

THE MEDIEVAL DARK HORSE:  
CHALLENGE AND REWARD IN THE MIDDLE ENGLISH LYRIC

BY

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A Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies  
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This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Dr. Patrick McBrine, Department of English, and it has been approved by the members of the candidate's thesis committee. It was submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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## ABSTRACT

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“The Medieval Dark Horse: Challenge and Reward in the Middle English Lyric” explores the genre’s history and literary merits while addressing the question of why this valuable and extensive body of literature has largely gone untapped by scholars.

The introductory sections detail the historical and modern contexts of the lyric, including the state of scholarship, manuscripts, editions, dating issues, purpose, audience, types of lyrics, and themes. This background informs a discussion of the genre’s difficulties and offers solutions with which to counter them. Close readings of eight poems are included to exemplify the lyric’s thematic range, stylistic diversity, and literary worth.

The goal of this study is to demonstrate that, despite its inherent challenges, the lyric is an important part of the Middle English corpus. While Chaucer continues to enjoy a plethora of scholarly attention, the lyric offers tremendous complexity and depth that is no less valuable and should not be ignored.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## THE STATE OF SCHOLARSHIP

The body of criticism surrounding the Middle English lyric is best described as modest, but growing. While the fragmentary nature of the lyrics has made study of the genre difficult, diligent scholarship nevertheless exists. Carleton Brown, Rossell Hope Robbins, and G. L. Brook among others have produced printed editions of most of the surviving manuscripts, and while many lyrics have been lost, enough remain to provide us with plenty of evidence. That said, a complete edition containing the entire corpus of Middle English lyrics is still a *desideratum*. The bulk of criticism on the Middle English lyric does not come close to that of Chaucer, even though the recent studies of R. T. Davies, Peter Dronke, and Thomas G. Duncan have helped to bridge the gap in our knowledge of this important literature.

According to Robert David Stevick, criticism of the Middle English lyric began in 1907 with an essay accompanying a collection of poems by Sir Edmund Chambers.<sup>1</sup> Chambers was eager to promote knowledge of the lyrics, which were not widely known at the time, and was among the first to discuss their origins, conventions, and artistic features. In his 1907 volume, *Early English Lyrics: Amorous, Divine, Moral & Trivial*, Chambers states that his purpose is “to provide an anthology of English lyrical poetry earlier than the advent of the sonnet with Wyatt and Surrey during the sixteenth century” (*ix*). Chambers bases his selections solely on the poems’ literary qualities and organizes them into his four categories. The essay accompanying his poems, “Some Aspects of Medieval Lyric,” provides a historical account of the lyrics and their artistic merits. In his own words, “The written lyric of the Middle Ages is generally the work of the minstrel or of the *trouvère*, who represent successive stages in the development of the poet as

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<sup>1</sup> Stevick, *One Hundred*, xviii. The volume by Chambers is *Early English Lyrics: Amorous, Divine, Moral & Trivial* (Plymouth: W. Brendon and Son, LTD., Printers, 1907).

a self-conscious artist” (259). Chambers traces the progression of different lyric forms and how they are interwoven over the centuries that span the Medieval period. For example, Chambers considers the co-existence of love-poetry and art-song to be a moment “so fundamental for the understanding of all subsequent literature in England as well as France” (261).

Once Chambers made a case for the inherent value of the Middle English lyric, further scholarship proceeded with an influx of new anthologies. Most of the work focused on the preservation of the texts, and according to Stevick, “Critical writing about the lyrics in the first half of this century is found chiefly in the introductions” of these collections and anthologies. Carleton Brown,<sup>2</sup> Rossell Hope Robbins,<sup>3</sup> G. L. Brook,<sup>4</sup> and R. L. Greene<sup>5</sup> are among the most prominent names associated with the establishment of criticism on the Middle English lyric. Brown and Robbins in particular are esteemed for *The Index of Middle English Verse*, published in 1943,<sup>6</sup> which contains 123 texts, each appearing in eight or more manuscripts, thirty-three of which are non-religious. Robbins and John Levi Cutler provided a supplement to *The Index* in 1965.<sup>7</sup>

Stevick also cites four other important studies from the first half of the twentieth century. F. J. E. Raby produced two books, the first of which details the development of Christian-Latin

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<sup>2</sup> See Brown’s *English Lyrics of the XIII<sup>th</sup> Century*, *Religious Lyrics of the XIV<sup>th</sup> Century*, and *Religious Lyrics of the XV<sup>th</sup> Century*.

<sup>3</sup> See Robbins’ *Secular Lyrics of the XIV<sup>th</sup> and XV<sup>th</sup> Centuries*

<sup>4</sup> See Brooks’ *The Harley Lyrics: The Middle English Lyrics of Ms. Harley 2253*

<sup>5</sup> See Greene’s *The Early English Carols*

<sup>6</sup> Brown, Carleton and Rossell Hope Robbins, eds. *The Index of Middle English Verse*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1943. Print.

<sup>7</sup> Robbins, Rossell Hope and John Levi Cutler, eds. *Supplement to the Index of Middle English Verse*. University of Kentucky Press, 1965. Print.



poetry between the third and twelfth centuries; the second for secular Latin poetry.<sup>8</sup> While both of these volumes concern Latin and not English verse, Stevick maintains that “The earliest extant lyrics in English coincide with the Latin lyrics produced at the very end of Raby’s range of centuries,” and thus Raby’s work provides some context for Middle English lyric poetry (*xix*).

In 1936, C. S. Lewis wrote *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition*, which defined courtly love as a conventional feature of Middle English poetry. In particular, Lewis sought to “trace in turn the rise both of the sentiment called ‘Courtly Love’ and of the allegorical method” (2). While Lewis granted that medieval allegorical love poetry had lost its accessibility with modern readers, he maintained that the genre was influential: “We shall understand our present, and perhaps even our future, the better if we can succeed, by an effort of the historical imagination, in reconstructing that long-lost state of mind for which the allegorical love poem was a natural mode of expression.” Several modern scholars, including Peter Dronke, consider Lewis’ work to be highly influential, and the first chapter of *The Allegory of Love* has shaped to some extent the thinking of later scholars.

Stevick also cites E. R. Curtius’ 1948 volume, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, which argues that the various literatures of medieval Europe should be considered parts of a whole rather than separate, unrelated pieces. Though notable for its tremendous breadth, the book’s chapters on medieval poetry deal exclusively with Latin rather than English. That said, Curtius remains important for his overview of Medieval literature and the wealth of contextual information he provides.

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<sup>8</sup> See Raby, *A History of Christian-Latin Poetry*, 1927, and *A History of Secular Latin Poetry*, 1934.

Owing to the work of scholars such as these, most of the textual work on the English lyric was completed by the 1960s. Stevick cautions, however, that

Much of the criticism produced during the early 1950s and early 1960s devoted specifically to Middle English lyric poetry was less than satisfactory, even though some critics were clear about the diversity of dialects, the lack of evidence about genre, the anonymity of texts, and their remoteness from modern ideas about lyric poetry. (xx)

Stevick advocates a measure of caution vis-à-vis these early sources in light of what he calls scholars' inability to "talk about the poems instead of the (anonymous) poets... [to] treat the texts as texts rather than as relics merely to be preserved and venerated... [and] to analyze the structure of expression... more deeply than for tropes, rhyme schemes, and metrical feet;"<sup>9</sup> in other words, he urges us to read the poems as poems. Peter Dronke, editor of *The Medieval Lyric*, first published in 1968 and currently in its third edition, makes clear that "no book exists in any language that treats this lyrical tradition as a whole."<sup>10</sup> Stevick does, however, commend Rosemary Woolf and Dronke for their studies of religious and secular lyrics, respectively.<sup>11</sup> In general, Stevick's claim concerning the state of early lyric criticism is accurate; many of the initial volumes contain little in the way of analysis, and most comprise only the texts themselves. However, this lack of foundational criticism should be treated with more sympathy, given the fragmented nature of the lyrics themselves. It seems natural that textual work, including manuscript collation, translation, etc., would need to be completed before any critical

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<sup>9</sup> Stevick, quoting from his own 1966 study.

<sup>10</sup> Dronke, *The Medieval Lyric*, 9.

<sup>11</sup> See Woolf, *The English Religious Lyrics*, 1968, and Dronke, *Medieval Latin*, 1968, and *The Medieval Lyric*, 1968.

commentary could be considered valid. The early work — including that of Chambers, Brown, Robbins, and others — though perhaps lacking in a certain prosaic approach, is a necessary first step in the study of Middle English lyrics. Without it, we would not have the sizable corpus we have today, and criticism would be more inaccessible still. Fortunately, given the textual work of early scholars, we have hundreds of readable and coherent texts ripe for criticism. Thomas G. Duncan, in his *A Companion to the Middle English Lyric*, shares this point of view. He states:

One concern of this volume has been to take account of the fundamental scholarship upon which our knowledge of Middle English lyrics rests, from the early pioneering work of Carleton Brown, Rossell Hope Robbins and Richard Leighton Greene, through the outstanding contributions of Rosemary Woolf and Douglas Gray in the last few decades, to more recent insights such as those of gender criticism. (xxv)

In short, because of its importance in establishing the text of the Middle English lyrics, the early work must not be disparaged unduly.

On its own, Duncan's volume provides a comprehensive and readable overview of the modern state of lyric scholarship.<sup>12</sup> According to Duncan, the significance of the Middle English lyric is attributable to three areas of critical focus: form, content, and influences from Old English.

The Middle English lyric marks the first appearance of true stanzaic form in English literature, with structured line numbers, set lengths, and rhyme schemes. Previously, the Old English alliterative line had been the dominant poetic form in English. Rhyme and stanzaic form

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<sup>12</sup> Duncan, *Companion*, xiii–xxv.

emerged only with the Middle English lyric, which Duncan calls “a striking innovation derived from and modeled on stanzaic lyrics in Old French and Medieval Latin literature” (xiii).

The Middle English lyric is also notable for its thematic content, specifically its focus on courtly love through devotion and service to one’s lady. “It is in Middle English lyrics,” writes Duncan, “that this troubadour ideal of romantic love first made its appearance in England” (xiv). Romantic notions of love occur in both secular and religious lyrics, and in the former, love is most often expressed in terms of a man’s desperate longing for his beloved. This romantic love contrasts with Old English, wherein a man’s devotion is almost exclusively devoted to his lord. This love between lord and retainer is filial. A kindred spiritual love also permeates the religious lyrics through devotion to Christ and with emphasis on Christ’s love for humanity. Such focus diverges from the less personal, more heroic depictions of Christ found in Old English poems like *Dream of the Rood*, which portrays Christ “as a young warrior, a hero, strong and steadfast, as he mounts the cross to do battle for mankind” (Duncan xv). Instead, the Middle English lyric often depicts Christ as an infant or as a suffering man of the cross. Emphasis on Christ’s humanity in the Middle English lyric intensifies the degree to which spiritual love is essential to our reading of the poems, both secular and profane. Romantic diction is also found throughout the religious lyrics and fosters a sense of affective piety in that context.

For all its deviations, Duncan cites the Middle English lyric’s continuities with Old English as a third area of interest. The alliterative line is often used within the rhyming stanzaic form, and major themes from Old English, such as transience, death, and judgment, are found throughout. The *ubi sunt* motif, notable in the Old English *Wanderer*, finds similar expression in the opening lines of “Contempt of the world,” dated late thirteenth century: “Where beth they,

beforen us weren, / Houndes ladden and havekes beren, / And hadden feld and wode?”<sup>13</sup> Such themes — prevalent in Old English literature — are often found in the lyrics as well, indicating the continuing oral influence of “those who came before.”

Despite the value of the Middle English lyric, it has failed to inspire persistent interest among modern readers. Duncan attributes this lack of readership to a variety of linguistic and contextual factors, all of which contribute to degrees of inaccessibility. According to Duncan, the esotericism of the Middle English lyric in its diversity of dialect explains in part why Chaucer is more often and easily read. As Duncan puts it, “[Chaucer’s] London dialect was the origin of what was later to become standard English, [so] it is the form of Middle English most familiar to modern readers” (*xvi*). In contrast, Middle English lyrics encompass a vast range of dialects, which makes becoming acclimated to the language more difficult. That said, in recent years online glosses have become available to help readers transcend inconsistencies in spelling, syntax, etc.<sup>14</sup>

More difficult to surmount, however, is the contemporary context of the lyric. Authorial copies are rare, and instead poems often exist as the work of unprofessional scribes. These copies are typically filled with odd and inconsistent spellings and textual corruption. Duncan points out that, despite imperfections in the texts, the standard collections of Brown and Robbins remain invaluable resources, although they have been somewhat dated by the release of manuscript facsimiles in more recent years.<sup>15</sup> The quality of surviving Middle English lyrics evidences one

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<sup>13</sup> Davies, *Medieval English Lyrics*, 56.

<sup>14</sup> See the University of Michigan’s “Middle English Compendium,” for instance, at <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/mec/>.

<sup>15</sup> See Duncan, *Companion*, *xvi*.

of the form's principle areas of critical study. Duncan explains that "as with any other early writings, the editorial task of attempting to arrive at texts purged of corruptions is of primary importance" (xvi). He suggests that the difficult nature of this work explains why it has gone unfinished, although the availability of restored texts has improved. Duncan stresses that "the editing of Middle English lyrics is a necessary and ongoing task."

The difficulties associated with the language of the lyrics and the mysteries surrounding their composition are compounded by the absence of authorial context. The majority of the surviving lyrics are anonymous, which may seem inconsequential, but this fact only frustrates our inaccessibility to the world of the poems. The absence of authorship causes a lack of association for the reader. By contrast, Duncan explains, "the grouping of short poems 'belonging' together as the work of one author has allowed such poems to be approached with a supportive sense of familiarity" (xvi). In other words, the lyrics lack the approachability afforded by well-known names like "Shakespeare," "Milton," or "Chaucer."

Further problems arise from the brevity of the lyrics, which makes discerning the context more difficult. A lengthy poem, such as *Beowulf* or *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, provides its own context through genre — a heroic epic or romance, for instance. The lyrics, on the other hand, provide no such guidance. Each is mysterious and self-contained, which allows a single poem to be read from many different points of view.

Another disadvantage comes from what Duncan considers "the probable loss of so much of the original corpus" (xviii). Unlike modern literature, which usually presents an author's entire body of work, the complete picture of the Middle English lyric is nonexistent and unattainable. Subsequently, comparative analysis is difficult, and finding connections and developments

within the surviving corpus is troublesome. We are left with the questions of how many lyrics have survived and how many have not. Duncan states, “it is truly a chilling thought that had BL MS Harley 2253 failed to survive, half the Middle English love lyrics from before Chaucer’s time — and those the best — would have been lost” (*xix*).

#### MANUSCRIPTS

The principal problem with the study of Middle English lyrics is that, while many have been preserved, most have been lost or exist in fragmentary state. In all likelihood, poems were intended for oral performances and were meant to be heard rather than read or written down. In addition, the anonymous authorship of most lyrics makes attribution and dating difficult.

Duncan explains the state of manuscript studies in relation to vernacular lyrics:

Middle English lyrics often survive in a random, scattered and marginal manner; even where they are found in any number in any one manuscript they are generally part of a miscellaneous collection of literary materials in verse and prose, sometimes partly in Latin and French, often with literary items keeping company with non-literary material. Nevertheless... recent research on their varied contexts of survival has added significantly to our understanding of these lyrics.<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, rarely do manuscripts consist only of lyrics, and thematic anthologies did not exist as they do today. Instead, we assume that contemporary audiences would have distinguished major

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<sup>16</sup> Duncan, *Companion*, *xxiv*.

themes, genres, and categories on their own (making such organization unnecessary) or that such generic divisions did not occur to medieval compilers.

The most complete and well-known collection of lyrics is contained in MS. Harley 2253, dated around 1340 and attributed to “the Harley scribe.” Known casually as “the Harley Lyrics,” the manuscript contains English, French, and Latin poetry of secular and religious natures and in multiple genres and styles.<sup>17</sup> Brook describes the contents of the manuscript as “very miscellaneous,” as it contains Latin religious pieces, verse, saints’ lives, fabliaux, and Anglo-Norman poems (1). The English poems include versions of popular works, including *King Horn*, *The Proverbs of Hendyng*, and *The Sayings of Saint Bernard*. Some of the earliest English political songs are also found in the manuscript, although the present edition does not include them.

The line between lyrical and non-lyrical religious poems is difficult to distinguish. According to Brook, “The lyric exerted an influence on other forms of verse, and in the poems of this manuscript it is possible to see the lyric gradually merged into other literary forms” (2). He cites *The Sayings of Saint Bernard* and *Maximion* as having structures and themes similar to the lyrics, but these works are too long and impersonal to be considered lyrics themselves. Brook believes it to be very unlikely that the manuscript’s lyrics were written by a single poet, given the diversity of dialects found throughout.

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<sup>17</sup> According to the description of George Leslie Brook, the manuscript is a parchment folio consisting of 141 leaves, 11.5 by 7.5 inches. Two leaves are missing after f. 52 and six after f. 140. The first 48 leaves contain Anglo-Norman religious pieces, which are written in a late thirteenth-century hand, while the rest contain miscellaneous prose and verse dated early-fourteenth century. It was once thought that the Harley manuscript consisted of two manuscripts bound together, with the second beginning at f. 49, where the second hand begins. This has since been disproven, because ff. 47 to 52 belong to the same gathering of leaves. A facsimile of the codex was published in 1965 by Oxford University Press, and it includes an introduction by N.R. Ker detailing the manuscript’s contents, dating, and provenance.



Also noteworthy is the Vernon Manuscript, deemed “the biggest and most important surviving late medieval English manuscript.” It contains over 350 Middle English religious texts, as well as the texts of *Piers Plowman*, *The Prick of Conscience*, and several other works. The Vernon Manuscript is currently housed at the Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford. The Sloane Manuscript 2593, attributed to Irish physician Sir Hans Sloane (1660–1753), is dated fifteenth century and contains a variety of carols and lyrics. It is currently held at the British Library in London.

The rest of the corpus of Middle English lyrics is less coherent and considerably more fragmented. As in the case of MS. Harley 2253, many lyrics appear in miscellanies alongside other works. The Harley manuscript is exceptional because of its breadth and preservation of secular verse. Derek Pearsall points out that “of all the English religious pieces within the MS itself all but five appear elsewhere, whereas there is no other MS of any of the secular-love poems or political poems”<sup>18</sup> (120). In truth, the surviving lyrics probably represent only a small sample of the Middle English lyric’s entire history.

#### EDITIONS

A number of anthologies contain selections of Middle English lyrics. R.T. Davies’ 1963 critical collection serves as this paper’s primary source.<sup>19</sup> Davies’ is a scholarly edition, containing 187 lyrics ranging from the mid-twelfth to mid-sixteenth century or just after the Norman Conquest to the poetry of Wyatt. Davies chooses lyrics subjectively, based on their

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<sup>18</sup> Derek Pearsall. “Old English and Middle English Poetry.” *The Routledge History of English Poetry*, vol. 1. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul), 1977.

<sup>19</sup> R. T. Davies, ed. *Medieval English Lyrics*, (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press), 1963.

quality and interest, and arranges them in a rough chronological order, though he admits that few lyrics can be dated precisely. The titles given to individual lyrics are of his own invention, and he claims to take them from memorable lines in the poems. Punctuation and capitalization is modern, and spelling has been modified only in an attempt to achieve consistency for the modern reader. The texts have been taken directly from their original manuscripts.

Davies' introduction contains four parts, including issues raised in reading the source material, such as the diversity of narrators, which may make specific lyrics more or less effective for modern readers. Some lyrics require what Davies calls "an educated historical imagination" when interpreting their meaning (14). Davies also discusses lyrical tradition, convention, preservation, musical elements, and popularity. His introduction includes a selective history of the medieval English lyric, discussion of the types of lyrics, and a guide to the edition itself. Davies also includes a chronological table, further reading, abbreviations, an appendix, and an index of first lines. The edition contains ample notes and glosses, which allow even the most archaic language to be quite easily understood. The result is an authoritative, yet accessible, anthology.

Thomas G. Duncan's 2005 *A Companion to the Middle English Lyric* is a tremendous resource.<sup>20</sup> It provides a comprehensive overview of the scholarship, difficulties, and value associated with the poetry. As its name suggests, the *Companion* is not an anthology with hundreds of lyrics untouched by commentary. Rather, it is a volume organized into chapters, each focusing on a theme, category, or genre. A different scholar provides criticism for each chapter. Using discussion of the lyrics' contexts and modalities, Duncan hopes the *Companion*

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<sup>20</sup> Thomas G. Duncan, ed. *A Companion to the Middle English Lyric*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005. Print.

“may guide readers to familiarity with and a fuller understanding and enjoyment of this important part of our literary heritage, and may also, in some measure, prove an incentive to further research.”<sup>21</sup>

In a similar vein, Peter Dronke’s 1968 volume, *The Medieval Lyric*, is currently in its third edition and serves as another excellent critical companion for anyone looking to study the literature. Speaking of the original edition, Dronke states, “The book focused on interpreting lyrics from a remote past by a ‘direct method’, suggesting modes of critical reading rather than attempting a complete survey, confronting texts freshly rather than offering any elaborate historical or theoretical framework” (*ix*). The volume serves as an introduction to the medieval lyric, including both religious and secular and the Romance and Germanic languages. It covers a range of 850–1300, and the lyrics are chosen by Dronke for their interpretive value and capacity for criticism. His first concern “was that the meaning of the poetry should emerge as clearly as possible” (11). The introduction of *The Medieval Lyric* is titled “Performers and Performance,” and it details the travels, social status, mode of performance, and repertoire of medieval performers. It also contains chapters on the religious lyric, “*Cantigas de amigo*,” the love-lyric, the *Alba*, dance-songs, and lyrics of realism. Melodies of twelve lyrics discussed in the book are also provided. Notably, *The Medieval Lyric*, much like Duncan’s book, can be read in its entirety as one would read a novel. In this way, it differs from other lyric anthologies, which present hundreds of numbered lyrics with little to no critical commentary.

The 1974 Norton Critical Edition, selected and edited by Maxwell S. Luria and Richard L. Hoffman, claims to be “one of the largest collections of Middle English lyrics ever made

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<sup>21</sup> Duncan, *Companion*, xxv.

available to the college student.”<sup>22</sup> It is one of the more accessible larger anthologies, containing 245 thematically arranged lyrics, including all thirty-one English lyrics from MS Harley 2253. To improve accessibility, the editors have “removed many of the orthographical obstacles inherent in Middle English verse and have modernized punctuation, capitalization, and obsolete letters” without sacrificing the poems’ integrity. The edition includes critical and historical backgrounds by Peter Dronke,<sup>23</sup> Stephen Manning,<sup>24</sup> Raymond Oliver,<sup>25</sup> and Rosemary Woolf.<sup>26</sup> Six poems are highlighted for criticism by multiple scholars, presumably for their literary merit and interest.<sup>27</sup> The Norton edition consults the works of Carleton Brown, Rossell Hope Robbins, and G.L. Brook, all of whom are considered the foundation for modern Middle English lyric scholarship. Still, the editors consider “a new edition, with variants, of the complete corpus of lyrics, based on modern editorial procedures” to be desirable.

The 1990 anthology, *Lyrics of the Middle Ages*, edited by James J. Wilhelm, claims to be thorough, with 295 lyrics.<sup>28</sup> Notably, the edition proposes fourteen linguistic categories for Middle English lyrics, which range from Latin and Welsh to Arabic and Spanish. Wilhelm’s anthology is lauded for depicting the poetic variety of the genre, yet the lyrics appear mostly in

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<sup>22</sup> Maxwell Luria and Richard Lester Hoffman, eds. *Middle English Lyrics*. New York: Norton, 1974. Print.

<sup>23</sup> From Dronke’s *The Medieval Lyric*. New York: Harper & Row, 1969. 13–27, 63–70, 144–147.

<sup>24</sup> From Manning’s “Game and Earnest in the Middle English and Provençal Love Lyrics,” *Comparative Literature*, 18. 1966. 225–241.

<sup>25</sup> From Oliver’s *Poems Without Names: The English Lyric 1200–1500*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1970. 74–85.

<sup>26</sup> From Woolf’s *The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968. 67–85.

<sup>27</sup> Criticism includes A.K. Moore on “Sumer is icumen in,” Rosemary Woolf on “In a frith as I con fare fremede,” Edmund Reiss on “Now goth sonne under wod” and “Foweles in the frith,” D. W. Robertson, JR., E. T. Donaldson, John Speirs, and Peter Dronke on “Maiden in the mor lay,” Thomas Jemieliity, Stephen Manning, D. G. Halliburton, and Leo Spitzer on “I sing of a maiden.”

<sup>28</sup> Wilhelm, James J., ed. *Lyrics of the Middle Ages*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1990. Print.

translation due to the array of foreign languages involved, and only a selection of texts in the original are appended.

Robert D. Stevick's 1994 anthology, *One Hundred Middle English Lyrics*, was first published in 1964 as a "student's text," designed for "non-specialists."<sup>29</sup> Stevick states that his edition aims to foster the linguistic competency necessary for understanding the poems. The edition contains sections on general background,<sup>30</sup> the scope and purpose of the edition,<sup>31</sup> a survey of criticism,<sup>32</sup> discussion of the language of the text,<sup>33</sup> and features of form and style.<sup>34</sup> The edition regularizes the spelling of the lyrics by using a central dialect. Stevick explains, "[The lyrics] are normalized as fully as possible to the emerging literary dialect of the London-East Midland region from about 1400" (xv). His edition seeks to represent the broad tradition of Middle English lyrics from the twelfth to fifteenth centuries. Stevick tries to show the range of forms, themes, subjects, methods, and qualities of the poems. They are arranged in rough chronological order on the assumption that thematic categorization makes for a biased reading experience. As a result, there are no descriptive or classificatory comments or appreciative remarks. Stevick purposely withholds interpretations and does not provide titles for the lyrics.

Other foundational anthologies include: G. L. Brook's *The Harley Lyrics: The Middle English Lyrics of MS. Harley 2253*; Carlton Brown's *Religious Lyrics of the XIV<sup>th</sup> Century*, *Religious Lyrics of the XV<sup>th</sup> Century*, and *English Lyrics of the XIII<sup>th</sup> Century*; R. L. Greene's *The*

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<sup>29</sup> Stevick, *One Hundred*, xviii.

<sup>30</sup> Stevick, *One Hundred*, x-xii.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii-xvii.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, xviii-xxxiii.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxiv-xlv.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, xlv-li.

*Early English Carols*; Douglas Gray's *A Selection of Religious Lyrics*; Rossell Hope Robbins' *Secular Lyrics of the XIV<sup>th</sup> and XV<sup>th</sup> Centuries*; and Rosemary Woolf's *The English Religious Lyrics in the Middle Ages*.

#### DATING

The dating of Middle English lyrics is generally considered to be problematic. Most editions point out the inherent difficulty associated with dating and attribute it to the fragmentary nature of the lyrics themselves. Duncan says, "The dating of manuscript sources can be no better than approximate and, moreover, by how long a lyric may have pre-dated its surviving copy is often far from certain."<sup>35</sup>

That said, four of the earliest lyrics are attributed to one St. Godric (c. 1065–1170), whose poems are of a religious nature.<sup>36</sup> G. L. Brook attributes their preservation, however, to the role of monasteries, rather than a reflection of contemporary taste. Davies refers to St. Godric as probably the first English lyricist, but points out that "several scraps of evidence suggest that there existed a range of popular poetry now almost entirely lost" (30). This range ostensibly covered the twelfth through fourteenth centuries, illustrating how the surviving lyrics represent only a small fraction of the entire body of work. Davies attributes this loss to the fact that lyrics were rarely written down, and he admits that explanations for this lack of record are varied.<sup>37</sup> If a minstrel had ownership over a lyric, he probably would not have wanted it falling into competitive hands. In addition, the more popular the song, the less likely it would need to be

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<sup>35</sup> Duncan, *Companion*, xix.

<sup>36</sup> For examples of Godric's lyrics, see Davies, *Medieval English Lyrics*, 51, and Dronke, *The Medieval Lyric*, 63.

<sup>37</sup> Davies, *Medieval English Lyrics*, 32.

written down. Lyrics were part of an oral tradition, and parchment and wax tablets were both expensive and impermanent. Furthermore, clerical scribes probably did not concern themselves with recording secular forms of entertainment, which might explain the dominance of religion in the surviving lyrics. However, the theory of orality itself in explaining the preservation of the lyrics is also inherently problematic, as it cannot be proven one way or another. One can claim lyrics were not written down because they were an oral tradition, but one can just as easily claim otherwise because no recorded explanation exists.

Religious lyrics, including the bulk of Marian poems, are characteristically dated from the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries, although religious references can be found through the sixteenth century. Davies notes that between the Norman Conquest and Chaucer, very few secular lyrics were recorded. The Harley manuscript, dated early fourteenth century, is extraordinary in this light. The lack of secular lyrics dating pre-Chaucer is possibly due to a lack of English interest in the refined love of French poetry. In addition, the fact that English was then not a court language — Latin and French dominated until the 1370s — probably prevented them from being written down. Only twenty of Chaucer's lyrics survive today.

Thomas G. Duncan, in his 2005 *A Companion to the Middle English Lyric*, emphasizes the uncertainty of lyric chronology and how dated manuscripts should be considered approximate at best. Further, he points out that the length of time a lyric may predate its surviving manuscript is impossible to pinpoint. Duncan warns, "As far as the early Middle English lyric is concerned, these considerations should make us wary of the discussions of the 'origins' and 'development' of genres to which literary historians are so greatly addicted" (*xix*).

In short, the dating of Middle English lyrics is a thorny endeavor, to the point where the process itself is a major area of analysis. A lack of authorial context and the heterogenous nature of medieval manuscripts contribute to a nebulous corpus full of holes, and subsequently, wonder and curiosity. The consensus, then, is to simply be conscious of the fragmentary nature of Middle English lyrics and the subsequent challenges it presents.

#### PURPOSE & AUDIENCE

Despite today's emphasis on textual analysis, lyrics are often studied for their aural characteristics. They feature many poetic devices, including refrains, musical effects, and rhyme. These devices are thought to have encouraged audience participation, as well as to make remembering the lyrics much easier.

Still, the fragmentary state of many lyrics prevents us from accurately determining their purpose. According to Davies, approximately two-hundred poems survive with music intact, half of which are polyphonic carols.<sup>38</sup> Davies cautions that the scarcity of evidence should make us wary of labeling lyrics as strictly literary or musical. He maintains, "the full extent to which medieval lyrics were 'literary' poems, rather than songs to be sung, cannot, in most cases, be readily determined" (27). Comparing lyrics with music and those without reveals few dissimilarities. Davies continues, "If anything, musical rhythm was probably determined by the rhythm of the words and it is not, therefore, possible to use such music as there is to discover how these poems were meant to sound" (28). Prosody in medieval poetry, Davies maintains, is as such inherently difficult, although the rhythm often presents itself.

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<sup>38</sup> Davies, *Medieval English Lyrics*, 27.



The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “lyric” as follows:

Of or pertaining to the lyre; adapted to the lyre, meant to be sung; pertaining to or characteristic of song. Now used as the name for short poems (whether or not intended to be sung), usually divided into stanzas or strophes, and directly expressing the poet's own thoughts and sentiments. Hence, applied to the poet who composes such poems.<sup>39</sup>

The first usage of “lyric” as a poetic form was by Sir Philip Sidney circa 1586 in his *A Defense of Poetry*,<sup>40</sup> wherein he refers to “the Earle of Surries *Liricks*.” The term was first used as an adjective by George Puttenham in *The arte of English poesie*, dated 1589, referring to “Lirique poets.” Rosemary Woolf observes that “lyric” is often interpreted as a song or poem that is “short, delightful, and melodious, and with a sweetness and light-heartedness that distinguish it from more serious and reflective poems,” particularly in some of the secular lyrics. Woolf describes the religious lyrics quite differently: “Many of these are long, few were set to music, and all of them are devotionally and didactically serious” (qtd. in D’Arcy 307).

Duncan maintains that “the major problem of modality stems from the term ‘lyric’ itself.”<sup>41</sup> He emphasizes that modern readers must set aside the nineteenth-century notion of “the expression of the poet of his own feelings.”<sup>42</sup> The Middle English lyrics are indeed often about love, but this and other emotions take place in the public — as opposed to private — sphere. The

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<sup>39</sup> “lyric, adj. and n.” OED Online. March 2012. Oxford University Press. 3 April 2012 <<http://0-www.oed.com.www.consuls.org/view/Entry/111676?rskey=Ii52Bs&result=1>>.

<sup>40</sup> See ed. R. W. Maslen’s edition, now in its third edition by Manchester University Press, 2002.

<sup>41</sup> Duncan, *Companion*, xxi.

<sup>42</sup> See the *OED* for John Ruskin’s 1873 usage in *Fors Clavegira: letters to the workmen and labourers of Great Britain*. III. xxxiv. 6.

tone of many religious lyrics is in fact one not of personal individuality, but rather of the voice of the Everyman, which allows the reader to identify with the speaker. As a result, we are presented with poems that are less intimate and private and more in the realm of thematic conventions, such as courtly love. Duncan points out, “What is obvious is the relish with which many Middle English love poets... made play with a range of literary conventions as they exercised their skill in versification.”<sup>43</sup> For example, the *reverdrie* motif is found throughout the lyrics and emphasizes the coming of spring. “Foweles in the frith” is one example, opening with the lines “Foweles in the frith, / The fisses in the flod.”<sup>44</sup> These lines are a conventional expression of *reverdrie*, but they contrast with the third line, “And I mon waxe wod.” The disconnect between the frolicking birds and fish and the narrator who feels he must go mad illustrates the willingness of Middle English lyric poets to upend generic conventions.

One must also be wary of the definition of lyric as meaning “a song.” Stevick distinguishes the Middle English lyric as separate from the Elizabethan connotation of poetry intended to be sung and the modern connotation of the lyric as a display of intense personal emotion.<sup>45</sup> However, Duncan finds this musical definition to be much more instructive. For the ancient Greeks, “lyric” meant a piece intended for the lyre, and the stanzaic form actually originated in song. Compare the A-A-B structure of a song: two repetitions of one melody followed by one instance of the second melody. This structure corresponds to the rhyme scheme of some lyrics, such as “With longing I am lad,” which goes A-A-B / A-A-B / B-A-A-B.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Duncan, *Companion*, xxi.

<sup>44</sup> Davies, *Medieval English Lyrics*, 52.

<sup>45</sup> Stevick, *One*, x.

<sup>46</sup> Duncan, *Companion*, xiii.

Some Middle English lyrics survive with music intact, including the famous “Sumer is icumen in.”<sup>47</sup> Duncan points out, “Since copies of such lyrics sometimes survive without music, other lyrics lacking music may also have been songs. Thus the absence of music in the Harley manuscript does not preclude this possibility for some of its lyrics.” As a result, a distinction exists between “song lyrics” and “literary lyrics.” Lyrics without music may still be laudable for their melodious language, while song lyrics may present literary devices like alliteration, metaphor, and rhyme.

The lyrics themselves were meant for a diverse audience, ranging from lowly commoners to the more learned upper class. Religious lyrics, often based on biblical events or serving as tributes to Mary, were meant to arouse a response in an equally religious audience.

Peter Dronke provides a comprehensive look at the Middle English lyric tradition in “Performers and Performance,” found in his 1968 volume, *The Medieval Lyric*.<sup>48</sup> Middle English lyrics originated in the Roman and Germanic musical traditions. Roman songs were often serious and written in praise of heroes, gods, ceremonies, and religion. The Greek Citharode, a performer of the highest art who appeared self-accompanied on a lute or flute, was at the center of the Roman music scene and helped music influence all aspects of Roman culture.

With the onset of Christianity, the Roman tradition continued, but the ceremonial and sacred context of songs were converted to Christian iterations. Songs were performed in halls, fairgrounds, and markets, but were not without detractors. Moralists, for example, hated players,

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<sup>47</sup> Davies, *Medieval English Lyrics*, 52.

<sup>48</sup> See especially Dronke, *The Medieval Lyric*, 13–31.

but could not eliminate them due to their popularity. Thomas Aquinas was the first theologian not to deem the profession sinful.<sup>49</sup>

At the same time, the Germanic people had their own musical tradition, at the center of which stood the *scop*, featured in the Anglo-Saxon poem *Widsith*, as well as in *Beowulf* and a variety of Old English poetry. According to Dronke, the *scop*'s power was considered divine and akin to the primordial poet (17). Nowhere is this more true than in the person of Cædmon, who was divinely inspired to sing about Creation.<sup>50</sup> Dronke points out, "His role is the most poignant on earth and the most glamorous; he is the loneliest of men and the most sought after; he is both the servant and the uncrowned legislator of mankind" (17). The greatest *scop* was well-travelled — often in search of new employment opportunities — and enjoyed a special social status. Many composers were also performers, educated, and fairly well-off in society. The acquisition of property was the *scop*'s biggest goal. These Roman and Germanic traditions acted as the foundation for the Middle English lyric.

According to Dronke, the medieval song has three principle functions: formal commemoration, entertainment, and cult.<sup>51</sup> Celebration required music, and the *scop*, being a musician, would make the celebration possible. The material used for entertainment included ancient stories, tales of love, biblical episodes, and themes from Arthurian Romance. These could take many forms, ranging from fabliaux and satire to ballads and drinking songs. The religious lyric has a complex history, and the Crucifixion and worship of Mary were dominant topics in thirteenth-century England. Between the Norman Conquest and Chaucer, few popular or

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<sup>49</sup> See Dronke, *The Medieval Lyric*, 16.

<sup>50</sup> See the Old English poem *Cædmon's Hymn*

<sup>51</sup> Dronke, *The Medieval Lyric*, 24.

sophisticated secular lyrics existed. Davies states that all secular lyrics are unique because of their narrower circulation.

Along with these functions, the Middle English lyric served as accompaniment for dancing, including secular and religious festivities. Dronke points out that the widespread condemnation of these dance-songs by members of the church illustrates their popularity. He adds, “For the times and places from which no denunciation survives we may assume that the religious dance-songs were favoured or at least condoned—not that they did not exist” (186). Dronke asserts that the carol and rondeau were likely two of the most popular dance forms due to their melodic qualities.

Overall, the purposes and audiences of the lyrics seem as diverse as the poems themselves. The content ranges from the solemnly religious, to the commemorative, to the dark and dreary, to the young and in love. In turn, the lyrics appear as though they were intended for a similarly eclectic range of individuals and occasions.

## TYPES OF LYRICS

### Religious Lyrics

In the broadest of terms, Middle English lyrics may be classified as either religious or secular. Religious themes dominated the lyric form from 1100–1250, and they were frequently didactic. G. L. Brook explains, “The most important influences on Middle English religious lyrics were the Bible, patristic writings, and the liturgy” (14). Religious lyrics are further categorized into Mariological, Christological, and moral-didactic varieties.

### *Mariological Lyrics*

The Mariological lyric is exemplified by “I sing of a maiden,” a poem Anne Marie D’Arcy calls “the finest of all English religious lyrics” (307). This poem reinforces many aspects of fifteenth-century Christian doctrine. It features a simple structure that emphasizes what D’Arcy calls “metrical austerity” and “doctrinal polyvalence” (307). The language is “theologically precise” and contains allegorical significance.

Mary’s presence in Middle English lyrics feels ubiquitous, indicating her importance as a source of divine inspiration and protection. “A hymn to Mary” evidences this role directly, while other lyrics, such as “An adult lullaby,” allude to it by contrasting Mary with Eve.

### *Christological Lyrics*

D’Arcy cites the thirteenth-century liturgist William Durandus for his description of the three modes of depicting Christ: “As an infant on His mother’s lap, as the suffering man on the Cross, and as the enthroned *Maiestas Domini* or Lord in Majesty, returning in glory to judge the quick and the dead” (310). The first and second modes are found most often in English religious lyrics, as they emphasize Christ’s humanity. D’Arcy continues, “The Passion is the fulcrum of popular medieval piety, and is the subject of a vast number of lyrics, particularly during the later Middle Ages” (310). The symbol of the crucified Christ was deeply affective for a medieval audience. Images of Christ suffering permeate many lyrics, such as the fourteenth-century poem *Whanne ic se on Rode*, which visualizes a punctured and bleeding savior as if it were happening before the audience’s eyes. Such content encouraged listeners to feel Christ’s pain, as if they were observing the Crucifixion, albeit from a respectful distance. Such lyrics emphasized a sense

of intimacy and personal knowledge of Christ's love, which reinforced the belief that a love of God was equated with a knowledge of God.

### *Moral-Didactic Lyrics*

These lyrics focused on the idea of a moral life as preparation for death's inevitability. Given death's universality, it stood as both a Christian and non-Christian topic in Middle English literature. Recourse to the *ubi sunt* motif, which asks, "Where are those who were before us?" demonstrates authors' emphasis on life's transitory nature.

### Secular Lyrics

After the period of religious record (1100–1250), the following century saw the influence of sin on literature, during which religious and secular content began to coexist from 1250–1350. Shortly after, English began to reemerge as a literary language, principally due to the efforts of Chaucer, as well as the Gawain poet, William Langland, John Gower, and Sir Thomas Malory.

Secular lyrics focused principally on themes of nature and love, such as the love song, *pastourelle*, and *reverdies* forms we find in the Harley manuscript. These poems often open with the idea of *lenten*, or "spring welcomed," which brings warmth and bliss. For example, the late thirteenth-century lyric, "Lenten is come with love to toune," opens with the lines, "With blosmen and with briddes rounne, / That all this blisse bringeth" (2–3). This imagery is augmented with sensory details, including the singing of nightingales and other fowl. Secular lyrics frequently feature a sense of sound, most often provided by birds. The language itself also emphasizes this aural quality through deliberate diction, such as "singeth," "springeth," and

“ringeth,” all of which are found in “Lenten is come with love to toune.” The poem goes on to reference floral images and the courtship of animals, including the rose and lily, which are conventional symbols emphasizing the beauty of nature, foliage, and earthly love.

Paradoxically, references to nature are not limited to secular poems, and the line between the secular and the religious is often blurred and ambiguous within the scope of Middle English lyrics. The white lily, for example, is often equated to Mary’s virginity and fertility, as demonstrated in “I sing of a maiden.” This lyric makes heavy use of natural imagery, including dew, grass, and flowers, to symbolize the Incarnation.

The first stanza of “I sing of a maiden” celebrates Mary’s virginity and the concept of *aeiparthenos*, or “Ever Virgin.” She is described as “Makeles” in the second line, which translates to “matchless.” Anne Marie D’Arcy explains, “Mary remains *sola in sexu femina*, or alone of all her sex... she is without a *mak* or ‘mate’ and she is *sine macula*, ‘without stain’, which reaffirms her unspotted sinlessness... but also may suggest her Immaculate Conception.”<sup>52</sup> Additionally, the first stanza demonstrates her consent and cooperation with the Incarnation of Christ with the line, “King of alle kinges / To here sone she ches,” or “King of all kings / She chose for her son” (3–4).

The three middle stanzas depict the process of the Incarnation. The still atmosphere and silent, invisible, falling dew symbolize Christ’s conception. Here, the grassy meadow represents the virgin’s womb, and lilies, branches, and sprigs are likened to Mary herself. The dew falling onto the grass and flowers alludes to Mary’s impregnation with Christ. D’Arcy points out that the falling of dew is unobservable, much like conception, and that, “As the ‘holy root’ of salvation,

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<sup>52</sup> D’Arcy, “The Middle English Lyrics,” 308.



Mary made the Incarnation and therefore the Redemption possible” (309). In addition, the dew and April represent rejuvenation and new life, much like the *reverdie* motif found in other lyrics. Because the *reverdie* is often associated with courtly love, “I sing of a maiden” presents a tension between the sacred and the profane. D’Arcy explains, “the almost imperceptible advent of Christ is not only reminiscent of the covert lover of courtly literature, who steals up on the lady in her *bowr*... but also the emergent iconographic motif of the angelic herald ‘creeping silently’ into the Annunciate’s *thalamus*” (309).

As “I sing of a maiden” shows, the use of secular language and imagery to describe religious topics is surprisingly prevalent in the lyrics. As a result, many poems can be read from both religious and secular points of view. This potential illustrates the fact that, despite its tendency to be labeled strictly as one or the other, a lyric often shows the capacity for different types of readings. As with all poetry, the concision of the language belies the depth found within each lyric.

## MAJOR THEMES

### Courtly Love

The subject of courtly love is ubiquitous in Middle English literature and finds frequent expression in the lyrics. Women are fair, flawless, and unattainable; men agonize and waste away in the name of love. Indeed, the conventions of courtly love are easily found, but the lyrics are not without outliers that present unique or unusual characteristics. “A cleric courts his lady,” for example, is an argumentative poem featuring two distinct voices, one for the male courtly lover, and the other for the lady, a voice that typically goes unheard. While the male courtly lover plays

his conventional role, the woman at first puts up a strong resistance to his pleading. As the poem progresses, the unique nature of their relationship becomes clear, and ultimately ends in a bittersweet resolution.

“Fairest between Lincoln and Lindsey” features many of the same courtly love elements, but features only the male speaker and lacks the former poem’s definitive resolution. Rather, it emphasizes artistry through the relationship between the speaker and the nightingale. The male is characteristically broken as in “A cleric courts his lady,” but rather than be consoled by his female companion, he unknowingly finds refuge in his symbiotic relationship with nature.

Still other poems, such as “Foweles in the frith” and “I must go walk the wood,” focus heavily on the male courtly lover’s love pangs to the point where the speaker loses his grip on reality. The male victims of courtly love are often driven to the woods in a sort of emotionally imposed exile. Despite their concision, these lyrics are capable of considerable ambiguity. Courtly love offers the most obvious reading, but there is also room for alternative explorations and analyses. Traditionally, the shorter a poem, the more difficult it is to parse, and the lyrics are no exception to this rule. Surprising is the amount of criticism that can be gleaned from the five short lines of “Foweles,” for example.

## Religion

Despite the ubiquity of courtly love in Middle English literature, religion is an even more prevalent theme in the lyrics. George Leslie Brook explains, “Whereas the Middle English secular lyric shows itself fitfully, the religious lyric flows in a steady stream” (14). Given that religious lyrics outnumber the secular poems, verse in praise of Christianity is common.

Mary's presence in particular is a driving force behind the production of religious lyrics, and "A hymn to Mary" is a prime example of poems dedicated to her spirit. Mary's divinity, purity, and grace take center stage, and even though these are virtues of the secular lover as well, she is frequently addressed directly by the speaker, who always seeks her spiritual guidance and protection. This relationship illustrates that, despite her majesty, Mary is nonetheless accessible to her followers, perhaps even more so than Christ. The lyrics addressing Mary appear to outnumber those directed at her son, and often a speaker will treat Mary as a liaison, asking her to put in a good word with Christ on his behalf.

Besides her accessibility, Mary's divine qualities are emphasized in other ways, including comparing her with Eve. Eve is mentioned in "An adult lullaby," as well as "A hymn to Mary." In the former poem, Eve is cited as the source of Adam's corruption, which contrasts with Mary's protective nature. In "A hymn to Mary," the comparison is much more explicit. Mary is referred to as a queen of paradise, which mirrors Eve's place as the would-be queen of Eden. The fact that Eden sees the fall of man affirms the opposition between the two women.

Despite the ease of a courtly love reading, "Foweles in the frith" also displays potential for religious connotations through biblical allusion. The speaker laments the fall of man, and his devastation stands as a microcosm for the state of humanity. He, like all humans, lives in a state of desperation and squalor. Further, the speaker's longing for "the best of bone and blood" may refer to Christ, and his pain reflects his empathy toward the crucifixion. The religious dimension to "Foweles" adds considerable depth to its five lines and illustrates the complexity and versatility of the lyrics.

## The Hardships of Life

Several lyrics concern themselves with the brutish nature of earthly existence, as well as a nostalgic longing for the past. Some of these poems bear obvious links to religious matters, but others are more obviously secular and focus on the realities of daily life on earth.

“Contempt of the world” is one such lyric, opening with a distinctive *ubi sunt* motif and featuring a disdain for the earthly life. The poem is not without some slight optimism, as it suggests hardship is worth enduring to be rewarded in the afterlife, provided one is equipped with the protection of Mary and Christianity. “Contempt of the world” stands as a Middle English version of *The Wanderer*. The poem is Anglo-Saxon in tone and subject matter, and — much like the speaker himself — it reflects a longing for the past, which exemplifies the continuity of Old English in the medieval period.

As with literature, one must consider the narrator’s reliability. Given that most speakers are male, the source of despair usually defaults to courtly love, as in “How long this night is.” This lyric features contrasting meteorological images and a speaker exhibiting the conventional symptoms of love pangs. “Foweles in the frith” and “I must go walk the wood” can also be read from a courtly love perspective, but all three show the capacity for additional explanations, including religious and moral dilemmas.

Perhaps more intriguing is the paradoxical lyric, “An adult lullaby.” Here, a mother sings her child to sleep, but the content of her song only reflects sorrow and harsh pessimism for her baby’s fate. Whether the lullaby is truly meant for the child’s ears or represents a mother’s inner confession is ambiguous, but the bleak tone remains constant.

## Nature

One would be hard-pressed to find more than a few lyrics that didn't include reference to nature. The *reverdie* motif remains strong and opens many poems, including "Fairest between Lincoln and Lindsey." Despite being a courtly love poem on its surface, this lyric holds an underlying meaning conveyed through the speaker's relationship to the nightingale. Avian symbolism is found throughout Middle English literature, and here man and bird are united in their artistry. Through this connection, the man finds companionship, if not solace.

More often, however, nature reflects a place of exile, usually embodied by the woods, as in "Foweles" and "I must go walk the wood." The wild, untamed nature of the woods reflects the speakers' inner turmoil. This parallel is particularly emphasized in "How long this night is," in which a violent storm accompanies the speaker's anguish.

Even religious lyrics refer to nature, as in "I sing of a maiden," which uses the imagery of dew falling on white lilies to represent Christ's conception. Floral imagery is also prevalent in the lyrics, and Mary is often referred to as the *rosa sine spina*, or "rose without thorns." White lilies are repeatedly used to symbolize her beauty and purity.

The role of nature in Middle English literature is diverse, yet consistently relevant to our understanding of the lyrics. It can act as a companion, adversary, or as a source inspiration for the speaker, and its prevalence reflects its importance.

Even in this small selection of lyrics, the diversity with which conventional Middle English topics are treated is visible. The flexibility, or what D'Arcy calls "elasticity," of the lyric form enables it to treat traditional themes in unique ways, which makes the lyrics both rich and entertaining. The lyrics range from the religious to the secular, and from the celebratory to the

miserable, but rarely are they without depth and purpose. Despite their difficulties, the lyrics have plenty to offer those willing to overcome their challenges. Truly, as this sample shows, the Middle English lyric is a world in the which the brave and persistent reader will discover many rewards.

#### CLOSE READINGS

##### “Foweles in the frith”

The late thirteenth-century lyric, “Foweles in the frith,” presents a case study in ambiguity. In just five lines, the poem presents the reader with natural imagery (1–2), inner turmoil (3–4), and biblical allusion (5), all of which contribute to a text indicative of the complex nature of Middle English poetry. Despite its compactness, “Foweles in the frith” can be read on a number of levels, each providing insight into medieval literary convention.

Notably, “Foweles” is a lyric in isolation. It lacks a known author and stands alone in its manuscript without any companion pieces. It is an orphan. Whether the poem is complete or fragmentary is also unknown. This lack of information leaves us with only the text itself, but fortunately, the twenty-five words we do have provide ample opportunity for analysis. For one, the text follows an ABBAB rhyme scheme and makes heavy use of alliteration. The first two lines complement one another by describing nature and the creatures residing in their usual habitats: “Foweles in the frith, / The fisses in the flod,” or “Birds in the wood / The fish in the sea” (1–2). In short, everything is as it should be. The poem’s opening depicts a sense of order, but this calm is quickly interrupted by the speaker, who interjects, “And I mon waxe wod” (“And I must go mad” 3). The speaker’s declaration seems bizarre and out of place because it disrupts

the natural harmony created by the first two lines. Despite a setting devoid of anything out of the ordinary, the speaker appears on the verge of madness. He lives in “mulch sorw,” but the source of this anguish is equally odd (4). The final line attributes his misery to the “best of bon and blod,” which seems paradoxical, if not nonsensical (5).

Scholarly readings of “Foweles in the frith” stem primarily from interpretations of the poem's three components: its opening about nature, the personal voice of the speaker, and the final line, “For best of bon and blod.” Depending on one's focus, the poem may be read on several levels. The first and simplest way is to understand it as a secular love narrative in which the speaker agonizes conventionally over a female courtly lover. Each of the poem's three components can be used to support this reading. The birds and the fish are part of the *reverdie* motif, the conventional springtime season in which the world teems with life and new love. In this world, the courtly male is inevitably miserable by contrast, awakened by the season of love but unable to win the object of his affection. As Thomas Moser points out, this situation is perfectly common in the world of medieval love poetry: “The unhappy poet goes walking in a spring landscape and discovers that the contentedness and order of the natural world only make him feel more miserable about the woman he loves but cannot have” (327). This is precisely what we seem to encounter here in “Foweles in the frith.”

This convention of the unhappy man in an otherwise harmonious setting is certainly echoed in other Middle English lyrics, including “Lenten is come with love to toune.” Considerably longer than “Foweles,” this poem offers images of spring and the blissful state of nature. There, we likewise find singing birds, lovely flowers, and animals frolicking with their mates. The speaker, however, feels differently. He says, “Moody meneth, as doth mo; / I wot I

am oon of tho, / For love that liketh ill” (“The moody man complains, as do more; / I know I am one of those / Who love likes ill” 22–24). While love is the source of nature's ebullient joy, the season only heralds in pain and sorrow for the courtly lover. He concludes, “If me shall wante wille of oon, / This wynne wele I will forgoon / And wyght in woode be fleeme” (“If I don't have what I want of one, / I will abandon all this happiness / And quickly be a fugitive in the woods” 34–36). That is, if he cannot find contentment, he will flee to the woods, much like the speaker in “Foweles” seems to have done. The female courtly lover enters the poem only in the final line. She is the “best of bon and blod.” Davies translates this verse as “the best creature living,” which is a conventional way for the male courtly lover to describe the object of his desire.

Paradoxically, she is both flawless and the source of his anguish. Literally, the final line translates as “the best of bone and blood,” or “the beast of bone and blood.” In the former case, eliminating Davies' use of “creature” humanizes the subject and makes interpreting the source of the speaker's affliction as a beautiful woman easier. On the other hand, to refer to a woman as the “best of bone and blood” was not uncommon in Middle English lyric poetry. “The Fair Maid of Ribblesdale,” for example, reads, “Founde were the feirist on / That ever wes mad of blod and bon / In boure best with bolde” (“Found were the fairest one / That ever was made of blood and bone / [In boure best with bolde]” 4–6). As a result, “Foweles” offers plenty of evidence for a courtly love interpretation. Indeed, such a reading has the advantage of coinciding with the conventional pangs of courtly love poetry, which put the man in physical and emotional distress because he suffers at his lover's whim.

Other readings of “Foweles” focus on religion, especially biblical allusions to Christ. From this perspective, the speaker's sorrow is the result not of a woman, but his lamentation on



the fallen state of man. The birds and fish may live in harmony, but the speaker's inner turmoil reflects the general state of humanity after the fall. He is no longer in tune with nature in the way that Adam and Eve once were. On the contrary, his mental state is diametrically opposed to the positive feelings the environment elicits. Man has fallen out of favor with nature, and so in part he resents it. In this light, the ambiguity of the word "best" or "beast" in the last line provides further possibilities. If the speaker walks with sorrow because of the beast of bone and blood, he may be lamenting humanity's lost lordship over the beasts of nature. On the other hand, "beast" may also refer to mankind's regression to a more primitive state, below the elevated condition originally awarded by God. The speaker's pain is therefore symbolic of man's banishment from Eden and his subsequent loss of identity represented by the "lost in the woods" imagery of "Foweles in the frith." To this end, Moser concludes, "seen thus, the poem stands either as a generalized lament for humanity's fall from paradise and its rightful place in God's order or as a more specific contemplation of humanity's unworthiness" (329).

Another religious interpretation of the poem leads to a more didactic reading by invoking a sense of a loss for Christ. In this case, the "best of bone and blood" stands for the Son of God and the opening focus on spring alludes to Easter, the time when Christians celebrate the Resurrection. The speaker's sorrow may therefore be attributed to feelings of loss over the death of Jesus. "He feels Christ's pain inwardly," writes Moser, "and in doing so, comes to experience Christ's sacrifice more immediately, to witness the son of God and of man brought low, lacking even that minimum owed the animals" (331). The speaker's pain therefore stems from guilt over the crucifixion and the savagery of the act, which violates dramatically the natural life and death of mortal beings, including animals. This religious dimension to "Foweles in the frith" deepens

the interpretative scope of the poem. “Foweles” is the only thirteenth-century lyric to arrive in the present day with musical accompaniment, and modern performances reflect the sorrowful tone we might associate with the death of Jesus. Otherwise, the woeful tune allied to the courtly lover is perhaps self-indulgent by contrast.

Ultimately, the brevity of “Foweles in the frith” belies its depth and complexity. Despite its length, the poem offers several possible readings, each with valid evidence. Secular lyric or religious allegory, the interpretation of the poem remains illusive and as paradoxical as the poem itself. Modern readers are left only with the certainty of the poem’s ambiguity.

#### “How long this night is”

The early thirteenth-century lyric, “How long this night is,” is in several ways similar to “Foweles in the frith.” Both poems are brief and open with lines about nature, and each features a deeply troubled speaker. Like “Foweles,” “How long this night is” contains a sharp shift in mood and tone, and while it may not be as paradoxical as the other poem, it still requires considerable parsing to be understood fully.

The poem opens with the words, “Mirie it is, while sumer ilast” (1). The tone of the lines is optimistic, but only because of the emphatic place of “mirie” and the summer setting. Still, “Sumer is icumen in” is not much longer, and no less vibrant for its brevity. It too emphasizes the mirth of spring and the attendant sense of vitality that accompanies the wildlife there. Like “Sumer,” the birds here sing out their sound, “With fugheles song,” and the singing contributes to the poem's sensory appeal, which, combined with the weather, creates a feeling of warmth and liveliness.

The first two lines also create a sense of ease and wistfulness through alliteration. The repetition of the “s” in “Mirie it is, while sumer ilast, / With fugheles song” has a sighing quality, like a summer breeze itself, and this contributes to a pleasant, peaceful feeling. These soft, soothing sounds reflect the summer season, so that the poem's form reflects the content. It is an audible reminder of this genre's oral heritage and musical quality of Middle English lyrics.

All of this natural imagery is conventional in the lyric, and yet the tone of jubilation is undermined in the third and fourth lines: “Oc nu necheth windes blast, / And weder strong” (3–4). A feeling of dread, violence, and misfortune now looms with an approaching storm. Because of how sudden the transition feels, the word “ilast” in the first line is retroactively emphasized. While it was a beautiful summer's day not long ago, that season was fleeting and is now just a memory. This departure recalls the conventional attitude in Middle English poetry about the transience of life and love: fortunes can change in an instant.

Notably, the poem's tone shifts to reflect the threatening weather. In place of the soothing, alliterative sounds of the first two lines, the description of the storm brings harsher consonants, particularly in the hard “c” and “t.” These letters force the reader to speak the lines with greater intensity, and they sound rougher, more brutish than those found in the earlier scene.

Only in the fifth line do we become aware of the speaker's presence during these meteorological phenomena. He interjects with, “Ey! ey! what this night is long!” (5). To claim the night is long when the storm has only just arrived seems strange, yet the speaker's words suggest perhaps that the warm summer day was only a figment of his imagination. To rationalize the sudden shift from sunny day to powerful storm, we may infer that, while summer is indeed a pleasant time, this man has not experienced it as of late. For him, summer exists only in his

mind. In that case, the first two lines are more nostalgic, a longing for the warmer, happier days of the past. The speaker uses the word “nu,” meaning “now,” to emphasize the severity of his current situation. He remembers summer fondly, but now, matters are much worse. Given the conventions of *reverdie* verse, we may assume that love also looms on the horizon, perhaps the very source of this storm.

The speaker gives some explanation as to why he sits in such a dark and violent state in the penultimate line, but this answer is vague. He says, “And ich, with well michel wrong” (6). We do not know what his wrongdoing is, nor can we be sure whether the storm is a direct result of his actions. Literally, that is absurd, but literature accounts for the potential pathetic fallacy. The speaker's “great wrong” is likely owing to some dreadful sin. Perhaps this is a man apart from God's grace, and therefore more susceptible to the storms of sin. The suggestion that the darkness is without end alludes to Hell, which is only augmented by the man's grief, mourning, and fasting, described in the last line. Perhaps the lyric serves as a warning to those who abandon God or lose their way. It suggests that a man of greater faith may not have lost summer's warmth.

The man's activities during the storm, which he describes as “Soregh and murne and fast,” only partially reveal the true extent of his wrongdoing (7). Grieving and mourning are usually associated with death, loss of faith, etc., and the act of fasting is similarly conventional. Being unable to eat is characteristic of the male courtly lover, but little else in the lyric seems to suggest a courtly love poem. On the other hand, Christians fast out of devotion to God. Fasting also has a voluntary connotation to it. If the man described himself as “starving,” we might be more likely to think he is being punished by a separate entity. As a result, the man's pain appears

to be self-inflicted, and thus the storm is probably a direct result of his actions. It is the speaker's sins that have brought this darkness upon him.

The key to the lyric is the correlation between the speaker's personal plight and the meteorological events surrounding him. The poem presents two movements: the natural transition of the weather and the personal transition of the speaker. Just as the calm exists before the storm, the man was likely content before committing his great wrong. The weather's shift from pleasantness to violence reflects the speaker's shift from a respectable man to what we presume to be a regretful murderer. The poem is laden with natural imagery, but remains devoid of explicit religious content, which makes it seem secular. Like the religious readings of "Foweles in the frith," however, it seems reasonable to attribute the speaker's misery to a moral or spiritual dilemma. Once again, despite its brevity and compact form, the Middle English lyric displays its capacity for ambiguity. While we can attempt to use the information at hand to determine what troubles the speaker, the poem's true meaning remains illusive and enigmatic.

#### "I must go walk the wood"

Written around 1500, "I must go walk the wood" revisits the troubled soul seen in lyrics like "Foweles in the frith" and "How long this night is." The poem is written in four stanzas, each containing five lines and a ABBAC rhyme scheme. Notably, the last line in every stanza is nearly identical and contains some variation of "And all for one." Otherwise, the poem maintains an air of ambiguity similar to "Foweles" and only in the last stanza do we gain clear insight into what troubles the speaker.

The lyric opens with the speaker's declaration, "I must go walke the woed so wild / And wander here and there / In dred and dedly fere" (1–3). The fact that he "must" go suggests this is not an act of free will. Already we may think the lyric conventional, since protagonist lovers are forever enthralled by the will of courtly women. Like those many men, the speaker's choice of words suggests that he too is in love's exile. He must go walk the wood because of some wrong he has committed, although whether that wrong is an act of love — thus making his suffering hyperbolic — or something more sinister is unclear. The fact that he will be wandering suggests that he has no goal or intent in mind, as one might have during an evening stroll.

The third line casts a shadow over the lackadaisical tone set in the first two lines. Suddenly a seemingly aimless walk in the woods is beset by "dread and deadly fear." This sharp shift in tone is common in many lyrics, including "Foweles," which opens with a description of nature before introducing the speaker, who "must go mad." In both poems, the speaker is being forced into a negative situation. They each "must" enter the woods, where they will exist in a state of madness, deadly fear, or some other mental prison, all of which are side effects of courtly love. This consistency portrays the woods as a place of exile and torment. Despite nature itself displaying a sense of order, the speaker is forced to endure his punishment there, and his mental disorder contrasts with his environment and augments his suffering.

The speaker reveals a bit more of himself by explaining, "For where I trusted I am begild, / And all for one" (4–5). The word "beguiled," meaning to be influenced or misled by trickery or flattery, suggests we have a textbook case of love pangs on our hands. To be emotionally devastated as a result of his interactions with a woman is a foundation of the male courtly lover's

character. In addition, his entire situation appears to be the consequence of one singular event. The source remains to be seen, but we can infer that a woman is behind his suffering.

In the second stanza, the speaker continues to elaborate on what happened, albeit while remaining ambiguous. He says, “Thus am I banished from my blis / By craft and false pretens” (6–7). Whatever the previous event was, it has robbed him of his happiness and his ability to experience joy. “Craft and false pretens” bear similarities to the word “begild” in the first stanza. The speaker clearly has become a victim of some kind of trickery or manipulation, which makes the suspect of a female courtly lover all the more plausible. The next line reinforces the idea of the speaker as a victim, as he claims he is “Fautless, without offens” (8). His story is appropriate for a male courtly lover, as they often spend many lines lamenting over how they have done nothing to warrant the female's harsh rejection. He believes his situation is hopeless, claiming, “As of return no certen is, / And all for fer of one” (9–10). These lines shed more light on the situation and the speaker's current mental state. In the first stanza, the man is exiled to the woods because of some event, which we presume to be his interactions with a woman. It is possible that this exile is self-inflicted, but even more certain is the fact that he won't be returning out of fear of his assailant in the first stanza. Thus, regardless of whether he walks the wood with or against his own free will, he has decided to remain there of his own volition.

The speaker certainly seems to have everything planned out for his wilderness vacation. He says his “bed shall be under the grenwod tree, / A suft of brakes under my hed, / As one from joye were fled” (11–13). The man appears to describe himself as a person fleeing from joy. That is, he likely is referring to his forcible removal from his past life when he was privileged to live in a house and sleep in a bed. That existence was presumably preferable to his current situation,

but because of the woman, he must flee to the woods. The notion of “fleeing from joy” could also suggest fleeing from the woman herself, as she likely gave him much happiness before he acted upon his feelings. Thus the female courtly lover personifies joy, an emotion that has become a source of fear for the speaker.

The speaker concludes the stanza with “Thus from my lif day by day I flee, / And all for one” (14–15). Davies translates the word “lif” as “beloved” or “source of my life,” which validates the theory that this is a case of courtly love gone wrong. The man is not only running from his past life, but he is also running from his beloved woman. If she truly is the “source of his life,” then losing her would explain why he must go walk the woods. The repetition of the word “flee” reinforces the notion that the man is trying to escape from something or someone, and the refrain “And all for one” could easily be replaced with “And all because of a woman.”

The final stanza continues to emphasize the severity of the speaker's exile. He claims, “The ronning stremes shall be my drinke, / Acorns shall be my fode” (16–17). At least the speaker has an appetite, which is unconventional for the male courtly lover. This might suggest we are meeting the speaker when he has truly given up hope. Perhaps the woman was so steadfast in her rejection that he no longer experiences love pangs and now exists in a sort of emotionally lobotomized state, subsisting on a diet of acorns.

The speaker concludes his lyric with the following lines: “Nothing may do me good, / But when of your bewty I do think / And all for love of one” (18–20). He affirms the hopelessness of his situation, but also suggests that his thoughts of the woman bring him comfort. To say that remembering the cause of his misery does him good sounds paradoxical, but perhaps the memory of her brings him all of the joy — but none of the pain — of her physical presence.



Thus, his exile may not be so bad after all in that, despite being exiled from society, he is able to live free of her harsh rejection, but with his memories of her beauty intact.

Ultimately, this lyric presents nature as a realm of emotional transition for the speaker. The conventions of courtly love happen in everyday society, but when the man is defeated by the object of his affections, he has no choice but to enter the woods. Remaining a member of society would pose an unhealthy risk for him, as the likelihood of encountering the woman again is high, and doing so would only further destroy his morale. By accepting defeat and retreating to the woods, the man is safe from the woman and can enjoy his few fond memories of her in solitude. Thus, "I must go walk the wood" suggests that the only plausible cure for the male courtly lover's pangs is an out of sight, out of mind approach. The poem features a degree of ambiguity, but the only real mystery here is for the narrator himself, who cannot understand why he is being drawn to the wood. We can, however. He is being forcibly pulled into the world of courtly love. The wood, with all its mystery, is where love happens. He must go walk the wood because he is sick with the pangs of courtly love. While they may fade with time, he will never escape his memories of her.

#### "A cleric courts his lady"

In the world of Middle English, courtly love is ever at the fore. This focus is especially demonstrated in the late thirteenth-century lyric, "A cleric courts his lady." This poem presents a feisty rant between two courtly lovers using a conversational format, but ultimately ends in the lady acquiescing to her pursuer. In this way, the plot is largely conventional but also features a unique response to the usual themes.

The poem stands out at once for its two speakers, a man and woman who take alternating stanzas to frame their opposing points of view. The young man's opening statement is conventionally overdramatic. He cries, "My deth I love, my lif ich hate, / For a levedy shene" (1–2). These lines epitomize the plight of the male courtly lover, who lies in such agony over his woman that he would prefer — and actually looks forward to — death instead of life. One thinks of the plight of Palamon and Arcite in "The Knight's Tale." When Arcite is exiled, he is tormented by the fact that he can no longer lay eyes on Emeyle:

His sleep, his mete, his drink is him biraft,  
That lene he wex and drye as is a shaft.  
His eyen holwe, and grisly to biholde;  
His hewe falow and pale as asshen colde;  
And solitarie he was and evere allone,  
And waillinge al the night, makinge his mone. (1361–1366)

Arcite is actually jealous of Palomon who, because he remains imprisoned, still gets to view Emeyle from his cell window.

Such love pangs are echoed by the lyric's cleric, and he describes her in equally exaggerative terms: "He is bright so dayes light / That is on me well sene" (3–4). That is, "She is radiant as the daylight, which my present state makes clear" (Davies). He is so moved by her beauty that only cosmic imagery can express his feelings. Ironically, her radiance is the cause of his misery, but it also acts as the source of light that reveals his pain. He exists in a world of darkness without her. He claims, "All I falewe so doth the lef / In somer when it is grene," which alludes to the inevitable failure of this pursuit (5–6). Just as the leaves wither and die as

summer wanes, so does the speaker's hope and will to live. Thinking is of no help to him, as being alone with his thoughts only compounds his anguish (7).

Pain persists in the second stanza, where sorrow and melancholy afflict the lover so severely he says, "I wene to walke wod, / Yef it me lengore laste" (11–12). That he goes mad over this woman is typical of the male courtly lover's pangs; his feelings run so deep that they cause him physical agony so long as he lacks the object of his affections. Naturally, the woman may cure him of his woes "with a word," but she refuses (13). The man laments aloud, "Whet helpeth thee, my swete lemman, / My lif thus for to gaste?" (15–16). The use of "lemman" as a term of endearment here is ironic, and the man desperately asks what the woman could possibly gain from putting him through this torture.

In a rather novel turn of events, the woman here responds to her lover and gives her own point of view in the third stanza. Sadly (for the man), she will offer no mercy. She calls him a fool and claims, "Shalt thou never live that day / My love that thou shalt bide!" (19–20). Her steadfast refusal is admirable, but, as we shall see, only temporary. She admonishes, "Thee is bettere on fote gon / Then wicked hors to ride" (23–24). Davies translates these lines to mean, "better safe than sorry," or literally, "better to walk than to ride a bad horse." The tone of her advice is ambiguous, however. Her sharp tongue suggests a warning, and genuine concern for his well-being at this point seems unlikely. Her reference to herself as a bad horse is also puzzling. Perhaps she has seen previous courtly lovers fall under her rebuffs and bears just enough affection to make her want to turn him away. But is it not already too late? The cleric is already suffering. He cries, "Weylawey! Why seist thou so! / Thou rewte on me, thy man" (25–26). He asks for pity, but perhaps her self-awareness and subsequent warning is the best she can offer

him. The man offers his own warning when he says, ““Yef I deye for thy love / It is thee mikel sham!”” (29–30). To suggest that allowing him to die for her love would reflect poorly on her is both humorous and pathetic, particularly to a modern audience. He begs her to let him ““be thy lef,”” which, despite being translated as “love,” recalls the leaf metaphor from the first stanza (31). He also refers to her as his “swete lemman” once again, but it is not enough to make a dent in her hardened exterior (32).

Their heated dance continues. The woman urges him to be quiet and stop acting like a fool. Allegedly, her father and family have had their eyes on him for some time. She repeats her earlier warning that,

‘Be thou in my bowr itake,  
Lete they, for no sinne,  
Me to holde and thee to slon,  
The deth so thou maht winne’ (37–40).

The emphasis on the consequences of being caught in her bower begin to suggest that she is not as opposed to the idea as she seems. Indeed, it is not that *she* will punish him if he is found in her room, it is that third party, her unwilling parents. Still the man continues to beg and in so doing offers us further insight into their relationship. They have a history. He reminds her, ““In a window ther we stod, / We kuste us fifty sithe”” (45–46). The dynamic of their relationship has now become a bit clearer: they were formerly lovers, but the outside interference of medieval Montagues and Capulets has torn them apart, causing the man to experience — or rather relive — his love pangs. Here, the woman cries, ““Weylawey! Why seist thou so!,”” which echoes the same line spoken by the man in line 25 (49). The fact that both lovers speak the same line alludes

to past connections and suggests that they have much more in common than we initially assume. The woman admits in the end that she loved a cleric once: “Ich lovede him betere then my lif — / Whete bote is it to leye?” (55–56). Her love seemed to rival the passion the man still feels now. She sees no point in denying it, as if to suggest that there may be hope for their future.

The man also waxes nostalgic, recalling how when he was a student, “Well muchel I couthe of lore” (58). The word “lore” suggests a pun, as it can mean both “learning” and the “lore of love.” As such, the man could be alluding to his more promiscuous days when he got little learning done. In either case, it raises an eyebrow as to how truthful the man is being. Perhaps their current separation is the result of his being unfaithful, although she does vouch for his loyalty in line 52.

The man emphasizes his “Woundes fele sore” suffered far from home, suggesting he has been wandering lost without her (60–62). His final cry for mercy finally hits its mark. She compliments him, “For thou spekest so stille,” which is ironic because she spent most of the poem telling him to be quiet (66). At last, with a word, she soothes his pain by declaring neither her father, mother, nor any other family member will prevent them from being together. She concludes, “That I nam thine and thou art mine, / To don all thy wille” (71–72).

The woman’s submission would be seen as conventional in that many female courtly lovers spend a handful of lines resisting their suitors before suddenly throwing themselves at them. However, this lyric presents a unique twist in that the two lovers have a history and have been torn apart by external forces. Despite coming off as shrewish in the early stanzas, here the female courtly lover emerges as the victor, displaying courage and heroism for resisting her family’s controlling ways.

The penultimate line suggests the two will have an equal relationship: “I shall be yours and you mine,” but the last line, “To do all your will,” undermines any potential for negotiation or compromise. She does not mention him doing all of *her* will, only the converse. As a result, the woman’s free will is ultimately negated. She has chosen a life of servitude to her husband. This ending suggests that, while the lyric does present a unique *Romeo & Juliet*-esque take on courtly love, their relationship will ultimately fall victim to the conventional gender roles found in Middle English literature.

“Fairest between Lincoln and Lindsey”

This late thirteenth-century lyric shares many of the courtly love elements found in “A cleric courts his lady,” but it differs because it lacks a definitive resolution for the speaker. Instead, the poem is much more content with alluding to the relationship between the poet and the nightingale.

The poem opens with a conventional depiction of *reverdie*, or “regreening,” which emphasizes the spring season. The first two lines draw a connection between the singing nightingale and the blossoming wood: “When the nightegale singes, / The wodes waxen grene” (1–2). This opening establishes the poem's setting as musical and full of life. A hint of a connection exists between the nightingale and the poet himself in that, through its song, the nightingale creates art and thus makes the world more beautiful. This idea will come to the forefront by the poem's conclusion.

The first four lines feature the nightingale's role. Its song signals the onset of spring and the blossoming foliage. The speaker, however, is wrought with pain brought on by his romantic woes. After four lines detailing the beauty of the season, the speaker interjects:

And love is to mine herte gon  
With one spere so kene:  
Night and day my blod it drinkes;  
Mine herte deth me tene. (5–8)

His graphic description is conventional behavior for the male courtly lover. The juxtaposition of the *reverdie* scene and the speaker's anguish is used to emphasize the fact that even though nature is blossoming and full of life, it only serves to reinforce the man's feelings of lovesickness. While we can take love's spear to have been metaphorically thrown by an unattainable female figure, the pain is very real for the speaker. His inability to gain the woman's affection results in a textbook case of love pangs, in which the male courtly lover experiences physical pain as long as he cannot be with the woman he loves. As evidenced by the violent nature of his words, love torments him relentlessly. It “drinks his blood night and day,” which is appropriate, as love pangs usually render the male courtly lover unable to eat or sleep.

The speaker uses harsh diction to illustrate the severity of his situation. The spear is described as “kene,” which can be translated as “fierce,” “savage,” “bellicose,” or belonging to an enemy (6). These attributes make sense, as he undoubtedly feels the spear was thrown by the lady or even love itself, both of which are adversaries of the male courtly lover. Additionally, he describes his heart as “tene,” which translates to “harmful,” “perilous,” “enraged,” or “vexed” (8). We can see how the speaker would feel betrayed by his heart, an organ that is

supposed to give him life. The rhyme of these two words draws the reader's attention and thereby emphasizes the gravity of the speaker's situation.

The second stanza continues to detail the speaker's plight and explains the extent of his longing. It begins with, "Ich have loved all this yer / That I may love na more," which is both paradoxical and conventional of the male courtly lover (9–10). He has spent so much time yearning for his love that it has exhausted all of his physical and emotional strength. The desperation of the speaker is similar to that found in "A cleric courts his lady," but the fact that there is no female voice responding makes him seem all the more lonely and pathetic. Despite having put a great deal of time into trying to initiate this relationship, he says, "Me nis love never the ner, / And that me reweth sore," or "Love is not any the nearer me, which grieves me greatly" (13–14). The hopelessness of his situation is only further solidified by his repeated use of "lemmon" (12, 15, 17, 25, 28, 37). Using a term of endearment when no one is around to hear it only makes him seem more pitiful.

The speaker begins to address his lady directly in the third stanza, pleading with her for just "love one speche," or "one word of love" (18). This line is reminiscent of "A cleric courts his lady," in which the man declares, "My sorewe, my care, all with a word, / He mighte away caste" (13–14). In both cases, the woman possesses the power to make the man's pain disappear with just a single word. The speaker in "Fairest" continues, "With thy love, my swete lef, / My blis thou mightes eche" (21–22). As long as they remain separated, the female courtly lover retains all the power in the relationship. As the speaker explains, "A swete kos of thy mouth / Mighte be my leche" (23–24). All he needs is a single kiss to cure his ailments, but even that simple act is an impossibility.



The penultimate stanza continues the speaker's pleading with his lady, asking her to please have mercy and show him some affection. The stanza concludes with the lines, "So muchel I thenke upon thee / That all I waxe grene," which Davies translates to "I am falling ill with thinking so much about you" (31–32). These lines again reinforce the physical pain the speaker experiences because of his love pangs, but more importantly, they draw a connection back to the nightingale at the beginning of the poem. When the nightingale sings, "The wodes waxen grene," and when the speaker thinks of his love, he also "waxen grene" (2, 32). The speaker is punning on the color green, as it alludes to both the coming of spring and his sickly appearance. The woods become green as the trees blossom, but the speaker turns green as a side effect of his lovesickness.

On a deeper level, however, the repetition of the phrase "waxen grene" validates the artistic connection between the nightingale and the speaker. In the first stanza, we see the nightingale singing, which signals the *reverdie* when the woods become green again. The proximity of the lines makes it seem as if the nightingale's song is literally what causes the trees to blossom. If the first two lines were reversed, they would read "The woods grow green when the nightingale sings." As a result, it is almost as if we are meant to attribute the *reverdie* to the nightingale's act of singing. On the other hand, the speaker, as a poet and an artist, thinks about love and subsequently turns green due to his love pangs. We can equate the nightingale with the speaker in the sense that they are both artists: the nightingale creates a song, and the speaker is creating a poem as he speaks. In fact, the poem itself can be considered a song because it is, after all, a lyric intended to be set to music. Thus, in both cases we have an artist creating a work of art, which results in a re-greening. For the nightingale, it is the coming of spring, but unfortunately, for the

speaker, it is a severe bout of nausea. Still, these two passages prove how the nightingale is symbolic of the poet himself.

The poem concludes with the speaker describing just how far-reaching his love is. Between Lincoln and Lindsey, Northampton and Lound, he says, “Ne wot I non so fair a may / As I go fore ibounde” (33–36). Like most male courtly lovers, he is a slave to unrequited love. The poem then comes full circle with its final lines. The speaker says, “I wole mone my song / On wham that it is on ilong,” or “I will sadly sing my song about the cause of my complaint” (39). Thus the poem begins and ends with a song. The nightingale's opens the poem, and the speaker's concludes it. The parallel between the nightingale and the poet is irrefutable. The speaker has been singing his song for the entire poem. If we imagine the poet to be in the woods while singing his lyric, he and the nightingale essentially become one with each other. They sing their songs in unison, performing a duet in which the forest blossoms alongside the man's love. Unfortunately, though his hue may match the woods, the speaker's emotional state of being does not mimic that of nature, reflecting the split personality of the poem's opening stanza.

#### “A hymn to Mary”

Mary is ubiquitous in religious lyrics. Her name permeates the literature, and there is no shortage of references to her son, Jesus Christ. Many lyrics serve as tributes to Mary and her powers of protection and guidance. Appropriately enough, “A hymn to Mary” encompasses many of the common themes of Marian lyrics. The first stanza offers plenty of cosmic imagery, which is used to establish Mary's divine stature and fortitude. She is “so fair and bright,” and the speaker refers to her as “Velud maris stella,” which means “like the star of the sea” (1–2). These

lofty images contribute to her greatness. By comparing Mary to a heavenly body, she becomes a figure of superlative grace and morality. The speaker calls her “Brighter than the dayes light,” which may seem hyperbolic, but is actually indicative of courtly conventions and the esteem in which Christians held Mary (3). She is both “Parens et puella,” mother and maiden (4), an honor she alone enjoys. As the mother of Christ, she is also mother for all Christians, and as a maiden, she represents chastity and purity above any other woman on Earth.

The second half of the first stanza contains a plea for help by the narrator. He says, “Ic crye to thee—thou se to me— / Levedy, preye thy sone for me,” which indicates that, despite her divinity, Mary is nonetheless accessible to her followers through prayer (5–6). The speaker's cry recalls a similar plea by the narrator of St. Godric's “A cry to Mary,” written in the mid-twelfth century. In this earlier poem, Godric asks that Mary, “bring heylich with thee in Godes Riche,” that she may bring him with her to the Kingdom of God (4). The speaker in “A hymn to Mary” uses a similar strategy, beseeching that Jesus allow him to come to her, presumably in Heaven. In both lyrics the speaker uses Mary as a vehicle to gain access to Christ and Heaven. As the mortal mother, Mary appears to be more accessible, since she is the one who receives the prayers of those seeking salvation. Comparatively, far fewer lyrics address Christ directly (or so the recorded evidence suggests). This discrepancy solidifies Mary's stature as a pure and divine, yet uniquely accessible, figure.

The second stanza contains an array of conventional symbolism, all of which reinforces Mary's stature. She is first described as “flower of all things,” which speaks to her universal appeal and good standing with the speaker and all Christians (10). More notably, she is *rosa sine spina*, a rose without thorns, a common Marian appellation in medieval poetry. A rose without

thorns holds all the beauty yet none of the danger of a traditional rose. It is not of this world, and thus exists as a heavenly symbol of Mary's purity. Mary is described in similar terms in the early fifteenth-century lyric, "I sing of a maiden," in which she is called "makeles" (2). This word holds a dual meaning as both "without equal" and "without mate." She is unmatched in her divinity. Anne Marie D'Arcy points out, "There would seem to be further plays on the word in that, as a virgin, she is without a *mak* or 'mate' and she is *sine macula*, 'without stain'... which reaffirms her unspotted sinlessness... but also may suggest her Immaculate Conception" (Johnson & Treharne 308). Mary therefore possesses unequalled purity; she is conceived and subsequently exists without sin. The Immaculate Conception was not considered dogma until 1854, but the use of "makeles" nonetheless speaks to Mary's divine purity.

"I sing of a maiden" also contains its own floral symbolism similar to "A hymn to Mary." The lyric describes Jesus "As dew in Aprille / That falleth on the flower" (11–12). Mary is conventionally symbolized by white lilies, and the image of the dew landing silently on the flower is symbolic of the Incarnation. The second stanza in "A hymn to Mary" is also dedicated to lauding Mary for carrying Jesus, an act for which she is called "the best of all" (14).

The next line refers to Mary as "Quene of Parais," which likely refers to her dominion in Heaven, 'Paradise.' However, the allusion also suggests a connection between her and Eve, who would have been the Queen of Eden, as described in the book of Genesis (15). In this way, the lyric sets up a dichotomy between two distinct queens of paradise, one being the paragon of purity, and the other the cause of man's fall. This connection is realized in the third stanza, where Eve is mentioned explicitly. The speaker recalls how "All this world was forlore" because of "Eva peccatrice," the sinner (19–20). Eve's title stands in direct opposition to the speaker's

adoration of Mary, which emphasizes the contrast between the two women. Indeed, “the world was lost” until Mary gave birth to Jesus, which caused all the world's darkness to go away (23). Mary is practically given full credit for bringing salvation to man because she provided a Savior in the form of Christ. Therefore, Mary acts a foil for Eve: she is a source of light and salvation, while Eve is but the bringer of darkness and death. In the stanza’s final lines, Mary is called the source from which “the welle springeth ut of thee / Virtutis” (26–27). These lines allude to her divine fertility as a mother and to Jesus as the savior of mankind, which reinforces her importance in man's redemption following the fall.

The penultimate stanza returns the focus to the speaker's request for entrance into Heaven. He believes Jesus “will nought werne thee thy bone,” or “will not deny you your request” (30). This line continues to emphasize Mary's humanity and accessibility; she is a vehicle with which to gain the favor of Christ. After all, Christ has “brought ous to blis / Superni” and has “shut the foul pit of hell” (33–36). Heaven appears to be the ultimate goal for the speaker, but only through Mary is he able to gain access.

The speaker does not conclude, however, without some final words of adoration for Mary. She is “the best counselor” in times of trouble, and he refers to her as “Felix fecundata,” or “the fortunate and fruitful one” (37–38). With his final plea, he implores Mary to convince Christ to bring his graciousness to all mankind: “That we moten comen till him, / In luce” (41–45). What initially seemed to be a personal plea seems to turn out to be a request for the entire human race.

In all, “A hymn to Mary” provides ample evidence for the general attitude towards Mary in the Middle English period. Laden with symbols and metaphors, Marian lyrics emphasize her

purity, grace, and divinity through the comfort of her poet-petitioners in addressing her directly. Thus her importance in the Christian faith and Middle English lyrics cannot be understated.

### “An adult lullaby”

The title of this early fourteenth-century lyric, “An adult lullaby,” is paradoxical. Lullabies are typically intended for children, and this one sounds as if it were meant for an adult. The irony, however, lies not with the intended audience. The lullaby is sung here to a child, presumably by its mother. What makes the poem disturbing is the content of the song itself. The mother spends thirty-six lines describing how the world is harsh, and how little her child has to look forward to. The lullaby is therefore “adult” in the content of the message, which is brutally honest and unforgiving. This is hardly a song of ABCs or a mother’s love.

The refrain of the lyric, “Lollay, lollay, little child,” opens the poem and leads to a question, “why wepestou so sore?” (1). These elements are deceptively innocent themselves, not unlike a nursery rhyme. “Ring Around the Rosie,” for instance, is thought to refer to the Bubonic Plague. The refrain belies more serious concerns, suggesting that perhaps it is the mother, not the child, who is actually weeping. Her inquiry is bizarre for two reasons. The first is the rhetorical nature of the question itself, as mothers often ask children why they are crying despite their inability to provide a cogent response. Additionally, given the harshness of her lullaby, the mother should know why the child is crying. It would be odd for a child *not* to cry upon hearing this lullaby. As children lack the speech skills to properly express themselves, crying is their only option. Because all we get from the child is tears, we can infer that he or she is an infant, and thus its response is appropriate.

As it turns out, the mother answers her own question in the next line. She says, “Nedes mostou wepe—it was iyarked thee yore / Ever to lib in sorow, and sich and mourne evere” (2–3). She informs the child, “you must cry” because he is destined to live a life of sorrow and mourning. She attributes her child's fate to tradition, as “thine eldren did er this, while hi alives were” (4). Thus, the child appears to have been born into an unescapable life of pain and suffering. The only comfort the mother provides comes in the refrain, “Lollay, lollay, little child, child, lollay, lullow,” but any chance of soothing the child is undermined by the lines that follow: “Into uncuth world icommen so ertou” (5–6). Davies translates “uncuth” as “alien,” which continues to suggest the child is in for a painful existence. This word will recur later on in the poem as well.

The second stanza's tone differs from the first's via several lines of natural imagery. It reads, “Bestes, and thos foules, the fisses in the flode, / And each shef alives, imaked of bone and blode” (7–8). These lines bear a striking resemblance to “Foweles in the frith,” which also mentions birds in the wood and fish in the river. Despite the sense of natural order, the speaker in “Foweles” walks with much sorrow “For beste of bon and blod” (5). In both lyrics, the human is uniquely afflicted with great sorrow. The mother in “An adult lullaby” explains that all creatures “doth hamsilf sum gode” except for “the wrech brot that is of Adames blode” (9–10). This is the first instance in the poem where we gain clearer understanding of what makes the child's life destined for misery. The elders mentioned in the first stanza now stretch all the way back to Adam in the Garden of Eden. We can thus attempt to rationalize the mother's merciless lullaby as a method of educating her child about Christianity and original sin. The idea of the lullaby as a teaching method is reinforced by the last lines in the second stanza, which read, “to car ertou

bemette; / Thou nost nought this worldes wild before thee is isette” (11–12). Davies translates these lines as, “you are destined for trouble; you do not know the wilderness of this world is set before you,” which emphasizes the fact that the child is, at this age, ignorant of both man's history of sin and the consequences he will have to endure as a result.

The third stanza opens with a bit of optimism, as the mother tells the child “if betideth that thou shalt thrive and thee, / Thench thou wer ifostred up thy moder kne” (13–14). She suggests that there is a possibility of the child leading a fulfilling life, and tells him to remember “Whan thou comest, what thou art, and what shall com of thee” (16). This emphasis on the past, present, and future reflects the structure of the lyric itself. The mother's lullaby mentions Adam and the history of sin, the state of the present world the child is born into, and it concludes by offering advice as to how the child should go about its life. Any sense of optimism is quickly undercut, however, as the stanza concludes with the mother's affirmation that “With sorow thou com into this world, with sorow shalt wend away” (18).

The mother then warns the child about the nature of the world. She advises him not to trust it, as it “makes the rich poor and the poor rich” and “turns pain to prosperity and also prosperity into pain” (20–21). She paints the world as fickle, dangerous, and untrustworthy. The child's “fote is in the whele: / Thou nost whoder turne, to wo other wele,” she says (23–24). The mother refers to Fortune's wheel, which dictates the child's fate. The image is that his foot is literally on the wheel, which would mean he is at the top of it. We might attribute this position to the fact that the child is an infant, which, while he is not free from sin as his mother repeatedly points out, makes him considerably less tainted than one who has lived for many years.



The penultimate stanza features the mother warning the child to look to the future and be prepared for a life of suffering. She calls him “a pilgrim in wikedness ibor,” doomed for a life of wandering a treacherous world (25). She says death will always be after him, as it has been for all descendants of Adam. Ultimately, the blame is placed on Adam, who “wove suffering” for the child in Eden because of Satan's wickedness (30).

The first line of the last stanza contrasts with the previous one, as the mother now says “thou nert a pilgrim bot an uncuthe guest” (31). The second use of the word “uncuthe” to mean “alien” echoes the last line of the first stanza, when the mother described the world as “uncuth” as well. Davies translates it as “alien,” but if we take “uncuth” to mean “full of sin,” then the mother states that both the world and her child are sinful. The fall of man created this world, and the child reflects the quality of the world in which he is born. Of course the child is alien; he has no choice in the matter. All descendants of Adam are born full of sin. Perhaps the alienation lies in the idea that nature itself is not sinful, as evidenced by the birds and beasts, but mankind is, and its invasion of nature causes all descendants of Adam to be considered alien.

The poem concludes just as morbidly as it begins, with the mother telling the child its days are numbered, and “Deth thee shall betide with bitter bale in brest” (34). There is no hope for this child. The poem ends with Adam taking the blame for the child's suffering via the mother. She explains, “this wo Adam thee wrought, / Whan he of the apple ete and Eve it him betoght” (35–36). This is the first and only mention of Eve in the lyric. Adam created the suffering, but it happened when he ate the apple Eve gave to him, suggesting that she is the true culprit. The focus on Adam rather than Eve is also unconventional because of the prevalence of Marian lyrics found in this time period.

Reading “An adult lullaby” from a literal point of view, wherein the mother is directly addressing her child and outwardly expressing the troubles of the world, provides an adequate understanding of the poem. But another reading can be gleaned if we take the lullaby as an inward looking monologue, providing insight into the mother’s persona. A parent may often sing to a child while contemplating his or her own problems, therefore experiencing the irony of comforting an innocent with no real concerns. Parents will mask their pain in front of a child, but because an infant cannot understand it, perhaps the mother allows her vulnerability and sorrow to come through. As such, “An adult lullaby” demonstrates how a simple motif — the lullaby — can be used to conceal deeper issues, much in the same way the lyrics themselves use a compact form to express complex themes.

#### “Contempt of the world”

“Contempt of the world” is a lengthy lyric written in the late thirteenth century. Over the course of sixty lines, its author develops a movement from nostalgic longing for the past to strong Christian teachings. The ultimate lesson is that one should endure the harshness of life on Earth rather than live in excess, since the former allows us to avoid Satan's temptations and earn the rewards of Heaven.

The first third of the poem is decidedly nostalgic. It opens with the lines, “Where beth they, beforen us weren, / Houndes ladden and havekes beren, / And hadden feld and wode?” (1–3). These questions establish the poem's tone through the conventional *ubi sunt* motif. The speaker longs for the past and wonders what has come of those who came before him. The lines also suggest ambiguous identity, as the speaker himself struggles to define his own place in relation to

his ancestors. His confusion creates a feeling of isolation, as if the speaker has awoken to find himself alone and without guidance. The first three lines also emphasize the masculinity of the past and men who led hounds, hawks, and owned land. This is contrasted by the next three lines, which read, “The riche levedies in hoere bour, / That wereden gold in hoere tressour, / With hoere brighte rode?” (4–6). These lines are noticeably more feminine in concern, referring to ladies in their chambers with gold headbands and shining faces. The fact that the speaker longs for both the masculine and feminine past augments his feelings of isolation and nostalgia. He longs for the men and for the women. That is, he longs for everyone and everything, and is thus completely alone. He remembers the past fondly, as his descriptions of the past are largely positive. The men were proud landowners, and the women seem royal — perhaps angelic — due to their gold accessories and shining faces.

The positive tone continues in the second stanza, where the speaker injects life into his memories with descriptions of his ancestors' daily activities. He says, “Eten and drounken and maden hem glad; / Hoere lif was all with gamen ilad: / Men keneleden hem beforen” (7–9). The speaker paints an image of revelry, with eating, drinking, and celebration aplenty. As Davies translates, “their life was spent wholly in pleasure.” The fact that men kneeled before them confirms that the speaker's ancestors enjoyed some degree of royalty. The speaker's longing for the past, then, is understandable, but also troubling in that it suggests the present is not as optimistic as the past once was.

Indeed, the lyric's tone takes a turn for the worst in the second half of this stanza. The speaker says, “They beren hem well swithe heye, / And, in a twinkling of an eye, / Hoere soules weren forloren” (10–12). Until this point, all of the speaker's memories have been positive, but

despite his descriptions of celebration and revelry, his ancestors “utterly lose their souls” in the twinkling of an eye. This pivot in attitude is yet another example of the sudden tonal shifts found in Middle English lyric poetry. Despite the sense of longing, the speaker's memories are largely positive until he remembers exactly why his ancestors are gone in the first place.

The third stanza echoes the first in its questioning and signals the transition in tone from fond recollection to somber reflection. He again questions, “Where is that lawing and that song, / That trailing and that proude yong, / Tho havekes and tho houndes?” (13–15). These lines contain repeated long vowel sounds, as in “lawing,” “song,” “trailing,” and “yong,” which reflect the poem's mood by invoking sad, wailing tones appropriate for someone crying out for the past. The speaker then turns his attention to the present, explaining that “All that joye is went away, / That wele is comen to weylaway, / To manye harde stoundes” (16–18). There is no doubt that something has caused this family line to degenerate over time, and at this point, the explanation begins to take shape.

According to the speaker, the celebration enjoyed by the ancestors in the beginning of the poem actually became their undoing. He says, “Hoere paradis hy nomen here, / And now they lien in helle ifere” (19–2). Initially, his explanation seems paradoxical: how can the family have gone from paradise to Hell so suddenly? Clearly, the “here” the speaker refers to is the earthly life. Thus, the celebratory lifestyle described in previous stanzas is actually a life of gluttony and excess, which resulted in punishment after death. The consequences, as it turns out, are quite severe: “The fuir it brennes evere”—they are consumed by unending fire, and their screams are relentless (21). The stanza concludes, “Thennes ne cometh they nevere,” or “they shall never come out of that place” (24). The speakers' description leaves little doubt about the fate of his

ancestors, and he effectively answers his *ubi sunt* question from the first stanza. They have all gone to Hell and will remain there for eternity.

At this point, the poem begins to undergo a third tonal shift, which emphasizes the importance of a devout Christian faith. The speaker addresses his audience directly, saying, “Dreye here, man, thenne, if thou wilt, / A luitel pine that me thee bit, / Withdraw thine eyes ofte” (25–27). He advises his listeners not to spend their time on Earth in revelry, as his ancestors did, but rather to suffer here so that they might avoid a similar fate. He continues, “They thy pine be ounrede, / And thou thenke on thy mede, / It shall thee thinken softe” (28–30). Compared to the reward, which is presumably Heaven, the pain of life on Earth is of little concern.

The next three stanzas serve as a call to action. The speaker encourages his audience to reject the temptations of Satan, which led to the downfall of his ancestors. With the protection of Christianity, they will be able to avoid a hellish afterlife. The speaker advises that when faced with Satan's charms, people must “Stond! ne fall namore adoun / For a luitel blast” (35–36). With the strength of character afforded by Christianity, they will have no trouble rejecting sin. Christianity is specifically recommended when the speaker orders his audience to “tak the Rode to thy staf,” or “take the Cross for your staff,” and “think on him that thereonne yaf / His lif that wes so lef” (37–39). He invokes the memory of Jesus Christ and, by literally referring to the cross as a weapon, emphasizes how Christianity is the best defense against sin and Satan. The speaker's tone becomes quite powerful and inspiring: “Ayein his fo that staf thou nim, / And wreke him of that thef” (41–42). He resembles a general rallying his troops before battle, even telling them “And do that traitre seyen that word, / Biget that murie londe” (47–48). Davies translates these lines as “make that deceiver say that word and gain that happy land,” which sounds

militaristic in that their goal is to make the enemy surrender so that they may win the field. Thus the lyric's tone has gone from nostalgic longing to fervent rallying and steadfast determination.

A fourth tonal shift occurs in the final two stanzas, where the poem resolves and ends peacefully. The penultimate stanza preaches the benefits of Christianity, including “day withouten night, / Withouten ende strengthe and might, / And wreche of everich fo” (49–51). The devout Christian also enjoys, in Davies' translation, eternal life with God, peace and rest without conflict, and well-being without any pain (52–54). With such ornate promises, Christianity does not seem to be a hard sell for the speaker. The poem assumes a didactic tone here, emphasizing the benefits of faith and encouraging conversion for the speaker's audience.

The lyric ends with a direct address to Mary, in which the speaker asks her to “Help ous sunne for to flen, / That we moten thy sone iseen / In joye withouten ende” (58–60). Mary is called “the shield against the fiend,” and it is only through acceptance of divine protection that the speaker's audience will have any hope of avoiding the fate of his ancestors. Again, Mary is the accessible religious figure here, as seen in lyrics like “A hymn to Mary.” Jesus himself is not addressed, but rather the people approach Mary in hopes of gaining God's favor.

The poem concludes with “Amen,” which suggests the lyric was read aloud, maybe in some sermonic fashion. The powerful call to action in the middle of the poem certainly supports this notion. The poem features a distinct three-part structure. The sense of nostalgia and longing serves as a kind of rising action, which peaks with the fiery invocation of Christianity and a commanding sales pitch for conversion. The lyric then concludes with a sense of peace achieved through the acceptance of faith and Mary's protection, which resolves the tension established at the beginning of the poem.

The contempt of the world, therefore, is one of disdain for the earthly life, which is short and brutish. Still, the speaker advises that it is worth enduring hardship and suffering so that one may gain entrance into Heaven. However, the only way to survive the earthly trials is to be armed with the power of Christianity, symbolized in this lyric by the cross as a weapon. Mary is the shield. By keeping one's faith to her, one is protected from the Devil's evil, and that loyalty is what will enable humanity to avoid the mistakes of those who came before and be granted a more peaceful end.

Beyond its nostalgia and Christian didacticism, "Contempt of the world" best serves to illustrate the continuity of Old English literature. It bears a striking similarity to the Old English poem "The Wanderer" in terms of tone and subject matter. Both poems feature the *ubi sunt* motif, a longing for the days of old, and a resolution achieved through Christianity. "Contempt of the world" thus proves that Middle English lyric poets remained cognizant of and influenced by their literary ancestors.

#### CONCLUSION

The inaccessibility of the Middle English lyric explains in large part why the genre has suffered such neglect. For one, the poems are notoriously difficult to date, and the authorial context remains all but a mystery. They survive in a variety of dialects, a fact that is further complicated by inconsistencies in spelling and textual corruptions in the manuscripts themselves. The characteristic brevity of the lyrics is part of their charm, but it often frustrates attempts at sustained interpretation. These factors and others contribute to a body of literature that is often difficult to penetrate. But despite these obstacles the Middle English lyric offers valuable insight

to anyone who troubles to forge past the inherent difficulties associated with this important body of literature.

Countless critics and students have poured over *The Canterbury Tales* and lost sleep over *Gawain* and the *Confessio Amantis*, but the lyric remains a cryptic dark horse, one that does not afford readers the same amenities as other texts of the period. The works of Chaucer, the Gawain poet, and Gower are more polished, cohesive, and thus more accessible. Chaucer's dialect is furthermore close to our own, and he uses it consistently; as a result we have grown comfortable with his contribution to the Middle English canon. This is a false sense of security, however. Middle English is not so pristine, and the lyric duly shakes us from the dream of Chaucer's literary landscape. We should not shy away from the apparent difficulty of the lyrics or imagine that their rougher lineage means necessarily that they are unworthy of our attention. On the contrary, the genre offers a wealth of literary and historical insight, to say nothing of the pleasure of reading. "Foweles in the frith," for example, offers us courtly love, Christological, and moral-didactic readings in just five lines, and each of these subjects is an essential cog in the wheel of Middle English literature; each pervades the corpus. Reading "Foweles" also enlightens our understanding of Chaucer and other writers of the period, offering yet another voice through which to interpret the literature of Middle English.

The lyric can reflect traditional themes in Middle English or it can upend the conventions, and because of their number and the fact that the genre spans the period, they offer a touchstone from which to judge all Middle English literature of a similar nature. Religious and secular lyrics alike grapple with concerns of human existence — pain, sorrow, fortune, love, death — and speak to the hardship of life in the Middle Ages. "An adult lullaby" does so through



the conceit of a nursery rhyme, while “Contempt of the world” invokes the distant past to promote Christian teaching. “A hymn to Mary” and “I sing of a maiden” present straightforward lessons on Christian doctrine, but they do so through complex metaphors. “Fairest between Lincoln and Lindsey” and “A cleric courts his lady” do treat the ubiquitous theme of courtly love, but the former does so through the expression of art while the latter provides a rare female voice to duel with the male courtly lover. The fact that many of these lyrics display both religious and secular themes speaks to their flexibility and richness. These are not poems to be dismissed quickly or easily. The dynamic nature of the Middle English lyric evidences its difficulty as a genre but also demonstrates a degree of depth persistent readers will find very rewarding.

The lyrics thus display great range and diversity, much of which can be attributed to authorship, which ironically remains a mystery. The lyrics’ anonymity poses challenges, true, but they also provide a variety of voices through which to experience the Middle Ages. While *The Canterbury Tales* offers an eclectic band of narrators, we are still contending really with Chaucer’s voice. He expertly interweaves numerous themes and characters into the thread of his narrative, but the lyrics offer an alternative to his fiction insofar as they present a multitude of individual voices that comment on equally diverse subject matter. As such, while less consistent in quality than Chaucer’s writing, the lyric is valuable for the broader context it provides, for the congruity, and the frequent deviations from the most well-known works of Middle English.

Going forward, students and scholars may take comfort in the textual work that now surrounds the Middle English lyric. Editing and preservation are ongoing tasks, but myriad lyrical anthologies are available, each of which contains hundreds of poems unembellished by critical commentary. These resources are helpful, but the anthologies generally provide little

analysis beyond the introductory chapters and often make generalizations about the criteria used to determine which poems have been chosen for the collection; the merits of individual lyrics are seldom discussed. So the mystery remains and, as a result, the responsibility must still fall upon the reader to determine their value and significance, unlike, say, “The Miller’s Tale,” which has been so universally established in the critical tradition that there is little question as to its general scope and purpose. Anthologies, then, despite improving legibility, often bring us no closer to understanding the literature of the lyrics. A more comprehensive collection and analysis of the lyrics remains to be done, and even the selection of poems chosen here demonstrates that there is much to be gained from confronting the inherent challenges associated with the Middle English lyric. In short, the genre is not to be dismissed or neglected for its shortcomings, but embraced for its complexity, power, and mystique.

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