

## THE APPLE MYSTERY IN ARTHURIAN ROMANCE.

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**I**N certain of our Arthurian romances we meet with an incident which, up to the present, has aroused no more than a passing interest. Picturesque and fantastic in appearance, it has been dismissed as the invention of a mediæval writer, copied more or less faithfully by his successors. Evidence, however, has recently come into my possession which proves beyond the shadow of a doubt that, so far from having been a trivial incident of folk-tale or fairy 'provenance,' we have in fact a link connecting our romances with a mysterious cult, the precise origin of which cannot be definitely determined.

Of the incident referred to we have three variants, occurring respectively in the Wauchier continuation of Chrétien's *Perceval*; in the Didot-Modena prose *Perceval*; and in the romance of *Durmart li Galois*. The relative position of these texts is still a matter of debate, as the evidence about to be produced will, I think, prove, the writers were really independent of each other, and were drawing from a common original.

We will take the Wauchier text first: Perceval, seeking for the Grail castle, comes to a tree, in which is seated a fair child, holding an apple. Perceval asks the road to the Grail castle, the child will not tell him, but advises him to go on the morrow to the pillar of Mont Dolorous, where he will hear that which will please him. Climbing upward through the branches the child vanishes.<sup>1</sup>

After Perceval has achieved the Mont Dolorous adventure, and been set on the road to the Grail castle, he comes after nightfall to a fair oak tree, having on each branch lighted candles, which vanishes at his approach. (Here we may note the lighted tree has no connection with the child.)

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Wauchier, Potvin's ed., ll. 33765 et seq.

In the prose text *Perceval*, seeking for the Grail castle, comes to cross-roads, where there is a fair cross, and a beautiful tree, in the branches of which he sees two naked children playing together. He conjures them in the Name of the Trinity, to speak to him. One of the children answers, they come from Paradise, whence Adam was driven, they know who *Perceval* is, if he takes the road to the right he will find that which he is seeking. With that, tree and children vanish.<sup>1</sup>

In *Durmart li Galois* the incident occurs twice ; at the outset of his career the hero, riding through a forest after nightfall, sees a tree, covered with blazing candles, on which is a naked child. The vision vanishes as suddenly as it appeared, but a Voice tells him that the next time he sees Tree and Child he must hearken, and obey the counsel given.<sup>2</sup> The second vision does not occur till near the end of the poem, after *Durmart* has married the queen of Ireland, and become reconciled to his father the king of Wales and Denmark. On this occasion the tapers on the tree are burning unequally, some bright, some dim. The Child, Who bears Five Wounds, is placing the bright candles to His right hand, the dim to His left. At *Durmart's* approach the vision vanishes, and a Voice, telling him he has seen Christ (an unnecessary detail, in view of the mention of the Five Wounds), bids him depart on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land ; a command which, in company with his wife, father, and mother, the hero obeys.<sup>3</sup>

As I remarked above, this episode has not, so far, been the subject of special attention on the part of critics, they have been content to pass it over with a brief remark as to the inter-relation of the *Perceval* versions (that of *Durmart li Galois* appears to have escaped attention), the general tendency being to regard *Wauchier* as the source of the prose variant ; so far no one has been concerned to enquire into the ultimate source of the incident. Unless I am much mistaken that ultimate source is now before us, and both in actual content, and in implication, it is of far greater importance than the casual introduction of the episode would lead us to suppose. The text in question will be found imbedded in *Le Pelerinage de l'Ame*,

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Modena's *Perceval*, pp. 55-56.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*, ll. 1500-42.

<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.*, ll. 15585 et seq.

by Guillaume de Deguilville, where it forms an interlude of some 1200 lines.<sup>1</sup>

The theme of the *Pelerinage* is one very familiar in Mediæval literature, i.e. the journey of the Soul after death, under the guidance of its guardian Angel, through the Other World, where it witnesses the torments of the damned, and the bliss of the redeemed. We may note that the Soul is generally represented in the form of a naked child. In the poem before us Pilgrim, and Angel guide, having passed through Hell, return to earth—

“mes ne demoura pas granment  
quë èsmes reirement  
sus terre dont avant parti  
estions, et la endroit vi  
tel chose que apparçeu  
n'avoie mie ne vëu.” ll. 5585 et seq.

He sees two trees, one covered with foliage, the other dry and barren, and certain figures, like to himself, disporting themselves beneath. The miniatures here give two naked figures playing with an apple beneath the green tree. (The miniatures are important, as they obviously reproduce the scenes of the drama.) The angel explains

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Le Pelerinage de l'Ame*, ed. by J. J. Stürzinger, for the Roxburghe Club, 1895, ll. 5581-6702. The editor prints in an Appendix the variant additions found in other MSS. which in one case extend to over 500 ll.

I am indebted for my introduction to the text to my friend, Miss Cameron Taylor, to whom the credit for discovering the real character of the Interlude belongs. Attention was first drawn to the text by Dr. Gustav Ludwig, in a study entitled *Giovanni Bellini's sogenannte Madonna am See, in den Uffizien* (Jahrbuch der Königlich Preussischen Kunstsammlungen, Berlin, 1902), and dealing with the subject of *The Apple in Christian Art*. Miss Cameron Taylor, who was working on the origins of Christian Art, was interested, went to Paris, read, and made excerpts from some of the MSS. there, and subsequently delivered a lecture, illustrated by slides from photographs of some of the miniatures, under the above title, at the British School of Art in Rome. The real significance and importance of the text had, however, eluded both scholars, and it was not till some years later, when she had become interested in the study of Comparative Religion, that Miss Cameron Taylor detected the real character of her find. When invited to deliver a lecture before the Quest Society, during this winter season, she revised her material in view of later knowledge, and it was when discussing the subject with her previous to the lecture that I detected the analogy with the Grail texts, an analogy confirmed by the evidence of the slides. Miss Cameron Taylor is not herself an Arthurian student, and was extremely interested at this additional evidence of the importance of the text.

that all who walk in the right way have their moments of sadness, and need play and solace—

“et d'estre apaisié com enfant  
d'aucune chose confortant.” ll. 5609-10.

These souls have found

“une pomme ou grant soulas a  
dont se jouent et joueront  
toutes fois quë ennui aront.” ll. 5614-16.

This apple, he explains, is not the apple of Adam through which misfortune (ahan) came to the world—

“mes est li pomme qui pour li  
en ce haut arbre sec pendi;  
et avoit creü par devant  
en ce vert arbre florissant  
d'arbre en arbre translatee  
et du vert au sec portee  
pour faire restablisement  
de l'autre pomme, indeveement  
par le dit Adam ostee  
qui li estoit devëee.” ll. 5622-32.

The Apple is Christ crucified for the redemption and restoration of the human race. The Angel proceeds to explain that, as the pips of the wild apple when planted will produce but sour and bitter fruit, unless a graft from a good apple-tree is introduced, so the progeny of Adam were all tainted with original sin, and even as wild apples—

“de quoi li maistre des pommiers  
point ne mectoit en ses greniers,  
ains les getoit on aus porceaus  
d'enfer a tas et a monceaus  
a tousjours pardurablement.” ll. 5669-73.

Until God the Father, choosing a suitable stock (i.e. St. Anne) grafted upon it the fair graft of the Virgin Mary, and produced an apple-tree that would bear 'franc fruit et agrëable.'

This, I think, we must take to represent the prologue to the drama proper, for after having dilated at some length upon the excellence of the green apple-tree, and the impossibility of restoring life to the dry, unless the fruit of the one is transferred to the other, the tone suddenly changes with the advent of another figure upon the scene—nothing, as said above, can be done

“jusques a tant que vint avant  
 une dame de fier semblant  
 qui Justice estoit nommee  
 par qui la chose muee  
 fu asses tost tout autrement  
 or entent, se tu veulx, comment.” ll. 5843-48.

Here a miniature shows Justice, sword in hand, standing between the two trees ; on the green tree is seated a figure in white, whom we learn signifies Virginité, holding on her lap an apple. The Soul with the guardian Angel look on from the background. From this point the Angel is silent, and the characters speak for themselves.

Justice speaks first, setting forth the case of the dry tree, wrongfully deprived of her apple, with the result that Adam and his heirs are damned, and can find no succour. The tree and the apple which she, Virginité, guards so carefully, are descended from this same Adam, and were created for the sole purpose of restoring life to this dry tree ; she must needs give up her apple to Justice, who will hang it on the dry tree and fix it firmly with nails, and by that means make restitution for the sin of Adam.

Virginité protests : she would guard the tree and fruit committed to her, but knows not how best to plead their cause. She recalls how Alexander, who was long in a savage country, found two trees, respectively of the sun, and the moon, who spoke to him, and told him of his fortune. If Justice be in very truth what she professes to be, she will command the two trees to speak, and to plead their own cause. The dry tree must speak first.

(Here follows the heading “*Altercation piteuse entre l'arbre vert, et l'arbre sec.*”)

The dry tree makes plaint that having been thus unjustly and prematurely deprived of her fruit, she could never come to honour, but, like a wild apple tree, could never bear good fruit. She had become “a nulle rien convenable, et du tout abhominable.” But now she sees on this flourishing green tree an apple, through which she may have full restitution, she appeals to Justice to make this restitution without delay or debate.

The green tree, the leaves quivering (hochant ses feuilles), replies that, even if descended from Adam, there is not in her that seed of sin which was implanted by him, and being thus free from any taint of the original wild stock, she owes no restitution. That should be made by

one who bears the original taint, the seed of her apple came from Heaven, she sees no reason why her 'doulce pomme,' otherwise called Jesus, should be taken from her. From Adam it has inherited nothing save the outer covering (*escorce de dehors*) which it received from her. If the tree be healthy, even more so is the fruit, Justice will surely agree that he who inherits the sin must make the restitution.

To this the dry tree makes answer that of a certes she will not deny that the heirs of Adam owe reparation, not alone to her, but also to God, Whose command Adam disobeyed, and to the souls who, through his sin have been doomed to eternal punishment, but they have not the power to do so. This green tree, and its apple, are the direct heirs of Adam, and the apple has done no wrong, therefore it has the power to make reparation, and satisfaction, and she demands of Justice that the apple be given up to her.

The green tree protests that it would be most unjust that he should pay who owes nothing, and that the debtor should go free, or that undue restitution should be made. The apple taken by Adam was of but little value, her apple is of worth and value beyond man's conception, it is a heavy thing to punish the innocent, and let the guilty escape.

The debate proceeds at some length, the dry tree pointing out that the green tree has little profit of her apple while she keeps it to herself, but if it be given to her, beaten, torn, nailed, and pierced, the juice which will flow therefrom will reinvigorate her roots, that is, the whole human race, the tree will be greater, more vigorous, more enduring, 'se du dit jus arrousees et medicinees sont les racines.'

The green tree, still protesting, refers the decision to Justice who answers that Force is neither Right, nor Reason; if the apple be such as Virginity insists, he will do nothing but what is right, in fact God the Father has already foreseen all and held counsel thereon with His Son.

Here the scene changes, we are transported to Heaven, where we assist at the Divine counsel of the Trinity.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Here we must figure to ourselves the mediæval stage, in three tiers, the upper representing Heaven, where we see the Three Persons of the Trinity seated; the middle stage, Earth, the scene set with the two trees, Justice standing between them; in the lowest tier the souls in Hell wait anxiously for the verdict upon which their final fate depends.

God the Father speaks first : He points out that man owes amends for the apple plucked in disobedience, whereby he must be lost, the which is ill-pleasing to the Deity (plural) who created him to be heir of Paradise. Fain would God find one who could pay the ransom, that the tree might be restored, but no angel can do so, Man alone, owes the debt, and may rightly pay it. Let the Deity now debate the question together, what sayeth God the Son ?

The Second Person of the Trinity speaks " True it is that the serpent deceived Adam by fraud, therefore it would be good could man be helped to find a way to make things right. But Adam and his successors are alike sinners, he has no heir who is not tainted with the first sin, or who is sufficient to pay so great a debt. The Holy Spirit is here, to Him appertaineth counsel, He will know what should be done."

The Third Person of the Trinity replies : " It is indeed right that he who makes amends should be man, since man it was who transgressed but that man must needs be innocent, and further, have power equal to that of the Godhead. And where shall such an one be found save that One of Us become Man, and take on Himself the form of an Apple, so that by that Apple the tree be restored, and the forfeit paid ? If this be not done man will never make his peace with God."

" Certes," replies God the Father, " Meseemeth that One of Us must make good the folly, else all men must perish. How seemeth it to Thee, very dear Son ?"

" I am," saith He, " of that advice, but a heavy thing it will be for Him to Whom that task is committed."<sup>1</sup>

" Thou speakest true, Son, it shall be Thou, but it must be at Thy pleasure. So I pray that it may please Thee to suffer this misease."

<sup>1</sup>The dialogue here is so quaint to modern ears, I give it in the original—

" Certes," dist lors Dieu le Pere  
 " bien croi qu'il faut que compere  
 ceste folie l'un de nous  
 ou que hommes perissent tous.  
 que t'en semble il, tres chier fils ?"  
 " il m'est," dist il, " ainsi avis ;  
 mes moult grief chose ce seroit  
 a cil qui commis y seroit." ll. 6247-54.

“Ha! what an evil apple, if I must needs bear the burthen, and become as a packhorse to pay the redemption of him who ate it, and who, perchance, will give thanks neither to Thee, nor to Me! Me-thinks I may well repent Me to have had a share in his creation, if this be My guerdon. But, My Father, if thus it must be, and it be Thy pleasure, however great the sorrow to me, Thy Will, not Mine, be done.” Yet, so the speech continues, it were well not to hasten, else man will not have had sufficient experience of the danger and peril to which his sin has exposed him. It were well he should know them, so that, when Grace is extended to him, he may be duly grateful.

To this God the Father assents, man shall be afflicted five thousand years, or thereabouts, after that he shall be helped. Meanwhile He, God the Father, with the aid of the Holy Spirit, will take measures to provide a fitting tree, into which God the Son shall descend and become an Apple. Then when God shall see Him as Apple, crushed and beaten, so that the juice pours forth, He will be well pleased, but he must have the juice as forfeit—then shall Hell deliver up man.<sup>1</sup>

We now return to Earth: Justice, turning to the green tree, bids her consider all that the dry tree has pleaded; the Debate of the Trinity, and the sentence passed that the dry tree shall be restored by the Apple which Virginité has already kept too long. The Apple falls to the ground of its own volition, without injury to the tree. Envy comes on the scene, saying that she will act as executioner for Justice—the Apple is nailed to the dry tree—

“si haut et si publiquement  
que de pres et loing toute gent  
de toutes pars et environ  
virent la restitution.” ll. 6345-48.

Here some MSS. give a miniature of Christ crucified in the tree, which is now covered with foliage.

The green Tree now becomes explicitly identified with the Blessed Virgin; wringing her branches, and uttering loud cries, she breaks

<sup>1</sup>This debate was possibly followed by an interlude, depicted in a miniature, where God the Father, in the guise of a turbaned Sage, is seen in an orchard, inserting a fresh young graft (the Virgin Mary) into the trunk of a tree (St. Anne).



into a lengthy series of laments, addressed in turn to God the Father ; God the Holy Ghost ; the Angel Gabriel ; St. Elizabeth ; the Woman who pronounced a blessing on Christ's Mother ; Simeon ; Joachim and Anna. To St. John ; the Angels ; to Death, the Earth, Sun, Moon, and Stars ; all interspersed with passionate appeals to her Son. (The character of these laments is rather that of Reproaches.) They conclude with a pathetic appeal to the dry tree who has won her cause, and is now in the sight of all justified, and renewed (revestue), to restore her Apple. To this the once dry tree, now again full of leaf, replies that she should not thus lament ; the Apple, when she, the dry tree, received it, was capable of suffering, and could undergo torment and death, but from henceforward neither Death nor Passion can touch It, "ains immortel toujours sera." After the Apple has been again plucked, and retained Three Days "en mes greniers" she will return It, glorified—

" et bien donner lors la pourra  
a tes amis a leur diner  
fruit meilleur ne pourras trouver."

Here the drama ends, the Angel drawing the moral that, not children alone, but those of advanced age, may find joy and solace in this Apple, and the Pilgrim utters the devout aspiration—

". . . le pommier qui porta  
la Pomme, et qui pour li ploura  
me doint de li si bien jouer  
que mes tourmens puisse oublier."<sup>1</sup>

Now I do not think that there can be the slightest doubt that we have here the text, more or less complete (the MSS. vary considerably) of a Mystery Play, dealing with the doctrine of the Atonement, nor that it was from this Play that the authors of the Grail romances derived the imagery of a Child in a Tree. As we saw above we have three distinct versions of the theme, and in view of the evidence of the text it seems clear that the authors responsible for these versions were writing independently of each other, they were individually familiar with the Play, and each chose such features as appealed to him.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Pelerinage de l'Ame*, Roxburghe Club ed., pp. 185-220.

“ there is much more in the account than can be explained by a Saxon habit of drinking health to everybody and everything at a particular season of the year. It is clear that what the Devonshire rustics were engaged in was a veritable sacrament, in which they brought their deity to their deity, and partook of their deity with their deity under solid and liquid symbolism.”

The study referred to gives a description of the ritual as practised in different parts of the country, and the reader who desires detailed descriptions of local variants may be referred to its pages. The main features of the ceremony are identical throughout, and a summary of these will be sufficient to show the curious analogy still persisting between these modern customs and the old Mystery Play.

The ceremony takes place at Christmas-tide, generally on the Eve of the Epiphany, i.e. old Christmas Eve. The farmer, with his household goes into the orchard, bearing a milk pan, or a jug, full of hot cider, in which are roasted apples, and sops of bread. They stand round the most fruitful apple-tree (sometimes the ceremony is repeated for more than one), and sing a song which varies somewhat in different counties. A Devonshire form runs :—

“ Here’s to thee, old apple-tree  
Whence thou may’st bud and whence thou mayst blow  
And whence thou may’st bear apples enow !  
Hats full, Caps full,  
Bushel, bushel, sacks full !  
And my pockets full too—Huzza ! ”

A Sussex form runs :—

“ Stand fast root,  
Bear well top,  
Pray God send us  
A good howling crop.<sup>1</sup>  
Every twig  
Apples big,  
Every bough  
Apples enow,  
Hats full, Caps full !  
Full quarter sacks full,  
Holla, boys, Holla, Huzza ! ”

In some cases the song is accompanied by pantomime, the singers

<sup>1</sup> The word ‘*howling*,’ above, is a rendering of *youling*, *yuling*. Cf. *op. cit.*, p. 11.

bending to the ground, and rising slowly, as if under the weight of a heavy sack.

Then each dips a cup into the pan or jug, and drinks a portion of the content, throwing the rest at the apple tree. The method of offering a libation to the tree varies ; sometimes cider, roasted apples, and sops of bread are all thrown together at the tree ; sometimes pieces of apple, or toast, it may even be a whole cake, are placed on the branches ; or a roasted apple is nailed to the trunk. The cider is, as a rule, poured on the roots. Thus, as in the Play, the apple is restored to the tree, which is watered by its juice. At the conclusion of the ceremony the wassailing party fire a salvo from their guns into the tree.

This is a brief summary of the main features of the ritual, which vary little in different counties, but here and there we meet with a very significant feature, which has elsewhere disappeared.

In Sussex a youth, bearing a jug of cider, climbs into the tree, and is apparently the object of the firing, care, of course, being taken not to hit him.<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Rendel Harris notes that in South Devon a little boy was hoisted into the tree, and seated on a branch. He was to represent a tom-tit, and sat there crying "Tit, tit, more to eat," upon which cider and cheese were handed up to him.<sup>1</sup>

The writer suggests that we have here the spirit of the apple tree, identified with a bird, and proceeds to argue for the existence of a bird sacrifice, the reminiscence of which is preserved in the hunting of the wren on St. Stephen's day. I would suggest that the evidence of the Play hints at something more sinister, i.e. the original sacrifice of a youth, for the rejuvenation of the tree, a barbarous ceremony, for which the Church endeavoured to substitute a symbolic sacrifice.<sup>3</sup>

But have we any evidence that this Christian Apple Mystery was ever directly connected with the Wassail ceremony ? I think so. In his exhaustive study Dr. Rendel Harris notes that, in some parts of Yorkshire the Wassail, here called *Vessel*, Cup, is carried from house

<sup>1</sup> Miss Lucy Broadwood is here my informant.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *op. cit.*, p. 21.

<sup>3</sup> It would be interesting to know to what tree St. Sebastian was traditionally bound. Arrows may well have been the original method of execution.

to house, while the bearers sing carols and collect money. "*The cup was sometimes accompanied by an image of Christ, and roasted apples.*" (The italics are in the original.) "In Northumbria the image of Christ is replaced by that of the Madonna."<sup>1</sup>

The learned author is at a loss to understand the connection of Christ and the Madonna with the Wassail apples, and can only suggest that the season, (Christmas) may be responsible. But on the evidence of our Mystery Play is it not more probable that we have here a survival of the Christianised form of the ritual in which the Madonna was identified with the Apple Tree, and Christ with the Apple?

And surely the fact that, while we have such a mass of evidence as to the survival of what was certainly at least part of a pre-Christian ritual, we find such very scanty traces of a definitely Christian form, would suggest that this elaborate attempt to Christianise a popular ritual did not meet with any general success: the earlier folk-custom stubbornly refused to be supplanted, and the 'Mystery' form became a mere literary survival. Where it did leave its traces was in Christian Art, especially in that of the Venetian painters, where we often find the Child Christ represented as holding in His Hand an apple, the symbol of His Passion.

In literature the only traces appear to be those preserved in our Grail romances, where they form another piece of suggestive evidence in favour of the original connection of the Grail tradition with early semi-Pagan, semi-Christian Nature Cults, a connection for which I have argued in *From Ritual to Romance*.

Since writing the above I have discussed the legend of St. Sebastian with friends who have pointed out that the saint is generally represented as bound to a dry and leafless tree, which in later Art becomes a column. Further, that it is difficult to account for the great "artistic" popularity of a character playing no important part in genuine ecclesiastical history. It appears to me that an enquiry into the origin and sources of the Sebastian legend might be productive of interesting results.

<sup>1</sup>Op. cit., pp. 12, 15.