

SELECTED READINGS OF ENGLISH
POETRY

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何功杰 编著

安徽教育出版社

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216-218



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责任编辑:吴 骅

装帧设计:包云鸿

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出版:安徽教育出版社(合肥市跃进路1号)

邮政编码:230063

发行:安徽教育出版社发行部(合肥市桐城路145号)

邮政编码:230061

经销:新华书店

排版:合肥南方激光照排部

印刷:合肥远东印刷厂

开本:850×1168 1/32

印张:18.75

字数:466 000

版次:1998年3月第1版 1998年3月第1次印刷

印数:2000

标准书号:ISBN 7-5336-2141-7/I·46

定价:22.00元

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Anonymous Lyrics and Ballads

佚名抒情诗和名谣 (13th C. - 15th C.)

It is impossible to date the individual lyrics and ballads with any certainty. Perhaps the oldest is the *Cuckoo Song*, which is probably of the twelfth century. In general, we only know that the poems must be earlier than the manuscripts in which they appear, and that they might have been reworded later by scribes.

Middle English lyrics include both religious and secular. The song of spring, the love lyric, the celebration of Virgin Mary, etc. are the members of the ancient genres. These lyrics are remarkably fresh in spite of the fact that in both the theme and form they are extremely conventional.

The Cuckoo Song¹

Sing, cuckoo, now. Sing, cuckoo.

Sing, cuckoo. Sing, cuckoo, now.

Summer is come in —

Sing loud, cuckoo!

The seed grows, the meadow blooms

And the wood comes into leaf.

Sing, cuckoo!

The ewe bleats after the lamb,
The cow lows after the calf,
The bullock leaps, the buck breaks wind² —
Sing merrily, cuckoo!

Cuckoo, cuckoo.

Well singest thou,³ cuckoo.

Cease thou never now!⁴

【Notes and Commentary】

1. To read and understand a medieval poem, the initial obstacle might be the spellings and pronunciations of words, for they are different from modern English. Our present *Cuckoo Song* is a modernized version, and here is an old version for you to read against the modernized one:

Sing, cuccu, nu. Sing, cuccu.

Sing, cuccu. Sing, cuccu, nu.

Sumer is i-cumen in —

Lhude sing, cuccu!

Groweth sed and bloweth med

And springth the wude nu.

Sing, cuccu!

Awe bleteth after lomb,

Lhouth after calve cu,

Bulluc sterteth, bucke verteth —

Murie sing, cuccu!

Cuccu, cuccu.

Wel singest thou, cuccu,

Ne swik thu naver nu!

Summer in England is the spring season in east countries. Apparently this lyric conveys the experience of liveliness and vitality of the beautiful spring days. The poem is made up of two stanzas, with a refrain. The tone is light and cheerful, which is brought about through the images of sight and sound. And the cuckoo bird provides the most important and impressive image of all in the poem, its beautiful songs being heard resounding in the air when spring comes. There are other images, either visual or audible, or both, which symbolize the vital forces and merriness of the spring days.

2. **breaks wind**: farts.
3. **Well singest thou**: Well sing you.
4. You will never stop singing now.

【Questions】

1. What is the tone of the poem? How is it achieved?
2. Concreteness is at the very heart of poetry. Point out the concrete images employed in this poem and explain their appropriateness to the occasion described.

【译诗】

布谷鸟之歌

无名氏

歌唱吧，布谷；歌唱吧，布谷；

唱吧，唱吧，布谷，布谷。

夏天已经来到，——

放声歌唱吧，布谷鸟！

种子发了芽，草地开了花，

林中嫩叶挂树梢，

歌唱吧，布谷鸟！

母羊跟着羊羔咩咩叫，

母牛哞哞跟着小牛跑，

公羊蹦蹦跳，公牛放大炮——

尽情地歌唱吧，布谷鸟！

布谷，布谷！

放开歌喉唱吧，布谷鸟！

让歌声永远荡山腰！

* * *

Western Wind¹

Western wind, when wilt thou² blow,

The small rain down can rain?³

Christ, if my love were in my arms,

I in my bed again!⁴

【Notes and Commentary】

1. Western wind in England is equal to the east or spring wind in the east countries.
2. **wilt thou**: will you
3. **The small rain** ...: (So that) the small rain can fall down?
4. "If-clause" here expresses a wish of the speaker, that is, "I wish that my love were in my arms, and that I were in my bed again!"

This short lyric is originally a song for tenor voices, probably the work of some courtier in the reign of Henry VIII (1216—1271).

Short as it is, the meaning of the poem is open to a number of interpretations. F. W. Bateson in his *A Guide to English Literature* suggested that the speaker is a girl associated with the soil to be softened by spring showers, so that she stands for natural fertility, like the Greek nature goddess, Persephone. Robert Penn Warren depicts it as a grieving lover seeking relief from the absence of his love in the sympathetic manifestation of nature. But according to Robert Baylor and Brenda Stokes, it might be treated simply and straightforwardly as a poem that vividly shows the speaker's unhappiness, his longing for spring, and for an even happier moment — making love with his love.

The poem is made up of a ballad stanza, that is, of four lines

with the first and third each receiving four accents, and the second and the fourth three accents, and with a rhyme scheme of abcb. (For "ballad", see "Notes and Commentary" to the poem *Lord Randal*.) There is a contrast in tone between the first two lines and the last two lines: the first two lines are the pure romantic appeal to the wind and the rain that they come to relieve the aridity and deadness of the lover's loneliness; with the last two lines, a change occurs: it expresses in naked terms the speaker's longing for the return of her or his lover, therefore the tone is more direct and realistic. The first pair of lines is closely associated with the second pair of lines in that the speaker's unhappiness, his or her longing for the return to the lover's embrace is compared to the aridity of the soil and thirsty for western wind and rain.

[Questions]

1. We have introduced, in Note 4, several critics' views about this poem. Which do you agree with? Give your reasons.
2. What is the tone of the speaker's voice in the first two lines? Angry? Impatient? Supplicating? What is the tone in the second two lines? What do the first pair of lines and the last pair have to do with each other?

【译诗】

西 风

无名氏

西风啊，您什么时候开始吹刮，
绵绵细雨什么时候降下来？
啊，但愿我的爱人在我的怀里，
让我们同床共枕重相爱。

* * *

I Sing of a Maiden¹

(about 15th c.)

I sing of a maiden

That is makeless:²

King of alle kinges³

To her son she ches.⁴

He came also stille⁵

Where his mother was

As dew in Aprile

That falleth⁶ on the grass.

He came also stille

To his mother's bower⁷
As dew in Aprille
That falleth on the flower.

He came also stille
Where his mother lay
As dew in Aprille
That falleth on the spray.⁸

Mother and maiden
Was never none but she —
Well may such a lady
Godes⁹ mother be.

【Notes and Commentary】

1. Mary has been an object of veneration in the Christian Church, because all men were saved in Christ and Mary had participated in the life that made this possible. Mary was said to be the mother of Christ, but how could Christ be conceived and Mary a virgin? This medieval lyric appears to reply to the question; as quietly and naturally as the dew falls.
2. **makeless**: a serious pun, meaning “matchless”, “mateless” and “spotless”
3. **alle kinges**: In Middle English, the plural of nouns are formed by adding s or es to the singulary, e. g. roote – rootes; king – kinges;