The Second Shepherd's Play

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ANONYMOUS

Known to modern literary scholars as the Wakefield Master, the anonymous author of *The Second Shepherd's Play* was likely a cleric who lived in or around Wakefield in York. The Wakefield Master was active during the last quarter of the fifteenth century and likely worked on several other Wakefield plays. He is known for his skillful combination of lighthearted farce with solemn religious content, making his mystery plays entertaining, relatable, and impactful.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Second Shepherd's Play reveals the tumultuous social, political, and economic climate of late-fifteenth-century England. Deeply impoverished laypeople—just like Coll, Gyb, and Daw in the play—were oppressed by wealthy landowners, being forced to work long hours for very little pay. In addition, the staging of *The Second Shepherd's Play* is also an indication of Medieval England's social and political fabric. Like all mystery plays, *The Second Shepherd's Play* was put on by a local guild, a sort of medieval trade union that also had political and religious objectives and was comprised of middle-class skilled workers. Guilds were a product of the increasing power and prosperity of cities.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Second Shepherd's Play is meant to follow *The First Shepherd's Play* in the mystery cycle, a play also attributed to the Wakefield Master. *The Second Shepherd's Play* is also similar in tone and content to the morality play, *Everyman*, which was also composed during the late fifteenth century. Like *The Second Shepherd's Play*, *Everyman* is marked by Christian themes and events, as well as a similar brand of slapstick humor, but *Everyman* differs in its treatment of characters as allegorical representations of good and evil.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Second Shepherd's Play*
- **When Written:** Around 1475 – 1500
- **Where Written:** Wakefield
- **When Published:** Around 1475 – 1500
- **Literary Period:** Medieval
- **Genre:** Mystery play
- **Setting:** Medieval England and Bethlehem
- **Climax:** When the shepherds discover the stolen sheep in the comic plot and see Christ in the religious plot
- **Antagonist:** Mak and Gill

EXTRA CREDIT

Famously Funny Many scholars consider Mak to be one of the most humorous character in Medieval literature, second only to Chaucer's characters.

Where is it Now? *The Second Shepherd's Play* exists within the Towneley Manuscript, currently stored at the Huntington Library of California in Pasadena.

PLOT SUMMARY

The Second Shepherd's Play opens with soliloquies from three different shepherds: first Coll, then Gyb, then Daw. Coll feels beaten down by the icy, wet, miserably cold weather that he must endure each night as he watches over the sheep. He's also beaten down by the wealthy landowners who put him in this position in the first place—when raising sheep became more profitable than farming, the landowners demanded that all their workers become shepherds. The shepherds work long hours in the blistering cold, make very little money, and have no way to stand up to the rich and powerful landowners.

The next shepherd who appears is Gyb. He, too, complains about the bitter cold and the harsh conditions. Besides the weather, Gyb feels oppressed by his marriage and he openly (and aggressively) wishes his wife were dead. He likens her looks to a pig and says he feels imprisoned. Eventually Gyb notices his friend Coll and goes to join him.

The third shepherd—Daw, a young boy who works for Coll and Gyb—enters. He complains, like the others, about the unforgiving weather, noting that this storm must be as powerful as Noah's flood. He feels oppressed not by the landowners or by marriage, but by his own hunger. He notices Coll and Gyb and goes to join them. The shepherds decide to stop wallowing in their misery and sing a nativity song ("The Holly and the Ivy") to cheer themselves up.

They notice a man named Mak is approaching. Mak has a reputation as a thief, with a specific penchant for stealing sheep. Pretending to be an important visitor from the south, Mak covers his head with a cloak and puts on a thick, fake accent. The shepherds don't buy Mak's disguise, so Mak gives up on that strategy. Instead, he tries to gain their sympathy, complaining that he has too many children at home (his wife has one child every year, sometimes two children). Mak claims

that his wife irritates him and drinks all the time, and he has no money or food for the family.

When night falls, all the shepherds must sleep. They force Mak to sleep between them so that the shepherds will sense if Mak gets up during the night to steal one of their sheep. In the middle of the night, Mak gets up and quickly casts a spell over the shepherds to ensure they won't wake up until long after daybreak. He steals a sheep and brings it home to his wife, Gill, who reminds him that stealing a sheep is punishable by death. However, the family is hungry (and Mak and Gill are both fond of manipulation and trickery), so they devise a plan to be able to keep the stolen sheep: Gill wraps the sheep in swaddling clothes to pass it off as a newborn baby. If the shepherds realize a sheep is missing and come knocking, Gill says she will lie in bed and feign pain, pretending she gave birth in the middle of the night. Mak approves of the plan and returns to the field where the other shepherds are still asleep. He hopes that by repositioning himself between the shepherds, it will look like he slept there the whole night and they won't suspect him as the thief.

When the shepherds wake up, Daw recounts a nightmare he had in which one of their sheep was stolen. Mak lies and says he, too, had a nightmare, although in his dream his wife gave birth to yet another child. Coll, Gyb, and Daw go to check on the sheep, and Mak returns home. The shepherds realize a ram is missing and immediately suspect Mak. They hurry to his house to confront him.

When the shepherds arrive, Mak and Gill put their plan into action. The sheep is wrapped up tightly in swaddling clothes, and Gill moans loudly about how much pain she is in post-childbirth. The shepherds search the house, but much to their surprise, they don't find their missing sheep or any lamb meat. In fact, they don't find any food whatsoever in the house. Sheepishly, they apologize to Mak for blaming him and joke that Mak's new baby smells as bad as their missing sheep did. To make further amends with Mak, the three shepherds extend to him an offer of friendship. Still trying to get the shepherds to leave, Mak sharply declines the offer, and the shepherds depart. Shortly after they leave Mak's house, however, the shepherds realize they didn't leave any sort of gift for the baby. They feel bad for blaming Mak and they're sorry for him due to his poverty and houseful of children, so the shepherds turn back.

Daw is first to turn up at the door again. Mak and Gill are flustered, thinking that they had already pulled off their trick. They try to shoo Daw out the door once more, but Daw says he wants to peek at the baby. He pulls back the cloth and is startled to see the missing sheep looking up at him. A desperate Mak attempts to think on his feet, exclaiming that their baby was stolen by fairies and then deformed. Once again, the shepherds don't buy Mak's story. Although stealing a sheep is punishable by death, Coll decides that simply humiliating Mak will be punishment enough. The three shepherds toss Mak in a blanket and leave with their sheep.

After all of the commotion with Mak—and after carrying a 140-pound-sheep back to the field—Coll, Gyb, and Daw are even more exhausted than they were before. The moment they lie down to rest, they are interrupted by an explosion of light and song. An angel appears before them, singing "Gloria in excelsis Deo" and exclaiming that Christ has been born. The angel urges the shepherds to go visit the baby boy born in Bethlehem. Stunned, the three shepherds immediately head for Bethlehem. They no longer care that they are cold, wet, tired, and poor—they just want to see Christ as soon as they can and they worry that they may be too late.

When they arrive in Bethlehem, each shepherd presents a gift to the newborn baby—from Coll, a bunch of cherries; from Gyb, a bird; and from Daw, a ball. The shepherds rejoice at meeting baby Jesus and know they are redeemed. Mary tells the shepherds to always remember this day, and as the play closes, the shepherds burst into a joyful song.

CHARACTERS

Coll – Coll is one of the protagonists of the play, alongside his two other shepherd companions, Gyb and Daw. The eldest of the three shepherds, Coll has the most political complaints and attributes his suffering to the wealthy landowners who force him to work long hours for little pay. Despite his struggles, Coll is empathetic and forgiving in the face of adversity. After finding out that Mak stole one of their **sheep**, a crime punishable by hanging, Coll shows Mak mercy and compassion by sparing him from the death penalty, even while Daw demands that Mak (and Gill) to be hanged.

Gyb – Gyb is the middle of the three shepherds (older than Daw but younger than Coll) and is also a protagonist. Like Coll, Gyb's life is marked by hardship, however he specifically feels oppressed by his marriage to his obnoxious, nagging wife. Besides his soliloquy at the beginning of the play, Gyb is the least outspoken of the shepherds, as his lines are the shortest and most infrequent.

Daw – The third protagonist, Daw, is the youngest of the three shepherds and reports to Coll and Gyb. Daw is treated somewhat poorly by Coll and Gyb and is plagued by his constant hunger and poverty. He shows the widest emotional range throughout the play. At times, he acts with compassion and warmth, such as when he runs back to Mak's house ahead of the other shepherds to give Mak's newborn baby a present. Other times, he is solemn and deeply religious: he is the first to urge the other shepherds to embark on their journey to Bethlehem to see Christ, he admonishes Coll and Gyb for trying to humorously replicate the Angel's song, and he notes how the nativity has erased their earthly suffering. However,

Daw is also the most violent of the shepherds, shown when he vehemently calls for Mak and Gill to receive the death penalty for stealing their **sheep**. Daw's wide emotional range reinforces that he is the youngest of the shepherds and reveals the way he gets swept up by his emotions.

Mak – Mak is the primary antagonist of the play, husband of Gill, father of several children, and enemy to the three shepherd protagonists, Coll, Gyb, and Daw. Widely known as a thief, Mak steals a **sheep** from the other shepherds, even though he knows the offense is punishable by hanging. Mak is deeply impoverished and struggles to feed his wife and children. Instead of working, Mak prides himself on making more by stealing than he could make with a steady job. Throughout the play, Mak is prideful, deceitful, and selfish. He blatantly turns away from God, acting instead in accordance with his own self-serving will.

Gill – Gill is an antagonist of the play, wife to Mak, and mother to several children. Cunning and deceitful, Gill is the mastermind behind the plan to disguise the stolen **sheep** as a newborn baby and to pretend she has just given birth in order to deceive the shepherds. Though she reminds Mak several times that theft is punishable by hanging, Gill is excited by the trick and wishes to help Mak with even more complicated schemes. Like Gyb's wife, Gill nags Mak constantly, although Mak and Gill's bickering is often playful.

Christ – Christ is the Son of God and the baby born in Bethlehem to Mary. The three shepherd protagonists—Coll, Gyb, and Daw—visit him and bring him humble **gifts**. By his birth, the Christ child brings redemption to mankind. As an infant, Christ has no lines in the play, and the only noise he makes is when he "merries" and "laughs" when Coll presents him with cherries.

Angel – The Angel is the heavenly being that appears to the three shepherds, Coll, Gyb, and Daw, between the comic subplot and the religious plot. The Angel sings "Gloria in Excelsis Deo" and explains the details and significance of Christ's birth. The Angel encourages the shepherds to travel to Bethlehem to see Christ, thus shifting the story from comedy to religious pedagogy.

Mary – Mary is the mother of Christ. Like the Angel, Mary reveals the significance of Christ's birth to the shepherds. She tells Coll, Gyb, and Daw that they are redeemed and urges them to tell others about what they've experienced in Bethlehem. Mary is the most overly pedagogical character in the play, as she reinforces the play's purpose of teaching religious lessons to a lay audience.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

EARTHLY VS. SPIRITUAL

The Second Shepherd's Play shows that worldly situations—no matter how banal or absurd—are always imbued with the sacred. The play's very structure embodies this idea. The first part of the play—the plotline in which Mak steals a **sheep** from the shepherds (Coll, Gyb, and Daw)—seems wholly devoid of spirituality, focusing instead on problems that belong solely to the earthly realm. The second part of the play, however, which is the story of the shepherds visiting Christ after his birth, is a religious rehashing of the original plotline. The parallels between the two parts of the play suggest that spiritual life is inseparable from earthly life, even if the spiritual aspect of life on earth isn't immediately apparent.

Most of *The Second Shepherd's Play* feels devoid of spirituality. It takes place in Medieval England, which is also when the play was first written and staged. The shepherds complain about things of this world: the weather, oppressive landowners, nagging wives, thievery, and hunger. Save for the occasional hymn or mention of the Church, the content feels largely of this world and separate from spiritual life. The crude humor also seems to set the first half of the story in a secular world. For example, when Mak initially fools the shepherds into thinking that the stolen lamb is actually his newborn baby, the shepherds apologize and joke that Mak's baby smells as bad as their sheep did.

The second part of the play, which is openly spiritual, seems at first glance to be utterly disconnected from the first part. The second part of the play departs from the earthly first part through a character swap. Mak, Gill, and the lamb are replaced by a deeply religious trio—the Angel, Mary, and Christ—highlighting that the second part of the play centers on spirituality. The play underscores the difference between its two parts with a rupture in geography and chronology. Though the first part of the play is set during the Middle Ages in England, the shepherds hear of the birth of Christ in Bethlehem and journey to see the baby. The nativity would have taken place several hundred years prior to the Medieval Period, so this is an enormous anachronism. Additionally, the swift shift from the shepherds lying in the fields of England to the shepherds presenting **gifts** to Christ in Bethlehem suggests that the journey was short, which has no basis in geographic reality. Though the trip to Bethlehem on foot should take weeks or months, when the shepherds arrive, the baby Jesus is still an infant in the stable. The anachronism and geographic impossibility of the second part of the play would have been obvious to its audience, which suggests that its strangeness is deliberate. Perhaps the discontinuity in time and geography is

meant to suggest that the sacred is not bound by the realities of earth, and that spirituality is relevant to and accessible from all times and places on earth.

Although the material world from the beginning of the play and the spiritual world from the end of the play seem to stand apart from one another, the earthly and spiritual are actually closely knit together. Parallels run between the two stories, highlighting their similarities. In addition, the inclusion of religious hymns throughout the play links earthly life to spiritual life. The Christian hymns sung throughout both the earthly and spiritual parts of the play are the clearest continuity between the two halves, suggesting that the spiritual interpretation of the play is more important than seeing it as simply a comedy. Both the earthly and spiritual plotlines are set in motion by a hymn. The shepherds burst into song several times, each time singing a religious hymn. At the beginning of *The Second Shepherd's Play*, they sing "The Holly and the Ivy," a song about the nativity and redemption. The song details the events of the nativity even though, according to the play's timeline, the nativity hasn't happened yet. The hymn further weaves the two timelines together, underscoring the connection between spirituality and worldly life. In addition, several moments of plot and symbolic parallelism link the two halves, ultimately underscoring the spiritual message hidden within the earthly first part of the play. While a stolen lamb wrapped in swaddling clothes appears to be the comical result of a clever trick, it actually parallels the Lamb of God wrapped in swaddling clothes in Bethlehem. In both plotlines, the shepherds embark on a journey to present a baby with a gift. When the shepherds see the lamb wrapped in swaddling clothes, they forgive Mak for his sins. When the shepherds see the Lamb of God wrapped in swaddling clothes, they know that *they* are forgiven, referring to him as their "sovereign saviour."

While the striking shift in tone from the play's first half to its second might seem inelegant, it makes more sense when understood in the context in which the play was originally performed. As a "mystery play," *The Second Shepherd's Play* was meant to teach biblical lessons to illiterate laypeople. The first part of the play—with its crude humor, familiar struggles, and relatable characters—seems meant to draw the audience in. The audience is able to see themselves as Coll, Gyb, and Daw (or maybe even as Mak and Gill), which makes the play's earthly events and lessons more resonant. Furthermore, by carrying the shepherds over from the comic plotline to the religious plotline, perhaps the play meant to make religion seem more relevant and accessible to a lay Medieval audience. The parallelism between the nativity story in Bethlehem and the story of the stolen sheep in Medieval England underscores the timelessness of the nativity, emphasizing that the nativity is important throughout all times and places. Ultimately, the play suggests that if the audience looks closely enough, they can see the miracle of the nativity playing out alongside their everyday lives, just as the Nativity in Bethlehem plays out alongside the daily lives of the shepherds.

CHRISTIAN CHARITY

The Second Shepherd's Play centers on Christian charity, or *caritas*. In this case, charity doesn't exclusively mean giving to the poor, but rather showing love to others in the same way that God loves mankind. Furthermore, the play argues that charity is a choice. Over the course of the play, the shepherds (Coll, Gyb, and Daw) gradually learn to show Christian charity by extending friendship, giving gifts even though they have very little to offer, and most importantly—in the deepest form of charity—by offering forgiveness. This demonstrates that charity must be much more than loving God—people should always choose to love their neighbors, even when that neighbor seems undeserving. The shepherds' acts of charity lead to their redemption, revealing that by showing genuine charity to others, God will show charity in return.

Mak is much like the typical Medieval European audience member, as he is not inherently good, nor is his life extraordinary. However, the author uses Mak as the example of how not to behave, since Mak neither practices nor accepts acts of charity. Mak says God's will doesn't include him: "By thy will with me, more than I can tell, / Lord, lack I." Mak acts according to his own will. Right before he steals the shepherds' **sheep**, Mak says, "*Manus tuas commendo / Pontio Pilato*," which means "into thy hands I commend to Pontius Pilate." This is a parody of Luke 23:46, when Jesus calls out to God, "into thy hands I commend my spirit," before dying on the cross. Mak also tries to put himself above the other shepherds by initially pretending to be an important southerner: "…I'm a yeoman of the king / And a messenger from a great lordling / …I must have reverence! / Dare you ask, who am I?" Representing the social ills of the rich dominating the poor that the author wishes to critique, Mak consistently chooses to act selfishly and deceitfully

In a similar way, the author uses the shepherds as the "everyman" figures who are not inherently good and whose lives (at least for most of the play) are not extraordinary in any way. In contrast with Mak, however, the shepherds choose to act charitably even in difficult situations. Their acts of charity towards Mak show the importance of behaving charitably, even when that charity is not reciprocated. Each act of charity that the shepherds perform leads them to another act of charity. When the shepherds offer Mak their friendship, he rejects them. This leads the shepherds to try to present Mak with a gift to relieve his poverty, which he also rejects. The gift leads the shepherds to discover that Mak's newborn baby is, in fact, the stolen sheep. Despite Mak's continuous rejection of their charity (not to mention his original theft of their sheep and his lies to cover his tracks), the shepherds still offer Mak

forgiveness. With the shepherds as the exemplar for choosing to act charitably, the author encourages the audience to practice charity in a time and place rampant with social ills, suggesting that acts of charity may heal society.

The shepherds' relentless commitment to unreciprocated charity results in their spiritual salvation, which suggests that by showing genuine charity to others, a person invites God's charity towards them. Neither Mak nor the shepherds are inherently good, but they both have the potential to be redeemed by Christ, and their differing fates at the end of the play give the audience a stark portrait of how their actions might invite consequences or rewards. After being tossed in a blanket as punishment for his misbehavior, Mak is not invited to return to the fields with the other shepherds. Consequently, Mak does not hear the Angel and is not invited to Bethlehem to see Christ. This cause-and-effect pattern shows that Mak's consistent selfishness and deception prevent him from being redeemed. The shepherds, by contrast, are rewarded for their consistent charity towards Mak by being called to meet the Christ child, a journey which results in God forgiving them for their sins. It is the shepherds' choice to consistently choose charity throughout the course of the play that deems them worthy of the ultimate act of charity: seeing Christ and being redeemed. In contrast, Mak's unwillingness to accept or show charity leaves him unworthy to go to Bethlehem and be redeemed

In *The Second Shepherd's Play*, the author highlights that *caritas*, or Christian charity, extends beyond loving God to loving one's neighbor. The play teaches charity by showing the audience the divergent fates of a character who refuses charity while actively harming others and characters who demonstrate charity in the face of insult and misbehavior. Like the audience, all of these characters are imperfect and all have the potential to be redeemed by Christ, but only the charitable characters are rewarded with salvation. This shows that charity—in the form of friendship, material gifts, and forgiveness—reaps its own spiritual rewards, even if it is unrewarded on earth.

SUFFERING AND REDEMPTION

Throughout most of *The Second Shepherd's Play*, the three shepherd protagonists—Coll, Gyb, and Daw—are repeatedly beaten down by bad weather, exhaustion, hunger, and other people. Even though this oppression seems crippling and constant, the play suggests that Christ's redemption and forgiveness have the power to relieve earthly suffering. The shepherds prove themselves to be worthy of this redemption by forgiving Mak for his thievery and manipulation. In this way, the play suggests that Christ redeems the suffering of those who show mercy themselves, while leaving those who are wicked and unmerciful—like Mak—in their oppressive earthly conditions.

The Second Shepherd's Play opens with long soliloquies from Coll, Gyb, and Daw, who each complain about the oppression they face. Coll says he is cold and sleep-deprived, and feels oppressed by the wealthy landowners who force him to work long hours for very little pay. Like Coll, Gyb feels beaten down by the freezing cold, but he also feels oppressed by his nagging wife, who makes him feel imprisoned by marriage. Daw thinks this storm is as powerful as Noah's flood and thinks about how the weather affects everyone. He also feels oppressed by hunger. The shepherds' complaints are lengthy and impassioned, highlighting the extent of the pain and hardship that they endure and setting the stage for Christ to relieve them of their suffering.

Though the shepherds are clearly miserable, when they experience yet another setback—Mak's theft of one of their **sheep**—they find themselves able to forgive him. The shepherds find the stolen sheep wrapped in swaddling clothes at Mak's house, proving Mak's guilt and making him eligible for the death penalty. However, after seeing the poverty and misery in which Mak and his family live, the shepherds decide to punish him through humiliation (tossing him in a blanket), rather than calling for his death. This is an act of mercy that saves Mak and shows the goodness of the shepherds, who are able to forgive someone who has made their already difficult lives even harder. This foreshadows the play's major instance of redemption—the nativity—which is still to come.

In fact, the play shows how the shepherds' earthly suffering melts away through the power of the nativity. Early in the play, after giving their soliloquies about the hardships they face, the shepherds are deeply miserable, and they decide to sing "The Holly and the Ivy"—a song about the nativity—to cheer themselves up. In the context of the play, the nativity hasn't happened yet, so it seems that the shepherds are singing of the promise of the nativity. Once they finish the song, the shepherds' initial complaints about the weather, landowners, hunger, and wives cease. This shows the power of the nativity: the mere *promise* of Christ's birth has the power to eradicate the shepherds' present suffering. Similarly, when the Angel appears to the shepherds announcing that Christ has just been born, they realize that their cold and tired state no longer matters as much. They note that "If we be wet and weary / Still, we'll find the child and lady." This comment demonstrates that, even though the weather is still brutally cold and the shepherds are exhausted from carrying the 140-pound stolen sheep back to the fields, they were chosen to see Christ, and they've been redeemed. In light of this, all that matters is getting to Bethlehem immediately to see Christ. Earlier in the play, thoughts of the nativity that is to come help the shepherds forget about and cope with their suffering. The *actual* nativity erases their suffering in a more substantial way, as the shepherds realize that Christ can save—not just distract—them from their suffering. When the shepherds present their **gifts** to Christ in Bethlehem, Mary notes that the men are redeemed.

She says Jesus was born "To keep you from woe," highlighting that the oppression the shepherds face is blotted out by Christ. Daw says, "I pray thee be near when I have need," showing that Christ will remain with the shepherds on a spiritual level and will intervene in times of trouble. Coll notes that Christ has cursed and beaten Satan: "Thou hast cowed at last the devil so wild / The false beguiler now goes beguiled." This phrase also points back to Mak, who is also a "false beguiler," highlighting that Christ has the power to save the shepherds from earthly oppressors, as well.

Although the birth of Christ traditionally means redemption from mankind's sins rather than relief from mankind's suffering, the play emphasizes redemption from suffering rather than sin. This would have been a deeply alluring promise to the play's Medieval audience since, as the shepherds' soliloquies point out, Medieval Europe was a tumultuous time rife with poverty, starvation, tyrannical landowners, and fierce weather. By suggesting that belief in the power of Christ can save people from the hardships that permeate their everyday life, the play lures its lay audience towards spirituality and good behavior. Since the shepherds' act of forgiveness toward Mak leads them to be forgiven (in the religious sense of the word), the play encourages the audience to practice forgiveness amongst themselves by promising them relief from their difficult lives in return.

SONG AS A MEANS FOR TRANSFORMATION

The Second Shepherd's Play is a "mystery play," which is a Medieval play meant to simultaneously entertain the audience and teach them biblical lessons. Echoing the mystery play's twofold purpose, the songs in *The Second Shepherd's Play* are meant to be both engaging and didactic. They pull the audience in with their beauty or humor, while simultaneously providing serious religious teaching on the importance of the nativity. Throughout the play, songs appear in moments associated with transformation; they shift the tone between scenes, and they transform the shepherds' moods, and later, their lives, when the Angel appears to them and sings of Christ's birth. This association of song with transformation reveals the purpose of the songs: to transform the audience's lives by luring them into spiritual truth through entertainment, showing that even lighthearted song can be a vehicle for serious religious messages.

At the beginning of the play, song is a tool to lighten the mood and make the play entertaining. "The Holly and the Ivy" marks the play's initial shift in tone from serious and socially critical (as seen in the shepherds' soliloquies) to lighthearted and farcical, as seen with Mak's comical introduction. Throughout the play, song adds an entertaining texture, infusing the action with both beauty and comedy. This is most notable when Mak sings an out-of-tune lullaby to the "baby," which is actually the stolen **sheep** in swaddling clothes. When the shepherds—Coll, Gyb, and Daw—enter Mak's home, Mak exclaims that the shepherds must speak more quietly as to not wake the baby, which points to the farcical nature of the first half of the play. The entertaining nature of the songs keeps the audience engaged throughout the play and breaks up the heavy, religious content into more digestible pieces.

However, song is shown to have a much more serious purpose, as well. This is first hinted through song's power to lift the shepherds' moods. After reciting their soliloquies and wallowing in their sadness, the shepherds sing to cheer themselves up. Singing uplifts them, giving them something fun to do together that will band them together and momentarily take their mind off of their struggles. It's also significant that the song they sing—"The Holly and the Ivy"—is a nativity song. The uplifting message of the nativity combines with the cheering element of song to transform the shepherds' moods. This combination of religion and entertainment suggests that, although faith is solemn and significant, it is also full of beauty and hope.

Just as song transforms the shepherds' moods at the beginning of the play, it transforms their lives at the end. When the Angel sings of Jesus' birth to the shepherds, they realize that they have been chosen to journey to Bethlehem and meet the Christ child. This leads to their salvation, which is the ultimate transformation of their lives, as it relieves their suffering and grants them eternal life.

While the Angel's song signals profound spiritual transformation, its structural role in the play—as a hinge between the first comic and second spiritual half, and as the first indication of the parallel plotlines of those halves—underscores the transformative power of song. After the Angel who sings of Jesus' birth disappears, the shepherds are in awe of the Angel's musical skill. Jokingly, Coll asserts that he can sing as well as the Angel—a brief moment of comedy that marks the pivot between the comedic first part of the play and the solemn, religious end of the play. In addition, the Angel's song reveals the parallelism in the play's two plotlines. The shepherds, who sing a nativity song at the beginning of the play, go on to forgive Mak and transform his life by sparing him from the death penalty. The Angel, who also sings a nativity song, transforms the shepherds' lives by leading them to their salvation in Bethlehem. The play's emphasis—thematically and structurally—of the transformative power of song comes to a powerful conclusion when the play ends with the shepherds singing about the nativity so that the audience will hear the story of Christ. This suggests that the play's songs are meant to be a way of transforming the audience's lives by informing them of Christ's power to redeem them. By closing with the shepherds' intention to spread the news of the nativity, the play encourages the audience to do the same, which points to the power of song to transform lives both inside and outside the

play's action.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

SHEEP

The sheep Mak steals from the three shepherds—Coll, Gyb, and Daw—symbolizes Christ, the Lamb of God. Wrapped in swaddling clothes and visited by three shepherds bearing gifts, the sheep represents the Christ child in the classic nativity story. The stolen sheep—and the shepherds' decision to bring it gifts when they think it is a baby—also foreshadows the shepherds' journey to Bethlehem to bring gifts for Christ. Serving as a link between the comic and religious plotlines, the sheep reveals a deeper purpose to the farcical first part of the play and infuses the entire play with a sense of cohesiveness and religious meaning.

THE THREE GIFTS

The three gifts that Coll, Gyb, and Daw bring for the Christ child—a bunch of cherries, a bird, and a ball—symbolize Christ's status as the Son of God. With their crimson-red juices, the cherries signify the blood Christ will spill for the sake of the world through his eventual crucifixion and redemption of mankind. The bird represents the Christian symbol of a dove, reflecting the peace Christ brings to the earth. Lastly, the ball symbolizes the orb. A common symbol in the Medieval period, the orb is often depicted in Medieval art with a scepter and represents power and royalty. Thus, the ball represents Christ's power and status as a spiritual King. Together, the three gifts reveal Christ's status as human and God. In addition, the gifts also reflect the shepherds' generosity despite their crippling poverty, ultimately leading them to earn redemption.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Branden Books edition of *The Second Shepherd's Play* published in 2011.

Scene 1 Quotes

❝ We are so hammed, / Over-taxed and rammed, / We are made hand-tammed / By these gentlemen.

Related Characters: Coll (speaker), Daw, Gyb

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.15-18

Explanation and Analysis

At the opening of the play, Coll gives a lengthy and impassioned soliloquy, complaining about his difficult life as a shepherd and pointedly blaming the wealthy landowners for his suffering. Coll's emotionally-charged complaints are reflective of Medieval England's social and political fabric, which was characterized by extreme poverty and tyrannical landowners. Just like his other shepherd companions, Gyb and Daw, Coll is forced to work long hours as a shepherd for very little pay. Used in succession, the rhyming words "hammed," "over-taxed and rammed," and "hand-tammed" have the rhythm of a hammer that beats Coll over and over again, emphasizing that Coll's struggles are crippling and constant. Since these lines appear in the opening moments of the play, they also suggest that suffering—and later, redemption from suffering—will be a key theme throughout the course of the play.

❝ There was never since Noah's flood such weather seen. / …How these snows all drown / The fields and the town / And bear all down, / 'Tis a wonder!

Related Characters: Daw (speaker), Gyb, Coll

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.74, 79-82

Explanation and Analysis

In his soliloquy, Daw likens the brutal storm to Noah's flood from the Old Testament, recognizing the way harsh weather affects everyone in the vicinity, regardless of whether they are rich city-dwellers or poor shepherds in the fields. While Daw's comment says something about the intensity of the storm, it also reveals Medieval England's divisive social makeup. Daw suggests that the gap between rich and poor is so wide that it takes a powerful, natural force—a storm strong and widespread enough to rival Noah's flood—to bridge the class divide. In addition, by comparing the present storm to a biblical one, Daw reveals the subtle religious underpinnings of the worldly first part of the play that will take a central role in the second part.

> Ere we go now, I would someone gave us a song.
> So I thought, as I stood, to beguile us along.

Related Characters: Gyb, Daw (speaker), Coll

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.111-112

Explanation and Analysis

After each of the three shepherd protagonists—Coll, Gyb, and Daw—give their long, sad soliloquies, Daw suggests that they stop wallowing in their misery and distract themselves with a song. Gyb agrees, noting that a song will "beguile us along," illustrating the way that singing has a cheering quality. This is the first instance of song in the play, as well as the first time that song is implied to have a transformative power—a theme that pervades the play up until its closing lines. In this instance, singing transforms the shepherds' sour moods and temporarily alleviates their suffering.

> Let be! I'm a yeoman of the king / And a messenger from a great lordling / ...I must have reverence! / Dare you ask, who am I?

Related Characters: Mak (speaker), Daw, Gyb, Coll

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.131-132, 136-137

Explanation and Analysis

Coll, Gyb, and Daw see Mak, a well-known thief, approaching. The shepherds recognize him instantly and address him by name, but Mak ignores their greeting and pretends to be an important visitor from the south. In the Middle English version of the play, Mak uses the word "Ich," the southern dialect of the word "I'm," contrasting with the shepherds' northern accents. Using his disguise, Mak tries to falsely put himself above the shepherds, pretending to be a powerful foreigner rather than a lowly local thief. Mak is immediately depicted as prideful and manipulative—he even goes so far as to demand that the shepherds show him respect as if he were their superior. Notably, Mak's poor conduct will leave him humiliated by the end of the play, while the shepherds will be saved by the Christ child as a result of their goodness. Therefore, Mak's imitation of power and importance does not reflect his fate—the shepherds wind up on top.

> Manus tuas commendo / Pontio Pilato.

Related Characters: Mak (speaker), Daw, Gyb, Coll

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 1.194-195

Explanation and Analysis

When Coll, Gyb, and Daw lie down to sleep for the night, they force Mak to sleep between them so that they will sense if he gets up in the middle of the night to steal one of their sheep. However, as soon as the shepherds fall asleep, Mak casts a spell upon them to ensure they don't wake up. He then pledges his allegiance to Pontius Pilate in this Latin quote. Mak's phrase is a parody of Luke 23:46, when Jesus, dying on the cross, calls out to God, "Into thy hands I commend my spirit." In contrast, Mak aligns himself with Pontius Pilate—the man who ordered Jesus to be crucified. By doing so, Mak shows that he consciously chooses to defy God's will and follow his own selfish impulses.

Scene 2 Quotes

> I am worthy of my meat, / For in a trice I can get / More than they who strive and sweat / All the day long.

Related Characters: Mak (speaker), Gill

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 2.14-17

Explanation and Analysis

When Mak returns to his shack to show his wife, Gill, the stolen sheep, she warns him several times that stealing is punishable by hanging. Flippantly, Mak waves off her warnings and confidently asserts that he can provide for his family better by stealing than by working. Mak tries to justify his theft by making it seem as if he is doing his family a favor, rather than stealing for his own benefit. In addition, he shows no remorse for his actions and actually looks down upon "they who strive and sweat / All the day long," meaning shepherds like Coll, Gyb, and Daw who work long hours. In this instance, and throughout the course of the play, Mak acts according to his own self-serving will, even when it hurts others. It's this kind of behavior that makes

the angel pass over Mak and reward the shepherds instead with Christ's salvation.

Scene 4 Quotes

Were a worse plight, I'd find a way still.

Related Characters: Gill (speaker), Mak

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 4.30

Explanation and Analysis

Despite being the mastermind behind the plan to disguise the stolen sheep as a newborn baby, and despite theft being a crime punishable by death, Gill still craves a bigger challenge. She tells her husband, Mak, that even if the plan were more complicated and dangerous than this one, she would still be able to help him pull it off. Gill's desire for a bigger challenge reveals her to be as prideful and manipulative as her husband—if not more so—as she seems to want to take part in a more dangerous scheme just for the thrill of it. Like her husband, Gill shows no signs of remorse for the theft or empathy for the hardworking shepherds who are now missing a sheep.

Scene 6 Quotes

Oh, my belly! I die! / I vow to God so mild / If ever I you beguiled / Then I will eat this child / That doth in cradle lie!

Related Characters: Gill (speaker), Daw, Gyb, Coll, Mak

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 6.61-65

Explanation and Analysis

While Coll, Gyb, and Daw search Mak and Gill's shack for any sign of their missing sheep, Gill cries out in fake postpartum pain and makes sweeping claims that she and her husband are innocent. She assures the shepherds that if she has ever tricked them, she will go so far as to eat her newborn in the cradle—which, unbeknownst to the shepherds (but fully known to the audience), is the stolen sheep that she and Mak have every intention of eating later. Gill's dramatic outburst is an example of the crude humor peppered throughout the first part of the play—a type of humor that the Wakefield Master was known for weaving throughout his mystery plays. It's also ironic, since she suggests that the consequence of her lying to them (which she is) is to do the very thing she most desires—to eat the sheep.

Sirs, for this deed, take my advice instead / For this trespass. / We will neither curse not fight / Nor dispute our right / We'll tie him up tight / And toss him in canvas.

Related Characters: Coll (speaker), Daw, Gyb, Gill, Mak

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 6.138-143

Explanation and Analysis

When the shepherds realize that Mak and Gill have been disguising the stolen sheep as their newborn baby all along, Daw is furious and is adamant that Mak and Gill face the standard punishment for theft—death by hanging. However, Coll reveals himself to be the most compassionate of the three shepherds and convinces Gyb and Daw to let Mak and Gill off easy. Instead of demanding Mak and Gill be hanged, the shepherds need only humiliate Mak by tossing him in a blanket. While humiliating Mak isn't a wholly compassionate thing to do (they could, for example, empathize with his plight and leave him be), it's an act of literal salvation (saving his life) that mirrors Christ's salvation of mankind. Therefore, the shepherds' mercy for Mak makes them worthy of an even greater act of charity later in the play, when the Angel chooses them to be saved by the Christ child.

Rise, herdsmen, rise, for Christ is born / To rend that fiend that Adam had lorn / The Saviour of all, this night is he born. / His behests / To Bethlehem go see / Where lies this baby / In a crib full poorly / Betwixt two beasts.

Related Characters: Angel (speaker), Christ, Daw, Gyb, Coll

Related Themes:

Page Number: 6.153-160

Explanation and Analysis

After carrying the 140-pound sheep back to fields, Coll, Gyb, and Daw are more exhausted than before. The moment that they finally lie down to rest, the sky ignites with light and sound, as an Angel appears, singing "Gloria in Excelsis Deo." The Angel tells the shepherds of Christ's birth and urges them to depart for Bethlehem immediately. The Angel's song, like all of the songs in the play, is transformative. In this instance, song transforms the mood of the play from comical and lighthearted (and, at times, absurd) to solemn and religious. The Angel's song and accompanying commentary also transforms the shepherds' lives, because it serves as a catalyst for their journey to Bethlehem to see Christ and earn redemption.

Hie we thither right merry / If we be wet and weary / Still, we'll find the child and lady, / We cannot lose.

Related Characters: Daw (speaker), Christ, Mary, Gyb, Coll

Related Themes:

Page Number: 6.182-185

Explanation and Analysis

Once the Angel departs, the three shepherds know they must get to Bethlehem immediately to see the Christ child. Daw notes that with Christ on the forefront of their minds, all of their earthly suffering melts away. Even the sleep deprivation and relentless storm that have been hounding them for the duration of the play no longer matter as much. The mere promise of seeing Christ gives the shepherds renewed purpose and comfort. This is similar to when, at the opening of the play, the shepherds sing a nativity carol to distract themselves from their earthly struggles. The theme of redemption from earthly suffering deepens once the shepherds arrive in Bethlehem and come face to face with the Christ child.

Scene 7 Quotes

Thou hast cowed at last the devil so wild / The false beguiler now goes beguiled.

Related Characters: Coll (speaker), Gill, Mak, Christ

Related Themes:

Page Number: 7.3-4

Explanation and Analysis

Once they arrive in Bethlehem, Coll, Gyb, and Daw present their humble gifts to the Christ child while Mary looks on. Before presenting Christ with his gift, a bunch of cherries, Coll declares that Christ's birth has cast out Satan, whom he calls "The false beguiler." However, since the word "beguiler" appears frequently in the first part of the play in the context of Mak and Gill's theft, Coll's comment implies that Christ's birth also does away with earthly "false beguilers," or tricksters, like Mak and Gill. Thus, the play affirms that Christ can save mankind from both spiritual and worldly oppressors.

And now he is born. / To keep you from woe / I shall pray him so, / Tell it forth, as ye go, / And mind on this morn!

Related Characters: Mary (speaker), Daw, Gyb, Coll, Christ

Related Themes:

Page Number: 7.32-36

Explanation and Analysis

Once all three of the shepherds have presented their gifts to Christ, Mary explains the significance of Christ's birth, declaring that Christ will keep them out of harm's way. She also urges the shepherds to spread the news of the nativity, consequently revealing herself to be the most religiously pedagogical character in the play. Since the heart of the mystery play is to teach religious lessons, Mary's lines are some of the most important lines in the play, even though they are brief. Her comments about Christ's power and significance extend beyond the shepherds and to the audience, implying that Christ will not only keep the shepherds safe, but will protect the entire audience, as well.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

SCENE 1

Standing alone in an open field in the middle of a raging storm, a man named Coll complains about the hardships he faces as a shepherd. He feels beaten down by the brutally cold weather, his lack of sleep because of constant work, and his crushing poverty. Most of all, he feels beaten down by the wealthy landowners who forced him into this line of work. He hopes to run into his fellow shepherds soon, since they can at least empathize with his struggles.

The play begins with a series of complaints, revealing that suffering will be a key idea. Furthermore, Coll's complaints are largely political, which is reflective of broad discontent among Medieval England's lower classes with the feudal system. Coll's complaints would be familiar to the Medieval lay audience, who would likely empathize with Coll's poverty and long work hours at the hands of tyrannical landowners.

Another shepherd, Gyb, enters. Thinking he is alone, Gyb grumbles to himself about the bitter cold and his terrible marriage. He likens his wife to a hen for her henpecking tendencies, to a pig for her looks, and to a whale for her size. Gyb feels imprisoned by his marriage to her and wishes he could escape. His increasingly aggressive soliloquy is interrupted when Coll calls out to get his attention. Gyb greets Coll with playful mock-contempt and asks if Coll has seen Daw.

Gyb's complaints are less political than Coll's, centering instead on his nagging wife. While Coll feels imprisoned by the wealthy landowners, Gyb feels imprisoned by his marriage—a struggle that the lay audience could also likely relate to.

Daw, a young shepherd boy who serves Coll and Gyb, enters. Not yet noticing the other shepherds, Daw remarks to himself about the raging storm, likening it to Noah's flood and recognizing the way powerful storms affect everyone in the vicinity, regardless of whether they are rich city-dwellers or poor shepherds in the fields. He notices his masters, Coll and Gyb, in the distance and joins them, complaining to them about his gnawing hunger. Coll and Gyb scoff at Daw, telling him that because he was late in meeting up with them, they ate his portion of the evening meal.

By likening the storm to Noah's flood, Daw reveals the subtle religious texture of the first part of the play. His remark about the storm's ability to affect all people—regardless of wealth or status—is indicative of Medieval England's stratified social climate. He suggests that it takes something natural and powerful to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor. When Coll and Gyb admit to (and even boast about) eating Daw's share of the meal, we are reminded that the protagonists are not just innocent victims—they, too, have the capacity to be unjust and unkind.

Daw mutters about how poorly he is treated, and Coll and Gyb scold him for complaining (despite the both of them having just indulged in long, sorrowful soliloquies at the opening of the play). Daw proposes they sing to pass the time, and Gyb agrees that a song would help lift their spirits, so the three men sing the nativity carol "The Holly and the Ivy." After completing their song, the shepherds' complaints cease. Their attention is quickly turned to Mak, a well-known thief, whom they see approaching.

This is the first appearance of song in the play, and song is shown to have a transformative quality, shifting the play's tone away from serious, socially critical territory into the comedic plotline. Singing also momentarily transforms the shepherds' moods by distracting them from their misery. The song, "The Holly and the Ivy," is a nativity song. According to the play's anachronistic timeline, the nativity hasn't actually happened yet, so the shepherds are singing here of the mere promise of the nativity, which is enough to quiet their complaints for now.

Although the shepherds recognize Mak immediately, Mak pretends to be an important visitor from the south of England, claiming with a thick, phony southern accent to be a "yeoman of the king" and "a messenger from a great lordling" and demanding the shepherds show him "reverence." When Mak's trick fails, eliciting nothing but laughter and snide remarks from the shepherds, he ditches his disguise and instead tries to earn the shepherds' pity by complaining about his difficult life.

Mak is immediately shown to be a trickster. He tries one thing after another to manipulate the shepherds, including disguising himself as an important southerner. With his thick, fake southern accent (in the Middle English version of the play, he speaks in a southern dialect) and his demand that the shepherds show him respect, Mak tries to falsely put himself above the other shepherds and seem superior.

Mak whines that he is hungry, tired, and sick, and has a house full of children that he is responsible for feeding. His gluttonous wife, Gill, does nothing but eat and drink, save for giving birth to one or two more children each year. Wishing her dead, Mak says that he longs to go to mass to "offer / Her burying-penny."

Like the shepherds, Mak's life is saturated with hardship. However, while most of the shepherds' complaints were voiced during soliloquies—when each shepherd thought he was alone—Mak complains about his suffering directly to the shepherds in order to gain their sympathy. Like Gyb, Mak is unhappy with his marriage. However, while Gyb wishes he could lose his wife, Mak implies that he wishes his wife were dead—he wants to go mass the following day to pay for her burial. Mak also blames his wife for having one or two more children each year, but he avoids taking his share of responsibility for those births. Throughout this entire interaction, Mak paints himself as the victim.

The "weary," "worn," and "forlorn," shepherds give into their exhaustion and lie down to rest. Nervous about Mak stealing one of their sheep while they sleep, they force Mak to spend the night between them so that they will sense if he gets up during the night. Mak complies with the sleeping arrangements, but once the shepherds fall asleep, he casts a spell on them to ensure they don't wake up till morning. Pledging his allegiance to Pontius Pilate by reciting "*Manus tuas commendo / Pontio Pilato*," Mak snatches the fattest **sheep**.

Before stealing a sheep, Mak utters, "Manus tuas commendo / Pontio Pilato," a parody of Luke 23:26, when Jesus, dying on the cross, calls out to God, "into thy hands I commend my spirit." Mak aligns himself with Pontius Pilate, the man who ordered Jesus to be crucified, making it clear that he acts not according to God's will, but according to his own. The reference to Pontius Pilate also points to the subtle religious underpinnings in the first part of the play that will be fully apparent by the second part.

SCENE 2

Pounding on the door to his shack, Mak calls out for his wife, Gill, to undo the latch. Gill is annoyed by the middle-of-the-night interruption, claiming she can't make any money since she is "Always pestered," but she lets her husband in anyway. When Mak proudly brandishes the stolen **sheep**, Gill sternly reminds Mak that theft is punishable by hanging. Mak waves off her comments, confidently asserting that he can provide better for his family by stealing than by working.

Although Mak has made Gill out to be a nag, Gill's comment about being "Always pestered" shows the henpecking goes both ways, and that their marriage is characterized by constant bickering. Gill's reminder to Mak that stealing sheep is punishable by hanging reveals her to be more levelheaded than her husband. When Mak disregards her warnings, declaring that he can make more by stealing than working, he shows that he acts according to his own self-serving will, regardless of the consequence.

Mak wants to eat the **sheep** immediately, but Gill stops him, reminding him that Coll, Gyb, and Daw will certainly suspect Mak of the crime and will come looking for their stolen sheep. Gill proposes that instead of eating the sheep right away, they disguise the sheep as a newborn baby until they can appease the shepherds. To make the trick more believable, Gill will lie in bed groaning as if she has just given birth.

Gill is the mastermind behind the plan to disguise the stolen sheep as a newborn baby, showing how she is quick-thinking, cunning, and deceitful. In contrast, Mak's haste to eat the sheep shows he is impulsive and careless.

Mak agrees to his wife's clever plan and returns to the fields where the shepherds are asleep, hoping it will appear as if he obediently slept amongst them the whole night. That way, when the shepherds inevitably discover one of their sheep is missing, they will have less of a reason to suspect Mak of the crime.

Mak is willing to go to great lengths to feign innocence. He thinks that returning to the fields will help prove his innocence, even though the shepherds have been suspicious of him all along.

SCENE 3

Coll, Gyb, and Daw awaken from their deep, spell-induced sleep. After quickly checking that Mak is still with them, Daw reveals a dream he had during the night, where Mak dressed in a wolf skin and stole one of their **sheep**.

Daw's dream conflates Mak with a wolf, implying that Mak is similarly sneaky, cunning, and dangerous. It is interesting that it is the youngest shepherd who has the prophetic dream—not an older, presumably wiser shepherd like Coll or Gyb.

Pretending to groggily awaken, Mak claims to have had a dream that his wife gave birth to yet another child in the middle of the night, even though they already have too many mouths to feed.

Mak's fake dream is part of his plan to make his wife's birth seem more believable, and it's also another chance for Mak to draw attention to himself and gain the shepherds' sympathy by playing the victim.

Before Mak returns home to his wife, he tells the shepherds to search him to prove that he hasn't stolen from them. As Mak departs, Daw tells Coll and Gyb that they should go check on their **sheep** just in case.

The shepherds are able to see through Mak's ploy despite his sweeping claims to innocence. This echoes the way the shepherds immediately saw through Mak's disguise earlier in the play.

SCENE 4

Mak returns to his hut from the fields. Beginning to feel nervous, Mak tells Gill that the shepherds will immediately suspect him when they realize one of their **sheep** is missing. Gill is unruffled, confident that their plan to disguise the sheep as a newborn baby will go over smoothly. She points out that even if their plan was more complex and dangerous, she would still be able to help Mak pull it off.

Gill's willingness to help Mak in even more difficult schemes reveals that she is as mischievous and deceitful as her husband. Her desire for a more dangerous plan also shows that she is a thrill seeker: a ploy that is punishable by death isn't satisfying enough for her.

Preparing for the shepherds' imminent arrival, Gill tells Mak to sing a lullaby to the swaddled **sheep** while she groans in fake postpartum pain.

Gill once again authoritatively directs the plans and reveals herself to be the real mastermind in the scheme and the marriage. She adds another layer to her already-clever plan by demanding Mak sing a lullaby to make the birth seem more believable.

SCENE 5

Back in the fields, the shepherds discover one of their **sheep** is missing and immediately suspect Mak and Gill. Angrily, the shepherds claim that they will not rest until they prove Mak guilty and recover their sheep. Coll knows where Mak lives, so the three men set off to confront him.

The shepherds not only suspect Mak—they suspect Gill as well, implying that Mak and Gill are known to be partners in crime (literally). Also, the shepherds are shown to be somewhat vengeful here, even if their anger is justified.

SCENE 6

Coll, Gyb, and Daw arrive outside of Mak's shack and are startled by the din Mak and Gill are making: Gill groans, while Mak sings abrasively and out of tune. The shepherds shout for Mak, who immediately admonishes the shepherds for speaking so loudly. He tells them they must whisper, as his wife is in severe pain having just given birth. Gill complains that even the sound of the shepherds' footsteps is too loud.

Although this could be a serious, even violent, encounter—the shepherds are angry at the loss of their sheep, and theft is a crime punishable by death—Mak's lullaby infuses the whole scene with lighthearted comedy. Lullabies are meant to be soft and soothing, but Mak's lullaby is off key, abrasive, and loud. Yet, Mak and Gill still insist the shepherds speak quietly and tip toe, adding to the scene's absurdity and humor.

Mak tells the shepherds that his dream about Gill giving birth in the night actually came true. The shepherds ignore his comment and tell him that one of their **sheep** has gone missing. Brazenly, Mak declares that had he witnessed the theft, he would have beaten up the culprit. Coll, Gyb, and Daw remark that they have reason to believe Mak is the thief.

Mak again tries to act superior, falsely putting himself above the other shepherds by claiming that only he would be able to stop the theft. Mak's deception and scheming seems to know no bounds, and he betrays no signs of shame.

Mak claims he is innocent and tells the shepherds to search his house. As the shepherds begin their search, Gill turns hysterical, claiming the shepherds are here to rob them and must leave at once. She says if she and Mak are lying about the **sheep**, then she "will eat this child / That doth in cradle lie."

Gill claims that if she has ever tricked the shepherds, she will go so far as to eat her newborn baby in the cradle—which, of course, is the sheep that she has every intention of eating later. Gill's comment is an example of the crude, slapstick humor that characterizes the first part of the play.

The shepherds fail to find their **sheep**, dead or alive, in Mak's shack, let alone any food whatsoever. Trying to ease the tension, Coll jokes that Mak and Gill's newborn baby smells as bad as their sheep did. The shepherds apologize to Mak for blaming him for the crime and encroaching on his space. They extend to him an offer of friendship, which Mak huffily rejects, insisting they leave at once.

The shepherds and the reader gain empathy for Mak in this encounter, as the shepherds see Mak's poverty firsthand while they search for their sheep. Not only do the shepherds not find the sheep—they don't find any meat or food whatsoever in Mak's home. The shepherds' newfound empathy is what leads them to extend to Mak an offer of friendship. Coll's joke about Mak's newborn smelling as foul as the missing sheep is another instance of the crude humor peppered throughout the first part of the play—one of the elements that sets the earthly first part of the play apart from the spiritual second part.

Not long after the shepherds depart, they realize that they failed to leave a gift for the baby. Daw runs back ahead of the others to present Mak with a sixpence. Meanwhile, thinking he had finally gotten away with his trick, Mak is startled to see Daw at his door once again and tries to send him away.

Even though Mak has just rudely rejected their offer of friendship, the shepherds still prioritize bringing Mak a gift for his newborn. They don't stop to discuss whether or not Mak is worthy of a gift, which reveals the shepherds' commitment to acting charitably even in difficult situations. Daw is the first to volunteer to run back to Mak's shack to bring a gift, showing his compassion and warmth.

Daw insists upon at least seeing the baby to give him a kiss. He pulls the cloth back and reveals—to his surprise and Mak's horror—the stolen **sheep**. Coll and Gyb finally catch up to Daw and see the sheep lying exposed in the cradle.

This is the first instance of the shepherds being rewarded for their charity. It is the shepherds' good intentions—bringing Mak a gift to relieve his poverty even after he rejected their offer of friendship—that leads them to uncover their stolen sheep. Wrapped in swaddling clothes and visited by three shepherds bearing gifts, the sheep represents the Christ child in the classic nativity story.

Coll and Gyb are amused by the cleverness of Mak and Gill's trick, but Daw is infuriated, demanding Mak and Gill be hanged for their crime. Desperately, Mak and Gill claim that their child has a broken nose, so that's why he looks strange. Gill also claims their child was stolen by a fairy and deformed.

Daw's violent outburst—right after his warmhearted plea to kiss Mak's newborn baby and leave him with a gift—reminds us that Daw is the youngest of the three shepherds and is easily swept up by his emotions. Daw's violent declaration that Mak and Gill must be put to death contrasts with Coll and Gyb's simultaneous amusement and annoyance. Meanwhile, Mak and Gill's increasingly absurd explanations for their baby's sheep-like appearance are reflective of the mystery play's purpose: to entertain and engage an audience while teaching religious lessons (the latter of which will appear later in the play).

Daw is adamant that Mak and Gill face the death penalty, but Coll compassionately spares Mak and Gill from being hanged. He convinces the other shepherds to "...neither curse nor fight / Nor dispute our right." Coll says humiliating Mak will be punishment enough, so all they need to do is toss him in a sheet, reclaim their sheep, and leave.

Coll reveals himself to be the most compassionate of the three shepherds, urging the others to forgive Mak for his wrongs and spare him and his wife from the death penalty. By letting Mak off with an easy punishment, the shepherds show their willingness to forgive someone who made their difficult lives even harder. Unbeknownst to the shepherds, they will be significantly rewarded for this act of charity.

That night, the shepherds return to the fields more exhausted than before, having carried their 140-pound **sheep** back with them. The shepherds collapse onto the grass to sleep when suddenly the skies explode with light and sound. An Angel appears, singing "Gloria in Excelsis Deo." The Angel urges the shepherds to go to Bethlehem, where the Christ child has been born "to rend the fiend that Adam had lorn."

The appearance of the Angel seems startlingly out of sync with the tone and content of the play so far, and the Angel's song shifts the play from crude and comical to solemn and religious. Notably, it is the shepherds—not Mak and Gill—who are chosen to see the Christ child, suggesting that the shepherds' consistent acts of unreciprocated charity have made them worthy of seeing Christ. It's also important to note that the angel is an anachronism—since the shepherds are in Medieval England and have been singing nativity carols for the duration of the play, it is jarring that the nativity is only just now unfolding.

The Angel vanishes as suddenly as it appeared, leaving Coll, Gyb, and Daw to marvel at what they've just witnessed. Jokingly, Coll and Gyb try to imitate the Angel's ethereal song, but Daw scolds them. Despite their bickering, all three shepherds know they must immediately depart for Bethlehem to see the Christ child.

Coll and Gyb's joking imitation of the Angel's impressive song temporarily shifts the tone of the scene away from spiritual territory and toward a lighthearted brand of humor that feels familiar from the first part of the play. This brief moment of comedy reveals how the Angel's song acts as a hinge between the two parts of the play: the funny, worldly plotline about the stolen sheep and the serious, religious plotline about the nativity.

Daw declares that it no longer matters that they're cold, wet, and tired—all that matters now is getting to Bethlehem as soon as possible to see Christ. The three shepherds sing another carol as they embark for Bethlehem.

Daw implies that the mere promise of seeing Christ has the power to melt away the earthly struggles that have been weighing on them throughout the play—an idea that will gain weight by the end of the play. Once more, the shepherds sing, moving the play from one scene to the next and transforming the setting from England to Bethlehem.

SCENE 7

Skipping the shepherds' actual journey, Scene VII opens with Coll, Gyb, and Daw at the stable in Bethlehem with Mary and Christ. Each of the three shepherds prepare to present Christ with a **gift**.

The omission of the shepherds' journey from England to Bethlehem implies the trip was short—another anachronism, as a trip to Bethlehem on foot would have taken weeks or months. The scene's exclusion of the shepherds' journey is reminiscent of the way the play glosses over the shepherds' journey to Mak's shack earlier in the play, revealing the first instance of parallelism between the two plotlines. Likewise, just as the shepherds brought a gift to Mak's child, the shepherds bring gifts to the Christ child—both instances show the shepherds' generosity despite their deep poverty.

Coll praises Christ for defeating the devil, noting how Christ's birth means that "The false beguiler now goes beguiled." Referring to Jesus as "my sweeting" and admiring the way he "merries" and giggles, Coll gifts the Christ child with a **bunch of cherries**.

Coll uses the phrase "the false beguiler now goes beguiled" to indicate that Christ's birth has cast out the devil. However, the "false beguiler" also seems to imply Mak and Gill, suggesting that Christ has the power to save mankind from both spiritual and worldly tormenters. Coll's gift is reflective of Christ's power: the blood-red cherries signify Christ's blood, which will be spilled in the crucifixion for the sake of mankind. Coll recognizes the two sides of the Christ child: the powerful Son of God who has cursed the devil and the sweet, little baby who giggles happily.

Gyb calls Christ the "sovereign savior" and presents him with a **bird**. He lovingly refers to the Christ child as "Little day star" and "little tiny mop."

Upon seeing baby Jesus, Gyb calls him the "sovereign savior," recognizing that Christ has been sent to save mankind. The bird Gyb gifts to Christ evokes the Christian symbol of a dove, reflecting the peace Christ brings to the earth. Like Coll, Gyb also recognizes Christ's humanity, lovingly nicknaming him "Little day star" (pointing back to the star in the traditional nativity story that helped guide the shepherds to Bethlehem) and "little tiny mop."

Daw's heart breaks at the sight of Christ's poverty. Calling baby Jesus "darling dear, full of Godhead," Daw presents him with a **ball** with which he can play tennis. He also asks Jesus to "be near when I have need."

Echoing the other shepherds, Daw sees Christ as both the savior of the world and a tiny newborn baby. The ball Daw gives Christ symbolizes an orb, revealing Christ's status as a spiritual King. The orb is a common symbol in Medieval art, often illustrated with a scepter to depict royalty and power. Daw's comments are significant because they suggest that Jesus will remain with the shepherds on a spiritual level and will intervene in times of trouble.

Mary explains the significance of Christ's birth, declaring that the Christ child is the Son of God sent to earth to redeem mankind. She urges the shepherds to spread the news of Christ's birth and to always remember their experience in Bethlehem.

Mary emphasizes that Christ can save, and not just distract, the shepherds from their earthly suffering. Traditionally, the birth of Christ means redemption from mankind's sin rather than suffering, but the play emphasizes the latter. This would have been an attractive promise to the play's Medieval audience, since Medieval Europe was saturated with poverty and political strife. By explicitly stating the significance of Christ's birth and urging the shepherds to spread the good news, Mary reveals herself to be the most overtly pedagogical character. Her presence reinforces the play's purpose of teaching religious lessons to a lay audience.

Coll, Gyb, and Daw know they are redeemed. They decide to spread the news of the nativity through song and leave Bethlehem singing joyful praises.

The shepherds decide to spread the news of the nativity through song, a medium that is accessible even to the illiterate—including the play's lay audience. In this way, the shepherds sing so that even those outside of the play, meaning the audience themselves, will hear the story of Christ and will be transformed. By closing with a song, the Wakefield Master also encourages the audience to spread the gospel in their daily lives.

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