

*Edited with
an Introduction
and Commentary
by*

John C. Hirsh

Medieval Lyric

*Middle
English
Lyrics,
Ballads,
and
Carols*

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For *Charlotte* and *Mossman Roueché*

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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).

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

hardly began in England, though the forms which the practice took were sometimes more orthodox there, and often were resolved in favor of the sacred, not the other way.⁷

But precedence did not belong only to France. In Germany the Minnesang sprang to life in the twelfth century, and by the time Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) came to write his brilliant lyrics, there was already present in Italy a century-old tradition of vernacular lyric poetry waiting for him to adapt and transform. Indeed, the thirst for vernacular lyric poetry was so great in Italy that the poems themselves appear in the most unlikely of places. Among the official registers of contracts and wills in Bologna in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century at least one notary would fill in the blank spaces at the end of his official entries with songs which he either knew by heart or had recently heard sung in the street.⁸ These additions had a practical intention – they sought to prevent forgeries in the registers by the insertions of new entries in the otherwise blank spaces – but some of the songs thus recorded are not known from any other source, and so remind us of the extraordinary popularity which vernacular lyric poetry enjoyed throughout Europe, and how many lyrics, in all probability, we have lost. This European vernacular tradition, following hard upon the heels of the medieval Latin one, can encourage the student to ask serious questions of the English lyrics which follow, since many of the questions they pose concerning point of view, voice, intention, and the role of the poet, are intrinsic to the genre.⁹

The Middle English Lyric

Following the Norman invasion of 1066, English, as a literary language, became all but submerged in Latin and in Anglo-Norman, so that texts which previously would have been written in, or translated into, the spoken language of the English people became fewer in number – though it is important to remember that they never entirely disappeared. It is therefore both surprising and pleasing that Middle English lyrics, both secular and (especially) sacred, appear suddenly and in really extraordinary numbers in the manuscript record relatively early in the thirteenth century, and continue almost without interruption well into the sixteenth. The manuscripts cited in this edition suggest that during this period the audience expanded considerably, becoming decidedly more secularized, though never losing its religious base, both among the clergy and increasingly among the laity. The religious poems are informed throughout by traditions of devotion and prayer which are identifiably British, though these traditions, rooted in pre-conquest spirituality, were themselves modified under continental influence, and the poems in turn reflect these alterations as the centuries proceed, so that the religious poems in particular come to represent, often starkly, both

Christ's suffering at the time of his Passion and the almost requisite responsiveness of the individual Christian. There seems very little doubt that the entrance into England of the orders of friars, particularly the Franciscans, had a real effect upon the production of lyrical poetry, by providing religious, vocational, and ideological justification for the writing of religious poems, and by inculcating the sense that such poems could make both religious faith and the teachings of the Church attractive to the ordinary Christian.¹⁰

But it is clear too that, over the centuries, they came to draw on a large number of other sources, passages from Latin sermons and popular devotional texts like the *Prymer* among them.¹¹ Although it is very difficult to say with confidence exactly when many lyrics were written, there was both change and development in the Middle English lyric at several stages, and in particular from the middle of the thirteenth century onwards, not only by the addition of new themes, narrative variation, and continental influences, but also in the latitude which poets permitted themselves in developing authorial voice and address, and indeed in almost all forms of poetic expression. Throughout this period, many Middle English lyrics were indebted, directly or not, to literary developments begun in narrative art forms, whether in their narrative tone, the voice of their persona, or even in their development of symbolic notation. These influences could overlap and interact with existing practices, so that it is difficult, on the basis of internal evidence alone, to fix the priority of these developments with any confidence, or to say definitively that this change grew out of that practice.¹²

Although I have focused in this anthology on the great wealth of anonymous lyrics preserved from the late medieval period, I have included in the first two appendices examples of lyrics by known English authors: Geoffrey Chaucer, then as now universally recognized as the greatest of medieval English poets; William Herebert, OFM (d. c.1333), a learned Franciscan academic and preacher who was Lector in Theology at the Franciscan house in Oxford, 1317–19; Richard Rolle (d. 1349), a very well-known mystic from Yorkshire; and John Audelay, a blind Augustinian cleric and chaplain of the fifteenth century, all of whom adapted the lyric's traditional conventions when they themselves wrote new ones. Chaucer's own lyrics are all but *sui generis*, and repeatedly press at the boundaries of the very form of the lyric itself. The effective and affecting English lyrics of the sophisticated English Franciscan William Herebert, who was also the author of a number of polished Latin sermons, provide examples of the sort of formal, even conventional, but felt texts which a dedicated Franciscan preacher could produce. Though perhaps lacking the sophistication of his Latin sermons, the poems engage their audience by their attention to clear, even hard, diction and detail, and by their studied orthodoxy.

No less dedicated to his vocation and his art was the blind poet John Audelay, who may have been somewhat less intellectual than other such authors, but who

drew upon a depth of religious feeling which showed his familiarity with the English devotional tradition, even though he was capable of sounding secular themes within the same poem. Earlier, the mystic Richard Rolle had written lyrics which were equally religious, and not at all constrained by liturgical practice. Rolle's lyrics reveal the love-longing that the poet himself experienced for the divine, and reflect the holy love and "gastly gladness" (spiritual joy) which were integral to his mysticism. His lyrics though, like Herebert's, included a homiletic effect, which was as intended as the poetic. Indeed many poets in this period (possibly not Chaucer, however) would have regarded the distinction as meaningless, since the poems were finally constructed and concerned to praise and reveal the ultimate reality which was God.¹³

Relatively early, religious poems began to interact with secular ones, really to the advantage of both, so that in the later periods it is no longer possible to tell at the beginning of an English poem whether it will proceed to a sacred or a secular resolution. One other circumstance which informs English lyrics, and which they share with their continental counterparts, is the extent to which women, sometimes apparently excluded from medieval authorship, wrote them. It is interesting to speculate too that lyric poetry may have offered one of the first opportunities for women to articulate emotions like love and resentment, devotion and impatience, which is present in the Western literary canon. In her examination of lyric poems preserved in the Findern manuscript, four of whose poems I have printed here, including three in Appendix C, Sarah McNamer has pointed out that not only were many of the poems which the manuscript contains written by women, but that they are among the first "self-expressive" examples of lyric poetry in English, and constitute an "authentic woman's lament"; further evidence for the circumstances of women's authorship is now emerging in examinations of the books that they owned and read.¹⁴ One other factor which aided in women's authorship, however, and which has not yet been thoroughly explored, concerns the extent to which secular lyrics were written at court, and so enjoyed both courtly and noble associations; in both of these women figured importantly.

Certainly some of the manuscripts which contain the best secular lyrics were produced at court or were associated with it, and particularly from the time of King Richard II (1367–1400, reigned 1377–99), English poetry was widely read and written in the fourteenth-century English court, as many lyrics (and their manuscripts) testify.¹⁵ Past commentary did not emphasize courtly associations even of individual lyrics, perhaps partly because some of the very best collections of Middle English lyrics had their origins elsewhere. British Library manuscript, MS Sloane 2593, for example, now only a fragment of what was once a much longer early fifteenth-century manuscript, contains one of the very best collections of sacred and secular Middle English lyrics, but is clearly associated

with Bury St Edmunds, almost certainly with the great Benedictine abbey there. Likewise, the quite extraordinary collection made in the first third of the sixteenth century and now preserved at Balliol College, Oxford, as MS 354, which describes itself as “A Boke of dyueris tales and balettes [ballads] and dyueris Reconynges etc.,” was largely written by one Richard Hill, a prominent London grocer and merchant, though evidently one with an eye for good poetry and song, among other (more unusual) texts.¹⁶

Still, even though some manuscripts containing secular lyrics do have undeniably courtly associations, there seems not to have been the tradition in England, as there was in France, of the nobility causing lavish manuscripts to be written which preserved illustrated and decorated lyrical poems.¹⁷ But it was certainly the court’s influence that precipitated, perhaps even caused, the developed sense of an English nation, brilliantly reflected in carols like “The Agincourt Carol” (no. 49). Even without the courtly associations present in other lyrics, this carol achieves, in its repeated *Deo gracias*, a sense of the divine protection which King Henry V (1386–1422, reigned 1413–22) claimed for his 1415 victory, and which is present in so many Middle English lyrics and carols, but which is here attached to the actions of the state. Throughout the canon of Middle English lyric poetry, however, whether written by men or by women, clerics or courtiers, English lyrics display an empirical tendency, a somewhat limited employment of literary convention for its own sake, and, in many cases, a kind of tough liveliness which sets them apart from many of their European cousins, as their attention to diction and to public attitude lends them both power and interest.

Ballads, Carols, and One Other Point

This freshness, often accompanied by a sense of wonder, carries forward from the Middle English lyric into the (somewhat later) ballads and carols, which can be documented only from the late thirteenth century, so that any connection with songs sung in earlier periods, whether in Britain or elsewhere, must be largely conjectural. When exactly true folk ballads began is still in doubt, though it is possible to believe that, whatever their origin may have been (I have printed Peter Dronke’s translation of an early poem informed by balladic practice, along with an extended introduction to recent critical attitudes toward the study of ballads, as an introduction to Part IX, below), the genre itself took root in the period after the twelfth century when evidence for medieval song becomes more widely available. Still, it has in the past been argued that ballads developed relatively late in the medieval period, and were informed, in many cases deeply, by the circumstances of their recitation and oral transmission. In