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"WHAT GRACE WE HAVE FUN"

**[An Examination into the Feasibility of Presenting
Medieval Religious Drama to a Modern Provincial New
Zealand Audience]**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis centres on the presentation, with appropriate music, of some medieval religious drama before a public audience at the Church of the Nativity, Blenheim on 23rd November, 1996. The three pieces - the Limoges Trope of the Shepherds at the Manger, the Fleury Play of Saint Nicholas and the Three Scholars, and the *Secunda Pastorum* from the Towneley (Wakefield) Cycle - were translated for the occasion into Modern English. The aim of the performance was to see how well members of a twentieth-century, provincial, New Zealand audience would respond to a type of drama outside their normal cultural experience.

The first two chapters of the thesis outline the considerable task of preparing for the presentation, covering such aspects as the background reading of scholarly views on medieval religious drama and especially on the chosen texts, the process of translation from Medieval Latin and Middle English, the choice of venue, the plays' characters and the selection of actors to portray them, the design of the set and the costumes, the acquiring of properties, the importance of music and the arrangements of the banns (advertising). Chapter III describes the actual performance, while Chapter IV attempts to evaluate the impact and effectiveness of the project, discussing as a test case the gifts of the shepherds to the Christ-Child in the *Secunda Pastorum* with regard to scholarly interpretations, director's intentions and audience reactions.

The Conclusion points to the success of the project, but emphasises that a modern director of medieval religious drama needs to be aware constantly of a number of issues to be faced in presenting such plays: the place of scholarly opinion in relation to production practicalities, language change as it affects translation, and the advantages and drawbacks of adaptation to the tastes and pre-conceptions of twentieth-century audiences who may enjoy a limited understanding of medieval times. The thesis ends with the hope that considering these issues will encourage future undertakings, not prevent them.

The Appendices to the thesis include the writer's translations of the plays chosen for performance and the Commentator's script for the 23rd November presentation.

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(By courtesy of Joan Bennett, Gillian Collins and Gilbert Leov)

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The subject of this thesis is a blend of the theoretical and the practical. The study desk has been balanced by stage furniture, the translator's constant scratchings-out by hammer and nails. Its pleasures have far outweighed its problems, and at no time has its undertaking, stretching over three years, been less than interesting.

The cast lists and acknowledgements in the programme for the 23rd November presentation (Appendix F) are evidence enough that the whole project depended on the support of many people. I am grateful to them all.

A number of organizations need a special mention - the Anglican Parish of Blenheim, the Blenheim Choral Society, Massey University's Department of English, the Marlborough Boys' College, the Marlborough Girls' College, and my sponsor, the Marlborough Repertory Society. I was encouraged both by their collective generosity with facilities, materials and expertise and by the continuing interest shown in proceedings by individuals from these groups.

But I owe a special debt of gratitude to two individuals. The first is my wife Gillian, whose enthusiasm for Middle English and incisive, positive approach have been a constant inspiration to me. And the second is my tutor Robert Neale, a scholar of high standards and unfailing courtesy. Any shortcomings in this thesis are my own.

INTRODUCTION

This thesis has its roots in an interest in medieval religious drama which stretches back over forty years. I can clearly recall, for instance, seeing *Everyman* in a North London church in the mid-1950s, and buying, when it first came out and I was an undergraduate studying History, A.C.Cawley's *Everyman and Medieval Miracle Plays* in the *Everyman* edition. Although my contact with medieval plays later became fitful [1], my interest in theatre - as reader, audience member, actor and director - continued. During recent years my studies at Massey University re-directed me towards the Middle Ages, and I began to ponder anew on medieval drama.

The provincial town in which I live, Blenheim, has a sound tradition of drama and operatic productions and choral concerts. Shakespeare is not unknown there, but I wondered if local people were aware of what was happening in the European dramatical world in the 500 years before his time. [2] From this speculation evolved a plan to present some medieval drama in the town, in order to discover how it would survive the centuries, how a twentieth-century provincial New Zealand audience would respond to it, and what would be necessary to bring text, actors and audience to a central point of accord and appreciation.

My general aims eventually materialized into the presentation of three pieces of medieval religious drama - the Limoges Trope of the Shepherds at the Manger, the Fleury Play of Saint Nicholas and the Three Scholars, and the Wakefield Master's *Secunda Pastorum* - which I had translated from Medieval Latin and Middle English. The performance took place at the Church of the Nativity, Blenheim on the evening of Saturday 23rd November, 1996, and included introductory material, music appropriate to the occasion and a commentary.

In its first two chapters, my thesis describes and explains the considerable preparation, stretching over two years, necessary for such an undertaking. The third chapter is an account of the performance itself with some impressions of its immediate impact, and the fourth, together with the conclusion, attempts an evaluation of the successes and failures of the total exercise, examining in particular the *Secunda Pastorum* shepherds' gifts to the Christ-Child, as some indication of the continuing issues

facing a modern presenter of medieval religious drama. The thesis appendices include my own translations of the plays and the Commentator's script.

The nature of my thesis invites departures from the customary approach of such researches. Firstly, my style entails an element of narrative, since I am describing an attempt to turn theory into practice. This process, I believe also, makes my translations and commentary script (Appendices A-E) especially significant to my argument. Secondly, I place some emphasis on the first person, with its appearance of self-centredness and its dangers of introspection. However, while there is some need to explain and evaluate in personal terms, I endeavour not to lose sight of the findings, sometimes contentious and always stimulating, of the large body of scholarship on matters literary, theoretical and practical which has been devoted to medieval religious drama. The 'I' of this thesis can be placed only in the company of the notable words and deeds of others.

NOTES

[1] But it included seeing a selection of plays from the Wakefield Cycle at the Mermaid Theatre, London in 1965.

[2] In 1985 my wife and I played the Noahs in an excerpt, translated by her, from the Wakefield *Play of Noah* for the Marlborough Repertory Society, but the audience, perhaps in awe of the Scriptural topic, were bemused by the verbal and physical combat between the characters. This became a salutary experience, guiding my thoughts when I came to consider the place of comedy in my presentation.

CHAPTER I

PREPARATION - THE WORD

A - BACKGROUND READING

Whenever moderns attempt to get to grips with medieval religious drama, the beginning tends to be with the word. One of my earlier - and continuing - tasks was to sample the findings of scholars on the subject in general and on my chosen texts in particular. M.C. Bradbrook, admittedly concerned with sixteenth-century interludes, makes a thoughtful point that the quality of a play **"must be recreated from all the data by scholarly insight before an act of sympathy can reclothe the lines with the depth of colour, movement, and vivacity that they ought to convey."** [1] This notion constantly served as a reminder that I must not only discover how others perceived the literary and dramatic worth of the material I had chosen, but also that I should glean from my reading useful information for my own processes of translation and play production. William Tydeman puts it, simply but effectively, **"Medieval plays were not designed as reading matter"** [2], and Richard Axton points to **"the life that is lost when a scribe reduces a play to written text."** [3]

One general impression which I gained was of the considerable change in attitude by scholars over the years to both the literary and the dramatic value of medieval religious plays. Up to the early twentieth century, the approach to such drama was antiquarian and condescending, as if nothing really counted before Shakespeare. So Katherine Bates could comprehensively dismiss the language of the Mystery Cycles as **"that most beggarly attire with which the vast idea is clothed upon"** [4], while Charles Mills Gayley deigned to call the *Secunda Pastorum* **"this little play"**, and his acknowledgement of it as **"English and alone, and a masterpiece"** [5] implied a severe judgement on everything else. Even scholars more sympathetic to the medieval drama were inclined to underestimate it. E.K. Chambers was prone to view it tidily as part of an evolutionary chain rising towards Shakespeare and undergoing, between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, a **"process of secularization"** [6] from church to open air, from priests to guilds. G.R. Owst's comprehensive interest in medieval civilization led him to examine Mystery Plays mainly for the influence of sermons on them [7]; thus his interest

in Gill's talking about the pot and the water (*Secunda Pastorum*, Lines 317-319) was not in any insight into the characters of either Gill or Mak or in any ironic comment on Mak's failed attempt at theft, but in its link with proverbs found in several homily books.

Yet it is easy to pour unnecessary scorn on these earlier scholars. They serve to remind us that while these plays were ambitious in scope, dealing with the Matter of Christianity from Creation to Judgement, they were also short, and so did not allow for the development of character complexity to which modern audiences are more accustomed. [8] And the earlier scholars often took an encyclopaedic approach to their subject which enables us to widen the scope of our own readings and conclusions. Thus Karl Young's criticised if respected collection of European religious plays helped to move me towards including Continental material in my programme. [9]

A standpoint critical of the literary merit of the medieval religious drama continued into the mid-twentieth century. Hardin Craig, for instance, writes of the *Secunda Pastorum* as **"a clever, farcical play that has come to stand erroneously in the popular mind as typical of mystery plays, possibly because critics are unwilling that mystery plays should be what they were, namely religious plays, and want them to be, as they were not, farces, comedies, and romantic dramas"** [10] - a thoughtful view, but over-stressing the farcical and underrating the religious as a stimulus to effective drama, which latter point Eleanor Prosser counters vigorously: **"As a result of modern prejudice, we have ignored the one key which can unlock the medieval mystery: the religion which was, indeed, its lifeblood"** [11], and so maintains that the didactic does not have to diminish the dramatic.

The essential and often complex link between drama and religion has been explored further. O.B. Hardison Jr., for instance, makes a strong case for the drama in religious ritual when he states that: **"Just as the Mass is a sacred drama encompassing all history and embodying in its structure the central pattern of Christian life on which all Christian drama must draw, the celebration of the Mass contains all elements necessary to secular performances."** [12] He explains, in addition, that the brevity of the Nativity episode in the *Secunda Pastorum* **"reveals not secularization but pious devotion to purity of source and tradition."** [13] So Hardison's arguments drew me back to the dynamic from which all three of my chosen dramatic pieces sprang, and which a modern scholar, whatever his attitude to religion, cannot ignore. If, too, its greater length and the greater amount of critical commentary on it lead in this thesis to a particular emphasis on the *Secunda Pastorum*, the other two pieces are worthy of respect, for their intention as well as for their dramatic, or potentially dramatic, qualities.

Other scholars, moreover, have seen other merits in the plays. Thus Glynne Wickham, criticizing those who are not prepared **"to credit medieval actors and technicians (and, by implication, playwrights also) with a mental age of more than seven"** [14], defends the plays' popularity and relative sophistication and argues for the amount of organization which must have gone into their performance. The impish critic A.P. Rossiter highlights the element of **"clashing comic contrasts"** [15] in the plays and pleads for a better knowledge of the *Prima* as well as the *Secunda Pastorum*. Such lively comments persuaded me that my chosen pieces deserved careful planning and an incessant openness to their dramatic possibilities

V.A. Kolve advances the discussion of the comic element in *Secunda Pastorum* by pointing out that Cycle dramatists on occasions **"invent a comic action simply in order to parallel the central action of the play, to honor and adumbrate that action by playing it twice, in different modes: Mak, Gill and a stolen sheep anticipate the true nativity adoration of Joseph, Mary and the infant Jesus."** [16] This prompted me to appreciate the basic unity of the play, with the message of the Nativity providing the driving force which both counterpoints and illuminates the comedy of Mak and the shepherds, and which is far from being the tacked-on religious conclusion to, admittedly, the bulk of the action. When speaking of the Corpus Christi drama in general, Kolve introduces a sophisticated level of interpretation of its intent, **"to celebrate and elucidate, never, not even temporarily, to deceive A lie disguised to tell the truth about reality, the drama was understood as significant play."** [17] Again, I recalled the need to have the dramatic and interpretative possibilities of the plays ever in mind, even if I did not accept the interpretations of all scholars.

The deliberations of Rosemary Woolf gave further insights into the *Secunda Pastorum*, particularly into the possibility that that Wakefield Master might have been familiar with French farces, of which *Maitre Pierre Pathelin* is the most noteworthy example. She persuaded me as well to increase my respect for the other two dramatic pieces in my programme with her arguments that liturgical plays never left the church but existed side by side with the Mysteries, and that they reached their highest point in the 12th century. Woolf summed it up with the comment that, as far as medieval English religious drama was concerned, **"it is change rather than progress that has to be described."** [18]

Even the demise of the Cycles has caused both scholarly debate and a measure of rehabilitation for them. If Rosemary Woolf restates the often-argued case for humanist,

Renaissance influences making the literary and aristocratic condemn them as crude, Father H.C.Gardiner argues forcefully that the Cycles' last days came "**not from any internal decay, but from an external force, the hostility of the Reformation.**" [19] At least both scholars mention the continuing popularity of the plays with local townspeople, especially in the north, in the second half of the sixteenth century, and the hostility to them, whether religious or literary, as more London based. In a sense, the Cycles were the victims of history as much as any lack of dramatic quality in them, and again I was being warned against approaching them with condescension..

While debate has continued on the literary merits of medieval religious drama, another general impression which I gained was that some scholars have made considerable advances in the understanding of the original conditions under which it was performed, and there has been a greater willingness to test its dramatic qualities by presenting plays for public performance, in or out of church. Thus, in the first instance, William Tydeman, citing Continental as well as English examples, can point to the ceremonial customs linked with Christmas tropes and to the presence of midwives in them [20], to the importance of *mansion*-staging which dominated the medieval period [21], to a civic desire - Lucerne and York are mentioned especially - for acting of a high standard in religious drama. [22] John C. Coldewey extends this last point by emphasising that "**many medieval plays were part of tremendous enterprises where civic or parish stakes were high. These enterprises drew pleasure, profit, and blessings upon their participants.**" [23] In a general defence of medieval acting standards, John R.Elliott Jr. contends that even in liturgical drama acting styles might have been "**less monochromatic than was once supposed.**" [24] I was to take pains with what I was attempting, and was to take nothing for granted.

Martial Rose, among others, makes the case for regional variations in the way the plays were presented. Although I did not come to follow it in every detail, Rose's cogent arguments for the Wakefield Cycle's being performed "**in one fixed locality, on a multiple stage, and in the round**" [25] helped to banish early any fleeting thought of presenting the *Secunda Pastorum* on a conventionally-perceived wheeled pageant. And Alan H. Nelson [26] took me even farther from pageant-wagons with his contention that, in the case of the Wakefield Cycle, the plays were staged very much as Martial Rose maintains, and that pageants were used chiefly for non-dramatic processions associated with the presentation - a point which Stanley J. Kahrl also makes in connexion with the *tableaux vivants* of Lincoln. [27]

And secondly, if scholars like Glynne Wickham and Martial Rose are theorists, they base many of their ideas on practice. Furthermore, in recent years there have been increasing numbers of productions of medieval religious drama, encouraged in part by a revival of interest in verse drama by dramatists like T.S.Eliot and Christopher Fry, and in part by the development of community plays, the nature of which has much in common with the production of the Cycles. Thus the 1951 Festival of Britain presentation of the York Cycle of plays by E.Martin Browne led to their becoming the focus of the triennial York Festival. I noted that they are presented in the ruins of Saint Mary's, a fixed site which John Marshall regrets "**bears such little resemblance to what is now known of the performance conditions in medieval and Tudor York.**" [28] The York Cycle has been presented elsewhere, such as at Leeds in 1975 and at Toronto in 1977 - and, indeed, some of the plays have been acted in the streets of York, as in 1992. Other significant presentations include a spectacular outdoor acting of *The Castle of Perseverance* at Toronto in 1979 and the evolving production of *The Mysteries* at the National Theatre in London between 1977 and 1985. The Canadian experiences in particular provide encouragement that people outside the bounds of England might appreciate the performance of such drama.

This reading about modern productions helped towards the making of some decisions for my presentation. For instance, Sheila Lindenbaum, reporting on the staging of the York Cycle at Toronto in 1977 [29], upholds the effectiveness of small pageant-wagons (measuring six feet by twelve feet), especially when the *platea* in front of them was exploited. Her argument is not only an interesting response to those scholars who have shown some reservations about the dimensions and practicability of pageant-wagons in such narrow areas as the streets of York, but also it bears some influence on the dimensions of my main set structure for the Saint Nicholas play and for the *Secunda Pastorum*. [30]

Delving into accounts of modern productions also raised a problem on which I had to reflect continually. How far should we adapt medieval religious drama to the assumptions and tastes of present-day audiences? Should we attempt to make any presentation as close to original acting conditions as possible, including using the original language? John Marshall is harsh on productions which allow "**an ill-conceived notion of audience expectation and response to obscure the nature and demands of a medieval text, leading to the compromise between authenticity and accessibility which rarely satisfies the interests of either**" [31], and is even harsher on attempts "**to achieve spurious relevance through acts of gimmickry.**" [32]

These are daunting words for someone planning to stage medieval religious plays in New Zealand and knowing that compromises must be made. Such a presentation faces hurdles enough, because of our country's remoteness from the European mainstream even in an age of communications technology, and its smaller population. In addition, although these problems are not restricted to New Zealand, fewer people study Latin in these times, and many are tempted to regard Middle English as a more foreign language than it really is; fewer people attend places of Christian worship regularly; we find lessening knowledge of the assumptions, religious, cultural and linguistic, on which these plays are based. If churches are the venues for such drama, there are fewer iconographical clues to reinforce the dramatic message, and certainly, in the South Pacific, no murals to be re-discovered under layers of zealous whitewash. [33] It is easy, then, for a would-be director here to shy away from turning a seemingly abstruse text into what could be equally abstruse action. But I took some small comfort from John R. Elliott Jr's wistful thought that "**We may wonder if the mysteries can ever be made to sound to our time as they sounded to theirs**" [34], and from his argument that if Middle English may do for select, academic audiences, translation - and whatever this may imply for adaptation - is needed for a wider appeal.

Moreover, I could take considerable encouragement from the many scholars who, as we have seen in these pages, have been prepared to study medieval religious drama in the context of original acting conditions, and further to attempt, in spite of considerable obstacles, performances of these plays, either adapted to modern tastes or as near to medieval practices as possible, which have proved stimulating to both scholars and the general public. I was heartened enough to continue with the important early task of translating my chosen texts from Medieval Latin and Middle English into a form of Modern English suitable to dramatic presentation in front of others.

Forward steps must still include avoiding potholes. If medieval drama studies tend to begin with the word, there is still a danger that they may end there, too. The study of the word must continue to be valued as, for example, the achievements of the Leeds Centre for Medieval Studies in publishing facsimiles and the REED scheme to publish all records of drama in the United Kingdom and Ireland attest. But, as we shall see later [35], there is an equal probability that earnest attempts to educate people in medieval significances - for instance, the shepherds' gifts to the Christ-Child in the *Secunda Pastorum* - can draw us back towards a narrowly literary approach to the plays. In medieval religious drama, word and action are, as much as elsewhere in the world of theatre, intertwined.

B - TRANSLATION

As I have indicated, my reading of scholarly material on medieval religious drama was a great incentive in my work of translating the chosen texts into Modern English. There were occasions, however, when the translation preceded the background reading, as was the case for the Saint Nicholas play. The discussion of the texts in this part of the chapter appears in their order of performance: in fact, my dealings with the *Secunda Pastorum* began long before my work with the other pieces, and ended long after.

1. THE VOICE OF GOD FROM THE YORK "JUDGEMENT DAY"

Of the four translations which I attempted, this brief Middle English passage [36] was the freest, to the point of becoming a paraphrase. It was used as part of my introductory material, to suggest God's view of what people had done with His world. My references were from A.C.Cawley [37] and Peter Happé. [38] Although I took liberties with the wording and condensed the original material, I felt that the best way to create for this stage of my performance the atmosphere of sadness and of Christ's Sacrifice was to keep to the simple if measured metre of the original. The condensing led me to change the eight-line stanza with its rhyme scheme of ABABABAB to one of four lines rhyming ABAB, which allowed for more frequent pausing and for the audience to reflect on what God says.

2. THE CHRISTMAS TROPE

My source for the translation [39] of the Limoges Trope of the Shepherds at the Manger was Karl Young. [40] The Latin of the very brief text presented little difficulty, but I found that a heritage of my Anglican youth, a familiarity with the Authorised Version of the Bible and with the Book of Common Prayer, tended to channel the wording of my translation, so that "*pannis inuolutum*" naturally became "*wrapped in swaddling clothes*." Then, as the overall plan of the performance emerged, music came to be an important element in the presentation of the trope (as it was, of course, in the original), so that proportionally less time was spent in polishing my translation than was done with, say, the *Secunda Pastorum*.

3. THE PLAY OF SAINT NICHOLAS AND THE THREE SCHOLARS

During a 1995 course in Medieval Latin my tutor required from me a translation of this miracle play [41], which I attempted in verse. While shorter and less complex than the *Secunda Pastorum*, the Saint Nicholas play impressed me with one or two lighter touches in the characterization of both the old couple (the innkeeper and his wife) and the scholars and with the odd sly comment in the dialogue, the play on "*caro recens*" in Lines 58, 60 and 62, for example.

At this stage I did not entertain the idea of performing the play, but my tutor's suggestion on returning the exercise that it might be worth producing persuaded me eventually to add it to my programme. Moreover, when I began the admittedly limited background reading on the Saint Nicholas plays, some words of Charles Mills Gayley, an earlier scholar of whose work it is easy to be dismissive, increasingly impressed me. Dealing with the Fleury play's being performed by medieval schoolboys, he stated that the Latin was of the simplest sort **"such as youngsters could commit to memory with no feeling of resentment towards the charitable saint."** [42] Here was some confirmation of the lightness of touch when dealing with a serious topic which I had detected when translating the play, and, furthermore, his emphasis on youth led me to consider casting it with college pupils.

Once I had decided on presenting the play, I consulted (and used subsequently as my standard) the version of the text which appears in Karl Young. [43] The differences between my two sources proved minor, and mainly concerned with spelling variants of the same word - for instance, Harrington chooses "*hospitium*" rather than Young's "*hospicium*" in Line 4 - or with the directions which precede the stanzas of dialogue. Thus, just before Line 13 Young has "*omnes*" while Harrington writes "*Clerici*." One small difference of layout became apparent in Lines 37 to 44 where Harrington treats the old woman's inflammatory speech as one stanza when Young divides it into the more normal two quatrains. The comparison of the texts therefore led to a few virtually insignificant changes.

My verse translation kept to the original's basic quatrain stanza with its AABB rhyme scheme, as I felt that its pace was appropriate to its brief but eventful narrative. However, I departed from the Latin metre, especially in ending almost every line with a stressed, monosyllabic word ("*cause*" and "*shores*" in Lines 1 and 2 set the pattern), whereas the original employed polysyllabic words which, to those accustomed to English

cadences, would call to mind Byron's *Don Juan*. Again, Lines 1 and 2 supply good examples in "*litas*" and "*exteras*."

If I emphasised the original's scholarly atmosphere in the opening stanzas with more formal expressions like "*learning's noble cause*" (Line 1) and "*higher tomes*" (Line 14), elsewhere I introduced more informal language. The old woman incites her husband to murder because "*we've got it made*" (Line 41), the old man refers to money as "*dough*" in Line 35 - though perhaps this is a slang term from not the character's or actors' youth but from mine - and he addresses the traveller-cum-saint as "*You are gentry, that's for sure*" (Line 54). Formality fittingly returns at the end with Saint Nicholas' use of words like "*contrite*" (Line 70) and "*implore*" (Line 76). So, one effect of my translation was to widen the range of formality in the dialogue, to help highlight the lighter touches which I saw in the play.

The overall simplicity of the language and the use of verse meant that the script presented little difficulty for the young cast to learn, although the very able actor playing the old man constantly turned Line 31's "*Come in, lads*" into a Battle-of-Britainish "*Come in, chaps*." Perhaps the influence of the language of my youth was greater than I thought. Also, if there was a scarcity of stage directions in the original, the skilled construction of the dialogue led easily to action, a quality shared with the *Secunda Pastorum* and appreciated by actors and director alike. After the performance, I added to the script stage directions and extra business which had developed during rehearsals.

4. THE "SECUNDA PASTORUM"

The translation process for the Middle English *Secunda Pastorum* was more complicated, and not only because the play is far longer than the others. As my first step towards writing my own version I examined the editing, translating and adapting work of others. [44] The great scholarly interest in the cycles in general and the popularity of the *Secunda Pastorum* in particular afforded me greater scope for investigation than with the trope and the Saint Nicholas play. My great debt to the authorities whom I consulted is obvious, even when I presume to disagree with them. Also, the stage directions which I included at this point were based on their helpful suggestions as well as on the few Latin directions which survive in Huntingdon MS. HM1. The abilities of the experts made the translating task appear effortless, an impression which soon faded with experience.

My first difficulty was to formulate a basic approach to a work several centuries old. As we have seen, it is a problem which besets modern directors of medieval plays. Should I keep as close to the original as possible, seeking praise from the purist while confusing those whose knowledge of the times and language of Middle English is scant? Or, because my version was to be staged in Blenheim, should I adapt what is a drama script for the Wakefield Master's contemporaries to the perceptions and experiences of twentieth-century New Zealanders?

My initial approach was in direct contrast to the light-heartedness I adopted in translating the Fleury version of the Saint Nicholas play, in that I aimed for closeness to the original. I had examined Adrian Henri's admirable modern adaptation and abridgement of the Wakefield Mystery Plays for the Wakefield centenary celebrations of 1988, noting in his introductory remarks that his aim was to offer **"in no way an academic transcription, but an attempt to preserve the spirit of the medieval texts in an actable modern version."** [45] His Cain drives a tractor and the shepherds of the *Secunda Pastorum* become **"three lads from Pontefract"** who are fond of **"a bit of a bevvy."** [46] I recognized that this makes for more vibrant theatre, but I considered it debatable whether the spirit of the original text really is maintained by too great a departure from it - surely trying to work in references to farmbikes, freezing works and Marlborough drought conditions creates problems of its own.

So I embarked on a translation which was serviceable after its fashion, but strained at several points in rhyme and rhythm. The use of mid-line rhyme in the opening quatrain of each stanza had, in fact, disappeared altogether. I felt the need to draft some introductory remarks, fortunately long since abandoned. Typical of their confessional mood were the words: **"I have on occasion resorted to paraphrasing (Lines 28 and 101, for instance) or to employing imperfect rhyme (Lines 23 and 27) or even to changing the rhyme pattern (thus Lines 37 to 40 become aabb rather than the normal aaaa). Frequently I lose the rhythmic sense of the original."** The fourth stanza of the play (Lines 28 to 36) is a fair example of the clumsiness which I was trying to excuse:

*"And a liveried man with power these days,
Look out the fool who grieves or gainsays!
None dare reprove him, use what force he may;
And yet no-one believes anything that he says -
Not one letter.*

*He can take what's ours
Boasting of his powers,
And all with the support
Of those socially better."*

I sent my translation (without the *apologia*) to my supervisor for a second opinion. Back came some useful suggestions for improving my text and a timely if gentle admonition that the Wakefield Master deserved a better response to his extraordinary rhyming powers. As a result I produced a second version which paid more attention to rhyme - even if mid-line rhyme did not re-appear [47] - and less to being literal, and which seemed to concede some ground to Adrian Henri. But my work was still basically more a translation than Henri's adaptation, which meant that even if the language became a little freer, there was no attempt to make the setting more up-to-date. A glance at the re-worked fourth stanza still reveals the highlighting of liveries and of the poor treatment of medieval peasants, even if the rhyme scheme and wording have altered:

*"Once a liveried man gets control these days,
Watch out the fool who opposes his ways!
You can't but put up with the tricks he plays;
Yet no-one believes a thing that he says -
Not one letter.
He can take what's ours,
He boasts and glowers,
For he's backed by the powers
Of the socially better."*

Throughout the play, moreover, there were still archaic elements in my language, showing that this was not a modern play. At the same time, the Northern English dialect disappeared, so that Mak's putting on a false accent when he first comes upon the shepherds provokes a comment on social classes and on snobbery rather than on "*sothren tothe*" (Line 215).

Furthermore, I reminded myself continually as I translated for the second time that my aim was to produce not just a translation but a dramatic script which I must use later to communicate with a New Zealand town audience. Paradoxically, this drove me back to the original text when I had completed this version, to check that my now greater freedom with the language had not caused me to stray from the Wakefield Master's handling of plot and characterization. For instance, Line 21, which reads in the original "*That men say is for the best; we fynde it contrary,*" had become the very different "*Cause our shoulders to sag, our wives to cry*", losing the grudging acknowledgement

by the First Shepherd that not everybody shares his bitter outlook on contemporary social developments. But I satisfied myself that my attempt both avoided a very awkward line to deal with and fitted in with the general sense of oppression in the rest of the stanza.

Another paradoxical consequence of this second version was that I retained the Latin used in Lines 266-267, whereas before I had translated everything into modern English. I saw the comic and ironic possibilities of Mac's imitating a priest, with devotional gestures supporting the words at this point. The Latin original also fitted my greater emphasis on rhyme patterns far better than my first English translation ("*Your hands I commend/To Pilate, O*"). I decided, however, to keep the Latin at this one point only, for a modern audience unaccustomed to a language which ordinary medieval people were prone to garble anyway.

This second translation was not without its blemishes and, moreover, would still demand my giving great thought to matters like movement, expression, tone and characterisation to enliven my literary toil. However, all the time I was aware that the original manuscript, while presenting me with the inevitable problems of bridging a considerable language gap, was inspiration enough in the process of turning word into drama. As J.W. Robinson comments of the Wakefield Master and the York Realist: "**Their scripts, particularly the former's, are as replete with implicit directions for actions as Shakespeare's.**" [48] Wherever I looked in the *Secunda Pastorum*, and not only in the Latin of Lines 266-267, there were clues for a director to exploit: the Third Shepherd's mistaking of the other two for ghosts (Lines 136-144) gives opportunity for broad comedy, even slapstick; the shepherds' meeting with the Christ-Child (Lines 710-754) is a skilful blend of theology and humour which can keep both directors and audience on their toes. And if the Angel sings angelically, how can we avoid thinking that the shepherds' musical efforts tend more towards the cacophonous? The Wakefield Master was, like the author of the Fleury Saint Nicholas play, a very crafty person.

Now it was time to consult a third opinion. I asked my wife, a perceptive student of Old and Middle English, to sit at the computer and to share reading my efforts aloud with me. This was useful for highlighting weak or inappropriate words and for examining both rhyme and the flow of dialogue. But its chief value lay in assessing the rhythm patterns of my translation, an aspect which I feared I had neglected in my desire to improve the rhyme. There was need also to examine closely those moments where characters shared lines and where I altered the number of feet in a group of lines for

special effect - in Lines 204-206, for instance, when Mak imitates the speech of his social superiors. As a result of this reading session I made a number of minor amendments.

At my wife's suggestion, we made a tape recording of the amended script, another valuable exercise in that there was more leisure to examine speech patterns and the impact of the language. The rewind button is an excellent invention. We were able to detect infelicities which had evaded our notice when we read from the computer - and it was significant to note that there were several such instances. I was able to play the tape again, to weed out even more weak expressions and to work on allusions which might confuse a modern audience. At this stage, for instance, the term "*liveried*" in Line 28 gave way to "*boss's*."

The next step I took with some trepidation. I invited three other people to join my wife and me in a play-reading of my efforts, followed by a discussion of the suitability of the material for production purposes. These were colleagues and friends with both an appreciation of literature and some experience in the theatre; nor were they sycophants. They coped very well with coming cold to the rhythm and vocabulary of the material, which was encouraging to me, and while they felt that my text had production potential, they made numerous and valuable suggestions for improving the language, which I was happy to incorporate into my text.

Some of these amendments were minor. Thus, Line 13 ("*Our arable land grows as much as a floor*") became "*Our arable land grows no more than a floor.*" Yet even this small change allows a careful listener to wonder whether it is the land or the floor doing the growing. An example of greater import was the group's unanimous reservation about my rendering of Lines 724-6:

*"Here, little Chap,
Of our faith You're the top:
I would drink of Your cup....."*

They felt that as well as a strained sense of rhyme, the passage displayed an obscurity which would puzzle a modern audience. Their comments forced me to look back at the original text and to realize that I had fallen prey to literalism, perhaps in an attempt to highlight medieval ideas of hierarchy and, in the reference to "*Your cup*", to emphasise the importance of the Mass in the religious practices of the Middle Ages. So I decided on another version:

*"Our Saviour You'll be,
Your blood sets us free,
Your light shines on me"*

The change from "*cup*" to "*blood*" made the meaning more accessible to twentieth-century ears while retaining resonances of my point about the importance of the Mass. The introduction of "*light*" also linked Line 726 with "*day-star*" in the next.

These several workings of the second version completed, I sent the script to my supervisor who considered that I had a reasonable base for a production. The rehearsal period, which started some months later, brought another spate of minor changes. Thus, in Line 49 "*sit on the grass*" became "*sit on a tussock*." As they got into their parts, the actors suggested changes which they felt would fit their characters better. Because our Angel was female, "*he*" became "*she*" between Lines 649 and 665. The First Shepherd's "*And bite on a turd*" [49] gave way to the more forceful "*Go bite on a turd*." The silliness, mine rather than the Wakefield Master's, of Line 404's "*Who's there by the door?*" revealed itself when Mak was standing outside his cottage and so unable to know exactly where Gill was inside. An alteration to "*Is anyone there?*" allowed Mak to add exasperation to his tone as Gill slowly made her way to the door.

Another improvement, concerning Line 560, came and went at the final rehearsal. To the Third Shepherd's asking about the identity of the godparents for the 'child', the actor playing Mak replied, "*God help them all*" instead of the script's "*Good luck to them all*." My instant reaction was to think how much better the actor's version was than mine and how it made more sense of the First Shepherd's response, "*That sounds odd to me*." However, the moment to comment passed, as I did not wish either to interrupt the actors at this stage of rehearsal or to burden Mak with a last-minute change. On the performance night Mak reverted to my words, to my regret.

One piece of translation, at the shepherds' discovery of Mak's and Gill's crime, worked unintentionally well. I had rendered the original "*Get weapon*" (Line 615) as "*Find some arms*", thinking that the First Shepherd was looking for something - a knife, perhaps - to coerce the miscreants. But all three shepherds, Mak and Gill took a different meaning from the line, believing that the shepherds were seeking some physical evidence whether the 'child' was human or not. Gill argued further that the next line ("*He was grabbed by an elf*") could be taken as an excuse which she offered when no human arms were found. Although my translation and assumption were literally correct, the cast's interpretation was persuasive, and changed for the better the intent of what seemed,

when I was translating, uncharacteristically violent words from the First Shepherd.

After the performance, I added, as I had done with the Saint Nicholas play, more stage directions to my script, to make some passages easier to comprehend, for example the frightening of the Third Shepherd by the other two and his relief at finding that they were not ghosts in Lines 136-144. The Third Shepherd's changes of mood I had suggested originally by dashes at Lines 137 and 140, but the need for a physical response (running away, then stopping) to some actions by the First and Second Shepherds enhanced the significance of Line 144's "*As my flight I'll spurn.*"

Furthermore, at this stage I asked some of my actors for their opinion of the script. I was curious to know how easy it had been to learn, how fluently and logically it held together. There were dangers in such a request. The positive reception to the final performance might have encouraged the cast to see everything in a rosy glow, or they might have been polite to my face and critical behind my back. The sense and sincerity of their responses allayed my fears.

All agreed that the rhythm and rhyme were a help in the learning of lines, although there were individual difficulties. Thus Mak found Line 202's "*great men's orders brings*" a tongue-twister. As this was the first specific criticism which I received, I went scurrying back to the original text to see how close my words were to the Wakefield Master's, as I did on other occasions. In this case it was clear that I was the creator of Mak's problem, partly because I had used the device of inversion to allow "*brings*" to rhyme with "*things*" at the end of the previous line. Mak also experienced difficulty with Line 207 ("*Why, who am I?*"), attempting different emphases on the words at different rehearsals. Neither this nor having Mak disdainfully move away from the shepherds relieved an unease which continued until beyond the performance, where the line was received well enough. I could defend myself by claiming that this time I was keeping to the original ("*Why, who be ich?*"), but my decision to abandon the notion of Mak's imitating "*sothren tothe*" had perhaps lessened the impact of the form "*ich*", and so weakened the whole line.

The young actor playing the Third Shepherd made the shrewd observation that his first comments (Lines 118-119) contained rhyming ("*Saint Nicholas*"/"*was*") which looked reasonable enough on paper but which was less effective vocally. In addition, he found that on some occasions it was hard to sustain a rhythmic flow where I had employed enjambement. He gave Lines 166-7 as an example:

"I'll not gain riches if I stay

Tending fields."

This persuasive point, accepted because I knew that the Third Shepherd was no mere sing-song deliverer of lines, was re-inforced when I noticed how much more skilfully the Wakefield Master, who also used enjambement there, handled this passage:

***"For yit lay my soper never on my stomake
In feyldys."***

The actress playing Gill, while happy enough with the rhythm and rhyme as aids to learning, found the device of inversion an obstacle at times, as in Line 308 ("***By your scrawny neck you're more likely to swing***"). Once more I could claim that the original itself is inverted, but I concede the danger of using the device as a mere convenience for a rhyme scheme. Gill expressed some reservations, too, about Line 443 ("***And call out by the wall on Mary and John***"). I accept now that I should have kept to the original's "***cry***" rather than introduce "***call***", as it captures better the spirit of Gill's feigned childbirth. Further valid comments by Gill explored the grey area between translation and characterization. [50]

The business of translation, be it the *Secunda Pastorum* or anything else, should never be complete. The translator must remain dissatisfied, prepared either to keep working on his efforts or to acknowledge that others can do it better. In the case of drama texts, another sense of incompleteness, as my background reading has revealed, comes from the need to give the words their full significance in terms of action. This was the next major step in my project.

NOTES

- [1] Quoted in Peter Happé's "A Guide to Criticism of Medieval English Theatre" in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. Richard Beadle (Cambridge, 1994), p.315.
- [2] William Tydeman, "An Introduction to Medieval English Theatre" in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. Richard Beadle, p.1.
- [3] Richard Axton, *European Drama of the Early Middle Ages* (London, 1974), p.13.
- [4] Katherine Bates, *The English Religious Drama* (1893, reprinted Port Washington, 1966), p.169.
- [5] Charles Mills Gayley, *Plays of Our Forefathers* (London, 1908), p.182.
- [6] E.K.Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage* (Oxford, 1903), vol. II, p.147.
- [7] G.R.Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England* (Oxford, rev. ed. 1961), *passim*.
- [8] When my cast came to rehearse the *Secunda Pastorum*, they found that there were sudden jumps of mood and action and some confusion whether certain lines were better directed at the audience or at other characters - the first scene between Mak and Gill (Lines 296 to 344) is a good example.
- [9] Karl Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church* (Oxford, 1933), *passim*.
- [10] Hardin Craig, *English Religious Drama of the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1955), p.234.
- [11] Eleanor Prosser, *Drama and Religion in the English Mystery Plays* (Stanford, 1961), p.18.
- [12] O.B.Hardison Jr., *Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages: Essays in the Origin and Early History of Modern Drama* (Baltimore, 1965), p.79. We may consider also the drama implicit in the Bible and in works like Handel's *Messiah*.

[13] *ibid.*, p.251.

[14] Glynne Wickham, *Early English Stages, 1300 to 1660*, vol. I (London, 1959), p.151.

[15] A.P.Rossiter, *English Drama from Early Times to the Elizabethans* (London, 1950), p.80.

[16] V.A.Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (London, 1966), p.173. In Chapter II, Part A of this thesis where I discuss characterization in the *Secunda Pastorum*, I resist, for instance, presenting Mak as a symbol for the Devil, but Kolve's influence leads me to highlight the differences between the false and true nativities.

[17] *ibid.*, p.32. Indeed, Kolve's arguments that such drama "**was conceived as a game**" (p.14) have Chaucerian resonances about them.

[18] Rosemary Woolf, *The English Mystery Plays* (London, 1972), p.53. I grant that my first two pieces were Continental in origin, and that the *Secunda Pastorum* came last in the programme - but this was because it was longest and last written, not to fit some evolutionary thesis. Richard Axton, in *European Drama of the Early Middle Ages*, takes a wider look at non-ecclesiastical influences on medieval religious plays.

[19] Harold C.Gardiner, *Mysteries' End* (New Haven, 1946), p.xii.

[20] William Tydeman, *The Theatre in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1978), pp.41-42.

[21] *ibid.*, p.57.

[22] *ibid.*, pp.202-204.

[23] John C. Coldewey, "Some Economic Aspects of the Late Medieval Drama" in *Contexts for Early English Drama*, eds. Marianne C. Briscoe and John C. Coldewey (Bloomington, 1989), p.97.

[24] John R.Elliott Jr., "Medieval Acting" in *Contexts for Early English Drama*, eds. Marianne C.Briscoe and John C.Coldewey, p.247.

[25] Martial Rose, *The Wakefield Mystery Plays* (London, 1961), p.26.

[26] Alan H. Nelson, "Some Configurations of Staging in Medieval English Drama", Chapter 7 of *Medieval English Drama*, eds. Jerome Taylor and Alan H. Nelson (Chicago, 1972). However, I acknowledge Sheila Lindenbaum's defence of pageant-wagons - see **Note 29** below.

[27] Stanley J. Kahrl, "Medieval Staging and Performance" in *Contexts for Early English Drama*, eds. Marianne C. Briscoe and John C. Coldewey, pp.219-237.

[28] John Marshall, "Modern Productions of Medieval English Plays" in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. Richard Beadle, p.291. In fact, over the years these performances have caused controversy. The latest was in 1996 when a woman was chosen to play the part of God.

[29] Sheila Lindenbaum, "The York Cycle at Toronto: Staging and Performance Style" in *Medieval English Drama: a Casebook*, ed. Peter Happé (London, 1984), pp.200-211.

[30] See Chapter II, Part A of my thesis.

[31] John Marshall, "Modern Productions of Medieval English Plays", p.291.

[32] *ibid.*, p.297. I note, however, that Marshall defends the modern practice of having women play women's parts - see the section on "The Actors and Their Characters" in Chapter II, Part A of my thesis.

[33] See Chapter IV of my thesis for a further discussion on the value of iconography in studying medieval religious drama.

[34] John R. Elliott, Jr., *Playing God: Medieval Mysteries on the Modern Stage* (Toronto, 1989), p.139.

[35] See Chapter IV of this thesis.

[36] See Appendix A.

[37] A.C. Cawley, *Everyman and Medieval Miracle Plays* (London, 1956), pp.191-192.

[38] Peter Happé, *English Mystery Plays* (Harmondsworth, 1975), pp.632-633. As with Cawley, Happé uses British Library MS. Additional 35,290.

[39] See Appendix B for both the Latin original and my translation.

[40] Karl Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, vol. II, p.4, where Young reproduces Paris Bibl. Nat., MS. lat. 887, Trop. Lemovicense saec. xi, fol. 9v.

[41] The text appeared on Pages 228-232 of K.P.Harrington's *Mediaeval Latin* (Chicago, 1962).

[42] Charles Mills Gayley, *Plays of Our Forefathers*, p.63. Gayley was also the first scholar to use the term 'the Wakefield Master.'

[43] Karl Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, vol. II, pp.330-332. Young gives as his source Orleans, Bibl. de la Ville MS. 201(*olim* 178), Miscellanea Floriacensia, saec. xiii, pp.183-187. This Latin version I present with my translation in Appendix C.

[44] My principal sources at this stage were: A.C.Cawley (ed.), *Everyman and Medieval Miracle Plays*, Peter Happé (ed.), *English Mystery Plays*, Adrian Henri (adapt.), *The Wakefield Mysteries* (London, 1991) and Martial Rose (trans.), *The Wakefield Mystery Plays*. The final version of my translation appears in Appendix D.

[45] Adrian Henri, *The Wakefield Mysteries*, p.vi.

[46] *ibid.*, pp.48 and 49.

[47] At a later stage, I read Martin Stevens' and A.C. Cawley's persuasive argument - on Pages xxix to xxxi of the Introduction to *The Towneley Plays* (Oxford, 1994) - that the Wakefield stanza consisted of thirteen lines, rhyming ABABABABCDDDC, rather than of nine. However, I kept to the nine-line stanza, to allow me greater freedom in changing Middle English to a more modern idiom.

[48] J.W.Robinson, *Studies in Fifteenth-Century Stagecraft* (Kalamazoo, 1991), p.12.

[49] Burdened with the susceptibilities of my 1950s Anglican youth, I approached the Vicar of the Blenheim Anglican Parish about using "**turd**" in church. His amused understanding set my mind at rest.

[50] Discussed further in Chapter II, Part B of my thesis.