
Warren Edminster. *The Preaching Fox: Festive Subversion in the Plays of the Wakefield Master*. New York: Routledge, 2005. 230p.

RICK McDONALD
UTAH VALLEY STATE COLLEGE

In *The Preaching Fox*, Warren Edminster painstakingly delineates the festive attributes of the plays traditionally attributed to the Wakefield Master. However, Edminster's analysis does more than just exhibit how the Master's plays partake of elements of the carnivalesque; as the evidence mounts, we begin to perceive how recurrent thematic means of employing festive elements serve as a signature trademark of the Wakefield Master. Using Bakhtin's concepts of the dialogic and the carnivalesque, Edminster clearly shows how the biblical surface of the Towneley plays conceals a far more subversive secular level of meaning, commenting on controversial issues in religion and politics of the day. It is not surprising that subversion of traditional hierarchies would be present in festive theater—the inversion of traditional power structures in festive works is common in medieval texts—but what is surprising are the Wakefield Master's recurring multivalent attacks on Church and State authority as detailed by Edminster's reading.

After outlining some of the conventions of medieval festive celebrations—violent invocations, Lords of Misrule, the usurpation of authority, reversal of everyday expectations, burlesquing of the serious or sacred, elevation of fools, grotesque feasting, ritual beatings, and abusive language—Edminster shows how the regenerative nature of the festive and carnivalesque not only encourages the presentation of unacceptable characters and behavior but also allows an undercurrent of support for some of the underlying societal problems alluded to in the festive content. In an inverted festive world, evil characters can usurp traditional power, but when the world rights itself, although they lose power, their commentary on social issues can remain.

In his analysis of *Mactacio Abel*, Edminster finds Cain's treatment as an angry, fratricidal brother to be conventional to festive theater, but Cain's spoken lines and actions conceal commentary on medieval farming and clerical abuses of Church offerings and tithing. Abel is the good shepherd who gives what he should to God, while Cain is the angry farmer trying to give as little as he can. The Master's dramatization of farmer versus shepherd might affect a peasantry recently subjected to enclosure (and often poorer than their parish priests) in a way that Cain's ultimate punishment does not entirely negate. Cain's subversive commentary on tithing obligations and his presentation as a struggling farmer could reflect the sentiments of numerous audience members.

Noah's biblical story, presented in *Processus Noe*, is one of reversal and renewal: the flood will destroy the evil of the earth so that goodness can start afresh, but hidden

within the Wakefield Master's treatment of traditional story, and the traditional play component of Noah's argument with his wife, is language that resonates with dissent over Church abuses. Noah, as a representation of Christ, has difficulty controlling his bride, and Noah's violent beating of her may reflect the perceived need for God to intervene in punishing his willfully disobedient bride: the Church (or authorities of the Church). Again, Edminster's argument does not detract from earlier readings of the superficial layers of the poem, but he identifies a deeper level of subversive commentary that runs throughout the Wakefield Master's plays.

In the *Prima Pastorum* and *Secunda Pastorum*, we have two plays that are traditionally accepted as containing significant amounts of social commentary, primarily because so little of each play directly concerns the nativity. Edminster's analysis of these two plays' festive qualities results in an additional level of social commentary that complements and extends surface-level readings of the shepherds as discontent medieval herdsmen. In *Prima Pastorum*, the shepherds take on the relatively traditional role of representing clergy, but their shenanigans concerning the imaginary sheep come to represent the predisposition of some medieval clergy to focus on intangible religious ideals when they should be addressing the real physical problems of their parishioners/flock—an accusation often leveled at the Church of that day. The complaints of the opening monologues of the shepherds in *Secundum Pastorum* concerning wives, enclosure, landlords, and servitude resonate throughout the play as Edminster ties complaints about weather, landlords, and wives to an extensive festive commentary on the complicity of landlords and clergy in the oppression of the peasantry. For example, Mak's parodic inversion of the nativity and Eucharist associates him with fraudulent clergy and Gyll's oppression of Mak situates her in the role of self-interested landowner.

Magnus Herodes' festive use of foolish soldiers/knights (in the slaughter of the innocents) results in the association of this violent biblical story with a parody of medieval courtly manners, and Herod's uncharacteristic use of French words while describing his court additionally associates his authority with that of the English aristocracy. Edminster finds that underlying this brutal biblical story are festive elements that allude to a complicity between secular courts and the Church in the oppression of their medieval subjects.

Although the festive nature of these plays allows parody of serious biblical stories, the Master's irreverent treatment of the buffeting of Christ in *Colihizacio* is often considered unorthodox by critics. According to Edminster, the presentation of Christ's beating as a yuletide game may seem irreverent, but it establishes Christ as one of the play's manifestations of a festive King of Fools. And Christ is not even the most festive character in the play: Christ's torturers are fool characters and Cayphas is a

Lord of Misrule, reminiscent of Herod. Throughout the chaotic world of the play Cayphas' violent abuse of power associates him with the corrupt elements of the medieval Church, and Anna's calculated way of relying on secular authority stands in for a secular legal system that often worked in conjunction with the Church. As a result, Christ's torture can be seen as a representation of how Church and State can perform violence on the entities they exist to serve.

As Edminster skillfully outlines the numerous unique ways that the Wakefield Master employs festive qualities in his plays, a pattern emerges that helps to establish the thematic style of the Master. Moreover, since this style, or "thematic fingerprint" as Edminster calls it, was identified using plays traditionally accepted as being written by the Wakefield Master, the resulting "fingerprint" may prove useful in identifying other plays (or parts of plays) within the cycle which may be attributable to the Master. Edminster's reading of the festive conventions of these plays not only provides the reader with a new way of looking at the meaning of plays by the Wakefield Master, it may prove useful in further understanding the authorship of the Towneley Cycle as a whole. ✱