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In this paper I wish to characterize the extant English Shepherds' Plays in order to show how playwrights responded to the biblical narrative, but specifically to note that the Chester and Towneley shepherds are presented more realistically than those in York, Coventry, and N.Town where they are represented as *pastores*. I will conclude with a discussion of the reception of the Chester *Shepherds*. Although the Visitation of the Shepherds was common in images and plays and presumably popular, not everyone thought so highly of them as one Puritan preacher's objections to the Chester *Shepherds* attest.

Since most of these plays were created for urban and town audiences by guildsmen or others, we would expect the dramatisations to represent their interests and piety in some way. But of what interest are shepherds to such audiences? How does one represent these characters? In the case of the city of Chester, for example, there was no tradition of sheep-herding in the area.⁵ Some of the plays — Coventry, York, N.Town, and the *Shrewsbury Fragments* — do not represent the shepherds naturalistically or as comic rustics but 'exegetically' as *pastores*.⁶

Because the biblical narrative is very brief, playwrights exercised considerable freedom in developing the story. After stating the circumstances of the swaddled Christ's birth in a manger (2:7), Luke 2:8–20 says that there were shepherds in the fields at night, an angel appeared to them and they were afraid. The angel tells them that that day in Bethlehem the Saviour was born and gives them a sign by which they will recognize the Child; then there is a chorus of angels singing *Gloria in altissimis Deo*. The shepherds make an immediate decision to go to Bethlehem. They report their experience to Mary, who ponders it in her heart, while everyone (the people to whom the shepherds report the event?) wonders at it. The shepherds joyfully return to their fields glorifying and praising God.⁷

The playwrights treated this narrative imaginatively, leaving out parts of Luke and adding material of their own:

1. in general the English Shepherds do not express fear of the Angel, though the Angel when it appears the second time in N.Town and Chester unaccountably asserts that they are afraid when that has not been shown earlier; rather, the Shepherds express fear of the cold and the dark and their nightmares. They usually express joy at the appearance of the star and the Angel;