

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

Middle English Lyrics



SELECTED AND EDITED BY
MAXWELL S. LURIA AND
RICHARD L. HOFFMAN

**AUTHORITATIVE TEXTS
CRITICAL AND HISTORICAL
BACKGROUNDS
PERSPECTIVES ON SIX POEMS**

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PERSPECTIVES ON SIX POEMS

Selected and Edited by

MAXWELL S. LURIA

TEMPLE UNIVERSITY

RICHARD L. HOFFMAN

VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE
AND STATE UNIVERSITY

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Preface

The delightful treasures of Middle English lyric are still, for some reason, *terra incognita* to the general reader. More surprisingly, they are often neglected or disdained even by students of medieval literature. Although the splendid achievements of *dolce stil nuovo*, of troubadour and goliard and Minnesinger, are widely appreciated and readily accessible in excellent translations,¹ most of their admirers appear to command little more of the native tradition than the charming but overworked "Sumer is icumen in."

In fact, the Middle English lyric at its finest has a lapidary concentration of statement and a controlled richness of tone which, once apprehended, are not easily forgotten:

All night by the rose, rose,
All night by the rose I lay;
Darf ich nought the rose stele,
And yet ich bar the flour away.

In their copiousness and variety, too, these poems—songs of love and death, God and nature, the pleasures of the table and the fears of damnation, the ebullience of youth and the melancholy of old age—form one of the great bodies of lyric verse in world literature.²

The editorial labors of Carleton Brown, Rossell Hope Robbins, G. L. Brook, and others, over a period of forty years, have provided scholars with printed texts of most of the contents of the extant manuscripts. These editions, which are listed in our Select Bibliography (pp. 351–352), vary considerably with respect to comprehensiveness and adequacy of presentation; and a new edition, with variants, of the complete corpus of lyrics, based on modern editorial procedures, remains a *desideratum*. These volumes have, however, indispensably provided us with the texts offered here, and we are grateful for this pioneering work, as, indeed, for the small but growing body of explicatory criticism, which we have also found useful. Among the few earlier anthologies of Middle English lyric, that of

1. For bibliographical information, see Peter Dronke, *The Medieval Lyric* (New York, 1969), pp. 241 ff.

2. The term "lyric" in the present context is merely approximate, and in fact unhistorical: the earliest use of the word recorded in the OED is by Sidney, in 1581. Most "lyric" verse of the Middle Ages is radically unlike the poetry thus

styled in more recent centuries, and criticism must develop sophisticated concepts for dealing with the differences. See D. W. Robertson, Jr., "Some Observations on Method in Literary Studies," *New Literary History*, 1 (1969–1970), 21–33; Stephen Manning, *Wisdom and Number* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1962), Preface.

R. T. Davies (London, 1963) is the best, and we have profited from his admirable notes and glosses.

The present collection is larger, by nearly sixty poems, than any other anthology devoted exclusively to the lyric and is the only one which includes all thirty-one English lyrics in MS. Harley 2253, all the verses by Friar Herebert printed in Brown XIV, the long and justly famous debate poem called "The Thrush and the Nightingale" (no. 59), and virtually all the poems of any consequence given by Professor Robbins in his important and charming volume of *Secular Lyrics*. We have wished to offer up a literary feast as well as a scholarly anthology, and we have consequently held artistic merit rather than philological or historical significance to be our chief touchstone for inclusion. Most of the best Middle English lyric verse, as it happens, is anonymous;³ but we have not, in any case, felt obliged to include "representative" selections by identified authors, such as Lydgate or Audelay, whose lyric production seems to us decidedly less interesting than the verse we have chosen. Such a late poet as Skelton, though arguably worthy of inclusion, was omitted to make room for less accessible authors. If the Scottish "makers" Dunbar and Henryson are represented by a thinner sheaf of poems than they deserve, it is for the same reason. Even Chaucer himself makes but a modest appearance in our pages. Fortunately, the work of these late medieval masters, unlike most of the pieces in this book, is available to the reader in adequate, and easily comprehensible, editions.⁴

Any editor of a Middle English text must wrestle with the problem of where his respect for manuscript authority ought to give way to consideration for his reader's ease. We have duly wrestled and are content, though scarcely complacent, with our solution. We have been guided in this delicate matter by our primary desire to reveal the poems *as poems* to readers who are not necessarily specialists in Middle English—to make them as "available" as possible—yet without doing violence to their original forms. We have, therefore, scrupulously respected their substantive integrity, while clearing away some of the orthographical and other impediments to appreciation. We have regularly modernized ð, þ, ȝ and p; and, wherever necessary, we have sought to make our text readable by substituting genuine but recognizable Middle English spellings for unrecognizable or grotesque ones. Similar considerations have governed our treatment of punctuation, capitalization, and typography.

3. In this collection, wherever the author of a poem is known, we have given his name and dates after the text.

4. F. N. Robinson, ed., *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, second ed. (Boston, 1957); W. M. Mackenzie, ed., *The Poems of William Dunbar* (London,

1932; reprinted 1960); H. H. Wood, ed., *The Poems of Robert Henryson* (Edinburgh and London, 1933; second ed., 1958); Philip Henderson, ed., *The Complete Poems of John Skelton*, third ed. (London, 1959).

Consistency has usually had to surrender to context, and the exigencies of rime and meaning have often helped determine our approach to word endings. The result, of course, will not satisfy those philological scholars who require diplomatic texts, and such will have recourse to the standard editions. Other readers, we hope, will not miss the chaos and caprice of medieval scribal practice, which is often as distracting as it is picturesque. We have tried, at all events, to make these poems readable without betraying their authenticity.⁵

Spanning four centuries and embodying several Middle English dialects, these poems vary widely in difficulty of language. We have attempted to gloss every unfamiliar or misleading word or phrase on its first appearance in each poem; but some words inevitably remain refractory. In particular, the poems in Harley 2253 contain language which has daunted all previous editors, and we cannot, alas, claim to have cut through every knot in these obscure texts.

A word is in order with regard to our arrangement and presentation of the poems, which (in one necessary sense) may seem as arbitrary as the selections themselves. We have sedulously, though perhaps not merely willfully, avoided the conventional classification of "religious" and "secular." In our view, this distinction, which has become commonplace since the editions of Brown and Robbins, more justly expresses modern culture than medieval; and, in fact, most of the manuscript collections embrace both sorts of poem.⁶ To be sure, some poems are manifestly "religious" in theme and substance, and some are equally "unreligious," in that they lack a manifest religious content. Both sorts will be found in this collection, together with a rather larger number of poems which are both "religious" and "secular," or, rather, neither one nor the other, reflecting the characteristic medieval apprehension of man's life on a middle-earth shadowed by the Tower of Truth.⁷ "Religious and secular," then, seems simplistic, and we have preferred to arrange the poems by subject, thus allowing the reader to discover for himself those peculiarly medieval modulations of sensibility which these poems embody.

For much the same reasons—departing again from the practice of Brown and Robbins—we have declined to contrive titles for these poems. Nearly all of them are untitled in the manuscripts, and it makes a difference whether one apprehends a short literary composition directly or through the prism of a title. We have preferred to give our readers the more characteristically medieval experience.

One of the most useful features of the volume should be the section of critical materials. Some twenty-five of the poems in the

5. We have made silently a very few textual emendations.

6. For example, Harley 2253; cf. G. L. Brook, ed., *The Harley Lyrics*, second ed. (Manchester, 1956), Introduction.

7. Cf. Professor Robertson's comment on "Mirie it is while sumer ilast" in *The Literature of Medieval England* (New York, 1970), p. 347.

collection are discussed here, at varying length, and the following chart will facilitate cross-reference:

Poem	Critical Discussion
"At a springe-well under a thorn" (192)	261-262, 324
"Brid one brere" (22)	264-265
"Erthe tok of erthe" (242)	307-308
"Foweles in the frith" (6)	263-264, 278-279, 319-321
"Gold and all this werldes win" (15)	262
"Heven it es a riche ture" (180)	290
"I sike when I singe" (228)	258
"I sing of a maiden" (181)	289, 325-349
"Ichot a burde in a bour ase beryl so bright" (26)	271
"Ichot a burde in boure bright" (33)	270
"If man him bithoghte" (233)	301-302
"In a frith as I con fare fremede" (30)	313-317
"It wes upon a Shere Thorsday" (203)	259-261
"Jentil butler, <i>bel ami</i> " (160)	284
"Lenten is come with love to toune" (4)	271-272
"Maiden in the mor lay" (138)	321-325
"Now goth sonne under wod" (190)	256-257, 317-319
"O mestress, why" (45)	286-287
"Sumer is icumen in" (3)	311-313
"Whanne mine eyhnen misten" (234)	303-305
"When the turuf is thy tour" (232)	261, 285, 305-307
"With longing I am lad" (28)	265
"With paciens thou hast us fedde" (146)	283
"Wrecche mon, why artou proud" (239)	282
"Yung men, I warne you everichon" (68)	284

Middle English spellings in the critical texts are not always the same as in the poems, but we have thought it best to leave them as we found them, relying upon the reader to make the appropriate identifications.

Princeton, August 1974

M.S.L.
R.L.H.

Richard Hoffman's death in 1981, at forty-four, took from us a scholar and teacher of conspicuous excellence and great promise. The surviving editor is better able than most to affirm that he was no less distinguished as a collaborator and friend. This new printing of *Middle English Lyrics*, in which some minor errors have been corrected but the content remains unchanged, may help keep in memory a little longer his fine discrimination and genuine scholarship.

Philadelphia, October 1986

M.L.

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I

Worldes bliss

I

Worldes bliss ne last no throwe.¹

It wit° and wend° away anon;

The lenger° that ich° it iknowe,

The lasse° ic° finde pris° theron.

For all it is imeind° wid care,

Mid sorewe and wid evel fare;

And at the laste, pouere° and bare

It let° mon, when it ginnet° gon.°

All the blisse this here and there

Bilouketh° at ende wop° and mon.°

departs / goes

longer / I

less / I / value

mingled

poor

abandons / begins / to go

encompasses / weeping / moaning

All shall gon that here mon° owet,°

All it shall wenden to nout;°

The mon that here no good ne sowet,°

When other repen, he worth bikakt.²

Thenk, mon, forthy,° whil thu havest mikte,°

That thu thine gultes° here arikte,°

And worche good by day and nikte,

Ar then thu be of lisse ilakt.³

Thu nost wanne Crist ure drikte

Thee asket that he havet bitakt.⁴

man / owns

nought

sows

therefore / might

guilts / set right

All the blisse of thisse life

Thu shalt, mon, enden in wep:°

Of huse and home and child and wife.

Sely° mon, tak therof kep!°

For thu shalt all beleven° here

The eykte° whereof louerd° thu were;

weeping

unthinking / heed

leave behind

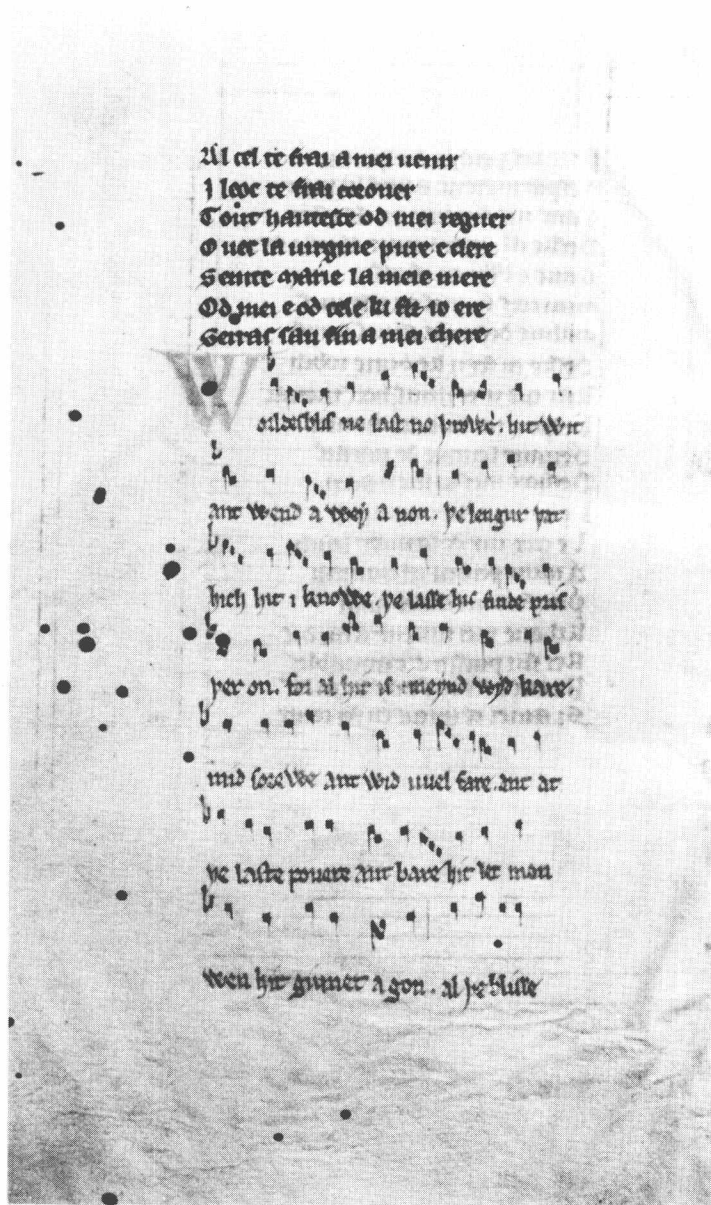
property / lord

1. World's bliss lasts only a short time.

2. When others reap, he will be beguiled.

3. Before you are deprived of joy.

4. You do not know when Christ Our Lord/ Will ask you for that which He has entrusted to you.



“Worldes bliss ne last no throwe” (poem 1) as it appears in a thirteenth-century manuscript at Oxford University (MS. Rawl. G. 18, now Bodleian 14751, f. 105^b). The text of this piece, together with its music, appears also in a manuscript in the British Museum (MS. Arundel 248). Reproduced by permission of the Bodleian Library, Oxford.

When thu list,^o mon, upon bere,^o
 And slepest a swithe^o druye^o slep,
 Ne shaltu^o haben wit thee no fere^o
 Butte thine werkes on an hep.^o

*lie / bier
 very / dreary
 shall you / companion
 heap*

Mon, why seestu^o love and herte
 On worldes blisse that nout ne last?
 Why tholestu that thee so ofte smerte⁵
 For love that is so unstedefast?
 Thu lickest huny^o of thorn, iwis,^o
 That seest^o thy love on worldes bliss,
 For full of bitterness it is.
 Sore^o thu mikt^o ben ofgast,^o
 That despendes^o here eykte^o amiss,
 Werthurgh ben into helle itakt.⁶

*do you set

 honey / indeed
 set
 grievously / may / terrified
 spend / possessions*

Thenk, mon, wharof Crist thee wroukte,^o
 And do wey prude and fulthe mood.⁷
 Thenk how dere he thee bokte^o
 On rode^o mit his swete blood;
 Himself he gaf for thee in pris,^o
 To buye thee bliss if thu be wis.^o
 Bithenk thee,^o mon, and up aris
 Of slouthe, and gin to worche good,⁸
 Whil time to worchen is,
 For elles thu art witless and wood.^o

*made
 bought, redeemed
 Cross
 price
 wise
 consider

 mad*

All day thu mikt understonde
 And thy mirour bifor thee sen,^o
 What is to don^o and to wonden,^o
 And what to holden and to flen;^o
 For all day thu siyst^o wid thin eyen^o
 How this world went and how men deiet.^o
 That wite^o well, that thu shalt dreyen^o
 Det,^o also^o another det.^o
 Ne helpet^o nout ther non to lien,^o
 Ne may no mon bu det ageyn.⁹

*see
 do / undertake
 flee
 see / eyes
 die
 know / endure
 death / just as / does
 helps / lie*

Ne wort^o ne good ther unforgulde,^o
 Ne non evel ne worth^o unboukt;^o
 Whanne thu list,^o mon, under molde^o
 Thu shalt haven^o as thu havest wrokt.
 Bithenk thee well, forthy, ic rede,^o
 And clanse thee of thine misdede,
 That he thee helpe^o at thine nede,
 That so dure^o us havet iboukt,^o
 And to hevene^o blisse lede
 That evere lest^o and faillet nout.^o

*will be / unrequited
 will be / unpunished
 lie / ground
 have
 counsel

 may help
 dearly / redeemed
 heaven's
 lasts / not at all*

5. Why do you suffer that which so often pains you?

6. Wherefore you shall be taken into hell.

7. And put away pride and filthy heart.

8. From sloth, and begin to do good.

9. Nor may any man be against death.

2

Worldes blisse, have good day!	
Now fram min herte wand° away.	<i>turn</i>
Him for to loven min hert is went,	<i>turned</i>
That thurgh his side spere rent;	
His herte° blod shadde for me,	<i>heart's</i>
Nailed to the harde tree.	
That swete body was itend°,	<i>made to suffer</i>
Prened° wit nailes three.	<i>pierced</i>

Ah, Jesu! Thin holy hed°	<i>head</i>
Wit sharpe thornes was biweved°,	<i>wrapped</i>
Thy feire neb° was all bispet°,	<i>face / spat upon</i>
Wit spot° and blod meind° all biwet;°	<i>spit / mingled / wet</i>
Fro the crune to the to°	<i>toe</i>
Thy body was full of pine° and wo,	<i>torment</i>
And wan° and red.	<i>pale</i>

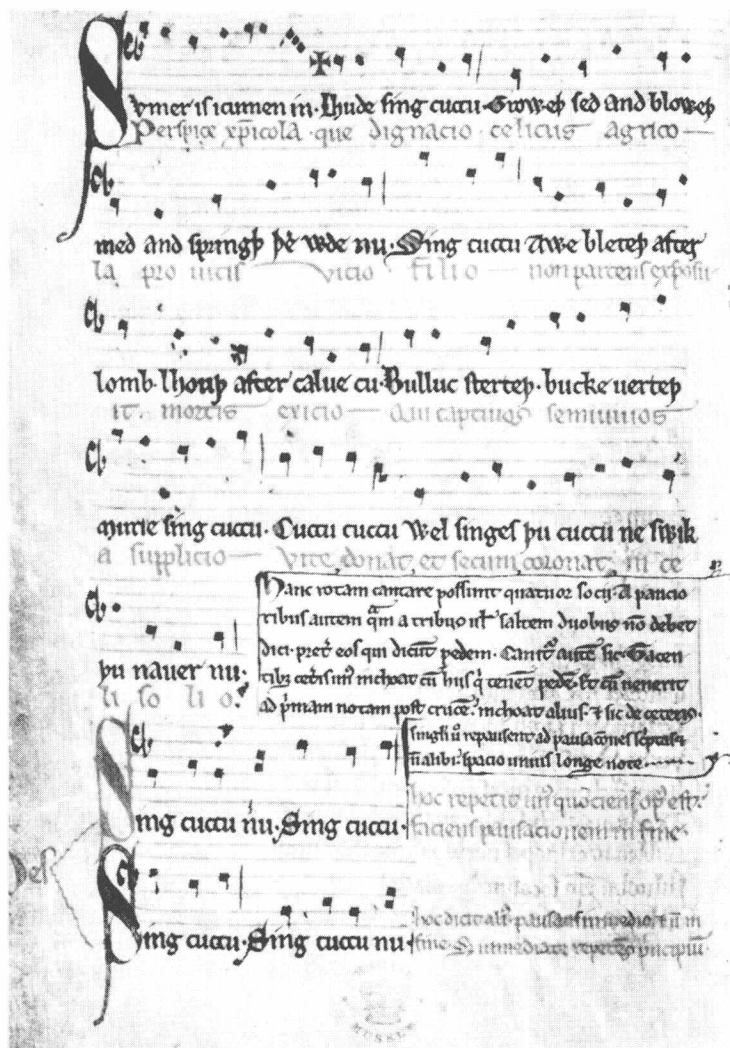
Ah, Jesu! Thy smarte° ded°	<i>painful / death</i>
Be my sheld and my red°	<i>counsel</i>
Fram develes lore.°	<i>teaching</i>
Ah, swete Jesu, thin ore!°	<i>grace</i>
For thine pines sore,	
Thech min herte right love thee ¹	
Whas° herte blod was shed for me.	<i>whose</i>

3

Sumer is icumen in, ²	
Lhude° sing, cuccu!°	<i>loudly / cuckoo</i>
Groweth sed° and bloweth° med°	<i>seed / blooms / meadow</i>
And springth the wude° nu.°	<i>forest / now</i>
Sing, cuccu!	

Awe° bleteth after lomb,	<i>ewe</i>
Lhouth° after calve° cu,	<i>lows / calf / cow</i>
Bulluc sterteth,° bucke ferteth.°	<i>leaps / breaks wind</i>
Murie° sing, cuccu!	<i>merrily</i>
Cuccu, cuccu,	

1. Teach my heart to love you properly. 2. Spring has come in.



“Sumer is icumen in” (poem 3), the most famous of Middle English lyrics, is one of several songs at the beginning of a monks’ commonplace-book compiled at Reading Abbey and now in the British Museum (MS. Harley 978, f. 11^b). This poem has usually been dated about 1240, but some musicologists believe that a date seventy years later is more likely. Reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the British Museum.

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Wel singes thu, cuccu.
Ne swik^o thu naver^o nu!

cease / never

Sing cuccu nu, sing cuccu!
Sing cuccu, sing cuccu nu!

4

Lenten^o is come with love to toune,
With blosmen^o and with briddes^o rounne,^o

*spring
flowers / birds' / song*

That all this blisse bringeth.

Dayeseyes^o in this^o dales,
Notes swete of nightegales—

daisies / these

Uch^o foul^o song singeth.

each / bird

The threstelcok him threteth o;¹

Away is here^o winter wo

their

When woderove^o springeth.

woodruff

This foules singeth ferly^o fele,^o

wonderfully / much

And wliteth^o on here winne wele,²

chirp

That all the wode ringeth.

The rose railleth^o hire^o rode,^o

puts on / her / rosy hue

The leves on the lighte^o wode

bright

Waxen all with wille.^o

pleasure

The mone^o mandeth^o hire bleo,^o

moon / sends forth / light

The lilie is lossom^o to seo,^o

lovely / see

The fenil^o and the fille.^o

fennel / chervil

Wowes^o this wilde drakes;

woo

Miles^o murgeth^o here makes,^o

animals / gladden / mates

Ase strem that striketh^o stille.^o

flows / softly

Mody^o meneth,^o so doth mo;^o

high-spirited man / laments / others

Ichot^o ich am one of tho,^o

I know / them

For love that likes^o ille.

pleases

The mone mandeth hire light;

So doth the semly^o sonne bright,

fair

When briddes singeth breme.^o

clearly, loudly

Deawes donketh the dounes;³

Deores^o with here derne^o rounes,

animals / secret

Domes for to deme;⁴

Wormes woweth under cloude,^o

ground

Wimmen waxeth wonder^o proude,

wonderfully

So well it wol^o hem^o seme.

will / them

1. The songthrush contends always.

2. "Winne wele": wealth of joys.

3. Dew moistens the downs (hills).

4. Tell their tales, or speak their opinions

If me shall wonte° wille° of on,°
This wunne weole⁵ I wole forgon°
And wight° in wode be fleme.°

*be lacking / pleasure / one
forego
quickly / fugitive*

[Harley 2253]

5

Mirie° it is while sumer ilast°
With fugheles° song—
Oc nu necheth¹ windes blast
And weder° strong.
Ey! ey! what this nicht is long,²
And ich° wid wel° michel° wrong
Soregh° and murne and fast.

*merry / lasts
birds'*

weather

*I / very / much
sorrow*

6

Foweles° in the frith,°
The fisses° in the flod,°
And I mon° waxe wod.°
Mulch sorw° I walke with
For beste of bon and blod.

*birds / wood
fishes / river
must / mad
sorrow*

7

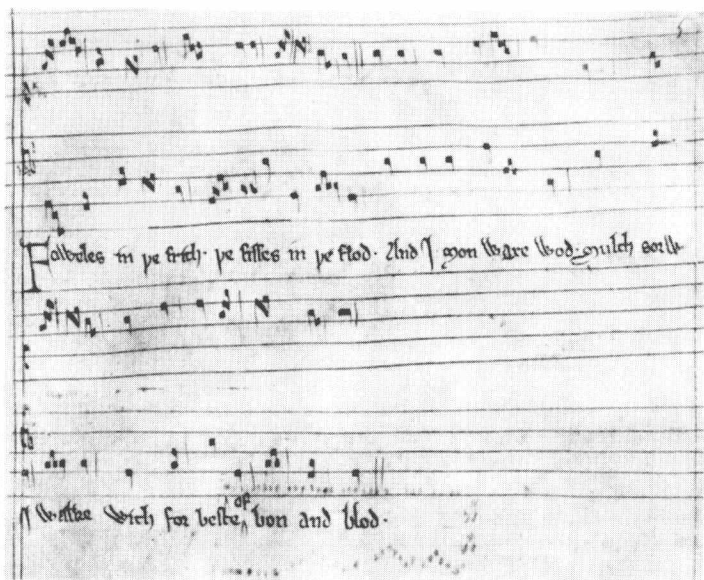
All other love is like the mone°
That wext° and wanet° as flowre in plein,
As flowre that fairet° and fawet° sone,
As day that scowret° and endet° in rein.

*moon
waxes / wanes
blooms / fades
passes rapidly / ends*

5. "Wunne weole": wealth of joys.

1. But now draws nigh.

2. How long this night is.



“Foweles in the frith” (poem 6) appears in Bodleian MS. Douce 139, now 21713, f. 5^a, and is dated about 1270. Professor D. W. Robertson notes that “the melody is not popular in character, and the usual view that the text is secular is dubious” (*The Literature of Medieval England* [New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1970], p. 348). Reproduced by permission of the Bodleian Library, Oxford.

The music of “Foweles in the frith” in modern notation, as printed by J. F. R. and C. Stainer in *Early Bodleian Music* (London: Novello & Co., Ltd., 1901), II, 10. Reproduced by permission of Novello & Co., Ltd.