

also through the eyes of those around us. The Chester cycle, whether in 1572 or in 2010, is indeed such a spectacle, and to participate in it was a joy and a pleasure.

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Notes

- 1 Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb (London, 2006), 10–12.

Chester Heads South: ‘Octavian’ and ‘The Shepherds’

The plays of ‘Octavian and the Nativity’, performed by Shenandoah University, and ‘The Shepherds’, performed by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, constituted a dramatic study in contrasts. While both of these consecutive modern-dress productions reconfigured much of the content shaped by sixteenth-century Chester to suit a twenty-first-century United States, the ways in which the performances achieved this reconfiguration were as different as their levels of success. Done properly and thoughtfully, a modern-dress and modernized performance can bring out details of medieval and early modern drama that twenty-first-century audiences would otherwise miss. The original social and dramatic contexts can become relevant to audiences separated from the plays by culture and time via a reinscription that updates or even resists those contexts and, just as importantly, the plays can be both moving and fun. A less clear sense of direction can result in a performance that doesn’t so much reinscribe the plays — transgressively or otherwise — as run roughshod over their sixteenth-century meaning in an effort to draw in a twenty-first-century audience.

Shenandoah University’s ‘Octavian and the Nativity’ did a fine job of reinscribing the plays, bringing the class divisions and dialects of contemporary Appalachia to bear upon the text. The production gave careful attention to costume with a tuxedoed Octavian and surprisingly effective human ox and ass, but the highlight of this very well-acted performance was a rural Appalachian Mary and Joseph. Reaching beyond humour or mere contemporizing, actors Jenn Power and Michael Ehlers ably represented the reverent

humility of the Chester Mary and Joseph for the Toronto audience. By investing Mary and Joseph with contemporary American markers of region and class, the Shenandoah production re-enacted what works so well in the Chester cycle, that is, encouraging the audience to see the biblical story as part of their own world, perhaps especially a part of their world that they might ignore or mock. Stephen Strosnider's performance of an Appalachian Expositor carried out this directorial decision: he managed to be dramatically engaging, frequently hilarious, and always completely appropriate to the Shenandoah production without becoming a parody of regional specificity. Director Carolyn Coulson-Grigsby and her actors handled one of the central pageants of the Chester Cycle with verve and grace, and when the audience laughed, as we often did during the course of Shenandoah's performance, we laughed with them rather than at them.

'The Shepherds' was also a modern-dress production, and it too reinscribed sixteenth-century Chester rurality as the working-class of the current southern US, but the effect on the audience was entirely different. This difference is partly due to the play itself. As David Mills points out in a



Fig. 6. The Expositor using an audience member as prop: 'Octavian' and 'The Nativity' (Shenandoah University). Courtesy of Heather S. Mitchell.



Fig. 7. The Shepherds (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign). Courtesy of Heather S. Mitchell.

head-note to his modernized text of the play, ‘What emerges is partly an affectionately humorous view of the local Welsh shepherds by the “townies” of Chester, and partly a symbolic action in which the literal contemporary shepherds are transformed by their visit to the stable into spiritual pastors seeking vocations within the religious life.’¹ To be sure, the shepherds of this production were often humorous, and the actors did a fine job of communicating director Kimberly Koch’s vision to the audience. The problem is that the costuming of the shepherds in their cut-offs, coveralls, and the very specifically American class-marked POW/MIA t-shirt along with the heavily emphasized southern accents pushed the performance into a satire of class and region in the US without really picking up on the second part of what Mills correctly asserts the play is about: the transformation of literal pastors to spiritual ones. Mills warns his readers that ‘Modern directors must consider ... whether the change of vocation can and should be achieved without comic effect’,² but that change in vocation was barely registered by an audience that was still considering the implications of having one of the shepherds give the infant Jesus an open bottle of beer. It was certainly funny, but was it recognizably the Chester Shepherds’ play? The humility implied in the Chester play’s gifts was replaced by a symbol of the social satire that characterized the whole production.

The close proximity of these two productions served not only to provide the audience with two very different views of how modern-dress productions of medieval drama can work, but also highlighted Shenandoah’s successes in reinscribing ‘Octavian and the Nativity’ while keeping the emotional power of the play intact. The balance between humour and the symbolic in ‘The Shepherds’ can be difficult to achieve; unfortunately, the well-acted production from Illinois at Urbana-Champaign was unable to maintain it.

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Notes

- 1 David Mills (ed.), *The Chester Mystery Cycle: A New Edition with Modernised Spelling*, Medieval Texts and Studies 9 (East Lansing MI, 1992), 125.
- 2 Ibid, 125.