



The Concept of *Beauty* in Medieval Nativities from England and Spain
El concepto de *Belleza* en las Natividades medievales de Inglaterra y
España

O conceito de *Beleza* nos Natais medievais da Inglaterra e da Espanha
Vicente CHACÓN-CARMONA¹

Abstract: Medieval nativity plays, in particular those dealing with the adoration of the shepherds, tend to depict two well distinct worlds, namely before and after the characters learn about the birth of the Messiah. English and Castilian playwrights depict the postlapsarian world prior to Jesus's birth as a gloomy, barren place inhabited by rough ignorant creatures awaiting their redemption. Even if beauty is not staged as such in these plays, it is clear that the characters, due to their moral state, are unable to appreciate the aesthetics of their surroundings. It is the aim of this article to analyse and compare the strategies utilised by the authors in order to stimulate the characters and make beauty somehow apparent to the spectators both in the English and the Castilian traditions. Special attention is paid to the roles played by landscape, language, and music.

Resumo: El presente artículo analiza el concepto de belleza en las obras medievales que dramatizan la Adoración de los Pastores en Inglaterra y Castilla. La belleza en estas obras no se representa en escena, solo se aprecia. Los personajes rústicos y cómicos con los que comienzan las obras sufren una transformación desde que el cielo manda a sus mensajeros y los hace partícipes de mensaje de salvación que el nacimiento del Mesías supone. Este trabajo pretende desvelar las estrategias que tanto en la tradición inglesa como en la castellana se usan para abordar el concepto de lo bello o su apreciación por parte de los personajes. El lenguaje, el paisaje y la música en las obras serán los objetos principales de este estudio.

¹ Departamento de Literatura Inglesa y Norteamericana, Universidad de Sevilla, Spain. E-mail: vchacon@us.es.



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Religious shepherds' plays present two distinct sections, namely, before and after the characters learn about the birth of the Messiah. In the English works, this information is provided by an angel, whereas in the Spanish ones, only a few of them include the heavenly being. In the texts in which no angel features, the news about the birth tends to be brought by one of the characters.² The first part of these plays tend to be somewhat comic in both traditions and also bulkier, whereas the Nativity scene proper – the adoration itself – is covered in a comparatively reduced number of verses.

As far as landscape is concerned, the natural world portrayed at the opening of each play is neither beautiful nor pleasant, by any standards. In most cases, landscape is described in negative terms, as it serves as a background for people who are not happy, most probably because of their unredeemed spiritual state. In the course of the dramatic action, however, the negative, oppressive scenery is transformed or even obliterated as characters evolve from comic, postlapsarian types into religious converts.

The characters in these works present an ambivalent nature, as they stand for local contemporary shepherds but also for biblical ones. Actually, it must have been easy for contemporary audiences to recognise them due to the

² The only exceptions in which angels do appear are FRAY ÍÑIGO DE MENDOZA's *Coplas de Vita Christi* (second half of the fifteenth century), Juan DEL ENZINA's *Égloga de las Grandes Lluvias* (1498), Fernando DÍAZ's *Farsa Nuevamente Trovada...en Loor del Nacimiento de Jesu Christo* (1554). It is also represented by the shepherd Macario in Lucas FERNÁNDEZ's *Égloga o Farsa del Nacimiento de Nuestro Señor* (1500). The angel is missing from ENZINA's second *Égloga* (1495), FERNÁNDEZ's *Auto o Farsa del Nacimiento de Nuestro Señor* (c. 1501), from Torres NAHARRO's *Diálogo del Nacimiento* (c. 1512) and López DE YANGUAS's *Égloga de la Natividad* (1518?). It is also absent in Sánchez DE BADAJOZ's *Farsa Teologal* (1530s) and *Farsa de la Natividad* (unknown date).



description of their daily routines, clothes and accessories, or their particular speech. The catechetical message is clear: the dispatch to the shepherds is as valid now as it was in Biblical Israel. In this sense, the setting is also ambivalent, on the one hand, contemporary Castile or England but also Biblical Israel. The notion of time is therefore twofold, as the characters live in contemporary time as the plays open but are transported to historical time (Biblical time, consequently, the past) in the course of the plays.

It is common in the dramas to find toponyms, which the audience must have easily recognised. However, even if no place names are mentioned as it happens, for instance, in Fray Íñigo's composition, the reader/spectator immediately ascribes the herdsmen to a concrete region because they speak in their local English brogues in the English plays, and in sayagüés in the Spanish one. This dialect was originally spoken in Sayago, a region in the Province of Zamora, in Northern Spain. This rustic, rough tongue was purposefully elaborated by Fray Íñigo and followed by the other playwrights who also dramatised the Annunciation scene. This is important, because Fray Íñigo is the first Castilian author to use this type of convention to characterise the shepherds in a religious pastoral play.

Therefore, their characteristic regional aspect ascribes them to a particular geographical area, Northern Spain, and also sets them apart from other types of characters and puts them into a particular group as marginal parsonages or social outcasts who belong to a rural world and are rustic, coarse, and invariably comic.³ However, it should be noted that the dialect spoken by the shepherds is a literary construct, a literary sayagüés derived from the original local dialect of Sayago which was used precisely to convey rusticity, coarseness, and by extension, a marginal and unredeemed nature. This language contrasts with the beauty of the angelic Latin or the purity of the angel's words in the plays in which he speaks in the vernacular.

The transformation of the shepherds into more refined creatures capable of admiring the beauty brought from heaven is not instantaneous. The vast majority of these plays include the shepherds' comic reaction to the angel's

³ This group would also include other types such as hermits and savages. For a study of the different types of rustic characters and other marginal types, see DEL RÍO, Alberto. 'Figuras al Margen: Algunas Notas Sobre Ermitaños, Salvajes y Pastores en tiempos de Juan del Encina'. In: GUIJARRO CEBALLOS, Javier (ed.), *Humanismo y literatura en tiempos de Juan de Encina*. Salamanca: University of Salamanca, pp. 147-61.



message: the shepherds are afraid, and this provokes laughter, but little by little they solve the Biblical puzzle. Not only that, through this comic relief the most important issues in the Nativity are addressed, such as the nature of the Baby or Mary's virginity. After they realise that the flying creatures are angels, they gradually understand the profound meaning of their words and eventually set off to Bethlehem to worship the Baby, following the angelic instructions.

Most shepherds' plays tend to open with a shepherd who complains about foul weather. The narrative in Luke's Gospel does not provide any information with regard to the weather, and only mentions that the story takes place at night: 'and there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.' (*Luke* 2: 8). The Apocrypha are not very explicit either, but both the Castilian and the English plays lay emphasis on the weather, which is invariably bad. The Towneley *First and Second Shepherds' Plays* open with a shepherd complaining about their hardships and particularly about the changeable weather which seems to be affecting the state of the character's heart and soul. In the *First Shepherds' Play* the first shepherd comments:

Now in hart, now in heyll
Now in weytt, now in blast,
Now in care,
Now in comforth agane,
Now is fayre, now is rane,
Now is hart full fane,
And after full sare. (ll. 7-13)

In the *Second Shepherds' Play* the unremitting 'stormes' and 'Tempest' (l. 10) and cold weather cause distress in the character's physical and emotional state. The shepherd who delivers the first speech claims that his 'legys thay fold' (l. 5) and that his 'fyngers ar chappyd' but also that he is 'lappyd/ In Sorrow' (ll. 8-9).

In the Spanish plays, references to bad weather are constant too. In Fernández's *Auto o Farsa del Nacimiento de Nuestro señor Iesu Christo*, the first stage direction indicates that Pascual, the first shepherd, enters swearing at the bad weather: 'muerto de frío, blasfemando de los temporales' (frozen, and swearing at the bad weather conditions). In Fray Íñigo de Mendoza's work, *Coplas de Vita Christi*, a shepherd recounts that the coming of the angel took



place in miserable weather conditions: a raging blizzard ('ventiscava', copla 153, l. 1), a strong Northern wind was blowing ('cierço', 'gallego', stanza 153, ll. 3-4).⁴

Apart from the adverse climatic conditions, the characters tend to provide a series of details about themselves and about their flocks, which are usually sick or famished and thrive in adverse natural conditions. Nature is actually presented in two different manners: as a fearful power that threatens the lives of people and animals alike, leaving no room for the appreciation of beauty on the one hand, and, on the other, as a source of life, as it provides the shepherds with the necessary remedies to cure their sick sheep, with pastures for the grazing of the flocks and with the necessary nourishment for mankind. In this latter case, the shepherds just use nature to their own benefit, with no time for aesthetic contemplations.

When the angel appears or another character brings the news of birth, some hints of beauty start to be appreciated in the plays: the angels, who are the embodiment of heavenly splendour, are in sharp contrast with the shepherds and they literally light up the scene (references to light abound) and the souls of those who are called to witness Jesus's miraculous birth. In order to show the shepherds' awareness of beauty, they tend to use a much more sophisticated and ornamented language in these scenes. Little by little, the shepherds are able to sing songs, and even polyphony. Since Heaven is usually described both in medieval drama and in the tradition of the Church as a musical place, angels, as its direct representatives, sing 'heavenly' songs which are invariably described as beautiful and harmonious.⁵

The shepherds stop their fights about earthly matters as soon as they hear the angel's celestial chanting and start to appreciate the beauty of the celestial messengers and their songs, which are invariably described as beautiful and harmonious. This is particularly evident in the Chester *Paynters' Playe* and in the Towneley *Second Shepherds Play*. In Lucas Fernández's *Égloga o Farsa*, Marcelo says: *¿No vos digo que no ha vn hora/ que vn ángel vino a desora,/ cantando por dulces artes?* ('Haven't I told you that not even an hour ago/an angel suddenly

⁴ 'Cierzo' and 'gallego' are northern winds, but especially 'gallego' is the name people from Castile assign to the Northern (usually moist) wind that blows from the neighbouring region, Galicia. This is an attempt to identify the shepherds with a very specific area.

⁵ See RASTALL, Richard. *Minstrels Playing: Music in Early English Religious Drama II*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001, especially chapters 1-4.



appeared,/singing sweetly and skilfully?', ll. 373–5). Likewise, in the *Auto o Farsa*, Juan rejoices in the following manner: *¡Cuán alegre estoy! ¡Qué tanto! desde que oí aquel dulce canto!* ('How happy I am/since I heard that sweet song!', ll. 269–70). At this point, they express their determination to set off to Bethlehem in order to pay homage to Jesus. Singing, therefore, marks the beginning of a journey, both physical and spiritual, which turns those rough, ignorant, 'European' contemporary rustics into Christian converts who travel to Bethlehem.⁶

Both the singing and the trip usually trigger the creation of a new atmosphere. Actually, in some cases, a great transformation in the landscape occurs after the announcement of the birth of Christ, leading up to the enactment of the Nativity episode proper, for which the preceding action has been a mere introductory sequence or introduction. A clear example of this change towards a positive beautiful setting is Fernández's *Auto o Farsa del Nacimiento*, in which the place becomes a pleasant bucolic prairie with scented flowers and happy animals:

Es cosa para espantar
de aquesto, ¿qué querrá ser?
Las aues muestran plazer
con su muy dulce cantar.
Y animales con bramar,
los campos con sus olores
como que touiessen flores, (ll. 145-52).

This is a frightful thing
What might this be?
The birds show pleasure
with their sweet songs.
And the animals' noises,
the fields smell
as though they had flowers.

In Fray Íñigo's *Vita Christi*, the originally sterile countryside that appears at the beginning changes into a fruitful 'verde pradera' (green prairie, stanza 151) in which the cattle are giving birth ('ovejás parideras', stanza 152) while angels sing. In the York *Chandlers' Play* (l. 71), Fray Íñigo's *Coplas de Vita Christi*

⁶ I have discussed the role of music in shepherds' plays in England and Castile in 'Singing Shepherds, Discordant Devils: Music and Song in Medieval Pastoral Plays'. In *Medieval English Theatre*, 32, 2010, pp. 62-80.



(stanza 136), the Coventry *Shearmen and Tailors' Pageant*, (l. 253), or the Towneley *First Shepherds Play* (ll. 588–92), there are similar reactions to the beauty of the angelic chants. Also, in the Towneley *Second Shepherds Play*, Primus Pastor describes the angelic music as 'a meruell' (l. 935).

Another way in which the plays acknowledge the spiritual transformation of the rustics is their use and/or understanding of Latin, which signals their leaving behind their rough brogues. Some stage directions suggest that they sing Latin songs derived from the liturgical services. In Fernández's *Égloga*, for example, the shepherds sing a corrupted *Et homo factum est* ('And he was made man', l. 460).⁷ Actually, the shepherds' problems interpreting the angelic Latin are common in many plays. Also, in Fray Íñigo's work there is another attempt to reproduce the Latin:

Aún tengo en la mi mamoria
sus cantos, asmo que creo
unos gritavan vitoria,
los otros cantavan goria,
otros indaçielçis Deo,
otros Dios es pietatis,
otros et in tierra paz
homanibus vanitatis,
otros buena voluntatis. (stanza 155)

I still have in my mind
his songs, I believe
that some of them proclaimed victory,
the others sang of glory,
and others said *indaçielcis Deo*,
others *Dios es pietatis*,
others *et in tierra paz*
homanibus vanitatis,
others *buena voluntatis*.

⁷ The expression is actually taken from the Nicæan Creed: 'Ei incarnatus est de Spiritu Sancto ex Maria Virgine, et homo factus est'. The correct words are 'factus est', not 'factum est.' There is also a medieval *villancico* (a popular song), recorded in the sixteenth-century *Book of Uppsala* which starts with 'Verbum caro factum est', a sentence found in the third part of the Angelus: 'Et Verbum caro factum est- et habitavit in nobis'. The shepherd had only heard the song and because he does not speak Latin, he says 'factum est', and not 'factus est'.



It is worth highlighting that Latin enjoys a significant dramatic function in these plays. Apart from being used for stage directions, as is common in other medieval plays, it frequently featured in the speeches or songs of holy and virtuous characters to signify their agreement with the official doctrine of the Church.⁸ The singing of the Latin *Gloria*, for instance, becomes a recurring element in most shepherds' dramas. In Vicente's *Auto Pastoril Castelhana*, Gil is stunned by Virgin Mary's beauty and paraphrases the *Song of Songs*: He addresses her with such compliments as *columba mea ferrosa* ('my fair dove', l. 348), or *tota pulchra amica mea* ('[Thou art] all fair, O my love', l. 360).⁹

His fellow shepherds are astonished by his sudden sophistication, thus prompting Silvestre to remark: *Con esso hablas llatin | tan a punto que es plazzer* ('Moreover, you speak Latin/ so accurately that it is a delight', ll. 366–7). Another instance of a shepherd trying to interpret Latin appears in the Coventry play, where Pastor II explains: '*Glore glorea in excelsis* — þat wase þer song' (l. 258). In the same play, Pastor I, for instance, specifies that 'we ma syng in his [Christ's] presence *Et in terra pax omynibus*' (ll. 262–3). In the Chester *Paynters' Playe* the characters discuss the angel's apparently unintelligible words until they finally discern that they are in fact *Gloria in excelsis Deo* (ll. 358–435).

The characters of the Towneley *First Shepherds' Play* manage not only to imitate Latin, but also recite Virgil since, according to Church tradition, the Roman poet may be regarded as one of the prophets, since he had foretold the birth of Christ in his *Fourth Eclogue*:¹⁰

Virgill in his poetré
Sayde in his verse ...
Iam noua progenies celo demittitur alto,

⁸ See RIDRUEJO, Mayte and PORTILLO, Rafael. 'La Traducción del Latín al Inglés en los 'pageants' del 'Ludus Coventriae''. In: SANTOYO, J. C. (ed.), *Translation Across Cultures: La traducción entre el mundo hispánico y anglosajón: Relaciones lingüísticas, culturales y literarias*. Actas XI Congreso AEDEAN. León: Universidad de León, Secretariado de Publicaciones, 1989, pp. 153–58.

⁹ The text obviously comes from the Vulgate, *Song of Songs* 4:3.

¹⁰ The full text can be consulted online at <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/verg.html>. For a Christian interpretation of the eclogue, see METFORD, C. J. *Dictionary of Christian Lore and Legend*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1983, p. 256. See also CROSS, F. L. and LIVINGSTONE, E. A. (eds.), *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974, p. 1444.



Iam rediet Virgo, redeunt Saturnia regna (ll. 556–9).

Finally, music marks the conclusion of the plays, adding a festive atmosphere to the enactment of a well-known Christmas episode. In the Spanish texts, the shepherds mention a trip to Bethlehem even if they do not travel and never actually meet Jesus, which might have involved having a man acting the part of Mary, a situation that might have been considered embarrassing.¹¹ The Castilian shepherds go offstage while singing a *villancico*, and, similarly, the shepherds also sing at the end of the plays in Coventry, Towneley and Chester.

To conclude, the characters in these Nativity plays undergo a deep transformation in the course of the dramatic action. First, they are unable to appreciate any beauty in front of them, although nothing that surrounds them seems to be beautiful. Only when Heaven manifests itself via the celestial being, the shepherds begin to be aware of the aesthetics that, for instance, music and song possess. The message brings about a transformation of the scenery into a well-lit place in which characters are gradually enlightened as they become the beneficiaries of Jesus's salvation plan, but also the spokesmen of the salvific message.

Because of their new role as shepherds of souls, their speech becomes more refined and, gradually, they manage to speak the language of the Gospels (i.e., Latin). After the angelic visit or the mere knowledge of the birth, their body and soul become more harmoniously related, under the influence of heavenly splendour. Thus, because their new spiritual state mirrors that of the angels and angels are the epitome of heavenly beauty, the originally rough, ignorant creatures of the beginning are finally allowed to appreciate and even produce beauty as their song and dances reveal.

¹¹ Women were not allowed to act in the Spanish theatre throughout the fifteenth and even the first half of the sixteenth centuries. In Puente Genil, a Spanish town near Córdoba, there is an annual parade of all New Testament male and female characters, but significantly, the only one not featuring in it is the Virgin Mary, since all personages are enacted exclusively by men. See LARA, Manuel Gómez et al. 'Easter Processions in Puente Genil, Córdoba, Spain'. In: *Medieval English Theatre*, 9: 2, 1987, pp. 93-124.