

A People That Can Amuse Itself

To amuse oneself is a mark of gaiety, vitality and love of life. It means that a man's own thoughts are attractive, artistic and satisfying. And the happiness of a people is not to be judged by the amount of fun provided for them. For fun can be provided as food can be provided; by a few big stores or shops. The happiness of the people is to be judged by the fun that the people provide. In healthier ages any amount of fun was really provided by the people and not merely for the people. It was so in a vast multitude of songs, fairy tales and dances; but it was so even in the more ornate and official business of the drama.

The men of the mediaeval guilds enacted in person the miracle plays, with all their highly-coloured symbolism of the mysteries of heaven and hell. I have the fullest political sympathy with the modern Trades Unions; but I confess I cannot easily imagine a railway-porter feeling quite comfortable in the costume of the Archangel Gabriel; or even a plumber getting the full delight out of being the Devil. Yet it must have been a very pure delight to be the Devil. There was any amount of gagging and grotesque impromptu in such a part; for the mediaeval men were quite without the modern reverence for the Devil. The carpenter or cobbler who had the happiness of acting Caiphas used to borrow a cope or chasuble from the parish church; and I earnestly hope that the Archbishop of Canterbury would now lend his apron and gaiters to a dustman for such a purpose.

But the only point here is that numbers of ordinary poor people acted; and there was nothing to prevent it being done in every town and even in every village. I daresay they acted as badly as Bottom the Weaver; but I am not talking about art, but about amusement. Above all, I am talking about people amusing themselves; and not only being amused.

G.K. Chesterton, article in "*Vanity Fair*," February 1920

- What difference does the author establish between “fun provided **for** the people” and “fun provided **by** the people”?
- What example of people amusing themselves does the author present?
- Why would it have been “a very pure delight to be the Devil” in one of the miracle plays? Why might a modern workman not “feel quite comfortable” playing the role of an Archangel?
- Why might it be considered ironic, that the parish church would lend a “cope or chasuble” to “Caiphas”? What do you think this shows about Medieval society?