

The Townely *Second Shepherd's Play* is a fossil of a form of mass entertainment from the fifteenth century, and to assist this discussion of the features of the play which contribute to the relevance of the play to our own feelings, I have chosen to compare it with a modern piece of mass entertainment with a similar treatment of a religious subject, the film *Monty Python's Life of Brian*. The contrast of these comedies will highlight that while we can feel a kinship with the people involved in the Mystery Play, we have largely lost the ability to accept their co-existence of farce and reverence, and the ordinary and the miraculous, and find foreign their abstract appreciation of time that is used to bring the community close to the origins of their Christian ritual.

For all its success as a means of bringing Christmas to people performing and watching such a play, the *Second Shepherd's Play* is really very striking in its ferocious parody of the play's subject. To say there is "probably no irreverence to the Christian religion intended" (Squiers, *Townely Shepherd's Plays*, 196) ignores the possibility of both reverence and irreverence coexisting in the play. The sheep stealing story could take its text from Luke 15:4-7, the parable of the lamb that was lost, and the author could not have chosen a more fundamental symbol of Judeo-Christian tradition to mimic than the lamb, with its resonances of the paschal sacrifice and its centrality to the rebirth and redemption the Christ child brings. To have a stolen lamb disguised as a newborn infant in the context of a play about Christmas borders on the blasphemous, and is every bit as irreverent as, for example, the crucifixion scene in *Brian*. In the *Shepherd's Play's* character Gyll, we are presented with a coarse, rude and devious "false Mary" every bit as outrageous as Brian's mother Mandy. Gyll's fake child and fraudulent labour pains are the opposite of the traditions of Mary's child and her pain free labour (Warner 33). Gyll's position as a counterpart of Mary allows a subtle comment on the questionable circumstances which must surround a virgin birth, through the joke concerning poor genetic material, and therefore the dubious parentage of the lamb (line 587). It is little wonder that the furore the modern work caused in certain religious

quarters had a medieval echo in the reservations of the Church concerning the direction of the Mystery Plays. (Squiers, *Survey of Medieval Verse and Drama*, 77)

Coexisting with the buffoonery in the play however, in a way not really feasible in a modern work, is a real reverence for Mary and her child. The shepherds are respectful, present appropriate gifts, receive a blessing from the virgin, and leave uplifted and rejoicing in song. The ability to contain both the farcical and the reverent within a single natural whole as present in this play, does not seem possible within the framework of the polarised viewpoints of this century. Monty Python attempts it with an awkward delivery of the Beatitudes as indistinctly heard from the edge of the crowd, but although what Jesus says is not tampered with, its muddled reception is played only as comedy, illustrating the sort of difficulty a modern comedy faces in presenting religious material, as to maintain the necessary consistency we require of such a work it must either be funny or reverent. The Mystery Play can be both effortlessly because it appears to be the product of minds which are very accepting of the way life is presented to them, and very resigned to the way things are. Poverty, for example, is complained about in the Shepherd's opening pieces but it is not solvable, and the play's response is to use poverty as fuel for the sheep stealing comedy, with the necessity of the theft to feed too many children, and also to be the setting of God's grace with Jesus born in the squalor of the stable. As Squiers notes "the distresses of the poor in the opening of the play finds its response towards the close" (*Townely Shepherds' Plays*, 171) with the humorous leading naturally to the religious.

Our loss of this acceptance of the world without full explanation is also seen in the play juxtaposing the ordinary and the miraculous as phenomena of apparently equal validity. The shepherds for example after discovering and dealing with their thief in a most down to earth way, seem only a little surprised by the appearance of an angel. Rather than disbelief appropriate to a modern person, the shepherds merely comment on the quality of the music and the bright lights, before happily bickering and singing their way to Bethlehem. Mak's magical abilities to

cause the shepherds to sleep heavily is treated most matter of factly, just as the limits to his enchantment are accepted, as the comedy relies on his ability to blind his companions to the sheep in his house and hence relies on Gyll's guile. Contrast this with the treatment of the miraculous in *Brian* as clearly fantastic with, for example, a spaceship rescuing Brian from the Romans. Our contemporary need for an orderly reality, even in comedy, makes the distinction inevitable between ordinary and supernatural in a way foreign to the world of the Mystery Play.

The treatment of time in the play is the key to its success as a community ritual in its original context, and an example of how its relevance to our thoughts is to present an alternative to, and hence show the subjectivity of, our institutionalised perspective. An audience with little appreciation of fixed history beyond a few generations, allows a looseness of time relations which provides us with shepherds who are both obvious contemporaries of their audience and witnesses to the nativity. That this can be comfortably accepted allows the community to feel closer to the object of their rituals. There is an inevitable loss of this ability to become one with the focus of religious devotion when our rigid time frame is imposed. This awareness of time allows anachronisms as the basis of humour in *Brian*, but while technically present in the *Shepherd's Play* they are just evidence of the "past and future [able to] coexist in the immediate present" (Squiers, *Survey of medieval Verse and Drama*, 76): that being the perceived and accepted world around them.

While our appreciation of time and reality distance us from the Townely play, the universality of the complaints of the opening speeches reinforce the humanity of the comic creations and our kinship with them. The hardship of farm work expounded by Coll, Gyb's lament on married life, and Daw's protest on weather and wages are still capable of evoking the empathy of a modern reader. Even Gyll's protest on her husband's lack of appreciation of her utility, shows feminism to be less of a recent innovation than is often supposed. The suspicion of one who puts on airs, as Mak does with his fashionable Southern accent is also a familiar source of comedy. The

familiarity possible with this aspect of the play makes the loss of their perspective in other elements of the play more striking.

Through a combination of rough comedy and exultant reverence the *Second Towneley Shepherd's Play* achieves a real involvement with its audience. By having fun with the players with jokes and songs, the authors only increase the closeness and hence the awe felt for Mary and her child. This can only be appreciated in a second hand way today, because although it is there in the poetic force of the play, the twentieth century mindset is uncomfortable with the loose timeframe and easy acceptance of the supernatural and the vulgar together, which are necessary for the kind of identification a fifteenth century participant could feel watching his neighbours recite the play each year. A contemporary comedy touching on similar ground like *Monty Python's Life of Brian* can include many of the same elements of the comedy found in the medieval play including disguises, concealment, death, crime, punishment and parody of religious symbolism, but it cannot be funny and respectful successfully, and can't make us close to the religious subject. The play's relevance to our own thoughts and feelings can be seen as a valuable way of thinking which has become foreign to us and which deprives us of perhaps useful devices for community identification and involvement.

List of Works Consulted

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