

“Life Is Sweet” Disgust for the world, no matter how pious the motives of those who express it, must to some extent deny the Bible’s statement that the work of the Creator is good, a fact that will be at least occasionally evident to all men’s senses. That earth’s beauty continued to inspire joy in medieval hearts is attested by such lyrics as *Spring Has Come*, which occur in profusion in all the vernaculars. On a more exalted plane, William Langland in *Piers Plowman* pays reverence to the divine Creator’s ordering of nature, and in so doing brings the reader a comforting sense of the closeness of God to His handiwork on earth. But while earth’s beauty is one proof of life’s potential goodness, a far more powerful one is young love. Such lyrics as *Alison*, of which there are a number, suggest that to try to teach hatred of the world to a lover is a lost cause; and the hero of the French romance *Aucassin and Nicolette* says that he will gladly pay for his earthly love with an eternity of hell. Other poets rebut the moralists with rollicking poems in praise of good eating and good drinking, and one—probably a monk—takes refuge from the austerities of life in splendid fantasy, in which he pictures an earthly paradise, *The Land of Cockaigne*, where all life’s forbidden pleasures are freely and joyously practiced.

[A Vision of Nature in *Piers Plowman*]¹

And sleeping I saw all this, and soon came Kind²
 And named me by name, and bade me note well,
 And through the wonders of this world wise to become.
 And on a mountain called Middle-earth, as it seemed to me then,
 5 I was fetched forth through natural forms to learn
 Of every creature, Kind, my Creator to love.
 I saw the sun and the sea and the sand after,
 And where birds and beasts by their mates were moving:
 Wild worms in woods, and wonderful fowls,
 10 With flecked feathers and of varied colors.

* * *

Birds I beheld that in bushes made nests—
 Had never man the mastery to make the smallest.
 I wondered from whom or where the magpie
 Learned to lay the sticks in which she lays and broods:
 15 Has no carpenter the craft to construct her nest so well;
 If any mason could make a mold for it, it would be much wonder.
 And yet I marveled more how many other birds
 Covered and concealed full craftily their eggs
 In marshes and in moors, in mires and waters,
 20 For fear of other fowls and for wild beasts,
 And for men should not find them when they from them went.

* * *

And soon I looked upon the sea, and so forth on the stars:
 I saw many marvels which may not be told now.
 I saw flowers in the field and their fair colors,
 25 And how among the green grass grew so many hues,

1. From the B Text: XI.312–21, 336–46, 354–59. 2. Nature.
 The translation is the editor’s.

And some sour and some sweet—wonder strange I thought it;
On their kind and their color to comment would take long.

*From Aucassin and Nicolete*³

[AUCASSIN RENOUNCES PARADISE]

In Paradise what have I to win? Therein I seek not to enter, but only to have Nicolete, my sweet lady that I love so well. For into Paradise go none but such folk as I shall tell thee now: Thither go these same old priests, and halt old men and maimed, who all day and night cower continually before the altars, and in the crypts; and such folk as wear old amices⁴ and old clouted frocks, and naked folk and shoeless, and covered with sores, perishing of hunger and thirst, and of cold, and of little ease. These be they that go into Paradise, with them have I naught to make. But into Hell would I fain go; for into Hell fare the goodly clerks, and goodly knights that fall in tourneys and great wars, and stout men at arms, and all men noble. With these would I liefly go. And thither pass the sweet ladies and courteous that have two lovers or three, and their lords also thereto. Thither goes the gold, and the silver, and cloth of vair, and cloth of gris,⁵ and harpers, and makers, and the prince of this world. With these I would gladly go, let me but have with me Nicolete, my sweetest lady.

*From The Land of Cockaigne*⁶

Far out in the ocean west of Spain
There is a land that's called Cockaigne.
There is no land beneath the air
With Cockaigne's excellence can compare.
5 Though Paradise is merry and bright,
Cockaigne is the fairer site.
What has Paradise got to show,
Where only fruit and green trees grow?
Though it has joy and pleasure sweet,
10 There's only apples for you to eat;
It has no hall, no bower, no bench,
And only water your thirst to quench;
There's little company there for you:
Elijah and Enoch are the only two;⁷
15 And well you know that men no more
Than a pair can be a dreadful bore.

In Cockaigne is food and drink
Got without trouble or sweat or swink.⁸

3. From Andrew Lang's translation. Aucassin makes this reply to someone who has warned him that if he finds his lost lady he will run the risk of sinning with her and thus of losing Paradise.

4. Cloaks worn by the clergy.

5. Gray and gray-and-white fur, probably of squirrels.

6. The translation is the present editor's, based on the text given in R. H. Robbins's *Historical Poems of the XIVth and XVth Centuries* (1959).

7. On Biblical evidence, they were the only mortals to have been "translated" alive to Paradise (Genesis v.24, II Kings xi.11-12, Hebrews xi.5).

8. Labor.

20 The food is choice, the drink is fine,
 At lunch, at tea time, or when you dine.
 There is no doubt, I make it clear,
 There is no land on earth its peer;
 Beneath the sky such joy and bliss
 No land can show to compare with this.

25 There is many a lovely sight:
 It's always day, there is no night;
 There is no ill will, grudge, or strife;
 There is no death, but only life;
 There is no lack of food or cloth;
 30 No man is there with woman wroth.

There is no serpent, wolf, nor fox,
 Horse nor sheep, cow nor ox;
 No pigs or goats does it enclose:
 There's no need there to hold your nose.
 35 Of stable or stud there is no trace:
 This is a wholly pleasant place.
 There is no fly, no flea, no louse,
 In clothes, in town, in bed, in house.
 There is no thunder, sleet, nor hail,
 40 No ugly worm or slimy snail.
 There is no storm, no rain, no wind;
 There is no man or woman blind;
 But all is pleasure, joy, and glee:
 Well is the man that there may be.

45 There are rivers great and fine,
 Of oil, of milk, of honey and wine.
 Water is used there for no thing
 Except to look at, and washing.
 There're fruits for every appetite,
 50 For all is comfort and delight.

Also there is an abbey fair:
 White and gray monks both live there.
 It has many bowers and halls—
 All of pastry are the walls,
 55 Of flesh, of fish, of choicest meat,
 The tastiest that man could eat.
 Of sugar cakes are the shingles all,
 Of church, of cloister, bower and hall;
 The pinnacles are fat puddings,
 60 Fit to be served to princes or kings.
 You may eat whatever you will:
 It is your right to take your fill,
 For all is common to young or old,
 To strong, to fierce, to meek, to bold.

65 So many and various are the birds,
 To name them all I lack the words—
 Thrastle, thrush, and nightingale,
 Woodpecker, partridge, lark, and quail,
 That are always singing with all their might—
 70 They keep it up both day and night.
 And another thing I mustn't omit:
 The geese, fresh roasted from the spit,
 Fly to the abbey—God it wot—
 And cry out, "Geese all hot, all hot!"
 75 They bring of stuffing a great supply,
 The best prepared that you could buy.

The tender larks, as is well known,
 Fly to a watering mouth on their own,
 All fixed up in an elegant stew,
 80 With a sauce designed to titillate you.
 There is no need to order drink:
 Just take enough without more swink.

When the monks have gone to Mass,
 All the windows that are of glass
 85 Turn themselves into crystal bright
 To give the monks a better light.
 And when the Mass has all been said
 And the prayers have all been read,
 The crystal turns back into glass,
 90 Of the same sort that it earlier was.

The younger monks, day upon day,
 After dinner go out to play:
 There is no hawk or bird so fast,
 Nor that better flies in the airy vast,
 95 Than the young monks, high of mood,
 Sailing on wings of sleeves and hood.

When the Abbot sees them soar,
 It always makes his pleasure more.
 But when the monks their flight prolong,
 100 He summons them to evensong.
 Yet still the monks come not to ground,
 But keep on flying round and round.

When the Abbot thus does learn
 That flying monks his summons spurn,
 105 He takes what maiden he can find
 And upward turns her white behind,
 And beats the tabors with his hand,
 To make his monks alight on land.

When his monks that sight espy,
 110 Down to the maiden quick they fly,
 And to the wench they too attend,

And spank her on her white rear end.
 And after all their thirsty swink,
 Meekly the monks go home to drink,
 115 And in an orderly formation
 Parade toward their night's collation.

* * *

A monk who will be stallion good
 And knows how best to set his hood,
 Shall have—and no man interfere—
 120 Twelve wives for each and every year.
 And not through grace, but all through right,
 With which to make himself delight.

And of these monks who can sleep best,
 And give his body greatest rest,
 125 Has cause to hope, with God's good aid,
 Soon Father Abbot to be made.

Whoso will come that land unto,
 Full great penance must he do.
 Seven whole years in hogs' manure
 130 He must wade—of that I'm sure—
 And all that time up to the chin:
 And thus he shall to that land win.

Lordings good and kind and true,
 May you to earth not say adieu
 135 Before you've had a proper chance
 To undergo all that penance,
 So that you may that land attain,
 And nevermore come here again.
 Let's pray to God it may so be;
 140 Amen, for holy charity.