Lullay, lullay, la lullay, Mi dere moder, lullay

[I]
Als i lay vp-on a nith
Alone in my longging,
Me þouthe i sau a wonder sith,
A maiden child rokking.

[II]
Pe maiden wolde with-outen song
Hire child o slepe bringge;
Pe child þouhte sche dede him wrong,
& bad his moder sengge.

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Fig. 5.—The Birth of Christ and the First Events of His Childhood. Miniature from the Psalter of Robert de Lisle, British Museum, Arundel MS 83, fol. 124. Composed of six corresponding yet contrasting scenes, the folio illustrates an iconic and symmetrical proportioning of narrative similar to that of "Als i lay vp-on a nith." For more extended discussion, refer to the Notes to Illustrations.
"Sing nov, moder," seide þat child,
"Wat me sal be-falle
Here after wan i cum to eld—
So don modres alle.

Ich a moder treuly
Þat kan hire credel kepe
Is wone to lullen louely
& singgen hire child o slepe.

Suete moder, fair & fre,
Siðen þat it is so,
I preye þe þat þu lulle me
& sing sum-wat þer-to."

"Suete sone," seyde sche,
"Wer-offe suld i singge?
Wist i ncuere þet more of þe
But gabrieles gretingge.

He grette me godli on is kne
& seide, 'heil! marie.
Ful of grace, god is with þe;
Beren þu salt Messye.'
[VIII]
I wondere michil in my jouth,
for man wold i rith none.
'Marie,' he seide, 'drede he nouth;
Lat god of heuene alone.

[IX]
Pe holi gost sal don al his.'
He seyde with-outen wone
Pat i sulde beren mannis blis,
Pe my suete sone.

[X]
He seide, 'hu salt beren a king
In king dauit-is see,
In al Iacobs woniing
Per king suld he be.'

[XI]
He seyde pat elizabet,3
Pat baraine was be-fore,
A child conceyued hat—
'To me leue hu he more.'

[XII]
I ansuerede blebely,
For his word me paigede:
'Lo! godis seruant her am i!
Be et as hu me seyde.'
[XIII]

Per, als he seide, i þe bare
On midwenter nith,
In maydened with-outen kare,
Be grace of god almith. 52

[XIV]

Pe sepperdis þat wakkeden in þe wolde
Herden a wonder mirthe
Of angles þer, as þei tolde,
In time of þi birthe. 56

[XV]

Suete sone, sikirly
no more kan i say;
& if i koude fawen wold i,
To don al at þi pay." 60

[XVI]

"Moder," seide þat suete þing,
"To singen I sal þe lere
Wat me fallet to suffring,
& don wil i am here. 64

[XVII]

Wanne þe seuene daiges ben don,
Rith as habraham wasce,
Kot sal i ben with a ston
In a wol tendre place. 68
Wanne he tuelue dayges ben do,
Be leding of a stere
Pre kingges me sul seke ho
With gold, ensens, & mirre.

Pho fourti day, to fille he lawe,
We solen to temple i-fere;
Per simeon sal he sey a sawe
Pat changen sal bi chere.

Wan i am tuelue zer of elde,
Ioseph & bu, murningge,
Solen me finden, moder milde,
In he temple techingge.

Til i be pretti at he lest
erne fro he suerue,
But ay, moder, ben at hin heste,
Ioseph & he to serue.

Wan he pretti zer ben spent,
I mot be-ginne to fille
Wer-fore i am hidre sent,
Poru my fadres wille.
THE ANNUNCIATION AND BIRTH OF CHRIST

[XXIII]

Ion baptist of merite most
Sal baptize me be name;
Pan my fader & pe holi gost
Solen witnesen wat i ame.

[XXIV]

I sal ben tempted of satan,
Pat fawen is to fonde,
Pele same wise þat was Adam,
but i sal betre with-stande.

[XXV]

Disciples i sal gadere
& senden hem for to preche,
Pele lawes of my fader,
In al þis werld to teche.

[XXVI]

I sal ben so simple
& to men so conning
Pat most partige of þe puple
Sal wiln maken me king.”

[XXVII]

“Suete sone,” ðan seyde sche,
“No sorwe sulde me dere,
Miht i þet þat day se
A king þat þu were.”
[XXVIII]

"Do wey, moder," seide Žat suete,
"Perfor kam i nouth,
But for to ben pore & bales bete,
Žat man was inne brouth.

[XXIX]

Perfore wan to & Žretti Ùer ben don
& a litel more,
Moder, Ñu salt maken michil mon
& seen me deyže sore.

[XXX]

Pe sarpe swerde of simeon
Perse sal Žin herte,
For my care of michil won
Sore pe sal smerte.

[XXXI]

Samfuly for i sal deyže,
Hangende on pe rode,
For mannis ransoun sal i payže
Myn owen herte blode."

[XXXII]

"Allas! sone," seyde Žat may,
"Siβen Žat it is so,
Worto sal i biden Žat day
To beren pe to his wo?"
"Moder," he seide, "tak et lithte,
For liuen i sal a-ȝeyne,
& in þi kinde þoru my mith,
for elles i wrouthte in weyne.

To my fader I sal wende
In myn manhed to heuene;
Þe holigost i sal þe sende
With hise sondes seuene.

I sal þe taken wan time is
to me at þe laste,
to ben with me moder in blis—
Al þis þan haue i caste.

Al þis werld demen i sal,
at þe dom risingge,
Suete moder, here is al
Þat i wile nou singge."

Serteynly, þis sithte i say,
Þis song i herde singge,
Als i lay þis golis-day
Alone in my longingge.
‘Als I Lay vp-on a Nith’

Thus the whole world is described in a most orderly sequence by Scripture as proceeding from beginning to end, in accordance with the peculiar beauty of its well-designed song. One can view, following the sequence of time, the variety, multiplicity and symmetry, order, rectitude and beauty of the many judgments proceeding from the wisdom of God governing the world. As no one can see the beauty of a song unless his view extends over the whole verse, so no one sees the beauty of the order and governance of the universe unless he beholds the whole of it. Because no man is so long-lived that he can see the whole of it with the eyes of the flesh and because no man can foresee the future by himself, the Holy Ghost has provided man with Holy Scripture, the length of which is measured by the extent of the universe.¹

WE HAVE SEEN THAT SACRED HISTORY, DEFINED BY THEOLOGY AND BASED ON Scripture, is the account of two creations, the creation of the world and of Adam and Eve, and Adam’s rejection of God and fall from grace; the re-creation, or reformation, of all things by Christ, as history prepared for and witnessed the birth, life, death and resurrection of its Redeemer. We have seen, because the second creation is the reformation of the first, that the events of sacred history bear a symmetrical relationship to each other, as events of the second creation are applied to and transfigure the events of the old. Christ in becoming man is the second Adam, Mary the second Eve. We
have seen, finally, that besides the symmetrical proportioning, there is a hierarchical value among events in relation to the Incarnation. As history approaches closer and closer to the appearance of Christ, it grows closer to its fulfillment, its reunion with God.

In reading "Gabriel, from evene-king" which celebrates a single one of the events in sacred history, we found these same proportions. The event of the annunciation was told in such a way that it reflected, through the figure of the maiden mother, the total course of sacred history, from the fall of man, to Christ's resurrection and ascension, and, finally, to man's own future entry into heaven. And we found that the meaning of the poem depended partly upon the relationship between events as arranged proportionally to each other by the sequence of stanzas: the painless birth, applied to man's release through the pain of Christ's death, gave man rebirth from the pain of Adam's sin.

But the definition of the beauty of sacred history is incomplete unless it includes the achievement of its purpose, the restoration of man's delight. In "Gabriel, from evene-king," the petition in the last stanza reflected this purpose. As man, living now, joined to Christ in the Church, the poet and his audience looked back from the present and, in virtue of both past and present, expressed hope for a future which had been foretold and prefigured, but which still awaited consummation.

From this point of view in the present, looking back with the poet and his audience, we are able to see the beauty of the plan of sacred history. We see not only the ordered relationships of the sequence of its events, but its end, the ultimate transformation of pain to joy. The beauty of this transformation reflects the goodness and wisdom of the Creator and is the basis of praise.

The next poem to be discussed organizes the events of sacred history in terms of their end in joy. For mankind seen in the light of sacred history, the experiences of joy and sorrow have very specific definition. Sorrow as defined by theology is the loss of God and the physical and spiritual pain resulting from it. Man's joy is his union with God in the beatific vision of heaven. The fulness of joy, or delight, is relative to the degree of closeness of man's union with God.

The sin of Adam and Eve was the beginning of all man's sorrow. It caused an infinite gulf between God and man. Only the infinite God could join the gap. In His incarnation, Christ, both God and man, took on Himself all the suffering caused by sin. Christ's crucifixion and death released man from the bondage to sin through Adam and reunited man to God. Thus the
THE ANNUNCIATION AND BIRTH OF CHRIST

Annunciation of Christ's coming is called the beginning of joy. But the reunion is as yet unconsummated. After Christ rose from the dead, the choice between separation from God and eternal suffering or union with God and eternal joy has been given to the power of the individual's free will, as each soul works out his salvation. Because the value of the suffering of Christ is infinite, man has as many possibilities to reject sorrow and accept joy as the moments he has to live and to decide.

Sorrow, then, after the Incarnation, when it is formulated by theology, has two possible definitions. It may be the absolute sorrow that comes from the loss of eternal joy because of sin. This is the sorrow expressed in the Middle English poems of penitence. Or, on the other hand, it may be a relative sorrow, which, springing from a limited view of suffering, makes the suffering appear to be absolute. The restricted view cuts the sufferer off from awareness that the final experience of history is transfiguring joy. This restricted view is natural to humanity. It can be widened only by the point of view of Divinity.

We have seen that Mary is the medium for the coming of God into history, and that being the one through whom heaven was reopened, she replaces Eve through whom heaven was lost. Just as Christ takes on the pains of man to give him rebirth, so Mary, spiritually suffering Christ's pains, becomes the spiritual mother of man. In "Gabriel, fram evene-king," Mary, having been assumed into heaven, was appealed to as she is now, from the point of view of present time. Being the creature closest to God, she was seen as man's intercessor as well as the sign of his joy. Yet even in heaven her spiritual motherhood, since man still suffers, can still cause her sorrow. It is sorrow because of her bond with man that, for example, is the subject of the fourteenth century "Quia amore langueo":

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I byd, I byde in grete longyng,
I loue, I loke when man woll craue,
I pleyne for pyte of peynyng
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However, just as every man during this life has imperfect vision, so Mary, the human mother of God, was subject during her life on earth to seeing what happened under its limited aspect of joy or sorrow. As a human mother, Mary's sorrow was greatest for her Son. We shall see, in Part II, that the poet uses Mary's limited human view as the source of drama in the poems on the compassion of Mary. In these poems, the poet will focus on the
pains of Christ and exclude the implications of the future joyful outcome of
the crucifixion, until the suffering portrayed reaches a great degree of inten­sity. In this way his poem can reflect the immensity of the consequences of
sin which caused such pain, and through this knowledge it can turn man’s
heart towards Christ.

Yet Mary’s experience of the events during her life was not defined solely
by the limitation of her own viewpoint. The matter is more complex. Her
experience of joy and sorrow was fundamentally related to the fact that the
events of sacred history themselves have the double potentiality of joy and
sorrow depending upon how wide the context is in which they are presented.
Thus, in the lyrics about Mary, each of the events of her life with her Son
may be presented either in the light of joy or in the light of sorrow. The
events are joyful when they look towards her Son’s final glory, which is the
source of her own and of mankind’s joy, or they are sorrowful when they
look towards her Son’s passion. Shown by the poet in its joyful aspect,
Christ’s birth will be described as the coming of the Messiah: seen in its
mortal poverty and humility, it will be shown to foreshadow His crucifixion.

The fact that the outcome of sacred history is ultimately joyful always has
the power to transfigure sorrow to joy. In the poems on Mary’s compassion at
the crucifixion, for example, the poet will often transfigure the present
sorrow by introducing into his poem Christ’s resurrection, ascension and
Mary’s assumption. It is especially the dialogues between Christ and Mary, or
Christ and man, or Mary and man, that are structured by this metamorphosis
of sorrow to joy. The dialogues of the mother of God with her Son are
dialogues between the limited view of humanity and the omniscience of
God. We shall see that it is theology’s formulation of the plan of sacred
history that provides the poet with the Divine perspective.

The next poem to be discussed is a dialogue between the Blessed Virgin
and her Child from the preaching book compiled in 1372 by Friar
John of Grimestone. The manuscript is an extensive and varied collection of
Latin theological materials arranged by subject, with Latin and English
poetry interspersed. There are short verses, moral lyrics, paraphrases and
songs. Among the selection of poems from it in Carleton Brown’s Religious
Lyrics of the Fourteenth Century are dialogues and laments spoken by
Christ and Mary.

The group of poems about the nativity and the group about the passion
can illustrate for us the double potentiality the events have for sorrow or joy.
Of those on the nativity, one (Brown, No. 57) is simply a song in praise of
Christ's birth, which relates how the words of the angel to Mary, the words of the prophets, the angels' song, the visit of the Magi, all manifested that the Child was God; but then, in contrast, how cruelly He was put to death for man's sake. Another (No. 58) has Joseph speak, "a man of [he elde lawe]," who testifies to Mary's virginal conception and giving birth. The poem contrasts Christ's poverty at His birth to the kingly nature of His Father in heaven. There are three poems about the poverty of Christ in His cradle. One (No. 59) is a lament by man because he is the cause of Christ's suffering. One (No. 65), prompted by the idea of the Christ Child weeping in the cradle, rues the suffering Christ will have and, in order to appeal to man to repent, describes His passion. In the last one (No. 75), first Christ, shivering with cold, tells man to learn to love as He loves, and then Mary addressing Christ, laments that she cannot help Him now or at His passion.

For the most part these poems see Christ's birth as it foreshadows His passion. They dwell on Christ's suffering to stir as sense of sorrow and repentence in the listener. The innocent child embodies Christ's innocence. By juxtaposing His passion to His nativity, relating the passion to an innocent child, a poet could dramatically illustrate the injustice of Christ's suffering.

"Als i lay vp-on a nith" (No. 56) uses all the principles I have mentioned. The dramatic basis of the poem is the limitation of Mary's point of view as she hears of her Son's life and death. The poet uses the second joy of Mary, the event of Christ's nativity, as it contains the potentiality for both joy and sorrow, and he organizes the events of the Incarnation as each reveals the glory or the suffering of Christ.

The Child tells His own story. Throughout the tale because her perspective is limited, Mary repeatedly mistakes the significance of an event. Each sorrow and each joy she hears of only foreshadows a later moment, which she will suffer or rejoice in, with increasing intensity, until she finally comprehends the joyful outcome of events. Through the course of the telling, her initial limited understanding is transformed by the Child, until she can recognize the full implications of what His godhood means for herself and for man.

The listeners' view is limited rhetorically by the poem to that of Mary. Although, like Christ in the poem and like the author, the audience has a knowledge of the whole, through watching the events of Christ's life unfold as they are presented to Mary, they see the plan in a new, limited way, as she saw it for the first time. Yet the fact that the listeners remain simultaneously
aware of the total plan of sacred history adds an ironic dimension to the poem. As Christ first asks Mary to recount to Him His future, they immediately anticipate the pain that will be caused her if this seemingly happy request is fulfilled, and they sympathize with the sorrow that Mary, who is now unaware, will feel. They wonder at the motives with which the Christ Child asks to know, since the knowledge will make His mother suffer. At the same time, they see the irony of the Child's own situation, that He asks to hear, a future not of joy, as one would hope for a child, but a future of crucifixion and death. If the listener projects his thoughts beyond, however, he will also think of the ultimately joyous outcome, when Christ will return in glory.

The Setting

Als i lay vp-on a nith
Alone in my longging,
Me þouthe i sau a wonder sith,
A maiden child rokking.

The poem is set in a vision framework, to translate the listeners to another time and place, to a "maiden" rocking a child. The paradox of mother and maid is not emphasized, but is one of the accepted mysteries of the vision. The presence of a maiden rocking her child leads the listener to expect her to sing a lullaby. Paradoxically, however, the maid has desired to make her Child sleep without a song. Then, incongruously to the expectations formed by the setting, it is the Child who speaks from His cradle. He will sing His own lullaby. The incongruity of the Infant speaking is an incongruity potential to every act of Christ because of the fact that He is God and both the source and the object of all human action. As God, He conceives Himself through Mary. Here as God He will tell His own story, and as God He will transform His own sorrow to joy.

Voicing the listeners' expectation of hearing a lullaby, the Child says that since mothers are wont to tell their children what will happen to them, and that since every good mother sings her child to sleep, so also should His mother sing Him to sleep with the same tale. Replying that she knows only what the events leading up to the present moment of His birth foretell, His
mother begins to sing of those. The listeners' perspective is narrowed to hers, to her joy as it must have been at Christ's birth with the words of Gabriel in her heart and the angel's prophecy of the Messiah confirmed by the fact of her painless giving birth to the Child.

The Foretelling

*Mary's Tale: The Proposal; The Acceptance and Birth*

He grette me godli on is kne
Ful of grace, god is with þe;
Beren þu salt Messye.”

The poet begins the story of the Child's life by having Mary tell what the angel said to her. The Gospel account of the annunciation is used, but in contrast to the first two poems discussed, it is used to emphasize the prophetic aspect of the angel's words to Mary. You shall bear the Messiah, the Savior of mankind.

I wondrede michil in my þouth,
for man wold i rith none.
“Marie,” he seide, “drede þe nouth;
Lat god of heuene alone.

þe holi gost sal don al þis.”
He seyde with-outen wone
þat i sulde beren mannis blis,
þe my suete sone.

As in "Gabriel, fram evene-king," the angel’s salutation contains both the greeting and the prophecy of Mary's motherhood and Mary is puzzled about how she, a virgin, shall conceive. By emphasizing that it is the God of heaven alone, the Holy Ghost, by Whom she shall conceive, the angel reassures her. She shall give birth “with-outen wone,” outside the law of women; that is, without pain.
In lines 35–36 which follow this phrase, because of her limited understanding, Mary makes her first error of interpretation. Not yet knowing the full meaning of the angel’s prophecy as history will fulfill it, she identifies “mannis blis” with the immediate joy of “Pe my suete sone,” the Infant lying before her. It will not be until her Child tells her of His resurrection and final heavenly glorification that she will fully comprehend “mannis blis.”

He seide, “pu salt beren a king
In king dauit-is see,
In al Iacobs woniing
Per king suld he be.”

In contrast to the other poems, here, where the significant events in the life of Christ will be related one by one, the poet has the angel develop the messianic significance of Mary’s Child. His words prophesy Christ’s kingship: You shall bear a king for David’s throne—David’s see—who shall be king over all the house of Jacob. The angel then gives the sign to Mary, also in the Gospel account, which will provide her with proof of his words: If barren Elizabeth can conceive, so must you believe what I say is true. And, in Stanza XII, Mary tells how, believing and pleased, she accepted.

In the next four stanzas, Mary recounts to her Son how the angel’s prophecy was fulfilled. As the angel had said, Mary bore her Child without pain. Not only this, but at the time of His birth the Shepherds heard the angels rejoicing that He was the Messiah. These two facts testify to the truth of the angel’s words, and in joy Mary finishes her account of her conception and giving birth. Now she can tell her Child no more. But in the same way as she had not fully comprehended “mannis blis” in the preceding stanzas, so here, she mistakes Christ’s birth itself for the full accomplishment of the joy she will comprehend only in Stanzas XXXIV–XXXVI.

“Moder,” seide þat suete þing,
“To singen I sal þe lere
Wat me fallet to suflring,
& don wil i am here.

Christ from the cradle then begins to instruct His mother. As the Son of God Who already has the view of His whole life, what He says establishes the tension in the poem between Mary’s joy and her sorrow. Immediately He
contradicts her joyous view by speaking of the events of His life as “What it befalls Me to suffer and do while I am here.” Although in its relationship to the phrase “& don,” “to suffring” suggests the meaning, what He will undergo or experience, the verb carries with it in Middle English all the connotations of injury, punishment and death, especially when it is applied to Christ. The poet uses it here in direct contrast to Mary’s joy and to introduce the idea of pain. Pain is the theme of the events the Child tells next: those which foreshadow His crucifixion.

*Christ’s Tale: Childhood*

The next five stanzas tell of four events of Christ’s childhood. Each stanza is introduced with a measure of time, and each stanza has a twofold purpose. The first is to present an element of suffering which foreshadows His passion and reflects also Mary’s coming sorrow. The second is to use each event to point to the Child as the Messiah, either as He fulfills the law or as He is singled out as the Son of God. When the seven days “ben don,” the Child begins, He will suffer pain as He fulfills the law of Abraham by being circumcised, cut in a “wol tendre place.” When twelve days have passed, He continues, the three kings, led by a star, will seek Him with their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Implicit is the homilist’s interpretation of their visit as the testimony of the gentiles that the Child is King, Priest and Messiah. After forty days, again in order to fulfill the law, the Child says, He will be presented in the Temple. Simeon will recognize Him as the Glory he has waited in old age to see, and he will prophesy. The Child does not say explicitly that Simeon’s prophecy will be of a sword of sorrow that will pierce Mary’s heart (Luke 2:34-35), but suggests it by contrasting the sword’s effect of sorrow to Mary’s present joy: Simeon’s “sawe . . . changen sal þi chere.”

The final event the Child foretells will happen when He is twelve years old and teaches the elders in the Temple. The Gospel account (Luke 2:41-52) relates this story from Mary and Joseph’s view, how, losing their Child after spending the Passover in Jerusalem, they return and search for Him for three days. When they find Him teaching in the Temple, Mary rebukes Him: “Son, why hast thou done so to us? Behold thy father and I have sought thee sorrowing.” But He replies to them: “How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be about my father’s business?”
His reply asserts His primary purpose on earth, to do the will of His Father.

The Gospel account ends: “And he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was subject to them. And his mother kept all these words in her heart. And Jesus advanced in wisdom and age and grace with God and men” (Luke 2:51-52). In paraphrasing it, the account in the poem transforms what in the Gospel is a summary of Christ’s childhood years into a prophecy which summarizes the rest of His childhood; saying that until Christ is “pretti at be leste” (Luke 3:23), He will be obedient to His mother and Joseph. As well as being a prediction, Christ’s words in the poem have the effect of a reply and reassurance for Mary’s rebuke. It is as if He intends to assuage Mary’s sorrow, the sorrow of both the Mary He will hurt at that future time and the Mary to whom He now talks from the cradle, whom He is causing by his tale to suffer everything in anticipation of the events.

**Christ’s Tale: The Divine Mission Begins**

The next five stanzas, as complement to His human childhood, recount the divine mission of Christ’s manhood, as He begins to fulfill His purpose, to redeem man. Lines eighty-five through eighty-eight fulfill the previous quatrain and act as a transition. Then the four aspects of His mission are described which lead towards the fulfilling of the prophecy that He is the Messiah. The first event the Child tells of shows He is the Son of God. He will be baptized by His forerunner John, and the form of a dove will appear and the Voice will testify, “Thou art my beloved Son. In thee I am well pleased” (Luke 3:21-22). The next event He recounts is how He will withstand the Devil. As Adam was, so Christ will be tempted by Satan, but unlike Adam, Christ will resist the temptation (Luke 4:1-13). And next, the Child relates how He will establish His Church, gathering disciples to teach His Father’s law over the whole world. And then, finally, He tells how His simplicity and knowledge will attract the people, so that most of them will desire to make Him King.

**Mary’s Response of Joy, the Contradiction**

At this point Mary bursts out in joy. Yet again she has mistaken a limited joy for full joy, and ignoring the prediction of sorrow present earlier in her
Son's description of His childhood, she says, Sweet Son, no sorrow should ever injure me if I could see that day on which You would be King. The poem arrives at the climax of the opposition between sorrow and joy. To Mary the kingship her Son foretells seems truly to fulfill what the angel of the annunciation had prophesied, and she rejoices. But her joy would have intense ironic overtones for the audience of the poem; for, being ignorant of the rest of His story, Mary does not realize what is entailed before her desire for her Son's future glory can be fulfilled. Before Christ finally ascends into His true kingship of heaven, He must undergo all the sorrow His humanity will suffer on earth.

Although, in Stanza XXVI, the Child had seemed to predict His kingship, His words to Mary had been carefully qualified: the “most partige” of the people, but not all, “sal wiln,” shall desire to, but not actually make Him king. In Stanza XXVIII Christ reproves Mary for her false assumption, and the next three stanzas (lines 113-124) plunge her into sorrow. In words which echo His correction, in Stanza XVI, of Mary's joy at His birth, Christ contradicts her statement that no sorrow would ever injure her: “Do wey, moder,” he says, it was not for this I came, but to be poor and to amend man's sorrow. Therefore, when two or more years of My mission have been accomplished, contrary to what you have said, you will mourn much and see Me die a cruel death.

The Child foretells His death in terms of the suffering Mary will experience. Taking up Simeon's words that Mary “changen sal þi chere,” He explains first that the change she will experience will be from joy to sadness. The figure of the sword piercing her heart, present in Luke's account but which the Child had omitted from His own, is here introduced and interpreted in relation to His passion. The sword to pierce Mary's heart will be the abundant compassion she will suffer at His own great pain, for, the Child starkly reveals, He will hang shamefully on the cross:

Samfuly for i sal deyȝe,  
Hangende on þe rode,  
For mannis ransoun sal i payȝe  
Myn owen herte blode.

For the ransoming of man I shall pay the blood of My own heart. This is not a figurative statement, because Mary will witness her Son's heart pierced by a lance. Out of this blood and water, the Church would spring. Mary could not have imagined that from the birth she gave to her Child "with-outen
wone" would come this "care of michil won," the rebirth of man in exchange for the blood of her Son’s heart.

Now is the moment of Mary’s greatest sorrow, the deepest contradiction of the joy she felt at her Son’s birth. Mary’s view takes her no further. She is fixed to the moment of her Son’s death. Alas, she says, Why shall I endure that day, to bear Thee for that woe? The context of their dialogue seems ultimately tragic.

Mary’s Response of Sorrow, the Transformation

“Allas! sone,” seyde þat may,
“Si þen þat it is so,
Worto sal i biden þat day
To beren þe to þis wo?”

But Mary is again mistaken. Just as, in the previous section, her joy at Christ’s earthly kingship had the implications of not being final, so here, her sorrow at the crucifixion contains implications of its outcome in joy. Mary has focused on His suffering only, but the Child had suggested that the giving of His heart’s blood for man’s ransom from pain was part of a higher purpose.

“Moder,” he seide, “tak et lithte,
For liuen i sal a-ȝeyne,
& in þi kinde þoru my mith,
for elles i wrouthte in weyne.

Christ replies to her outburst, and asserts the power of His godhood over the suffering of His humanity: Mother, bear this lightly, for I shall live again and in your nature through my power. His words foretell His resurrection as a renewal of His birth in human nature, and He replies to Mary’s despairing question from the preceding stanza, Why did I bear You if it is to such a death?, by affirming: Or else I have wrought in vain.

The point of Mary’s greatest suffering is when Christ suffers most and when He seems least powerful, when He seems, in fact, to die. But this is also the moment when the Child asserts His godhood most fully. With His
assertion He transforms the moment. The last section moves from passion to action, as the Child goes on to tell how He shall return to His Father in His human nature, to heaven. He shall send the Holy Ghost with His seven gifts. And when Mary's time comes to die, He shall take Mary with Him to be a mother in heaven. All this He has planned. With these words, the angel's prophecy at the annunciation is fulfilled joyously and completely.

We have reached the moment in the events of sacred history from which the poet himself speaks and in which his audience hears the poem. Just as the Child tells Mary what will happen after her own death, so, in the last stanza, He foretells the last judgment, when He will come again as King and Judge and in virtue of His resurrection all men will rise from the dead. Here the Child stops speaking. The poet takes his listeners out of the context of his dream vision, into the reality of the occasion on which the vision took place, as in the last verse he specifies the context of the first:

Serteynly, his sithte i say,  
 Pis song i herde singge,  
 Als i lay his golis-day  
 Alone in my longingge.

The time is the festival of Christmas. The fact that the listeners now celebrate the event of the nativity testifies that the birth of the Child has in fact occurred, that the story foretold has happened, that the Child was God; that sorrow, solitude and longing have been turned into joy, that the Child and His mother are now in heaven together in joy. The listeners can rejoice in hope for themselves and praise the mother and the Child as they have revealed the beauty of God's plan.

The Structure

From this summary of the poem, it is possible, as did the poet and his audience, to look back on the story told by the mother and Child and to see in it a certain order and beauty of proportion. So regular do the proportions appear to be that they enable us to divide the poem into exact units, which may well reflect the units of melody to which the song was set. If we omit the opening and closing frame quatrains, leaving them to be a special introduction and an echoing conclusion, the poem falls naturally into seven
groups of five stanzas. These units of five quatrains, in turn, can be seen to be ordered by their subject matter into, first, a unit of five stanzas which gives the setting and, then, three groups of ten stanzas each which recount the life of Christ. This grouping by subject matter has been represented above by the headings given to the poem's analysis. Correspondences between the organization of the different stages of the telling and the repetition of certain patterns of phrasing support the proportions in the poem made apparent by the subject matter.

The introductory five quatrains (II–VI) provide the lullaby setting and prepare for Mary's singing of the annunciation and birth of her Son. In the first group of ten stanzas (VII–XVI), Mary tells her part of the tale. In the first unit of five within this group (VII–XI) she relates the proposal, the angel's greeting and prophecy of the Messiah; and in the second unit (XII–XVI) she relates the fulfillment of the proposal, her acceptance and the consequent birth of Christ. She ends her tale in a spirit of joy. “He grette me godli on is kne” in the first unit is responded to by “I ansuerede blepely” in the second. And corresponding to the last of the introductory stanzas (VI), this first group of ten quatrains ends with a quatrain (XVI) that leads into the next part, as Christ says He will tell of what in His life He will suffer and do. Christ's tale occupies the second and third group of ten stanzas.

The second group (XVII–XXVI) divides also into two units of five quatrains each. The first five (XVII–XXI) tell of Christ's childhood, ending with His promise of obedience to Mary and Joseph until “i be þretty at þe leste.” Each stanza of the five tells of one event. Each opens with a phrase indicating an interval of time: “Wanne þe seuene dayges ben do,” “Wanne þe tuelue dayges ben do,” “Pe fourti day, to fille þe lawe,” “Wan i am tuelue þer of elde,” “Til i be þretty at þe leste.” Complementary to the first, the second unit of five stanzas (XXII–XXVI), beginning “Wan þe þretty þer ben spent,” tells of Christ's manhood. As the stanzas recount the acts of His divine mission, they develop the promise of His childhood and bring Christ's tale to the moment when the people desire to make Him king. At this point, Mary interrupts her Child's story with her second expression of joy. In the same way as in this group's first unit of five, in the second unit each stanza tells of one event, and each stanza repeats a phrase, “I sal.”

The last group of ten stanzas (XXVII–XXXVI) shows Christ's contradiction of Mary's joy and her sorrow at its extreme; then it counterbalances her sorrow with Christ's account of the ultimately joyful outcome of events. In the first unit of five (XXVII–XXXI) the sorrow is told. “Do wey moder,”
Christ contradicts Mary’s “Suete sone,” and then He tells how she will suffer at His crucifixion. His explanation of why she will suffer begins with a phrase which echoes the phrase introducing each of the events of His mission, “Perfore wan to & bretti zer ben don,” and reinforces the idea in the preceding stanza that the Child’s suffering is the true way in which His mission will be fulfilled. In the first stanza of the second and final unit of five (XXXII–XXXVI), Mary cries out in despair that she ever gave birth; whereupon Christ counters with a prediction of His resurrection and of man’s glory (XXXIII–XXXVI). The despairing “‘Alas! sone,’ seyde jat may” is countered by “‘Moder,’ he seide.” Christ’s foretelling of the glorious events of His life continues to recall the manner in which He recounted His mission. After Christ foretells ultimate joy, the poem concludes with the frame quatrains (XXXVII), which makes explicit the setting of the vision on “golis-day.”

With a cursory reading, one might classify “Als i lay vp-on a nith” as an example of the religious lyrics which, in Kane’s terms, would seem to recede into a common background of indistinguishable accounts of the life of Christ. However, it can be seen from the summary of the poem and of its proportions that through the dialogue of God with man, the poet is reflecting in his poem the beauty of the transformation in history of man’s pain into joy, the beauty of the Incarnation.

There are two principles of proportion by which the poet organizes this transformation. As in the case of “Gabriel, fram evene-king,” both are also principles of proportion in the events of sacred history. The first is that the poet presents the Incarnation in the form of the fulfillment of truth. The poem develops as the recounting of a series of three prophecies and fulfillments: the annunciation of “mannis blis,” fulfilled by the birth of Christ and ultimately by His resurrection and ascension to glory; the prophecy of Simeon, fulfilled by the crucifixion; and the angel’s prophecy of Christ’s kingship, first falsely seeming to be fulfilled by the Child’s account of Palm Sunday and then truly fulfilled by the Child’s foretelling of His return in glory at the last judgment.

The first principle of proportion, the fulfillment of truth, works in relation to the second, the dramatic fulfillment of desire. The movement of the poem is not controlled, as it was in “Gabriel, fram evene-king” by the objective sequence of events in history, but by the minds conceiving it. There is first of all the point of view of Mary; the principle revealing the symmetry of events is the reflection of joy and sorrow in Mary’s heart, in a progression which
reveals more and more the full implications of the manhood and godhood of
her Child, as her pain and joy grow more intense. Although the movement
of the poem is controlled by the perspective of Mary, the perspective of the
listeners from the first transcends what she knows. They see the events more
from the point of view of the Child, Who has knowledge of the whole.

The poem begins in the spirit of Mary's joy at Christ's birth. This
incomplete joy is countered by Christ's story of the pain present in the events
of His childhood, but reestablished by the foretelling of His mission, which
ends with the telling of a second, but also incomplete joy, His Palm Sunday
kingship. To Mary's second mistaken rejoicing, Christ replies in a way that
plunges her into deepest sorrow; only again to raise her, with the account of
His resurrection, ascension and of her own assumption, to a comprehension
of fullest joy. Thus the poem moves from joy to joy, in three stages: first,
from an initial limited joy; then, counter to suggested sorrow, to a second
deeper but misconceived joy; then finally, counter to the experience of most
intense sorrow, to the comprehension of ultimate joy.

Given these two principles of structure in the poem, if in our mind's
eye—in the same way as we juxtaposed the individual stanzas of "Gabriel,
fram evene-king"—we exclude the introductory five quatrains and place the
three groups of ten stanzas which recount the life of Christ side by side, we
can see that the development of the narrative is symmetrically proportioned
according to the units of five stanzas. Within each group of ten stanzas, the
first and second units of five contrast, yet complement each other. Thus the
first five quatrains in each group develop Mary's experience of sorrow, while
they also prefigure or prepare for the second unit of five stanzas; the second
five quatrains, while fulfilling the events related in the first unit, contrary to
the first develop Mary's experience of joy. The principle of structure corre-
sponds to that found in the Psalter of Robert de Lisle. (See Figure 5 and its
descriptive note.)

We can see the proportion established in the first group of ten stanzas
(VII–XVI). The first unit of five presents the story of the annunciation of
Christ's birth. The annunciation contains the prophecy of joy in the words
"mannis blis." Yet latent in the prophecy is sorrow. The words "with-outen
wone" refer back in sacred history to the penalty of Eve and refer forward to
the pains Mary will suffer at the rebirth of man. In the second unit of five,
the story of the actual birth of Christ fulfills the event that was promised in
the first unit, and Mary is joyful.

In the second group of ten stanzas, the first unit of five presents the story
of the events of Christ’s childhood. While confirming His messiahship by the circumcision, epiphany, presentation, and then the finding in the Temple, the stanzas specifically develop what the Child will suffer: the wound, when He is cut; death, in the gift of myrrh; crucifixion, in the prophecy of Simeon; and finally, separation from His parents, in the search of Mary and Joseph for their Son at Passover. The second unit of five, correspondingly, fulfills the promise of the Child’s divinity and kingship by the story of the events of His manhood, and Mary experiences great joy.

In the third group of ten, the first unit of five, which is the description of the crucifixion, fulfills the promise of suffering both implicit in the first unit in the story of Christ’s birth and explicit in the first unit of the second group in the story of Christ’s childhood. The description of her Child’s crucifixion causes Mary’s most intense experience of sorrow. The second unit of five fulfills ultimately the angel’s prophecy in the first group of ten of “mannis blis” and completes the account in the second group of ten of Christ’s mission, by manifesting His victory as God over sin and death. At the same time it counters the crucifixion by foretelling the events to follow it and provides the full cause for Mary’s joy.

Not only does the poet proportion the vision narrative of the life of Christ according to these two principles, but he sets the whole dream vision in relation to his audience by means of them. The introductory five quatrains place the dialogue at the time of Christ’s nativity. By the two frame quatrains’ setting of the poem itself at the time of the celebration of Christmas in the Church year, an analogy is established between the situation of the poet and his audience and the situation of the Christ Child and Mary.

Thus the poem can be seen, more deeply, to act as a prophecy and fulfillment of truth in relation to the audience. Just as for Mary the birth of her Child is the fulfillment of the words of the angel at the annunciation, so for the audience the fact that it is “3olis-day” gives testimony that the Child speaking in the poem has in fact been born. As the Child foretells the rest of His life to Mary in terms of the fulfillment of what was prophesied in order that He may teach her the ultimately joyful outcome of events, so through Mary the audience recalls the outcome of events they know have already actually come to pass, and they are reminded that, indeed, except for the last judgment, all the Child has foretold has come to pass.

Because of its setting, the whole poem can also be seen to act as the dramatic fulfillment of desire in relationship to the audience. That the deeper purpose of the poet is focused beyond Mary and on the audience’s desire for
joy is revealed by his handling of the last two stanzas. The dialogue of the poem is left incomplete. Omitting Mary's response, the poet concludes the poem with the Child's account of final joy. It is for the listener to apply the significance of Christ's tale, beyond its consequences for Mary, to himself. The frame quatrains make this application clear. The opening quatrain introduces the dialogue as a dream vision witnessed by a solitary speaker who lay one night alone in his "longging." The concluding quatrain, affirming the vision was true, reveals that it took place on Christmas Day. The setting on "solis-day" is a testimony to the listener that the ultimate transformation of his own solitary longing into joy has in fact been made possible.

There is, finally, a further general comparison to be made between the movement of sorrow to joy in the poem and the point of view of the audience established by the poem's setting at Christmastide. There is an analogy between Christ's view in the poem of the progression of the events in His life and the perspective in time of the liturgy of the Church as it looks forward from the Christmas season. After the joyous celebration of Christmas will come the penitential season of Lent, culminating on Palm Sunday, when Christ's entry into Jerusalem will be celebrated, and in Holy Week, when the passion and death of Christ will be relived by the Church. The sorrowing at the passion on Good Friday will be succeeded by the rejoicing at the resurrection on Easter. This in turn will be succeeded by the joyous time of Ascension and Pentecost, and the triumphant summer season of feasts, which includes the celebration of Mary's assumption, and whose liturgy prefigures the joy of the Heavenly Jerusalem, to be established by the second coming of Christ and the resurrection and final judgment of mankind.