy and the magical quality they acquire onstage through the use of religious symbolism and typological references. Simultaneously, the key role they play in the didactic mission requires a formal kind of mediation in order to optimise the audience's reception.

It is precisely because the *Second Shepherds' Play* lacks such scenes that we have chosen to take a closer look at the kind of mediation at work in this most unusual biblical play. Although the episodes of the Annunciation and the Nativity are central to the two Shepherds' plays by the Wakefield Master, the predominance of human characters and the apparent focus on human concerns, not

2. These cases of "breaking frame" are actually licensed means of confirming it. Indeed, they reduce the psychological distance between the extra-dramatic audience and the represented world in order to optimise the reception. (See Elam, p. 87.) In the case of biblical plays, such addresses or oblique speeches also serve a didactic function.

3. We find a number of such characters in the cycle plays. Some merely act as prologues or epilogues and assume mainly—but not solely—an explanatory and choric function, providing the audience with theological guidance, appealing also to their emotions, conjuring mental images and drawing their attention to certain details, parallels or contrasts in the action. Even when they are clearly identified, these characters do not take part in the plot.

to mention the absence of a Nativity scene,[4] are indeed striking.[5] And yet it seems that mediation plays a central role in this pageant. Indeed, religious—and theatrical—mediation does not merely function vertically, that is to say, between the spiritual sphere and the Christian community, via the artefact, with a view to creating a link, a connection between these two spheres. The spiritual link is also a horizontal one, which aims at binding the Christian community together. If this is less noticeable than the direct address, its presence within the dramatic world is nonetheless essential. As may be inferred from the first definition given by the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, reconciliation is the key message of biblical drama and of the event of the Nativity in particular, since they prefigure the reintegration of fallen mankind within the divine plan through the birth of Christ. In the *Second Shepherds' Play*, this reintegration first becomes manifest as a feeling of unity and harmony among the Christian community, as represented onstage by the three shepherds and the two thieves. Thus it seems that the kind of mediation at work in this pageant functions very subtly yet very efficiently, since it constitutes both its mainspring and its main theme. Furthermore, this pageant also stands out for the use of traditional features in a very unusual way. The grotesque mode, which affects numinous episodes in the other biblical plays, develops here into a grotesque allegory of a numinous episode which is not staged. And yet, despite the apparent absence of supernatural events, the powerful symbolism of this allegory provides the audience with a successful medium for representing spiritual concepts.

Mediation seems to rest on the main characteristic of the *Second Shepherds' Play*, which is both a structural and functional duality. Although human concerns seem to predominate, the play falls into two mutually mirroring episodes duplicating the general pattern of "birth and reconciliation". The shepherds' encounter with Mak, who steals one of their sheep and tries to conceal the theft by means of a grotesque subterfuge, and the adoration of Christ the Redeemer by the shepherds are "two unequal but matching sides of a figural diptych" (Meredith, p. 155). We shall see that presenting the audience with parallel yet interrelated worlds, with many echoing images of restored unity, constitutes a very efficient technique indeed.

4. In all the other cycles, the Nativity scene is a carefully staged, highly visual scene.
5. Meredith has pointed out the specificity of the Wakefield Master's verbal and structural techniques, based on what he refers to as "individualised humanity" (p. 154; see also pp. 150-57).

Still, from a structural point of view, the embedded game—Mak and Gill's farcical plot to conceal the stolen sheep as their newborn baby—functions as a medium on two levels. As part of the human side of the diptych, the episode prompts the shepherds to generosity and forgiveness towards Mak. As a grotesque analogue of the Nativity, this embedded scene gives a particular depth to that episode which, although it is not staged, underlies the pageant at the core of the biblical play.

Furthermore, the game within provides the audience not merely with a symbolic image, however enlightening the latter may be, but with a spiritual experience they can share. Indeed, grotesque analogies—in particular, flesh and food images—express a mystical state of identification with Christ's sufferings or *imitatio Christi*. Thus, structural and functional duality characterise the pageant on several levels. At first, the embedded form only seems to replicate the complex interrelations between divine and human matters. But, the play within being also an illusion within, it acquires authenticity through this formal reduplication and imposes itself as a revelation.

Examining duality as the pageant's main feature first in the overall structure of the play and then in the play within will help to unveil a complex and pregnant symbolic mode which emerges as the main instrument of mediation.

Duality in Structure: A Mirror Image

Peter Meredith's analogy between the *Second Shepherds' Play* and a figural diptych interestingly focuses on the play as a medium for representing and accessing the spiritual world, whereas human concerns seem to predominate in this play. Yet it is an image which we may have to reconsider after we have examined the mode of representation which is involved here. The biblical part of the pageant (the adoration of the Shepherds) is only 168 lines long. It starts at line 920 when the angel appears to the shepherds, after a long prologue during which each character voices his predicament, a quarrel takes place and is settled, and then a theft is committed and forgiven. Although they are unequal, the two parts are obviously interdependent. Both human and biblical narratives follow the same pattern, from discord to reconciliation: between men, and between humanity and God. This mirror effect is further intensified by the reiteration of this pattern in the first part, illustrating the biblical theme of the Redemption of humanity—prefigured in the birth of Christ—on a human level.

Indeed, this pattern of reconciliation is repeated three times: it occurs between the three shepherds, between Mak and his wife, and finally between the shepherds and the thief. Each time, following an argument, the characters reach a state of harmony which culminates in a song. These echoes of the biblical pattern bear a striking resemblance to the extra-dramatic reality yet simultaneously function as reflections of the harmonious spiritual model of which music is a revealing allegory. Thus, the structural duality of the pageant is meant to convey the platonic idea that the Creation is a mirror of the divine which it is possible to decipher, and stresses the interdependence of the two spheres. It is through this mirror structure and its symbolic function that mediation is carried out, while its efficiency rests on the double reference of the representation, which also establishes a psychological link with the audience through allusions to the extra-dramatic world.

The presentation of the three shepherds as three individuals appears at first as a multiple occurrence of a single "actant".[6] In the choric introduction to the play, the three shepherds, prompted by the weather, complain in turn about different inequalities and conflicts, and picture the material world as a fallen one. The themes of these complaints (social inequalities, marital conflict), as introduced by the shepherds, serve an individualising function, but, interestingly, they will also be developed in the Mak and Gill episode.

While the first shepherd introduces himself as an exploited farmer, he and his fellow, the second shepherd, are in turn accused by the third shepherd of exploiting their even poorer servants. Following his master's refusal to give him food and drink, the third shepherd's direct address to the audience, using the first person plural, could certainly have triggered some kind of empathetic response:

> Sich servandys as I,
> That swettys and swynkys,
> Etys *oure* brede full dry,
> And that me forthynkys,
> *We* ar oft weytt and wery
> When master-men wynkys;

6. This term refers to one of the different functions assumed by the characters in the play considered as a actantial model: the subject, the object of the quest, the opponent, the adjuvant, etc. (See Greimas et Courtés, "actant" [p. 3] and "actanciel" [p. 4]). Christ's torturers and the three Maries are examples of such non-individualised characters, who are often unnamed.

Yit commys full lately
Both dyners and drynkys.
Bot nately
Both *oure* dame and *oure* syre,
When *we* have ryn in the myre,
Thay can nip at *oure* hyre
And pay *us* full lately. (ll. 222-34)

Unlike the farm-worker's subjection to the landlord or the shepherd boy's to his masters, the wedded man's subjection to his wife (as exemplified by the second shepherd) is more of a traditional literary theme than a fact of life. Still the emphasis is laid on men's suffering and oppression by women, who are pictured as hens full of sexual energy or monstrous creatures gulping down food and drink and plaguing their husbands with numerous children:

Sely Copyle, oure hen,
Both to and fro
She kakyls;
Bot begyn she to crok,
To groyne or to clok,
Wo is hym is oure cok,
For he is in the shakyls. (ll. 98-103)

She is browyd lyke a brystyll,
With a sowre-loten chere;
Had she oones wett hir whystyll,
She couth syng full clere
Hyr Paternoster.
She is as greatt as a whall;
She has a gallon of gall. (ll. 148-54)

The shepherds' complaints are meant to be understood both literally and symbolically. On the one hand, the picture drawn by these three soliloquies is bound to have been a familiar one for the extra-dramatic audience, whether it refers to their social, economic, or cultural background.[7] Furthermore, the physicality of the description calls for a psychological response from the audience. The words used to describe men's subjection to the elements or their social or marital conditions are particularly hard ones. The body is so severely affected by the cold that

7. Even if the link is more obvious for the members of the audience who identified with the oppressed, this picture of feudal society would still have held significance for landlords.

it seems to lose its integrity[8]; the world itself is changeable and unreliable, and its reality is questioned.[9]

Simultaneously, the overall sense of unbalance and of oppression conveyed by the shepherds' speeches refers to a post-lapsarian humanity, and the use of such concrete, vivid images gives body and strength to this symbolic representation for a contemporary audience. Thus the double referentiality[10] of the theatrical discourse and its oblique nature[11]—emphasized, furthermore, by the second shepherd's direct address[12]—cause the extra-dramatic reality of the audience and the biblical world to merge. Accordingly, the spiritual reality seems to acquire immediacy for the audience.

If these complaints indeed follow the general pattern from conflict to resolution, each of them does so in a particular way. The first shepherd finds relief in voicing his discontent; the second shepherd's plight sounds unresistingly comical and is thus deflated; the boy's complaint about his master is resolved through its enactment onstage. Finally, all conflicts are dissolved and harmony prevails,[13] as the three shepherds join together in a song in which each retains a distinctive voice, and which, as an expression of earthly harmony, foreshadows the angel's song:

> *1 Pastor.* Let me syng the tenory.
> *2 Pastor.* And I the tryble so hye.

8. "I am nerehande dold, / so long have I nappyd; / My legys thay fold, my fyngers ar chappyd" (ll. 3-6); "When my shone freys to my fete / It is not all esy" (ll. 90-91).
9. "Whoso couthe take hede / And lett the warld pas, / It is ever in drede / And brekyll as glas, / and slythys, / This warld fowre never so, / With mervels mo and mo, / Now in weyll, now in wo, / And all thyng wrythys" (ll. 174-82).
10. In a previous study, following Lascombes, we have referred to this phenomenon—which occurs when two different referents are assigned to a sign onstage—as "diaphora". In this episode, this device is affecting time and space. The shepherds are biblical characters, living in a corresponding background, but the striking individuality of these characters and their numerous references to an extra-dramatic reality make the material world and the biblical one coincide for the audience. Thus, the shepherds' choric speeches enable the audience to be aware of a spiritual dimension through the double interpretation—both symbolic and literal—of discourse, creating a psychological link between the extra-dramatic reality and the divine sphere.
11. Similarly, the addresses to God, Christ or St. Nicholas beginning each speech (ll. 1, 79-80 and 70-71) could be heard not merely as colloquial and anachronistic expressions, but as appeals to God's Mercy, which would then be answered by the blessing Mary gives them at the end of the play.
12. "Bot, yong men, of wowyng, / For God that you boght, / Be well war of wedyng, / And thynk in youre thought" (ll. 131-34).
13. Guinle has pointed out the importance of the integration of musical scenes in the dramatic text in general and particularly in the *Second Shepherds' Play*.

3 Pastor. The the meyne fallys to me.
Lett se how ye chauntt. (ll. 270-73)

This first stage of harmony is soon to be disrupted by the arrival of Mak, whose jarring voice mars their song and forebodes trouble: "Who is that *pypys* so poore?" (l. 283). Indeed, his arrival creates a new development in the action and introduces two kinds of conflict --marital feud, theft and deception—which echo the shepherds' complaints.

The theme of marital discord is illustrated both by the verbal image projected by Mak of his relationship with Gill and by its enactment onstage. Mak's description of his predicament echoes in many ways the second shepherd's and sets him in a role which is recognised by the public as the well-known cultural figure of the hen-pecked husband plagued with a lazy, spendthrift and shrewish wife who, furthermore, is incredibly fertile:

1 Pastor. How farys thi wyff? By thi hoode,
How farys she?
Mak. Lyys walteryng—by the roode—
By the fyere, lo!
And a howse full of brude.
She drynkys well, to;
Yll spede othere good
That she wyll do!
Bots ho
Etys as fast as she can,
And ilk yere that commys to man
She bryngys furth a lakan—
And, som yeres, two. (ll. 339-51)

Following the disrupting effect of Mak's appearance onstage, this description, however exaggerated, restores an impression of continuity and familiarity,[14] and the role is bound to appeal to the audience's empathy, even if it is mitigated with farcical laughter. Furthermore, the verbal image thus created by Mak creates a context for the subterfuge he sets up with Gill to conceal the stolen lamb.

14. The only jarring note seems to be Mak's reaction to the third shepherd's attempt to remove Mak's coat; he pretends to be the king's messenger and asks for more respect in Southern English dialect: "What! Ich be a yoman, / I tell you, of the kyng, / The self and the some, / Sond from a greatt lordyng, / and sich / Fie on you! Goyth hence / Out of my presence! / I must have reverence. / Why, who be ich?" (ll. 291-99). This already betrays Mak's capacity to play a role and undermines his self-built image of an unhappy husband.

Yet there is more in this theme than the familiar, comic aspect. Mak's return to his cottage and to his wife presents us with a burlesque version of Joseph's Return. The parallel is clearly made between Mak's second return home, following a dream of Gill giving birth—a parody of the Annunciation—and the moment of Joseph's arrival home, knocking at the door and impatiently asking to be shown in.[15] In the episode of Joseph's Return, the apparition of the angel puts an end to the argument opposing Joseph to Mary, and unity in the couple is restored when Joseph understands his mistake. Similarly, Gill soon puts her concern about the theft and its possible dire consequences[16] aside to help her husband disguise the sheep. When Mak returns home for the second time, Gill's complaints about her female status subside,[17] and the couple's unity is restored as they plan their subterfuge. As they play the part of a happy family brought together by the birth of their child, they hold a mirror—however deformed—to Mary and Joseph rejoicing over the coming of Christ, an image which is echoed by the jarring "harmony" of Mak's lullaby and Gill's faked groans:

> *3 Pastor.* Will ye here how thay hak?
> Oure syre lyst croyne.
> *1 Pastor.* Hard I never none crak
> So clere out of toyne. (ll. 686-89)

Finally, the conflict opposing the shepherds to Mak the thief and its outcome offer a last example of earthly reconciliation which parallels the biblical theme of the pageant. This third occurrence of the pattern is the most developed, since it involves a parodic "annunciation" (Mak's dream), a mock birth and an "adoration" sequence. The latter is a moment of revelation for the shepherds, as they recognise their stolen sheep and eventually forgive Mak, an attitude prefiguring their biblical role. This final occurrence also seems to complete the shepherds' reconciliation with each other, then with Mak, and prefigures their spiritual transformation. Thus, the third shepherd's animosity towards Mak[18] is several

15. This parallel is particularly obvious in lines 582-87, which echo the first lines of "Joseph's Doubt", Play 12 of the N-Town Cycle.
16. She warns him, "By the nakyd nek / Art thou like for to hyng" (ll. 445-46) and "It were a fowll blott / To be hanged for the case" (ll. 454-55). Mak replies, "I have skapyd, Ielott, / Oft as hard a glase" (ll. 456-57).
17. "Why, who wanders? Who wakys? / Who commys? Who gose? / Who brewys? Who bakys? / What makys me thus hose?" (ll. 599-602); "Full wofull is the householde / That wantys a woman" (ll. 606-7).
18. He removes Mak's cloak lest he should hide his spoils there: "Is he commen? Then ylkon / Take hede

times tempered by the other two shepherds, before they in turn start to suspect him:

3 Pastor. When we had long napt,
Me thought with a gyn
A fatt shepe he trapt;
Bot he mayde no dyn.
2 Pastor. Be styll!
Thi dreme makys the wood. (ll. 534-39)

3 Pastor. Now trow me, if ye will
By Sant Thomas of Kent,
Ayther Mak or Gill
Was at that assent.
1 Pastor. Peasse, man, be still
I sagh when he went.
Thou sklanders hym yll.
Thou aght to repent
Goode spede. (ll. 660-68)

Having unsuccessfully searched Mak and Gill's cottage for their sheep, the shepherds humbly admit their mistake, while Mak rejoices at their credulity in his asides to the public.[19] Similarly, when the shepherds return to Mak's cottage to present the newborn with a gift, their attempt at reconciliation is genuine, and it is precisely this genuineness that enables them to see through the couple's deceptive trick and to discover their sheep:

2 Pastor. Mak, freyndys will we be,
For we ar all oone. (ll. 816-17)

This worldly revelation does not simply end with the discovery of the stolen sheep, but eventually leads the shepherds to forgive Mak and let him go. Their thirst for revenge seems to vanish with him and remain only as a trifling memory. Having thus reached a state of spiritual awareness—since they are able to see beyond worldly matters—the shepherds are ready to play their part as witnesses and messengers of the divine birth. The angel's apparition to the shepherds and his heavenly

to his thing / *Et accipit clamidem ab ipso"* (ll. 289-90). He also makes Mak sleep between them, lest he should escape: "Bot, Mak, com heder. Betwene / Shall thou lyg downe" (ll. 378-79).

19. *1 Pastor.* We have markyd amis; / I hold us begyld. / *2 Pastor.* Sir, don. / Sir—Oure Lady him save! (ll. 796-99).

song come not only as an annunciation of Christ's birth, but as a celebration of this accomplishment:

> *2 Pastor.* Say, what was his song?
> Hard ye not how he crakyd it,
> Thre brefes to a long?
> *3 Pastor.* Yee, Mary, he hakt it:
> Was no crochet wrong,
> Nor nothing that lakt it. (ll. 946-51)

As the shepherds marvel at the perfection of the song—which they knowledgably express in technical terms—they are now aware of how imperfect and comical their performance is. Since the divine is made flesh and blood in Christ's birth, man's reintegration in the divine plan is now complete, and there is no more need for human imitation:

> *2 Pastor.* Let se how ye croyne!
> Can ye bark at the mone? (ll. 955-56)

Thus, the shepherds' experience offers a worldly counterpart to the biblical theme of the play. Furthermore, the sense of real situation created by the cultural and social references helps to establish a strong psychological link between the dramatic world and the audience. Although the latter are aware of the subterfuge, the shepherds' status of audience to Mak and Gill's farce provides them with an interesting mirror image which enables them to follow the experience closely. In this perspective, it seems that the biblical matter of the play actually predominates and even pervades the whole pageant. Indeed, the events of the first part of the pageant do not merely reflect the divine sphere or foreshadow the reintegration of mankind into God's divine plan. They provide an illustration of the new state of harmony initiated with the birth of Christ and culminate in three musical sequences, which come as moments of revelation and prepare for the angel's message, which is announced by the central song of the pageant. Thus, the two parts of the diptych present the audience with a tangible image of Redemption, as well as a carefully prepared medium for contemplation.

Functional Duality of the Play Within: Towards an Awareness of Symbolic Meaning

The duality characterising the overall structure of the pageant affects its constitutive elements, as well as their function, in a most interesting manner. Thus, Mak and Gill's trick of concealing the stolen sheep from the shepherds has all the characteristics of a "play-within-a-play". Occurring on a human scale, it seems to belong to the first part of the pageant. Yet, as we have seen, it plays a crucial role in the shepherds' spiritual growth, and its farcical aspect is reminiscent of the grotesque mode, which affects numinous episodes in the biblical plays.[20]

The embedded structure appears as a meta-theatrical game directed by Mak and Gill. Indeed, Mak's verbal skill can conjure up an image of domestic despair, and Gill shows a particular ability to direct and act the "farce" she has created. This capacity to act and simulate ironically underlines the double frame of the action, and in doing so points at the serious aim of the illusion. The use of more-or-less direct address makes it clear that the grotesque game is set up for the extra-dramatic audience. Mak's soliloquy (ll. 387-425), however choric-sounding at first,[21] is directed to the public, and his speech soon becomes an actual performance. Indeed, Mak verbally comments on his actions, appearing as actor and director at the same time and with the mysterious ability to cast spells.[22] Similarly, Gill's account of her stratagem to Mak is obviously directed to the audience:

> *Uxor.* A good bowrde have I spied,
> Syn thou can none:
> Here shall we hym hyde,
> To thay be gone,
> In my credyll. Abyde!
> Lett me alone,
> And I shall lyg beside
> In chylbed, and grone. (ll. 478-85)

Gill's skills as a stage director soon outshine Mak's. Indeed, it is she who prompts him to go back to the shepherds and pretend to awake from a premonitory dream

20. Episodes such as Joseph's Return in the various Cycles, the *Nativity* in the *N-Town* and *Chester* cycles, and *The Trial of Mary and Joseph* in the N-Town Cycle show many occurrences of this grotesque mode.

21. In the first nine lines of the soliloquy, Mak's use of the third-person pronoun gives his speech a choric quality, which subsides when he switches back to the first-person pronoun in the following lines.

in order to return safely to his cottage, and get ready for another performance of her own devising. The audience witnesses a stage director's preparation for performance, as Gill comments on and directs Mak for the following scene:

Uxor. I shall swedyll hym right
In my credyll.
If it were a gretter slyght,
Yit couthe I help tyll.
I will lyg downe stright.
Com hap me.
Mak. I wyll.
(ll. 623-28)

Uxor. Harken ay when thay call;
Thay will com onone.
Com and make redy all,
And sing by thyn oone;
Syng "lullay" thou shall,
For I must grone
And cry outt by the wall
On Mary and John,
For sore.
Syng "lullay" on fast
When thou heris at the last;
And bot I play a fals cast,
Trust me no more. (ll. 634-46)

This meta-theatrical game is particularly comical when the audience simultaneously witness the shepherds reaching Mak's cottage and the two actors' hasty preparations inside: Gill begins to groan and Mak "sings" a lullaby (ll. 686-89).

The functional duality of the episode becomes apparent when the performance fails to fool the shepherds. The intense involvement required from the audience by this burlesque plot (dealing with such trivial matters as sheep-stealing) clearly serves a purpose lying far beyond the comic effect.[23] Moreover, the aborted performance shifts the emphasis on its very frame. Thus, the "play within", being also an "illusion within", seems to acquire the genuineness of an

22. This characteristic could be seen as a hint to the playwright and stage director, not to create a world out of nothing, since this does not apply to religious drama, but to recreate a world (that of the Bible) through theatrical illusion.

23. This involvement is ensured by Mak and Gill's oblique speech during the preparation of their trick.

inverted illusion,[24] and the meta-theatrical game would thus function as a revealing device, arousing the audience's awareness of a symbolic meaning.[25]

This revealing function is emphasises by the grotesque mode which characterises the trick directed by the two thieves. A traditional feature of numinous episodes in the mystery plays,[26] it occurs here in the absence of a numinous scene, so that we have little guarantee that the audience did not merely respond to this episode as a farce.[27] Yet the images used in the meta-theatrical game, being widespread in contemporary vernacular writings, seem to be part of the audience's cultural background and could be expected to ensure an appropriate response from the latter. The "game within" would then function as an enlightening analogue of the Nativity, and this ostension *in absentia* has a particularly strong theatrical effect.

Indeed, the play within and the action leading to it—the theft and the preparation of the subterfuge—are pervaded by pregnant images of hunger and food which can be read as an allegory of spiritual yearning and fulfilment.[28] Mak's

24. The *Second Shepherds' Play*'s use of meta-theatrical hints appears early in the play, when one of the shepherds tells the others about his nightmare. The frame of the nightmare ironically reflects the extra-dramatic reality, since he wakes up in a terrible state after dreaming that he was in England (ll. 504-11).

25. In the other cycle pageants or plays where this embedded structure can be found, sometimes as a short "game" in which secondary characters suddenly take on leading roles, the apparent diversion actually has a precise function in relation to the main theme. This is the case in *Passio Domini*, the second play of the Cornish *Ordinalia*, in which the jailor of Christ and a "boy" enact some sort of fight reminiscent of the sword dances. This episode occurs during the Judgment of Christ by Pilate (ll. 2239-2318) and despite the term "interlude", it has a precise function in the play, since it recalls the battle and victory of life against death, thus using a pagan motif to prefigure Christ's resurrection.

26. The grotesque mode implies the use of concrete images, sometimes referring to bodily functions, in order to provide a "safe" and efficient representation of spiritual concepts for a mostly unlearned audience. As theatrical representation is but the sign of a supra-reality beyond our understanding, these images, however inappropriate, provide a powerful allegory for events which cannot be conceived in logical terms. This propensity to resort to concrete images to convey spiritual truths for obvious didactic reasons can be found in medieval sermons and books written for the instruction of parish priests, such as Mirk's. The grotesque mode also reveals the essential role of the body to experience divinity, since this medium echoes the Incarnation of Christ or Mary's consent to conceive God's son. In this perspective, elements which tended to be seen as questionable accretions to the biblical matter of these plays are now acknowledged as enlightening cultural images.

27. In keeping with Woolf's reservations about the level of understanding of the audience, we may indeed wonder if the latter would not have failed to grasp the symbolic meaning of some hints or verbal images used by the two tricksters: "For, though the episode has a religious orientation … it could easily be missed by the unsophisticated, who would then understand it only as simple farce" (Woolf, p. 192).

28. In the late Middle Ages, food is such an essential part of life that it is the most common gift of charity. Abstinence from food provides the most authentic form of ascetic practice, and hunger is a very significant symbol which metaphorically refers to the believer's desire to experience Christ's sufferings. This analogy can be found in many spiritual writings from the thirteenth century onwards and originates in

theft seems to be motivated by starvation, and his haste to see the sheep slain and roasted shows how severe his hunger is.[29] Similarly, Mak and Gill's oaths, far from sounding blasphemous, express a desire to eat God and thus to be reunited with Him:

> *Mak.* As I am true and lele,
> To God here I pray
> That this be the fyrst mele
> That I shall ete this day. (ll. 751-54)
>
> *Uxor.* I pray to God so mylde,
> If ever I you begyld,
> That I ete this chylde
> That lygys in this credyll. (ll. 773-76)

Thus, the mock-birth of the lamb[30] offers a revealing image of the Nativity,[31] since this embedded image foreshadows Christ's sacrifice, through which regeneration is made possible. The unnatural birth of the sheep to Mak and Gill also parallels that of Christ into the natural world, providing an interesting analogue of the complexity of Christ's nature and revealing the didactic purpose of the theatrical game.[32]

one of Paul the Apostle's epistles to the Corinthians. Accordingly, and in reference to the last Supper, the act of eating the Host is a means to consume Christ, to become part of Him, another image of spiritual reintegration. Thus, beyond the comic element obviously generated by the situation, it seems reasonable to think that the audience would have grasped the spiritual dimension of the metaphor of hunger and recognised in the image of the lamb a direct allusion to Christ the Redeemer. Concerning the importance of the body and food in medieval religious thought and practise, see Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, as well as *Jeunes et Festins Sacrés*, pp. 18-19, and Beckwith, pp. 58-59. The second chapter of my doctoral dissertation provides a short summary of this system of spiritual symbols (pp. 134-48).

29. "I am worthy my mete, / For in a strate can I get / More then thay that swynke and swette / All the long day" (ll. 448-51); "I wold he were flayn; / I lyst well ete. / This twelmothe was I so fayn / Of oone shepemete" (ll. 465-68).

30. We can assume that the lamb used for the performance was a wooden doll, similar to that representing the new-born Christ. We may also wonder if this doll was meant to represent a real referent—a lamb—or if another prop, hinting at a spiritual interpretation, was used.

31. These remarkably concrete religious symbols, as well as the emphasis on emotion in devotional practice, betray a strong influence from Franciscan piety and from lay religious movements such as the *devotio moderna*. Since the latter originated and spread in modest, comparatively less learned backgrounds, the audience of the *Second Shepherds' Play* could be expected to share this spiritual disposition and grasp the full meaning of the apparently grotesque parody.

32. In this respect, the two thieves' insistence on their parenthood when the shepherds discover that the baby is their lost sheep offers another echo of Joseph's Return, which goes far beyond parody. Mary's

In this perspective, Mak and Gill's subterfuge actually brings to light the meaning of the Nativity, emphasising the redemptive role of the Christ Child through the image of the lamb, since this well-known biblical image stresses the humanity of Christ and the intensity of the suffering he undergoes to redeem mankind. In this light, Gill's prayer[33] and the shepherd's "lytyll day-starne" lose some of their comical quality and become reminiscent of the true Nativity. If the use of this image to qualify the "false child" grotesquely counterpoints the later address to Christ—the "true" child"—by one of the shepherds (l. 10), it also acquires a particularly strong meaning when the lamb is perceived as a sacrificial figure of Christ. The role of the body as a medium to experience divinity[34] is further emphasised after the shepherds have beheld the Christ child and express their physical sense of blessedness[35] as a sign of Redemption. This spiritual well-being both counterparts and responds to the shepherds' complaints about the physical sufferings inflicted by the weather in their introductory speeches. Indeed, these sufferings are both real and symbolic, since they are also reminiscent of Christ's suffering on the Cross.[36]

The analogy of the *Second Shepherds' Play* with a diptych unveils its function as a image of contemplation. The deliberately inadequate reflection of divine matters and the reduplication of the theatrical frame provide the audience with an enlightening illustration of the spiritual meaning and of the concrete consequences of Redemption in the natural world. The boundaries between the natural world and the divine sphere vanish, as supernatural events appear to be integrated into human life. Simultaneously, we can imagine that the pregnant mystical images used to refer to the experience of divinity would have called for an intense emo-

claim to Joseph that he, with God, is the father of the child she bears hardly sounds less unnatural to him than Mak and Gill's claim does to the audience: "I am he that hym gatt, / And yond woman hym bare" (ll. 870-71).

33. "No, so God me blys / Ang gyf me ioy of my chylde!" (ll. 794-95). Despite the obvious double meaning of the prayer—Gill is rejoicing about the feast to come—it retains a strong spiritual overtone: the Lamb of God will bring heavenly bliss to mankind.

34. Happé, pp 272-73, draws our attention to the punishment inflicted on Mak by the three shepherds, which is reminiscent of tossing a pregnant woman in a sheet to induce childbirth. This bodily image would refer to the expiation of sin and draw a parallel between the pains of labour and those of Hell.

35. "(*2 Pastor.*) Lord, *well is me*! / Now we go, thou behold. (*3 Pastor.*) Forsothe, allredy / It semys to be told / Full oft. / (*1 Pastor.*) *What grace we have fun!* / (*2 Pastor.*) Com furth; *now ar we won!* / (*3 Pastor.*) To syng ar we bun / Let take on loft!" (ll. 1080- 88).

36. See esp. ll. 1-13 and 79-91.

tional involvement from the audience and have led them to experience an *imitatio Christi* by proxy,[37] giving another dimension to the mediating process.

The pageant itself stands as an image of mediation and reintegration. The manifestation of the divine will in the natural world leaves it transformed and yet undisturbed. This sign of restored harmony encompassing the natural world shows how tangible Redemption is. Similarly, the three shepherds' transformation enables them to live through a religious experience and integrate this experience into their everyday life. As Happé points out, this pattern "accords with the Wakefield master's concern with the substance and the difficulty of human experience" (p. 270). Indeed, this image of contemplation plays an essential part in the medieval audience's reception, inviting them to conduct their own spiritual experience in the same perspective.

37. Furthermore, the feeling of self-denial experienced by the Christian audience in this *imitatio Christi* would ironically counterbalance the apparent predominance of human matters.

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