

OLD-POLISH CAROLS

The wonder of the night in Bethlehem by the authors of “Carmelite Cantica” from the 18th century

Summary

This monograph deals with Polish carols, in particular the “Carmelite Cantica” published by Barbara Krzyżaniak in 1980. The Old-Polish manuscript, created in the 18th century in the Kraków Carmelite monastery, comprises the words of 358 carols of varied chronology, provenance and genre – from earnest church hymns to pastorales based on folk motifs. The author is interested in how the linguistic form described in the canonical Gospels was used to expand the picture of Bethlehem, and render it in greater detail and give it a national character in the works of Old-Polish artists. The focus here is on such features as the figure of Baby Jesus and Holy Mary, Joseph and the shepherds, together with the whole world of Bethlehem and the world outside it (e.g. the flora and fauna) that rejoices in the arrival of the promised Saviour.

The book is composed of eight chapters devoted to the following issues: 1) The origins and history of Polish carols (Chapter 1); this chapter serves as an introduction to the topic taken up in this monograph by outlining the changes that took place in poetic works related to Christmas from the Middle Ages to the 20th century; 2) the characteristics of the historical text, i.e. “Carmelite Cantica”, which served as the basis of the analysis provided in this monograph (Chapter 2); 3) the image of the Holy Family created by the authors of Old-Polish carols (Chapter 3); 4) the image of the shepherds preparing themselves to head for Bethlehem and who later pay homage to and bear gifts for the newly-born Saviour and his parents (Chapter 4); 5) antroponyms, i.e. the names of people documented in the Old-Polish carols; among them are the names of biblical characters, heroes known from mythology, names and nicknames of shepherds, as well as those of the Carmelite nuns who lived in the Kraków monastery in the 19th century and who took part in the nativity play and activities organized in the monastery around the Christmas and the New Year period (Chapter 5); 6) description of typical Polish realities as documented in the carols, e.g. describing the preparation and behavior of shepherds upon receiving the Gospel from the Angels (Chapter 6); 7) what the lyrics of the Old-Polish carols document as the representation of various types of fauna (especially birds) that take part in the wedding feast held to celebrate the birth of the Saviour; 8) the world of early music performed by angels, shepherds

and other participants of the adoration and entertainment for the Holy Infant as presented in Christmas songs (Chapter 8).

The lyrics of the carols contained in the Carmelite collection provide contemporary readers with numerous observations related to life in the Polish village in bygone times, especially that of the poorest social class, to which the shepherds and farm labourers belonged. Old-Polish carols provide information on the kind of clothing worn by the shepherds, the kind of food they themselves ate but also that which children were fed, about various types of equipment and tools used in the household and the farm, about the most popular musical instruments in the Polish countryside of the 18th century, and finally also about the customs (e.g. the custom of visiting neighbours to pass on Christmas wishes) and social etiquette etc. There is also a wealth of information about the traditions followed in the Polish monasteries throughout the festive season (e.g. the still popular 'crib', i.e. the tradition of rocking the figure of Baby Jesus in a cradle to lullaby carols sung by all members of the monastic order). Of special interest is the description of the traditions related to the birth and upbringing of children in bygone Poland, which is compared to the modest motherhood of Holy Mary, the mother of Jesus, and to his childhood years (*Song* no. 315). All the features mentioned above are connected with the progressive process giving a national quality to Polish Christmas carols and their gradual approximation, in terms of their plot and melodic line, to the Polish gentry-and-bourgeoisie style and local folk art.

The whole array of issues presented above is depicted in the carols thanks to the utilisation of a rich repertoire of literary forms and linguistic devices, e.g. it is reflected in the selection of names attributed to both Baby Jesus and Holy Mary. Jesus is depicted in the carols as a typical baby, whose helplessness and poverty evoke feelings of sympathy among the audience. However, this image is not entirely negative and in the nativity scenes featuring the shepherds, and the Holy Family, despite its poverty, it is presented in a very joyful and energetic manner, and hence worthy of the glory that was bestowed upon them by grace of God.

The final part of this monograph, which contains the appendix and the bibliographical list of books and articles cited in the work, also features an ample selection of the lyrics of Old-Polish carols, which serves to illustrate the analysis provided by the author.

Translated by Rob Pagett