

Beste of bon and blod: Embodiment in Middle English Lyric

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Abstract

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This dissertation argues that Middle English lyric is uniquely successful at connecting readers and hearers with our own bodies and with the bodies of medieval textual subjects. This effect occurs on the levels of content, form, and tone, although my emphasis is primarily on the formal components through which the connection is achieved, and my evidence is drawn largely from formal analysis of the songs. The methods through which the lyrics connect us with our bodies are sophisticated and include especially the carefully managed use of the linguistic category of deixis; nuanced, intentional portrayal and evocation of affect, or physically demonstrated emotion; and implicit and explicit reference (via form and content respectively) to the ways in which lyrics were literally embodied by medieval subjects through danced performance. I argue that Middle English lyrics construct and maintain the “I” of an uttering subject while also reinforcing an embodied sense of self in the text’s reader or hearer. The corpus of surviving lyrics uniquely demonstrates how language, subjectivity, the body, and poetic form are related, speaking to the profound utility of verse (both in the medieval period and today) in constructing a sense of self and in relating to and empathizing with others.

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Chapter 1

What is Lyric? What is Embodiment?

Introduction

This dissertation is part of a larger movement within academe to reclaim the validity of the body as a site of knowledge. In literary studies, this practically means prioritizing the body and the senses in reading and interpreting textual artifacts. In employing theoretical approaches privileging embodiment, there are two categories of body to consider. The first is the bodies *in* the texts, particularly the speaking subject or “I” of the text. The second category involves examining the bodies interacting with the texts by reading or hearing them—bodies both contemporaneous with the production of the text (in this case, late medieval England) as well as modern bodies, including our own. In this dissertation I will employ both approaches, in Chapters 2 and 3 focusing largely on the bodies in the texts, and in Chapter 4 on both the bodies in the texts and the medieval bodies interacting with the texts. Far from being mutually exclusive, these two approaches are in fact mutually dependent, since to empathize¹ with bodies in texts we rely on our own embodied experiences.

In order to examine how we, as readers, relate on a kinaesthetic level with the “I” or subject of a text, I will here conduct an in-depth study of Middle English lyric, a field long overdue for renewed attention. After a flourishing of interest in the 1960s and 70s, Middle English lyric recedes markedly from scholarly conversation.² Recently, however, lyric and form generally are enjoying a resurgence in popularity in scholarly and to some extent popular discourse. The publication, in 2014, of *The Lyric Theory Reader* (ed. Virginia Jackson

¹ “Empathy” in this study is used in its linguistic sense, that is: to inhabit, as readers, the speaking “I” (or, more rarely, a “you”) of a text.

² There are some notable exceptions, particularly Siegfried Wenzel’s work, during the 1980s, on Franciscan spirituality and Middle English lyric.

and Yopie Prins) represents the first major edited collection on lyric theory since Chaviva Hošek and Patricia Parker's *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism* thirty years prior. New Formalist approaches, in particular, have reinvigorated lyric studies with innovative work from a number of emerging and established scholars working in diverse periods and cultural contexts. In the field of Middle English lyric specifically, New Formalist methods as well as developing approaches in textual studies³ and theories of affect, embodiment, and performance⁴ are changing the shape of the field. Renewed attention to lyric in general and Middle English lyric specifically is overdue, and happily this dissertation is only one of many recent approaches to lyric. Here, lyric will be examined through the compound lens of various theoretical methodologies that can be grouped under the rubric of "theories of subjectivity and embodiment." The study of embodiment itself is reemerging in scholarly discourse (after something of a lull) with the advent of affect studies, history of emotions, posthumanism, and related discourses such as new materialism and thing theory. As will be demonstrated, this dissertation is situated in a rich matrix of recent work applying these varied theoretical approaches to medieval texts.⁵

My overarching claim is simple: Middle English lyric is uniquely successful at connecting readers and hearers with our own bodies and with the bodies of medieval subjects.⁶ This effect occurs on the levels of content, form, and tone, although my emphasis

³ Kathleen Palti and Cynthia Rogers have conducted particularly nuanced work on Middle English lyrics, including the Findern Lyrics, using manuscript-focused approaches.

⁴ See especially the work of Seeta Chaganti, who in recent years has turned her focus from the intersections of Old and Middle English poetry with material culture to the related study of late medieval representations of dance in poetry and visual art.

⁵ For example, the fortieth annual Sewanee Medieval Colloquium, in April 2014, was centered on "Medieval Emotions." Notable scholars in various disciplines (history, literary and cultural studies, music, historical anthropology) have in recent years productively explored the intersections of the body with medievalisms: Caroline Walker Bynum, Miri Rubin, Barbara Rosenwein, Fiona Somerset, Bruce Holsinger, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, Elizabeth Scala, Sara Ritchey, Daisy Delogu, and Seeta Chaganti, among many others.

⁶ This admittedly fraught term will be defined in greater detail shortly; for now, suffice it to say that "subject" refers to "the 'I' of the text."

here will be primarily on the formal components through which the connection is achieved, and my evidence will be drawn largely from formal analysis of the songs. The methods through which Middle English lyric connects us with our bodies are sophisticated and include especially the carefully managed use of the linguistic category of deixis; nuanced, intentional portrayal and evocation of affect, or physically demonstrated emotion;⁷ and implicit and explicit reference (via form and content respectively) to the ways in which lyrics were literally embodied by medieval subjects through danced performance.

It is almost certainly the case that this connection, through Middle English lyric, of the bodies that experience them and those inhabit them occurs via other avenues as well. Potentially illuminating approaches to the lyrics that remain largely under-explored include textual studies methodologies (such as closer examination of manuscript context and intertextuality), social and political history (for example, allusions within the content of lyrics to contemporary events), performance studies, and theoretical orientations other than those focused explicitly on the human body. Here, however, I confine my analysis largely to the (edited) texts of the poems themselves, eschewing for the sake of scope both in-depth studies of the manuscripts from which the lyrics are drawn as well as most historical evidence. There is ample room for scholarship making use of all of the aforementioned approaches, but it is far beyond the scope of a dissertation-length project to employ them all. Thus, this study remains focused on theoretical approaches privileging embodiment and how they can productively “open” lyrics in a way that allows readers and hearers, both medieval

⁷ This study employs the words “affect” and “emotion” interchangeably, unless otherwise noted. This is a departure from much scholarly practice, in which (as will be explored in more detail in Chapter 3) “affect” usually refers to embodied emotion and “emotion” is often used in a specialized sense referring to a culturally specific practice in a particular historical community. To sharply delineate the terms suggests that “mind” and “body” are separate systems; in this study, the terms are intentionally conflated.

and modern, to empathize with the “I” of the text and in doing so to connect us with our own bodies.

Many poets and scholars today actively participate in a burgeoning (if not yet long) tradition of reading lyric poetry with a dual focus on the formal features of the verse as well as the bodily and sensuous. Recently, for example, Celia Carlson notes explicitly that she “... places formalism at the heart of sensuous knowledge” (“Lyric Image as Sensuous Thought” 158). Poet and theorist Susan Stewart’s 2002 monograph *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, although not the first work to account for the role of sensuous knowledge in lyric reading, is nonetheless foundational. Stewart is perhaps the first to undertake a book-length study of the role of the senses in reading poetry, and nearly all later scholarly treatments of embodiment in lyric respond to and are informed by Stewart’s work. New Formalist approaches, similarly, often emphasize the role of the senses in reading; in her foundational essay, “What is New Formalism?” Marjorie Levinson explicitly aligns the movement with affect and the sensuous, noting that the movement represents

... a recoil from what is cast as the arid rationalism ... of the theoretically informed historicisms and from both the positivist and the antiquarian strains of historicism now abroad, with their alleged indifference to the cognitive and political dimensions of feeling. (561)

In this essay, Levinson also notes the explicit value, in many threads of New Formalist thought, placed on the pleasure of reading. Close attention to the formal aspects of lyric is a hallmark of the “new lyric studies,” the subject of a special issue of *PMLA* in 2008, following up on the 2006 MLA meeting focused on “The Sound of Poetry/The Poetry of Sound” under the aegis of then-president Marjorie Perloff. In its attention to the formal, craft choices by which affective and empathetic effects are created, this dissertation situates itself firmly within New Formalist discourse. The methodology here employed proceeds from close reading (paying special attention to formal features), takes into consideration the

social, cultural, and performative dimensions of the lyrics, displays close attention to affect and to the role of the body in interacting with lyrics, and further highlights the sensuous pleasure reading and hearing the lyrics can provide. Scholar and poet Heather Dubrow has recently applied New Formalist techniques to elegant effect in her work on Early Modern lyric poetry and theory (most notably in *The Challenges of Orpheus*) and I hope here to conduct my readings and contextualizations of earlier lyrics with the same care.

As a final (preliminary) methodological note, I should briefly address the body of texts with which I will be working. The lyrics I reference in this dissertation date from the early twelfth through the early sixteenth centuries. They are found in miscellanies, sermons, commonplace books, anthologies, and sometimes embedded within longer works of poetry or prose. They are written in various dialects of Middle English and occasionally also contain Anglo-Norman French or Latin. They are, almost without exception, anonymous. Further, they can be accurately characterized as “popular” in that, like popular music today, most of them were likely recognized and performed formally as well as spontaneously in an enormous variety of settings, over a fairly wide temporal and geographical range, and by people representing a broad range of ages, occupations, identities, and social classes.

Obtaining specific situating information for the lyrics, however, is difficult in the extreme. In general, rather than trying to do so, I hope instead to celebrate this difficulty, which, while admittedly preventing some types of analysis, in fact allows for others. The corpus of Middle English lyrics is, for example, a prime candidate for New Formalist analysis, which puts attention to the text itself, as well as readerly experience, at the heart of literary interpretation. For scholars, constructing an argument by drawing on texts from

diverse eras is often suspect, in a way that is not usually the case for contemporary poets.⁸ After all, the lived experience of a serf fifty years after the Norman Conquest would be unrecognizable to a noblewoman of the early fifteenth century. However, it is also the case that most of the lyric texts addressed in this study very likely had a long life, invisible to us, both before and after being written in the forms to which we have access today; it is impossible to know for certain, of course, when in the life of the lyric written transmission occurred. In his landmark study *Medieval Identity Machines* (which itself examines medieval bodies in texts from c. 600 to c. 1400) Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argues for a radical re-conception of temporality, suggesting that “time itself can be conceptualized within the same open, connective ... frame within which [he reads] bodiliness and identity” (xxiv). Even more radically, in his introduction to *The Postcolonial Middle Ages* Cohen stresses that the entirety of the Middle Ages is itself both “alluringly strange” and “disconcertingly familiar” to us as embodied readers today:

It makes little sense to choose between continuist and alterist approaches to the study of the Middle Ages when both these metanarratives contain truths about the relation of the medieval to the modern and postmodern. [...] Medieval studies as interminable, difficult middle must stress not difference (the past as past) or sameness (the past as present) but temporal interlacement, the impossibility of choosing alterity or continuity (the past that opens up the present to possible futures). (5)

Following Cohen, it can be both responsible and productive to examine in tandem texts from various eras (and locations) during the medieval period. Like medieval bodies, the medieval texts in this study are simultaneously familiar and strange, and although their performed lives cannot usually be traced beyond textual evidence, the incredibly long

⁸ This is especially true for medievalists, who, understandably, tend to get a bit prickly in the face of the continued popular misconception that the medieval period was an undifferentiated “dark age” during which sophisticated Greco-Roman knowledge and culture were lost entirely and nothing much interesting occurred until the Tudors (or, at the very earliest, Petrarch and Chaucer).

afterlives of several of the lyrics⁹ is at least suggestive of a similarly expansive history during the medieval period.

Before beginning an in-depth study of specific lyrics, however, it will be necessary to first define the foundational terms and concepts used in this study. Particularly, the terms “lyric” and “embodiment”—both used widely in diverse academic disciplines—are not by any means self-explanatory. Having very briefly situated the texts with which I will be working in this study, I will now turn my attention to what, exactly, makes them “lyrics,” and, further, what makes them “embodied.”

What is Lyric?

“Students with a keen sense of curiosity—or perhaps merely a keen sense of mischief—” notes Heather Dubrow wryly, “could fruitfully exercise either predilection by asking their teachers for a brief definition of lyric” (“Lyric Forms,” 114). Indeed, defining lyric has proved a persistent nuisance for scholars, with many (including many medievalists, as we will see shortly) simply concluding that lyric is essentially impossible to pin down. Briefly, I will look at some of the defining features of lyric that have been suggested by scholars during the last fifty years in the hope of clarifying the selection of texts in this dissertation. Although theories of lyric can of course easily be traced to the ancient world (and lyric theory in English goes back at least to Puttenham, whose 1588 *Arte of English Poesie* is an important point of departure for many contemporary lyric theorists) for the sake of time I will confine my brief review of lyric theory to the mid-twentieth and twenty-first centuries (which of course draw on ancient, Early Modern, and, particularly in the twentieth century, Romantic theories of lyric). I will, further, focus my attention on the problem of

⁹ For example, the “Corpus Christi Carol,” (first extant copy transcribed c. 1500), was radically reinterpreted by the late, critically acclaimed singer/songwriter Jeff Buckley in the mid-1990s.

defining lyric, a thorny issue that will serve as a lens through which to view the possibilities offered by various approaches to lyric.

As a point of departure, lyric is the genre associated most closely in the minds of many (not least the New Critics themselves) with the New Criticism. So linked in the scholarly mind with New Criticism is lyric, in fact, that as Virginia Jackson notes, "...the ahistoricism attributed to New Critical close reading became confused and identified with an inherent ahistoricism of the lyric genre itself" (*Dickinson's Misery* 93). For William Rogers' *The Three Genres and the Interpretation of Lyric* (1983), a late but typical specimen of New Critical lyric studies, the defining feature of lyric is that it is the form of poetry not epic or drama, this distinction of course being Aristotle's. Brevity is also a key feature for theorists from the Romantic era through the present; in fact only twenty years ago Mark Jeffreys cited brevity as the *sole* defining feature of the genre. John Stuart Mill's definition of lyric as "overheard" rather than "heard" (and the attendant assumption that lyric expresses the poet's or dramatic speaker's deep, genuine emotion) has also had a powerful afterlife, through Eliot, Adorno and Frye, suggesting that, for many, lyric represents the poet's or speaker's "true" or "pure" feelings.

To conceive of lyric as unadulterated emotional expression, devoid of artifice, suggests an inherent contradiction in the genre, given that lyric sets itself apart from ordinary speech, via the use of formal devices, perhaps more than any other genre (a fact widely recognized by scholars, poets, and casual readers).¹⁰ This line of thought, pervasive in diverse critical approaches, generally argues that lyric poetry is the most quintessentially "literary" genre because it is the most obviously crafted. As Jonathan Culler succinctly notes, "Poetry lies at the centre of the literary experience because it is the form that most clearly asserts the

¹⁰ For a classic formulation of this argument by a preeminent lyric theorist, see Jonathan Culler's *Structuralist Poetics* (1975).

specificity of literature, its difference from ordinary discourse by an empirical individual about the world” (*Structuralist Poetics* 162).¹¹ Culler traces the formal features that “mark” lyric to the genre’s origins in incantation, chant, and song.¹² This association of lyric poetry with song is a familiar trope across various theoretical affiliations throughout the twentieth century. In *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), Northrop Frye classically associates lyric with “babble”—that is, oral/aural effects derived from spoken and sung language—and Andrew Welsh, in *Roots of Lyric* (1978) convincingly links lyric to song as well as song-like genres such as charm, riddle, and magic spell. Welsh connects the four-beat line, especially (common in “children’s charm”—“Rain, rain, go away”—as well as prayer and hymn), with song and lyric poetry, in opposition to the five-beat “literary” line of the sonnet and other forms. This linkage of lyric poetry with song is also, of course, evident in the word itself, which, from its origins in English through contemporary usage can mean both “the words to a song” and “a certain kind of written poetry.”¹³ The connection of lyric with song appears perhaps most succinctly in an oft-quoted passage of Louis Zukofsky’s 1978 book-length work “A”: “I’ll

¹¹ In tracking modern and contemporary definitions of lyric, it is worth paraphrasing here, in full, Culler’s most recent formulation of the features of lyric (as opposed to narrative), in a 2012 lecture. Lyric:

- 1) demonstrates complexity of the enunciative apparatus
- 2) contains hyperbolic or “extravagant” features
- 3) makes use of performative effects, including disruption of syntax
- 4) is optative (imagines a response to its address)
- 5) alludes to a context of ritual
- 6) creates an effect of the lyric “now” with present tense and the deictic “here”
- 7) is epideictic, making claims about man’s value
- 8) invites the reader, at least temporarily, to occupy the place of the speaker

¹² Although many aspects of Culler’s approach to lyric have continued to evolve over the course of his long career, his association of lyric poetry with song has remained consistent. See, for example, the 2008 article “Why Lyric?” (*PMLA* 123.1): “The force of poetry is linked to its ability to get itself remembered, like those bits of song that stick in your mind, you don’t know why” (205).

¹³ The OED’s first definition of lyric is as follows: “Of or pertaining to the lyre; adapted to the lyre, meant to be sung; pertaining to or characteristic of song. Now used as the name for short poems (whether or not intended to be sung), usually divided into stanzas or strophes, and directly expressing the poet’s own thoughts and sentiments.” While nearly every aspect of this definition is debatable for medieval (and, I would argue, contemporary) lyric, the inherent link between lyric poetry and song lyric is broadly accepted by most lyric theorists and poets, whether they see themselves working within a long lyric tradition or, like the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, position themselves as anti-lyric. Even Virginia Jackson, the lyric theorist perhaps most responsible for problematizing our understanding of the term, allows for the connection of lyric with song as the very first point in her introduction, written jointly with Yopie Prins, to *The Lyric Theory Reader*.

tell you. / About my *poetics*— / music / \int [an integral] / speech / Lower limit speech / Upper limit music” (138).

The association of lyric poetry with song is not limited to the twentieth century. Just after the turn of the millennium Amittai Aviram argues “against the idea of ‘lyric subjectivity’ as a useful concept, [urging] instead a concept of lyric that maintains an allusive connection to its etymological origins in song” (61) and in a recent monograph Robert von Hallberg argues that “lyric poetry is by definition musical” (227). Lyric theorist and Early Modern scholar Heather Dubrow, drawing on performance studies and the neurosciences (in a way, incidentally or perhaps not, comparable to some contemporary theorists of affect and embodiment), implicitly links lyric and song in suggesting that “... [performance studies scholar] Richard Schechner’s suggestion that repetitive rhythms create arousal and even ecstasy neurologically implies that comparable responses to poetry are more likely to involve enthusiastic identification with its speaking voice than critique” (*Orpheus* 96). And in his article on lyric in the third edition of *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*,¹⁴ James William Johnson concludes:

Though the attributes of brevity, metrical coherence, subjectivity, passion, sensuality, and particularity of image are frequently ascribed to the lyric, there are schools of poetry obviously lyric which are not susceptible to such criteria [...] the irreducible denominator of all lyric poetry must, therefore, comprise those elements which it shares with the musical forms that produced it. (714)

As will be demonstrated, the link between lyric and song in Middle English poetry is profoundly suggestive. Nevertheless, many recent formulations of lyric are more circumspect, refusing to accept uncritically the until-recently unquestioned link between lyric poetry and music. Brian Reed, for example, stresses that the oral and visual aspects of poetry are imbricated: “The poem has something to do with sound of course—one can scan it

¹⁴ Johnson’s article on lyric, in the first, second and third editions of the text (1965-1993), has been replaced in the fourth edition (2012) by Virginia Jackson’s.

metrically, for instance, or talk about its intonation and tone—but it remains less vocalized than vocalizable” (272). Oulipo poet Jaques Roubaud goes further, baldly stating that “A song is not a poem and a poem is not a song” (18). This distinction between lyric poetry and song lyric makes sense for modern and contemporary poetry, in which most “lyric” poems are bookish, generally meant to be experienced silently, individually, and on the page.

Although in the contemporary poetry reading (a cultural institution unknown in the medieval period) lyric is performed orally and received aurally, and may highlight the intrinsic (though metaphorical) “music” of language, actual musical accompaniment is (except in rare cases) absent. Similarly, contemporary music lyrics, however “poetic” they may be when sung, generally are unsuccessful as “lyric poetry” divorced from their music, and are not intended to be read as such. This is a very different musico-literary landscape from the late medieval period, when vernacular verse was not conceived of primarily as written but rather as chanted or sung, and written lyrics were in most cases meant to serve as transcriptions for performance, not self-consciously “literary” compositions. To be sure, there existed widely diverse methods of encountering texts in the Middle Ages, from the monk reading meditative lyrics for a spiritual purpose, to the fairgoer listening to a lyric sung by a traveling *jongleur* or *jongleuse* with instrumental accompaniment. Neither of the previous possibilities includes the lyric experiencer¹⁵ reading the lyric aloud or singing it him or herself, both of which no doubt occurred at various times and places during the Middle Ages. However, it is nonetheless safe to say that linking lyric with song is particularly appropriate in considering medieval lyric. Thomas Duncan, for example, holds that “If ... with regard to Middle English poetry, the term lyric in its nineteenth-century sense is potentially misleading, in another sense, that of a song, it is particularly instructive” in that most lyrics (with the

¹⁵ This study employs the term “lyric experiencer” to refer to the receiver of the poem, who may experience the text through reading or singing it, silently or aloud, or by hearing it read or sung.

exception of “literary” forms imported from France, such as the *ballade*) were almost certainly sung (xxiii). Some (albeit few) Middle English lyrics do survive with their music, perhaps most notably “Sumer is icumen in” and “Miri it is.” Peter France, in *The New Oxford Companion to Literature in French*, defines lyrics as “compositions which tend to be strophic, sung to music, and organized around a first-person voice” (476). He also notes, however, that by the late fourteenth century “musicality comes to be regarded as an inherent trait of poetry which no longer needs the addition of musical accompaniment.” It is generally impossible to tell on a case-by-case basis which premodern lyrics were sung (Dubrow, *Orpheus* 216) unless a lyric survives with its music. All of the lyrics addressed in this study, however, fit comfortably within the rubric of “song-like” poems, and in this dissertation the words “lyric” “poem” and “song” are used interchangeably.

Lyric theorists, then, differ in how closely they link lyric poetry with song; this relationship is often connected with the weight a theorist gives to the “marked” nature of lyric. As noted, Jonathan Culler celebrates lyric’s distinctiveness; on the other end of the spectrum Virginia Jackson, in the most recent edition of *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, argues that lyric is an overly generalized, quasi-meaningless creation of modern critics. Susan Stewart takes a middle road, cautious of “any theory of literary history that celebrates the so-called marginal status of poetry”:

... It has been a frequent claim of both cognitive anthropology and comparative poetics that poetry exists in tension with speech on the one hand and song on the other. But the fixed terms of such a model of genre can hardly accommodate the temporal nature of poetic experience. Nor can a static model acknowledge the complexity of the subject’s passage from reception to expression in the *work* of poetry as it moves between aspects of received tradition such as metrical convention, aspects of sense impression such as rhythm and interval, and individuation of utterance. (*Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, 248)

Stewart does not reject the kinship of lyric with song (and in fact includes several Middle English lyrics discussed in this dissertation) but she does complicate it, suggesting that a

model of lyric that examines oral/aural effects in isolation, not taking into account the experience, in time, of receiving a lyric poem, is fundamentally incomplete. Rather, we must also consider the “musical” features of lyric (for example, a four-beat line or use of end rhyme) as “aspects of sense impression” encountered in time by embodied subjects.

Stewart’s model is particularly suggestive for Middle English lyric, which, as a form largely conceived of as orally performed, existed for most medieval lyric experiencers as a practice inseparable from time and body, from lived incident. Stewart’s insistence on the proximity of lyric to lived experience provides an important transition to the next category frequently cited as definitive of the genre—that is, subjectivity.

To what extent does a poetic experiencer (reader, hearer, or speaker) of a lyric poem identify with the poem’s “I”? Another way of asking this question: how, and how much, in inducing us to empathize with a lyric “I,” does poetry connect us with our bodies? The idea that lyric is uniquely tied to a speaking “I” (or, more rarely, a “we”) is so fundamental to our understanding of the genre that Stewart has suggested that “it is almost unbearable to imagine lyric outside of [the] terms of subjectivity” (“Preface to a Lyric History” 212).¹⁶ Lyric has been associated with subjectivity in the popular and scholarly mind since at the late eighteenth century; the Romantic notion of lyric equates it with an intense expression of the poet’s innermost thoughts, feelings, and desires. This sense has never disappeared from conceptions of lyric, and (particularly in the popular mind) the expression of deeply held personal feelings is usually considered a (even the) definitive feature of lyric, whether written or sung. A New Critical addition to this model of intense subjectivity is the construction of a speaking “persona,” an imagined speaker divorced from the author’s biography; this approach transforms all lyrics into dramatic monologues. The association of lyric with the

¹⁶ Jackson and Prins, however, have expressed doubt about this in their important article, “Lyrical Studies,” in *Victorian Literature and Culture*.

intense experience of a subjective self—the “I” of Romantic poetry and dramatic monologue—is no longer in vogue in academia (and, as will become obvious, neither is it very useful when reading Middle English lyric). Nevertheless, it remains in the non-specialist mind a defining feature of the form.

In a more nuanced account of identificatory reading, Heather Dubrow suggests that the more “oral” a lyric is, the more likely readers are to identify with it: “... a reader may identify with the speaker completely for part but not all of a specific reading, though a rupture in that identification is less likely when a poem is close to those analogues to lyric—chant and magical incantation” (*Orpheus*, 96). Obviously, identity categories for which the reader is unaligned with the lyric “I” have the potential to disrupt identification even in the most “musical” of lyrics, and Dubrow goes on to suggest that “in cataloguing interacting coordinates of subjectivity, literary and cultural critics need to encompass not only the three commonly cited traits—race, class, and gender—but also such issues as age and geographical region” (*Orpheus* 97). I appreciate here her call to broaden the range of identity-based critical categories available to the reader of lyric, and would in fact further extend Dubrow’s suggestion to other categories of embodied difference: sexual identification and experience, disability and difference in ability, even degree of kinaesthetic awareness. All of these factors, inscribed in and on readers’ bodies via gene expression, trauma, socialization, and individual as well as cultural memory, shape the ways in which readers encounter, interact with, and react to the content and formal elements of lyric texts. Shortly, I will address in much greater detail the terms of embodiment and subjectivity in this approach to lyric. However, it is worth noting briefly here that subjectivity in lyric poetry is linked by many New Formalist scholars with the structures of form itself, suggesting that lyric connects readers to our embodied selves by formal means. Celia Carlson suggests that this occurs via the

establishment of a powerfully inclusive space encompassing the speaking and receiving subjects:

... poetry through form establishes a shared space between maker and other, and in that space affective engagements can be made and practiced. It is the abstraction of form that makes those affective engagements possible, and that is part of the ethics of art, in that art provides encounters in which one can experience emotions and achieve cognitions, then be released from the experience unharmed. ("Poems as Objects," 73)

Amid the general profusion of possibility surrounding the task of defining of lyric, students of medieval (and specifically Middle English) lyric encounter additional challenges.¹⁷ A primary stumbling block is that medieval experiencers of what we call "Middle English lyric" certainly would not have called it that; the word "lyric" probably did not exist in English until the 1580s (Spearing *Textual Subjectivity*, 176; see also Woolf, 1, and McNamer "Female Authors, Provincial Setting" 70). Moreover, as noted, the lyrics are usually anonymous and very difficult to date; in fact, in scholarship of the 1960s and 70s, Middle English lyric is very often defined by what it is *not* (see, for example Raymond Oliver's 1970 monograph *Poems Without Names* and J. A. Burroughs' 1978 article "Poems Without Contexts").¹⁸ More recently, definitions of lyric we have already encountered generally obtain for most medievalists, particularly brevity, oral/aural features linking the genre to song, and above all an emphasis on subjectivity marked by strong emotion. In her introduction to the 2002 collection *Medieval Woman's Song: Cross-Cultural Approaches*, for example, Anne L. Klinck posits that Old English poems "Wulf and Eadwacer" and "The Wife's Lament" "are lyrics not in a formal sense but by virtue of their intensely personal emotion and their focus on the

¹⁷ Disappointingly, scholars of Middle English lyric are curiously set apart from lyric theorists generally; see, for example, the 2013 essay collection *The Lyric Poem: Formations and Transformations* (ed. Marion Thain) whose very broad scope only begins in the Early Modern period.

¹⁸ Again, insofar as this is true, Middle English lyric is particularly well suited to New Formalist analysis, with its focus on interpreting a lyric text using primarily features internal to the text itself. Mary Carruthers, in *The Book of Memory*, reminds us that in the medieval period authorities ("auctores") were texts, not people, so that it is anachronistic to speak of "extra-textual authorial intention" (190).

lyric moment” (6). Yet the “formal features” that define a lyric (and any discussion of their absence from these poems) remain unspecified. What are these formal features, and when do English poems become, “formally,” lyrics? How, specifically, do we evaluate the presence or absence of “intensely personal emotion” in a poem, especially one from which we are separated by more than a thousand years of changing emotional norms? And finally, what is the “lyric moment” that ultimately defines these poems?

This haziness of definition is apparent in nearly all studies of Middle English lyric. John Edwin, in the introduction to his chapter on “Pieces Lyrical in Impulse or Form” in *A Manual of Middle English Writings*, similarly relies upon subjectivity and emotion as the defining features of lyric, sketched in the vaguest possible terms: “In the present chapter the terms ‘lyric’ and ‘lyrical’ are applied only to pieces that are chiefly expressive of personal emotion or of emotion imagined as personal, or that are phrased or constructed to impress as one of these classes” (485). As to how, exactly, to recognize “personal emotion,” he admits that the category is “elastic.” Medievalist Jessica Brantley notes, “beyond its fundamental brevity, the lyric genre is notoriously hard to characterize” (121). And Rosemary Greentree, in her *Annotated Bibliography of Middle English Lyric and Short Poem*, tersely concludes, “We must ... question the worth of any idea of coherence in the genre” (6). Rosemary Woolf, on the other hand, claims that the Middle English short poem is in fact quintessentially lyric: “... we find the medieval lyric conforming more closely to later definitions of the lyric than does much seventeenth-century religious poetry. The insistence on one simple emotion, movingly expressed, is more ‘lyrical’ than the complex and ingenious thought of many Metaphysical lyrics” (11). Arthur Moore, too, stresses features of Middle English lyric that align with contemporary definitions, including “direct subjective expression ... of the writer’s moods and feelings” and “musical origin” (5).

For some scholars, then, lyric's indefinability is unproblematic. It is even, in fact, useful, in that it challenges positivist assumptions about genre. "Lyric" may be, after all, a fiction, a back-formulation used to describe poems that never would have been seen as "lyric" by those responsible for creating and transmitting them. Regarding medieval lyric, Gayle Margharita celebrates this blurring of boundary: "Lyric poetry, like autobiography, problematizes the relation between form and affect, figure and voice, or, more generally, inside and outside" (62). Similarly, Rei Terada celebrates lyric's "generic openness": "The [recent New Formalist] emphasis on lyric's permeability—a disinclination to posit an inside or outside of lyric—is entirely proper and inevitable and more or less consistent with the trends Hošek and Parker presented in 1985" (195). Terada, like Jackson and to some extent Stewart, is invested in decentering lyric as marked or set apart from ordinary discourse, suggesting that "... lyric studies participates in the renewal of lyric ideology when it suggests that lyric, whether conceived as object, dynamic, or even ruse, is irreplaceably exemplary, that no other experience leads as cleanly to this kind of defamiliarization or critical conclusion" (198-199). But Culler maintains that lyric's uniqueness still holds:

If we believe language is the medium for the formation of subjectivity, lyric ought to be crucial, as the site where language is linked not only to structures of identification and displacement before the consolidation of subject positions but especially to rhythm and the bodily experience of temporality, on the one hand, and to the formative dwelling in a particular language, on the other. Narrative structures are translatable, but lyric, in its peculiar structural patterning, figures the givenness, the untranscendability, of a particular language, which seems to its users a condition of experience. ("Why Lyric" 205)

I am crucially indebted to Jackson, Terada, and other scholars who question the coherence of "lyric" as a genre. Their insistence upon specificity of historical and cultural context, and upon examining critically how the term "lyric" has been imposed on works and authors in a way that is sometimes unhelpful and frequently even counterproductive, has played an

enormously important role in my approach to Middle English short poems. However, I simultaneously align my approach with Culler in insisting upon lyric's kinship with song (at least for the medieval period) and its generic specificity; as the most formally "marked" of genres, lyric is, if not "transcendent," certainly unique (or, in Culler's terms, "extravagant"). Further, lyric's uniqueness is tied, I will argue, to the ways that it connects us, through means of form, to our bodies and to the embodied lyric "I." To fully explore how this is accomplished, I will now turn my attention from lyric to the body.

What is Embodiment?

If defining "lyric" has proved difficult, defining "the body," "embodiment" and "subjectivity" is perhaps even more fraught. "Subjectivity" is both a familiar and a protean term in philosophy, literary theory and the sciences, and contemporary discourses of subjectivity and the body vary widely. For literary critics, "subjectivity" is still primarily associated with the psychoanalytic or poststructuralist subject, whose identity is formed through trauma and through language. Philosophers are more likely to take as their starting point the phenomenological subject (as articulated foundationally by Husserl and Merleau-Ponty), who is more explicitly embodied, actively perceiving and engaging with the world through the senses.¹⁹ In addition to these frameworks, the late twentieth century witnessed the rise of literary subjectivity, as formulated by medievalist Michel Zink in *The Invention of Literary Subjectivity* (1999) (published in French in 1985 as *La Subjectivité littéraire*). This

¹⁹ Conceptions of the subject in phenomenology are notably different from those in structuralist and poststructuralist thought in that, for phenomenologists, the body is a valued and indeed primary site of knowing. In recent years, with the explosion of interest in the neurosciences among scholars in the humanities, phenomenology and philosophy of mind have begun to overlap; philosopher Sean Gallagher is perhaps the best-known and most prolific contemporary scholar in the field (see, for example, *How the Body Shapes the Mind*, 2006). This sea change in philosophy of mind (now inextricably bound up with the neurosciences) has had the effect that philosophy of mind has in some sense become philosophy of the body, that is, of the biological structures that create consciousness. See also the recent *Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Phenomenology* (2013).

connection of the “invention of subjectivity” with the high medieval era is not limited to Zink; recently a rich vein of research links the “I” of the text with the formation of subjectivity in twelfth and thirteenth century Europe,²⁰ particularly in troubadour and trouvère lyric.²¹ Also of interest to medievalists is Peter Haidu’s 2004 *The Subject: Medieval/Modern*, which examines, with a political bent, the human “subject” as “subject” to law and governance.²²

Perhaps the most provocative development in the field of medieval subjectivity, however, is A.C. Spearing’s recent work on the “I” of the Middle English poetic text. Spearing is interested in “not how the poems express or represent individual subjectivities, whether of their writers or of fictional characters, but how subjectivity is encoded in them as a textual phenomenon” and seeks to problematize the assumption that any literary text is “the utterance of a speaking subject, so that in it a human consciousness is given a voice, and evaluation of that voice and identification of its origin will form the necessary guidelines for interpretation” (*Textual Subjectivity* 1). For Spearing, then, crucially, the “I” of the text is, in and of itself, authoritative. There is no need to look for authors or even dramatic speakers “behind” the text; the text’s “I” should be approached on its own terms as an authoritative, unified narrator. I rely heavily on Spearing’s formulation of textual subjectivity in this study, and when I speak of a “subject” I mean a “textual subject” in Spearing’s sense, that is, “the I of the text,” who must be considered on his own terms, unburdened by an imagined

²⁰ “Literary subjectivity” itself in some ways proceeds from the even earlier concept of the “discovery of the individual” located by various scholars at points from the high medieval period through the Renaissance (see especially Colin Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual, 1050-1200*, 1972). The study of the individual is still current; see, for example, Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (2005).

²¹ This high medieval “invention of subjectivity” in troubadour-era France is, further, often linked to the rise of the vernacular; see, especially, Judith Peraino, *Giving Voice to Love: Song and Self-Expression from the Troubadours to Guillaume de Machaut* (2011), Sarah Kay, *Subjectivity in Troubadour Poetry* (2006), and Sarah Spense, *Texts and the Self in the Twelfth Century* (2006).

²² This volume includes a chapter on “The Love-Lyric as Political Technology,” bringing both psychoanalytical and Marxist theory to bear on troubadour lyric.

individual author or “speaker.” While it is true that various Middle English lyrics “present [themselves] as a direct expression of [a] poet’s thoughts and sentiments” (*Textual Subjectivity* 188), the phrase “present themselves” is key; it is an exercise in futility to search for the “real” speakers of these anonymous texts. The “I” of the text must nonetheless be treated as embodied and volitional, since of course that is how we, as embodied text experiencers (medieval and modern readers, hearers, translators, transmitters, and performers) empathize with that “I.” In this dissertation, then, “subject” refers to the textual, rather than psychoanalytic subject. This means of approaching the textual “I,” as authoritative in its own right, freed from an author or “persona” lurking behind it, resonates in an important way with how medieval readers would likely have understood that “I.” Rosemary Woolf speaks, for example, of the “abnegation of individuality” and “self-effacing” nature of much Middle English religious poetry (6, 15) and William Tydeman notes of late medieval poets writing in English, “individual experiences were rarely their starting-point” (12). Louise Bishop further reminds us that “in late medieval England, the word *self* worked not as a concept of embodied separate consciousness [...] but as a grammatical nominative intensifier” (192). Spearing’s concept of textual subjectivity is, then, immensely useful in approaching the “I” of Middle English lyric and, in this study, the word “subject” always refers to the “I” of the text.

In addition to Spearing’s concept of medieval “textual subjectivity,” another important approach to the authoritative textual “I” employed here draws on a particular thread of affect theory. The affect theory lineage this dissertation follows (to be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3) emerges from feminist, queer, and body theories of the late

twentieth century.²³ The recent advent of affect studies itself, as a category of inquiry reflecting what has been termed the “affective turn” of the humanities, is an extension of and builds upon the overlapping fields of feminist, gender, and body theory of the late 1980s and early 90s, perhaps most foundationally Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet*, both published in 1990. However, although this philosophical lineage emerges out of psychoanalytic theory and represents a particular line of poststructuralist thought, it is distinct from (and in fact, in some ways diametrically opposed to) the work of poststructuralist scholars such as Derrida, Lacan, Foucault, Irigaray, and their many interpreters. Unlike much theory of the “linguistic turn,” Sedgwick, Butler, Tompkins, and others situate knowledge (at least partially and in some cases primarily) in the body and in embodied response and performance. For example, Elizabeth Grosz, in *Volatile Bodies* (1994), sums up the approach to embodied knowing currently being extended in the affect theories within which I situate this work:

... all the effects of subjectivity, all the significant facets and complexities of subjects, can be as adequately explained using the subject’s corporeality as a framework as it would be using consciousness or the unconscious. All the effects of depth and interiority can be explained in terms of the inscriptions and transformations of the subject’s corporeal surface. *Bodies have all the explanatory power of minds.* (viii, emphasis mine)

One of Grosz’s primary critiques of psychoanalytic theory is, of course, that the supposedly “universal” bodies examined by Freud, Derrida, Lacan, Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty are in fact male bodies, and her work (as well as the work of Sedgwick and Butler) is importantly linked to and arises from feminist and queer criticism. Certainly, the critical and theoretical

²³ Most of these theories draw directly on or are in some way respondent to psychoanalytic and poststructuralist theory, and figures such as Elizabeth Grosz and Silvan Tompkins (himself a psychologist) are foundational to the lineage of affect theory within which this dissertation is situated. However, I distance myself somewhat from psychoanalytic theory—and, as I will discuss shortly, also from resultant affect theories relying heavily on neuroscientific evidence—although to do so entirely is impossible. I aim, here, to retain Grosz and others’ refreshingly kinaesthetic approach to the embodied self while setting my readings apart, as much as is practicable, from the conception of the psychoanalytic (and, later, neuroscientific) subject these theorists in some ways critiqued and in other ways retained.

landscape has changed in the twenty years since *Volatile Bodies* was published. The “linguistic turn” has given way to the “affective turn” and the body as a means of knowing is no longer so stigmatized and subordinated to language and mental processes. However, dance scholar Susan Leigh Foster has recently cited the continued and persistent mistrust, within academia, of the body and of bodily knowing:

Often derided or dismissed within the academy, kinesthesia [how the brain senses bodily movement] and the information it might provide have typically been received with skepticism at best. Pervasive mistrust of the body and the classification of its information as either sexual, unknowable, or indecipherable, have resulted in a paucity of activities that promote awareness of the body’s position and motion, or the degree of tension in its muscles. (7)

Thus, despite the recent prominence of affect theory, kinaesthetic knowing is far from appropriately valued in the academy. This phenomenon, which I will take up in more detail shortly and again in Chapter 3, is truly puzzling. After all, we are all embodied. The turn toward affect, rather than a theoretical fad or fashion, has the potential to change irrevocably the way we conceive of knowledge.

The feminist emphasis on the body, exemplified by Sedgwick, Butler, and Grosz, was accompanied in the late twentieth century by a parallel movement of scholars theorizing the medieval body. Perhaps the most well-known and incisive scholar of the medieval body is Caroline Walker Bynum, whose foundational work on women and food (*Holy Fast, Holy Feast*, 1988), gender and the body in medieval religion (*Jesus as Mother*, 1984, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 1992, *The Resurrection of the Body*, 1995, and *Wonderful Blood*, 2007), embodiment and identity (*Metamorphosis and Identity*, 2005) and materiality (*Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe*, 2011) changed entirely the landscape of medieval religious studies and in fact medieval studies in general. Incredibly prolific, Bynum continues to be one of the preeminent scholars of the medieval body, and any study of medieval bodies,

including this one, necessarily responds to her work.²⁴ Although body theory has fallen out of fashion in recent years, it continues to be relevant, and not only as the precursor to affect studies. Recent scholars extending the work of Bynum and others on the body include Bruce Holsinger, whose work on literary-musical relations is particularly relevant to this study, as well as prominent theorist Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, who, in his early work on monster theory, suggests that “the body is a hybrid category, part cultural and part material, in which interior and exterior are always enfolded, always crossing into each other” (*Of Giants* xvii). Cohen’s 2003 monograph *Medieval Identity Machines* expands the boundaries of the body in a way analogous to recent work in posthumanism:

... human identity is [...] unstable, contingent, hybrid, discontinuous; the work of creating a human body is never finished; gender, race, sexuality, and nation are essential but not sufficiently definitive components of this production; sometimes the most fruitful approach to a body or a text is to stop asking “What is it?” and to start following Deleuze and Guattari’s injunction to map what a body *does*. (xxiii)

Thus, reading the human body as a cultural artefact is very much alive in medieval studies; the recent *Cultural History of the Human Body in the Medieval Age*, for example, contains articles on diverse corporeal topics from “Bodies and the Supernatural” to “Beautiful Bodies.”²⁵

Before discussing in more detail how theories of affect are employed in this dissertation, and what, exactly, is meant by “embodiment,” a brief note on the emerging field of history of emotions (which can itself be seen as an alternative to, and even a critique of, affect theory) is in order, if only because it is so curiously ignored by most affect theorists. The two methods of inquiry, rather than informing each other (as would be eminently natural) are in fact largely divorced from each other in recent scholarship. Broadly, affect theorists are more likely than historians of emotion to insist upon the universality and

²⁴ Other important early scholars of the medieval body include Carolyn Dinshaw, Sarah Kay, Miri Rubin, Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Sarah Beckwith, Shulamith Shahar, Rita Copeland, Monica H. Green, and Nicholas Watson.

²⁵ Kalof, Linda, ed. *A Cultural History of the Human Body in the Medieval Age* (2014).

biological basis of emotion, referencing, classically, the work of psychologist Paul Ekman and his followers. Historians of emotion, on the other hand, are more likely to stress the influence of culture upon emotional experience and expression. Similarly, historians of emotion are, by and large, much more circumspect in drawing upon evidence from the neurosciences; they are more likely than affect theorists to see their work as extending, rather than opposing, the “linguistic turn” since, as Eugenia Lean notes in an important recent conversation in the *American Historical Review*:

...for historians, text, and thus language, is often our primary access to historical agents of the past, and we need to think critically about both how text mediates our access to affect in the past, and how language—along with bodily practice (which is also historically constructed, and in this way can be metaphorically read as a “text”)—mediated emotional experience for our historical subjects. (1498)

Prominent historians of emotion, as well as other scholars invested in emotion and embodiment, have called into question the usefulness of affect theory in examining emotion in any historical era, suggesting that any framework of accounting for emotion that is based on universality, rather than rooted in the intimate particulars of a specific cultural context, is deeply flawed. William Reddy notes succinctly (and anti-Ekman) that “virtually all the feelings an adult ‘experiences’ are the result of training” (*AHR* 1497) and Barbara Rosenwein elaborates:

... our discipline [is] so very different from the discipline of psychology, which tends to postulate that our emotions are universal and were the same in the past as they are in the present—only differently expressed. The ways in which emotions are expressed are, in fact, our only pathway to them. (*AHA* 1496-1497)

Rosenwein’s measured assessment of this fundamental difference between history of emotions (a sub-discipline of history) and affect theory (a theoretical movement in the humanities, profoundly influenced by psychology and the neurosciences) is a diplomatic formulation of a cluster of critiques which has been worded more strongly by other scholars (most eloquently Ruth Leys), and has not, puzzlingly, been responded to by affect theorists

themselves, broadly thus: that emotions cannot be separated from the culturally specific ways they are expressed; that to rely on one psychologist's account of "universal" emotion is a betrayal of historically rigorous scholarship; that Ekman himself has been roundly and intelligently critiqued by other psychologists; that relying, as many affect theorists do, on recent research in the neurosciences is endlessly problematic, given that a) most literary and cultural critics lack the deep understanding of and familiarity with neuroscientific literature that often confounds even scientists themselves, and b) that neuroscientist "popularizers" such as V.S. Ramachandran and Antonio Damasio present their theories as accepted fact, when there exists a great deal of dissent among highly-informed scientists regarding how humans experience, process, and express emotion. These critiques are well founded, and should be taken seriously by any literary critic relying on affect theories, especially those that draw heavily on the neurosciences. However, in the same *AHR* conversation, historian of emotions Nicole Eustace defends the potential usefulness of allowing brain science to affect the historical study of emotion:

The crucial point to take from the neurosciences is that there *is* a biological basis for emotion, making the chronological and cultural variations in its manifestation all the more meaningful. [...] Cutting-edge neuroscientists are discovering what linguistic theorists have been arguing all along: that language fundamentally shapes both the expression and the experience of emotion. There is no culture-free acontextual means of experiencing or accessing emotion. [...] For scholars, the goal in taking a universalist view of emotions—of positing a common biological substrate upon which culturally distinct constructs are built—is *not* to establish normative emotional values on the basis of which some people or groups can then be judged as aberrant or inferior. Quite the opposite: the point is to make emotion a basis for the recognition of our common humanity, the better to see the historical significance of its expressive variety. (1505-1506, 1525)

While it is true that many affect theorists rely overly much (and often irresponsibly) on insufficiently understood neuroscientific theories, I join Eustace in suggesting that a universalist view of emotions (which nevertheless *must* move beyond Ekman's problematic work) has the potential to be profoundly useful to readers of historical texts. Ultimately, as

Eustace maintains, there should be no need to reject the neurosciences altogether,²⁶ nor to reject affect theory as an insufficiently rigorous approach to embodied knowing. To do so has the dangerous potential of reifying the mistrust of the body ubiquitous in scholarship up to and of the “linguistic turn,” which persists, in many ways, still today.

Employing affect theory, then, does not necessitate an ahistorical approach. Affect theorist Monique Scheer emphasizes “the mutual embeddedness of minds, bodies, and social relations in order to historicize the body and its contributions to the learned experience of emotion [...] emotions can thus be viewed as acts executed by a mindful body, as cultural practices” (199, 205).²⁷ Affect theory, in validating ways of knowing rooted in the physical, does not therefore reject the role of mind or culture; rather, at its best it simply seeks to integrate chronically undervalued kinaesthetic means of acquiring knowledge with established intellectual and social ways of knowing. After all, the mind is continuous with the body. Neurons (usually called “nerves” in the peripheral nervous system) exist in every bodily tissue except cartilage, not just in the brain. Hormones, long known to have an incalculable effect on our emotions, are produced not only in the brain but also in the throat (thyroid and parathyroid glands), chest (thymus and heart), midsection (kidneys, adrenal glands, digestive tract, pancreas) and reproductive organs. Further, that the mind has a profound and observable effect on the body is accepted by all doctors and scientists, without

²⁶ Although I make use, in this dissertation, of theorists who dabble in the neurosciences, I do not make any claim to comprehensively understand recent neuroscientific insights into the emotions, and will not rely overly much on the biological sciences in my readings of texts. With Eustace and others, I claim only that there *is* a biological basis for emotion, a concept that will become especially important in Chapter 3. It should, further, be noted that not all affect theorists rely on neuroscientific research, and also that historian of emotions William Reddy, while recently suggesting in the aforementioned *AHR* conversation that the humanities should “hold off on” the use of neuroscientific data, himself is better versed in the neurosciences than perhaps any other historian or literary critic today, having spent a great deal of energy familiarizing himself with original, cutting-edge neuroscientific literature meant for an audience of scientists.

²⁷ I will return to this concept of a “mindful body” or “embodied mind” in Chapter 3 in arguing that we must move beyond any model in which the mind and body are seen as separate entities. Cartesian dualism, supposedly long dead, is in fact alive and well in most theories of knowing and being, including most affect theories.

exception. Think, for example, of the placebo effect, by which a medically ineffectual treatment causes changes in the body; this effect is so well known that it is taken into account in every medical experiment. There is no need to rely on cutting-edge, highly controversial neuroscientific evidence to claim that the body is a site of knowing; one need only turn to any introductory physiology textbook.

Ideally, as the disciplines mature, the radical kinesthesia of affect theory will be combined with the historical rigor and cultural specificity of history of emotions. Affect theorists have a great deal to learn from the carefully situated historical work of such superlative scholars as Rosenwein, Reddy, Eustace, Jan Plamper, and others. In this dissertation, I do not place kinaesthetic knowing “above” cognitive and social ways of knowing; rather, I argue that most scholars (including most affect theorists as well as their critics) still subscribe to a version of Cartesian dualism that assumes mental and kinaesthetic means of acquiring knowledge are separate. In fact, the body and the mind are imbricated—they are not different systems. We receive, retrieve, and process information with our entire organism; we enter into communication with our entire organism. When I use the term “body” in this dissertation, I am referring to the embodied mind, the corporeal human form that “knows” through interrelated kinaesthetic, mental, and social avenues.²⁸ If I appear to emphasize the corporeal at the expense of the cognitive, it is because the body as a site of knowing is still, as Foster suggests, unaccepted and unacceptable in general academic discourse. If affect scholars often emphasize the body at the expense of the mind (in so

²⁸ I am not, obviously, the first to suggest that the body and mind are not separate systems. The terms “bodymind” and “mindbody” have been proposed independently by a number of neuroscientists, medical doctors, psychologists, practitioners of movement systems (Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais, Structural Integration or “Rolfing,” and body-mind centering are some of the more well-known) and scholars of religion, gaining traction (particularly in the New Age community) in the 1980s and 90s. However, these terms have not taken hold in academia; because of their continued (though perhaps unjust) association with pseudoscience and the New Age movement, I will instead here use “body” to refer to the body/mind unit. For an influential phenomenological approach to an imbricated bodymind system, heavily informed by the neurosciences, see Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought* (1999).

doing upholding the same dualist tropes they purport to destroy) this can perhaps be forgiven in light of the long and continuing history of mistrust of the body in both scholarly and popular discourse.

Of course, the medieval bodies that sang, copied down, railed against, and danced to these lyrics are irrecoverable, and (aside from some aspects of material culture) all that remains to help us understand these bodies are their texts. This is unfortunate, and ironic, when considering late medieval England, a semiliterate society in which the vernacular was only beginning to gain prominence in written texts. Spearing's work on textual subjectivity is so significant precisely because many late medieval texts in English (including nearly all of the lyrics addressed in this study) are anonymous and uniquely devoid of context.

Anachronistic though it may be, this instability of context in many ways mirrors the contemporary interest in lyric studies in collaboration, pastiche, and hybridity perhaps more closely than any other period in the history of English poetry. For medieval as for contemporary poetics, the author is radically decentered. We must treat the speaking "I" in these poems as a textual subject with her own personhood and embodied experience. It makes no practical difference whether the "I" of a poem does in fact represent a single, literally embodied subject expressing his genuine feelings, as in most cases it is absolutely impossible to attach such a person to the text. Even looking for an "author" is a flawed undertaking: medieval singers and scribes freely stole, copied, invented, reinvented, and hybridized in ways that, again, are perhaps unmatched until our own contemporary period. The necessarily conventional and collaborative nature of many medieval poems makes it much more productive to see the "I" of the text itself as *auctor*—both "author" and

“authority.”²⁹ It is eminently sensible, then, to treat the “I” of these poems as embodied subjects in their own right.

Besides examining the embodied experience of the textual subjects of Middle English lyric, there is another avenue toward understanding the medieval bodies we encounter in these poems: that is, our own embodied experience. Inescapably, one thing we have in common with both the textual subjects in these lyrics as well as the medieval subjects who wrote, transcribed, disseminated, sang, and danced to the songs is that we all have bodies. It is certainly valid to ask, as many historians of emotion implicitly or explicitly do, how we know that medieval bodies were like our own; inevitably, they both were and were not. Medieval people were shaped much as we are; their physiology functioned more or less as ours does; they were susceptible to disease and bodily harm; they were fascinated by bodily difference. Nonetheless, it is equally indisputable that medieval people related to their bodies in some ways that are completely foreign to us. As the editors of *A Cultural History of the Human Body in the Medieval Age* remind us, medieval people were by and large physically marked by scarring and injury much more than we are today, at least those of us with access to modern Western medicine and particularly emergency care. It would have been much more unusual in the late medieval period to see elderly people, and, on the other end of the spectrum, babies and young children died throughout the Middle Ages with a frequency that would be utterly horrifying to us in the West today. Further, medieval people had more limited (though by no means zero) options in terms of changing their appearance, lacking sophisticated technologies of, for example, dentistry, tooth and hair bleaching and dyeing, and prosthetics. Reconstructive and cosmetic plastic surgery was, if not entirely unknown,

²⁹ This is not to suggest, of course, that approaches looking at manuscript authors and scribes are valueless. See, for example, the current debate on the possible female authorship and/or copying of several poems in the Findern manuscript, with compelling evidence for various possibilities of authorship, adaptation, and scribing.

exceedingly rare. Obviously, then, medieval bodies were in some ways similar to and in some ways different from our own. Cohen's previously cited thoughts on transhistoricity are relevant here as well; stressing "the impossibility of choosing alterity or continuity" he instead suggests a model of looking at the past that "opens up the present for possible futures" (*Of Giants* 5).

While freely admitting that medieval bodies were in some ways different from our own, and further that, as medievalists and other scholars have noted from Butler and Bynum through the present, the body is itself culturally constructed (and thus, the ways in which medieval people conceived of and related to their bodies cannot have been identical to the ways we do today) I nonetheless maintain that it is both possible and useful (not to mention inevitable) to "read with our bodies," that is, to use our own embodied ways of knowing to inform how we see the past, including speculating on how medieval people might have read and related to texts such as the lyrics addressed in this study. Like any identity category, the ways our knowledge is shaped by our bodies inevitably factors into our interpretations of texts; better to be as candid as possible about these reactions and willing to critically relate to our embodied knowing itself than to allow our kinaesthetic responses to silently influence interpretation. Ruth Leys' claim that this represents a reified version of the affective fallacy notwithstanding (451), I am hardly the sole recent voice championing a deeper trust of and reliance on one's own body in scholarship. Spearing insists that he "knows of no evidence for doubting the truth of Lee Patterson's statement that 'subjectivity is a human characteristic that has always been part of our history'..." (*Textual Subjectivity* 33) and Susan Leigh Foster notes that postcolonial, queer, and gender studies, with their focus on specificity and contextual knowledge, must nonetheless "continue to grapple with the nature and constitution of what is shared or communal within experience," urging us to consider

“ways in which a shared physical semiosis might enable bodies, in all their historical and cultural specificity, to commune with each other” and finally, crucially, asking, “Are there techniques of knowledge production that invite us to imagine the other without presuming knowledge of the other?” (14). This study cannot, alas, provide a definitive answer.

However, I do hope here to bring Foster’s question—which for so many scholars would be answered by a foregone, resounding “no”—closer to the forefront of scholarly conversation. This study is, then, an attempt to reclaim the validity, even the primacy, of the body and of kinaesthetic knowing in reading literature.

Before concluding, a third way of accessing embodiment in lyric should be at least gestured toward: that is, by paying close attention to the materiality of the texts. Bodies created and copied the manuscripts we have today, and bodies held and used them. In an article on the Findern lyrics, Sarah McNamer stresses the importance of materiality in an era when many scholars (including myself) rely on edited texts rather than original manuscript editions: “The position, layout, and script of poems in their original manuscript settings, as well as the character of the volume as a whole, can not only provide missing information, but also act as a corrective to the misinformation which is often unwittingly supplied by modern anthologies and editions” (279). Concerns of space, scope, and specialty unfortunately prevent me from treating manuscript context in any meaningful detail in this study.³⁰ I hope this failing is somewhat mediated by the near-certainty that most late medieval English people did not experience the lyrics as written but rather as spoken, chanted, or sung.

³⁰ Further, because in most instances I did not have access to the manuscripts (or facsimiles of manuscripts) from which the lyrics are drawn, I do rely here on edited texts. In each case I have chosen the available edition with the least regularization, as far as can be discerned. In a few instances I have adapted an edition slightly; however, irregularities in editorial practice here reflect the multiple editions from which the lyrics are drawn. There is no singular, complete edited corpus of Middle English anonymous lyric.

Structure of the Dissertation

Both “lyric” and “embodiment,” then, are fraught terms when applied to texts of the medieval era. Furthermore, in working with texts at a remove of roughly 500-800 years, both medieval bodies and lyrics (as they were largely experienced by medieval audiences) are lost to us. How, then, to conduct a study of Middle English lyric without falling prey to irresponsibly ahistoric interpretive frameworks? In this dissertation, I will explore embodied subjectivity in Middle English lyric from three different angles, drawing on diverse theories and methodologies but with the single aim of unpacking the ways in which readings privileging subjectivity and physicality can “open” the lyrics and help us better to understand both how medieval subjects may have perceived and interacted with the lyrics and how we today can connect with the lyrics on a meaningful, kinaesthetic level today.³¹ Throughout, in the emerging tradition of New Formalism, I combine in-depth close readings of lyrics with first an exploration of the linguistic category of deixis, subsequently theories of affect and embodiment, and finally social history to unpack the ways in which the lyrics function on an embodied level. The root of my approach, then, is grounded in in-depth formal analysis, examining characteristics such as meter, rhyme, and repetition to see how patterns of kinaesthetic meaning are created through purely formal measures (which very often explicitly reinforce the content of the lyrics). Throughout I will also address the complicated issue of tone, piecing together how form and content are in relationship to create a particular tonal tenor, and, importantly, whether that tone is likely to be perceived differently by a modern and a medieval audience, or by different subsets of a medieval audience.

³¹ This emphasis on embodied readerly experience may recall, in the minds of some of my own readers, reader-response criticism, which places the receiver’s experience at the heart of the textual encounter. Although this dissertation will not dwell on the rich history of reader-response theories from the 1960s through the present, I have certainly been influenced by reader-response critics, including Stanley Fish and Michel Riffaterre. The call in affect studies toward “reading with the body” makes it a companion field to reader-response criticism.

The first chapter, “*Herkneth me: Deixis and the Lyric Subject*” examines how the linguistic category of deixis can contribute to a reading of body, physicality, subjectivity and connection with audience in Middle English lyric. The ways in which the bodies of singers, speakers, readers, and textual subjects are involved in actually or virtually performing lyric (via personal pronouns and other deictic words) provide an important interpretive tool for actively and kinaesthetically engaging with lyric poetry in English from the medieval period through the present. In the lyrics, deixis has powerful potential to create empathy with the “I” of the text through craft choices, locating the “I” of the textual subject (and sometimes the receiver as well) in contexts of space, time, body, and relationship. In this way, deixis brings the lyric experiencer into palpable relationship with the world of the text through felt empathy with the textual subject.

The second chapter, “*Mulch sorw I walke with: Affect and Embodiment*” draws on contemporary theories of affect and, to a lesser extent, the distinct but related field of history of emotions to explore how two particular affects—melancholia and desire—are portrayed in various lyrics through their embodied textual subjects. These two affects, often considered opposite extremes, in fact blur into each other in many Middle English lyrics; the supposedly passive affect of melancholy is in fact often marked by inner motion, and the supposedly active affect of desire often leached of its kinetic potential by conventional language. In recent years emotion as well as sensuous knowledge has been recognized as important categories of inquiry in texts of all eras, and the study of affect in medieval texts is proving to be a valuable field of investigation. Like the linguistic category of deixis, the affective categories of melancholy and desire help lyric experiencers to empathize with the “I” of a text and to connect with the bodies of textual subject and subsequently with our own bodies. In validating felt ways of knowing, the emerging theoretical landscape of affect studies and

history of emotions provide a welcome alternative to theoretical approaches, still dominant in academia, privileging the construction of knowledge through language.

The third chapter, “*Come and daunce wit me: Carols and Woman’s Song*,” turns toward carols (a subset of Middle English lyric) and the ways in which they are perhaps the most inherently and explicitly embodied lyric form for their medieval singers and performers as collectively sung and danced. The latter half of the chapter narrows to focus on Middle English woman’s song (a large subset of which are carols) and examine the problematic ways in which the bodies of their medieval textual speakers are potentially aligned and/or at odds with the bodies of real late medieval English women. This chapter, then, is most closely focused on the ways in which the texts of lyrics are connected intimately to bodies, particularly as they are enacted through the dancing bodies of medieval people and especially women. Drawing on recent approaches in embodied poetics, this chapter examines one specific, practical use of texts as they are closely connected to the bodies of their medieval performers. Many of the lyrics explicitly align women with the body, especially the sexualized body, through the related stereotypes of the “lustful country maid” and the pregnant and abandoned woman. The overlapping categories of carol and woman-voiced lyric are tied especially thoroughly to the embodied performance of lyric in late medieval England. Throughout, this study attempts to reclaim the validity of the body as a site of knowledge and to bring the lively, undervalued corpus of Middle English lyric back to the forefront of both lyric studies and medieval studies.

Chapter 2

Herkneth me: Deixis and the Lyric Subject

Introduction

The idea that a deep understanding and deft wielding of deixis creates high-quality poetry is not new. Since the early twentieth century, with the work of Karl Bühler and later Émile Benveniste, deictics “have acquired central importance in linguistic and literary theory” (Southerden 52) and there is a well-established body of scholarship on deixis in Romantic, modern, and (to a lesser extent) contemporary Anglophone poetry.³² Further, a number of contemporary American poets show marked attention to the nuanced use of deixis and particularly an interest in the myriad uses of the second-person pronoun. Since “you” in a poem can stand for any number of persons singular or plural (for example, a love-object, the reader, or a cohort or collective linked to each other through some defining experience) and often in fact has several of these meanings, alternately or simultaneously—and since, in English, there is no difference between the second-person singular and plural pronouns—“you” is a particularly rich area of exploration.³³ This focus on “you” may also be due, in part, to influential lyric theorist Jonathan Culler, who, in *Structuralist Poetics*, maintains that first- and second-person pronouns, representing the poem’s subject and its addressee respectively, are the “most interesting” of all deictics (165).

³² See, to cite just a few examples, recent articles on spatial deixis in the poetry of Robert Creeley, Wallace Stevens, and “Milton to Keats” by David Kennedy, Mark Jeffreys, and Mark Bruhn respectively, as well as Keith Green’s 1992 doctoral thesis on deixis in the poetry of Vaughan, Wordsworth, Pound and Ashbery.

³³ This fixation on “you” has been current for at least a decade—William Waters’ 2003 monograph on lyric address, tellingly entitled *Poetry’s Touch*, is devoted entirely to exploring what it means when a poet says “you.” More recently, contemporary poet and scholar William Camponovo incisively summarizes the power of the contemporary lyric “you” in an article on John Ashbery: “‘You’ is valuable not when it means only one thing, nor when it means infinite things, but rather when it locates itself in a continuum of meaning that is actively navigated and claimed” (24).

Not incidentally, this surge of interest in deixis has been accompanied by an interest in the ways poetry writes itself on the body.³⁴ In the emerging field of embodied poetics, linguistic devices such as deixis are examined alongside evidence drawn from cognitive science, affect theory, and foundational theories of embodiment (especially as related to gender and sexuality) to explore the ways in which language on the page is also written on the bodies of authors, speakers, readers, hearers, and (for medieval lyrics particularly) singers and scribes, and the ways in which textual bodies enflesh themselves through words. This chapter draws on the work of Susan Stewart, Virginia Jackson, Heather Dubrow, A.C. Spearing, and others to argue that deixis in Middle English lyric works in subtle and surprising ways to create a connection between the textual body of the lyric subject (the “I” of the poem) and the body of the poem’s receiver, who may be medieval or modern and who may experience the text through reading or hearing.

At the most basic level, deictics—also called “shifters” or “sliders”—are words that are context-dependent, words that have no meaning outside of a particular speaker-and-receiver communicative unit. In *Cognitive Linguistics*, Croft and Cruse define deixis as “the phenomenon of using elements of the subject’s situatedness—more specifically, the subject qua speaker in a speech event—to designate something in the scene” (59). Use of deictics, then, is based on common ground; context and shared knowledge are required to understand them. And because “situatedness” is inherently embodied, deixis constitutes an important textual link between the uttering and receiving bodies that meet in any poetic encounter.

This chapter examines the ways in which Middle English lyrics employ deixis to connect the reader or hearer to her own body through an acknowledgement of and

³⁴ In addition to the resources cited in this chapter, see also the work of Celia Carlson, especially “Lyric Image as Sensuous Thought,” (2012).

engagement with the physical body of the lyric's textual subject, which works to create empathy in the lyric experiencer. One way to explore this phenomenon is through a focus on the *uses* of Middle English lyric in the day-to-day lives of medieval people, relying on the insights of historians to understand how lyrics were literally embodied: for example sung, danced to, and incorporated into religious and secular ritual. I will take up one aspect of this approach in Chapter 4, examining the ways in which carols were enacted through dance. This chapter, however, uses intratextual evidence to look at the complex ways in which lyric subjects relate to their audiences through the mediation of verse.

Deictics, then, provide an entry point for bodies into the world of the text. By physically locating a poem's subject in space, time, body, and occasionally even a social web or net of relationships, deixis becomes a doorway from the world of the page to the tangible world in which all text experiencers reside. Deixis is thus instrumental in creating and maintaining empathy in the reader or hearer of a literary text, as empathy is predicated on complex, felt cognitive/affective responses that can only occur when the reader is brought into relationship with the textual subject (for example, by inhabiting the text's "I," or, more rarely, "you").

Empathy is understood colloquially as the ability to imagine oneself in the situation of another person, and is strongly associated with being able to understand and share the emotions of others; empathy is also widely considered a defining characteristic of humanity, and psychopaths and bullies are routinely characterized in fiction, journalism, and social scientific literature as lacking in empathy. For linguists, empathy is the ability to imagine a situation from a written "speaker's" "point of view" and as such is intimately related to deixis. For cognitive scientists, philosophers of mind, and some affect theorists, the concept of empathy is inextricably tied to the relatively recent (and still contentious) discovery of

mirror neurons.³⁵ I here define “empathy” as the felt³⁶ reactions produced in the body of a lyric experiencer in response to the felt situation of the lyric subject, expressed through the mediation of written or performed words.³⁷ The lyrics examined in this chapter employ deixis of person, time, and space in complex, nuanced, and knowing ways to produce empathy in their medieval readers and hearers, and indeed—since twenty-first century readers are (for the foreseeable future at least) creatures equally as embodied as our medieval counterparts—for any reader today as well.

If deixis works to create empathy, it can be used in literary texts such that the reader identifies with the textual subject. Thus, deixis is often cited as the preeminent device employed in poetry toward the purpose of building a “persona” whose physiological/psychological space can be occupied by the lyric experiencer. In *Structuralist Poetics*, Culler maintains that

... a whole poetic tradition uses ... deictics in order to force the reader to construct a meditative persona. The poem is presented as the discourse of a speaker who, at the moment of speaking, stands before a particular scene, but even if this apparent claim was biographically true it is absorbed and transformed by poetic convention so as to permit a certain kind of thematic development. (195)

³⁵ Much discussed in recent popular science literature, mirror neurons fire when an animal performs an action or when the animal observes that same action being performed. These neurons have been verified in primates and birds and introduced to the public by neuroscience popularizers including V. S. Ramachandran and Antonio Damasio. However, recently the purpose and significance of mirror neurons have been hotly contested, with many scientists objecting to the oversimplified portrait of mirror neurons as guarantors of human empathy. A recent literature review by James Kilner and Roger Lemon at the University College of London has shown that the function of mirror neurons in humans is in fact still controversial and little-understood by brain scientists; even the existence of mirror neurons in humans has not been definitively established. See Kilner, J.M. et al. “What We Currently Know About Mirror Neurons,” *Current Biology* 23.23 (December 2013): R1057-R1062.

³⁶ It is convenient in this study to speak of “felt” reactions and responses, since “to feel” conveys a sense of both physicality (we “feel” a touch) and interiority (we “feel” an emotion). Again, the felt cognitive/affective knowledge examined here assumes that the body and mind are continuous rather than discrete.

³⁷ I am unable to summarize here the enormous body of research on empathy in popular literature, literary theory, linguistics, anthropology, psychology, sociology, and the cognitive sciences. This is, however, an extraordinarily rich and under-explored area of inquiry as regards the lyric; much more work has been done on empathy in narrative forms, particularly the novel.

This view of deixis and empathy is a particularly good fit for much Romantic and even Modern poetry, which indeed often self-consciously constructs a “meditative persona” from which a non-authorial or quasi-authorial speaker holds forth. However, the concept of a meditative persona (and indeed of a “speaker” in the New Critical sense) is not a comfortable fit for most Middle English lyrics, which, for the most part, should not be viewed as intensely subjective *cris de coeur* of an individual “speaker.” There is in any event little evidence to suggest that medieval writers, singers, and readers approached most lyrics in this way, although the purposes and uses of lyrics did vary widely. Rosemary Woolf, for example, speaks of the “abnegation of individuality” (6) and “self-effacing” nature (14) of Middle English religious lyrics, maintaining that

... [religious poets’] personal moods and emotions are not revealed in their poetry, for they are not concerned with the question of how they feel individually, but only with what kind of response their subject should properly arouse in Everyman. (6)

Mary Carruthers further claims that “self-expression is a meaningless term in a medieval context [...] for there was no concept of an autonomous, though largely inarticulate ‘individual self’ to be defined against social norms” (182).

I do not here claim that any given Middle English lyric represents the speaking voice of an individual person (much less an “author”); in fact, I will explicitly argue otherwise, that these poems are hybrid creations reflecting many hands in the creation and transmission processes. However, I do not subscribe wholeheartedly to Carruthers’ (and earlier Woolf’s) assertions that medieval people had no individualized sense of self. Certainly, the commonalities of human beings were often stressed, particularly in a religious context; most religious lyrics assume, for example, that every member of their audience is a Christian and a sinner. As Woolf and others have noted, the medieval character of *Everyman* in some ways suggests that one individual, for a late medieval literary and dramatic audience, is not

radically different from another. However, this does not deny the possibility of an individual, nor does it preclude medieval people possessing a sense of their own subjectivity.³⁸ Crucial here is the likely difference between lyric production and lyric experience. The lyrics were almost certainly produced collaboratively; however, there is every reason to suspect that a medieval audience empathized on an individualized and subjective level with the “I” of a lyric in much the same way we do today. Despite the collective construction of the lyrics, medieval lyric experiencers probably connected to the “I” of the text as if it were an individual.

The related debate, waged with gusto in scholarship from the 1960s and 70s, regarding whether Middle English lyrics are “more personal” or individualized than they are conventional, is of limited interest today, as scholarly trends have moved toward new models of authorship and text experience. Certainly, Middle English lyrics are often highly formulaic. The extent to which they arise from “folk” or collective tradition, though ultimately unknowable, is undoubtedly significant. However, treating the “I”s of the songs as textual subjects subverts the need (and perhaps the desire) to determine if the “I” of any given poem represents an actual, individual person. Spearing emphasizes that medieval poems spoken from a particular viewpoint are “textual performances, not the spoken words issuing from the living, conscious bodies that they sometimes imitate” (*Medieval Autographies* 97).³⁹ He is also careful to emphasize that, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in Europe, although autobiography did not exist and so medieval authors could not have been working toward it, there *did* exist “a culture that was growing more interested in individual

³⁸ For example, that varieties of religious experience were radically expanding to include more private, personal, and individual forms of devotion in the late Middle Ages has become a truism. Recently, Jessica Brantley has made the illuminating argument that late medieval private and public forms of devotion are less radically polarized than most scholars assume; see *Reading in the Wilderness* (2007).

³⁹ Spearing is referring in this instance to the prologue to the “Canterbury Tales,” but this holds equally true for lyric.

lives and especially in individual interiorities” (99). Thus the body of extant Middle English lyrics is in some ways an ideal textual corpus upon which to base an in-depth analysis of the uses of deixis in creating empathy. Largely lacking in context, likely produced collectively, the lyrics were created in a society that was increasingly interested in subjectivity and interiority. *Auctores* were texts, not people (Carruthers 190), but medieval people almost certainly responded to and empathized with the textual “I” as an individual.

Although many scholars have conducted careful codicological and paleographical analyses of the manuscripts from which these lyrics are drawn (including the few well-known manuscripts in which many lyrics appear: Harley 2293, Rawlinson D.913, the Findern manuscript, Sloane 2593, and the “Red Book of Ossory”), much contextualizing information for these lyrics is simply impossible to recover, as scholars from the mid-twentieth century through the present are quick to note.⁴⁰ I will gesture toward contextualizing information for individual poems, including approximate dates, intended audiences, and occasionally information on their possible oral and written transmission and performance, but I will not provide extensive situating information for each of the many lyrics here addressed. As noted, the great majority of this information is simply inaccessible. This is, undeniably, unfortunate. The lack of contextualizing information, however, makes these “authorless texts” the perfect candidates for a deictic analysis, since there exists so little information to aid in interpretation other than what is inherent to the texts. In literary criticism, it is usual to speak with the language of intent, but with no single author behind these poems, the text itself is *auctor*. Lacking most context and cause, we can only examine the *effects* of the poems; the corpus of Middle English lyric is, then, an ideal site for New Formalist analysis. However, it is equally alien to my methodology to engage in a purely New Critical speculation on what the poems

⁴⁰ See, classically, J.A. Burrow’s “Poems Without Contexts” (1979).

may mean based only on “the information from the text,” meaning, really, what I wish to read into them based on my own experience as a reader as well as my imagined ideas about medieval writers, reader, singers, and audiences. The great bulk of midcentury criticism (and indeed some contemporary criticism) of Middle English lyric engages in this sort of free-flowing, associative interpretation.⁴¹ I hope to avoid this pitfall by situating my analyses firmly within the interpretive matrix of contemporary theories of subjectivity and embodiment, especially affect theories and Spearing’s work on textual subjectivity.

In addition to being in some sense “without context,” Middle English lyrics are also in important ways liminal. The lyrics were and are frequently considered marginal texts (and in the original manuscripts are often literally marginal as well, appearing on flyleaves and at the end of longer texts as “filler”). In manuscript, they often physically inhabit the liminal space between longer, more canonical texts and, like the babewyn or hybrid marginal monsters, are in this way simultaneously fascinating and unsettling.⁴² They are ubiquitously described by twentieth century critics as “charming” and “simple” (which is, perhaps, a reasonable surface understanding of the tone of many of the songs upon first reading) but they are also somewhat unnerving, surrounded as they are by unanswerable questions. Were the lyrics primarily spoken or sung, written down or read aloud? How were they used? Are they to be read straightforwardly or parodically? These mysteries and many more complicate the oft-cited “accessibility” of Middle English lyric to a twenty-first century audience. Here,

⁴¹ See, for example, the four brief interpretive essays, all originally from the 1950s and 60s, on “Maiden in the mor lay” included in Luria and Hoffman’s 1974 anthology, to be discussed shortly.

⁴² The meaning of “babewyn,” (“baboon-like”) had broadened by the late medieval period to include all composite beasts; the monkey (*simius*) was thought to eerily mimic humans (*similitudo*). Babewyn, then, are literally marginal, but also “marginal” in the sense of being uncanny; see Michael Camille’s study *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art* (1992).

for example, is one of the most famous Middle English poems, the 14th century “Maiden in the mor lay”:⁴³

Maiden in the mor lay,
In the mor lay,
Sevenight fulle, sevenight fulle.
Maiden in the mor lay,
In the mor lay,
Sevenightes fulle and a day.

Welle was hire mete.
What was hire mete?
The primerole and the—
The primerole and the—
Welle was hire mete.
What was hire mete?
The primerole and the violet.

Welle was hire dring.
What was hire dring?
The chelde water of the—
The chelde water of the—
Welle was hire dring.
What was her dring?
The chelde water of the welle-spring.

Welle was hire bour.
What was hire bour?
The rede rose and the—
The rede rose and the—
Welle was hire bour.
What was hire bour?
The rede rose and the lilie flour.

It is impossible to discern what, exactly, is going on in this lyric. The narrative is clear enough—a maiden sleeps in a bower on the moor, subsisting on well-water, primroses, and violets—but it is difficult not to read some mystical significance into the lyric, universally described as “enigmatic.” This sense of mystery is eagerly noted by midcentury as well as contemporary critics, who often speak authoritatively to the identity of the maiden despite the fact that there is no way of knowing who she is or what she represents. Midcentury

⁴³ Ed. Luria and Hoffman (128)

critics, especially, tend toward the fantastical; in the four interpretive essays on the poem in Luria and Hoffman's anthology (by D.W. Robertson, Jr., E.T. Donaldson, John Speirs, and Peter Dronke), for example, the woman is referred to as a "child of nature" a "faery" and a "water-sprite." This poem has drawn scholars past and present because it is both profoundly unfamiliar (in what universe is such an attractively mysterious woman imaginable?—she is far away from anything so protean as commerce, industry, and apparently also basic human needs for anything other than floral sustenance and shelter) but also profoundly familiar (for these critics, at least, this woman is identical to the idealized, magical fantasy women of myth, straight out of *The Golden Bough* or *The White Goddess* or, for that matter, fantasy novels and films from Tolkien through the present).⁴⁴ Like the language itself (and, as Cohen notes, the entire medieval period) lyrics like "Maiden in the mor lay" feel, to a twenty-first century audience, at once foreign and familiar, uncanny, liminal, in that they feel part of neither a medieval past nor the present but an imagined past reflecting the modern reader's concerns, fantasies, and desires.

This liminal quality of Middle English lyric is mirrored by the liminal function of deixis. Dan McIntyre suggests that through the act of reading our deictic center shifts, potentially many times, throughout the text:

As we read, we assume the spatial, temporal, social, person-related and empathetic deictic coordinates are not to be interpreted with reference to our own deictic centre, but instead in relation to a deictic center somewhere within the fictional world or what some theorists call the "text world" or "discourse world." (118)

⁴⁴ I will largely leave aside here the potentially profoundly sexist implications of this mode of criticism, particularly when male critics speculate about its possible performance (as will be seen in other dance-songs, among which we should count this lyric; it is referred to in one of its three manuscript witnesses as a *karole*). Dronke, for example, recounts a deeply detailed, romanticized, and wholly imagined scene in which a female performer enacts a sort of pantomime of sleeping, eating, and waking in a circle of male admirers, after which "all the dancers make her a bed of flowers; she reclines on it; the bell sounds once more, and she falls back into sleep, again as out of reach as at the beginning. It is along these lines," he concludes, "that we can picture the living reality that such a song may have been." I cannot, of course, prove that this is *not* the way the song was performed. Puzzlingly, Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou builds her own recent analysis in "*I have a yong suster*" on Dronke's.

The possibility for an unstable deictic center allows the reader to experience the tangible world—immersively, vicariously—from viewpoints not his own (often many within a single text). In allowing readers of a text to experience the lived world from multiple viewpoints, deixis works to create a liminal space in which a reader is neither “here” nor “there.”

Imagine the feeling of being drawn into a good novel—although you gradually lose the sense of your physical surroundings as you are caught up in the world of the text, you of course are still “you,” reacting to and interacting with the narrative from the perspective of your own lived, embodied subjectivity. Understandably, deixis as it relates to “point of view” has thus acquired a prominent place in narrative theory. However, an immersive “text world” can be powerfully at work in lyric as in narrative, and the study of how deixis works to create the felt world of the lyric can reveal just as powerfully the formal techniques by which empathy is produced.⁴⁵

Deixis of Person and Empathy

Personal pronouns are ubiquitous in Middle English lyric. An explicit “I” is not at all unusual in both straightforwardly narrative as well as image-driven poems; poems with an “I” speaker may in fact outnumber poems with no “I.”⁴⁶ And where there is an “I,” there is often (though not always) an explicit or implied “you.” Perhaps the most common addressees in Middle English lyric are love-objects, whether a courtly lady, “rustic maid” (or, more unusually, man), spouse, the Virgin Mary, or Christ.⁴⁷ Sometimes, rather than an

⁴⁵ In her monograph on twentieth century Italian poet Vittorio Sereni, Francesca Southerden also repeatedly links deixis to liminality.

⁴⁶ This is perhaps most interesting when contrasted with the surviving body of Old English lyric (itself a contested genre), for which an “I” speaker is very unusual. Plummer notes that although “The Wife’s Lament” opens with the word “Ic,” this is “very rare in Old English poems except for the Psalms and riddles” (14).

⁴⁷ However, “you” is not always a love-object and is not even necessarily a person. See for example “The Complaint of Chaucer to His Purse,” in which the eponymous author satirizes the traditional courtly complaint

“I/you” framework, a poem will be situated within a collective first-person voice, as in “Adam lay ibowndyn,” when, in a joyous celebration of Mary, Queen of Heaven “we” join together to sing an exuberant *Deo Gracias*. The emphasis in this and other “religious” poems on collectivity—the creation of a group identity comprised of the textual subject, the text experiencer and unspecified others bound by shared, embodied religious practice—is certainly an intriguing contrast to the impassioned, self-consciously singular, and self-focused “I” of secular love poetry. It is perhaps dangerous, however, to put too much interpretive pressure on the use of the first-person plural, rather than singular, pronoun; Patrick Diehl convincingly argues that “in many medieval religious poems, singular and plural first-person pronominal forms seem to be virtually interchangeable” (167) and gives one Middle English example of alternate versions of a poem in which “I” and “me” neatly replace “we” and “us” with no apparent change in import or intent (171).⁴⁸

The first-person singular pronoun does, however, have particular importance in linguistic and literary theory for contemporary scholars. Francesca Southerden notes the rise to prominence of the “I” in the 1950s and 60s with the work of linguist Émile Benveniste, who suggested that “I” is not merely a pronoun but a speech act, underlining “the egocentric perspective at the root of language.” Deictics, then, are for Benveniste “an existential as well as a linguistic index, which foreground the present instance of discourse through which the speaking subject gains life, announcing itself” (52). This creative function of deixis, through which a speaking subject inscribes herself on the world through language, affirming her existence and the ability to exercise her will, can help explain why deixis ties language so

of the lover to his lady by directly addressing his purse (“To yow, my purse, and to noon other wight / Complayne I, for ye be my lady dere.”) By locating readers in a specific scenario, the poem grounds us in the author’s (imagined) physical situation; we can easily picture the purse lying inert and woefully flat on Chaucer’s table or chair.

⁴⁸ Reiss further reminds us that first-person pronouns, both singular and plural, may simply represent Everyman (*Poems without Names* 4).

intimately to the living, breathing body (textual or otherwise). The use of “I” marks a subject as an agent, temporally and spatially located, situated at a particular place in his life cycle, with a particular personality, emotional makeup, and mood, all expressed in inherently embodied ways.

Culler has further emphasized the important organizational function of the “I”: “Our major device of order is, of course, the notion of the person or speaking subject, and the process of reading is especially troubled when we cannot construct a subject who would serve as a source of the poetic utterance” (*Structuralist Poetics* 170). However, Spearing, who has explored in depth the role of pronouns in creating the textual subject of Middle English literature, emphasizes rather the freedom of the written “I,” which can represent anyone:

... the first person singular pronoun need not be referential (referring consistently to an individual who uses the word “I”); it may only be deictic, its function being to convey proximity and experientiality without specific reference to a pragmatic center or *origo*. (*Textual Subjectivity* 14)

This purely deictic “I” stands in opposition to Culler’s assertion that the absence of an identifiable and physically situated speaking subject presents difficulty in understanding or enjoying a poem, whether medieval or modern. Is Spearing’s purely deictic “I,” then, a barrier to or a catalyst for empathy with a textual subject? Does the oft-cited “performativity” of the lyric (identified by Culler as one of its most salient features), through which the “I” “performs” the speech act of the poem, help or hinder a lyric experiencer’s empathy with an embodied speaking textual subject? In the lyric “I syng of a myden,” for example, the first-person pronoun in the initial line has the effect of performing the very act it describes. Does this help us connect with a particular, embodied textual subject, or is this a “purely deictic” “I” we are meant to simply fill with ourselves and our own embodied experience?

Perhaps these two perspectives are not mutually exclusive. Culler's view allows us to understand how we read a poem's "I" as a specific, embodied, uttering subject, separate from ourselves, while Spearing's view allows us to fill the pronoun with our own experience. The "I" of a lyric thus paradoxically works to create an individualized medieval subject as well as a template upon which twenty-first century readers may project our own selves. In addition to the use of deixis, language pertaining to bodies, embodied emotion, and the senses helps to solidify this dual effect. Specific, sensory details, as writers and readers have long known, help us to connect intimately with a textual speaker even if we have very little, culturally, in common with that speaker. While embodied actions and reactions are culturally inscribed (for example, the ways we walk, speak, eat, sing, and carry ourselves are created by the cultural matrices in which we move) affective embodied responses to emotional stimuli (that is, those that are outward, expressive, communicative, written on the body) remain remarkably stable across cultures, although specific stimuli prompting specific affects varies wildly. The fundamental or "basic emotions," as influentially articulated by psychologist Paul Ekman in a paradigm that is now recognized as both flawed and incomplete, are in fact fundamental *physical expressions of emotion*—in other words, affects.⁴⁹ Thus, though the motivations and internal experiences of any given person, as well as the way affective responses are interpreted, vary widely both between and within cultures, the experience of gasping or crying, it must be assumed, functions physiologically in much the same way both

⁴⁹ To review: Ekman's work on facial expression and emotion, beginning in the 1970s, has come under criticism from anthropologists and historians of emotion, though it remains in use by many psychologists, sociologists, and affect theorists. The simplest formulation of Ekman's theory is that there are certain universal emotions, communicated via "basic facial expressions," which remain relatively stable from culture to culture. See especially the second edition of *Emotion in the Human Face* (1983), to which foundational affect theorist Silvan Tomkins has contributed the final chapter. It is worth noting that although Ekman's work has been called into question by social scientists, its essential framework is still accepted by many scientists and engineers, and is currently being employed in cutting-edge technology for diverse purposes, primary among them advertising. For a very recent (and somewhat disturbing) popular article on the advent of "affective computing" and its relationship to advertising, see Raffi Khatchadourian's *New Yorker* article "We Know How You Feel" (2015).

transhistorically and transculturally. In this way the body, in its infinite variability, is nonetheless the ultimate equalizer, since affects are, for each of us, fundamentally the same physical experiences, though, again, their causes, and how they are assessed and evaluated, vary enormously from person to person and culture to culture. A grimace does not discriminate between a medieval European person and a contemporary American one. Tears do not recognize race, gender, age, or socioeconomic status. Physiologically, it must be assumed that a blush is a blush is a blush. *However*, because, as I have argued, the body and the mind are not separate but imbricated; because a human being is a body-mind unit for which emotional and physical felt responses *cannot be separated*; because, as historians of emotion are quick to note, any cognitive/physiological felt response cannot be dissociated from our assessment of that response, which is formed by culture and subsequently nuanced by our individual particulars; because of all of these factors, basic emotions theory cannot be the endpoint of (effective) affective literary analysis. I do not, then, argue that empathy is created when a lyric experiencer “sees” a textual subject blush and knows, instinctively or inherently, what that blush means. I *do*, however, argue that felt information pertaining to the body, the senses, and emotional/affective response are common to every human being past and present, and thus has the powerful potential to create an affective response in the text experiencer. This response may or may not align with the cognitive/emodied “feeling” a medieval text experiencer would have felt, but the creation of empathy via language pertaining to the body (including deictics) does catalyze an affective response on the part of the lyric experiencer that can correspond in intensity, if not always in kind, with that of the lyric subject; further, this response is experienced kinaesthetically by the experiencer’s body (and again, by “body” I mean “body-mind unit”).

This section focuses on lyrics in which pronouns work to reveal an embodied textual subject and to draw the lyric experiencer's attention to his own embodied self, thus producing physical/cognitive empathy with the poem's textual subject. Unfortunately, an exhaustive survey of the myriad uses of pronouns in Middle English lyric is beyond the scope of this project; the focus here will be specifically on the ways in which pronouns produce empathetic affect in the receiver of the text via the portrayal of an embodied portrait of the textual subject.

The Harleian lyric "A wayle whyt ase whalles bon"⁵⁰ is a good initial example of the complex ways in which pronouns (as well as the poem's sly tonal complexity) work to create empathy in the reader.⁵¹ In this love lyric, the back-and-forth between the subject's "I" and the third-person pronouns referring to the love object is a carefully constructed attempt to control the discourse, and the relationship, between these two figures. The pronouns in this poem, along with careful management of the subject matter, work to successfully create empathy with the text's "I." This effect ensures that the poem's last line, which in a different context might feel tonally "off," is in fact a tonally perfect, mischievous closing image as surprising as it is intimately and intensely physical.

The poem begins with three descriptions of the lady: she is as pale as whalebone and as brightly shining as a gold bead; she is like a turtledove; she is known far and wide for her virtue. The initial use of parataxis and juxtaposed images to create a portrait of the lady sets the reader up for a highly conventional love poem. The remainder of the first stanza continues in this familiar vein: "Hire gladshipe nes neuer gon / Whil Y may glewe." Thus far, this is an entirely conventional lyric. However, in these last two lines of the first stanza,

⁵⁰ This fifty-five line poem is available in full online at Wessex Parallel Web Texts.

⁵¹ Several critics, including Degginger (1954) and Ransom (1985) read this poem as a parody of the courtly love lyric, citing the poem's slightly bawdy ending as well as arguing for a different stanza ordering that points toward an "ironic reconstruction" of the poem. These arguments are suggestive but not, ultimately, convincing.

we encounter the first of many instances in which the poem's subject is explicitly contrasted with its object. This construction, setting up a pattern that will be repeated many times throughout the poem, slyly establishes a relationship between the subject and the love-object where no relationship, outside of the poem, exists. This strategy effectively puts the lyric experiencer into the subject's position: the "I" functions in one sense as a "purely deictic" or experiential "I" but in another sense as a narrative "I" who physically performs the embodied act of singing. And although "whil Y may glewe" is usually translated as "while I can compose [or 'make'] songs," it may equally well be translated "while I may call out [or 'cry' or even 'pray']" or "while I rejoice." This last is particularly salient, since it links the lady's happiness with the narrator's own. *Glouen*, in other senses, may also mean, "to stare," "to shine brightly," "to be heated to glowing," "to be inflamed with emotion" and even "to blush" (MED *glouen*). These intensely bodily affects, then (some active, some passive), also inform our perception of the way the subject responds to the lady's "gladship" or happiness in a manner that is simultaneously helpless (he cannot make her love him) as well as an aggressive attempt to assert the power of his gaze and his will.

Further, in this initial stanza "hire gladship" functions as a sort of metonymy standing for the lady's whole being; rather than a body part (as is the case later in the poem, when her eyes and lips are for the subject representative of the lady's physical entirety) here the representative of the love-object's body is her happiness. Emotion and physicality are thus linked by this textual subject as clearly as by any modern affect theorist. Of course, the other implication of this line is that the lady's happiness is dependent on the speaker and his possession (imagined or real) of her body. And if the last two lines are understood as "her happiness will never go away / while I rejoice," this imagined connection (between the lady's happiness and body and the subject's own) is made even more intimate.

Granted, these delusions are quickly set aside. We do not get the sense that the subject believes the lady is in love with him but rather that he is trying to make her so through the use of associations with himself (for example, linking their emotions). However, this first stanza leaves the nature of their relationship intentionally ambiguous—we initially believe, perhaps, that this is a song about *requited* love. This tonal tenor, sly and mischievous rather than parodic, in fact characterizes the entirety of the poem and reaches its fulfillment in the lyric's last lines.

At the poem's inception, then, the unnamed love object ("she") is placed (even forced) into a relationship with the poem's subject ("I"). This relationship is sustained throughout the poem by the repeated linkage of first- with third-person pronouns (or, occasionally, nouns) representing the lady, often embedded in language of physicality and emotion:

When **heo** is glad / Of al this world na more **Y** bad / Then beo with **hire myn** one
 bistad (7-9)
 The care that **I**cham yn ybrad / **Y** wyte a **wyf** (11-12)
Heo me wol to dethe bryng / Longe er **my** day (21-22)
Hyre heye haueth wounded **me**, ywisse, / **Hire** bende browen that bringeth blisse. /
Hire comely mouth that mihte cusse / In mucche murthe **he** were; / **Y** wolde
 chaunge **myn** for **his** / That is **here** fere. (25-30)
Ich vnne **hire** wel ant **heo me** wo / **Y**cham **hire** frend ant **heo my** fo (45-46)
Me thuncheth **min** herte wol breke atwo ... In Godes greting mote **heo** go (47 &
 49)

The poem's structure, alternating first- and third-person pronouns, make clear that the subject seeks to link himself, emotio-physically, with the love-object, even suggesting the quasi-magical substitution of himself for her current lover (aligned by the subject, however begrudgingly, with the lady herself, through the unavoidable use of third-person pronouns for both of them). This linkage is performed systematically and even mathematically, setting up an equation with the subject himself on one side and the love-object on the other (the fact that they are opposites in extremes of affection does not lesson and in fact perhaps

strengthens this bond; the lady, in loving the subject not at all, is the perfect inverse and thus the perfect complement to the subject's obsessive and excessive emotion).

Throughout, the “subject” or content of the poem indeed remains the subject himself, not the lady. The poem is rife with pronouns referring to the textual “I”; in a poem of fifty-five lines there are no less than thirty instances of first-person pronouns including forms of “I,” “me,” “my,” and “mine” (as well as one “that” that refers to the subject, “that lefly”) and one instance where “him” is best read as referring to the poem’s subject himself (44). Pronouns referring to the love object are fewer (providing quantitative proof that the poem is concerned primarily with the subject himself and his own pain rather than the lady with whom he is in love) at twenty-two (mostly variations of “hire” and “heo” but also two “that”s and one “thing”). As is evident in the above list, the specter of the “other man” makes a (pro)nominal appearance as well, with three references.⁵² Pronoun usage here functions as an important organizational and rhetorical device, helping us track the circular and sometimes difficult-to-follow implicit narrative of rejection. “Linking words” and phrases—functioning exactly as the “concatenation words” in *Pearl*—also serve as an important organizational device; in many cases the last line of a stanza is linked to the first line of the next stanza via a “key word” or phrase:

Y wite **a wyf**. // **A wyf** nis non so worly wroth (12-13)
With **eyen** gray. // Hyre **heye** haueth wounded me, ywisse (24-25)
That is **here fere**. // Wolde **hyre fere** beo so freo (31-32)

This device gains especial significance when the reader is literally invited into the poem via a linked phrase at the formally and conceptually liminal moment between the sixth and seventh stanzas (38-39): “Wo-se wole of loue be trewe, do **lystne me**. // **Herkneth me**, Y ou telle.” In this transition, the physical act of listening, along with the first- and second-

⁵² I have twice counted the pronoun in the phrase “here fere” for the love-object, rather than her lover, since the other man is being defined in these instances in relation to her.

person pronouns, together establish a link between the body of the subject and the body of the poem's receiver. This explicit reference to the lyric experiencer also makes the longed-for love relationship (which, unfortunately for the speaker, has expanded uncomfortably into a love triangle) in fact a sort of "love diamond" with the Lady's actual lover and the hearer himself playing important supporting roles in the subject's drama. The listener (and here readers are portrayed as physically listening) serves as witness to the lover's plaint, both validating his pain and making this poem even more crowded; in this wholly self-involved personal drama, the character list has expanded to include not only an "I" and a "she" but also a "he" and now a "you."

The seventh stanza, after the command "Herkneth me, Y ou telle," goes on to describe in great detail the subject's pain: "Nys no fur so hot in helle / Al to mon / That loueth derne ant dar nout telle / What him ys on." The subject needs the hearer to validate his pain, as he is not receiving this longed-for attention from the love-object. The immediacy, intimacy, and of course physicality of the acts of speaking and listening establish a strong affective and empathetic link between the subject and the experiencer, which mirrors the affective links already created between the subject, the lady, and her lover. Like Keats' "This living hand," which (as will be discussed) is for many lyric theorists the quintessential example of deixis creating a physical bridge between subject and reader, "A wayle whit as whalles bone" literally reaches out from itself (though in this case via sound, not touch) to physically connect with its receiver in a way that is not dulled despite the many centuries between the poem's textual subject (and scribe) and a twenty-first century reader.

The remarkable way in which this poem creates empathy via physicality and deixis is extended by its surprising ending. The last stanza, in its entirety, reads:

Iche wolde Ich were a threstelcok
A bountyng other a lauercock,

Swete bryd!
Bituene hire curtel ant hire smok
Y wolde ben hyd.

Scholars have occasionally read this poem as parodic or ironic, holding that no “courtly” love poem could end with this explicit sexualization and enfleshment of the “untouchable lady.” This prudery, however, should be ascribed to the midcentury critics of this poem rather than its medieval creators and interpreters. The content of the poem’s final stanza slyly (and a bit sadly) replicates the methodology it has exhibited throughout; it attempts to link the body of the subject with the body of the love-object but, as always, falls just short. By wishing himself a bird (whose avian body stands in so often for the body of the singing poet himself in poetry from ancient times through the present) that can nestle between his lady’s kirtle and shift, this textual subject attempt to will himself physically close to his lady. The ending is in one sense rather mischievous, implying that the subject wishes to snuggle in his lady’s clothing without her knowing, thus, again, creating a physical connection through force of his will that she is unaware of and perhaps would be explicitly resistant to. In another sense, the speaker believes he is being eminently reasonable; by wishing to nestle into her petticoat but no further, he perhaps feels that he is asking no more than is his due, owed him by virtue of his great love. Again, the sentiment here is both active, in that the subject wishes to have license to assert control over his lady’s body, but also passive, in that he wishes to be a small bird, subject to his lady’s superior power.

If the tone of “A wayle whyt ase whalles bone” has been contested, this next lyric leaves little doubt about its tonal tenor. The delightful (though sadly fragmentary) Rawlinson lyric “D ... dronken”⁵³ draws readers and hearers into a very different tonal landscape through the same textual mechanism of person deixis.

⁵³ Ed. Oliver (33)

D ... dronken—
 dronken, dronken y-dronken—
 ... dronken is tabart atte wyne.
 hay ... suster, walter, peter,
 3e dronke al depe,
 and ichulle eke!
 stondet alle stille—
 stille stille stille—
 stondet alle stille—
 stille as any ston;
 trippe a lutel wit þi fot,
 ant let þi body go!

The reader or hearer is immediately drawn into this poem via the rousing round of repetitions of the word “dronken” (how many is unclear, as parts of the first few lines of the lyric are lost). Even on the page, this poem’s musical devices are compelling. In contrast with the incremental repetition found in many other lyrics, which changes slightly with context, repetition here works less subtly to produce the lively atmosphere of a party bursting with joy and companionship and, of course, alcohol. Although the primary drunkard here is ostensibly “Tabart” (as we discover in the third line, before which we suppose—perhaps not incorrectly—the drunkenness is the narrator’s own) we can safely assume that all of the characters in the poem are thoroughly soused. Of course, a singer would not have to be literally drunk to sing the song (and it is almost impossible to believe that this was not sung) but in singing it one takes on the role of the drunkard. Further, the lyric’s simplicity and intensive use of repetition ensures that one *could* plausibly sing the song with sobriety not absolutely intact. Indeed, the song itself is intoxicating, with its “heavy, regular meter,” (Oliver 34) its infectious repetition recalling a canon (which it may well be), and, above all, its insistence on the physicality of its textual subject, its characters and its audience. The narrator directly addresses a number of other people in his immediate vicinity, as a result of which Raymond Oliver considers it the “cry [of an] individual” since “no one could speak

these lines *in propria persona* who did not have a sister, and friends named Walter and Peter.” He goes on to suggest that any singer could easily personalize the song simply by substituting the names of his own friends. This insistence on an individualized speaker rather misses the point. The specifics of the characters in this poem are genially formulaic—“sister” “Walter” and “Peter” stand in for whatever crowd is assembled on the occasion of the performance of this drinking song. The implied “you” of the commands in the second half of the poem, then, are directed simultaneously to the imaginary characters in the song, to the drinking companions of whoever is actually singing the song, to anyone reading or hearing the song, and to the “you” of the singer herself.⁵⁴ Thus the last two, imperative lines of the lyric (“Trippe a lutel with thy feet, / And let thy body go”) could equally well be applied to the drinkers or to the lyric experiencer himself: as listeners, we are invited to participate in a drunken stumble as well as a dance step (see MED *trippen*). By situating its listeners firmly in our bodies, then, the poem explicitly makes its experiencers into participants; we ourselves are included in the implied “you” of the singer’s commands.

The second half of the poem, then, is both a literal invitation to dance (and drunken instruction for the dance steps to be performed) as well as a rollicking drinking song, and it will be returned to, in the context of dance, in Chapter 4. For our purposes here, however, even the text of this song connects listeners with our bodies by means of the insistently physical content as well as the personal deictics, the “I” and implied “you” of the commands. The “I” in “D ... dronken” serves as a good example of Spearing’s “purely deictic” subject, expressing and causing in response pure experientiality and affect (in this case, joy) without being strictly tied to a narrative “speaker” who has a sister, friends named

⁵⁴ Although Oliver insists that the “speaker” of this poem is “a man in the act of drinking” I see nothing in the text (nor in its limited context) implying that the speaker must be male, particularly since at least one of the characters in the poem is explicitly female.

Walter and Peter, etc. These pronouns set up a relationship between an “I” and a “you” that invites (even insists upon) the audience member occupying one of these positions. If we read or sing the poem aloud, we become the poem’s “I”; reading the poem silently or hearing it sung, we become its “you.” Either way, we are implicated in the song in a way that, brilliantly, we do not resist, suffused as the lyric is with such good cheer.

Moving from the explicitly secular to the sacred, it will prove instructive to analyze one particularly interesting example of a religious lyric for which we have multiple manuscript versions, and in which deictics of person are working in subtly different ways as the lyric evolves over time. Variations on the Middle English poem, “White is thy naked breast” (adapted from the Latin *Candat nudatum pectus* from John of Fécamp’s *Liber Meditationes*) survive in six manuscript versions, the earliest dating to about 1240 (Woolf, *The English Religious Lyric* 28). The early versions (as well as some later ones ranging even toward the second half of the fourteenth century, with a version in John of Grimstone’s preaching book) speak of Jesus’ broken body in the third-person and in the past tense (the first line, for example, is “Whyt was hys naked brest and red of blod hys syde”). A later, variant version of this poem, however, transposes the action into the present tense with a simultaneous shift to direct address of Christ (“Wyt is þi nachede brest / and blodi is þi side”). This shift from third-person to second-person pronouns, coupled with the shift from past to present tense, speaks to the increasing possibility in the later medieval period of a direct address to, and physical relationship with, Christ’s body.⁵⁵

Wyt is þi nachede brest and blodi is þi side
 Starke weren þine armes þat strekede weren so wyde
 Falu es thi faire ler and dummes þi sithe
 Drie es þin ende body on rode so ytycthe

⁵⁵ This version is found in MS Digby 55, c. 1270. Transcription accessed via DIMEV (#6540) as well as Woolf, *The English Religious Lyric* 29.

Pine pedes hongen colde al so þe marbre ston
Pine thirlede fet þe rede blod byron

In this meditative lyric, the direct address of Christ through the use of second-person pronouns clearly demonstrates the importance of deixis in creating empathy. This effect becomes increasingly significant in the later Middle Ages, as the physical identification with Christ, via techniques associated with “affective piety,” is predicated on feeling kinaesthetic empathy for a purely textual figure.⁵⁶ The efficacy of a meditative lyric is wholly dependent on the reader’s ability to physically empathize with someone she cannot literally see or touch. In stark opposition to “A wayle whit as whalles bone,” the love object, rather than the speaking subject, is the clear focus of this poem; “thy” and “thine” are repeated eight times in this six-line poem. In addition to second-person pronouns, the present tense here creates a sense of immediacy and physicality. The use of present-tense verbs is not completely consistent (note “weren” in the second line) but overall this poem is situated firmly in the “lyric present” (itself a somewhat problematic notion that will be taken up in great detail shortly). Nevertheless, in this poem the use of the present tense puts readers directly at the scene of Christ’s crucifixion rather than looking back toward it as a past event.

Another poem that uses a combination of personal deixis and present tense toward the effect of creating immediacy and empathy is the Findern lyric “Where y haue chosyn steadfast wol y be.” Rossell Hope Robbins titled this poem (along with many other secular love poems) “To his mistress” (“Findern Anthology” 613). Others, however, have suggested a female speaker and author. Sarah McNamer has made the case for female authorship of this and other Findern lyrics, further describing the love lyrics in the Findern manuscript as

⁵⁶ For a book-length study of meditation on and compassion with the medieval textual religious subject, see Sarah McNamer’s *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion* (2010).

“sincere expressions of authentic female emotional experience” (“Female Authors” 280).⁵⁷ It is certainly true that many of the Findern lyrics are less formulaic and more sincere (or at least less self-focused) than many other love lyrics, although attempting to assess the “authentic emotional experience” of an individualized medieval author is itself not an entirely authentic (or at least, not a very medieval) way of approaching the “I” of a poem. All fifteen of the Findern lyrics that McNamer attributes to female authors, however, are indeed spoken by an “I” and/or address a “you,” and she makes the compelling case (drawing evidence from within the manuscript as well as from contemporary letters) that a female subject here “affirms her marriage vow” (303). My focus in looking at the lyric will be on how deixis works to create at least the perception of a sincere subject, employing pronouns both to create the strong sense of an individualized, embodied textual subject and to connect the reader to his or her own body.⁵⁸

Where y haue chosyn stedefast woll y be
 Newyre to repente in wyll thowth ne dede
 yow to sarue watt 3e commaund me
 neuer hyt with-drawe for no maner drede
 Thus am y bownd by yowre godelyhede,
 Wych haþe me causyd, and þat in euery wyse
 Wyle I in lyfe endure to do yow my servyse

⁵⁷In a recent review, however, Richard Beadle (who has, with A. E. B. Owen, edited a facsimile of the manuscript) expresses doubt that any of the Findern lyrics were authored or written down by women: “... there is little or no evidence from this period that women of the class represented by the Findern family, or for example by their more fully documented Norfolk cousins the Pastons, learned to wield a pen: if they did, it seems to have been a skill that did not extend significantly beyond writing their name or initials. [...] If indeed they were gentlewomen, Elisabeth Cotton and Elisabeth Francis [the two names that appear in the manuscript] would probably have been rather affronted by the demeaning suggestion that they had been engaged in writing out long texts: writing, at this time, was work, and work was what your household or estate servants did—or your local clerics, if they could be persuaded or (like scribes) paid” (229). Cynthia Rogers’ dissertation on the Findern manuscript (in progress), entitled “‘Make thereof a game’: The Findern Manuscript’s Lyrics and their Late Medieval Textual Community” supports Beadle’s assertion that both female authorship and scribship of any of the lyrics are unlikely; however, she also concludes that although “there is no solid evidence for what roles women may or may not have held in the production of the Findern Manuscript [...] we can say with certainty that the booklets of the manuscript are unusually thematically cohesive around the subjects of gentility and the nature of women debates.”

⁵⁸ This edition of the poem is Robbins’, though I have emended it based on the manuscript facsimile to reflect the lack of scribal punctuation.

yowre desertt can none odere deserue
 wych ys in my remembrauns both day and nyght
 Afore al creaturus I yow loue and serue
 Wyle in thys world I haue strength and myȝt
 Wych ys in dewte of very dewe ryȝt
 by promes made with feythful assuraunce
 Euer yow to sarue with-owtyn varyaunce

Unlike “Wyt is þi nachede brest,” which addresses Christ as “thou,” the subject’s husband is here addressed with the more formal “you,” except in the case of “thy promes,” which suggests that this poem is at its most intimate in reminding the husband of his own marriage vow. Deixis of person is central to this work; in fact, the rhetoric of this poem is organized around first- and second-person pronouns. The lyric begins with an affirmation of the subject’s will as she takes ownership of and expresses agency in her marriage—it is not until the third line that readers are explicitly told what the subject has chosen, the “you” of her husband. Although the construction of the I/you relationship here is, in some ways, figured as servile (appropriating from courtly culture the language of being “bound” by love) it is notable that the poem opens with a strong affirmation of the subject’s own agency. The rest of the poem performs a sort of back-and-forth between the “I” and the “you” that is most clearly seen in the lines of the first stanza which contain both first- and second-person pronouns: “Thus am **y** bownd by **yowre** godelyhede” and “Wyle **I** in lyfe endure to do **yow** my servyse.” This is followed by an expansion and reversal of this formula in the first two lines of the second stanza: “**yowre** desertt can none odere deserue / wych ys in **my** remembrauns both day and nyght.” The rhetoric of these lines serves to interweave the lives of the “you” and the “I” in a way that, cannily, belies the servile sentiment of the poem; the subject here actively asserts her agency in braiding together the lives of herself and her husband. This imbrication is, furthermore, on a physical/cognitive plane; her husband’s

“deservingness” or great worth is held tangibly and constantly within the subject’s memory or thought. Rather than saying she “thinks” on his worth day and night, or that she “remembers” his worth, this subject maintains that her husband’s worth exists, literally, inside her and, as such, must be in some way dependent on her. Like the speaker in “A wayle whit as whalles bon,” the subject here seeks to link herself and her love object physically through the mediation of verse, but in this case (a reversal in more ways than one of the traditional, male-voiced romantic lyric), rather than attempting to assert her will over an unwilling love-object, the subject rather insists upon her own active role in choosing and maintaining her marriage.

Clearly, it is both possible and profitable to read Middle English lyric (and any lyric from which a reader is separated by great spans of time, space, and/or cultural context) with a close focus on deixis of person in order to experience the poem in a tangible, kinaesthetic way. The next section examines more deeply how present-tense verbs, as well as other deictic time markers, work to create “lyric time,” with close attention to the ways in which immediacy and distancing connect textual subjects and text experiencers through embodied verse.

Deixis and the Lyric Present

Scholars and poets alike frequently cite the “timeless” nature of lyric poetry. Yet of course any lyric poem (and indeed any textual artifact) is necessarily culturally situated in a particular era. In *Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre*, Sharon Cameron holds that the unique way in which time functions in lyric poetry is in fact the defining feature of the genre:

Unlike the drama, whose province is conflict, and unlike the novel or narrative, which connects isolated moments of time to create a story multiply peopled and framed by social context, the lyric voice is solitary and generally speaks out of a single moment in time. (23)

Cameron is not alone in focusing her definition of lyric on the way it situates itself in time. For Anne L. Klinck, it is the “lyric moment” that ultimately enables the tidy characterization of the Old English poems “Wulf and Eadwacer” and “The Wife’s Lament” as lyrics (6). This “lyric present” is usually equated in literary theory and criticism with a sense of timelessness and is perennially cited as one of the defining features of the genre. In a recent lecture, for example, Jonathan Culler, calling the lyric form itself a “monument to a moment,” observed that in lyric poetry the effect of the “eternal present” is often created with present tense, disruption of syntax, and the use of deixis (“Theory of the Lyric”). “Narrative is about what happens next,” Culler maintains, “... lyric is about what happens now.”⁵⁹ However, Virginia Jackson, who has consistently challenged the boundaries of the genre, argues for a theory of lyric time based on “situatedness” and physicality—also created through use of deixis. How is it that deixis can simultaneously create these two, seemingly opposite, effects of situatedness and timelessness? Perhaps not coincidentally, the major book-length study of lyric time, Sharon Cameron’s aforementioned 1979 monograph, is also a study of Dickinson. This overlap between lyric theorists and Dickinson scholars is intriguing; Cameron and Jackson use Dickinson’s poems both to show how she has become established as the quintessential American lyric poet and to deeply trouble this generic commonplace.⁶⁰ Similarly (when they are addressed by scholars at all) Middle English lyrics are generally regarded as prototypical exempla of the form. Small, musical (usually with three- or four-beat lines and conspicuous sound devices such as rhyme, repetition and alliteration) arguably

⁵⁹ In *Structuralist Poetics* (1978) Culler goes farther in defining lyric poetry as “atemporal,” although this bold assertion may have softened somewhat with time, as he has not explicitly maintained this claim in criticism of recent years.

⁶⁰ Susan Stewart has also explored the question of lyric time (and what is at stake in defining poems as “timeless”) in great detail in Chapter 5 of *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, drawing evidence from a wide variety of transhistorical poetry including Middle English lyric. Stewart is interested in “how poetry takes place within, speaks to, and often transforms concepts of time” (198).

demonstrating “intensely personal emotion” (Klinck 6), Middle English lyrics are furthermore (implicitly and occasionally explicitly, especially in twentieth century literary criticism) “timeless,” ahistorical and apolitical representatives of a vague medieval past.⁶¹

It is true that in reading medieval lyrics we are much farther removed in time than we are from Dickinson and, in most cases, have little or no information regarding the date and circumstances of composition. The great majority of Middle English lyrics have no identified authors and can be dated and situated only approximately based on dialect, paleographic evidence, and manuscript context. However, these methods often reveal little about a lyric’s origin, and scholars frequently have access to extremely limited information regarding the transmission and uses of an individual lyric, including its intended audience and whether it was read silently, read aloud, or sung. At the same time, Middle English lyrics (like all textual artifacts) are inarguably culturally situated. It is an unfortunate reality that the huge majority of that situating information is simply inaccessible to us.⁶² However, Middle English lyrics are nonetheless artifacts of their time, and furthermore demonstrate a sophisticated awareness and manipulation of effects of immediacy and distancing.⁶³ Here, I will

⁶¹ As Gayle Margherita notes in *The Romance of Origins*, “‘timelessness,’ (like ‘universality’) is not a sexually neutral concept” (4). Although I do not here address the implications of a “gendered timelessness” for Middle English lyric, this is certainly a productive direction for future research.

⁶² A few scholars (notably David Jeffrey and Siegfried Wenzel) have produced studies of Middle English lyric that situate it in a specific cultural context (in both of these cases, in the context of Franciscan spirituality and preaching). Chapter 4 will incorporate the insights of social historians to further address one particular use of Middle English lyric: as an accompaniment to dance.

⁶³ See Heather Dubrow, *The Challenges of Orpheus* (108-119) for an in-depth study of Early Modern lyric that seeks balance between effects of immediacy and distance, presence and absence. Dubrow suggests: “However powerful demonstrations of lyric immediacy have been, they have typically unbalanced interpretations of the mode by neglecting the interaction in question; however persuasive theorized denials of presence in certain senses have been, they have too often dismissed as a mere ploy its survival as a poetic effect” (108-109). She also, quite rightly, stresses the profound effect of liturgical time upon the medieval and Early Modern worldview: “Liturgical events were seen as happening in the present even though they were associated with a distant historical moment and with recurrent previous celebrations of it” (119). Although I do not have the leisure to here address liturgical and other medieval frameworks of understanding time, this is certainly a productive direction for research regarding the way time functions in Middle English lyric.

demonstrate how a sense of situatedness in and of time is created in certain lyrics via craft choices.

It is, in fact, the case that Middle English lyrics often feel “timeless” to twenty-first readers, and, arguably, some lyrics probably held this same tonal resonance for medieval readers and listeners. However, rather than being inevitable, this sense of timelessness was carefully crafted to effect a response in the lyric experiencer. Furthermore, in addition to creating a sense of timelessness, the use of time deixis in many Middle English lyrics often produces the concurrent sense of a subjective and above all an embodied speaker, situated, inevitably, in a particular moment. This interpretation does not negate the temporally suspended feeling of many of the lyrics. Rather, these two effects work together to create a paradoxically timeless-feeling lyric that is simultaneously grounded in the physical particularities of the lyric’s medieval textual subject via the use of the present tense as well as the deictic word “now.”

The idea that the present simple tense creates an effect of timelessness has been current at least since the early 1950s, when, in *Feeling and Form*, Susanne K. Langer describes the present simple tense as “the tense of subjectivity.” In his 1974 article on “The Lyric Present,” George Wright notes that although the use of the present continuous tense in poetry increased sharply during and after the Renaissance, the use of the simple present “has remained central in poems” from Chaucer to the present (564). Wright suggests that the use of the present tense

makes us feel that the interlude taking place is not only timeless but somehow enduring; it is outside of time but it has duration [...] similarly, this lyric tense often has a hint in it of futurity, [giving] some poems a feeling of being on the verge of something to come. (566)

He further argues that this “lyric present tense,” containing within itself past, present, and future, creates an “abiding present” that is

timeless yet permanent, pastlike yet edging toward the future, repeatable yet provisional, urgent yet distant, ceremonious and archaic [...] offering as actual conditions that we normally accept only as possible, special, figurative, provisional. (569)

Heather Dubrow, however, cautions against the uncomplicated yoking of the present tense with lyric: “The more sophisticated studies of lyric time⁶⁴ often at the very least complicate a bald association of that form with the present tense [...] a number of powerful recent studies⁶⁵ [...] have also qualified or queried the immediacy of the lyric.” Dubrow herself aims “to dislodge immediacy as the putative norm for lyric and instead look at its coexistence with, and occasional interaction with, its opposite number” (115); she successfully demonstrates that effects of immediacy and distancing coexist in Early Modern lyric. In my application of aspects of her methodology to Middle English lyric I will first examine how the lyric present is created through the use of present tense, which, while it in some sense creates a feeling of timelessness, also connects the lyric textual subject inseparably to his own body and thus a specific moment in time. I will then track how the use of the deictic word “now” in several poems functions to bring the reader into the poem and connect her to her own body. Ultimately, I argue that the use of deixis of time does indeed create a sense of temporal suspension or timelessness. However, concurrent with this feeling is the sense of an embodied speaker and listener, placing us as receivers not (or not only) in an atemporal “lyric present” but (also) firmly in the speaker’s medieval present as well as our own twenty-first century “now.”

A.C. Spearing, among others, has stressed the deictic importance of tense: “... details such as verb tenses and conjugations belong to the deixis, creating small-scale effects of proximity and distality” (*Medieval Autographies* 238). In “The Lyric Present,” Wright suggests

⁶⁴ Here Dubrow cites only Cameron’s 1979 study.

⁶⁵ Along with Anne Ferry’s *The Title to the Poem* (1996), Dubrow cites as examples two recent book-length studies of marginalia in Early Modern texts.

that the present tense functions in lyric poetry in a number of ways. First, it “borrows meaning ... from all the contexts, all the familiar occasions, on which we use the simple present in speech, or on which earlier poets have used it in poems.” Second, “it borrows ... from the historical present, from our experience of present verbs used to describe a past action.” Third, it “borrows from the context of repeated action: we feel in an introductory I walk or I sit or I stand a solidity, a portentousness, a freedom from singleness.” Wright concludes, “In effect, therefore, what we find in such verbs is a new aspect or tense, neither past nor present but timeless—in its feeling a lyric tense” (564). Although these functions are unquestionably at work in lyric poetry (and I will shortly examine in detail the ways in which deixis of time creates a temporal landscape at once past, present and future), the stress Wright places on the “lyric present” underplays the extent to which any lyric is situated in time via the temporal context of its author, scribe, intended audience, and experiencers from its inception through the present.

In examining how the present simple tense is at work in Middle English lyric, I will first look at two religious poems meant to inspire pious feelings in the reader or listener (although they do so in two very different ways). The first, “*Quanne hic se on rode*,” is a relatively straightforward artifact of late medieval “affective piety” and, like “*Wyt is þi nachede brest*,” uses a meditative focus on the body of Christ, combined with the use of present-tense verbs, to create the sense of an embodied speaker. The second, “*When the hede quakyth*,” trains a spotlight on the dying body to focus the reader on (his own) death with the aim of amending sins in this life.

Although “Quanne hic se on rode” appears uniquely in MS BL Royal 12 E.1, at least five variations on this lyric appear in other manuscripts;⁶⁶ in fact, this poem has become a textbook case of *mouvance*⁶⁷ and tracking its variations a valuable exercise in textual studies. One particular version of the poem, more than any other, is instructive in examining how the lyric present is at work.⁶⁸

Quanne hic se on rode iesu mi lemman
An be siden him stonden marie an Iohan
And his rig isuongen and his side istungen for þe luue of man
Wel ou hic to wepen and sinnes for leten
Yif hic of luue kan
Yif hic of luue kan
Yif hic of luue kan

That this poem is in the simple present tense is not in itself unusual (in fact all other versions of this poem are, as well). Still, like many late medieval poems meant to inspire piety, the simple present tense here gives the impression that the poem’s subject is at the scene of the crucifixion. Moreover, the action that occurs in the poem feels both eternal and repeated; each successive re-reading of the poem reenacts the drama for the subject and the reader, which happens not only *again*, but *still*. Wright notes that the lyric present feels both continuous and repeated “not only in the sense that it can be returned to again and again but in the sense that it remains, it abides” (564). This “abiding” present is clear in many Middle English poems, but particularly in poems meant to inspire pious sentiment via physically felt emotion. The subject (an “I”) literally “sees” Jesus, Mary and John; therefore she “ought to weep” and “leave [her] sins.” Machan sees in Middle English lyric generally an immediacy and a “nondistinctive ‘I’” which is “an especially valuable conceit in enabling the reader to

⁶⁶ According to Wessex Parallel Web Texts (WPWT). DIMEV lists four additional variants in as many manuscript witnesses and Woolf claims there are “seven related versions” (33).

⁶⁷ See WPWT (which includes an exercise, intended for undergraduates, in comparing the various manuscript editions) as well as Tim Machan’s *Textual Criticism and Middle English Texts* (1994).

⁶⁸ This transcription is my own, from the digital manuscript (WPWT).

experience specific emotions and feelings” (100). It is true that this “I” is in some sense protean, in its powerful immediacy standing in both for the textual subject and the reader, but what Machan does not emphasize is the extent to which this immediacy is created by an emphasis on the bodies of both the subject and Christ. The subject’s gaze itself pierces the body of Christ, which is hanging from the cross (in marked contrast to Mary and John, who “stand” beside it); weeping and leaving off sinning are appropriate embodied responses to the intensely physical image of Christ’s beaten back and pierced side. Cause and response mirror each other neatly at the heart of the poem, and both are inseparable from Christ’s body and from the body of the subject, here collapsed into the body of the reader. Thus the bodies of Christ, the poem’s “I” (which stands not only for textual subject but also potentially for the poem’s author, adaptor, and/or scribe), and the poem’s reader or hearer, whether medieval or modern, are mapped onto and folded into each other, here toward the purpose of inspiring felt empathy and consequently appropriate action.

This sense of timelessness-yet-specificity is also created via the poem’s thrice-repeated, masterfully crafted final line; this triple repetition is unique among variants of this poem. Playing on the many meanings of the verb *connen*, this line can be read, “If I am capable of love” “If I know anything about love” and perhaps even “If I can recognize love.” The first two senses are the most present. In the first sense, if the subject is able to love, she ought do so and leave her sins; in the second sense, if she has any knowledge of love, she’ll know enough to leave her sins. Even the unrepeated line, then, balances more than one simultaneous meaning. With the triple repetition, however, layers of meaning multiply complexly.

Susan Stewart, among other theorists, has stressed the importance of incremental repetition in the creation of lyric time:

Lyric's first-person, subjective, and emotional rendition of time is built through processes of incremental repetition, progression, and return. In this sense, lyric can both oppose, and go beyond, other models of sequential and chronological time. (198)

In the last, repeated lines of “Quanne hic se on rode,” we are affected by a clear sense of atemporality or suspended time. This is, in Stewart's terms, an instance in which incremental repetition works in opposition to chronological time. Further, we are powerfully affected by a vertiginous sense of eternity: that is, past, present, and future here occur simultaneously, as in Wright's “lyric present.” In this sense, the lyric goes beyond chronological time. However, there is even a third temporal logic at work here, generated by the concrete, specific and vigorously embodied imagery of the rest of the poem. When we encounter these last few lines—purely intellectual, entirely abstracted—we are hardly free, after so much connection earlier in the poem to the experience of embodiment, from feeling time in a biologically (hence chronologically) specific way, tied to (our notion of) the way Jesus experienced the crucifixion, and for post-medieval readers also to (our notion of) how a medieval reader would have encountered and interacted with the poem. Thus lyric time functions here in a way that is simultaneously in opposition to, beyond, and comfortably within chronological or sequential time. Stewart, in gesturing toward “the utopian possibilities of repetition and simultaneity” says that the deictic “is its own [temporal] location” (156); this is clearly evidenced in this version of “Quanne hic se on rode.”

Raymond Oliver has emphasized the hypotactic nature of this lyric, stressing that it is not until two thirds of the way through the poem that we are able to put together its logic (*Poems without Names* 99). This, too, keeps the focus firmly on the lyric present, as we must follow the poem's logic (and its construction of the three-in-one body of Christ, the narrator, and the receiver) from moment to moment. Woolf also views another version of this poem as much less static than many other medieval verses on the Passion, citing a

“movement of thought” throughout the poem that culminates in a “personal emotional statement” (*The English Religious Lyric* 4). Sarah McNamer further notes that this repetition “functions as a kind of periperformative incantation, suggesting that iterative performance can bolster at least the will to learn to feel as compassionate beloved, even if this form of pitying love does not come easily” (*Affective Meditation* 181).⁶⁹ McNamer here draws attention to an important reality of embodied poetics: the formal device of repetition is here performative, recalling the embodied rituals of incantation and charming, magical practices that, through the repetition of words, are intended to effect physical realities. “Quanne hic se on rode” is highly original—Woolf notes that there is apparently no Latin source for it—but (like any other artifact of late medieval meditative religious practice) it should not be mistaken for a Romantic “spontaneous overflow of emotion.” The poem has been carefully crafted toward a particular and practical *use*: that is, the production of religious sentiment in the reader through a focus on the body of Christ as well as the lyric subject’s (in this case conflated with the lyric receiver’s) own body.

Another meditative lyric that demonstrates particularly keenly how the present simple tense works to create a multifaceted “lyric present” is in the “signs of death” genre, best attested in moral verse but also found in medical texts.⁷⁰ “When the hede quakyth” also employs a close focus on the body, in this case to inspire the reader to consider her own death with the aim of amending sins in this life, a different means to the same end as

⁶⁹ McNamer draws this idea of the periperformative from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, citing *Touching Feeling*: “Periperformative utterances aren’t just about performances in a referential sense: they cluster around them, they are near them or next to them or crowding against them; they are in the neighborhood of the performative” (68).

⁷⁰ See Rossell Hope Robbins, “Signs of Death in Middle English,” (1970).

“Quanne hic se on rode.” This poem is found in at least ten manuscripts but is, curiously, rarely anthologized.⁷¹

When the hed wakyth
& þe lippis blakyþ
And the nose sharpith
& þe synow sterkyth
And þe brest pattyþ
And the breth wantyþ
And the tethe ratelyth
And the throte rotelyth
And the sole is went out
of the body ne tit but a clowt
And aftyr be it in pyt
And with erth fast y dyte
Sone be it so stokyn
þe sowle all clene is fur 3yte

Like the previous poem, this work has no apparent Latin source, although Wenzel traces its “thought” to St. Jerome’s “Signs of Death,” which appears, as does a version of this poem, in the *Fasciculus morum* (*Verses in Sermons* 97). In fact, Woolf considers this poem, “with its stark combination in each line of noun plus verb,” to be one of the most effective works of the *Fasciculus morum* (81).⁷² Phoebe Spinrad cites this poem, with its focus on the liminal horror of the deathbed, as arising from the long tradition of work in many genres detailing the horrors of death and hell (29).

Although the images in this poem are certainly vivid, it is the present tense verbs that are at the heart of the lyric’s power. Readers are not only shown a static “picture” of a dying body, with gruesome adjectives describing its every gory detail. We actually observe, in real-time, the last, awful movements of the dying body, a body which is, until the last, terribly

⁷¹ From Oxford, Bodleian Library Laud misc. 213 (SC 1045). This edition accessed via DIMEV.

⁷² The *Fasciculus morum* (“little bundle of virtues”) is an early fourteenth century preaching manual and the subject of Siegfried Wenzel’s 1978 monograph *Verses in Sermons*. Wenzel devotes little time to this lyric (perhaps because it survives in multiple versions and manuscripts—he maintains that this lyric is “well-known”) although he does hotly contest David Jeffrey’s assertion that the poem consists of “three grisly stanzas and a stark refrain” (Wenzel 103, Jeffrey 194).

dynamic. These details are both remarkably specific and vivid (the “sharpening” nose as the cheeks sink back into the skull, the starting sinews, the panting breath) and, completely naturally and completely uncannily, the same in the fourteenth century as in the twenty-first. The intense physicality of this poem makes it impossible for the reader not to empathize with the dying body (who is universal, without age, sex, or in fact any defining characteristics other than its humanity); in reading this poem our attention is compelled gratefully toward the assemblage of our own animate parts, though all the time aware that each of us, someday, will personally experience something closely akin to the events of this lyric (of course, the conceivers of this poem and poems like it are counting on this response to inspire us toward piety and penance). Later versions of this poem go farther, turning it into a macaronic “instruction manual” on the art of dying.⁷³

The present simple tense, then, is one defining feature of the “lyric present” that is common to many lyrics both medieval and modern. The use of temporal deictic words such as “now” and “soon” is another important formal device that works to create the simultaneously timeless and situated lyric present. Interpretation of deictic time markers—now/then, before/after, sooner/later, yesterday/tomorrow—shifts depending on the “present” of both the lyric’s subject and its receiver. Here I will briefly examine the temporal deictic marker “now” in four poems in order to explore the ways in which deixis of time functions to bring the reader into the poem and connect him to his own body.

The well-known Rawlinson lyric “Mirie it is” will be examined in greater detail in the next chapter, as a prime example of medieval melancholy. I introduce it briefly here, however, as its use of the temporal deictic “now” provides a useful illustration of lyric immediacy that creates physical empathy. “Mirie it is” addresses the onset of winter: it is

⁷³ See Woolf (82) and Spinrad (29).

merry indeed in the summer (“Mirie it is while sumer ilast / wið fugheles song”) but now winter is approaching (“oc nu necheð windes blast / and weder strong”). Having at the very first been inclined, perhaps, to expect a poem about the mild summer, we are almost immediately alerted to the fact that the first two lines are nostalgic, not celebratory. The deictic “now” of the poem’s third line puts the lyric experiencer squarely in the singer’s physical situation: cold, hungry, and situated temporally in the middle of a stormy winter. This “now” functions not only rhetorically (as a sort of volta, alerting the reader to the tonal and emotional landscape of the poem) but also to achieve an effect of corporeal immediacy. Adding to this effect, we can hardly help but imagine the consequences of the “wintry blast” on buildings, animals, and human bodies. Further, the reference to “this” night situates the lyric’s receiver firmly in the subject’s own present. Returning to this poem in the context of medieval melancholy, I will further explore the ways in which the poem creates the clear sense of an individualized subject, making empathy with that subject not only possible but also inevitable.

Another poem that makes use of the deictic “now” is the mid-thirteenth century lyric “Nou goth sun under wod”:⁷⁴

Nou goth sonne under wod
me rweth marie þi faire Rode
Nou goþ sonne under tre
me rewep marie þi sone and þe

In such a tiny poem so laden with meaning (the primary double meaning being the literal sun setting and Jesus, Mary’s son, carrying and then being pinned to the “tree” or cross) the repeated “nou” functions similarly to the “nu” in “Mirie it is” in that it both lends the poem immediacy and serves to transport the reader or hearer directly to the site (spatial and

⁷⁴ The poem survives in over forty manuscript witnesses, and has been attributed to Edmund Rich, Archbishop of Canterbury (1175-1240), as it occurs in his *Speculum Ecclesie*. This version is found in Oxford, Bodleian Library Digby 20 (SC 1621). Transcription accessed via DIMEV.

temporal) of the action (in this case, the crucifixion). Furthermore, in this case the repeated phrase (“Nou goth sonne under wod ... Nou goþ sonne under tre”) creates a sense of timelessness that works both with and against the immediacy of the scene. If the sun is, at the moment we join the subject in this lyric, setting, what does it mean when, only two lines later, the sun is setting again? Here, as in “Quanne hic se on rode,” incremental repetition works in a tripartite way: it creates a lyric present that simultaneously opposes, goes further than, and also (in the poem’s physicality) exists within in chronological time. The sense of immediacy and physicality created by the deictic “now” is tempered by the feeling that the “now”-moment is trapped or stuck in time: the sun sets, then it sets again.⁷⁵ Wright’s sense of an “abiding present” is useful here, created in part by what Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou calls this poem’s “direct” and “simple” language, “at the same time objective and personal, intense but not sentimental” (569). She argues that the poem is patterned on folksong and the conventions of oral literature, although given its context in a devotional manual it probably was not meant to be sung. Arguably, the composer of this poem (who was almost certainly a cleric, whether Rich or someone else) here co-opts the “timeless” feeling inherent in folksongs while adding an overlay of immediacy and physical presence by which, as Boklund-Lagopoulou argues, “the sunset on Calvary becomes the ‘now’ of an English countryside” (569). Similarly, Alan Fletcher contends that the poem “bring[s] sacred history’s distance emotionally up close [...] the event is narrated in a timeless, eternal present in which its historical distance tends as a result to be elided” (“The Lyric in the Sermon” 202). While these descriptions of the poem’s immediacy are useful, they do not take into account the

⁷⁵ Susan Stewart provides an in-depth analysis of lyric time in “Nou goth sonne under wod” centered on the sunset and what it measures and promises in this poem, ultimately arguing that “what unifies the most interior view and the most extended view here in time and space is the ‘measure of motion’—[the poem’s] sixteen beats and slight shifts (*wod* to *rod*, *tre* to *þe*) that turn those four sentences into an eternity through its incremental ‘nows’” (203).

complexity of lyric time in this poem. Incremental repetition works here in such a way that the events of the poem simultaneously *happened* in a nonspecific, long-gone Biblical past, *are currently happening* as they are experienced through meditative reading and have application via the production of piety in a medieval present, and *will continue to happen* both again, via repetition in each Christian's emotional life, and still, in that the moment of the crucifixion has eternal, continued relevance to a Christian worldview.

Not all lyrics use the deictic “now” to create a multiplicity of immediacies. “Nou sprinkes the sprai,” a carol and *chanson d’aventure* found uniquely in London, Lincoln’s Inn Hale 135, uses “now” toward an effect of a straightforwardly accessible present.⁷⁶ The repetition of “now” in this poem serves simply to create a sense of the immediacy (and the exuberance) of the spring season, although there is a twinge here of timelessness; the spring that occurs in this poem, we feel (as indeed we do feel on glorious days) might well last forever—“Nou sprinkes the sprai—/ Al for loue icche am so seeke / That slepen i ne mai!” The speaker’s lovesickness in this poem, however, can hardly be taken seriously; rather, readers are given the sense of a manic, unfolding present that is redoubled with each repetition of the refrain. Here, rather than creating a sense of overlapping and unfolding temporal potentialities, incremental repetition works with the straightforward aim of intensifying the poem’s sentiment. And although it is true that the verses of the poem are tonally ambiguous—the woman the speaker encounters has apparently been forsaken by her lover and curses him (“The clot him clingge!”)—for the narrator himself the situation is hardly so grave. In this case, the deictic “now” works, simply but successfully, to create a manifold and unending exuberance in the eternal “now” of the poem-world. As noted, it is not coincidental that this “eternal now” is situated in springtime; in his introduction to

⁷⁶ “Nou sprinkes the sprai” is in fact the first line of the poem’s three-line refrain; this work begins “pis endre dai als i me rode” and appears in DIMEV as #614, “As I me rode this ender day.”

Medieval English Lyrics, R.T. Davies confidently asserts that “April and the springtime was a season constantly occurring in medieval poetry” (15). He means, presumably, that the subject matter of many poems relates to springtime, or perhaps that many Middle English lyrics with implicit or explicit narrative are set in spring. However, his phrasing is telling, and indeed “Nou sprinkes the sprai” does give the sense that the growth and renewal of spring is “constantly occurring” in the eternal present of this and other springtime lyrics.

In focusing on multiplicity and simultaneity in the effects of the lyric present, I have thus far given little attention to the idea that the feeling of “timelessness” in Middle English lyric comes from its oft-cited “conventional” and “formulaic” nature. The question of whether Middle English lyrics are more “conventional,” formulaic, and familiar or more “individual” and tied to a particular medieval person’s subjectivity—and the related question of whether medieval lyric is more familiar to us than strange—is ultimately unanswerable and, in my view, less interesting than the ways in which poets, scribes, and readers of the medieval era (like poets and audiences of our own era) claim, adapt, rewrite, hybridize, and interpret texts toward their own purposes.

In “The Lyric Present,” Wright, establishing that “the present unlocated physical action proposed by ‘lyric tense’ is a virtual contradiction in terms” asks: “How can action be physical and yet unlocated?” (571). His answer is that the simple present is the “tense of timelessness,” located in an unspecified lyric present that recalls the past and gestures toward the future. Yet physical action in a poem is never unlocated, only multiply located in three or more “presents,” including, at the very least, the present of the physical text, the embodied textual subject, and the poem’s living, breathing reader. “Readers [of lyric poetry],” Heather Dubrow incisively notes, “often want it to call back the dead, to make the past an unchanging present” (*Orpheus* 116). But a poem’s “present,” like any imagined “past” in

which it existed, is imbricated with the temporally located bodies of its creators and receivers. This chapter's final section examines the ways in which lyrics (and their attendant bodies) are spatially located as well.

Deixis and Lyric Space

Keats' late, untitled poem "This living hand" often serves as a keystone work in any discussion of deixis in poetry—discussion that is usually specifically invested in describing and defining lyric space.⁷⁷ Although well outside the time period addressed in this study, the poem provides a good introduction to the deictic power of textual touch.⁷⁸

This living hand, now warm and capable
Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold
And in the icy silence of the tomb,
So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights
That thou would wish thy own heart dry of blood,
So in my veins red life might stream again,
And thou be conscience-calm'd. See, here it is—
I hold it towards you.

Like "A wayle whit as whalles bone" (and other Middle English lyrics to be discussed shortly) this poem reaches out in an intensely physical way toward its addressee (though who this might be—Fanny Brawne, any reader, perhaps an unspecified audience of future readers—remains tantalizingly unclear). The intense, unsettling vividness and immediacy of this poem can be traced to its use of deictics of person (thou, you), time (now), and, of most interest here, space (this, here). Heather Dubrow writes particularly acutely on the creation of the palpable sense of gesture and tactility in this poem as created by the "here" of the last

⁷⁷ Although there is a rich recent literature theorizing "place" and "space" as distinct concepts, in this study I employ the terms interchangeably.

⁷⁸ Ed. Stilling (384)

line (*Orpheus* 110-112).⁷⁹ It is instructive to compare this analysis to A.C. Spearing's recent reading of a section of verse from Hoccleve's account of his own (writing) hand in the *Regement of Princes* (for example, "For sykyr myn handys gynne to feynte") (*Medieval Autographies* 236). The evocations of the literal, physical hand in these two texts, separated by almost four centuries, nonetheless employ similar strategies: they both use the present tense and a focus on the physical body of the textual subjects (in both of these cases consciously conflated with the bodies of the authors) to reach out, literally, toward their readers. In "This living hand" the deictic "here" physically locates the poet within reaching distance of his reader; similarly, in Hoccleve's *Regement*, a close focus on the writing hand (which in this passage is spatially located quite specifically on the page, imaginatively if not literally the very page the reader encounters).

Deictics of space, at their simplest, include the deictic demonstratives "this" and "that" as well as "here" and "there" and some verb pairs that depend on the speaker's position (for example, "bring/take" and "come/go"). As with deictics of person and time, deictics of space function in Middle English lyric to produce empathy by bringing the reader or hearer into the poem in an explicitly physical way. Numerous examples of deixis of space can be found in diverse Middle English lyrics; "A wayle whit as whalles bone," for example, contains a pointed use of "bring." In confidently (and somewhat brazenly) asserting "A wife nis non so worly wroght / When heo is blithe to bedde ibrought" the subject confidently establishes a connection between himself and his love-object that is in fact decidedly one-sided.

⁷⁹ For further discussion of deixis in "This living hand" see Stewart (*Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* 160-162), Culler (*The Pursuit of Signs* 153-154), Cocoran (341-344), Engler (65), and Waters (145-150).

The mysterious little carol “Ich am of Irlaunde,”⁸⁰ found uniquely in the Rawlinson manuscript, similarly rewards close attention to its use of deixis of space. I will return to this poem later in the context of carols and dance, but to lay the groundwork for that discussion it will prove useful to introduce the lyric in the context of spatial deixis.

Ich am of Irlaunde
ant of the holy londe
of irlaunde

Gode sire, pray ich þe,
for of saynte charite,
come ant daunce wyt me
In irlaunde.

The poem begins with what is apparently a refrain, but is followed by a single “verse”; it is impossible to know if the lyric is fragmentary. Scholars generally agree, though, that it is a dance song,⁸¹ and its brevity, repetitiveness, rhyme, and simple (though curiously variable) meter all support this conclusion, as does, of course, its explicit reference to dancing. The first-person pronoun in the poem’s initial line functions, as in “I syng of a myden,” as a performative cue. This initial line also aligns the subject with Ireland and establishes the deictic centrality of her⁸² location. In the poem’s first stanza we are twice told that the singer is “of” (that is, from) Ireland, but the syntactical construction (as well as the redundancy of the repetition so very soon after it has first been introduced) gives the sense that the subject is in fact *representative of* Ireland; she is a sort of metonymy for the country itself.

After reading the lyric through, however, it is clear that “of” must also mean “in.”

We must assume that the subject is, literally or metaphorically, in Ireland as she uses the deictic verb “come” to establish Ireland as the song’s deictic center; were she not there

⁸⁰ Ed. Robbins, “The Middle English Carol Corpus” (200)

⁸¹ See, for example, Boklund-Lagopoulou, Burrow, and Holland.

⁸² The gender of this poem’s textual subject has been assumed by most scholars to be female; this issue will be taken up later in the context of dance songs. For the moment, I will forgo discussion of how gender functions in this song and will refer to the subject as “her” and “she.”

already, she would rather have urged the reader to “go” with her to Ireland. The intended effect of this formal choice is a bit ambiguous. John Scattergood sees this as a “love lyric that has been subverted to a religious purpose” (48) and it is indeed tempting to make much of Ireland’s status here as a “holy land,” perhaps implying that, wherever the audience is located, it is a rather less-than-holy place. Boklund-Lagopoulou interprets this poem as the utterance of a foreign, female speaker who invites her male dance partner “into the elsewhere, the space of the sacred.” She continues, provocatively, “The dance here is the ritual which unites male and female, and in so doing unites the everyday, secular space of here and now with the sacred elsewhere” (*Suster* 38). While this may be a bit of an interpretive leap, indisputably the song’s establishment of Ireland as its deictic center (and its placement of the listener outside this center) draws the reader into a physical relationship with the poem’s textual subject. Whatever the symbolic significance of Ireland to this poem, the establishment and maintenance of a clear deictic center works to create empathy with (in the sense of physical relationship to) the song’s textual subject, even before consideration of the danced nature of this lyric, to be addressed in Chapter 4.

Another illustrative example of a poem that effectively uses deixis of space to connect with the reader on a kinaesthetic level is the well known early sixteenth-century Corpus Christi carol, whose sophisticated deictic moves will be considered in greater detail in the next chapter in the context of medieval melancholy.⁸³

*Lully, lully, lully, lully,
The fancon hath born my make away.*

He bare hym vp, he bare hym down,
He bare hym into an orchard brown.

In that orchard ther was an hall,
That was hangid with purpill and pall.

⁸³ Ed. Hirsh (81-82)

And in that hall ther was a bed,
Hit was hangid with gold so rede.

And yn that bed ther lythe a knight,
His wowndes bledyng day and nyght.

By that bedes side ther kneleth a may,
And she wepeth both nyght and day.

And by that beddes side ther stondith a ston,
Corpus Christi wretyn thereon.

The initial, striking instance of deixis in the poem is its initial line. After the first repetition of the song's chorus we are introduced to the subject's lover, borne away by a falcon: "He bare hym vp, he bare hym down." This striking, cinematic image uses the deictics "up" and "down" to create the effect that the lyric experiencer is in flight with the falcon and the love-object. This effect is startling and surprising in contrast with the deictic "away" in the initial and repeated chorus, which locates the deictic center with the subject. This shift mirrors in miniature the shift from chorus to verse and back again, which itself masterfully mediates the shifting deictic center, following the abducted lover but always coming back to the singer. As the poem progresses, readers travel with the abducted man through a dead orchard and finally into a hall on which the wounded or dying Christ/knight lies beside a weeping maiden. The shift in tense with the introduction of the Christ/knight in the fifth stanza from past to present reinforces the physicality and immediacy of the scene, but it is the deictics of space that work the hardest to give this poem its powerful sense of tactility and embodiment. The reader is able to empathize both with the speaker (who is trapped, suspended, and grounded in both the moment and the location of losing her love) and the beloved himself, who is taken first into the air and then progressively deeper into a mysterious castle. These dual narrative threads, combined, create the clear sense of an embodied subject and make

empathy with that speaking subject—the ability to feel, physically and emotionally, with the speaker—both natural and intimately tied to the lyric experiencer’s own body.⁸⁴

Before examining in detail a particularly delightful (and interpretively thorny) poem that uses deixis of space in some remarkably nuanced ways, I will here gesture briefly toward two poems that work in a similar way as “He bare hym vp, he bare hym down” to create empathy via deixis of space. First, Chaucer’s triple roundel “Merciless Beauty,” in which the surprising final stanzas paint for the reader a vivid image of Chaucer running *from* (rather than toward) the personified figure of Love, is a striking example of a deictic reversal (“from” where we expect “to”) that creates kinaesthetic empathy with the lyric’s author by painting the surprising, comic, and easily visualized portrait of the author escaping Love as quickly as possible, quite literally running in the other direction. Second, the famous riddle song “I have a yong sister”⁸⁵ makes a similar move as “Ich am of Irlaunde” in placing the speaker and the poem’s secondary central figure (in this case, the “sister” or lover, where in the former poem it is the “you” of the reader/receiver) in disparate locations separated by an expanse of physical space and making rhetorical, narrative, and deictic use of their widely separate locations. Both of these poems use place and space markers to guide our reading or,

⁸⁴ Susan Stewart references the Corpus Christi carol in a discussion of the purely deictic sublime: “... the sublime offers the possibility of deixis without orientation. Baroque art indicates the ways in which vertigo might be more broadly connected to aesthetic devices such as wit, trompe l’oeil, or perceptual surprise in general. Its appearance as an effect in works of art calls on an array of aesthetic problems that I have been pursuing: the ways vertigo compels dread, anxiety, anticipation, and repetition once it has been experienced; the ways an aberration or failure in hearing creates problems of unfathomable distance; the ways the internal labyrinth of the ear can be projected into models of space in works of art; the ways vertigo is characterized by a loss of, or absence of, the anchoring capabilities of touch. Hence, the dynamic between falling and being caught might stem from infantile experience” (*Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* 194). Although I am not wholly convinced of this last suggestion, I do find the proposed relationship between deixis and the sublime in this poem compelling.

⁸⁵ This poem is found uniquely in the fifteenth century manuscript BL Sloane 2593, a collection of lyrics and carols which also contains “I syng of a myden” and “Adam lay ibowndyn,” although alternate versions survive up to the present: the lyric found its way into Child’s ballad collection and survives as a folk song that has been recorded by numerous artists throughout twentieth century, from Sam Cooke to Joan Baez. The poem serves as the central organizing lyric for Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou’s 2002 study of “ballad and folksong” *“I have a yong suster”*: *Popular song and the Middle English Lyric*.

in the latter case especially, our heard and felt understanding of the text. Boklund-Lagopoulou notes the association in “I have a yong suster” of the concrete images in the poem with spring and “natural elements which grow and ripen with the passage of time,” stressing an element of deixis of time as well as of space (*Suster* 74). In the interest of saving both space and time here, however, rather than lingering on these poems I will now move toward deeper analysis of one particular poem that uses deixis of space in nuanced and noteworthy ways.

The poem usually called “The Man in the Moon” is found uniquely in Harley 2253. First boldly cited as the only comic Middle English lyric by R.M. Wilson (263), this tonal characterization of the poem (though not its uniqueness) has been upheld by Menner (1949) and Spiers (1957) and it has further been identified as satirical by Edmund Reiss (1963) and Carter Revard (1967). Although the poem certainly has comic elements, it is in fact tonally complex, and this complexity is achieved through its nuanced use of deictics, especially deictics of place.

Despite several available paraphrases and translations (some literal, others awkwardly idiomatic) by Davies, Sisam, Luria and Hoffman, Duncan, and others, the sense of the poem is difficult to untangle.⁸⁶ R.J. Menner has made the most comprehensive (and most coherent) account of the poem, situating the work in the context of English hedging, as explored through manorial and court records. For those of us unfamiliar with the intricacies of medieval English hedging practices, the poem presents something of a challenge. Despite the poem’s many mysteries,⁸⁷ however, it is a fine example of careful use of deixis of place both

⁸⁶ This discussion refers to Celia Sisam’s edition of the poem (132-134).

⁸⁷ For example, is “Hubert” a conventional name for a magpie, the man in the moon, or a friar? Is the poem a satire on the Franciscans, as Reiss maintains, or an interpretation of a folktale about the thieving man in the moon, as Menner suggests?

to construct a narrative and to create empathy or identification with the poem's textual subject.

This forty-line poem relates the tale of the man in the moon, simultaneously mischievous and melancholy, who (as one might expect of a wanderer) carries his possessions on a forked stick as he makes his journey across the sky. Comically (and somewhat pathetically) shivering with cold and fear of falling, he steals sticks from the hedges that mark the boundaries of properties and fields. In spite of this labor he is also compared to a lazy Franciscan friar idly leaning on his stick. Having illegally stolen sticks from a hedge, the hayward⁸⁸ has taken the moon-man's *wed* or "pledge"—money(?) kept as security or collateral—which is subsequently given in trust to the bailiff. The "I" of the text is invisible for the first half of the lyric. In the penultimate stanza, however, the narrator switches from third- to second-person and directly addresses the moon-man, suggesting that he bring the cuttings he has stolen to his (the subject's) home. Together they will invite the hayward over for "really good booze" (*fol good bous*) after which he'll be "drunke as a dreint mous." Then they can get the pledge back from the bailiff (perhaps by stealing the hayward's money or some token to suggest they are his emissaries?). Despite the narrator's grand plan, however, in the last stanza (with a switch back to third-person) we are told that the moon-man cannot hear the subject's shouts ("the cherl is def—the de'l him to-drawe!": to me, this shouting and cursing at the sky suggests that the narrator himself may have partaken of a bit too much *good bous*.) It is again noted that the moon-man will not hurry (despite the narrator's urging) and that he is a thief who "can nought o lawe." He is named and again called a thief—"Hupe forth, Hubert, hosede pye!"—but, although the narrator gnashes his

⁸⁸ Usually glossed as "hedge-keeper," a hayward was "an officer of a manor, village, or religious establishment, charged with maintaining hedges and enclosures, with keeping cattle on the common, with protecting grain from trespass and theft, with supervising the harvest of grain" (MED *beivard*).

teeth in frustration, “the cherl n’il nought adown er the day dawe.” As this last line suggests, throughout the extended personification the man in the moon is conflated with the moon itself; though it moves throughout the night (“Man in the moone stand and strit”) we are unable to *see* it move (“He is the sloweste man that ever was y-boren!”). Further, it goes through phases and during a “new moon” is apparently not there at all (“It is many day go that he was here”).

Although the comic elements of the poem, noted by various critics, are readily apparent, the text’s tonal complexity, partially achieved through the nuanced use of deixis of place (which also functions to construct a narrative and to create empathy or identification with the poem’s textual subject) makes this poem more than simply comedic. In the third line, for example, the moon-man is worried he’ll “slip down” (*adown slit*) from the sky. Not only does this complicate a straightforwardly comedic reading (remember, the moon-man is also trembling in fear) but it also complicates the physical location of the moon-man, and thus how we read the poem, both narratologically and tonally. If he is worried about falling, he must be located in the sky; this is sensible, for a moon. However, he is also explicitly located in the hedge (readers are told that only the hedge knows what he wears, perhaps because its thorns tear his clothing) and he can, furthermore, accompany the narrator to his house and have adventures on earth as a man. The moon-man, then, is simultaneously in the sky, in the hedge, and journeying the earth (possibly as moonlight). This locational complexity is further complicated by the use of deictics of space. See, for example, the following excerpts:

Whider trowe we this man ha the way take?
He hath set his o foot his other to-foren.
For non highte that he hath ne seeth me him ne’r shake;
He is the sloweste man that ever was y-boren! (lines 9-10)

This ilke man upon high whene'r he were—
Wher he were i the moone boren and y-fed?— (lines 17-18)

The complexity of the moon-man's location (both current and past) complicates a straightforward reading of the poem's narrative. The central character *is* "the moon" (*mon*) but is also "a man" (*mon*). He can undertake human actions (trembling, walking, stealing, eating) and furthermore exists both in the sky and on earth. In the first excerpt above, the locational ambiguity of the moon-man is made explicit, and although "wher" in the second excerpt is best read as "whether," it can also be read as "where." This spatial ambiguity on one hand sets us apart from the moon-man, in that he is moon, but also creates a palpable sense of physical empathy, in that he is man.

As mentioned, the actions of the moon-man are manifold: he stands, strides, bears a burden, trembles and wavers, wears clothes which can be ripped to shreds, sits down, walks on a road (putting one foot in front of the other), pitches stakes in the ground, closes holes in a hedge-fence, cuts more sticks with an axe, leans on his forked stick and, together with the narrator, is at least theoretically able to lure the hayward homeward, drink ale, and sneak off to the bailiff to get back his pledge. Throughout these myriad physically locatable actions he performs as a man, however, he is also, as moon, simultaneously both "immobile" and "slow." References to his "walking" are particularly numerous, recalling both the steps of a man and the movement of the moon across the night sky, imperceptible from moment to moment but clearly evident during the course of a night.

The last two lines of the poem ("Though me teene with him that myn teeth mye / The cherl n'il nought adown er the day dawe") cement the dual identities of the moon-man. On one hand, he is the distant, unhearing moon that cannot but follow his natural course. On the other, he is equally a troublesome "churl" who refuses to acquiesce in or even

acknowledge the narrator's questionable scheme to retrieve his pledge from the bailiff. Interestingly, it is this human, embodied aspect of the moon-man that causes an embodied reaction in the narrator, who gnashes his teeth in (perhaps drunken) frustration that Hubert will not listen to him. Even when the narrative of this poem is difficult to untangle, its construction of the moon-man as both embodied and celestial causes for readers a palpable (if slightly confusing) empathy with the title character, who, sadly, has no place to call his own. Located both on earth and in the sky, empathy with the moon-man is predicated on the neither-here-nor-there-ness created in the text via deixis of space.

Case Study: Erþe toc of erþe

I will conclude by gesturing briefly toward one poem in which a nontraditionally deictic word works toward the creation of deixis. In the early fourteenth century poem *Erþe toc of erþe*, the word *erþe* (repeated twelve times in a four-line poem) functions in a sophisticated way as a deictic marker of space and perhaps even of person. *Erþe toc of erþe* survives in a dizzying array of versions in more than twenty manuscripts and, uniquely among poems analyzed in this study, at least two inscriptions: the first on a tomb in London⁸⁹ and the second in a chapel in Stratford-on-Avon.⁹⁰ Here is the early fourteenth century "A" version, a Harleian lyric in four lines.⁹¹

Erþe toc of erþe erþe wyþ who	<i>Earth taken from earth, earth with woe</i>
erþe oper erþe to þe erþe droh	<i>Earth drew the other earth to the earth</i>
Erþe leyde erþe in erþene þroh	<i>Earth laid earth in an earthen grave</i>
þo heuede erþe of erþe erþe ynoh	<i>Then earth had enough earth from earth</i>

⁸⁹ See DIMEV 1166.

⁹⁰ See DIMEV 1170.

⁹¹ The later "B" version is much longer, consisting of seven quatrains; its first stanza is roughly comparable to the "A" version. There also exists a much longer "C" version (with eighty-two lines) and at least two other significant variants.

Although Reiss identifies two “macro” meanings of the word “earth” in this poem, “man” and “nature” (51), the many and varied meaning of “earth” (soil, dust, clay, one of the four elements, world, human body, grave, “the worldly” as opposed to the spiritual, humankind) create a synergistic effect in which the poem achieves myriad meanings as a result of the many connotations and associations of this common noun, but also in which “earth” begins to function as a quasi-deictic word whose meaning shifts depending on the location (spatial, temporal, and within life-cycle) of the person reading it.

In this poem, characteristics of folk song and popular piety coexist effortlessly with a sophisticated sense of theology and word-craft—in fact, Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou cites this lyric as a textbook case of a work in which “the distinction between learned and popular culture breaks down” (*Suster* 43). Reiss notes that the lyric is a variation on the apparently uniquely English “Earth upon earth” theme, itself a variation on such forms as the *danse macabre* and the Debate Between Body and Soul, and that it can be thought of as a riddle, like the Findern lyric “Pees maketh plente” (55). Reiss also reads this poem as damning, seeing in its last line an indictment of “man’s greed or gluttony” which has caused his death. Although this tonal tenor is tenable, I rather read it as sly, slightly macabre, and keenly aware of its own intelligence and dark humor.⁹² Though Rosemary Woolf reminds us, quite rightly, that puns, in the Middle Ages, did not necessarily or even usually signal humor (*Religious Lyric* 85), the compounding of *earths* in this poem does lend the poem something of the riddle and even the tongue-twister (Reiss cites the “intentional heaviness and awkwardness of sound and rhythm,” 54), particularly in the last line, which, it is safe to assume, would take a moment to parse even for a medieval listener. I will briefly move through the poem, tracking

⁹² Admittedly, the “B” and “C” versions take a view of man’s unworthiness both grimmer and more focused on God, the soul, and the afterlife than the “A” version.

its potential interpretations both line-by-line and holistically, before discussing the deictic significance of the word “earth.”

The clearest and easiest reading of the first line is “Earth (the human body) was taken out of (or formed from) earth (dust or clay).” This poem clearly references Genesis 3:19b “... for dust thou art, and into dust thou shalt return.”⁹³ However, although His presence certainly looms over this poem, God as creator does not appear; it is as if earth has created the body from itself. If the first line’s verb is translated actively rather than passively, a paraphrase might be, “Earth took out of earth (itself) (a human made of) earth with woe.” In this paraphrase, “with woe” can refer either to the earth (further supporting a view of the earth as a mother giving birth to humans, giving resonance to the idea found elsewhere in Genesis that birth pains are punishment for original sin) or the “earth” of humankind, eternally marked by sin.

If the first line is a birth, the second line can represent either human childhood and adulthood, during which “earth” (man) literally plays in and then works the earth (dirt/soil). In this schema, the first line represents birth, the second life, the third death, and the fourth the afterlife (either of the earth or the human). Conversely, the second line can represent death, in which earth draws the human back to itself in an inexorable, magnetic return. There is something here also, in this unambiguously moral, penitential, and religious verse, of the secular love lyric, in which lovers, parting, look forward to meeting again. The mother/child paradigm is here (as in so many Marian lyrics) also mapped onto a schema of lovers and sexual union, and “woe” has an undercurrent of loss at being separated, as if earth and humankind cannot stand to be apart and (after only a single line representing the mayfly brevity of a human life) the original earth draws “other earth” (the human body) back into

⁹³ Douay-Rheims translation of the Vulgate.

itself. Following this interpretation, it is only after earth lays her human in a grave (that is, in herself) that they are satisfied and complete. Only then does earth have enough (in the sense of the fullness, sufficiency, and abundance) of earth. The tactility and sensuality of the imagery lends credence to this interpretation. In this schema, the first line represents birth, the second and third death, and the fourth the completion of an afterlife properly united with earth. This interpretation, then, apparently has greater complexity and multiplicity of meaning than the former. However, yet another layer of meaning can be added to the first interpretative schema, in which the first line represents birth, the second life, the third death, and the fourth the afterlife. Here, if the second line represents a human life, the third line might also imply that it was “(working the) earth” that laid “earth” (man) in his earthen grave, and furthermore the fourth line can mean that earth itself had enough of earth (the human body) and so breaks down its body into hers or, conversely that earth (man) had enough of earth (the world), implying that the soul in question is headed for heaven.

Clearly, then, the word “earth” here is both “shifting” and “sliding” in meaning. But in what sense is it properly deictic? Is this not more accurately polysemy, or multiple meanings? Technically, yes. “Earth” here is not exactly deictic in the way that, for example, “he” or “now” is. However, this poem functions as a sort of border case, showing us the limits where polysemy pushes toward deixis. As we have seen, any deictic word, like “you” or “now,” cannot be understood outside of a subjective, individual context. In “*Erpe toc of erpe*,” the word “earth” functions as a deictic in that its meaning shifts depending on the location of the person reading it: in place, in time, age (place in life-cycle), and temperament. If a reader inclines toward religious sentiment, for example, she would likely choose an interpretation privileging humankind’s inherent sinfulness as well as the inevitability of an afterlife in heaven. If a reader is young, he may be more likely to choose a reading focusing

on images of nature and natural cycles.⁹⁴ A twenty-first century reader, even one situated in a nominally Christian cultural matrix, is likely to vastly undervalue the importance of a Christian worldview to the poem's medieval readers, for example. Though not technically a deictic word, "earth" in this poem aligns the reader with the lyric's implied "I," inviting the lyric experiencer to inhabit this (uniquely "empty" or fillable) text with the circumstances of her own life and experience. Further, incremental repetition in this poem serves to enhance the deictic function of "earth," since with each repetition the meaning of the word changes while its collective meanings (and its *meaning*, its import and significance) are reinforced. The multiple and widely varied readings inherent in this poem make it much more complex than a riddle, which, although mysterious, has only one correct answer, and they also illustrate the role of deixis in creating a poem's tone or emotional tenor, toward which I will shortly turn.

Conclusion

Deixis in Middle English lyric, then, works in nuanced ways to create empathy (understood here as cognitive/kinaesthetic felt response) in the lyric experiencer with the "I" of the text. This occurs via practical, craft choices on the part of the lyric; although lyrics obviously do not literally write themselves, a model of lyric text as *auctor* (both author and authority) is useful for these texts, in which authorial identity is in most cases irrecoverable and in many likely collaborative. Deixis in the lyrics tangibly locates the poem's "I" (and occasionally other figures in the poem, including the lyric receiver) in felt context: physical, temporal, locational, relational, identificatory. In this way deixis works to bring the lyric experiencer into relationship with the text-world through the body of the textual subject.

⁹⁴ However, it is impossible to read this lyric simply as a "nature poem," as it has, puzzlingly, been categorized on the Poetry Foundation website.

A.C. Spearing's concept of "textual subjectivity" is, then, particularly useful in reading medieval lyric because our knowledge about the authors of the lyrics as well as the conditions of their performance and how they were received by medieval audiences is so limited.⁹⁵ The model of lyric "I" as textual subject neatly subverts the anachronism inherent in the "author" model, as well as the related "meditative persona" and "speaker" models, of the poetic "I." As Spearing notes, people in the late medieval period were increasingly interested in "individual lives and interiorities" (*Medieval Autographies* 99), and this interest is reflected in the richly constructed textual subjects and the relational, emotional, and sensory worlds they inhabit. This is not to suggest, however, that there is a one-to-one relationship between the "I" of the text and the lyric's author or scribe. Like medieval and modern readers and hearers of lyric, medieval authors, adaptors, translators, composers, scribes, and performers probably identified with the "I" of the texts they had a hand in creating, transmitting, and preserving some but not all of the time. It is for this reason that the "I" of the text can be seen on its own terms, as representing an embodied, individual subjectivity that, while never corresponding to a single lived subjectivity, can nonetheless be spoken of as an individual subject in its own right.

Deictic analysis is, then, a useful approach to any text that resists individual authorial authority, whether because it is anonymous and/or collaborative, or because its author consciously opposes identification with his work. As such, the corpus of Middle English lyric is a particularly strong candidate for deictic analysis, since nearly all lyrics fall into at least one of the above categories (and some likely fall into all three). Since deixis is predicated on embodiment—situatedness of person, place and time has no meaning outside of a

⁹⁵ In fact the implementation of a model of textual subjectivity has great potential for scholars of poetry of any era, including contemporary poetry, since this model of subjectivity provides a clear and useful way of approaching the speaking subject that is at least potentially both more engaging and less fraught than "author" or "speaker" models of looking at a poem's "I."

subjective, speaking-and-receiving pair of “I”s—deictic analysis is indispensable for any poet or scholar interested in the ways lyric texts connect readers to their bodies. Deictics provide an “in” for the reader or hearer of a poetic text by locating the textual subject in space, time, and body in a way that conveys experientiality and proximity to the embodied lyric receiver (often, but not always, by inviting the receiver to fill the “I” of the poem with her own lived experience). Through this process, deictic words and phrases allow for empathy on the part of the reader with the textual subject. Lyric theorists including Jonathan Culler, Susan Stewart, Virginia Jackson, and Heather Dubrow have explored the ways in which English poetry of diverse eras, from the medieval period through the present, successfully connect lyric subjects and experiencers through deictic means.

However, examining in detail instances of deixis (and especially “I”) in Middle English lyric inevitably leads to the related challenge of reading the *tone* of a poem’s speaking subject at such a cultural remove. Any spoken (or written) utterance of any era can in fact imply its opposite through the use of irony; the interpretive difficulties this poses to communication in our own era are greatly magnified and compounded when looking at texts many hundreds of years old. The next chapter will assess the evidence for reading two affects—melancholy and desire—in diverse Middle English lyrics, which, as we have seen, often have very little contextualizing information, tonal or otherwise. In examining these lyrics, I will continue to look at deixis as well as other formal features to gauge what the poems can reveal about their medieval textual subjects.

Chapter 3

Mulch sorw I walke with: Affect and Embodiment

Introduction

Like the linguistic category of deixis, careful management of the affective categories of melancholy and desire allows lyric experiencers to empathize with the “I” of a text. The tonal qualities of these affects are communicated via both form and content, and the lyrics’ portrayal of melancholy and desire enables us to connect on a kinaesthetic plane with the textual subjects as well as with our own bodies. In examining lyrics through the overlapping fields of these two emotions, this chapter argues that portrayal of affect in Middle English lyric can be powerfully individuated even through language that is, on some occasions, far from dynamic, and in others extremely formulaic. In many cases, lyric experiencers are able to empathize with and respond to the textual subject as an individual despite language that is highly conventional or that doesn’t seem to “go” anywhere.

“Affect,” however, will require some initial examination; the term is rangy and diffuse. From recent research in cognitive science regarding the physiological basis of emotion, to the theorization of “public” or “social” emotion, to philosophies of embodiment and subjectivity, the meanings of “affect” can vary widely between and even within disciplines. Indeed, as an emerging discourse, there is not any central definition of affect—is it identical with emotion? To what extent is it embodied? How is it different from mood/*Stimmung* or from “feeling”?⁹⁶

⁹⁶ This confusion in some ways mirrors and extends earlier scholarly discourse on “the body,” a term that is equally fraught. See the 1995 essay “Why All the Fuss about the Body?: A Medievalist’s Perspective” in which Caroline Walker Bynum addresses the inconsistencies in the use of the term “the body” in Anglo-American scholarship, and the widely varied disciplines (epistemology, epidemiology, literature, history, biology, demography, art) approaching and defining the body in very different ways.

Over the past decade, however, within the related fields of literary criticism and cultural studies, patterns of usage and interpretation have begun to solidify. In their introduction (tellingly entitled “An Inventory of Shimmers”) *Affect Theory Reader* editors Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg outline no less than eight separate approaches to the theorization of affect, each with its own lineage, trajectory, and central concerns (6-8). This profusion of potentiality notwithstanding, two primary approaches to affect have emerged. The first, rooted in the Deleuzo-Guattarian project of interpreting and extending Spinoza and continuing through the work of their translator Brian Massumi, characterizes affect as a “prepersonal intensity” (Deleuze and Guattari xvi) that is nonlinear, prelingual, and omnipresent in our fractured and image-driven late capitalist culture. Above all, Massumi and others equate affect with the boundless potentiality of an unfolding, emergent “virtual present” where multiple and even contradictory possibilities overlap and entwine (Massumi 27). If this sounds impenetrable, it very often is; Massumi’s “virtual” is difficult to pin down and it is often unclear how, specifically, the virtual is in relationship with the body, perception, and emotion.⁹⁷

Conversely, the affective lineage exemplified by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, following the work of psychologists Silvan Tomkins and Melanie Klein and grounded in queer and feminist theory and pedagogy, is unabashedly syncretic, drawing on various discourses to create a theory of affect that is at its core physiological but nondualistic: “[affects] occur neither in mind nor body but in an assemblage, network, or system that is not comprehensible in terms of its corporeal or cognitive component parts” (Flatley 11). Thus shyness, shame and guilt, for Sedgwick and others working in a psychoanalytic framework,

⁹⁷ Here, for example, is an explanation of “the virtual” on Massumi’s faculty website at The European Graduate School: “The virtual environment in prospective relationships to virtual objects produces form that is dictated through interaction of the potential modifications.” Massumi’s theory and especially his interpretation of scientific data have come under particularly incisive and cogent critique by trauma theorist Ruth Leys.

are different emotions but constitute faces of the same affect because they are all expressed through the “shame response” (withdrawing into the body, blushing, reducing facial communication and covering the face) (Tomkins 134). Many affect theorists from both of these primary lineages, however, in general follow Paul Ekman’s “basic emotions theory” and neuroscience popularizers such as Antonio Damasio in assuming that physiological response precedes conscious, cognitive response. For affect scholars,

the difference between “affect” and “emotion” is acute and critical: a question of ontological, even physiological precedence [...] “affect” can signify an unconscious, pre-discursive bodily response in quite precise terms: the beat of the heart; the rush of blood to the face; the flow of tears from the eyes. The consciousness of emotion, so often mediated by language, is seen as secondary. (Trigg 5-6)

Although, as discussed in Chapter 1, I do not subscribe wholly to Ekmanian psychology, and further am hesitant to rely on emerging neuroscientific theories still very much in debate, this focus on the physiological is profoundly useful in analyzing the ways in which Middle English lyric connects readers to its embodied textual subjects through the creation of empathy. Affect studies, rooted firmly in sensual and kinaesthetic knowing, thus provides a compelling lens through which to investigate the emotive tenor of the lyrics. This approach—broadly focusing on *effects* rather than *causes*—can in fact illuminate any premodern text, from which we can glean the presence of affects but often cannot establish with any certainty the intentions behind them. Stephanie Trigg suggests that “in literary studies ... it makes sense to follow Massumi [in distinguishing “affect” as radically different from “emotion,” which is mediated by language] and maintain the distinction between affect and emotion” since texts so often transmit not the internalized cognitive/emotional experience of a subject but the embodied reactions of subjects which communicate thought and experience to the reader (6).

Concurrently with the rise of affect as a theoretical lens, the discourse of history of emotions has emerged as a parallel category of inquiry. I have addressed the divergent approaches of the two discourses in Chapter 1; to restate, affect theorists are likely to emphasize emotional expression as pre-discursive, pre-conscious, and relatively continuous across cultures, whereas historians of emotion are more likely to stress the cultural construction and cultural specificity of emotions themselves as well as the ways in which they are expressed. Stephanie Trigg has recently made the most cogent and comprehensive assessment of affect theoretical versus history of emotions approaches:

... in contrast to the unconscious or pre-discursive emphasis of affect theory, “emotion” emerges with a more specialized sense, referring to the way we experience, narrate, and perform what we feel. In practice this is how that term is used in the field named as the history of emotions. Historically-oriented studies, where we cannot accurately map, chart, or measure somatic or cognitive affect, must rely on textual and material traces and representations of feelings and passions: the emotions *as they are processed, described, and performed by human subjects*. (7, emphasis original)

Trigg suggests that affect theory may be uniquely suited to literary analysis, and history of emotions more appropriate to historical texts. How, then, to approach the study of literature in history? This study generally uses the term “affect” to refer to a particular felt emotion (specifically, in this chapter, melancholy or desire). However, I do not distinguish sharply between “affect” and “emotion”; to do so risks suggesting that the body and mind are separate entities. For affect scholars, physiological responses precede cognitive ones; for history of emotions scholars, the physiological is often elided altogether. Neither approach has yet developed a model in which physiological responses, cognitive responses, and individual and cultural interpretations of those responses are seen as indivisible.

Feminist scholar and trauma theorist Ruth Leys has systematically critiqued Massumi and other affect theorists relying on the neurosciences for their irresponsible use of scientific and social scientific data. As she and others have noted, Ekman and Damasio both have

been rigorously critiqued, often and incisively, by other psychologists and neuroscientists. It is undoubtedly true that most affect theorists employing neuroscientific data probably do not understand them very well. They largely rely on popularizers, like Damasio, who present their theories (hotly debated within the scientific community) as fact. Neuroscience is very much a developing field, and scientists themselves do not yet understand many of the fundamental ways in which the brain processes emotion and empathy. Humanities scholars, building upon these theories in complex and admittedly elegant ways to theorize how we process and exhibit emotion, are often well out of their depth. Historians of emotion (who are by and large leery, as we have seen, of relying on psychological, anthropological, and neuroscientific evidence) recognize the potential danger of locating emotion in bodies that are often assumed to be stable over time and culture. A typical assertion from Rosenwein, for example: “I don’t assume that in the past [emotional vocabularies] were the same as in the present, *pave* most psychologists, though I imagine that in the Western past they were closer to our Western vocabulary than in Asia or Africa” (*AHR Conversation*, 1494).

No serious (or even cursory) scholar of medieval literature, however—no matter how invested in affect theory—would claim that emotional norms were the same in 1215 as in 2015. One need only glance at, for example, the “Song of Roland,” with its sobbing knights and soldiers fainting *en masse*, to know beyond a doubt that emotional vocabularies and expectations were radically different for the text’s composers and audiences than for readers today. However, the physiological pathways through which emotions were initiated almost certainly *were* the same. Medieval brains cannot have been so very different from our own, nor medieval bodies; in evolutionary time, eight hundred years is not terribly long. It is the ways in which emotions and bodies were *read* that were different; and certainly the differences are sometimes extreme. However, it is well worth considering that the knights in

the “Song of Roland,” and for that matter the textual speakers in the lyrics, do not appear to have access to physiological expressions of emotion we have lost; nor, I suspect, have we evolved new methods of affective expression since the twelfth century. As noted in Chapter 2, there are no grounds to suspect that a blush was produced in a radically different way for a medieval lyric speaker than it is produced for us (and it may well be produced for us in some of the erotic lyrics to be here addressed).

Recently, even Rosenwein edges toward suggesting that the physiological and the emotive are intertwined. She speaks of a physiological “affective potential” that is universal but “manifests itself in different ways at different times in response to the conditions, assumptions, values, goals, and everything else that makes up human society and political life” (*AHR Conversation* 1505). And in an interview with Jan Plamper, she is even more explicit:

At a certain level, to be sure, there is truth to the universalist claim. Emotions have a biological reality, and they may be associated with certain parts of the brain and facial musculature. Without denying that emotions are “hard-wired,” I should like to argue that they are like notes in a scale; in context, as they are actually used and expressed, they come out different—as differently (sometimes) as a fugue by Bach and a hip-hop rap. (260)

Nonetheless, there is at present little conversation between affect theorists and historians (led by Rosenwein, Reddy, and Miri Rubin) working on emotion. This lack of conversation is particularly curious in that both discourses are struggling with many of the same problems surrounding emotion: for example, questions of terminology,⁹⁸ determining the extent to which emotion is biological, and struggling with how (and how much) to make use of neurobiology, neurochemistry and neuropsychology. One hopes that in the future the discourses will inform each other more overtly. In the meantime, despite the potentially

⁹⁸ This is a particularly fraught issue for medievalists, whose medieval textual subjects are much more likely to speak of “passions” or perhaps “sentiments” than “emotions,” “feelings,” or “affects.”

fraught nature of affect studies as a discipline, it nonetheless can be profoundly useful in allowing us to understand medieval emotion. I do not suggest that medieval bodies were exactly like our own, nor that the ways in which medieval people felt, processed, expressed, and understood emotion would be entirely familiar to us today. However, textual portrayals of affect (along with art-historical evidence) are the only avenues we have to accessing medieval emotion; this is, as Rosenwein suggests, what makes history “... so very different from the discipline of psychology, which tends to postulate that our emotions are universal and were the same in the past as they are in the present—only differently expressed. *The ways in which emotions are expressed are, in fact, our only pathway to them*” (*AHR Conversation* 1496, emphasis mine).

No less than any other field in the humanities, medieval studies is witnessing the affective turn. In conjunction with the allied field of medieval subjectivity (led, in recent years, by A. C. Spearing, Judith Peraino and Peter Haidu) affect theories can be singularly illuminating in allowing us to read medieval bodies through literary texts. Studies at the intersection of affect and the medieval period are as diverse as work, like Peter King’s, that helps us to understand how medieval minds viewed emotions, to work, like Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s, that uses Deleuzo-Guattarian theories of bodies as “desiring-machines” to explore medieval “possible bodies.” The question of the emotions, then—how we experience them, how we interpret and express them, and how we understand and empathize with them in others—is increasingly relevant to the study of medieval literature in its many forms. With this in mind, this chapter examines two affects, melancholy and desire,⁹⁹ as they appear in several Middle English lyrics from the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries.

⁹⁹ Although both “desire” and “melancholy” may actually be seen most accurately as two categories or constellations of several related affects, for the purposes of this study “desire” refers to “sexual desire.” Several related facets of “melancholy” will be discussed.

I have chosen to focus on these emotions in tandem for several reasons. First, melancholy and desire may be conceived of as opposed, in that melancholy is often characterized (in texts from the Middle Ages through the present) by passivity or a lack of affect, whereas desire may seem inherently active and in fact perhaps the most self-evidently “embodied” of emotions. This binary, however, breaks down very quickly. Melancholy subjects (in Middle English lyric, at least) undertake many types of actions, although medieval melancholia is indeed fundamentally characterized by passivity or even helplessness (though not, importantly, a lack of “affect” or physically demonstrated emotion). On the other hand, desire, though in some cases portrayed as an emotion propelling and even requiring action, is occasionally leached of its embodied potential by the extremely conventional nature of much medieval love poetry. Second, melancholy and desire are important for both medieval and modern subjects; they recur again and again in literary texts and particularly in lyric poetry. Third, these affects provide a useful contrast in the context of affect studies in that melancholia is perhaps the most-theorized emotion and love or desire, oddly, one of the least.¹⁰⁰

Inevitably, the bodies here are textual bodies, and I necessarily examine “not how the poems express or represent individual subjectivities, whether of their writers or of fictional characters, but how subjectivity is encoded in them as a textual phenomenon” (Spearing, *Textual Subjectivity* 1). The medieval bodies that sang, recited, copied down, preached against, contrefacted,¹⁰¹ and danced to these lyrics are gone, and our primary source of information about those bodies is their surviving texts. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to assume that the textual bodies in these lyrics can tell us something about the way medieval people

¹⁰⁰ Love and desire have, however, received much more critical attention from history of emotions scholars; William Reddy’s most recent book, for example, is entitled *The Making of Romantic Love* (2012).

¹⁰¹ Contrafacting is the practice of composing new lyrics to an existing melody.

understood, experienced and expressed melancholia and desire. That we are able to empathize with these textual speakers (just as we often empathize powerfully with popular music of our own era with a melancholy or desiring “I”) suggests that an individuated “I” is created in the lyrics even through formulaic, passive, or (at first glance) lifeless language.

Melancholia: Medieval/Freudian

I will first briefly examine what the word “melancholy” meant to a medieval audience and map this onto “melancholia,” in the Freudian sense (that is, as opposed to mourning), subsequently exploring a peculiarly medieval affect, joyous melancholy, which is sometimes linked with the *felix culpa* or “happy fault” of original sin. The varied facets of melancholy often exhibit a lack of agency, and this sense of helplessness is present in Freud as well; in both mourning and melancholia the subject has no control over the loss of the loved object. What Freud de-emphasizes, however, is that this lack of agency is often expressed in intimately embodied ways; this is certainly the case in these lyrics.

Though we are perhaps most familiar with medieval “melancholy” as one of the four humors, in fact Old French *melancholie* first appears in literature with the meaning “profound sadness” and only later in the medical sense (OED). And although one might expect melancholy (whether in this emotional sense or in its medical meaning as an excess of black bile) to be considered negative, there is evidence that it was tonally ambiguous in the medieval period.¹⁰² A prime example of “ambiguous melancholy” is Albrecht Dürer’s 1514 engraving and “master print” *Melencolia I*. Among the engraving’s numerous ambiguities and

¹⁰² On the positive potential of medieval melancholy A. C. Spearing notes, “There has been a long tradition of seeing melancholy as inspirational and creative ... Chaucer was the first English-language poet to make the connection” (*Medieval Autographies* 178). In *Ugly Feelings*, theorist Sianne Ngai also categorizes melancholia as one of the “potentially ennobling or morally beatific states” as opposed to “ugly” (“amoral and noncathartic”) feelings like anxiety, envy, and paranoia (6).

an ideal) after which, lacking closure, the person sinks into pathological despair. Mourning however, in Freud's schema, is nonpathological—upon losing the loved object the person is able to grieve and eventually to achieve closure. Although Freud initially claims that “the exciting causes due to environmental influences are, so far as we can discern them at all, the same for both conditions” (in other words, the loss of a loved person or value) further on he admits that in melancholia “the object has not perhaps actually died, but has been lost as an object of love” and cites as an example the case of “a betrothed girl who has been jilted” (244). Furthermore, “in mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself” (245). For Freud, both mourning and melancholia are rooted in a perceived lack of agency; the person experiencing these affects has no control over the emptiness and meaninglessness by which he is afflicted, and the melancholic subject is characterized by a marked and potentially debilitating helplessness. After the death of a loved one, for example, or the loss of a loved ideal, it may indeed seem as though the world is meaningless, but the lack of control the subject feels over her surroundings is simply an intensified iteration of the lack of control all humans have at any time over events external to themselves. In melancholia, however, as Freud notes, it is the subject's very selfhood that has been diminished, apparently without conscious control (and presumably against the wishes) of the subject. This can explain why, in a Freudian sense, mourning is finite and melancholy potentially infinite. The feelings of helplessness central to Freud's melancholia are powerfully at work in the characterization of melancholy in Middle English lyric.

To be sure, there are some major misalignments between Freudian and medieval melancholy. Although medieval audiences were certainly familiar with the terms “mourning” and “melancholy” there is nothing to indicate that they would have made the distinction between mourning as bounded and nonpathological and melancholia as boundless and

pathological. Perhaps even more significantly, Freud is focused above all on the individual ego and the losses that ego can suffer. Many poems from throughout the Middle Ages, however, express a much more abstracted, philosophical approach to the melancholy inherent in the human condition as transitory, rather than responding to an individualized loss. Furthermore, for an Early Modern audience (as we have seen in Dürer and Ficino) melancholy, rather than being monolithically pathological, had both pathological and nonpathological manifestations. As a humor, melancholy or black bile was thought to nourish and keep balance in the body, but its excess (brought on by love-longing, for example) was unnatural (MED). Although in modern usage both “mourning” and “melancholy” are understood colloquially as “grief” or “sadness,” “melancholy” has the connotation of a hard-to-shake, indefinable malaise that is deeply entrenched in the mind and body. The way melancholy is portrayed in the lyrics suggests that it had these same resonances for a medieval audience, but that the term was potentially more nuanced, with more and slightly different shades of meaning.

For Freud, melancholia is characterized by “painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, *inhibition of all activity*, and a lowering of self-regarding feelings ...” (243, emphasis mine). The inhibited activity Freud here describes is in Middle English lyric, more specifically, a sense of motion-in-stillness. Melancholy subjects in Middle English lyric are indeed outwardly passive, but they also display a great deal of inward activity in the form of obsessive, repetitive inward motion.¹⁰⁵ For the melancholy subject, action occurs—the heart continues to beat, the body assumes shapes and postures,

¹⁰⁵ Interestingly, Stanford biologist Robert Sapolsky has noted in numerous publications and lectures that clinical depression is often characterized by extreme outward listlessness, but that the chemical and hormonal profiles of people with depression suggest intense, exhausting inward “activity”: “When looking at a depressive sitting on the edge of the bed, barely able to move, it is easy to think of the person as energy-less, enervated. A more accurate picture is of the depressive as a tightly coiled spool of wire, tense, straining, active—but all inside” (276). I do not here wholly equate representations of medieval melancholy with clinical depression, but I do find this link suggestive.

even completes repetitive movements—but with no real liveliness or purpose. This listlessness and passivity are characteristic of the medieval melancholy lyric subject in its many variations.

Malaise/ Alienation

The faces of melancholy apparent in these first two poems perhaps most closely approximate “melancholy” in the senses it is used, colloquially, today. These two lyrics express variants on the same subtype of melancholy, rooted as they both are in a lack of human control over the environment and our own emotions. They are also two of the few Middle English lyrics to survive with their music intact (and attached) and thus favorites of contemporary students, scholars and performers of early music. Here is the thirteenth century “Foweles in þe frith”:¹⁰⁶

Foweles in þe frith,
þe fisses in þe flod,
And i mon waxe wod.
Mulch sorw I walke with
for beste of bon and blod.

In their readings of this poem, critics (including Edmund Reiss, John Hirsh, and Richard Osberg) have frequently noted the lyric’s heavy alliteration, two-part structure, enigmatic religious references and of course its final, brilliant pun: that man is both the “best” (*beste*) of creatures but also still “a beast” (*beste*). Most interesting to me, however, is the use of the verb *walke* in the fourth line. It is not difficult to see how this poem might typify melancholia. Birds have their place in the forest and fish in the stream, but the narrator has no place he feels at home. This belonginglessness is ironic since man is, as it were, the “best” of the “beasts”; there is probably here an allusion to man’s kinship with Christ. It is perhaps

¹⁰⁶ Ed. Oliver (116)

not incidental that the animals mentioned in the poem fly and swim, while the speaker is earthbound.¹⁰⁷

In one sense, this poem simply describes the subject's state of mind. Not much *happens* here; there is neither explicit narrative nor even any implied or alluded-to (as is the case, for example, in many love lyrics and religious songs). Rather, the simple, declarative lines set up an implied contrast between animals (which have places to belong) and the speaker (who does not). In this sense the poem feels static, even claustrophobic; this is perhaps best exemplified by the surprising lack of verbs in the first two lines. Fish here do not "swim" and birds neither "fly" nor "sing" nor "nest." The narrator, on the other hand, "walks" with no companion but sorrow. As one of only two verbs in the poem (and as its most active verb) an immense amount of pressure is put on this word. The speaker does not "have" sorrow. He doesn't "feel" it or even "go" with it—rather, he *walks*.¹⁰⁸ In this sense, melancholia, in this poem, truly is a lived *affect*, rather than an "emotion" that occurs solely internally. Instead of being experienced on only a cognitive plane, sorrow is felt in every sense, lived in, on and through the speaker's body, which is moved, literally, by this sorrow.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ It is illuminating to read this poem as an adaptation, expansion, and re-purposing of Matthew 8:20, in which Jesus says, "vulpes foveas habent et volucres caeli tabernacula / Filius autem hominis non habet ubi caput reclinet" ("The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air nests: but the son of man hath not where to lay his head") (trans. from the Vulgate and the Douay-Rheims translation of the Vulgate respectively). See Thomas Moser's exhaustive 1987 exegesis of the poem in this light as well as Kathleen Palti's recent exploration of this poem beside a lullaby that also paraphrases the verse.

¹⁰⁸ That the subject walks "with" sorrow may suggest that sorrow is here personified as a companion, rather than internalized as an embodied condition. However, sorrow as written on the narrator's body is a more tenable interpretation because the subject walks with "much sorrow," a construction that does not make sense if sorrow is a personified abstraction.

¹⁰⁹ As early as 1951, Arthur Moore noted that in Middle English lyric "feeling swirls and eddies in the wake of the action" (44). Although much of Moore's analysis of the lyrics is reductive, in this idea that emotion follows action (perhaps in the tradition of William James) he prefigures not only contemporary theories of affect but the findings of some recent cognitive scientists that, indeed, our bodies do react to stimuli measurably before our minds. Although I here attempt to move toward a paradigm that does not distinguish between mind and body as separate sites of knowing, it is nonetheless notable that Moore's observation precedes the work of Ramachandran, Damasio, and others by nearly half a century.

Admittedly, “walk” is not, perhaps, the most evocative verb one might imagine. This narrator does not, for example, “collapse” or “cry out” with sorrow. Yet it is the very simplicity of “walk” (mirroring the simplicity of the poem’s structure) that lends the word its power. In an otherwise static, timeless-feeling lyric, this one verb calls to mind the numbing repetitiveness of walking and in so doing works harder than any other word in the poem to create its melancholy cast.¹¹⁰ Freud maintains that melancholy is characterized by a lack of activity, even a lack of affect, but in fact (although melancholy in these lyrics certainly does seem to subdue action) repetitive, drudging movement is here a hallmark of melancholy (walking upright separates man from the animals: so, too, does melancholy). Like the contemporary cliché, the speaker “puts one foot in front of the other,” and he does so endlessly. We speak of life as a “journey” or as a “long march to the grave” in which we have no choice but to keep walking. This subject here experiences a potentially numbing lack of agency—he *can only walk* and furthermore he *must walk*—he is trapped in a repetitive physical pattern that mirrors the melancholy monotony of his thoughts.¹¹¹

The thirteenth century “Myrie it is” similarly ties melancholia especially closely to the changing of the seasons.¹¹²

Myrie it is while sumer ilast
 with fugheles song
 oc nu necheth windes blast
 and weder strong
 ej ej what þis nicht is long

¹¹⁰ Susan Stewart suggests that “poems on walking often juxtapose two meters and produce [a] sort of tension between moving and stopping,” citing the children’s rhyme “Step on a crack, you’ll break your mother’s back”: the first line is characterized by spondees and the second by “a perfectly regular iambic trimeter” (*Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* 212). Interestingly, this metrical juxtaposition is present in “Foweles in þe frith” as well; the poem opens with two stress-timed, two-beat lines and closes, like the rhyme above, with a line of perfect iambic trimeter.

¹¹¹ A number of readers of this poem (including Peter Dronke, Stephen Manning, and John Hirsh) translate “for” as “on account of,” interpreting the subject’s sorrow as love-longing for a woman who is “the best of bone and blood.” This exegesis is certainly tenable, but the text is less interesting as a love poem than as an exploration of the human condition as inherently melancholy.

¹¹² Ed. Boklund-Lagopoulou (42); I have deleted punctuation and capitalization.

and ich wid wel michel wrong
soregh and murne and fast

The turning of the year reminds this subject that all things change and fade—mild weather and birdsong, as well as human life. This reminder of his own mortality puts him in a gloomy mood; far from merrily cozying up indoors, the subject is rather inclined to “sorrow and mourn and fast.”

This poem exhibits a sense of motion-in-stillness very similar to “Foweles in þe frith.” In one sense, the poem merely paints a picture with very little movement: summer “lasts” and winter “comes,” but these verbs are hardly evocative. It is various other words in the first half of the poem that create a sense of both stillness and activity—“fugheles song” calls to mind the cheery trill of birdsong but also, inevitably, the hopping, flapping, and flying of those same fair-weather creatures. And though “blast” is being used in this poem as a noun, we can hardly help but imagine the effects of that wintry blast on buildings, animals, and human bodies. In the second half of the poem, after a non-expressive to-be verb (only the fourth verb in the poem so far) the lyric ends with an almost shocking concentration of three consecutive, and highly evocative, verbs: “soregh” “murne” and “fast.” In a lyric that has been, thus far, miserly with its action verbs, this last line initiates a striking push forward to the poem’s narrative, ironically just at the moment the narrator is perhaps most regressive, drawing into himself with verbs of suffering, abstinence, passivity, and interiority. The immediacy created by this contrast perhaps represents the subject’s attempt to understand his own felt experience in a world where he has very little control over anything, least of all the weather.

“Foweles in þe frith” and “Myrie it is” are often paired in scholarly discussions of Middle English lyric as examples both of medieval melancholia and of short lyrics with a

“binary” structure.¹¹³ It is certainly the case that their tininess, their repeated consonant sounds, and their two-part structure (each has a sort of volta about halfway through) go far in creating a powerful sense of timelessness and, paradoxically, a concurrent sense of endless or repeated movement which, together, generate the feeling of helplessness and even claustrophobia. However, it is the verbs—both their selection and their placement—that work hardest to construct an imminent sense of melancholy that seems to move but does not “go” anywhere. This finely-drawn portrait of medieval melancholy has a palpably felt effect on the body of the lyric experiencer; the restless, helpless feeling of intense inward energy with no outlet is a feeling we can easily empathize despite the seeming listlessness of the lyric “I” and the language used to evoke melancholy.

Joyous Melancholy

If medieval melancholy, in the previous two poems, approximates modern melancholy, the next iteration of melancholy in Middle English lyric is peculiarly medieval. It is rooted in the popularly accessible theological tenet of the *felix culpa*, or “happy fault” of original sin, and can be seen clearly in the well-known lyric “Adam lay ibowndyn”:¹¹⁴

Adam lay ibowndyn, bowndyn in a bond,
Fowre thowsand wynter thowt he not to long;
And al was for an appil, an appil that he tok,
As clerkis fyndyn wretyn in here book.

Ne hadde the appil take ben, the appil taken ben,
Ne hadde neuer Our Lady a ben heuene qwen;
Blyssid be the tyme that appil take was,
Therefore we mown syngyn *Deo gracias*!

¹¹³ See, for example, Oliver, *Poems Without Names* (116).

¹¹⁴ Ed. Reiss (138)

In this poem we expect a contrast between Adam's sin and Christ's redemption, but instead Adam is linked with Mary.¹¹⁵ Had Adam not taken the apple, this subject tells us, Mary would never have been queen of heaven; this surprising reversal gives added weight to the poem's exuberance. The repetition in the middle of lines one, three, and five give this refrain-less poem a refrain-like quality, and the rupturing of that pattern in line seven focuses our attention on the sentiment expressed therein, prefiguring the exuberance of the final "*Deo gracias!*"

This exuberance is also lent weight via the sharp contrast between the melancholy first stanza and the jubilant second. However, although there is a clear chronological progression from the melancholy fact of man's sin to the joyful reign of Mary (and of course the implied fact of Christ's redemption), the triumphant redemption does not *negate* the sin. The "joyful melancholy" of this poem is both explicit—the exuberant second stanza is informed by and irrevocably colored with the mournfulness of the first—but also implied by virtue of its obvious (to a medieval audience) immediacy and continued relevance. Celebrating the incarnation does not erase the reality that all people are marked, physiologically and psychologically, by the Fall, embodying Adam's imprisonment even as they are redeemed via the blood of Christ.

This poem, like "Foweles in þe frith" and "Myrie it is," displays a palpable sense of motion-in-stillness. The effect is created by the evocative yet motionless first stanza, the conceptual language of the second, and the very contrast between them, which emphasizes the pattern of sin and redemption in which humanity is trapped. Adam is physically bound in this poem, the bonds of sin and death expressed here by the image of the first man bound in

¹¹⁵ Mícheál Vaughan suggests that the pair of First Adam/Second Adam (that is, Adam and Jesus) may be implicitly paralleled here with the pair of Eva/Ave (in addressing Mary, the angel reverses, both in letters and in the world, the sin of Eve). The pair in this poem, however, is Adam and Mary, thus de-emphasizing both Jesus and Eve in favor of the "inner" pair responsible for the Fall and the Incarnation respectively.

chains for four thousand years (expressed as four thousand *winters*, which, although formulaic, maintains some of its expressive power in numbering a person's years by the winters he has survived). For these first three lines of the poem, the portrait of a physically imprisoned Adam is received by the lyric experiencer as a vivid but static picture. The fourth line, however, provides a dynamic change; zooming out visually from the scene in an intensely cinematic way, we see scholars reading the story of Adam's fall ("As clerkis fyndyn wretyn in here book"). This second level of representation heightens the sense of motion-in-stillness; further, the progression from looking at a text to looking at scholar looking at a text prepares us for the second stanza, in which we zoom out once more, into the heavens.¹¹⁶

Overtones of joyous melancholy can also be found in religious lyrics that do not reference the *felix culpa*. "I syng of a myden" is often paired in discussion with "Adam lay ibowndyn" due to its similar use of repetition as a focusing device; the two lyrics are also found uniquely in the same fifteenth century manuscript, Sloane 2593.¹¹⁷

I syng of a myden kyng of alle kynges	þat is makeles, to here sone che ches.
he cam also styлле as dew in aprylle,	þer his moder was þat fallyt on þe gras.
he cam also styлле as dew in aprille,	to his moderes bowr þat fallyt on þe flour.
he cam also styлле as dew in aprille,	þer his moder lay þat fallyt on þe spray.
moder & mayden wel may swych a lady	was neuer non but che— godes moder be.

¹¹⁶ This "zooming" effect is similar to the ascent of the falcon and the "zooming in" on the stone in the Corpus Christi Carol.

¹¹⁷ Ed. Oliver (83)

A great deal has been written on this masterful, enigmatic poem, which has long been lauded as possibly the greatest of all Middle English lyrics.¹¹⁸ The poem is both intensely erotic (patterned as a love lyric about a king and a lady) and intensely reverent. Formally, it is highly structured and repetitive. The Virgin's *bowr* (body/womb) literally houses God (in the form of Christ, God-as-son), yet it is also God (in the form of the Holy Spirit, God-as-lover) who has come to her *bowr* (chamber) to impregnate her, begetting himself with perfect circularity. Mary is God's consort, but she is also a sort of room through which God is incarnated in human form. Scholars have noted the seminal imagery in this poem (the dew is fertilizing grass, flowers, and trees); this is quite clearly a delicately stated but direct figuring of Mary's impregnation by the Divine.¹¹⁹ The focus of this poem is Mary's *fiat*,¹²⁰ signifying her willingness to carry the Son of God, with the bond between the trinity (note the three times "he cam also styll") and Mary figured as both sacred and sexual. Mary's "choosing" ("kyng of alle kynges / to here sone che ches") is the most important, and indeed the only, action she takes here. For the rest of the poem, Mary performs no actions, giving the sense, as in "Adam lay ibowndyn," that the lyric is a visual image transcribed. The poem's melancholy cast is created at least partially by this effect; the suspension of activity so characteristic of melancholy is powerfully at work here.

"I syng of a myden" has none of the immediately apparent joyous melancholy as "Adam lay ibowndyn." However, its kinship with that poem, as well as its hushed reverence, approaching sombreness, at this very joyful occasion, tinges the poem with this very affect. Furthermore, if, as I have argued, melancholy is created in Middle English lyric through a

¹¹⁸ See Manning, "I Syng of a Maiden," Hirsch, *Medieval Lyrics*, and Boklund-Lagopoulou, "*I have a yong suster*: Popular Song and Middle English Lyric."

¹¹⁹ Thomas Jemielly diplomatically notes that the poem is "very candid about the physical intimacies of Christ's conception in Mary" (Luria and Hoffman, 325).

¹²⁰ *Fiat* means "let [your will] be done," so in holding that Mary "chose" Jesus, this poem ascribes rather more agency to Mary than is inherent in the concept of the *fiat*.

sense of motion-in-stillness, this lyric is exemplary in that regard. The major action on Mary's part is her "choosing," which, despite its considerable significance, is nevertheless impossible to pin to a physical movement. The movement of God, on the other hand, is limited to coming, in every sense of the word. Nevertheless, we do get a clear impression of kinaesthesia and narrative progression in this poem: Mary's assent causes Christ to fall like dew first on the grass, then on the flowers, then on the tree branches. This ambiguously passive "falling" is unlike the active "cam" of the previous lines, and thus the poem progresses within each stanza from motion to stillness; there is also a logical progression from the ground up over the course of the poem (grass, flowers, branches), and these effects together heighten the poem's sense of narrative development even as the poem is rooted, literally, in *stylleness*.

Medieval melancholy, then, is insistently physical, in that it is lived in, by, and through the body. In this sense, the affect is dynamic; bodies, after all, are never motionless but always moving, growing, changing, decaying. On the other hand, melancholy as it is expressed in these lyrics is at times curiously static. Scholars frequently note the timeless, eternal quality of many Middle English lyrics (indeed, it is that very feature that often makes them difficult to "place" in a specific material or historical context). The unavoidably embodied subjects of and figures in these poems are in that sense frozen bodies, timeless bodies, bodies representative of the human condition rather than individuals with personalized feelings and unique physical characteristics. Formally, the repetition of tropes, rhymes, sounds and syntactical patterns (as well as, often, the formulaic nature of language and theme) buttresses and reinforces this effect. These lyrics exhibit a strong sense of motion-in-stillness, like paintings with a great deal of "expression" and "movement" that are ultimately static works of art. However, even through language that evokes stillness,

passivity, and even helplessness, lyric experiencers are able empathize with the lyric “I” through the use of words and formal devices creating the impression of the textual subject as embodied.

Melancholia is similarly linked, through formal devices, to feelings both of physical and psychological heaviness and passivity. In this sense, medieval melancholy bears a great deal of resemblance to the “melancholy” we speak of, colloquially, today: a difficult-to-describe and difficult-to-shake affective condition that profoundly affects a person’s felt relationship with herself and the world. Though outwardly passive, medieval melancholy lyric subjects display a great deal of unobservable activity in the form of inward motion—Adam falls, sorrowful subjects lament, Mary chooses, humanity is redeemed. The passivity of the narrators of and characters in the poems belies their profoundly, kinaesthetically *felt* responses, and if their outward movements are repetitive or listless, their inward activity has great personal and sometimes even social or religious significance in a way that must have been as powerfully resonant with medieval text experiencers as it is to us. Even the uniquely medieval affect of joyful melancholy is not entirely unknown in the twenty-first century; from Freud onward there is a sense of melancholy as pleasurable, a sort of delicious (if self-indulgent) engulfing. That we are able to connect with the melancholy subjects in these poems even through language that is, on the surface, listless and passive suggests that this listlessness and passivity of the poems in fact is merely the surface layer of a multi-layered melancholy rooted in physicality and more active than it appears on first reading. That we recognize in these lyrics—and the medieval bodies that utter and inhabit them—something of ourselves may explain their enduring appeal. The next affect to be discussed, sexual desire, has similarly preoccupied medieval and modern people alike.

In theorizing love and desire¹²¹ there is no single, foundational Ur-text comparable to “Mourning and Melancholia.” Although Freud famously theorized desire throughout his career, William Reddy, among others, has recently called for the need to radically reconsider how we conceive of sexual desire in history and in literature: “... the theorization of desire is often inadequate. Foucault and Lacan, in effect, took over from Freud (not uncritically, but without sufficient historical understanding) a notion of desire that can trace its history back to Augustine of Hippo” (Reddy in Plamper, 238). This examination of desire in Middle English lyric relies primarily on Lauren Berlant’s recent monograph *Desire/Love*, as well as work Barbara Rosenwein, whose thoughts on form and convention can be productively applied to Middle English verse.

In a recent interview, Berlant provocatively equates the scholarly object of study with the love object:

The critical object is unbearable much like the object of love is: too present, distant, enigmatic, banal, sublime, alluring and aversive; too much and too little to take in, and yet, one discovers all this only after it’s been taken in, however partially, always partially, and yet overwhelmingly even at the smallest points of genuine contact. (“Conversation: Lauren Berlant with Dana Luciano”)

The corpus of surviving Middle English lyrics can indeed be overwhelming to approach: enigmatic, nearly always anonymous, and often lacking in all but the most basic context. This makes lyrics that include desiring subjects a particularly appropriate case study in embodied poetics, as the disorientation and intensity experienced by present-day readers in approaching these lyrics mirrors the disorientation and intensity of their medieval textual

¹²¹ Although “love” and “desire” are (at least potentially) radically disparate in both theory and practice, for the purposes of this study “love” will mean “romantic love” and “desire,” “sexual desire.” The two are often conflated in Middle English secular lyric, and if I conflate them here it is not because I believe they are indistinguishable but because it is often impossible to tell in the lyrics whether “love” or “desire” is being addressed or expressed.

subjects. I will here examine affects of romantic or sexual desire as it appears in several later lyrics, arguing that, like melancholia, desire is expressed in them through language that connects the affect to the body and to embodied subjectivity in intimate although sometimes surprising ways.

At first glance, desire may seem like the most likely emotion to be agreed-upon as inherently embodied. However, the highly conventional nature of much medieval secular love poetry creates in many instances an “abstract” or “non-embodied” desire that, while purportedly focusing in minute detail on the physical body of the beloved, actually effaces the physical presence of both the lyric’s love-object and its speaking subject. In other lyrics, however, love or desire as a felt sensation is expressed through the body of the lyric’s textual subject in some remarkably strange and powerful ways. I will argue that selected lyrics create for lyric experiencers an intimately, even shockingly tangible sense of their individualized textual subjects, even through conventional or formulaic language.

Love Conventional, Love Singular: Blazons and Lovesick Subjects

On the subject of the conventional, Berlant has this to offer:

... how can we love singularly? How can we love [...] without being general? I don’t think we can [...] I think the relation between the personal and the impersonal is not a relation of antithesis, but that we are always trying to find forms so that we can be found. And if you want to be found by others, the form that you find is not the form of your radical singularity, [it’s] the form that you make available, both consciously and unconsciously, to other humans. And so it’s not about getting outside of convention and finding something original, because, you know, the language of love, there’s a reason it’s not very original [...] it’s because you want to be found, and you want to find ... (“Lauren Berlant on *Desire/Love*”)

The question of whether lyric desire is conventional or whether it is subjectively, physically felt by a poem’s speaking “I” is, of course, impossible to answer (which has not stopped scholars, past and present, from trying). However, it is certainly possible to trace how, in

these poems, desire is expressed as embodied in sometimes conventional and sometimes strange ways. Two instances in which embodied desire can be seen most clearly as conventional are the blazon (in which the focus is on the body of the love-object, who is nearly always female) and in descriptions of the effects of love-sickness (in which the focus is firmly on the body of the medieval speaking subject or lover, who is nearly always male). In both of these tropes (which are often employed consecutively in the same lyrics) desire is frequently experienced by the poem's reader or hearer in a way that is abstract, non-physiological, due to extremely conventional language that does not allow us any access to an individualized subject or love object. As is readily apparent to anyone with even a smattering of experience with Middle English love lyrics, all lovesick medieval poetic subjects behave in more or less the same manner: they are unable to sleep, eat, or stop thinking about the love-object; they "groan" and "sorrow" and pine; they feel and act as if insane. The objects of desire in these poems are often no more individuated; in fact most are conventional to the point of absolutely effacing any individualized traits of a particular woman. Characteristics of the love-object usually include grey eyes, high, arched eyebrows, a sweet, kissable mouth, a rosy complexion, long hair, a slender waist, long, thin fingers, plump arms, and skin that is white as a lily or as whalebone. In *Desire/Love*, Berlant notes that in psychoanalytic thought "the will to destroy (the death drive) and preserve (the pleasure principle) the desired object are two sides of the same process" (25). And indeed, the most conventional of these poems, while purportedly immortalizing the love-object, in fact efface or destroy her entirely, eliding any distinguishing marks of embodied individuality even in their quest to praise and preserve her as the very exemplar of idealized beauty.

Even in highly conventional love poems, however, it is sometimes the case that readers and hearers get a clear sense of an individualized, embodied love object and/or

speaking subject. Textual artifacts of what is still usually called “courtly” love are, certainly, rife with conventional language and stock phrases. However, in some cases they nonetheless present love and desire in powerfully individuated ways, giving lyric experiencers the sense of individual subjects possessed of their own uniquely expressed embodied subjectivities.

Here’s Berlant, again on convention:

What does it mean about love that its expressions tend to be so *conventional*, so bound up in institutions like marriage and family, property relations, and stock phrases and plots? ... [this conventionality] suggests ... that love can be at once genuine and counterfeit, shared and hoarded, apprehensible and enigmatic. (*Desire/Love* 7)

In order to explore the ways in which desire in Middle English secular love lyric can be simultaneously conventional and differentiated, I will investigate how conventional language can be used toward creating an individuated, embodied lyric subject. To do so I will examine several poems that include fairly divergent variations on the same image. Although variants of this image appear frequently in surviving Middle English lyrics, slight differences in phrasing in each poem provide subtle but significant changes in the way readers or hearers receive the lyric and allow us to empathize with the textual subject.

This image is variously expressed, but in all cases refers (usually somewhat obliquely) to the beauty of a woman under her clothing. In every instance here addressed the image appears at least two-thirds of the way through the lyric, and, in the first two lyrics, in the last three lines (of poems that are between thirty and forty lines, independent of refrain). All of these lyrics display a close focus on the love-object’s body as well as on the physical effects imagining or viewing it causes in the subject’s own body. They also all emphasize the love-object’s unattainability, and thus in these poems the speaker’s body is suffused with longing; desire in these lyrics is inevitably connected to the lack or frustration of its fulfillment. This is a truism for love lyrics, and certainly in many ways these poems are highly conventional.

However, what has been largely overlooked is the extent to which subtle variations on conventional language, as well as a close focus on the love-object's body in sometimes surprising ways, can create the powerful sense of an individualized and embodied lyric speaker.

The Harleian lyric "Bytuene mersh & aueril"¹²² is perhaps best known for its refrain, "An hendy hap ichabbe yhent, / ichot from heuene it is me sent— / from alle wymmen mi loue is lent, / & lyht on Alysoun." Within the poem, the speaking subject describes Alysoun in a way that is firmly within the blazon tradition, subsequently painting a complementary picture of himself as a conventional lovesick suitor. In the poem's final stanza he makes the conventional declaration that he will die if deprived of his lady's love. The surprise here comes in the last two lines of the poem, their own sentence: "geynest vnder gore," says the subject, "Herke to my roun" ("Listen to my song/plea").

The Middle English Dictionary translates "Geynest under gore" as "kindest in clothing," but given the close focus on the lady's body in this poem "kindest under the skirts" is perhaps more evocative.¹²³ Again, this is a variation on a stock phrase; we will soon see several similar variants. It is nonetheless significant, however, that the focus moves beneath the lady's clothing at the end of the poem. If not shocking, this is at least mildly surprising in its insistence and desperation (both for reciprocated love and to get under Alysoun's skirt) and, in this highly conventional poem, gives readers and hearers a clear sense of the textual subject's embodied desire, which is linked at its most honest to the slightly-more-particularized body of the love-object. Although all other descriptions of Alysoun in

¹²² Ed. Oliver (22)

¹²³ "Gore" refers to the lower part or skirts of a gown, coat or robe, and is not necessarily gendered, although it can also mean "a triangular piece of cloth," in this case a clear double entendre cheekily alluding to what is, literally, under the love-object's skirts.

this poem give us little sense of her as an individual, the minor scandal of imagining her beauty under her clothes does go a bit farther in particularizing her.

This image, and its placement, recurs in several poems. A similar lyric also appearing in Harley 2253, “With longing I am lad,”¹²⁴ follows the same trajectory as “Bytuene mersh & aueril,” detailing in tortured specificity both the lady’s alluring physical characteristics as well as the familiar hyperbolic symptoms of the subject’s own lovesickness. Again, the subject’s desperation reaches a climax at the poem’s end, when his last description of the lady is as “most brilliant under her linen (skirt)”:

Brightest under bis;
Hevene I tolde all his,
That o’ night were hire guest.

The phrase “brightest under bis” is every bit as conventional as “geynest under gore” and in fact the two phrases appear contiguously in the middle of a different lyric in the Harley manuscript. In this poem, though, “brightest under bis” is the culmination of the speaker’s frustrated desire; readers are, at this point, connected intimately to his body as the subject reaches out (perhaps literally) to the inaccessible body of his love-object, most beautiful, he imagines, under her clothing.¹²⁵ Again, although this is a variation on a stock phrase, its placement in the poem, and the fact that it gestures toward the beautiful features of the woman that are unseen and un-described, are thus tantalizingly more individuated than her conventional lily-white skin or rosy complexion. In this way even a formulaic phrase can differentiate the woman, bodily, from other women and further connect the speaking subject (and thus too us, his eavesdroppers) most intimately to his desire and his body as it reaches out to hers.

¹²⁴ Ed. Luria and Hoffman (24)

¹²⁵ As in the previous phrase, “brightest under bis” is a double entendre—“bis” can mean not only linen but dark fur, thus simultaneously referring both to the woman’s clothing and what the speaker wistfully imagines is underneath, with a sort of double (or x-ray) vision.

In “Gracius and gay,”¹²⁶ preserved in a fifteenth century Irish manuscript, the formula is altered a bit. The phrase appears in the penultimate of five stanzas, again at the end of a traditional blazon for the love object. In this iteration, alliterative like the previous two but with the added singsong element of rhyme, the lady is “sweet under schete.” The “sheet” in question is, of course, a bed sheet, but almost certainly also refers to the woman’s dress or skirt; the Middle English Dictionary’s relevant definition is “any length of cloth, esp. linen; also, a piece of cloth used as a receptacle.” In this way the word gestures toward the speaking subject’s wistful imagination of what the lady is like under the bed sheets (as in nearly every poem of this type, the subject clearly has no first-hand knowledge of the love-object in this regard).¹²⁷ As in the previous two instances, the conventional phrase “sweet under schete” connects us more closely than any other image in the poem to the woman’s body and to the subject’s embodied desire.

As a last example, we have already encountered a variation on this image that is torqued toward an even stronger creation of empathy in “A wayle whit as whalles bon.”¹²⁸ The lyric is, like the other poems addressed thus far, a blazon with a close focus on the objectified body of the lady as well as the suffering body of the textual subject. Here, again, is its final stanza:

Ich wolde ich were a threstelcok,
 A bounting other a lavercock,
 Swete brid!
 Bitwene hire curtel and hire smok

¹²⁶ Ed. Luria and Hoffman (48)

¹²⁷ I should note here, however, the lyric usually called “The Fair Maid of Ribbesdale” (“Most I riden by Ribbesdale,” ed. Luria and Hoffman, 25), in which the textual subject goes rather farther in his description of the love-object: “Hire tittes aren anunder bis, / As apples two of parays, / Youself ye mowen seo.” (“Her breasts are under linen / Like two apples of paradise / As you yourself may see”). Given that the subject admits he is seeking out “wilde wimmen” it is unsurprising that he dares so much in his description; indeed this is the first but not the only time in the poem the woman’s breasts are praised. In this instance the familiar image of the woman under her clothing is extended and further specified, resulting in a very different tonal effect from the other poems here addressed.

¹²⁸ Ed. Luria and Hoffman (28)

I wolde ben hid.

Although syntactically this trope is unlike the others we have seen (geynest under gore, brightest under bis, sweet under schete) its kinship with those phrases and status as a variant on that image is clear. And, as in the preceding cases, this is the moment in which the subject's embodied desire is least conventional and most individual. In imagining himself, bird-formed, nestling between his lady's kirtle and shift, the speaking subject and his love object are at their most embodied, their most individuated, their most empathetic, and their most lovable. We can easily empathize with this narrator, who is here simultaneously sly, coy, and desirous, because the felt reality of his imagined situation is so finely drawn.

The dual traditions of the blazon and the lovesick speaking subject are not the only places in the corpus of Middle English secular lyric in which we get the palpable sense of an individualized, embodied speaker even through language that is largely conventional. The following short, one-stanza songs, both appearing in the fifteenth century manuscript Bodleian 6668, are only two of a number of surviving short poems that stress the centrality and physicality of the literally wounded heart.¹²⁹

1) Go, hert, hurt with adversitee,
And let my lady thy wondes see;
And sey hir this, as I say thee:
Farewell my joy and welcom peine,
Till I see my lady againe.

2) Alas, departing is ground of wo!
Other songe can I not singe.
But why part I my lady fro,
Sith love was cause of our meeting?
The bitter teres of hir weeping
Min hert hath pershed so mortally,
That to the deth it will me bring
But if I see hir hastily.

¹²⁹ Luria and Hoffman (49)

In the first poem, the subject “sends” his heart to his lady, as if it were a gift or love letter, instructing it to present itself to her in the hopes that this gory but unquestionably heartfelt token will convince her of the his sincerity. Again, in this poem we see the poet riffing on a conventional image; the idea of an object (more usually the poem itself) as messenger is standard, but in this poem, where the “messenger” is the subject’s heart, the stakes are rather higher. Similarly, in the second poem, the lady’s bitter tears (as sorrow written on her body) are darts that literally pierce the subject’s heart. Another good example of effective embodiment (and thus individualization and creation of empathy) through conventional language is the stock phrase “bone and blood,” a conventional formula that nonetheless graphically connects us to the loving and loved subjects in these poems in an intensely embodied manner; when the narrator claims, in “The Fair Maid of Ribblesdale,” for example, that he has found “the feirest on / that ever wes mad of blod and bon” we cannot but be struck by the love object’s physicality.¹³⁰

We are left with the question, still, of why these poems are paradoxically most individuated at their most conventional. In the trope of the woman imagined as most beautiful under her clothing, for example, the image of the beloved at her most embodied is paradoxically expressed through a variation on a stock phrase. Barbara Rosenwein, in a recent interview, problematizes our instincts regarding conventional and “authentic” emotion (*AHR Conversation*, 1495-97). Why, she wonders, does it seem more authentic when, for example, an interview subject says “I am in love” than when eleventh-century troubadour Peire Vidal sings “Through love I am so strongly full of love that all my wishes are of love”? She suggests that four factors play into our perception of “authenticity” of emotional expression, namely:

¹³⁰ We have already encountered this phrase in “Foweles in the frith,” where it functions, similarly, to stress the narrator’s physicality and thus our own, allowing for the powerful creation of empathy with the text’s “I.”

- 1) *Form.* The interview subject does not seem to be speaking in a formal genre, whereas Vidal clearly is doing so.
- 2) *Context.* We can observe the interview subject's face and gestures, and hear her tone of voice and spoken inflections. The ability to gain information from her physicality bolsters our perception of the sincerity of her felt emotion. Obviously we cannot observe historical subjects.
- 3) *Responsiveness.* We can interact with the interview subject by asking her to elaborate on her sentiments. The interview subject, as living text, responds to our questions, whereas the Vidal text cannot respond.
- 4) *Empathy.* Crucially, "we think we know what she means because we too have been in love, and we can empathize. Of course, that means that we assume (perhaps an unwarranted assumption) that her love is just like our love—or at least close enough. But when Vidal goes on to say 'You are beautiful to me, lovely lady ... for I am in your lordship [*senhoriu*],' we know for sure that his 'love' is not our 'love.'"

Rosenwein goes on to systematically complicate each of these perceived differences in the "authenticity" or "sincerity" of the interview subject and the troubadour lyric. She first notes, echoing Berlant, that although we do not think of ourselves as expressing emotion in "form" or "genre" (rather assuming that we are able to express emotion "spontaneously"), in fact we are constrained in our emotional expression by the norms of our culture, unable to express "unpremeditated" emotion outside of the emotional vocabulary and gestures with which we have been inculcated. She reminds us, crucially, that even the assertion "'I am in love' is a convention, more or less a modern topos." For Rosenwein, as for Berlant, this constriction is not, functionally, a limitation but rather a necessary structure allowing us to be understood: "Emotions are largely communicative tools, and if we are to understand one another, we are wise to express ourselves through well-worn paths that all of us are familiar with."

Rosenwein here provocatively suggests that emotional expression can indeed be most powerful *at its most conventional*. Precisely because the primary function of emotions are as "communicative tools," it makes perfect sense for a lyric subject to express himself at his most sincere through currently circulating formulae that his audience will readily understand.

Individuals and collectives of singers and scribes (both professional and amateur) could (and still can) easily tweak these tropes to fit a particular situation or simply as an individualized artistic or cultural expression within their own textual and emotional communities. This must have occurred in practice far more often than any surviving textual evidence suggests, and was more than likely usually improvisatory.¹³¹ As Rosenwein puts it,

I cannot know if Vidal himself was “really” in love with a “real” lady who was “really” his lord. But I can know that he was expressing himself in a way that was highly appreciated; that being in love with a lord was an emotional expectation within his community; and that Vidal certainly knew what “being in love” meant (at least on his own terms), whether or not he was “in love” at the moment. I’m not so sure that we can know much more than this about our lady on the other side of the microphone.

It is probably not accidental, then, that in many of these lyrics the moment of the deepest convention is also the moment of the deepest embodiment. As Rosenwein and Berlant suggest, form and convention are always at play in any expression of emotion, textual or lived, observed or solitary. The options available to us for emotional expression are dictated by the overlapping emotional communities¹³² within which we live and the generic possibilities of our culture. The foregoing love lyrics surprise us with their portraits of individualized subjects where we expect conventional ones; even through formulaic language, empathy is created and maintained.

Love in and on the Body: Erotic Lyrics

In a blog post written after the completion of *Desire/Love* but prior to its publication, Berlant comments on one of the little book’s failings:

¹³¹ See, classically, Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (2nd ed., 2000).

¹³² Rosenwein coined the phrase “emotional community” in her 2006 monograph *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* to describe “groups in which people adhere to the same norms of emotional expression and value—or devalue—the same or related emotions” (2).

I have a book coming out with some older thoughts about [love theory], but the examples are all wrong. Always, the examples are all wrong, which is why love theory tends to be so conservative: ProustProustProustBovaryBovaryBovary AbelardEloiseCourtly. It's not that the classics can't be wrong, it's that they won't be disgusting, and love theorists tend to have an aversion to the disgusting. (*Supervalent Thought*)

The tendency to see the “courtly” in opposition to the erotic (or the “disgusting,” to use Berlant’s terminology) is widespread in criticism of Middle English lyric. Particularly striking are the many anthologies in which erotic lyrics are clearly demarcated from “courtly” love lyrics, each relegated to separate chapters or sections.¹³³ This suggests an implicit judgment on the part of the editor that “courtly love” and “sexual desire” are entirely separate and even opposed, although whether this reflects editorial opinion or rather an evaluation of how medieval authors, singers, and scribes viewed the lyrics, and love, is unclear. In any case, as has been amply demonstrated in the previous section, the boundary between “courtly” and “erotic” (in Middle English lyric at least) can be extremely blurred. In the foregoing discussion of linked conventional images of being (or getting) under the love-object’s clothing, descriptions of the loved women are both very conventional and very “courtly,” in the sense that they draw heavily on language and tropes associated with love depicted in high medieval troubadour and trouvère poetry and later in vernacular poems of England and elsewhere. These conventions include, for example, a male speaker (usually apparently unmarried) who loves a noble lady (often married); that love as unrequited; a situation that purports to focus on the love-object but is in fact focused firmly on the suffering subject himself; impassioned declarations that the speaker will die if the lady does not return his

¹³³ See John Hirsh’s 2005 anthology of Middle English lyrics, ballads, and carols, which makes no distinction between religious and secular lyric in chapters entitled, for example, “Poems of Mourning, Fear, and Apprehension” and “Poems of Joy and Celebration” but clearly distinguishes “Poems Inviting or Disparaging Love” from “Poems about Sex.” Similarly, in what is perhaps the most recent anthology of Middle English lyric, Thomas Duncan’s 2013 *Middle English Lyrics and Carols*, most poems dealing with sex are relegated to “Miscellaneous Lyrics” rather than appearing with “Love Lyrics” (themselves demarcated from later “Courtly Lyrics”—Duncan’s editorial practices here are rather opaque).

love. In these same poems, however, the trope of imagining oneself under or between layers of the lady's clothing, while also conventional, certainly cannot be considered a "courtly" idealization of an untouchable love object; the image in fact derives its considerable power from its surprising, titillating, even slightly shocking engagement with the lady's sexualized body. Thus any neat classification of these poems into the diametrically opposed categories "courtly" and "erotic," like the even commoner division between "religious" and "secular," is artificial. While the latter division, however, has long been recognized as false, "erotic" and "courtly" lyrics are still considered generically distinct even by scholars of lyric (and, as we have seen in Berlant, by scholars of love as well).

Nevertheless, although I maintain that there is no hard line between "courtly" and "erotic" lyrics, the following poems are unquestionably more specific, and more explicit, about the ways love and desire are written on the body than those addressed so far. The intimately physical manifestations of love or desire in these poems connect the affect firmly to the body in similarly original and successful (if rhetorically very different) ways as the previous poems treating love and desire. Tonally, too, this next group of poems is distinct from the previous set; in general, these lyrics take themselves much less seriously. Although these poems are certainly more focused on genitalia and on coitus than any poem addressed thus far, it is still the case that "romantic love" and "sexual desire," while occasionally useful shorthand, are not clear-cut categories that would have been recognized as distinct by a medieval audience. In fact, the following poems function in a manner very similar to the poems we have already seen, that is, by riffing on well-established tropes, which has the effect, despite their very conventional nature, of connecting readers closely to the individualized desiring bodies in the poems.

The extended metaphor organizing the fifteenth century lyric “I haue a gentil cok” is a good example of this effect. The humor of this poem comes from the gradual realization on the part of the audience of what, exactly, the poem’s male narrator is describing.¹³⁴

I haue a gentil cok,
Crowyt me ech day.
He doth me rysyn erly,
My matyins for to say.

I haue a gentil cok,
Comyn he is of gret,
His comb is of reed corel,
His tayl is of get.

I haue a gentyl cok,
Comyn he is of kynde,
His comb is of red corel,
His tayl is of inde.

He legges ben of asor,
So genitil and so smale,
His spores arn of syluer qwyt,
Into the worte wale.

His eynen arn of cristal
Lokyn al in aumbyr,
And euery nyght he perchit hym
In myn ladyis chaumbyr.

The dual meaning of “cock,” of course, survives to the present, but for a medieval audience this song’s double entendre would have been more ambiguous and therefore more powerful, as the word, in the sense of “rooster” would have been experience-near, to borrow a term from anthropology, in a culture where humans and domestic animals lived in close proximity at nearly every level of society. It is much more likely, then, that a medieval audience hearing this lyric for the first time would not immediately get the joke; Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou notes how incremental repetition is here used to “slow down the progress of the poem and delay the surprise ending” (*Suster* 71). I would extend this claim in suggesting that repetition

¹³⁴ Ed. Hirsh (118)

in fact works to alert the reader or hearer to the fact that the “cok” in this poem is not (or only) a rooster. There are other clues, though, in retrospect: the possible play here on “perchen” (perch) and “percen” (pierce), even the echo of “genital” (genital) in “genitil” (noble).¹³⁵ Part of the success of this poem, then, is in the way it disguises its true subject matter at the outset, followed by a gradual “reveal”; by the poem’s end, we know that it is not only about the male body but about that region of the body which was (and is) likely to be considered most bodily of all.

This poem is focused squarely, even myopically, on (one part of) the body of the male speaker, rather than on the female object of desire, who features only as an afterthought in the poem’s final line.¹³⁶ Nonetheless, as in the love lyrics of the last section, the love-object here is missing yet indispensable; although we may suspect where the poem is heading, it is not until this last line that our suspicions are confirmed.¹³⁷ The absent female body, then, completes the poem both formally and thematically—the “cok” itself is not complete without engaging, in the poem’s last line, in heterosexual intercourse.¹³⁸

“We bern abouten non cattes skinnnes”¹³⁹ is another lyric in which desire (in this case the desire both of men and of women) is figured in surprising, embodied, and very funny ways. The lyric is voiced by chapmen seeking to sell their wares to women. These wares, however, are not the usual purses, pearls, and pins but rather each peddler’s “two stones,” virile “smiting jelly,” and a mysterious powder that makes maidens’ wombs swell. Whereas “I haue a gentil cok” has occasionally been interpreted primarily as chivalric rather than

¹³⁵ OED cites “genytal” in use in this sense as early as the late fourteenth century Wycliffite Bible.

¹³⁶ Although the female genitals do make a veiled appearance as the “worte wale” or “plant roots” into which the rooster’s “syluer qwyte spores” (“silver white spurs”) are firmly dug.

¹³⁷ Here too the lady’s “chamber” echoes the “bowr” in “I syng of a myden.”

¹³⁸ In this poem Martha Bayless’s observation about the seduction lyric “I haue a newe garden” is relevant; she notes, “The poetics of seduction ... is identical with the poetics of the joke. As the man seduces the maiden, the poem seduces its audience” (171).

¹³⁹ Ed. Luria and Hoffman (81)

sexual,¹⁴⁰ from this poem's beginning (or, at the latest, its second stanza) there is no mistaking its meaning.

*We ben chapmen light of fote,
The foule weyes for to flee.*

We bern abouten non cattes skinnnes,
Purses, perles, silver pinnes,
Smale wimpeles for ladies chinnes;
Damsele, bey sum ware of me.

I have a poket for the nones,
'Therine ben tweyne precious stones;
Damsele, hadde ye asayed hem onys,
Ye shud the rathere gon with me.

I have a jelif of Godes sonde—
Withouten fyt it can stonde;
It can smiten and hath non honde;
Ryd yourself what it may be.

I have a powder for to selle,
What it is can I not telle;
It maket maidenenes wombes to swelle;
Therof I have a quantitee.

Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou primly notes this lyric's "rather course sexual joke"; certainly, it is not subtle.¹⁴¹ But sexual desire in this poem, while on the surface limited to the lovingly-described male genitalia,¹⁴² is actually couched within the larger framework of women's desire both for sex and for objects. This lyric is predicated on the assumption that the peddlers' desire for women mirrors women's desire for the more usual wares of peddlers—items like purses, pearls and pins—a desire which itself borders on the sexual. Further, the focus of the subject's boast is not (or not only) myopically on the man's sexual prowess but also on the woman's pleasure, as the chapman assures the "damsele" he wishes to bed that

¹⁴⁰ See Wright (1856) and Boklund-Lagopoulou (*Suster*, 71).

¹⁴¹ Much ink was spilled in an (unintentionally) humorous scholarly debate in the late 1980s and early 1990s centered on the correct translation of "jelyf," centering on whether the word refers to semen or the penis itself.

¹⁴² In addition to the obvious, "chap," can mean "shape," which itself can mean "the sex organ/genitals" (MED).

once she has tried his wares, she “shuld the rathere gon with me.” It is certainly true that this poem and the last are both, like most of the love lyrics in the previous section, rooted deeply in the male body and male fantasy, and I do not argue that the poems suggest equivalence between the men and women in these lyrics. However, the lyrics are undeniably *dependent* on women, in that the male sexual bodies (or, really, male sexual organs) in them have no meaning in isolation but rely on women’s embodied desires to give them significance.¹⁴³

In the carol “I pray yow, maydens euerychone”¹⁴⁴ the male speaking subject is similarly reduced to his sexual equipment, although this lyric is somewhat anomalous in that both sexes speak. The poem is set up as a dialogue between men and maidens (both “elder” and “yonger”) in which the women clamor for “puddings” (the carol’s burden is “Podynges at nyght and podynges at none; / Were nat for podynges the world were clene done”). Women are portrayed in the poem as sex-crazed, begging for the “podyng that grows out of a man” and the man in question is a farcical variant of the peddler or tradesman in “We bern abouten non cattes skinnnes” and the related lyric “May no man slepe in youre halle,” helpfully providing exactly what the women need (in fact, the lucky woman who is granted the man’s “pudding” pays him forty pence for it). The song ends with the younger maidens jealously awaiting their own “pudding,” which is spoken of as entirely divorced from the man who must, necessarily (one hopes!), accompany it:

Then spake the yonger maydes euerychone:
 “Happie thou arte, for now thou haste one,
 But, and we lyve another yere, as plese God we may,
 We will haue eche of us one whatsoeuer we pay.”

¹⁴³ “May no man slepe in youre halle,” to be addressed briefly in the next chapter along with other woman-voiced erotic lyrics, as well as “I pay yow, maydens euerychone,” to which I now turn, also figure sex in terms of trade or commerce.

¹⁴⁴ Ed. Greene (280)

If “We bern abouten non cattes skinnēs” and “I pray yow, maydens euerychone” are rooted deeply in the male body and specifically male sexual organs, another lyric, “Atte ston castings my lemman iches” displays a similarly close focus on male genitalia (including a similarly ingenious metaphor for embodied male desire) but with an obviously female speaker:¹⁴⁵

Atte ston casting my lemman iches
and atte warastling sone i hym les
allas þat he so sone fel
wy nadde he stonde better vile geres

The primary double entendre upon which this lyric hinges links the lover’s performance at sports with his sexual performance. The story of the maiden who chooses a lover when he wins at stone-casting and, fickle, leaves him when he loses at wrestling is paralleled by the under-story of the woman who chooses a lover while the stone-casting game occurs and, after an unsatisfying sexual encounter in which he does not “stand” as well as she wishes, leaves him shortly afterward during the wrestling competition. The maiden’s lover fails to “stand” or perform well either at sport or during sex, in which his “geres” or “equipment”¹⁴⁶ does not hold up, literally, as well as the subject would prefer. In linking the literal falling of the man’s sexual “equipment” to the sports of stone-casting and wrestling, along with the implication that the sexual encounter has occurred out-of-doors during a festival or fair, we are here connected to desire as an embodied experience for both men and women.¹⁴⁷

In the foregoing erotic lyrics, there are admittedly prominent features distinguishing these poems from those of the last section. Perhaps most notably, each of the erotic lyrics includes a close focus on male genitalia, which is figured in every instance with various

¹⁴⁵ Transcription accessed via DIMEV (738).

¹⁴⁶ Although the primary meaning of “geres” here is “equipment,” the word can also signify deceitful or wily behavior (MED), perhaps suggesting that the woman feels tricked, as well as disappointed, at the outcome of the sexual encounter.

¹⁴⁷ This thirteenth century lyric, one of the earliest extant English dance songs, survives in a sermon, which helpfully provides an allegorical interpretation; for example, “Bi þe ‘ston’ is vnderstondin þe harde herte of man and of womman ...” (Greene cxlvii).

metaphors: as a rooster, as “smiting jelly” and “purse,” as sporting equipment, as pudding. However, this set of poems is analogous to the love lyrics of the previous section in that each poem riffs on a conventional image or trope—in the former instance, of the beauty of a woman under her clothing, and in the latter instance, of comparing male genitalia to an object or animal. Both sets of poems are equally connected to the physical bodies of their (usually male) subjects, and both sets depend absolutely on the embodied female other they implicate or to whom they are addressed.

Love and desire in Middle English lyric, then, are expressed through language that sometimes sets us apart from and sometimes connects us to the embodied desire of the medieval subjects in and objects of love. Through the variously expressed image of the love-object under her clothing, particularly, we are able to connect (not only in spite of convention but because of it) to the speaking subject who physically reaches out toward the body of his beloved. At the same time, this image (and other images connecting the reader to the body of the textual “I”) also reaches out across time, to the lyric experiencers reading, hearing, and engaging with these lyrics today. This chapter concludes with a brief look at the transitional affect of love-longing, which inhabits the liminal space where melancholy and desire overlap, and can further illuminate the ways in which the successful portrayal of both affects in Middle English lyric hinges upon each lyric’s ability to connect readers with the body of the textual subject and consequently their own bodies.

Love-Longing

Love-longing is an ambiguous and protean affect incorporating elements of both melancholy and desire. In examining the two affects in tandem in this chapter, I have shown how both affects, produced by content and formal means, instigate empathy in lyric

experiencers, allowing us to connect with the medieval textual subject and with our own bodies even through language that is (in the case of melancholy) often at first glance passive or (in the case of desire) frequently formulaic. This is not to say that the “melancholy” of a medieval person (or textual subject) is identical to the “melancholy” we experience today. However, as Rosenwein notes, it may be just as problematic to assume that any other person’s “melancholy” is the same as our own, even if that person moves in a cultural matrix familiar to us. While the medieval affect of love-longing is probably not identical to the romantic longing we experience today, the two affects are closely related, and in fact William Reddy suggests that romantic love as we understand it—that is, as intimately connected to longing and the deferment of its fulfillment—has its origins in high medieval Europe.¹⁴⁸

As noted, Middle English love and erotic lyrics emphasize the unattainability of the love-object, connecting desire and longing to lack and frustration. This love-longing is often expressed in longer poems that, while not always strictly narrative, often edge closer than some of the lyrics we have seen thus far toward telling a story. Affects as diverse as the “luf-longing” of English mystic and hermit Richard Rolle and the “luf-daungere” of the Pearl Poet both have their origins in the ideal of love for an unattainable lady.¹⁴⁹ Much has been written about how “courtly” codes of behavior had wide-ranging effects both within and outside of court spheres, heavily influencing texts by both men and women during the high and late Middle Ages. My intent here, however, is not to track the influence of *amour courtois* on Middle English lyric but rather to appraise love-longing as a transitional affect displaying aspects of both melancholy and desire. The two emotions, although in some ways conceived

¹⁴⁸ See *The Making of Romantic Love* (2012).

¹⁴⁹ They may equally well have their origins in spiritual concepts regarding God as love-object (as expressed particularly eloquently in late medieval mystical texts such as the anonymous *Cloud of Unknowing*) and of the unequalled faultlessness of the Virgin. Indeed, by the late medieval period, language and concepts dealing with sexual and religious love-longing inform each other to an incalculable degree.

of as opposite extremes of activity and passivity, are in fact both ambiguous: melancholy, as we have seen, while appearing very passive, is often characterized by intense inward movement, and desire often does not live up to its “active” potential due to the highly conventional nature of much medieval love poetry.

Love-longing, as a transitional affect blending desire and melancholy, demonstrates particularly incisively that both of these ambiguous affects were conceived of by medieval audiences as inherently embodied. In the two lyrics that follow, melancholy and desire coexist and indeed overlap and fade into each other while always keeping the lyric experiencer connected to the subject’s physicality and therefore their own. Neither poem is as succinct as the tiny, jewel-like lyrics discussed thus far. However, each of these lyrics demonstrates the same repetition of tropes, words, rhymes and sounds as the shorter poems, and this relentless repetition evokes the obsessive focus and embodied rhythms of love-longing as one facet of medieval love and melancholia.

The subject of “With longing I am lad,”¹⁵⁰ an early fourteenth century poem, exemplifies the tropes common to medieval experiencers of love-longing. This poem has been addressed previously in the context of love lyric (its final stanza, containing the stock phrase variant “brightest under bis,” is a prime example of a generic phrase which nonetheless creates the powerful sense of an embodied subject) but the lyric’s lovesick subject is also a melancholy subject, and his experience of love-longing, in straddling these two affects, creates a particularly potent sense of embodied subjectivity.

With longing I am lad—
On molde I waxe mad—
A maide marreth me;
I grede, I grone, unglad,
For selden I am sad
That semly for to see.

¹⁵⁰ Ed. Luria and Hoffman (24)

Levedy, thou rewe me!
To routhe thou havest me rad.
Be bote of that I bad;
My lif is long on thee.

Levedy of all londe,
Les me out of bonde.
Bought ich am in wo;
Have resting on honde,
And send thou me thy sonde
Sone, er thou me slo.
My reste is with the ro;
Thagh men to me han onde,
To love nuly noght wonde
Ne lete for non of tho.

Levedy, with all my might
My love is on thee light,
To menske when I may;
Thou rew and red me right,
To dethe thou havest me dight;
I deye longe er my day.
Thou leve upon my lay;
Treuthe ich have thee plight,
To don that ich have hight
Whil my life leste may.

Lilie-whit he is:
Hire rode so rose on ris,
That reveth me my rest;
Wimmon war and wis,
Of prude he bereth the pris,
Burde on of the best.
This wommon woneth by west,
Brightest under bis;
Hevene I tolde all his,
That o night were hire guest.

Like other love lyrics discussed here, this poem is rooted firmly in the bodily, affective experience of love; that is, in the physical changes love causes in the lover's body. The speaker is "lad" (burdened, laid low) with longing; he "waxe(th) mad" (just as the melancholy subject in "Foweles in þe frith" "waxe(th) wod"); he groans and cries out in frustration. He is physically constrained (like the joyously melancholic subject of "Adam lay ibowndyn"),

implores his love-object to loose him from the bonds of passion. Despite his apparent physical constraints, however, the lover is unable to stay still (he is restless as a roe); he is dying ahead of his time; he cannot sleep (“thou reveth me my rest”). In the latter half of the poem, the focus shifts from the lover’s body to the body of the beloved, employing highly formulaic language borrowed from the tradition of the blazon: the beloved is lily white with a rosy complexion; she lives in the west; again, strikingly, she is “brightest under bis.”

Although for twenty-first century audiences this lyric may read as cloying or overblown, there is no trace of irony for the melancholy speaker or, presumably, his audience. Rather, the various tropes and phrasing choices indicating constraint, passivity, and vulnerability are clearly meant to typify the plight of the ideal lover and the ideal melancholic subject, who is literally bound up in and held down by the weight of his passion.

The mid fifteenth century lyric “I am sorry for her sake”¹⁵¹ serves as an instructive counterpoint. At first glance a sincere love lyric, this poem is in fact a cheeky send-up of the genre it professes to exemplify. This tongue-in-cheek parody of the melancholic lover gives us a sense of how prevalent he is as a poetic trope, and of the weight and importance of medieval love-longing as both a facet of love and of melancholy in the contemporary mind. In this poem, the conventions of love-longing are subtly but effectively lampooned, proving that medieval love and melancholy, like their twenty-first century counterparts, were both omnipresent and not immune to subversion.

*Care away, away, away,
Murning away.
I am forsake,
Another is take,
No more murne ic may.*

I am sorry for her sake,
Ic may well ete and drinke;

¹⁵¹ Ed. Luria and Hoffman (40)

Whanne ic slepe ic may not wake,
So muche on her ic thenke.

I am brout in suche a bale,
And brout in suche a pine,
Whanne ic rise up of my bed
Me liste well to dine.

I am brout in suche a pine
Ibrout in suche a bale,
Whanne ic have righte good wine
Me liste drinke non ale.

On first reading, this poem appears to be a relatively straightforward love lyric. In the refrain, the speaker apparently attempts to banish his grief at losing his beloved to another (“I am forsake/another is take”) and, sick on melancholy, expresses his exhaustion and inability to continue mourning the lost love. He is “sory” (full of sadness) at the loss of his beloved, and thinks about her constantly. Her rejection has caused great anguish and torment. All of these symptoms, of course, sound similar to the narrator of “With longing I am lad,” and in fact similar to the speakers of hundreds of medieval love lyrics. However, on closer inspection this poem is in fact a parody of love-longing, playfully mocking the conventional distress of the desperate lover. This clear as early as the first stanza—the rejected lover is sad, but still able to eat and drink; he thinks of his beloved so much ... that he lazes abed all day. Clearly, this narrator is hardly pining; the medieval lover should grow pale and sick, having no appetite and incurable insomnia. Instead, this speaker—when he finally does get out of bed—is ready for a hearty meal.

The last stanza is a bit more enigmatic, but on closer inspection clearly follows the first two, in fact upping the poem’s sly humor with a final, saucy metaphor. The speaker has already told us he has no trouble eating or drinking, and the poem’s final lines provide a twist on this theme; when he has access to excellent wine, he tells us, he has no desire to drink (cheap) beer. The implication is that the subject has access to one or more women of

quality and thus has no need for his previous love. These last lines also force us to reconsider the refrain: rather than commanding care away, the subject remarks that his worries disappeared as soon as a substitute lady was found.

The tone of this poem is akin to the triple rondeau “Merciles Beaute,” usually attributed to Chaucer. In this lyric the first stanza neatly follows the conventions of behavior for a melancholy, desiring subject. Subsequent verses, however, become progressively more subversive, moving from seemingly straightforward adoration through mild reproach toward a sly, jolly kiss-off to Love in general and the love-object in particular. Should there be any doubt that “I am sorry for her sake” should be read similarly, one need only reference the only other extant Middle English lyric in which the refrain begins “Care away, away, away”: “All that I may swink or swet.”¹⁵² This song is a rollicking *chanson de mal-marié* in which a henpecked husband complains that his wife is dissatisfied no matter what he does, causing him great consternation. The implied critique of the subject’s mate (or former mate) in both of these poems, as well as their shared refrain, leave no doubt that they are tonally linked.

In “I am sorry for her sake” the major tonal shift from songs of genuine medieval melancholy is the upending of the trope of passivity. In “With longing I am lad” the lover is controlled by his melancholy; against his will he is unable to eat, sleep, or stop thinking about his beloved. Conversely, in “I am sorry for her sake” although the lover claims that he is at the mercy of his melancholia, he is in fact in full, active control of his desires and environment. His claim that when he sleeps he cannot wake up (aside from being a reversal of and satire on the “sleepless lover” trope) makes it furthermore clear that the loss of his love in fact helps him sleep (and later eat) with more pleasure. Thus this lover, claiming lack of agency, mocks the traditional, melancholy lover, perhaps insinuating that other

¹⁵² The burden of this late fifteenth century poem is “Care away, away, away / Care away for evermore.”

melancholic lovers are disingenuous and could easily pull themselves out of despair if they wished. Conversely, humor may be a way to deal with the reality that—in love as in life—we are not, in fact, in control of most aspects of our lived experience, from the loss of a loved one to another person to the sickness, decay, and death of our own bodies.

Unlike “Myrie it is” and “Foweles in þe frith,” these love lyrics (disparate in tone though they may be) do have an implied narrative. The speakers of these poems fell in love; they were rejected, they suffered; in one case, at least, the narrator emerged unscathed from the love-battle. However, like the shorter lyrics exemplifying melancholy (and in spite of being several times as long and markedly more narrative) both “Myrie it is” and “Foweles in þe frith” exhibit a palpable sense of motion-in-stillness toward the purpose of either expressing or mocking melancholia. The frustrated and mock-frustrated speakers of these two poems *do* all sorts of things: think, groan, lament, fidget, eat, drink, sleep, toss and turn, rise from bed. However, neither seems ever to leave his lonely room. Though the first whines at and pines after his beloved in the west, begging her to send him a message, he takes no initiative in pursuit of her, preferring to plead his case in verse. The second speaker wakes up with a healthy appetite in spite of his lady’s rejection; he “may well ete and drinke” but he never explicitly leaves the bedroom to do so. And although he implies, in the final stanza, that he may have one or more new lovers, he does so through the use of a sidelong, sly metaphor that doesn’t “go” anywhere—he does not seek, conquer, or woo his women-wine, content to make his point through a figure of speech.

It is not only certain secular lyrics, however, that display a palpable, melancholy love-longing via a strong sense of motion-in-stillness. One of the best examples of medieval melancholia is the Corpus Christi Carol, examined in the previous chapter for its use of deixis of space. This lyric’s tangible melancholia is produced by its unique interplay of

stillness and motion. On one hand, the fantastical meta-story of the falcon that has stolen the singer's lover conveys a powerful sense of movement: the speaker's mate is violently snatched up, borne away, and then carried down into an eerily still, dead orchard. From this moment forward, however, the sense of movement conveyed by the subsequent verses is less a true dynamism and more of a progressive "zooming in" effect in which, with no explicit sense of journeying (the falcon no longer "bears" the beloved into the hall, beside the bed, etc.) we are shown a series of pictures-in-text allowing us to focus in, closer and closer, on the stone on which the body of Christ is written.

As a carol, the poem's burden (a specialized type of refrain, to be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter) is repeated in between each verse and thus a sense of movement is never absent from the lyric; rather, it is continually affirmed—again and again the falcon snatches up the speaker's beloved and bears him away. Loss in this lyric is, then, perpetually renewed, like the knight's always freshly bleeding wounds. The maiden's incessant weeping mirrors and intensifies the immediacy of the subject's loss. Even while creating a sense of motion, however, the repetition of the refrain (and the closely parallel structure of the verses) emphasizes the static, timeless nature of the scene. As lyric experiencers, no less than the figures in the song, we are frozen, impotent to help the wounded knight. Like the knight who bleeds without dying, or the maiden who weeps without stopping, and like the subject's beloved himself, again and still borne upward and away, we are transfixed and immobile, unable to stop cycling back to the trauma of the loss of the beloved (standing in for the trauma of Christ's fragmented, broken body); we are unable to look away. The potent blend of love and melancholy in this lyric produces a yearning love-longing that was powerfully understood by medieval readers and remains powerful for readers today.

Conclusion

The emerging landscape of affect studies, then, provides formidable interpretive possibilities for the lyrics. In validating embodied means of knowing, affect theories as well as history of emotions are crucially important tools in a scholarly landscape still dominated by theoretical approaches rooted in the construction of knowledge through language. Kinaesthetic and linguistic ways of knowing, however, do not have to be opposed. As we have seen in the foregoing lyrics, melancholy and desire are created via formal devices that in fact connect us to the speaking subject and to our own embodied affective experience. Affect theorists who draw most heavily on neuroscientific evidence suggest that physiological response precedes consciousness of an emotion; these same scholars have been incisively criticized for rushed and inaccurate interpretations of scientific data. In fact, as I have argued, the physiological and the psychological (in this case, how we process felt emotion through reason and through language) are inextricably entangled. If I here stress the ways in which physiological response (portrayed in the texts and mirrored in the body of the lyric experiencer) creates empathy with the textual subjects of Middle English lyric, it is because that particular approach, grounded in sensual knowing, is still largely neglected in literary studies, and provides a worthwhile lens through which to investigate the ways emotion is communicated in the lyrics.

The affective categories of melancholy and desire allow lyric experiencers to empathize with the “I” of a text in a way that is powerfully felt, kinaesthetically and psychologically. Although the two affects are often considered disparate extremes by both medieval and modern audiences, in that melancholy is portrayed as passive and desire as active, in fact the medieval melancholic subject, as seen through the lyrics, displays striking inward motion, and the highly conventional nature of much medieval love lyric sometimes

leaches the songs of their empathetic potential (at other times, however, embodied subjectivity emerges even through highly conventional language). The tonal qualities of these affects are produced by both content and form and, although “melancholy” and “desire” no doubt have different resonances for medieval and twenty-first century audiences, some aspects of the affects, as well as their considerable power to inspire empathy, have remained stable over the centuries, explaining the lyrics’ reemerging appeal. The movement of these subjects, though mostly on an inward plane, causes us as lyric experiencers to be likewise moved, in a way that is no less physical for being subtle. The next chapter will turn toward a less subtly embodied subset of lyric in looking at carols and dance.

Chapter 4

Come and daunce wit me: Carol and Woman's Song

Introduction

Thus far this study has focused on the ways in which embodiment is figured within the texts of Middle English lyrics and how we, as readers, connect to the embodied textual subjects of the lyrics through the formal category of deixis and the theoretical category of affect. This chapter will move toward a closer focus on medieval bodies themselves, both textual and tangible, beginning with a discussion of carols and the ways in which medieval people physically interacted with lyrics through dance. The latter half of the chapter examines the interactions of lyric, body, and voice by looking at the literal and figurative bodies voicing Middle English woman's songs, many of which are themselves carols. Throughout, this chapter focuses on the ways the texts of lyrics are connected most closely to bodies, as they are literally embodied through the voices and gestures of medieval subjects. Carols and woman's song are inseparable from the moving medieval bodies that interacted with and enacted them through song and dance. My primary aim here is not to reconstruct medieval dance practices but to explore the possibilities of accessing medieval bodies through carol texts. This chapter does so through a two-pronged approach, first looking at texts on bodies (in the form of danced *caroles*) and then looking at bodies in texts (specifically, women's bodies in woman-voiced carols).

A focus on the embodied uses of lyric is very much in line with recent approaches in the emerging field of embodied poetics, approaches that privilege texts as practical objects to be interacted with and employed in specific cultural contexts.¹⁵³ It is of course easiest for

¹⁵³ For a particularly significant study employing this methodology, see Jessica Brantley's 2007 monograph *Reading in the Wilderness: Private Devotion and Public Performance in Late Medieval England*. Approaches privileging the embodied uses of the Middle English lyric are not entirely new; as early as 1972 Edmund Reiss noted that

twenty-first century readers to conceive of Middle English lyrics as words on paper, since that is necessarily how we encounter and interact with them today. However, as Sarah Kay observes of troubadour lyric, “[a] song is less a text than an act that associates the performer with his audience” that is, inevitably, inseparable from the “gesturing, singing body of the performer” (132), despite the fact that the surviving texts are usually divorced from music and always from movement, the essential components of song and dance. As today, lyrics in late medieval England served diverse practical purposes, from entertainment at dinners, courts, and festivals to lullabies; from political or protest songs that were “chanted or sung [...] to arouse an audience to a frenzy of patriotism” (Moore 94) to, it must be assumed, romantic lyrics used to woo a lover or would-be lover.¹⁵⁴ Erotic, courtly, political, religious, prophetic, lulling—various types of Middle English lyric were insistently physical in that they were lived in, by and on the bodies of both lyric performers and audiences, and continue to have life on the virtual bodies of lyric textual subjects as well as actual bodies of twenty-first century scholars and performers. The first half of this chapter focuses exclusively on the carol, a subgenre of lyric associated from its beginnings with dance, and specifically on the connections between the texts of carols and the bodies of the people that voiced them. My aim in this section is to construct a hybrid notion of carols, both textual and embodied, which considers these lyrics on the page as well as in their performative matrices. Beginning with a discussion of carols and the ways medieval people physically interacted with lyrics through dance, the chapter will conclude with a look at woman-voiced carols and other lyrics

“most short poems from the English Middle Ages [...] are social artifacts, public and useful, whose purpose can be gauged only with respect to a larger purpose” (11).

¹⁵⁴ This chapter, like the previous two, generally addresses lyrics used in non-liturgical and non-meditative contexts, but of course there are rich possibilities for exploring more explicitly religious lyrics in their embodied and practical use. Siegfried Wenzel’s remarks regarding the work of Rosemary Woolf come to mind: “The question which her evaluation of individual poems in the light of the meditative tradition thus poses is a historical one: how are we to envision the actual use of these religious poems? Were ‘meditative lyrics’ indeed used in true meditation? Were they whispered or sung in the stillness of a hermit’s or a nun’s cell? Were they recited from the pulpit?” (*Verses in Sermons*, 125)

that connect women especially closely to the body. First, however, it will be necessary to examine the burden, the formal device that sets carols apart from other Middle English lyrics.

The Burden and the Body

The defining feature of a carol is not its subject matter but its burden, a specialized type of what we now call a refrain (usually a couplet) that opens the lyric and is subsequently repeated (in performance though almost never fully in manuscript) after every verse (Greene xi). Karl Reichl suggests that refrain may be the defining feature of popular lyric generally (*Medieval Oral Literature* 45),¹⁵⁵ but many other theorists take broader stance in arguing that the marked use of repetition generally—including refrain but also repetition of words, stresses (meter), and sounds (rhyme and other aural effects)—is the defining feature of popular lyric from the Middle Ages through the present. Barbara Herrnstein Smith cites repetition as “the fundamental phenomenon of poetic form” (38), Siobhan Philips similarly holds that “poetry is defined by and constituted by its use of repetition” (21), and the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* defines repetition as “the basic unifying device in all poetry.” The organizational function of repetition is often stressed: Krystyna Mazur notes, “Repetitions structure our attention to what we read” (xi). However, variance and repetition in verse (and especially the alternations of stanza and refrain) may also enact the powerful but contradictory human desires for continuity and change. Heather Dubrow suggests, “The versions of repetition—the recurrence of a refrain, a word, an action—that are so characteristic of lyric may be a way of negotiating loss and recovery: subsequent versions of

¹⁵⁵ Incidentally, Reichl also traces a great many other medieval poetic forms back to the carol, suggesting that the burden is the template for later types of refrain: “The presence of refrains in the *rondet* and *rondeau*, as well as in related lyric-musical forms such as the *virelai*, the *villancico* or the carol, has been interpreted as pointing to an origin of these forms in a kind of round-dance or *carole* ...” (*Medieval Oral Literature* 45-46).

the repeated element remind us of the absence of the original one and yet offer the hope of recovery via substitution” (“Lyric Forms” 121). This somewhat melancholy view hints at the possibility of refrain to trouble or unsettle us. As Mazur notes:

... repetitions disappoint: even the recurrence of the same words in the same order and at identical intervals enacted by refrains never produces the same effect twice: with varying degrees of skill poems will force us to read their refrains differently each time. (xi)

Mazur cites Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Raven,” the classic example, for obvious reasons, of a poem in which refrain changes tone and meaning with each iteration. The narrator’s initial dismissal of the raven’s arrival as the sound of the wind and “nothing more” morphs by the poem’s end into then raven’s first ominous, then terrifying, then hopeless “nevermore” of death and oblivion.

Both the structuring and the unsettling effects of repetition are evident in many aspects of the device, from refrain to meter to aural effects such as rhyme, assonance and alliteration. Refrain is, nonetheless, a marked type of repetition in that an entire stanza—often as long as the verses themselves—is repeated at regular intervals, usually in between each verse (this is, in any event, how the burden functions; it is also repeated initially and finally). Refrain is closely linked to embodied poetry via performance; the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* notes that refrain is “a frequent (though by no means universal) feature of oral poetry [and] may give a solo performer time to remember the next verse or encourage communal recitation” (1151). John Hollander suggests, too, “modern lyrical refrain derives in good part from the medieval carol [burden]” (74). However, refrain, and repetition generally, are still peculiarly under-theorized.¹⁵⁶ The remainder of this section

¹⁵⁶ Although two relatively recent monographs do take up the topic of repetition in Modern American poetry: Siobhan Philips’ *The Poetics of the Everyday* (2009) and Krystyna Mazur’s *Poetry and Repetition: Walt Whitman, Wallace Stevens, John Ashberry* (2005). Also of particular interest to medievalists is Jennifer Saltzstein’s recent monograph, *The Refrain and the Rise of the Vernacular in Medieval French Music and Poetry* (2013).

will briefly treat the ways in which the burden, as a specialized type of refrain specific to carols, works to connect lyric experiencers to our bodies and the bodies of lyric subjects.

John Hollander, in a foundational essay on refrain,¹⁵⁷ stresses its intrinsically allusive quality (75), and later theorists have generally agreed that each repetition of a refrain references all previous iterations. He, along with most theorists who are non-specialists in medieval literature, does not distinguish between “refrain” and “burden,” but Richard Leighton Greene, the foremost editor of medieval English carols, uses both terms in a specialized sense.¹⁵⁸ Greene defines refrain, as opposed to burden, as “a repeated element which forms part of a stanza, in the carols usually the last line.” In these terms, the raven’s “Nevermore” is a refrain. The burden, however, “is a repeated element which does not form any part of a stanza, but stands wholly outside the individual stanza-pattern” (clx). Generally, burdens are comprised of two lines and appear in manuscript at the beginning of the song (occasionally the first few words are repeated after each verse as a “catch phrase,” usually followed by “&c.”). However, there is a great deal of variability across burdens; some extant burdens have three, four, and even five lines. The length of the burden does not correspond in any meaningful way with the length of the stanzas. In Greene’s terms, then, a “refrain” is a repeated word or phrase at the end of a stanza; a “burden” corresponds to a modern “chorus,” (or, confusingly, modern “refrain”) and is sung after each verse stanza. Greene also stresses, perhaps overly much, the “detachable” nature of the burden from its song, adamant that “a burden is less closely tied to a given carol than is a refrain” (clxi). It is true

¹⁵⁷ “Breaking into Song: Some Notes on Refrain,” in *Lyric Poetry Beyond New Criticism* (1985). A lightly revised and expanded version of the essay also appears in Hollander’s *Melodious Guile: Fictive Patterns in Poetic Language* (1988).

¹⁵⁸ Moving forward I will generally follow Greene’s usage; however, in this section I cite some contemporary theorists of refrain whose ideas are suggestive of burdens as a specialized type of what we now consider a “refrain”; note that they are not using the term in this specialized sense.

that a few carols possess the same (or similar) burdens; however, often the burden is integrally related to the subject matter of the song in a way that Greene deemphasizes.

In a recent manuscript, Jonathan Culler stresses the “nowness” of refrain (at the same time upholding the traditionally dichotomous relationship of lyric and narrative): “... above all refrain disrupts narrative and brings it back to a present of discourse. It is through refrain, for instance, that ballad tries to remain lyric while relying on narrative structures” (*Theory of the Lyric* 25). In this sense, refrain has a deictic function, connecting the speaker with the textual “here and now.” However, it is not always clear how, precisely, a refrain (for our purposes, a burden) achieves this effect—does each repetition bring us back to the initial instance, maintaining stability in the midst of narrative and emotional progression? Or is each repetition irrevocably influenced by the verses that precede it, so that the burden constantly changes in meaning alongside the narrative progression of the lyric? In the latter view, far from being a simple (though not simplistic) tie to the “here and now,” refrain can serve both a narrative and a tonal function, furthering the “action” of the literal or emotional arc of the song and, further, changing and informing the way the lyric experiencer feels about the subject matter being communicated as well as the “I” communicating it. Indeed, the ambivalence of the burden mirrors the constant flux of stasis and change in the body; both the repetition of the burden and the intensely musical meter of most carols mimic the rhythms of the body—breathing, heartbeat—which remain relatively consistent throughout a person’s life (although even these familiar rhythms take on new meaning as a body progresses forward in time and accumulates experiences). Siobhan Philips recently perceptively connects repetition with daily habit and bodily rhythms; she develops a “poetics of everyday time” in which “quotidian existence cannot be ignored or underestimated” (2).

The burden, then, provides stability in the shifting narrative and/or emotional landscapes of medieval carols. Seeta Chaganti suggests, “the burden became a relatively stable point through its repetition and also through the memory that the body in motion generates for it [through the carol’s round-dance format]” (“Choreographing *Mouvance*” 92). However, there are carols for which it would be a misstep to read too much meaning in the burden; particularly notable in this regard are burdens comprised mainly of nonsense words including “a,” “o,” “hey,” “aye,” and “troly loly.” These phrases generally simply communicate, as Hollander puts it, “Now meaning stops for a while and we all dance again” (75) or “Now everybody sings” (87). In a carol like “Al this day ic han sought,”¹⁵⁹ however, it is nearly impossible to see the burden as merely marking time or connecting the reader, hearer, or participant to the present moment. The carol, in the voice of a female servant, narrates a holiday in which she half-completes or altogether shirks her duties, finally sneaking off with “Jakke,” who buys her ale and then rapes her, leading to her pregnancy.¹⁶⁰ The burden of this carol (again, repeated initially and after each subsequent verse) is as follows: “Rybbe ne rele ne spynne yc ne may / For joyghe that it ys holyday.” While the content of the burden, with its giddy excitement and anticipation, supports the first half of the narrative stanzas, it is strikingly at odds, both tonally and narratologically, with the rape, pregnancy, and fear of her mistress that the subject expresses in the song’s second half. It is impossible to hear or read the burden in the latter half of the carol with the same whimsical tone it has at the beginning.

¹⁵⁹ Greene (275)

¹⁶⁰ The subtlety, nuance, punning, and sense of play evident in the erotic lyrics of the last chapter are entirely absent in this description of the sexual encounter: “Sone he wolle take me be the hond, / and he wolle legge me on the lond, / that al my buttockus ben of sond [...] In he pult, and out he drow, / and ever ye lay on hym y-low: / “By Godus deth, thou dest me wow ...”

The burden, then, is common to all carols, but it functions in disparate ways from song to song. As a subset of (and possibly a precursor to) the modern “refrain” (not to be confused with Greene’s medieval “refrain”) it represents both stability and even stasis, in that it remains the same throughout the carol, but also changes according the narrative and emotional arc of the stanzas around it. The burden also may have played a key role in the danced performance of carols, a subject to which I will shortly turn.

Introduction to Carols

The classic study of the Middle English carol is Richard Leighton Greene’s *The Early English Carols*, published in 1935 with a revised and expanded second edition appearing in 1977. Greene’s anthology is still the most complete collection of English carols to 1550 and his introductory matter the most comprehensive introduction to Middle English carols as a genre. Although the carol as a European lyric and dance form is probably very old, it is impossible to know when, exactly, caroling began to be practiced in England. Greene tells us that “the word seems first to occur in extant English literature about 1300 in the *Cursor Mundi*, where it has the exact sense of Old French *carole*, that is, a ring-dance in which the dancers themselves sing the governing music” (xxiii).¹⁶¹ Modern audiences are likely to think of the carol exclusively as a religious form (perhaps because the meaning of “carol” has largely been narrowed to “Christmas carol”) and it is true that a great number of surviving carols address mortality, the saints, the Virgin, and key moments in the liturgical year

¹⁶¹ Since English “carol” and French *carole* both refer simultaneously to a sung lyric and its accompanying dance form, to avoid confusion here “carol” refers to lyric (whether textual or sung) and *carole* to a danced carol. This is a slight departure from general scholarly practice in which “carol” generally refers to the song and dance form in England and *carole* to the equivalent tradition in France. I follow Greene and others in assuming that the English carol and the French *carole* (for which much earlier evidence exists) are essentially similar; for an alternative view, distinguishing the earlier *carole* from the later medieval English carol, see Kathleen Palti’s unpublished 2008 dissertation “‘Synge we now alle and sum’: Three Fifteenth-Century Collections of Communal Song.” By 1300, caroling was presumably established as a social song and dance form (see, for example, Palti “Singing Women” 370).

(particularly events surrounding the birth of Jesus, from the Annunciation and Nativity through Epiphany).¹⁶² However, the earliest carols were likely secular; in fact the carol “simply *was* secular music as far as many [in twelfth and thirteenth century France] were concerned” (Page 111).¹⁶³

Although many surviving texts of carols demonstrate a sophisticated interplay between what are usually called “oral” and “literary” features, the carol undoubtedly has its origins in popular (as opposed to ecclesiastical) song. Christopher Page notes that it is in fact “virtually the only form of popular music from [the high Middle Ages] of which we have any direct knowledge” (183). And while music does not survive for most extant carols, secular poems were certainly experienced by a medieval audience primarily as sung rather than read silently or aloud.¹⁶⁴ It is impossible to discern whether early Middle English carols recorded in writing (often by clerics) are, as Reichl puts it, “oral literature transcribed” (“Plotting the Map” 8) or mimic popular verse: in other words, whether the texts of surviving carols “imitate” or “are” folk songs (40). However, the assumptions behind this dichotomous terminology are flawed. Recent scholarship is by and large far beyond any possible simplistic understanding of oral *versus* literate verse. Even the most purely “oral” medieval texts (to which of course we have no access) are ambiguous—for example, following Ruth Finnegan, these texts could have been composed orally, transmitted orally, performed orally, or some combination of the three (16-24). Even carols preserved in written form by literate clergy, whether intentionally (as is the case for many religious carols) or inadvertently (for example,

¹⁶² Greene even identifies two “Carols of the Trouble of Joseph” (162-163).

¹⁶³ Christopher Page’s *The Owl and the Nightingale*, on musical life in France in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, synthesizes a wealth of French texts to give readers an idea of what caroling might have looked like, both literally and as a social phenomenon. Page’s research is focused exclusively on France, for which much more (and much earlier) evidence for caroling exists. Given the free flow of political, linguistic and cultural exchange between England and what is today France, Page’s evidence is suggestive of England as well.

¹⁶⁴ Although (as is likely becoming obvious) studies on the performance of Middle English lyrics are almost nonexistent, a recent study by Linda Marie Zaerr on romance and the minstrel tradition is of interest; see *Performance and the Middle English Romance* (2012).

in sermons that quote secular carols to condemn or allegorize them), would have circulated “... as much orally as in writing” (Boklund-Lagopoulou, “Popular Song and the Middle English Lyric” 556).¹⁶⁵ Kathleen Palti goes further in arguing, of woman-voiced lyrics specifically, that

critics predominantly treat them as imitations of oral traditions, co-opted within religious or satirical literature, a reading pattern established by Richard Leighton Greene in his influential study of the carol and which continues to dominate more recent analyses [such as those of John Plummer, Thomas Duncan, and Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou].” (“Singing Women” 359)¹⁶⁶

Indeed a large number of surviving texts of Middle English carols are preserved, usually in fragmentary form, in sermons, many of which are still unedited and unpublished. Clerical opposition to carols is well documented, and many sermons include fragments of carols that are allegorized and/or condemned.¹⁶⁷ Clergy also composed lyrics; Boklund-Lagopoulou suggests that friars, first arriving in England in the 1220s, may have composed the vast majority of religious carols, often set to existing popular tunes (*Suster* 24).¹⁶⁸ As such, in writing sermons that opposed the singing and dancing of carols and in composing new ones, clergy were instrumental in preserving them. Greene provides convincing evidence for the association of carols with witchcraft (cxlii) and the disapproval of dance generally among

¹⁶⁵ Carols and other lyrics are not unique in this respect; hymns, prayers, and indeed most of the liturgy would have been known to most illiterate and semi-literate people of all classes (including the clergy) through oral performance rather than written text.

¹⁶⁶ Palti’s theory regarding lullabies can be productively extended to most carols as well as, perhaps, lyrics generally: “Examination of the lullabies does not support divisive terminology of authenticity and imitation but rather reveals the ways in which literary and musical culture, Latin and vernacular texts, and the scholarly and popular overlap in medieval lyrics” (361). It is probably not incidental that Palti makes this argument in the context of a discussion of woman-voiced lullabies and bawdy carols; the “oral” features of these lyrics are gendered in such a way that those features, associated with women, are often coded as “rustic” “authentic” and “illiterate.”

¹⁶⁷ Siegfried Wenzel is the best known collector and scholar of lyrics embedded in sermons (especially in his 1986 monograph *Preachers, Poets, and the Early English Lyric*). More recently Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou has examined both scraps of popular songs surviving in sermon contexts (*Suster* 23) and woman’s dance songs quoted in sermons (“Yate of Heaven” 136).

¹⁶⁸ This process is called “contrefacting” (Boynton 48). It is likely that clerics also composed erotic lyrics; certainly they recorded them, as we will see later in this chapter.

pious clergy and laypeople (xcliii).¹⁶⁹ Nevertheless, the carol form itself can be considered “semi-liturgical” (Woolf 151):

Time and time again the polemics refer to the *carole* as an unholy parody of the Church’s liturgy: as priests sing to God with their acolyte singing the responses, so carolers sing to the Devil, the dancers “replying” to the leader of the dance; as the priest dresses himself in special vestments for the Mass, so the carolers put on special clothes for what some polemics explicitly call the “Devil’s liturgy,” the *officium diaboli*. (Page 182)

A prime example of clerical and even popular mistrust of singing and dancing carols is the well-known tale of the carolers of Kölbigk, who, for dancing outside the church on Christmas Eve, are cursed by a priest to dance incessantly for a year, at the end of which they collapse and some of them die.¹⁷⁰

I am not the first to explore the embodied nature of carols, although much work remains to be done in the field. Aspects of caroling that remain underexplored include their political uses, carols as processional hymns (a function proposed by Rossell Hope Robbins and hotly refuted by Greene), carols and Franciscan Spirituality,¹⁷¹ and the performance of Holly and Ivy songs (as well as other carols associated with the Christmas season that were connected with specific dances and games).¹⁷² This study will look specifically at the ways in

¹⁶⁹ In twelfth and thirteenth century France “the rulings of ecclesiastical councils, sermons, and narrative sources are full of references to [carols], for the ecclesiastical authorities generally regarded them as an abomination—an evocation of the Israelite’s blasphemy as they danced before the golden calf, and of Salome’s wickedness in Herod’s palace” (Page 110). Page later notes that in fact “many churchmen regarded the *carole* as a form of popular heresy” (182).

¹⁷⁰ For an analysis of this story in the context of the *danse macabre*, tarantella, and other forms of manic dancing, see Seeta Chaganti’s 2012 article, “*Danse macabre* and the virtual churchyard.”

¹⁷¹ This topic received some attention in the twentieth century but has yet to be taken up by scholars in recent years. See David Jeffrey, *The Early English Lyric and Franciscan Spirituality* (1975) and the work of Siegfried Wenzel, especially *Preachers, Poets, and the Early English Lyric* (1986).

¹⁷² Greene briefly addresses Holly and Ivy carols; Arthur Moore does as well in *The Secular Lyric in Middle English*. More recently, Seeta Chaganti has used them as her primary example texts in an exploration of bodily and textual movement intended to demonstrate how Paul Zumthor’s conception of *mouvance* is the textual equivalent to the movement of bodies in medieval *caroles*. “The carol’s stanza and burden pattern represents a formal alternation between more and less stable elements of the carol’s performance and textual witness [...] the carol’s formal roots in dance will allow us to see again how the body in motion gives shape to this interaction between the song’s relative constants and variables” (“Choreographing *Mouvance*” 85). Zumthor himself used lyrics and other poems as example texts in his formulation of *mouvance* (see *Toward a Medieval Poetics*

which carols are embodied through dance as well as the ways in which bodies are figured in carols and the overlapping field of woman's song. Moving forward, I will first focus on carols and dance in order to explore this one specific example of the myriad ways in which lyrics were likely embodied in late medieval England. I then turn my attention to woman's songs (many of which are carols) in order to further unpack the ways lyrics are written on the textual and literal bodies of medieval subjects and people, in this case in a way that is profoundly gendered.

Carols and Dance

Although textual evidence remains frustratingly thin, Peter Dronke among others suggests that "one of the prime functions of lyric throughout the Middle Ages was to accompany dancing" (*Medieval Lyric* 186). The *carole* was not the only type of medieval dance. Evidence exists for paired dances in court settings, solo dances performed by professional and non-professional men and women, and the related but distinct phenomena of *danse macabre* and manic dancing.¹⁷³ However, from Greene forward scholars agree on "the enormous vogue of the carole as a social pastime" (xliv). Singing and dancing carols was ubiquitous in England and France during the late Middle Ages and the popularity of the form spanned nearly all social classes; Page suggests that the carol was in fact "the principal point of contact between the musical culture of the villages, towns, and courts" (55)¹⁷⁴ and that *caroles* were danced at fairs, tournaments, and urban saints' festivals (110-133) as well as

Chapters 3 and 5). Chaganti is not the first or only person to bring the concept of *mouvance* to bear on lyric as embodied texts; see Sarah Kay, *Subjectivity in Troubadour Lyric* Chapter 4.

¹⁷³ Chaganti has recently explored these phenomena (in both their embodied realities and their textual and pictorial representations) in the framework of the "virtual" dance space where medieval texts and bodies intersect in "*Danse macabre* and the virtual churchyard."

¹⁷⁴ Again, Page's research is focused exclusively on France. Evidence that caroling in general was practiced across social classes is supported by evidence from Germany (Salmen) and from Early Modern England (Stevens).

in courts. Salmen, speaking of the pan-European *carole*, further claims that *caroles* were performed both night and day in locations as diverse as “churches, monasteries, cemeteries, lime trees beneath which tribunes were held, the courtyards of castles, gardens, roads, streets, [and] open fields” (174). Salmen also notes that “ritual dances took place ... in English cathedrals” prior to 1425, further stressing the fluid line between dance and ritual movement and gesture:

Dance customs in and around churches ranged from the devout bending of the knee, devotional gestures of prayer, processional steps, and the circumambulation of places of worship, to the dancing accompaniment of sequences and tropes, and round dances about the Christmas crib or around the altar. (166)

Salmen is not the only scholar to address the ways in which the physical locations where *caroles* and other forms were danced might have literally shaped the dance itself. Page suggests that carols in the round echoed the geography of the walled city and the churchyard (111), and more recently Chaganti has explored the role of the “virtual churchyard” in influencing the shape of the *danse macabre*.

Alas, we have no medieval equivalent of Early Modern dance manuals that might help us better to understand what the movements of the *carole* actually looked like—choreography in general is not at all well documented and difficult to reconstruct. Robert Mullally has recently conducted the most systematic



From *Roman de la Rose*, Oxford Bodleian MS Add. A. 22, c. 1300, French

attempt to date, suggesting that the dance in its various forms probably involved holding hands,¹⁷⁵ processing, and stepping or walking (Chapter 5 “A Reconstruction of the

¹⁷⁵ Page cites a French poem completed in 1226 that describes a group of men and women waiting for a tournament to begin: “Someone said: ‘Let us dance a *carole* while we wait here, that way we shall not be so bored’; / Then they took one another by the hand” (87). As above, pictorial representations of carolers often portray them holding hands.

Choreography”). This seems reasonable, if only because it is a bit difficult to imagine a dance that does *not* involve these elements (with the exception of hand-holding, which is well



From *Roman de la Rose*, Meister des Rosenromans, 1420-1430, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek

documented with both literary and art historical evidence). Reichl and Dronke, among others, suggest that the *carole* was danced by alternating circling with dancing or stepping in place, these phases corresponding to the verse (sung by a soloist) and the burden (sung by the

assembled company) (Reichl, *Medieval Oral Literature* 45-46; Dronke, *The Medieval Lyric*, 189). The limited

available textual and art historical evidence supports this reconstruction,¹⁷⁶ as well as the oft-cited claim that *caroles* were danced by a company either of only women or of men and women together. The claim that during a *carole* a soloist sang the stanzas and the assembled group of dancers sang the burden, particularly, has been stated as fact since Greene. This is commonsensical; after all, in this mode of performance only one person at any time would have to know the verses. Further, this mimics how popular lyrics are often sung still today. However, I have yet to encounter any scholar citing medieval (or anthropological) evidence that proves, or even suggests, this method of performance was generally true for the medieval carol/*carole*.

In fact it is frequently difficult to assess where scholars (from the early twentieth century through the present) acquire their evidence regarding the danced performance of carols.¹⁷⁷ In his discussion of *caroles*, for example, Peter Dronke has several very specific ideas

¹⁷⁶ Although dancers are sometimes depicted in a chain rather than a ring; note the two illustrations here from editions of the *Roman de la Rose*, separated by over a century. The earlier depicts dancers in a chain while the later depicts dancers in a ring, with a single figure, possibly representing the singer, outside the ring.

¹⁷⁷ Midcentury speculation regarding medieval dance practices, in particular, tends to be rather overheated, as in Arthur Moore's 1951 monograph *The Secular Lyric in Middle English*: "Words and melody were an inevitable

about choreography that are presented as fact but are nowhere cited or unpacked. Similarly, Judith Bennett describes the *carole* thus:

The main singer stood in the center of a circle; as she (or he) sang each stanza, others danced clockwise around her (or him); for the refrain, both singer and dancers stood still (or danced in place) and sang together. (187)

Despite this rather detailed description of the dance, Bennett cites no evidence to support it.

Salmen claims that *caroles* could be executed in a closed circle, and open circle, or a chain; that they “could have a narrow or a wide ambitus”; that dancers could (but didn’t always) link hands or elbows; that they could “involve the employment of kerchiefs, swords, hoops, etc.” Salmen cites no evidence, textual or art historical, for these claims, and in fact goes on to say that “the texts yield very little information concerning the tempo or mode of performance” (174). Where medieval depictions of choreography are cited, they are often based on art historical evidence (which, though invaluable, is necessarily static— even more so than texts, which can, though rarely do, describe specific movements) as well as textual evidence from later periods or obtained by synthesizing variant texts from across Europe (again, this can be very useful but is also perhaps suspect in determining caroling practices specific to late medieval England). Occasionally, choreographic reconstruction is based on pure supposition; Neil Cartlidge’s speculation that woman-voiced seduction lyrics may have been performed by men “in grotesque costumes,” for example, is completely unfounded (401).

Recently, however, scholars have become more circumspect in their claims regarding the danced performance of *caroles*. Karl Reichl admits:

... it is difficult to be certain exactly how these dances were performed and how the movements tally with text and music; in folklore a great profusion of round-dances

accompaniment of scintillating dances *en rond* and orgiastic perambulations in Maytime, indisputable manifestations of a native spirit unreconciled to the concept of a world utterly doomed by the machinations of Satan” (3).

with all kinds of variations can be found, a fact which is of little help in elucidating the choreography of the *carole*. (*Medieval Oral Literature*, 45)

Seeta Chaganti has recently implied that to provide a “positivist account of medieval dance practices” (“Choreographing Mouvance” 78) is less interesting than privileging methodologies that explore movement in medieval dance texts (both textual and pictorial) as simultaneously physical and “virtual” (in other words, abstract or conceptual).¹⁷⁸ For example, in two articles regarding the *carole* and the *danse macabre* respectively, Chaganti explores how Paul Zumthor’s model of *mouvance*, or textual variance, can productively be applied to movement itself in theorizing medieval dance practices.¹⁷⁹

The carol is, then, a dance song by definition. With this in mind, surprisingly few surviving carols directly address dance in their lyrics. However, several carols do connect text with body explicitly through the dancing bodies in the text of the lyrics as well as implicitly through the carol form. Greene claims that only one surviving carol addresses dance explicitly, the Christmas song “A child is boren amonges man.” The burden is as follows:

Honnd by honnd we schulle ous take,
And joye and blisse schulle we make,
For the deuel of ele man haght forsake,
And Godes Sone ys maked oure make.

Greene suspects that the first two lines of this carol “may be taken over unchanged from a secular piece [in] imitation of the burden of some song for a round dance” (clxviii) and it is true that explicit references to dance appear nowhere in the lyric’s stanzas. Despite Greene’s claim of uniqueness, however, although “A child is boren amonges man” is admittedly the

¹⁷⁸ Ironically, she provides the only secondary citations I have encountered regarding specific choreography of dance steps of the *carole*, both in early twentieth century French studies: Alfred Jeanroy’s *Les Origines de la poésie lyrique en France au moyen âge* (1904) and Joseph Bédier’s “Le plus anciennes danses françaises” (1906).

¹⁷⁹ Here is her illuminating take on the burden as both formal and embodied: “...fixing the burden in the chorus’s mind might have been instrumentalized by physical, embodied experience as with repetition.” (“Choreographing *Mouvance*” 87). She continues by citing the very long tradition of using movement to aid in memory, from Roman rhetorical gestures through the use of the body in memorization, as seen through the work of Mary Carruthers. Similar strategies persist through the present day.

only carol addressing dance that survives with its burden intact, at least three other lyrics explicitly address dance, all of which are almost certainly carols.¹⁸⁰ The fragmentary “D ... dronken,”¹⁸¹ examined in Chapter 2 in the context of deixis and subjectivity, includes a literal invitation to dance. Here again is the second half of the poem:

... stondet alle stille—
 stille stille stille—
 stondet alle stille—
 stille as any ston;
 trippe a lutel wit þi fot,
 ant let þi body go!

It is impossible to prove that this song is, in fact, a carol, since no burden survives. However, its explicit reference to dance, as well as its insistent (and infectious) repetition make it difficult to believe that this song was not danced to, and probably the burden has simply been lost along with much of the other text. Insistently musical in its meter and repetition (particularly of “stille”), this lyric includes an instance of literal dance instruction within the text of the song (“trippe a lutel wit þi fot, /ant let þi body go!”). Although of course “trippe” cannot be tied to a particular dance step, the word’s slyly layered meanings (including “to dance” but also “to (flirtatiously) step on someone’s foot while dancing,” and, as today, “to stumble” and “to fall down”) suggest that this injunction serves as literal dance instruction as well as, perhaps, a playful acknowledgement of the effects of drunkenness on the dancer’s ability to complete these same steps. Further, in an instance of function mirroring form (as well as the blurring of identity between textual and actual singing and dancing subject) the simplicity and repetition of the song ensure that a reveler or group of revelers could actually perform the song while drunk. The sophisticated interplay of text, music, and dancing bodies

¹⁸⁰ Puzzlingly, Greene does not include these in his Appendix of “Fragments of Texts Probably in Carol-Form.”

¹⁸¹ Oliver (33)

in this carol gives us some sense of the way the lyric might practically have been used by medieval dancing bodies.¹⁸²

Perhaps the best-known English carol addressing dance directly is the tiny, enigmatic poem “Ich am of Irlaunde,”¹⁸³ which, like “D ... dronken,” has already been examined in the context of deixis.¹⁸⁴ This song, too, provides a clue to its own danced performance:

Ich am of Irlaunde
ant of the holy londe
of irlaunde

Gode sire, pray ich þe,
for of saynte charite,
come ant daunce wyt me
In Irlaunde.

Since this poem, like the last, survives uniquely in the Rawlinson manuscript,¹⁸⁵ there is no way of knowing whether it is fragmentary. With so little contextualizing information, interpretations of this little song have varied widely and a bit wildly. John Scattergood sees this as a “love lyric that has been subverted to a religious purpose” (48). Norman Holland claims that the poem functions as a spiritual invitation to Christian charity as well as, mysteriously, a veiled proposal of marriage. J.A. Burrow reads into this tiny poem choreographic instruction, locating Ireland “in the make-believe geography of the dance floor, with the area occupied by the soloist at the centre of the ring of carolers” (19). Karin

¹⁸² Regarding the correspondence between text and text-performer, A.C. Spearing notes a moment at the end of the first fitt of “Wynnere and Wastoure,” in which the narrator drinks in the dream. This moment merges into a call for a break for refreshment in real life: “The poem might really have been designed for reading aloud, with pauses for drink in which its real-life performer hints that there will be no continuation unless his cup too is filled ‘freschely and faste’ [...] The function both of the textual “I” and of the implied “you” he addresses is to evoke an experiential realm of bodies with thirsty mouths and bleary eyes, a world of space (through which the kind looks about him) and of time (through which the public performance or private reading of the poem is extended)” (*Medieval Autographies* 27).

¹⁸³ Ed. Robbins (200)

¹⁸⁴ It is probably not an accident that the few extant carols addressing dance directly in their lyrics are also prime examples of how deixis can connect us to the bodies of medieval lyrics speakers, since, as I have argued, canny use of deictics is remarkably effective at connecting a reading or listening subject to a speaking textual subject even across great physical and temporal distances.

¹⁸⁵ Rawlinson D.913 is the mid-fifteenth century exercise book of a student at Oxford, containing several lyrics.

Boklund-Lagopoulou interprets this poem as the utterance of a foreign, female speaker who invites her male dance partner “into the elsewhere, the space of the sacred.” She continues, provocatively, “The dance here is the ritual which unites male and female, and in so doing unites the everyday, secular space of here and now with the sacred elsewhere” (*Suster* 38). This liminal space of unification is in fact the female speaker’s dancing body. In this way, the carol is connected to the body of the female speaking subject and, by extension, the body of any female performer of this lyric. We will see shortly how closely the carol form is associated with young women; this association can easily become insidious. Page notes:

The imagery of sexual corruption is ubiquitous in the polemics against *caroles*. There are constant references to the lascivious influence of the young girls who figured so prominently in the dances, and these seem to betray a deep-seated fear of enhanced female attractiveness brought to a game where women could at least pretend to be sexually predatory. (182-183)

Certainly, in “Ich am of Irlaunde,” dance itself is gendered female. This next lyric also explicitly figures its female textual subject’s body as dancing, further linking her to the corporeal and specifically to sexuality.

In the rather long¹⁸⁶ fifteenth century woman-voiced carol “Ladd Y the daunce a Myssomur Day”¹⁸⁷ a female servant leads a ring-dance during midsummer games. Jack, a young clerk, comes into the ring to dance and flirt with the narrator, winking and “tripping” on her toe. Jack and the narrator “turndun owre daunce in a narw place” upon which “a cussynghe ther was.” Things progress naturally from here, and by the end of the lyric, though the narrator tries to keep it a secret, her swelling belly betrays the love affair: “Euel yspunne yern, euer it wole out!” she laments. This comes as no surprise to listeners, even ones unfamiliar with the genre, since the song’s burden is:

¹⁸⁶ The carols and narrative lyrics discussed here are often quite long; rather than providing the full texts of the longer lyrics I will rely more heavily on summary and quotation.

¹⁸⁷ Ed. Greene (276). Oddly, this poem is not discussed in Greene’s introductory matter regarding dance.

Alas, ales, the wyle!
 Thout Y on no gyle,
 So haue Y god chaunce.
 Alas ales the wyle
 That euer Y cowde daunce!

Throughout the carol, then, dancing (or at least women's dancing) is associated with women's bodies and also prefigures and mimics the sexual encounter. And indeed, the servant's bad-tempered mistress berates her when she returns home from her amorous encounter—"Sey, thou stronge strumpeth, ware hastu bene? / Thy trippyng and thy dauncyng, wel it wol be sene." Being seen dancing is, in this carol at least, analogous to being seen pregnant and unmarried, and there is the potent suggestion that the one leads to the other and that the logical end of both is pregnancy and/or social disgrace.¹⁸⁸

Judith Bennett suggests that performance of this carol paradoxically "required its performer to lead a dance at the same time as she (or he) sang about the pleasures and dangers of leading a dance," further suggesting that "to dance" was itself a euphemism for sexual activity (188-189).¹⁸⁹ Neil Cartlidge extends this metaphor in claiming that "tripping" refers to the woman's metaphorical "fall." He further maintains that

The song's effectiveness ultimately depends upon the dramatic contrast between the girl's proud and happy state—her elegant steps in the dance, her power to command presents and her glee in teasing the devil—and its brutally unconcealable consequence in an unwanted pregnancy. The contrast is designed to illustrate the universal moral that pride comes before a fall, rather than to warn against the infringement of any particular sexual or social code. (409)

While Cartlidge's reading rightly contrasts the apparent power of the dancing subject against her very real vulnerability, he vastly underestimates the profoundly embodied, sexualized,

¹⁸⁸ At least two scholars are adamant that this "woman-narrated" song was male-authored (see Deyermond and Donaldson). There is, of course, no way to know if this or any other anonymous lyric was written a man, and in fact conceiving of a song as "written" by a single person is itself misleading in this era. We do know this lyric only survives because a male scribe transcribed it.

¹⁸⁹ The burden to a lost carol, quoted in a Latin sermon, suggests that "Ladd Y the daunce" was not the only carol connecting woman's sexual activity with dancing (and suggesting that she would have been better off attending to her chores at home): "Wylawey þat iche ne span / whan y to þe ringe ran" (Greene 490).

and gendered subject matter at the core of this carol. The poem's tonal tenor may be open for debate—it is likely that most medieval audiences, both male and female, would have found this song much funnier than twenty-first century audience are largely inclined to—but there is little doubt that the primary focus of the carol is the female subject's sexualized, and sexually active, dancing body. Middle English carols are closely linked with women's singing and dancing bodies. In some, like "Ich am of Irlaunde," women's dancing bodies are not necessarily seen as negative or explicitly equated with sex (and, as we will see, historical-cultural evidence suggests that women did lead dance and song with no negative social repercussions). In songs like "Ladd Y the daunce a Myssomur Day" and the lost carol "Wylawey þat iche ne span," however, dancing and sexuality are two linked aspects of women's embodied experience that are both clearly valued negatively. Further, the portrayal of women's eroticized bodies in motion (whether dancing, flirting or engaged in sex) is much more likely to be censorious than celebratory. The themes, tropes, narrative events, and characters in "Ladd Y the daunce" return time and again in other lyrics and carols figuring women as embodied (and particularly as sexualized) more than men. Puzzlingly (or perhaps not, given the widespread scholarly assertion that these songs were often authored, or at least preserved, by men) the speaking subjects of these songs are very often also the same women who are associated in them, to their detriment, with the bodily. In the sections that follow, woman-voiced carols and other lyrics, while not addressing dance specifically, nonetheless figure women as even more profoundly connected to the body (and especially to sexuality) than many of the lyrics examined so far.

Gender and Voice: Woman's Song

Although both sexes sang and danced carols, then, the form was especially associated with women, particularly young women. Depictions of women singing and dancing carols abound in art and literature as well as bookkeeping records from sources as diverse as convents and the royal households of both Edward I and Henry VII (Palti "Singing Women" 360, Mullally Ch 3). *Caroles* are associated with women by both Chaucer¹⁹⁰ and the *Pearl* poet.¹⁹¹ Christopher Page cites the *Lancelot*, an "influential romance" of the mid-thirteenth century, in which, following a dinner, "[the young men] go caroling and watch the dances of ladies and young women" (89). Further, (at least in France in the late thirteenth century),

... a large company of 'young girls trained in making festivity' was a great asset to any occasion when the noble families of a region were gathered together for a full court. A magnate [...] could require his daughters to sing for him when he chose; it was their duty to enter silently when called, to sing, and then to accept any criticism that the listeners felt inclined to offer them. In this way a group of *dames qui le renon / avoient d'estre bien chantanz* at court activities was a reserve of musical talent and free entertainment to supplement the activities of the minstrels whose demands upon attention (and upon the purse) were not always in season. (104-105)

As Susan Boynton and others have noted, "theologians also concerned themselves with *caroles*, often condemning young women who danced in them" (55).

In looking at carols and dance, scholars examine primarily (of necessity) the bodies of the textual speakers voicing the lyrics. Behind them, however, are the actual medieval

¹⁹⁰ "I sawgh hyr daunce so comlyly,
Carole and synge so swetely,
Laughe and pleye so womanly,
And loke so debonairly,
So goodly speke and so frendly
That certes y trowe that evermore
Nas seyn so blysful a tresor."

"Book of the Duchess," 848ff

¹⁹¹ "... he mace hym as mery among þe fre ladyes
With comlych caroles and alle kynnes joye ..."

"Gawain and the Green Knight," 1885-86

bodies—often or even usually female—that sang and danced the carols. Similarly, in examining embodiment and gender in the woman-voiced lyrics that follow, while I will in general analyze the figurative “voices” of the textual speakers, the literal voices of medieval singers and speakers lurk behind the readings. I focus here on woman-voiced lyrics as a powerful case study in the potential relationships between the voices of textual subjects and the intimately embodied realities of medieval subjects. Further, although the women’s bodies in the following songs are not usually dancing, many of the lyrics are in carol form, thus powerfully connecting the songs with the dancing bodies of real medieval women.

A vibrant body of research on medieval woman-voiced lyric has existed for more than thirty years. *Vox Feminae*, John Plummer’s groundbreaking edited collection on medieval woman’s song, appeared in 1981 and was only succeeded twenty years later with another collection of essays, *Medieval Woman’s Song: Cross-Cultural Approaches* (ed. Anne L. Klinck and Ann Marie Rasmussen, 2002). More recently, Anita Obermeier, Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou, Kathleen Palti, and others have both extended and challenged the work of these collections in looking at the ways in which woman’s song has functioned in specific times and places throughout the Middle Ages. Palti’s work on lullabies and carols, in particular, thoughtfully works toward articulating new ways of reading and interpreting Middle English woman’s song both in theory and in performance.

We have already seen how women, particularly young women, were associated with dancing *caroles*. Women’s bodies (figured in ways that connect women more closely to the body and especially to the sexual body than men) also regularly appear *in* the carols. Similarly, while a consideration of embodied, singing voices are inseparable from carols and other lyrics—since to “voice” a song in performance requires a living, breathing person—the figurative voices of female textual subjects in carols and other lyrics provide an important

window into how medieval people, both men and women, conceived of the embodied reality of being a woman in England in the late Middle Ages. This window is necessarily limited—literary or textual reality cannot ever neatly map onto embodied reality—but lyric texts do function as mirrors, reflecting, at least partially, one aspect of women’s experience, or at the very least how men and women perceived women’s experience and how that experience was valued. When we encounter a woman-voiced lyric, then, several questions immediately come to mind: who is the speaking subject of a Middle English woman’s song? How often and under what circumstances did women in the Middle Ages literally “voice” or sing the lyric? How closely did the experience of the speaking textual subject mirror the experience of the literally embodied singing subject? Perhaps most intriguingly, could a woman have written the song?

Although it is impossible to answer these questions with any finality, because of the strong association of women with carols (and the textual and art historical evidence that women frequently led *caroles*) it is probable that many women-voiced carols and other lyrics were also performed—both sung and danced—by women. Literary evidence, bookkeeping records, and visual depictions of female singers suggest that women caroled, both in single-sex and mixed groups, at most levels of society. There is little evidence specifically that women composed carols, but Susan Boynton, speaking of pan-European medieval lyric, stresses that “composition was not entirely distinct from performance until the later Middle Ages,” leading her to conclude that “...given the fluid boundary between composer and performer in this period, it is likely that women created at least some of the music they performed” (47, 58).¹⁹² Of course, medieval ideas about authorship were very different from

¹⁹² She also seeks to broaden our idea of what “counts” as participation in composition and performance, noting that “patronage can be seen as another ‘invisible’ musical activity; many noblewomen promoted the composition of works they could perform themselves ...” (59-60). There is ample evidence that women

our own, thus, as Boynton puts it, "...lessen[ing] the extent to which a song's essence is purely a product of the author" (61). Evidence is similarly lacking for many of the particular circumstances in which women frequently sang and danced carols, although carols were certainly performed on holidays, and Kathleen Palti cites a tradition of women caroling at roadsides, supported by literary as well as documentary evidence beginning in the early fourteenth century ("Lullabies" 370). Although only a small percentage have explicitly female speakers, carols still make up the huge bulk of all Middle English woman-voiced lyrics. In some instances, as we have seen, dance is addressed in the song itself. In the lyrics that are carols, women are further associated with the body through the reference to dance implicit in the carol form. In other lyrics, however, (some of them carols) women are also associated with the body through content as well as voice.

Exploring the female textual subjects who voice carols and other lyrics (and speculating on how closely these textual subjects may mirror actual subjects) is an area of inquiry that dates back to the beginnings of scholarly interest in woman's song generally. Many of the essays in *Vox Feminae* take up the issue, and the question is ubiquitous in *Medieval Woman's Song*; Judith M. Bennett's essay "Ventriloquisms: When Maidens Speak in English Songs, c. 1300-1550" is particularly relevant for our purposes. Sarah Stanbury takes up "Gender and Voice in Middle English Religious Lyric" in the 2005 collection *A Companion to Middle English Lyric* (ed. Thomas Duncan). From *Vox Feminae* forward, then, scholars of later medieval lyric have accepted that "the carol both was (as dance form), and *was conceived of as being*, appropriate to the female voice" (Plummer 138, emphasis original). Defining woman's song more generally, however, has proved thornier. Anne Klinck has outlined most succinctly the parameters of woman's song (updated slightly from her

composed music at various times during the Middle Ages, from the oft-cited Carolingian decree of 789 that nuns should not compose or send *winneleoda* to the compositions of Hildegard of Bingen.

foundational formulation almost twenty years prior) (“Women’s Song in Medieval Western Europe” 525). In her view, the defining characteristics of woman’s song are as follows:

- 1) the femininity lies in voice rather than in authorship
- 2) the utterance is perceived as in some way contrastive to male-voice song
- 3) the language and style are often simple, or affect simplicity
- 4) the subject is the loves, loyalties, and longings of the speaker
- 5) in the context of medieval Europe, this poetry is secular, not religious

In her introduction to *Medieval Woman’s Song*, Klinck further notes that “... woman’s song is characterized by [...] a strong physical element in the speaker’s account of herself and her feelings” (2). However, these definitions are somewhat ambiguous—if the “femininity” of the song “lies in voice rather than authorship,” surely it is nonetheless worthwhile to consider the extent to which women may have had a hand in the composition of the songs they performed, and, further, how they may have felt about (in other words, “read,” tonally) the content of the songs? What specific features make a song “secular” rather than “religious”? In what ways, precisely, is woman’s song “contrastive to male-voice song”? What formal elements make the style of woman’s song “simple”? Perhaps most importantly for any examination of affect and embodiment in these songs, what, exactly, composes their “strong physical element”? How is it characterized? What does it signify?

One way to begin to answer these questions is to examine the ways in which women were connected, in these songs, to the body and especially to sexuality. We have already seen how women were figured as particularly corporeal (compared to men) in carols that address dance explicitly. Another way to begin to access the ways in which women are connected to the body in Middle English woman’s song is to examine how the voices of the female textual speakers function in these lyrics (some, but not all, of which are carols) to connect women to the somatic.

To explore the ways in which this occurs, I will first examine some of the many Middle English lyrics presenting a young, earthy, and often gullible “country maid” who is in touch with (though often not in control of) her body and sexuality, and will continue with a look at the reverse (or extension) of the previous trope in examining the ways in which carols figure conventionally pregnant and abandoned women. I have already argued that carols addressing dance explicitly connect the act of dancing with the embodied textual subjects that voice them; I will now move toward examining the ways in which woman-voiced carols are similarly tied to the embodied textual subjects that voice them via a close focus on the conventional, sexualized experience of the related tropes of the sexually available and the pregnant and abandoned woman.

Lustful Maidens in Woman-Voiced Erotic and Seduction Lyric

Woman-voiced lyric has long been equated with romance and sexuality. Plummer succinctly notes that the main themes of Middle English woman’s song are “love and sex” (135); Klinck and Rasmussen similarly consider the subject of love a defining feature of the pan-European genre of woman’s song, moreover suggesting that “the mode of woman’s song presents a gender stereotype, to be sure, but one that is taken up in multifarious ways by different poets who work within the stereotype, transform it, or subvert it” (5). Common (and frequently overlapping) narratives in Middle English woman’s songs include a female servant on holiday or attending a fair, a lustful maiden seduced by a clerk, and a woman impregnated and then abandoned by her lover. Judith Bennett provides further insight into ways in which sex and romance were gendered in lyric generally and particularly in woman’s song:

... young women were sexualized in [Middle English lyrics] much more than young men. Men were certainly imagined as would-be or actual lovers, but they were also

imagined as schoolboys, apprentices, knights, merchants, scholars, blacksmiths, and the like. (256)¹⁹³

Although there are many narrative types and sub-genres of woman-voiced lyric, the reduction of female lyric subjects to their sexual selves is primarily expressed by means of two tropes, by no means mutually exclusive: that of the lustful (and sexually available) country maiden and the pregnant (and usually abandoned) singlewoman.

“Off seruyng men I wyll begyne”¹⁹⁴ is a typical example of the former. This carol is composed of nine verses in addition to the burden, and between each line of each verse and burden is the nonsense tag “troy loly.”¹⁹⁵ The poem is a sort of reverse blazon, inverting the trope in which the beloved lady is described piece by piece; in this case a clearly female narrator describes the dashing serving-men in an unusual instance of reversed gendered norms. In no way should this suggest that this carol’s narrator is equivalent to the male narrators of love poems, however. In this poem it is not the man’s features but his *clothing* that is described in loving detail, including his fine scarlet hat, “London black” hose, and satin doublet. In the catalogue are a very few descriptors that do not relate to the man’s clothing—his “here as black as geitt” follows the description of his scarlet hat, for example. But we are given only two other descriptors not pertaining to the serving man’s clothing, both of which are telling. First, we are told that his “kyss is worth a hundred pounde,” thus figuring the man’s amorous action in terms of money. And finally, at the end of the poem, when at last describing the man’s face during what should be the carol’s climax, the singer lamely opines, “his face yt ys so lyk a man / who cane butt love hyme than?”

¹⁹³ Bennett also observes that the role of maidens in song is severely limited compared with the many relational and professional roles occupied by real singlewomen in late medieval England.

¹⁹⁴ Ed. Hirsh (163)

¹⁹⁵ This line is repeated, then, a total of thirty-four times. It is tempting to consider the possibility, in the face of this profusion of repetition, that a particular dance step may have been attached to the phrase, but of course this can only be speculative.

The “lusty lady” in this carol is figured as myopically focused on the physical and sexual, but in a way that is not comparable to male lyric narrators, in that the female speaker here is *both* reduced to her sexuality *and* made to seem vapid, flighty, and narrow-mindedly focused on the material world and particularly that which can be valued monetarily. This humorous but decidedly unsympathetic textual subject contrasts with the sincere male narrators of similar love lyrics. In some ways, this is the sister-carol to “We bern aboute no cattes skinnnes,” addressed in the previous chapter as an example of a (male-voiced) erotic lyric with a close focus on the male body. In both of these lyrics, women’s supposed desire for money and for objects is eroticized, analogizing it to men’s desire for sex. Although the first textual subject is male and the second female, both fit neatly within a conventional discourse in which men eroticize women’s bodies while women eroticize the economic and material power represented by the male body and its accoutrements (clothing and objects for sale).¹⁹⁶

“We bern aboute no cattes skinnnes” and “Off seruyng men I wyll begyne” are only two of several extant lyrics (at least one other of which, “Atte ston casting my lemman iches,” is woman-voiced) displaying a close focus on the eroticized male body. The following three woman-voiced erotic lyrics exhibit instead an intimate focus on the *female* body and

¹⁹⁶ It would be remiss not to mention, at least in passing, the thoroughly delightful male-voiced erotic lyric “May no man slepe in 3oure halle” (Ed. Luria and Hoffman 89), which displays a unique twist on the man-as-peddler trope evident in other erotic songs. Here is the first stanza:

May no man slepe in youre halle,
 For dogges, madame—for dogges, madame;
 But if he have a tent of xv inche
 With twey clogges,
 To drive away the dogges, madame.
 Iblessed be such clogges,
 that giveth such bogges,
 Bitwene my lady legges,
 To drive away the dogges, madame.

In subsequent stanzas the man helpfully drives out rats and flies as well. As Martha Bayless notes, here “the speaker acts as a marketer, identifying a need for which no evidence had existed, and then proposing a solution which he himself is presumably perfectly suited to implement” (166).

particularly female genitalia in a way that may sometimes reflect the feelings of medieval women but may instead (or also) reflect the fantasies and desires of their male lovers (whether, to borrow Bennett's phrase, "would-be or actual").

The refrain of "If I be wanton I wotte well why"¹⁹⁷ demonstrates this potential ambiguity:

If I be wanton I wotte well why
I wold fayn tary another year
My wanton ware
shall walk for me
My prety wanton ware
shal walk for me
I wyll nott spare
to play with yow
he tygh he tygh
he hyght he

Although the focus of this female subject is female genitalia (specifically her own), rather than the sexualized male body, this poem displays a striking kinship with "We bern aboute no cattes skinnnes" and "Off seruyng men I wyll begyne." In this lyric the woman refers to her genitalia as her "ware." "Ware" is a multivalent word in Middle English with at least six primary meanings; it can function simply as a catchall for "thing" or "object" but more usually refers, as today, to merchandise or commodities (MED).¹⁹⁸ It also, however, survives in occasional use referring to both male and female genitalia. Nevertheless, the primary meaning of "ware" remains "an item for sale." In an interesting variation on the previous poems, in which women view men's bodies in terms of money and commerce, in this lyric a female speaker "commercializes" her own sexual self. It is difficult to understand exactly

¹⁹⁷ Ed. Bernard Fehr. Plummer refers to this ten-line refrain as a "burden," implying that the song is a carol (147). However, I know of no other carol with such a long burdens—a couplet is usual and five lines seems to be the outside limit—and this lyric is not listed in Greene. DIMEV describes the poem as being composed of "five couplets and a 10-line heading, abbreviated in repetition as pseudo-burden" (DIMEV 2101) and indeed it is the "verses" that are couplets, making this song formally unique, as far as I am aware, among surviving Middle English lyrics.

¹⁹⁸ It is also a possible spelling of *veir* ("fur"), suggesting that this figure may be a variant on the punning trope of the woman under her clothing examined in the last chapter.

how this figure of speech is working in the poem, which presents a great many interpretive difficulties. What does it mean, for example, that the woman's ware will "walk" (or even "wake" if that is how the word is best translated) for her—particularly since she has just told us she is staying where she is? And are the last two lines simply a nonsense refrain?

In any event, this female textual subject's pride in her sexual self reminds us, as Plummer notes, of the Wife of Bath's pride in her "*bele chose*" (the French equivalent of "ware" in that they both mean literally "thing") or "quoniam" (147)—and she is hardly the only female lyric subject who engages in this sort of playful boasting. The song usually called "Silver White"¹⁹⁹ works with multiple layers of meaning in a manner equivalent to erotic lyrics from "We bern abouten non cattes skinnnes" and "I have a gentil cok" to "Atte ston casting my lemman iches." The lyric's female speaker tells us how her lover bade her wait at the north end of Silver White (followed by the south and west ends—the omission of the east makes it seem likely that the unique text, in Huntington Library EL 34.B.60, is incomplete). At each end of Silver White (a hill? a river? money?) the subject tells, she "leyde [her] ware." Luria and Hoffman translate "ware," with willful naiveté, as "target," but as we have just seen, "ware" can mean simply "thing" and, as here, "sexual equipment." In this song it may have the additional layer of "defense" (as in the Modern English adjective "wary"). "Target," though, is indeed the literal meaning here; in a barely-veiled sexual pun, after laying down her "ware" the woman's lover "smites" it repeatedly. The woman herself describes this figurative "target" variously in material, specific, even evaluative terms: "a bogeler brode," "a peckel wide," and "a bushel brode."

Plummer believes that this lyric, like the last, is voiced by a similarly boastful female speaker who is proud of the quality and desirability of her sexual "equipment." However, the

¹⁹⁹ Ed. Luria and Hoffman (88)

descriptors suggest an implicit disgust surrounding female genitalia and women's bodies generally. The sex in this poem is portrayed as consensual, but the tone of the lyric is much more ambiguous than the last. The language describing the sexual encounter is martial, violent; the man "smites" and "jousts." Moreover, the language the textual speaker uses to describe her participation in the sexual encounter ("I leyde my ware") implies passivity and alienation from her body, as if her genitalia, while belonging to her, are not really a part of herself. Even more troublingly, the repeated introductory lines ("At the northe (/suthe/weste) ende of Selver White, / My lef me bat") can mean "My love bade me ..." but equally well "My love battered me."²⁰⁰ To be sure, the next two lines "finish" the thought started in the first two, making the most literal interpretation of *bat* inevitably "bade":

At the northe ende of Selver White,
 My lef me bat—
 At the northe ende of Selver White,
 My lef me bat I scholde abide.

Given the smiting, jousting, and otherwise martial imagery composing the entire fabric of this poem, it is impossible that "bat" does not also carry violent connotations in its first appearance. This is somewhat at odds with the identical final quatrains of each stanza, which suggest the woman's complicity:

Shalle ther never man just therat
 But if he can
 Shalle ther never man just therat
 But if he can it smite

This suggests that the subject has agency in her choice of sexual partners, supporting Plummer's reading of the poem as tonally equivalent to "If I be wanton I wotte well why,"

²⁰⁰ MED notes that *bat* is a rare past form of *bidden* (to ask, beg, request) but a common past form of *bīten* ("to pierce, penetrate, cut, slash ... to hit or land [a blow]"). The word is also listed as a possible past form of *bēten* ("to flog, beat, whip, punish"). It is very likely that in this poem "bat" is meant to have some or all of these overlapping meanings simultaneously. The word is spelled "bat" throughout the first two verses and "bade" in the third.

and indeed I know of no other lyrics besides these two in which the word “ware” is used by a woman to describe her own genitals. However, this poem is at best tonally ambiguous, leaving lyric experiencers perhaps unsettled by the detachment with which the subject views her own sexual self as well as the violent imagery used to portray the sexual encounter.

The trope of the sexually available country maiden is, then, clearly at work in “At the northe ende of Selver White,” as in “If I be wanton I wotte well why.” As many scholars of woman-voiced lyric have noted, these poems were likely largely male-authored and represent more closely the desires and fantasies of male clerics rather than female servants. As Bennett has suggested, in these erotic lyrics women are connected closely to the material world and especially to sexuality in a way that does little justice to the complexity of any real-life medieval woman. This discussion of lyrics featuring the stereotypical “lustful country maid” will conclude with a look at one seduction lyric in which the trope is clearly at play before transitioning to an examination of an overlapping class of seduction lyrics, in which the ambiguously carefree maidens of these previous lyrics return (or, rather, meet their unhappy ends) as pregnant and abandoned lovers.

In the woman-voiced seduction lyric “Oh lord so sweet Sir John doth kiss,”²⁰¹ the narrator comes across as a largely willing victim of Sir John’s charms. Each verse, detailing the highly formulaic romance of the narrator and Sir John, ends with the tag “I have no powre to say him nay.”²⁰² The first two (of five) stanzas are blandly descriptive of the mutual attraction between the narrator and Sir John. The third stanza, however, takes a more explicitly sexual turn and at the same time becomes more grounded in the material and the

²⁰¹ Ed. Luria and Hoffman (83). We will soon see a much darker poem in which a woman is similarly seduced by “Sir John”; a clear tradition exists of seduction poems featuring clerics named John, Jack, or Jankyn. See, for example, “As I went on Yol Day in owre prosessyon,” “The last tyme I the wel woke,” “I haue a newe garden,” “Ladd Y the daunce a Myssomur Day” and “Al this day ic han sought.”

²⁰² In Greene’s terms, this is the refrain; the carol’s burden is “Hey noyney! I will love our Sir John and I love eny.”

commercial; John offers to “pay” for the pleasure the narrator gives him, and so puts “his offering” in her “box” (slang for female genitalia that survives to the present day). In the next stanza, the woman’s sexualized body is alternately figured as a mouse trap in which the narrator wishes her lover could stay “both night and day,” continuing: “He gropeth nisllye aboght my lappe— / I have no powre to say him nay.” In the last stanza, there is a turn toward an even more explicit focus on the material, in the form of gifts the subject receives from Sir John—rings, fine furs, and “other things.” In one way this transition from the sexual to the material is a bit unexpected, the first two stanzas having established the relationship and the next two stanzas elaborating its sexual nature. However, this turn toward the material is prefigured by the language of commerce in the third stanza, in which gender roles are reversed in a way that is undoubtedly meant to be humorous; rather than giving an offering of money to the cleric in return for religious services, it is the clerkly lover who puts his “offering” into the subject’s “box.” This language recalls the trope (by now familiar) in lyrics featuring the conventional “lustful maiden” as subject and/or, for that matter, object, in which women’s lust is *often* for sex, but *always* for objects.

These lyrics featuring sexually uninhibited (and, in some cases at least, potentially sexually victimized) female subjects all display a close focus on the female body and genitalia which is in some ways analogous to the erotic lyrics, examined in Chapter 3, with a similarly detailed focus on male genitalia. In his discussion of woman-voiced erotic lyrics, Plummer suggests that the sexually voracious female speakers in these woman-voiced lyrics come directly from the pages of antifeminist literature, and it is certainly true that women are sexualized in these songs in a way that must bear little resemblance to the multiplicity of sexual desires and experiences of late medieval English women. It is also true, as Bennett suggests, that woman-voiced lyrics or maiden’s songs are almost by definition erotic lyrics,

and that women's bodies are sexualized in these songs in a way that is inherently limiting and does not reflect the diversity of experience of medieval women. However, some subset of medieval women certainly did experience desire both for male bodies and for possessions (however grossly that desire may be figured in these lyrics), and the female textual speakers of these songs must have resonated with some of the medieval women who sang them. Similarly, the next set of woman-voiced lyrics, portraying conventionally pregnant and abandoned maidens, must have had very different tonal resonances for the various women who sang and heard them, depending on their family and economic situations, status in their communities, and previous embodied experiences, particularly of sexuality, conception, and child-bearing.

Pregnancy in Woman-Voiced Seduction Lyrics

In addition to being portrayed as lustful country maidens, women are also conventionally portrayed in woman-voiced lyrics as pregnant and abandoned, a state that is figured, in the songs, in some ways as the logical end of the lusty maidens of the previous song-type and in some ways as a foil to those same women.²⁰³ In the three songs that follow, all of which are carols falling into the "seduction-by-clerk" genre, the female subjects begin as "lustful maidens" of the previous song type but end up as pregnant and abandoned. As closely related as these two song-types are in content and form, however, they are tonally distinct. The first song-type is distinctly ribald, flighty, even jolly, and (even in lyrics with such as "Silver White" that include implied violence) were probably primarily comedic to most of their medieval audiences. In the pregnancy lyrics, however, the formal components of the songs work in even more surprising and often somewhat sinister ways against their

²⁰³ One of these songs, "Ladd y þe dance a myssomur day," has already been examined in the context of carols and dance.

subject matter. Given the fluidity between the two song-types—and the fact that the following pregnancy lyrics are carols and were therefore presumably danced to—woman-voiced pregnancy lyrics often feel much more ominous than the lighthearted seduction lyrics. Reading tone, of course, can be notoriously difficult even in poems of our own era, let alone those from which we are separated by hundreds of years.²⁰⁴ Nevertheless, the subject matter of the pregnancy lyrics does provide an appreciable contrast to their danced performance, and—given that some medieval women certainly experienced the fate detailed in these songs—we can assume these carols held dark overtones for at least this component of their medieval audience in a way that most of the foregoing erotic lyrics probably did not.

Scholars do not always clearly delineate erotic lyrics from pregnancy lyrics, and it is true that “woman-voiced seduction lyrics” accurately describes both song-types. However, I am not the first to distinguish between the two. Martha Bayless similarly suggests that pregnancy lyrics finish the story that the seduction lyric begins:

... [in the pregnancy lyrics] this movement (from courtship to seduction, from the abstract and spiritual to the material and physical) culminates in the production of lasting carnality, an infant: a human that is all bodily need and no spiritual reflection. [...] When language is stripped away to the physical bodies that underlie it, it is the woman who cannot escape the consequences of somaticization. She is left literally holding the baby. (Bayless 167)

While both types of lyric associate women closely with the body and especially the sexual body, Bayless here observes that the pregnancy lyrics takes this association to its ultimate conclusion, leaving the woman with the wholly embodied proof of the affair in the form of a child. The body of the baby makes all the difference for the woman holding it; the playful sex romp of the erotic lyrics, no matter how faithfully it is replicated in the opening stanzas of a pregnancy lyric, cannot but be colored by the very real consequences of the sexual

²⁰⁴ Efforts at tonal analysis are often further frustrated, as Neil Cartlidge notes, “by the uncertain state of the copies in which [the lyrics] survive” (396).

encounter at the song's end, whether it is the swelling belly the woman cannot long hide (as in "Ladd y þe dance a myssomur day,") or a baby for which the woman cannot provide (as we will soon see in "The last tyme I the wel woke").

Recently Neil Cartlidge has read into this class of lyric great pathos, arguing against scholars who claim that the lyrics are disdainful of their speaking subjects and were in fact written by clerics in effect making fun of ignorant peasant women. Cartlidge rather argues for the subjects' "profoundly wry and worldly-wise self-pity" (402), further assuming that the lyrics' depictions of the sexual license allowed by festivals is a literal, almost anthropological account of what "really" occurred in many medieval women's lives. The sincerity Cartlidge reads into these lyrics is predicated on the assumption that the texts reflect unchanged the embodied reality of unwed medieval mothers. Cartlidge repeatedly characterizes this class of lyric as above all "cynical" and deadly serious.

Bayless, on the other hand, reads the pregnancy lyrics as unambiguously comic despite the fact that the unwed mothers of the songs undoubtedly had their counterparts in actual medieval women. She argues that Cartlidge has profoundly misread the tone of the songs as "pragmatic and didactic," further asserting that

society can contain multivalent responses to a single issue: extra-marital pregnancy, for instance, can be regarded as immoral, inconvenient, surprising, or even comic, according to the woman's circumstances, the circumstances of the observer, and, of course, the genre of narrative in which it is described. (172)

However, neither Bayless nor Cartlidge does justice to the tonal complexity of the pregnancy lyrics, grounded intimately in the bodies of the women in the carols as well as the bodies of the men and women singing and dancing them. Bayless is correct in that these lyrics were probably primarily comic, but they must have been decidedly unfunny to women who were seduced, raped, and sometimes impregnated by clerks or other men in positions of power. Surely, as Cartlidge suggests, these lyrics reinforced and were in dialogue with other, more

serious social messages women received regarding unwed pregnancy and its economic, moral, and social consequences for both mother and child.

Bayless convincingly demonstrates the likelihood that many of the lyrics served a largely comic function and, we will soon see, formal analysis of many of the poems reinforces her assertion that the songs were above all meant to be funny. However, she goes on to stretch this interpretation well beyond its limits:

... humor suspends moral judgment, denies the impact of suffering and holds that the world is fundamentally entertaining ... although women's powerlessness may be chilling in the real world, in the comic world, such powerlessness is literally reduced to a joke. That something so disturbing in the real world should serve as the stuff of entertainment may be chilling, but it should be noted that humor is an equal-opportunity trivializer: lovers, clerics, kings, peasants and maidens all get their come-uppance in various comic texts.²⁰⁵ (173)

Claiming that humor in any historical period or genre is an "equal-opportunity trivializer" is an enormous misstep bordering on the absurd. In recent years this issue has been thrown into particularly sharp relief by the debate surrounding rape jokes, arguably instigated in 2012 when comedian Daniel Tosh, responding to a female audience member who called out during a live set that "Rape jokes are never funny" countered "Wouldn't it be funny if that girl got raped by, like, five guys right now?"²⁰⁶ A public outcry against Tosh's "joke" was met with an equally public backlash from (largely male) comedians, including Chris Rock and Gilbert Gottfried, collectively arguing that the nature of comedy is such that any individual or group is fair game for ridicule. Comedian and feminist Lindy West has provided perhaps the most coherent response to this point of view:

This fetishization [...] of being an "equal-opportunity offender," is bizarre [...] Being an "equal opportunity offender"—as in, "It's okay, because Daniel Tosh

²⁰⁵ Bayless here draws particular attention to the Miller's Tale, in which the "sexually unrestrained young woman" is "the one character who suffers no injury or indignity."

²⁰⁶ Tosh apparently never denied the incident, which has received a great deal of internet media coverage. See, for example, Adam Martin's July 2012 story in the Atlantic's *The Wire* "Daniel Tosh's Apology For Gang Rape Joke Almost as Weak as the Joke Itself."

makes fun of ALL people: women, men, AIDS victims, dead babies, gay guys, blah blah blah”—falls apart when you remember (as so many of us are forced to all the time) that all people are *not in equal positions of power*.²⁰⁷

West's ideas have since become known, in shorthand, as “punching up versus punching down.” That is, the most effective comic texts challenge, rather than uphold, inequalities of power. In Middle English woman-voiced seduction lyrics, the pregnant female subject, in the ultimate position of powerlessness, is *always* the butt of the joke,²⁰⁸ mirroring the potent medieval reality that women engaging in sex outside of marriage faced potential practical and social consequences enormously more dire than men behaving similarly. One need not assume, as Cartlidge does, that the lyrics were “read” by their medieval singers and audiences as deadly serious reflections of actual pregnant and abandoned women (or as dire warnings against premarital or extramarital sex) to allow that medieval women did engage in sexual activity outside of marriage, and that that activity, particularly when followed by visible pregnancy, had the potential to carry very real and very negative economic and social consequences.

Cartlidge, however, frequently imposes undue gravitas on the pregnancy lyrics, for example reading the macaronic lyric “Up Y arose in verno tempore” as serious when it is more appropriately read as humorous. In Cartlidge's view, the Latin in this poem is used for “its plangency and greater rhetorical impact, [...] to heighten the pathos of [the pregnant woman's] lament,” although he allows that “it is possible that with the Latin enters the mocking perspective of the clerks” (399). Far from being merely “possible,” it is difficult to believe that the use of Latin is anything other than mocking. Each quatrain begins in English

²⁰⁷ She continues, wryly: “‘Oh, don't worry—I punch everyone in the face! People, baby ducks, a lion, this Easter Island statue, the ocean...’ Okay, well that baby duck is dead now. And you're a duck-murderer. It's really easy to believe that “nothing is sacred” when the sanctity of your body and your freedom are never legitimately threatened.”

²⁰⁸ ... with one possible extant exception, to be addressed momentarily.

and switches to Latin halfway through in a way that is initially slightly humorous but, when the woman begins speaking, devolves into farce—for example, “Now what shall Y say *meis parentibus* / Bycause Y lay with *quidam clericus*?” Cartlidge may be correct to note that “the Latin phrases which are so anomalous in her mouth make the whole situation seem rather remote and unreal” but the strangeness of the Latin in the mouth of this “lustful country maiden” can only be read as poking fun at (or at least condescending to) the illiterate textual subject. This is clearly a song by and for male clerics. The palpable differences between the sympathies of woman-voiced erotic and pregnancy lyrics indicates the diverse audiences for woman-voiced lyric, and suggests that their tonal resonances depend on the varied embodied lyric experiencers hearing and performing them.

In a carol that begins “The last tyme I the wel woke”²⁰⁹ for example, the insistently sing-song meter and diction work against the subject matter in a way that may have been perceived quite differently by different subsets of a medieval audience. The carol tells the story of a maiden who is raped (or perhaps seduced) by the familiar clerkly figure of “Sir John.” By the carol’s end, after an ongoing sexual relationship, the female speaker is pregnant and apparently abandoned. The song charts, very explicitly, the woman’s defloration, repeated sexual encounters, and unwanted pregnancy, yet its meter is extremely regular, even doggerel-like, and thus (even without music) sounds rather silly and jolly. This metrical simplicity is paralleled by simplicity of rhyme; typically for this genre of carol, the lines within each stanza have a single rhyme (so that the end-rhymes of the first stanza, for example, are “woke / croke / boke”). Furthermore, the nonsense tag “-ey,” added to the last word of each stanza and the refrain, gives the carol a singsong, nursery-rhyme feel that is

²⁰⁹ Cartlidge maintains that this poem refers to “a well-wake—a seasonal celebration which was probably a rural survival of pagan rites from the pre-Christian past” (404). The carol’s opening line is, however, probably best interpreted as simply “the last time I stayed awake by the well at night.”

strikingly at odds with its subject matter. For example, in the second stanza, after being caught by Sir John and sworn to silence, the maiden is deflowered, apparently against her will:

Yet he did me a wel wors turne:
He leyde my hed again the burne;
He gafe my maydenhed a spurne
And rofe my kell-ey.²¹⁰

The singsong feeling the nonsense tag “-ey” creates is sustained throughout the poem (for example, “I was begyled-ay ... To beyre a childe-ey”) and creates a truly strange tonal dissonance between the subject matter and the danced nature of the song. As we have seen, all surviving evidence regarding the danced performance of carols suggests that they were generally performed on joyous occasions of celebration, holiday, or simply recreation, and further that they were associated with young women, for whom being seduced, impregnated, and abandoned by a man in a position of power could have been a very real and very frightening possibility. These lyrics, then, represent an instance in which the embodied performance of the carol, in which young women had agency, is strikingly at odds with the body of the young woman *in* the carol, who, though she is the carol’s thematic and speaking subject, is subjected to the advances of a powerful man she may not be able to refuse.

To be sure, it is not entirely clear whether these advances are unwanted. The narrator and Sir John “made as mery as flowres in May,” and (in another instance of the trope of a women being “seduced” by objects as much as men) her lover brings her gifts “wonder[fully] copious.” However, the initial sexual encounter is described as something

²¹⁰ This version is a composite of two editions, Greene, and Luria and Hoffman, whose reading “kell” rather than Greene’s “bell” I find more convincing. See MED, *calle* (= *kealle*, *kel*, *kelle*) (*n.*) 3: “an enveloping membrane” (presumably equivalent to Modern English “caul”). The MED does list “?Maidenhead, ?vulva” as a possible meaning of “bell,” citing that it may be a special use of “belle” or an abbreviation of “bele chose.” However, their only citation is this lyric. Not having access to the manuscript (Cambridge University Library Ff.5.48), I am unable to assess and interpret the initial letterform.

that is *done to* the narrator, rather than something she chooses to participate in, and the final result of the love affair—that is, an unexpected pregnancy—is clearly unwanted. Here is the carol’s last stanza:

I go with childe, well I wot;
I schrew the fader that it gate,
Withouten he finde it milk and pap
A long while-ey.

Sir John’s gifts, rich as they are, are not enough to provide for the child, and we are left with the distinct impression that he intends neither to claim nor economically support the woman or their child. Bayless further notes that, since the father is a cleric,

this is not a courtship that can end in marriage, a sacrament that takes place on a spiritual as well as a corporeal level. Instead the exclusively carnal liaison can have only carnal results. Thus the maiden who waked the well curses the father for purely material reasons: she needs milk and pap to keep her baby alive. (169)

Several surviving lyrics are thematically similar to “The last tyme I the wel woke.”

“This enther day I mete a clerke,” for example, shares many elements with “The last time I the wel woke,” such as an emphasis on defloration as well as the woman’s sorrow at her lost virginity (its burden is “A, dere God, what I am fayn, / For I am madyn now gane!”) as well as the suggestion that the clerkly lover has enchanted the narrator and used magic to make her fall in love with him and succumb to his advances. Furthermore, both lyrics end in a similar manner, with the subject refusing ever again to find herself in this position; the burden of “The last tyme I the wel woke,” for example, is: “I have forsworne it whil I live / To wake the well-ey.”

The last example of a poem of this type I will examine is the macaronic carol usually called “Jolly Jankyn”.²¹¹

*“Kyrie,” so “Kyrie,”
Jankin singeth merie,*

²¹¹ Ed. Luria and Hoffman (84)

With “*aleison*.”

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

Kyrieleison.

Jankin began the offis on the Yol Day,
And yet me thinketh it dos me good, so merie gan he say

Kyrieleison.

Jankin red the pistil full fair and full well,
And yet me thinketh is does me good, as evere have I sell.

Kyrieleison.

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

Kyrieleison.

Jankin craked notes an hundered on a knot,
And yet he haked hem smaller than wortes to the pot.

Kyrieleison.

Jankin at the *Agnus* bered the *pax-brede*;
He twinkeled, but said nout, and on min fot he trede.

Kyrieleison.

Benedicamus Domino, Crist fro schame me schilde.

Deo gracias, therto—alas, I go with childe!

Kyrieleison.

This poem is perhaps both the most formally sophisticated of the seduction-by-clerk poems, and the most tonally strange. The interweaving of fragments of the mass as well as the narrator’s contention that the mass, as sung by Jankin, is “doing her good” justifies what we later know is an affair by claiming that it is spiritually improving. Although the woman is initially seduced by Jankin’s voice, it is the first physical contact between them that suggests the true nature of their relationship with the familiar flirtatious gesture of treading on her foot. When we realize, somewhere between the penultimate and the last verse, what has actually been happening all along, the carol’s burden suddenly is thrown into a new light—as several critics have noted, the repeated *Kyrie eleison* is almost certainly a pun on the name Alisoun, stereotypically the lustful country maiden. Although it has been suggested that all or most seduction-by-clerk carols were written by clerks themselves, this last has the most potent ring of male fantasy and male authorship—the words put in the woman’s mouth are

fawning, unconvincing. Further, it is extremely difficult to read the tone of the last stanza—as prideful, fatalistic, terrified, making the best of things, even jolly.

Ultimately, it is tempting to turn to seduction and pregnancy lyrics—with their young, female textual subjects eternally seduced by clerks named Jack, John, and Jankin—for information about the ways in which medieval English women related to their bodies through sexuality and through dance. It is dangerous, however, to conflate textual subjects with real ones, a trap Cartlidge, for example, falls into when he notes of a particular seduction lyric that “... the girl regards her father’s attitude as the only reason for her lover’s departure, [but] it is possible that she is deceiving herself” or when he says that “the credibility of this [same] speaker has been doubted” (401). But how can we possibly doubt a textual subject? What would that imply? If she is the invention of a mean-minded cleric, a caricatured fantasy, we must nonetheless take her on her own terms as an “I.” Nonetheless, Cartlidge does strike a chord when, for example, he claims that the lyrics “testify to a depth of anxiety about extra-marital pregnancy which surely indicates that for many women such an eventuality was a supreme disaster, both economically and socially” (411). Although we can never know exactly how closely erotic and pregnancy lyrics mirror the lives of medieval women, the lyrics are nonetheless suggestive of some of the ways women related to their bodies through sexuality and through dance.

Conclusion

In various types of Middle English woman-voiced lyrics, then, women are connected with the body and especially with sexuality in both implicit and explicit ways. The danced and sung nature of the carols, whether addressed explicitly within the song’s text or implicitly via the presence of the carol’s characteristic burden, reinforces the connection of

these carols' female narrators with female embodied experience (portrayed in ways that are highly conventional and usually highly sexualized). It is impossible to know exactly how medieval audiences understood these songs, but it is nonetheless clear that Middle English carols as both song and dance form were associated with women in a way that stresses women's bodily and especially sexualized nature and experience. Woman-voiced lyrics that are not carols, incorporating the related stereotypes of the "lustful country maiden" and the pregnant and abandoned woman, similarly portray women as much more intimately connected to the somatic and the material than men. Further, regardless of who wrote the lyrics and the (in)authenticity of their female "voice," we must take into account the ways in which these songs changed, tonally, depending on who was literally voicing them.

The fact that many of the woman-voiced erotic and pregnancy lyrics here addressed are carols, and that they were likely sung and danced by young women analogous to the carols' textual subjects, is a particularly interesting case study of a suggestive overlap of textual and actual lyric speakers. Literally embodying the carol form through dance was perhaps a rare sphere in which young women in medieval England had expertise and even primacy; the ubiquitous connection of caroling with young women in high and late medieval England and France suggests that this was a sphere considered appropriate for women's bodily participation. Dancing *caroles*, however, is linked in some erotic lyrics with women's uncontrolled sexuality, seduction, and subsequent pregnancy, perhaps implying that caroling, as a domain in which women actively participated in an explicitly kinaesthetic way, was also the object of both clerical and popular mistrust (this is certainly supported by the many medieval sermons that condemn carols and supply religious lyrics or interpretations to secular tunes).

The carols and woman-voiced lyrics examined in this chapter provide the most clearly kinaesthetic link between bodies and texts discussed thus far: the literal embodiment of lyrics via dance. More than the linguistic category of deixis, more even than the embodied affective categories of melancholia and desire, carols and woman's song connect lyric experiencers to the speaking textual subjects that voice the lyrics through form (the carol's characteristic burden and other repetitive elements), content (especially clear in the case of woman-voiced erotic and seduction lyrics) and the embodied historical practice of singing and dancing carols, connected closely with young women. All of these elements, from the burden and refrain (which translate bodily rhythms into textual ones) to the tonal ambiguity, intimately tied to the body, of the woman-voiced (although possibly male-authored) seduction and pregnancy songs, make carols and woman-voiced lyrics two overlapping categories of Middle English lyric tied particularly closely to the enacted reality of lyric in the lived world. In its examination of one iteration of embodied lyric, this chapter is part of a larger movement of scholarship and poetry invested in embodied poetics and lived verse in its many forms. The next and final chapter provides some concluding thoughts on embodiment and form in Middle English lyric.

Chapter 5 Conclusion

In exploring, through the corpus of anonymous Middle English lyrics, three related aspects of the ways in which poems are connected to the body, this dissertation situates itself in a larger body of scholarship interested in the ways the human body receives, performs, and interacts with texts. This focus on embodiment, exemplified in the emergence of affect studies, history of emotions, and other theories of subjectivity and embodiment including A.C. Spearing's "textual subjectivity," is by no means unique to the twenty-first century; embodied poetics had its place even within scholarship solidly of the "linguistic turn" (Jonathan Culler's emphasis on deixis in *Structuralist Poetics* is a prime example) and often relies heavily on lyric theories from the Romantic era through the present, linguistic research from the mid-twentieth century forward, and body theories of the late twentieth century. However, recent studies of affect and emotion, particularly as applied to verse by New Formalist scholars, *do* represent a new "turn" in the humanities. In their insistence on broadening means of knowing to include the emotional and kinesethic alongside the more familiar cognitive and social, in their willingness to incorporate (if occasionally precipitously) evidence drawn from the sciences and social sciences, and in their return to form and genre, new fields of inquiry such as New Formalism, affect theory, and history of emotions call for a broader view of what constitutes knowledge in the academy and outside of it, as well as a radical re-thinking of how we read, understand, and interact with lyric texts.

This study's contribution to the rapidly growing field of embodied poetics has been to retrain scholarly focus on Middle English lyric, largely neglected for the past forty years, while simultaneously applying theoretical lenses that privilege kinaesthetic and affective knowing to lyric studies. I have argued here that Middle English lyric functions by subtly and

successfully connecting readers with its embodied textual subjects as well as with our own bodies as lyric experiencers. The avenues through which this effect is accomplished are multiple and carefully nuanced and include the use of deictic words, representation and elicitation of affect, and references to the ways that lyrics were physically embodied in the late medieval period in England through dance (especially by women) both implicitly in the carol form and explicitly through content. Late medieval lyric texts in English suggest a culture increasingly interested in “individual lives and interiorities” (*Medieval Autographies* 99), and the strongly detailed evocation of textual subjects and their text-worlds is created in Middle English lyric via deixis; sensory, affective, and kinaesthetic language; and various elements of form including meter, rhyme, and repetition. In recognizing the key role of form in connecting readers to the bodies of lyric subjects and to their own bodies, the emerging tradition of New Formalism is of profound use in readings privileging affect and embodiment. New Formalist scholarship acknowledges that linguistic and kinaesthetic means of constructing knowledge and self are not opposed but in fact mutually dependent—the ways we use language, as cognitive linguistics has long recognized, are profoundly indebted to and even in fact reliant on our embodied nature. For this reason, “marked” features of lyric—particularly “heightened” language (what Culler describes as lyric’s hyperbolic or “extravagant” nature), stress patterns, and oral/aural effects—both arise from and palpably affect the bodily experiences, rhythms, and emotions of lyric subjects and receivers.

At present, certain strands of the allied field of affect studies perhaps overemphasize the significance of the body at the expense of the mind; throughout this study I have suggested that a more integrated approach to an imbricated body-mind unit is more useful in examining lyric (and other) texts. Until the deep significance of the body is accepted by the

scholarly community at large, however, readers invested in embodied approaches to texts must continue to actively value kinaesthetic knowing. If some affect theorists rely overly much upon selected scientific studies suggesting that the body knows “before” the mind, even that the body has access to forms of knowing the mind does not, this phenomenon must be seen in context, as an over-correction of hundreds of years of mistrust of bodily and kinaesthetic knowing in Western scholarship, which persists through the present.

Kinaesthetic ways of knowing are not opposed to or even separate from mental processes; the physiological, the psychological, and the social are interconnected in the generation and solidification of knowledge and of self within individuals, groups, and societies.

In employing New Formalist and affect studies approaches, it is well worth considering that in recent years even the concept of “the body” is being radically reconsidered. Contemporary scholars “opening” ideas about the medieval body to revision and re-interpretation build on body, gender, feminist, and queer scholarship of the late twentieth century including, foundationally, Judith Butler’s work on gender, Carolyn Dinshaw’s queering of Chaucer and other medieval texts, and Caroline Walker Bynum’s work on corporeality and materiality. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, for example, has memorably argued for a fundamental reevaluation of the corporeal:

What if the body were conceived as ... open and permeable? What if corporeality and subjectivity—themselves inseparable—potentially included both the social structures (kinship, nation, religion, race) and the phenomenal world (objects, gadgets, prostheses, animate and inanimate bodies of many kinds) across which human identity is spread? (*Medieval Identity Machines* xii)

In this “opening” of the body, Cohen follows Donna Haraway and others (including many linguists, epidemiologists and neuroscientists) in arguing that the body is not limited to what we reflexively picture as the human form. Much, even most, work along these lines is being conducted vis-à-vis bodies and texts of the twenty-first century; Haraway and other

posthumanist scholars, for example, are interested above all in the changes science and technology have wrought on the body, from robotic prosthetics to vehicles and smart phones as an extension of self. However, medieval text experiencers were embodied in ways that are similarly fluid. Just as our identity easily, even unconsciously encompasses a car, laptop computer, or cell phone, tools were likewise employed in late medieval England as an extension of the body, enabling humans to efficiently plant and harvest crops, cook food and brew beer, clear forests, and reclaim marshlands. Social and religious organizations and institutions—from parish to guild to tithing to family—impacted individual identity in the medieval period in a way familiar to Americans in the twenty-first century but probably to a much greater extent, since individual self-sufficiency was neither as highly valued nor as possible as it is today in the West, with our economies and technologies of easily accessible, mass-produced food and objects. Like contemporary viruses and bacteria from the common cold to HIV, *Yersinia pestis*, the bacterium probably responsible for the bubonic plague of the late medieval era, moved from body to body, relentlessly incorporating itself into an individual's identity even at its host's profound expense. Embodied identity in both the medieval and modern eras is, further, fluid enough to incorporate other bodies; a nursing mother or lovers joined in sexual intercourse are perhaps the most obvious examples, but think also of the necessity of communal labor to a medieval harvest, or the frequent obligation of a late medieval English peasant woman to have a man “stand” for her in court. The body, then, whether medieval or modern, is not a discrete, bounded entity, but rather permeable, porous, absorptive, able to expand and alter its boundaries to incorporate tools, microbes and even other bodies, yet also, by and large, to maintain its sense of totality in their absence.

This openness of the body mirrors what Rei Terada calls the “generic openness” of lyric, its “disinclination to posit an inside or outside” (195). In fact both fields of study—embodiment and lyric—lend themselves to inclusivity and vagueness of boundaries. Like Terada and Cohen, I see this inclusivity as positive and productive, inviting us to consider the limits of body and genre without the necessity of fixing perimeters. How broad can a body be? With how wide a lens can we understand lyric?—and what corporeal and generic possibilities does this openness allow for? This inclusive approach may also serve as a counter-balance to the ever-narrowing insistence on situational specificity that is a hallmark of current scholarship across many disciplines. It is, obviously, of crucial importance to remain vigilantly suspicious of claims to universality, which so often encode hegemonies (particularly of gender, race, class, and ability) in ignoring or erasing embodied difference and attendant differentials of power. Further, it is clearly of the utmost importance to question medieval values and concepts, like “love,” or “selfhood,” that appear similar to our own but may in fact be radically different. However, it is also important to recognize that this approach can quickly become limiting, either by constricting the available categories of inquiry (for example, to race, class, and gender, which, as Cohen and Heather Dubrow suggest, are vital but in and of themselves insufficient in understanding the totality of an individual’s embodied experience), or by losing sight, as Susan Leigh Foster puts it, of what is “shared or communal within experience” (14)—of what makes us human. We must, then, consider medieval bodies with a sense of what Cohen calls “temporal interlacement.” Stressing how very foreign medieval bodies and ways of knowing were (as scholars tend to do when writing for other scholars) denies the important ways the embodied experiences of medieval people were in some ways eerily, profoundly similar to our own. On the other hand, over-emphasizing these similarities (an approach common when writing for or

speaking to a non-specialist audience) likewise betrays an incomplete understanding of embodied medieval realities. It is only by holding both truths in mind simultaneously that we can responsibly approach medieval embodied experience; medieval lives are *both* agonizingly familiar *and* incomprehensibly strange. Cohen argues for “the impossibility of choosing alterity or continuity” (*The Postcolonial Middle Ages* 5), and in approaching medieval bodies, textual and actual, we must read, consciously, effortfully, with this negative capability, allowing the texts in their familiar sentiments to move us (emotionally, cognitively, physically) toward empathy while never assuming that we “know,” intuitively, how a medieval text experiencer would have related to a particular lyric “I.”

Because every text experiencer is embodied, however, conceiving of text-experience as limited to the cognitive is false, impossible. Usually unacknowledged, our embodied experience shapes textual perception radically and irrevocably. Readers invested in affect might train themselves to read viscerally, but this simply involves paying attention, deliberately, to the physiological, psychological, emotional, and cognitive responses already taking place, inevitably, in the body.²¹² These felt responses—among them longing, disgust, curiosity, elation, boredom—occur whether readers are consciously aware of them or not. Like the medieval readers and hearers of these lyrics, we are moved (emotionally and, at least potentially, physically) by the lyrics. For this to occur, it must be the case that we recognize in them something of ourselves and our own embodied experiences, even if that recognition may occasionally assume a kinship with the medieval other that overemphasizes shared experience and does not entirely do justice to her simultaneous alterity.

To grapple with these questions at all, apropos of the lyrics, was until very recently seemingly of little interest to medievalists. Happily, a revival of scholarship on Middle

²¹² It perhaps bears repeating here that by “body” I mean the imbricated body-mind unit which itself exists as part of a larger “body” of social and political structures as well as emotional communities.

English lyric is in progress. In recent years scholars such as Seeta Chaganti, Kathleen Palti, Julia Boffey, Thomas Duncan, Ardis Butterfield, and Anita Obermeier are making lyrics increasingly visible in the larger landscape of medieval studies. Unfortunately, however, the lyrics are still largely ignored by both contemporary poets and lyric theorists (and when acknowledged are often profoundly misunderstood, as in the characterization, by the Poetry Foundation, of “Nou goth sonne under wod” as a “nature poem”). Exceptions do exist: Susan Stewart and Anne Carson have both engaged with medieval texts in their poetry and critical work, contemporary experimental and performance poet Caroline Bergvall explores Middle English language and texts in her recent book-length work *Meddle English* (2011), and poet Maureen McLane includes a chapter on Chaucer in her recent *My Poets* (2013), which blends scholarship, personal essay, and verse. By and large, however, contemporary poets in their poetry, scholarship, and teaching (both at the undergraduate and MFA levels) often limit their engagement with texts to work from the Early Modern period through the present. This is an unfortunate missed chance, since, as I have argued, Middle English lyric and contemporary verse are in many ways aligned: in their decentralization of the author, their hybridity, and their directed use of craft devices such as parataxis, pronouns, and kinaesthetic language. Scholars of medieval verse, on the other hand, could benefit immeasurably from close attention to the ways that working poets read. Poets are trained, in both the university and public reading settings, to devote close, felt attention to the formal aspects of verse and the effects of those craft choices upon the thoughts, emotions, and physical responses of themselves and their audiences. This reading strategy is rarely employed in the literature classroom at any level, and even less in scholarship on literature of the medieval or any other era. Just as affect studies and history of emotions, which are closely related and should naturally inform each other, are not at present “speaking” in any

meaningful sense, contemporary readers and writers of poetry, lyric theorists, and scholars of medieval verse are not (usually) entering into conversation in any medium.

There is still, then, ample room in the fields of lyric and medieval studies for a multiplicity of embodied approaches to reading the lyrics. Manuscript studies approaches, for example, focused on materiality, intertextuality, and reading processes, have hardly been touched upon here. However, in-depth studies of the ways in which lyrics in their surviving manuscripts were physically interacted with—read, used, touched, and held—have the potential to greatly illuminate the uses of lyric as textual and material artifacts, and the ways in which medieval text experiencers approached and understood them. Work on the provenance and history of manuscripts also has the potential to provide invaluable information regarding the use of the manuscripts—who read them? To whom? Were they read silently or aloud? Individually or communally? Toward what purposes and effects? The rigorous manuscript studies approaches that have characterized work such as Jessica Brantley’s *Reading in the Wilderness* (2008) have, so far, largely passed the lyrics by (with the possible exception of the Findern lyrics, which, as noted in Chapter 1, are at the heart of a lively and ongoing debate regarding female authorship, scribeship, and literary activity).

Closer attention to the uses of deictics, and especially pronouns, too, has the potential to clarify the ways in which formal devices are used to establish textual subjectivity. This study has examined only one very particular use of pronouns in Middle English lyric; there is much work still to be done here, following the robust body of scholarship during the past quarter century on pronouns in Modern and contemporary poetry. For example, although elided in this study, a productive direction for future research would be to examine how a lyric experiencer, instead of empathizing with the “I” of a poem, might instead put herself in the cognitive/affective position of the lyric’s “you.” This question is particularly

relevant to gendered readings of the lyrics, since the active, desiring subjects of most medieval love lyrics are male, while the acted-upon love objects are nearly always female. This binary does break down, however, in specific but suggestive circumstances, such as in many of the sexually explicit erotic lyrics, the songs of the women troubadours, and in fact many types of woman-voiced lyric.

In addition to the work that remains to be conducted on Middle English lyric in terms of manuscript-focused approaches, a related field remaining sadly underexplored is charms studies. Some work has been conducted on Old English Charms (most notably Karen Jolly's 1996 monograph *Popular Religion in Late Saxon England: Elf Charms in Context*) but Middle English charms—a corpus of texts in which magic, literary form, and embodiment overlap in powerfully suggestive ways—have been neglected. Charms hold great promise for contemporary scholars of literature interested in healing, subjectivity, and the relationships between author, audience, and text, but although these texts occasionally receive attention from folklorists, they are as yet largely ignored in literary studies and certainly in poetics (a small but significant subset of the charms are in verse). There is currently no comprehensive edited corpus of Middle English charms, and very few book-length studies devoted entirely to them. A happy exception is Don C. Skemer's *Binding Words: Textual Amulets in the Middle Ages* (2006), which examines the ways in which charms, in the form of textual amulets, were produced, disseminated and physically interacted with, primarily by being carried and worn against the body. Other contemporary scholars investigating the uses of Middle English charms as they are related to healing, subjectivity, and the relationship between author, audience, and text include Louise Bishop, Lea Olsan, T.M. Smallwood and the linguist Francisco Alonso-Almeida, but this is an area that is given little attention in literary studies and by medievalists in general. Lyric and affect theories both

have the potential to illuminate the means by which charms, as healing texts bearing features of both lyric poems (with clear, intentional use of formal features intended to effect practical changes in the material world), and physical objects intended to be instruments of healing, are tied to embodied subjectivity. Charms, as well as herbal recipes in verse, can productively elucidate the relationships between written and spoken language, healing practices intended to have an effect on the body, and lyric poetry. Charms in verse share many features with the anonymous Middle English lyrics addressed in this dissertation, including brevity as well as rhythmic, repetitive, and other “sound” devices. Further, they demonstrate particularly clearly the link between text, body, “I,” and audience, and as such lend themselves to detailed deictic analysis. Jonathan Roper has proposed the term “incantatory I” to describe the ways in which the “I” of a charm functions; the “I” of a verse charm, examined alongside the charm’s formal poetic devices, can open toward situated, embodied readings of the charms as both lyrics and as tangible objects intended to produce tangible results.

Privileging approaches that pay close attention to the body and the senses in the construction of knowledge is of increasing importance as scholars in diverse fields continue to grapple, as they must, with “what is shared or communal in experience” (Foster 14). As affect theorists and others, in recent years, have made their first attempts at relying upon recent research in the biological sciences—however flawed or incomplete these attempts have been—this step is nonetheless of great importance. The scholarly community at large may be nearing the end of what poststructuralist approaches, fragmenting knowledge and identity in ever more minute shards, can teach us about the nature of lived, embodied experience. As historians have long noted, we read the past, literally and figuratively, through the lens of present concerns, biases and values. This is both natural and inevitable; we need not presume knowledge of the historical other, or assume that her experience of body and

self is equivalent to our own, to understand that we likely share some aspects of embodied experience with her, experience rooted in a human physiology that has not changed appreciably since the medieval period. At the same time, we must continue to approach medieval lyric texts anew, insofar as is possible; persistently questioning what we think we know about medieval lived experience; interrogating, with each new development in medieval archaeology, demography, art, social and political history, and epidemiology, what the medieval body meant to its contemporaries, and what it means to us today; always remaining open to the shock both of recognition and of foreignness in medieval lyric texts and bodies.

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