## TOSSING MAK AROUND

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One of the major difficulties faced by the teacher of dramatic texts is getting students who are used to reading poems and narratives to realize that the words on the page are not the play itself but rather a "script" for its performance, and that any interpretation of the text must take conscious account of the non-textual aspects of that performance. Our understanding (as well as our teaching) suffers if we ignore these necessary complements to the dramatic text. We all have our favorite examples to call students' attention to the necessity of "visualizing the performance" in order to understand the play. When the action accompanying the words is indicated in the scripted words, or in stage directions, we can justify the necessity more readily. However, where these aids to the imagination are absent we must work harder to summon up the embodiment of the text in action. When we are ignorant or uncertain about the conventions of staging, movement, and delivery--as we are generally about medieval drama--we must work very hard indeed to convince ourselves, and to inform our students, about what "must be going on" in a particular play. With a very few exceptions, we must try to recover the "performance" from the scanty evidence of the texts themselves. Unfortunately, most medieval playwrights did not use their dialogue, as Shakespeare and others frequently did, to tell the audience what is happening and where it is occurring; and medieval directors and scribes did not rubricate the text for the benefit of later readers.

The character Mak in the Wakefield "Second Shepherds' Play" provides an effective way to highlight these issues. And discussing his role in the play can lead a class to examine some larger issues about the process, and goals, of literary criticism--as well as its limits. First, I describe how scholars have offered many interpretations and explanations of Mak: he is an outcast, a Cain-figure; a diabolical deceiver; Antichrist, or his herald; an emblem of the effects of socio-economic oppression; a sinner functioning as audience-surrogate . . . . The list can be extended and the competition among these views is fairly fierce because some resolution of the issue is necessary: without understanding Mak we cannot understand this play. On the other hand, by focusing on his comings and goings, we can, I think, illuminate the *idea* of the "Second Shepherds' Play."

The last we see of Mak in the play demands that we engage in acts of dramatic and of historical imagination: after his "hee frawde" is uncovered by the three shepherds they "cast hym in canvas." This event has been variously interpreted: it is "some rough fun," a punishment, an act of ridicule or of forgiveness, an aid to the onset of childbirth (given metaphoric, or symbolic, weight), [p. 147] or a subtle figuration of the spiritual winnowing of the wheat from the chaff at the eschaton. The disagreements are many, and the subtle refinements in nuances indicate the wide range of critical interpretation--as well as the implied necessity of having this wordless event cohere with interpretative views derived (presumably) from careful reading of the text. The critics' views of the "meaning" of the canvas tossing depend not on its own significance, externally determined, but rather on how this neutral (or ambiguous) sign attains meaning from the context in which it occurs.

However, even after these possibilities are examined, there remain a couple of questions about this event in the play that need answering. Even if we opt for one interpretation of the canvassing of Mak or even if we lean toward its being a polysemous symbol, we are left with some unresolved critical matters--which those who have exercised themselves on the canvassing of Mak seem to have almost completely ignored. For example, what happens to Mak after the shepherds have finished tossing him about? Does he lie on the ground? Does he go home? Does he depart the "stage" altogether (however that might be accomplished)? To choose among these options is to make very different sense of the play.

After he is "cast in canvas," Mak says nothing more in the play. But where is he when he is silenced? Is silence the dramatic equivalent of non-existence? Does absence from the ears dictate absence from the eyes? From the mind? This play has a number of "entrances," but no obvious exits: the three shepherds and Mak all "enter" at the beginning. On the matter of exits, however, the play remains silent. Movements in and from and to the *plataea* (= undifferentiated acting space, usually not distinct from the audience) are reported; likewise for the two *stationes* (= fixed, defined settings, associated with one or more of the characters). We are left uncertain, however, about some important matters, such as where does Mak come *from* when the manuscript reports his entrance: "Tunc intrat Mak"? Our sense of his character, and his moral comparability (or incomparability) to the shepherds, will dictate our answer. If Mak enters from his *statio* and returns to it at the end, then we imply by this that he operates as some kind of principle of disorder and evil; we align him with the forces of darkness, and must, I think, take his repentance at the end as a further "frawde."

But I do not find the implication of Mak's moral fixity altogether satisfactory; to imply his damnation goes against what I feel to be the play's presentation of his humanity. He may be morally worse than the three shepherds, but they are not perfect by any means, and it is their moral development that the play charts. So I wonder about Mak, and try to get my students to wonder about him: Where does he go when the shepherds go to Bethlehem? Does he go home (because he is unregenerate)? Does he stay in the *plataea* (because he has become a bit more humanized by his experience, on the road to true repentance [p. 148] if not yet quite ready to enter the ranks of the morally enlightened)? Or does he perhaps tag along, silent, behind the shepherds (to suggest that he too has received some moral revelation in the course of his experience, and that he has moved from parody to participation, even if he cannot proclaim it with the fluency of the shepherds)? Or does he exit into the audience (and so give pointed effect to the moral lesson of the play)? All these seem to me *possible*. But only one of them can be right at any given time, for any given performance. The play's director must choose one or other action. This "performance fact" I force on my students, to make them sharpen their own readings of the play, and to help them produce their own conclusions to the play that arise from considerations of its central issues, of its integrity as a work of high art. This also provides a way for me pointedly to make the case that they cannot hide behind the contemporary critical Laodicaeanism: that the text can mean all of these things. It certainly didn't when it was performed, and the effort to interpret becomes an act of historical imagining, an effort to find the "best" solution to a problem that, practically speaking at least, can admit of only one solution.

I then go on to raise similar questions about the location of Mak and Gill's house and its relation to the Bethlehem stable. Are these two settings visible throughout, on either side of the *plataea*, with Mary, the Child and the Angel as present to view as Gyll in her cottage? Or does Bethlehem "replace" Mak and Gyll's cottage—with the complications that such a substitution would raise for deciding where Mak might go after the blanket-tossing, to say nothing of the moral implications that would arise from a doubling of the parts that some have suggested accompanies this transformation of the cottage into the Bethlehem stable? These are not insignificant questions: a director must make decisions about such matters, and the reader too must at least ask what are the grounds on which such decisions can be made? Then we are left to ask how we test the adequacy or superiority of any of the options available to us?

Even if we leave aside the problematic question of determining authorial intention, we may still find it useful to grapple with historical questions about the actions and movements and locations likely to have been employed at Wakefield. Furthermore, unless we wish to hide entirely from the implications of such questions for our reading and interpretation, we ought not, even in the face of our nearly absolute ignorance, claim that these questions are insignificant. Since we don't have (and may never have) the "safety net" of performance records or reviews, nor a clear sense of the pertinent theatrical conventions and traditions, we cannot depend on such authorities to guide our choice. We have a text of the play. But it is only an outline, a supplement. In the absence of stage directions, or other authority, we fall back on the slippery "meaning" of the play as the authority for our performance, and where the text is silent, we must still decide: How am I going to deal with Mak's entrance [p. 149] and his exit (if indeed I have him exit)? To do otherwise would be to misread and misrepresent the play as it survives.

After I have raised these questions and critical problems, I try out my "solution." By such interpretative experiment I try to stimulate my students to question their own solutions, since I am not entirely confident that mine really qualifies as the "best." Also, I am less interested in arriving at some firm consensus than in raising more questions and in suggesting the kinds of things which could be adduced as "evidence" to support their decisions. I begin with my two basic axioms: first, that the action of this play, as many have pointed out, essentially operates on parodic principles, and second, that these principles are best served by having Bethlehem on one side of the *plataea* and Mak and Gyll's cottage on the other. With such background, what can we say about the events after the canvassing of Mak? After the shepherds toss Mak around, they lie down to sleep--the second time in the play they do this (a repetition that I argue is structurally and thematically important to the play). In the first instance the shepherds insist that Mak sleep in their midst. In the second, let us presume (in the absence of contrary evidence) that he too is worn out from the exertion and lies down with them. This not only applies Ockham's razor to the problem, but provides a striking punctuation of the play's action, making clear the subdivisions in the play's orderly structuring of the plot.

What happens in the case of the first sleep scene? Mak gets up, chants a magic spell, steals a sheep and departs for his home, leaving the shepherds to sleep on. What does the text tell us about the second sleep? An angel arrives (the real "sond from a greatt lordyng"), sings the *Gloria*, the shepherds arise, discuss the angelic pronouncement and the prophecies, and depart for Bethlehem. To mark the contrasting actions, I suggest that in the second instance Mak should be the one to remain asleep while the shepherds depart and return. At the level of the play's moral lesson, this would work well: Mak has not achieved the shepherds' enlightenment, but he is also not consigned to static anti-Christianity, nor is he consigned to some outer darkness by being "off stage." He has reached the *plataea*, has learned something, seems to be morally improved, but is not yet fully awake to the spiritual realities that the shepherds now recognize. The play, in this view, is morally optimistic, not Manichaean; reform, even of the deceitful Mak, is possible, but such reform is represented in this play as first of all a process within an individual, not some transformation arising primarily from external or transcendent revelation.

I find that the attempt to recover this play's meaning gains in force and specificity if it is cast in these performance terms, if students try as directors to choose among the viable options before us for the location and action of these characters. Does it make a difference if we choose to locate the Bethlehem stable and Mak and Gyll's cottage on [p. 150] opposite sides of the acting area? Or if, to choose the more common alternative, we replace the cottage with the stable for the last scene? Of course it does. Each version has its attractions, but as directors we cannot have both. As readers and critics we may contemplate the two possibilities, but we must be ready to choose between them when the necessity for action replaces the freedom of thought. Likewise, we must do something with Mak--he must come from somewhere, and we must decide what happens to him when he goes silent. On these decisions, and through the process of sifting and assessing evidence which permits us to arrive at such decisions, we not only arrive at informed interpretations of the play, but we also put ourselves more immediately in the presence of the enacted drama and its historical situation. I find this approach to the "Second Shepherds' Play" leads to better understanding of the play; and it has the additional benefit of raising crucial, and helpful, questions about the process of reading and deriving meaning from literary texts. Some of these lessons can be extrapolated from the study of "The Second Shepherds' Play" and applied effectively to other historical literary and artistic artifacts.