

"THE CHERRY-TREE CAROL": ITS SOURCES AND ANALOGUES

Pamela L. Royston

In general, scholars agree that certain popular ballads of the late Middle Ages seem to interrelate with a variety of other genres in both origin and narrative development and in form.¹ Various ballads within the Child canon have been compared and contrasted with their antecedents and analogues in courtly lyrics, carols, religious songs, sagas, historical chronicles, and verse romances. In the case of the "Cherry-Tree Carol," Francis James Child's headnotes direct the student to compare the ballad with several apparent sources: most notably, chapter XX of the Pseudo-Matthew gospel and the second chapter of Luke. Further, Child points out that "there are many narratives of the childhood of Jesus, based on the apocryphal gospels, in which this legend must needs be found."² Thus, the student is directed to compare the manner in which Child Ballad 54 tells the story of Mary's request that Joseph pluck her some fruit from a tree with the manner in which the same story is told in the fourteenth century *Cursor Mundi*, the fifteenth century northern *Childhood of Jesus*, and the fifteenth century Coventry Mystery, "N Town," or "The Birth of Christ." These presentations of the story offer ample basis for a comparison from which the student may begin to consider how Child Ballad 54 submits to the processes of the ballad tradition material which is conveyed both in the popular-dramatic context and in the

didactic, harmonistic context which related such materials to parallel passages in the Holy Scripture.³

Through such tracing and comparison, it is my purpose to demonstrate that, in the case of "The Cherry-Tree Carol," (1) we need to abandon the old question as to whether a ballad derives by a process of "degeneration" or "reduction" from models of written poetry or song; and (2) we need to consider anew that, whatever impetus is provided, the ballad is essentially self-generative, perpetuating and celebrating an experience within a context which is peculiarly its own. This paper endeavors to suggest that, via oral tradition, "The Cherry-Tree Carol" relays a story just as interesting and complex, albeit different in its orchestration of complexity, as its literary analogues. It endeavors, in effect, to appreciate Child Ballad 54 within its own *donnée* without viewing it in isolation from time and place, or literary and social history.⁴

But, first, let me issue a word of caution. As valuable as Child's headnotes may be in initiating the student who would undertake a source study of Ballad 54, the title which the editor ascribes to the song is both misleading and disorienting. "The Cherry-Tree Carol" is not a carol. It is more ballad-like. The song exemplifies at least two of Motherwell's three definitive "ballad features." It is distinguished by that dramatic structure which rushes headlong into the narrative or story with no prefatory remarks or detailing of background;⁵ and it is characterized by a number of common-places--for instance, the impossible task, the sympathetic plant, the mother-son dialogue.⁶ More generally, "The Cherry-Tree Carol" epitomizes what David Buchan calls the "recreative" nature of the oral process.⁷

That is, it forms and re-forms a story in a number of different ways and, apparently, provides a good deal of recreation, a good deal of creative play and sport in doing so.

Although "The Cherry-Tree Carol" suggests certain aspects of the popularized religious story, and although it suggests certain aspects of Christmas celebration in some of its American variants,⁸ it does not comply with Richard Leighton Greene's definitive statement that:

The presence of an invariable line or group of lines which is to be sung before the first stanza and after all stanzas is the feature which distinguishes the carol from all other forms of Middle English lyric.⁹

I have not observed the presence of a burden in any of the variants of "The Cherry-Tree Carol." Nor have I observed the presence of what Evelyn K. Wells proposes as the essential characteristic of the carol: namely, the refrain inherent in the stanza.¹⁰ I am aware that a recent commentator on "The Cherry-Tree Carol" adopts a contrary point of view. In general terms, David C. Fowler, in *A Literary History of the Popular Ballad*, places "The Cherry-Tree Carol," as a religious song, at the periphery rather than at the center of the canon of balladry.¹¹ In specific terms, Fowler focuses upon "The Cherry-Tree Carol"'s displacement of the apocryphal story from its place in the flight into Egypt sequence to draw two conclusions about the song's generic identity. First, he states that the transfer of the story to a nativity setting displays "an ingenuity that is scarcely attributable to folk 're-creation.'"¹² Second, he states that the new setting of the cherry-tree incident "necessarily makes this piece a Christmas or nativity carol."¹³

Fowler here isolates and defines a ge-

neric type according to the most rudimentary observations about setting and subject matter. In my view, "The Cherry-Tree Carol"'s transfer of the cherry-tree incident to a new setting incorporates a striking array of motifs, commonplaces, and narrative techniques which define the canon of balladry as a whole. I propose that "The Cherry-Tree Carol" is much more than a set-piece celebrating Christmas or nativity. In order to demonstrate the ballad's tonal and thematic complexity, and its participation in the oral tradition, I shall refer the reader to the other redactions of the story.

In the Pseudo-Matthew gospel, chapter XX, the story unfolds as Mary and Joseph flee across the desert into Egypt.¹⁴ On the third day of the journey, Mary is overcome with fatigue and the heat of the sun. Seeing a tree, she says to Joseph, "Let us rest for a while under the tree's shade." Joseph hurries to lead Mary to the palm and helps her dismount from the ass. After Mary sits down, she notices that the leaves of the palm tree are full of fruit. She asks Joseph to gather these fruits for her. Joseph replies that he is astonished to hear such a request and points out not only that the tree is of excessive height, but also that they are in real need of water because the animal skins, being nearly empty, need to be refilled. At this point, the baby Jesus, sitting on his mother's lap, says to the palm, "Oh tree, bend down your branches and refresh my mother with your fruits." The palm immediately inclines its top and green twigs to Mary. As Mary gathers the palm-fruits, the tree remains inclined, waiting for a second command from Jesus to rise up again. Jesus says to it, "Lift yourself up and strengthen yourself and be the sister of the trees which are in my father's paradise. Also, uncover

from your roots a stream of water, which is presently hidden in the earth, and let the waters flow out of this vein to our fulfillment." Immediately, the palm becomes erect, and the clearest, coldest, and sweetest springs of water begin to flow from its roots. Joseph and Mary, seeing the springs of joyful water, exult with great joy. Giving thanks to God, with all beasts and men, they are fulfilled.

Unlike the ballad narrative which will be discussed in the next part of this paper, the gospel narrative sketched above is relatively lofty in tone. The Latin text is replete with a number of imperatives, and the explicit and direct commands of Jesus lend a sense of providential necessity to both dialogue and action. The rather explicit moral or exemplum which concludes the story would seem to invoke the reader to join Mary and Joseph and all of creation in the proper praise of God. The gospel caps this invocation with a symbolic picture of the heavenly paradise; and, in focusing a significant amount of graphic attention upon the transformation of the palm, the gospel opens itself to harmonistic and anagogical interpretation. The life-giving water which springs from the roots of the desert-planted palm may very well accrue its full meaning in relation to the oil of mercy which flows from the tree that Seth sees in the center of paradise. Likewise, the related gift of fruit to Mary within the prophetic context of the *Cantica Canticorum* would seem to bring the Pseudo-Matthew into accord with the concept of salvation. Finally, the transformation of the tree in the desert, given the palm's special association with Jesus' ride into Jerusalem, looks forward to the transformation of the tree as the cross on Calvary. This indirect approach of evocation allows the concept of

redemption to constitute the background of the story. The narrative begins as an apparent description of the trials of a journey, then changes to a reflection of Mary's travail, and finally becomes a revelation of the possibility of succour and of the coming of salvation to the world. On the deepest level, the story as outlined in the apocryphal gospel does not look at the human round, but rather looks--or at least directs the reader's view--heavenwards.

When we turn to the story outlined in "The Cherry-Tree Carol," we encounter a very different kind of focus and approach:

Joseph was an old man,
 and an old man was he,
 When he wedded Mary,
 in the land of Galilee.

Joseph and Mary walked
 through an orchard good,
 Where was cherries and berries,
 so red as any blood.

Joseph and Mary walked
 through an orchard green,
 Where was berries and cherries,
 as thick as might be seen.

O then bespoke Mary,
 so meek and so mild:
 'Pluck me one cherry; Joseph,
 for I am with child.'

O then bespoke Joseph,
 with words most unkind:
 'Let him pluck thee a cherry
 that brought thee with child.'

O then bespoke the babe,
 within its mother's womb:
 'Bow down then the tallest tree,
 for my mother to have some.'

Then bowed down the highest tree
 unto his mother's hand;
 Then she cried, 'See Joseph,
 I have cherries at command.' 15

Here, the story, removed from its wasteland setting, does not evoke the anagogical concept of redemptive fertility, but rather juxtaposes a potentially humorous view of a wife's inane request with a potentially spiritual consideration of miracle and mystery. With all due respect to Fowler's conclusions, one might begin to evaluate Child Ballad 54 by noting that the ballad may rather easily be related to both the humorous ballads which detail marital bickering and to the romantic ballads which detail courting ritual. The ballad's characterization of Joseph as the old *gnof* who is last to know of his young wife's apparent infidelity, together with Joseph's cross reluctance to comply with his wife's request, align "The Cherry-Tree Carol" with the generally humorous concerns of Child Ballads 274 and 275, respectively, "Our Goodman" and "Get Up and Bar the Door." Similarly, the imagistic details of the orchard and the "cherries and berries, / so red as any blood,"¹⁶ as well as the partial organization of the narrative according to the pattern of request conveyed and request denied, would seem to associate "The Cherry-Tree Carol" with pastourelles such as Child Ballads 74 and 2, "Lord Thomas and Fair Annet" and "The Elfin Knight" and with romantic ballads such as Child Ballads 7 and 200, "Earl Brand" and "The Gypsie Laddie." In the ballad tradition, Mary's desire for the fruit is a tongue-in-cheek revelation of her pregnancy, utilizing the cherry's folkloristic valence rather than its symbolic evocation of the promised people's hunger and thirst in the desert, which can be quenched only by the Lord. Joseph's angry re-

sponse to this request does, as Fowler suggests, provide the "dramatic cue for the intervention of the true Father speaking through the unborn Son, commanding the tree to bow down."¹⁷ But Joseph's rancorous reply also endows the ballad with a frank and somewhat humorous sexuality as it directs our attention to the ballad commonplace of the lover plucking the fruit or flower of his lady's maidenhead. Given the popular association of the cherry with the hymen, Joseph's rebuke assumes an even more erotic coloration, and an increased attitude of jealousy or sour-grapes.¹⁸

At this point, it should become clear that "The Cherry-Tree Carol" orchestrates a variety of attitudes and feelings in a manner quite apart from that of the Pseudo-Matthew. As we move further into the ballad narrative, we encounter the archetypically chagrined husband, who variously bewails his fate in Child variant A; and in a Kentucky variant:

'I have done Mary wrong;
But cheer up, my dearest,
and be not cast down.'¹⁹

'O what have I done?
Lord have mercy on me!'²⁰

A similarly aged Joseph in the fifteenth century Coventry Mystery, who also implicates his wife, goes so far as to humble himself and lament that he has offended "god i' trinity."²¹ The Mystery Play, unlike the pseudo-gospel upon which it was apparently based, joins the ballad in a free and easy portrayal of a marital dispute in which a wife, using common parlance, establishes a nearly impossible task for her mate to fulfill.²² Yet, in spite of the farcical and humorous parallels which exist between the popular song and the popular drama, and in

spite of both genres' free and direct use of dialogue to advance the tale, a crucial difference separates "The Cherry-Tree Carol" from "N-Town" in intention and effect. In the drama, the cherry-tree interlude takes place in the context of a journey--even a pilgrimage of sorts--as Mary and Joseph move towards Bethlehem. In the ballad, the interlude, being compressed, takes place within the domestic realm of an orchard or garden, wherein the husband and wife are at home. The Coventry Mystery departs from both the Pseudo-Matthew and the northern **Childhood of Jesus**²³ in removing the cherry-tree incident from the flight into Egypt sequence, but it does place the cherry-tree incident within a sequence of Christian transformation, spiritual narrative, and biblical plot. The ballad, on the other hand, true to its type, plunges us into the middle of the "fifth act" of the play. We do not travel, via the ballad, upon the road of Christian pilgrimage. Our focus is fixed upon the human figures at the center of a walled garden. We lose the full-fledged moralistic and allegorical development of the apocryphal legend as worked out in the **Cursor Mundi**,²⁴ or even in the more attenuated version in the **Childhood of Jesus**, but we gain a greater sense of human interaction and experience, an increased appreciation of the perils of psychological rather than spiritual exchange.

This is not to say that all mystery drops from the ballad as we know it. In a number of variants, the ballad, unlike the Pseudo-Matthew, the **Childhood of Jesus**, or the **Cursor Mundi**, presents Jesus speaking not from his mother's lap, but rather from her womb:

O then bespoke the babe,
 within his mother's womb:
 'Bow down then the tallest tree,
 for my mother to have some.'²⁵

O then bespoke our Saviour,
 all in his mother's womb:
 'Bow down, good cherry-tree,
 to my mother's hand.'²⁶

Adding a different kind of sexual and graphic emphasis to the narrative, such detail significantly relates the ballad, albeit with a reversal, to the revenant ballads in which voices speak from beyond the other boundary of life, from the grave rather than the womb. In other variants, the child does not speak to the tree from Mary's womb. Rather the tree itself speaks and/or bows down of its own volition; and the child, subsequently born, sits on his mother's lap to predict his death and resurrection:

Then Mary took her babe,
 and sat him on her knee,
 Saying, 'My dear son, tell me
 what this world will be.'

'O I shall be as dead, mother,
 as the stones in the wall;
 O the stones in the streets, mother,
 shall mourn for me all.'

'Upon Easter-day, mother,
 my uprising shall be;
 O the sun and the moon, mother,
 shall both rise with me.'²⁷

With this alteration, ~ "The Cherry-Tree Carol," as Fowler points out, parallels the mother-son dialogues of "Edward" (13), "The Twa Brothers" (40), and "Lizzie Wan" (51). The motif of the sun and the moon rising together at the resurrection links the ballad to "Lizzie Wan" (51-B17) and "The Twa

Brothers" (49-D20) even more tightly.²⁹

The detail of the stones in the street which shall mourn for the child, like the detail of the cherry-tree which variously speaks and bends to the Virgin's desires, firmly establishes "The Cherry-Tree Carol" within the ballad realm of the supernatural as much as within the gospel realm of legendary miracle. When the variants continue to include descriptions of the child's birth--as in Child variants B, C, and D--the narrative is drenched less with biblical doctrine and detail than with ballad commonplace. Whether the speaker be human or divine, reference and comparison are drawn from the house and hall, the purple and pall clothing, the silver and gold decor, and the white and red wine of the Child canon at large. This popularizing impulse persists even in the popular lyric derived from the story which relays how Joseph and Mary hear angels prophesying the birth of Jesus in a stall as they walk in a cherry garden.³⁰

Clearly, these angel prophecies are based upon the second chapter of Luke, and we see a legitimate "ecclesiastical" source join the major apocryphal source already discussed. As M.J.C. Hodgart would have it, the folksinger apparently preferred the apocryphal over the traditional biblical source, "perhaps because there may have been an undercurrent of heresy and paganism in the Christianity of the English peasantry."³¹ Indeed, the apocryphal gospel does seem to be the main source, supplying the story to which the prophecies of Luke seem later to be attached. Yet, Hodgart is as extreme in insisting upon the folk's pagan transformation of Christian motif as Fowler is extreme in insisting upon the singularly harmonistic function of "The Cherry-Tree Carol." Fowler implies that the ballad takes its meaning

only from its relation to the temptation of Eve as outlined in the fourteenth century Cornish drama, **Origo Mundi**, in which we read:

- EVE: I am perplexed, thinking
 What I may do
 Through plucking the apple,
 For fear of there being guile in thee.
- DEVIL: Pluck it at thy peril;
 Without delay, quickly be done,
 And also cause thy husband
 That he eat from it.
- EVE: Bend down the tree toward the ground,
 That I may reach them.
- DEVIL: I will, but come quietly,
 Pluck it and go thy way.³²

As Eve takes the fruit and presents some to her mate, the drama of the Fall proceeds according to biblical precedent. Here, according to Fowler, the ballad makes its point:

. . . the bowing tree of the Old and New Testaments are graphic reminders of the Fall and redemption. A fragment of this harmonic system is preserved in "The Cherry-Tree Carol."³³

I would suggest that "The Cherry-Tree Carol" is neither entirely paganistic nor entirely harmonistic. The ballad may reflect the heterodox belief, popular in the Middle Ages, that Joseph, being surprised to learn of Mary's pregnancy, accused her of an illicit relationship. It may poke fun, employing bawdy imagery and stock, comical characterization, at the Christ child's parents, but the localizing popular drama does much the same thing, without stripping the legend of its spiritual values or movement to celebration. On the other hand, to say that the ballad is harmonistic is to approach it primarily as a literary text rather than as

traditional matter. "The Cherry-Tree Carol" indubitably reflects certain Christian motifs and values, but Fowler proposes an overly systematic manner of audience response to such attributes. Moreover, Fowler's proposal fails to consider the ballad's multi-faceted investigation of the human round in which sexual, domestic, interpersonal, mystical, and even seasonal considerations play against one another. In "The Cherry-Tree Carol," the main interest is finally the story itself. Like the Pseudo-Matthew, the ballad may present a kind of moral. Like the *Cursor Mundi*, the ballad may ask its audience to broaden its consideration of a familiar legend. But, "The Cherry-Tree Carol" presents its issues in the form of drama rather than sermon or allegory. Thus, the ballad re-creates the apocryphal material within the oral tradition.

NOTES

1. Holger Olof Nygard, "Popular Ballad and Medieval Romance," in *Folklore International: Essays in Traditional Literature, Belief and Custom in Honor of Wayland Debs Hand*, ed. D.K.Wilgus (Hatboro, Pa.: Folklore Associates, 1967), p. 161.
2. Francis James Child, ed., *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1898; rpt. New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1962), II, p. 2.
3. Throughout this paper, I use the term "harmonistic" not only to refer to the relating of literary materials to a series of parallel passages in the Holy Scripture, but also to suggest in small the peculiarly medieval program of interpretive response which associated legendary materials with canonical Scriptures in order "to give the common

man a panoramic view of the Bible and its major themes." See David C. Fowler, **A Literary History of the Popular Ballad** (Durham: Duke University Press, 1968), p. 45.

4. The model for such essay is inspired in part by Nygard's study of "Lady Isabel and the Elf-Knight." **The Ballad of Heer Halwijn, Its Forms and Variations in Western Europe: A Study of the History and Nature of a Ballad Tradition** (Helsinki: Folklore Fellows Communication No. 169, and Knoxville, Tenn., 1958)

5. William Motherwell, **Minstrelsy Ancient and Modern, with a Historical Introduction and Notes**, new ed., (Detroit: Singing Tree Press, 1968), p. xii.

6. *Ibid.*, p. xi.

7. David Buchan, **The Ballad and the Folk** (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 51 ff.

8. MacEdward Leach points out in **The Ballad Book** (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1955), p. 175 that several American variants of "The Cherry-Tree Carol" relay that Joseph asks Jesus when his birthday will be to learn that Jesus will be born on the fifth, sixth, or seventh day of January Old Christmas was, of course, celebrated on January 5 from 1752-1799; then a day was dropped, and Old Christmas was celebrated on January 6; finally, in 1900, another day was dropped, and Old Christmas became January 7.

9. Richard Leighton Greene, ed., **The Early English Carols** (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1935), cxxxiii.

10. Evelyn K. Wells, **The Ballad Tree: A Study of British and American Ballads, Their Folklore, Verse and Music** (New York: The Ronald Press, 1950), p. 195.

11. Fowler, p. 20.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

14. The Latin text, taken from **Codex Apocryphus Novi Testamenti**, ed. Ioannis Caroli Thilo (Lipsiae, 1832), pp. 395-396 is reproduced below. The summary which is presented in the body of this paper follows the Latin text and neither omits nor adds detail.

Factum est autem in die tertia perfectionis suae, ut Maria nimio ardore solis fatigaretur in eremo. Et vidans arborem dixit ad Joseph: Quiescamus aliquantulum sub umbra ejus. Joseph autem festinans duxit eam ad palmam et descendere eam fecit de jumento. Cumque resedisset Maria, respexit ad comam palmae, vidensque eam repletam pomis dixit ad Joseph: Desiderium mihi est, si fieri potest, ut ex fructibus hujus palmae perciperam. Et aid ad eam Joseph: Miror te dicere hoc, cum videas, quantam altitudinem habeant rami palmae hujus. Ego autem gravissime de aqua cogito, quae nobis jam defecit in utribus: et non habeamus, unde eos replere aut nos ipsos refocillare debeamus. Tunc infantulus Jesus laeto vultu in sinu matris suae Mariae virginis dixit ad palmam: Reflecte, arbor, ramos tuos, et de fructibus tuis refice matrem meam. Statim ad hanc vocem inclinavit palma cacumen suum usque ad plantas Mariae, et colligentes ex ea fructus, quos habebat, omnes referti sunt. Postea vero quam collecta sunt omnia poma ejus, inclinata manebat exspectans, ut ejus imperio surgeret, cujus imperio fuerat declinata. Tunc Jesus dixit ad eam: Erige te, palma, et confortare et esto consors arborum mearum, quae sunt in paradiso patris mei. Aperi autem ex radicibus tuis venam, quae occulta est in terra, et fluant ex ea aquae ad satietatem nostram. Et statim erecta est palma, et ceperunt per radices ejus egredi fontes aquarum limpidissimi et frigidi et dulcissimi nimis. Videntes autem fontes aquarum gravis: sunt gaudio magno, et satiati sunt cum omnibus jumentis et homnibus gratias agentes deo.

15. Child, no.54, var. A, p.2.
16. Ibid. no. 54, var. A, p. 2.
17. Fowler, p. 49.
18. On the association of the cherry with the hymen, see, **The American Thesaurus of Slang**, 2nd ed. (1953), s.v. "Cherry." See also Lowry Charles Wimberly's observations on the sexualizing properties of certain fruits and flowers in **Folklore in the English and Scottish Ballads** (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1965), p. 123.
19. Child, no. 54, var. A, p. 2.
20. Josephine McGill, "The Cherry-Tree Carol," **JAFI** 29 (1916), p. 293.

(1916), p. 293.

21. "The Birth of Christ," in *Ludus Coventriae: A Collection of Mysteries, Formerly Presented at Coventry on the Feast of Corpus Christi*, ed. James Orchard Halliwell (London: The Shakespeare Society, 1841), p. 146.
22. See MS Addit. 31042, printed in *Archiv*, 74 (1835), pp. 327-339.
23. See *Cursor Mundi*, ed. Richard Morris, Early English Text Society, Original Series, 59 (London: K Paul, Trench, Trübner and Company, 1875), pp. 657 ff.
24. See, for instance, *Cursor Mundi*, ll. 683-698.
25. Child, no. 54, var. A, p. 2.
26. *Ibid.*, no. 54, var. B, p. 3.
27. *Ibid.*, no. 54, var. A, p. 2.
28. Fowler, p. 49.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
30. *Ibid.*, pp. 49-50.
31. M.J.C. Hodgart, *The Ballads* (London: Hutchinson's University Library, 1950), pp. 19-20.
32. "Origo Mundi," in *The Ancient Cornish Drama*, ed. Edwin Morris (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1859), II, pp. 14-16.
33. Fowler, p. 50.
34. See Wells's remarks on the popular drama, p. 183.