
MIDDLE ENGLISH LYRICS

The best of the Middle English lyrics, both religious and secular, seem remarkably fresh despite the fact that in both theme and form they are extremely conventional—at times almost stylized. The song of spring (the French *reverdie*), the love lyric and love complaint, the celebration of the Virgin Mary, the witty satire of women, the meditation upon Calvary—even the rollicking verse in praise of good food, good drink, and good living—are members of ancient genres, most of which had developed in France (some of the poems here printed closely parallel French lyrics). The poet's love in *Alison* is conventional even in her name, which is that of the Wife of Bath and of the heroine of the Miller's Tale, and the poet could have written her praise without ever having loved anything more feminine than books, which contained hundreds of ladies with Alison's charms. The fact that most of them would have been blue-eyed blondes might make love for a black-eyed brunette seem daringly realistic, but conventions set up anti-conventions which become as rigid as their older antitheses. Yet those who feel that such a lyric as *Alison* is the genuine complaint of a 13th-century English lad are right in their reactions as readers if wrong in fact, for the poem re-creates excellently the excitement of young love—and the time must have been full of young men yearning for black-eyed Alison.

It is the same with the spring songs. Spring returns in much the same literary terms in poem after poem, year after year, century after century, but the best medieval spring songs also vigorously reproduce the actual excitement of its natural return every March and April. For while every good poet brings something of his own observing to the tradition he is following, the writers of medieval lyrics are especially distinguished for their unself-consciousness and immediacy. Just as there was no consciousness on the part of the medieval man of anachronism—historical differences in time or place—there seems to have been no self-consciousness about his attempts to express himself in poetic terms: convention apparently liberated him, instead of oppressing him in the way it is often supposed to do. It is with perfect naturalness that the poet of *Sunset on Calvary* relives the scene, standing with the mother Mary beside the cross on which her Son hangs; or the poet of *I Sing of a Maiden* visualizes the mystery of the Virgin Birth in terms of the most natural of mysteries, the falling dew; or the poet of *Adam Lay Bound* cheerfully regards Adam's sin and its dire consequences as a kind of childish naughtiness and punishment that had the tremendous effect of bringing Christ to earth. The very simplicity of the poet's attitude achieves the most striking artistic results.

Several of the poems printed here depend on traditions that are no longer alive. *I Have a Young Sister* is a riddling poem that is reminiscent of the Old English riddles, though its clues, highly suggestive sexual symbols, are of a fully developed sophistication.

It is impossible to date the individual lyrics with any certainty. Perhaps the oldest is the *Cuckoo Song*, which is probably of the 12th century, and one may guess that the other spring songs are of the late 13th or early 14th; but some of the best of the lyrics (*I Sing of a Maiden*, *Adam Lay Bound*) may be of the 15th century. In general, we know only that the poems must be earlier than the manuscripts in which they appear, but because of the fact that an early lyric might have been reworded by a late scribe in such a way as to make it appear late, we can rarely tell by how many years any given lyric preceded the manuscript that records it. The sources of the texts printed here are too diverse to be listed. Spelling has been normalized as in the selections from Chaucer.

In Praise of Brunettes

- Some men sayen that I am blak.^o *dark*
 It is a colour for my prow.^o *profit*
 Ther^o I love ther is no lak;^o *where / fault*
 I may not be so whit as thou.
- 5 Blak is a colour that is good:
 So saye I and manye mo.^o *others*
 Blak is my hat, blak is my hood,
 Blak is al that longeth^o therto. *belongs*
- Blak wol do as good a neede^o *job*
 10 As the white at boord and bedde;
 And therto also trewe in deede,
 And therto I laye my lif to wedde.¹
- Wind and water may staine the white;
 Ywis^o the blak it may nat so; *indeed*
 15 Ther is the blak is al my delit:
 I am yholde^o by skile^o therto. *obliged / reason*
- Peper withoute it is wel blak;
 Ywis withinne it is not so:
 Lat go the colour and taak the smak.^o *savor*
 20 This I saye by me and mo.
- God save alle hem that beeth browne,
 For they beeth trewe as any steel.
 God keepe hem bothe in feeld and towne—
 And thanne shal I be kept ful weel.^o *well*

The Appreciative Drinker

- Here I was and here I drank:
 Farewel, Dame, and mikle^o thank. *much*
 Here I was and had good cheer,
 And here I drank wel^o good beer. *very*

A Charm Against the Night Goblin

- Saint George, Oure Lady^o knight, *Lady's*
 He walked day, he walked night,
 Till that he found that foule wight;
 And whan that he her found
 5 He her bete and he her bound,
 Til trewly ther her trouthe she plighte²

1. As a pledge.

2. "Trouthe she plighte": she promised.

That she sholde nought come by night
 Within sevene roode^o of lande space *quarter of an acre*
 Theras^o Saint George ynamed was. *where*

The Blacksmiths

Swart smeked³ smithes, smatered^o with smoke, *smuted*
 Drive me to deeth with din of here dintes.⁴
 Swich noise on nightes ne herde men never,
 What knavene cry⁵ and clatering of knockes.
 5 The cammede kongons⁶ cryen after “Cole, cole!”
 And blowen here bellewes that^o al here brain brestes.^o *so that / splits*
 “Huf, puf,” saith that oon, “haf, paf,” that other.
 They spitten and sprawlen and spellen^o many spellis;^o *reel off / charms*
 They gnawen and gnasshen, they grones togidere,
 10 And holden hem⁷ hote with here hard hamers.
 Of a bole-hide^o been here barm-felles,^o *bullskin / aprons*
 Here shankes been shakeled for the fire-flunderes.⁸
 Hevy hamres they han that hard been handled,
 Stark strokes they striken on a steeled stokke.⁹
 15 “Lus, bus, las, das,” routen^o by rowe— *sing*
 Swich doleful a dreem^o the devil it todrive.^o *music / drive away*
 The maister longeth a litel and lassheth a lesse,
 Twineth hem twain and toucheth a treble.¹
 “Tik, tak, hik, hak, tiket, taket, tik, tak,
 20 Lus, bus, lus, das!” Swich lif they leden,
 Alle clothe-meres,² Crist hem give sorwe!
 May no man for bren-wateres³ on night han his rest.

Earth Took of Earth

Erthe took of erthe erthe with wogh;
 Erthe other erthe to the erthe drogh;
 Erthe laide erthe in erthen through:
 Thanne hadde erthe of erthe erthe ynogh.

Spring Has Come with Love

Lenten is come with love to towne,
 With blosmen^o and with briddes roune,⁴ *blossoms*
 That al this blisse bringeth;
 Dayes-yēs⁵ in thise dales,

3. Black smoke-stained.

4. Noise of their blows.

5. Shouting of helpers.

6. Snub-nosed good-for-nothings.

7. Keep themselves.

8. Are covered with shin guards against the sparks.

9. I.e., an anvil.

1. These two lines mean, perhaps: “The master

smith draws out a half note and bangs out a quarter note, / mixes them together and gets to a treble.”

2. Mare-clothers, horse-armorer.

3. Water-burners: the smiths are constantly pouring water on hot metal to cool it.

4. Birds’ song.

5. Daisies (“day’s-eyes”).

- 5 Notes sweete of nightegales—
 Eech fowl song singeth.
 The threstelcok him threteth oo.⁶
 Away is here^o winter wo *their*
 When woderove⁷ springeth.
- 10 Thise fowles singeth fcrly fele⁸
 And whiteth on here winne wele,⁹
 That al the wode^o ringeth. *wood*
- The rose raileth hire rode,¹
 The leves on the lighte wode
 15 Waxen^o al with wille.^o *grow / joy*
 The moone mandeth hire blee,²
 The lily is lossum^o to see, *lovely*
 The fenil³ and the fille;
 Woweth^o thise wilde drakes, *woo*
 20 Males mirgeth^o here makes^o *gladden / mates*
 As stream that striketh stille;^o *flows continually*
 Moody meneth—so dooth mo:⁴
 Ichoot^o ich am oon of tho *I know*
 For love that liketh ille.⁵
- 25 The moone mandeth hire light,
 So dooth the seemly sunne bright,
 When briddes singeth breme.^o *loudly*
 Dewes donketh^o the downes,^o *dampen / hills*
 Deeres writh here derne rounes,
 30 Doomes forto deeme.⁶
 Wormes^o woweth under cloude,^o *snakes / stones*
 Wommen waxeth wonder proude,
 Sowel it wol hem seeme.⁷
 If me shal wante wille of oon,⁸
 35 This winne wele⁹ I wol forgoon,
 And wight^o in wode be fleme.^o *creature / exiled*

The Henpecked Husband

- How! hay! it is noon lees:^o* *lie*
I dar not^o saye whan she saith "Pees!"^o *nothing / hush*
- Yonge men, I warne you everichoon:^o *every one*
 Olde wives take ye noon.^o *none*
 For I myself have oon at hoom—
 I dar not sayn whan she saith "Pees!"

6. The thrush chatters constantly.

7. A sweet-smelling plant.

8. Wondrous many.

9. And warble of their joyous state.

1. Arrays her face.

2. Sends forth her complexion (i.e., her light).

3. Fennel, an herb; "fille" is probably also an herb.

4. Mournful things complain—so do others.

5. That is ill pleased because of love.

6. These lines probably mean: "Animals make their secret sounds / in order to settle their (love) affairs."

7. This seems to them good.

8. If I must do without my pleasure in one.

9. Joyous state.

- 5 Whan I come fro the plow at noon,
 In a riven^o dissh my mete is doon.¹ *broken*
 I dar not asken oure dame a spoon—
 I dar not sayn whan she saith “Pees!”
- If I aske oure dame breed,
 10 She taketh a staf and breketh myn heed,
 And dooth^o me runnen under the bed— *makes*
 I dar not sayn whan she saith “Pees!”
- If I aske oure dame fleissh,^o *meat*
 She breketh myn heed with a dissh:
 15 “Boy, thou art not worth a rissh!”^o *rush*
 I dar not sayn whan she saith “Pees!”
 If I aske our dame cheese,
 “Boy,” she saith al at ese,
 “Thou art not worth half a pese.”^o *pea*
 20 I dar not sayn whan she saith “Pees!”

A Bitter Lullaby

- Lullay, lullay, litel child, why weepestou so sore?
 Needes most^o thou weepe, it was y-yarked^o thee yore² *must / destined*
 Evere to live in sorwe, and siken^o everemore, *sigh*
 As thine eldren dide er this, whil they alives^o wore.^o *alive / were*
 5 Lullay, lullay, litel child, child, lullay, lullow,
 Into uncouth^o world ycomen so art thou. *strange*
- Beestes and thise fowles, the fisses in the flood,
 And eech sheef^o alives, ymaked of boon and blood, *creature*
 Whan they cometh to the world they dooth himself som good—
 10 Al but the wrecche^o brolo that is of Adames blood. *wretched / brat*
 Lullay, lullay, litel child, to care art thou bimet:^o *destined*
 Thou noost nat this worldes wilde bifore thee is yset.³
- Child, if it bitideth that thou shalt thrive and thee,^o *prosper*
 Think^o thou were yfostered up thy moder^o knee; *remember / mother's*
 15 Evere have minde^o in thyn herte of thise thinges three: *thought*
 Whennes thou comest, what thou art, and what shal come of thee.
 Lullay, lullay, litel child, child, lullay, lullay:
 With sorwe thou come into this world, with sorwe thou shalt
 away.
- Ne tristou⁴ to this world, it is thy fulle^o fo: *entire*
 20 The riche it maketh poore, the poore riche also;
 It turneth wo to wele^o and eek wele to wo: *well-being*
 Ne triste^o no man to this world whil it turneth so. *trust*

1. I.e., my food is served.

2. Long since.

3. You don't know that the wild beasts of this

world are set before you (i.e., preferred to you).

4. Don't trust.

Lullay, lullay, litel child, the foot is in the wheele:⁵
 Thou noost⁶ whether it wol turne to wo other to wele.

- 25 Child, thou art a pilgrim in wikkednesse ybore;^o *born*
 Thou wandrest in this false world—thou looke thee bifore:
 Deeth shal come with a blast out of a wel dim bore^o *cranny*
 Adames kinne down to caste—himself hath do bifore.⁷
 Lullay, lullay, litel child, so wo thee warp^o Adam *wove*
 30 In the land of Paradis through wikkenesse^o of Satan. *wickedness*
- Child, thou nart⁸ a pilgrim, but an uncouth^o gest: *unknown*
 Thy dayes beeth ytold,^o thy journeyes beeth ycest^o *numbered / determined*
 Whider thou shalt wenden, north other^o est,^o *or / east*
 Deeth thee shal bitide with bitter bale^o in brest. *pain*
 35 Lullay, lullay, litel child, this wo Adam thee wroughte
 Whan he the apple eet, and Eve it him bitoughte.⁹

5. I.e., Fortune's foot is turning the wheel on which all people must ride.

6. Don't know.

7. To cast down Adam's kin as Adam himself has

previously caused that it should be cast down.

8. Are not.

9. Gave it to him.