

A Medieval Christmas

A Theatre Production by Students of the English Department Bern

Under the direction of Professor Annette Kern-Stähler and her assistants Dr. Nicole Nyffenegger-Staub, Kathrin Reist and Eva Grädel, 16 students from the English Department of the University of Bern performed four medieval plays at the *Historisches Museum* Bern. The performances of the individual plays were integrated into a tour through the medieval part of the museum, focusing on the interrelations between medieval drama and art (fig. 2). The first play featured the Old Testament prophecies of Christ's birth through the prophets Jesse and Jesaja (fig. 3). This was followed by the Annunciation (fig.4) and Joseph's Doubts (fig.5): Joseph, coming back home, finds Mary heavy with child and is afraid of being called a cuckold. In the final play, the members of the audience join Joseph and Mary on their journey to Bethlehem in the course of which the so-called cherry tree miracle happens: Longing for the cherries from a tree they pass on their way, Mary asks Joseph to pluck some for her. Joseph who is unable to reach the branches of the tree tells her: "Let him pluck you cherries who got you with child" - and after a short prayer offered by Mary, behold, the tree bows down to her. After Christ's birth, two midwives verify the marvel that Mary is indeed a virgin (fig.6). The audience was sent off with the "Cherry Tree Carol", sung by all the students who were involved in the production.

Originally, the plays were part of cycles of plays, representing biblical history from the Creation to the Last Judgment. These cycles were performed on a series of wooden wagons, so-called pageants, which were drawn through the city, stopping at various stations for their performances. By integrating the plays into a tour through the museum, the students of the University of Bern's English department managed to imitate the processional character of the Cycle Plays while at the same time being able to point out the interrelations between medieval art and drama. Medieval art is often very theatrical and much of medieval art served the same function as medieval plays: To make salvation (or the way to it) more concrete and more tangible for the lay people who often lacked the education to read and understand the Bible. Similarly, the tour through the *Historisches Museum* Bern lent itself to discuss parallels between the prohibition of religious drama during the Reformation and iconoclasm (particularly visible in the Museum's collection of beheaded sculptures from the Bern Münster). While the students used a Modern English translation of the plays, the prophets and Archangel Gabriel delivered their lines in Middle English.

The performances took place on 20, 22 and 23 December and were sold out completely. Special thanks go to Prof. Kern-Stähler and her assistants and to the *Historisches Museum* Bern for hosting us.

Chantal Imhof and Victoria Senger, University of Bern



Fig.1: The Annunciation scene was staged amidst some of the original figures of the Münster portal created by Erhard Künig, including Mary and John the Baptist as intermediaries between humans and Christ.



Fig.2: The Tour Guides Victoria Senger, Nicole Nyffenegger-Staub and Kira Köllges (from left) welcome the spectators



Fig.3: The prophets Jesse and Jesaja present Christ's Family Tree to the audience



Fig.4: Mary thanks Angel Gabriel for having been chosen to be the mother of Christ



Fig.5: Mary endeavours to convince Joseph of her loyalty towards him



Fig.6: On their journey to Bethlehem, Mary and Joseph pass by a cherry tree and are advised by a citizen of Bethlehem to seek shelter among a horse barn



Fig.7: Two midwives doubt that Mary is still a virgin after having given birth to Christ