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The Second Shepherds' Play: "Coll's Speech"

Sally Profeta

Medieval mystery plays were significantly influential to English theater throughout the sixteenth and into the seventeenth century. They were well acclaimed by all facets of society not only for their appeal to the 'religious orientation' (Roney 1) of their audiences but also the social controversy of the time period (Greenblatt & Abrams 407). *The Second Shepherds' Play* (*Secunda Pastorum*) is an example from the "Towneley Cycle" (Edminster 1) or Wakefield Cycle of mystery plays that achieved great success. This play was likely an "alternative" (Roney 1) to *The First Shepherds' Play* (*Prima Pastorum*), one of two Nativity plays written by an anonymous playwright from Wakefield, Yorkshire, who is widely acknowledged as the Wakefield Master. According to scholars, the Wakefield Master was most likely a "highly educated cleric" whose greatest talent was coalescing religious allusions with comedic nuances. In the *Secunda Pastorum*, the Wakefield Master's "development of plot and character" is especially unparalleled by other mystery playwrights of his time (Greenblatt & Abrams 408).

Even though this play was meant to be a parody of the Nativity story, it also contains significant medieval socio-political commentary that is especially evident in the first scene (Edminster 1). Wakefield introduces Coll, a shepherd and tenant farmer, through a lengthy poetic soliloquy that describes Coll's dissatisfaction and distress concerning his socio-economic status. This lament is an example of Wakefield's use of Estate's satire not only to present the shepherd as a singular character, but as a representative of an entire class of disgruntled, lower class citizens. He starts by describing his complaints with the weather and his physical condition, then goes on to describe how injustice and poverty is inflicted on his social class through taxation and forced obedience to their superiors, concluding with a reversion back to his normal routine (Greenblatt & Abrams 409).

In the 1994 edition of the Early English Text Society by A.C. Cawley and Martin Stevens, there are thirteen lines per stanza, ("thirteeners"), whereas they were "traditionally" printed as 9 lines per stanza with an introductory quatrain which consisted of four longer lines. Additionally, the language has been "normalized" to modern English

where applicable. The play's rhyme scheme, according to this particular edition, is noted as a b a b a b a b c d d d c (Greenblatt & Abrams 408).

Firstly, one must examine the themes that are consistent throughout the soliloquy. Wakefield expresses two major themes in Coll's speech, namely, hardship and class antagonism. Hardship is conveyed throughout Coll's speech by way of his continuous complaints concerning melancholy, resentment, and anguish that are usually stressed at climactic moments in each stanza. For example, in the very beginning he explains his dread for winter when he describes how the "weathers are cold", he's "nearhand dold" or nearly "numb", his "fingers are chapped" or roughened, and he's all "lapped in sorrow" ("wrapped" in grief). He sympathizes with those that "never rest / Middy nor morrow", which expresses his feeling of exhaustion. As he continues, he supplements his complaints with words such as "rammed" which can be translated as "beaten down" and statements such as "Thus live we in pain,/ Anger, and woe, By night and by day" emphasizing the constant burden of his dissatisfaction that causes him great torment (Greenblatt & Abrams 408-409).

It is imperative, however, that the audience understands the social implications of being a lower class shepherd and a farmer who cultivates the land of wealthy landowners. Thus, Wakefield uses the theme of class antagonism coupled with hardship to portray his underprivileged social status and illustrate a popular criticism on hierarchical society. This example of estate's rivalry portrays the conflict between the three estates (clergy, aristocrats, and peasants) in medieval society. Coll describes his occupation when he states:

But we sely husbands
That walks on the moor,
For the tilth of our lands
Lies fallow as the floor.
(Greenblatt & Abrams 409)

In this line he describes himself as a "[husband]" or a "[plowman]" who originally cultivated his superior's farmland but now does not because these landowners found it more profitable to let the soil grow fallow and create an enclosure for sheep pasture. The conversion of these peasant plowmen into shepherds has lowered their "economic worth" and thus reduced their capability to sustain their

already difficult lifestyle. Coll complains about the “abuses and predations of the upper classes” and the obvious injustice inflicted upon the peasantry by denying their right to cultivate the land (Edminster 3).

To illustrate the effects of this exploitation of the lower classes, Coll exhibits discontent by saying “In faith we are nearhands / Out of the door” meaning that in reality these husbands, including himself, are practically homeless. He describes his superiors as “these men who are lord-fest” or men who work hand in hand with feudal oppressors, who “cause the plow tarry” or inhibit efficient farming. By saying that these men “reave us our rest” Coll is depicting them as heartless oppressors that overwork their peasantry for self-gain “In point to miscarry” or to the point of absolute ruin on the part of the impoverished. With this strong emotionally driven expression of frustration, the rivalry between the upper and lower classes are apparent (Greenblatt & Abrams 409).

Furthermore, Coll gives the audience a glimpse of these lord-fest men’s self-righteousness by saying:

For may he get a paint-sleeve
Or a brooch nowadays,
Woe is him that him grieve
Or once again-says.
(Greenblatt & Abrams 410)

This suggests that these men become full of pomp and inflated pride once they are granted a position of authority by their lords, instantly becoming haughty and tyrannical towards opposition. Coll’s perspective on his oppressors is especially lucid when he states, “I were better be hanged / Than once say him nay”, which means that these men would rather have him killed than hear rebuttal (Greenblatt and Abrams 410). The sarcastic tone that Coll uses helps amplify his dissatisfaction and thus makes it easier for the audience to relate to his anger. His tone is forceful at times, for example when he says “Thus hold they us under, / Thus they bring us in blunder, / It were a great wonder And ever should we thrive,” which emphasizes the oppressive aspects of these lords rule over the husbandry and the lack of opportunity these peasants have now that they are so heavily subjugated (Greenblatt and Abrams 409). Coll describes the hierarchy more clearly when he implies that even these men who demonstrate “boast and bragance” are themselves supervised by even higher standing upper class men, or “Men that are greater” (Greenblatt & Abrams 410).

To better call attention to the emotional aspect of Coll’s situation, the Wakefield Master uses rhyme and meter to his advantage in order to achieve a desired effect on his audience. His use of rhyme is essential to epitomizing Coll’s tone from stanza to stanza. The alliterative effect he attains when he says “We are so hammed, / fortaxed, and rammed” with the use of the words “hammed” and “rammed” expresses his absolute exasperation as a result of these oppressive measures their superiors undertake. The audience can tell that the stress is placed on all three of those expressive words (Greenblatt & Abrams 409).

Furthermore, alliteration utilized through the words “napped”, “chapped”, and “lapped”, express fatigue, feeling of being worn out, and being overwhelmed respectively. All of these rhyming words by definition emphasize weariness and melancholy and are continuously stressed throughout the stanza, giving the audience a constant reminder of Coll’s emotional state and sorrowful tone. In the same way, the words “wary” and “tarry” when Coll exclaims, “Our Lady them wary! / These men that are lord-fest, / They cause the plow tarry”, both have similar effects on the audience since by definition, wary is a curse and tarry is an unwelcomed interference. Because they rhyme, the audience understands the frustration that Coll is experiencing with these gentry-men’s ill-governance (Greenblatt & Abrams 409). Additionally, one can see how Coll’s tone changes in the last stanza by looking at the rhyming words, “walk”, “talk”, and “stalk” that express a sort of monotony and passivity that Coll feels as he realizes that after sufficiently articulating his dissatisfaction, he must to his work (stalking after sheep) (Greenblatt & Abrams 410).

Throughout Coll’s lament, the Wakefield Master uses key literary techniques to demonstrate the social and political aspects of society in this time period as expressed through a character that experiences these truths firsthand. The recurring themes of hardship and class antagonism throughout the soliloquy help convey the discontent of the peasant class. The melancholy and torment the shepherds suffer is well highlighted through Wakefield’s expert use of rhyme and alliteration to reveal the suffering the peasant class must endure as a result of hierarchical tyranny. The Wakefield Master’s skillful use of these elements makes him a great influence for the future of professional English theater, and an excellent example of a great medieval mystery playwright

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