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CONTENTS

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CHARMS, CHANGELINGS, AND CHATTER: SONIC MAGIC IN THE "SECUNDA PASTORUM"

Sarah Harlan-Haughey

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Abstract

Mak, a sheep thief and occasional "nigromancer", performs several acts of magic in the course of the *Second Shepherds' Play* (*Secunda Pastorum*), including a charm and a multilingual incantation. The play's subplot parallels the story of the Christ child's birth and is sometimes seen as a demonic inversion of that holy narrative. But outlaw Mak and his trickster wife are not the only characters who resort to verbal magic. The shepherds utter macaronic charms and so too does the Virgin Mary at the sublime conclusion of the play. It has long been noted that the author was fascinated with the power of words – both profane and holy – and music – both cacophonous and sublime. In his sonic universe, magical language plays a similarly important role. Intriguingly, the Wakefield Master does not use a binary evaluatory system for verbal magic like the one he implies for speech or music. Instead, verbal magic in the form of charms, incantations, and folk prayers is the tool of sinners and saints. Characters in the *Secunda Pastorum* perform a wide range of verbal magic which likely cast a rhetorical spell on early audience members, many of whom used similar verbal magic in their own lives.

Keywords: charms; magic; performance; *Second Shepherds' Play*; sound.

1. Introduction

Mak, a sheep thief and occasional "nigromancer", performs several acts of magic in the course of the *Second Shepherds' Play* (*Secunda Pastorum*), including a charm and a multilingual incantation. The play's subplot (concerning Mak's sheep-stealing) parallels the story of the Christ child's birth and is sometimes seen as a demonic inversion of that holy narrative. Mak,

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in his role as a trickster, a magician, and the father of a "horned child", has been seen by critics as a type of the Antichrist. But outlaw Mak and his trickster wife are not the only characters who resort to verbal magic in this famous play. The shepherds utter macaronic charms and so too, arguably, does the Virgin Mary at the sublime conclusion of the play.

It has long been noted that the author of this most powerful and idiosyncratic of the Towneley mystery plays, the so-called Wakefield Master, was fascinated with the power of words – both profane and holy – and music – both cacophonous and sublime [1]. In his sonic universe, magical language plays an important role. Intriguingly, the Wakefield Master does not present us with a binary evaluatory system for verbal magic like the one he implies for the spoken word (mad bluster and verbosity are presented as agents of evil; calm, measured, or lyrical words as serving the holy) or music (crotchety or off-key singing versus the harmonizing of the angels). Instead, verbal magic in the form of charms, incantations, and folk prayers is the tool of both sinners and saints. Characters in the *Secunda Pastorum* perform a wide range of verbal magic, and in doing so probably cast a rhetorical spell over the late medieval audience as well, many of whom likely used similar charms, incantations, and prayers in their own lives.

The author of the play connects the performance of magic with the magic of miracle, and even conflates them at the end of the play. Rather than demonize all acts of magic, the playwright contextualizes folk magic within a larger frame of supernatural wonder and miracle [2]. Drawing upon current scholarship on the magic practice of both laypeople and clergy in late medieval Britain, this study examines the magic utterances in the *Secunda Pastorum*, which were scripted to impact a crowd that might have reacted powerfully to the performance of spells, gibberish, and magical inversions. Audiences could have seen their own living practice mirrored in the play, and would thus have been brought to contemplate the greatest magic of all – the miracle of Christ's birth at the play's culmination.

[1] The notion of a Wakefield Master, a single author of the five plays in bob and wheel stanzaic form and preserved in Huntington MS HM 1, has been thoroughly and convincingly challenged by Dane 2009, 57-74, and Epp 2017, among others. I continue to use the controversial and admittedly retrograde epithet "Wakefield Master" as a shorthand for the author/s of this marvelous play, simply because it *is* a masterpiece, and the person/s who created it deserves the epithet.

[2] St. Augustine argued that all magic issued from the Devil or was assisted by demonic forces. See *de Civitate Dei*, VII 19, translated by Dyson, Augustine 1998, 339-341.

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2. Charms, changelings, and cherries

The *Secunda Pastorum* begins with three shepherds – Col, Gib, and Daw – watching over their flocks by night. They are met by the trickster and thief Mak, who joins their group and steals a sheep while the other shepherds sleep (Mak has charmed them in order to rob them). The three shepherds awaken to find their sheep missing and track it back to Mak's home, where he and his wife have swaddled the animal and laid it in a cradle. The shepherds recover the lost sheep and then hear the angels singing about the birth of the Christ child. They then visit the nativity and present gifts to Mary and the baby.

In general, the charms and incantations performed in the play are pastiches of groups of prayers and cross-signings found in vernacular sources and in some contemporary books of hours. This large number of sources suggests widespread use and knowledge [3].The first occurs when the trickster Mak enters the dramatic action clad in a cloak and utters a strange prayer to God with his seven names [4]:

> Now, Lord, for thy naymes sevyn,
> That made both moyn and starnes
> Well mo then I can neven,
> Thi will, Lorde, of me tharnys.
> I am all uneven;
> That moves oft my harnes.
> Now wold God I were in heven,
> For ther wepe no barnes
> So styll. (274-282)

The troubles and irritations of everyday life have thrown Mak out of alignment; his evocation of cosmic order suggests he can be redeemed – and that the Wakefield Master has sympathy for him. But his use of the names of God in his wry deathwish also aligns him with magic. Robert E. Jungmann has noted that this invocation is likely an indication that the Wakefield Master was knowledgeable about medieval magic and demonology, as the seven names of God are used to make acts of conjuring more efficacious [5]. Mak's entrance into the action (on a dark night in the wilderness)

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[3] See Munson 1985, 187.

[4] *Tunc intrat Mak in clamide se super logam vestitus*. For a discussion of parallels in the Chester Plays and *Lay La Fresne*, see Marshall 1972, 720-736.

[5] Jungmann 1982, 27, points to a parallel in the *Lemegeton* and argues: "It does seem from the context of the play, however, that the author of the *Secunda Pastorum* was very

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certainly aligns him dramatically with supernatural power, and, as we will soon see, he is indeed a conjuror.

The three shepherds (Mak's soon-to-be victims) are quite sensitive to the nocturnal uncanny as the Shepherd 3 (Daw) shows us when he joins the action: "We that walk on the nyghtys / Oure catell to kepe, We se sodan syghtys / When othere men slepe" (196-199). Such (implicitly supernatural) sudden sights make the three companions disinclined to trust visitors, but when Mak meets them in the bleak, cold fields, they reluctantly admit him into their company. When it is time to rest, they ask him to lie between them so he can't betray them. As Mak settles down to sleep, he utters the remarkable prayer:

> Fro my top to my too,
> *Manus tuas commendo*
> *Poncio Pilato*;
> Cryst crosse me spede. (383-386)

As the editor notes, this "night spell" "echoes, in garbled Latin, part of a prayer recorded in a 1555 book of York Hours, which likewise calls for making the sign of the cross" [6]. This inappropriate parody of Christ's final words is amusing, but also sinister. The audience might have recognized a charm, or at least some profane mockery of ecclesiastical and liturgical speech. Whether effectual or not, Mak's corruption of biblical language, and his invocation of the Roman governor partially responsible for the passion, is problematic at best. His prayer is dramatically ironic – though it may fool the three shepherds into thinking the prayer will protect the sleepers from evil, the feared evil is literally in their midst, in the form of Mak himself. Mak then surges up from his deceptively recumbent position and casts a spell on the already sleeping shepherds:

> Bot abowte you a serkyll
> As rownde as a moyn
> To I have done that I wyll,
> Tyll that it be noyn,
> That ye lyg stone styll

much aware of the special meaning which a reference to the seven names of God would have for anyone knowledgeable in medieval magic and demonology. That the Wakefield poet was himself knowledgeable in this area can be seen elsewhere".

[6] The *Horae Eboracenses* (Wordsworth 1920, 26), a "layman's prayerbook" reads: *Per crucis hoc signum: fugiat procul omne malignum. Et per idem signum: saluetur quodque benignum. Per signum sancte crucis de inimicis nostris libera nos, Deus noster. In manus tuas, Domine, commendo spiritum meum: redemisti me, Domine, Deus veritatis. Amen*.

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To that I have doyne,
And I shall say thertyll
Of good wordys a foyne
On hight:
Over youre heydys my hand I lyft;
Outt go youre een, fordo your syght
Bot yit I must make better shyft
And it be right. (400-411)

Mak draws "or otherwise creates" a classic charmed circle around the shepherds to keep them asleep until he escapes with the sheep he intends to steal [7]. Mak's extravagant crossing of his whole body moves beyond habitual ritual into a magical performance [8]. When he says he must "make better shyft /and it be right", there are likely other actions he must take to make the spell hold. Mak is invoking inanimate objects (the moon, a stone) that embody the trait he wishes to impose on his victims – immobility. The curse on the eyes is a spell that appears elsewhere in British folklore. This blindness motif occurs in extant materials in connection with supernatural (specifically fairy) activity [9]. Eyes are often a focus of magical anxiety (consider, for example, the widespread belief in the evil eye), and it seems that fairies have the power to take away human eyesight [10]. Mak's symbolic "plucking out" of the recumbent shepherds' eyes would likely have been seen as a sinister act aligned with occult forces like fairies and other invisible beings. His magic allows Mak to steal a "fat shepe" undetected, and head home to his wife (422).

After Mak has successfully stolen this sheep, Shepherd 1 (Coll) awakens and chants or sings a garbled (and presumably habitual) morning prayer:

Resurrex a mortruis,
Have hald my hand.
Judas carnas dominus,
I may not well stand;

[7] See Epp 2017, editorial note, 400-412 for this discussion. Though many critics have read Mak's spell as ineffectual and comically behind the dramatic action (since the shepherds have already resolved to sleep before Mak charms them), the way the shepherds become uncontrollably drowsy is nevertheless unnatural and uncanny.

[8] Specifically, charms, which can be pastiches of groups of prayers and cross-signings found in vernacular sources and in contemporary books of hours (cf. Munson 1985, 187).

[9] Two classic examples are the Middle English romance *Sir Launfal*, in which Guinevere is blinded by Sir Launfal's fairy mistress (1006-1008); and *Tam Lin* (Child 39), in which the Queen of Fairy regrets she had not blinded Tam Lin before he escaped her realm.

[10] See also Shepherd 2's curse on Mak: "Mak, the dewill in youre ee" (313).

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My foytt slepys, by Jesus,
And I walter fastand.
I thoght that we layd us
Full nere Yngland. (504-511)

As Garrett Epp notes, "The first of these garbled Latin lines echoes the Creed (and part of a traditional morning prayer), 'he rose from the dead' (*resurrexit a mortuis*), while the second – likely a parodic distortion of a phrase such as *laudes canas domino* ('sing praises to the lord') translates as 'Judas, flesh, lord'" [11]. Coll's awakening charm is humorously interlarded with protestations of creaky joints and feet that have fallen asleep, and the winking observation that they have awoken somewhere that looks remarkably like England, not the Holy Land [12]. In this homely context, as compared to the malevolent prayer uttered by his false companion Mak, his inadvertent misuse of Christian prayer and substitution of the other great villain of the Passion seems ingenuous rather than sinister. His mistake is further domesticated by his aching mortal body [13]. In such a context, his sinful ignorance and his use of a garbled charm becomes endearing to the audience who recognize him as vulnerable to Mak's trickery [14].

As they awkwardly awaken from sleep, the shepherds gradually realize something is amiss. Sensing some diffuse malevolence, Shepherd 3 (Daw) becomes afraid; he thus uses a blessing as a prophylactic charm: "Bensté be herein! / So me qwakys; / my hart is out of skyn" (517-519). He goes on to describe a prophetic dream about Mak, who appeared "lapt / In a wolfe skyn" (531-532). He is enjoined by the second shepherd to "Be styll, / Thi dreme makys thee woode. / It is bot fantom, by the roode. / Now God turne all to good, / If it be his wyll" (538-542). Daw's truthful dream plays with the commonplace that outlaws wear the wolf's skin, and serves to further mark Mak as a dangerous, even demonic, figure [15]. Daw has been

[11] See Epp 2017, editorial note, 504-506, for this discussion.

[12] Morgan suggests there may be "a hint of magic or miracle in the Shepherd's lines" here. See Morgan 1964, 678.

[13] The prayer is in intertextual conversation with books of hours and courtesy manuals. See Munson 1985, 187: "Both charms mix fragments from the same group of prayers and cross-signing for laymen found in Books of Hours and indicated in vernacular sources".

[14] The shepherds use charms in *Prima Pastorum* as well, and there too their well-intentioned "charm casting" uses somewhat garbled Latin. See lines 417-425 and Epp's note on the contexts of Gramarye.

[15] See Edminster 2005 for a book-length discussion of this play cycle's anticlerical carnivalesque satire involving the predatory preacher, and Harlan-Haughey 2016, 15-16 for an overview of medieval literature involving the vulpine or lupine outlaw.

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vouchsafed divine knowledge from God that counteracts Mak's malignant charm, and even though Shepherd 2 (Gib) dismisses the dream as phantasmic, it is in fact prophetic [16]. Nevertheless, in spite of his misreading of the situation, his extempore prayer arguably dispels the miasma that oppresses the scene owing to the previously misused words of power. This prayer possibly saves these lovable blunderers from their own ignorance and the forces of evil that conspire against them, as we shall see. Mak's malign use of spells and charms is thus counterpointed by the other shepherds' more innocent – even reflexive or habitual – use of incantation. Daw, arguably the hero of the episode, models the typical (albeit exaggeratedly incompetent) everyday use of charms, prophylactic prayers, and the like, while Mak's spellcasting is extreme and dangerous [17]. Nevertheless the two contextualize one another within a continuum of normalcy. It is interesting to note that elsewhere in the play, the shepherds display a sound knowledge of doctrine and a graceful macaronic literacy – their ineptitude here is thus striking [18].

A comic interlude follows the rustling of the sheep. The shepherds search for their stolen animal and, after some humorous obfuscation on the part of Mak and his wife Gill, find it swaddled in the couple's much-used cradle. As the shepherds first offer gifts and congratulations, then become suspicious of the "baby", the two thieves become more outrageous in their lies. Consider, for example, this blasphemous oath, uttered by Gill to assuage the shepherds' suspicions:

> A, my medyll.
> I pray to God so mylde,
> If ever I you begyld,
> That I ete this chylde
> That lygys in this credyll. (772-776)

[16] For the distinction between different types of dreams, see Macrobius' S*omnium Scipionis*, 87-92. Other Middle English fictions in which a character fatefully misinterprets the type of dream he has been vouchsafed include Chaucer's "Nun's Priest's Tale", in which Pertelote wrongly dismisses Chaunticler's prophetic dream of the fox as a product of indigestion, and *The Lytel Gest of Robin Hode*, in which Little John dismisses Robin's dream of capture as a "swift sweven" (lines 13-17).

[17] See Mack 1978, 81, for a reading of Mak's magic as inept and ineffectual.

[18] Consider Gib's: "For Isay sayd so: / *Ecce virgo /Concipiet* a chylde that is nakyd" (982-983). And Shepherd 1: "Patryarkes that has bene, / And prophetys beforne, / Thay desyryd to have sene / This chylde that is borne. / Thay ar gone full clene; / That have thay lorne. / We shall se hym, I weyn, / Or it be morne /To tokyn" (998-1006).

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This oath seems false but is actually technically true – Mak and his wife do intend to consume their ill-gotten sheep-baby. The strangeness intensifies, as does the threat of the supernatural, as Daw wryly observes the oddity of the swaddling job:

> Wyll ye se how thay swedyll
> His foure feytt in the medyll?
> Sagh I never in a credyll
> A hornyd lad or now. (364-367)

The baby is now both decidedly unsettling and humorously demonic. This uncertainty about its ontology feeds into anxieties about changelings and the power of language to transform reality. As Mak and his wife become aware they can no longer hide their horned lad's true nature, they play their most desperate hand – one which plays on the shepherds' superstitions:

> He was takyn with an elfe;
> I saw it myself.
> When the clok stroke twelf
> Was he forshapyn. (890-893)

Such a monstrous "forshapyn" child would be a changeling, a human baby who was "stolen" by supernatural agents and replaced with an uncanny double[19]. The concept of the changeling appears frequently in English mystery plays, perhaps reflecting vernacular anxieties about Christ as a sort of changeling Himself[20]. In this case, the sheep baby is literally a changeling, if not of the supernatural kind. The humor and dramatic irony around his advent in Mak and his wife's hut gains its power from the sheep-baby's contrast with the truly supernatural baby lying in another cradle nearby. Though the shepherds discover the trick and punish the rustlers, the specter of the changeling has been raised, and will haunt the rest of the play.

After the absurd comedy of the false nativity, the shepherds are guided by the angels' transcendent polyphonic song to the true nativity, where they marvel at the scene and offer the Christ child some idiosyncratic gifts – a "handsel for the mare" (a charm to scare off night demons) and a miraculous bunch of winter cherries. Again, their use of charms to ward off evil is sweetly misguided – the Christ child will be the greatest warder-off of evil the world has seen, and presumably needs no handsel. The author,

[19] This is "a parodic nativity whose force cannot have been lost on even the most obtuse spectator" (Green 2016, 132).

[20] Green 2016, 128.

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however, allows no note of ridicule to intrude on the tender scene. In fact, the inclusion of the cherry bob serves to mark the shepherds as uniquely blessed, in spite of themselves. The cherry tree miracle functions in clear contrast to Mak's false miracles, and connects the action of the first half of the play to the divine birth. Note the tone of relief in the shepherds' words as they laugh and play with the infant, whose birth has foiled the "warlock" (ambiguously either the Devil or Mak) [21]:

> Thou has waryd, I weyne,
> The warlo so wylde;
> The fals gyler of teyn
> Now goys he begylde.
> Lo, he merys.
> Lo, he laghys, my swetyng.
> A welfare metyng;
> I have holden my hetyng.
> Have a bob of cherys. (1028-1036)

The cherry tree miracle is a common folk motif in Middle English literature. Miraculous unseasonality appears as early as the Old English *Andreas*, and the specific motif of the cherry in midwinter appears in the "Cherry Tree Carol", in the N-Town Cycle "Nativity Play", the romance *Sir Cliges*, and here [22]. In each case the cherry tree produces its miraculous fruit in response to a rash speech act (Joseph's shame at cuckoldry, Sir Cleges' despair at his bankruptcy, and as I argue, in this play, the misuse of powerful verbal magic).The cherry tree miracle is a Marian (or at least a Christmas) miracle, with its fruitful abundance in winter, but it is also certainly a verbal magic – though in this play the miracle might seem oblique [23].

The transgression of the play is righted by Mary's correct use of the same numinous lexicon originally invoked by Mak when he called upon

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[21] "The reference to the seven names of God helps to characterize Mak as an inept magician or warlock, that is, a male witch" (Jungmann 1982, 26).

[22] See *Andreas* lines 1448-1449, and "Nativity" (N-Town), lines 26-43. The "Cherry-Tree Carol": "O then bespoke Joseph, / With words most unkind: Let him pluck thee a cherry / That brought thee with child" (Child 1860, 2.2). Douglas Sugano, the editor of the N-Town "Nativity", notes the "cheerful spontaneity of Coll's 'Have a bob of cherys' at the end of the Second Shepherd's Play (Towneley 13.1036), which also celebrates the generous a-seasonality of the Christmas gift" (Sugano 2007, note to line 39). This joyful offering contrasts sharply with Joseph's attempted reprimand of his wife in "The Cherry-Tree Carol".

[23] See Guilfoyle 1978, 212-215 for a discussion of the cherry branch incident in this play.

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the seven names of God. After the shepherds' gift giving, Mary speaks and arguably closes the magical circle opened by Mak when he alluded to the seven names of God. Mary's charm – and her echo of God's seven names in her rhyme – is true magic, straight from the source, and it links with the earlier stanza in repeated imagery and rhyme:

> The Fader of heven,
> God omnypotent,
> That sett all on seven,
> His Son has he sent.
> My name couth he neven
> And lyght or he went.
> I conceyvyd hym full even
> Thrugh myght as he ment,
> And now is he borne.
> He kepe you fro wo;
> I shall pray hym so.
> Tell furth as ye go
> And myn on this morne. (1063-1075) [24]

Mary's peroration deploys specific diction shared with Mak's charm (seven, heaven, naming, God). It returns to themes introduced in Mak's speech and reverses them. If Mak rued the birth of unwanted "barnes" that weep, Mary revels in her child's birth; if Mak spoke feelingly of mortal woe, Mary prays that God keep the shepherds from it. There can be little doubt that this is an intentional chiastic structure that is meant to call our memory back to Mak's charm and neutralize it.

Mary is a common actor in charms and her actions serve to protect, cure, and ward off danger, natural and supernatural. Here, her counter-charm protects the previously vulnerable shepherds from "woe", but the performance of this incantation charms the audience as well. The author's careful chiastic structure – with Mak's introduction of the seven names of God and Mary's closure with the same – opens up a magic space within the play where words have power to invoke the supernatural, and anything becomes possible. As a result, we see a wide range of different kinds of charms, folk prayers, and spells. I argue here that the Wakefield Master sees these as a set of related practices, and presents them as such [25] .

[24] For further discussion, see Zimbardo 1978, 405.

[25] In this, the playwright is in sync with pastoral writers, who, as Rider notes, may have been making "realistic concession[s] to current attitudes" when they "shared this widespread view that not all charms were magic". They recognized that many were useful,

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3. The sonic charming continuum

Secunda Pastorum operates in a dream logic of analogy and inversion, veering wildly from horror to hilarity, from nonsense to wondrous sublimity[26]. The play is rich with symbolism and magic, and features many incantatory speech acts, including several charms, the invocation of the specter of changelings, the verbal transformation of an outlaw into a wolf/Satan, the use of handsels, and arguably, an episode of great white magic in the *magnum mysterium* of Christ's birth. The play's episodes mirror one another – the demonic changeling is mirrored or counteracted by the Christ child, and the malignant magic of Mak and the inept use of charms by the shepherds is enclosed or contained by Mary's completion of his opening rhyme and the cherry tree miracle[27]. Albin, in particular, has shown that the work is sonically coherent:

> Sensitivity to the Chester Shepherds' soundedness in performance reveals that its climactic action – an angel singing a sophisticated Gloria, its audience of shepherds responding with playful macaronic Latin – stands not as an isolated outburst but rather as the concentrated centre of a thoroughgoing network of meaningful sound that stretches from the play's first to its last line. By reading the Chester Shepherds play with ears attuned to its sounded dimension, we gain insight into how the play fostered opportunities for interanimating presence, identity, and community by manipulating the aural space of late-medieval theatrical enactment to draw an audience into sonorous presence. The play patterns sounds, verbal and otherwise, into a meaning-bearing experience of sound in its own right in order to develop a dynamic acoustic space in which present sounding and hearing can become the fulcrum of redemptive meaning.[28]

The Wakefield Master sets up a marvelous concatenation of sound, charm, magic, and miracle. What is intriguing about the author's use of verbal

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and "churchmen's views of magical cures probably also shaped the charms that were copied in medieval England". It is significant that "the majority of surviving charms do not include unknown words. Instead, they used words which were known, such as Greek words like *agios* (meaning 'holy'), names for God, or the names of saints and other biblical figures: the names of the three Magi in the New Testament were believed to act as a charm against epilepsy, for example" (Rider 2013, 57). The prayers, charms, and spells performed in this play are mostly known words, though misused – and therein lies the rub.

[26] Unsurprisingly, it has lent itself to Bakhtinian readings: see Bowers 2002; Templeton 2001; Edminster 2000.

[27] On this see Zimbardo 1988, 405.

[28] Albin 2013, 33.

E. Cianci - N. Wolf (cur.), *The Language of Magic* - Milano, LED, 2022
ISBN 978-88-7916-996-7 - https://www.ledonline.it/Il-Segno-le-Lettere/996-language-of-magic.html

magic is that even when wielded by wicked characters – even ones inverting holy names or using the name of Pontius Pilate instead of that of Jesus Christ – they are not necessarily demonized. The playwright seems to have been too subtle (or merciful) a theologian for that. Some charms and spells (as well such "vayn carpynge" as crotchety songs and demonic gibberish) are certainly products of a postlapsarian, post-babelian world, a world where the Word has become words – scattered between the three realms and used for all sorts of purposes [29]. As such, they are imperfect in their efficacy, but, to use a relevant example from our play, the shepherds are not punished for using Judas' name in a waking charm; in fact, they are obliquely rewarded with their privileged and transcendent vision of the holy nativity. This is consonant with current critical opinion of charms and charmings as paraliturgical performance of mainstream religion, not, as previously supposed, relics or evidence of alternative religious practice [30]. But even this sublime vision does not nudge these mortals away from interaction with magic (the cherry miracle) or the misuse or abuse of language and sound. Their imperfect, if eager and charming, emulation of the divine song of the angels suggests they, and all humans by analogy, will soon slide back to our own imperfect use of language, verbal charms and all. In the expansive and humanistic work of the Wakefield playwright, that is perfectly fine.

4. Popular magic and mimicry

The Wakefield Author is attuned to all sonic registers and seems to delight in all of them, while perhaps at the same time, as Stevens notes, "It seems that the Wakefield Author willfully provided a caution against the very fiber of his own art, as if to warn that the voice of poetry in the context of the highest verities can beguile its auditors. There is in the Wakefield Plays a strong, implicit argument against the enchantment of art, and an equally strong affirmation of the artless" [31]. The same is true in the more specific

[29] See Stevens 1977, 101-102. Stevens notes: "Catherine Dunn has pointed out that there is a basic lyric voice in the Towneley cycle which she calls 'the voice of the Church' ('la voix de l'eglise'), a voice that is highly subjective and that speaks or even chants characteristically in patterned sound structures".

[30] See for example Rider 2013, 67-69; Roper 2003b, 26.

[31] Stevens 1977, 104. On the range and complexity of the Wakefield author's art, see 105.

E. Cianci - N. Wolf (cur.), *The Language of Magic* - Milano, LED, 2022
ISBN 978-88-7916-996-7 - https://www.ledonline.it/Il-Segno-le-Lettere/996-language-of-magic.html

instances of the use of verbal magic; even if dangerous in the wrong hands, one senses that the author affirms the simple piety of the shepherds' attempts to influence the world with their prayers and charms. The play begins with taboo words, gibberish – sound and terror, and the invocation of the monstrous unknown [32]. Then follow Mak's entrance and his wolfish behavior and use of malevolent charms. After the shepherd's macaronic charms, we are led to Gill's false oath and the uncertainty about the nature of the"baby", which taps into popular belief about charms, children, and changelings. These verbal magics are followed by the transcendent finale, where spells are echoed and inverted by the voice of the Virgin herself, and the changeling sheep-baby is cancelled out by the true miraculous "changeling", the Christ child [33].

On the level of the magical sonic continuum, this play preserves a demotic register [34]. As Richard Firth Green attests, "the mystery plays come closer than most other medieval literary genres to preserving the flavor of common speech" [35]. The plays spoke peoples' language on purpose, and the people likely spoke back to the plays – their viewing of the late-medieval spectacles meant entering into a contract of reciprocity, a kind of "binding talk" with a "participation framework specific to it" [36]. Moreover, when we consider Albin's reading of sonorous presence and the interanimation of community and identity in late medieval theatre, we must recognize that early audiences would likely be familiar with the types of charms and prayers that are exaggeratedly performed by the players [37]. In what follows, I speculate about the audience's engagement with traditions

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[32] "I trow the shrew can paynt, / The dewyll myght hym hang!" (304-305).

[33] The shepherds' hail can be read as a performance of the popular sacred, an incantation to God. In contrast to Mak's misuse of the supernatural (and the shepherd's deluded charming upon waking), their homespun yet transcendent hail to the newborn child serves as an example of true faith made beautiful in spite of limitations.

[34] "There can be little doubt that the farcical plot of the Second Shepherds play was deliberately meant to emphasize the dissonances of everyday life" (Stevens 1977, 115).

[35] Green 2016, 128. See also 138 on the voice of the little tradition in the mystery plays.

[36] See the discussion of "footing" in Goffman 1979, 140. I follow Martha Feldman's manifesto here: "The various orders of meaning between onstage action and offstage reaction would be understood as shared and intersecting, and as rituals transacted between audience and staged event. In short, the inclusive view taken (especially) in studies of ceremony would help break down the dichotomy between doer and viewer" (Feldman 1995, 443).

[37] See Albin's discussion of "straddling" (Albin 2013, 35). For a different implied audience, see Johnston 2015, 139-140.

E. Cianci - N. Wolf (cur.), *The Language of Magic* - Milano, LED, 2022
ISBN 978-88-7916-996-7 - https://www.ledonline.it/Il-Segno-le-Lettere/996-language-of-magic.html

of word magic in late medieval England, asking how audiences might have seen themselves and their neighbors reflected in the play's soundscape of popular charms, crossings, and incantations, and how this may help us understand the role of the charms in the first part of the play – their power and their menace.

While the portrayal of charms is particularly common in late medieval drama, it is not unique to the genre. Popular use and misuse of charms are parodied or mimicked in other late Middle English literature, though as Jonathan Roper has argued, we must distinguish between literary representation of charms and charms themselves [38]. The charms and prayers performed in this play are either exaggerated parodies or fairly realistic representations of actual practice, the practice of both professionals and laypeople. It is important to emphasize that the use of charms is not at odds with Christian practice. As David Elton Gay notes in his work on the Christianity of incantations: "Christianity has since its inception accorded great power to the demonic and to words of power that could confront and defeat demonic incursions into this world". As charm scholarship has demonstrated, the boundaries between magic and religion are notoriously difficult to demarcate [39]. Earlier than the late medieval period, clergy had banned all "incantations" but it is unclear what this meant on the ground [40]. Gay notes "the difficulties encountered in defining charms as something other than religious or as completely distinct from prayer" [41]. This ambiguity of definition could make performance of charms charged loci of religious praxis [42]. On the one hand, many were commonplace and officially accepted means of effecting power and protection in one's life. On the other hand, the misuse of verbal magic could potentially endanger the user as well as innocent victims.

Thus, the audience might have laughed sympathetically at the shepherds' sleeping and waking prayers, felt a frisson of fear at Mak's occult incantations, and laughed at his parody of the behavior of friars, famous

[38] For example, the creation of a magic circle for the purpose of blessing or conjuring is attested in several late Middle English sources. See Green 2016, 131, and Roper 2003, 50.

[39] See also Rider 2013, 46, on the "major problem medieval English churchmen faced when they thought about magic: how to distinguish it from legitimate religion. Like the borderline between magic and the natural world, the line between magic and religion was difficult to identify, and different people could take very different views of practices which were close to that borderline".

[40] Rider 2013, 56.

[41] Gay 2004, 37.

[42] Gay 2004, 34.

E. Cianci - N. Wolf (cur.), *The Language of Magic* - Milano, LED, 2022
ISBN 978-88-7916-996-7 - https://www.ledonline.it/Il-Segno-le-Lettere/996-language-of-magic.html

users of charms and benedictions, and they would likely have responded with relief to Mary's charm at the end of the performance that blesses them and allows them to escape the magic circle. These instances serve to create a web of folk belief and a spell that is cast over the audience, drawing them into the anxieties at the heart of the play[43]. The atmosphere of black magic created by Mak (specifically by his use of the seven names of God and his necromantic circle), even if it is held at a distance by comedy and its fictive nature, suffuses the world. This miasma is then cleared by the bright light of the miracle of Christ's work, a transformation that is underpinned by the changing soundscape as we move from the unpleasant crotchets of the thief's lullaby to his "baby", to the angels' glorious and technically proficient singing.

The use of magic in public performance may have been a source of anxiety – the audience might worry about the shepherds' inadvertent misuse of charms. Though it seems that charms were generally quite faithfully transmitted from user to user, once in a while, "users of charms could mishear, misremember or reshape what came to them"[44]. The Wakefield Master might be commenting on laypeople's use of words of power without perfect knowledge of Latin. However, elsewhere, the same characters display remarkable macaronic literacy. Some of the magic language is in Latin gibberish and some in English – fluent and menacing[45]. But what if a hapless user of the language of magic accidentally invokes demonic forces instead of holding them at bay? This is a question that the play asks and answers. The other shepherds may use the charms, certainly flubbing the letter of the words, though not the spirit that inspires them. Perhaps for this reason their misuse of words does not rebound on them to their

[43] Here I am invoking Victor Turner's conception of theater as a reflexive device for people to examine the problems inherent in life, as the dramatic crisis presented on stage leads to a breach of social rules and draws the audience into a state of self reflection (see Turner 1982, 16-20). The supernatural space of the play is complex, as each magical speech act creates its own psychic staging, invoking disparate "players" on a sort of stage-within-a-stage. In the words of Ulrika Wolf-Knuts on the psychic staging of charms, "the person who in a certain situation finds it necessary to utter a charm would occupy the central role on the dramatic stage which is, in this case, also populated by a sick cow, Jesus, the Holy Virgin, a bumble-bee, and God, not to mention other curing factors" (Wolf-Knuts 2009, 63). In the psychic staging of this play, the players are the trinity, the demonic forces, the forces of fairy / the supernatural, the mortal characters, and the audience. Each spell or charm uttered invokes two or more of these players.

[44] Smallwood 2003, 12, 22-23.

[45] On nonsensical Latin that echoes biblical or liturgical language and "deploys an occult power (virtus)", see Olsan 2013, 136-137.

E. Cianci - N. Wolf (cur.), *The Language of Magic* - Milano, LED, 2022
ISBN 978-88-7916-996-7 - https://www.ledonline.it/Il-Segno-le-Lettere/996-language-of-magic.html

detriment. On the contrary, they seem protected from evil and accident by God himself, leading a charmed life, so to speak; the theological argument seems to be that if one's heart is in the right place no elf hath power to charm, and one can't even harm oneself. The verbal gaffes are consistently egregious and anachronistic, as we see in the substitution of the name of Judas for that of God the Father, yet as other critics have noted, their magic and the attempted magic of Mak is ultimately ineffective – or is it? Could it be that the characters' invocation of magic releases powers in the world that make possible their vision of the Christ child? In this case, the misuse of magic words functions typologically as a kind of *felix culpa*[46].

Another anxiety that this play's performance might have awakened is the use of false oaths – a form of verbal magic that would be potentially quite dangerous. The mild oaths of the shepherds are intensified by the active magic practice of Mak – they serve as a gentle reminder to the audience to take care with their daily use of powerful words. Maks' wife also swears a false (but true) oath when she ironically exclaims to the suspicious shepherds that she will eat her child (772–776). The couple's "hee frawde" is outed by the trio of shepherds – but it is compounded and made more sinister by the demonic/sheepish character of the "infant". The contexts of witchcraft that inflected audience reaction have long been noted by critics of mystery plays[47]. It seems likely that people felt utterances in the play to have real power. James Paxton has connected the suppression of the "artificial demonic" of the mystery plays to the rise of sixteenth-century witch hunts – that magic was present, or at least seen to be present, in mystery plays is corroborated by the puritans' disgust for (and fear of) the genre[48]. It thus seems possible that the Wakefield Master calculated the fear and sense of unease that these false oaths and dangerous utterances would arouse in the audience, preparing them for the relief of the nativity at the end.

A third related anxiety raised by the play is the common confusion between fairies and other supernatural agents, such as angels. The audience would likely have picked up on the anxieties felt by the shepherds, who appear familiar with fairies and other supernatural visitors ("sudden

[46] Shepherd 2 and Mak embody subtle positions on the continuum from charms to maleficium. The intimacy of the shepherds' hails and prayers to the "derlyng dere / full of godhead" is a contrast to the use of God's name in the first half of the play – the verbal intimacy of their address to the baby Jesus overcomes the obfuscation and incomprehensibility of bad magic.

[47] See, for example, Gardner 1974, 74.

[48] Paxton 1997, 145.

E. Cianci - N. Wolf (cur.), *The Language of Magic* - Milano, LED, 2022
ISBN 978-88-7916-996-7 - https://www.ledonline.it/Il-Segno-le-Lettere/996-language-of-magic.html

sights") in the night – they are the best candidates for the angels' revelation. The problem lies in telling the difference between these two categories of supernatural being, as Shepherd 1 shows us when he tries to describe the angelic song he has heard:

> This was a qwant stevyn
> That ever yit I hard.
> It is a mervell to nevyn
> Thus to be skard. (933-936)

This strange voice frightens because it appears out of nowhere and it is uncanny – likely much like the "sudden sights" he has been subjected to in the past. It seems that the art and beauty of the angelic song, as well as his ability to light up the wood in a sudden flash of blinding light, reassures the shepherds. Nevertheless, the author has drawn a clear parallel between the scary appearances of demons and fairies at the beginning of the play, and the overwhelming appearance of the angel at the end. This purposeful confusion of two supernatural categories is just one of several in the play, as our discussion of the ironic parallels between the baby Jesus and the changeling sheep-child shapeshifted at the midnight hour has shown. These clear parallels also draw upon lore familiar to the audience, and thus gain in power and nuance.

5. Conclusion

The Wakefield Master presents verbal magic as a continuum. His world is expansive, encompassing angels, devils, mortals of every stamp, and God himself. His compassion for the foibles of humanity is palpable as he juxtaposes necromantic spells with benign forms of charm. He ultimately portrays all of these performances as part of the spectrum of human experience, lives lived with only partial views of eternity and grace, and a limited scope for improvement without divine intervention and mercy[49]. The author's complex contrapuntal form introduces themes, inverts, develops, and varies them, thus building the intricate structure the play is noted for – everything is interlinked with everything else. *Secunda Pastorum* gains its

[49] By tossing Mak in a blanket the shepherds are "flouting the church courts" and solving the problem on their own, carnivalesque but relatively merciful, terms (Green 2016, 142).

E. Cianci - N. Wolf (cur.), *The Language of Magic* - Milano, LED, 2022
ISBN 978-88-7916-996-7 - https://www.ledonline.it/Il-Segno-le-Lettere/996-language-of-magic.html

power from a "thoroughgoing network of meaningful sound that stretches from the play's first to its last line" [50]. It is ultimately a meditation on magic and the power of words to make things come to be. And drama *is* magic, no more so than in this play. Just as the shepherds' imperfect attempts to sing with the voice of angels is presented as an example of everyone's duty to emulate the divine, however impossible that may be, so too is human folk magic presented (and likely seen in the late Middle Ages) as an echo of God's power. Magic is not wrong or evil, it is merely a miracle seen through the glass darkly – and better left alone without proper knowledge [51].

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[50] Albin 2013, 34.

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E. Cianci - N. Wolf (cur.), *The Language of Magic* - Milano, LED, 2022
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