

## MAN BE MERRY

## A Study of English Mediaeval Christmas Carols

A BROWSE among mediaeval English Christmas Carols is an interesting as well as a seasonable pastime. From such collections of songs and poems as Sloane 2593, Eng. Poet. E.I., Brit. Mus. Addit. 5665, Trin. Coll. Camb. O.3, 58, Selden B. 26, and the Commonplace Book of Richard Hill, the grocer's apprentice, Balliol 354<sup>1</sup>—to name not by any means all, but some of the most important sources of our knowledge of the subject—it is possible to gain an insight into the attitude towards Christmas revealed by these pre-Reformation popular songs. These collections, written down in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, though many of them were probably composed at an earlier date, have happily survived all the vicissitudes and perils which beset the path of manuscripts. History has shown us that England was indeed no island of saints in those days, far from it. In view of this it is at least gratifying to notice how the carols which bear the undoubted stamp of songs of the people, capable of appealing to all grades of society, are full of the simplest and sincerest piety with an awareness and appreciation of the Incarnation as the basis of the joy which they express. The exhortations to be merry are innumerable, but it is merriment with a difference. No empty unmeaning frivolity, but a light-hearted gaiety founded on a very sure and overwhelming piece of good fortune. The danger has been very real, for

‘By an apple of a tree  
Bond men all made were we.’

Before the Incarnation every man to hell did go, and says the poet grimly it was ‘little merry then.’ But now all is changed.

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<sup>1</sup> See Wright Warton Club, 1856, Wright Percy Society, 1841, 1847. Fuller-Maitland *English Carols of the Fifteenth Century*, Anglia 36, 26, 12.

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' Now is well and all thyng aryght  
And Cryst ys come as a trew Knyght . . . .  
Thus the feend ys put to flyght.'<sup>2</sup>

So sings one writer, and another 'that ever was thralle now ys he free,' which phrase would be full of meaning for a man of those days. It was indeed a great escape, we have been bought 'fro devels wyld,' so well may a refrain exhort

' Man be merie as byrd on berie,  
And all thi care let away !'

Not only is our Lord likened to a knight; in another poem He is the merchant whose heart was set on a bargain, 'This chaffare lovyd He right weel,' even though the price was high, and consequently when He claims our love and allegiance 'He askyth nought but that is Hys.' It is the generosity of the Incarnation which captivates men's hearts.

' He that was riche, without any nede,  
Appeared in this world in right pore wede,  
To make us that were pore indeed,  
Riche, without any nede trewly.'

Churlish indeed would be he who would not rejoice that 'this game (*i.e.*, the Redemption) is begonne.' Not only has man's redemption been assured, but he has gained more than that. The fall, thinks one, certainly was a *felix culpa*, for

' Ne hadde the appil taken been  
Ne hadde never our lady  
A been hevene qwen.' So  
' Blyssid be the tyme  
That appil take was,  
Therefore we mown syngyn,  
" Deo gracias." '

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<sup>2</sup> The spelling of these poems is only modernized so far as was deemed necessary to make them intelligible to modern readers. The metre often requiries final e (es) to be sounded as it still was in Middle English.

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Another, writing with an echo of those sermons such as Chaucer gives in the Parson's Tale, where the seven deadly sins and their remedies are expounded, having in mind one of the shoots of that subtle vice accidie, sadness, begins his carol with one of the preacher's points.

' A principal poynt of charyte,  
It is mery to be,  
In Hym that is but One,  
Be mery, be mery, be mery, I prey you everyone.'

Other verses tell of the Incarnation, and the last makes the following request:

' Now Mary for thy sonys sake,  
Save them all that merthe make,  
And longest holdy on.  
Be mery, etc.'

As might be expected our Lady is the inspiration of some of the loveliest of the carols, for instance the happily well-known ' I syng of a mayden.' She is the ' feirest flower of any field,' a phrase from a poem dating as early as the thirteenth century.

' Of a rose synge we  
Misterium mirabile.'

is the refrain of a fifteenth century song writer who relates how that bright unfading rose Mary bore the ' Prince of pryce.' Another taking a like theme sings of a ' lovely rose ' out of whose bosom a Blossom sprang. Many branches there are to this heavenly rose tree, each with a religious significance. Thus one which ' sprang to hevене ' is the Blessed Sacrament which every day ' sheweth in prestes hand.' This rose theme which occurs several times is perhaps seen at its best in the following restrained and exquisite example:

' There is no rose of swych vertu  
As is the rose that bare Jhesu.  
Alleluya.

For in this rose conteyned was  
Hevене and erthe in lytyl space.  
Res miranda,

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By that rose we may wel see  
There be one God in personys three,  
Pares forma.

The aungelys sungen the schepherdes to  
"Gloria in excelsis Deo."  
Gaudeamus.

Leave we al this werldly merthe,  
And follow we this joyful berthe.  
'Transeamus.'

Touching indeed are some of the cradle songs wherein our Lady is depicted fondling her Child or lulling Him to sleep with such tender words as

'Lullay, my lyking, my dear sone, my sweetyng,  
Lullay, my dear heart, myne own dear darlyng!'

Dating from the time of Henry VII or VIII is an alliterative poem composed with more conscious artifice than many another, but no less charming on that account.

'The moder full mannerly and meekly as a mayd,  
Lokyng on her lytill son so laughyng in lap layd  
So pretyly so pertly so passyngly well apayd, . . . .  
Full softly and full soberly,  
Unto her son she saide.  
"Quid petis o fili?"  
Mater dulcissima baba  
"Quid petis o fili?"  
Michi plausus oscula da da.'

Two verses of the poet's reflections follow, the second of which in its last lines returns to the original scene.

'Yet softly to her swete son me thought I heard her sayn  
Now gracious God and goode swete babe yet once this game  
agayne.  
'Quid petis o fili?' etc.

No other of the cradle songs is as carefree as this, though one has the burden

"A my dere, a my dere son"  
Sayd Mary. "A my dere,  
Kyss thi moder Jhesu,  
With a laughing chere!"

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for in spite of this laughter the carol relates that she 'sore did weep,' and when St. Joseph asked wherefore she replied, because 'my son a kyng that made all thyng, lyeth in hay.' The hardships of poverty and the distress which they cause both Mother and Child is often realistically depicted. A pitiful cry of the poverty-stricken Mother comes from a fourteenth century manuscript, where our Lady weeps and grieveth sore at the 'porful bed,' more like a bier than a cradle, on which her Infant lies with ox and ass for His companions. Heart-rending is the wail of the Babe Himself, who complains:

' I may not slep, but I may wepe,  
I am so wo begone;  
Slep I wold, butt I am colde,  
And clothys have I none.'

Less dire in the poverty suggested is the delightful dialogue in which our Lady questions her son as to the suitability of such privations for one who is 'King veray.' It is only right, she thinks, that He should be laid in 'good aray' in the hall of some great King. Our Lord assures her that even though He lies in a crib His royalty will receive some recognition, for three Kings will come to visit Him upon the twelfth day. Our Lady's misgivings silenced, she asks Him how she may make Him glad of cheer, and He replies:

' My moder sweet, when tyme it be,  
Thou take me up aloft,  
And sette me upon thi knee,  
And handell me full soft.  
And in thine arme, thou lap me warme,  
And keep me nyght and day;  
And yff I weep and may not sleep,  
Thou syng "by by lullay." '

This she promises to do on condition that He will bring to bliss all who 'wyll or can' be merry on Christmas Day.

Not only does the lack of bare necessities mar the happiness of these two; the Passion also casts a shadow which cannot be forgotten. Thus in another dialogue our Lady is troubled to see her Infant weep, and asks Him the cause

of His distress, fearful lest it should be some failure on her part. The Child then unfolds to her the story of the Passion with all its meed of suffering. Our Lady is aghast and will scarcely believe it. She cannot think that He who 'never dide amyse' should be treated thus, and in one verse exclaims almost indignantly 'when Gabryell called me full of grace, He told me nothyng of this.' Songs of pure gladness are those in which the noise of the shepherds' pipes is imitated in the chorus, 'Tyrlly, turlow, tyrlly, turlow.' Jolly Wat the shepherd who in his pipe made so much joy might be a character stepped out of the Mystery Plays, and is as simple and homely as were probably those shepherds who visited the crib at the first Christmastide. Wat sat on a hill with his sheep-dog tethered to his girdle, beside him were his tar-box, flute and flagon. He saw a star as red as blood and heard the angels sing. He immediately started for Bethlehem, first bidding his dog 'Kepe well my shep fro the corn.' Arriving at the Stable, 'he sweat' he had gone so fast. He offered the Infant such things as he had to give, 'my pype, my skyrte, my tar-box, and my scrype.' Astonished that our Lady should know his name, for she addressed him as 'myne owne herdes man. Wat,' he bade her 'Lull well Jhesu in thy lap.' And having made his farewell to St. Joseph with the 'round cap,' he departed with the words,

' Now may I well both hope and syng,  
For I have been at Crystes bearyng.'

There is no picture of the Wise Kings to equal that of Wat, they are stately figures of 'great noblay,' who come with gifts from some far-off place, 'Ynde' or even 'Galely,' or as 'ffelosafers ffro Caldey,' as one scribe writes in a brave attempt to cope with difficult words, who meet with 'Herowd that moody kyng.' One carol-writer, however, allows his imagination to fill in the picture a little, and represents them as surprised when they found that the star led them to but a Child and His Mother. The eldest king, he says, went foremost, for he would see 'what doomys man that this shuld be.' The second king saw but a Babe in arms when he had expected a grown man,

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The saints of the Christmas season are not forgotten. There are songs of Stephen, who was 'a clerk in Kyng Herowdes halle,' of St. John, 'Crystys dear darlyng,' of the Holy Innocents, and of St. Thomas of Canterbury, who was as 'a strong pyller of brass.'

The remaining types of carol may be roughly classified as those half-religious, half-secular, which treat of the time of 'Cristemas,' sometimes personified as Sir Christmas, in which the good lord of the house bids welcome to all who visit him and partake of such fare as he provides, and shout in chorus such a refrain as

'What cheer? Good cheer! Good cheer! Good cheer!  
Be mery and glad this gud new yere.'

The tone is often more religious than secular, except in the Holly and Ivy songs, which are entirely secular, and even the wassail song in Richard Hill's *Commonplace Book* is one of joy and thanksgiving for the Incarnation. The boar's head carols deal more frankly with good fare and 'ryght gud chere,' indeed in one of them the different courses and all the delicacies to be found on the table are described with gusto. But even among these is one which tells that the boar's head betokens a Prince without peer.

As a recent study<sup>3</sup> has pointed out, the mediaeval preacher was not slow to warn his audience against overstepping the mark while merry-making during the Christmas season, since 'he that can most rybawdry in spekyng or syngyng . . . ys callyd a joly felowe and a stowte revelour.'<sup>4</sup> So it is not surprising that the voice of the moralist should be heard in one of the carols:

'Man be mery I thee rede,  
But bewar what merthis thou make;  
Crist ys clothed yn thy wede . . .  
Man bewar how thou Hym trete,  
For He ys made man for thy sake.'

K. M. KILBRIDE.

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<sup>3</sup> *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England*. By Dr. Owst. (Camb. Univ. Press 1933; pp. 483-4.)

<sup>4</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 483.