

The Carol

by L.L. Neuru

Caroling at Christmas is good fun at church, at home or with a group of friends. But there have been many long years when respectable people would not dare to sing carols or admit it if they did, since in late antiquity, and throughout much of the Middle Ages and during the puritan period in England and North America, having fun was bad according to church authorities. Caroling was especially bad, because it was associated with dance, and dance led to unspeakable things - especially when men and women caroled together.

The word carol refers to a song-form which is a lively folk-song especially suited to dancing, often in a ring. It was a highly pagan activity, associated with seasonal festivals, such as the northern winter solstice and Midsummer's night. The English word carol is related to the French caroler, Latin c(h)oraula, Greek choraules and ultimately to Greek choros, which was the group of men who sang or chanted in dance or procession during performances of Greek plays. A serious effort has been made by linguistic historians to connect carol with carouse, but unfortunately with no valid academic result.

In Latin poetry, woodland dancing and singing occur with human or divine participants, as in Horace Odes 1, 4 and 4, 7, both about spring (which was a favourite subject for carols), and it is evident that the activity of singing and dancing, or caroling, occurred throughout history. However, it horrified early church fathers, who labelled the caraula as cantica diabolica performed by witches,

demons and possessed people in the woods at night. All attempts to eradicate the carol failed, and the gaiety of the carol infected even church choirs: church authorities complained about singers who actually added dramatic gestures and sound effects such as the whinnies of horses and the sounds of thunder to the chanting and singing of the sacred services. The result was that the church tried to take over the carols and make them respectable, adding religious words to the old pagan dance tunes. They often mixed parts of old Latin hymns with the pagan words which by the Middle Ages were often in the modern vernacular languages, such as English, French and German. This resulted in many carols which are partly in modern languages and partly in Latin, such as the 14th century In Dulci Jubilo (tune: Good Christian Men Rejoice). Most people in the Middle Ages, even if they could not read and write, knew enough Latin to understand and sing along.

Many carols, formerly pagan, became associated with Christmas. The Holly and Ivy, for example, is about Christ's birth, but is also about the holly and ivy as important northern European fertility symbols, male and female respectively. The refrain of this carol, "the rising of the sun, the running of the deer", certainly sounds as if it has more to do with the northern European woodland and the winter solstice than it does with dusty Bethlehem.

Carols enjoyed open popularity from the later Middle Ages, about the 14th century, until a second wave of puritanism hit England in the 17th century. In 1647 Christmas itself was banned along with all festivals of any sort. Christmas was the worst of all, declared one Puritan fanatic; it was the "heathen's feasting day, profane man's ranting day, superstitious man's idol day, the multitude's idle day, Satan's working day". But this wave of repression did not eradicate carols either, and much has been done to reconstruct what simply went underground, from old manuscripts and from musical ethnology.

One very splendid example of an old pagan carol in Latin is the Tempus Adest Floridum, in celebration of the spring. If you pay attention to the words you may see why the church fathers worried about the effects of caroling. This carol is sung to the tune of Good King Wenceslas. The Christmas version in English was an attempt even as late as the 19th century to make this old pagan carol respectable.