



The Trope of the Loveable Rogue: Mak in *The Second Shepherd's Play*

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Abstract: This paper examines Mak's role in *The Second Shepherd's Play* as a negative moral exemplar within medieval

drama's didactic framework. Contrasted with the charitable shepherds, Mak embodies deception, selfishness, and spiritual estrangement. His exclusion from the Nativity revelation reinforces the play's message that charity, forgiveness, and virtue receive divine reward.

Keywords: The Second Shepherd's Play, Mak, Wakefield Master, Medieval Drama, Didacticism, Nativity, Charity, Forgiveness, Comic Parody, Religious Symbolism.

If one were to focus on the assertion that Medieval drama were mostly written with the intention of commemorating certain religious and social events with chiefly didactic purposes directed towards the audience, then it automatically follows that the characters in such plays were created as pegs for hanging a moral argument from. Then, if we may dissect *The Second Shepherd's Play* on that note, it must beg the question that what purpose does Mak, perhaps the most memorable character in the play serve, especially since he does not seem to embody any holistic moral argument?

A charitable view of Mak might paint him as an anti-hero, a sort of energizer within a serious theological theme resented in the form of comic parody. Mak's wife and the sheep disguised as a baby serve as a crude representation of the holy family of Joseph, Mary, and baby Jesus. The treatment meted out to him by the three shepherds upon the scandalous discovery of the lie he had been selling them may also be interpreted as an unholy parody of the holy ending.

It is easy to classify Mak as a dishonest rascal, one who exploits his position of poverty for sympathy among his mates and also subsequently endeavors to sustain himself and his wife through unscrupulous means. Even if one tries to be sympathetic towards his conditions and pleads for some consideration in this regard, such a plea does not hold much

water when he is compared to the three shepherds in the play, Coll, Gib, and Daw. The play's opening sequence is structured around three consecutive melancholic soliloquies from these three, in which they take turns to complain about the various hardships they face in their respective lives. Coll highlights the effect that the biting cold weather has on him. He points out that he is not wrapped in enough clothes which makes him extremely uncomfortable. Furthermore, he complains about the harsh treatment that is meted out to him by the wealthy landowners who make him work long hours on their land for very limited pay, leaving him little time for rest. Coll can be said to be a representative of the contemporary peasant class, pointing out their oppression at the hands of the feudal landowning class. Like Coll, Gib also feels terrible in the harsh cold. However, it seems that his problems are of a more domestic and personal nature, as Gib feels beleaguered by his wife whom he considers an ugly and insufferable nag. He delivers a speech bemoaning the demerits of marriage and wails that a wedding is only a fancy term for the imprisonment of man. Daw suffers from the weather like his mates, as he compares the ongoing storm to Noah's flood, emphasizing on the effect he fears it might have on him. He furthermore says that he suffers from hunger and malnourishment, a fact that highlights his sorry position.

In light of these facts, it can be easily ascertained that the plight of the three shepherds were indeed pitiable. Yet, their conduct is entirely different in the face of hardship, when compared to that of Mak. While the latter comes across as a clever rogue who has managed to figure out how to cheat the system and make off with ill-gotten gains, the three shepherds are simple in their outlook and prefer to suffer in silence instead of blaming anyone else or using their misery as an excuse to project further misery onto this world. When Mak's elaborate lie of having another baby is exposed and he is caught for the theft of their sheep, the shepherds find it in

themselves to forgive the man and not kill him in revenge, even though had Mak succeeded in his little heist, it would have caused them significant damage. Upon witnessing the sad conditions in which Mak and his wife live, they take pity upon him and decide to humiliate him by wrapping him up in a blanket and tossing him up and down, and ultimately chasing him and his wife out of their house. This incident supposedly emphasizes upon the power of forgiveness and its capacity to lead to redemption, foreshadowing the event of nativity that is yet to be shown in the play.

Another demonstration of Mak's character is his refusal to either practice or accept charity. The Wakefield Master uses his character as an example for the audience as to how not to behave. Mak argues that God's will does not include him and thus he acts in his own interest without any empathy for his fellow humans. Mak's character may be outlined as the prototype for the blaspheming and selfish atheist that the Wakefield Master seems to despise. In fact, right before he makes off with the stolen sheep, he utters a parody of Luke 23:46 by saying 'into thy hands I commend to Pontius Pilate', a disrespectful rendition of Christ's original speech where he said to God 'into thy hands I commend my spirit' before perishing on the cross to save humanity. Mak also displays his hubris towards the beginning of the play as he tries to trick the shepherds into believing that he is an important man from the south, implying that they are beneath him.

As a result of his unholy behavior, Mak is not invited back into the fields with the shepherds and he subsequently does not witness the angel announcing the birth of Christ. As a result, he does not get to travel to Bethlehem and witness the son of God, a privilege which the three shepherds enjoy due to their sustained charity and forgiveness. Thus, the play ends with a clear message that an ideal life lived in the service of humanity shall always be rewarded by the Lord, and makes an example out of Mak as instruction on how not to live a life.

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