



October 2023

“With middal smal and wel ymake”: Objectification and Power in Medieval English Love Songs

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Recommended Citation

Jones, Allison D. (2023) ““With middal smal and wel ymake”: Objectification and Power in Medieval English Love Songs,” *International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities*: Vol. 11: Iss. 3, Article 3.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7710/2168-0620.1139>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.cwu.edu/ijurca/vol11/iss3/3>

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Abstract

Through reading sets of medieval love songs one can notice trends that are connected to the conventions of fin'amor or courtly love. Troubadours, medieval French poets, would compose and sing songs that reflect the trends of courtly love during the time period. Within the lyrics of these songs there are two main trends when it comes to the objectification of the female beloved. First, they spend a great deal of time in describing the physicality of the beloved, but make no inferences or connections to her interior life—going so far as to animalize her. Even when those beautiful features may be manufactured, their artificiality still supersedes her personhood. Second, they use the lyric technique of reprisal to formally reinforce sense of woman as inanimate. Using the anonymous “Alison” and Geoffrey Chaucer’s “Complaint to his Purse” as example cases, in this essay I demonstrate the techniques that effect this displacement of power, as well as how they are still prevalent in popular music today. Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Elizabeth E. Tavares

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Peer Review

This work has undergone a double-blind review by a minimum of two faculty members from institutions of higher learning from around the world. The faculty reviewers have expertise in disciplines closely related to those represented by this work. If possible, the work was also reviewed by undergraduates in collaboration with the faculty reviewers.

Abstract

Through reading sets of medieval love songs one can notice trends that are connected to the conventions of *fin'amor* or courtly love. Troubadours, medieval French poets, would compose and sing songs that reflect the trends of courtly love during the time period. Within the lyrics of these songs there are two main trends when it comes to the objectification of the female beloved. First, they spend a great deal of time in describing the physicality of the beloved, but make no inferences or connections to her interior life—going so far as to animalize her. Even when those beautiful features may be manufactured, their artificiality still supersedes her personhood. Second, they use the lyric technique of reprisal to formally reinforce sense of woman as inanimate. Using the anonymous "Alison" and Geoffrey Chaucer's "Complaint to his Purse" as example cases, in this essay I demonstrate the techniques that effect this displacement of power, as well as how they are still prevalent in popular music today.

Keywords

medieval poetry, English literature, gender and sexuality studies, Geoffrey Chaucer, The Canterbury Tales, The Wife of Bath, Sir Thomas Malory, Arthuriana

Never had much faith in love or miracles (miracles) uh!
 Never wanna put my heart on the line, uh!
 But swimming in your water is something spiritual (spiritual) uh!
 I'm born again every time you spend the night, uh!
 — Bruno Mars, “Locked Out of Heaven” (2012)

Through reading sets of medieval love songs one can notice trends that are connected to the conventions of *fin'amor* or courtly love. Troubadours, medieval French poets, would compose and sing songs that reflect the trends of courtly love during the time period. Within the lyrics of these songs there are two main trends when it comes to the objectification of the female beloved. First, they spend a great deal of time in describing the physicality of the beloved, but make no inferences or connections to her interior life—going so far as to animalize her. Even when those beautiful features may be manufactured, their artificiality still supersedes her personhood. Second, they use the lyric technique of reprisal to formally reinforce sense of woman as inanimate. Using the anonymous “Alison” and Geoffrey Chaucer’s “Complaint to his Purse” as example cases, in this essay I [FINISH] .

“wel ymake”: The Objectification of Alison

The Middle English poem “Alison” exemplifies how women in love songs were objectified rather than portrayed as another human being. In this anonymous poem, the speaker talks about his love for a woman named Alison, whom he finds to be very beautiful physically, focusing as it does on her face, hair, skin, and physique. For example, “on hew hire her is fair ynough” suggests that the hue of Alison’s hair is fair enough (l. 13). If “fair” meant the color of her hair is light, or as we know it blonde, it may possibly have been dyed in order to meet the beauty standards of the time. The poem continues:

Hire browe browne, hire ye blake;
 With lossum cheere heo on me lough;
 With middel smal and wel ymake. (ll. 14–16).

“Hire browe browne, hire ye blake” reinforces the suggestion that her hair is possibly being dyed as her brows are brown in color. Along with her hair, her eyes are black, which (alongside grey) was prioritized. The lines then move away from her face as the speaker ends the physical description with her body shape “with middel smal and wel ymake,” or her midsection being small and thin and body being well made, a description typically reserved for inanimate objects (l. 16). That these descriptions do not connect her interior with her exterior suggests that she is only something to admire and look at but not a person to interact with or have a relationship with.

Along with being valued according to her beauty, Alison is also being literally portrayed as otherworldly—something that is impossible for any mortal being to achieve. Michael Bryson and Arpi Movsesian argue that, when it comes to songs pertaining to courtly love, “women are removed from their bodies, denied their sexuality, idolized, dehumanized, and turned into goddesses of light and air” (237). The black eyes she has are not a natural eye color for a human to have, thus another way of the speaker moving his love from the status of another human and looking at her as something unnatural. Her beauty is being described as if she comes from the fairy world, supported by the comment that “ichoot from hevene it is me sent” (l. 10). According to the *Norton Anthology*, “ichoot” means “I know,” thus driving the line to say something along the lines (pun intended) of the speaker knowing she was sent to him from heaven itself; she is literally “out of this world.” Alison is being treated similarly to the idea of “goddesses of light and air,” and by being so is idolized by the speaker.

By attributing an otherworldliness to Alison, she is rhetorically placed on a pedestal by the speaker while simultaneously removed of her agency. As E. Jane Burns’s observes, “raised high atop

the metaphorical pedestal of courtliness, the lady reputed to have ultimate control over her suitor's well-being, his life, and even his death actually derives little power, authority, or material gain from this glorified position" (24). This is to say the beloved is placed, regardless of her will, on a different level of morals than the speaker himself. For example, when the speaker proclaims that without Alison he would "mournen evermore," suggests she has power over this man who is in love with her to the point of death (l. 36). Putting Alison on this pedestal and describing her as otherworldly, the speaker both takes away her agency and objectifies her.

The objectification of women in medieval English love songs has more to it than just the removal of power or agency, however. In this case, the speaker is giving a sense of power over to Alison whether or not he will live based on her loving him back or not. As such, he is giving her a power over himself but also having the other option be something that benefits himself as we don't know if Alison will accept him. According to Cynthia Garrett, this rhetorical move by the speaker allows for "both the male role of languishing devotion to a mistress and the female role of high-minded inaccessibility" (51). The speaker is giving himself up to Alison in a sense as he is leaving it up to her whether he dies or not, but he is also putting her at a spot of inaccessibility as well. This is further complicated by Alison being compared to an animal.

Alison is not just described as an object and something from out of this world, but also animalized through the intense focus on her physical appearance in the poem. Her skin is compared to that of swan feathers: "hire swire is whittere than the swan," where "swire" refers to her neck (l. 28). Considering that swans were known to be graceful and beautiful with their long white necks, the speaker is making the case that his love's neck is whiter than the swans. It also bears mentioning that swans were associated with the classical rape narrative of Leda, as well as were formal property of the crown, so any allusion to them also took the risk of suggesting violent conquest without consent. While pressure here is put on comparing Alison as more beautiful than the swan's, the rhetorical choice still requires she be on the same level of a bird. This can also be connected to the wording of an earlier line "for to been hire owen make," where "make" means "mate," thus building the picture that she is a bird choosing her mate (l. 18). The idea is reminiscent of Chaucer's "The Parliament of Fowls," whose plot focuses on a female bird choosing her mate.

Finally, by considering the structure of the piece itself, it appears that the poem makes use of the reprisal technique in lyrical song to add to the objectification of the beloved. It first comes up within the first stanza as "an hendy hap ich habbe yhent" which is translated to mean "a gracious chance I have received" (l. 9). Seven lines follow and then are followed by a couplet that ends with this reprisal line; three more introduce Alison. Each stanza after this ends with the anaphora "an hendy" as well as "an hendy hap" (ll. 30, 39, 21). In this context, this implies that while the speaker is yearning for Alison, he also has been given a chance to get her. In songwriting, it is typical to employ the use of a chorus or a reprise to make a point, hence why they're always repeated. The repetition of this line shows that it is important to the meaning of the song: that the speaker is looking at Alison as a *thing* he has been given a chance to obtain.

"to you, my purs": The Female Handbag

The love poem by Chaucer titled "Complaint to His Purse" employs similar conventions to that of the anonymous "Alison" to make abstract claims about female objectification. The conceit of the song is an extended metaphor of beloved and the lover's pocketbook. The lover directly addresses his purse as his core audience: "to you, my purs, and to noon other wight, / Complaine I, for ye be my lady dere" where "wight" means creature or object person (ll. 1–2). This comparison puts a direct connection between women as not only an object, but money as well. Notice that he states in that

opening line “to you, my purs,” speaking not just to any purse, but his own purse which he has control of and ending with “for ye be my lady dere.”

This direct address establishes the comparison of his purse, which is then evolved to being the same as a gold coin, which is as yellow as the sun itself in his mind: “or see youre colour, lik the sonne bright, / That of yelownesse hadde nevere peere” (ll. 10–11). Knowing that “sonne” is referring to the sun and “peere” means equal clarifies that the sun’s color has no equal. By doing this, the speaker is comparing his lady to the golden color and sheen of the coins that should be in his purse. This is really the only compliment he gives her, and like the previous example, it is just a physical one at that.

Unlike “Alison,” however, this work employs hyperbole to discuss the status of the lover and show his power over the beloved. For example, the line “I am so sory, now ye be light” provides an interesting case of passive aggression (l. 30). This line blames the lady in question for being what he calls to be “light” or fickle. In so doing, he does not overtly accuse her of rejection, but instead frames it as if apologizing for what he implies she’s doing. This takes away her chance to apologize (or even consider if she needs to), as well as makes her out to be the antagonist. The speaker adopts a passive stance on it by saying sorry in her place, turning the emphasis of the poem on himself rather than as an appeal to her. Along with the passive-aggressive behavior, the crafting of exaggerations increasingly suggests one should be suspicious of the speaker’s motives. Key is that the speaker goes so far as to have every stanza repeat a death wish if he is rejected: “beeth hevvy again, or elles moot I die” (l. 7).

Similarly to “Alison,” “Complaint to his Purse” also uses the technique of a repeated reprise to express the level of heartbreak for the speaker. At the end of each stanza, “beeth hevvy again, or elles moot I die,” reinforces the idea that if she is not heavy, then he must die. The word heavy is the important point in this line. If your purse is heavy this would of course imply it’s full of coin or money implying a person would be rich. Remembering that “light” means fickle it can be interpreted that heavy would mean to be loyal rather than the opposite of being light which is meaning fickle in this sense. Burns argues, regarding courtly love speakers, that “they show that even courtly accounts that reinforce rigidly gendered stereotypes of the lovestruck suitor and beguiling lady provide a range of alternatives to these pat formulations” (25). This suggests that he is so lovestruck that his life doesn’t matter if his love doesn’t love him in return. By doing so, he begins to do what is done in “Alison,” putting the woman in his life above all else, but he is putting some perimeters around this as he is apologizing for her “lightness.” This fake submission of power suggest the idea that the woman in question is the one that holds all the cards when in reality the speaker is saying “be this or I will die,” putting the blame on her if she doesn’t do what he wants her to.

In addition, the repeated line is used by the speaker to put himself in a position of control under the lady. This is similar to how Alison is given power over the speaker but a power that is determined by the speaker. He is also approaching this power a bit differently as the speaker speaks for his lady and has control over her in the fact that he is saying she is his purse. Thus, it is a false sense of power as the speaker can take it away at any moment he decides he’s no longer in love. Repeated over and over functions in song format as a chorus. By having “beeth hevvy again, or elles moot I die” be repeated in this sense as the last line of each stanza the speaker is showing that this is the point of the song. This makes sense given that courtly love is displayed as “love, will, desire, and the willingness (even determination) to risk everything, up to and including death” (Bryson and Movsesian 121). In both “Alison” and “Complaint to his Purse,” the speakers put their lives on the line, unrequested, so that their lady to change how they feel in order, regardless of her desires.

Medieval Love Songs on Mars: Some Conclusions

In both pieces, the speaker tends to give their love a sense of power over them but in a twisted way that ends up giving power back to the lover himself. This suggests a self-awareness by these poets of

a power dynamic that gives a false sense of control to the woman in the relationship and the actual control stays with the speaker of the poem. To objectify the beloved is then an aspect of control. In "Complaint to his Purse," we see a metaphor of woman-to-object, whereas in "Alison" it is a variety of objects and animalistic comparisons. The structure of the pieces underpin this argument as their chorus-like form points toward this level of control and objectification. These two medieval love songs indicate how much of control there is with the admirer over the woman.

In analyzing these lyrics, I was struck in the several centuries since similar rhetorical techniques are still being deployed today in chart-topping hits. One striking case is the catalogue of Bruno Mars, whose music filled with lyrics that follow the same patterns as "Alison" and "Complaint to his Purse." In "Locked out of Heaven," as a case in point, Mars both frames his lover as an otherworldly or heavenly being as well as makes it appear as if her only use for him is for sex. In the repeated chorus, Mars states "Your sex takes me to paradise" as well as "Cause you make me feel like, I've been locked out of heaven/ For too long, for too long." He is giving her a false sense of power by saying that specifically her sex is what takes him to an otherworldly place, and that without it he is apparently "locked out of heaven." In 2012, the beloved still has no personality or even physical beauty in this song, nor does she have any kind of voice.

The similarities to medieval lyric are uncanny. In "Complaint to his Purse," the speaker is giving his lover a false sense of control, which raises the question: why is Mars locked out of heaven? First of all, heaven is a place you go when you die and he isn't dead right now (unless he's some sort of zombie), so does he know he won't be getting into heaven without her? Or is he just referencing the idea of paradise and drawing upon Christianity's version of it? Either way, these questions make sense considering that throughout the entire song he is putting her on the same level as a deity: "you make me testify / You can make a sinner change his ways." Not only is he putting her on the same level as a god, but does so with diction affiliated with Judeo-Christian thought. In doing so, Mars is committing a very blasphemous act while putting the beloved in a situation where she can't reject him for the threat of self-harm. We don't have her voice or feelings in this song, we only know how Mars is viewing this relationship, not unlike both of the sets of medieval English lyrics. In all these cases, the beloved is made out to be something that is unnatural and yet maintains no agency in decisions of the heart. What might a new kind of love song look like for the next century?

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