The Woman's Voice in Middle English Love Lyrics

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Abstract

Courtly love lyrics, like other courtly genres, are dominated by male-voiced texts that privilege male perspectives. In conventional courtly love lyrics, women are silenced and objectified by the male speaker. Still, a handful of woman-voiced lyrics--"women's songs"--exist in the courtly love lyrical tradition. This thesis studies women's songs in Middle English and their role in the androcentric courtly love tradition.

In the first chapter, I discuss critical perspectives on conventional courtly representations of women. In the second chapter, I locate Middle English women's songs in literary contexts other than courtly love: the Middle English lyrical tradition, the cross-cultural phenomenon of medieval women's songs, and the manuscript contexts of Middle English women's songs. In Chapter Three, I discuss the individual songs themselves and examine the range of perspectives found in woman-voiced lyrics.

My discussion of Middle English women's songs includes texts not previously admitted to the genre. This expanded collection of women's songs creates an alternative courtly discourse privileging female perspectives. Middle English women's songs create a space for women's voices in courtly love.

Rèsumé

Les poèmes lyriques qui font partis de la tradition de l'amour courtois sont dominés par des textes qui privilégient la voix et les représentations masculines. Dans ces textes, le narrateur rèduit les femmes à l'absence et confine à un statut d'objet. Pourtant, quelques poèmes lyriques mettant en scène des voix féminines- "les chansons des femmes"--se manifestent dans la tradition de l'amour courtois. Cette thèse étudie ces chansons et leur rôle dans de context medièval de l'amour courtois.

Dans le premier chapitre, j'examine les theories critiques concernant les représentations conventionnelles de la femme dans l'amour courtois. Dans le deuxième chapitre, je situe les chansons medièvales dans des contextes littéraires autres que l'amour courtois: la tradition lyrique de l'Anglais ancien, les phénomènes inter-culturels des chansons medièvales des femmes et les manuscrits de ces chansons. Dans le troisième chapitre, je réfléchis sur les chansons individuelles et j'examine l'étendue des perspectives qu'on trouve dans les poèmes lyriques féminins.

Mon exposé des chansons medièvales féminines inclut des texts qui antérieurement n'auraient pas été admis comme genre. En privilégiant des perspectives féminines, cette collection élargie crée un discours alternatif sur l'amour courtois et un espace dans lequel les voix féminines peuvent s'affirmer

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A Note On References

Despite their small number (or perhaps because of it) the twenty-odd women's songs discussed in this paper have never been anthologized in a single collection. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the student of women's songs to find copies of the texts in a number of different lyric collections. Individual scholars employ different methods of documentation when discussing these songs, and it is a frustrating and time-consuming process to find the copies of the lyrics. In addition, different lyric collections identify and edit individual texts very differently. In an attempt to alleviate some of the frustration for the reader, I refer to the lyrics by the first line or, in a few cases, such as "Kyrie, so Kyrie", by a distinctive line in the lyric that is commonly used as a title by other critics.

The initial mention of a lyric in this paper is followed by a parenthetical documentation containing two references. The first is the lyric's assigned number in The Index of Middle English Verse, hereafter abbreviated to IMEV. The second reference is the author reference for the source in which the version of the lyric I used in my research can be found. With the exception of lyrics found in Greene, the number following the author reference is a page number. Since Greene numbered the carols he anthologized individually, I have quoted those numbers, with the abbreviation "No.," instead of the page number in the author reference to his book. For instance, the first mention of "Kyrie, so Kyrie" appears thus: "Kyrie, so Kyrie" (IMEV

377; Greene No.457). I hope that the reader finds this system useful easier for the location of editions of the texts used in this paper. Other editions of individual lyrics are listed in the IMEV, should the reader wish to compare them to my selections

Introduction

Given their small number in the corpus of Middle English courtly lyrics, perhaps the lack of critical attention given to women-voiced lyrics is not surprising. Most scholarly interest in women's songs, such as John Plummer's and Maureen Fries's respective contributions to Vox Feminae, has focused on the relationship between Middle English women's songs and continental women's songs. Such preliminary critical work has tended to amalgamate women's songs from several distinct literary traditions and to reduce their literary significance to a single contribution, their role as "other," or "organized contrast" to the dominant masculine voices in medieval literature, especially courtly love.

While it is true that women's voices automatically invert the courtly standard of the male poet addressing and describing the silent lady, I feel that this inversion does not necessarily place women's songs exclusively outside courtly discourse in the antagonistic manner that other critics suggest. Some English women's songs do parody courtly love, yet others describe--even criticize--courtly love from a woman's perspective without sacrificing courtliness itself. Despite the small number of texts, Middle English women's songs provide a variety of perspectives in their contribution to the courtly lyrical corpus.

This thesis will investigate the implications of the gender inversion of the speaking voice in courtly love lyrics in Middle English. The woman's voice provides

alternative representations of women in a tradition that silences and objectifies the courtly lady. Even women's songs we suspect of being vehicles for the misogyny of male poets often betray those standard masculine representations of women through their appropriation of the woman's voice. Other women's songs in Middle English may have been written by women. These women's songs reappropriate courtly love by reclaiming space for the lady's voice. All women's songs address women's experiences of love which are neglected in male-voiced texts. Individual women's songs, however, contribute different perspectives that contrast with each other, as well as with male-voiced songs. I will analyze these diverse contributions of women's songs to courtly literature.

Before the significance of the contribution of woman-voiced texts to courtly love can be appreciated, the androcentric nature of courtly love must be explored. The first chapter is a discussion of critical perspectives on courtly love, specifically, interpretations of courtly representations of women. Most courtly literature is written in the masculine voice, providing a masculine view of women. The courtly idealization of the lady is highly ambiguous, and there is no critical consensus as to whether such idealization provides positive or negative representations of women. Either way, representations of women in courtly lyrical texts are masculine literary constructions dependent upon women's silence. By breaking this silence, women's songs create a new space for women in courtly love.

In the second chapter I will elaborate on the literary contexts of Middle English women's songs aside from courtly love. As a new and somewhat ill-defined genre, there has been some critical confusion over the definition of women's songs, particularly in Middle English. English women's songs possess the distinctive characteristic of being dominated by one particular lyrical form--the carol. Plummer suggests that English women's songs are almost exclusively carols; however, in my research I have found that such is not the case. Although carols appear to make up a significant percentage of the corpus, women's songs in Middle English are not restricted to a single lyrical form. Also in this chapter I will address a second problematic assertion of Plummer's concerning the courtly role of women's songs. He suggests that women's songs are popular texts intended as deliberate foils to male-voiced courtly texts Again, I find the contribution of women's songs to English courtly literature more diverse than Plummer would allow, a characteristic they share with women's songs from the French, German, and Portuguese traditions. Nor does manuscript evidence support Plummer's assumption regarding the exclusively popular status of Middle English women's songs. A survey of Middle English manuscripts containing women's songs reveals that medieval scribes and compilers intended women's songs as both commentaries on and contributions to other courtly texts. Therefore, the final section of Chapter Two is a brief investigation of the codicological evidence concerning Middle English women's songs.

In Chapter Three, I turn to the individual songs themselves. Beginning with the critical assumption by Plummer and others that women's songs in Middle English tend to parody women and courtliness alike, I discuss the subversive feminism in songs that appear at first glance to be largely negative representations of women. Many of these lyrics contain feminist subtexts exposing medieval misogyny in life and literature. Laments of seduced and abandoned women may have been intended ironically, but they reveal the masculine prejudice of courtliness in its failure to include female realities, such as illegitimate pregnancy. While these women's songs represent women at a disadvantage in the game of love, other women's songs resist courtliness without sacrificing the strength of their female speakers. Such songs are a transition to the other extreme in women's perspectives on courtly love found in women's songs: lyrics that *celebrate* courtly love while avoiding the objectification of the courtly lady found in male-voiced texts.

Taken as a whole, it is difficult to provide any single definition of the role of women-voiced love lyrics in courtly discourse. In the handful Middle English women's songs found so far, there is a song for almost every conceivable variation of courtly lyricism. This diversity, however, means that women's songs respond to each other as well as to male-voiced texts. The result is a space for women's voices in courtly love that is much broader than previously recognized. Women's songs are a sub-genre of courtly love that creates, in effect, a woman's courtly love.

Chapter One

Critical Perspectives on Women in Courtly Love

For decades medievalists have debated the significance of the courtly love literary phenomenon. Gaston Paris introduced the term *amour courtois* in 1883, unleashing a "flurry of scholarly activity" (Ferrante, Perfection 3). Scholars continue to debate the legitimacy of a literature defined by its theme of sexual politics in the courts of the High Middle Ages; and to debate the significance of that literature to medieval life. Some scholars reject the idea of courtly love literature as a genre altogether. Perhaps the most emphatic skeptic of courtly love is D.W. Robertson Jr. who claims that "the subject has nothing to do with the Middle Ages" and that the literary phenomenon is only "an aspect of nineteenth and twentieth century cultural history" (17).

There is little question that courtly love literature is confused with courtly love scholarship. This is true of all literary scholarship, of course, but with courtly love it takes on special significance. Readings of representations of women in courtly literature have provided some of the most impassioned scholarly debate--probably because any discussion of love and gender relations is such an intensely personal (and

covertly political, ideological, and cultural) experience.[1] Given the small number of courtly texts most medievalists refer to, the vehemence of their conclusions is sometimes quite surprising. Theodore Silverstein entitled his essay on the history of courtly love scholarship "Guenevere, or the Uses of Courtly Love." His choice of the word "uses" draws our attention to the fact that what the critic brings to the text when evaluating it is as important as the text itself. Silverstein prefaces his essay by noting that "special concerns and interests, historical, literary, and philosophical," have "defined the general field of courtly love and determined some of its *foci* of interest" (77).

Yet it is the critical tradition of courtly love scholarship itself that provides the most substantial evidence for the existence of the genre of courtly literature, contridicting Robertson's assertion that it is only an invention of twentieth-century minds. Most medievalists agree that a number of medieval texts share certain characteristics identifiable as courtly conventions. The confusion arises from the diverse interpretations of those conventions. Robertson's rejection of courtly love is a response to early literary scholarship that interpreted courtly conventions quite

[1] One notes a marked lack of the usual academic reserve in critical texts on courtly love. From C. S. Lewis's gentle idealism to Robertson's strenuous, almost angry insistence that courtly love is an "impediment to the understanding of medieval texts," to Andrée Kahn Blumstein's indignant rejection of chivalry, the subject seems to inspire medievalists to more passionate defences of their arguments than scholarly writing usually allows. Toril Moi plays with the irony of this from a feminist perspective--much of the work of the earlier male scholars contains a number of chivalric or anti-feminist assumptions about women that would rival those of Andreas Capellanus himself. Moi notes that in their defences these scholars become as passionate as any of Andreas's lovers. "like hermeneutically distraught lovers, they untiringly try to decipher the sibylline utterances of the lady . . ." (29)

literally. Scholars imagined a society of nobility who lived life according to courtly convention and who left behind them a descriptive literary record of poems, tales, and songs. There does appear to be some historical evidences that social conditions in eleventh and twelfth century France were "generally favorable to the development of a literature of love":

> Among these it is customary to cite: the relative refinement of life at southern courts; the role of women in the shaping and support of an artistic climate appealing to both sexes; a general relaxation of feudal organization as evidenced in numerous *alleux* or free holdings, the demographic signs that the fief had ceased to fulfill a purely military function; the limited influence of an open-minded clergy over the southern magnates; a waning of enthusiasm for the Crusades . . .; and, finally, the revival of a money economy along with the reopening of trade routes to the east. (Bloch, Medieval French 215)

However, the textual evidence connecting these possible influences with courtly love literature is practically non-existent. If such historical social conditions did produce courtly literature, then the genre quickly became distant from the producing culture. In his essay "Clio and Venus: An Historical View of Medieval Love," John F. Benton illustrates this distance between the literary context of courtly love and the socio-political context of the Middle Ages. He sees little evidence, for instance, that adultery was tolerated in medieval society as suggested by courtly literature. Benton

suggests that the slight liberalization of marital laws in France were "a general movement toward a more peaceful and better ordered society in the second feudal age" (35). He does not attribute such liberalization to a courtly revolution.

The extent of courtly literature's autonomy from medieval society is difficult to judge. Many scholars find it unlikely that such a large, uniform literature could have developed completely independent of society. I too, see a conscious literary culture that could not have been written in a vacuum, although I do not think that legal codes, such as Benton used, would necessarily *reflect* a philosophical or artistic movement in the Middle Ages. Instead of reading courtly love as an historical reality, I prefer Joan Ferrante's reading of courtly love as "a mode of thought," or a medieval social philosophy:

> The concept is not a simple one, but rather a cluster of personal feelings and social values, all of which can be found in the early troubadour and *Minnesang* lyrics. . . . The poet's response to courtly love varies, depending on his point of view as well as on the genre in which he chooses to work, but whatever his attitude, whatever the genre--lyric, romance, allegory, fabliau--he does deal with it. For medieval writers, courtly love is real. (Ferrante, Perfection 3)

For most modern scholars, courtly love is also real, although each scholar envisions a different reality. As Robertson suggests, the literary genre of courtly love involves the psyche of those studying it as much, if not more, than it involves the

literature itself. If this is the case, it would certainly support Toril Moi's theory that interest in courtly love is revived during periods of social upheaval concerning gender relations. She notes that:

> Robertson is, of course, quite right in stressing the historically determined nature of this kind of research: if 'courtly love' became a focal point of interest first in the 1930s and then again in the 1960s, this is surely not unrelated to the fact that these two decades witnessed a crisis of conventional sexual ideology and values. Similarly, my own interest in Andreas and courtly love is inspired by contemporary feminist debate on love and sexuality. (16)

Gender representation lies at the heart of courtly discourse. Therefore, the interpretation of courtly representations of women is at the heart of courtly love scholarship. Nowhere is the social baggage that critics bring to a reading of a text more apparent than in the debate over courtly representations of women. How should we read the courtly convention of the idealization of the lady? Some critics claim that courtly love, as a literary tradition at least, has a legitimate feminist significance. Others deconstruct courtly discourse to suggest that the chivalry was deceptive, that it was only another variation of medieval misogyny. Indeed, in some courtly texts we can find some of the most vicious anti-feminism in medieval literature. The extremism of the courtly idealization of women automatically involves its binary opposite. Misogyny is latent in courtly representations and is prone to occasional flare-ups, as

Katherine Rogers notes in The Troublesome Helpmate: A History of Misogyny in Literature:

> [A] reaction against courtly love seems to have been inherent in the system, so that misogyny crept into even the chivalric romances. . . . It appears that even the ardent courtly lover occasionally suspected that he had overidealized love and women, and was moved to bitter rejection or at least to a wish to right the scales with a portrayal of what woman "really" is--often a cynical portrayal (58)

This ambiguity in courtly representations of women is epitomized by one of the primary courtly texts, Andreas Capellanus's The Art of Courtly Love. Books One and Two reflect the surface values of courtly love: the beloved is superior, the lover is abject, and the service of love is ennobling. However, Book Three is a violent renunciation of all that went before it, claiming that women are evil and inferior to men, and that love undermines a man's character and endangers his immortal soul.

The structure of The Art of Courtly Love as a whole points to the obvious dualism in Andreas's mind and in medieval culture concerning love and women. The misogyny of Book Three does not come completely out of the blue; it is a logical extension of the misogynistic subtexts in the idealization of the beloved in Books One and Two.[2] In many ways, idealization restricts women as much as it elevates their

[2] See Betsy Bowden 69-72 and Moi 26-29 for discussions of these subtexts. For a summary of approaches to The Art of Courtly Love see Moi, 14, where she divides the critics into four schools of thought regarding Andreas's intentions

status. It promotes an arbitrary and unattainable standard of femininity for real women. It is also, as Andrée Kahn Blumstein points out, a way of making women responsible for social mores, or as the case may be, the failure of those mores:

> [B]y imposing and foisting virtue and moral responsibility upon women, by positing an ideal for women to live up to, men have forced women into a role men do not wish to play themselves--indeed, a role that is almost humanly impossible to sustain. They have burdened women with goodness to excess. When the woman then fails to live up to this ideal, as she inevitably must, her failure is held against her by disappointed men. . . . (108)

Women's failure to attain the perfection of the courtly lady may justify their subjection in real life. Ironically, chivalric idealization disguises this oppression, because a male-created standard is the only testimony of what femininity is or should be (Blumstein 105).

Yet other scholars, most notably C.S. Lewis in his canonical The Allegory of Love, interpret the superiority of the lady as a sign of feminine power. "The lover," Lewis claims, "is always abject" (2). Lewis reads courtly love as an historical event in which real noblewomen had complete control over their lovers. Many scholars of courtly love hesitate to follow Lewis's reading of courtly literature as indicative of a medieval "women's movement." Sheila Fisher and Janet Halley, for instance, warn that

"the relationship between textual record and historical experience is too problematic to allow us to read literary images as representations of women's lives" (9)

However, identifying courtly literature with historical women need not be as literal as in Lewis's reading. For instance, while Joan Kelly-Gadol views the woman's role in courtly love as indicative of an historical "renaissance" for women, she does not claim that courtly love itself existed as an historical structure during the Middle Ages. She interprets courtly literature as an image for changes in the status of medieval women. Observing that women had greater inheritance rights than during most other periods, and that they often participated in the administration of estates (albeit usually in their husband's name), Kelly-Gadol claims that there was an increase in women's power in twelfth-century Provence (182).[3] Such legal evidence also "accounts for the retention of matronymics in medieval society, that is, a common use of the maternal name, which reflects the position of women as landowners and managers of great estates, particularly during the crusading period" (182).[4]

The "ideology about women" found in literature, Kelly-Gadol states, has a "rich inferential value" in its reflective role concerning a society's treatment of women:

> The literature, art and philosophy of a society, which give us direct knowledge of the attitudes of the dominant sector of that society toward women, also yield indirect knowledge about our other criteria: namely,

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[3] See also Bogin, 22-25; and Bloch, Medieval Misogyny 188-91 concerning changes in women's legal and social status in eleventh-and twelfth-century France.

[4] See also Bloch, Medieval Misogyny 186-88.

> the sexual, economic, political and cultural activities of women. Insofar as images of women relate to what really goes on, we can infer from them something about that social reality. (176)

Kelly-Gadol is quick to point out, however, that ideological reflections of the status of women are not necessarily literal duplications of historical women's realities. "[T]he relations between the ideology of sex roles and the reality," Kelly-Gadol cautions, "are complex and difficult to establish":

> Such views may be prescriptive rather than descriptive; they may describe a situation that no longer prevails; or they may use the relation of the sexes symbolically and not refer primarily to women and sex roles at all. (176-77)

Courtly love reflects some *conceptualization* of the lives of women--not a reality.[5] Such concepts existed in medieval minds, if not in medieval daily lives. For example, if the image of the lady spurning her lover's petitions and sending him into exile from her love was not an actual reality, perhaps it was a psychological image of women's increased legal strength in twelfth-century society more directly evidenced through matronymics and changes to inheritance and dowry laws (Bloch Medieval Misogyny 183).

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[5] This distinction is similar to Ferrante's distinction between courtly love as "a rigid system of rules of behaviour" and courtly love as "a mode of thought, expressed in literary convention" in her position regarding the correlation between courtly literature and history (Perfection 3).

Courtly love's idealization of the lady might have reflected an increased acceptance of women in positions of power. "[C]learly," Kelly-Gadol writes, "it represents an ideological liberation of their sexual and affective powers that must have had some social relevance" (181). Furthermore, she suggests, women's financial and legal strength "also accounts for the husband's toleration of his wife's diversions, if discreetly pursued. His primary aim to get and maintain a fief required her support perhaps even her inheritance" (182).[6] The expansion of women's rights in the twelfth century may have created a social atmosphere in which women were perceived as powerful and influential members of society in their own right--a power that was translated into the idealized lady of courtly love.[7]

Kelly-Gadol's assumption that the existence of courtly love is both the result of and the evidence for women's influence in the Middle Ages is the sort of argument

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[6] Kelly-Gadol notes that courtly literature seems to be unconcerned with the issue of pregnancy and illegitimacy: "Much as the tenet that love thrives only in adultery reflected and reinforced the stability of arranged marriage, so the political role of women, and the indivisibility of the fief, probably underlies this indifference to illegitimacy" (182). The class bias in courtly love is crucial to Kelly-Gadol's theory. I agree with her observation that the lack of concern with illegitimacy was dependent on the lady's protective wealth. The trials of unwed motherhood and illegitimacy usually, although not always, are softened somewhat by financial security. This is interesting in the context of the woman's song as anti-courtly. The abandoned maidens of woman-voiced carols are often poor and do not share the wealthy lady's unconcern with illegitimacy. Often the women's songs devote a great deal of time to the woman's apprehension of being found out once her pregnancy begins to show.

[7] Bloch reads the courtly response to women's increased social powers differently than Kelly-Gadol. While Kelly-Gadol sees courtly love as a reflection of the elevated status of women in society, Bloch perceives it as a control mechanism aimed at limiting those powers. "As long as woman was property to be disposed of," he concludes, "she was deprecated in accord with received misogynistic notions of the feminine as the root of all evil; but as soon as woman became capable of disposing--and, more specifically, of disposing property--she was idealized in the terms of courtly love" (Medieval Misogyny 196). Bloch reads idealization as a tool of social control.

that provokes writers such as Fisher and Halley to stress the danger of extending artistic representations of women to real women. Fisher and Halley note that received images of women circulated throughout male literary circles and that this "homosocial literary activity" meant that "literature was a fundamentally male 'homotextual' activity: one in which male writings referred to, responded to, manipulated, and projected desire upon other men and other men's writings as much, if not more, than they claimed to represent the extraliterary world and the women in it" (4).

Fisher and Halley's reading of courtly love interprets the idealized lady as a masculine literary construct that reinforces a male reality in two ways. First, the lady represents all that is valued in the courtly society: not only is she idealized femininity, but she is also idealized courtliness. The lover must strive to attain that societal ideal, to become one with it:

> Here are the crucial themes celebrated in every courtly song: the supreme beauty of the lady as a visible expression of ethical ideals; the universal esteem she enjoys as a consequence; the implicit vindication of the poet's complete submission to her will. She is the image of every courtly virtue. She *is* what he wants to become--what he can never be, but what he can recognize and aspire to. . . . [T]he ideal is unattainable. (Goldin Mirror 75)

The lady's second function in affirming male reality is her representation of characteristics outside the masculine self. The courtly lover's masculinity, and by

extension his individual identity, is reaffirmed by the lady, who, in her extreme femininity, defines what he is *not*. The paradox is that although it is impossible for the lover to attain the perfection of the lady, his failure to do so only reinforces his individuality, his humanity:

> The system that valorizes male individuality and social bonds also tends to appropriate woman's potential power and influence. As courtly love idealizes femininity, it dresses up the tensions of male/female relationships in the guise of love . . . Such a perspective shifts the emphasis from the lady as an object of individual desire to the lady as a vehicle for male interaction. (Burns 214-15)

The lady, on the other hand, is a collection of golden virtues, not an individual. She is "patterned into a state of limited or non-being" (Blumstein 113).[8] Human weakness is reserved for men alone, and it only reaffirms their humanity and individuality. Women, on the other hand, are restricted to perfection.

The ideal of the lady has little to do with women; the lady is a two-dimensional representation of a male ideal of femininity based on the concept of the feminine as a collection of characteristics projected outside the male self. In courtly love, the feminine is a collection of all of the positive attributes of humanity, while in misogynist literature the feminine is the most negative aspects of humanity. Both of

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[8] For further discussion of the lack of individuality in the ladies of courtly love see Bloch Medieval French 224-25 and Burns 258-59. For a discussion of the standardized beauty of women in courtly literature see Finke 119 and Schmolke-Hasselmann 319.

these representations dehumanize and objectify women, while reaffirming male individuality.

Nevertheless, some scholars of courtly love have reappropriated the lady. They admit that she may be a masculine signifier more than a representation of real women, but they perceive the poet/lover as more controlled by, than controlling, his own creation. Frederick Goldin's theory is an example of how a negative reading of the idealized lady in courtly love may be reinscribed as a positive reading. Goldin reads the lady primarily as a voiceless mirror created by the lover who uses her to reflect a desired image of himself. Yet Goldin is forced to admit that some of the lady's power is retained in her very ability to reflect--she judges the lover by the extreme standards he included in her creation. The male lover, like Narcissus, is a slave to his own reflection:

> This stabilizing effect of the self-image is a fact of human nature: what distinguishes the courtly man is that this image of his hoped-for self has merged with the image of the lady in his mind. To judge his present worth he looks to her, and if he is fortunate, she will give him some sign, and then he will know whether he is on the way toward becoming what he wants to be, what he knows he ought to be.
>
> He therefore gives her a terrible power over him, the power to judge him and to formulate his identity. ("Perspectives" 56)

Similarly, Ruth Cassel Hoffman suggests that the lady in male-voiced courtly poetry functions as a "shadow voice." Although she does not speak, her action, "that is, when the poet imagines her acting," determines the actions of the poet/lover (233). Hoffman concludes that the lady's voice can be heard through the poet-lover's reaction. The lady is the determining factor, the inceptive, albeit inaudible, voice of the poem:

> The lady's actions confirm the tone of the poem, and help us to assess the state of mind of the poet. Her function in the poem is to reflect the poet, to provide a cause for his feelings. (233)

Therefore, the creation of the lady by the poet/lover is subverted by her control of him. The courtly love poet has created a discourse that places him at a disadvantage. Courtly love may be a masculine reality, but the poet is not necessarily in control of that reality.

Moi offers a similar feminist reappropriation of courtly discourse in her rereading of Andreas Capellanus's misogynist Book Three. Moi points out that Andreas's about-face on the subject of women is based on his insecurities as to the ability of a courtly lover to truly understand (and therefore control) the words of the lady in courtly discourse (30). Andreas views the lady's words as "so many arts" intended to obstruct the lover's ability to distinguish an honest from a deceitful woman. Andreas's misogynistic solution is to recommend avoiding women altogether (Andreas 147).

Moi's feminist solution to Andreas's ambiguous attitude towards women is to accuse him of the same deceit he decries in women. The contradiction between the chivalry in Books One and Two and the misogyny in Book Three reflects Andreas's, and by extension courtly love's, ambiguous attitude towards women. In the final analysis, Andreas's own words are as ambiguous and misleading as any of those used by lady. Scholars who attempt to interpret them are reduced to playing the role of the anxious lover:

> . . . in the modern debate over the 'true' meaning of the De amore, the critics accurately enact the problems of the text: like hermeneutically distraught lovers, they untiringly try to decipher the sibylline utterances of the lady, who now, in a final twist of the plot, turns out to be Andreas himself. There is much consolation for feminists in the thought that in the end the old misogynist has been forced to play the female lead himself. (30)[9]

The deceitful lady is only one convention in the male-created courtly love tradition. It is the tradition itself that is ambiguous and deceitful, for which the male poet has only himself to blame.

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[9] Bloch also makes a similar point concerning the hypocrisy of medieval anti feminists who accuse women of loquaciousness and deceit, commenting that "the portrayal of women as endless garrulity or as contradiction would not be so significant, however, if it were not for the defining rhetorical context of all antimatrimonial literature, which seeks to dissuade from marriage and to do so precisely by speaking, often at great length" (Medieval Misogyny 55).

Nevertheless, many courtly love scholars remain convinced that courtliness contains an inherent male advantage. The words of the lover, while dressed in devotional and submissive clothing, may be read as containing veiled threats against the lady who refuses to participate in the courtly charade by accepting the lover's attentions:

> Service is but a thinly-veiled form of seduction leading ultimately to subjugation. . . . If the Lady . . . is indeed the dominant partner in the love relationship, she retains that claim to power only by fulfilling the wishes of her lover. She can play the role of 'lord' only as long as he is willing to relinquish it to her. Indeed women who do not love, those who refuse to submit to male desire, are said to commit a grave error and routinely accused of treason . . . . Yet treason, we should remember, is most commonly a crime of vassal against lord, not lord against vassal. (Burns 266-67)

The lady was superior to the lover because of her inaccessibility, her chastity. In such circumstances, the man's attempt to seduce the lady was subversive. The lover's adoration of the woman was really a tool to subdue her power over him: "The troubadour's desire to sleep with the Lady is ultimately a desire to bring her under control, to defuse the implicit power of women and reestablish the male/female hierarchy" (Burns 268-69).

Thus assured of his temporary inferiority to the lady, the lover could afford to be quite forceful in his so-called love-service. In Andreas's examples of seduction, the man quite often employs not-so-subtle threats against the lady in order to enforce his suit. In addition to accusing such women of "treason" in the courts of love--a somewhat poetic tactic--the determined lover might employ a more sadistic means of attaining his goal. Ladies who failed to respond positively to the lover's petitions were threatened with eternal damnation, in language that reflects the subconscious sadism and phallic obsession of the lover himself:

> The torture prepared for the celibate women is thoroughly sadistic. For each woman awaits a long pole, bundled about with thorns, held by two strong men. As punishment for her celibacy she must spend eternity seated astride the pole, her bare feet just touching the burning ground, as the two men twist and grind the thorny bundle. (Bowden 78) [10]

The lady is damned if she does and damned if she doesn't. She is seduced and conquered under threat of rape and torture.[11] Therefore, the superiority of the lady may be at best temporary and at worst illusory: "The poet's promise to serve his lady is a deft ploy designed to make her serve his ends" (Burns 266).

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[10] Bowden is summarizing a lengthier description found on pages 79-80 in The Art of Courtly Love.

[11] Toril Moi notes the irony in this seduction based on the threat of rape and comments wryly: "The lover's strategy is thus one of intimidation and verbal sadism: his language enacts his aggression . . . , and the fact that the courtly lady, unlike the peasant woman, escapes outright rape ought not to be interpreted as conclusive evidence of his respect for her" (25).

Most authors consistently read conflict into courtly love, assuming some sort of power struggle between the lady and her lover. Yet June Hall McCash finds evidence that, in a *few* courtly love texts, the courtly couple abandon this struggle and achieve some mutuality in their relationship. In such texts, the standard courtly idealization of women is often adjusted to accommodate a more realistic representation, although the representation remains essentially positive:

> Some writers did . . . accept mutual love as an attainable ideal, an acceptance almost always accompanied by a relatively positive attitude toward women. It is not surprising to find that poets associated with the court of a strong and independent woman were frequently among those who broached the question of mutual love. (McCash 432-33)

The dependence of texts celebrating mutual love on positive women characters is significant when we consider that women poets were apparently some of the strongest proponents of mutual love.

The songs of the *trobairitz*, one of the few examples of women's songs known to be actually written by women, are songs that often describe the ideal of mutual love (434).[12] Similarly, some Middle English women's songs, possibly written by women, deemphasize the power struggle between men and women. McCash's observation (that the ideal of mutual love thrived in female-authored texts that portrayed women in a realistically positive light), only underlines the fact that, in most cases, courtly love

[12] See also Bogin, 68-69.

was a male-authored convention quite divorced from the reality of its female subjects. Women in conventional courtly love texts were rarely portrayed as equals.

Like other courtly texts, courtly lyrics are usually written from male perspectives, in the voice of the poet/lover. The impact of the gender of the lyrical narrative voice on courtly representations of women is substantial because the lyric is often read as the quintessential courtly form. The lyric appears to be an "honest" courtly voice: its non-narrative sentimentality seems uncontrived when compared to other courtly literatures. Of course, the apparent honesty and spontaneity of the lyric is itself a courtly convention. The lyric is actually a "tool" in courtly love; it is the lover's sentimental offering to the lady in love-service (Burns 267). The individuality of any given lyric is an illusion. Burns notes that "when we consider that sentiment is often a product of social conditioning and that emotions, however personal, are not wholly individualized or unique, it becomes clear that the lyric *moi* of the troubadour song is as much a cultural construct as a poetic or empirical one" (256).

For the most part, gender representations in male-voiced courtly lyrics adhere to conventional courtly standards. Burns, who takes a pessimistic view of courtly representations of women suggests that the lyric is the epitome of courtly objectification of women. She suggests that the purpose of the lover's song is to "attenuate the menace of female sexuality by codifying desire and seduction, enclosing them within a safely idealized framework." The song is a "literary appropriation of sexual power," the result of which is "the portrait of the Lady" (267).

On the other hand, Hoffman suggests that the lady retains her autonomy in the lyric so that she can act as the impetus for the actions of the male lover, a role she plays in other courtly literatures as well. Hoffman points out that the actions of the lover are actually his *reactions* to the lady's gestures. He reflects her movements so that we may see the lady through his words:

> Through the poet's descriptions of her behaviour, we can piece together a picture of her attitudes. It is still a "shadow voice": she speaks through her actions, though these are dim, seen indirectly, with gestures sketched and not completed. But she is much more that a sign or a symbol: the lady in the poem is a voice, an actor, with a role--albeit an occasional one--to play. (234)

Hoffman claims that the silencing of the lady's voice in most courtly lyrics should be attributed to the non-narrative structure of the poem, not to male rhetorical dominance. The lyric, which is supposed to be an immediate emotional reaction of the poet to the lady, cannot accommodate her version of the story within the confines of its form. Therefore, the lady is a "shadow voice" in lyrical courtly discourse.

Courtly representations of gender may be read as both empowering and disempowering for women. Idealization of the lady has been interpreted as an antidote to medieval misogyny and as a component of that misogyny. Debates on the status of women in courtly love refer back to questions concerning the "truth" behind courtly literature. To what extent are the courtly representations of women reflections of

medieval attitudes towards women? Do they have any basis in medieval social, legal, psychological, or ideological reality? Certainly, any attempt to draw direct parallels between literary women and historical is highly problematic.

"But," as Krueger writes, "from the perspective of feminist criticism, the reading of woman as a metaphor is also a dangerous practice" (22). She goes on to warn that by separating the literary woman from the historical woman and making her a figment of the male imagination, the masculine production of literature is only reinforced. There is little question that male voices have a monopoly on courtly discourse, and that this affects the dominant representations of women in the literature. Most courtly texts are written in male voices, from male perspectives. Women's songs disrupt that male advantage by claiming a space in the most significant form of courtly love literature--the lyric. Courtly love lyrics exemplify courtliness; in lyrics, courtly conventions are condensed and essentialized. Furthermore, the lyric has a double life in courtly love. It is a text within a courtly narrative that maintains a separate identity as an individual courtly text. The courtly lyric both describes and participates in courtly love. Its combined functions reinforce any potential empowerment or disempowerment of women in the tradition.

Obviously, the woman's song inverts the male-voiced lyrical tradition by switching the genders of the poet and the "shadow voice." If the lyric is a distillation of courtly convention, then the woman-voiced lyric is the most influential space for women in courtly discourse. Although there are other literary forms--such as the

fabliau--that invert courtly love conventions, most, if not all, of these other forms rely on satire, which is only partially effective in granting women a voice of their own. Satire's exaggeration and derisive quality usually taints the sympathy of the portrayal, and undermines any potential empowerment. While many woman-voiced lyrics, especially in Middle English, are satirical, others are genuinely courtly. Apart from the initial role reversal, some women's songs work closely within the conventional dynamic of the courtly lady and her lover. This involves a fine distinction that I would like to emphasize: the woman-voiced lyric is, by definition, an inversion of and therefore a contrast to the courtly male-voiced song, however, the *result* of that inversion is not always anti-courtly.

The contribution of Middle English women's songs to courtly love should be understood in conjunction with other contexts of the songs; the Middle English lyrical tradition, the cross-cultural phenomenon of medieval women's songs, and their manuscript contexts. A distinctive minority in medieval literature, women's songs create a space where the borders of conventional scholarly disciplines--lyrical texts, national literatures, and codicology--are collapsed. The next chapter will address these contexts of Middle English women's songs and their intersection with courtly love.

Chapter Two

Contexts of Middle English Women's Songs

Only recently have scholars begun to recognize women's songs in Middle English. Vox Feminae, a pioneering anthology edited by John F. Plummer, was the first to address a body of woman-voiced Middle English texts as a genre. In his essay from that volume, "The Woman's Song in Middle English and its European Backgrounds" he compiled a list of fifteenth-century lyrics composed in a woman's voice. Altogether, Plummer's list includes nineteen Middle English lyrics. Of these nineteen, three are fragments or couplets (IMEV 445, 3902.5, 3897.5), and two (including one of the couplets, 3897.5) were not anthologized in available sources, insofar as I could determine.[13] Therefore, Plummer's list really contains only fifteen complete women's songs that would be available to most scholars.

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[13] IMEV 445 is found in the sermon of a disapproving cleric lecturing on the dangers of "wilde wimmen" who participate in ring-dances (Greene xlix-l). The complete couplet is as follows: "atte wrastlinge my lemman i ches / and atte ston-kasting i him for-les." IMEV 3902.5, described in the Index as "lament of fallen virgin--one couplet" may be found in Mynors 216. "Vaylaway whi ded y so / now ich an in alle wa" is the couplet in its entirety. IMEV 3897.5, "Were that that is ydon [sic]," is another couplet, however it was not available in any of the standard sources for Middle English verse. It is described only by the authors of the Index as "an act beyond recall--one couplet." I assume that the other line of the couplet indicated to Plummer that the speaker was a woman--I was unable to confirm this for myself. Another lyric, IMEV 438, "At the north end of seluer whit" was also unavailable. It is listed in the Index as only being published in L.S. Mayer's Music, Cantilenas and Songs Etc. from an Early Fifteenth Century Manuscript, (London: privately printed, 1906) of which there were only one hundred copies published.

Plummer offers no precise definition of women's songs as a genre. A survey of the material he includes in Vox Feminae, however, reveals certain shared characteristics among women's songs from a variety of literary traditions, including French, German, Portuguese, and English. The broadest definition of women's songs is that they are secular lyrics written in women's voices, which celebrate or lament women's experiences of love and sexuality. Because of the emphasis on secular love, women's songs are included in the secular lyrical tradition.[14]

Women's songs are a genre only recently recognized in medieval literature, and they do not fit easily into inherited literary catagories. Distinguishing them as secular overlooks the fact that there are woman-voiced religious lyrics, most notably the Marian *planctus*, a category of religious lyric in which the Virgin Mary mourns the death of her Son. Marian lyrics and secular women's songs were occasionally included

[14] The lament is found more often than the celebration. The theme of the abandoned woman is seems to be dominant in English woman's songs, as in women's songs in general. Of course, many male-voiced lyrics sing of estrangement from the beloved, yet the difference, as Anne Howland Schotter perceives it, is that men's abandonment is a temporary obstacle in a courtship that they initiate and continue. The men are generally active in courtly love, with the woman as the passive recipient of the love-service, therefore male songs of estrangement do not involve any essential passivity in the way the woman's songs do "while the man's songs either bewail frustration or boast of consummation, woman's songs merely lament abandonment" (Schotter 22). Lawrence Lipking also interprets the poetic tradition of abandoned women as "passive" although he does not share Schotter's judgement of such songs being "merely" laments. Indeed, Lipking reads such passivity as "highly subversive." These songs "subvert the rule of action" in literature, which assumes the there must be "a series of events brought to their natural and logical conclusion." The passivity of abandoned women is an event in itself--their inability to act on their own behalf means that the rest of the text must move around them: "Nothing they do will bring the hero back, nothing they say has power to affect the plot. The best they can hope to achieve is to retard the inexorable forward motion of events. Yet they do succeed in giving the reader pause" (3). Women's songs are a "pause" in the courtly drama of infatuation, pursuit, and seduction. Often, they describe what occurs after the courtly narrative has finished for the man--the woman is left with heartbreak, humiliation and pregnancy. The woman's lament serves as a reminder of the false structure the courtly narrative places on gender relations.

in the same manuscript, suggesting that medieval scribes may have thought them to be related. The manuscript Cambridge University Library Ff. 5.48, for instance, includes both women's songs and two Marian laments.

Religious and secular women's songs interact by thematic contrast, as Maureen Fries discusses in her essay "The 'Other' Voice: Woman's Song, Its Satire and Its Transcendence in Late Medieval British Literature." Fries notes that "Mary's *planctus* defines by contrast the position of the seduced and abandoned lay female" (159). The women of the secular lyrics lose their virginity and bear the illegitimate children of corrupt clerics, in contrast to Mary's constant virginity and divine maternity (160).

Still, the interaction between Marian lyrics and women's songs is the interaction between two related, but distinct, genres. Despite the shared characteristic of the female voice, Marian lyrics should not be subsumed into the genre of the woman's song, for the definition of women's songs involves thematic considerations in addition to the poetic convention of the woman's voice. Women's songs deal with women's experiences of love, sexuality and gender politics. They involve the plurality of women's lives, not the exclusive divinity of the Blessed Virgin. The Virgin is even more removed from the reality of women than is the courtly Lady, whose experiences, although objectified by the male court poet, at least assume the structure of human gender relations. As I will show below, women's songs respond more directly to male-voiced court lyrics than to woman-voiced religious lyrics.

The straightforward and inclusive definition of women's songs as secular love lyrics written in women's voices is employed by scholars of French, Portuguese, and German women's songs in Vox Feminae. In his study of the Middle English woman's song, however, Plummer implied two further restrictions to his own definition Through his choice of texts, Plummer suggests that the Middle English woman's song is an exclusively popular genre that provides "organized contrast" to the genre of the male-voiced court lyric ("Middle English" 135). In order to substantiate this argument regarding the popularity of the woman's song Plummer limits his list almost exclusively to songs in the carol form.[15] The carol is a descendant of popular English dance-songs; its structure is closer to a musical form than is the structure of other lyrics. The carol's musical genealogy, therefore, aligns it with the popular tradition.

Plummer's unstated but active assumptions regarding the "primitive lyricism" of Middle English women's songs causes him to locate the genre primarily in the most musical and popular lyrical form, the carol (6). He appears to interpret woman-voiced lyrics quite literally as "songs", while other scholars interpret lyricism more broadly. It is generally assumed that, with the exception of the carol, the musicality of lyrics is more a suggested quality then a structural reality:

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[15] I have observed that two songs in Plummer's list are not carols: "Summe men sayon that I am blak" (IMEV 3174; Schmolke-Hasselman 320) and "I can be wanton and yf I wyl" (IMEV 1286.5, Wagner 452). Athough he lists them with the woman-voiced carols, Plummer does not include either of these songs in his discussion. This indicates to me that he was aware that these songs compromised his connection of women's songs to carols, and that he deemphasized the non-carol lyrics accordingly

> To speak of the "musical" qualities of [lyric] poetry is not to say that such poetry is written always to be sung. Neither does the appellation of "musical" indicate that [lyric] poetry possesses such attributes as pitch, harmony, syncopation, counterpoint, and other musical characteristics of a tonal, musical line or sequence. (460)

While I don't agree with Plummer's exclusion of other lyrical forms, the fact that fifteen of the twenty women's songs discussed in this paper are carols does warrant an investigation of the carol and its relevance to women's songs.

In The Early English Carols, Richard Leighton Greene anthologized Middle English carols and distinguished them from other secular lyrics. His definition of the carol is still standard in Middle English literary studies. Greene claims that the carols, unlike other lyrics, retained their musical connection because they descended from the dance-song or "carole." He claims that the carol can be "distinguished from other lyrics by its form rather than its subject" and that the distinguishing formal convention is the burden, or chorus, repeated between stanzas (xxxii). Greene suggests that the burdens are "the mark of [the carol's] descent from the dancing circle of the carole" (xxxiii). Greene finds the burdens to be indicators of "the real, the vocal life of the carols" and places them in the popular tradition (xxxiii).

Greene asserts that all carols are essentially popular, not courtly, because of their association with their orally transmitted descendants, dance-songs. Nevertheless, he finds it unlikely that carols that appear in fourteenth and fifteenth century manuscripts

were themselves transmitted only orally up until that point. Probably they had circulated in writing for some time, although it is possible that they had begun as orally transmitted texts. By the late Middle Ages Greene sees evidence that the carols were deliberately collected in manuscripts, indicating "conscious activity on the part of individuals through whose hands they passed, rather than [an] . . . uncontrolled oral tradition" (cxxix-cxxx).

Greene suggests that most of the carols may have been transmitted orally within a "limited group" of educated peers who then copied them and composed others (cxxx). He describes this point as "midway between the uncontrolled oral tradition of folksong and the exclusively manuscript tradition of long and learned works":

> The repeated performance of a carol would involve its being committed to memory, and many people who never set pen to parchment doubtless learned some of these carols by word of mouth. But the same pieces, unlike folk-songs, were also current in manuscript copies, against which singers who were not illiterate folk-singers could check their repertory. (cxxxi-ii)

Plummer implicitly derives his definition of women's songs from Greene's definition of carols. Not surprisingly, he reaches a similar conclusion concerning the popularity of the English woman's song. The popular status of the carol agrees with Plummer's perception of the woman's song as "organized contrast" in English lyrical tradition. Caught in his restriction of the woman's song to

virtually one form, Plummer attempts to further justify that restriction by suggesting that carols are "appropriate to the female voice," reasoning that women were often the dancers in the ring-dance ancestors of the carol (Plummer "Woman's Song" 138).[16] Indeed, many of the woman-voiced carols evoke the festivals where these dances may have been performed (Greene cxxxix).

Nevertheless, despite the temptation to make a literal connection between dancing women and woman-voiced carols, we must be wary of trying to turn a literary convention, the woman's voice, into an historical reality. Plummer himself notes the difficultly of distinguishing the literary from the historical in the face of lyrics that seem to be both dance-songs and *about* dance-songs:

> The carol both was (as dance form), and *was conceived as being*, appropriate to the female voice. The distinction between . . . the songs sung by women in their dances (those complained of by the councils), and songs which served to evoke the picture of dancing women, should be insisted upon. (138)

Plummer goes on to suggest that, at least in some cases, the motif of dancing women is itself a literary convention, an "artistic male creation" based on the cultural myth of ring-dancing which may or may not have had some sort of legitimate historical basis

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[16] In Greene's lengthy chronicling of the literary evidence of the tradition of ring-dances and the singing of carols, a significant number of the examples he gives involve the (usually illicit) dancing of women. See Chapter 2 of his Introduction, "The Carol as Dance-Song," particularly the examples on pages xlvi-xlvii and xlix-l.

(138-39).[17] Yet, despite his hesitation Plummer connects his list of women's songs to the role of women in the dance-song tradition. His focus is on the "song" quality of woman-voiced lyrics.

Form, specifically the repeated burden, rather than voice, determines Plummer's definition, and his list of women's songs is restricted to woman-voiced carols. Furthermore, the popularity of carols denotes the popularity of women's songs. Plummer locates women's songs in the role of "organized contrast" to courtliness: that is to say, women's songs are aware of the courtly conventions and consciously reject them. They participate in the courtly spectrum by "defining what courtesy was not" (137).

The underlying agenda of finding Middle English women's songs almost exclusively popular caused Plummer to neglect woman-voiced lyrics outside the carol form. In my analysis of English women's songs I have added five more lyrics to Plummer's original list of fifteen available carols. Four of the lyrics in question are found in the Findern Anthology (Cambridge University Library MS Ff. 1.6) and although one of them comes close to the carol form ("What-so men sayn") the others are simply lyrics.[18] The fifth song, "Greuus ys my sorowe" is found in British

[17] Although Greene may have been guilty of placing too much emphasis on the connection between carols and the dancing women, Plummer does not discount the historical evidence that seems to suggest real dance-songs of women existed "at least as early as the sixth century" (137). He bases his conclusions, as Greene and others did, on the "ecclesiastical grumblings" condemning such songs. See Greene, cxl-cxlv

[18] Cambridge University Library MS. Ff. 1.6 was christened the "Findern Anthology," by Rossell Hope Robbins in 1954 ("Findern" 610). He chose the name from the family he determined to be the primary owners of the manuscript judging from notes found containing references to the Findern family. The

Library MS Sloane 1584. These additional five women's songs are examples of lyrics that are further removed from their musical origins than are the carols. They are also examples of English women's songs that retain the courtly ethos even as they subvert the primary courtly convention of the silent lady/love object, defying Plummer's dictum that Middle English women's songs are strictly popular.

The division between popular and courtly texts is problematic, as it imposes modern standards on medieval literatures that perhaps did not operate within such rigid definitions. To be sure, there is a real sense of a tradition of literature that participates in some way with a refined notion of love that has been called "courtly." As a literary form, courtly literature seems to involve "a range of learning and literary art" exclusive (at least in its beginnings) to the upper-class court poets who shared with their audiences "certain values, conventions and artifices not universally recognized" (Dronke Medieval Latin and the Rise of the European Love Lyric 1). By contrast, the genre of popular poetry is comprised of texts that do not evoke this refined vision of court life or employ the poetic conventions of courtliness.

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editors of the facsimile edition of the manuscript retained the name along with Robbins's conclusion that it was compiled "in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries" at a Derbyshire country home by the Finderns and their friends (Beadle and Owen viii). Kate Harris challenged prevailing opinion concerning the origins of the manuscript, claiming that Robbins's conclusions were based on "evidence which is not only post-medieval but which also represents an abuse of the volume" (299). She goes on to note that, given the number of different surnames in the manuscript, "it is as accurate, if not more accurate, to call the manuscript the 'Cotton,' 'Frauncis' or 'Shirley Anthology,' as it is to refer to the 'Findern Anthology'" (307). Everyone seems to agree, however, that the manuscript was available to several members of families who apparently had country homes in Derbyshire.

Despite acknowledging the arbitrary classification of courtly and popular texts, medievalists persist in attempting to assign individual texts to these two catagories. Rossell Hope Robbins suggests that the popular lyrics, judged "unworthy of permanent record" were often jotted down in the margins, fly-leaves, and other scattered areas of empty space in the manuscripts of larger collections. He concludes that popular texts "were preserved only because the manuscript, to which they were incidental, was preserved." On the other hand, courtly texts, Robbins suggests, were deliberately preserved "for their own supposed worth" (Secular Lyrics xxxiii-iv).[19]

The implied value judgement in Robbin's comment is often assumed by medievalists to have been shared by medieval writers and compilers themselves. However, as Julia Boffey warns, "the degree of care evident in the copying need not invariably indicate the relative desirability of any text" (34). Furthermore, manuscript evidence suggests that medieval writers were fully aware of the dialogue between the two types of literature and the contribution of popular texts to that dialogue. Boffey points to Trinity College, Cambridge MS R.3.19., as an example of the "debate on the nature of love and of women" between popular and courtly texts. Anti-courtly texts are found combined in this manuscript with courtly love lyrics resulting in a "pattern of

[19] Some manuscripts appear to have been deliberate collections of popular material, especially carols An example of a carol collection is St. John's College, Cambridge, MS S 54 (259), which appears to have been a pocket-book collection (Greene 325). Similarly, BL MS Sloane 2593 contains an immense number of songs and carols to the exclusion of almost everything else (307-7). Surely the preservation of these popular lyrics was not incidental or dependent on more courtly texts

courtly sentiment undercut by realism and anti-feminism" (19).[20] The Findern manuscript, which contains several women's songs, also combines courtly and popular texts. The women's songs, incidently, contribute to both sides of the debate.

Therefore, manuscript evidence supports Plummer's idea that the popular women's songs, like other popular texts, provide "organized contrast" to courtly lyrics. Other critics have also recognized the shared space of popular and courtly material. Even Boffey, who excludes anti-courtly lyrics from her study of courtly love lyrics does so in the recognition that the "'courtliness' of the poems is more a matter of their implicit values than of any connection with real, historical courts" and that "parodies, . . . of course rely for their effect on acquaintance with courtly forms, and have some claim to be described as 'courtly' themselves" (4).

To circumvent the problematic polarization of popular and courtly catagories, Peter Dronke suggested the more inclusive term "the courtly experience" to connect the two poles (3). The value of Dronke's inclusive phrase has special significance to the study of women's songs. Songs such as some of those taken from Plummer's original list of carols could be considered a reaction against the principles of courtly

[20] Anti-courtly literature parodies the courtly love literary tradition directly--that is, it parodies the literary convention itself. "Parody and satire," explains Kathryn Gravdal, "are quite distinct systems of text production. Parody is a textual play on literary traditions and conventions, while satire is a literary commentary on the real world, usually meliorative in its pragmatism" ("Vilain and Courtois" 6). Gravdal implies that what is not courtly is automatically parodic or satiric. Women's songs can be either, both, or neither in their commentary on courtly love and the reality of women's lives. Although some women's songs are anti-courtly in the sense that they invert the courtly paradigm of the silent lady, many of them can not be said to "parody" courtliness or "satirize" female experience. Such women's songs are unusual examples of non-courtly material, which nevertheless retain the illusion of courtliness through their appropriation of most of its conventions.

love. They have engaged in the courtly experience, if only to undermine it. Songs such as the four Findern women's songs I have added to the corpus are definitely courtlier than the carols; however the woman's voice still provides the "organized contrast" to the male-voiced court lyric. These songs *use* the courtly experience to bring women's realities to light.

Studies of women's songs in other languages are not restricted to poems that are clearly musically structured (in the sense of the repeated burden of English carols), or exclusively popular, and I can see little justification for insisting upon these characteristics in Middle English. Plummer attempts to substantiate his concept of Middle English women's songs as anti-courtly by emphasizing their connections to anti-courtly elements in continental texts. He concludes that Middle English women's songs are as courtly as their European counterparts by virtue of their shared role of organized contrast.

I have two objections to Plummer's conclusion. My own analysis of Middle English women's songs has convinced me that they are not exclusively anti-courtly, and that Plummer has overstated this role in order to make them fit into his system of "organized contrast." Secondly, Plummer's tactic of assigning the woman's song in English the role of "organized contrast" also leads him to overstate the anti-courtly role of the woman's song in other languages. In order for his argument to work, Plummer must exaggerate the satire and anti-feminism of continental and English

woman's songs alike, which he does primarily by aligning them with the anti-courtly fabliau tradition ("Middle English" 136).

Plummer connects several characteristics shared by anti-courtly English women's songs and French fabliaux: the ironic lament for lost virginity, the character of the clerical seducer, the themes of abandonment and illegitimate pregnancy, as well as the more general anti-feminism in which women are portrayed as lustful, greedy, fickle and downright nasty people (144-50). However, this comparison is based on the extraction of anti-courtly traits without regard for their original textual contexts. Plummer's monolithic view of the anti-courtly woman's song forces him to disregard or de-emphasize courtly women's voices in all languages.

Plummer bases much of his evidence for the anti-courtliness of women's songs on the assumption that the songs were male-authored, but written in women's voices. His conclusion is that the representations of the female characters are largely ironic and intended to be anti-feminist. Therefore, he draws attention to women's songs in French and German that appear to be similar ironic presentations of women's voices by male poets. Yet this assumption of male authorship is not necessarily valid. Meg Bogin's study of the *trobairitz* describes a genre in which the women poets speak unironically of their experiences of courtly love, writing of their "own intimate feelings" (Bogin 68). Not only does Plummer neglect to connect courtly women-authored texts such as the *trobairitz* to English women's songs, but he also rejects the possibility that male-authored women's songs could respond to courtly texts without

being ironic or anti-feminist. In his study of German women's songs authored by men, William E. Jackson cautions against reaching such conclusions: "It is not generally obvious to what extent the portrayals in the poems . . . show some basic attitude toward women on the part of a given poet" (81).

As Jane Burns has noted, the subjectivity of the male-voiced court lyric is largely a poetic construct (256). The issue of subjectivity becomes even more compelling for woman-voiced material. How genuine are the "intimate feelings" of the *trobairitz*? Are male-authored women's songs usually, as Plummer suggests, ironic or misogynist? The Portuguese woman's song tradition suggests that this was not always the case. Kathleen Ashley suggests that parody in male-authored women's songs in Portuguese is sometimes a self-parody of courtly pretensions by male poets themselves, rather than a parody of the women whose voices the poets appropriate. Ashley describes how the *cantigas de amigo* often take the form of a discussion between two female characters on women's courtly love experiences:

> The presence of the lover or the poet-as-lover, especially in poems addressed to girlfriends, sometimes provides the occasion for clever parody of love poetry, typically at the expense of the male love lyric and the male poet, not the female persona. The formulae of the male love lyric may be mocked, as in one poem where the exaggerated claims of the courtly lover that he loses his mind or dies for his mistress are held up to ridicule. The woman speaker tells her *amigas*

that when she sees her lover turn up quite healthy after all his protestations she asks him, "Didn't you die for love?" (38)

The gentle mockery of courtly convention in this poem is reminiscent of one English woman-voiced lyric neglected by Plummer. Although this English lyric is not a dialogue like the Portuguese lyric Ashley writes of, it evokes a comparable scene of a confidence between women concerning courtly love experiences. In "What-so men seyn" the woman speaker warns her female audience of the courtly pretensions of men:

What-so men seyn,
Love is no peyn
To them, serteyn, Butt varians.
. . . . . .
For every daye
they waite ther pray,
Wher-so they may And make butt game.
(IMEV 3917; Barratt 268-70)

The criticism in this lyric is, as in the *cantigas de amigo*, directed at men and their courtly games. The gentler humour and sardonic voice may be, as Elizabeth Hanson-Smith suggests, "a particularly 'feminine' sense of humour" that provides stark contrast with the more vicious anti-feminist lyrics found in both male and female voices (191).

These two lyrics argue against any suggestion that criticism of courtliness is the exclusive property of either sex. The Portuguese song was male-authored, and it is very possible that the English song was woman-authored, yet both are anti-courtly, *feminist* women's songs. Plummer's assumption regarding the irony of male-authored women's songs is too simplistic. Women's songs, be they composed by women or not, contain possibilities for both feminism and anti-feminism. Similarly, it is dangerous to draw assumptions concerning the literary "nature" of women's songs as a genre based on the presumed (but ultimately unknown) gender of their authors. Both the songs discussed above possess attributes often mentioned in connection with women's songs in different literary traditions: less contrivance, more honesty, and more realism than the male-voiced court lyric. Many critics attempt to attribute some kind of emotional or poetic "purity" to women's songs.[21] This is an extremely contentious issue, as it calls into question all of our assumptions regarding male or female authorship and reveals our lack of the most basic historical knowledge concerning medieval poets. I feel that the more "realistic" nature of the woman's song may be more a phenomenon that is perceived by critics than an actual reality--although I admit that women's songs appear to subscribe *less* to courtly poetics.[22]

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[21] Robbins perceived the lyrics as having a "simple form" ("Secular Lyrics" 233). Meg Bogin felt that the language of the *trobairitz* lyrics was "direct, unambiguous and personal" in comparison to the courtly conventions of the male troubadours (67). Similarly, Plummer notes that woman's songs "contrast with the male love lyric in being more highly narrative and in striking the reader at first glance as more realistic" ("Woman's Song in Middle English" 135).

[22] Whether this is the result of gendered authorship or literary convention is impossible to say. I agree with William Jackson's comment that "It is not a simple matter to draw conclusions which bear on knowledge about the sexes from the texts of the woman's song, lest one risk attributing to sexual make-up what may be actually due to tradition" (53).

This argument for the "realism" of women's songs can be upheld so long as we keep in mind that there are exceptions to such rules; they are only general conclusions that should not be taken as the defining qualities of the woman's song. The first premise of courtly love, the male adoration of the lady, is immediately overturned in all women's songs because it is the lady herself who is speaking. Therefore, we can say that at least one "unrealistic" convention of the male court lyric is dispensed with the moment the lady is given a voice. Other courtly conventions may or may not follow. For instance, Ashley mentions one *cantigas de amigo* in which the speaker mocks the male lover's assertion that he will die for love. Yet in an English woman's song we find the line "That unkyndnes haith kyllyd me" (IMEV 1018, Barratt 283). Clearly, in this lyric the woman speaker is adhering to the courtly convention of dying for love found in many of the male-voiced lyrics. Therefore, I am wary of generalized conclusions regarding the realism or anti-courtly qualities of woman's songs, other than the basic divergence from the trope of the silent lady.[23]

The silence of the objectified lady/love object in courtly discourse is the primary convention of male-voiced courtly love lyrics. Women's songs from all cultures share the initial premise of inverting that preliminary convention by endowing the lady with a voice. Yet this seems to be the only common denominator of women's songs cross-culturally--women's songs defy further generalization. Some are positive in their representations of

[23] In her essay, "Fictions of the Female Voice: The Women Troubadours," Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner cautions against reading French women's songs as personal testimonies instead of poetic constructs. "The women poets," she notes, "have inscribed their own voices in a *highly conventional lyric system*; any efforts to distinguish the particular character of their voices must recognize at the same time *the rhetorical play which sustains the appearance of spontaneity and feeling*" (867, my emphasis).

women, and some are negative. Some are presumably male-authored, others female-authored Some are satirical or parodic, others are courtly. To attempt to nationalize woman's songs in any one language, or to universalize them, would mean rejecting their incredible diversity We should recognize the common denominator of the woman's speaking voice without essentializing woman's songs as they appear in a variety of languages and cultures

Plummer's perception of women's songs as "organized contrast" to male-voiced court lyrics is legitimate. Unfortunately, he sabotages his own insight by interpreting the "contrast" of the court lyric strictly as anti-courtliness. Like other critics of women's songs, Plummer essentializes women's voices into a single contribution. I find that women's songs provide a variety of responses to male-voiced lyrics; they contrast male constructions of courtly love in a number of ways.

Plummer is not the only critic guilty of reducing a diverse collection of woman-voiced lyrics to a single literary function in courtly discourse. Woman-voiced lyrics have probably been lumped together by critics as the "other" voice simply because of their small number in a corpus of predominantly male-voiced lyrics. However, this small group is not presented as a uniform contribution in medieval manuscripts.

Women's songs appear, like most other secular lyrics, distributed throughout fifteenth century Middle English manuscripts. This rather late transmission has been attributed to religious control over literary production in the Middle Ages. Rossell Hope Robbins commenced his study of secular lyrics with the following remarks:

> The most significant feature of the Middle English secular lyric is its subordinate position in relation to the religious. For every secular lyric there are three or four religious. . . . I do not think that the destruction of manuscripts accounts entirely for this disparity; it is simply that religion dominated the scene, and all problems and conflicts had a religious frame of reference It is only towards the end of the fifteenth century, when the ideas of the Renaissance began to ferment in England, that secular poems became more popular. (Secular Lyrics xvii)

Once the religious stronghold on literature began to loosen, more and more secular material appeared in manuscripts. Collections of primarily secular material were produced towards the end of the Middle Ages. Secular lyrics appear in almost every type of manuscript. Some are found in the margins and on the blank folios of manuscripts otherwise devoted to scholarly or religious material. Others are found in manuscripts of other secular material, including significant works by major authors, or collections of miscellaneous literary texts. There are a few manuscripts that appear to be collections devoted only to the lyrical genre. It seems significant that of the nineteen women's songs listed by Plummer, several of them are clustered together within the same manuscript, indicating that some women's songs were transmitted together due to scribal interest in their similarities.

The manuscript containing the highest number of woman's songs in the carol form is Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge MS 383. In it are found three woman-voiced carols: IMEV 225 "Al this day ic han sought" (Greene No.452); IMEV 1849 "Ladd Y the daunce a

Myssomur Day" (Greene No.453) and IMEV 1330 "This enther day I mete a clerke" (Greene No.455), as well as a non-carol woman's song, IMEV 3174 "Summe men sayon that I am blak" (Schmolke-Hasselman 320). The carols are three of what I judge to be the most satirical, bawdy and anti-feminist of known women's songs. Gonville and Caius 383 also contains five other carols, according to Greene's description. Three of these other carols are satirical or irreverent in nature, including a parody of a courtly love lyric with decidedly misogynist overtones. The manuscript appears to be a "trilingual student's exercise and commonplace book" filled with assorted items including "many memoranda and much penmanship practice." The carols in the manuscript are "written in odd spaces in the same fashion as other notes and memoranda" (Greene 324). Perhaps the women's songs in this manuscript were jotted down by a distracted student for his own amusement--which might explain their scurrilous nature (Boffey 25).[24]

While women's songs found in commonplace books or manuscripts of miscellany are not unusual, other are found in manuscripts intended as deliberate literary anthologies, rather than haphazard collections. The lyric "Kyrie, so kyrie" (IMEV 2494; Greene No.457) appears in a song collection, British Library MS. Sloane 2593. The carols in this manuscript were all recorded by one hand. Furthermore, there is little consensus as to the subject matter of these songs (Greene 306). This seems to suggest that, unlike the student-scribe who apparently had a much more laissez-faire attitude towards the carols he chose to preserve, the compiler of

[24] Boffey notes that lyrics in manuscripts that appear to have been exercise books were apparently intended as "light relief." In addition to Gonville and Caius MS 383 other student collections are British Museum MS Harley 3362 and British Museum MS Addit. 60577 "In each case," Boffey observes, "the heavier material is interrupted by more light-hearted pieces, . . . jokes, riddles, carols and songs" (25).

Sloane 2593 had set about to collect any and all the carols available him, without any particular agenda as to their subject-matter. Similarly, the woman-voiced carol "This enther day I mete a clerke" (IMEV 3594; Greene No.454), is found in St. John's College, Cambridge MS. S.54 which is, according to Greene, "of unusual interest as a pocket-book of carols" (325). Greene goes on to note that this manuscript has "obvious similarities and correspondences" with BL MS Sloane 2593, the aforementioned song collection, although Sloane 2593 is not of pocket-book size. (326).

Other woman-voiced carols appear to have been additions to manuscripts that were not designated as lyric collections in particular, but were in some way assigned to literary interests. For instance, the carol "The last tyme I the wel woke" (IMEV 3409; Greene No.456) is found in Cambridge University Library Ff. 5.48, a manuscript dating from the second half of the fifteenth century that includes a number of texts of various literary genres mixed in with religious materials, among them a Marian text cluster. Greene lists the principle contents accordingly:

> Myrc's Instructions for Parish Priests (imperfect at beginning). The ABC of Aristotle. The Northern Passion. Signs of Death. Remedies for the Seven Deadly Sins. A tale in verse of an incestuous daughter [sic!]. A tale of King Edward and the shepherd. Dialogue between a nightingale and a clerk. A verse fabliau of a basin. The Tournament of Tottenham. The tale of the adulterous squire of Falmouth. Two lamentations of the Virgin. A prayer of the Five Joys of the Virgin. St. Michael and the Annunciation, from the South-English

> Legendary. Part of The Southern Passion. 'The mourning of a hare.' Weather prophecies. Carol No.456. Verses on provisions for a feast. Robin Hood and the Monk . . . (322)

The material in this manuscript gives no clear indication, aside from a vaguely popular piety, of the compiler's agenda for the collection.

Yet some manuscripts suggest that the compiler might have had a special interest in woman-voiced material. Of the twenty complete women's songs available, eight of them are divided equally between two manuscripts: Gonville and Caius 383 and the Findern manuscript. Another manuscript, British Library MS Sloane 1584, contains only one woman-voiced carol; however, it also contains a lengthier love-song in a woman's voice. The carol, "Off seruyng men I wyll begyne" (IMEV 2654; Greene No.446) is included in Plummer's list of women-songs, but the love-song, "Greuus ys my sorowe" (IMEV 1018; Barratt 283-87), was neglected, despite its female narrator and Greene's description of it as a "song" (306).[25] The compilation of the manuscript is attributed principally to John Gysborn, a Premonstratensian canon of Coverham, Yorkshire. Most of the manuscript's contents were written in his hand. Aside from the two women's songs, the principle contents are, as described by Greene:

> Theological material, including instructions for deacons and sub-deacons, questions to be asked in confession, prayers, etc. Medical recipes, Carol No.

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[25] Barratt includes this song in her anthology Women's Writing in Middle English, but chooses the title "Unkindness Hath Killed Her" taken from the first line of the chorus (283-87). Greene's title, which is the one I use, is the first line of the poem.

446. A Sermon for Easter. Directions for colours, enamelling, etc. A history of confession. (306)

Obviously, this manuscript was devoted primarily to more practical or more clearly pastoral material. The presence of two woman-voiced items in this manuscript is much more conspicuous than the woman's songs we find in carol collections or in manuscripts of literary miscellany. Boffey calls Gysborn's manuscript "a kind of commonplace book" which "in its own eccentric way disposes of the possibility that courtly love lyrics reached only a refined and aristocratic readership" (43/129).

There can be no definite conclusions to be drawn regarding the motivation of the scribe's, or scribes', inclusion of the woman-voiced items to Sloane 1584.[26] It is interesting that there are no male-voiced lyrics in this manuscript, as there are in other manuscripts containing woman's songs. Furthermore, unlike the satirical carols in the student's exercise book, these two items are more refined in nature. Certainly "Off seruyng men I wyll begyne" is slightly risqué, but it is nothing as parodic as the three seduction-abandonment-pregnancy women's songs of Gonville and Caius 383.

The question of possible scribal interest in woman-voiced material in Gysborn's manuscript is made more interesting by the issue of the difference in hands in the manuscript. Greene notes that the Gysborn appears to have been the compiler of most of the material, including the carol. Other hands apparently added medical recipes and the history of confession. Frustratingly, Greene goes on to mention that the "carol is in Gysborn's hand, but

[26] According to Greene, the carol is in Gysborn's hand and "Greuus ys my sorowe" is in another, unidentified, hand. Gysborn was not the only contributor, although most of the material is in his hand.

not the other English song" without specifying if the hand responsible for "Greuus ys my sorowe" is the same as either of the other additional hands (306). Boffey mentions the additional hands without specifying which texts they were responsible for. She does, however, note that the later scribes might have been "acquaintances of a similar vocation, for some of the added material preserves exactly the tone distilled by Gysborn's own copy" (129). This comment concerning the "tone" of the manuscript is interesting if we consider that both woman's songs in it are essentially positive representations of women.[27] It appears that Gysborn established a "gentlemanly" tone that was continued by other contributors.

Manuscript evidence often hints at the priorities and prejudices of compilers or authors. Representations of women in the texts of individual manuscripts are especially revealing. Since it is assumed that the majority of compilers and authors were men, only texts written in women's voices are intriguing. Even more intriguing, however, is the Findern Anthology, a manuscript that contains four women's songs that might have been written by women. This manuscript offers exciting possibilities regarding the significance of women's songs to medieval women themselves.

The Findern manuscript is a late fifteenth and early sixteenth-century collection of a variety of literary material, as well as some casual jottings related to the functioning of the household in which it may have been kept. The principle contents include versions of Chaucer's Complaint unto Pity, Parliament of Fowls, Complaint of Venus, as well as some

[27] Although Plummer includes the carol "Off seruyng men I wyll begyne" in his analysis of ironic and anti-feminist women's songs, I feel this interpretation was misguided by his assumptions regarding the anti-courtly nature of women's songs in general. For my reinterpretation of this carol, see Chapter Three.

of Gower's tales from Confessio Amantis. In addition to these and other well-known literary texts, there are a number of short lyrics. Several of the lyrics are woman-voiced and others are in voices that could be male or female. In addition, there are names recorded in the manuscript, many of which are women's names. Although the relationship between the names and the texts has not been fully explained, almost every scholar of the manuscript has agreed that it seems to indicate that women were interested in or contributed to the manuscript in some manner (Greene 322; Robbins, "Findern" 611; Hanson-Smith 179-80).

Robbins suggests that the manuscript was used as a copy-book by the Findern family and their friends in which they transcribed their favorite literary texts ("Findern" 611-12).[28] What is interesting about the contents of the Findern manuscript is not, however, the versions of texts found elsewhere, but the high number of texts that are unique to this manuscript. In fact, Hanson-Smith specifies that "all but four of the two dozen secular lyrics are unique occurrences" (181). All of the Findern lyrics *in women's voices* are, insofar as available manuscript descriptions indicate, among those unique to the manuscript. There are no parallel transmissions of the four women's songs (IMEV 3917, 2279, 3878, and 4272.5) found in Findern.

Texts unique to the Findern manuscript often contain scribal irregularities or errors, suggesting that some of the poems were not copied, but were composed directly on the

[28] Harris disagrees slightly with Robbins on this point, and suggests that the manuscript was less significant to the family in later times: "far from being a treasured repository of literary texts, [the manuscript] was readily accessible at this period in the sixteenth century for several members of the household employed in the service of the Findern family to make whatever jotting they chose" (299). However, such "jottings" are far outnumbered by substantial contributions (they are found only on ff 50v and 70r-v), indicating that the book was never fell into use as some sort of household record permanently.

manuscript (Harris 308; Hanson-Smith 181; Beadle and Owen xii). At least one of the woman's songs indicates this possibility. Harris illustrates how the alterations to the fifteenth line of the woman-voiced lyric "My wooful hert this clad in payn" (IMEV 2279; Barratt 270) may have been caused by the author's desire to "avoid a repetitious line, too similar to line 12" (308).

The combination of the unique texts, perhaps spontaneously composed, and the women's names in the manuscript suggests that some of the amateur poets might have been the women themselves. The Findern manuscript and the Gonville and Caius manuscript 383 both contain four women's songs, the highest number found in any single manuscript. A brief comparison of the frivilous, anti-feminist texts of the Gonville and Caius exercise-book, and the courtlier tests of the Findern manuscript, is revealing.

I suspect that the involvement of women in this manuscript influenced the attitudes toward women in the texts. The women's songs of the Findern manuscript appear to be serious courtly compositions, refined and sympathetic to the woman's viewpoint. We can only speculate as to the motivation of the "student" who copied down the satiric carols of Gonville and Caius 383. Perhaps he was confident that no female eyes would view them. How different are the contents of the Findern manuscript, which we suspect received a great deal of input (original or otherwise) from women! In fact, the courtliness of the Findern women's songs harmonizes with the tone of the manuscript overall. Beadle and Owen note that the manuscript "is immediately conspicuous as an anthology of secular and 'courtly' verse" (xii). In this light, the contributions written in woman's voices--especially if they were

transcribed or composed by women themselves--are especially significant. They are conscious contributions to courtly discourse from a female perspective. As Hanson-Smith points out, some of the women's songs appear to be indirect responses to the male-voiced lyrics also found in the manuscript. Her example is the poem "My wooful hert this clad in payn" (IMEV 2279; Barratt 270) that presents the woman's version of the departure of the lover, so often lamented in the male-voiced songs:

> The man must depart, the beloved remains. The woman's counterpart [to the male lover/poet] tells us what it is like to stay at home and how a woman perceives the absence of the lover. (183)

It is possible, then, that the Findern manuscript is an example of women's participation in the courtly love literary corpus. The Findern lyrics suggest that individual women, familiar with the courtly love tradition (as they must have been had they read the other contents of the manuscript) intended to add their voices as "minority reports" on the phenomenon of courtly love (Hanson-Smith 179).

The Findern women's songs are some of the most striking examples of courtliness in women's voices. Yet only Elizabeth Hanson-Smith isolated the four women's songs in the manuscript as woman-voiced court lyrics. Unfortunately, she did not connect them with woman-voiced carols or the genre of women's songs in general. After adding these four lyrics and "Greuus ys my sorowe" to Plummer's list of carols it is evident that women's songs in Middle English are not only anti-courtly. Plummer's interpretation of women's songs as organized contrast is valid in the sense that the songs add women's voices to

courtly discourse, which has traditionally been seen as "essentially a man's conception of love" (Dronke 9).

By virtue of the gender of their narrator, woman-voiced lyrics are automatically outside conventional courtly discourse--positioned as the opposite of the "male" courtly love. Yet the Findern lyrics and some of the carols demonstrate that women's songs may respond to the male-voiced corpus without sacrificing the tradition of courtly love itself The woman speaker may present an experience of love that provides an "organized contrast" to the courtly male experience without necessarily being anti-courtly. Therefore, my study of the women's song will broaden the definitions of both women's songs and courtly love The defining characteristic of women's songs is voice, not form or their courtly role. If women's songs participate in courtly love both by anti-courtliness and women's courtliness, then the traditionally male-dominated courtly tradition must be re-evaluated to accommodate women's voices. In the next chapter I will address the contributions of individual women's songs to courtly love.

Chapter Three

Women's Songs in Middle English

Women's songs participate in courtly love by responding to the courtly conventions found in male-voiced courtly love songs. As in continental courtly literatures, representations of women in English court lyrics are usually distillations of standard courtly conventions, specifically the idealization of the lady. Middle English women's songs both undermine and support the courtly tradition. The women's perspective on courtly love in these songs involves a wonderful range of opinion; much more so than most critics (Plummer, for instance), have acknowledged. It is extremely important to note that Plummer excludes the Findern lyrics from his collection of women's songs, deciding instead to restrict the list to carols, the so-called "popular" form descended from dance-songs (138). In his eagerness to establish the role of "organized contrast" for the woman's song, Plummer excludes or deemphasizes songs that are courtlier in nature.

Plummer's emphasis on this anti-courtly counterpoint as the role of the woman's song assumes that they were male-authored. By limiting the woman's song to carols that were presumably all composed by men, he cannot see the female narrator as anything other than a figure removed from the experience of the performer, a figure that is objectified accordingly. For Plummer, there is a "real distance between the speaker and audience" borne of the artifice of a male performer appropriating a woman's voice (140). Plummer assumes that the

audience would not connect the experiences of a song's female narrator with real women's experience if the song were a male creation.

Plummer divides women's songs into two primary catagories: celebrations and laments. The distance between the speaker and the audience is maintained whether the audience response is sympathetic to the narrator (non-ironic distance) or antipathetic (ironic distance): "One thus finds two axes: celebration versus lament on the speaker's part, and ironic versus non-ironic reaction on the part of the audience" (140).

Even if the narrator is not intended as a figure of ridicule, Plummer suggests that a non-ironic distance is maintained between her and the experience of real women in the audience. Maureen Fries also makes the point that the presentation of the female voice does nothing to alleviate the position of women as "other" in courtly literature or medieval literature as a whole (172). Furthermore, Plummer concludes that the "ironic pole," as it appears to him, "seems to predominate" in woman's songs in English (140).

My discussion of Middle English women's songs will begin by questioning Plummer's assumption that English women's songs usually involve an ironic distance between the character of the female narrator and the audience. Even if the songs were male-authored, and the authors objectified the woman narrators as they objectified the lady in the male-voiced lyrics, their appropriation of the woman's voice would compromise their intentions. Through what we might call "a human connection" or even "a woman's connection" there is the possibility of the identification of the woman listener with the

woman's song.[29] I feel that even the most anti-feminist surfaces of these songs contain more sympathetic sub-texts, since most of these songs tell of real women's unpleasant experiences of seduction, pregnancy, and abandonment.

After exploring the feminist sub-texts of anti-feminist women's songs, I will reinterpret other English women's songs that appear to have had more sympathy for the woman narrators. Plummer's readings of the songs are coloured by his belief in their essential anti-feminism. Some of the woman-voiced carols are more ambiguous in their attitude towards woman than his readings admit. They contain possibilities for both feminist and anti-feminist readings. Finally, the discussion will move to readings of women's songs that resist Plummer's idea that "ironic distance" dominates representations of women in English women's songs. Using some of Plummer's carols, and adding non-carol lyrics, I will explore the reduction of that distance between characters and audiences in women's songs.

Plummer's assumption of the audience's ironic distance from the narrator in women's songs is true in fewer cases than he is willing to admit, although it is undoubtedly true in some. He is quite right to point out that the audience cannot honestly be expected to take seriously the speaker's insistence in the lyrics "This enther day I mete a clerke" (IMEV

[29] Another critical issue, associated with this one, is not who composed the woman's songs, but who sang them regularly. Not surprisingly, Plummer, who reads the English lyrics as almost all unsympathetic to women, finds it "very nearly inconceivable" that the songs would be sung in public by a young woman--especially the bawdier songs of seduction, abandonment, and pregnancy (150). I find this doubtful (although perhaps we are both guilty of falling into stereotypes regarding the idealized nature of women, at the cost of underestimating female bravado and wit). However, even if the women only heard the songs from sarcastic male voices, they still could have identified some of the pro-feminist subversions discussed in this paper. Furthermore, satirizing satire often empowers, as feminist humourists demonstrate, so that a brave woman could reclaim the most misogynist of songs by singing it--with a certain flair--herself.

3594; Greene No.454) and "Kyrie, so kyrie" (IMEV 377; Greene No.457) that they were totally ignorant and helpless in the face of their clerical seductions. In the first carol, the former maiden claims that she lacked the intelligence (in the previous lines she describes how he tricked her into sex through his clerkly "gramery") to refuse him ("To warne hys wyll had I no may") and yet by the last stanza she has, after brief consideration, come up with a deception of her own to deflect the blame for her situation.[30]

A, dere God, qwat I am fayn
For I am madyn now gane.
[1]
This enther day I mete a clerke,
And he was wylly in hys werke;
He prayd me with hym to herke,
And hys cownsell all for to lerne.
[2]
I trow he cowd of gramery;
I xall now a good skyll wy:
For qwat I hade siccurly,
To warne hys wyll had I no may.

[30] The woman says that she will tell everyone she has been on a pilgrimage. Greene suggests that she means to explain her pregnancy as the result of a seduction while actually on the pilgrimage (491). Perhaps this was more excusable because the maiden was away from the security of hearth and home. Another possibility is the woman is telling us in advance of her alibi, which she will use if she goes away to have the baby in secret. This would be a more effective way of avoiding the consequences of an illegitimate pregnancy.

[3]

Qwan he and me browt un us the schete,

Of all hys wyll I hym lete;

Now wyll not gyrdyll met;

A, dere God, quat xal I say?

[4]

I xall sey to man and page

That I haue bene of pilgrymage;

Now wyll I not lete for no qwage

With me a clerk for to play.

Similarly, the speaker in "Kyrie, so kyrie" mocks the Church doctrines of transubstantiation and the immaculate conception, as she describes her seduction by a cleric during Christmas Mass. This carol has both an anti-feminist and an anti-clerical agenda. Its anti-feminism exaggerates the woman's naïveté beyond the possibility of its being genuine. The woman overstates her case for being deceived, repeating several times that "yyt me thinkyt it dos me good" with each successive transgression of the cleric, until the inevitable result:

'Kyrie, so kyrie'

Jankyn syngyt merie,

With 'aleyson.'

[1]

As I went on Yol Day in owre prosessyon,

Knew I joly Jankyn be his mery ton.

[Kyrieleyson.]

[2]

Jankyn began the Offys on the Yol Day,

And yyt me thynkyt it dos me good, so

merie gan he say,

'Kyrieleyson'

[3]

Jankyn red the Pystyl ful fayre and ful wel,

And yyt me thinkyt it dos me good, as euere

haue I sel.

[Kyrieleyson.]

[4]

Jankyn at the Sanctus crakit a merie note,

And yyt me thinkyt it dos me good: I payid

for his cote.

[Kyrieleyson.]

. . . . . .

[7]

Benedicamus Domino: Cryst fro schame me

schylde;

Deo gracias therto: alas, I go with chylde!

[Kyrieleyson.]

Two other lyrics that involve an ironic distance between the speaker and the audience are "Ladd Y the daunce a Myssomur Day" (IMEV 1849; Greene No.453) and "The last tyme I the wel woke" (IMEV 3409; Greene No.456). It is quite clear the author intended the audience to be unsympathetic to the plight of the seduced maidens in these songs. As in "Kyrie, so Kyrie" the woman's overstated protestations of innocence go beyond the boundaries of belief. This type of mock lament is not unique to women's songs in Middle English. Anne Howland Schotter reads some Latin women's songs similarly, and compares them to the goliardic poems of the lament of the roasted swan. The audience is supposed to enjoy the "parody of the planctus" in which they pretend "for a moment to take seriously the sufferings of a creature alien [to themselves]" (29). Like Plummer and Fries, Schotter finds that women's songs operate within an exclusively anti-feminist agenda of objectifed women. For Schotter, the use of the woman's voice reinforces, rather than alleviates, that ironic objectification:

> The genre as a whole is, in a sense, an extended use of prosopopoeia, in that it is an attribution of thought and feeling to a group which was historically mute. . . . The majority of the woman's songs . . . are cynical, showing approval of

> the woman's abandonment. . . . [They] express a strong sympathy towards men and hostility towards women. (30)

I agree with Plummer, Fries, and Schotter that some lyrics, such as the four mentioned above, appropriate women's voices in the cause of anti-feminism. However, I feel that the extension of this aspect of ironic distance or prosopopoeia cannot be extended, as Schotter suggests to "the genre as a whole." Alan Deyermond also takes issue with the tendency of these authors to interpret woman-voiced lyrics, particularly those in Latin and English, as "mere cover--and a fairly transparent one--for the male point of view" (145). Deyermond's solution, however, is to dismiss anti-feminist women's songs as male-identified or, as he puts it, "in substance man's-voice poetry" which is not in the "authentic tradition of woman's song" (147, 131).[31] While I agree with Deyermond that these songs are not "authentic" in the sense that they are not truly speaking for women, I do not entirely agree with his estimation that they are only a "dead end" in the study of woman's songs (147). These women's songs may not redeem their women speakers, but they still retain subversive references to women's experiences and women's realities.

These four lyrics, which undoubtedly place their narrator at an ironic distance from her audience, nevertheless retain some value in the field of women's songs as commentaries

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[31] Deyermond uses this phrase, "the authentic tradition of woman's song" without having, to my mind, defined it adequately. As this paper has discussed, the "tradition" of the woman's song is so vast and ill-defined by scholarship in general that his assertion that it is not necessary to "waste time by arguing the overwhelmingly strong case for a widespread and very ancient tradition of woman's song" is quite problematic (127) However, I sense through his choice of songs used to illustrate his article that the primary feature of authenticity regarding women's songs is that they be female-identified That is, the songs must present a more or less sympathetic representation of their narrator and any distance she might have from her audience be non-ironic in nature

on the very real social conditions women may have faced in the Middle Ages. Although they are sarcastic, mocking songs that implicate the victim/narrator in her own downfall, they contain as a sub-text realistic depictions of the nature of sexual abuse. I find these four lyrics to be the most anti-feminist of the woman's songs. They are also the only women's songs in the corpus that deal with the clerical seduction of a maiden.

All four of the poems dealing with clerical seduction include a seduction scene in which some degree of coercion is used to overpower the woman. The figure of the clerical rapist or seducer is a common one in medieval literatures in virtually every Western European language.[12] It appears that there is some correlation in this case between literature and history. The vow of celibacy was almost constantly challenged throughout the Middle Ages. "Poets and preachers may have exaggerated the seriousness of the problem for rhetorical effect," notes James Brundage, "but reforming polemicists did not have to search diligently to discover ample evidence that the Catholic clergy often felt that although celibacy might require them not to marry, it did not oblige them to renounce sex" (Law, Sex, and Christian Society 536-37).

Kathryn Gravdal found that an astonishing percentage of rapists brought to court in medieval France were clerics. In thirteenth and fourteenth-century England, clerics made up the largest group of charged rapists in secular courts (Ravishing Maidens 126). She speculates that "[t]he power and prestige of their office may have lead them to commit sexual abuses with a certain regularity" (126-27). Perhaps some women's songs, although

[12] For a discussion of the licentious cleric as a "stock" character in Middle English lyrics, see Plummer, "Woman's Song" 144-45.

generally unsympathetic to the narrator's dilemma, are addressing this abuse of clerical power. Furthermore, the cleric's privileged status over the servant woman in these lyrics may have represented the normal male privilege in society. The motif of clerical rape in women's songs may have been an image for both gender and class politics in medieval society

I am fully aware that this reading of anti-feminist women's songs was probably not the reading intended by the writer or composer. The speakers in these poems were not presented as sympathetic characters. In the least vicious of the poems--"Ladd Y the daunce a Myssomur Day"--we suspect that the woman was not as oblivious to Jak's [sic] intentions as she implies. In the poems "This enther day I mete a clerke" and "Kyrie, so kyrie" there is more of a suggestion of the intellectual coercion used by the clerk who dupes the maid to some degree, although, her innocence is questionable. The lyric "The last tyme I the wel woke" comes closer than the others to depicting a seduction that may in fact be a rape I read a certain amount of seriousness in the song, which prevents it from being a successful satire. There is a bitter realism to this woman's song. Even Greene, who includes it in his list of "amorous carols," observes that this woman's song is "more realistic," because of the girl's insistence that she will bear the child and reveal the father (492).

The details of the rape are violent, starting with the semi-serious image of "Ser John" [sic] catching the maid "with a croke." He then swears her to silence, takes her to a secluded well and proceeds to rape her. In case we might be tempted to romanticize or deemphasize the force Sir John employs, the maid makes it quite clear that he tore her clothes ("rofe my bell [-ey]") and stole her virginity without ceremony, and without her compliance ("He gafe

my maydenhed a spurne"). However, it is the girl's embittered refrain in the burden of "I haue forsworne hit whil I life / To wake the well-ey"--her refusal to participate in well ceremonies in the future--that suggests the lasting trauma of a rape. Her apparent resignation to her situation and the belated acceptance of her rapist in the final stanzas of the song are undercut by the burden, which stresses her disgust and anger at her predicament:

I haue forsworne hit whil I life,

To wake the well-ey.

[1]

The last time I the wel woke,

Ser John caght me with a croke;

He made me to swere be bel and boke

I shuld not tell-ey.

[2]

Yet he did me a wel wors turne:

He leyde my hed agayn the burne;

he gafe my maydenhed a spurne

And rofe my bell-ey.

[3]

Sir John cam to oure hows to play

Fro euensong tume til light of the day;

We made as mery as flowres in May;

I was begyled-ay.

[4]

Sir John he came to our hows;

He made hit wondur copious;

He seyde that I was gracious

To beyre a childe-ey.

[5]

I go with childe, wel I wot;

I schrew the fadur that hit gate,

Withouten he fynde hit mylke and pap

A long while-ey.

Although this poem is presented in a style similar to the other male-identified poems of clerical seduction--that is, with a jocular rhythm and a satirical tone--its subtext of social consciousness undercuts its anti-feminism. This same strand of social criticism runs through the other three "rape songs," although in the other songs it is even more repressed by their aggressive anti-feminism. It is difficult, however, to laugh at the predicament of this woman, and it makes us question our response to the other three lyrics.

The reality of such lyrics might hit a little too close to home for women readers. Even the poem "O Lord, so swett Ser John dothe kys," in which the woman narrator appears willing and looks forward to her liaisons with Sir John, ends each stanza with the line "I

haue no powre to say hym nay." While it does not appear that the woman in this particular poem has been a rape victim and her powerlessness presumably refers to her overwhelming desire for her lover, the final line of each stanza contains within it the possibility of ambiguous feelings regarding her situation.

I do not want to dismantle that meaning of "O Lord, so swett Ser John dothe kys" to the point where the reading ruins its charm and, more importantly, its potential feminist assertion of female sexuality. However, it is possible to read a reference to social realities for medieval women in the line "I haue no powre to say hym nay." Women's power over their own sexuality in medieval texts (and society) was problematic. The concept of rape as we understand it did not exist during the Middle Ages. It was confused with abduction, seduction, or adultery.[33] While I prefer to interpret the lyric "O Lord so swett Ser John dothe kys" as what it appears to be at first glance--the sexual enthusiasm of a healthy, happy woman--I also feel it is important to locate this poem, and others like it (such as "Al this day ic han sought") within the diverse range of women's songs. I feel that it rests somewhere between the poems of clerical seduction and the poems in which the women speakers are more positive about their sexual experiences.

Some of the women's songs represent women in a largely negative light, and yet contain subversive possibilities for positive representations in the realism of their stories, which lies beneath the anti-feminist satire. This type of subversion is dependent on the tension between literary presentation (the speaker is a "fallen woman") and the possible

[33] Brundage's article "Rape and Seduction in Medieval Canon Law" summarizes the Church's attitude in the Middle Ages towards sexual violence.

historical reality (the woman is a rape victim). Other women's songs are feminist interpretations of courtly love literary conventions, without references to historical subtexts.

Since women are idealized in courtly love, it would seem logical to assume, as Plummer and others do, that women would be degraded in anti-courtly lyrics. While this appears to be true of some women's songs, such as those discussed above, it would be an over-generalization to extend this assumption to *all* women's songs. As I suggested above, even the most anti-feminist of women's songs contain some possibility for the redemption of their representations of women. Furthermore, I believe that the majority of women's songs are quite assertive--although not necessarily unambiguous--in their positive representations of women. Still other Middle English women's songs are *extremely* positive regarding women. Such songs manage to question the conventions of courtly love without necessarily resorting to the degradation of the lady.

Scholars of Middle English women's songs suggest that women's songs contrast courtly love lyrics as misogyny contrasts idealization. Plummer and Fries read only negative representations of women into Middle English women's songs. Plummer finds that even the songs in which the woman sings proudly of her own sexuality or beauty are not empowering, because they are actually condemnations of female pride and capriciousness:

> I can be wanton and yf I wyl, but yf youe thouche me I wyll crye howe . .
>
> (IMEV 1286.5; Wagner 452)

While I do think such bawdy songs could be read this way, I also feel that they contain other possibilities.

Plummer admits that he reads these lyrics within the context of the more obviously anti-feminist lyrics. The women who sing of their own sexuality are meant, Plummer suggests, to be associated with the seduced maidens of the other songs, who assume some amount of responsibility for their fate through the fault of their own arrogance: "[i]f pride does not strike one as being a central trait of the betrayed maiden, the characteristic is more prominently displayed in another group of the English woman's songs" (147). This "other group" of songs are, like "I can be wanton and if I will," songs of women's sexual pride. As Plummer points out, when these songs are connected to the ironic laments, the implication is that the women of the laments are sexually irresponsible and should be held accountable for their own oppression. In this context, women's songs of sexual pride appear to undermine they cause they advocate· women's sexual independence. Yet, if we remove from this context that reads women's songs as essentially anti-feminist, then these songs take on a different perspective.

If we choose to pair these songs with women's songs in which the speakers profess genuine affection for their mates, then they may be read as an affirmation of women's sexuality. While I do not deny that the following song portrays the serving girl who narrates it as somewhat irresponsible--she just wants to escape work, get drunk, and have a roll in the hay with Jack--the song is also a step towards other lyrics that are less disdainful of female desire:

> Rybbe ne rele ne spynne yc ne may
>
> For joyghe that it ys holyday

[1]

Al this day ic han sought;

Spyndul ne werue ne vond Y nought;

To myche blisse ic an brout

Ayen this hyghe holyday.

. . . . . .

[6]

Jakke wol brynge me onward in my wey,

wyth me desyre for te pleyghe;

Of my dame stant me nan eyghe

An neuer a god haliday.

[7]

Jakke wol pay for my scoth

A Sonday atte the ale-schoch;

Jacke wol sowse wel my wroch

Euery god haliday.

[8]

Sone he wolle take me be the hond,

And he wolle legge me on the lond,

That al my buttockus ben of sond,

Opon the hye holyday.

[9]

In he pult, and out he drow,

And euer yc lay on hym y-low:

'By Godus deth, thou dest me wow

Vpon this hey holyday!'

[10]

Sone my wombe began te swelle

As greth as a belle;

Durst Y ant my dame telle

Wat me betydde this holyday.

It is difficult not to read this character without some appreciation for her aggressive ambition to enjoy herself. We might not approve of her, but we laugh with her, not at her. Even her inevitable pregnancy seems innocuous: it is less a punishment and more an anticipated finale to her holiday. The following lyric, "If I be wanton I wotte well why" (IMEV 1269.5; Fehr 58), is even less moralistic than "Al this day ic han sought":

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.[34]

The crudity of this poem suggests that it is meant ironically, but its brash voice also suggests that the humour is not really intended to be at the speaker's expense. This is also emphasized by the lack of a moralistic ending such as one in which the speaker is punished for her transgression with illegitimate pregnancy. The character here suggests the stock "whore-with-heart-of-gold," which is admittedly a masculine construct, but at least one that is more favorable in its depiction of women.

The assertive female sexuality in these poems is an implicit rejection of the sterile (literally and figuratively) and passive courtly lady. Yet they do not automatically substitute misogyny for idealism. The next lyric I will discuss, "Of seruyng men I wyll begyne" (IMEV 2654; Greene 446), is even more positive towards women's sexuality that the above poems The woman in this song seems truly happy and is appreciative of her partner's charms There is no punitive pregnancy at the end of the lyric The narrator joyfully sings that she and her lover will be together until death, suggesting that the relationship is a legitimate partnership, not a casual encounter. In fact, in this song the courtly roles of the man and woman are reversed. She sings of her man's beauty the same way the male lover of the courtly lyric sings of his lady's attributes:

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[34] Plummer glosses "ware" as *mons veneris* (147).

His bonet is of fyne scarlett,

Troly, loley,

With here as black as geitt,

Troly, lolye.

Nevertheless, there are important differences between male-voiced courtly lyrics and this song. "Of seruyng men I wyll begyne" appears to reject some of the more unrealistic aspects of the courtly tradition. For instance, there is the inference that the couple are not adulterers. There is also a rejection of the class bias in courtly love. The beloved is a servant (indeed, the song extends the celebration of his charms to all serving men), not a nobleman. Finally, although the man is cast in the traditional role of the lady, there is no sign that he withholds his attentions from his lover in the way the courtly lady might ("His kysse is worth a hundred pounde"). This poem is my first example of a woman's song that rejects some of the less admirable qualities of courtly love, without sliding into obscenity or misogyny.[35]

[35] Plummer suggests that women in the poems of female sexual pride, including this one, are intended to be the epitome of all female vices--including non-sexual ones--in the manner of the Wife of Bath who, he says, comes "directly from the pages of anti-feminist literature" (148) While there is no space here to present the arguments for the feminist interpretations of the Wife of Bath, I would like to point out that Plummer's idea that the narrator of "O Lord, so swett Ser John dothe kys" follows the anti-feminist tradition with a "character filled with pride, lechery, and greed" (149) does *not* apply to the narrator of "Off seruyng men I wyll begyne." In fact, this woman is quick to mention that "Off mett and drynk and feyr clothing, / By dere God, I want none," thus retaining the courtly integrity of desiring only her beloved

I find it difficult to read any of the satirical anti-feminism of the ironic women's songs in the woman's joyful refrain "So well ys me begone" ("So fortunate am I" Greene 486):

So well ys me begone,

Troly, lole,

So well ys me begone,

Troly, loly.

[1]

Off seruyng men I wyll begyne,

Troly, loley,

For they goo mynyon trym,

Troly, loley.

[2]

Off mett and drynk and feyr clothyng,

Troly, loley,

By dere God, I want none,

Troly, loley.

[3]

His bonet is of fyne scarlett,

Troly, loley,

With here as black as geitt,

Troly, lolye.

. . . . . .

[5]

His coytt itt is so tryme and rownde

Troly, lolye,

His kysse is worth a hundred pounde,

Troly, lolye.

. . . . . .

[8]

Whersoeuer he bee, he hath my hert,

Troly, loly,

And shall to deth depart,

Troly, lolye.

Other women's songs attack other courtly conventions more directly--especially the wonderfully indignant "Summe men sayon that I am blak" (IMEV 3174; Schmolke-Hasselman 320) in which a dark-haired woman takes to task courtly idealized beauty:

[1]

Summe men sayon that y am blac.

yt ys a colour for my prow;

ther y loue ther ys no lac,

y may not be so wyte as thou.

[2]

blac ys as a clur that ys god--

so say y & many mo;

blac ys my hat, blac ys my hod,

blac ys al that longet ther-to.

[3]

blac wol do as god a nede

as the wryte at bord & bedde;

& ther-to also treu i dede,

& ther-to y ley my lyf to wedde.

. . . . . .

[6]

god saue ale hem that buth broune,

for they buth trew as any stel;

god kepe hem bothe in feld & toune,

& thanne schal y be kept ful wel.

As Beate Schmolke-Hasselman points out, the narrator's complaint is wholly legitimate. Any intended irony is muted by our identification with her challenge to the medieval "beauty myth"[36]:

> . . . [How] bitter the feelings of all those English ladies must have been who did not correspond exactly to the literary ideal depicted in the poetry--an ideal that over the years greatly influenced the aesthetic tastes of men in late medieval Britain. Seen in this light, it is not difficult to feel compassion for the outcry of a woman with dark skin and black hair, asserting her self-esteem through making it clear to everyone that, in spite of that, she is white within and as true as any steel. (319)

Other poems challenge other courtly conventions in a less direct manner. The subtlety of these challenges have not always been appreciated by critics. For instance, Fries has suggested that the position of the woman in the woman's song is actually very similar to the position of the lady in the courtly love lyric. Fries reads the English woman's song, and, I

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[36] I am using the convenient phrase coined by Naomi Wolfe in her tremendously popular book, The Beauty Myth. Wolfe uses this phrase to name the production (largely by the mass media) of the cultural ideal of feminine beauty in Western contemporary culture and investigates the impact this has upon real women living in its shadow. Schmolke-Hasselman describes the medieval version of the beauty myth as it is found predominantly in courtly love. She suggests that the literary convention of the description of the lady's beauty is a common denominator connecting Middle English and French lyrical traditions. She notes that the courtly Lady possessed certain stock characteristics that described an impersonal ideal more than a real woman.

> A beautiful woman in fourteenth-century English poetry had a lily-white body, a face with rose-coloured cheeks, fair hair gleaming like gold and reaching to the feet. She has arched eyebrows, brown or black, a long, swan-like neck, long arms, beautiful fingers, small hard breasts, a small waist, pretty legs and feet. Her lips are made for kissing, and what is hidden under her garment makes her admirer long to lie next to her. (300)

think, women's songs in general, as reinforcing the woman's status as "other" in the courtly tradition. In the woman's song, Fries asserts, the woman's attention is focused on the male lover. This fixation on the male is similar to the fixation of the lover on himself in the male-voiced lyric, where he sees the lady as the mirror of his own qualities. The result, Fries concludes, is that both courtly lyrics and women's songs focus on the man, leaving the women as individual characters out of the picture (159).

Furthermore, Fries points out that the woman's fixation on the male means that his movements determine her emotions in the poem. She is either joyful in his presence or miserable in his absence. Thus, she is just as passive as the lady in the courtly poetry, neither of them can initiate any sort of connection with her lover, both are at the mercy of the man's whims (157). Finally, Fries claims that this reflects the lack of control that a woman has in a man's world and her inability to "confine her man within the bounds of her feminine world," that is to say, her sphere of domesticity (159).

Fries presents all of these points separately; however they all share her conclusion regarding "the actual powerlessness, as opposed to the rhetorical dominance, of the woman in the woman's song" (157). Fries readily admits that she is generalizing (171), and although I believe that her conclusions are inappropriate if applied to *all* English woman's songs, they are certainly applicable in some cases. To start with her final and, I think, her strongest point--the observation that woman's songs illustrate the real powerlessness of women in a man's world--I wish to consider the ironic laments discussed above. I feel that Fries's observation supports the idea that the women's songs contain some commentary on social

reality. Certainly, given the disadvantage in her social position, a servant girl was bound to suffer in a man's world--a point these songs make quite *without* sympathy for the victim.

Fries, however, intends her observation to be extended to the motif of the lady who passively waits in her domestic sphere while her lover travels afar for worldly purposes. It is this concept with which I have more difficulty, as I see evidence in the songs that the women were not always passive, pining, or completely domestic in their affairs. To start with, Fries's observations imply a class bias based on the situation of a noble lady and her knight/lover. Many of the women's songs are about the relationships of the lower classes--where both men and women worked.

Although servant girls were by no means worldly (nor were servant men, for that matter), neither were they cloistered. Nor can they be described as passive. They had many other things to do aside from moping over some man's absence. Thus, the tone of the servant-girl songs is usually one of joyful anticipation for the upcoming release from drudgery, rather than the languishing tone found in courtlier songs. There is little indication in the woman's songs "Al this day ic han sought" and "Off seruyng men I wyll begyne" that the woman speaker "pines in [her lover's] absence" in the manner that Fries suggests (172). The servant girl of "Al this day ic han sought" barely distinguishes between her delight at her release from work and her pleasure with her lover. Sex, for this woman, seems to be an expected part of the holiday festivities, like good food and drink:

[1]

Al this day ic han sought;

Spyndul ne werue ne vond Y nought;

To myche blisse ic am brout

Ayen this hyghe holyday.

[7]

Jacke wol pay for my scoth

A Sonday atte the ale-schoch;

Jacke wol sowse wel my wroch

Euery god haliday.

[8]

Sone he wolle take me be the hond,

And he wolle legge me on the lond,

That al my buttockus ben of sond,

Opon this hye holyday.

Similarly, the woman's praise of her lover in "Off seruyng men I wyll begyne" seems to be quite free from self-pity or loneliness. In fact, this woman underscores the point that in cases of true love, spatial distance is irrelevant, as they are bound together until the end of their lives:

[8]

Whersoeuer he bee, he hath my hert,

Troly, loly,

And shall to deth depart,

Troly, lolye.

All in all, Fries's theories are difficult to support unreservedly when we consider individual woman's songs in Middle English. Her assertion that the women in these songs are just as passive as the women in the male-voiced courtly lyrics is troubling if we consider lyrics such as "If I be wanton, I wotte well why" and "O Lord, so swett Ser John dothe kys" in which the narrators trumpet their desires for one and all to hear. Even if we interpret these songs, as Plummer does, as ironic and anti-feminist, it is difficult to see these women as *passive*, whatever their other faults! But the most problematic aspect concerning the idea of the passivity of the woman speaker in the woman's song is that she is, by the very act of her singing the lyric, inverting those passive/active roles of the lady and her lover in the courtly tradition of love-service. The love lyric was the courtly service offered by a lover to his lady. The woman who proclaims her love in song has appropriated that active love-service with her first note. Woman's songs, by definition, are active, even when their subject is female passivity.

As for the woman's constant fixation on her lover, I feel that here too, Fries overstates the case. Naturally, the woman is fixated on her lover in songs such as "Off seruyng men I wyll begyne"; that is the point of the poem and, not surprisingly, it is a poem that works very closely within the structure of the courtly lyric. However, other songs, particularly those in which the woman is left pregnant, are not as concerned with the lover as they are with the woman's unfortunate situation.

Although much attention in the seduction/pregnancy lyrics is devoted to the seduction, by the end of a song such as "The last tyme I the wel woke," the emphasis has switched to the result of that seduction. It is the illegitimate pregnancy that is the point of the story, not the emotions of the woman for her lover. In fact, in lyrics such as these any reference to the lover is usually restricted to (quite unromanticized) descriptions of his actions, not the girl's feeling towards him, as is the case in this song:

[1]

The last tyme I the wel woke,

Ser John caght me with a croke;

He made me to swere be bel and boke

I schuld not tell-ey.

[2]

Yet he did me a wors turne:

He leyde my hed agayn the burne;

He gafe my maydenhed a spurne

And rofe my bell-ey.

I do not wish to imply that Fries's conclusions are completely invalid; they are simply too generally applied to English women's songs as a literary corpus. Unlike Plummer, or Schotter, however, Fries's framework for English women's songs allows for the possibility of more non-ironic than ironic interpretations concerning the intended response of the audience. I find some of her ideas useful when considering woman's songs that adhere more

closely to courtly convention. In these poems the woman *does* more closely resemble her courtly sister in her passivity and her misery in her lover's absence, made necessary by his worldly obligations:

> Wolde God that hyt were so
>
> As I cowde wysshe bytuyxt vs too!
>
> [1]
>
> The man that I loued altherbest
>
> In al thys contre, est other west,
>
> To me he ys a strange gest;
>
> What wonder est thow I be woo?
>
> [2]
>
> When me were leuesy that he schold duelle,
>
> He wold nought sey onys farewelle;
>
> He wold noght sey ones farewell
>
> Wen tyme was come that he most go.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> [5]
>
> I am icomfortyd in eueryd side;
>
> The colures wexeth both fres and newe;
>
> When he come and wyl abyde,

[6]

I loue hym tryweky and no mo;

Wolde God that he hyt knywe!

And euer I hope hyt schal be so;

then schal I chaunge for no new.

Alan Deyermond suggests that the audience is meant to respond sympathetically to the woman in songs such as this one and "Y louede a child of this cuntre." He feels that Plummer's insistence upon the distance of the audience from the woman's experience is mistaken in these cases (143). Like Deyermond, I feel that there is genuine sentiment in some of the Middle English women's songs, such as the carol "Y louede a child of this cuntre," (IMEV 1330; Greene 455), which I quote here in its entirety:

Were it vundo that is ydo,

I wold be war.

[1]

Y louede a child of this cuntre,

And so Y wende he had do me;

Now myself the sothe Y see,

That he is far.

[2]

He seyde to me he wolde be trewe

And chaunge me for none othur newe,

Now Y sykke and am pale of hewe,

For he is far.

[3]

He seide his sawus he wolde fulfulle;

Therfore Y lat him haue al his wille;

Now Y sykke and mourne stille,

For he is fare.

Here, the woman's lament contains no sneering suggestion of her own responsibility for her unhappiness. She says simply that she gave up her virginity out of a misguided confidence in the man's vows of fidelity. In keeping with the gentler tone of the lyric, the audience is not sure of the woman's situation at the end of her lament. Is her illness due to her broken heart? Or pregnancy? Either way, this speaker's simple tale, in contrast to the crude sexual puns and fantastic circumstances of the ironic laments, inclines the audience towards identification with her. It is interesting to compare the presentation of this narrator to the presentation of the narrator of "Al this day ic han sought." The licentiousness of the woman of the bawdier carol is not her only fault--she is also lazy and, it is implied, drinks too much. The sad-voiced woman of "Y louede a child of this cuntre" is portrayed as indiscreet or naïve--or at worst, stupid.

Woman's songs that are non-ironic in tone do not stray as far from the established courtly conventions found in male-voiced lyrics. While Fries's theory that a woman in the woman's song is constrained by courtly convention--witness her passivity, her fixation on the

man and her powerlessness in the male world--does have more weight here, her conclusion that this reinforces the courtly representation of the woman as "other" does not, I feel, give credit to the legitimacy of sentiment found in some woman's songs.

Similarly, Plummer grounds his argument that women's songs participate in courtly love by "defining what courtesy was not" in the observation that the women's voices were actually male creations intended to uphold the masculine artistic dominance in courtly love. Both critics locate the woman's song in courtly love by transferring the courtly convention of the dehumanization of the lady/love-object found in the male-voiced lyric to the female-voiced lyric. Plummer also points to the anti-feminism of some women's songs as the defining contrast to courtliness. While I appreciate the attempts of these authors to maintain the courtly integrity of the woman's song through organized contrast, I am disinclined to read all of the woman's songs as extensions of the objectification or anti-feminism apparent in male versions of courtly love.

The woman's song creates a space for the woman's voice and vision in courtly love. Whether this is done by mocking the idealism of courtly love (in songs of lusty women instead of pristine ladies, or laments of disgraced servants instead of conveniently sterile adulteresses) or by simply offering a woman's opinion on the courtly experience, the women's songs provide an alternative voice to the male experience. Some women's songs appropriate courtly discourse to present women's perspectives. The lyric "The man that I loued altherbest" (IMEV 3418; Greene 451) is an excellent example of an English woman's song that contributes a sincere female voice to the courtly tradition:

Wolde God that hyt were so

As I cowde wysshe bytuyxt vs too!

[1]

The man that I loued altherbest

In al thys contre est other west,

To me he ys a strange gest;

'What wonder est thow I be woo'?

[2]

When me were leuest that he schold duelle,

He wold noght sey onys farewelle;

He wold noght se ones farewell

Wen tyme was come that he most go.

[3]

In places ofte when I hym mete,

I dar nought speke, but forth I go;

With herte and eyes I hym grete;

So trywe of loue I know no mo.

[4]

As he myn hert loue,

My dyrwar dyre, iblessed he be;

I swere by God, that ys aboue,

Non hath my loue but only he.

[5]

I am icomfortyd in euery side;

The colures wexeth both fres and newe;

When he ys come and wyl abyde,

I wott ful wel that he ys trywe.

[6]

I loue hym twywely and no mo;

Wolde God that he hyt knywe!

And euer I hope hyt schal be so;

Then schal I chaunge for no new.

This song retains many of the primary courtly conventions found in the male-voiced lyric: the distant lover (spatial in this case, but often emotionally distant); the distraught poet, "icomfortyd in every side"; secret, agonizing; meetings and declarations of love and life-long devotion.

The poem contains two lines that are commonly found in male-voiced love lyrics. First is what Robbins jocularly calls the "metaphysical 'portable heart' topos" ("Middle English" 219). The offering of the poet's heart to the beloved is found in many English court lyrics, especially in situations where the rest of the lover is absent:

> Surgery [sic] like this was not uncommon in medieval court poetry. In one lyric, the poet offers his heart to his mistress, since he will 'be syldyn in youre syght.' In another, the poet instructs his heart to go with his lady, while the poet remains 'alone in heuynes . . . as a hertles body.' (218)

Robbins goes on to note that the portable heart is seen in a "rare" woman-voiced lyric from the Findern Manuscript, even though we find it in some carols that are written in the woman's voice.[37] Our narrator in the lyric "Off seruyng men I wyll begyne" claims that her lover carries her heart with him "Whersoeuer he bee." Narrators of less courtly women's songs tend to offer other body parts to their admirers, such as their "wanton wares."

The second common convention appears in the song "The man that I loued altherbest." The final line of the poem reads, "Then schal I chaunge for no new," which Greene glosses as a "cliché frequent in love poetry in both Middle English and Early Modern English" (488). Of course this also indicates the broader courtly convention of pledging one's eternal love, a motif that also appears in "Off seruyng men I wyll begyne" where the narrator uses the more matrimonial "he hath my hert . . . / And shall to deth depart."

The idea that the lyric "The man that I loued altherbest" has an essentially courtly character, is reinforced by the fact that in the original manuscript a second scribe went through the poem and changed the masculine pronouns representing the beloved to feminine

[37] It is only fair to note that this is not an oversight on Robbins's part--he excludes the carol as a courtly form (208). This is the sort of definition Plummer was arguing against when he stressed the courtly possibilities in the English woman's song and, by extension, the carol (135-37).

pronouns, so that the song could be adapted to a male speaker bewailing his lady's absence.[38] This is some indication, then, that medieval scribes did not restrict themselves to the respective catagories of the "courtly" male-voiced love lyric and the "popular" female-voiced love lyric as rigidly as modern day editors would have them do.

Nevertheless, all edited versions of the song that I have found have been recorded in the female voice, as the original version was written. I feel that this is appropriate because the situation of the man leaving the woman is more realistic than the reverse, given the social patterns illustrated in other courtly texts. Often, men are depicted as being unwillingly drawn away from their ladies by the obligations of nobility and knighthood while the woman stay at home:[39]

> [E]ven a well-born lady who commands some material wealth and distinguished social position does not possess freedom of movement; and though she may give her love freely, she is constrained by social circumstances in a variety of ways not felt by men. While we often hear men complaining that their mistress is haughty, we do not find them lamenting that a business trip or a war has taken her out of reach, unless of course the husband or the *jaloux* have carried her off. (Hanson-Smith 183)

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[38] Greene notes that this "changing in the MS. of the gender of the pronouns throughout a medieval love-lyric is rare, if not unique to this text" (488). See also Barratt 287.

[39] Some scholars believe that absence of men as a result of the Crusades was one of the impetuses for the establishment of the courtly love convention. See Bogin 29-32.

Furthermore, this lyric, when read as a woman's song, contains in it subtle departures from standard courtly tradition, which might indicate some differences unique to a woman's experience of courtly love. In some ways, this poem acts as a mild defence for the remote, silent ladies of the male-voiced lyric. Often, in the male-voiced lyric, the lady is portrayed as keeping aloof from her besotted lover/poet, or else as rejecting him altogether:

> I askid the cause why and wherfor
> She displeside was with me so sore;
> She wold nat tell, but kepe in store;
> Pardy, it was no nede. (IMEV 3179; Greene 442)

By contrast, the female speaker in the woman's song appears to be very much in love. Nor is she presented as a fickle woman who toys with her lover for fun. Indeed, she pledges that "Non hath my loue but only he." If she seems reluctant to express her feelings for him, she explains that it is only because of her shyness and nervousness during their clandestine meetings:

> In places ofte when I hym mete,
> I dar noght speke, but forth I go;
> With herte and eyes I hym grete;
> So trywe of loue I know no mo.

Although it is not stated overtly in this lyric, there is the possibility that the relationship presented is a secret--in fact, there is the possibility that the man himself is unaware of the woman's feelings! The woman's admission that she "dar noght speke" points

to the reality of a situation often overlooked in male-voiced lyrics, but emphasized so well in the ironic laments of abandoned women: the consequences of a love affair might be greater for women than for men.

The realistic perspective of this carol is found again in the lyrics of the Findern manuscript. These lyrics, which were quite possibly written by women, also are sympathetic towards women separated from their men:

My woofull hert, this clad in payn,
Wote natt welle what do nor seyn:
Longe absens grevyth me so.

For lakke of syght nere am I sleyn,
All joy myne hert hath in dissedeyn:
Comfort fro me is go.

Then thogh I wold me owght complayn
Of my sorwe and grete payn
Who shold conforte me do?

Ther is no thynge can make me to be fayn
Butt the syght of hym agayn
That cawsis my wo.

None but he may me susteyn

He [illegible]ort in all payn:

Y love [illegible] moo.

To hym I woll be [illegible]e and playn,

And evyr [illegible] teyn

Tyll d[illegible]

My hert shall I n[illegible]ym refrayn;

I gave hitt hym withowte constrayn,

Evyr to contenwe so. (IMEV 2279; Barratt 271)

The inclusion of the Findern women's songs mitigates against Plummer's theory that most woman-voiced lyrics were male artistic constructs that were meant to be read ironically. The Findern woman's songs manage to display the disadvantages of being a woman in a man's world without portraying their protagonists as passive victims.

The wonderful poem in the Findern manuscript, "What-so men seyn" (IMEV 3917; Barratt 268), hovers between lyric and carol. It is probably the best example of a woman's song that criticizes male versions of courtliness, while maintaining the dignity of the female speaker. This is the one woman's song that mocks the entire courtly phenomenon outright, claiming that courtly love is just a game in which women are the prizes. Like the ironic

laments, the implication in this poem is that women would do well to avoid the game altogether.

However, the poet doesn't illustrate this point by mocking the poor maiden who runs afoul of the gap (with all its biological consequences) between courtly love and love in real life. The female narrator assumes the voice of wisdom and experience, not the voice of the betrayed victim. "A rapier sharp, yet subtle humour," notes Elizabeth Hanson-Smith, "is deployed in defense and defiance" (190):

> What-so men sayn,
> Love is no peyn
> To them, serteyn, Butt varians.
>
> For they constreyn
> Ther hertis to feyn,
> Ther mowthis to pleyn Ther displesauns.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> For when they pray
> Ye shall have nay,
> What-so they sey: Beware, for sham.

For every daye
They waite ther pray,
Wher-so they may And make butt game.

Then semyth me,
Ye may well se
They be so fre In evyry plase,

Hitt were pete
Butt they shold be
Begelid, parde, Without grase.

The author offers a second defence of the sibylline lady who so frustrates the male poet--a defence that is quite the opposite of the admission of shyness of the speaker in "the man that I loued altherbest." If men insist on playing their foolish and dangerous games, our author suggests, then our best defence is to deceive them in kind (Hanson-Smith 191). Such a spirited, wholesale rejection of courtly love is rare however, and the other poems of the Findern manuscript tend to bemoan one negative aspect of courtly love without rejecting the tradition altogether. In fact, some of the songs employ courtly discourse against courtliness itself.

Another poem from the manuscript is not really a lyric, and therefore not a woman's song, but it is nonetheless another example of courtliness written in a woman's voice. It

describes the disadvantaged position of the lady waiting for her lover. The woman's voice manages to express the true sentiments of an individual without violating her appointed role in the courtly drama. Since the poem is too long to quote in its entirety, the first three stanzas will have to provide adequate evidence of its character:

Come home, dere hert, from tarieng;
Kuasith me to wepe, bothe weile and wring,
Also to lyve evere in distresse
So gret there may no wright expresse:
Al my joye ye torne to mournyng.

Sorowe is in myn herte digging;
To dethe, I trowe, he woul me bring
In woful trans withoute redresse.

Whanne I have of you sume tiding,
Gret joye I have, withoute failing,
Right as me ought with rightwisnesse;
But yet may not myn heveynesse
Depart frome me til your comyng. (IMEV 3878; Barratt 271)

The humanized representation of the lady found in this poem also occurs in the woman's songs. They provide a contrast to courtly convention by making the woman an

active participant in the tradition through her description of her experiences. Even in poems where the woman adheres to the proscribed passivity of the lady in courtly love, her voice has an effect on the reader. Therefore, she is active in the sense that her song creates a space for women's experiences in courtly love. With the addition of women's songs, courtly love must be restructured to include women's voices in its discourse.

Conclusion

The majority of courtly love texts are written from the male perspective, in the male voice. The space for women in conventional courtly love is extremely narrow. The idealized lady is severely restricted, her power is temporary and limited. She is at the mercy of the male voices that describe her. She cannot speak for herself or of her own perspectives. Her primary function is to be the object of her lover's desire. She reaffirms his masculinity, his individuality, his humanity. The most immediate effect of women's songs is to break this female silence in courtly love.

But what are the implications of the addition of woman's voices to courtly love? Previous scholarship has suggested that women's songs participate in courtly love by setting up a binary opposition to courtliness, by "defining what courtesy was not." Women's voices are the "other" to male voices. Like the courtly lady, they affirm male identity by providing "organized contrast." The courtly tradition in male-voiced texts is reaffirmed by the anti-courtly female-voiced texts; just as the masculinity and individuality of the male poet/lover is reaffirmed by the idealized femininity of the courtly lady.

This reading of Middle English women's songs, espoused primarily by Plummer and Fries, is dependent upon a very limited selection of woman-voiced texts. Plummer's conviction that women's songs were exclusively popular is both the cause and effect of his restriction of the genre to the carol form. For Plummer, "women's songs" are not simply

lyrics written in women's voices. They are more narrowly defined by their form, and their function as a foil to male courtliness.

Both Plummer and Fries read from a critical perspective privileging male voices and male realities. For these critics, the courtly male text is the dominant reality, reinforced by anti-courtly women's songs. Not surprisingly, Plummer's restriction of the genre of women's songs to exclusively popular texts supports his reading of women's songs as exclusively anti-courtly. However, in my analysis of the woman's song I have included texts that fall outside Plummer's initial definition. These additional women's songs are not restricted to one lyrical form or literary function.

These women's songs bring with them additional perspectives and broaden the dimensions of the woman's song as a genre. No longer restricted to a single function of courtliness, women's songs now dialogue with each other on courtly love and, by extention, love in general. Not only is the contribution of women's songs to the courtly love tradition multi-faceted, but the songs themselves are an autonomous sub-genre of courtly love based on women's experiences, on women's voices. The new, expanded collection of women's songs do not simply reaffirm male courtly identity, but also create a parallel dimension of courtly texts centered on female identity. The expanded collection of women's songs sets up an alternative courtly discourse privileging female realities, not male realities. It creates, in effect, a woman's version of courtly love.

This shift of context, from male to female courtly love, allows us to re-read the women's songs Plummer interpreted as only intended to bolster male courtly experiences.

Certainly, in the context of male courtly lyrics, women's songs such as "Kyrie, so Kyrie" and "Al this day ic han sought" are satires of courtly convention found in male-voiced texts. But when we shift the context of these songs to the sub-genre of women's songs based on women's experiences, these lyrics can be read differently. Now they are contributions to female courtly discourse based on women's realities. Unlike the courtly lady, the women in these texts have a voice; and they speak of such uncourtly subjects as rape and illegitimate pregnancy. They highlight women's disadvantaged position in both medieval society and medieval texts.

At the other end of the spectrum of women's songs are texts that reappropriate courtliness in women's voices. The women in the songs such as "The man that I loued altherbest" and "Y louede a child of this cuntre" reject the convention of the silent lady without rejecting courtliness itself. These songs reverse the courtly roles of the distant lady and the lovesick poet. The speakers in these songs give the lady a voice in the courtly role usually reserved for the male poet. They songs do not, however, reject courtliness itself.

Furthermore, hovering in the background of these courtly women's songs are the anti-courtly carols that point to the brutal realities of female existence. This creates a tension between the two versions of women's realities in the game of love. This tension is the space for dialogue in the genre of women's songs, and many of the songs inhabit that space between the two extreme perspectives of women in courtly love.

While the extremes of these two poles of women's songs implicitly respond to each other, other women's songs debate courtly convention and female realities more directly. The

woman's song "Summe men sayon that y am blac" challenges the male courtly ideal of beauty, exposing it for what it is: an arbitrary standard created by men that bears no relation to women's true selves. The speaker of "Off seruyng men I wyll begyne" appropriates the courtly convention of singing the lady's praises and instead sings the praise of her servant/lover. Both these songs call attention to a particular courtly convention and approach it from a woman's perspective.

As a collection of texts, women's songs both respond to and recreate courtly love. The Findern lyric "What-so men sayn," epitomizes this new courtly discourse. The speaker of this lyric is not playing the courtly game; she does not pander to male fantasies of fallen women or angelic ladies. She is not a victim of the biological realities of love, nor is she silenced by playing the role of the courtly lady. She addresses a female audience, urging them to either avoid the game of love altogether or to reappropriate it to their own advantage. This speaker envisions a new courtly reality, one in which the woman, not the man is privileged. As a woman discussing the game of love with other women, this narrator's song embodies the genre of women's songs as a whole. Women's songs, as a genre in all its diversity, disrupt the convention of female silence that is the defining characteristic of courtly love. Scholars of Middle English must adjust their definitions of courtly love to accommodate women's voices.

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