

Middle English Lyrics

Although many Middle English lyrics have a beguilingly fresh and unselfconscious tone, they owe much to learned and sophisticated continental sources—the medieval Latin lyrics of the “Goliard poets” and the Provençal and French lyrics of the Troubadours and Trouvères. Most authors were clerics, aware of the similarities between earthly and divine love, and fond of punning in Latin or English.

The anonymity of the Middle English lyrics prevents us from seeing them as part of a single poet's oeuvre, as we can, for instance, with the poems of Chaucer, Dunbar, and Dafydd ap Gwilym. Rather, we must rely on more general contexts, such as genre, to establish relationships among poems. One of the most popular genres among the secular lyrics was the *reverdie*, a poem celebrating the return of spring. The early thirteenth-century *Cuckoo Song* (“Sumer is icumen in”) joyfully invokes the bird's song, and revels in the blossoming of the countryside and the calls of the animals to their young. More typical examples of the *reverdie* are *Alisoun* and *Spring*, whose male speakers ruefully contrast the burgeoning of nature with the stinginess of their beloveds; in *Spring*, flowers bloom, birds sing, animals mate—but one woman remains unmoved. In the genre of the love complaint, *My Lefe Is Faren in a Lond and Fowls in the Frith* express erotic loss and frustration with great succinctness.

Frustration was not the only attitude in Middle English love lyrics, however. A stance more boasting than adoring or despairing is taken in the witty lyric *I Have a Noble Cock*. Furthermore, clerical misogyny is expressed in *Abuse of Women*, which ostensibly praises women by absolving them of the vices—gossip, infidelity, shrewishness—typically attributed to them in satires against women; yet the refrain first praises women as the best of creatures but then undercuts this claim in Latin, which few women would have been able to understand.

Although most of the Middle English lyrics are in the male voice, there are a few “women's songs”—most likely written by men—which convey female experience. Occasionally these songs are invitations (for instance, the enigmatic *Irish Dancer*), but more often they are laments by an abandoned, and often pregnant, woman. A *Forsaken Maiden's Lament* is punctuated by the regretful refrain: “Were it undo that is ido, / I wolde bewar.” Two of the women's songs, while concluding with laments about pregnancy, stress the cleverness and charm of the clerical seducers, perhaps suggesting that churchmen were their audience as well as their authors. *The Wily Clerk* attributes a young man's skill at deception to his scholarly training, as does *Jolly Jankin*, whose clerk engages in multilingual wordplay, turning the “Kyrie Eleison” into a request for mercy from the woman herself, “Alison.”

The majority of Middle English lyrics were not secular but religious. Songs in praise of the Virgin Mary or Christ, however, employ the same erotic language as the secular lyrics, often in conjunction with typological figures linking events in the Old Testament to those in the New. In *Adam Lay Ibounden*, for instance, the poet follows a statement of the “fortunate Fall”—that Adam's sin was necessary to permit Christ's redemption—with a courtly compliment to the Virgin Mary. Similarly, *I Sing of a Maiden* draws on the typological significance of Gideon's fleece in Judges 6 (the soaking of the fleece by dew figuring Mary's impregnation by the Holy Spirit) while also employing the courtly imagery of a poet “singing of a maiden” who “chooses” Christ as her son, as if he were a lover. In a much longer poem in praise of the Virgin, the poet—casting himself as Mary's “knight” caught in the bonds of love—begs her mercy and also compliments her by contrasting her with her antitype, Eve.

Occasionally the Middle English religious lyric uses secular motifs and genres in a way that approaches parody. For instance, the second stanza of the Nativity poem *Mary Is with Child* resembles a pregnancy lament by a young girl. Mary, however, explains that her condition will be a source of joy rather than shame, when she will sing a lullaby to her “darling.”

This Middle English poet, far from blaspheming, was trying to humanize the mystery of the Nativity and relate it to daily life.

Other religious poems either celebrate Christ or reject the world. The poems to Christ, in their tenderness and immediacy, resemble those to Mary. In only four lines, *Now Goeth Sun Under Wood* evokes nature's oneness with Christ (the setting sun figuring the crucifixion) and the poet's empathy with the Virgin mother. Poets used erotic language in poems to Christ as well as those to Mary, as in *Sweet Jesus*, *King of Bliss* and *Jesus, My Sweet Lover*. Finally, in a different vein, the *Contempt of the World* questions the values of courtly life, with the “ubi sunt” (“where are”) motif. “Where beth they biforen us weren?” it asks, evoking the lovely women who enjoyed their paradise on earth and now suffer the eternal fires of hell.

The Cuckoo Song

Sumer is icumen in,
Lhude° sing, cuccu!
Groweth sed° and bloweth° med°
And springth° the wude° nu.
5 Sing, cuccu!

Awe° bleteth after lomb,
Lhouth° after calve° cu,
Bulluc sterteth,° bucke ferteth.
Murie° sing, cuccu!
10 Cuccu, cuccu,
Wel singes thu, cuccu.
Ne swik° thu naver° nu!

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

spring has come in
loudly / cuckoo
seed / blooms / meadow
grows / forest / now

ewe
lows / calf / cow
leaps / farts
merrily

cease / never

Spring

Lenten° is come with love to toune,
With blosmen° and with briddes° roune,
That all this blisse bringeth.
5 Dayeseyes° in this° dales,
Notes swete of nightegales—
Uch° foul° song singeth.
The threstelcok him threteth o;¹
Away is here° winter wo
When woderove° springeth.
10 This foules° singeth ferly fele,
And wliteth on here winne wele,²
That all the wode ringeth.

The rose raileth hire rode,
The leves on the lighte° wode
15 Waxen° all with wille.
The mone mandeth hire bleo,³

spring / town
flowers / birds' / song

daisies / these

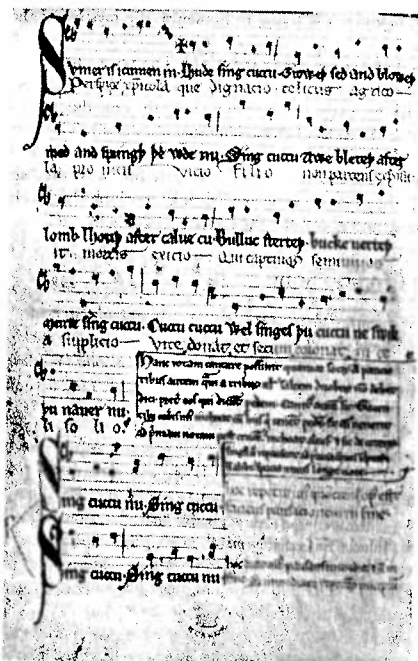
each / bird

their
woodruff / groups
birds / wonderfully much

puts on her rosy hue
bright
grow / pleasure

1. The song thrush contends always.
2. And chirp their wealth of joys.

3. The moon sends forth her light.



This page contains the words and music to one of the earliest and best loved of Middle English lyrics, *The Cuckoo Song* ("Sumer is icumen in"). The lyric is a *reverdie*, or spring song, but its joyful description of nature's rebirth is given a more sober allegorical interpretation by the interlinear Latin gloss, apparently to be sung to the same tune. The gloss parallels the lyric's celebration of the reawakening landscape with an account of the "heavenly farmer" (*celicus agricola*) whom "rot on the vine" (*vitis vicio*) leads to sacrifice his Son. The fact that the manuscript was copied at a monastery reminds us that this song, like much other early English secular poetry, survives only because it was seen to have religious relevance.

- The lylie is lossom⁴ to seo,
 The fenil⁵ and the fille.⁶
 Woves⁷ this⁸ wilde drakes;
 Miles murgeth here makes,⁴
 Ase strem that striketh⁸ stille.⁵
 Mody meneth, so doth mo;⁵
 Ichot⁹ ich⁹ am one of tho,⁹
 For love that likes⁹ ille.
- 25 The mone mandeth hire light;
 So doth the semly⁹ sonne bright,
 When briddes singeth breme.⁹
 Deawes donketh the dounes;⁶
 Deores with here deme rounes,⁷
 Domes for to deme;⁸
 Wormes woweth under cloude,⁹
 Wimmen waxeth⁹ wounder⁹ proude,
- lovely / see
 fennel / chervil
 woo / these
 flows / softly
 I know / I / those
 pleases
 lovely
 loudly
 the soil
 become / wondrously

4. Beasts gladden their mates.
 5. The high-spirited man mourns, so do others.

6. Dew moistens the downs (hills).
 7. Animals with their secret whispers.
 8. Speak their opinions.

- 35 So well it wol hem⁹ seme.⁹
 If me shall wonte wille of on,⁹
 This wunne weole⁹ I wole forgon
 And wight⁹ in wode be fleme.⁹

Alisoun

- Bitwene Mersh⁹ and Averil⁹
 When spray⁹ biginneth to springe,⁹
 The lutel⁹ fowl⁹ hath hire⁹ will
 On⁹ hire lud⁹ to singe.
 5 Ich⁹ libbe⁹ in love-longinge
 For semlokest⁹ of alle thinge:
 He⁹ may me blisse bringe;
 Ich⁹ am in hire haundoun.⁹
 An hendy hap ich hadde ihent!¹
 10 Ichot⁹ from hevene it is me sent;
 And alle wimmen my love is lent,⁹
 And light⁹ on Alisoun.²

- On hew⁹ hire her⁹ is fair inogh,
 Hire browe browne, hire eye blake;
 15 With lossom chere he on me logh,³
 With middel⁹ small and well imake.⁹
 Bote⁹ he me wolle⁹ to hire take
 For to ben hire⁹ owen⁹ make,⁹
 Longe to liven ichulle⁹ forsake,⁹
 20 And feye⁹ fallen adoun.
 An hendy hap ich hadde ihent!
 Ichot from hevene it is me sent;
 From alle wimmen my love is lent,
 And light on Alisoun.

- 25 Nightes⁹ when I wende⁹ and wake—
 Forthy min wonges waxeth won⁴—
 Levedy,⁹ all for thine sake
 Longinge is ilent⁹ me on.
 In world nis non so witer⁹ mon
 30 That all hire⁹ bounte⁹ telle con:
 Hire swire⁹ is whittore⁹ then the swon,
 And feirest may⁹ in toune.
 An hendy hap ich hadde ihent!
 Ichot from hevene it is me sent;

9. If I shall lack the pleasure of one.
 1. A fair destiny I have received.
 2. Alisoun is a stock name for a country woman, shared by the wife in Chaucer's *Miller's Tale* and by his Wife of Bath.
 3. With lovely manner she laughed at me.
 4. Therefore my cheeks become pale.

to them / appear
 wealth of joys
 quickly / exile

March / April
 twig / grow
 little / bird / her
 in / language
 I / live
 fairest
 she
 I / power

I know
 taken away
 settled
 color / hair

waist / made
 unless / will
 her / own / mate
 I will / refuse
 doomed

at night / turn

lady
 come
 wise
 her / excellence
 neck / whiter
 maiden

35 *From alle wimmen my love is lent,
And light on Alisoun.*

Ich am for wowing all forwake,⁵

Wery so water in wore⁶

Lest eny reve⁷ me my make⁸

40 Ich habbe iyerned yore.⁷

Betere is tholien while sore⁸

Then mournen evermore.

Geynest⁸ under gore,⁸

Herkne to my rou!⁸

45 *An hendy hap ich habbe ihent!*

Ihot from hevене it is me sent;

From alle wimmen my love is lent,

And light on Alisoun.

I Have a Noble Cock

I have a gentil^o cok,

Croweth^o me day;

He doth^o me risen erly,

My matins for to say.

5 I have a gentil cok,

Comen he is of gret;^o

His comb is of red corel,

His tayel is of jet.

I have a gentil cok,

10 Comen he is of kinde;^o

His comb is of red corel,

His tail is of inde.^o

His legges ben of asor,^o

So gentil and so smale;

15 His spores^o arm of silver white,

Into the worthe-wale.^o

His eynen^o arm of cristal,

Loken^o all in aumber;

And every night he percheth him

20 In min ladyes chaumber.

My Lefe Is Faren in a Lond¹

My lefe is faren in a lond²—

Alas! why is she so?

And I am so sore bound

5. I am for wooing all sleepless.

6. Weary as water in a troubled pool.

7. (For whom) I have long yearned.

8. It is better to suffer sorely for a time.

1. Chaucer alludes to this poem in *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, line 113.

2. My beloved has gone away.

I may nat com her to.

She hath my hert in hold,^o

Where-ever she ride or go,

With trew love a thousandfold.

Fowls in the Frith

Foweles^o in the frith,^o

The fisses^o in the flod,^o

And I mon^o waxe^o wod.^o

Mulch^o sorw^o I walke with

For beste¹ of bon^o and blod.^o

Abuse of Women

Of all creatures women be best:

Cuius contrarium verum est.¹

In every place ye may well see

That women be trewe as tirtil^o on tree,

Not liberal^o in langage, but ever in secree,^o

And gret joye amonge them is for to be.

Of all creatures women be best:

Cuius contrarium verum est.

The stedfastnes of women will never be don,

So jentil, so curtes they be everychon,²

Meke as a lambe, still as a stone,

Croked^o nor crabbed find ye none!

Of all creatures women be best:

Cuius contrarium verum est.

15 Men be more cumbers^o a thousand fold,

And I mervail how they dare be so bold

Against women for to hold,

Seeing them so pacient, softe, and cold.

Of all creatures women be best:

Cuius contrarium verum est.

For tell a woman all your counsaile,

And she can kepe it wonderly well;

She had lever go quik^o to hell,

Than to her neighbour she wold it tell!

Of all creatures women be best:

Cuius contrarium verum est.

1. Either "best" or "best."

1. Latin for "The opposite of this is true."

2. So well-bred, so courteous is each one.

For by women men be reconciled,
 For by women was never man begiled,
 For they be of the condicion of curtes Grisell,³
 For they be so meke and milde.

*Of all creatures women be best:
 Cuius contrarium verum est.*

Now say well by^o women or elles be still,
 For they never displeed man by ther will;
 To be angry or wroth they can^o no skill,
 For I dare say they think non ill.

about

have

*Of all creatures women be best:
 Cuius contrarium verum est.*

Trow^o ye that women list^o to smater,^o
 Or against ther husbondes for to clater?
 Nay, they had lever^o fast bred and water,
 Then for to dele in suche a mater.

think / like / chatter

rather

*Of all creatures women be best:
 Cuius contrarium verum est.*

Though all the paciens in the world were drownd,
 And non were lefte here on the ground,
 Again in a woman it might be found,
 Suche vertu in them dothe abound!

*Of all creatures women be best:
 Cuius contrarium verum est.*

To the tavern they will not go,
 Nor to the alehous never the mo,^o
 For, God wot,^o ther hartes wold be wo, knows
 To spende ther husbondes money so.

more
knows

*Of all creatures women be best:
 Cuius contrarium verum est.*

If here were a woman or a maid,
 That list for to go freshely arayed,
 Or with fine kirchers^o to go displayed,
 Ye wold say, "They be proude": it is ill said.

kerchiefs

*Of all creatures women be best:
 Cuius contrarium verum est.*

The Irish Dancer

Ich^o am of Irlaunde,
 And of the holy londe
 Of Irlande.

I

Gode^o sire, pray ich thee,

good

3. Griselda, the long-suffering wife of Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale*; the tale ends with the observation that there are no more Griseldas left.

For of sainte^o charitee,^o
 Come and daunce wit me
 In Irlaunde.

holy / charity

A Forsaken Maiden's Lament

*Were it undo^o that is ido,^o
 I wolde bewar.*

undone / done

I lovede a child^o of this cuntree,
 And so I wende^o he had do me;
 Now myself the sothe^o I see,
 That he is far.

young man
thought
truth

*Were it undo that is ido,
 I wolde bewar.*

He seide to me he wolde be trewe,
 And change me for non other newe;
 Now I sikke^o and am pale of hewe,
 For he is far.

sigh

*Were it undo that is ido,
 I wolde bewar.*

He seide his sawes^o he wolde fulfill:
 Therefore I lat him have all his wille;
 Now I sikke and morne stille,^o
 For he is far.

promises

quietly

*Were it undo that is ido,
 I wolde bewar.*

The Wily Clerk

A, dere God, what I am fayn,
 For I am madyn now gane!¹

This enther^o day I mete a clerke,^o
 And he was wily in his werke;
 He prayd me with^o him to herke,^o
 And his counsel all for to layne.^o

other / cleric

to / listen

conceal

A, dere God, what I am fayn,
 For I am madyn now gane!

I trow^o he coud^o of gramery;²
 I shall now telle a good skill^o why:
 For what I hade siccurly,^o
 To warne^o his will had I no mayn.^o

believe / knew

reason

certainly

resist / strength

1. Ah, dear God, how worthless I am. / For I am no longer a virgin.

2. Latin learning, or magic—indicates the magical power which the speaker attributes to the clergy, who could read Latin.

A, dere God, what I am fayn,
For I am madyn now gane!

15 Whan he and me brou^t un^o us the schete,^o
Of all his will I him lete;^o
Now will not my girdil met^o—
A, dere God, what shall I sayn?

brought / on / sheet
permitted
meet

A, dere God, what I am fayn,
For I am madyn now gane!

I shall sey to man and page^o
That I have bene of pilgrimage.
Now will I not lete^o for no rage^o
With me a clerk for to pleyⁿ.

youth
permit / lust
play

25 A, dere God, what I am fayn,
For I am madyn now gane!

Jolly Jankin¹

"Kyrie,"^o so "Kyrie,"
Jankin singeth merie,^o
With "aleison."²

Lord
merrily

5 As I went on Yol^o Day in our procession,
Knew I joly Jankin be^o his mery ton.^o
Kyrieleison.

Yule (Christmas)
by / tone

"Kyrie," so "Kyrie,"
Jankin singeth merie,
With "aleison."

10 Jankin began the offis^o on the Yol Day,
And yet me thinketh³ it dos me good, so merie gan he say
Kyrieleison.

church service

"Kyrie," so "Kyrie,"
Jankin singeth merie,
With "aleison."

15 Jankin red the pistil^o full fair and full well,
And yet me thinketh it dos me good, as evere have I sell.^o
Kyrieleison.

Epistle
luck

"Kyrie," so "Kyrie,"
Jankin singeth merie,
With "aleison."

20 Jankin at the Sanctus craked^o a merie note,
And yet me thinketh it dos me good—I payed for his cote.
Kyrieleison.

uttered

1. "Johnny," a stock name. Also the name of Chaucer's Wife of Bath's fifth husband, who was a clerk.

2. "Kyrie eleison." Greek for "Lord have mercy upon us"

(an early part of the Mass). The poem puns on "Alison," supposedly the speaker's name (a stock female name).

3. It seems to me.

25 "Kyrie," so "Kyrie,"
Jankin singeth merie,
With "aleison."

Jankin craked notes an hundered on a knot,^o
And yet he hakked hem smaller than wortes⁴ to the pot.
Kyrieleison.

at once

"Kyrie," so "Kyrie,"
Jankin singeth merie,
With "aleison."

35 Jankin at the Angnus bered the pax-brede;⁵
He twinkeled, but said nout, and on min fot he trede.⁶
Kyrieleison.

"Kyrie," so "Kyrie,"
Jankin singeth merie,
With "aleison."

40 Benedicamus Domino,⁷ Crist fro^o schame me schilde.^o
Deo gracias,⁸ therto—alas, I go with childe!
Kyrieleison.

from / shield

"Kyrie," so "Kyrie,"
Jankin singeth merie,
With "aleison."

45

Adam Lay Ibounden

Adam lay ibounden,^o
Bounden in a bond;

bound

Four thousand winter
Thowt^o he not too long.

thought

5 And all was for an appil,
An appil that he took,
As clerkes finden wreten
In here^o book.

Ne hadde^o the appil take^o ben,

their
had not / taken

10 The appil taken ben,
Ne^o hadde never our lady
A ben hevene quen.¹

not

15 Blisded be the time
That appil take was!
Therefore we moun^o singen
"Deo gracias!"¹⁰

may
Thanks be to God!

4. Vegetables.

5. At the Agnus Dei (at the later part of the Mass), Jankin carried the pax-brede, an article signalling the exchanging of the kiss of peace.

6. He winked, but said nothing, and on my foot he stepped.

7. Let us bless the Lord.

8. Thanks be to God.

1. Have been heaven's queen.

I Sing of a Maiden

- I sing of a maiden
That is makeles,¹
King of alle kinges
To^o here^o sone she ches.^o
- 5 He cam also^o stille^o
Ther^o his moder was
As dew in Aprille
That falleth on the gras.
- 10 He cam also stille
To his moderes bowr
As dew in Aprille
That falleth on the flour.
- He cam also stille
Ther his moder lay
As dew in Aprille
That falleth on the spray.^o
- 15 Moder and maiden
Was never non but she:
Well may swich^o a lady
Godes moder be.
- 20

*for / her / chose**as / quietly
where**twigs**such*

In Praise of Mary

- Edi^o be thou, Hevene Quene,
Folkes froure^o and engles^o blis,
Moder unwemmed^o and maiden clene,
Swich^o in world non other nis.^o
- 5 On thee it is well eth^o sene^o
Of alle wimmen thu havest that pris.^o
My swete Levedy,^o her my bene,^o
And rew^o of me yit^o thy wille is.
- 10 Thu asteve^o so^o the dais-rew^o
The^o deleth^o from the derke night;
Of thee sprong a leme^o newe
That all this world haveth ight.^o
Nis non maide of thine hewe
So fair, so shene,^o so rudy, so bright.
- 15 Swete Levedy, of me thu rewe,
And have mercy of thine knight.
- Spronge^o blostme^o of one rote,^o
The Holy Ghost thee reste upon;
That wes for monkunnes^o bote,^o

*blessed
comfort / angels'
unspotted
such / is
easily / seen
prize
Lady / prayer
take pity / if**climb / as / dawn's ray
that / separates
light
illuminated**beautiful**sprung / blossom / root**mankind's / healing*

1. Spotless, matchless, and mateless.

- 20 And here^o soule to alesen^o for on.
Levedy milde, softe and swote,^o
Ic^o crye thee mercy: ic am thy mon,^o
Bothe to honde and to fote,
On alle wise^o that ic con.^o
- 25 Thu ert^o erthe^o to^o gode sede;
On thee lighte^o the Hevene^o dewes;
Of thee sprong the edi^o blede^o—
The Holy Ghost hire on thee sews.^o
Thu bring us ut of care, of drede,^o
- 30 That Eve bitterliche us brews.
Thu shalt us into Hevene lede—
Welle^o swete is the ilke^o dewes.
- Moder, full of thewes^o hende,^o
Maide, dreigh^o and well itaught,^o
- 35 Ic em in thine lovebende,^o
And to thee is all my draught.^o
Thu me shilde^o from the Fende,^o
Ase thu ert fre,^o and wilt^o and maught:^o
Help me to my lives ende,
And make me with thine sone isaught.^o
- 40 Thu ert icumen^o of heghe^o cunne,^o
Of David the riche king.
Nis non maiden under sunne
The^o mey be thine evening,^o
- 45 Ne that so derne^o loviye cunne,^o
Ne non so trewe of alle thing.
Thy love us broughte eche^o wunne:^o
Ihered^o ibe^o thu, swete thing!
- 50 Selcudliche ure Louerd it dighte!
That thu, maide, withute were,^o
That all this world bicluppe ne mighte,^o
Thu sholdest of thine boseme^o bere.^o
Thee ne stighte,^o ne thee ne prighte,^o
In side, in lende^o ne elleswhere:^o
- 55 That wes^o with full muchel^o righte,
For thu bere^o thine Helere.^o
- Tho^o Godes sune alighte wolde^o
On erthe, all for ure^o sake,
Herre^o teyen^o he him nolde
Thene^o that maide to ben^o his make:^o
- 60 Betere ne mighte he, thaigh^o he wolde,
Ne swetture thing on erthe take.

*their / deliver
sweet
I / man**way / can**art / earth / for
came down / of heaven
blessed / fruit
sowed it
fear**most / same**virtues / gracious
patient / taught
bonds of love
leaning
shield / Fiend
noble / will / can**reconciled**come / high / lineage**that / equal
secretly / can**eternal / bliss
praised / be**mate
could not encompass
womb / bear
stabbed / pricked
loins / elsewhere
was / much
bore / Savior**when / wished
our
higher / servant
than / be / mate
though*

1. Marvellously our Lord arranged it.

Levedy, ° bring us to thine bolde °
And shild ° us from helle wrake. °

Amen.

*Lady / abode
shield / vengeance*

Mary Is with Child

Nowel! nowel! nowel!

Sing we with mirth!

Christ is come well

With us to dwell,

By his most noble birth.

Under a tree

In sporting me,

Alone by a wod-side, °

I hard ° a maid!

That swetly said,

"I am with child this tide. °

"Graciously

Conceived have I

The Son of God so swete:

His gracious will

I put me till,

As moder ° him to kepe.

"Both night and day

I will him pray,

And her ° his lawes taught,

And every dell °

His trewe gospell

In his apostles fraught. °

"This ghostly ° case °

Doth me embrace,

Without despire or mock;

With my derling,

'Lullay, ° to sing,

And lovely him to rock.

"Without distress

In grete lightness

I am both night and day.

This heavenly fod °

In his childhod

Shall daily with me play.

"Soone must I sing

With rejoicing,

For the time is all ronne °

*side of a wood
heard*

time

mother

*hear
in every way*

carried

spiritual / act

lullabye

child

run out

1. A poem that opens with the speaker in the countryside overhearing a woman's lament raises expectations that we will hear a *chanson d'aventure*, with erotic connotations.

That I shall child, °
All undefil'd,
The King of Heven's Sonne."

give birth to

Sweet Jesus, King of Bliss

Swete Jesu, king of blisse,

Min herte ° love, min herte lisse, °

Thou art swete mid iwisse. °

Wo is him that thee shall misse!

*heart's / joy
certainly*

Swete Jesu, min herte light,

Thou art day withoute night,

Thou geve ° me streinthe and eke ° might

For to lovien thee aright.

may you give / also

Swete Jesu, min herte bore, °

In min herte thou sete ° a rote °

Of thy love, that is so swote, °

And leve ° that it springe mote. °

*remedy
may you set / root*

Swete Jesu, min herte gleem, °

Brightore then the sonnebeem,

Ihore ° thou were in Bedleheem;

Thou make me here thy swete drem. ¹

light

born

Swete Jesu, thy love is swete;

Wo is him that thee shall lete! °

Gif me grace for to grete °

For my sinnes teres ° wete. °

abandon

*cry
with tears / wet*

Swete Jesu, king of londe,

Thou make me fer ° understonde

That min herte mote ° fonde °

How swete beth ° thy love-bonde.

*to
may / experience
is*

Swete Jesu, Louerd ° min,

My lif, min herte, all is thin, °

Undo ° min herte and light ° therin,

And wite ° me from fendes ° engin. °

*Lord
yours
open / alight
guard / the Devil's / trick*

Swete Jesu, my soule ° fode,

Thin werkes beth ° bo ° swete and gode;

Thou boghtest ° me upon the rode; °

For me thou sheddest thy blode.

*soul's
are / both
redeemed / cross*

Swete Jesu, me reoweth ° sore

Gultes that I ha wrought yore; ²

Tharefore I bidde ° thin milse ° and ore; °

Mercy, Lord, I nul ° namore.

I regret

*beg / mercy / grace
will not*

1. May thou make me hear thy sweet melody.

2. The sins that I have committed in the past.

Swete Jesu, Louerd God,
Thou me boghtest with thy blod;
Out of thin herte orn° the flog;
40 Thy moder° it segh° that thee by stod.

ran
mother / saw

Swete Jesu, bright and shene,°
I preye thee thou here my bene°
Thourgh ernding° of the hevene quene,
That thy love on me be sene.°

beautiful
prayer
intercession
seen

45 Swete Jesu, berne° best,
With thee ich hope habbe° rest;
Whether I be south other° west,
The help of thee be me nest.°

of men
to have
or
nearest

Swete Jesu, well may him be
50 That thee may in blisse see.
With love-cordes drawe thou me
That I may comen and wone° with thee.

dwell

Swete Jesu, hevene king,
Feir and best of alle thing,
55 Thou bring me of° this longing
To come to thee at min ending.

out of

Swete Jesu, all folkes reed,°
Graunte us er we buen° ded
Thee underfonge° in fourme of bred,
60 And sethe° to hevene thou us led.°

counsel
are
to receive
later / may lead

Now Goeth Sun under Wood

Now goth° sonne under wod:°
Me reweth,¹ Marye, thy faire rode.°
Now goth sonne under tree:
Me reweth, Marye, thy sone and thee.

goes / forest
face

Jesus, My Sweet Lover

Jesu Christ, my lemmon° swete,
That diyedest on the Rode Tree,°
With all my might I thee besече,
For thy woundes two and three,
5 That also° faste mot° thy love
Into mine herte fitted° be
As was the spere into thine herte,
Whon thou soffredest deth for me.

lover
Cross

as / may
fixed

1. I feel pity for.

Contempt of the World

Where beth° they biforen us weren?
Houndes ladden° and hawkes beren,°
And hadden feld and wode;
The riche levedies° in here° bour,°
5 That wereden° gold in here tressour,°
With here° brighte rode:°

are
led / bore
ladies / their / bower
wore / head-dress
their / face

Eten and drounken and maden hem° glad;
Here lif was all with gamen° ilad.°
Men keneleden° hem° biforen;
10 They beren hem well swithe° heye° —
And in a twinkling of an eye
Here soules weren forloren.°

themselves
sport / spent
kneeled / them
very / high

lost

Where is that laughing and that song,
That trailing¹ and that proude gong,°
15 Tho° hawkes and tho houndes?
All that joye is went away,
That wele° is comen to weylaway,°
To manye harde stoundes.°

gait
those
prosperity / woe
times

Here° paradis hy° nomen° here,
20 And now they lien° in helle ifere;°
The fuit° it brennes° evere.
Long is "ah!" and long is "oh!"
Long is "wy!" and long is "wo!"
Thennes° ne cometh they nevere.

their / they / took
lie / together
fire / burns

thence

25 Drey° here, man, thenne, if thou wilt,
A litel pine that me thee bit;²
Withdraw thine eyes° ofte.
They° thy pine° be unrede,°
And° thou thenke° on thy mede,°
30 It shall thee thinken° softe.

suffer
comforts
though / pain / severe
if / think / reward
seem

If that fend,° that foule thing,
Thorou wikke roun, thorou fals egging,°
Nethere° thee haveth icast,
Up and be good chaunpion!
35 Stond, ne fall namore adoun
For a litel blast.

the Devil
counsel
down

Thou tak the rode° to° thy staf,
And thenk on him that thereonne gaf°
His lif that wes so lef.°
40 He it gaf for thee; thou yelde° it him;
Agein° his of that staf thou nim°
And wreke° him of that thef.°

cross / as
gave
dear
give back
against / take
avenge / thief

1. Walking with trailing garments.

2. A little pain that one enjoys.

- Of righte bileve° thou nim that sheld,
 The whiles that thou best° in that feld,
 45 Thin hond to strengthen fonde;°
 And kep thy of with° staves° ord,°
 And do° that traire seyen that word.
 Biget° that murie° londe.
- Thereinne is day withouten night,
 50 Withouten ende strengthe and might,
 And wreche° of everich fo;
 Mid° God himselven eche° lif,
 And pes° and rest withoute strif,
 Wele° withouten wo.
- 55 Maiden moder,° hevене° quene,
 Thou might and const and owest to bene°
 Oure sheld agein the fende;°
 Help us sunne° for to flen,°
 That we moten° thy some° iseen°
- 60 In joye withouten ende.

belief
 are
 try
 at / staff's / point
 make
 win / happy

punishment
 with / eternal
 peace
 happiness

mother / heaven's

Devil
 sin / flee
 may / Son / see

Dafydd ap Gwilym

Widely regarded as the greatest Welsh poet, Dafydd ap Gwilym flourished in the fourteenth century, during a period of relative peace between two failed rebellions—that of Llywelyn, the last native prince of Wales, in 1282, and that of Owain Glyn Dwr (Owen Glendower), in 1400. A member of an upper-class family whose ancestors had served the English king, he wrote for a sophisticated audience of poets and patrons.

Dafydd drew inspiration from both continental and Welsh poetry but not, significantly, from English. (Influence, if any, went the other way, for the Middle English Harley lyrics, composed near the Welsh border, may owe their intricate rhyme scheme and ornamental alliteration to Welsh poetry; see *Spring* and *Alisoun*, pages 551–54). Among continental poets, the Roman Ovid is the greatest influence, whether directly or through twelfth-century Latin adaptations. He is the only foreign poet whom Dafydd mentions by name (*One Saving Place*, line 39). Dafydd is also indebted to medieval French and Provençal lyric genres—the *aubade* (dawn song), and the *reverdie* (spring song)—as well as to the *fabliau*.

Much of Dafydd's charm comes from his undercutting and transforming inherited poetic conventions through his personal revelations. His most endearing device, the self-deprecating persona, has been compared to that of his younger contemporary, Geoffrey Chaucer. There is an important difference, however, for while Chaucer in early love poems like *The Parliament of Fowls* presents himself as a failed lover, Dafydd often boasts of his success. Although he gives comic accounts of romantic failures in such anecdotal poems as the *Tale of a Wayside Inn* (in which a tryst ends in disaster when he goes to the wrong room), these are as often due to external obstacles as to his own inadequacy. In fact, Dafydd's persona is much more akin to Ovid's than to Chaucer's. In *The Ruin*, Dafydd gives an erotic twist to the ascetic Christian motif of the impermanence of worldly pleasures (as in the Old English *Wanderer*, page 172,

3. You may and can and ought to be.

and the Middle English *Contempt of the World*, page 565) by recalling that he once made love in a cottage that is now abandoned. He concludes his complaint *The Winter* with the observation that he would not venture out in such snowy weather for the sake of any girl.

Dafydd's poetry owes an equal debt to the rich poetic tradition of Wales. He shows familiarity with characters from the Arthurian tradition, which was originally Celtic although transformed by French adaptations by the time it reached him. In the poems included here, he often emphasizes the local Welsh setting. In *One Saving Place*, for instance, he lists all the locales where he sought his beloved Morvith, or she refused him—places with names like Meirch, Eleirch, Rhiw, and Cwcell hollow. In *The Winter*, it is specifically in north Wales that he is assailed by snow. Finally, part of the humor in the *Tale of a Wayside Inn* derives from Dafydd's self-presentation as a "Welshman" whose accidental presence in their bedroom is discovered by three coarse Englishmen.

Dafydd's work is also distinguished by the poetic techniques of Welsh poetry, which are extraordinarily complex. His *cywyddau* (lyric poems) are written in the traditional lines of seven syllables, which rhyme in couplets, with the rhyming syllables alternately stressed and unstressed. He applies further ornamentation with a technique called *cyngghaned*—internal alliteration or rhyme, which he sometimes extends over many lines. Although such an intricate style is impossible to capture in English, Rolfe Humphries has tried to approximate it in the translations given here. Easier to reproduce are Dafydd's *dysfalu*—strings of fanciful comparisons, such as the metaphors for snow used in *The Winter*:

The snowflakes wander,
 A swarm of white bees.
 Over the woods
 A cold veil lies.
 A load of chalk
 Bows down the trees.

Will someone tell me
 What angels lift
 Planks in the flour-loft
 Floor of heaven
 Shaking down dust?
 An angel's cloak
 Is cold quicksilver.

In extending the virtuoso techniques of the native tradition, Dafydd set the standard for Welsh poets for the next two centuries.

Aubade¹

- It seemed as if we did not sleep
 One wink that night; I was sighing deep.
 The cruellest judge in the costliest court
 Could not condemn a night so short.
 5 We had the light out, but I know,
 Each time I turned, a radiant glow
 Suffused the room, and shining snow

1. The *aubade* or dawn song is a genre of love lyric with a long European tradition, in which two lovers lament the necessity of parting at dawn. Chaucer uses the *aubade*, as later do Shakespeare (in *Romeo and Juliet*) and John Donne (in *The Sun Rising*).