

Edited by

John C. Hirsh

*Medieval
Lyric*

*Middle
English
Lyrics,
Ballads,
and
Carols*



**Blackwell
Publishing**

*Edited with
an Introduction
and Commentary
by*

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Preface

For about a decade, roughly between 1965 and 1975, the publication and critical examination of medieval lyrical poetry was one of the hottest areas in the study of English medieval literature, both in Britain and in America. Rosemary Woolf's widely anticipated 1968 study *The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages* appeared in the same year as the revised edition of Peter Dronke's *Medieval Latin and the Rise of European Love-Lyric*. Taken together the two works, one carefully developing the traditions within which the English lyric expressed itself, the other concerned with the extent to which the medieval lyric poet, writing in Latin, was in dialogue with those traditions so as to express his individuality and originality, seemed to generate interest in a genre which had not heretofore been regarded as central to what was then confidently regarded as the medieval literary canon. In the next year Sarah Appleton Weber's *Theology and Poetry in the Middle English Lyric*, and in 1972 two studies, Douglas Gray's *Themes and Images in the Medieval English Religious Lyric*, and Edmund Reiss' *The Art of the Middle English Lyric*, though proceeding from very different critical assumptions, provided a new view of the medieval English lyric, one which emphasized poetic individuality and aesthetic novelty, and which revealed an attachment and contribution to a European poetic tradition and convention which had not been much noted before. Both the decade itself and the energy which had offered so many new readings of English lyrical texts seemed to give way to other, sometimes theoretical concerns after the publication of Gray's *Selection of Religious Lyrics*, which appeared in the Clarendon Medieval and Tudor Series in 1975.

In the intervening thirty years other studies have appeared, and, no doubt at least in part because of the work I have just described, the lyric is no longer as marginalized as it once was, though it is certainly possible to believe that the emphasis on individual poetic accomplishment present in most of the studies I have just cited had the effect of limiting its appeal to those whose theories, from the late 1970s on, led elsewhere. Recently, though, it has become possible again

to speak without apology both of literature and of individual poetic practice, a circumstance which has led to a kind of lyrical *renovatio*, in which studies in gender and culture, among others, have led to a reauthorization of these extraordinary texts, having discovered in them modes and means of expression not elsewhere available, and also a richness of implication and nuance which had appealed as well to the earlier investigators. This new interest has, in recent years, reached out to the study of carols and ballads, as the question of their medieval roots, uses, and practices is raised again, and the traditional literary-historical formulations are called into question. This edition is a contribution to these new concerns and these new readings, and, while not at all ignoring earlier readings and contributions, seeks to engage students in the serious study of the extraordinarily interesting texts printed here.

In the course of my work I have incurred many debts, not all of them financial. I am most grateful to the libraries which preserve the manuscripts upon which this edition is based for permission to work in their collections, and to publish edited versions of texts based upon their holdings, and I am equally grateful to the librarians who assisted me in my labors. These include: Balliol College Library, Oxford; the Bodleian Library, Oxford; the British Library, London; Cambridge University Library; the Eton College Library, Windsor; Gonville and Caius College Library, Cambridge; Lambeth Palace Library, London; Trinity College Library, Cambridge; and Worcester Cathedral Library. I am also grateful to the Archive of Folk Culture and to the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress for assistance with my study of the ballad. More personally, my greatest debt is to Douglas Gray, J. R. R. Tolkien Professor of English Literature Emeritus at Oxford, not only for generously reading and commenting upon my manuscript, but, more than 30 years earlier, for introducing me both to the study of the medieval English lyric itself, and to those who were speeding its examination, in particular Peter Dronke, Professor of Latin Literature Emeritus at Cambridge, who kindly gave permission to print his translation of "Foebus abierat" in the introduction to part IX, and the late pioneering scholars Rossell Hope Robbins and Rosemary Woolf. The sense of innovation and discovery which attended upon those early days resides still in the lyrics themselves, and in the work which these scholars produced, and seems to me available as well to any who actively engage them.

Other debts are less direct but not less real. I am particularly grateful to Thomas Niles of New York and to John Edward Niles of Silver Spring, Maryland, who together hold the copyright of *The Ballad Book of John Jacob Niles*, for permission to publish the American versions of five ballads which appear in part IX below, and which their father, the great American student of ballads John Jacob Niles, collected in Appalachia during the 1930s. The copyright for these ballads, as for the *Ballad Book* itself, remains with them. I am also most grateful to Eudora

Richardson of Georgetown for having introduced me to Thomas Niles, some years since. At Georgetown I have profited from the work and advice of Sarah McNamer, herself a distinguished student of the Middle English lyric, and also from the general counsel and good example of my closest colleagues in medieval literature at Georgetown, Jo Ann H. Moran Cruz, Penn R. Szittyá, and Kelley M. Wickham-Crowley. At Georgetown too I have benefitted from the often perceptive comments of students in many different courses, and it was the evident interest of these students in lyrics and ballads in particular that encouraged me to proceed with this edition. In Oxford my work has been assisted, in ways too many and various to record, by Helen Cooper, P. Jeremy Fairhead, Neil Ferguson, OP, Rev. Dr Harriet Harris, Laura C. H. Hoyano, Jörn Leonhard, and Bernard O'Donoghue. In London my greatest personal debts are to my friends Charlotte and Mossman Roueché, to whom I have dedicated the volume.

This edition was begun in 2000 when I was a Keeley Visiting Fellow at Wadham College, Oxford, and I warmly record my gratitude to the then-Warden, the late John Flemming, and to all the fellowship, for my election and support. At Georgetown I am also grateful to David W. Lightfoot, Dean of the Graduate School, for supplying a grant-in-aide, which helped. I am further grateful to Andrew McNeillie, former Literature Editor at Blackwells, and to Emma Bennett and Karen Wilson, also of Blackwells, for their help and support with this project. I am most grateful as well to Anna Oxbury, whose evident knowledge and interest was of real help in the editorial process.

Georgetown University,
Washington, D.C.

Abbreviations

The following works are cited throughout, the earlier editions at the beginning of each poem:

Allen: Hope Emily Allen, ed., *English Writings of Richard Rolle, Hermit of Hampole* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1931).

Ballad Book: *The Ballad Book of John Jacob Niles* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961, rpt. New York: Dover Publications, 1970).

Brown A: Carleton Brown, ed., *English Lyrics of the XIIIth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932, rpt. 1965).

Brown B: Carleton Brown, ed., *Religious Lyrics of the XIVth Century*, second edition, revised by G. V. Smithers (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957).

Brown C: Carleton Brown, ed., *Religious Lyrics of the XVth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939, rpt. 1962).

Brown Collection: *The Frank G. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore*, Newman Ivey White, general editor, 7 volumes (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1952–64). The ballads are cited from volume 2: *Folk Ballads from North Carolina*, Henry M. Belden and Arthur Palmer Hudson, eds. (1952). Music for the ballads is printed in volume 4 (1957).

Child: Francis James Child, ed., *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, 5 volumes (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin; London: Henry Stevens Sons and Stiles, 1882–1898, rpt. New York: Dover Publications, 1965).

Coffin: Tristram Potter Coffin, *The British Traditional Ballad in North America*. Revised edition with a supplement by Robert deV. Renwick. Bibliographical and Special Series, *The American Folklore Society* (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1977).

Davies: R. T. Davies, ed., *Middle English Lyrics: A Critical Anthology* (London: Faber and Faber; Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1964).

- Duncan A: Thomas G. Duncan, ed., *Medieval English Lyrics, 1200–1400*, Penguin Classics (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1995).
- Duncan B: Thomas G. Duncan, ed., *Late Medieval English Lyrics and Carols, 1400–1530*, Penguin Classics (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2000).
- Gray: Douglas Gray, ed., *A Selection of Religious Lyrics*, Clarendon Medieval and Tudor Series (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975; rpt. Exeter, 1992).
- Greene: Richard L. Greene, ed., *The Early English Carols*, second edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977).
- IMEV: *The Index of Middle English Verse*, Carleton Brown and Rossell Hope Robbins, eds. (New York: Columbia University Press for The Index Society, 1943).
- Randolph: *Ozark Folksongs*, Vance Randolph, ed., 4 volumes, revised edition (Columbia, Mo. and London: University of Missouri Press, 1980). The ballads are cited from volume 1: *British Ballads and Songs* (1980).
- Reimer: Stephen R. Reimer, ed., *The Works of William Herebert, OFM*, Studies and Texts 81 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1987).
- Robbins: Rossell Hope Robbins, ed., *Secular Lyrics of the XIVth and XVth Centuries*, second edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955).
- SC: Falconer Madden, et al., *A Summary Catalogue of Western Manuscripts in the Bodleian Library at Oxford*, 7 volumes in 8 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1895–1953).
- Supplement: *Supplement to the Index of Middle English Verse*, Rossell Hope Robbins and Jonathan L. Cutler, eds. (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965).
- Whiting: Ella Keats Whiting, ed., *The Poems of John Audelay*, OS 184 (London: Oxford University Press for the Early English Text Society, 1931).

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Introduction

This is an anthology of medieval poetry both interesting and excellent, for which I have made the reader's imaginative understanding of the text and context my first consideration in selecting, editing, and commenting upon each of the poems which follow, while keeping in mind the critical and philological requirements of a student of medieval texts. Remembering that "Best sentence and moost solaas" was Chaucer's standard for the tales his pilgrims were to tell, I have chosen poems which open to the reader important aspects of their art, religion, and culture, and which can be read with interest by students either beginning or continuing their examination of medieval literature. These poems offer an insight into the workings of medieval poetic practice, if only because the best English lyrics, ballads, and carols, are as good as any written or composed in Europe during the period, and when their attention to diction, word-play, idealized and empirical images are taken into account, they can be understood to have informed modern poetic practice, too. But they offer as well an insight into the workings of medieval culture itself, both in its religious practices and in its secular constructions.

Directions and Beginnings

Medieval Christianity, at once lyrical and severe, powerfully attuned to the responsiveness of the individual Christian and also to teachings concerning Christ, his mother, the Church, and the saints, is fully represented here, as are the joy and apprehension, the freedom and doubt, the celebration and the reflectiveness which attended upon medieval Christian life. In a way difficult to describe but less difficult to understand, the medieval religious lyric, particularly in the vernacular, speaks directly of those values, attitudes, and assumptions which made up the religious life of the articulate, faithful, and devout individual Christian. It is usual,

especially in the study of pre-Reformation British religiousness, to turn to the ubiquitous handbooks of spiritual guidance, written usually by men and as often by clerics, in order to discern and define the states – or more often the stages – of spiritual development, and the kinds of mental engagement practiced. But religious lyrics equally, and often with greater responsiveness, reveal and even define those attitudes. We sometimes find in these lyrics the studied, even pedagogical introduction to the practice of devotion present in the devotional handbooks. But more often what emerges is the result of that engagement, one which sometimes reveals or encodes the birth or the growth of religious attitudes. That development is often less reasoned than those which the handbooks taught, and usually is closer in tone to what the fourteenth-century English mystic Richard Rolle recorded of his revelations, which came to him “suddenly and unknown.” This same sense of *disconnection* is present too in the leaps of mind and of spirit which certain of the lyrics record, and in the sense of wonder many reveal. In their own way then, the best of the vernacular religious lyrics bring us as close to an understanding of the actual practice, celebration, and experience of medieval religiousness as any other source, though given their poetic origins, the understanding which they hold out is always in some sense conditional.

But all was not religion. Medieval secular life flourishes among these lyrics too, at once witty and bawdy, celebratory and ironic, bitter and joyous. For all of their apparently universal appeal, many of these secular lyrics originated in, or at least were associated with, courtly and noble audiences, as were many of the manuscripts which still preserve them. Secular lyrics sometimes echo, in homage or in irony, religious ones, though they carve out their own way too, and the tradition of secular lyric poetry and secular songs written in English, which is now so universal, begins in the late medieval period. For reasons of culture and audience, secular lyrics lent themselves to parody and satire more easily than religious lyrics did, though in the hands of a master, like Geoffrey Chaucer, the parody could take on a life of its own, enriching the language and the poetic tradition both. It was in this period, after all, that secular lyric poetry made its appearance in English, preparing the way for the rich and powerful mixture of love, politics, sorrow, celebration, angst, irony, joy, and detachment which register so powerfully in lyrics, songs, and poems today.

I have divided this anthology into ten parts, and purposefully, I have not put all themes or like poems together. Thus, carols can be found elsewhere than in their assigned section, religious themes erupt in the midst of love poetry, and allusions to sex register throughout. It is important to remember how very diverse and also how varied Middle English lyrics are, whether secular or religious, and also how widespread they and their influence proved to be. Attitudes toward the uses of learning (many of the authors were clerics, both young and old), toward

the meaning of Christian life, toward the practice of poetry, toward love and toward sex, change from poet to poet, from lyric to lyric. It is true that certain of the poems echo – and occasionally resist – each other, but it is equally true that in doing so they identify and define values, attitudes, and assumptions which at once spring from and inform the poetic practices in which their makers engaged.

The Medieval Lyric

There are quite literally thousands of lyrics preserved in English from the medieval period, and although their connection to Old English poems is still a matter of discussion and even dispute,¹ the genre as a whole appears to have taken on a new life, if not actually sprung into being, in the thirteenth century, rather later than elsewhere in Europe, but at a time when the friars, new religious orders like the Franciscans, followers of St. Francis of Assisi (1182–1226), and Dominicans, followers of St. Dominic (1172–1221), dedicated themselves not to living in isolation in monasteries (Christian monasticism first appeared in Egypt and Palestine late in the third century, though its most important growth took place under the influence of St. Benedict of Nursia (d. 550)), but rather to preaching the word of God to the people, whom they thus sought to lead to salvation. Many lyrics were undoubtedly written for this commendable purpose, though friars wrote lyrics as well for each other and simply for the joy of making poetry, while others who were not friars also took up the practice, inscribing, singing, and reciting poems, both secular and religious, many of which, thankfully, found their way into medieval manuscripts, and have so come down to us.²

The initial explosion of Middle English lyric poetry was thus like a Russian spring, yet like a real Russian spring, it was the product of deep roots, which were founded in Old English linguistic and even poetic traditions, in Latin literature and Christian liturgy, in vernacular music, song, and dance, in theological nuance and doctrine, and in philosophical teaching and distinction. Its origins reached back to the beginnings of Christianity itself, when songs were sung in imitation of the hymns inscribed by Homer, Pindar, and many others in honor of the Greek and Roman gods. Early accounts of devout Christian practices, in particular one contained in a letter Pliny the Younger (c.61–112) addressed to the emperor Trajan concerning his examination of some Christians whom he had in custody, records those Christians singing in the pre-dawn hours (*ante lucem*) songs or hymns “to Christ as to a god” (*Christo quasi deo*) (*Ep.* 10.96). Hilarius of Poitiers (d. 368), drawing upon Byzantine tradition, composed, perhaps for the first time in the West, a *Liber Hymnorum*, to be used in services by the congregation. Wherever begun, this practice was taken up and advanced by, among others, Ambrose of Milan (d. 397), who, as Chadwick remarks,

popularized the congregational hymn “in order to identify with the values of the *plebs*,” since singing involved both genders, and the rich and the poor alike.³

The moral and psychological support which the congregational singing of hymns provides proved particularly helpful during a period of difficulty with the authorities, and it is possible that the practice took root, or at least developed apace, around about the time of the Arian persecution in 386. In any event, a celebrated follower of Ambrose, Augustine of Hippo (354–430) specifically records in his *Confessions* (IX 7.15) that it was during such a time that “the decision was taken to introduce hymns and psalms [*hymni et psalmi*] sung after the custom of the eastern Churches [*secundum morem orientalium*], to prevent the people from succumbing to depression and exhaustion. From that time to this day the practice has been retained and many, indeed almost all your flocks, in other parts of the world [*et per cetera orbis*] have imitated it.”⁴ The roots of the religious lyric were in song, and the roots of religious song may have been there.

The Byzantine musical tradition which came eventually to feed the West was itself the product of deliberate ecclesiastical policy and studied artistic innovation. “The great basilica churches of the eastern world had become places of newly elaborated liturgical drama,” Peter Brown writes. “They offered a form of ‘sacred theater’ which strove to rival the ever-present ‘Church of Satan’ – the ancient theater and the Hippodrome. The hymns of Romanos Melodes, a Syrian immigrant to Constantinople who wrote in the days of Justinian, filled the churches with a new, high form of religious poetry. Borrowed from Syria, the chanted hymn, the *kontakion*, was a religious form as novel and as stunning, in its own way, as the Baroque oratorio.”⁵ These deep liturgical resonances fed a related sense of wonder and reverence which remains, changes having been made, in certain medieval religious lyrics, though secular lyrics from the same period sometimes oppose them explicitly. Still, their usual effect was to add a religious and musical resonance to the poems they informed, and to lend an air of orthodoxy to their tone – even when the poem itself was not specifically (or not at all) concerned to be orthodox.

It is good to remember that, sudden as the appearance of vernacular lyrics in thirteenth-century Britain may have been, they were already well established on the continent. In southern France the sophisticated, witty, and sharp songs of the troubadours begin in the eleventh century, and those of Guillaume IX (1071–1127) the seventh Count of Poitiers and the ninth Duke of Aquitaine, among the earliest which have come down to us, are so deeply invested in the persona of the poet, that unlike many of the English lyrics, it is hardly possible to ignore it. But certain other troubadour practices are not entirely dissimilar to what appeared in England. Thus Bernart de Ventadorn’s great lyric “*Car vei la lauzeta mover*” (“When I see the lark moving”) begins with the opening of the *Kyrie eleison* of the *Cum júbilo* mass.⁶ The easy linking of sacred song and secular convention